



MPIfG Discussion Paper 16/3

Group Representation for the Working Class?
Opinion Differences among Occupational Groups in Germany

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Abstract

In this paper, we take up the burgeoning debate about the underrepresentation of the working class in politics. In the literature section we discuss theories of group representation and look at recent empirical studies of responsiveness that have begun to disaggregate public opinion by sociodemographic categories. Empirically, we analyze a dataset of more than 700 survey items collected in Germany between 1980 and 2012. The analysis shows that respondents within one social class are more similar to each other than to members of other classes and that class-based differences outweigh those of education, region, or gender. While opinion differences are not always large, they can reach 50 percentage points. There are frequently gaps of between 20 or 30 percentage points in support for or opposition to policy changes. Since workers' opinions tend to differ from the opinions of those groups who are well represented in parliament, their numerical underrepresentation might bias decisions against them, as recent studies suggest.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Discussion Paper greifen wir die aktuelle Debatte über die politische Unterrepräsentation der Arbeiterklasse auf. Im Literaturteil stellen wir Kernargumente der Theorien deskriptiver Repräsentation dar und verknüpfen diese mit aktuellen Studien aus der empirischen Responsivitätsforschung. Im empirischen Abschnitt analysieren wir einen von uns erstellten Datensatz mit mehr als 700 Sachfragen, die jeweils nach der Zustimmung oder Ablehnung einer vorgeschlagenen Politikänderung fragen. Die Sachfragen stammen aus Umfragen, die zwischen 1980 und 2012 erhoben wurden. Wir zeigen, dass sich die Befragten innerhalb einer sozialen Klasse in ihren Einstellungen systematisch ähnlicher sind als Befragte aus unterschiedlichen sozialen Klassen. Zudem sind Einstellungsunterschiede zwischen sozialen Klassen größer als zwischen anderen sozialen Gruppen (Bildung, Region, Geschlecht); sie betragen häufig mehr als 20 oder 30 Prozentpunkte. Da Arbeiter sich von den Gruppen unterscheiden, die zahlenmäßig stark im Parlament vertreten sind, könnte dies vermehrt zu Politikentscheidungen entgegen ihren Interessen führen.

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Group Representation for the Working Class? Opinion Differences among Occupational Groups in Germany

1 Introduction

Feminist theorists have convincingly argued that it may be necessary to deviate from principles of representation that formally treat everyone the same. Disadvantaged groups who are numerically underrepresented in parliament deserve special attention for their voices to be heard. Proponents of “group representation” emphasize that who the representatives are has an impact on what they do. The probability of policies that, for example, are sensitive to female priorities or ethnic minorities’ interests rises if members of these groups are represented in parliament. At the same time, most of those who favor group representation do not believe that their arguments apply to the working class. The main reason is that in most countries parties exist that – at least historically – saw themselves as representatives of the working class and many party names still bear witness of these origins even today. Yet, these parties no longer send workers to parliament. Across all parties, legislators from privileged social backgrounds vastly outnumber those from blue-collar and lower white-collar occupations, with an increasing trend toward more exclusion.

In Europe, the share of legislators with a university degree has increased steadily since the 1950s (Best 2007: 96, 100), while the number of blue-collar workers in parliaments has decreased during the same time (ibid.: 100). In the United States, where money from private donors plays a prominent role in financing election campaigns, more than half of the members of Congress are millionaires (see opensecrets.org; data from 2012). Lawyers and businesspeople have comprised more than 75 percent of Congress since the 1950s, and alumni of the most prestigious universities are highly overrepresented (Carnes 2012: 6). Workers, in contrast, have always been underrepresented: they constituted only two percent or less of the legislators who served in each Congress between 1901 and 1996, with a downward trend since the 1970s (ibid.: 6–7).

Despite this obvious bias in the composition of parliaments in favor of the middle and upper classes, champions of “group representation” more often than not restrict their arguments to the representation of women and ethnic minorities. Only recent work on unequal political representation has revived interest in this issue since empirical research on responsiveness found that, when in conflict, policymakers respond to the preferences of the wealthy but remain mostly inattentive toward economically disadvantaged

We would like to thank Benjamin Braun, Lukas Haffert, Jorma Heier, Svenja Hense, and Jeffrey Verhey for their extremely helpful comments.

groups (Gilens 2005; Bartels 2008: Chapter 8). Against the background of this “poor political representation of the poor” (Giger/Rosset/Bernauer 2012), group representation of the working class has become a topic of recent debates (Pontusson 2015).

In this paper, we contribute to the burgeoning debate about the underrepresentation of the working class. However, we will not examine the entire “chain of responsiveness” (Powell 2004) but instead focus on the first step: Do social classes differ in their political preferences? Arguments for group representation presuppose that disadvantaged groups differ in their interests and political preferences and have different perspectives on common issues (Mansbridge 2015: 261–262). If there were no such differences, specific representation would not be necessary. While advocates of group representation assume that on a number of crucial questions the preferences of women and men differ, we need to establish whether and to what extent this also holds true for social classes. To shed light on this question, we analyze an original dataset on public opinion over the last 30 years in Germany. For the first time, we differentiate attitudes by different social classes rather than looking at average public opinion, as older studies did (Brettschneider 1995).

The present paper is organized as follows: In the next section we briefly outline the concept of social class that is used throughout the paper. In the third section we discuss theories of “group representation” and empirical studies of policy responsiveness. Following the literature discussion we proceed by introducing our dataset and explaining the methodology used for the empirical analysis. We analyze a dataset comprising more than 700 survey questions in six broad policy areas and focus on opinion differences between occupational groups. The fourth section demonstrates, first, that occupational groups tend to hold different opinions on questions of substantial political importance, and, second, differences between social classes are larger than those between women and men, East and West Germans, and between educational groups. Finally, in the concluding section, we discuss our findings.

2 Social class

In the not too distant past, prominent voices declared the concept of class “insignificant” or “dead” (Pahl 1989; Clark/Lipset 1991; Clark/Lipset/Rempel 2001; Pakulski/Waters 1996). As post-materialism and individualization took hold, social classes seemed to matter less and less (Beck 1983). But the obituary might have been written prematurely. Empirical studies find that social class still explains differences in life chances, subjective social location as well as political attitudes and behavior (Weakliem/Heath 1999; Hout 2010; Manza/Brooks 2010; Lareau/Weininger 2010). Unfortunately, the term social class is sometimes understood rather loosely as an “umbrella concept” (Goldthorpe, cited in Lareau 2010: 11) which captures different types of social inequality. In this case, class is used interchangeably with education, income, or some other measure of

socio-economic status. Rather than employing such a broad concept of social class, the present paper takes an individual's position in the labor market as a starting point. Social classes are differentiated according to the type of contract, the tasks, and the degree of autonomy and authority linked to a specific occupation (Erikson/Goldthorpe 1993: 35–47). This specific concept of social class makes it possible to compare the explanatory power of class to other indicators of social stratification.

We use occupational groups rather than other measures, such as income or education, for a number of reasons.¹ First, class positions are not identical to but clearly correlated with other measures such as income or education (Carnes 2012: 8; Hout 2010: 33–35). Second, as occupations define the relative position of individuals in labor markets and production units, members of the same occupational group are similarly affected by structural and political transformations within the political economy. As described by Erikson and Goldthorpe:

In contrast with the social groupings found at similar levels of prestige or status, classes ... can be expected to show some degree of homogeneity not only in the kinds and levels of resources that their members command but further in their exposure to structural changes and, in turn, in the range of at least potential interests that they may seek to uphold.
(Erikson/Goldthorpe 1993: 31)

Third, and most important for our purpose, political attitudes are very much influenced by an individual's position in the labor market and his or her related experiences, as Manza and Brooks argue in their essay on class politics:

Workplace settings provide the possibility of talking about politics and forging political identities, and work also provides the springboard for membership in organizations where class politics are engaged: unions, professional associations, business associations, and so forth.
(Manza/Brooks 2010: 204)

Similarly, Kitschelt (1994) argues that political preferences are shaped by experiences in market structures, such as the location of employment in private or public production sectors, and in experiences in the daily environment of work organizations (*ibid.*: 15–18). While measures such as income are able to capture status, they might, however, group individuals with very different life chances and socialization experiences – and hence probably with different interests and attitudes – together (Carnes 2012: 8). Accordingly, using the occupational group as a measure for social class seems most suitable for our purpose.

1 The survey used in our analysis only includes data on education and occupation, but not on income. Consequently, we can only examine and compare these two measures empirically, as is further elaborated in the empirical part of the paper. However, since we believe that occupation is best suited to our analysis, the lack of income data does not appear problematic.

3 Theory and literature review

Liberal democracy faces a growing tension: While it champions political equality, it is confronted with rising inequality. Political participation is highly uneven, and political decisions are much better aligned with the interests of the rich than with those of the poor. Even though democracy can – in principle – cope with social inequality, it must ensure that economic well-being does not directly translate into political influence. If disadvantaged groups cannot hope that their interests will have an equal chance to prevail against those of more privileged groups, democracy is harmed. There is growing empirical evidence of a systematic bias in favor of the middle and upper classes. Recent studies suggest that one of the reasons for this is the underrepresentation of the working class in parliament. Some authors claim that better descriptive representation would improve substantial representation. In this section, we will discuss the relevance of theories of group representation and empirical studies of policy responsiveness for this issue.

The theoretical case for group representation

In her influential book on the concept of representation, Pitkin (1967) emphasizes the *activity of representing* as the most substantive element of political representation, because only by judging the actions of a representative are we able to say whether true representation takes place. A representative in her view is someone “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (ibid.: 209). The notion of responsiveness is crucial and means that the representatives have to take into account the wishes and opinions of their constituency and respond to them. It does not mean, however, that representatives must respond to every single popular wish, but rather that they must not “frustrate or resist the people’s will without good reason“ or “frustrate or resist it systematically or over a long period of time” (ibid.: 233). Thus, it is the *substantive acting for others* that lies at the core of her theory. Consequently, it is of minor importance to Pitkin *who* does the representing, that is, whether the representatives resemble their constituency in certain characteristics. To put it bluntly: What matters for representation is *what* the representative does, not who he or she is.

Several authors have contested this view, arguing that the characteristics of the representatives *do* matter in certain situations and that the representation of specific groups should be improved. In “The Politics of Presence” Phillips (1995) argues in favor of group representation of women and ethnic minorities in legislative bodies. Her starting point is the observation that certain groups need a special form of representation because they are disadvantaged by structural discrimination: “When histories of inequality, deprivation, or exclusion have placed individuals in different relationships to economic resources and political power, we do not treat them equally when we treat them as if they were the same” (ibid.: 93). For individuals who have experienced one

or more of the “five faces of oppression” (Young 1990: 184) or who are members of a “marginalized group” that faces “contemporary inequality as compared to other social groups” (Williams 1998: 176), group representation is justified.

Group representation is thus thought to tackle existing structures of political exclusion, and Phillips (1995: chapter 2) identifies four key arguments to support this claim. First, inclusion of formerly excluded groups provides them with the public acknowledgment that they are of equal value. Second, when party programs do not include all aspects that are important to the represented and party positions do not exist for all issues, the characteristics of the represented become important in the political process. Third, people from disadvantaged groups need more forceful advocates on the political stage. Fourth, group representation can transform politics by bringing new ideas to the political agenda that have previously been ignored or suppressed, thereby opening up the full range of policy options.² The possibility of articulating silenced perspectives and transforming political agendas is at the core of these arguments. This does not mean, however, that disadvantaged groups are presumed to share a homogenous perspective on the majority of political issues simply because they belong to the same group. Rather than assuming an essentialist identity of women or ethnic minorities, Phillips (ibid.: 82–83) argues that *shared experiences* increase the *probability* that the perspectives of the disadvantaged group will differ from those of others, and if taken into account will eventually lead to different outcomes.

Arguments in favor of group representation assert that certain groups have distinct interests and political preferences that are not adequately catered to through existing channels of representation. While it might seem obvious that women and men differ in their political attitudes at least on some issues, it is not as clear whether the same still applies to social classes. In fact, most theorists of group representation have rejected the idea that workers are equally in need of descriptive representation (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995: 174–177; Williams 1998: 201).³

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- 2 In a similar vein, Mansbridge (1999) identifies four conditions under which the descriptive representation of groups is most plausible. First, in a context of “communicative mistrust,” communication between a dominant and a subordinated group is distorted because the historically subordinated group distrusts the dominating one. Second, under the condition of “uncrystallized interest,” relevant political issues are not yet on the political agenda. Third, when the historical exclusion of a certain group has constructed a social meaning or image of that group as “not able to rule,” group representation can change these social constructions and shape social perceptions. In addition, when the subordinated group has experienced political exclusion, group representation can make the polity more legitimate in the eyes of the disadvantaged, leading to a higher “de facto legitimacy.” If these circumstances are present, they legitimate group representation.
- 3 Phillips, for instance, argues that even though working-class people have always been marginalized in politics, “class itself has had an extraordinary presence” (Phillips 1995: 173). As the left–right divide has shaped whole party systems, one can hardly argue that issues related to class have been silenced or blocked from the political agenda. She admits, however, that besides objective working class interests, the lack of working-class “perspectives” in parliaments might lead to policies that override workers’ concerns.

Inequality and responsiveness: Empirical studies

In most developed democracies, the numerical underrepresentation of women has been reduced over the last 20 years without, however, reaching parity. The “politics of presence” does, on balance, lead to a better substantive representation of women (Wängnerud 2009), although female parliamentarians might not always promote exactly those policies feminists call for (Celis/Childs 2012). At the same time, workers’ representation has deteriorated (Best 2007; Carnes 2012: 6–7). As a result, a debate about working class representation is starting to emerge (see Pontusson 2015). Whether or not the perspectives and interests of workers are systematically underrepresented in political decisions needs empirical examination. However, existing evidence is limited at best. Several recent studies have demonstrated that parliaments are responsive to the citizens’ demands but with a heavy bias in favor of the better-off. However, the majority of studies of policy responsiveness focus on income or education rather than on social class.

Empirical research on the responsiveness of representative democracies has a long tradition, starting with the influential study by Miller and Stokes (1963). As already noted, responsiveness means that the representatives take into account the wishes and opinions of their constituents when making political decisions. Thus, studies of general responsiveness ask whether and to what extent political decisions reflect what citizens want. The majority of these studies focus on the American case and find a relatively high congruence between general public opinion – measured by representative polls – and political decisions, be it measured by individual roll call votes or parliamentary decisions (for an overview, see Manza/Cook 2002; Shapiro 2011).

In recent years, the focus of this research has shifted from the issue of general responsiveness to whether representatives are *equally* responsive to all citizens; that is, whether constituents’ opinions are equally well reflected in policy choices or whether some groups exert more influence than others. Several researchers have provided strong empirical evidence for the case of unequal responsiveness when looking at income or educational groups (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Gilens/Page 2014; Jacobs/Page 2005). They have shown that policymakers respond much more strongly to the wishes and preferences of wealthy Americans than to average citizens, who have almost no influence on political decisions. Bartels, for instance, finds that the senators’ voting behavior in roll call votes is only influenced by the preferences of their wealthy constituents, but not by constituents with low or average income (Bartels 2008: chapter 9). Based on 1,779 survey questions asking whether respondents agree or disagree with various proposed policy changes, Gilens (2005, 2012) compares the opinion of poor, average, and rich citizens to the actual policy change. He demonstrates that when the opinions of respondents on the 90th and the 50th income percentile diverge, the preferences of the

“median voter” have no impact on actual policy change, whereas the preferences of the rich significantly affect policy change. The poor can only hope that their preferences are taken into account if these do not conflict with those of the rich.⁴

Other authors have focused on specific policy fields, such as Jacobs and Page’s (2005) analysis of US foreign policy, or examined different legislative levels, such as Flavin’s (2012) study on US states. Their findings are similar to those of Bartels and Gilens, as they also find skewed responsiveness in favor of the wealthy. Much less research has been carried out on countries other than the United States. In a comparative study of 24 European democracies, Bernauer et al. (2013) analyze the ideological congruence between individuals and parties on a left–right scale and find that poor citizens, by this measure, are not as well represented as the rich.⁵

One of the mechanisms that might produce biased responsiveness could be the under-representation of workers in parliament, as a few recent studies suggest (Carnes 2012; Hayo/Neumeier 2012; Lupu 2015). Carnes (2013) offers the most thorough analysis so far. He constructs a dataset that includes information on the type of occupation held by 783 members of US Congress prior to entering Congress. While there are relatively few members from a working-class background, he was still able to compare their attitudes, voting behavior, and political activities to members from other occupations. Carnes finds that working-class legislators have distinct political opinions (ibid.: 95), consistently vote for the most liberal policies (ibid.: 42), and work hard to find co-sponsors of their bills but are less successful than legislators from other classes in getting them enacted (ibid.: 79). After numerous empirical tests, Carnes concludes that the “unequal social class makeup of our legislatures tilts the policy-making process in favor of outcomes that are more in line with the needs of white-collar professionals and less in line with the needs of working class Americans” (ibid.: 89).

These empirical studies suggest that not only women and ethnic minorities but also the working class might deserve “group representation.” For Mansbridge (2015: 266), *substantive misrepresentation* provides justification for group representation. Further, since organizations traditionally inclined to promote workers’ interests are in steady decline, she argues, workers no longer achieve proportional representation of their interests. When the representational system fails to represent a group’s distinct interests through other mechanisms, descriptive representation can be important for a democracy. To better understand whether the call for improved working class representation is justified, we first need to empirically determine whether political preferences differ between social classes. The following section addresses this question.

4 For an interesting exchange on these findings see Soroka/Wlezién (2008) and Gilens (2009).

5 As the authors only look at ideological congruence and not at political decisions, however, it is virtually impossible to conclude unequal political responsiveness directly from their findings.

4 Data and methods

To examine the extent to which occupational groups differ in their opinion on political issues, we constructed a comprehensive data set consisting of 737 survey questions posed between 1980 and 2012 in Germany. The questions were collected from *Politbarometer*, a representative survey of German citizens founded in 1977 and conducted monthly by the *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V.* institute.⁶ The *Politbarometer* collects public opinion on parties and politicians as well as on proposed policy changes that are high on the current political agenda. Issues range from the minimum wage or cuts in social insurance benefits to proposed changes in abortion rights or same-sex marriage. Some sample questions are: “Should the minimum wage be the same in all sectors or should there be different wage levels in different sectors?” or “There are discussions about a possible prohibition of the right-wing party NPD: Do you favor or do you oppose such a prohibition?” Socio-demographic indicators such as the occupation group, age, gender, and education of the respondents are also captured.

By hand-sifting through codebooks and questionnaires, we identified 895 questions surveying opinions on a proposed policy change. In total, 619 of these questions ask whether the respondent favors or opposes a certain proposal, 118 offer two different policy alternatives to choose between. In order to measure differences in opinion across groups, both these types of questions are used. The remaining 158 questions offer more than two possible answers and had to be excluded from the analysis because of a lack of comparability. Since the categories of education and occupation used by *Politbarometer* vary across survey years and geographical region (Eastern and Western Germany), it was necessary to create somewhat broader but consistent categories.⁷

Our measure of social class is based on the occupational scheme developed by Erikson and Goldthorpe (1993: 35–47). We distinguish between skilled and unskilled blue-collar workers, routine white-collar employees and higher ranking white-collar employees (service class), civil servants, and the self-employed. Unlike in the Erikson-Goldthorpe scheme, in our study, civil servants constitute an additional category because their employment relations differ from other white-collar employees in terms of social security benefits and duration of contract. The differences between social classes – defined in this way – are not always as distinct as one would hope. For example, self-employed respondents include both large-scale entrepreneurs and individuals in a very precarious labor market position. Similarly, civil servants include judges and professors but also police officers and municipal garbage collectors. Given this internal heterogeneity, it is

6 Strictly speaking, the survey is not representative of the German population as a whole, but only of German citizens, as individuals without a German passport are excluded.

7 In 1992 and 1993, occupational categories in Eastern and Western Germany were so different that it was not possible to harmonize them. These two years were, therefore, excluded from the analysis. Eastern German respondents are included from 1994 onwards.

likely that our results underestimate class differences and are thus a conservative measure. The groups differ in size as they approximately reflect the occupational structure in Germany.⁸

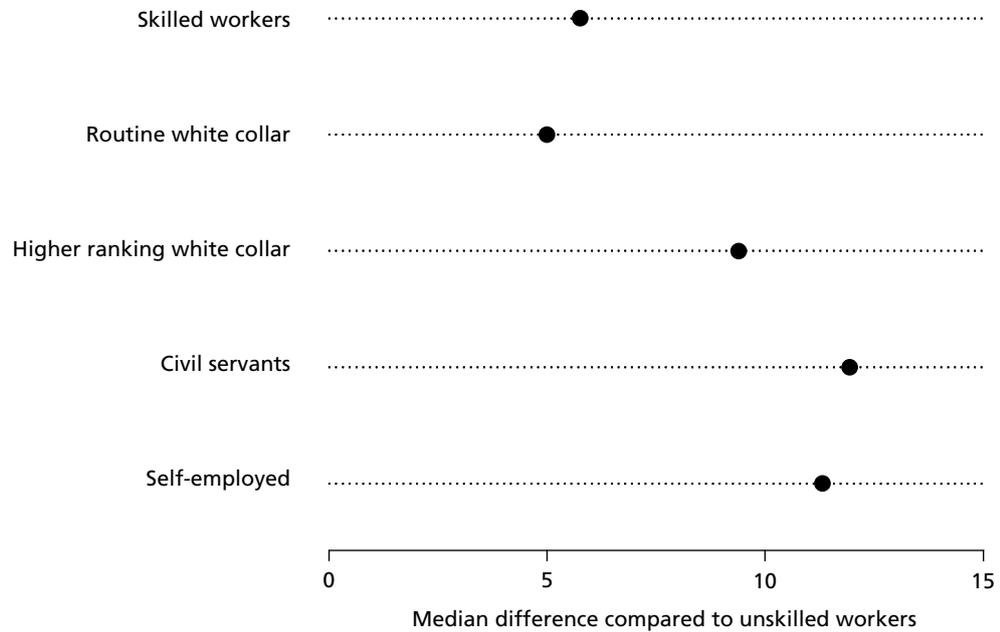
In our final dataset, the survey question is the unit of analysis. Variables indicate the proportion of respondents selecting each respective answer of the two possible responses within each social category (gender, age, education level, occupation group, and geographical region [east/west]). In order to measure differences in opinion across social groups, we subtracted the proportion of respondents in one category (e.g., unskilled workers) from the proportion of respondents in another category (e.g., self-employed) and then took the absolute value of the resulting difference. If, for instance, 60 percent of the unskilled workers agreed with a certain policy proposal, but only 40 percent of the self-employed did, then the measured difference is 20 percentage points. Additional variables indicate the year and the policy area of the respective survey question. We assigned each question to one of the following policy areas: foreign policy, economic and fiscal policy, labor market and social policy, migration, and social and cultural issues.

5 Empirical analysis

In an initial step, we look at some examples of questions where disagreement is either very large or very small, in order to get a first impression of the nature and magnitude of opinion differences. One case where the opinion difference is very significant, for instance, is the question about the potential privatization of the German railway system (*Deutsche Bundesbahn*). In 1991, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with proposals to privatize the public railway corporation and transform it into a private stock market company. While only 30 percent of unskilled workers were in favor of this proposal, almost 60 percent of higher ranking employees and civil servants agreed with it. Among self-employed respondents, the share of proponents was even higher, with 71 percent supporting privatization. This amounts to a total difference of 40 percentage points between unskilled workers and the self-employed. This case clearly and succinctly illustrates the theoretical expectation that disagreement with a policy proposal increases with the social distance between social classes. However, this

8 In 2010, for instance, unskilled workers constituted 11 percent, skilled workers 18 percent, routine white-collar employees 19 percent and higher ranking white-collar employees 34 percent of the respondents. Civil servants and the self-employed constituted 7 and 11 percent, respectively. The group sizes differ somewhat from official statistics provided by the German Federal Statistical Office (Statistisches Bundesamt 2015), with workers tending to be over- and employees underrepresented. One reason for this is that retired persons are not included in the official statistics on occupations. In our data, in contrast, retired persons are included and assigned to the occupational group of their former employment. However, the differences only amount to a few percentage points (at most).

Figure 1 Average differences in public attitudes between unskilled workers and other occupational groups



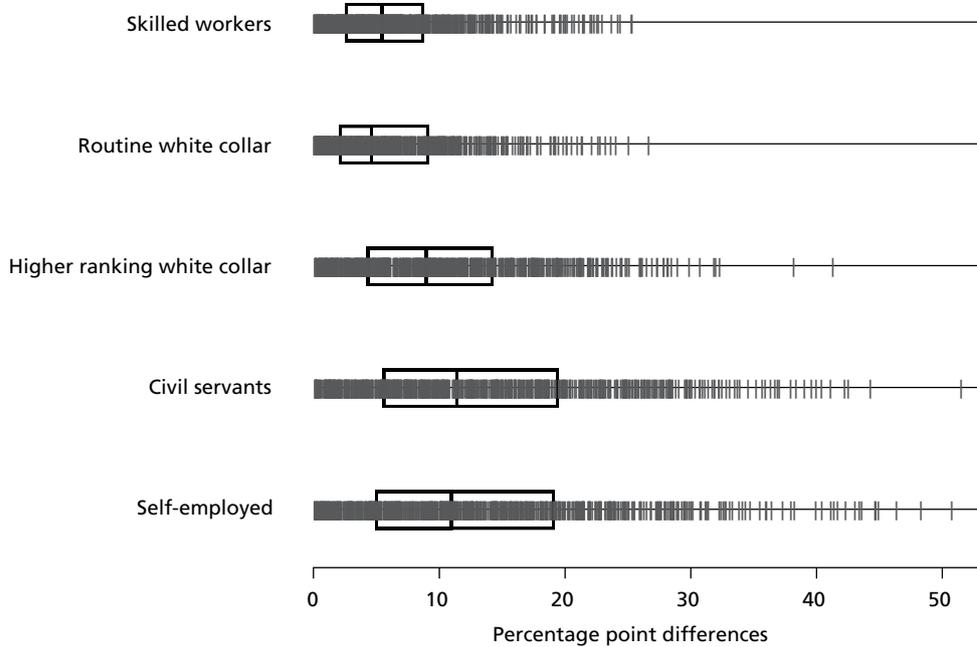
Data: *Politbarometer* 1980–2012; authors' calculations.

Note: Each dot shows the median difference in opinions between the reference group (unskilled workers) and those of the other occupational groups.

does not apply to each and every political issue. In the case of the expansion of child-care services for children under the age of three, for instance, respondents from all occupational groups shared very similar views. When asked in 2007 whether they favored or opposed the federal government's plan to triple the number of slots in public child daycare facilities, the majority of all occupational groups agreed, with support ranging from 79 to 85 percent. These examples show that in order to acquire an exhaustive picture and be able to draw conclusions about differences between social classes in general, a systematic empirical analysis is required.

For this purpose, we first analyze whether there are – across all survey questions – sizable differences in political attitudes between different occupational groups. To this end, we look at the opinion differences between social classes and how these compare to opinion differences among other groups. If social class is a meaningful analytical concept, the attitudes of survey respondents who fall in the same occupational group should be more similar than attitudes across occupational groups. Figure 1 shows the differences between the lowest occupational group (unskilled workers) compared with five other social classes. The median difference is calculated across all survey questions

Figure 2 Spread of opinion differences between unskilled workers and other social classes



Data: *Politbarometer* 1980–2012; authors' calculations.

Note: Each vertical line represents one survey question. We calculate the (absolute) differences between those who agree with a policy change in both the reference group (unskilled workers) and the other five occupational groups. A total of 50 percent of all cases are located within the box where the vertical line marks the median.

in our dataset.⁹ The overall gap in attitudes tends to grow as the social distance between occupational groups increases. For skilled workers and routine white-collar employees the gap is still relatively modest, while for higher ranking white-collar employees it is considerably larger, and the gap for civil servants and the self-employed is largest of all. These results demonstrate that adjacent occupational groups share similar attitudes, although the available occupational categories are not as distinct as they ideally would be.

Basing our analysis on averages may lead to the true magnitude of opinion differences being underestimated. Naturally, not all issues are highly contested and social classes do not always take opposing positions. On many subjects, workers' opinions do not differ from those of civil servants or self-employed respondents. However, there are some highly contested issues where major differences can be observed. Figure 2 again compares low-skilled workers' attitudes to those of other social classes, but also includes information on each of the survey questions analyzed, thus giving a visual impression of the spread of opinions. As before, the attitudes of unskilled and skilled workers are most similar, although opinion differences of up to 30 percentage points can be seen

9 We use the median rather than the mean because it is a conservative measure of difference with positively skewed data.

on specific issues. However, relatively large opinion differences are much more frequent between workers and other social classes. In some cases, the gap can reach 50 percentage points. The boxes in Figure 2 include 50 percent of all questions as well as the median. Both measures confirm that blue-collar workers differ most strongly from civil servants and the self-employed. While very large differences are rare, those of between 20 and 30 percentage points are frequent.

Even if considerable differences can be seen between social classes, these could be restricted to differences in the degree of support for a particular policy change. If 70 percent of workers and 90 percent of civil servants are in favor of a specific change, the difference would be 20 percentage points. The very same difference would acquire a different level of significance if the respective numbers were 40 and 60 percent. In a binary choice this would mean that the majority of workers opposes a policy change, while the majority of civil servants supports it. For unskilled workers and civil servants, opposing interests can be identified in roughly one-quarter of our cases, while in the remaining three-quarters, only the degree of support differs. The figure is similar with regard to the self-employed and drops to roughly ten percent for skilled workers. Consequently, while unskilled and skilled workers frequently differ in their opinions, this is generally a matter of degree rather than principled disagreement.

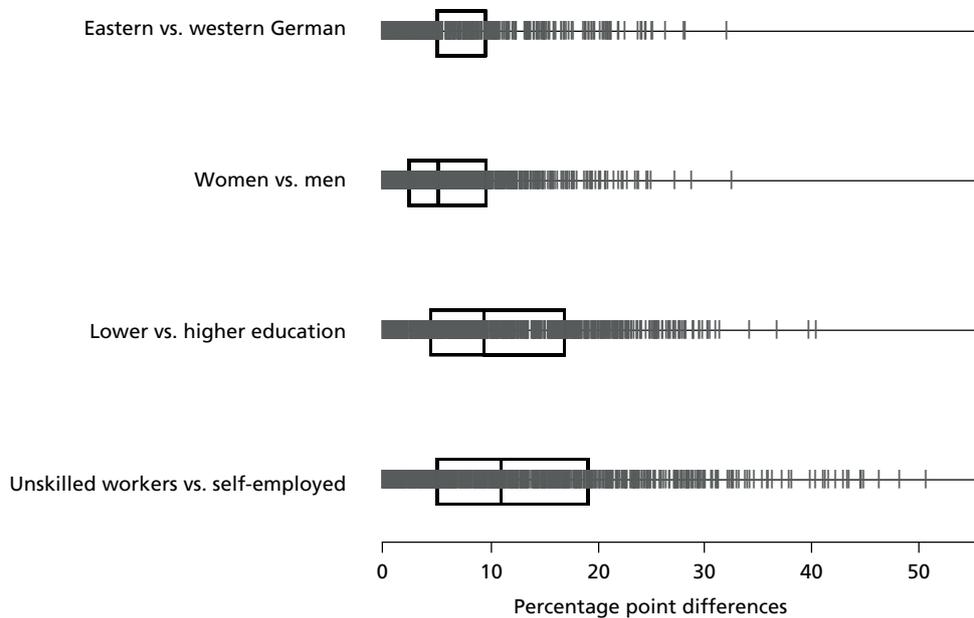
Although we have established that there are notable opinion differences between social classes, we still have to determine whether these differences remain large in comparison with other social groups. Figure 3 shows the dispersion of public opinions for four pairs of groups, namely, women and men, eastern and western Germans, those with low and high levels of formal education, and, finally, unskilled workers and the self-employed. The figure illustrates that differences are largest between occupational groups and much smaller between eastern and western Germans or women and men.¹⁰ Even across educational groups, which are often used as an indicator of stratification, opinions tend to be more homogeneous.¹¹ We can therefore conclude that social class does capture meaningful differences between survey respondents.

In a next step, it is relevant to examine whether opinion differences vary across different policy areas. Since the present study focuses on social class, we would expect to find pronounced opinion divergence in (re-)distributive areas such as economic policy, finance, labor market, and social policy. However, the traditional left–right cleavage

10 However, it is important to add that this does not undermine the case for female group representation. Feminist theorists have argued that opinion surveys register opinions on issues that are already prominent on the political agenda. They remain silent on those issues that groups would raise were they better represented (Phillips 1995: 81–82).

11 By comparing unskilled workers to the self-employed, we are comparing two rather small groups at extreme ends of the occupational strata. This could bias the comparison with groups comprising all respondents (east and west, for example). However, as Figure 2 demonstrates, the opinion differences between unskilled workers and higher ranking white-collar employees, who are located in the middle of the occupational strata, still outweigh those of other groups.

Figure 3 Spread of opinion differences between social classes and other groups

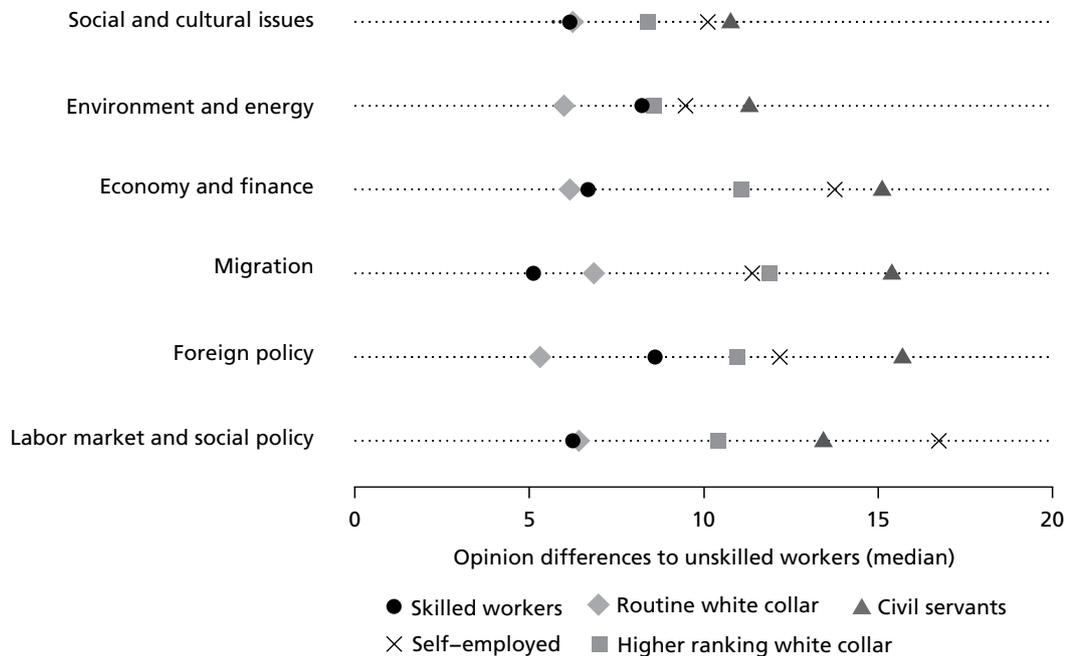


Data: *Politbarometer* 1980–2012; authors' calculations.

Note: Each vertical line represents one survey question. We calculate the (absolute) difference between those who agree with a policy change in each paired comparison. A total of 50 percent of all cases are located within the box where the vertical line marks the median.

centering on material (re-)distribution and state intervention might not be the only relevant dimension separating social classes in their preferences and interests. Similar to Beramendi et al. (2015), we assume that interests have become more diverse and electorates more fragmented, making it impossible to map all relevant social cleavages on one single policy dimension. Thus, we might also expect to find large differences in other areas such as social and cultural issues or migration, where we would anticipate lower social classes to adopt what some authors call “particularistic” views (Beramendi et al. 2015: 18–19). Figure 4 compares the average differences between the opinions of five occupational groups and those of unskilled workers in six policy areas. Based on this comparison, we can make several important observations. First, in all six areas, the opinions of skilled workers and routine white-collar employees are more closely aligned with unskilled workers than with members of higher social classes. In fact, in three policy areas, the opinions of lower ranking employees are even closer to those of unskilled workers than the opinions of skilled workers are. Second, across almost all areas, the opinions of civil servants and the self-employed diverge most strongly from workers' opinions. In five of six areas, including economic and financial policy and migration, opinion differences are greatest between unskilled workers and civil servants, whereas on questions about labor market and social policy, workers differ most sharply in their opinions from the self-employed. In general, higher ranking employees take intermediate positions. Finally, social and cultural issues as well as environment and energy poli-

Figure 4 Opinion differences in six broad policy areas



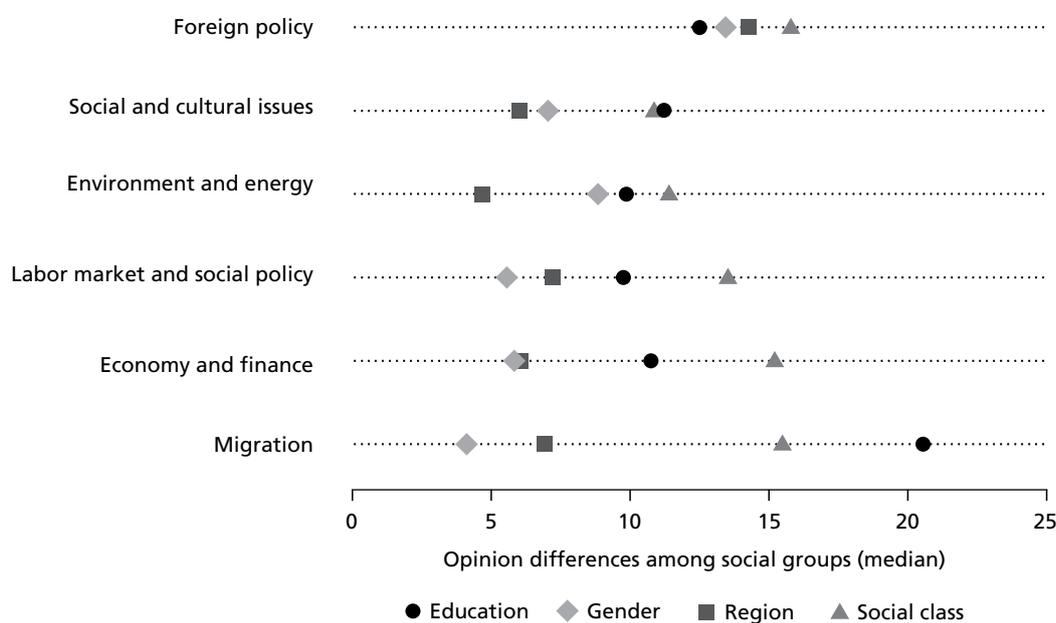
Data: *Politbarometer* 1980–2012; authors' calculations.

cies seem to be less controversial than issues in the other four policy areas. As before, the average (median) conceals substantial differences within each policy area, where there can be up to 50 percentage points between the opinions of two different classes.

The significant differences between workers and higher social classes in the areas of economic and social policy are in line with our expectations and point to the fact that issues of (re-)distribution and state intervention, which traditionally separate workers from higher social classes, are still an important dividing line within society. The discrepancy between civil servants and workers in the area of migration policy is also worth mentioning. It is important to note at this point that the data only allow us to examine the magnitude of opinion differences, but not their ideological leaning. A closer look at specific questions can provide us with at least an indication of the specific attitudes behind the overall differences. In the area of migration policy, however, workers and routine white-collar employees seem to be more “particularistic” than civil servants and higher ranking employees, with the self-employed taking an intermediate position here. With regard to both questions about refugees and labor migration and questions concerning dual citizenship, workers tend to hold more anti-immigration views.¹² This

12 For example, on the question as to whether Germany should facilitate the immigration of people who are “useful” for the country, only 35 percent of unskilled workers agreed, in comparison to 64 percent of civil servants and 62 of the self-employed (*Politbarometer* 2004).

Figure 5 Contrast of opinion differences in six broad policy areas



Data: *Politbarometer* 1980–2012; authors' calculations.

is in line with Dancygier and Walter (2015), who show that low-skilled workers have stronger anti-globalization and anti-immigration views, partly because globalization (of labor) has the most negative impact on this group.

Finally, we look at opinion differences in different policy areas across social groups. Figure 5 compares the magnitude of opinion differences in four different social categories across six policy areas. In most areas, the attitudes of women and men or western and eastern Germans do not diverge very strongly. In all areas, the differences are larger for educational group and social class. However, in four areas the differences between unskilled workers and civil servants are greatest. With regard to social and cultural issues, the spread is almost identical to that of respondents with a high and low level of education, while migration is the one policy area where education trumps social class. In fact, those with high and low levels of education adopt opposing views on half of the 42 questions that focus on migration.¹³

13 As almost 90 percent of the parliamentarians in the German Federal Parliament (*Bundestag*) are university graduates, their opinions might diverge quite starkly from those of the general population.

Overall, our data strongly suggest that members of the working class frequently hold different opinions from members of social classes that are overrepresented among voters, party officials, and parliamentarians. The differences are significant in comparison with other social groups and even supersede the disparities between educational groups.

6 Conclusion

Not only is voter turnout lower among workers, but this group is also underrepresented in parliament. These two facets of political inequality could possibly be tolerated if there were no or only minor differences in the political preferences of social classes. However, having examined more than 700 survey items from the last three decades in Germany, we find that there are considerable and consistent discrepancies in the attitudes of different occupational groups. While unskilled and skilled workers do not agree on all issues, the gap in attitudes is much more pronounced with regard to higher ranking white-collar employees, civil servants, and self-employed respondents. In many instances, the difference in opinions is only a matter of degree, but in a considerable number of cases there are principled disagreements. The opinions of different social classes align much more closely with adjacent classes than with more distant ones. The differences captured by other measures of stratification are not as large as those captured by social class, even though education is frequently used in empirical analyses.

Since occupational groups differ in their political preferences, there is ample scope for policymakers to respond to the interests of the electorate in an unequal manner. To date, there have been no studies determining whether or not this applies to Germany. Future research could help to establish whether substantive representation is biased against numerically underrepresented groups. Although the number of female parliamentarians in the *Bundestag* has reached 35 percent, only a small number of legislators were workers before entering parliament. As in other countries, lawyers, teachers, and the staff of political organizations are the most prominent groups in the German parliament and four out of five parliamentarians are university graduates. In contrast to the United States, private money is less important, however. Election campaigns are largely publicly funded and, in general, the amount of money spent is just a fraction of that spent in the United States. The *Bundestag* is not an assembly of the rich but very much one of higher ranking professionals and civil servants. Nevertheless, among the general population, these groups do not hold the same opinions as workers. If members of parliament share their peers' perspectives, political decisions will tend to be biased against the working class.

Given what we know about political inequality, it seems only natural to ask whether there is a need for some form of group representation of the working class. Primarily feminist scholars have convincingly argued that women and ethnic minorities should

be entitled to group representation. They have, however, generally rejected the notion that this should also apply to workers. However, over the last two decades, there has been a significant rise in social and political inequality even in formerly relatively egalitarian countries such as Germany. Patterns of class-based exclusion are reemerging and we need to reexamine how we can improve the political representation of the lower social classes. As trade unions are losing members and left-wing parties no longer recruit or mobilize workers in large numbers, their interests no longer figure prominently in public or parliamentary debates. While empirical evidence has shown that we do not live in a “classless society” (Kingston 2000), parliaments in wealthy democracies are not an accurate reflection of society. Middle-class males are overrepresented at the cost of women, migrants, and the working class. As long as society continues to believe that this has no consequences for the political agenda, for the positions taken in political debates, and, ultimately, for the policy decisions made, this will undermine democracy’s most cherished principle of political equality.

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