

The case for Increasing working class representation:

A study of Swedish working class attitude change from 2002-2021

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Abstract

This paper studies Swedish working class economic and cultural attitudes from 2002 to 2021 in order to discern whether increased radical right support has led to attitude change, and whether or not these changes complicate working class representation. The results suggest that whilst the working class has become slightly more left-leaning in its economical attitudes, cultural attitudes have become increasingly similar to those of the radical right. By including a variable for economic marginalisation, I find support for economic hardship being a contributing factor for increased radical right sentiment and inclination to vote for the Sweden Democrats. Through a Marxian conceptualisation of interests, this thesis concludes that increased representation of working class interests is desirable, but that the Sweden Democrats do not represent the substantive interests of the working class. This thesis contributes to the continuing study and understanding of new cleavages in Western European politics and how they affect party preferences among voters.

Keywords: Working class, socioeconomic preferences, sociocultural preferences, descriptive representation, substantive representation, radical right parties

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Throughout the 20th century, Sweden has been considered the poster child of the Social Democratic welfare state. Its state run capitalism generated considerable amounts of wealth, laying the groundwork for an egalitarian and solidaristic society, primarily focused on dampening social inequalities through an extensive welfare system (Blomqvist. 2004:139-140; Rothstein. 2015:2). This, however, has changed. Since the 1990's, social policy-making has become increasingly focused on economic efficiency and consumerism, viewing the public sector as a service provider, evaluated by its ability to satisfy consumer needs to the lowest possible cost (Blomqvist:151). Since this shift in policy orientation, the loss of outright egalitarian and equalising political ideals has led to the gap between rich and poor widening, not only in terms of material wealth, but also the accessibility to fundamental welfare services.

Wealth inequality has historically been relatively high in Sweden. The compensatory effect of the welfare state has led to low personal assets in an international comparative perspective, as the generous welfare state made investing in personal security nets redundant. Hence, capital wealth has become increasingly concentrated among top earners (Credit Suisse. 2023:55). Since 2014, 61.5% of accumulated wealth in Sweden has been allocated to the top 1% earners, largely due to a high concentration of capital which has become more important as a relative share of total income (Oxfam Sverige. 2023; Finanspolitiska rådet. 2024:3). The top share of wealth owned by the 1% equaled 35.8% in 2023, which has led to Sweden's wealth gini coefficient rising to a staggering 87.4. In contrast, Finland and Denmark show coefficients of 72.4 and 73.6, with the top 1% owning 25.5% and 23.4% of all wealth respectively (Credit Suisse. 2023:55). Among the Nordic countries, Sweden has the most unequal distribution of wealth.

Income inequality is also on the rise. In 2021, Sweden's income gini coefficient rose to 0.333, showcasing the highest level of unequal income distribution since measures began in 1975 (SCB. 2023). Whilst Swedes' economic standard has risen continuously since the 1990's, the relative share of the population with a low economic standard has also increased steadily since measures began in the early 2010's (SCB. 2023).

Whilst overall wealth is an important factor in a country's general welfare and prosperity, its effect on citizens' health and social welfare becomes less significant the more wealth a country generates (Pickett & Wilkinson. 2010:6). As countries get richer, what becomes more important for deciding the population's welfare is the relative difference between rich and poor. Income and wealth inequality have negative effects on several different aspects of society. It degrades levels of trust, hinders social mobility, lowers educational performance, reduces life expectancy and increases homicide rates (Pickett & Wilkinson: 19). Inequality also has a generational effect, i.e. it often perpetuates itself from generation to generation. Whilst these effects have been mitigated by Sweden's generous welfare programs, this effect has become less compensatory as said welfare programs are continuously streamlined and underfunded in order to chase efficiency (Blomqvist:151). Sweden now finds itself more economically unequal than ever in recent history, with an underfunded healthcare, declining school results, increased segregation and rampant gang violence resulting in a comparatively high rate of deadly gun violence per capita in Europe (Brå. 2021:5).

Increasing inequality, declining welfare and high unemployment are trends which tend to mobilise support for left-wing parties favouring redistributive economic policy. This is not the case in contemporary Sweden. Instead, support has surged for the radical right party, the Sweden Democrats. A large share of their support has come from working class voters who previously voted for the Social Democratic party (Jylhä et al. 2019:220). During the span of 20 years, a significant portion of the working class have gone from voting for a left leaning party to supporting the far right, which constitutes an unprecedented shift in the Swedish electorate (Oskarson & Demker. 2015:629; SVT. 2022). Although Sweden is far from being the only Western European country in which the radical right are experiencing a resurgence.

The historical ties between the workers movement and the Social Democratic party might make Sweden a less likely scenario, as instead of voting for the radical right in order to combat inequality, it would be expected of them to further align with economic left-leaning parties.

Compositionally, the working class has transformed. Blue collar occupations have diminished, as Sweden has moved from being a manufacturing economy to a service economy. But although its configuration has changed, the working class still exists, and almost definitionally belong to the poorer segments of society. Often, they bear the consequences of increasing economic inequality, as the welfare they depend upon declines both in terms of

quality and availability. This begs the question of why working class voters are mobilised towards the Sweden Democrats, a political party which does not favour a redistribution of resources to the poorer segments of society. As of the 2022 election, the Sweden Democrats allied with the right party government, which since its entry into power has made historical cuts in welfare spending amidst an economic recession and high inflation. During the election campaign, the party profiled around promises of making unemployment benefits more generous and easily accessible (Sverigedemokraterna. 2022:29). A promise which since then has been broken, as the unemployment fund is set to be reformed and become more restrictive. But if the Sweden Democrats are facilitating economic policy which stands in contradiction to the working class' economic interests, why are they so heavily supported by said social group?

Previous research from Gidron (2019) shows that working class voters are moving rightwards due to their sociocultural beliefs, i.e. traditions, habits and views entrenched in one's identity, being more salient than their socioeconomic one's (Gidron. 2019:148). As economic marginalisation increases, the working class prioritise nativist identities and values which are held in higher regard. Gidron theorises that working class voters are split into two groups, both favouring redistributive economic policy, but differing on sociocultural issues (ibid.). This however raises two questions. First, does the segment of the working class which has migrated to the right actually hold redistributive socioeconomic preferences? Or have their economic preference also shifted rightwards in an effort to harmonise their preference formation? Secondly, previous research has shown that working class individuals are largely absent from Swedish parliament, suggesting that the working class is underrepresented in national executive bodies (Folke & Rickne. 2023:1-2). In conjunction, these points beg the question of whether or not the working class has become too dissimilar in their preferences to be represented as a coherent voting block?

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to delineate how the working class' sociocultural and socioeconomic preferences have changed over time and understand to what extent preferences differ within it. In charting these changes better insight is gained into how changes occur within the working class and to what extent they can still be denoted as a homogenous segment of society. Throughout

this process, determining to what degree the working class would benefit from increased representation or whether their interests are antithetical to one another will be possible.

The general aim of this thesis is to further the understanding of the working class and its transformation, as historical political structures erode in favour of new issues and cleavages. Exploring working class attitude change can aid us in discerning how political competition in Sweden has evolved among different segments of society.

1.3 Research question

Drawing from the background and purpose statement, the research question derived for this thesis thus becomes:

How have Swedish working class voters' socioeconomic and sociocultural attitudes changed over time? How do these changes affect the ability to represent the working class as a homogeneous group?

1.5 Case selection

When studying political behaviour and class voting, Sweden can be studied as a prime example. The case contains one of the most successful labour movements in history, and has been the poster child of the Social Democratic welfare state. Throughout the 1900's, class voting remained strong in Swedish society, as traditional cleavages along left-right economic divides was seen as the most important political issue (Vestin. 2019:23). Previously high levels of class voting have since declined, but in a comparative perspective, levels of class voting are continuously high (ibid.).

The fact that class politics so rigidly structured the Swedish political system previously meant that the country provided a negative case of increased support for populist right parties in Europe (Rydgren. 2002:28). Social class and socioeconomic questions dominated Swedish politics, as sociocultural issues carried less saliency for voters. The explosive growth of the Sweden Democrats in the last decade has proven that this rigid structure would not last forever, as the party now amasses around 20% of the popular vote, with a large portion of their voters belonging to the working class (Rydgren & van der Meiden. 2016:6; SVT. 2022). Rydgren and van der Meiden point out three structural changes in Swedish politics which have facilitated this

growth: the decline of class voting, the growing saliency of sociocultural issues, and the depolarisation along the socioeconomic divide (Rydgren & van der Meiden:3).

They propose that realignment and dealignment has weakened class voting, as the alignment between working class voters and the Social Democratic party has decreased, politicisation of new issues has become not only possible, but more important, thus realigning the working class along new issues (Rydgren & van der Meiden:5-6). The authors also point towards a dealignment process, as Swedish voters become less and less confident in political institutions and parties. When dissatisfaction and mistrust become more wide-spread, political loyalty and party identification also decrease, enabling other parties to mobilise voters from across previous conflict lines (Rydgren & van der Meiden:8-9).

As a result of this re- and dealignment process, issue voting has become more prevalent. As social identities and class become less valuable as voting cues, party choice is instead dictated by stances on policy issues. This has led to politicisation of new issues, most notably the issue of immigration, a topic which had low saliency prior to the 2014 election around which the Sweden Democrats have mobilised support (Rydgren & van der Meiden:9-12).

The third structural change of Swedish politics is that of depolarisation along socioeconomic divides and the ideological convergence of mainstream parties (Rydgren & van der Meiden:14). These phenomena cause voters to perceive parties as being the same, exacerbating discontent and distrust towards the political establishment. In turn, niche parties can mobilise along political extremes. Due to convergence and depolarization of the socioeconomic issue dimension, niche parties are also able to politicise and mobilise along new issue dimensions (ibid.). Additionally, this convergence of mainstream parties has led to a socioeconomic consensus among centrist political parties, which in fact has been an economic shift towards the right, further exacerbating marginalisation and discontent among the working class. This 'consensus' and general agreement around rightist economic policy in Sweden can in large part be explained by supranational commitments and the increased independence of national fiscal bodies. For example, economic autonomy and political budgeting has been restrained by prior commitments to annual budget savings, explicit goals of reducing inflation, and the obligatory partaking in the European free market economy (Rydgren & van der Meiden:14-15). Thus economic governance has, to a certain extent, been depoliticised. Since the early 2000's the Social Democratic party have tried to appeal to a growing segment of

middle-class voters, as their traditional voter base has shrunk, whilst the Conservatives rebranded themselves as “the new workers party”, signalling a move towards the centre. Conclusively, distinguishing between Social Democratic and Conservative economic policy has become increasingly difficult for voters, as both parties have moved closer to the economic centre (Rydgren & van der Meiden:15-16).

1.6 Structure

The following section will introduce two fields of research which constitute the basis of this thesis, that of working class identity and working class representation. These provide insight into the political behaviour of the working class as a social group and how their interests are represented within different political contexts. Next, the theoretical section delves into how new cleavages in Western European politics have restructured party competition, and how the working class has come to ally itself with the radical right. Subsequently, the theoretical foundation for the concept of representation is presented. Concluding the theoretical section of this thesis, the operationalisations derived from the theoretical literature are presented and problematised. The hypotheses used in order to empirically answer the research question are then presented and motivated. Afterwards, the methodological segment describes the research design employed in order to answer the hypotheses, what data is utilised and the limitations which this thesis faces. The empirical results are then presented and analysed, followed by a discussion regarding the case of improving working class representation in Swedish politics. Concluding this thesis is a brief discussion of limiting factors, and objectives for future research.

2. Literature review

The literature is divided into two sections. One pertaining to working class identity, focusing on the recent development of working class voting behaviour and the underlying reasons for it, the second focuses on to what extent the working class is sufficiently represented and how representation is beneficial to the working class.

2.1 Working class identity

The sociocultural issue dimension has become increasingly prevalent in Western European politics, as the traditional socioeconomic issue dimension is losing its importance in structuring political party conflict. Gidron (2019) finds that working class voters are being cross-pressured, as parties combine welfare consumption politics with conservative nativist values, and libertarian free market politics with progressive liberal cultural values (Gidron:146). This would imply that as sociocultural issues become more salient, working class voters would be expected to split into two groups, both favouring redistributive policy, but differentiating along liberal or conservative cultural values. Gidron's theoretical expectations are that voters, to a greater extent, identify with issues that are more salient to them. In turn, issues gain saliency when attached to something considered desirable or positive in society. Since working class voters are enduring economic hardship, their socioeconomic status is perceived as something undesirable and negative, which in turn leads them to attach less saliency to these issues (Gidron:146). On the other hand, heightened prevalence of sociocultural issues in politics have increased nationalist and populist sentiments of the 'pure people', attaching positive connotations to being for example a native Swede. Hence, as working class voters have seen their socioeconomic status declining, and their sociocultural identity becoming beneficial, sociocultural issues become more salient (Gidron:148). As he concludes, it is enough to be conservative along one issue dimension, whether it is cultural or economical, in order to turn right, which would explain the increase in support for radical right parties, as those parties combine cultural conservatism with consumption favoured economic policy, as opposed to traditional left parties who tend to lean progressive along cultural lines (Gidron:147). According to Gidron, it would be expected to see a greater split among working class voters, where some move towards the radical right, and some remain with the traditional left working parties.

Oskarson and Demker (2015) provide further insight into the Swedish case, suggesting that established working class voters have realigned with the Sweden Democrats. The authors propose that this is not the result of increased anti-immigration sentiments or decreased voter polarisation along economic left-right positions, rather it is a result of working class dealignment with the Social Democratic party, combined with decreased left-right discernment between established parties. In turn, this has allowed working class voters to realign along authoritarian and libertarian positions (Oskarson & Demker. 2015:629). Their argument is that as long as both the supply and demand side of politics are divided along left-right dimensions, realignment or mobilisation along other conflict lines is unlikely, which is why working class voters historically have aligned with left parties in support of redistributive and consumption based economic policy (ibid.). Although, over the last decades there have been shifts in both the supply and demand side, as globalisation, modernization, and increased levels of education have shifted voters' value structures, as well as Social Democratic parties adopting liberal positions in order to retain or capitalise on middle class voters who embrace progressive views. For working class voters, this has caused the aforementioned dealignment and detachment from traditional Social Democratic parties, as they have instead aligned with the conservative and authoritarian values of radical right populist parties (ibid.).

The central puzzle for this thesis is the question why working class voters would vote for a populist radical right party, despite it not being in their socioeconomic interest. One perspective which has been considered is the realignment along authoritarian and libertarian divides presented by Oskarson and Demker. However, is the mere increased saliency of a new set of issues enough for voters to shift their political identities, and in extension, vote against their economic interests?

Jylhä et al. (2019) compare differences between the Sweden Democrats' voters who previously voted for the two larger mainstream parties, the Moderates and the Social Democrats, before further comparing those who migrated to the Sweden Democrats and those who stayed loyal to their previous party (Jylhä et al:220). The authors present three overarching motivations for voter mobility from mainstream parties to the Sweden Democrats, their socioeconomic status, sociocultural beliefs, and political distrust (Jylhä et al:224-228). Their findings are similar to those of Oskarson and Demker, however, they provide additional insight into voter migration from the Social Democratic party to the Sweden Democrats. A primary factor for this electoral

mobility is the relative increase in equality for historically marginalised groups, in combination with the decreased importance of manual labour, which has put poorly educated, predominately white, men who are employed in manual labour, in a relatively disadvantaged position in the international economy (Jylhä et al:224). Whilst radical right parties generally diffuse stances on economic policy, they tend to support rightist economic policy, this points to migrated voters from the Social Democrats either premiering their sociocultural values, or shifting their economic policy positions to align with their new party identity (ibid.). Sweden Democrat voters tend to be centrists regarding economic policy, however, as voters are aggregated as a group, it is unclear whether they mainly attract centrist voters, or if the distribution is proportionally left-right, resulting in an aggregate centrist position (Jylhä et al:225). The authors found that voters who migrated from the Social Democratic party to the Sweden Democrats tended to be more left leaning in their economic preferences than other Sweden Democratic voters. However, they lean more rightward, and hold more welfare chauvinistic views, than the average Social Democratic voter (Jylhä et al:239).

The relative loss of socioeconomic status which the working class has experienced coincides with them being socioculturally left behind. As society has grown more liberal and progressive, working class voters share the sentiment that other groups are being favoured, and that everyday Swedes are neglected by mainstream parties. In addition, as liberal sociocultural values often reside amongst the economic and cultural middle class, characterised by economic stability, repeated economic crises have disproportionately affected working class voters, something which perpetuates the sense of neglect (Jylhä et al:228-239). Taken together, there seems to be a split in the working class, as some migrate to the radical right, and some are retained in traditional working class parties such as the Social Democrats and the Left Party.

The question resides in whether or not this divide amongst working class voters is hindering working class interests from being realised, are these sociocultural divides and diffusion of interests hindering redistributive economic policy which would alleviate the working class' economic grievances?

Previous studies of subjective class identity have shown inconsistent results, as some studies show an overrepresentation of working class identities among the middle class, whilst some show an overrepresentation of middle class identities among the working class (Evans et al. 2022:1179). This has led to two distinct claims regarding income inequality, some assert that

class identity is accentuated by inequality, whilst others find inequality to distort individuals' connection between objective and subjective class. This has led to research showing that a working class identity either is linked to favouring redistribution or sociocultural conservatism (ibid.) Evans et al. (2022) instead show that class identity is dependent on national context, reflecting relative societal importance of cultural or economic values (Evans et al:1178). They find that in contexts in which class is ascribed, being working class is more intimately linked to particularistic sociocultural values, whilst in contexts in which class identity depends on current economic status, redistributive preferences are more important (Evans et al:1196).

2.2 Representing the working class

At the heart of this thesis lies the question of how democratic society can forward the interests of the working class. A group which in Sweden has seen themselves become increasingly marginalised, as economic inequality rises and aspects of the Swedish welfare state becomes less egalitarian. Forwarding the interests of marginalised groups is an important aspect of liberal democracy, as it improves perceived legitimacy and helps improve overall conditions of said group (Folke & Rickne:1). The marginalisation of the Swedish working class coincides with their decreased levels of representation. Fewer members of the working class reach the upper echelons of politics, whilst the Social Democratic party has increasingly focused on reaching the expanding middle class instead of their traditional working class supporter base. This constitutes a decline in their descriptive and substantive representation, two concepts which will now be explained.

When it comes to descriptive and substantive representation, the two concepts are not dichotomous. Researchers have studied the relationship and covariance between descriptive and substantive representation at length, but perhaps none have accounted for it with the same eloquence as Jane Mansbridge (1999), finding that descriptive representation of underrepresented groups can lead to their substantive interests being promoted (Mansbridge. 1999). In other words, when people in the electorate look like you, or when you can presume that they share the same experiences as you do, not only are you prone to feel better represented, in some instances your policy preferences are actually being forwarded . In her study *Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent 'Yes'* Mansbridge concludes that descriptive representation is desirable, in terms of resulting in substantive representation, in

specific contexts when certain criteria are met (Mansbridge:652). These circumstances are when communication has been impaired between groups, as one group historically has been subordinated, when issues are uncrystallized, as they haven't been on the political agenda for long enough, when certain groups haven't been included in the electorate, thus implying that they're unfit to rule, and when a polity's de facto legitimacy is seen as low within some groups, as they aren't proportionally represented in deliberations (Mansbridge:641-652). In such scenarios, the costs of implementing descriptive representatives is outweighed by the benefits marginalised groups receive in terms of their actual interests being represented (ibid.).

Several studies have found that descriptive representation can help further the substantive interests of different marginalised communities. More specifically, descriptive representation improves not only the substantive interests of these historically marginalised groups, but improves accountability, political legitimacy and political participation across a wide variety of political and geographical contexts (Rosenthal. 1995; Reinghold. 2006; Beckwith. 2007; Haider-Markel. 2007; Atkeson & Carrillo. 2007; Wägnerud 2009; Barnes & Burchard. 2012; Jones. 2014). However, political engagement and substantive representation is affected the most by descriptive representation when representatives belong to a preferred political party and issues are uncrystallized (Reinghold & Harrell. 2010; Espírito-Santo, Freire & Serra-Silva. 2020).

But does this hold for the working class? As Mansbridge states, descriptive representation translates into a substantive representation of interests, but only when certain criteria are met (Mansbridge:652). Carnes and Lupu (2015) as well as Barnes and Saxton (2019) conduct multi-level analysis on 18 Latin American countries in order to discern whether or not the inclusion of working class politicians in the legislature improves substantive representation and perceptions of legitimacy (Carnes & Lupu. 2015; Barnes & Saxton; 2019). Carnes and Lupu find evidence suggesting that politicians from working class backgrounds actually do bring redistributive perspectives to the table, showing a tendency to introduce bills geared towards improving workers' economic conditions (Carnes & Lupu:14). Their findings point toward social class background being the most important in the agenda-setting stages rather than in roll-call voting, as political parties possess less control in introducing new bills. When voting, however, politicians tend to tow the party line (ibid.). In support of these findings, Barnes and Saxton find that including the working class improves not only working class satisfaction, but the legislative satisfaction of the entire electorate. When the working class is included, both perceived approval

and trust is improved, suggesting that there is a link between working class descriptive representation and policy implementation favouring working class conditions (Barnes & Saxton:11). Barnes and Saxton argue that their findings are generalisable, although only in regions where wealthy elites dominate politics, inequality is high and trust in representative institutions is low (Barnes & Saxton:13). Further evidence is provided by Carnes (2012), who finds that social background affects economic policy outcomes in congress, outcomes which more often than not favour the upper-class (Carnes. 2012:22). His findings suggest that whilst the underrepresentation of working class individuals in political institutions is not the root cause of increased economic inequality, social background composition of political institutions can exacerbate inequality due to a lack of responsiveness, as affluent politicians are predisposed to promoting economic policy disadvantageous to less affluent groups (Carnes:22-23).

Contrary to these findings, Hahn (2022) uses cross-national ESS and CSS data in order to study preference congruence between working class voters and political elites in a Western European context, finding only small support for descriptive representation improving substantive representation (Hahn. 2022). Instead of social background, the main predictor of preference congruence is party affiliation (Hahn:16). However, this does not entail that working class citizens are adequately represented by existing political parties. Rather, Hahn points toward party homogeneity being the main problem, as working class preferences tend to be diametrically opposed along cultural and economical lines (Hahn:19). Furthermore, Hahn points out two methodological fallacies which might cause low levels of citizen-elite congruence for the working class which could suggest that increased working class descriptive representation might still be valuable. First, the two datasets employed differ on both wording and underlying response scales, which despite harmonisation reduces validity. Second, policy issues included in the data are general and not specific, more concrete policy issues likely make differences more pronounced (ibid.). O'Grady (2018) finds that working class MP's are more inclined to favour policies benefiting working class citizens, whilst careerist politicians favour strategic voting and towing the party line (O'Grady. 2018). As being an MP becomes an outright career path, adhering to internal party discipline becomes more important, and as career politicians become increasingly more common, MP's with working class backgrounds are phased out of Parliament, resulting in less opposition to welfare reform (O'Grady:32-33). O'Grady however mentions that

these findings might be highly contextual, in part due to the British majoritarian system and the volatile situation of the Labour Party in the 1990's (ibid.).

In conclusion, descriptive representation does seem to improve the substantive representation of working class voters, although the degree to which it translates appears tied to contextual factors. The question is whether or not these factors can be found in the case of Sweden, and if it therefore is possible to call for increased descriptive representation of the working class. In Latin America, North America and Western Europe, working class citizens are underrepresented, and have been for some time (Carnes & Lupu:6; Carnes:5; Hahn:11).

3. Theory

The theoretical section initially focuses on macro explanations for the changes occurring in Western European political systems, how voter segments and social groups are changing, and how new issue structures emerge. Sequentially, it delves deeper into different concepts of representation, how they function and interact.

3.1 Dealignment and realignment theory

Two central theoretical perspectives of class voting research are that of dealignment and realignment, which was briefly touched upon in the literature review. The former hypothesise that the historically stable class and political party structure is dissolving whilst the latter argues that it is just transforming (Vestin. 2019:7-8). Voting behaviour and social groups were formed as a result of the industrial revolution and the establishment of nation states, distinct groups such as the working class being largely isolated, political parties emerging from shared experiences within said groups (Vestin:7). Hence, party strength was determined by group size and degree of isolation from groups with overlapping interests. From this bottom up perspective, voting behaviour is predicted from social identity, as group identity becomes more overlapping and wealth increases. This reshapes societal group structures, creating new political factions with new sets of political preferences (Vestin:7-8). These changes would entail greater social heterogeneity, in turn making social group belonging a less distinct decider for political party affiliation. Another theory within the dealignment perspective suggests that as education and information becomes more readily available, social group belonging becomes less of a useful heuristic shortcut. Instead, party choice has become more sophisticated and issue based, as voters decide what issues are most important to them, rather than voting in accordance with their perceived social background (Vestin:8). From a top down perspective, the decline in class voting is instead explained by parties choosing to appeal through political questions in which social class is less useful in determining voter behaviour. Other top down approaches suggest that an ideological convergence amongst political parties weaken class voting. An alternative viewpoint explains decreasing working class party homogeneity through new political issues such as immigration and climate change, which cross pressure the working class population (ibid.)

Realignment theory argues that traditional conflict lines are being reconfigured as social structures and relations are changing in tandem with new political issues, new party policy positions and internal changes in the shape of party systems (ibid.). From a bottom up perspective, theory is most concerned with the social trends behind the recomposition of support for redistributive policy and the welfare state and the development of new political beliefs. Other top down institutional approaches suggest that labour market relations have distorted the economic left-right dimension as highly qualified specific labour becomes more vulnerable to market disruptions, parties blurring working class interests in order to appeal to segments of the middle class (Vestin:10; Häuserman, Kurer & Schwander. 2015).

3.2 New cleavages in Western European society

For a time, Western European political systems have experienced turmoil and restructuring. The previous hegemony of centre-left and centre-right parties has ruptured, as parties mobilising around new political issues have surged in popularity. Increased prosperity, secularisation and changing class structures have rendered traditional cleavages obsolete, thus weakening the grip of parties organised along said traditional cleavages. New parties and new ideological conflicts have weakened the impact of left-right economic values, but what underlying mechanics are spurring these changes? Ford and Jennings (2020) suggest that sociodemographic changes are the root cause to these new cleavages, as the composition of the electorate has transformed since the post-war period (Ford & Jennings. 2020:296). This thesis will be honing in on two emerging cleavages, the demographic decline of uneducated socially conservative white labour and the expansion of higher education (Ford & Jennings:300).

First, labourers with socially conservative attitudes who hold almost no educational qualifications have historically been snapped up by social democratic parties. As domestic industries declined, union membership decreased and economically left parties moved towards the centre, this voter segment has both shrunk and become increasingly unbound to a political party (Ford & Jennings:304). Demographic decline and the loss of political influence among this group has, in tandem with economic marginalisation, brought forth xenophobic and authoritarian attitudes, causing them to align with radical right parties (ibid.). In this case, the compositional changes in the electorate producing these attitudes are mass immigration, ethnic diversity and the establishing of significant muslim populations which have acted as “situational triggers” (ibid.).

This would lead us to expect that a homogeneous working class would overwhelmingly express support for reducing immigration and express distaste towards multicultural values.

Secondly, a larger number of people than ever hold university degrees, and as graduates hold distinct preferences, they have become a significant cohort in the electorate (Ford & Jennings:300). Graduates, juxtaposed to those with lower levels of education, have a tendency to hold liberal morals and values, rejecting social hierarchies, defending minority rights and shedding national identities (Ford & Jennings:300-301). In a globalised economy, cosmopolitan graduates fare better than uneducated nationalist, as they possess technical and cognitive skills more suited to the service oriented economy. The cleavage in this instance is created through the dichotomous relationship between the well educated market economy sociocultural liberals and the uneducated redistributive sociocultural authoritarians, i.e. the winners and losers of globalisation. As the working class belong to the losing side, it would be expected of them to be in favour of redistribution, state run welfare, and higher taxation, in order to compensate for their relative loss in the globalised economy.

3.3 Descriptive and substantive representation

This thesis is concerned with the question of representation, are Swedish working class interests aligned to such a degree in which the group can be called homogeneous? Or is there a divide amongst working class voters' interests which renders wide group representation difficult? In order for this thesis to answer those questions, I first need to derive a definition of what I mean when I say that *A is representing B's interests*. What do we do when we *represent*? And what do we define as someone's *interests*? Pitkin (1967), through her seminal work *The Concept of Representation*, offers an extensive framework on how representation works, what reasons we have for believing something is being represented, and how we construe someone's interest (Pitkin. 1967:10). She devises three different ways in which something can be represented, descriptively, symbolically and substantively, all three constructing different conceptualisations of what is being represented and how. This thesis is mainly concerned with the concepts of descriptive and substantive representation, i.e. when someone is representing through intrinsic characteristics they themselves possess or representing by forwarding the interests of those represented. Both concepts carry their fair share of theoretical difficulties, which will be expanded upon in the next section.

The fundamental concept of descriptive representation is concisely summarised by Pitkin: you represent by “being something rather than doing something” (Pitkin:61). The concept stems from the ideas of democratic proportionalism in which democratic functionality is based upon representational government mirroring society at large, the ideal type being a perfect resemblance of societal groups within governing bodies, thus representing the variety of interests in society (ibid.). Of course, exact proportionality is near impossible to attain within a political assembly or legislative body. What a descriptive assembly strives for in representing is not the average person within the populus. Instead, we are looking for representatives who are exceptional in some of their characteristics i.e. intelligence, experience or public spiritedness, whilst simultaneously possessing typical characteristics found within certain segments of the population (Pitkin:76). Meanwhile, these typical characteristics need to bear political relevance of some sort (Pitkin:88-89). They need to affect the ways in which different groups of people interpret contemporary political society.

Representation however does not solely function as a ‘standing for’ someone or something. In order for an individual or group to be properly represented there has to be a component of acting, as someone is representing not only your existence or presence, but also your interests, an ‘acting for’ or ‘speaking for’ component of representation (Pitkin:115-116). This pertains to what Pitkin denotes as the concept of substantive representation, as in representing someone or something by forwarding their interests (ibid.). When an agent ‘acts for’ someone it necessitates a deliberative component, our actions require justification and reasoning as if we were to explain ourselves to the person or group we are acting for (Pitkin:119). Through this line of reasoning, we cannot say that an agent represents a group solely because they indirectly happened to act in a way which forwarded said groups interests, representation has to be intentional. Substantial representation brings its own conceptual difficulties. Specifically, what lies in a person's interest?

The philosophical literature on interests and preferences is extensive to say the least; fully divulging this topic is not within the scope of this thesis (Hansson & Till. 2022). However, Pitkin does elaborate on the subject. In her view, representing someone’s interests consists in large part of a balancing act. On the one hand, completely submitting to forwarding the will of constituents renders representation useless, in the sense that the representative is not so much representing as relaying information, becoming more of a delegate than a

representative. On the other hand, the representative cannot assume full autonomy within the legislative, assuming they know the interests of the constituents better than the constituents themselves, and ignore the will of those he or she is supposed to represent. By disregarding their will they are not representing, but instead the representative becomes principal of the constituents' interests (Pitkin:162-165).

Understanding the definition of what lies in a person's interest, within the scope of this thesis, will in large part be explained through a Marxist conception of 'class interest'. In accordance with this view, class interests are seen as something objectively determinable, whether this interest coincides with the current preferences of the individual or not (Pitkin:158). Given this definition of interest, constituents might very well vote or act in direct contradiction to their interests, as they have a misconstrued understanding of what lies within their real interests (ibid.). The implications of this conceptualisation are twofold. First, it makes it possible for us to objectively ascertain what lies in someone's class interest. When we know what lies in someone's interest, it also becomes possible for us to assess whether or not their interests are being accurately represented. If we were to utilise a conceptualisation which on the one hand, balances the will of constituents, and on the other admit that they sometimes do not know their own interest, the conceptual clarity becomes too muddled in order to determine whether someone's interests are being represented or not. Second, the Marxist concept of class interest, or class consciousness, presupposes class homogeneity, as the main struggle within society is between those who do not hold the means of production, the proletariat, and those who seek to maintain control of the means of production, the bourgeois (Britannica. 2013). The overarching objective of each class being the seizing or maintaining of the means of production. However, the hegemony of the bourgeois is that *of a minority for said minority*, it is inherently self serving, and the maintaining of said hegemony only becomes possible as long as the bourgeois utilises its resources in order to suppress the class consciousness of other classes (Lukacs. 1989. p 69). Although, in order to gain class consciousness, a class needs to see its position and evolution in historical society with regard to the process of production, it requires said class to objectively infer consciousness on the entirety of society, a consciousness which is actively being suppressed by bourgeois society and the ruling class (Lukacs. p. 59-60). Hence, it is concluded that working class interests would be represented more accurately if they were to acquire class consciousness, as their interests then could be represented homogeneously without interference or suppression

by the bourgeois. This thesis concerns itself with exploring the working class' preferences, are they becoming increasingly dissimilar? And if that is the case, is it the root cause for the marginalisation of the working class?

3.4 Operationalisations

This thesis contains three major operationalisations; the working class; socioeconomic preferences; and sociocultural attitudes. First, as this study aims to describe preference changes within the working class, it is necessary to operationalise who the working class actually are. The second operationalisation aims to create a definition of what working class socioeconomic interests are in order to study how their preferences change. I use variables where working class preferences should be both unified and easy to identify, whilst also being typical for the left-right economic divide. Lastly, the sociocultural operationalisation attempts to define sociocultural attitudes central to radical right party ideology, which the working class is expected to have adopted. All operationalisations are problematised, elaborating on different strengths, weaknesses and limitations of the different variables chosen.

3.4.1 Operationalising the working class

Before delving into the operationalisation of the working class, a clarification regarding structure and concepts is in place. Whilst the main concern is studying the working class, they need to be compared with something in order to discern if changes are isolated to the working class or not. Therefore, three populations are used in order to contrast changes in working class attitudes; a hard operationalised working class population, consisting of several variables in order to demarcate who is considered to actually be working class; a weak operationalised working class population, solely using a variable for subjective self placed social class in order to demarcate those who see themselves as working class; and lastly, a population with no operationalised variables, in order to construct a control population. The hard operationalised population will henceforth be denoted as 'the working class', the weak operationalised population as the 'subjective working class', and the control population as the 'general population'.

Operationalising the concept of 'working class' is a difficult undertaking, seeing as it is cross-cutting, in the sense that adhering to a certain religion or belonging to an ethnic minority is not a sufficient criteria for being included (Berman & Snegovaya. 2019:10). The historical

connotation for being included within the working class voter segment has mainly depended on what occupational group you belong to. Historically, if you were a blue-collar worker in a labour-intensive industry, you belonged to the working class. However, throughout the 20th century, western democracies' economies have moved from relying on production of goods to being providers of service, something which has both diminished the traditional working class population, as well as blurred the lines of what constitutes the modern working class.

Cohen et al (2017) show that work prestige has diminished in recent history, as individuals put less emphasis on occupational titles defining their social class, instead using income as a defining factor to determine their place in the societal hierarchy (Cohen et al. 2017:1). Their results are not that surprising when considering the evolution of working class identity. When the traditional working class labour force diminishes, as manufacturing and physical labour become less prevalent within the economy, individuals look for other ways of conceptualising their class. Whilst subjective placement of class is multifaceted, it is not solely based on income, occupation, or background, a more objective identifier becomes an effective proxy in order to estimate class. More precisely, income becomes useful since it partly already factors for education, family background and occupation. Individuals from well off families tend to acquire more prestigious educations which in turn lead to occupations that generate more income. Additionally, people from well off families tend to maintain the class background from which they were raised, and the subjective as well as objective social class of people with working class backgrounds tends to shift when they acquire higher education, often because they see their income rise.

Additionally, a large part of policy promoting working class interests has historically been characterised by being redistributive. As blue-collar workers worked long shifts with small salaries, they were perceived as belonging to a lower strata of society, their work being more physically demanding than that of a clerk or government official, and receiving relatively little compensation in comparison. Redistributive economic policy, as well as labour regulation, were, in the Swedish case, in large part enacted to improve conditions for the working class. Social security such as pensions, healthcare and education have been intimately tied to the Swedish labour movement. All in large part due to the relative economic hardship of working class people. In other terms, the question of income and material standard has historically been

intrinsic to the concept of the working class. Hence, it is also intrinsically tied to the operationalisation of the working class in this thesis.

However, there are certain limitations when solely using self-placed subjective class perception and income as ways of operationalising the concept. With the former, there is a risk of including people who see themselves as working class when in reality, their material standard would make them comfortably middle class. This could be down to either holding social working class preferences, having been raised in a working class family or just being downright incorrect or dishonest in their classification. The same goes for the reverse relationship, i.e. subjectively identifying oneself as middle class whilst in reality belonging to the working class. Cohen et al denotes this as the “Victorian bargain”, as individuals who economically belong to the working class identify themselves as middle class based on morality, holding traditional religious, sexual and societal preferences (Cohen et al:3-4). Whilst the “Victorian bargain” has lost its historic relevance for the modern working class, similar processes have been observed among working class individuals, by transforming one's social identity through dissociation in an attempt to climb the social ladder (Kaufman. 2005). By using the latter, there are similar risks. Solely basing the operationalisation on income can generate false positives, including people who are yet to join the labour force, people who are willfully unemployed and students. These segments of society, whilst momentarily having lower incomes, are not guaranteed to be future members of the working class, neither are they likely to identify themselves as working class individuals.

In order to operationalise the concept of working class this thesis utilises both self placement and income, only including respondents who fall below the median income and perceive themselves as being part of a worker household. Whilst this operationalisation will exclude cases which might have been relevant, it makes the conceptualisation more precise, only including cases in which working class identity is substantiated by both subjective self perception and more objective economic indicators.

The selection of variables from the society, opinion, and media (SOM) dataset in order to operationalise the working class are exclusionary and threefold. First, all respondents who did not identify themselves as living in a ‘working home’ were excluded from the working class. This is the primary subjective self placement variable and accounts for subjective class.

Second, all respondents whose household income superseded 500,000 Swedish crowns were excluded. This variable constitutes the objective class variable. Using household income is

not ideal, seeing information regarding the size of respondents' household is lacking, i.e. it is unknown whether or not there are multiple people contributing to the total income. The upper limit of 500,000 SEK is chosen due to two factors. Firstly, the variable is numeric, ranging from 1-5, very low to very high, and is secluded into hundreds of thousands. As I am conceptualising an aspect of being working class as having a relative economic disadvantage, I include respondents whose income is below the median, which in 2022 amounted to 371,000 SEK a year (SCB. 2024). Although, the SOM variable combines 300,000-400,000 and 400,000-500,000 into one value, medium income. In order to include a sufficient number of observations, potential households in which one person earns 500,000 SEK a year are included, which is above the median income of Sweden. However since information regarding household constitution is lacking, more than one person could be contributing to the gross household income. This would entail that for two working adults, their monthly income would be close to 21,000 SEK, significantly below the Swedish median. However, this also means that if a household is made up of two working adults earning 28,000 SEK each, their gross household income would be considered as 'high' in the dataset at 672,000 SEK, hence being excluded from the operationalisation. This is a problematic aspect regarding the validity of the operationalisation as it inherently excludes cases which should be included and includes cases which should be excluded due to lack of information.

Lastly, students and pensioners are excluded from the selection of observation. Students are excluded due to them not being active in the labour market. Whilst it is possible that students either used to belong to the working class prior to pursuing a higher education, or, are enrolled at a university for applied sciences, there is no possibility to discern them from non working class students. Additionally, there is no way of differentiating between those who are pursuing a degree and those who are attending a singular course. Although in general, attending university tends to increase expected income over time, and since there is no way of differentiating between types of students, they are excluded as a precaution in order to not include respondents who do not fit the operationalisation.

Pensioners are at a similar economic disadvantage as the working class, but they are not active in the labour market. Hence, they are excluded. An important thing of note is the inclusion of the unemployed. Similarly to students and pensioners, the unemployed are at an economic disadvantage but do not partake in the labour market. However, unlike pensioners, the

unemployed are projected to re-enter the labour market at some point, and since they identify as working class, they would be included had they been gainfully employed. Another note on the inclusion of the unemployed within the working class operationalisation is that unemployed benefits and work security have been among the strongest pillars of the workers movement throughout history. Unemployment benefits are policy areas which are heavily prioritised by both Social Democratic and Sweden Democratic voters. The Sweden Democrats also attract the highest share of unemployed voters.

3.4.2 Operationalising socioeconomic preferences

In order to discern whether or not the working class' economic preferences have changed, the definition of economic preferences first has to be operationalised. In doing this I try to pinpoint survey questions in which it would be expected of working class individuals to hold similar preferences. As a part of the working class operationalisation includes a low income component, variables with clear incentives for economically disadvantaged individuals are preferable. This is down to the fact that people with smaller incomes stand to benefit more from economic redistribution, government sponsored welfare or larger taxation. It would be expected from them to rationally maximise their utility. All of these components can also be categorised as policies typically championed by the workers movement as they improve economic equality. Due to the scope and length of this thesis, three variables are chosen in order to operationalise the socioeconomic preferences of the working class.

Due to the thesis' operationalisation of the working class being quite comprehensive, and the study's time span being quite extensive, two criteria become increasingly important when choosing a fitting variable. These are a large number of cases and a continuous time series. Unfortunately, All SOM-variables are not created equal. Some are only asked sporadically over the duration of a couple of years and some simply lack valid cases in order for us to generalise observations. Hence, some variables which might have been more fitting in order to operationalise economic preferences have been disregarded, this will be problematised further in the discussion section of this thesis.

The chosen variables which construct the 'economic preference' operationalisation are 'lower taxes', 'reduce the public sector' and 'healthcare should be managed by the private sector to a larger extent'. The first variable is macroeconomically oriented, and gives an idea of

respondents' socioeconomic ideological orientation. People who lean leftwards tend to see taxation as something favourable, whilst those who lean rightward tend to favour tax-cutting. The second variable is more obviously ideologically tied, as right-leaning parties often champion the reduction of the public sector, whilst left-leaning parties tend to oppose this view. Hence, it is expected that opposition towards reducing the public sector would appeal to the working class, whilst support for the policy is expected to be low.

The third variable, whether or not the private sector should be more responsible for healthcare, is a policy question in which ideological division is quite obvious. The economically left-leaning parties are very heavily pro state healthcare, whilst economically right parties favour privatisation. Additionally, low income earners should theoretically favour state-run healthcare, as larger costs are covered through taxation, making for an extensive social security net and providing healthcare which they in many cases could not afford.

The strong point of these variables is that they are clear in ideological distinction, with right-wing parties generally supporting a smaller public sector in order to limit public expenditures in combination with lowering taxes (Herwartz & Theilen. 2017:75; Högström & Lidén. 2023:250) Left-wing parties on the other tend to champion a larger public sector and increased taxation (Högström & Lidén. 2023:250). The last variable concerning increased healthcare management by private actors is murkier. Whilst this issue typically splits the left and right party blocks, parties relying more heavily on cultural identity are more volatile. For example, the Christian Democrats want to nationalise healthcare entirely, whilst the environmental party wants more private non-profit actors to be responsible for healthcare (Kristdemokraterna. 2023; Miljöpartiet. 2023). Although this diffusion is not expected to impact the validity of the operationalisation, as both parties typically attract an insignificant amount of working class voters.

Another strength of the variables used to operationalise working class economic preferences is that they are continuously asked over a significant period of time and have a high number of valid cases. Thus, changes can be observed from year to year whilst simultaneously ensuring that validity is high.

However, there are a few problematic aspects of the operationalisation. For example, whilst taxes generally work as a good heuristic shortcut for economical position, they are a multifaceted tool. Economically disadvantaged members of the working class might actually

prefer lower taxation due to their strenuous situation. Additionally, they might prefer lower taxation for their own social group and higher taxation for middle or high income earners. Also, the quality of welfare in Sweden, whilst generally good in a comparative perspective, has deteriorated. Long waiting times to receive healthcare, staff shortages, closing of facilities in rural areas and the underfunding of public schools might lead to citizens feeling that they are not getting their money's worth, which in turn might lead to a preference for lower taxation. This negatively impacts the validity of the operationalisation. Similar arguments apply to the public sector and privatisation of healthcare variables. This is problematic, however adequate data on variables which might have been more fitting in operationalising economic preferences is lacking.

An argument which could be made is that whilst these variables signify distinct economical and ideological positions, none of them are inherently tied to working class preferences. Whilst similar preferences should be expected among economically disadvantaged respondents, none of these variables are specific to the working class experience historically. If this is the case, are the working class' economic preferences being measured, or is it simply the study of low income earners' preferences? If it was proven that working class preferences regarding issues intimately tied to the benefit of their social class, preference change in a less likely case would be proven. This would seriously bolster the claims of this thesis. The answer as to why such variables are not used is simply that the variables in the SOM dataset which pertain to, for example, unemployment benefits and workers rights either lack continuous measurement or valid cases. They cannot be used without weakening the generalisability and validity. However, a counter argument can be made as to why these variables should not be used in the first place. Since these variables are intimately tied to the workers movement and the working class, there is a possibility that overall, their economic preferences have changed, just not pertaining to these specific questions. Chances are that solely looking at these specific variables, results in missing big picture changes in the working class' preference formation. An ideal scenario would be a combination of general economic questions and specific working class economic issues, however, that is not possible due to data limitations.

3.4.3 Operationalising sociocultural preferences

From the theoretical section, three sociocultural issues in which the working class are presumed to have moved further rightward are derived. These are immigration, trust in the daily press and trust in the government. As new cleavages emerge over time, it is expected of social groups to realign themselves among their social groups, and as the working class has moved closer to the radical right, the working class are expected to continuously move rightwards. It is also expected that, over time, the working class leans further right than the subjective working class and general population.

Anti-immigration sentiments have been the focal point of radical right parties' political agenda. This is also true in the case of Sweden. The issue has been politicised and mobilised by the radical right party the Sweden Democrats, appealing to the white working class segment of the population. Anti-immigration sentiments resonate well with the marginalised working class, as immigrants are seen as welfare dependent and spreading cultural beliefs directly opposed to nativist values (Mudde. 2012:9-10). Hence, the variable 'accept fewer refugees into Sweden' is included. Immigration became increasingly politicised during the 2010's as the Sweden Democrats grew exponentially. Thus, it is expected that working class immigration attitudes grow increasingly negative over time. Additionally, I expect that the working class hold more negative views of immigration than the subjective working class and general population.

Desinformation and mistrust of established media has increased in recent years (Säkerhetspolisen. 2022). As news consumption has moved over to social media, citizens can now get their news from fringe media outlets or actors who are untruthful or hold strong political bias. In turn, this has led to a relativisation of truth in news media as one can pick and choose what to believe. The exponential growth of alternative media also fuels mistrust against established media outlets, as they are accused of hiding the truth or pushing a political agenda. In the case of Sweden, the public service broadcasting company (SVT) and the public service radio company (SR) have been scrutinised by the Sweden Democrats for a perceived left-wing bias (SVT. 2018; Aftonbladet. 2024). This can lead to a perception of established media outlets 'hiding the truth', further fuelling feelings of marginalisation and pushing people towards political extremes. Alternative media outlets often take anti-establishment positions which resonate well with working class voters who perceive themselves as becoming increasingly

marginalised, often confirming their worldviews or biases. Thus, it is expected that the working class will harbour more resentment and less trust towards the daily press.

Lastly, as radical right parties often position themselves as anti-establishment in order to capitalise on disillusioned voters a variable for political mistrust is included. Among marginalised groups, such as the working class, satisfaction and trust in the political process tend to decrease as their situations go unaddressed (Hayes & Hibbing. 2016:3-4). Additionally, feeling like the political process is illegitimate, or that your interests are not being represented, the acceptance of anti-democratic methods increases, thus weakening democracy (Ford & Jennings:304). Increased political mistrust among the working class, relative to that of the subjective working class and general population, would suggest that economic hardship further enhances feelings of marginalisation and political illegitimacy. As the population becomes increasingly disillusioned with the political process, they turn to anti-establishment parties that do not alleviate their economic grievances. I expect that political trust has decreased to a larger extent among the working class than the general population, and further mistrust among the working class population, as they suffer economic hardship.

Trust in government is chosen as opposed to trust in political parties, the reason being that I expect working class voters to be more inclined to support the Sweden Democrats, a party which has not been in government. Additionally, results in political mistrust might be misconstrued when looking at political parties, as the entry of the Sweden Democrats might yield strong trust among the working class, thus nullifying evidence of overall political mistrust.

In summation, three variables are chosen in which I assume that the working class has moved further rightward, not only in relation to the general public, but in relation to the subjective working class as well. These are also the sociocultural variables which I perceive to be most apt in explaining working class migration to the radical right, despite it not being in their economic interest. I also presume that the variable for political mistrust can strengthen the claim for increased working class representation.

Conclusively, the variables chosen are all measured over a significant period of time and contain a substantial number of valid cases, improving the ability to generalise the findings.

4. Hypotheses

From the theoretical background, I derive three hypotheses about working class preferences which will be tested empirically through this thesis. These will be exemplified below.

As has been highlighted throughout the theoretical section, the working class has suffered increasing economic hardship. And as their socioeconomic status suffers, they turn to their sociocultural identities in order to regain some form of societal status. Thus, they activate nativist identities, subduing their socioeconomic preferences and identities (Gidron:148). As socioeconomic identities lose saliency, the working class' socioculturally conservative identities become more important, premiering values such as being ethnically Swedish, refuting multiculturalism, and embracing traditional Swedish cultural beliefs. On the supply side, the decreased saliency of the previously strong socioeconomic left-right divide has allowed political parties to mobilise along sociocultural lines. In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats have politicised immigration, arguing that multiculturalism is antagonistic to Swedish cultural values. Hence, they have captured increasingly larger parts of the working class voter segment who, due to economic marginalisation, have attached increased saliency to their sociocultural identities. Simultaneously, in an attempt to capture voters from an expanding middle class, the Social Democrats have become increasingly socioculturally liberal, thus decoupling parts of their previously strong ties to the working class and facilitating working class mobility within the political system (Rydgren & van der Meiden:5-9). Due to the inclusion of income in the working class operationalisation, it is expected that they will be more inclined to vote for the Sweden Democrats than the subjective working class and general population. The first hypothesis thus becomes:

H1: The working class will be more inclined to vote for the Sweden Democrats than the subjective working class and general population.

Working class voters tend to hold economic preferences in favour of redistribution. Due to their historical economic marginalisation, state sponsored welfare and extensive security nets have been paramount in the pursuit of dampening inequality between social groups. As income and wealth inequality in Sweden has increased continuously, it would be expected that working class support for redistribution and the maintenance of the Swedish welfare state would grow stronger

over time. As working class voters recognize their relatively disadvantaged position within society, it would be expected that they support policies which would address their hardship. However, as has been stated throughout the literature, large portions of the working class have migrated to radical right parties, subduing their socioeconomic preferences in favour of their sociocultural one's. Whilst a majority of working class voters are still expected to hold redistributive or left-leaning policy preferences, as more individuals move rightwards in party preference it would also be expected that some of them change their socioeconomic preferences in order to align better with their sociocultural identity. I expect that this would create increased rightist socioeconomic preferences among the working class, as a larger portion of this group moves to the radical right. As the first hypothesis states, I expect the working class to be more inclined to vote for the Sweden Democrats. It would thus be logical to expect the hard working class' socioeconomic preferences to become more right leaning over time compared with the subjective working class and general population. This is mainly due to the proportionally smaller share of the subjective working class I expect to move rightwards, resulting in a smaller relative increase in economic right preferences. In other words, whilst the working class are expected to be more left leaning, I also expect that support for redistributive economic policy will decrease over time. The second hypothesis becomes:

H2: Working class support for left-leaning economic policy will be smaller in 2021 than in 2002. The working class will shift more rightward than the subjective working class and the general population.

As has been discussed in the theoretical section, radical right parties have politicised and mobilised around sociocultural issues which previously were not of salience in Swedish politics. With the socioeconomic cleavage losing its saliency, sociocultural issues have sprung up and become increasingly important in attracting voters. As was concluded in the first hypothesis, this will result in the historically socioculturally conservative working class migrating to the radical right. The underlying reason for this being the loss of status as working class voters become relatively poorer compared to other segments of society. As I expect economic marginalisation to be an active mechanism in pushing the working class rightward, my hypothesis is that the working class will move further rightward, adopting the more extreme attitudes of the Sweden

Democrats. Presumably, the subjective working class will also move right, however not to the same extent as the working class, seeing as there is no variable for economic marginalisation. As Swedish politics have begun leaning more rightward, I expect a general shift among the general population, however not to any similar effect of the working class and subjective working class. Hence, the third hypothesis reads as follows:

H3: The working class' sociocultural preferences will become relatively more right-leaning over time compared to the subjective working class and general population.

These are the three hypotheses which will be tested in order to answer the research question of this paper. In the next section, the methodological considerations and research design used to test these hypotheses will be elaborated upon.

5. Methods and material

5.1 Research design

The research design employed in this thesis is quite straightforward. My aim is to examine changes within socioeconomic and sociocultural working class preference formation. Thus, I operationalise and define the working class and analyse how attitudes towards different policy questions change over time. Since I am dealing with survey questions, I look at how percentage shares of answers differ over the time period. In order to discern whether changes in attitudes are specific to the working class, I contrast and compare it with the subjective working class and the general population. By contrasting the sample with both the subjective working class and general population, I can study whether or not changes in the working class are isolated to the working class or trends in the entire population and to what degree they differ. It also allows me to examine whether or not attitude changes in the working class are more noticeable than in the subjective working class, i.e. whether trends are more extreme among what I operationalise as the working class. Due to attitudes varying from year to year, the extremities of the temporal demarcation will be used in order to discern general trends.

As attitudes among survey respondents are studied, the variables are ordinal, making causal inference impossible. What I am instead able to do is make descriptive inferences, comparing the results with one another and testing the level of significance through chi-squared tests of independence, comparing expected and observed results in order to determine whether there is a link between the variables or whether it is incidental (Wieringa. 2014:135-141). Below, the research design employed in answering the hypotheses will be elaborated upon in greater detail.

H1: The working class will be more inclined to vote for the Sweden Democrats than the subjective working class and general population.

In order to answer the first hypothesis, I compare the party preference variable between the working class, subjective working class and general population and measure how it has changed over time. Parties who as of 2021 do not hold a place in parliament are removed. I create a line

graph for the working class, one for the subjective working class and one for the general population, with one line for each political party depicting percentage share of party preference. This generates three graphs delineating how large shares of the working class, subjective working class and general population prefer each political party from 2002 to 2021. This allows me to compare the shares who support the Sweden Democrats among the working class, the subjective working class and the general population. In order to strengthen the claim, the odds ratio of being working class and preferring the Sweden Democrats is calculated. This allows comparisons in inclination of voting for the Sweden Democrats among the working class, subjective working class and general population, examining whether inclination increases the most among the working class.

H2: Working class support for left-leaning economic policy will be smaller in 2021 than in 2002. The working class will shift more rightward than the subjective working class and the general population.

In answering the second hypothesis, I employ a similar design to the previous one. Three policy suggestions make up the combined socioeconomic operationalisation, “lower taxes”, “reduce the public sector” and “increase the privatization of healthcare”. The changes in attitudes over time are what will be examined. For the working class, subjective working class and general population I create line graphs, charting a line for each possible answer corresponding to the answered percentage every year within the temporal demarcation. This generates three graphs depicting attitudes towards each policy for the working class, subjective working class and general population, and enables me to compare policy attitude change both within and between each population. In order to establish whether or not the working class has become more right leaning in its socioeconomic preferences, shares of combined positive and negative attitudes towards policies between the populations are compared. In order to test whether or not the results are significant, I run chi-squared tests of independence on the distributions of being working class and share of answers for each policy, predetermining an alpha value of 0.05..

H3: The working class’ sociocultural preferences will become relatively more right-leaning over time compared to the subjective working class and general population.

In order to test the third hypothesis, I employ the same design as was used to answer the second hypothesis, only it is applied to the sociocultural operationalisation instead. Three variables make up the sociocultural operationalisation, “trust in government”, “accept fewer refugees into Sweden” and “trust in the daily press”. As was done in the previous hypothesis, a line graph corresponding to each policy for each of the populations is created. I then observe and compare changes in attitudes throughout the time span. In order to establish whether or not the working class has become relatively more socioculturally right-leaning I compare shares of combined positive and negative attitudes towards policies between the populations and run chi-squared tests of independence on the distributions of being working class and share of answers for each attitude. The predetermined alpha value chosen to test the level of significance is 0.05.

5.2 Data

In order to conduct this study extensive data which charts Swedes’ party preferences, policy preferences, and cultural attitudes over a considerable amount of time is required. In order to achieve this, the cumulative SOM dataset will be employed. Below, the cumulative SOM dataset will be introduced, motivated and problematised.

The SOM institute at Gothenburg University conducts surveys that track Swedes’ views on politics, society, democracy, and values, as well as their background, income, and employment. Their cumulative dataset contains 1,424 variables with 165,840 observations for individuals residing in Sweden between the ages of 16 to 90, dating back to 1986 (SOM institute. 2024). This should be considered extensive and allows me to use a wide array of characteristics and preferences in order to construct both a comprehensive working class identity and socioeconomic and sociocultural operationalisations. Surveys are conducted annually from a randomised sample with a response rate around 50%. Although the response rate has continuously decreased, at 50% it should be considered high in an international perspective (Folke & Rickne:46). Though, this does imply that as I come closer to the penultimate year within the data, the sample becomes slightly less representative.

The temporal demarcation of this study is between 2002 and 2021. Ideally, I would have employed a time-span reaching further back in time, it is however not feasible within the scope of this thesis. The year 2002 is a fitting starting point as it constitutes an entire election cycle

preceding the formation of the right party alliance that gained electoral success in 2006. It also precedes the Sweden Democrats almost reaching the 4% parliamentary barrier, marking their entry into the collective consciousness of the public. The year 2021 is chosen due to data limitations, as the SOM-surveys for 2022 were not available. This is unfortunate as 2022 was a pivotal election year in Sweden which saw a right wing government elected with the support of the radical right party the Sweden Democrats. The coalition of right parties was largely successful due to their ‘tough on crime’ and ‘tough on migration’ stances, as gang related shootings have increased significantly in Sweden during the last couple of years. The Sweden Democrats have been given a crucial role in Swedish politics as the government relies on their support for a majority in the legislature. Also, the government has proceeded over an economically volatile period as Sweden has experienced both recession and high inflation. Cuts in welfare spending, higher interest rates and increased food prices have seen more Swedes impoverished and struggling to make ends meet.

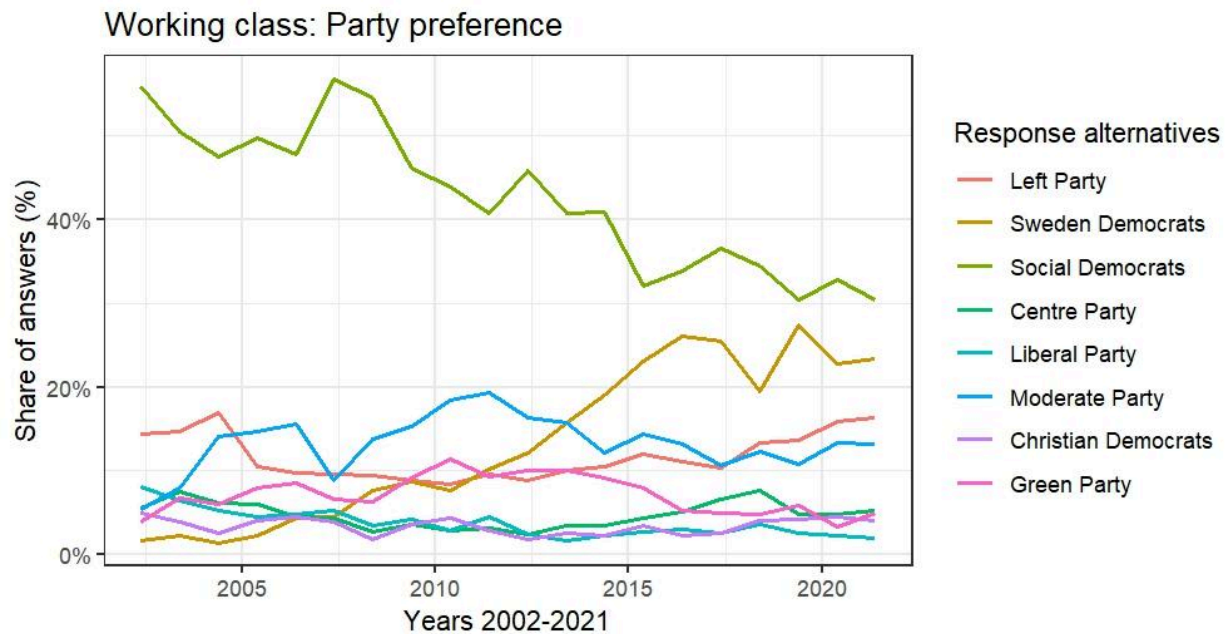
Since the election in 2022, the government has passed increasingly restrictive laws on criminality which have been criticised due to a lack of legal certainty. Another problematic aspect of this demarcation is that since the 2022 election, the Social Democratic party has introduced an updated societal analysis, in which they derive several societal failings as the consequence of increased immigration (Socialdemokraterna. 2023; Socialdemokraterna. 2023). Whether these factors impact the alignment to the Social Democratic party within the working class voter segment is something which cannot be investigated within the scope of this thesis.

6. Results and analysis

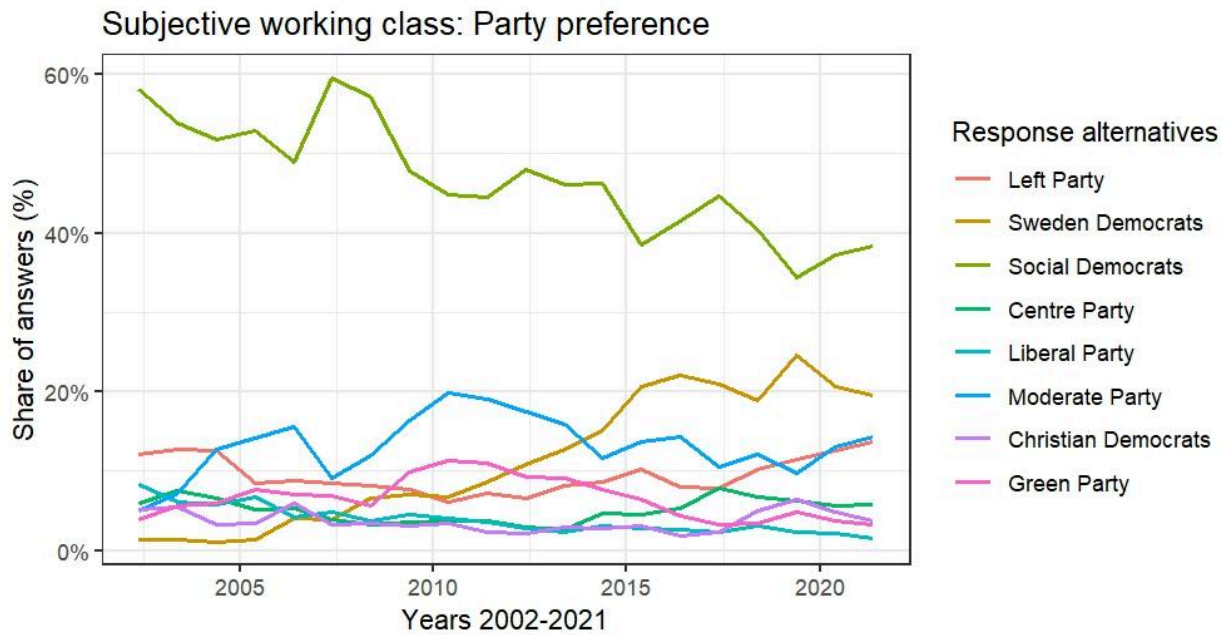
6.1 Working class party preference

Before delving into working class preference and attitude changes, I first need to look at how the working class segments' voting behaviour has changed. These results will be compared with those of the subjective working class and the general population. In doing this, insights into how working class party mobility has changed since 2002 are gained and to what degree a 'divided working class' can be spoken of. Comparing the results with those of the subjective working class generates a better understanding of how employment and economic marginalisation affect party preference.

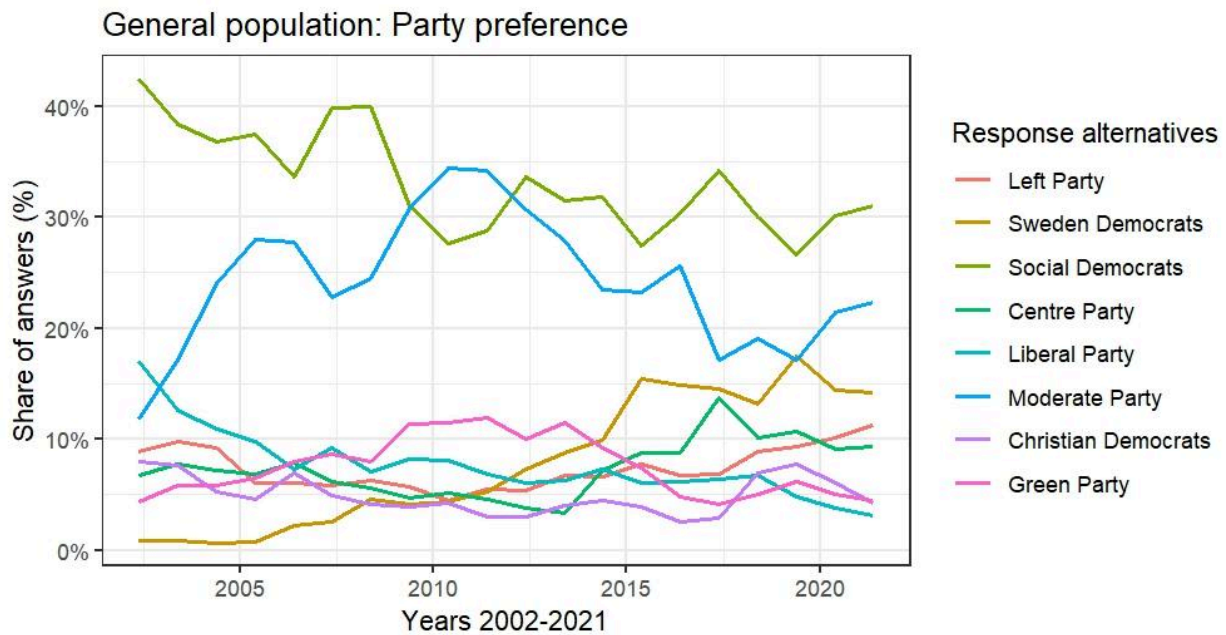
Graph 1a: Shares of working class party preferences from 2002-2021



Graph 1b: Shares of subjective working class party preferences from 2002-2021



Graph 1c: Shares of general population party preferences from 2002-2021



The most notable difference in voting behaviour when comparing the working class and subjective working class is the pronounced downturn in vote share for the Social Democrats. In 2002 the Social Democratic party amassed over 50% of the vote share among the working class and subjective working class. In 2021 their share has shrunk to 38% in the subjective working

class and a staggering 30% in the working class. The party has suffered huge losses regardless. The 25 percentage point drop in the working class however suggests that the working class vote has become increasingly accessible to other parties, a historical first in the case of Swedish politics.

Simultaneously, support for the Sweden Democrats has surged since the mid-2000's. Notably, the working class continuously yields higher support for the Sweden Democrats, reaching a peak of 27.5% of the vote share in 2019 compared to that of 24.5% in the subjective working class during the same year. Nevertheless, support for the Sweden Democrats among the working class has increased substantially, resulting in the party becoming the second largest among working class voters. The calculated odds ratio of being working class and voting for the Sweden Democrats amounts to 1.68 (1.60-1.78) at a 95% confidence interval, suggesting that being working class increases inclination to vote for the party. Another observation is the difference in trend line when comparing the working class and subjective working class. The former shows a trend towards decreasing support for the Social Democrats and an increase in support for the Sweden Democrats, whilst the latter trends toward the reverse. Apart from the obvious difference in share of support between the working class and subjective working class, the working class shows a reversed trend in future working class voter behaviour with regards to the Sweden and Social Democrats.

Another thing of note is that the Moderates seem to have cemented their support among the working class. Peaking at almost 20% around the 2010's, their support has since decreased, but remains solid at around 10-14% among the working class and subjective working class. Lastly, support for the Left Party has also gone through some interesting changes. Whilst the beginning of the 2000's saw them garner relatively high support, their results fell to about 10% from 2003-2017. Since 2017, their support has gradually increased, eventually returning to the level of support they enjoyed in the early 2000's. A not too unexpected difference between the working class and subjective working class is that the Left Party receives around 1-2 percentage points more support in the former than in the latter. This difference has increased marginally closer to 3 percentage points in the latter years of the time period. It is however impossible to ascertain whether or not this will be a sustained trend.

Looking at the graph depicting the party preferences of the general population, the differences are, as expected, substantial. Most notably, the Moderates are considerably more

preferred among the general population as they steadily hold the position as Sweden's second largest party, even surpassing the Social Democrats at one point. Similar to the working class and subjective working class, the Social Democratic party loses a considerable amount of supporters, dropping by eleven percentage points during the time period. Both the baseline support and drop-off for the Social Democrats are smaller among the general population. Interestingly enough, support for the Social Democrats in 2021 is almost the exact same in the general population as in the working class. While support for the Sweden Democrats also increases among the general population, their growth is far from as striking as in the working class or subjective working class. Peaking in 2017, they have since stagnated and show a slight downwards trend, similar to the subjective working class graph. Support for the Left Party in the general population follows a similar pattern to the working class and subjective working class. Whilst support is 1-2 percentage points lower, the overall evolution is similar, showcasing growth since 2017.

In summation, the general population depicts a less polarised party system than that of the working class and subjective working class, the general trends are similar but less extreme. The most noticeable characteristic of the working class graph is that when factoring for employment and income, support for the Sweden Democrats increases whilst support for the Social Democrats decreases. In other words, economic marginalisation and employment seem to increase the inclination to move to the radical right. Working class voters also seem to have become more divided. In 2002, the Social Democrats and Left Party held 70.26% of working class support, in 2021 they only managed 46.84% (74.22% in 2002 and 51.85% if the Greens are included). Furthermore, support for parties closer to the political extremes of the political system has increased since 2010, as both the Left Party and Sweden Democrats have seen significant growth.

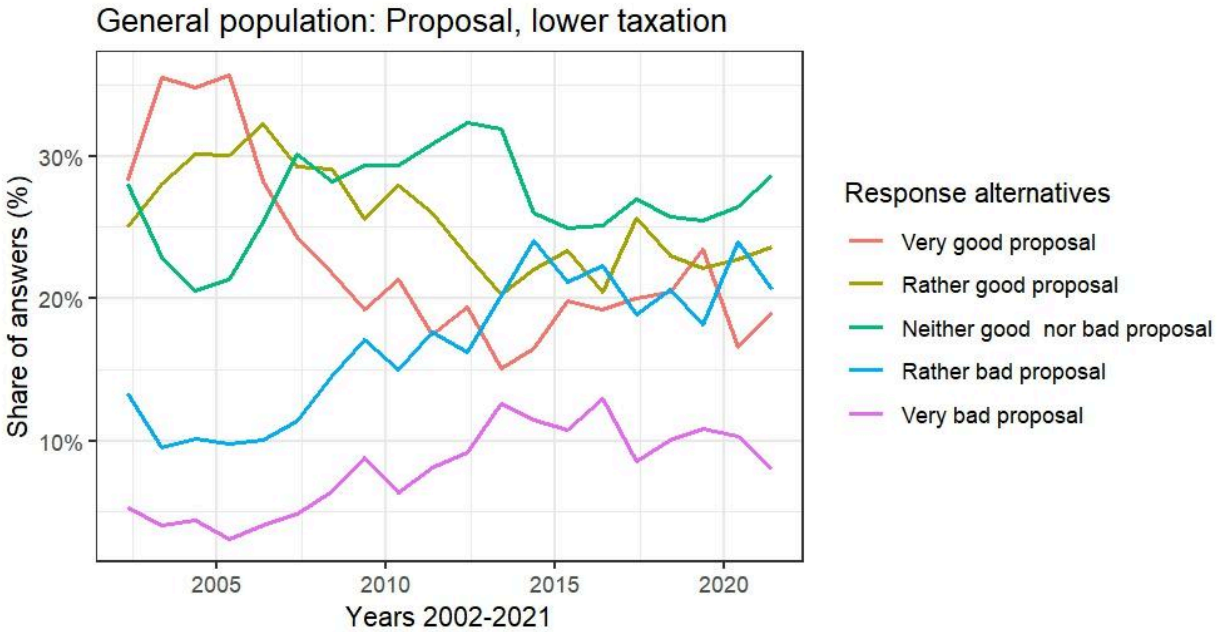
6.2 Socioeconomic preferences

In this section, the results from the socioeconomic operationalisations will be presented and compared among the working class, subjective working class and general population. First, attitudes toward lowering taxation will be presented, followed by attitudes toward decreasing the public sector and lastly attitudes toward increasing privatisation of healthcare.

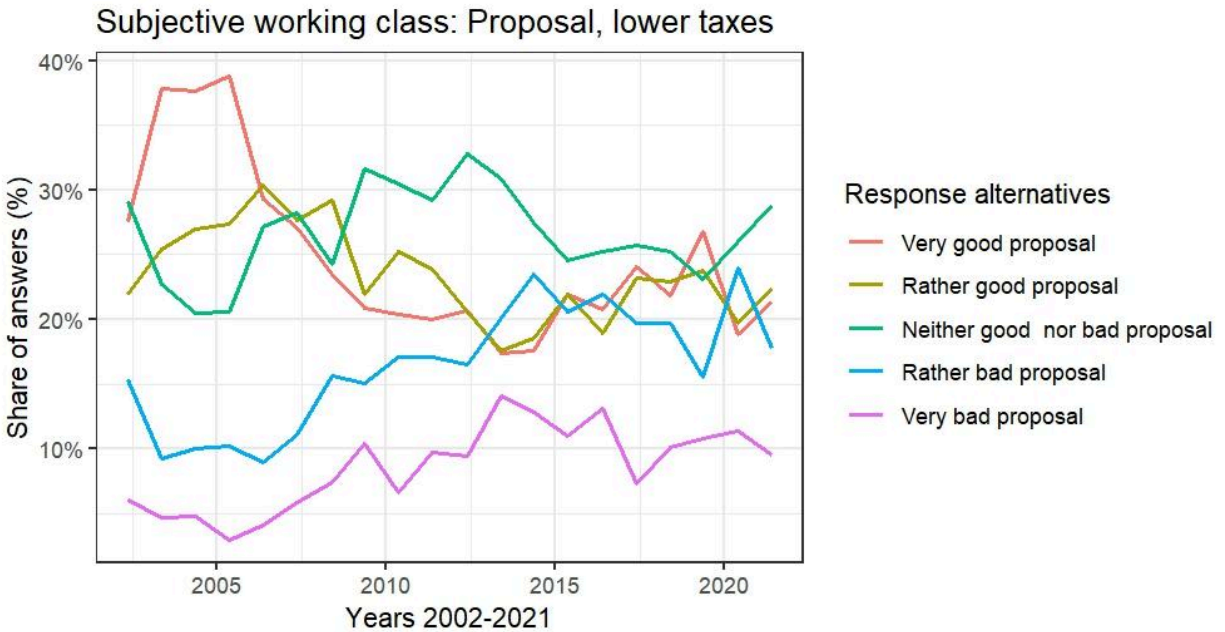
6.2.1 Lowering taxation

Three graphs depict each population's attitudes towards lowering taxes from 2002 to 2021.

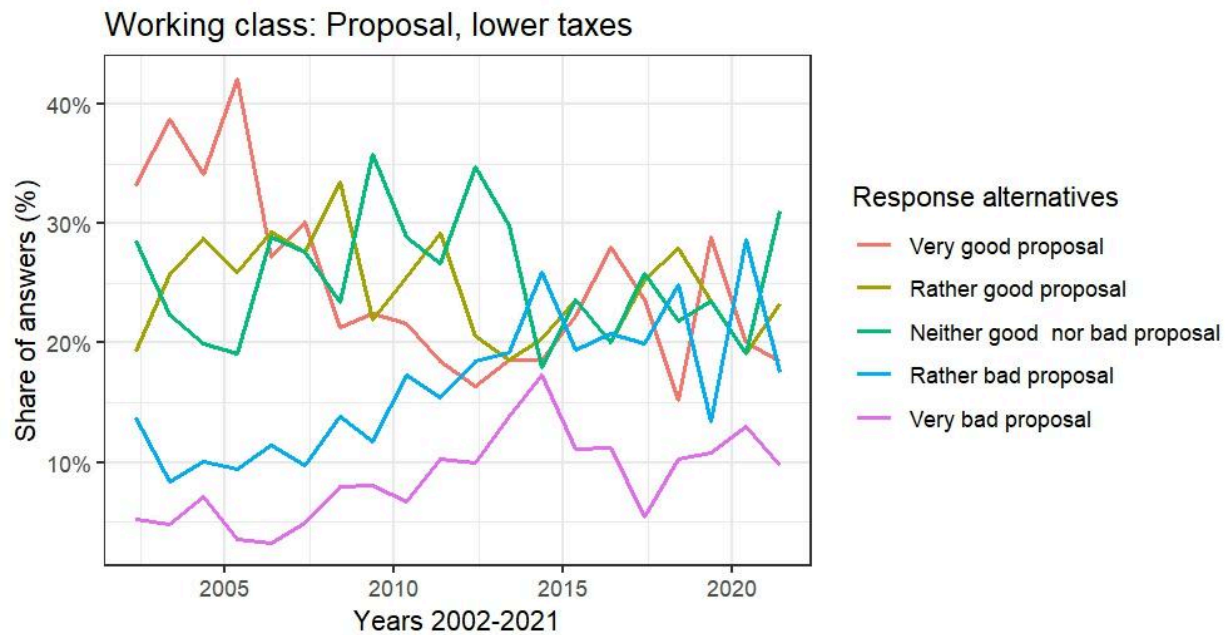
Graph 2a: Working class attitudes towards lowering taxation



Graph 2b: Subjective working class attitudes towards lowering taxation



Graph 2c: General population attitudes towards lowering taxation



An interesting thing of note when comparing the three populations is that aggregate and specific positive and negative attitudes are strikingly similar in the case of the working class and general population. Whilst the general population both were, and is, slightly more positive in general towards lowering taxation, they also show a slightly larger increase in opposition towards the policy. The working class and general population see the largest aggregate changes throughout the time period, showing a general trend towards lessened support for lowering taxes. In comparison, the subjective working class shows much less variation over time, with the smallest aggregate differences between 2002 and 2021. Of note is that in 2002, the subjective working class showed the least support and largest opposition towards lowering taxes, in 2021 however, they displayed the most support for the policy. The chi-squared test of independence returns a p-value of $7.174e-14$, suggesting that the risk of this distribution being entirely coincidental is very small, and that there likely is a link between the variables.

When solely looking at the subjective working class, a small trend towards decreasing support and increasing opposition towards lowering taxes is observed. This trend is twice as large within the general population, suggesting that overall attitudes towards lowering taxation

have changed more drastically than among the subjective working class. However, when factoring for economic marginalisation and employment, these trends become more similar to those of the general population. This would show that over the time period, economic marginalisation has led to an increase in more left-leaning tax policy attitudes and a decrease in right-leaning tax policy attitudes. Among the working class, preferences for this policy have become more left leaning, attitudes are however, as they were in 2002, generally more skewed rightwards.

The large support among the working class and subjective working class for lowering taxation is quite unexpected. Whilst lower taxation, increased freedom of choice and increased independence were trademarks of the very successful right party alliance in the mid 2000's, support for lowering taxes was already high by that point and would instead continue to trend downwards after their election into parliament. A possible explanation is that economical marginalisation among the working class renders their disposable income relatively small. Whilst they might benefit from an overall increase in taxation, their personal situation would become more bearable if taxes were lower. Interpretation of the questionnaire perhaps also affects their answer. Whilst the working class might support increasing taxation of high income earners and lowering taxes for low income earners, that differentiation is not made in the survey. They themselves being low income earners might skew their answer towards supporting lower taxation as they are economically marginalised. However, this does not explain the continuous decrease in support for lowering taxes among the working class sample

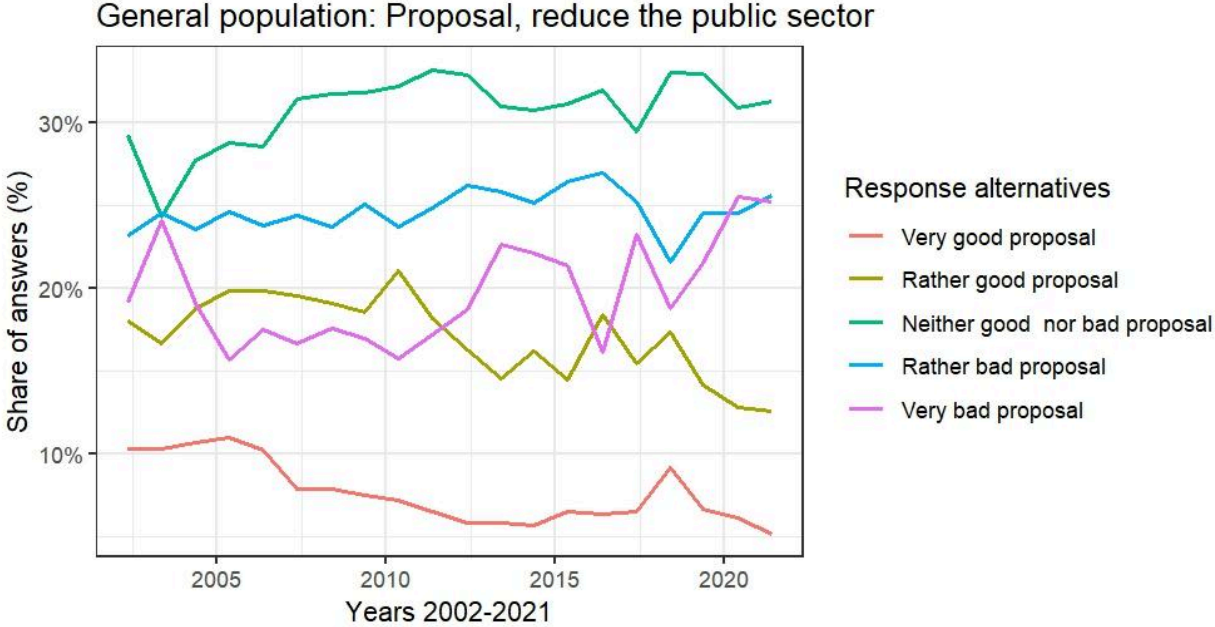
Another possible explanation for the high support for lowering taxes among the working class is the economical variable employed in order to discern between working class and subjective working class. As was problematised in the working class operationalisation, the household income variable is an amalgamation of different incomes over time in order to construct a relative income variable. As inflation and wages increase, the real difference in income becomes larger. The difference between earning four hundred thousand Swedish crowns in 2002 and 2021 is almost a hundred thousand crowns, which results in the sample becoming relatively poorer every year as the median wage increases. If lower income is related to attitudes toward taxation, this would explain why opposition towards the policy increases. However, this does not explain why similar trends among the subjective working class and general population are observed, as they do not include any controlling variables for income.

A final hypothesis on why these results are observed is that relative wealth inequality has led to the entire population feeling relatively marginalised. As the difference in income between top earners and the general public increases, support for lowering taxation decreases and opposition increases. It is possible that the general population has become more aware of the difference in income between themselves and the super rich, resulting in less support for the policy.

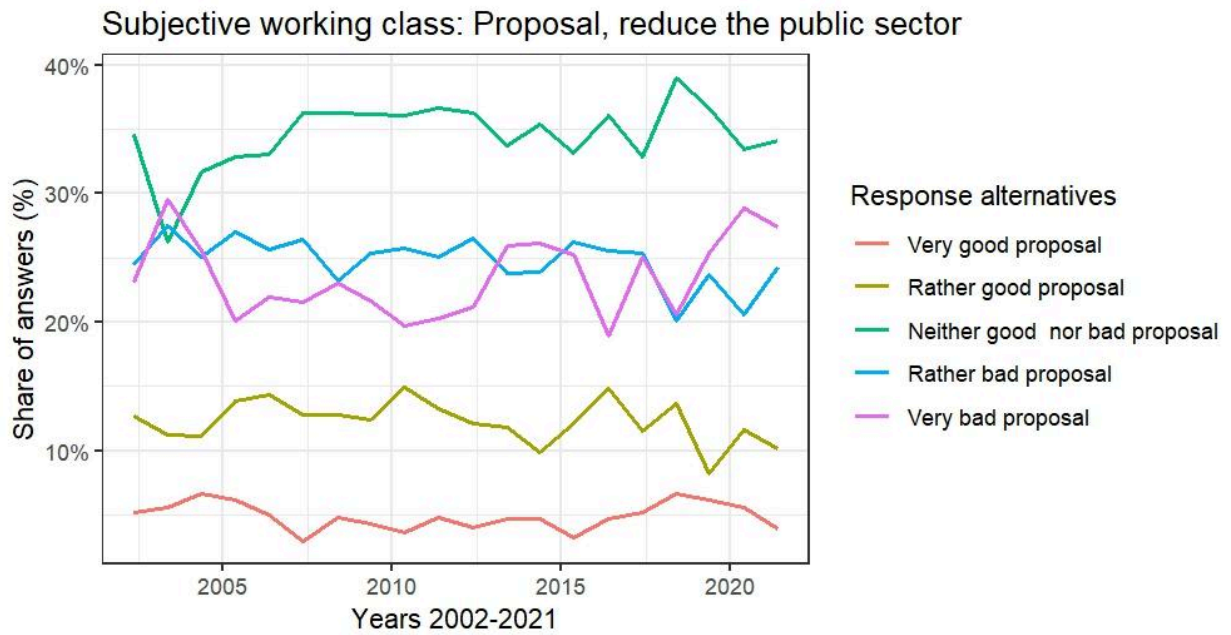
6.2.2 Reducing the public sector

Initially, the three graphs showcasing working class, subjective working class and general population change in attitude towards the policy proposal ‘reduce the public sector’ are presented. These graphs depict relative response alternative frequency in percentages from 2002 to 2021.

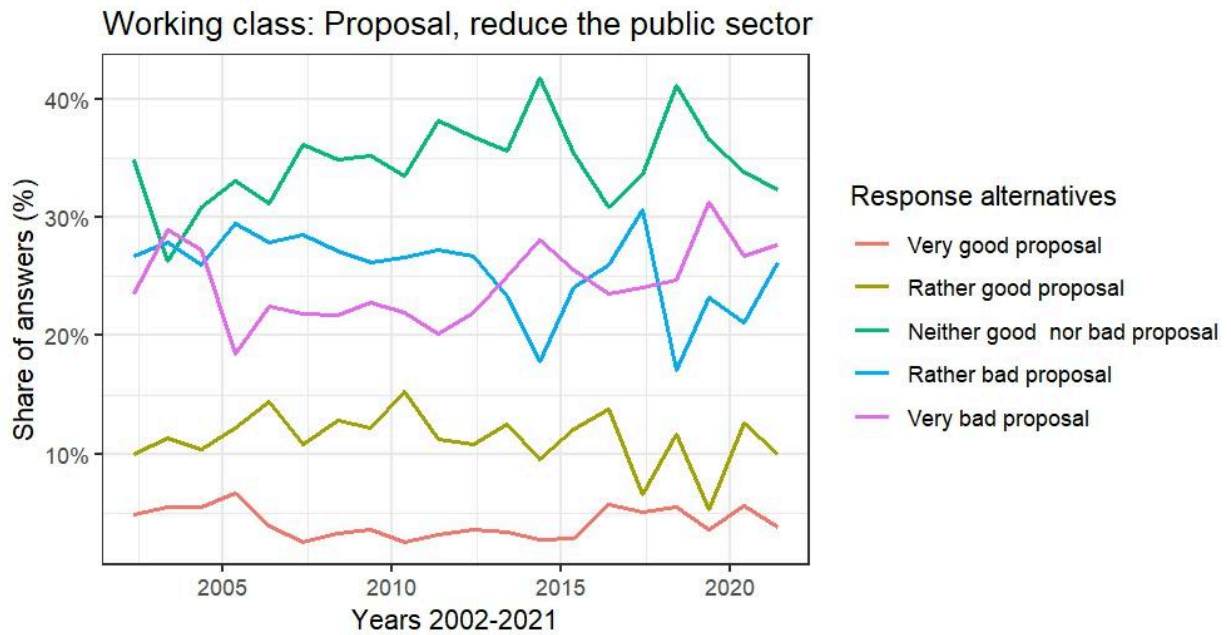
Graph 3a: Working class attitudes towards reducing the public sector



Graph 3b: Subjective working class attitudes towards reducing the public sector



Graph 3c: General population attitudes towards reducing the public sector



As expected, the working class showed the lowest amount of aggregate support and largest amount of aggregate opposition towards reducing the public sector, both in 2002 and in 2021. The chi-squared test of independence returns a p-value of 2.2e-16, suggesting that there is a link between the variables. However, the difference between the working class and subjective

working class is marginal. Support for reducing the public sector remains largest among the general population, as opposition towards the policy remains the smallest. However, differences are small as support for the policy has diminished drastically.

These results are not surprising. Sweden has always had an all encompassing public sector which the public, in general, cherishes. The public sector has been especially important for those who are economically marginalised. As income and wealth inequality grows, the need for a robust public sector increases. It is therefore no surprise that opposition towards reducing the public sector becomes larger when factoring for class and economic hardship. A possible interpretation of the overall increased opposition towards the policy is reactionary sentiment towards previous regulations of the public sector. Since the 1990's, the Swedish public sector has had an explicit focus on streamlining and efficiency in an attempt to offload redundancies and maximise output. Following trends of 'new public management', the public sector has been increasingly run as a private corporation, focused on delivering results to the smallest cost (Blomqvist:151). The public sector has since been characterised by budget cuts, increased bureaucracy, staff shortages and a continuous decrease in quality, especially in rural areas. As public sector service quality and size continuously decreases, it is possible that citizens recognise this trend and become increasingly worried about a dismantling of the public sector services which they rely upon.

Increased public sector affection could also be explained in relation to increased privatisation of welfare services, especially that of education and healthcare. In the specific case of education, in 1992 private actors establishing schools were allowed to receive state funding identical to public schools in an attempt to stimulate educational performance, specialisation and efficiency (Larsson & Ringarp. 2022:79). Since the reform, private schools have been characterised by profit maximisation rather than educational performance. Resulting in the marketisation of schools and increased school segregation, as which school you attend has become more important in determining social class belonging (Larsson & Ringarp:88-91). All in all, Swedish school results have continuously dropped over the last several decades, whilst this is not entirely due to the increase of private actors, their sometimes questionable business practices have become symbolic for the weakened public sector. It is thus possible that the general public have equated a reduction of the private sector, and increased privatisation, with a general decrease in quality of public sector services.

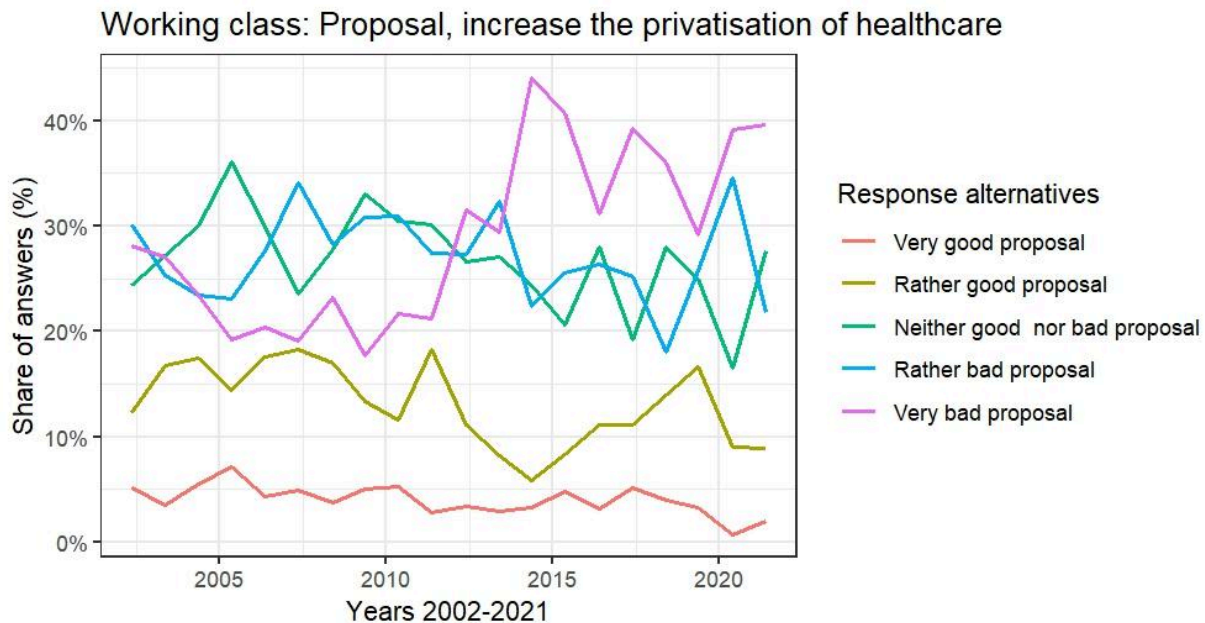
A parallel possibility is that the side effects of economic inequality have affected citizens' trust in the public sector. As educational opportunities, healthcare service and overall social mobility become increasingly dependent on where you live or your social background, it is possible that Swedes see increased public sector responsibility as both more desirable and safe, as opposed to increased private sector responsibility.

Whilst there has been an overall leftward shift in preferences, the working class are, in absolute terms, the most leftist in regard to reducing the public sector. This would prove that there is a slightly stronger relationship between being working class and preferring left-leaning policy, than subjectively perceiving oneself as working class and preferring left-leaning policy. Although in relative terms, the subjective working class and general population have become more left-leaning.

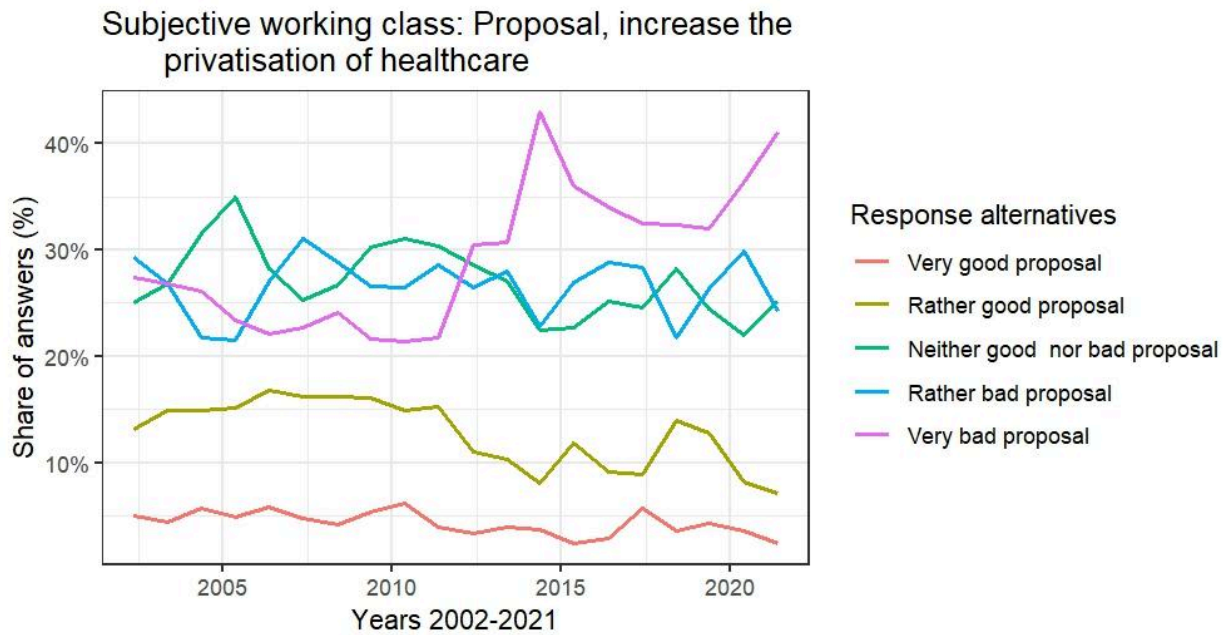
6.2.3 Increase privatisation of healthcare

Below, three graphs depict the working class, subjective working class and general population's attitudes towards increasing the privatisation of healthcare from 2002 to 2021.

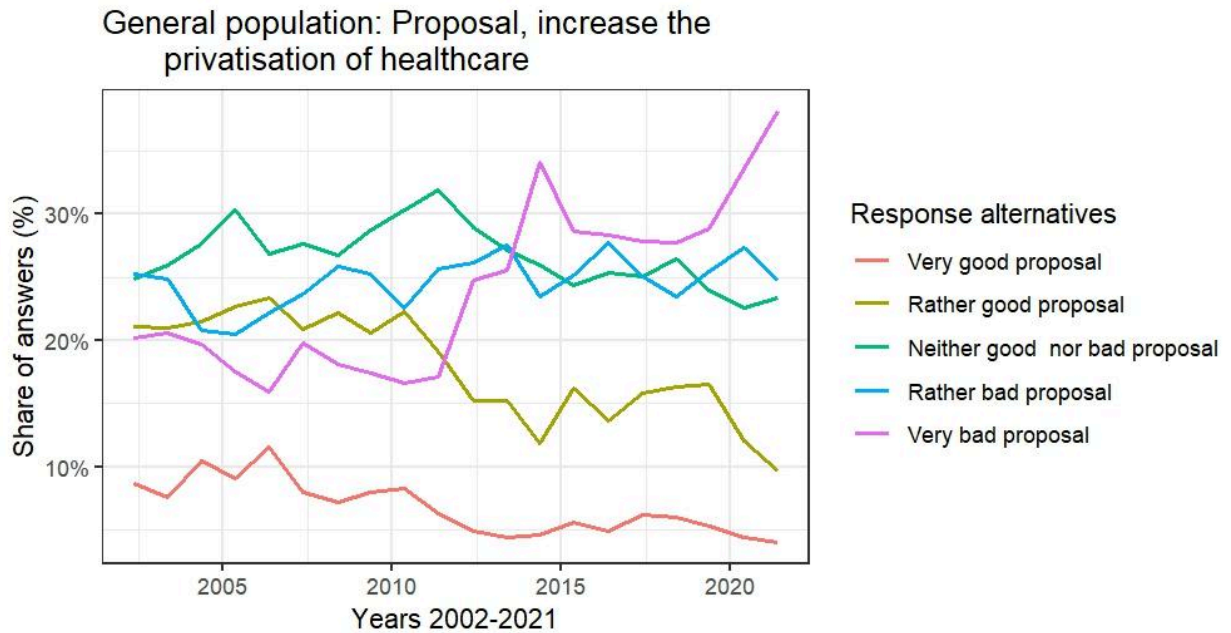
Graph 4a: Working class attitudes towards increasing the privatisation of healthcare



Graph 4b: Subjective working class attitudes towards increasing the privatisation of healthcare



Graph 4c: General population attitudes towards increasing privatisation of healthcare



Overall, support for privatising healthcare has decreased among all the populations whilst opposition has increased, suggesting a relative move leftwards economically. In 2002, the working class showed both the least support and largest opposition towards privatising healthcare. In 2021 they showed the second largest support and least opposition. The chi-squared

test returns a p-value of $2.2e-16$ at a predetermined alpha value of 0.05, suggesting that the risk of this distribution being coincidental is very small. These results are quite surprising as it would be expected that economic marginalisation increases support for state sponsored healthcare relative to the subjective working class and general population in which an economic variable was not included. Whilst this was the case in 2002, the working class has moved leftwards economically, but not quite to the extent of the subjective working class or general population. An important note is that the working class contains a relatively larger share of neutral respondents, suggesting it is slightly less mobilised, or contains a larger share of economic centrists, the distinction is however impossible to ascertain. Another interesting note among all populations is that opposition towards the policy has become increasingly concentrated among the very negative sentiment. In both the working class and subjective working class, the less extreme response has shrunk considerably, suggesting that disapproval towards the policy is very strong.

There has been an overall leftwards shift in attitudes towards the privatisation of healthcare. This shift is not isolated to the working class or subjective working class but applies to the general population as well. Whilst the proportions of it are unexpected, the general shift in attitude can be understood in the context of Swedish healthcare. Longer waiting times, staff shortages and a perceived drop in quality have led many Swedes to have an increasingly negative view of Swedish healthcare (Cederberg. 2024). This increased dissatisfaction has coincided with an expansion of private health centres, which could lead to individuals equating increased privatisation with a drop in quality. The role of private healthcare has also begun to be questioned to a larger degree, both in political and public debate, which could lead to an increased negative sentiment among individuals. Whilst it was expected of the working class to move rightward, which it did not, it shows no sign of developing more leftist policy preferences than the subjective working class or general population.

A possible explanation to the relatively larger opposition among the general and subjective working class is the inclusion of old age pensioners and sick pensioners. As neither the subjective working class nor general population contain any employment variable, it is possible that this might affect the results. The reason for this being that pensioners interact with healthcare services to a larger extent than the employed. Increased interaction in turn leads to increased awareness of differences between private and public healthcare functions, differences

in operating procedure and possible flaws. In the case of pensioners, the differences between private and public elderly care providers have increased, with those employed in the private sector being more likely to work part time, having a lower income, and being less satisfied with their working conditions (Kommunal. 2022). In extension, this affects the quality of care negatively, which might make pensioners more inclined to oppose increased privatisation of healthcare. Pensioners are also more likely to have interacted with Swedish healthcare prior to both its decrease in quality and increased privatisation. It is possible that they equate correlation with causality, concluding that increased privatisation has led to worsened healthcare.

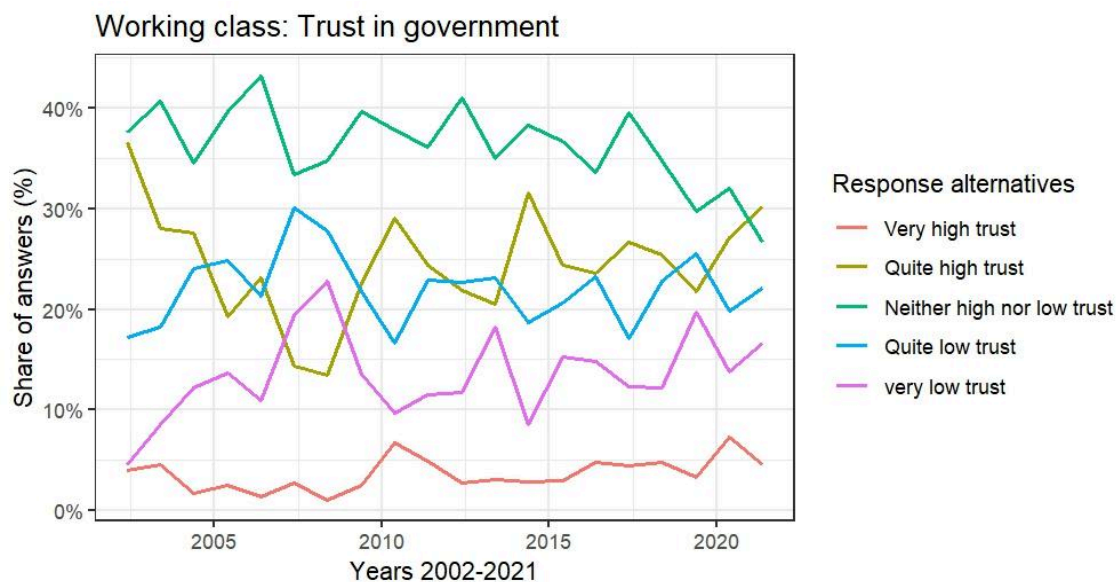
6.3 Sociocultural preferences

In this section, the results from the sociocultural operationalisations will be presented and compared among the working class, subjective working class and general population. First, trust in government will be presented, followed by attitudes towards restricting immigration, and lastly, trust in the daily press.

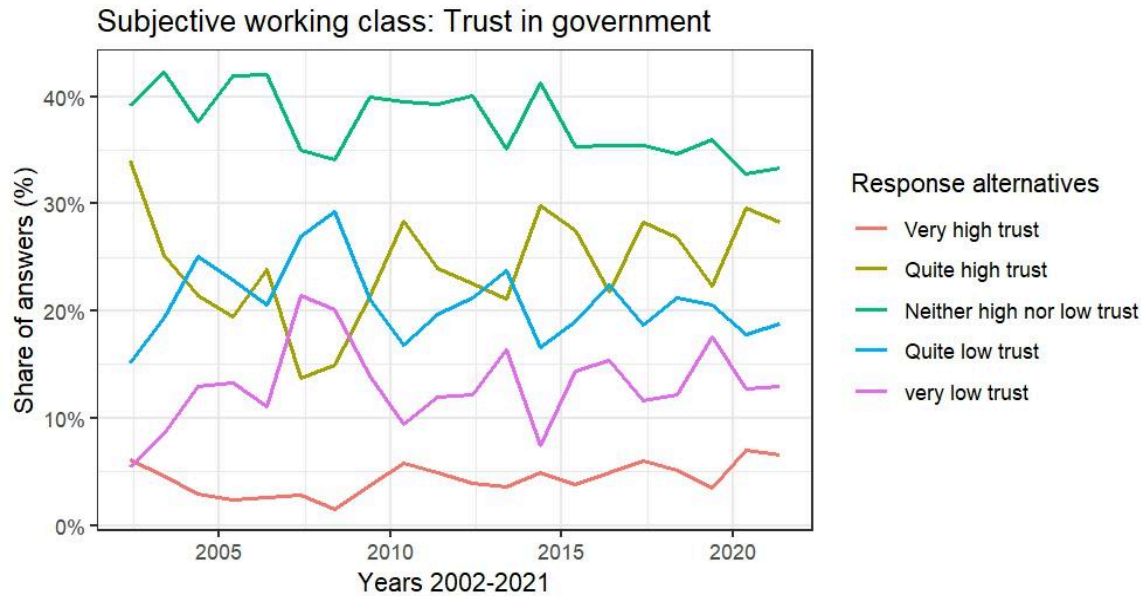
6.3.1 Trust in the government

First, the three graphs depicting the working class, subjective working class and general population’s are presented, showing the relative share of responses over time.

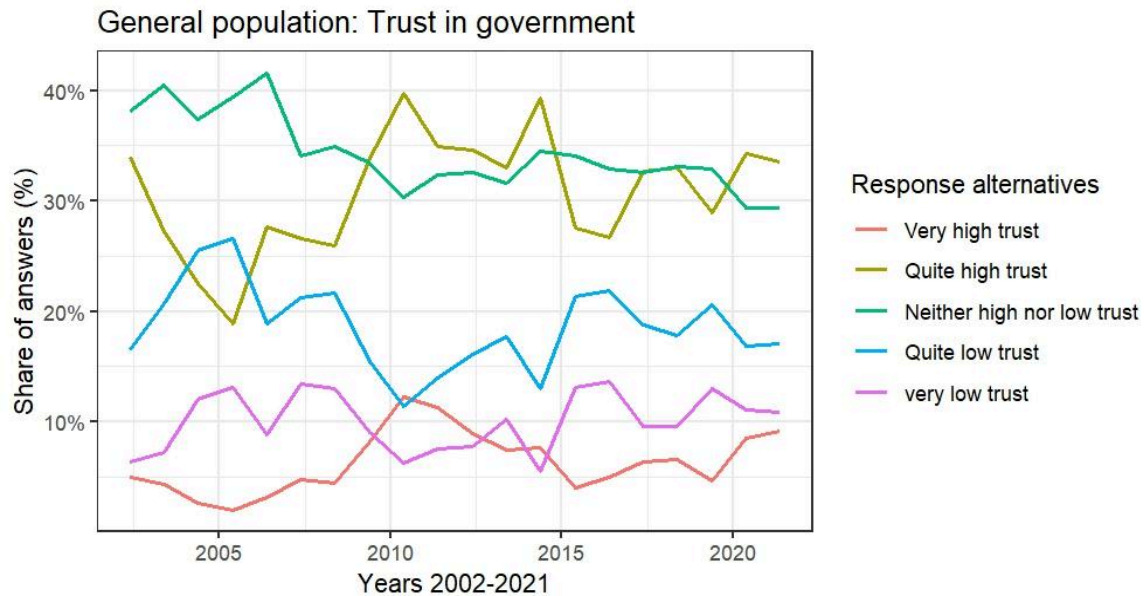
Graph 5a: Working class trust in government



Graph 5b: Subjective working class trust in government



Graph 5c: General population trust in government



In comparing the populations, it is evident that the working class' trust in government has eroded over time. Not only have they become less trusting, but since 2002 the working class have begun actively distrusting the government to a larger extent. The chi-squared test of independence returns a p-value of $2.2e-16$, suggesting that the results are significant at a predetermined alpha value of 0.05. Whilst the general population also has come to actively distrust the government to a slightly larger extent in 2021, their trust has simultaneously grown as a smaller share of

respondents remain neutral. If neutral responses are disregarded, the working class has become, on average, more distrusting of the government than they are trusting. This stands in stark contrast to the beginning of the time span, when the working class were roughly double as trusting as they were distrusting. Most notably, the growth in mistrust among working class voters has been concentrated among those feeling that they have very little trust in government.

When comparing the working class and subjective working class, overall trust has decreased in similar amounts, working class trust is however less concentrated in the very trusting option. The working class has also seen stronger growth in mistrusting sentiment relative to that of the subjective working class. An interesting difference between the two is that the share of neutral respondents among the working class has seen a larger decrease than that of the subjective working class. This suggests that attitudes are mobilised to a greater extent among the working class as opposed to the subjective working class.

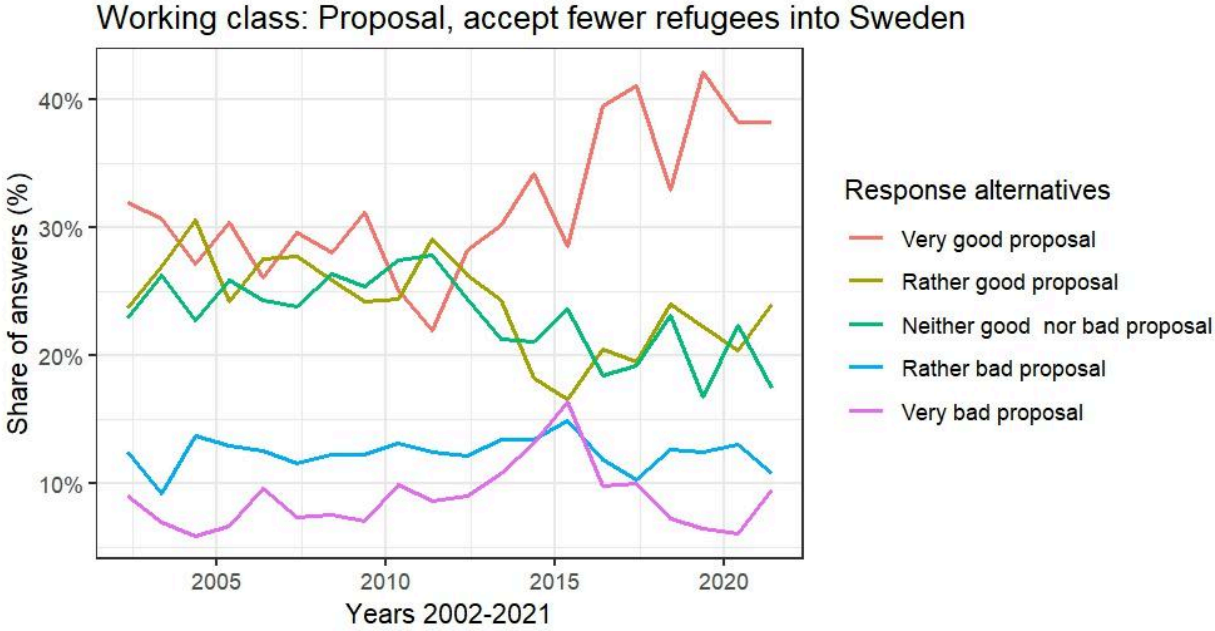
Whilst the general population has become more divided in their view of political trust, the working class has become overwhelmingly pessimistic. It is however not unexpected that this is the case when studying social groups that have become increasingly marginalised. As can be observed, when factoring for economic marginalisation and employment within said social group, political mistrust increases even further. Whilst the working class were relatively politically marginalised in the beginning of the time series, their levels of political trust are quite similar to those of the general public, the change in attitude has occurred throughout the study's time span. As has been discussed throughout the theoretical section, this time period has seen the increased emphasis on socioculturally liberal values, increased difficulty in discerning differences between economic left and right policy, globalisation and increased economic inequality. All issues which have affected the working class disproportionately as their cultural values have become less prevalent in Swedish society, whilst their standing in the international economic hierarchy has worsened. This period has also seen the Social Democrats, which historically was the party representing working class interests, attempt to appeal to other voter segments in place of the working class, thus weakening the working class' access to representation, while their economic situation worsened. In light of these societal changes which can be seen throughout the time period, it is understandable why political trust has eroded in such a drastic fashion among the working class, as they see governments come and go, but perceive none as addressing their situation.

With increased political mistrust, the party preference results become increasingly understandable, as working class voters migrate to an anti-establishment party claiming to represent their interests. Working class voters perceive the political establishment as antithetical to their interests and way of life, instead turning to the radical right. In turn, the radical right becomes increasingly antagonistic towards the political establishment, holding them responsible for the perceived societal erosion, further strengthening working class political mistrust. Conclusively, increased political mistrust is, to one extent or another, signifying a democratic deficit which should be attended to.

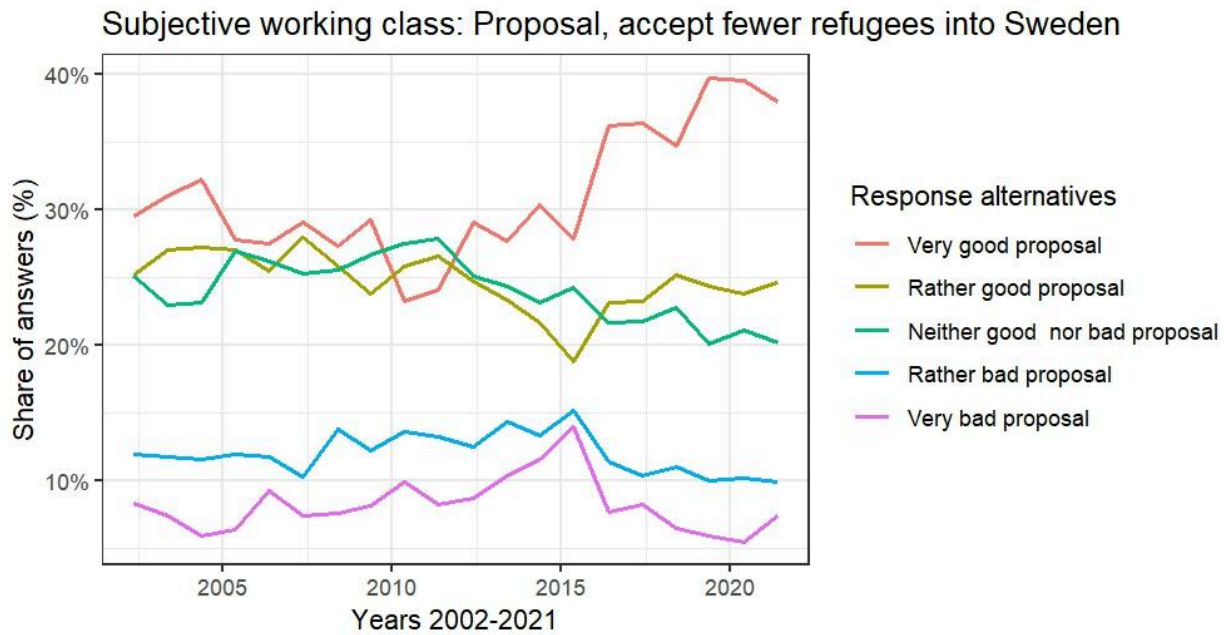
6.3.2 Sweden should accept fewer refugees

Below, the graph for each population’s attitude towards accepting fewer refugees is presented. Shares are measured as a percentage of the population and span from 2002 to 2021.

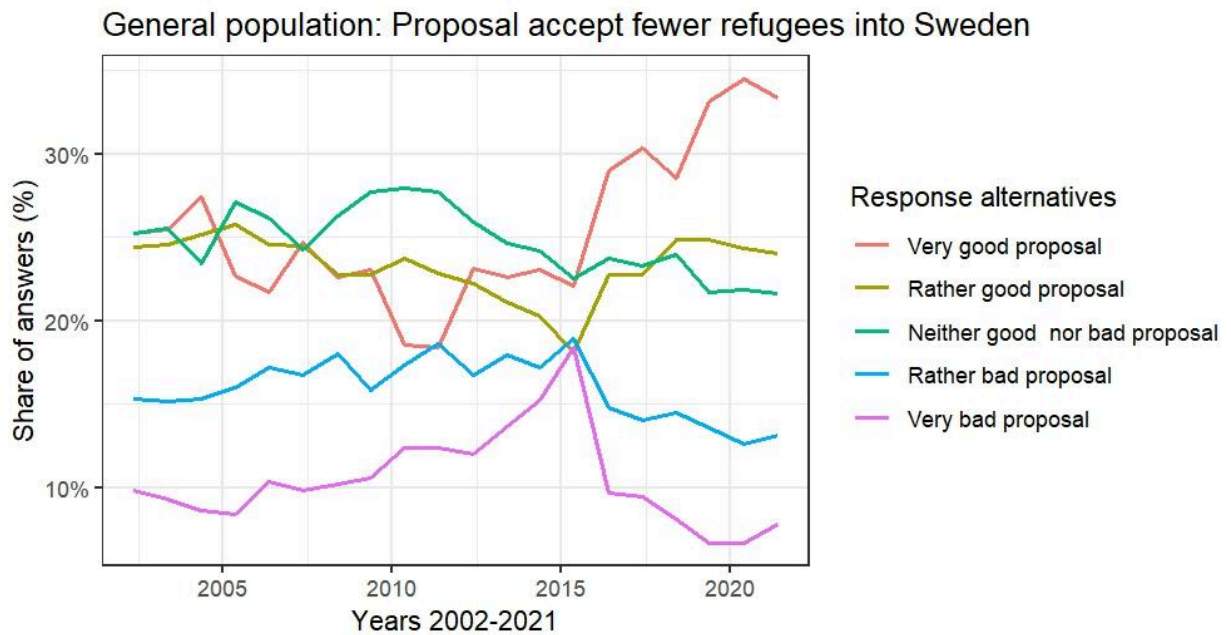
Graph 6a: Working class attitudes towards accepting fewer refugees



Graph 6b: Subjective working class attitudes towards accepting fewer refugees



Graph 6c: General population attitudes towards accepting fewer refugees



It comes as no surprise that sentiments towards immigration have become increasingly more negative among all the populations as radical right parties have mobilised the issue. Since the Sweden Democrats' entry into parliament, anti immigration sentiments have increased the working class, subjective working class and general population, especially after the migration

crisis in 2015. Notably the policy mobilises more respondents over time, as less people perceive the policy as neither good nor bad, suggesting that the issue has become more divisive. As expected, the working class hold the most positive views on restricting immigration, in line with the theoretical literature and the party preference results. A chi-squared test of independence returns a p-value of $2.2e-16$ at a predetermined alpha value of 0.05, suggesting that there is a link between the variables. Between the two different working class populations, an interesting difference is to be found, as the subjective working class are slightly more inclined to be neutral regarding the policy, suggesting that the working class is slightly more divided on the issue than the subjective working class.

As can be observed in the graphs, anti immigration sentiments have continuously been larger among the working class when compared with the general population. The theoretical literature suggests that level of education often contributes to sociocultural beliefs: as education increases, individuals become more liberal and accepting of multicultural values. With education in many cases being tied to income and occupation, it is no surprise that when factoring for social class and income, support for the policy increases. As members of the working class observe a struggling welfare, with healthcare becoming less accessible, school results dropping, increased gang related violence, and the formation of parallel societies, whilst simultaneously experiencing a drop in their own quality of life, immigrants have become a scapegoat for explaining why their life situation is decaying. This thesis makes no attempt to infer causality, although these signs of societal decay are similar to those of increased societal inequality, with wealth becoming increasingly concentrated among the top echelons of society. While the general population has become more sceptical towards immigration, the segments of society who were already experiencing social and economic marginalisation have become even more negative, as they equate migration with a struggling society and a falling standard of living, instead of increasing inequality and the marginalisation of low income earners.

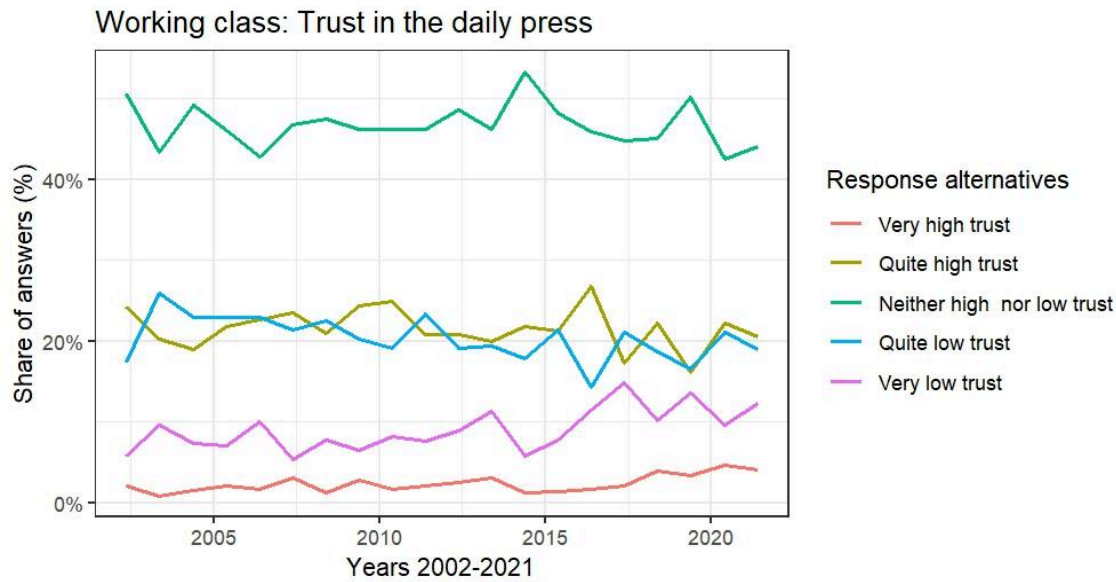
The working class is the societal segment which has mobilised the most around the issue of migration, simultaneously showing similar opposition to the policy as the general public. This would suggest that the working class is slightly more divided on the issue than the subjective working class. A possible explanation to this is that a rift has been created within the working class, as they have become increasingly divided along the issue of immigration. Whilst the majority supporting restricting immigration has grown, the decrease in opposition towards the

policy has not been especially noteworthy. Most notably, the working class is alone in seeing a small increase in very negative attitudes towards the policy.

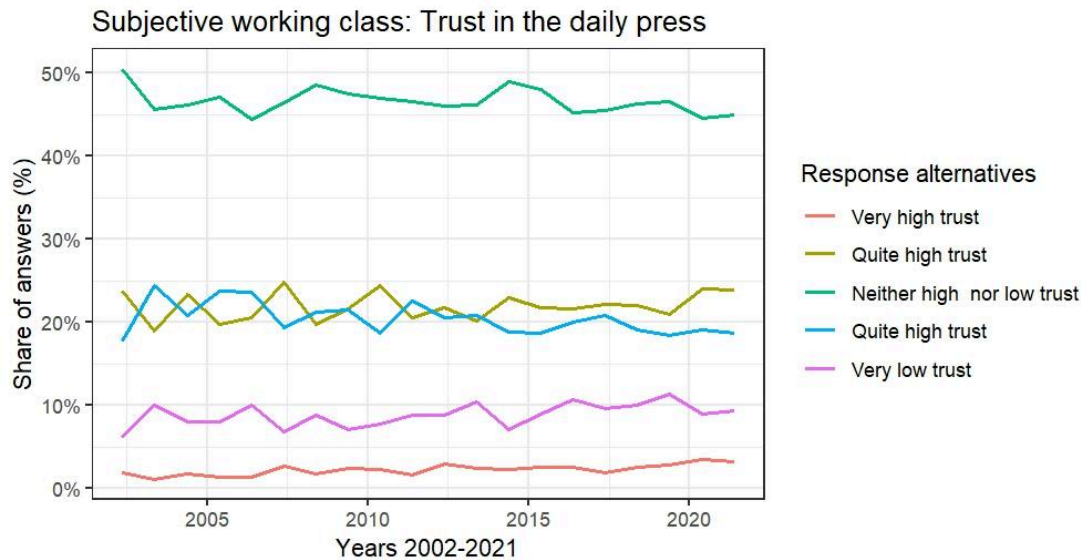
6.3.3 Trust in the daily press

Below, three graphs depict the working class, subjective working class and general population's trust in the daily press from 2002 to 2021.

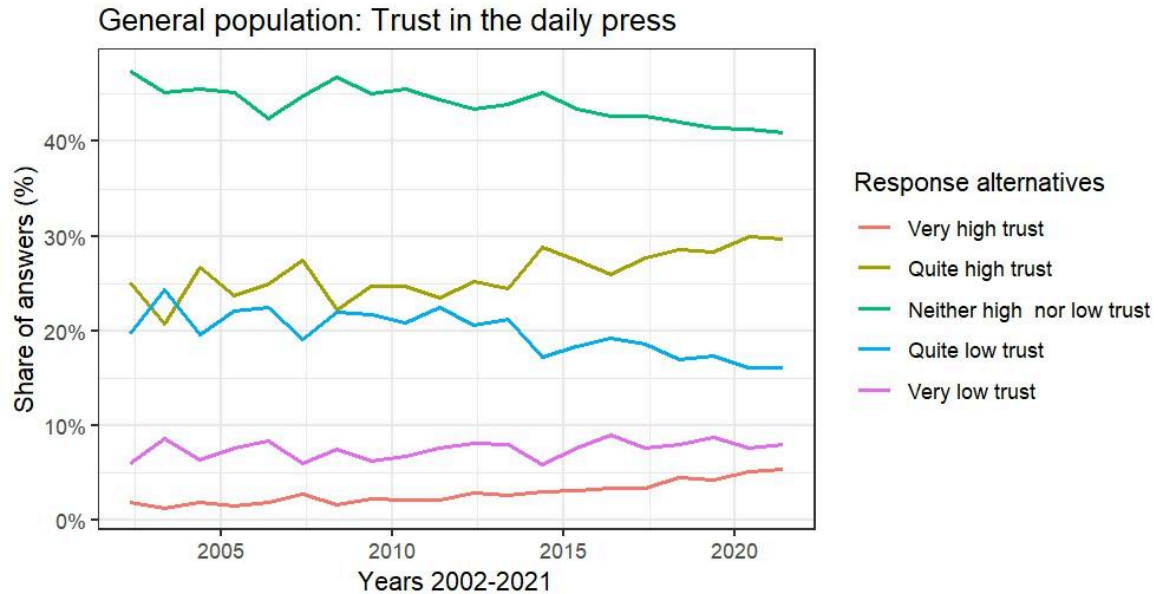
Graph 7a: Working class trust in the daily press



Graph 7b: Subjective working class trust in the daily press



Graph 7c: General population trust in the daily press



Notably, the working class is alone in having combined trust in the daily press decrease over the time period. It also sees the largest increase in mistrust compared to the other populations. With a chi-squared test of independence generating a p-value of $2.2e-16$, there is likely a link between the variables and the distribution observed. Whilst the general population becomes more trusting towards the daily press and less mistrusting, the working class appears to become less trusting and more mistrusting. The difference between the working class and subjective working class is also noteworthy, as the subjective working class becomes both more trusting and distrusting of the daily press. This suggests that when factoring for economic marginalisation, trust in established media decreases.

A possible explanation to this is that as you see your societal position weakened, established media can be perceived as not reporting on issues which pertain to your situation. Most established news media in Sweden lean culturally liberal, instead differentiating on economic position. If you are socioculturally conservative, issues which you perceive as important might be overlooked or not perceived as issues at all. The experience of economic marginalisation in conjunction with having little to no representation of one's sociocultural views, may lead people to perceive the media as detached from the realities on the ground. Thus increasing mistrust.

Another possible explanation relates to party preference. As could be observed, the working class has a larger tendency to lean radically right, preferring the Sweden Democrats to a larger extent than the other populations. The Sweden Democrats have notably been critical towards established media, often claiming that they are being misrepresented or that reporters are ideologically biased against them. The Sweden Democrats have also leaned heavily into alternative media, creating their own media house, mostly used in order to discredit other political parties and their representatives, although at surface level it has no connection to the political party (Kalla Fakta. 2024). Their reporting mostly pertains to sociocultural issues such as immigration, environmentalism, criminality and anti-establishment views. If your preferred political party regularly discredits established news media, and claims that it is politically biased, there is a likelihood that your trust in said media decreases. Thus, as larger parts of the working class migrate towards the radical right, it is not unexpected that their trust in established media decreases.

6.4 Is there support for the hypotheses?

This section will briefly summarise the findings and conclude whether or not the hypotheses stated in chapter four were accurate.

6.4.1 Does economic marginalisation increase radical right party preference?

The results suggest that both the working class and subjective working class are, on average, more inclined to prefer radical right parties than the general population. However, the working class are more inclined to prefer the Sweden Democrats than the subjective working class. This suggests that the variable for economic marginalisation and employment increases inclination to vote for the Sweden Democrats. Notably, not only does this increase the working class' proclivity towards preferring the Sweden Democrats, it also lowers support for the Social Democrats. The working class is more likely to prefer the Sweden Democrats, and are about as likely as the general population to prefer the Social Democrats, suggesting that the previously strong ties between the Social Democratic party and the working class have been, if not severed, at least severely damaged.

6.4.2 Has working class support for redistribution decreased?

Contrary to the hypothesis, working class support for left-leaning policy has increased rather than decreased since 2002. I expected that as the working class migrated to the radical right, preferences for left-leaning economic policy would diminish. Instead decreased working class support for lowering taxes, reducing the public sector and increasing privatisation of healthcare can be observed. Simultaneously, the working class has developed increased opposition toward these policies. The shift leftward is not, however, isolated to the working class, as both the subjective working class and general population has moved leftward since 2002.

6.4.3 Has the working class adopted radical right cultural attitudes?

I expected that as the working class migrated to the radical right, they would adopt sociocultural preferences similar to those of the radical right. This was also the case. The working class has become increasingly supportive of restricting immigration, they have become less trusting of the daily press, and less trusting in government. Simultaneously, the share of the working class which opposes restricting migration, trusts the daily press and trusts the government has decreased. Compared with the subjective working class and general population, the working class has moved remarkably rightwards. All three populations have moved rightward to some extent, the shift in working class attitudes is however more pronounced.

7. The case for increased working class representation

Previous to the Sweden Democrats entering parliament, it was expected that the working class had been relatively homogeneous. That, after their entry, the working class' previously homogeneous left-leaning economic preferences were to shift rightward as they realigned with the radical right. Simultaneously, as the working class realigned along the sociocultural divide, they were expected to become increasingly right-leaning, and homogeneous, in their cultural attitudes. Through this line of reasoning, the representation of the working class would become increasingly difficult, as their increasingly heterogeneous economic attitudes cause them to misconstrue their actual interests. Thus, resulting in the working class preferring political parties and representatives that do not in fact represent their interests. The theoretical expectation was that the working class itself would lose sight of its economic interests, and that this would be an underlying reason for increased support of radical right parties. Through a Marxist conception of interest it was expected that the working class did not know their interests, and hence, would not act upon them. Whilst they do not act according to their interests, as they mobilise support for the radical right, the analysis of their economic preferences show that not only do working class voters know what lies in their interest, their interests have also become increasingly congruent over time. Contrary to my expectations, since 2002, working class economic preferences have become both increasingly left-leaning and homogeneous. Based on the empirical analysis, there is little evidence supporting the claim that a rift has been created within the working class' economic attitudes. Instead, what the analysis shows is that economic attitudes have become more congruent over time, which in turn should facilitate the representation of working class interests, as their interests align to a greater extent.

In line with my reasoning and the previous literature, the working class has adopted cultural attitudes increasingly similar to the radical right. The analysis implies that the working class harbour distinct cultural attitudes dissimilar to the general population, suggesting that economic marginalisation is an underlying reason for developing attitudes similar to radical right parties. This is in line with the theoretical literature, stating that the support for radical right parties in large part stems from being on the losing side of an internationalised economy and lacking adequate political representation (Rydgren & van der Meiden:14-15). Through a Marxian conception of interests, it is not possible to argue that radical right parties represent the working

class substantively. I do, however, argue that radical right parties represent the working class weakly through descriptive means. The Swedish Social Democratic party's attempt to capitalise on new voter segments led to shifts in policy conflicting with working class interests, and as Swedish politics became increasingly professionalised, working class voters were left with a lack of representatives and representation (Folke & Rickne:26-27). As underrepresentation goes unaddressed, marginalisation breeds mistrust in democratic actors, and in line with Gidron's findings, the working class attaches increased saliency to issues in which their identity and belonging is perceived as desirable rather than a disadvantage (Gidron:146). This representational vacuum of the working class has allowed radical right parties to assume the position of representing the working class. But rather than forwarding their actual interests by alleviating the economic hardship which working class voters experience, radical right parties represent the working class by acting as a mouthpiece of discontent, with working class voters choosing the radical right in order to voice their mistrust. Although, radical right parties are limited to representing the working class descriptively.

Fully representing the substantive interests of the working class is antithetical to radical right parties, as they rely on mobilisation on sociocultural issues and attract voters from both the economic left and right. Hence why the Social Democrats and Moderates have seen the largest share of support migrate to the Sweden Democrats (Göteborgs Universitet. 2018). As Gidron concludes, voters who migrate from right parties to radical right parties are not cross-pressured like the working class, they prefer rightist economic policy and are socioculturally conservative (Gidron:146). They do not face the same trade-offs as the working class, hence why the largest share of radical right support comes from the Moderates, not the Social Democrats (Göteborgs Universitet. 2018). Fully representing the interests of the working class entails embracing redistribution, economic policy which likely results in diminished support, as right party voters migrate back to the Moderates. Radical right parties are generally vote seeking, attempting to mass mobilise voters in order to create a popular movement, pitting the 'pure people' against the 'corrupt elite'. Garnering large amounts of support showcases that they represent the 'will of the people' which is intrinsic to domestic political conflict and further mobilising support. Thus, increased substantive representation of working class voters risks creating internal turmoil, damaging the image of a homogeneous people and a unified will. Additionally, addressing the economic marginalisation of working class voters would undercut the underlying mechanisms

which fuel support for the radical right parties. If voters' interests are being forwarded by the political establishment, and they feel adequately represented, political mistrust is likely to decrease, thus removing some of the incentives to support anti-establishment parties.

But why is it important to address the substantive underrepresentation of the working class? If the working class chooses to migrate to radical right parties, perceiving it to be in their interests, in what way is it justified to discredit this choice? The answer to this question is twofold, with the first resting on egalitarian reasoning and the second addressing the fundamental problem with democratic societies.

Firstly, the representational deficit of working class interests is important to address because the marginalisation of social groups is damaging to their quality of life. When the interests of social groups are not being adequately represented, their ability to partake in society on equal conditions diminishes. There is an intrinsic quality in having a society in which the needs of the people are not only heard, but also met. The same line of reasoning goes for other social groups that historically have experienced marginalisation, women, ethnic minorities, the disabled and members of the LGBTQ-community, just to name a few. That is why the question of representation is intrinsic to democracy itself, and it is the reason why the research field on representation is both extensive and long lived.

Second, addressing the underrepresentation of the working class also has instrumental importance to democracy itself. A fundamental risk in democratic regimes is that the dismantling of democracy is well within reach through democratic means. In recent years, *democratic backsliding*, the study of democratic erosion through democratic means, has become increasingly popular among scholars. In the United States for example, the Republican party has chipped away at the fundamental institutions of liberal democracy by mobilising support from marginalised segments of the electorate through anti-immigrant sentiment, increased political mistrust and discrediting established media outlets. In no way am I attempting to equate Swedish and American contemporary politics, but similarities can be found, not only in Sweden, but in other Western European democracies as well. By addressing the substantive underrepresentation of the working class, it is possible that the support for radical right parties, and the increasing political mistrust, diminish, in turn, reducing the acceptance of anti-democratic means.

The difficulty of representing the working class is, as Gidron states, that they are being cross-pressured (Gidron:146). Through my hypotheses, I presumed that working class economic

preferences would move rightward, thus impeding the ability to substantively represent their economic interests as a rift emerges along economic attitudes. Instead, economic attitudes have shifted leftward, suggesting that substantive representation of the working class' economic interests could be possible, if paired with socioculturally conservative attitudes.

8. Discussion

In conclusion, through the analysis, I show that working class voters are more likely than the general population to prefer the Sweden Democrats. Furthermore, including operational variables for income and employment further increases support for the radical right, and severely reduces support for the Social Democrats. Additionally, the analysis finds support for the working class becoming more left-leaning in economic policy attitudes over time, although this change is relatively small and not isolated to the working class, as the subjective working class and general population also become more left-leaning in their policy attitudes, and see larger relative changes than the working class over time. Thus, economic marginalisation seems to have little effect on economic policy attitudes. Lastly, the analysis shows that the working class has adopted cultural attitudes more similar to the radical right. It also shows that the working class are more inclined to move socioculturally rightward than both the subjective working class and general population. These results support the literature suggesting that economic marginalisation contributes to increased radical right sentiments (Ford & Jennings:304-305). From the results, I draw the conclusion that marginalisation and underrepresentation of the working class leads to increased mistrust in liberal democratic institutions. This can affect the democratic quality negatively and should be addressed through furthering the descriptive and substantive representation of the working class.

There are however caveats which should be made regarding these results and the worries raised in the section on operationalisations. This thesis faces the same problems as Hahn, as the results of my economic operationalisation suggest that the variables were not ideologically precise, seeing as the working class, subjective working class and general population held very similar attitudes (Hahn:9). Whilst it is possible that this convergence is due to the decreased saliency of the traditional socioeconomic cleavage, more ideologically polarising variables could have represented the shifts in the populations' economic attitudes more accurately. The cause of this problem was the lack of continuous and extensive data, which made it impossible to draw any generalisable conclusions from more fitting variables. If data was available regarding questions of labour laws or redistribution, this thesis might have been able to ascertain whether or not working class economic attitudes have changed to any significant extent. Instead,

variables which fall in line with welfare chauvinistic views had to be used, which made it difficult to draw any definitive conclusions and lowered overall validity.

With the available data, combining an extensive operationalisation of what constitutes the working class with less general policy alternatives seems to be difficult. Especially as response rates decrease, thus making findings less generalisable as time goes on. This is problematic, especially as social group belonging transforms in tandem with new social cleavages, data is needed in order to both trace and explain the causal mechanisms underpinning political and societal change.

As radical right parties continuously threaten and undermine democratic norms and values, it becomes increasingly important to understand not only how they gain support, but what can be done in order to address the underlying discontent on an individual level. With the Social Democrats taking a harder stance on immigration, future research should study what effects this policy change has. Both in terms of support for the Sweden Democrats, but also in terms of working class preference formation. This policy orientation presented by the Social Democrats has the potential to win back voters from the Sweden Democrats, as their sociocultural and socioeconomic preferences align to a greater extent. However, it also has the possibility to distance current and former voters from the party, as they are perceived as moving too close to the right by socioculturally liberal voters, whilst simultaneously, not moving right enough in the eyes of socioculturally conservative voters. Research should also study the effects that this has on the preference formation of the working class specifically, if it prompts voters to return to the Social Democrats, or if voters perceive the party as symbolic for increased marginalisation, cementing their place in the radical right.

9. Literature

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Appendix

Working class odds ratio results

	Outcome +	Outcome -	Total	Inc risk *
Exposed +	1936	10868	12804	15.12 (14.50 to 15.75)
Exposed -	8065	76221	84286	9.57 (9.37 to 9.77)
Total	10001	87089	97090	10.30 (10.11 to 10.49)

Point estimates and 95% CIs:

Inc risk ratio	1.58 (1.51, 1.65)
Inc odds ratio	1.68 (1.60, 1.78)
Attrib risk in the exposed *	5.55 (4.90, 6.20)
Attrib fraction in the exposed (%)	36.72 (33.74, 39.56)
Attrib risk in the population *	0.73 (0.46, 1.01)
Attrib fraction in the population (%)	7.11 (6.27, 7.94)

Uncorrected chi2 test that OR = 1: $\chi^2(1) = 370.779$ $\text{Pr}>\chi^2 = <0.001$

Fisher exact test that OR = 1: $\text{Pr}>\chi^2 = <0.001$

Wald confidence limits

CI: confidence interval

* Outcomes per 100 population units

Chi-squared tests of independence

Chi-squared test of independence lower taxes

X-squared = 67.632, df = 4, p-value = 7.174e-14

Chi-squared test of independence reduce the public sector

X-squared = 498.81, df = 4, p-value < 2.2e-16

Chi-squared test of independence increase privatization of healthcare

X-squared = 171.96, df = 4, p-value < 2.2e-16

Chi-squared test of independence trust in government

X-squared = 811.06, df = 4, p-value < 2.2e-16

Chi-squared test of independence accept fewer refugees

X-squared = 279.32, df = 4, p-value < 2.2e-16

Chi-squared test of independence trust in daily press

X-squared = 198.83, df = 4, p-value < 2.2e-16