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Political cleavages in Sweden: an in-depth analysis of multi-dimensional conflict and the educational divide

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the transformation of political cleavages in Sweden, focusing on the transition from class-based voting to a multi-dimensional party system. Specifically, it examines whether the 2022 Swedish parliamentary election aligns with global trends where education and income have diverged as primary predictors of political support. To test the validity of Thomas Piketty's "Brahmin Left vs. Merchant Right" theoretical framework, this study analyses how socioeconomic status, occupational class, and redistributive preferences structure contemporary voting behaviour in Sweden. This thesis integrates Abou-Chadi and Hix's (2021) theory of party-system fragmentation and Daniel Oesch's (2006) horizontal work logics, framing the Swedish landscape through Bartolini and Mair's (1990) lens of cleavage accretion. A two-step analytical approach is utilised to 1) replicate Piketty's methodological approach, estimating socioeconomic predicted probability gradients to establish long-term trends, and 2) conduct a party-family analysis which aims to uncover the specific mechanisms of political realignment and evaluate whether a bloc-level analysis obscures the intra-bloc pluralism driving the educational divide.

The results provide support of a consolidated education-based cleavage, showing that educational attainment is a stronger predictor of left-right alignment in Sweden compared to income. However, the findings indicate that this does not constitute a complete realignment of the traditional Left but is instead a result of *party-system fragmentation*, indicating that the observed divergence is primarily anchored in the inverse educational sorting between the Green party and the Sweden Democrats where support for the former increases steeply with educational attainment and *vice versa*. The rise of a "multi-elite" party system is thus not evident in the data. The results provide tentative support for the role of horizontal differentiation in occupational class, revealing that party alignment is rooted in specific work logics. New sociocultural divides have thus not wholly replaced historical class conflicts; rather, they have been layered on top of them in a process of *accretion*, indicating a transition into a *tripolar political space*. Additionally, this study demonstrates that highly educated left-wing voters remain strongly committed to income redistribution and have, in fact, not abandoned the economic interests of the working class.

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1. Introduction

Recent research in comparative political behaviour has documented a transformation in how social groups align with political parties across Western democracies. Several scholars within the field argue that the class-based party systems of the postwar era have gradually evolved into what they describe as a “multi-elite” based party system, structured by multidimensional political conflict, where neither represents the economic interests of the working class. In this configuration, education and income no longer point in the same political direction: highly educated voters increasingly support left-leaning or progressive parties, while high-income voters continue to align with the right. This divergence between high education and high income – summarised in French political scientist Thomas Piketty’s distinction between the “Brahmin Left” and the “Merchant Right” – is presented as a defining feature of contemporary electoral politics.

Piketty’s core argumentation and thesis are that:

In the early postwar decades, the party systems of Western democracies were “class-based”, that is, social democratic and affiliated parties represented both the low-education and the low-income electorate, whereas conservative and affiliated parties represented both high-education and high-income voters. These party systems have gradually evolved towards what we propose to call “multi-elite party systems”: higher-educated elites now vote for the “left”, while high-income elites still vote for the “right” (Gethin *et al.*, 2021a:15).

Sweden represents a particularly compelling case for examining these developments. Historically characterised by strong class-based alignments, a dominant Social Democratic Party (SAP), and corporatist labour-market institutions, Sweden long appeared to deviate from the patterns observed elsewhere (Lewin, 1988; Franklin *et al.*, 2009; Pierre, 2016). Yet recent decades have seen substantial socioeconomic and political change: rapid educational expansion, rising income inequality, the weakening of traditional labour-market organisations, and the emergence of the Greens (MP) and the Sweden Democrats (SD) (Elgenius & Wennerhag, 2018; Edling & Eldén, 2018; Bergman *et al.*, 2021). Since the late 60s, expansion of higher education has transformed Sweden into a “knowledge society”, where over 30% of voters now possess a university degree (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016). Recent decades have been characterised by “winner-takes-all politics” and increasing levels of inequality (Pierre, 2016). While historically egalitarian, Sweden saw income inequality increase by one-third between the mid-1980s and early 2010s – the largest growth among all OECD countries during that period (Edling & Eldén, 2018). Notably, Bartels (2017:47) has found that across thirty affluent democracies, Sweden included, “[policy-makers] seem to respond primarily or even entirely to the preferences of

affluent people”. These developments raise questions about whether Sweden has followed the same trajectory toward a multi-elite based party system or whether its cleavage structure – i.e., a durable societal division that organises political competition over the long term – has evolved in a distinct way.

Existing scholarship provides harmonised long-run evidence on Swedish political cleavages up to the 2018 election. Piketty and colleagues (see Gethin *et al.*, 2021b and Martínez-Toledano & Sodano, 2021), in particular, document the reversal of the education gradient and the persistence of income-based voting. However, their comparative design necessarily treats each country at a high level of aggregation and relies heavily on a simplified left-right bloc structure. Piketty’s approach has received critique for overlooking potential intra-bloc pluralism, thereby neglecting the possibility of “changing patterns of support within blocs, namely growing support for green/left-libertarian and radical right parties, rather than any significant changes in patterns of support for mainstream center-left and center-right parties” (Abou-Chadi & Hix, 2021:82). In other words, this approach is powerful for identifying broad socioeconomic gradients but less suited for analysing the party-side mechanisms that may underlie them – especially in contexts where new party types have become central to political competition. The 2022 election is especially relevant in this regard, as it marks the full consolidation of the Sweden Democrats as a recognised major actor as well as a further intensification of the sociocultural divide. Because these developments occurred after the period covered by Piketty and colleagues, the most consequential phase of Sweden’s contemporary party-system transformation remains unexamined in their framework, making an updated, party-level analysis necessary.

The purpose of this thesis is therefore twofold. Initially, it extends the empirical scope of existing research by applying Piketty’s methodological framework to the 2022 Swedish parliamentary election, generating the first set of education- and income-based voting gradients for this election (Model 1). Subsequently, and more importantly, it critically evaluates the explanatory power of the Piketty framework by integrating a complementary analytical approach (Model 2) which draws predominantly on Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021). The latter authors challenge Piketty’s thesis that modern electoral politics has become a battle between a “Brahmin Left” and a “Merchant Right. Specifically, they argue that focusing on “the Left” versus “the Right” as two coherent blocs misses the fragmentation of party systems, specifically the rise of Green/Left-Libertarian and Radical Right parties. Thus, while the Piketty model effectively captures broad socioeconomic divides, it risks obscuring the role of emerging party families in structuring the education cleavage. Model 2 therefore examines how education,

occupational class and sector of employment, and redistributive preferences shape support for distinct party families, allowing for a more fine-grained assessment of the mechanisms behind the contemporary Swedish cleavage structure.

With this dual-modelling approach, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates about the transformation of political conflict in “advanced democracies”, a term that points to nations sharing specific institutional history, economic structure, and patterns of political conflict, chiefly a stable history of electoral democracy (Abou-Chadi & Hix, 2021; Gethin *et al.*, 2021a, 2021b). It provides new empirical evidence for the most recent Swedish election and therefore offers a theoretically informed evaluation of whether Sweden conforms to, or diverges from, the multi-elite pattern. In doing so, it highlights the importance of integrating socioeconomic gradients with party-side dynamics to understand how political cleavages evolve in a rapidly changing political landscape.

1.1 The Research Problem

The evolution of political cleavages in Sweden remains insufficiently understood despite extensive comparative research. Existing studies, including Gethin *et al.* (2021a, 2021b) and Martínez-Toledano & Sodano (2021), provide harmonised long-run evidence up to the 2018 Swedish election, but their cross-national framework groups all Swedish parties into a single left and a single right bloc, it necessarily analyses Sweden at a very coarse level of aggregation, masking variation between individual parties, i.e., their comparative orientation necessarily treats Sweden at a methodologically high level of analysis. As a result, the Swedish case is primarily represented through broad socioeconomic gradients rather than through an analysis of the party-side mechanisms and historical developments that may explain them.

This creates two gaps in the literature. First, Sweden combines institutional features that should, in theory, dampen the emergence of a multi-elite party system with developments that should accelerate it, e.g. rapid educational expansion, rising inequality, and the rise of new party families. How these countervailing forces interact remains unclear. Second, the 2022 election has not yet been analysed within the Piketty framework. This election occurred in a political environment marked by heightened sociocultural polarisation and the consolidation of the Sweden Democrats, making it a crucial test case for evaluating whether the reversal of the educational divide and the persistence of the income gradient, documented up to 2018, persist.

Beyond these empirical gaps lies a deeper research puzzle. According to Piketty's framework, the rise of a “Brahmin Left” should be driven by the increasing concentration of highly educated voters within left-leaning parties. Yet in Sweden, the party system has evolved

in ways that complicate this expectation. The emergence of the Greens (MP) and the Sweden Democrats (SD) has restructured the political landscape along sociocultural lines, and recent work by Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021) suggests that the education cleavage may be driven less by economic conflict and more by sociocultural dynamics centred on identity, borders, and environmentalism. If this is the case, then the Swedish education gradient may not reflect a shift in the mainstream Left's socioeconomic base at all, but rather the rise of new party families that attract highly educated voters for reasons unrelated to redistribution.

The central research problem in this thesis consists in two parts:

- a) to determine whether the 2022 election aligns with the multi-elite pattern identified in comparative research, and
- b) to assess whether the Piketty framework is sufficient for explaining Sweden's contemporary cleavage structure, or whether a more party-centred approach reveals additional mechanisms.

1.2 Research questions

The present thesis is guided by the following overarching research question:

Has Sweden's political cleavage structure evolved in a way that aligns with the multi-elite pattern identified in comparative research?

To address this question, the thesis focuses on three sub-questions:

1. *Does the 2022 election exhibit the characteristic divergence between education and income documented in recent decades?*
2. *How do the 2022 voting patterns relate to Sweden's historical cleavages?*
3. *What political and societal developments help explain the contemporary configuration of Swedish political conflict?*

With these questions I aim to translate the broader research puzzle into a set of empirically tractable components, in order to evaluate not only whether Sweden exhibits the socioeconomic divergence highlighted in Piketty's multi-elite framework, but also whether this pattern can be understood without examining the party-side dynamics that have reshaped the Swedish political landscape. By combining a replication of Piketty's indicators with a party-centred analysis inspired by Abou-Chadi and Hix, my work links Piketty's long-run comparative research to the specific institutional, historical, and partisan developments that characterise Sweden specifically. In doing so, the research questions provide a framework for assessing both the continuity and transformation of Swedish political cleavages in the 2022 election.

1.3 Contributions

This thesis contributes to the fields of sociology and political economy. Previous scholarship has performed in-depth analyses of Western countries other than Sweden or aggregated, comparative analyses in which Sweden is only one of several countries – the present paper contributes to this research by diving deeper into the plausible mechanisms and drivers that are unique for Sweden. Moreover, previous research is situated primarily within the field of political economy whereas this research takes a more sociological approach, focusing more on the social aspects of the evolution of political cleavages and the specific contexts that underpin them. The main novelty of the present paper is thus the analysis and theoretical exploration of the implications of the most recent Swedish National Election Survey (SNES) post-electoral survey round (Oscarsson *et al.*, 2024) as well as a deeper inquiry than previously offered into plausible contextual factors which may have enabled or inhibited the evolution of contemporary political cleavages in Sweden.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This section outlines the remaining chapters of this thesis. Chapter 2 presents a contextual background of Swedish politics and societal development during twentieth century and onward – the incontrovertible role of the SAP and the trade unions, as well as the rise of new political parties and their respective impacts on the transformations of Swedish politics. Chapter 3 presents the current State of the Art within the research on political cleavages, mainly within the fields of political science and political sociology. Chapter 4 outlines the theoretical underpinnings and conceptualisations that will be used in this thesis, which is mainly based on the classic theory on political cleavages by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), but also on theoretical developments by Bartolini and Mair (1990), Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021) and Oesch (2006). Chapter 5 details the two-step methodological procedure: first, a replication of Piketty's (2020) predicted probability gradients (Model 1); and second, a party-family analysis (Model 2) that bridges individual-level survey evidence with macro-structural theory. Chapter 6 documents the outcomes of these two models. Chapter 7 discusses the findings in relation to theory and previous research. Lastly, Chapter 8 summarises the main contributions of this thesis and offers some suggestions for the trajectory of future research on this matter.

2. Background

To understand contemporary cleavage structures in Sweden, I argue that it is necessary to know something about Swedish history as it relates to political development. Therefore, this chapter

presents a brief summary of the main political events and societal changes during the post-war period to the present. I do this to position the findings of this study within a history of more far-reaching processes.

The Swedish political system is a unicameral parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy, characterised by a high degree of proportionality and a unique process for government formation. Sweden utilises a proportional representation system designed to ensure that the distribution of seats in the Riksdag (the Parliament) closely reflects the popular vote. To be eligible for seats, a party must win at least 4 percent of the national vote. This threshold was introduced in 1970 to prevent extreme parliamentary fragmentation. Uniquely, national, regional, and local elections are held on the same day, which contributes to an exceptionally high voter turnout, often exceeding 80 percent (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016).

2.1 The political landscape in postwar Sweden

Sweden has been a parliamentary democracy since 1917. Soon thereafter, in 1921, the first national election with universal suffrage was realised. This period has been argued as the starting point for several key characteristics of the Swedish political system: a democratically accountable cabinet, popular movements, free mass media, and the welfare society (Petersson, 2016). The decades succeeding World War II saw a social democratic political dominance unprecedented in any other European country. The Social Democrats had ruled for several decades prior to the end of the second world war, but during the post-war era, SAP hegemony was a fact. The implications of this period are important because they provide the baseline against which later party-system fragmentation and the weakening of traditional class alignments can be assessed.

Sweden has been seen as the archetypical representative of the five-party model (Berglund and Lindström, 1978; Lewin, 1988; Martínez-Toledano & Sodano, 2021). Each distinct social class was strongly associated to a party – workers by the SAP, peasantry by the Agrarians, and the economic and social elite by the conservatives. Beyond these three main parties, one centre-right liberal party and a communist party offer a more radical alternative on the left completes the model. The model with five parties in two opposing blocs – the left wing represented by SAP and the bourgeoisie by the Moderates – remained until 1988, with the entry of new parties, which we will return to later in this chapter.

One of the main characteristics of the post-war decades in Sweden was the strong position and influence of labour market organisation. Several scholars have argued that the evolution of Swedish politics and the evolution of Swedish trade unions during the 20th century are strongly

interconnected (Heclo & Madsen, 1987; Kjellberg, 1990; Hadenius, 1997a). The collaboration between the trade union confederation LO (Landsorganisationen) and the SAP was undeniably actualised through the 1938 Saltsjöbaden agreement, which established a legislative and institutional framework for regulating relations between the labour market parties (Hadenius, 1997a; Kjellberg, 2017). Another important aspect to highlight is that point out that “Educational issues were important to the Social Democrats, since education was regarded as fundamental to the task of eliminating class distinctions” (Hadenius, 1997b:41). As early as 1927, SAP reformed the school system to strengthen the position of primary schools.

However, although this period is often viewed as predominantly characterised by SAP rule, the party's power was threatened several times (Hadenius, 1997a). The nonsocialist opposition strongly criticised several aspects of SAP's party program's during this period and gained ground to the extent that SAP and the Agrarians eventually formed a coalition government. Interestingly, the introduction of proportional representation in the Parliament in the 1920s was originally a strategic technique used by conservative parties to reduce the dominance of the SAP as the labour movement grew (Lijphart & Aitkin, 2002). Heclo and Madsen (1987) challenge the idea of Sweden as a predominantly leftist country, arguing that SAP always tip-toed right on the margins of majority support. This nuance is crucial, for even during the era of SAP hegemony, the boundaries of the class cleavage were not static, and this historical instability informs how I interpret the more fluid patterns observed in 2022.

2.2 1970-2000

The 1970s marked a period of significant institutional and societal transformation in Sweden. The promulgation of the 1974 Instrument of Government transferred formal executive authority from the monarchy to the parliament, consolidating Sweden's status as a fully parliamentary democracy. However, it also marks the beginning of the decline of SAP (Martínez-Toledano & Sodano, 2021).

A major structural change during this period was the rapid expansion of higher education. The number of individuals enrolled in tertiary education rose dramatically – from around 80,000 in the 1960s to 130,000 in the 1970s and more than 300,000 in the 1980s (Heclo & Madsen, 1987). Over 30% of Swedish voters now possess a university degree (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016). As educational attainment has increased, the traditional class-based party alignments that formerly characterised Swedish politics since the early twentieth century has begun to loosen.

Simultaneously, the Swedish party system underwent a process of diversification. Emerging parties and movements increasingly challenged the authority of established political actors

across the ideological spectrum. The five-party model that had structured Swedish politics since the postwar era began to erode (Martínez-Toledano & Sodano, 2021). In the aftermath of the 1980 referendum on nuclear power, the Green Party (Miljöpartiet de Gröna, MP) was founded by academics and activists who positioned the party as a progressive alternative to the established blocs (Elgenius and Wennerhag, 2018). With its flat organisational structure, anti-nuclear stance, and emphasis on environmental and post-materialist issues (Hadenius, 1997a; Dolezal, 2010), the MP entered parliament for the first time in 1988 – famously “dancing into” the Riksdag accompanied by a samba orchestra.

The late 80s and early 90s saw further party-system fragmentation. In 1991, two additional parties entered parliament: the Christian Democrats (KD), founded in 1964 but electorally marginal until this point, and New Democracy, a short-lived populist party founded the same year (Aylott, 2016; Martínez-Toledano & Sodano, 2021). Although New Democracy quickly collapsed, its brief success signalled growing voter dissatisfaction. These developments foreshadowed the sociocultural conflicts that later become central to Swedish politics and help contextualise why the SD were eventually able to mobilise segments of the working class.

During this period, the SD were also founded (1988), emerging from a radical right-wing and neo-Nazi milieu. Throughout the 90s, however, SD remained electorally insignificant and socially stigmatised. Scholars argue that the strength of the traditional class cleavage and the hegemonic position of SAP acted as a “shield” that delayed the breakthrough of the radical right in Sweden (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016; Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019). Yet public concern about immigration was already rising: by 1994, 21 percent of Swedes said that they were worried about immigration, and by 2002 nearly half expressed support for stricter border controls (Martínez-Toledano & Sodano, 2021).

By the late 1990s, however, the MP had moved closer to the centre-left bloc, partly due to strategic considerations. As SAP's electoral strength declined, the party increasingly relied on support from MP and the Left Party to secure parliamentary majorities. This realignment marked the beginning of a more fluid and fragmented party system, setting the stage for the major political transformations of the 2000s and 2010s.

2.3 2010 and onwards

The 2010s represent a decisive turning point in Swedish political history, marked by the consolidation of new sociocultural cleavages (Elgenius, 2018) and the rise of the Sweden Democrats as a major political force (Hellström & Lindahl, 2021). As the SAP gradually adopted a more centrist, “catch-all” strategy, it began to depoliticise class and increasingly

emphasise the concerns of the new middle class (Pierre, 2016). This created a void in the representation among segments of the working class, particularly those with authoritarian-leaning values or scepticism toward cultural liberalism (Bergman *et al.*, 2021). The SD capitalised on this ‘window of opportunity’ by contrasting the identities of authoritarian-leaning workers with those of libertarian middle-class academics (Oskarson & Demker, 2015; Elgenius, 2018; Hellström & Bevelander, 2018). This struggle contributed to a dramatic shift in unionised working-class support as well (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016; Magnusson, 2018): support for the SAP among LO members fell from 80% in 1956 to 42% by 2015, with SD becoming the second most popular party in this group (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019).

After years of organisational reform and efforts to distance themselves from their old associations with neo-Nazi connections, SD entered parliament in 2010 (Elgenius & Wennerhag, 2018). Their breakthrough effectively ended Sweden’s long-standing two-bloc system. As a hinge party, SD had, and still has, a lot of blackmail potential, giving them a lot of indirect influence (Hellström & Lindahl, 2021). Moreover, the SD’s rhetoric of anti-immigrating and anti-multiculturalism has increasingly attracted young low-income and low-education voters. The party’s rapid growth continued: SD became the third-largest party in 2014 and the second-largest in 2018, marking what Martínez-Toledano & Sodano (2021:169) describe as “the last piece in the demise of Swedish exceptionalism.” The SD has gained the most traction among men, manual workers (predominantly LO members), and individuals living in rural areas. They are also particularly strong among low-educated voters and those who harbour low levels of political trust and general mistrust of the “established” elite (Oscarsson & Holmberg (2016). Elgenius and Rydgren (2019) note that the SD frames its message as a defence of the nation against a “politically correct elite” (often associated with academic and professional classes) that has “betrayed” traditional social solidarity.

During the same period, the MP solidified their position within the Left bloc. Although originally claiming to transcend the left-right divide, the MP became firmly perceived as a left-leaning party due to its consistent cooperation with the SAP and its strong alignment with cosmopolitan, pro-immigration, and environmentalist values (Aylott & Bolin, 2015). This shift reflects broader European trends in which Green parties have become key representatives of a highly educated, urban, sociocultural professional class (Dolezal, 2010; Enyedi & Deegan-Krause, 2013). This realignment also highlights why highly educated voters increasingly cluster around environmentally progressive parties rather than the traditional left, a pattern that is central to several of my hypotheses.

Conclusively, the period from 2010 onward marks the consolidation of a multidimensional cleavage structure in Sweden. The rise of the radical right, the integration of the MP into the left bloc, and the weakening of SAP's historical working-class base have collectively transformed the Swedish party system (Bengtsson & Jacobsson, 2018). This transformation is directly relevant for my study because it reshapes the meaning of class, education, and sectoral divides, making it necessary to revisit whether traditional cleavages still operate as expected.

3. State of the Art

Contemporary research on political cleavages seeks to explain why the social bases of party support have changed so profoundly over the past decades. For the purposes of this thesis, this literature is essential because it establishes the empirical patterns that the Swedish case must be evaluated against. Understanding these developments is also central for assessing the strengths and limitations of the Piketty framework, which treats education and income as the two central axes of contemporary political conflict. The following review therefore synthesises the comparative evidence on cleavage evolution and situates Sweden within this broader transformation.

A large body of comparative research documents the long-term transformation of electoral alignments in Western democracies. Early postwar patterns were characterised by strong class voting, with manual workers and low-income groups consistently supporting social democratic or left-leaning parties, while higher-income and business-oriented groups aligned with conservative or liberal parties (Knutsen, 2006, Franklin *et al.*, 2009; Gethin *et al.*, 2021a, 2021b). Over time, however, these alignments have weakened. Studies using long-run survey data and harmonised cross-national datasets show a gradual decline in the strength of traditional class voting and the emergence of new divides structured around education, cultural values, and attitudes toward globalisation (Dalton, 2018; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018, Gethin *et al.*, 2021a). This shift away from conventional class-based voting is the starting point for understanding why education and income have become the dominant predictors of contemporary political conflict.

One of the most notable empirical findings is the divergence between education and income as predictors of vote choice. As traditional class alignments have weakened, scholars have increasingly turned to education and income as the key socioeconomic indicators structuring political behaviour. Across many Western democracies, higher-educated voters have increasingly supported left-leaning or progressive parties, even as higher-income voters continue to align with the right (Stubager, 2009; Gidron & Hall, 2017; Piketty, 2018). Stubager

(2010) demonstrates that *length* of education in particular is associated with a new “education cleavage” based on authoritarian-libertarian values and argues that this dimension has become independent of the traditional class-based economic cleavage. This pattern has been observed in countries with diverse institutional settings, which suggests a broad structural transformation in the social bases of party support. Using long-run survey data, scholars have documented that the education gradient in voting has shifted from negative to positive in many countries: whereas lower-educated voters once formed the core of left-wing support, highly educated voters now constitute a central part of the left’s electoral base (Stubager, 2009; Bovens & Wille, 2017).

This reversal is often interpreted as a result of educational expansion, occupational restructuring, and the increasing political relevance of cultural issues. Income, by contrast, has remained a relatively stable predictor of right-leaning voting. Empirical studies consistently find that higher-income individuals continue to prefer parties advocating market-oriented policies, lower taxation, and limited redistribution (Evans & Tilley, 2017; Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015). Contrastingly, Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021) have found that the new middle-class voters who support the Left (a group theorised in the literature to consist largely of sociocultural professionals and public sector workers) are actually strong supporters of the welfare state and economic redistribution, rather than elites who have abandoned these goals. Additionally, Kulin & Svallfors (2013) have shown that while members of the working class are generally more in favour of redistribution, the cognitive link between abstract values and concrete policy support is often stronger among the highly educated. Nonetheless, the combination of a stable income gradient and a reversed education gradient have led several scholars to describe contemporary party systems as “multi-dimensional” or “multi-elite,” with different elite groups aligning with different parties based on distinct forms of socioeconomic capital (Bovens & Wille, 2017; Gidron & Hall, 2017; Gethin *et al.*, 2021a). This divergence is central to the present thesis, because it forms the empirical foundation of the multi-elite model that I test and critique using Swedish data.

However, socioeconomic indicators alone cannot account for the full restructuring of political conflict. A parallel body of research shows that cultural and sociopolitical attitudes have become increasingly important. Research highlights the growing importance of cultural and sociopolitical attitudes – including immigration, national identity, and environmental protection – as drivers of electoral behaviour. These issues have become increasingly salient since the 1990s and have contributed to the consolidation of a new cultural axis of political conflict (Kitschelt, 1994; Kriesi *et al.*, 2008; Abou-Chadi & Hix, 2021). Empirical analyses

consistently show that voters with lower levels of formal education, rural residence, or more traditional value orientations are more likely to support culturally conservative or radical right parties (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Rydgren, 2018). Relatedly, Gidron and Hall (2017) argue that working-class men without a college education have suffered a decline in relative social status, leading them to reject the “progressive” values of the educated elite in favour of populist right-wing parties that often move their economic platforms to the left to appear as providers of social protection.

The interaction between economic and cultural attitudes further complicates the picture. Piketty (2020) argues a for “divorce” between the left and the working class, suggesting that as left-wing parties began to represent the educational elite, they moderated their redistributive goals to appeal to this new base. Several scholars argue against the narrative that social democratic parties around Europe have lost the working class to the extreme right due to their shift to the right on economic issues (“Third Way”) or their shift to the left on cultural issues (“identity politics”) (Abou-Chadi *et al.*, 2021). Instead, they show that social democratic parties have primarily lost voters to green and mainstream right-wing parties. A related body of work also examines attitudes toward redistribution, welfare policy, and economic inequality (Dolezal, 2010; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018; Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2019). These studies show that redistributive preferences remain strongly associated with left-right voting, but their interaction with education has become more complex. In several countries, highly educated voters express strong support for cultural liberalism but more moderate or ambivalent preferences on economic redistribution, while lower-educated voters often combine economic left-leaning preferences with cultural conservatism (2015; Beramendi *et al.*, 2015). Dolezal finds that supporters of Green parties across Europe can be characterised as “young, highly educated, work as social-cultural specialists or are students, are predominantly urban, and less attached to Christian churches” (2010:1). This trend has been observed as early as in the 80s (Poguntke, 1987). Beyond the environment, Green party voters have been found to adhere more strongly to libertarian, pro-immigration, and cosmopolitan values (Enyedi & Deegan-Krause, 2013). This decoupling of economic and cultural attitudes is a central empirical finding in contemporary cleavage research.

Scholars of cleavage theory have increasingly argued for a realignment – i.e., lasting changes in party positions and the fundamental shift in the composition of party supporter bases – of cleavage structures rather than dealignment – i.e., the gradual weakening of historical political cleavages and the fragmentation of long-standing links between social groups and political parties – which was the dominating idea for some time. Already in 1998, Kriesi suggested that

“the decline of traditional cleavages does not necessarily signify the end of structuration of politics by social divisions” (1998:181). Nonetheless, many scholars have suggested a ‘globalisation cleavage’ between the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of globalisation (De Wilde *et al.*, 2019; Helbling & Jungkuntz, 2020; Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Teney *et al.*, 2014). i.e., a reconceptualisation of contemporary politics not as a simple erosion of old alignments, but as a process of realignment around new axes of conflict. Importantly, this shift does not imply that traditional cleavages have disappeared; rather, it reflects a growing recognition that old and new divisions coexist and interact, producing a more complex and multidimensional cleavage structure than the dealignment thesis initially suggested (Bornschieer & Kriesi, 2012; Crulli & Emanuele, 2025).

In the wake of this development, a ‘neo-cleavage’ theory has emerged (Marks *et al.*, 2021), suggesting that while the classic left/right political scale is growing increasingly irrelevant, the GAL/TAN (Green/Alternative/Libertarian and Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist) divide is gaining all the more relevance (Edling & Eldén, 2018). Marks *et al.* (2021) have suggested the emergence of two new cleavages: ‘integration/demarcation’ and ‘transnational’. Notably, Hooghe & Marks (2025:636) argue that “an education cleavage now structures voting for GAL and TAN parties in Western Europe”. Jackson and Jolly (2021) and Dassonneville *et al.*, (2024) have shown that the transnational-nationalist dimension is better at predicting Europeans’ vote choices than measures on the left/right continuum. The idea that Western Europe has entered a post-cleavage era is thus challenged. Instead, scholars argue that new forms of conflict have emerged and become structured, particularly those related to globalisation, identity, and cultural change (Kriesi *et al.*, 2008; Hooghe & Marks, 2018). This theoretical shift reinforces the need to analyse not only socioeconomic gradients but also the party-side mechanisms through which new cleavages become politically organised.

Beyond socioeconomic predictors, comparative research highlights the role of party system diversification in reshaping electoral alignments. The rise of Green parties, liberal-progressive parties, and radical right parties has altered the structure of political competition and created new opportunities for voter realignment (Meguid, 2005; Hooghe & Marks, 2018). Empirical studies show that these parties draw support from distinct social groups: Green parties from highly educated, urban, and culturally liberal voters; Radical Right parties from lower-educated, economically insecure, and culturally conservative voters (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Rydgren, 2018). Relatedly, Oesch and Rennwald (2018) have found fundamental shift in Western European electoral competition from a bipolar configuration (Left vs. Centre-Right) to a three-way struggle driven by the rise of radical right-wing parties – what the authors call the *tripolar*

political space. This diversification strongly suggests a weakening of traditional left-right blocs and the emergence of more fragmented and fluid party systems with the rise of radical right parties. Voter volatility has increased, and long-standing partisan loyalties have eroded (Dalton, 2018). Comparative analyses also show that realignment processes vary across countries depending on institutional features, welfare state structures, and historical patterns of political organisation (Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015). For my purposes, this diversification is essential because it shapes the party-level patterns of socioeconomic alignment that the empirical chapters seek to disentangle.

3.1 The Swedish Case

Although Sweden has long been considered an archetypical case of stable class-based politics, empirical research shows that it has undergone many of the same transformations observed elsewhere. Studies covering the postwar period document the gradual decline of class voting, the weakening of the traditional Social Democratic (SAP) coalition, and the rise of new political actors (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016; Aylott & Bolin, 2015). The expansion of higher education, increasing income and wealth inequality, and the emergence of the Greens (MP) and the Sweden Democrats (SD) have all contributed to a more complex and multidimensional cleavage structure (Oskarson & Demker, 2015; Esaiasson & Wängnerud, 2016; Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019).

Empirical analyses up to the 2018 election show a clear reversal of the education gradient in Sweden, with highly educated voters increasingly supporting left-leaning or progressive parties (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016; Oskarson & Demker, 2015). At the same time, the income gradient has remained stable, with higher-income voters continuing to prefer right-leaning parties (Aylott & Bolin, 2015). Research also highlights the growing importance of cultural issues – particularly immigration and national identity – in structuring Swedish voting behaviour, especially since the rise of the SD (Rydgren, 2018; Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019). Arzheimer *et al.* (2017) emphasises that support for the SD is driven not just by policy, but by deep-seated ‘status anxiety’ among lower-educated groups who feel disadvantaged by the shift to a globalised ‘knowledge society’. Connecting these recent trends to the longer historical trajectory described in the background section highlights how Sweden’s evolving party system shapes the expectations and empirical tests developed in the following chapters.

Lastly, existing comparative datasets (Gethin *et al.*, 2021a, 2021b; Martínez-Toledano & Sodano, 2021) include Swedish data only up to 2018, leaving the 2022 election unexamined. Because these datasets are harmonised across many countries, they treat Sweden at a high level

of analysis, providing limited insight into the specific historical and institutional mechanisms that may shape its cleavage structure. I argue that it is therefore imperative to zoom in on the Swedish case at a lower, more detailed level.

4. Theory

In this thesis, the theoretical framework rests on three core ideas. First, that cleavages are multidimensional phenomena that combine social divisions, identities, and organisational expressions. Second, that education and income represent distinct forms of capital that shape political preferences through different mechanisms. Third, cleavage structures evolve over time in response to broader social transformations, and understanding these transformations requires a conceptual approach that treats old and new conflicts with the same analytical criteria. This framework guides the empirical analysis of the 2022 Swedish election and provides the basis for interpreting the patterns of voter behaviour observed in the data. In the remainder of this chapter, I argue for and present four hypotheses linked to patterns of party support in Sweden.

The concept of political cleavages remains one of the most influential analytical tools for understanding how social divisions become politically meaningful. In its classical formulation, developed by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), a cleavage is not just a correlation between social background and political behaviour. Rather, it should be viewed as a historically rooted conflict that crystallises around major turning points in state formation and industrialisation. In their original work, Lipset and Rokkan identified four cleavages: centre/periphery, state/church, rural/urban and workers/employers (the latter also referred to as the class cleavage). What distinguishes a cleavage from a mere social divide is that it is embedded in collective identities and organisational structures. Cleavages are, in this sense, structured, enduring, and reproduced through institutions, parties, and group identities. As Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021:89) point out, it is necessary to acknowledge that “noneconomic issues have always played a role in democratic politics, and perhaps the “golden age” of redistributive politics, between the late 1940s and the early 1960s, is an exceptional period in an otherwise multidimensional structure of politics.”

Moreover, education has been declared a kind of master variable because it determines not only economic life chances but also value orientations (Zollinger & Attewall, 2026). Several scholars have pointed out its central role in producing universalistic values and empathy, which in turn sort voters along a transnational cleavage (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Marks *et al.*, 2021), i.e., a new divide that stratifies groups in society on a global scale, not contingent on nation borders. This shift is most pronounced among younger Swedish generations who are

increasingly divided along educational lines rather than historical class lines (Gethin *et al.*, 2021a).

Later theorists, most notably Bartolini and Mair (1990), formalised this understanding by identifying three constitutive elements of a cleavage, moving beyond a simple focus on social structure to include the mechanisms that translate social divisions into durable political conflict (see also Bornschier, 2010; von Schoultz, 2015; Crulli & Emanuele, 2025). Firstly, a *social-structural division*, which is defined as the objective basis of the divide. This division is founded on an observable characteristic that distinguishes individuals in a society, such as social class, religious denomination, status, or education. Second, a *normative or identity-based component*, refers to a shared set of values and beliefs that provide a social group with a sense of collective identity and self-awareness. Without this psychological element, a structural category remains a “group on paper” rather than a political actor. And thirdly, an *organisational expression*, the manifestation of the group in the form of political parties, mass organisations, or trade unions that coordinate collective action. From this point of view, these organisations act as agents of mobilisation, translating group identity into a durable pattern of political behaviour. Bartolini and Mair’s (1990) framework acknowledges the existence of a cleavage only when all three elements are present. This conceptualisation is important because it prevents the term from being applied to any politically salient issue. A conflict may be intense or electorally relevant, but unless it generates collective identities and is channelled through political organisations, it does not qualify as a cleavage in the classical sense.

Furthermore, Bartolini and Mair (1990) specify three central criteria for evaluating the strength and longevity of cleavage structures over time: The first is *social structure*, which refers to the stability of the social relationship represented by the cleavage. This can be analytically measured by the stability of partisan alignments: if voters rarely change allegiances from a party on one side of a cleavage to a party on the opposite camp, the social group is considered “closed”. The second is *salience*, which denotes the relative importance of a cleavage compared to other divides in the party system. Salience is maintained through active political conflict, which highlights group boundaries and keep group identification relevant for individual members. The third and last is *encapsulation*, which describes a situation where parties provide an encompassing social environment (through schools, clubs, and newspapers) that isolates their supporters from the appeals of political competitors, thereby “encapsulating” the voter within a specific milieu (precisely what the SAP did in its prime). I stress that, while my analysis is limited to the individual level, Bartolini and Mair’s (1990) framework provides the theoretical benchmark for what constitutes a cleavage *proper*.

This framework implies that cleavages evolve as societies change, and that new social divisions may become politically structured. The concepts presented above dictate that education can function as a cleavage only if it produces stable identities and is channelled through specific party organisations. In other words, if education has become a meaningful cleavage, it should manifest not only as a social distinction but as a stable identity expressed through support for specific party families. If education has become a central axis of identity and organisation in contemporary politics, I expect it to structure contemporary party support in Sweden as well. From this assumption, I arrive at the following hypothesis:

H1: Education-based voting should align highly educated voters with culturally progressive parties rather than the traditional left

Recent theoretical work has emphasised the importance of applying these criteria consistently to both old and new conflicts. Crulli and Emanuele (2025) argue that much of the contemporary debate has been hindered by the tendency to treat traditional cleavages and globalisation-related conflicts with different conceptual standards. Their contribution is not empirical but conceptual: they insist that the analytical status of a cleavage does not depend on its historical origin but on whether it exhibits the three constitutive elements. This perspective makes it possible to analyse both old and new political conflicts using the same criteria.

Building on this conceptual foundation, contemporary cleavage theory has increasingly focused on the transformation of political conflict in advanced democracies. While the classical model emphasised the stability of economic and religious divides, more recent work highlights the emergence of a cultural dimension structured around values, identity, and globalisation. This sociocultural dimension is often conceptualised as the GAL/TAN axis (Green-Alternative-Liberal vs. Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist). The GAL/TAN framework conceptualises political conflict as increasingly organised around attitudes toward multiculturalism, environmentalism, gender equality, and social liberalism (Hooghe *et al.*, 2002; Kriesi *et al.*, 2008). In neo-cleavage theory, Green parties serve as the counter-pole to the radical right (TAN parties) (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Marks *et al.* 2021). Importantly, this is not just an empirical observation about voting patterns, it is also a theoretical claim about the structure of political conflict. According to this theory, education has replaced occupation as the primary structural anchor for Green party voters. In doing so, they have successfully politicised a “second dimension” of politics – values related to identity, borders, and environment – which mainstream parties (Social Democrats, Conservatives) initially struggled to integrate. From this

perspective, cultural issues have become an independent political conflict dimension. Kriesi *et al.* (2008) hypothesised the following positioning of party families with respect to this transformed political space (Figure 4.1).

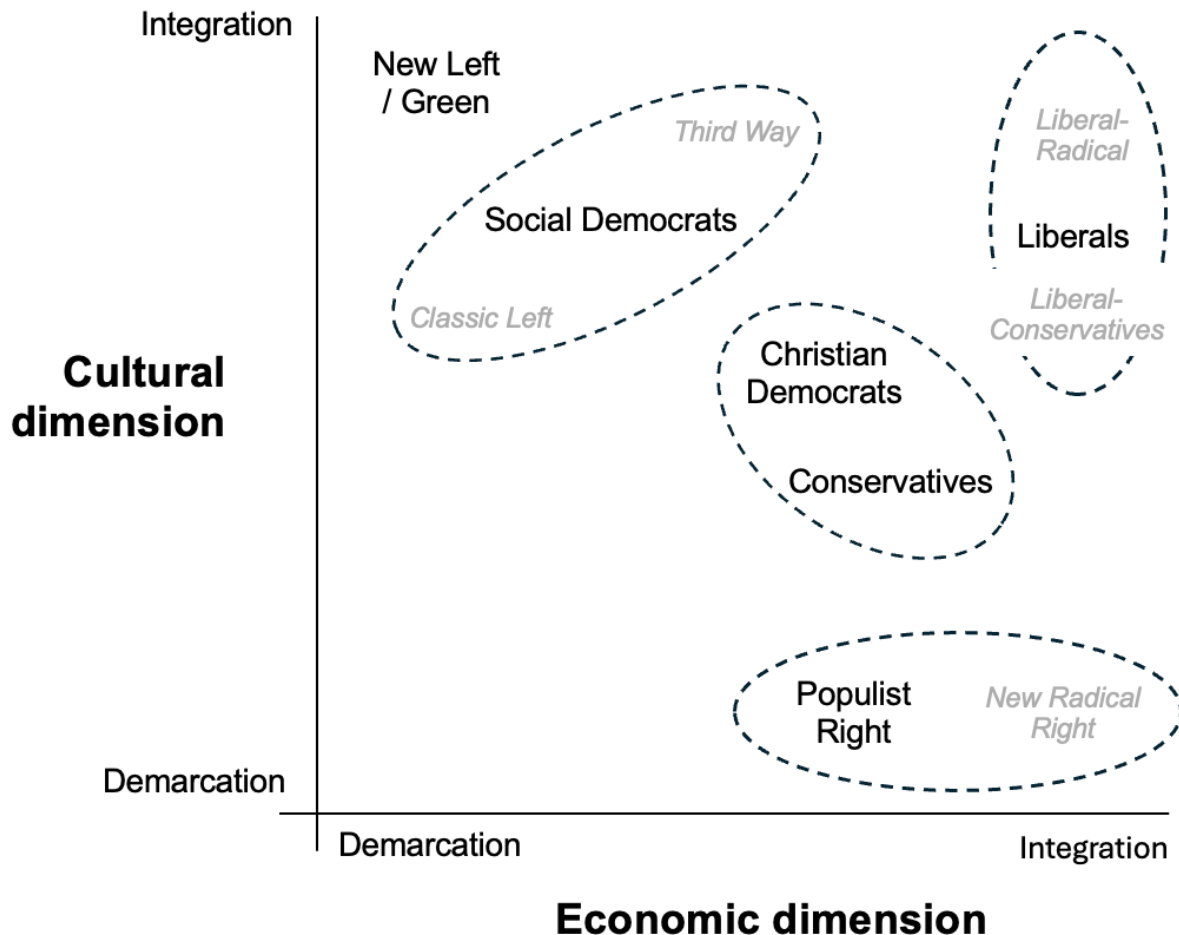


Figure 4.1 Expected positioning of party families with respect to the new sociocultural cleavage

Moreover, Oesch and Rennwald (2018) has contributed to this theoretical lens by developing the notion of *tripolar political space* in European politics, driven by the rise of radical right-wing parties in the last three decades. The tripolar configuration presupposes that political contestation is structured along at least two distinct dimensions: the economic axis and the GAL/TAN axis. The authors claim that these two dimensions host three primary party blocs: The Left, the Centre-Right, and the Radical Right. In a tripolar space, electoral competition plays out through three specific occupational segments: party preserves, contested strongholds, and open competition. Party preserves contend that some classes remain the reliable base of a single pole. Sociocultural professionals (e.g., in health, education) are the preserve of the Left, while large employers and managers remain the preserve of the Centre-Right. Contested

strongholds implies that two critical classes are now split between poles. The working class is a contested stronghold between the Left and the Radical Right, while small business owners are contested by the Centre-Right and the Radical Right. Finally, in open competition, all three poles compete relatively equally for the votes of technical specialists and office clerks.

This theoretical perspective suggests a clear mechanism linking education to party choice. If the GAL/TAN dimension has become a structured cleavage, and if education is one of its primary social bases, then highly educated voters should align with the parties that anchor the GAL pole. Thus, the emergence of the cultural cleavage implies a predictable pattern of educational sorting across party families. This adds up to the formulation of a second hypothesis:

H2: Highly educated voters in Sweden will gravitate toward environmentally progressive parties

A related theoretical development is the notion of a transnational cleavage, articulated by Hooghe and Marks (2018). This perspective argues that globalisation has created political conflicts between cosmopolitan and more nationalist groups. The key theoretical insight here is that globalisation produces not only material winners and losers but also competing normative visions of political community. This divide pits “globalisation winners” (highly educated, urban, sociocultural professionals) against “losers” (lower-educated workers and rural residents who feel disadvantaged by the shift toward a knowledge economy) (Helbling & Jungkunz, 2020; Zollinger & Attewall, 2026; Crulli & Emanuele, 2025). Gethin *et al.* (2021a:5) suggest that the working class may perceive the Left as parties defending the “winners of the higher education competition”, which could explain why lower-educated voters feel left aside. Additionally, education plays a central role in shaping the cluster of cosmopolitan-libertarian versus nationalist-authoritarian attitudes that define the contemporary transnational cleavage because it is associated with cognitive skills, value formation, and exposure to diverse social environments (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007). The transnational cleavage thus provides a conceptual explanation for why education has become an increasingly important structuring principle of political conflict.

Understanding this multidimensionality requires a conceptual distinction between different forms of socioeconomic capital. Education and income, although correlated, operate through different mechanisms. Education is associated with cultural capital, cognitive skills, and occupational trajectories that shape values and worldviews (Bourdieu, 1984; Stubager, 2009).

Income is associated with material interests related to taxation, redistribution, and welfare state design (Evans & Tilley, 2017). Yet recent research complicates the assumption that education primarily structures cultural preferences while income structures economic ones. Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021) show that highly educated voters have, in fact, not abandoned the economic interests of the working class; on the contrary, support for redistribution increases with education level. In the new cleavage structure, several scholars argue that education has replaced occupation as the primary “sorter” of voters, that effectively distinguishes between those who embrace open, cosmopolitan societies and those who favour national control (Marks *et al.*, 2021; Zollinger & Attewall, 2026; Crulli & Emanuele, 2025). Furthermore, Bonomi *et al.* (2021) posit that when cultural conflict becomes salient, voters switch from class to cultural identity. This causes conservative economic losers to actually demand *less* redistribution because they identify more with their cultural group than their economic class.

The divergence between education and income as political predictors is therefore not an anomaly but a theoretically expected outcome in a multidimensional political space, where individuals occupy multiple social positions that may pull them toward different political orientations. The theoretical distinction between cultural and material forms of capital implies that redistributive preferences remain a central component of the economic cleavage, particularly attitudes toward redistribution, even as education increasingly structures the sociocultural one. From this expectation I derive the third hypothesis:

H3: Redistributive preferences remain a strong structuring force in Swedish electoral behaviour, with pro-redistribution voters aligning with left-leaning parties to a higher degree

The transformation of cleavage structures can also be understood through the lens of long-term social change. Educational expansion, occupational restructuring, and value change have altered the social bases of political conflict. Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021) contend that political preferences are partially determined by structural socioeconomic developments (e.g. the “Information Revolution”) beyond mere political choice. In this line of argumentation, these processes do not necessarily weaken old cleavages but rather reshape them. Class, for example, may no longer map neatly onto occupational categories, but continues to structure political preferences through perceptions of economic security, social status, and distributive justice (Oesch, 2006). Oesch (2006:263) instead proposes the idea of horizontal differentiation in occupational class as a potential layering mechanism of old and new divides, where the “middle

class is not conceptualised as a unitary grouping, and the manual/non-manual divide is not used as a decisive class boundary.”

Relatedly, Bartolini and Mair (1990) propose the concepts of *persistence* and *accretion* to understand how modern party systems transition from the “frozen” landscapes of the 20th century to contemporary multidimensional conflicts. The authors argue that the persistence of a cleavage is not necessarily dependent on a static social structure, but on the stability of the political alternatives that cleavages produce. Rather than new conflicts replacing old ones in a clean break (realignment), the literature suggests a process of accretion – a geological metaphor where new cleavages are formed in succession and overlay one another. In other words, territorial and religious divides may manifest in new forms, reflecting changes in identity, mobility, and cultural diversity. In other words, political conflict today may reflect both older and newer divisions. A new cleavage (such as the education cleavage) does not extinguish the old class cleavage; instead, it settles on top of it, creating a more complex, multidimensional political space. The social bases, identity structures, and organisational expressions of cleavages may change, but the underlying logic of structured conflict remains. Critically, Westheuser and Zollinger (2025) contributes with a Bourdieusian synthesis to explain *how* these new layers become “frozen”. The authors argue that group identities are stabilised through bottom-up ‘social closure’ (lifestyle-based habits) and top-down ‘classification struggles’ where parties like the MP and SD effectively “name” and define new social collectives.

If older cleavages persist in transformed ways, then contemporary political behaviour should reflect both historical divisions and newer socioeconomic and cultural ones. Based on the theoretical propositions of Bartolini and Mair (1990) and Oesch (2006), I also expect that beyond education, occupational class and sector of employment also structure vote choice in systematic ways. However, I stress that this is more of an interpretative expectation, as I, within the scope of this thesis, do not conduct a longitudinal analysis, but rely on cross-sectional data. This leads to my fourth and final hypothesis:

H4: Traditional Swedish cleavages – such as rural-urban and socioeconomic class – remain relevant but are increasingly layered with newer divides based on education and horizontal differentiation in occupational class and sector of employment

In conclusion, these theoretical perspectives have important implications for the analysis of contemporary elections. They suggest that political behaviour cannot be understood solely through the lens of economic conflict or cultural conflict. Instead, they require an integrated

framework that recognises the distinct but interacting roles of education and income, the coexistence of old and new cleavages, and the multidimensional nature of political competition. Such a framework does not assume that any particular cleavage is dominant; rather, it provides the conceptual tools to analyse how different conflicts are structured, how they generate identities, and how they are mobilised by political actors.

5. Data and Research Design

This thesis conducts two separate statistical analyses. The first (Model 1) replicates Piketty's methodology to enable strict comparison of the 2022 Swedish national election with the previous results of the long-run comparative analysis presented in Gethin *et al.* (2021a). The latter (model 2) is based on the method in Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021). I conduct the latter analysis to contribute to a more theoretically grounded and nuanced picture in comparison to Piketty's simplified model, which has been questioned for being oversimplified, potentially overlooking important aspects of social factors and party alignment. Model 1 specifically addresses the overall RQ and RQ1. With Model 2, I aim to make a deeper inquiry into specific party-family variations, which is reflected in *H1-H4*, which were presented in Chapter 4. Additionally, Model 2 serves the purpose of making a more nuanced inquiry into the data to address RQ2 and RQ3.

It is important to clarify that this study uses individual-level survey data – specifically vote choice and redistributive preferences – as evidence for the existence of macro-level structural cleavages (Gethin *et al.*, 2021b; Crulli & Emanuele, 2025). In political cleavages research, a macro-structural divide is considered 'politicised' or 'structured' when individual-level data reveals persistent correlations between social characteristics (like education or class) and party support (Esaiasson & Wängnerud, 2016; Marks *et al.*, 2021; Zollinger & Attewell, 2026). Finding distinct socioeconomic constituencies for different party families serves as a proxy for the 'structuration' of the party system, indicating that macro-level divisions are being successfully organised into the political arena (Esaiasson & Wängnerud, 2016). Consequently, while I do not directly measure meso-level organisations, the presence of these individual-level patterns is interpreted as a manifestation of the underlying structural 'glue' – such as educational homophily or social networks – that stabilises contemporary political identities.

5.1 Data

The quantitative analysis in this thesis is based on post-electoral survey data from the Swedish National Election Studies (SNES), a long-running research programme that has collected

high-quality survey material for every parliamentary election since 1956. Over time, SNES has built one of the most comprehensive datasets on individual-level political behaviour in any advanced democracy. Its surveys include detailed socio-demographic information alongside measures of political attitudes.

For the 2022 election, the analysis relies on the most recent pre- and post-electoral survey conducted by the SOM Institute. Although the full SNES 2022 dataset has not yet been released, all variables relevant to this thesis are already available through the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (Oscarsson *et al.*, 2024). The CSES dataset is produced in collaboration with the Comparative Research Center Sweden (CORS) and funded by the Swedish Research Council, ensuring continuity with earlier SNES waves in terms of sampling design and question structure. It contains 6,000 respondents and 238 variables, which provides a sufficiently rich basis for my analysis. However, it is important to note that cross-sectional data only captures a “snapshot” of voter behaviour at a specific point in time, which allows for the estimation of predicted probability gradients but is insufficient for establishing the direction of causality.

5.2 Replicating Piketty: Data and operationalisation (Model 1)

This thesis replicates the technical procedures developed by Piketty and colleagues (Gethin *et al.*, 2021a), including their data harmonisation strategy, variable construction, and regression-based estimation of education and income gradients. This is necessary to ensure methodological comparability. Their approach provides a standardised framework for measuring political cleavages across time, which allows this thesis to benchmark Swedish results against the broader cross-national patterns they identify. By reproducing their analytical steps as closely as possible, any subsequent deviations observed in the Swedish case can be attributed to substantive political dynamics rather than methodological inconsistencies. All methodological decisions are documented to ensure transparency and reproducibility (see Appendix 2).

To classify Swedish parties into left- and right-wing blocs, this thesis follows the approach used by Gethin *et al.* (2021a), who base their cross-national party coding on The Manifesto Project indicators of economic left-right positioning, welfare state preferences, and sociocultural (GAL/TAN) orientations. Their classification provides a theoretically grounded and empirically validated framework for grouping parties consistently across countries and time. Using their bloc definitions for Sweden ensures full comparability with previous findings.

A central methodological challenge in analysing long-run political cleavages is that survey instruments evolve over time. The Swedish National Election Studies (SNES) span nearly seven decades, and although they are exceptionally consistent by international standards, the structure,

granularity, and availability of key variables nonetheless vary across survey waves. Therefore, it is necessary to harmonise all relevant variables in the CSES dataset into the same format. The following paragraphs outline the procedures used to standardise education, income, vote choice, and socio-demographic controls, and to construct the left-right bloc classification that underpins the empirical analysis.

The first step in the harmonisation process involves extracting and recoding education variables. SNES surveys include several different education measures over time – ranging from broad categories such as “primary/secondary/university” in early waves to more detailed distinctions in later decades. The CSES education variables are recoded into a consistent hierarchical scale that captures the expansion of higher education in Sweden. This scale distinguishes between (1) primary education, (2) lower secondary, (3) upper secondary, (4) university degree, and (5) postgraduate education. This recoding allows the analysis to compare the composition of the highly educated electorate to previous findings and to approximate the top 10 percent of the education distribution using the quantile reweighting procedure described in the next subsection.

Income variables require even more extensive harmonisation. SNES surveys report income in discrete brackets, and the number and width of these brackets vary substantially across decades. Early surveys contain only a handful of broad categories, while later surveys include more fine-grained brackets. Because the empirical strategy relies on constructing income deciles, these brackets cannot be used directly. Instead, each income variable is recoded into a consistent set of ordered categories, and the quantile approximation method is applied to estimate the share of each bracket that falls into each decile. This ensures that the income distribution is comparable across elections despite changes in survey design and the evolution of the Swedish economy.

Vote choice is harmonised by mapping the CSES party codes to a set of party identifiers consistent with the division made by Gethin *et al.* (2021a). This is necessary because party labels, abbreviations, and coding schemes change over time. Once harmonised, vote choice is further recoded into left- and right-wing blocs. This classification reflects the ideological structure of Swedish party competition and ensures that my analysis is directly comparable to the cross-national results reported in the Gethin *et al.* (2021a).

In addition to education, income, and vote choice, several socio-demographic variables must be harmonised to serve as control variables in the regression models. These include age, gender, region of residence, union membership, occupation, and immigration background. Each variable is recoded into a format consistent with Gethin *et al.* (2021a). For example, regional

variables are harmonised into a four-category rural-urban classification, while occupation variables are recoded into broad categories that capture major labour-market sectors. Union membership is harmonised into a binary indicator, despite changes in question wording over time. These controls are included to ensure that estimated socioeconomic voting gradients reflect genuine cleavage patterns rather than compositional shifts in the electorate.

Harmonising education, income, vote choice, and socio-demographic variables creates a consistent dataset, but it does not yet solve the core methodological challenge: SNES reports education and income in discrete categories, whereas the analysis requires quantile-based measures such as the top 10 percent and bottom 50 percent. Because the meaning of these categories changes over time, directly comparing brackets across decades would produce misleading estimates of socioeconomic voting gradients and would make long-run comparisons impossible (*ibid.*). To address this, the thesis adopts the quantile approximation and reweighting procedure developed by Piketty and colleagues, which allows for the construction of quantile groups in the CSES data that is consistent previous findings (*ibid.*).

The core idea behind the procedure is fairly straightforward: within each income or education bracket, individuals are assumed to be uniformly distributed (*ibid.*). This assumption makes it possible to estimate what share of each bracket falls into each quantile boundary. For example, if the bottom 10 percent of the income distribution lies partly in the lowest bracket and partly in the second-lowest bracket, the method assigns fractional weights to individuals in those brackets based on the proportion of the bracket that belongs to the quantile. This avoids the common pitfall of treating entire brackets as if they belonged to a single quantile, which would systematically overestimate or underestimate the true socioeconomic composition of each group.

In Piketty's approach (*ibid.*), this procedure unfolds in several steps. First, for each election year, the cumulative distribution of respondents across income or education brackets is calculated. This makes it possible to identify where the quantile boundaries – such as the 10th, 50th, or 90th percentile – fall within the bracket structure. When a boundary falls between brackets, the assignment is straightforward: all individuals in the lower brackets belong to the quantile, and none in the higher brackets do. When a boundary falls within a bracket, that bracket is split proportionally.

Income Reweighting Matrix		Decile-specific reweighting factor									
Bracket number	Frequency range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	0.000–0.363	0.276	0.276	0.276	0.173						
2	0.363–0.426				0.593	0.407					
3	0.426–0.518					0.804	0.196				
4	0.518–0.677						0.515	0.485			
5	0.677–0.998							0.072	0.312	0.312	0.305

Table 4.1 Dispersion of fractional income weights across deciles

Education Reweighting Matrix		Decile-specific reweighting factor									
Bracket number	Frequency range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	0.000–0.020	1.000									
2	0.020–0.053	1.000									
3	0.053–0.121	0.689	0.311								
4	0.121–0.248		0.621	0.379							
5	0.248–0.336			0.589	0.411						
6	0.336–0.370				1.000						
7	0.370–0.498				0.231	0.769					
8	0.498–0.691					0.009	0.518	0.473			
9	0.691–0.971							0.031	0.357	0.357	0.255
10	0.971–1.000										1.000

Table 4.2 Dispersion of fractional education weights across deciles

A complication arises because individuals may belong fractionally to multiple quantiles. This makes regression analysis impossible unless the dataset is expanded. Following Gethin *et al.* (2021a), the thesis therefore duplicates each observation ten times, once for each decile. Each duplicate receives a weight corresponding to the share of the bracket that falls into that decile. For example, if an individual belongs 48 percent to the first decile and 52 percent to the second, their first duplicate receives a weight of 0.48, their second duplicate receives a weight of 0.52, and all remaining duplicates receive a weight of zero. This expansion preserves the original sample size in weighted terms while enabling decile-level vote share estimation and the inclusion of decile indicators as predictors in regression models. To account for the fact that each respondent now appears multiple times, standard errors are clustered at the individual level. This adjustment ensures that the statistical inference accounts for the non-independence of duplicated observations. The use of weighted logistic regression also ensures that the estimated gradients reflect the true distribution of the Swedish electorate.

Although the assumption of uniform distribution within brackets is a simplification, it is a conservative one. Gethin *et al.* (2021a) have found that vote shares tend to vary monotonically across brackets, meaning that individuals in higher brackets consistently vote more like higher-income or higher-educated groups. Under these conditions, the uniformity assumption produces lower-bound estimates of the true gradients, making the results more cautious rather than more extreme.

In the CSES dataset, both income and education are measured using ordered categorical brackets rather than continuous variables. The income variable (`income5`) consists of five broad income categories, while the education variable (`edu10`) consists of ten ordered education levels. Because these categories do not represent equal-sized population groups, they cannot be interpreted as deciles. Following the procedure in Gethin *et al.* (2021a), I convert both variables into population-weighted deciles before estimating cleavage curves.

For each variable, the population share of each category is computed to derive its cumulative distribution. Subsequently, the theoretical decile boundaries are overlaid to calculate the proportional overlap between each survey category and each decile. This produces a 10x10 reweighting matrix that maps the original categories onto deciles. Each respondent is expanded into ten rows, one for each decile, and assigned a decile-specific weight reflecting the share of their category that falls into that decile.

This procedure yields two analytically distinct datasets:

- 1) Income-decile dataset (`CSES22_inc`), where the variable `decile` represents income deciles and weights are given by `inc_weight`.
- 2) Education-decile dataset (`CSES22_edu`), where the same `decile` variable represents education deciles and weights are given by `edu_weight`.

The `decile` variable is therefore identical in name across datasets, but its meaning is determined by the corresponding weight. This ensures that income and education cleavages are estimated on comparable 1-10 decile scales, while the regression models themselves continue to use the original survey categories as predictors. This approach preserves the integrity of the survey measurement while enabling a consistent decile-based analysis of socioeconomic cleavages. Moreover, all subgroup cleavage plots (gender, age, region, party) are based on the combined decile-expanded dataset (`CSES22_final`) and the combined model predictions. The income and education lines are generated by grouping the same predictions over income deciles and education categories, respectively, with the decile interpretation encoded in the reweighting scheme.

The empirical analysis in this thesis is centred on estimating long-run socioeconomic voting gradients – specifically, the extent to which education and income predict support for left- and right-wing parties in Sweden. These models allow for a systematic examination of how the political behaviour of different socioeconomic groups has evolved in comparison to previous findings, and whether Sweden exhibits the characteristic divergence between education and income that defines a “multi-elite” party system.

The key independent variables are indicators for belonging to the top 10% of the education distribution and the top 10 percent of the income distribution, as constructed through the quantile approximation and reweighting procedure. These variables operationalise the two dimensions of socioeconomic inequality that are central to Piketty’s framework: educational capital and economic capital. The education gradient captures the extent to which highly educated voters are more or less likely to support left-wing parties, while the income gradient captures the extent to which high-income voters are more or less likely to support right-wing parties. Together, these gradients provide a direct test of whether Sweden has transitioned from a class-based party system to a multi-elite structure in which education and income point in different political directions.

To isolate the effects of education and income from other factors that may influence vote choice, the models include a set of socio-demographic control variables. These controls are drawn from the harmonised SNES dataset and include age, gender, region of residence (urban/rural and county), union membership, immigration background and occupational sector. Including these controls ensures that the estimated gradients reflect genuine socioeconomic cleavages rather than compositional changes in the electorate. For example, controlling for union membership is essential in the Swedish context, given the historically strong link between organised labour and the Social Democrats. Similarly, controlling for region captures the growing importance of urban-rural divides in Swedish politics.

The operational model estimated in this thesis expresses the probability of a left-bloc vote as a function of an individual’s position in the education or income distribution, measured using deciles, alongside a set of demographic controls. Formally, the model takes the following logistic form:

$$\Pr(\text{Left vote}) = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Decile} + \gamma X + \varepsilon$$

where $\beta_1 \text{Decile}$ represents either the respondent’s education decile or income decile, and X denotes the vector of control variables. The coefficients are interpreted as the change in the log-odds of voting for the left bloc associated with belonging to the top decile of education or

income, relative to the bottom 90 percent. To facilitate interpretation, the results are later transformed into predicted probabilities. Operationally, support for RQ1 is defined as observing a statistically significant positive education gradient (higher education deciles being more likely to vote Left) alongside a negative income gradient (higher income deciles being less likely to vote Left).

5.3 Limitations of the Piketty approach

Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021) point to three main discrepancies between Piketty's rationale for the transformation of electoral politics and the common political science understanding of this development. First, the authors argue that the left and right bloc division is oversimplified and risks missing important nuances when analysing the educational divide, and crucially "needs to pay attention to the rise of green/left-libertarian and radical right parties" (ibid., 2021:79). Second, "a simple hierarchical understanding of class groups (bottom vs. elites) does not explain the underlying shifts of parties' socioeconomic support bases" (ibid., 2021:81). Thirdly, although highly educated middle-class voters may have become a key constituency for parties of the left, it is misleading to interpret their social policy and redistributive preferences as simply opposing redistribution (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2019; Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015). Rather, this line of argumentation asserts that this new middle class remains strongly supportive of the welfare state (see also Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015).

In Piketty's defence, the aim of this model was never to investigate the fine parts of political development and societal cleavages, but to get at the broad strokes of cleavage transformations on a global scale. The magnitude at which the level of analysis is operating makes it difficult, and perhaps irrelevant, to pay attention to details. Piketty stresses that "this basic left-vs-right characterization [...] should be viewed as an enormous simplification of a much more complex landscape" (Piketty, 2018:10). In relation to the education cleavage, which is the principal focus of the present thesis, Piketty grants that in the results of the long-run analysis of twenty-one countries, the dimension of education as a determinant of electoral behaviour "does not fully coincide with the traditional economic dimension (income and wealth) and appears to be related to a large and complex set of policy issues, including the environment, migration, gender, education, and merit" (Gethin *et al.*, 2021c:8). Even though Gethin *et al.* (2021a:1) acknowledge that the transition from class-based to multidimensional party system has been "accelerated by the rise of green and antiimmigration movements, whose distinctive feature is to concentrate the votes," they still conceptually treat the Left and the Right as homogenous blocs.

5.4 Integrating party-side analytical framework (Model 2)

The complementary statistical model developed in this thesis is informed by the analytical approach proposed by Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021), who argue that contemporary electoral realignments cannot be understood solely through vertical socioeconomic hierarchies such as income or education. Kriesi *et al.* (2008) provide a crucial theoretical challenge to models (like Piketty's) that group parties into simplified binary blocs by contending that party competition in post-industrial societies must explicitly account for the distinct developments of the new-left (Green and Left-Libertarian parties) and the new-right (populist Radical Right parties). Their framework highlights how voters with similar levels of education or income may nonetheless diverge politically because they work in different organisational environments, perform different types of tasks, or are embedded in distinct institutional settings. This perspective provides a valuable corrective to the Piketty model, which focuses primarily on broad socioeconomic gradients and therefore risks overlooking the mechanisms through which party competition structures these divides.

In contrast to the strict comparability requirements of the Piketty model, the Abou-Chadi & Hix approach is more straightforward and flexible. It does not require harmonisation across countries or decades, and it is therefore well suited for a single-country analysis that seeks to uncover the party-side mechanisms shaping contemporary cleavages. Following their logic, the model estimated here uses the same core variables as the Piketty replication but applies them within a party-family framework. This allows the analysis to test hypotheses that directly challenge the interpretation offered by Gethin *et al.* (2021a), particularly the claim that the education divide is primarily a function of the left's changing socioeconomic base. The shift from a bloc-based to a party-family framework allows the model to evaluate whether the education divide is concentrated within specific party families (*H1*, *H2*), the structuring strength of redistributive preferences within the Swedish electorate (*H3*), and whether class-based patterns persist alongside newer divides (*H4*).

A central hypothesis in this thesis, drawing on Abou-Chadi & Hix (2021), is that the MP plays a pivotal role in producing the positive education gradient observed in Sweden. Rather than reflecting a wholesale shift of highly educated voters toward the mainstream Left, the education divide may instead be driven by the rise of a sociocultural party family that attracts highly educated, urban, and culturally liberal voters. This model therefore defines party groups differently.

The raw CSES party variable is recoded into four party families in line with Abou-Chadi and Hix's (2021) division:

- *Mainstream Left*: Social Democrats (SAP)
- *Mainstream Right*: Moderates (M), Centre (C), Christian Democrats (KD)
- *Radical Right*: Sweden Democrats (SD)
- *Green/Left-Libertarian*: Greens (MP)

By modelling predicted probabilities of voting for each party family separately, the analysis can identify whether the education gradient is concentrated among the Greens, diffused across the left bloc, or distributed in a more complex pattern across the party system. This component of the analysis constitutes a direct test of *H2*, as it examines whether the positive education gradient is driven specifically by environmentally progressive parties rather than by the mainstream Left. Support for *H1* and *H2* is operationally defined as finding that the highest predicted probabilities of a Green (GAL) vote are concentrated in the highest education categories.

A third dimension incorporated into the model is support for income redistribution, measured in CSES through respondents' agreement with the statement "Reduce the income differences in society" (q339b). Redistributive preferences remain a central component of the traditional left-right divide, but their interaction with education and occupational class has become increasingly complex. Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021) argue that understanding contemporary cleavages requires examining how economic attitudes intersect with sociocultural identities and occupational environments. By including redistributive preferences alongside education and occupation, the model can assess whether support for redistribution continues to structure vote choice within party families, or whether sociocultural factors have become more decisive (*H3*). A hypothesis is supported if the interaction between education and redistributive attitudes shows a consistently negative AME, meaning that as education increases, the impact of favouring redistribution on the probability of voting Left becomes substantively stronger.

In addition to education, the model incorporates two further explanatory dimensions that Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021) identify as central to contemporary political conflict: occupational group (q353) and sector of employment (q356). Occupational group is operationalised using Oesch's (2006) class schema, which distinguishes between horizontal work logics – organisational, technical, and interpersonal – and vertical skill levels. Additionally, Oesch proposes a fourth work logic: the independent logic. This is applied to employers and the self-employed, whose position is defined by their ownership of the means of production rather than an employment contract. This classification captures the horizontal differentiation within the labour market that is central to the argument that different segments of the middle and working

classes develop diverging political preferences based on their work experiences. However, due to the lack of sufficiently precisely defined occupational groups (such as ISCO 4-digit codes) in the CSES dataset, it was not possible to construct a class schema strictly in line with Oesch's full 8- or 17-class framework. Instead, I draw on the overarching categories in Oesch's schema to construct a simplified version that preserves core distinctions regarding work autonomy, organisational authority, and exposure to market risk. Oesch (2006) acknowledges that while a detailed schema is theoretically ideal, simplification is often a statistical necessity. The available CSES occupational categories were grouped into seven categories:

OCCUPATIONAL CLASS	CSES VARIABLE(S)	WORK LOGIC	TRIPOLAR ROLE
LARGE EMPLOYERS	<i>Self-employed: 10 or more employees</i>	Independent	Centre-Right Preserve
HIGHER-GRADE MANAGERS	<i>White-collar worker with an executive function</i>	Organisational	Centre-Right Preserve
ASSOCIATE MANAGERS	<i>White-collar worker with a leading organisational function</i>	Organisational	Open Competition
SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS/FARMERS	<i>Self-employed: 1–9 employees, Self-employed: no employees, and Farmers</i>	Independent	Contested (Right/Radical Right)
OFFICE CLERKS	<i>White-collar worker</i>	Organisational	Open Competition
SKILLED CRAFTS	<i>Blue-collar worker with a leading function</i>	Technical	Contested (Left/Radical Right)
PRODUCTION WORKERS	<i>Blue-collar workers</i>	Technical	Contested (Left/Radical Right)

Table 4.3 Mapping of Oesch's (2006) class scheme onto CSES occupational categories

Crucially, it must be emphasised that the white-collar (public servants) categories in this dataset are likely highly heterogeneous. Because the CSES variables do not explicitly distinguish between different work logics within these white-collar groups, sociocultural professionals – such as teachers, social workers, and nurses – are “hidden” within the general categories. This is a significant limitation, as Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021) identify sociocultural professionals as a distinct “Brahmin Left” preserve characterised by an interpersonal work logic and strong support for redistribution and progressive values. Consequently, these categories may conflate

the distinct political orientations of organisational managers and interpersonal specialists. Despite these data constraints, this approach allows the analysis to tentatively incorporate the horizontal dimensions of occupational class.

The distinction between public and private sector employment follows Benedetto *et al.* (2020), who argue that public sector employees are more likely to vote centre-left, either because left-wing parties promise to maintain or improve conditions in the public sector, or simply due to “self-selection effects”, some people are already more motivated by the public sector and are therefore more likely to choose the public sector, which is then reflected in political alignment. Abou-Chadi and Hix emphasise that both mechanisms can operate simultaneously, and that the political consequences of sectoral employment are therefore best understood as part of a broader horizontal cleavage. These two models aim to shed light on *H4*.

The aim of this party-side analytical framework is thereby to enable a more fine-grained examination of the mechanisms underlying Sweden's contemporary cleavage structure. It focuses on how party competition interacts with occupational environments, sectoral divides, and sociocultural identities, beyond the broad socioeconomic gradients emphasised by Piketty. I argue that this approach is particularly well-suited to the Swedish case, where the rise of the MP and the SD has reshaped the political landscape in ways that arguably cannot be captured by a simple left-right bloc structure. By integrating these insights into the statistical analysis, the thesis pursues a more nuanced account of the forces driving the education divide and the broader transformation of political conflict in Sweden.

5.5 Limitations

While the methodological framework of this thesis provides a robust foundation for examining cleavage transformation, several limitations must be acknowledged. These constraints define the scope of the study and transition the findings from definitive proofs to theoretically grounded associations.

First, the lack of individual-level wealth data in the SNES/CSES survey represents a significant gap in testing the “Merchant Right” dimension of Piketty's framework. While income and education are strong correlates, they are not perfect proxies for wealth, which has seen rising inequality in Sweden since the 1990s. Consequently, the “Merchant” pole is analysed primarily through an income-based material lens, leaving the independent structuring role of wealth outside the empirical scope of this study.

The most critical constraint regards the capacity to answer *H4*, namely the lack of detailed ISCO 4-digit occupational codes in the dataset. This prevented the construction of a class

schema strictly in line with Oesch's full framework, necessitating a simplified version that preserves core vertical and horizontal distinctions but sacrifices granularity. Because some categories likely "hide" several groups, the results regarding horizontal differentiation must be interpreted as suggestive rather than definitive.

Finally, it is essential to emphasise that the quantitative models in this thesis are descriptive and based on statistical associations. Because the analysis relies on cross-sectional survey data it is insufficient for establishing any direction of causality. While the results identify systematic patterns of party support and educational sorting, the inability to account for confounding variables means the findings should be viewed as evidence of durable partisan alignments rather than causal mechanisms.

6. Results

This chapter presents the empirical results in a structure that follows directly from the research questions and the analytical framework outlined in Chapter 5. The results are therefore organised in two parts. The first part (Section 6.1) examines whether the 2022 election displays the broad socioeconomic patterns associated with the multi-elite framework, addressing the question of whether Sweden displays the socioeconomic divergence highlighted in recent comparative research. The second part (Section 6.2), inspired by Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021), investigates the party-side mechanisms that help explain these patterns, thereby assessing how contemporary voting patterns relate to both historical cleavages and newer sociocultural and occupational divides. This structure speaks directly to the overall RQ by moving from a general socioeconomic overview to a more detailed analysis of the mechanisms shaping Sweden's current cleavage structure.

6.1 Model 1: Voter-side results

The estimated cleavages (see Figure 6.1) provide a concise summary of how strongly income and education structure support for the left bloc in Sweden. Each cleavage measure represents the difference in predicted probability of voting for a left-bloc party between lower and higher socioeconomic groups, using the quantile-based reweighting procedure described in Chapter 5. Positive values indicate that low-education and/or low-income groups are more likely to vote for the left; negative values indicate the opposite.

Figure 6.1 shows that, across all specifications, income cleavages are positive, though modest in magnitude. Nonetheless, it is an indication that lower-income voters remain more supportive of the left than higher-income voters. The magnitude of the cleavage varies

depending on the threshold used. The bottom 20% measure produces the smallest gap, while the bottom 90% measure produces the largest. This reflects that the top 10% income voters are particularly right-leaning. This pattern is consistent with the notion that income still captures a material dimension of political conflict, but that the divide is concentrated at the very top of the distribution rather than being linear across all income groups. When controls are added, income cleavages shrink but remain clearly positive. This suggests that part of the raw income gradient is explained by compositional factors such as age, gender, region, sector, and religiosity, yet a substantial independent income effect persists. In other words, income continues to structure left-right voting even after accounting for demographic and attitudinal covariates. This aligns with findings in the comparative literature that the economic cleavage has weakened but not disappeared. Additionally, the fact that the bottom 90% measure is only marginally larger than the bottom 20% measure indicates that the income gradient is shallow rather than concentrated among a small elite.

In contrast, the education cleavages are consistently negative, and substantially larger in absolute magnitude than the income cleavages. This means that higher-educated voters are more likely to support the left than lower-educated voters. The pattern is stable across all thresholds and becomes slightly stronger when controls are added, indicating that the education gradient is not simply a by-product of demographic composition. These results reflect the well-documented education divide in Western democracies, where education has become a central axis of political conflict. In the Swedish case, the size of the education cleavage is striking when compared to the income cleavage. Whereas income differences produce only modest positive gradients, the education gradients are roughly three to four times larger in absolute terms. This indicates that educational attainment has become a far stronger predictor of left-bloc support than material income position.

Importantly, the negative sign does not imply that lower-educated voters are uniformly right-leaning; rather, it reflects the fact that higher-educated voters are disproportionately concentrated within the left bloc, while lower-educated voters are more evenly split or more likely to support right-leaning and radical-right parties. Interestingly, the bottom 20% versus the top 80% education cleavage stands out as the strongest of the controlled education measures. While the other controlled cleavages remain large and negative, they are slightly smaller in magnitude, suggesting a more moderate divide when comparing broader segments of the education distribution. The fact that the bottom 20% becomes more distinct once controls are added might be an indication that the lowest-educated voters differ from the rest of the electorate in ways not captured by demographic or structural characteristics alone. In other

words, the education cleavage seems to be partly anchored in a particularly sharp discontinuity at the very bottom of the education distribution, where voters are substantially less likely to support the left even after controlling for other factors.

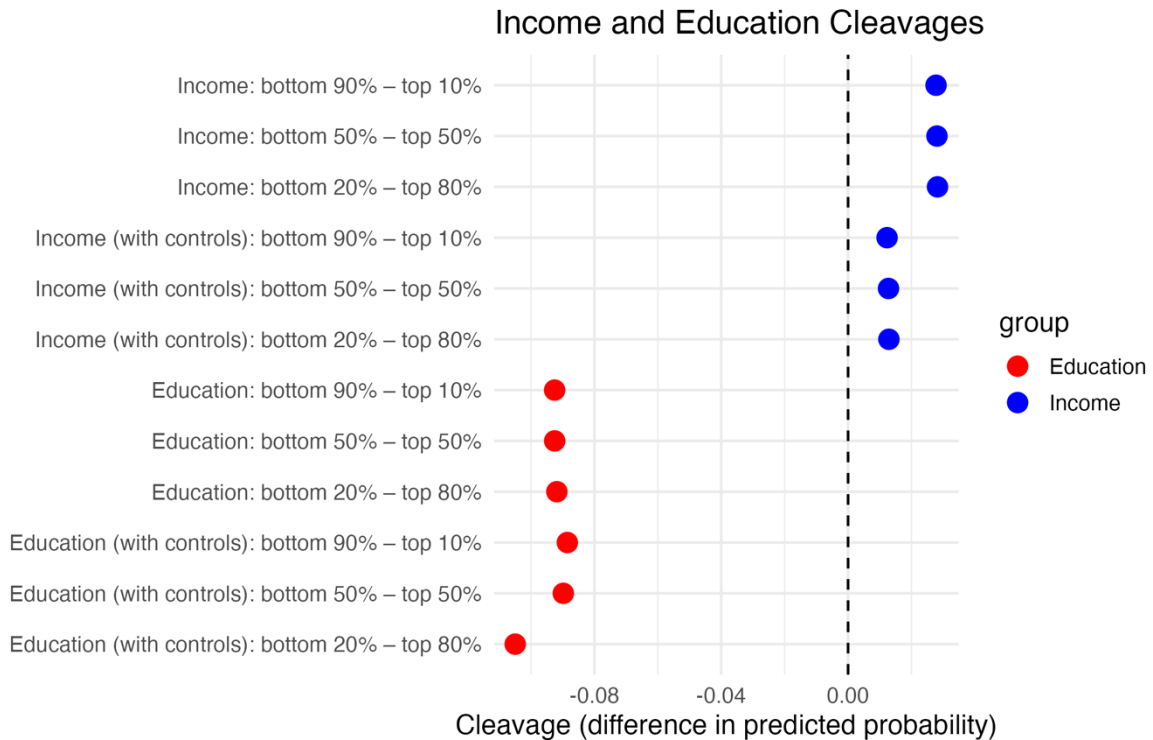


Figure 6.1 Predicted probability of voting left by education and income with and without controls

However, Figure 6.1 confirms that the trend that Piketty and colleagues (Gethin *et al.*, 2021a) have observed in several countries in Western Europe still applies in the Swedish parliamentary election in 2022, which provides support for RQ1 in the present thesis, namely that the 2022 election overall exhibits the characteristic divergence between education and income documented in recent decades. These findings are further corroborated by the full CSES sample results provided in Appendix 1 (Figure 5). However, the 2022 estimates also show that these gradients are somewhat flatter than in earlier decades, suggesting that the long-run trends documented in Gethin *et al.* (2021b) may have stabilised in Sweden specifically, rather than intensified. Nonetheless, this confirms the durability of the multi-elite pattern in Sweden.

Following the analytical strategy of Gethin *et al.* (2021a), the subsequent paragraphs extend the baseline description of the Swedish electorate by exploring subgroup variations (see Appendix 1).

The gender breakdown reveals a slight but clear divide in the direction of both cleavages. Among women, both income and education slopes are positive, i.e., higher-income and

higher-educated women are more likely to support the Left than their lower-status counterparts. Among men, the pattern is inverted for both cleavage gradients. This divergence suggests that gender moderates the meaning of socioeconomic position in the political space, which is supported by several studies specifically investigating the role of gender in political alignment in Sweden (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016; Andersson *et al.*, 2024).

The cohort breakdown (see Appendix 1) reveals a similarly patterned but generationally structured set of differences. Among the youngest voters (18-34), both income and education cleavages slope downward, indicating that higher socioeconomic status is associated with lower left-bloc support. This suggests that younger, higher-educated and higher-income voters are more likely to align with the right or the radical right, a pattern consistent with the generational distinctiveness of contemporary right-populist support. Among middle-aged voters (35-54), both cleavages flatten considerably, indicating that socioeconomic position plays a weaker role in structuring political preferences in this cohort. Among older voters (55+), the pattern reverses: both cleavages slope upward, meaning that higher-income and higher-educated older voters as a whole are more left-leaning.

The regional breakdown (Appendix 1, Figure 3) shows that the interaction between income and education is partly conditioned by place as well. In the countryside and small towns, the income cleavage slopes downward: higher-income voters are less likely to support the left, and this pattern is especially pronounced among lower-educated groups. In large cities, the pattern reverses: higher-income voters are more likely to support the left, and the education gradient is positive. Cities and larger towns show a more muted pattern, with relatively flat income slopes but clear education gradients. These regional differences suggest that the meaning of socioeconomic status is shaped by local opportunity structures, labour-market composition, and cultural environments.

Most notably, the party-family breakdown (Figure 6.2) offers insight into one of this thesis' main points of inquiry, namely whether intra-bloc pluralism better nuances the reality of the education divide. It reveals that the education and income cleavages do not align uniformly with the "Brahmin Left" rationale. For the Left party family, both income and education gradients are clearly downward sloping, demonstrating that support is strongest among lower-income and lower-educated voters and declines as deciles increase. Only in the very top income deciles does the income line flatten out rather than continue to fall. This marks the Left as the most "traditional" class-based party in the system, retaining a disproportionately lower-status electorate. By contrast, the Green and Centre-Liberal families show relatively strong upward gradients for both education and income. For both party groups, however, the

income gradients clearly flatten out in the highest two to three deciles, while the education gradient continues its pronounced upward slope. This implies that the top 20% of income earners choose parties other than these. The Right shows the most surprising pattern, as both gradients increase through the first five deciles before making a sharp downward turn. The Radical Right display downward gradients, with support concentrated among lower-income and lower-educated voters. Notably, the breakdown of parties into more distinct party families rather than a simplified left-right divide shows that the education cleavage is internally differentiated within the left bloc itself: the Left remains anchored in lower-status groups, while the Green and Centre-Liberal parties draw more heavily on higher-educated strata, and the Radical Right seems to compete directly with the Left for lower-educated voters.

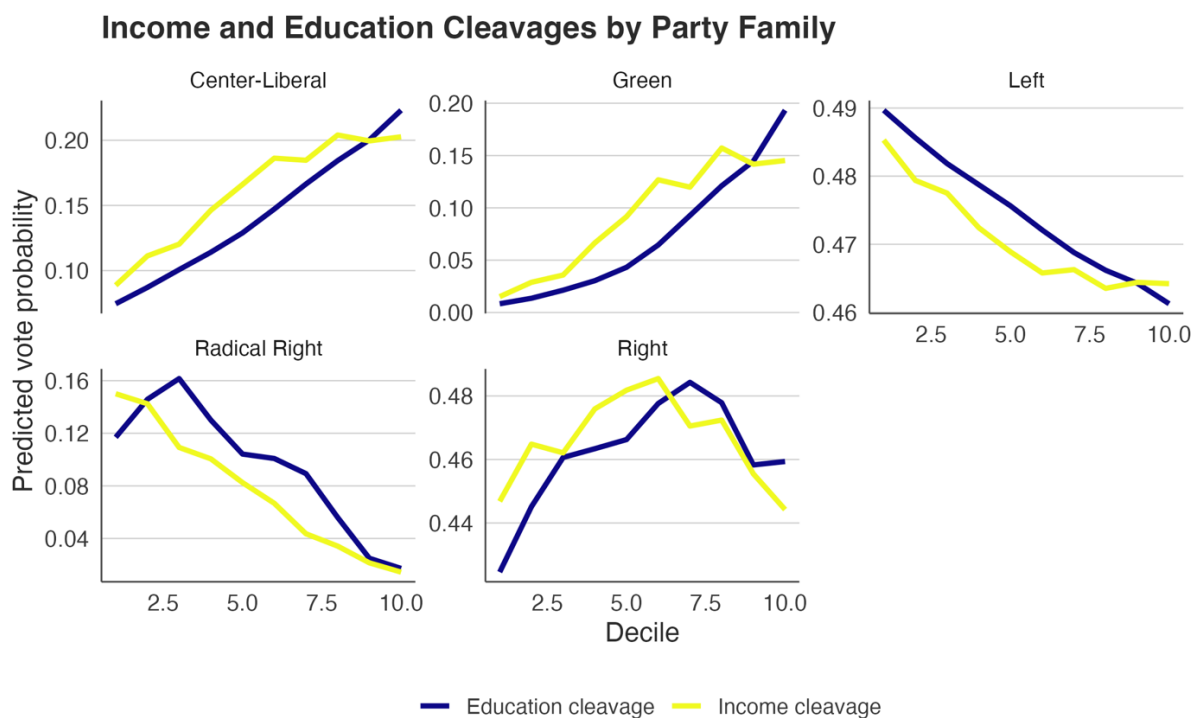


Figure 6.2 Predicted probability of voting on a party family by education and income.

Contrary to Piketty's findings, and in line with Abou-Chad & Hix (2021) and Amable & Darcillon (2022), Figure 6.2 shows that pooling all more or less left-leaning parties in fact produces a negative slope. It is only when separating the Left and Greens at the modelling stage the reality of the underlying data becomes attainable: that both the education and income gradient remain negative for the Left but strongly positive for the Greens. This finding has two clear implications for this thesis. It directly addressed the overall RQ, in that Sweden's education cleavage does not seem to strictly align with the multi-elite pattern proposed by

Piketty. Second, it speaks to the hypotheses by confirming that highly educated voters cluster around culturally and environmentally progressive parties (*H1*, *H2*), while the Left continue to attract lower-educated and lower-income voters. In other words, the Swedish case does not display a unified “Brahmin Left,” but a differentiated left in which mainly the Greens embodies the education-based realignment (see also Figure 4 in Appendix 1 for a comparison of income cleavage magnitudes).

Overall, the results of most recent post-electoral survey round (CSES) reveal a clear asymmetry in that education is a stronger predictor of left-right alignment than income. This suggests that the sociocultural dimension associated with education has become more politically salient than the traditional economic dimension associated with income, i.e., Sweden’s traditional socioeconomic class structure has not disappeared, but it has been reconfigured. While income still matters, its predictive strength is lower and more sensitive to model specification. This pattern mirrors broader trends in Western democracies, where the political left increasingly draws support from higher-educated voters, while lower-educated voters – regardless of income – are more likely to support right-leaning or Radical Right parties. In relation to my overall RQ, these findings indicate that contemporary cleavages cannot be understood solely in terms of economic class but need to be interpreted through the lens of education-based sociocultural conflict.

6.2 Model 2: Party-side results

In this section, I present the results of a disaggregated analysis to examine the specific mechanisms of party alignment and the potential drivers behind the broad gradients identified in Model 1. The purpose is to nuance Piketty’s explanatory logic by adopting an approach informed by Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021), which moves beyond vertical socioeconomic hierarchies to incorporate redistributive preferences and horizontal differentiation in occupational class and sector of employment. This perspective challenges the assumption that the Left and Right function as coherent, homogeneous blocs.

Figure 6.3 presents the predicted probability of voting for the left bloc across four levels of educational attainment. These results reveal a non-linear education gradient, which stands in contrast to the linear reversal associated with the “Brahmin Left” thesis. As shown in the figure, voters with long-cycle tertiary education (≥ 2) exhibit the highest likelihood of supporting the Left, followed closely by those with only primary education. Conversely, voters with upper-secondary education show the lowest predicted probability of a left-wing vote. This U-shaped pattern suggests that the Swedish Left remains a fragmented multi-class coalition. While

the high support among the educational elite aligns with the “Brahmin” profile, the persistent anchor among primary-educated voters indicates that the Mainstream Left has managed to retain a significant portion of its traditional base. Although the overlapping confidence intervals across these groups necessitate a cautious interpretation, the ordering strongly implies that the relationship between education and a left vote is not monotonic.

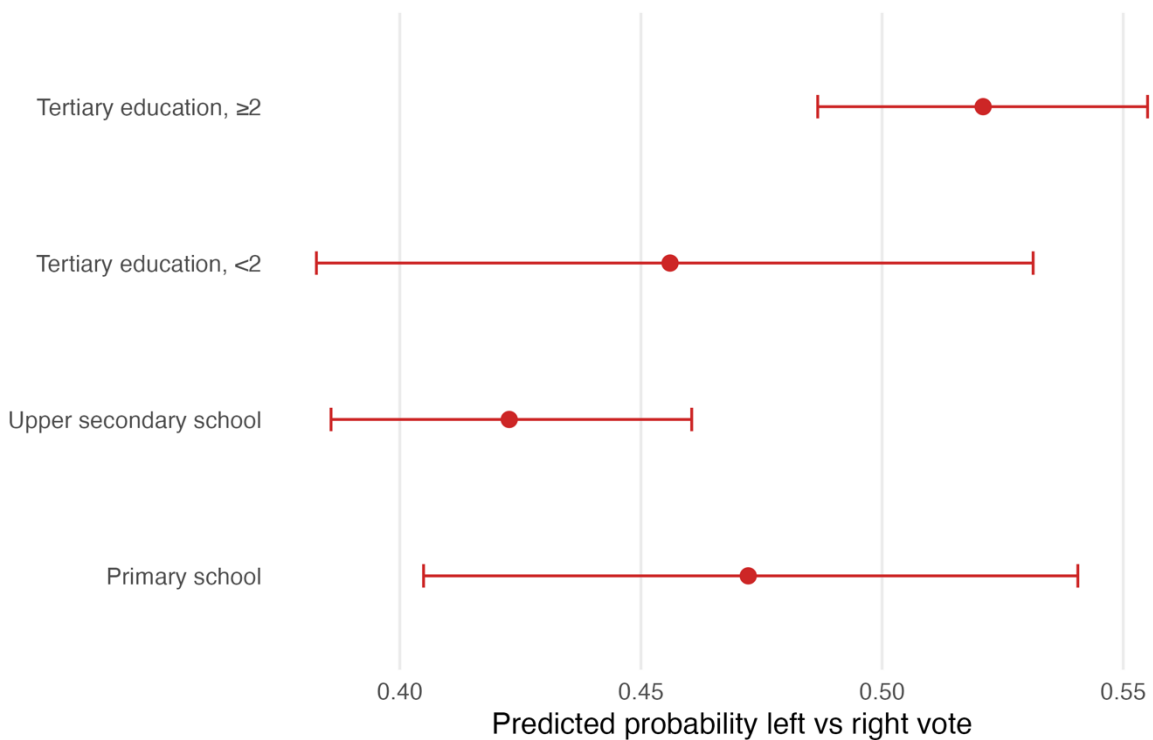


Figure 6.3 Predicted probability of voting left by education

One of Abou-Chadi and Hix’s (2021) main propositions is that it is in fact the Green parties in European national politics that increasingly attract highly educated voters, not the left in general. Additionally, they find that, while the Radical Right increasingly attracts low-income, low-education voters. Figure 6.4 shows predicted probabilities of voting for four major party families across the same education categories. The results reveal a highly structured and asymmetric education gradient that differs sharply across party families, where trajectories for a Green and a Radical Right vote are visibly inverted.

Support for the Mainstream Left (SAP) exhibits a clear downward gradient as education levels increase: voters with only primary schooling are the most likely to support this party family, while both short- and long-cycle tertiary groups display significantly lower levels of support. This supports *H1*, which posits that highly educated voters will align with progressive parties rather than the traditional Left. Moreover, the Mainstream Right (M, C and KD) display

an inversed pattern. Their support is weakest among voters with only primary schooling and increases with upper secondary education. Support is strongest among those with short tertiary education but declines again among those with high tertiary education. Notably, the short-cycle tertiary group occupies a pivotal middle position where support for the two blocs is nearly indistinguishable.

Theoretically, this pattern sheds light on how the traditional left-right cleavage currently operates in Sweden. The mainstream blocs still reflect elements of the historical class divide, but the educational structure of their support shows that this cleavage has been reshaped. These patterns indicate that education continues to structure the traditional left-right divide, but in a non-linear way: the Greens increases sharply with higher education while the Mainstream Left retains its strongest base among the least educated. The Mainstream Right is comparatively strong among those with lower tertiary education but fails to attract support from remaining educational categories, and the predicted support for the Radical Right decreases drastically with higher educational attainment.

Voters with long-cycle tertiary education show the highest predicted probability of voting Green (MP), while those with primary or upper-secondary education show very low probabilities. This provides a strong foundation for confirming the hypothesis that the positive education gradient observed in aggregate Left voting is predicted primarily by the Greens rather than a generalised “Left”. Notably, the vote probability for the Green party increases as the probability for the Mainstream Left declines. Furthermore, support for the Radical Right (SD) displays the opposite pattern: it is highest among voters with primary and upper-secondary education and declines sharply among tertiary-educated voters. This steep negative gradient mirrors findings across Western Europe and reinforces the interpretation of the radical right as an increasingly influential representative of lower-educated voters. The findings confirm *H2*: highly educated voters show a pronounced tendency to support environmentally progressive parties, indicating that environmentalism is a key axis of political alignment among this group.

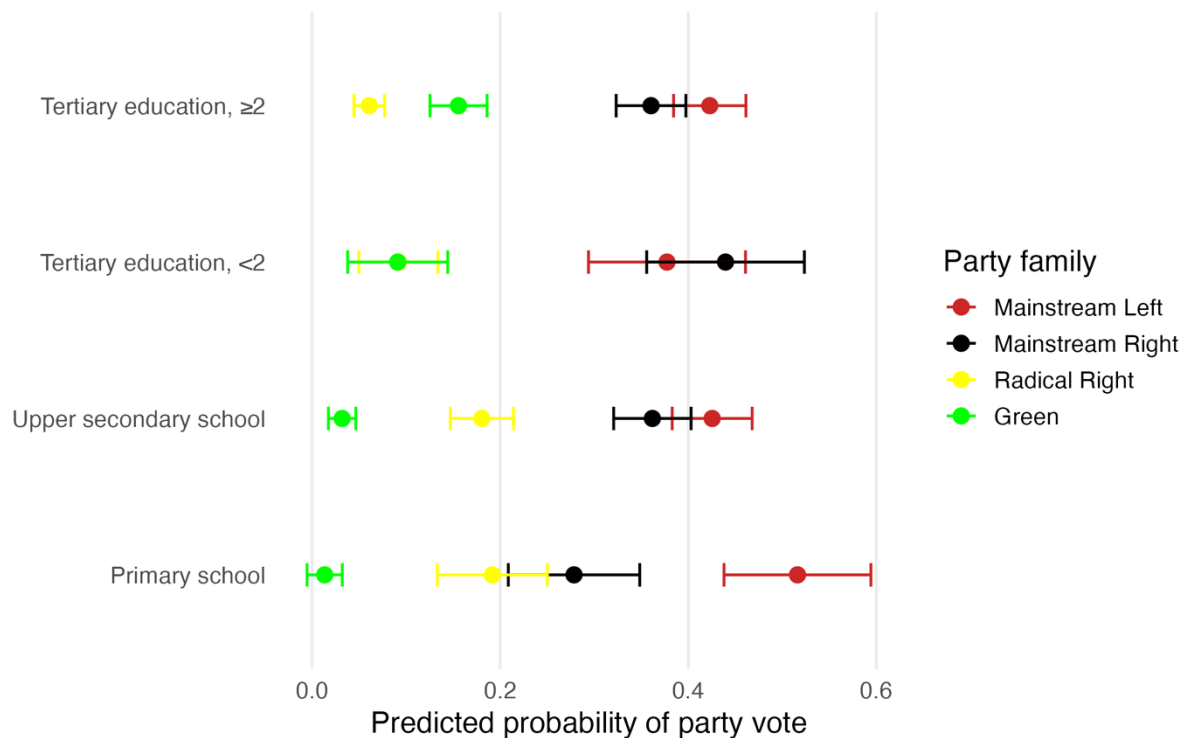


Figure 6.4 Predicted probability of party vote by education

Figure 6.5 presents predicted probabilities of voting for one of the four major party families across seven occupational groups informed by Oesch's (2006) occupational class scheme. The results reveal a class gradient that differs across party families, underscoring the relevance of occupational class in shaping Swedish electoral behaviour. This pattern tentatively supports the expectation (*H4*) that occupational class structures Swedish party alignment, consistent with Oesch's (2006) framework. It also provides additional support for this thesis' assumption that contemporary cleavages have layered on top of old ones, in line with Bartolini and Mair (1990).

Support for the Mainstream Left is highest among the technical and organisational categories of the working and lower-middle classes, consistent with the historical class basis of the Swedish left. Production Workers and Skilled Crafts display the highest predicted probabilities of voting for the Mainstream Left, followed closely by Office Clerks. This confirms that the Social Democrats maintain their traditional anchor in the technical work logic, even as the party system fragments, indicating the persistence of the historical cleavage mentioned in RQ2. Furthermore, Mainstream Right support is heavily concentrated in the independent and organisational work logics at the top. Large Employers, Higher-Grade Managers, and Small Business Owners/Farmers show the highest predicted probabilities of voting right. The Radical Right's support is most pronounced among categories following a technical work logic. Production Workers exhibit the highest predicted probability of supporting the Radical Right,

followed by Skilled Crafts. In contrast, the organisational elite – Higher-Grade Managers and Large Employers – show very low probabilities of supporting this pole. Lastly, in line with *H1* and *H2*, support for the Green Party is highest among the public servants: Higher-Grade Managers, Associate Managers, and Office Clerks. An important note here is that the high Green support among these white-collar groups likely stems from the fact that sociocultural professionals (e.g., teachers, nurses) are “hidden” within these categories due to dataset constraints. Theoretically, these interpersonal specialists are the primary preserve of the GAL pole, characterised by an interpersonal work logic and strong support for post-materialist values.

These findings imply that occupational class remains a powerful structuring force in Swedish politics, particularly along the sociocultural dimension. The sharp contrast Production workers and Skilled crafts (who cluster toward the Radical Right and Mainstream Left) and remaining occupational groups (who cluster toward the Mainstream Right and Greens) suggests that horizontal differentiation captures meaningful social environments and identity structures that education alone cannot explain.

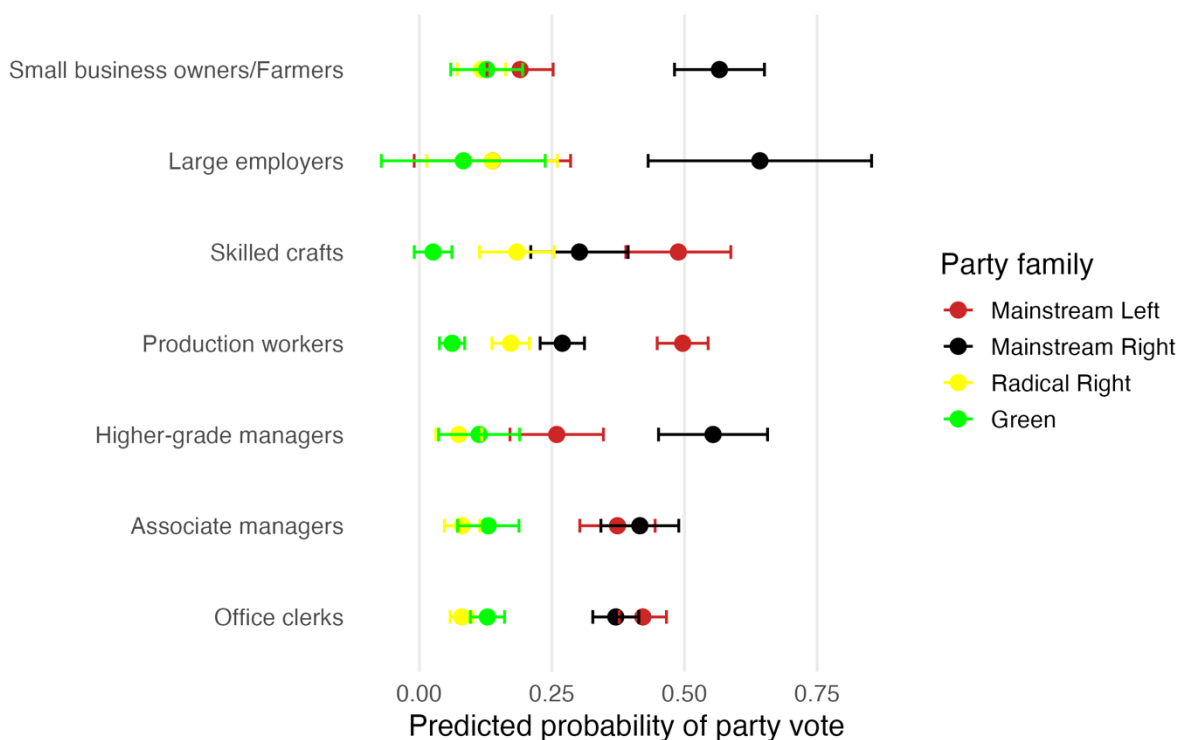


Figure 6.5 Predicted probability of voting for party by occupational segment

Figure 6.6 presents the predicted probability of voting for the mainstream left across the seven occupational groups, disaggregated by public- and private-sector employment. The results

reveal a sectoral cleavage that aligns with the findings of Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021) and Benedetto *et al.* (2020), although the pattern is not as clearly pronounced. The largest discrepancy is observed among Office Clerks, where public-sector employees are significantly more likely to vote left than their private-sector counterparts. A similar, though less statistically distinct, trend is visible among Associate Managers. For Production Workers and Skilled Crafts, the probability of a left-wing vote remains high across both sectors, suggesting that the technical work logic acts as a more consistent anchor for mainstream Left support than sectoral affiliation. Predictions for Small business owners/Farmers and Large Employers are unreliable due to an insufficient number of respondents in these two categories. Only 2 out of 24 valid responses (which in total is too few for a reliable prediction model as it is) in Large employers and 5 out of 215 valid responses in Small business owners/Farmers are public employees. The most conservative interpretation is that a statistically reliable sector effect is primarily concentrated in the lower- and middle-tier organisational roles.



Figure 6.6 Predicted probability of voting left by occupation and public versus private sector

Figure 6.7 displays levels of agreement with income redistribution across four education groups, separately for respondents who voted for the left and those who voted for the right. The results reveal a clear and consistent divide between the two blocs: left-bloc voters overwhelmingly support income redistribution, while right-bloc voters are far more divided, with substantial disagreement – especially among the highest educated and those with upper

secondary education. Figure 6.7 also highlights an important pattern: attitudes toward income redistribution are a central factor distinguishing left- and right-bloc voters, especially among the highly educated. To examine this more formally, I estimate a left/right vote model including an interaction between redistributive preferences and education.

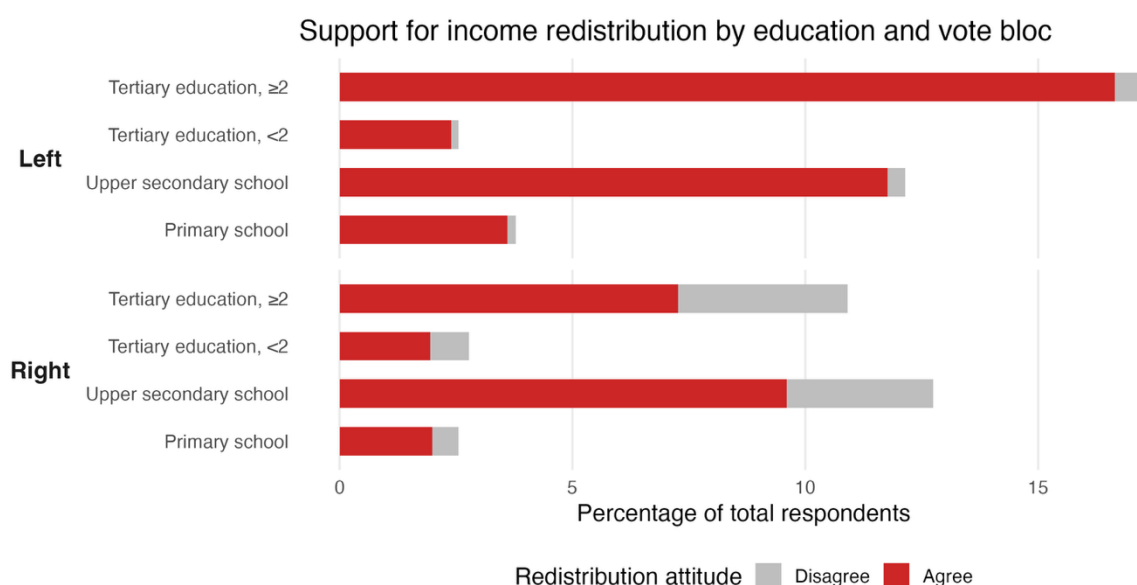


Figure 6.7 Redistributive preferences by left-right vote and education

Figure 6.8 presents the resulting average marginal effects (AME) of agreeing with the proposal to ‘reduce the income differences in society’, with education included as an interaction term. The marginal effect coefficient is consistently negative, indicating a systematic association where a decrease in support for redistribution corresponds to a lower predicted probability of voting for the left bloc. Notably, the magnitude of the AME increases – becoming more negative – at higher levels of education, meaning that the predictive strength of redistributive preferences is significantly more pronounced for highly educated voters than for those with lower levels of education. In other words, while material interests structure voting across the electorate, being pro-redistribution appears to be a powerful sorter for university-educated voters in their alignment with the Left.

This finding is directly supported by Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021), who show that the highly educated left is *not* economically moderate – they are in fact more pro-redistribution than anyone else. This confirms *H3*, which posited that redistributive preferences is a strong predictor of left voting for all groups. Additionally, the effect is strongest among the highly

educated, meaning that the educated left is not economically centrist; rather, they are economically egalitarian.

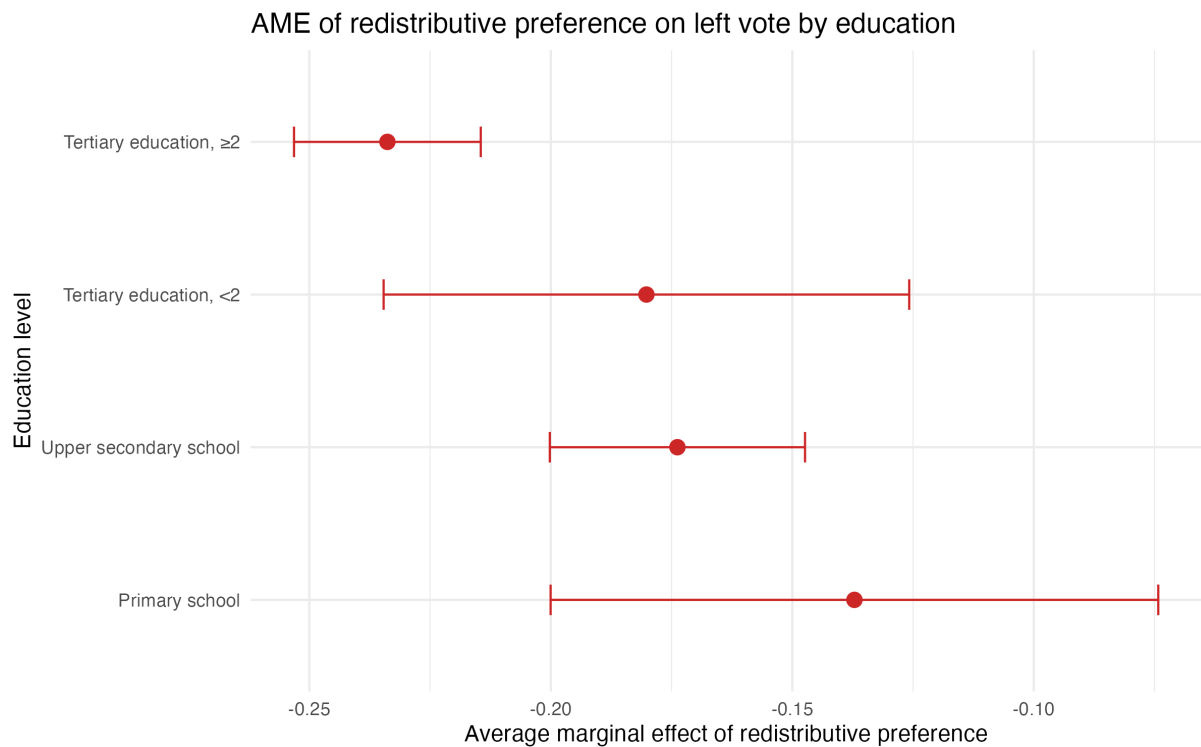


Figure 6.8 Average marginal effect of redistributive preference on left vote by education

In conclusion, the results show that Sweden in 2022 exhibits elements of the multi-elite pattern but also departs from it in important ways. The Piketty model replication (Chapter 6.1) confirms a positive education gradient and a stable income gradient, yet the party-family analysis implies that these patterns are primarily predicted by the Greens and the Sweden Democrats rather than by the traditional left-right blocs. Occupational class and sector continue to structure vote choice in ways that the Piketty approach obscures: manual and lower white-collar workers remain central to the mainstream-left electorate, while higher white-collar professionals and employers align with the mainstream right, and the radical right draws disproportionately from lower-skilled groups. Finally, redistributive preferences remain a strong dividing line between left and right, with little variation within the left but substantial education-based variation within the right.

Overall, the findings indicate that Sweden's cleavage structure is multidimensional, with education primarily shaping the sociocultural axis and occupational class and sector continuing to anchor economic conflict. These results speak directly to this thesis' research questions: they show that Sweden does display the education-income divergence highlighted in recent

comparative work (RQ1), but that this pattern only becomes intelligible when situated within Sweden's historical class structure (RQ2) and the rise of new sociocultural party families (RQ3). The data also clearly supports the hypotheses by demonstrating that highly educated voters cluster around culturally and environmentally progressive parties (*H1-H2*). Furthermore, *H3* receives support in that redistributive preferences positively correlates with education, and increases with higher education, and traditional class-based cleavages persist alongside newer education-based divides (*H4*) receives tentative support.

7. Discussion

This chapter dissects the empirical findings presented in Chapter 6, interprets them through the theoretical framework. The following two subsections aim to discuss and contextualise the primary findings of this thesis. The final part concludes by highlighting the larger theoretical implications of my results. In doing so, the discussion assesses the extent to which Sweden conforms to or diverges from comparative trends and addresses relevant findings in relation to the hypotheses and research questions that guide this thesis.

Model 1 shows that Sweden continues to display the basic contours of the multi-elite based party system proposed by Piketty and colleagues. These findings directly relate to RQ1, *Does the 2022 election exhibit the characteristic divergence between education and income documented in recent decades?*, by confirming the persistence of the education-income divergence. It confirms that higher-educated voters are more likely to support the left bloc and higher-income voters lean right, consistent with findings up to 2018, which suggests that Sweden is not exempt from the long-term restructuring of electoral alignments observed across Western democracies.

However, although the Swedish case exhibits the broad contours of the multi-elite pattern described in comparative research, it does so in a qualified and fragmented way. Rather than reflecting Piketty's idea of two opposing elite camps, I find that the Swedish pattern closely follows what Abou-Chadi and Hix's (2021) have previously observed, namely that the education divide emerges from the rise of new party families – specifically the Greens (MP) and the Sweden Democrats (SD) – rather than from a shift in the mainstream Left's social base. This means that the overall RQ, *Has Sweden's political cleavage structure evolved in a way that aligns with the multi-elite pattern identified in comparative research?*, is not fully validated by the results. On the surface, the 2022 election reproduces the familiar divergence between education and income. However, my own analysis (Model 2) finds that political space cannot

be reduced to a simple left-right division and that the so-called “Brahmin Left” has in no way abandoned the economic interests of the working class and is rather more *Green* than Left.

The mainstream Left is thus not a “party of the elite” but rather the leader of a fragmented, multi-class coalition. Its success among the highly educated is seemingly anchored in a genuine demand for redistribution and social investment, while its traditional working-class base remains a significant – though now shared and contested – constituent. This creates a political landscape defined by accretion (i.e., where new sociocultural divides have layered on top of, rather than replaced, the old class cleavage) rather than a simple replacement of class by identity, in line with the theoretical proposition by Bartolini and Mair (1990). The Swedish political landscape, as reflected in the 2022 national election, is characterised by *layered* cleavages in which the traditional class divide continues to anchor the mainstream Left, but is increasingly intersected and complicated by the education cleavage and the GAL/TAN axis. In short, rather than a homogenous multi-elite party system, my results indicate a party system fragmentation where distinct educational and cultural constituencies, mobilised predominantly by the MP and the SD, appear *alongside* the old class structure.

7.1 Deconstructing the “Brahmin Left”

Model 2 confirms one of the main expectations of this thesis, namely that the positive education gradient for the left vote is actually not associated with a fundamental shift in the social base of the Mainstream Left, but by higher-educated voters supporting the Greens (Figure 6.4). This echoes Abou-Chadi and Hix’s (2021) findings on party-system fragmentation, namely that the new sociocultural cleavage is in fact associated with the Greens and the Radical Right. The increase in predicted support for the Greens among highly educated voters confirms *H2*, which predicted that education would be associated with environmentally progressive parties. Thus, the education divide observed in Model 1 reflects the rise of a distinct party family mobilising highly educated voters on cultural and environmental issues rather than a transformation of the Mainstream Left’s core electorate.

Furthermore, the left vote probability by education pattern is theoretically notable because it complicates the standard “reversal of the educational divide” narrative argued by Piketty (2018). Rather than a simple linear increase in left support with higher education, the results (Figure 6.4) indicate that long-cycle tertiary education is distinct from short-cycle tertiary education, and that voters with no additional education beyond primary schooling remain largely left-leaning. This supports the idea that different educational trajectories map onto

political preferences in different ways, and that the education cleavage in Sweden is more segmented than the Piketty framework assumes.

A critical theoretical point for my analysis is the motivation behind the educated Left vote. Piketty (2020) suggests the Left lost the working class because it moderated its stance on redistribution to appeal to the educated. However, my results directly challenge this assumption, in that support for income redistribution (Figure 6.8) remains strongly associated with voting left across all educational groups. (Not to say that Piketty is completely mistaken: Bartels (2017) found that government responsiveness is powerfully tilted toward the preferences of affluent citizens). Specifically, Figure 6.8 shows that among voters with long tertiary education, support for redistribution increases the probability of voting left by more than twenty percentage points. This lends strong support for *H3*, namely that redistributive preferences remain a primary structuring force in Swedish electoral behaviour. As shown by (Abou-Chadi & Hix, 2021:89), growing income inequality is at least in part explained by the fact that electoral politics is no longer exclusively characterised by the fight between “the haves” on the right and “the have nots” on the left.’

Rather than a “divorce” from egalitarian goals, these results suggest that the Swedish “Brahmin Left” might be more accurately characterised as a “*Green Brahmin Left*”. This segment of the professional class does not abandon economic egalitarianism but instead combines a commitment to the welfare state with progressive cultural and environmental values. This supports the view that while new sociocultural divides have emerged, the economic cleavage persists in the form of attitudes toward redistribution and social investment. Finally, the positive education gradient is primarily associated with the Green Party (MP) rather than a shift in the Social Democrats’ base. This reinforces the argument that the mainstream Left remains a fragmented multi-class coalition rather than a unified “Brahmin” elite, with the Mainstream Left retaining its traditional anchor among the lower-educated and blue-collar categories (see Figure 6.4). Theoretically, this finding echoes the view of Bornschier (2010) and Kriesi *et al.* (2008), that while new sociocultural divides have emerged, the economic cleavage has not disappeared; instead, it persists in the form of attitudes toward redistribution, welfare-state expansion, and taxation.

Lastly, while Model 1 shows a broad education gradient for the Left, Model 2 reveals that this “Brahmin” base is specifically rooted in horizontal work logics (Figure 6.4). Green party support is not just a general elite phenomenon but is concentrated among Higher-grade managers, Associate managers, Office clerks, and Small business owners/Farmers. This concentration reflects Oesch’s (2006) theory that organisational and interpersonal work

environments foster distinct political values. However, a key caveat is the internal heterogeneity of these categories; because the dataset cannot isolate sociocultural professionals, they remain “hidden” within these white-collar groups.

Theoretically, these interpersonal specialists are the primary GAL/Green preserve (Oesch, 2006), meaning the observed support likely stems from them rather than all managers. The Green support among Small business owners/Farmers nuances the “Merchant Right” thesis, showing them to be a contested stronghold where environmental concerns now cross-cut traditional economic alignments. This deconstruction confirms that the Swedish Left is a fragmented multi-class coalition whose educational advantage is tied to specific professional environments. The concentration of Green support across the organisational and independent work logics provides empirical support for *H4*, demonstrating that horizontal differentiation in occupational class now likely serves as a key structuring layer that intersects with Sweden’s historical cleavage anchors.

7.2 The mirror image and horizontal logic

The TAN pole (Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist) functions as the mirror image of my findings on the Left. While the Left attracts highly educated voters who are pro-redistribution, the Radical Right mobilises the so-called “losers” of globalisation – lower-educated workers and rural residents – who prioritise national identity and border control over traditional economic left-right issues. My results regarding the Sweden Democrats (SD) reflect the “working-class realignment” emphasised in neo-cleavage theory. My findings show that, among the predicted probabilities of a Radical Right vote, being low-educated (Figure 6.4) and belonging to Production Workers and Skilled Crafts (Figure 6.5) produced the strongest correlations – the two segments of society that have the most to lose from a growing knowledge economy and an increase in the influence of cosmopolitan values. Both occupational groups follow a technical work logic, which makes them a contested stronghold in the tripolar space (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018).

This finding directly relates to RQ3, in that it contributes an understanding of *what political and societal developments help explain the contemporary configuration of Swedish political conflict*. Relatedly, a plausible perspective is that of how subjective social status and “status anxiety”, in this case predominantly lower-educated white men who have seen their relative social standing decline, induce support for the populist right among those who lack tertiary education, creating a “cultural backlash” against the progressive values of the “Brahmin Left”. As Gidron and Hall (2017) and Inglehart and Norris (2016) points out, this realignment occurs

along the GAL/TAN dimension, where the working class is pulled away from the Left due to its libertarian cultural positions and toward the Radical Right's defence of national culture and traditional norms. The 'void in representation' on socioeconomic matters, created by the strategic shift by SAP towards the centre, can be seen as a failure of the democratic system to respond to the welfare demands of the lower-educated and poor, effectively pushing parts of the working class toward populist alternatives.

Sub-group analyses in Model 1 highlight additional nuances to the picture. Among Green voters (Figure 6.2), as well as among women (see Appendix 1), the likelihood of the left vote increases with both education and income. For Centre-Right voters, the gradients rise until approximately the highest two deciles to then decline sharply. Regionally, both gradients are negative in small towns and become increasingly positive the larger the society, which reflects the urban concentration of progressive, highly educated voters. Theoretically, this further strengthens the idea of a process of accretion (Bartolini & Mair, 2010), where new issues – e.g. immigration, identity, and cultural protectionism – layer themselves onto an older class divide (Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) rural-urban divide), rather than replacing the original cleavage structure. Furthermore, gender and age patterns also show that income is largely flat across sub-groups, while education varies substantially. This reinforces the assumption that education is one of the new chief structuring dimensions of contemporary political conflict (*H4*). Older cohorts were socialised into a political environment where higher education aligned with social-democratic and liberal values, while younger cohorts entered a landscape increasingly characterised by new sociocultural divides. The generational patterns suggest that the meaning of education and income is historically contingent.

Despite the simplified occupational schema (Figure 6.5), the results allow for several careful conclusions about how occupational class continues to structure political conflict in Sweden. These findings speak directly to RQ2, as they show how historical class cleavages persist but now operate within a more complex, multidimensional landscape. My occupational class analysis indicates that class differentiation today is more horizontal rather than purely vertical in that Higher-Grade Managers, Associate Managers and Office Clerks, Small Business Owners/Farmers and Large Employers, and Skilled Crafts and Production Workers map onto distinct political poles in the tripolar space described by Oesch and Rennwald (2018). My data implies that the Merchant Right (Mainstream Right) is anchored in the *independent* logic (Large Employers) and the top of the Organisational logic (Higher-Grade Managers). Conversely, Office Clerks and Small Business Owners/Farmers represent more volatile "open competition" or "contested" zones where the traditional class divide has weakened most significantly. The

theory (Oesch, 2006) suggests that sociocultural (semi-) professionals and self-employed professionals, which would likely be found within my white-collar categories and Small business owners/Farmers, are the most likely to vote Green, which would support the hypothesis of a new occupational class divide based on horizontal differentiation.

At the same time, blue-collar workers continue to support the Social Democrats but also show the highest probability of voting for the Radical Right, illustrating how the traditional labour-capital divide has been overlaid by a new GAL/TAN conflict. These patterns demonstrate that occupational class still channels political preferences in ways that education and income alone cannot capture. Rather than a simple “Brahmin Left vs. Merchant Right” realignment, contemporary Swedish cleavages are best understood as the interaction of enduring class structures with newer sociocultural divides. This continuity aligns with Bartolini and Mair’s (1990) notion of a qualified persisting cleavage: the underlying division between labour and capital remains meaningful, even if its organisational and identity components seem to have weakened. Conclusively, my analysis is not detailed enough to draw any resolute conclusions, apart from theoretically inferred probabilities. Based on these results, *H4* receives tentative support in that new divides are clearly structured by education, but I cannot confidently claim to confirm the assumption of horizontal differentiation based on occupational class apart from that theory strongly implies which groups are likely hidden in my broader occupational categories.

Public sector employment (Figure 6.6) shows that the sectoral divide is concentrated in organisational roles, particularly among Office clerks. This is contrasted with Production workers and Skilled crafts, for whom the probability of voting Left is high regardless of sector. This suggests that for those in the technical work logic, class and work environment are more powerful predictors of political identity than whether their employer is public or private. This refines the “public sector anchor” assumption from Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021) by showing its effects are not universal across all classes in the Swedish 2022 context. In contrast to Benedetto *et al.* (2020) and Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021), who observed horizontal differentiation between public and private employment as a central factor for a left-wing vote, my results show a less distinct dialectic relationship between public and private employment, visualised by the often-overlapping CIs. The most significant finding is that publicly employed Office clerks are significantly more likely to vote left compared to private sector equivalents.

7.3 Broad theoretical implications

The following paragraph examines the stability of contemporary Swedish cleavages through Bartolini and Mair's (1990) framework. Just like the Swedish Democrats (SAP), in the postwar decades, succeeded in *encapsulating* its electorate through trade unions, local municipal clubs, pamphlets and newspapers *et cetera*, it is clear that both the Greens (MP) and Sweden Democrats (SD) are also actively using these means to cement their voter bases – both have connections to various interest groups and NGOs, both have alternative news sites where the own narrative can be slightly emphasised, and so on. In terms of *salience*, the educational divide clearly fits the criteria, but public salience in itself is modest. The concept of salience demands that the cleavage structure is subjected to active political conflict. This part is relatively easy to succeed with. The SD is the arguably the only party out of the two that have something to gain from addressing the issue of the knowledge economy, which is reflected in their frequent criticism against the sociocultural elite, the so-called “establishment”. Furthermore, Bartolini and Mair (1990) argue that salience can be seen as the stability of the social relationship represented by the cleavage. However, the authors might not have expected how volatile voting behaviour would become in contemporary European politics. Voters change allegiance between elections now more than ever, so upholding a *social structure* in the authors' definition becomes increasingly difficult. Although this investigation did not fit within the scope of the present thesis, future research should make a deeper inquiry into the frequency of which voters change allegiances from a party on one side of a cleavage to a party on the opposite camp.

Moreover, applying the Bartolini and Mair (1990) framework to the 2022 Swedish election suggest that the educational divide in Sweden represents an emerging but qualitatively distinct cleavage. The divide satisfies the *socio-structural* and *normative* criteria: Model 1 demonstrates that education has overtaken income as the primary structural anchor of party alignment – with education gradients three to four times larger in magnitude than income – while Model 2 reveals a clear normative “sorting” between a “Green Brahmin Left” and a TAN pole. However, the *organisational* criterion remains only partially satisfied; unlike the historical *encapsulation* of the mid-20th-century SAP, the contemporary structuration of the educational divide seems to rely on thin or lifestyle-based closure. In this modern configuration, political identity seems to be maintained through educational homophily and social networks rather than the mass associations of the past.

Moreover, a major puzzle in neo-cleavage theory, one that is called forth by my answers to RQ2 and RQ3, is how these new layers of accretion become “frozen” without the mass organisations (like unions) of the past. Office Clerks, for example, sit in the “twilight zone”

between organisational authority and routine work, potentially making them an “open competition” group where traditional union-based encapsulation has faded.

In the current era, closure is increasingly achieved through lifestyles, cultural habits, and symbolic boundaries. Education seemingly acts as a primary sorter of voters, creating homogeneous social networks and marriage markets that stabilise new political identities. Political entrepreneurs (parties like the SD or MP) engage in top-down classification struggles to name and define these new social groups, effectively forging a collective identity out of structural raw material. Conclusively, it does not seem that the Swedish party system is “thawing” into total chaos; rather, my analysis indicates that the Swedish party system is undergoing a process of accretion, where the persistence of the old class structure provides the foundation for a new, structured, and durable transnational divide. These theoretical perspectives contribute to RQ3 by implying that Sweden’s contemporary cleavage structure reflects both long-standing economic divisions and newer sociocultural divides. So, while traditional mass organisations like unions have weakened, educational homophily and social networks may provide a new form of social closure that stabilises these new political identities. This pattern illustrates that the educational divide has not yet developed the full organisational encapsulation or identity consolidation that Bartolini and Mair (1990) consider necessary for a fully institutionalised cleavage. Its political expression is concentrated in the MP rather than in the mainstream Left, indicating an emerging but not yet structurally “closed” line of conflict.

Furthermore, the emergence of the SD as a major political force has strong implications for the establishment of a tripolar space in Sweden (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). My results, supported by previous research, indicate that this configuration has led to a fragmentation of the Left and that segmented parts of the traditional working class have been pulled away from the SAP toward the SD’s TAN pole. The SAP’s historic move toward a centrist “catch-all” strategy to attract the new middle class did seemingly create an opportunity for the SD to frame economic conflict as a clash of “deservedness” between ethnic Swedes and immigrants. The SD’s breakthrough is most visible among those in the technical work logic, where they have arguably attracted a worker identity based on nativism and national belonging rather than capital-labour conflict. However, the 2022 voting patterns clearly show that Sweden’s historical cleavages continue to shape electoral behaviour, albeit in transformed and layered ways. The traditional class cleavage remains visible: blue-collar workers still lean toward the SAP, while business owners and higher white-collar groups align with the centre-right. This continuity reflects the long-standing labour-capital divide institutionalised through Sweden’s union

movement and welfare state, contextualising how the 2022 election relates to Sweden's historical cleavages (RQ2).

Lastly, my results indicate that education does seem to form the basis of a new, persistent cleavage. When my Model 1 results are added to the long-run comparative study of the 1946-2018 period by Gethin *et al.* (2021b), the larger picture confirms a persisting education-income divide, albeit less pronounced in Sweden specifically. Socioeconomic factors seem to have a substantial effect on ideological positioning and party alignment as well, but it does not show the same structuring capacity as education does, in determining both socioeconomic *and* sociocultural matters. With the rapid increase in number of highly educated citizens and the rapid decrease in demand of low-skilled, manual labour, it is easy to see how the “winners” and “losers” of this development start to form solid electoral bases that need new political representation. Indeed, my findings support the ideas of a rise of a “knowledge economy” and “Information Revolution” as well as a transnational cleavage structured by education.

In conclusion, I have shown that while higher education is positively associated with support for culturally progressive parties, this pattern is predicted primarily by the Greens rather than by a fundamental transformation of the mainstream Left, which confirms *H1*. Long-cycle tertiary education is also strongly linked to Green Party support, confirming that environmentally progressive parties mobilise a distinct, highly educated constituency (*H2*). Furthermore, *H3* receives clear support in that redistributive preferences remain a strong predictor of left-wing voting across all educational groups, challenging the idea of an economic “divorce” between the Left and its electoral base. Finally, *H4* receives tentative support as the findings suggest that horizontal differentiation in occupational class serves as a structuring layer that intersects with Sweden's historical cleavage anchors. While Model 2 reveals alignment patterns that broadly correspond to Oesch's (2006) horizontal work logics – such as the technical logic anchoring competition between the SAP and SD – this conclusion must be treated with caution. All in all, these results show that Sweden's cleavage structure reflects both continuity and transformation, with education structuring the sociocultural axis and redistributive preferences continuing to anchor the economic one.

8. Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate whether Sweden's political cleavage structure has evolved in a way that aligns with the multi-elite pattern identified by Piketty and colleagues, and to assess whether Piketty's bloc-level framework is sufficient for explaining contemporary Swedish electoral behaviour. By adding the party-family approach informed by Abou-Chadi and Hix

(2021), I provide a nuanced account of how socioeconomic, cultural and attitudinal factors shaped vote choice in the 2022 Swedish election.

My analysis confirms that the transition of Swedish politics into a “multi-elite” party system, where education and income no longer point in the same political direction, remains, but strongly indicate that this transformation is not a uniform shift across entire political blocs but is largely anchored in party-system fragmentation. The emergence of a “Brahmin Left” in Sweden is specifically a party-level phenomenon concentrated in the Green Party, while the mainstream Left continues to contest its traditional working-class base with the Radical Right. Furthermore, I conclude that Sweden’s cleavage structure is best understood as undergoing a process of accretion, in which old and new divides layer on top of each other. This multidimensional configuration underscores that political realignment in Sweden is characterised by the coexistence and interaction of several lines of conflict that vary in salience across social groups. My analysis shows that the Piketty framework, collapsing party competition into a left-right bloc, is not specific enough for the diversification of the Swedish party system. The rise of new party families has introduced new sociocultural and GAL/TAN divides that a two-bloc-level model cannot detect.

To sum up, the empirical findings of this thesis demonstrate that the 2022 Swedish election aligns with the multi-elite pattern through a clear divergence between education and income (RQ1). Specifically, the analysis confirms that highly educated voters have gravitated toward environmentally progressive parties – the Greens – rather than the traditional mainstream Left (*H1*, *H2*), yet these voters remain anchored by strong, egalitarian redistributive preferences (*H3*). Crucially, *H4* receives tentative support, as the results suggest that horizontal differentiation in occupational class serves as an additional structuring layer in the Swedish landscape. However, due to the likely internal heterogeneity of the occupational categories, these horizontal patterns are suggestive rather than definitive. Similarly, while traditional class and regional cleavages persist (RQ2), the data regarding sector and specific occupational fractions remains somewhat blurred by these data constraints. Finally, this study reveals that the transformation is primarily associated with party-system fragmentation and the rise of new sociocultural poles (RQ3) rather than a wholesale realignment of the historical class structure, characterising the Swedish landscape as one of cleavage accretion.

Future research should investigate how these new educational and cultural identities become “frozen” or institutionalised in the absence of traditional mass organisations like labour unions. Additionally, as this study focused on income and education, incorporating individual-level wealth data is essential for future research to fully understand the “Merchant Right” and

whether rising wealth inequality independently structures voting behaviour. Finally, there is a need to explore how political entrepreneurs – such as the Sweden Democrats and the Greens – effectively “name” and define new social collectives, forging collective identities out of structural shifts in the knowledge economy.

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Appendix 1: Additional figures for Model 1

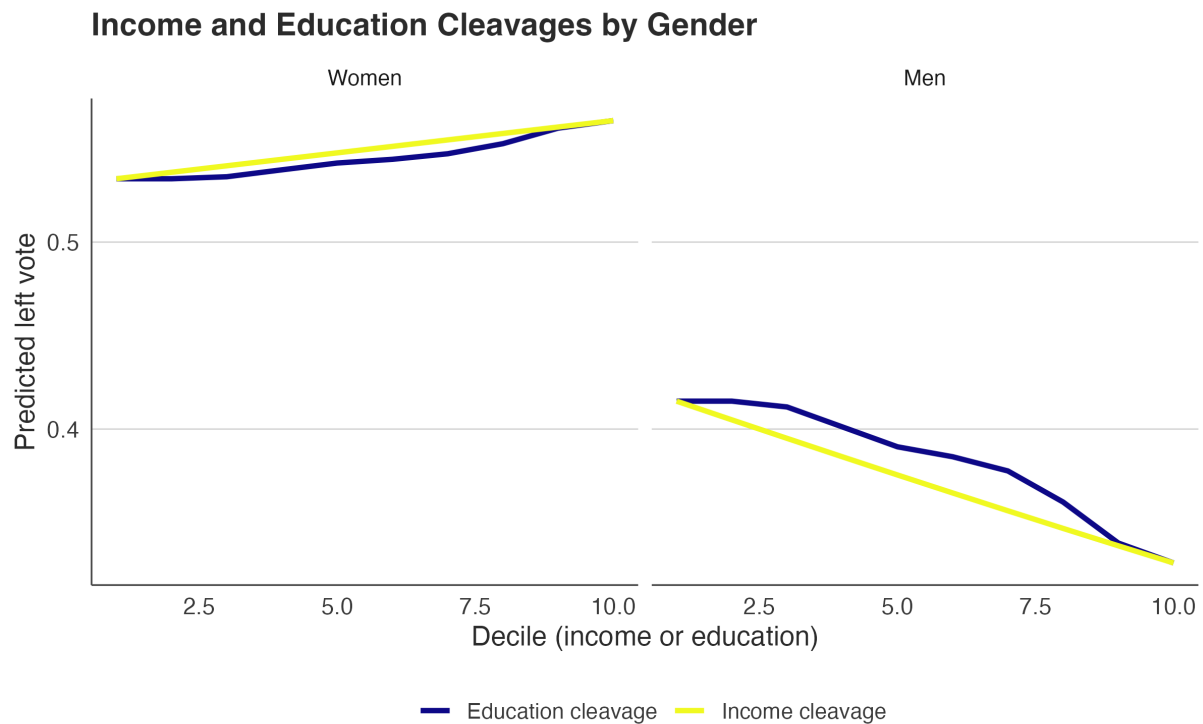


Figure 1: Income and education cleavages by gender

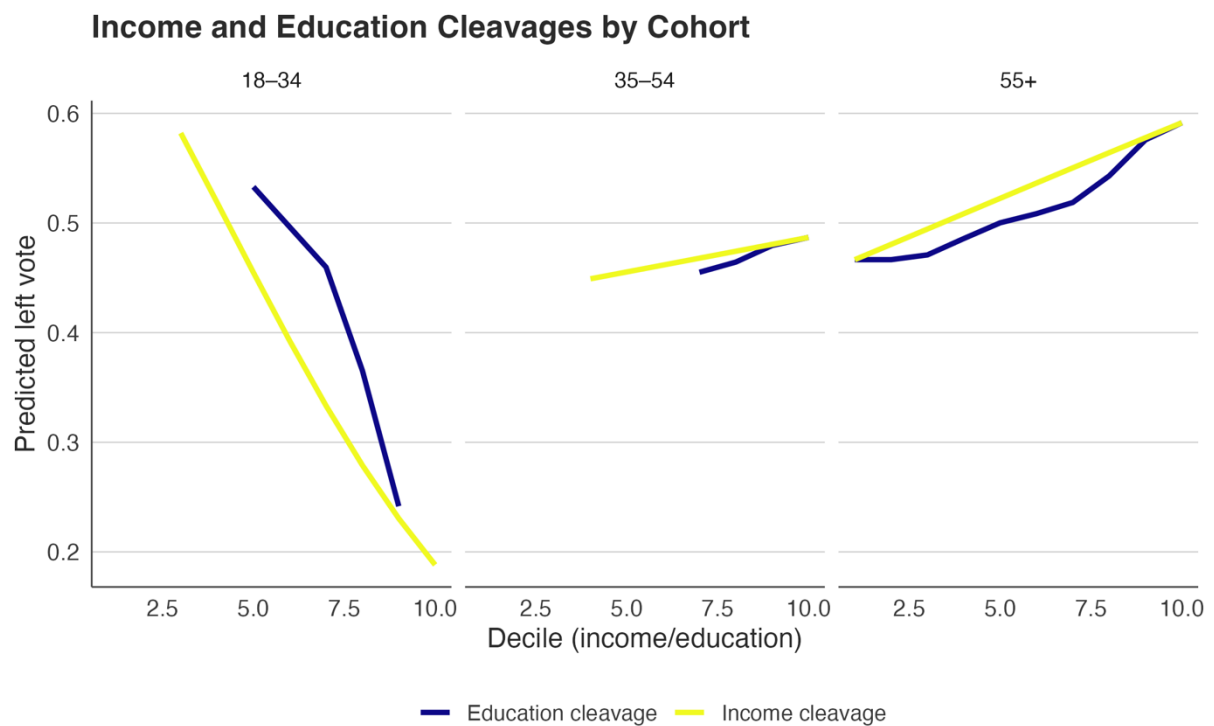


Figure 2: Income and education cleavages by cohort

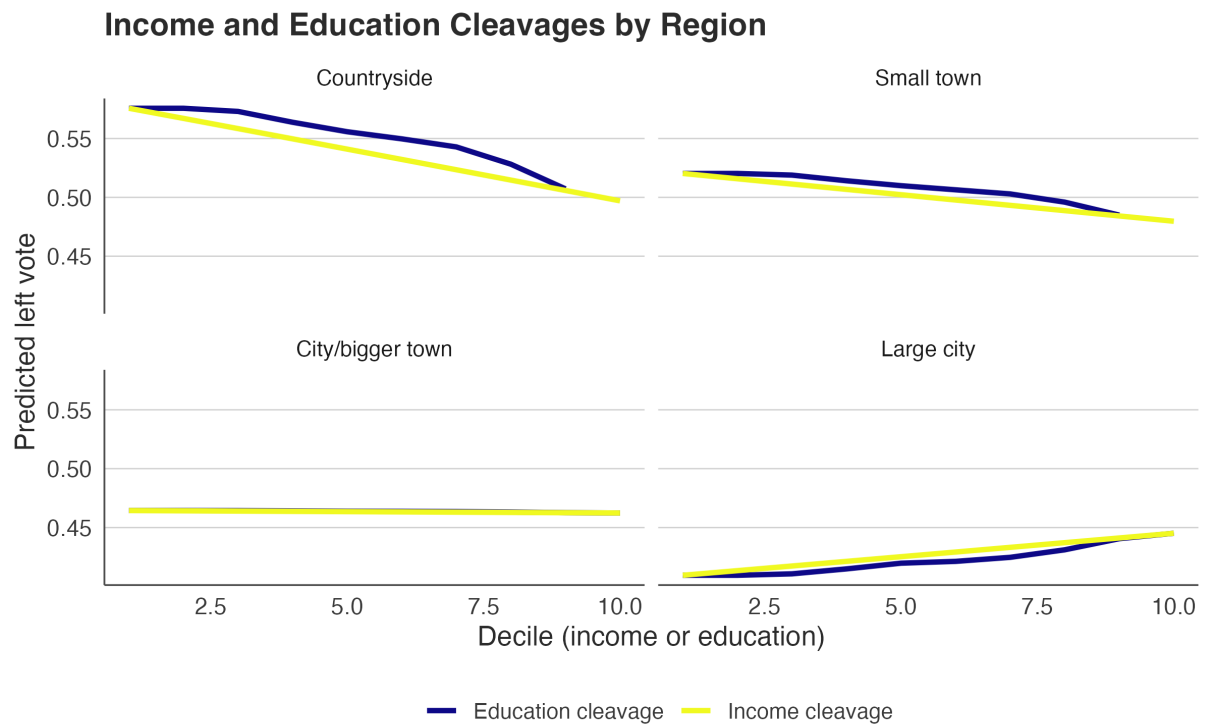


Figure 3: Income and education cleavages by region

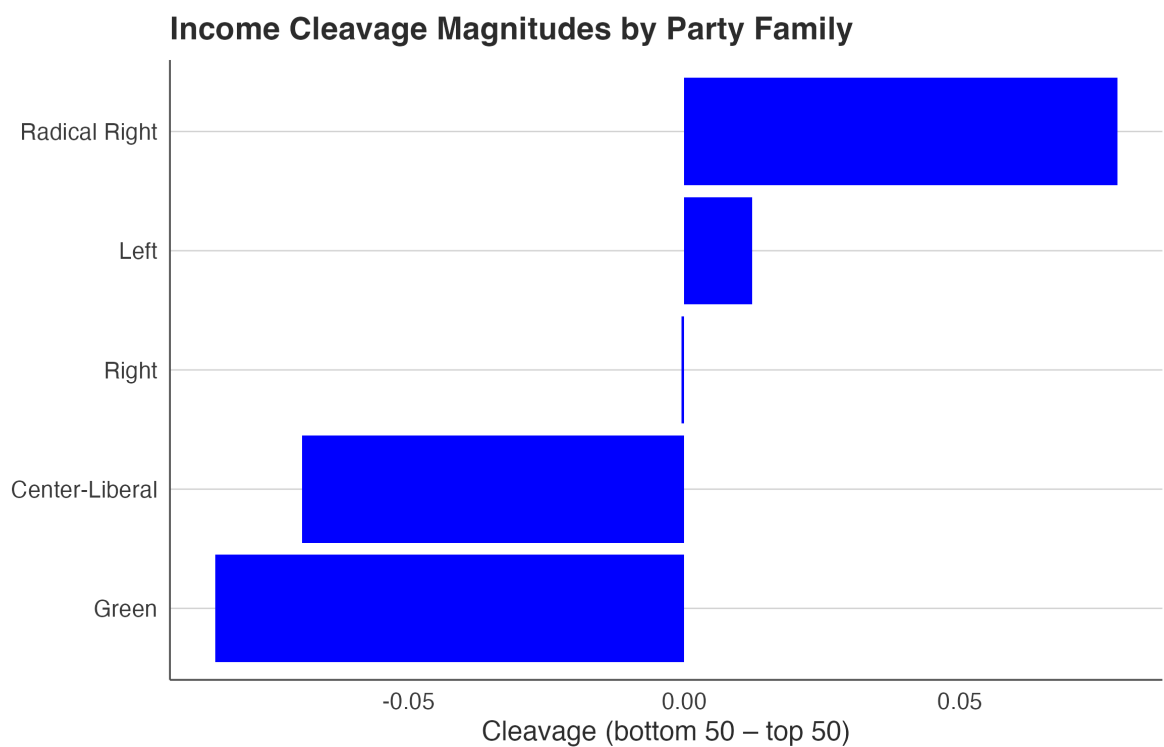


Figure 4: Income cleavage magnitudes by party family

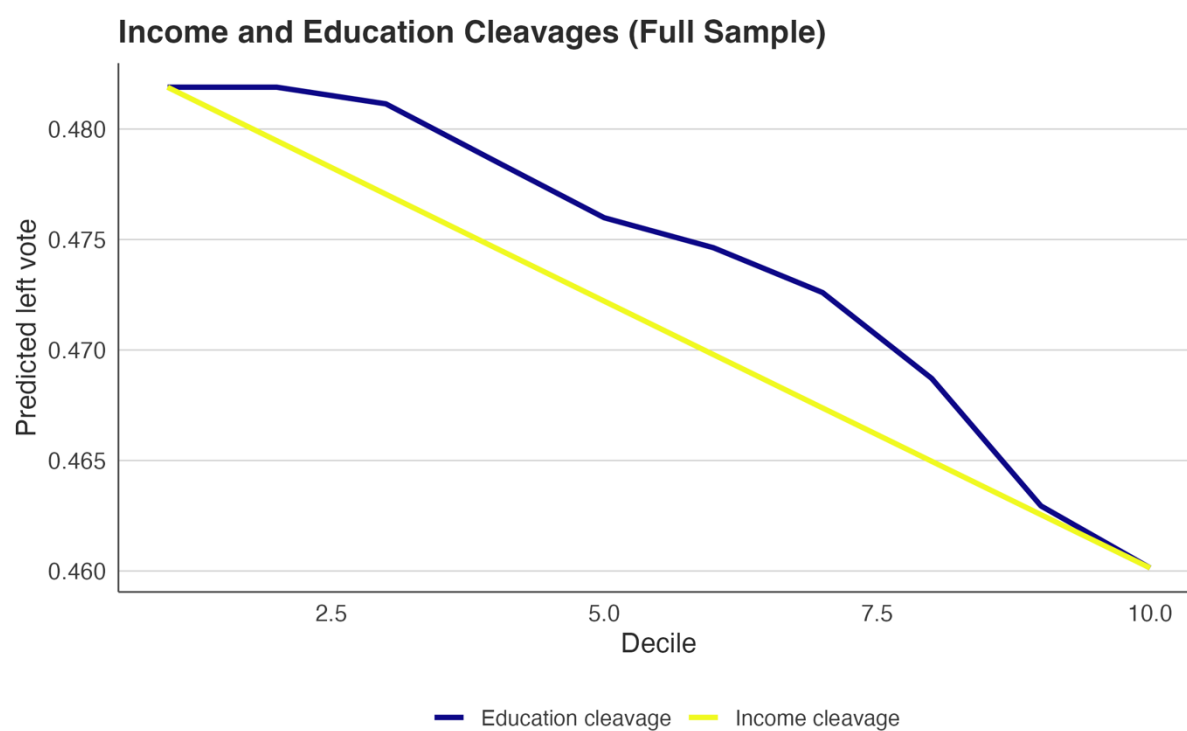


Figure 5: Income and education cleavages on the full CSES sample