

# Changing Party Systems, Socio-Economic Cleavages, and Nationalism in Northern Europe, 1956-2017

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# *Changing Party Systems, Socio-Economic Cleavages, and Nationalism in Northern Europe, 1956-2017* \*

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## **Abstract**

This paper draws on a rich set of electoral surveys to explore the changing relationship between party support and electoral socio-economic cleavages in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden from the mid-twentieth century until the present. All five countries have experienced a progressive decline in their strong class cleavages, which coincides with the emergence of multi-elite party systems, in line with most Western democracies. While in the 1950s-1960s the lowest-educated and lowest-income voters were more left-wing, since the 1970s-1980s the vote for the left has gradually become associated with the highest-educated voters, who have drifted apart from the more right-wing economic elites. We also investigate how this transformation relates to the success of populism and nationalism over the recent decades among the lowest-educated and lowest-income earners. Despite historical, cultural, and political links, the transition of Nordic countries towards a multi-elite party system has happened at different speeds, offering interesting insights on the specificities of the national trajectories.

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# 1 Introduction

This paper studies the changing relationship between party support and electoral socio-economic cleavages in Northern Europe. How have political cleavages developed in some of the world's oldest and most egalitarian democracies? Have Nordic countries transitioned towards a multi-elite party system as most Western democracies? How have the deeply rooted trails of long-lasting nationalistic ideas changed the party system over the course of the century? We answer these questions using electoral surveys conducted in Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland from the mid-twentieth century until the present.

The Nordic countries have been described as unusually stable and well-functioning multi-party systems ([Lane et al., 1993](#)). The five countries also have strong historical, cultural and political links. Nonetheless, they do not have the same historic pre-conditions, economic resources, foreign policy positions and in recent decades their party systems have evolved differently. These differences have been recently found to largely explain why Nordic countries are distinctly dissimilar in voter alignment and their political systems ([Bengtsson et al., 2013a](#)).

All Nordic countries except from Iceland have been found to have stronger class-based party systems than most Western democracies. We confirm the existence of these strong class cleavages and document that their decline coincided with the emergence of a multi-elite cleavage structure comparable to that found in most Western democracies ([Piketty, 2018](#); [Piketty and Kosse, 2020](#); [Bauluz et al., 2021](#)).

In the 1950s-1960s, Nordic countries had a class-based system, as the left-wing vote (socialist-labour-democratic) was associated with lowest-educated and lowest-income voters. Since the 1970s-1980s, it has gradually become associated with highest-educated voters.

Nonetheless, the path towards a multi-elite party system has happened at different speeds in Northern Europe. It has been faster in Norway and Denmark, where the traditional left has lost the support of the lowest educated at the benefit of the right and the far right, while the New Left (green and new left-wing parties) has attracted the vote of the highest educated. In contrast, the reversal of the education cleavage has been less pronounced in Sweden and Finland, as the traditional left has

managed to keep a larger share of its working class electorate. In Sweden, the persistent hegemony of the Social Democratic Party has prevented the emergence of a clear multi-elite party system, despite strong support for the Left Party among the highest educated. In Finland, the delay was largely due to the foundation of the Left Alliance in the early 1990s, a competing new left-wing party that contrary to the Greens attracts the lower class vote. The exception is Iceland, which did not develop a strong class-based party system and has had a very stable multi-elite party system since the late 1970s.

This structural evolution can contribute to explain the rise of populism and nationalism, as the lowest-educated and the lowest-income voters might feel left behind. In Norway and Denmark, the anti-immigration Progress Party emerged already in the 1970s as an anti-tax party, in contrast to the True Finns, founded two decades later as successors of the Agrarian Party, who were in favor of greater progressive taxation. The Swedish exceptionalism myth vanished with the success of the far-right Sweden Democrats in the 2010s, whereas in Iceland the renewed political line of the Progressive Party prevented new nationalist parties from emerging. Increasing migration towards Northern Europe has also led to the implementation of tighter immigration policies that may have favored the emergence of a religious cleavage according to which Muslim voters are more left-wing, in line with what was found in France (Piketty, 2018).

## 2 Norway

### 2.1 *Party System and Election Results, 1957-2017*

The Norwegian constitution signed in 1814 transformed Norway from an absolute into a constitutional monarchy. However, it was not until 1898 and 1913 that universal male and female suffrage, respectively, were established. The Norwegian multi-party system was long dominated by the Labour Party (*Det norske Arbeiderparti*, DNA), the largest party since 1927 in the Parliament (the *Storting*). The DNA uninterruptedly led single-party majority governments from 1945 until 1961, followed by alternating coalitions and minority governments.

The strong support of the Labour to join the European Community (EC) yet weakened its hegemony: the electorate's rejection of membership in the 1972 Referendum

was followed by a decrease in its vote share of about 11 percentage points in the 1973 Storting election (Figure 1). Such loss did not come together with an increase in support for the right. The main winner of the Labour Party's defeat was an anti-European Community faction that separated from the Labour during its pro-membership campaign and joined the Communists and the Socialist People's Party in the Socialist Electoral League. In the 1980s, in line with the "Rightist Wave" across Europe, the Norwegian electorate made a shift towards the right (Lafferty, 1990). The Conservative Party formed its own minority government in 1981 with 32 percent of the votes, and took part in a coalition government with the Christian Democratic Party and the Center Party in 1983.

On the eve of the 1994 second EU-membership referendum, divergent ideological positions within the center-right coalition allowed the Labour to come back to power. At the same time, the new anti-immigration Progress Party was gaining support among the right-wing electorate, surpassing the Conservatives in the 1997, 2005, and 2009 parliamentary elections. From 2005 to 2013, the country was governed by the Red-Green Coalition, an alliance of the Labour Party, the Center Party, and the Socialist Left Party, in which the agrarian Center Party represented the environmentalist ideology.

In what follows, we will study the changing relationship between party support and socio-economic characteristics using Norwegian post-electoral surveys for all general elections held between 1957 and 2017.<sup>1</sup> The Norwegian Labour Party and the Socialist Left Party are classified as left-wing parties, while right-wing parties include the Conservative Party, the Progress Party, and the Christian Democrats. Because of their centrist position, the Liberal Party and the Center Party are not included neither in the left nor in the right in our analysis.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See appendix Table AD1.

<sup>2</sup>See Methodological Note at the end of the paper for a more detailed description of the research design.

## 2.2 *The Decline of the Labour Party and the Emergence of a Multi-Elite Party System*

The transformation and the increasing fragmentation of the Norwegian political system have come together with a transformation of political attitudes. Whereas in 1957-1965 the difference between the share of tertiary-educated and non-tertiary-educated voters voting left fell by almost 30 percentage points, this difference has become positive, reaching more than 3 points in the 2010s.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the difference between the share of top 10 percent and bottom 90 percent earners voting left remains negative over the entire period (Figure 2). The divergence between highest-educated voters and top-income earners reveals that Norway has moved towards a multi-elite party system, as it has been documented for the majority of Western democracies.

To shed light on the drivers of this transformation, we can further decompose the electorate by educational attainment and consider specific parties. Between the 1960s and 1990s, the relationship between educational attainment and left vote was monotonically downward sloping. The reversal in the 2000s was mainly driven by the substantial reduction in the support for the Labour Party among the lowest-educated voters, exacerbated by a simultaneous increase in the share of tertiary-educated voters supporting it.<sup>4</sup> Despite this reduction, the Labour is however still supported by a larger share of primary-educated voters than of university graduates, but it has increasingly competed with the Progress Party and the Conservative Party in the political representation of the primary educated since the 1990s, signaling a clear shift of the lowest educated towards the right in recent decades. The Socialist Left Party has also contributed to the reversal of the education cleavage, as it has counted on the support of highest-educated voters since its debut in 1973 as the Socialist Electoral League. This finding is common to the majority of Western countries, where New Left parties have gained the support of the higher-educated segment of the electorate.

The transformation of the education cleavage has not come together with a reversal in the income cleavage. In particular, the share of left-wing vote has remained quite

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<sup>3</sup>See appendix Figure AB18 for the difference between the top 10 percent and the bottom 90 percent educated voting left.

<sup>4</sup>See appendix Figures AB1, AC27, and AC28.

flat across the income distribution up to the 90th percentile over the 1957-2017 period, above which the share of left-wing votes sharply decreases. Considering specific right-wing parties reveals greater support for the Conservative Party among high-income voters, while the Progress Party has attracted a higher share of voters among low-income groups.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.3 *Declining Class Cleavages and the Emergence of Other Socio-Economic Cleavages*

One of Norway's most important political cleavages relates to social class. From the 1950s until the 1990s, nearly 70 percent of voters identifying with the working class voted for the left, compared to 30 percent of other voters (Figure 3). Since the 2000s, this cleavage has weakened due to the decrease in the support for the left among the working class, and to the simultaneous increase in left votes among the rest of the population (Knutsen, 2001). The decline in class polarization is mainly explained by the weakening of class identity and the consequent electoral mobility, which is stronger in Norway than in the rest of Nordic countries (Worre, 1980).

The decrease in the importance of the class cleavage has coincided with the emergence of the Norwegian multi-elite party system. In fact, class was so relevant in explaining party choice that it shifted the education gradient up on average from -22 to -7 until the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> With the shrinking of class polarization from the 2000s, the sensitivity of the education gradient to the inclusion of class as a control has become negligible.

Over the 1980s, another interesting transformation has characterized the Norwegian political scenario: the country has experienced a strong reversal of the traditional gender cleavage, according to which women were more right-wing.<sup>7</sup> Women used to vote relatively more for the Christian People's Party that defended religiosity and traditional moral values (Listhaug, 1985). This reversal was mainly driven by the increasing share of women voting for the Socialist Left Party, which has been the closest left-wing political group to the feminist movements.<sup>8</sup> In addition, we find

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<sup>5</sup>See appendix Figures AB2, AB3, AC12, and AC16.

<sup>6</sup>See appendix Figure AB25.

<sup>7</sup>See appendix Figures AB10 and AB21.

<sup>8</sup>See appendix Figures AC21 and AC31 for the voting support by gender respectively for the Christian Democrats and the main left-wing parties.

that the modern gender cleavage is largely explained by the expansion of women's employment in the public sector, confirming pre-existing findings in the literature (Knutsen, 2001). The gradual increase in the share of voters employed in the public sector has also come together with a decline of private employees' support for the left and a slight increase in the share of left-wing public employees, leading to the emergence of a sectoral cleavage.<sup>9</sup>

#### 2.4 *The Progress Party's Anti-Immigration Platform and the New Religious Cleavage*

The roots of the Norwegian nationalism date back to its fight for the construction of a national identity, separated from the neighboring countries. However, immigration was not perceived as an issue until the 1970s, when the number of immigrant workers started to increase (Bergmann, 2016). The anti-immigration Progress Party, founded in 1973 as a no-tax party, gained the support of lowest-educated and lowest-income voters. Although it only captured a restricted share of votes in the 1970s, mainly attracting young voters from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, the 1987 election first and the elections of the 2000s later represented turning points in the party's electoral success.<sup>10</sup> Over time, the focus of the party's platform has moved from labor immigration and the increasing number of foreign workers in the country to the threat of Muslim immigrants to Western culture and values (Fangen and Vaage, 2018).

These positions have certainly played a crucial role in the determination of a religious cleavage leading Muslims to vote more for left-wing parties: Table 1 shows that 70 percent of Muslims voted for the main left-wing parties over the 2013-2017 period, and 59 percent of them supported the Labour Party.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, support for the Labour Party among Catholics, Protestants, or voters with no religion did not exceed 30 percent. As in a number of other Western democracies, a new religious cleavage therefore seems to have emerged in Norway.

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<sup>9</sup>See appendix Figures AB11 and AB24.

<sup>10</sup>See appendix Figures AC15 to AC18.

<sup>11</sup>The Muslim vote is only available for the last decade (2013-2017) These results need to be interpreted with caution, as the percentage of Muslim electors in our sample is quite small.



## 3 Denmark

### 3.1 *Denmark's Political System and Election Results, 1960-2015*

Denmark's path towards democracy was marked by two pivotal events: the adoption of the Constitutional Act in 1849, which stipulated the end of the absolute monarchy, and the 1915 first election held under universal suffrage. The Constitution's revision of 1953 introduced the unicameral Danish Parliament (the *Folketing*) and a proportional representation system, which highly influenced the following governments' structure, making it difficult for one party to obtain the absolute majority. Danish political history is thus characterized by the predominance of minority coalitions. The 1950s were a period of relative political stability, due to the balance of power between the three biggest parties, the Social Democratic Party, the Liberal Party (Venstre), and the Conservative People's Party, and the three smallest parties, the Social Liberals, the Communist Party, and the Justice Party.

A first deviation that led to left-right polarization happened in 1960, when the Justice Party lost all its seats, while the Socialist People's Party, founded by former members of the Communist Party, entered in the *Folketing* along with the Independent Party on the right-wing side of the political spectrum (Figure 4) (Stehouwer and Borre, 1969). Until 1973, governments were mainly constituted by the Social Democratic Party, sometimes in coalition with the Social Liberal Party on the left, and by the Venstre-Conservative coalition on the right, also in some cases with the support of the Social Liberal Party.

The 1973 election has been defined as the "landslide election", which brought upheavals to the Danish multi-party system (Green-Pedersen, 2001). The number of elected parties doubled, and the far-right Progress Party entered in the Parliament for the first time with 15.9 percent of votes, becoming the second party of the country. With only 12.3 percent of votes, Venstre formed a minority coalition, together with the main right-wing parties (above all the Conservative Party and the Progress Party) and the Social Liberal Party. Although the majority of the traditional parties registered losses, the hardest hit from the landslide election was for the Social Democratic Party, whose vote share collapsed from 37.3 percent in 1971 to 25.6 percent in 1973. In 1975, they entered back in the government and remained in power until 1982. However, the Social Democrats' weakened position made it necessary to

get support from the right-wing bloc to rule.

In 1978, the Social Democratic Party tried an unsuccessful cross-bloc cooperation with Venstre, which came to an end only one year later (Green-Pedersen, 2001). The coalition had to deal with the consequences of a dramatic economic crisis initiated with the first oil shock in 1973 and with the difficulty of getting the proposed policies approved, since support from the non-socialist coalition was essential. In 1982, a center-right minority government constituted by the Conservative People's Party and Venstre, along with the Center Democrats and the Christian People's Party came to power and remained until 1988. Between 1988 and 1990, the Conservative People's Party and Venstre formed another government coalition with the Social Liberal Party.

During the same period, the Social Democratic Party took positions closer to the center to attract centrist parties in a future coalition. In 1993, they succeeded and formed a coalition government with the Center Democrats, the Social Liberal Party, and the Christian Democrats. The Socialist People's Party, that used to present itself as an alternative to the left of the Social Democratic Party, also changed its position towards the center with the aim of eventually cooperating with the Social Democratic Party. This strategy cost the party a large loss of support during the 1990s to the benefit of the Red-Green Alliance, the most left-wing party in the *Folketing* (Daiber et al., 2012). On the extreme right of the political spectrum, the 1990s also witnessed the gradual decline of the Progress Party and the birth of the anti-immigration Danish People's Party in 1995. In the 2015 election, the latter became the second party in the country, supporting a Venstre minority government along with the Conservatives and the Liberal Alliance.

In what follows, we will study the changing relationship between party support and socio-economic characteristics using Danish post-electoral surveys covering all general elections held between 1960 and 2015.<sup>12</sup> For the sake of simplicity and following the existing literature, we have classified the Social Liberal Party as a left-wing party, despite its centrist orientation that led it to support both right-wing and left-wing governments (Bengtsson et al., 2013a).

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<sup>12</sup>See appendix Table BD1.

### 3.2 *Towards a Multi-Elite Party System*

The transformation of the Danish political system, as in Norway, has been associated with the emergence of a multi-elite party system. The difference in the share of left vote among tertiary-educated voters and non-tertiary educated voters after controls was equal to -15 percentage points in 1960-68, after which it gradually increased until reaching 5 percentage points in the last decade. In contrast, the difference in left vote between the top 10 percent and bottom 90 percent earners has remained negative over the whole 1960-2015 period (Figure 5). While the Conservative Party has always been supported by the highest-income voters and the Danish People's Party by the lower socio-economic classes, Venstre registered the majority of votes among bottom-income earners until the 1980s, before a reversal that aligned it with the conservative right.<sup>13</sup>

The analysis of the evolution of electoral support for specific education groups and left-wing parties provides interesting insights on the drivers of the reversal of the educational cleavage. The change in voting behavior was mainly driven by the joint influence of the Socialist People's Party and the Social Liberals on the higher educated, reinforced by the emergence of the Red-Green Alliance in the 1990s. The educational cleavage is less marked when we exclude the contribution of the Social Liberal Party, which has counted on the support of the highest-educated since the 1960s. However, the reduction in the support for the Social Democratic Party among the lowest-educated plays a minor role in the determination of the reversal: as for the Norwegian Labour Party, the Danish Social Democrats still rely on a majority of primary-educated voters. However, while in 1990-98 they had a vote share of 43 percent, this share fell to nearly 30 percent in the following decades. The decline coincides with the rise of the confidence in the Danish People's Party among the lowest-educated and lowest-income voters.<sup>14</sup> These results are in line with the finding of Rune Stubager, who classifies the parties on a libertarian-authoritarian dimension to document the existence of an educational cleavage in Denmark and the same party-specific voting patterns we have described (Stubager, 2013).

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<sup>13</sup>See appendix Figures BC17, BC22, and BC32.

<sup>14</sup>See appendix Figures BC36 to BC38.

### 3.3 *Class, Sector, and Other Socio-Economic Cleavages*

Denmark is also characterized by strong class cleavages. From the 1960s to the 1990s, the share of self-identified working class voters supporting the left was larger than 80 percent, compared to 40 percent of other voters. Over the last decade, class polarization has almost vanished, due to both a sharp decline in the vote for the left by the working class and to an increasing support among the rest of the population (Figure 6). As in the case of Norway, the educational gradient is highly sensitive to the inclusion of perceived social class, confirming the importance of the class cleavage.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from education, income and class, Denmark stands out among the Nordic countries for having a particularly strong sectoral cleavage.<sup>16</sup> While during the 1960s and 1970s there were no significant differences in left vote between public-sector and private-sector employees, there has been a sharp decline in the share of private-sector employees voting for the left since the 1980s. This transformation coincided with the deterioration of private sector confidence towards the Social Democratic Party when dealing with the economic and political crisis of the 1980s. The Venstre-Conservative governments at the time attracted part of this lost vote share by openly promoting a process of privatization of the public sector and the reduction of corporate taxation (Andersen et al., 1996). Employment sector also seems to be playing a crucial role to explain the emergence of a modern gender cleavage, as its inclusion as a control in the regression of the difference between women and men voting left shifts the curve downward and makes the gender gap not statistically significant after the 1980s.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.4 *Attitudes towards Immigration and the Rise of the Danish People's Party*

The success of the Danish People's Party from the mid-1990s reveals the importance of the immigration issue in Danish society. An anti-immigration rhetoric was first introduced in the Parliament by the Progress Party in the 1970s, even though at that time its main focus was the abolition of the income tax and the reduction of bureaucracy. With the increase in the number of asylum seekers, immigration started to become a heated topic in political debates. After the dissolution of the coalition with

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<sup>15</sup>See appendix Figure BB24.

<sup>16</sup>See appendix Figures BB9 and BB25.

<sup>17</sup>See appendix Figure BB23.

the Social Liberal Party in 1993, the Conservative Party and Venstre embraced the Progress Party's platform, tightening their position towards immigration (Green-Pedersen and Odmalm, 2008). The anti-immigration stance was reinforced by the emergence of the Danish People's Party that considered immigration as a threat to national identity and burdensome for the Danish welfare state. In 1998, the year of the Danish People's Party's debut in the Parliament, almost 60 percent of individuals interviewed believed that immigration was a topic of great or decisive importance and 46 percent stated that too much public resources were invested in refugees' aid, according to the surveys used in this paper. The terrorist attacks of 2001 eroded the distance between the anti-immigration party and the mainstream political parties, which had until that moment criticized its anti-Muslim positions (Bergmann, 2016). Over time, the attention of the public opinion has also moved towards Muslims and Islam. In 2007, while 34 percent of respondents saw general immigration as a menace, 47 percent expressed their concern about the interaction between Muslims and Danish culture. As shown in Table 2, the Danish People's Party's electorate is aligned with that of other anti-immigration parties across Europe, as it has mainly attracted voters from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## 4 Sweden

### 4.1 *The Swedish Five-Party System and Election Results, 1956-2014*

Sweden has been a parliamentary democracy since 1917 and universal suffrage was introduced soon after in 1921. The Swedish political system has been considered as a prototype of a five-party system. While in Norway and Denmark the first deviations from the model already happened during the 1970s and especially with the 1973 "earthquake" elections, the Swedish Parliament (the *Riksdag*) exclusively hosted the five traditional parties until 1988 (Pierre, 2015). These parties were grouped in two opposed blocs, the left-wing one led by the Social Democratic Party with the support of the Left party, successor of the Communist Party of Sweden, and the bourgeois bloc, constituted by the conservative Moderate Party, the Liberal People's Party, and the agrarian Center Party.

Over the course of the 20th century, the Social Democratic Party has been the largest party in the *Riksdag*. In particular, it has been in power for more than 60

years between 1932 and 2006, generally obtaining 40 to 50 percent of votes (Figure 7). Although most Swedish governments have been minority governments as in Denmark, the political supremacy of the Social Democratic Party has led to less political instability. Until the 1970s, the Swedish “moderate pluralism” tended towards a one-party dominant system, given that the Social Democratic predominance was flanked by the weakness of a non-compact right-wing bloc (Sartori, 2005).

The 1970s were a decade of significant institutional changes, such as the adoption of a unicameral Parliament in 1970 and the promulgation of the 1974 Constitution, which transferred the full legislative power to the Parliament. At the same time, it was also the first setback of the Social Democrats’ dominance. In 1976, the Center Party, the Liberal People’s Party and the Moderate Party formed the first coalition government in 44 years, although the Social Democrats gained 42.7 percent of the votes. The latter came back to power in 1982, after six years in opposition. Moreover, the Moderate Party became the second party in Parliament from 1979 onwards, surpassing the Liberals and the Center Party.

This turmoil was only an anticipation of the transformation that the Swedish political system was to experience. Until 1988, the stable five-party model persisted, mainly due to the 4 percent vote share threshold that parties needed to reach to gain seats in the *Riksdag*, until the environmentalist Green Party, founded after the 1980’s nuclear power referendum and inspired by the subsequent anti-nuclear movements, entered Parliament. The year 1991 was also considered as a minor “earthquake” election (Aylott, 1995).<sup>18</sup> Two additional parties managed to gain representation in the *Riksdag*, the Christian Democrats and the right-wing New Democracy. Meanwhile, the old Social Democratic Party obtained the lowest result since 1928, receiving only 37.7 percent of votes. The Moderate Party formed a minority government with the support of the Liberal Party, the Center Party, and the Christian Democrats.

The new government had the difficult task to deal with the financial crisis that hit the country at the beginning of the 1990s. The conservative government implemented liberal reforms, privatizing publicly owned firms, cutting corporate and capital taxes as well as public spending, and designing programs to reduce inflation and budget

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<sup>18</sup>N. Aylott, “Back to the Future: The 1994 Swedish Election,” *Party Politics* 1, no. 3 (1995): 419–429.

deficits. While in 1994 the Social Democrats regained the lost consensus, the same cannot be said for the following election four years later. The party lost more than 10 percentage points, whereas the Left Party experienced an impressive increase in support, becoming the third party in the Parliament. This outcome was certainly an expression of voters' dissatisfaction by the austerity policies implemented by the Social Democratic Party, but it was also linked to the Left Party's anti-EU position in the referendum of 1995, as well as to its fights to defend the welfare state and to its gradual detachment from the communist ideology. However, the Left Party's support of the Social Democrats cost them a reduction in the share of votes by almost 6 percentage points in 2006.

The 2010 election represented a real turning point in Swedish political history. On the left-wing side, the Social Democrats, the Left Party, and the Greens created for the first time a red-green coalition. On the right-wing side, the far-right anti-immigration party, the Sweden Democrats, entered for the first time in the Riksdag with 5.7 percent of votes. The appearance of this party on the political scene can be considered the missing piece to establish the end of the Swedish "exceptionalism". In what follows, we will analyze the evolution of the relationship between voting behavior and socio-economic characteristics using Swedish pre- and post-electoral surveys covering all general elections held between 1956 and 2014.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4.2 *The Path Towards a Multi-Elite Party System*

The long persistence of the traditional party system has undoubtedly affected the evolution of voting patterns in Sweden. The delay in the political upheavals with respect to Norway and Denmark are reflected, above all, in the analysis of the education cleavage. While the difference in left vote between the top 10 percent and the bottom 90 percent of earners is stable and negative as in the rest of Nordic countries, the same alignment does not occur for education (Figure 8). The negative gap in left vote between tertiary and non-tertiary-educated voters presents an upward trend but approaches zero only in the 2010-2014 elections. This suggests that Sweden has experienced the same transition as Norway and Denmark towards a multi-elite system, but at a lower speed.

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<sup>19</sup>See appendix table CD1.

The stability in the income cleavage between top-income and bottom-income earners is largely due the persistent support of top earners for the Moderate Party and the Liberal People’s Party, while the Sweden Democrats have appealed to the low-income segment of the electorate.<sup>20</sup> Swedish surveys make it possible to further explore the “rich-poor” dimension, providing information about the assets held by voters in some years. The evolution of left vote by wealth group presents a downward and monotonic trend, with the bottom 50 percent voting more for the left, followed by the bottom 40 and finally by the top 10 percent.<sup>21</sup>

The delayed path towards the reversal of the educational cleavage can be better understood by analyzing voting patterns by party. The share of left-wing tertiary-educated voters has increased over time, yet the left has also managed to retain the majority of primary-educated voters over the entire period, as the share of primary-educated voters used to be about 60 percent and has only fallen to 50 percent in the last decade.<sup>22</sup> Although the shift among the lowest-educated towards the right has been weaker than in Norway and Denmark, the decomposition of the vote by party also reveals many similarities that may contribute to closing this gap. Indeed, the Left Party first and the Green Party later have captured the support of the highest-educated since their debut in the political arena. On the right, the Liberal People’s Party and the Moderate Party have relied on a majority of tertiary-educated voters, even though the Moderates have gained more support among lower-educated voters in the last decade. Moreover, in line with their twin parties around Europe, the far-right Sweden Democrats have exerted a strong attraction on the lower socio-economic classes that, until the 2000s, had favored the Social Democratic Party: the fraction of primary-educated voting for the Social Democrats fell by 20 percentage points from 2002-2006 to 2010-2014, the decade of the far-right party’s success. This competition between the Sweden Democrats and the Social Democratic Party in the representation of the most disadvantaged classes is extremely similar to the one documented in the Norwegian and Danish contexts.<sup>23</sup> The recent dynamics suggest that, if the Sweden Democrats’ continue absorbing the lowest-educated vote, the education gradient is likely to become positive over the next decade. Sweden would

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<sup>20</sup>See appendix Figures CC10, CC14 and CC22.

<sup>21</sup>See appendix Figure CB6.

<sup>22</sup>See appendix Figure CB1.

<sup>23</sup>See appendix Figures CC25 to CC28.



then be more aligned with the multi-elite party systems observed in most Western democracies.

#### 4.3 *Social Class, Unionization and Other Socio-economic Cleavages*

Class cleavages are of remarkable importance in the Swedish context. Between the 1950s and the 1990s, 70 to 80 percent of voters identifying with the working class used to vote for the left, as opposed to 30 to 40 percent of the rest of the population. In the 2010s, the decrease in the share of working-class voters supporting the left has modestly undermined class polarization (Figure 9). The relevance of social class can be confirmed when analyzing its contribution to the evolution of the educational cleavage. The inclusion of social class leads to an impressive upward shift of the education gradient which only seems to disappear in the last decade.<sup>24</sup> This persistence can be explained by the Swedish Social Democrats' primacy in attracting the working class consensus until the early 2000s.

The strength of the Swedish class cleavage allows one to explore another interesting aspect, that is the strong connection between union membership and voting behavior. Union members' tendency to be more left-wing, also visible in other Nordic countries, is particularly pronounced in Sweden<sup>25</sup>, and can be linked to the strong historical ties linking the Swedish Trade Union Confederation to the Social Democratic Party (Bengtsson et al., 2013b). Finally, we also document the emergence of a modern gender cleavage which can be entirely explained by the increasing share of women employed in the public sector.<sup>26</sup> The expansion of the welfare state has accentuated the public-private divide, with private employees voting less for the left, as observed in Norway and Denmark.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4.4 *The Sweden Democrats and the End of Swedish "Exceptionalism"*

The absence of an extreme-right party at the end of the 1990s and the accommodating immigration policies have long led the public and academic opinion to consider Sweden as an exceptional model of refugees' reception. This peculiar feature of the Swedish context used to clearly differentiate it from other Nordic countries, despite

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<sup>24</sup>See appendix Figure CB26.

<sup>25</sup>See appendix Figures CB7 and CB23.

<sup>26</sup>See appendix Figure CB21.

<sup>27</sup>See appendix Figures CB10 and CB25.

similarities in their party systems. Already in the 1980s and 1990s, however, the surveys at our disposal suggest that a number of respondents were concerned about the increasing number of asylum seekers: in 1994, 21 percent of interviewees believed that the phenomenon was highly worrying, and by 2002, 47 percent had become in favor of stricter controls at the borders. In contrast to Denmark, attitudes towards immigration had at that time not translated into political changes, as political parties had not brought this issue at the center of their political agenda (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008). Nonetheless, the Swedish exceptional model vanished with the emergence of the Sweden Democrats, as the party worked on the renewal of its reputation previously associated to its ties with neo-Nazi movements, until it managed to enter Parliament in 2010. With their anti-immigration rhetoric and the rejection of a multicultural society, they have increasingly gained the support of young, low-income, and low-educated voters in recent years (Table 3).

## 5 Finland

### 5.1 *Finland's Multi-Party System and Election Results, 1972-2015*

Finnish independence was recognized in 1917, after 500 years under Swedish rule and a century of Russian annexation. In 1918, Finland entered a Civil War opposing the Bolshevik-leaning Red Guards, supported by the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, to the White Guard, supported by the German Empire, leading to the eventual military victory of the latter. After a brief attempt to establish a kingdom, the country became a republic. Nevertheless, the construction of a democratic system had already started in 1906, with the establishment of universal suffrage.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Finnish Parliament (the *Eduskunta*) was dominated by four big parties: the Social Democratic Party, the Agrarian League (rebranded as Center Party in 1965), the liberal-conservative National Coalition Party, and the Finnish People's Democratic League reuniting the left-wing forces of the country under the lead of the Communist Party of Finland (Figure 10). The party system has always been highly fragmented and none of these parties has ever occupied a dominant position, contrary to what has been documented for Norway and Sweden. Thus, the biggest parties have only surpassed the threshold of 25 percent of popular votes in parliamentary elections in a few cases. The failure to achieve

a majority of seats has certainly influenced the government formation and its subsequent stability. From the late 1940s to the end of the 1960s, the country witnessed the succession of almost twenty different governments. Moreover, while other Nordic countries were mainly characterized by the alternation of opposite blocs, in Finland cross-bloc coalitions have been the most frequent solution. Another peculiarity of the Finnish political system was the influence exercised by the head of the State during the process of government formation. For instance, in 1987 his influence culminated in the formation of a coalition between the Social Democrats and the National Coalition Party (Mattila and Raunio, 2002).

The 1990s were marked by a sequence of important events that led to further political fragmentation. The country went through a severe financial crisis and the unemployment rate rose from 3 to 17 percent during the first half of the decade. In 1991, the Center Party, which had mediated between the left and the right since the post-war period, formed a center-right government with the National Coalition Party. They proposed austerity policies aimed at reducing public services and the provisions of the welfare state built during the 1960s by the Social Democrats and the left-wing parties (Kiander et al., 2004). The unpopularity of the center-right government however benefited the Social Democratic Party that took power in the following elections in 1995, with 28.3 percent of votes, thanks to a five-party coalition with the National Coalition Party, the centrist Swedish People's Party, the Green League, and the Left Alliance, the successor of the Finnish People's Democratic League. Four years later, a constitutional reform limited the role of the Head of the State in favor of the Parliament, who has since then been entitled to elect the Prime Minister (Kiander et al., 2004).

Despite increasing political fragmentation, the Social Democratic Party, the Center Party, and the National Coalition Party continued to achieve the highest vote shares throughout the 2000s, with around 20 to 25 percent each, until the 2011 election represented a real turning point in Finnish political history. The far-right True Finns, founded in 1995, became the third party in the *Eduskunta* with 19.1 percent of votes. It then surpassed the Social Democratic Party in the following election, enabling it to take part in a center-right coalition government along with the Center Party and the conservatives.

In what follows, we will analyze the changing relationship between party support and

socio-economic characteristics using Finnish post-electoral surveys covering all parliamentary elections held between 1972 and 2015.<sup>28</sup> The Social Democrats, the Left Alliance, and the Greens are categorized as left-wing parties, whereas the Finnish Rural Party, the National Coalition Party, and the True Finns as right-wing parties. The Center Party is excluded from these two categories.

## 5.2 *Towards a Multi-Elite Party System?*

The relationship between voting behaviors and education in Finland shares more similarities with the Swedish scenario than with the Norwegian and Danish contexts. While top-income earners are more right-wing over the whole period, the highest-educated have gradually become more left-wing (Figure 11), but this increase has not been large enough to generate the same reversal in the education gradient as in the case of Norway or Denmark.

The replication of the analysis for the main left-wing parties reveals interesting insights into the underlying mechanisms. The Social Democratic Party has close ties with the largest union confederation (SAK) and has counted on a majority of lower-educated voters since the late 1970s. Instead, the Greens, as in Sweden, have mainly been supported by highest-educated voters since their emergence in the 1980s. Support for the Left Alliance used to be stronger among lower-educated voters, but the composition of its electorate has profoundly changed in recent decades and now the party obtains slightly more support among the highest educated.<sup>29</sup> The Left Alliance defines itself as a red-green party, where green refers to environmental issues, while red stands for the tradition of the workers' movement, but also, in a broader sense, the demand for social justice (Daiber et al., 2012). However, its cooperation with the Social Democrats, as well as its rapprochement to the neo-liberal wave in recent decades led to a loss of credibility and a decline in the support for the party, especially among the lower-educated. Despite the loss of support among the lower-educated of the Left Alliance and the strong support among the highest-educated towards the Greens, the persisting large vote share and class-based nature of the Social Democrats explains why the transition towards a multi-elite party system has been late and it is still incomplete.

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<sup>28</sup>See appendix Table DC1.

<sup>29</sup>See appendix Figure DC26.

On the right-wing side, the National Coalition Party has always obtained higher support among tertiary-educated and high-income voters, as was also documented for traditional conservative parties in Western Europe. In addition, the difference between tertiary- and non-tertiary- educated voters supporting the party has further increased over the last decade, which suggests that the True Finns have managed to capture a part of the already exiguous share of low-educated and low-income voters supporting the Conservatives.<sup>30</sup> If the True Finns continue absorbing the lowest-educated vote, the education gradient is likely to become positive over the next decade. Finland would be then more aligned with the multi-elite party systems of most Western democracies.

### 5.3 *The Importance of Class and Other Socio-Economic Cleavages*

In line with Norway, Denmark and Sweden, Finland also presents a persistent and strong class cleavage (Knutson, 2010). The Finnish electoral surveys do not include questions on perceived social class in every election, so that we have used occupational class as a proxy. Figure 12 shows that workers are clearly more left-wing than any other occupation throughout the whole period, but the share of workers voting for the left has declined from 66 to 39 percent between the 1970s and the 2010s.<sup>31</sup> The importance of occupational class is also mirrored in the fact that it is the only control variable that strongly affects the education gradient, shifting the curve upwards.<sup>32</sup>

Apart from education, income and class, another important political divide in Finland relates to region of residence: voters in Southern Finland have been disproportionately more left-wing than in Central or Northern Finland. The regional cleavage is strongly correlated with rural-urban and class cleavages, as most urban areas and workers are in Southern Finland.<sup>33</sup> Finland has also experienced the emergence of a modest “green” modern gender cleavage, as contrary to the rest of Nordic countries women have only shifted their vote from the National Coalition and the Center

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<sup>30</sup>See appendix Figures DC10, DC14, and DC25 to DC28.

<sup>31</sup>Note that in this case workers are all those employees that are not entrepreneurs or self-employed, managers, intermediate level employees, or farmers. Figure DB10 in the appendix shows the strong Finnish class cleavage for the available decades (1980s, 1990s and 2000s).

<sup>32</sup>See appendix Figure DB24.

<sup>33</sup>See appendix Figures DB7 and DB8.

Party to the Greens and the Left Alliance, but not to the Social Democrats.<sup>34</sup>

#### 5.4 *Finnish Nationalism and the Peculiar Profile of the True Finns*

Finland was a homogeneous country with a low level of immigration, so that right-wing nationalist politics were not prominent around the mid-twentieth century. Nonetheless, agrarian populism had been present in Finnish politics ever since the beginning of the 1960s. The Finnish Agrarian Party was founded in 1959 to defend the interests of the rural Finnish, who felt alienated in the fast-moving post-war society, against the urban elite (Arter, 2010). The party obtained its greatest electoral support in the 1970s and early 1980s, when the party won approximately a tenth of the vote. It then started to have financial difficulties and it was succeeded in 1995 by a new nationalist party, the True Finns.

The True Finns managed to gain seats in Parliament as early as 1999, although the peak of its success was reached after the 2007 election. The party diverges from analogous political organizations in other Nordic countries in several aspects. First, it has operated on a more moderate profile and its origins are not from neo-Nazi movements as the Sweden Democrats. Along with their less aggressive narrative, the True Finns also differ from the Danish and Norwegian model in their view of the economy. The Danish and the Norwegian Progress Party were founded as no-tax parties, whereas the True Finns advocated for progressive taxation and the re-introduction of a wealth tax (Arter, 2010). This position has created uncertainty about its classification in the left-right political spectrum.

However, when it comes to the immigration issue, the party realigns with other far-right anti-immigration parties across Europe, rejecting multiculturalism, asking for a reduction of asylum seekers and emphasizing the burden of migration influx on the Finnish welfare state at the expense of the Finnish population. This re-alignment with far-right parties is corroborated by the analysis of the characteristics of the party's supporters in the most recent decade: the True Finns has mainly attracted rural, lower-educated, and lower-income voters (Table 4).

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<sup>34</sup>See appendix Figure DC29.

## 6 Iceland

### 6.1 *Iceland's Party System and Election Results, 1978-2017*

After centuries of Danish rule, Iceland was recognized as a fully sovereign state in 1918 and joined Denmark in a personal union with the Danish king. While universal suffrage was already achieved in 1920, however, it was only by 1944 that Iceland became an independent republic. The Icelandic political scenario has since then revolved around four political parties or coalitions: the center-left Social Democratic Alliance, which is the result of the merger between the existing left-wing parties in 2000 (the Social Democratic Party, the People's Alliance, the Women's List and National Awakening); the left-wing socialist and Eurosceptic Left-Green Movement, founded in 1999 following disagreements over the formation of a broader left-wing alliance; the right-wing Independence Party, born in 1929 after the unification of the Conservative and Liberal Party; and the Progressive Party, a center-right agrarian party founded in 1916 (Figure 13). The Independence Party has long been the largest party in the Icelandic Parliament (the *Althing*), obtaining the largest number of seats in the Parliament since 1942. Before 2009, left and center-left parties represented a weaker force in the Parliament, with no party achieving a majority. Nevertheless, the Social Democrats and the People's Party took part in government cabinets led by the Independence Party and the Progressive Party.

The financial crisis of 2008 caused a political upheaval, leading to the end of the relative stability that had characterized the Icelandic political landscape over the 20th century. In October 2008, the three major banks of Iceland went bankrupt and the financial system collapsed. The IMF intervened with a \$2.1 billion bailout program. The breakout of protests came short after. From October 2008 to January 2009, Icelandic citizens took part in the largest protests in the history of the country, calling for the resignation of the Independence Party's government and forcing the government to hold early elections. In the elections of April 2009, the first left-wing coalition in the history of Iceland came into office with 51.5 percent of votes. The new coalition formed by the Social Democratic Alliance (SD) and the Left-Green Movement (L-G) had to deal with the daunting task of economic recovery. By 2013, the unemployment rate fell below 5 percent, but this was not enough to guarantee a new victory of the left-wing coalition. The 2013 elections led to a huge defeat of the

governing parties with losses of 16.9 (SD) and 10.8 (L-G) percentage points. The center-right opposition benefited from the unpopular austerity policies put in place by the government and regained the majority in Parliament. In the 2013 elections, there was also a shift towards new political parties: along with the four traditional parties, six new political parties were represented for the first time in Parliament.

In 2016, the Progressive Party's new Prime Minister Gunnlaugsson was forced to resign, due to his involvement in the Panama Papers' scandal, and the Progressive Party was defeated in the anticipated elections of October 2016 as the Independence Party became the largest party. Moreover, three emerging parties, the Pirate Party, Bright Future, and the Reform Party obtained 32 percent of votes. The latter two joined the Independentists in a coalition government which lasted less than one year, due to another scandal related to Bright Future's leader. In the anticipated elections of October 2017, finally, the Independence Party, the Left-Green Movement and the Progressive Party obtained a majority of votes. With the aim of restoring political stability, all three formed a large left-right coalition led by the Left-Green's leader, Katrín Jakobsdóttir.

In what follows, we will study the changing relationship between party support and socio-economic characteristics using post-electoral surveys covering all parliamentary elections held in Iceland between 1978 and 2017.<sup>35</sup> The Left-Green Movement and the Social Democratic Alliance are classified as left-wing, while the Independence Party and the Progressive Party are classified as right-wing. The Pirate Party is excluded from the left-right classification, as it considers itself to be an anti-system political organization.

## 6.2 *The Stability of the Multi-Elite Party System*

Iceland has experienced the emergence of new parties in recent decades, in line with what we observed in other Western democracies. Nonetheless, the country is singular in that the income and education gradients have been very stable since the 1980s, moving in parallel trends but with opposite signs (Figure 14). While the difference between the share of top 10 percent and bottom 90 percent earners voting left has generally fluctuated between -5 and -10 percentage points, the gap in

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<sup>35</sup>See appendix Table ED1.



left vote between tertiary-educated and non-tertiary-educated voters has fluctuated between +5 and +10 points. Contrary to the rest of Nordic countries, therefore, a multi-elite party system has not recently emerged in the Icelandic political scenario, as it seemed to already prevail in the 1980s.

To better understand the stability of the education cleavage in Iceland, one can investigate variations by party. Whereas the Socialists and Social Democrats have counted on the support of lowest-educated voters in other Nordic countries, they have been primarily supported by the highest educated at least since the 1980s in Iceland. The education gradient has barely changed since the 1970s, given that the decline in the highest-educated vote to the Social Democratic Alliance during the 2000s has been largely captured by the Left-Green Movement since its debut in the mid-1990s. The Independence Party has also captured a fraction of the highest-educated vote from the Social Democratic Alliance since the 2000s, but to a much lower extent than the Left-Green Movement. Hence, the shift in the vote among the highest-educated from the predecessors of the Social Democratic Alliance towards the Left-Green Movement is clearly behind the stability in the Icelandic education gradient.

The Progressive Party, instead, has relied on a majority of lowest-educated voters among its electorate since the 1980s. The Pirate Party also attracted slightly more the primary educated in 2013, but such advantage faded in the 2017. Its success in the 2010s among different socio-economic groups represents another major differentiation with respect to the other Northern European countries, where dissatisfaction with the political establishment among lower-educated and lower-income earners has benefited to new far-right nationalist parties. The Pirate Party, instead, has been closer to the left-wing side of the political spectrum on social issues, promoting the enhancement of civil rights, direct democracy, and the right to privacy and to self-determination. Thus, the stability of the education gradient may be further explained by the influence that the Progressive Party, the formerly agrarian party, has retained in the rural and poorer areas of the country and by the absence of a strong far-right party capturing the vote of the lowest educated.<sup>36</sup>

To better understand the stability in the income cleavage in Iceland, it is also very

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<sup>36</sup>See appendix Figure EC25.

useful to decompose the vote by income group and party. The Independence Party presents a strong and persistent positive income gradient, while other parties do not have a clear gradient except from the Left-Green Movement.<sup>37</sup> The few low-income voters that used to vote for the Socialists and Social Democrats until the 1990s have shifted their vote towards the Left-Green Movement, who has disproportionately attracted the vote of young low-income voters. Overall, these results are in line with those of Eva Önnudóttir and Ólafur Harðarson, who argue that the Icelandic political cleavage system has remained intact despite major changes in party-voter linkages (Önnudóttir and Harðarson, 2018).

### 6.3 *The Weak Class Cleavage, the Persistence of the Rural-urban Cleavage, and Other Socio-Economic Cleavages*

The existence of an early multi-elite party system in Iceland might be due to the lack of strong class cleavage and to the absence of any party historically attracting both lower-educated and low-income voters. Icelandic electoral surveys do not include questions on perceived social class, so that we have used occupational class as a proxy. Figure 15 shows that in stark contrast with the rest of Nordic countries, class cleavages are not very pronounced in Iceland, as workers are not substantially more left-wing than higher managerial employees or self-employed individuals.

Apart from the education and income cleavages, Iceland presents other important socio-economic cleavages, in particular a strong and persistent rural-urban cleavage.<sup>38</sup> Voters and MPs in the peripheral areas in Iceland have in general been more favorable to economic support for agricultural areas and less willing to reduce the level of road and tunnel construction in rural areas (Valen et al., 2000). Moreover, MPs from the periphery have been more willing to protect communities and municipalities in peripheral areas which are struggling to hold on to their industries and inhabitants (Kristinsson, 1999). The party that has better represented the interests of rural areas has been the agrarian Progressive party, although its importance in the periphery has weakened over time. The importance of the Progressive party largely explains why the difference between the share of rural and urban left-wing voters

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<sup>37</sup>See appendix Figures EC2, EC6, EC10, EC14, and EC18.

<sup>38</sup>Note that the rural-urban cleavage can also be considered as a center-periphery cleavage, as we consider as urban area the capital area (about 63 percent of the population in 2016) and as rural area the rest of the country, since this variable was the only one available throughout the whole period of analysis.

has remained negative until today.<sup>39</sup> As in the rest of Nordic countries, a strong and rising sectoral cleavage opposing public-sector and private-sector employees also seems to have developed in recent decades.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, we also observe the emergence of a modern gender cleavage since the 1980s.<sup>41</sup> Women's tendency to be more left-wing has been mainly driven by the Social Democratic Alliance until the breakout of the financial crisis, after which declining confidence in the Social Democrats among women has been compensated by increasing support for the left-wing feminist and environmentalist Left-Green Movement. The gender gap mainly rose at the end of the 1980s due to the strong women support towards the Women's Alliance fighting for gender equality and for women representation in the political system, as the country was lagging behind the other Northern countries in this aspect.<sup>42</sup>

#### 6.4 *Icelandic Nationalism and the Role of the Progressive Party and the Pirate Party*

Contrary to the rest of Nordic countries, Iceland currently lacks a strong extreme-right wing party. However, this peculiarity should not be interpreted as a manifestation of a weaker nationalist feeling, but as a deep rooting of post-colonial nationalism within the main traditional parties. Since gaining full independence in 1944, Icelanders have faced a dilemma between emphasis on self-rule and thus isolationism in foreign relations on the one hand, and participation in international relations in order to support its claim for recognition as a European partner on the other (Bergmann, 2016). Hence, political parties have also split along these lines to attract either internationalists, represented by the Social Democratic Party and the Social Democratic Alliance, or isolationists represented by the Progressive Party, the Independence Party, the People's Party, and the Left-Green Movement. In the 2016 and 2017 elections, 22 percent of pro-EU voters supported the Social Democratic Alliance, compared to only 3 percent of voters opposed to EU integration. In contrast, 35 percent and 13 percent of anti-European voters voted for the Independence Party and the Progressive Party respectively, compared to 9 percent and 5 percent

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<sup>39</sup>See appendix Figure EB24.

<sup>40</sup>See appendix Figure EB20.

<sup>41</sup>See appendix Figure EB22.

<sup>42</sup>See appendix Figures EC23 and EC26.

of pro-EU voters ([Table 5](#)).

Since the onset of the financial crisis, a completely renewed leadership was initiated by the traditional Progressive Party. The old agrarian party took a hard stance against foreign creditors, international institutions and introduced an anti-Muslim rhetoric, which until then had been absent in the country, as there is no significant Muslim minority in Iceland. The Progressive Party thus moved closer to far-right parties in Western Europe. It was the first such party among Nordic countries to head a government, forming a coalition with the Independence Party in 2013. Looking at the characteristics of its electorate reveals that the Progressive Party's main supporters are rural, low-income, and low-educated voters, characteristics that are much in line with the profiles of other new far-right parties across Europe. These facts suggest that the new political line followed by the Progressive Party has partly filled the gap occupied in other European countries by the far right, and may explain why the two new far-right nationalist parties, the Iceland National Front founded in 2016 and the Freedom Party founded in 2017, have until now received very little support.

## 7 Conclusion

This paper explores the long-run evolution of the relationship between the structure of political cleavages and socio-economic inequalities in Northern Europe. The analysis has been conducted using pre- and post-electoral surveys for Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland over the 1956-2017 period.

The key result is that these countries have experienced a transition from a strong class-based system to a multi-elite party system, despite having long been described as exceptionally stable from a political perspective. Starting from the economic crisis of the 1970s, the adoption of the neo-liberal ideology and the swing towards market values have drifted the traditional center-left apart from the working class. This has represented an opportunity for the emerging populist right-wing parties to capture the growing dissatisfaction of this part of the electorate.

Nonetheless, this transformation has not happened at the same pace and with the same strength in all five countries. The differences largely depend on the specificities of their party systems and political histories. While the reversal of the education

cleavage has been faster in Norway and Denmark, in Sweden and Finland the traditional left has managed to retain a larger share of the class-based electorate, preventing the emergence of a clear multi-elite party system. The exception is Iceland, which did not develop a strong class-based party system and has had a very stable multi-elite cleavage structure since the late 1970s.

We also document that all five countries are characterized by a strong sectoral cleavage deeply linked to the rise of the modern gender cleavage, and by a persistent urban-rural cleavage, although with varying magnitudes. Overall, these results confirm existing evidence supporting the absence of a representative *Nordic voter*.

This analysis could be further enriched by updating the series by incorporating the most recent post-electoral surveys, especially the ones for Sweden and Finland. Whether their strong class-based systems will continue slowing down the transition towards a multi-elite party system or not or is an open question that new data sources will help to answer.

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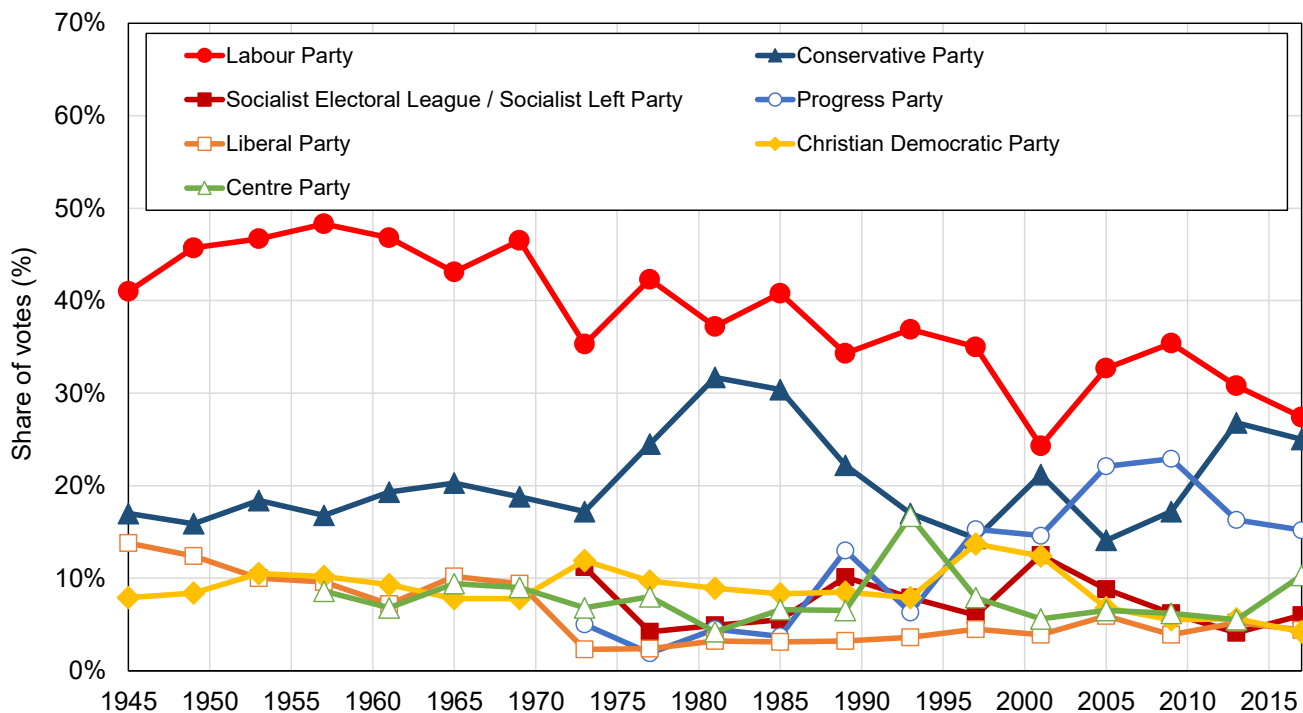
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# Figures and Tables

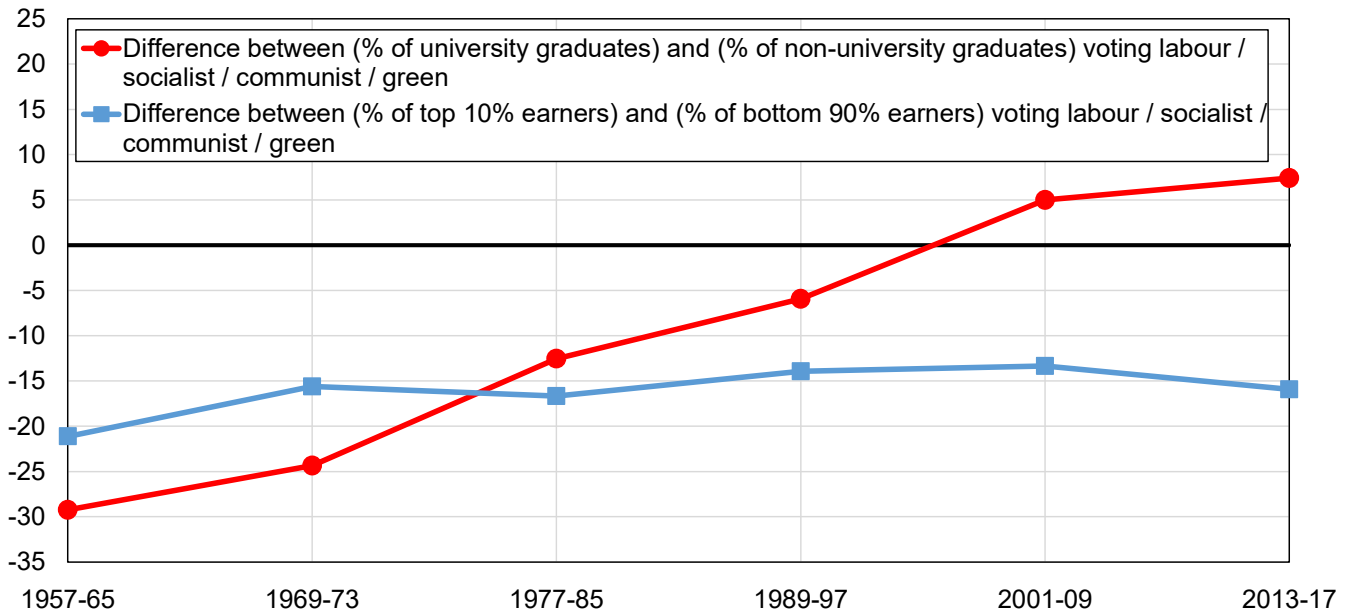
**Figure 1 - Election results in Norway, 1945-2017**



**Source:** authors' computations using official election results.

**Note:** the figure shows the share of votes received by selected political parties or groups of parties in parliamentary elections held in Norway between 1945 and 2017. The Labour Party received 27% of the votes in 2017.

**Figure 2 - The emergence of a multi-elite party system in Norway, 1957-2017**



**Source:** authors' computations using Norwegian post-electoral surveys.

**Note:** the figure shows the relative support of top-income and highest-educated voters for the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party, and other affiliated parties. In the 1950s-1960s, top-income and highest-educated voters were less likely to vote labour / socialist / communist than low-income and lower-educated voters. The labour / socialist / communist / green vote has gradually become associated with higher-educated voters, giving rise to a "multi-elite party system". Estimates control for income/education, gender, age, marital status, employment status, region, and union membership.

**Figure 3 - The decline of class voting in Norway, 1957-2009**



**Source:** authors' computations using Norwegian post-electoral surveys.

**Note:** the figure shows the share of votes received by the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party, and affiliated parties by subjective social class. In 1957-1965, 74% of voters identifying with the "working class" or the "lower class" voted labour / socialist and affiliated, compared to 52% in the 2000s. No data available in the 2010s.

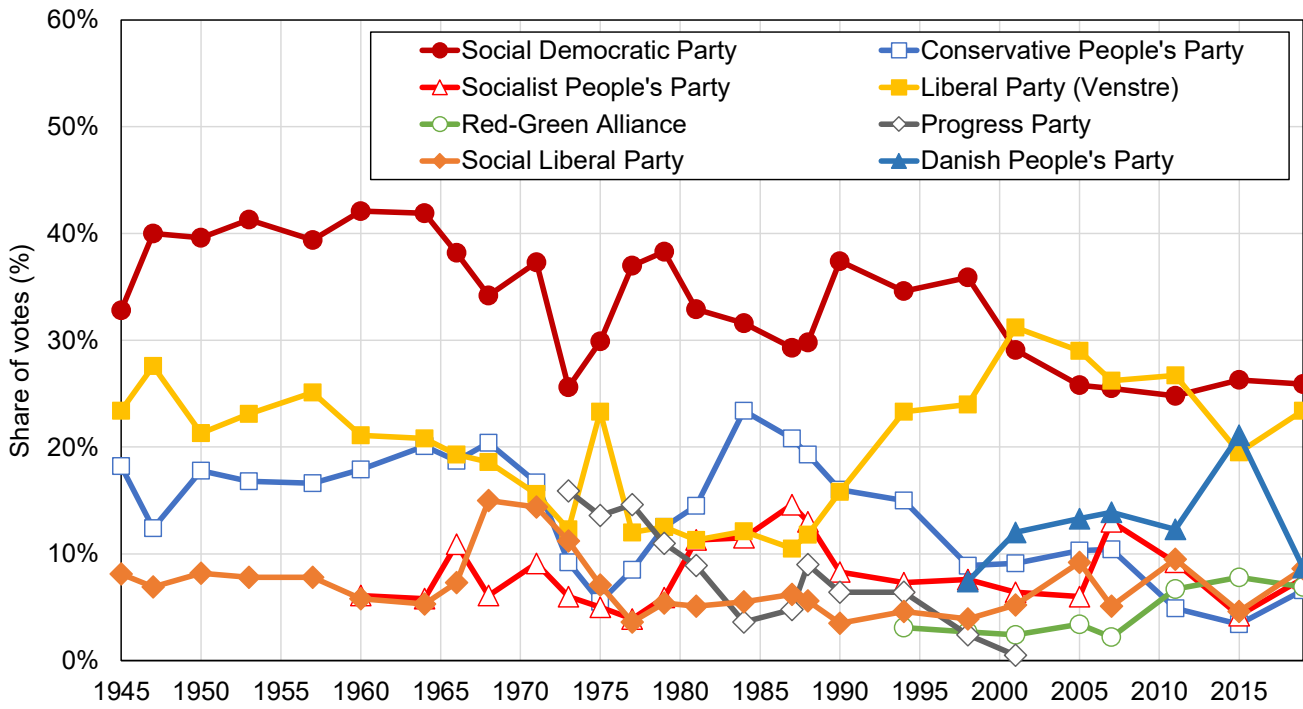
**Table 1 - The structure of political cleavages in Norway, 2013-2017**

	Share of votes received (%)							
	Socialist Left Party	Labour Party	Green Party	Liberal Party	Centre Party	Christian Democrats	Conservative Party	Progress Party
<b>Education</b>								
Primary	5%	30%	1%	3%	8%	5%	25%	20%
Secondary	4%	27%	3%	4%	9%	5%	29%	16%
Tertiary	8%	27%	4%	8%	5%	5%	30%	8%
<b>Income</b>								
Bottom 50%	6%	28%	4%	5%	8%	5%	25%	15%
Middle 40%	6%	30%	3%	5%	7%	3%	30%	11%
Top 10%	4%	20%	1%	8%	5%	1%	46%	11%
<b>Gender</b>								
Women	9%	30%	3%	6%	6%	6%	27%	10%
Men	4%	25%	3%	5%	8%	4%	31%	16%
<b>Age</b>								
20-39	9%	25%	5%	8%	7%	5%	25%	12%
40-59	5%	28%	2%	5%	7%	4%	33%	12%
60+	4%	30%	1%	4%	8%	8%	27%	15%
<b>Religion</b>								
No religion	16%	30%	7%	7%	3%	3%	18%	7%
Catholic	9%	9%	0%	0%	4%	10%	49%	14%
Protestant	4%	27%	2%	5%	8%	5%	31%	14%
Muslim	11%	59%	0%	4%	0%	4%	13%	5%
Other	6%	15%	9%	9%	2%	25%	17%	6%

**Source:** authors' computations using Norwegian post-electoral surveys.

**Note:** the table shows the average share of votes received by the main Norwegian parties by selected individual characteristics over the 2013-2017 period. The Labour Party was supported by 9% of Catholic voters, compared to 59% of Muslim voters, during this period.

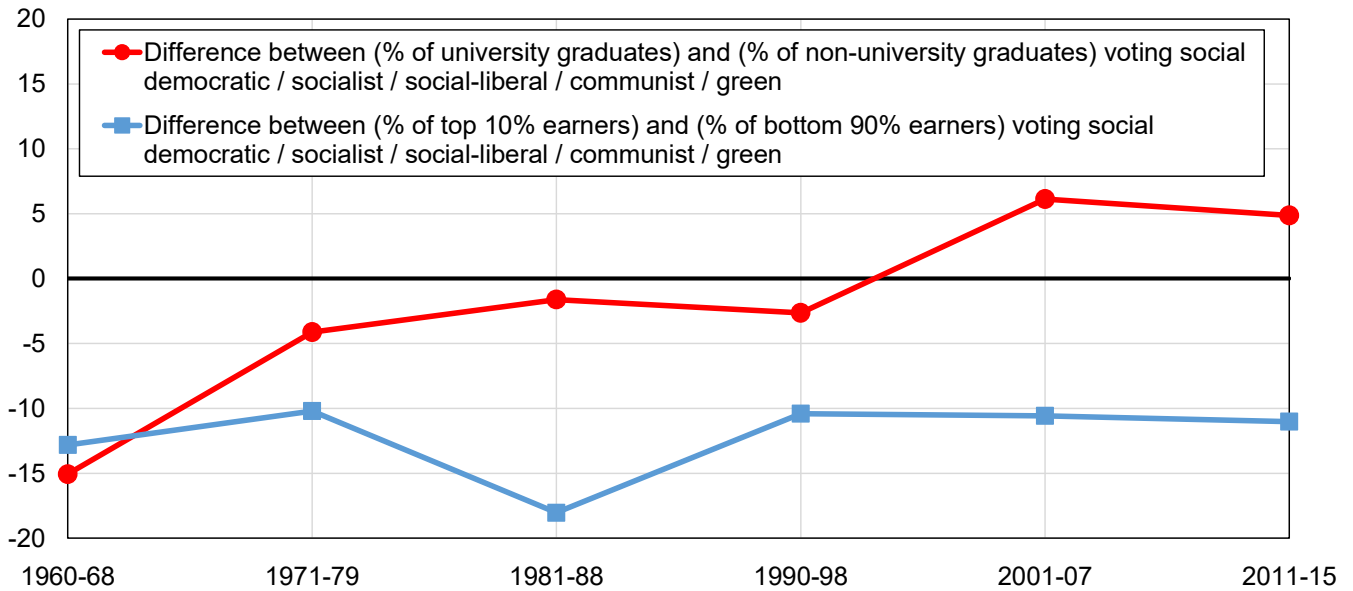
**Figure 4 - Election results in Denmark, 1945-2019**



**Source:** authors' computations using official election results.

**Note:** the figure shows the share of votes received by selected political parties or groups of parties in general elections held in Denmark between 1945 and 2019. The Social Democratic Party received 26% of votes in 2019.

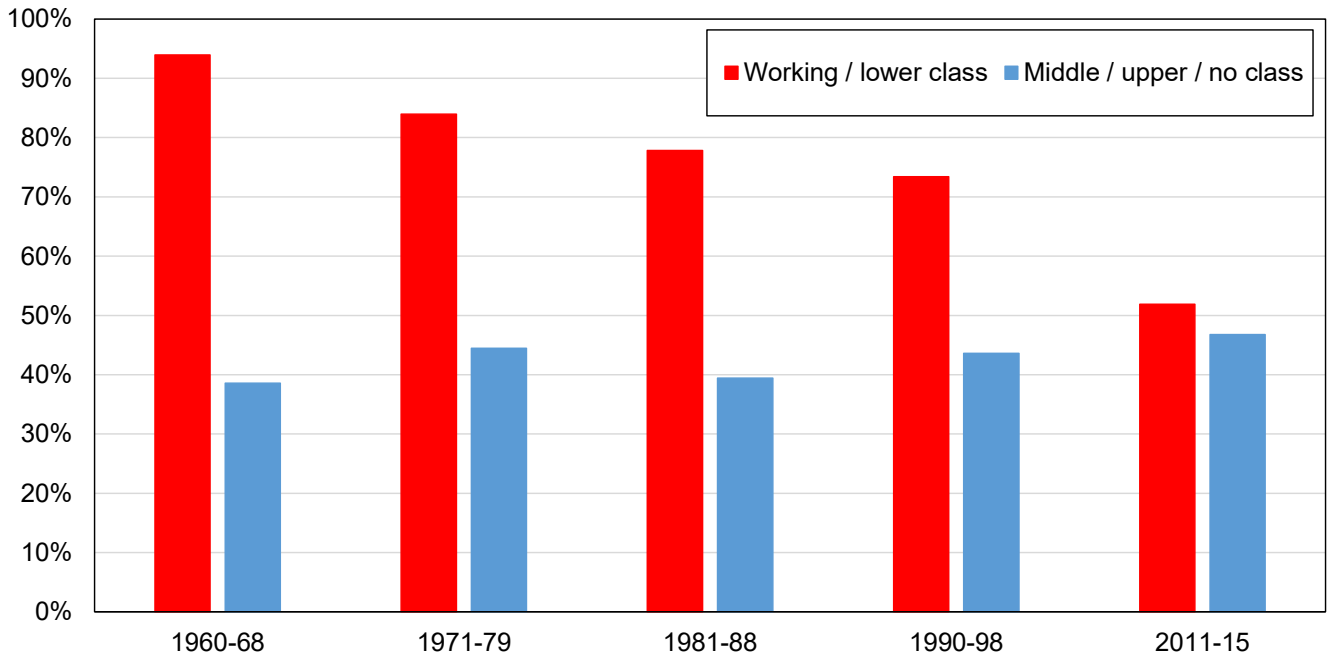
**Figure 5 - The emergence of a multi-elite party system in Denmark, 1960-2015**



**Source:** authors' computations using Danish post-electoral surveys.

**Note:** the figure shows the relative support of top-income and highest-educated voters for the Social Democratic Party, the Socialist People's Party, the Social Liberal Party, the Red-Green Alliance, and affiliated parties. In the 1960s, top-income and highest-educated voters were less likely to vote social democratic / socialist / social liberal / communist than low-income and lower-educated voters. The social democratic / socialist / social liberal / communist / green vote has gradually become associated with higher-educated voters, giving rise to a "multi-elite party system". Estimates control for income/education, gender, age, marital status, employment status, region, and union membership.

**Figure 6 - The decline of class voting in Denmark, 1960-2015**



**Source:** authors' computations using Danish post-electoral surveys.

**Note:** the figure shows the share of votes received by the Social Democratic Party, the Socialist People's Party, the Social Liberal Party, the Red-Green Alliance, and affiliated parties by subjective social class. In the 1960s, 94% of voters identifying with the "working class" or the "lower class" voted for these parties, compared to 52% in the 2010s. No data available in the 2000s.

**Table 2 - The structure of political cleavages in Denmark, 2011-2015**

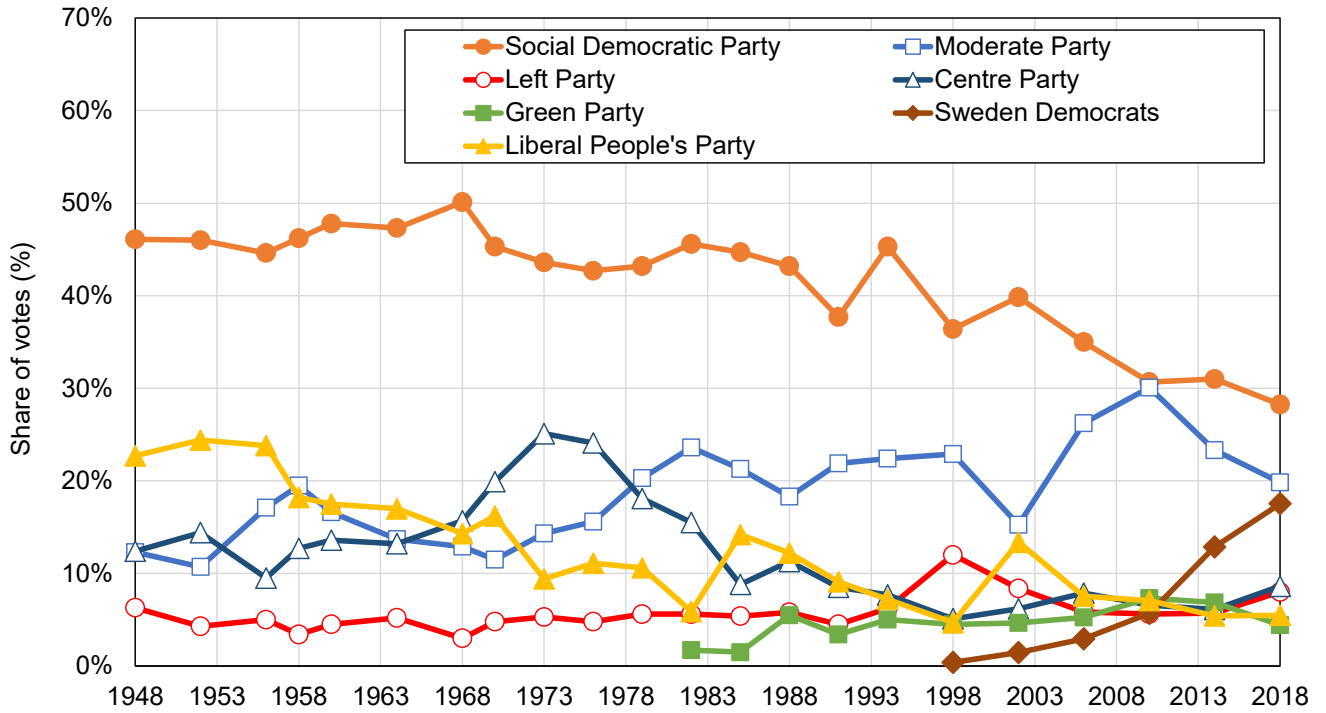
	Share of votes received (%)						
	Red-Green Alliance	Socialist People's Party	Social Democratic Party	Social Liberal Party	Venstre	Conservative People's Party	Danish People's Party
<b>Education</b>							
Primary	6%	4%	32%	3%	25%	2%	23%
Secondary	9%	7%	32%	8%	24%	4%	13%
Tertiary	9%	8%	32%	12%	22%	6%	7%
<b>Income</b>							
Bottom 50%	11%	7%	32%	7%	19%	3%	17%
Middle 40%	7%	6%	34%	8%	25%	5%	13%
Top 10%	3%	3%	29%	13%	30%	8%	6%
<b>Gender</b>							
Women	9%	8%	34%	8%	22%	4%	12%
Men	7%	5%	29%	7%	25%	4%	17%
<b>Age</b>							
20-39	11%	7%	28%	11%	21%	4%	12%
40-59	7%	7%	34%	8%	24%	5%	14%
60+	4%	5%	35%	3%	28%	4%	19%
<b>Sector</b>							
Private/Mixed	4%	5%	30%	10%	36%	5%	9%
Public	11%	14%	45%	16%	18%	4%	6%
<b>Location</b>							
Urban	10%	7%	34%	9%	21%	4%	12%
Rural	5%	6%	29%	6%	28%	4%	18%

**Source:** authors' computations using Danish post-electoral surveys.

**Note:** the table shows the average share of votes received by the main Danish parties by selected individual characteristics over the 2011-2015 period. 45% of public sector employees voted for the Social Democratic Party, compared to 30% of other active voters.



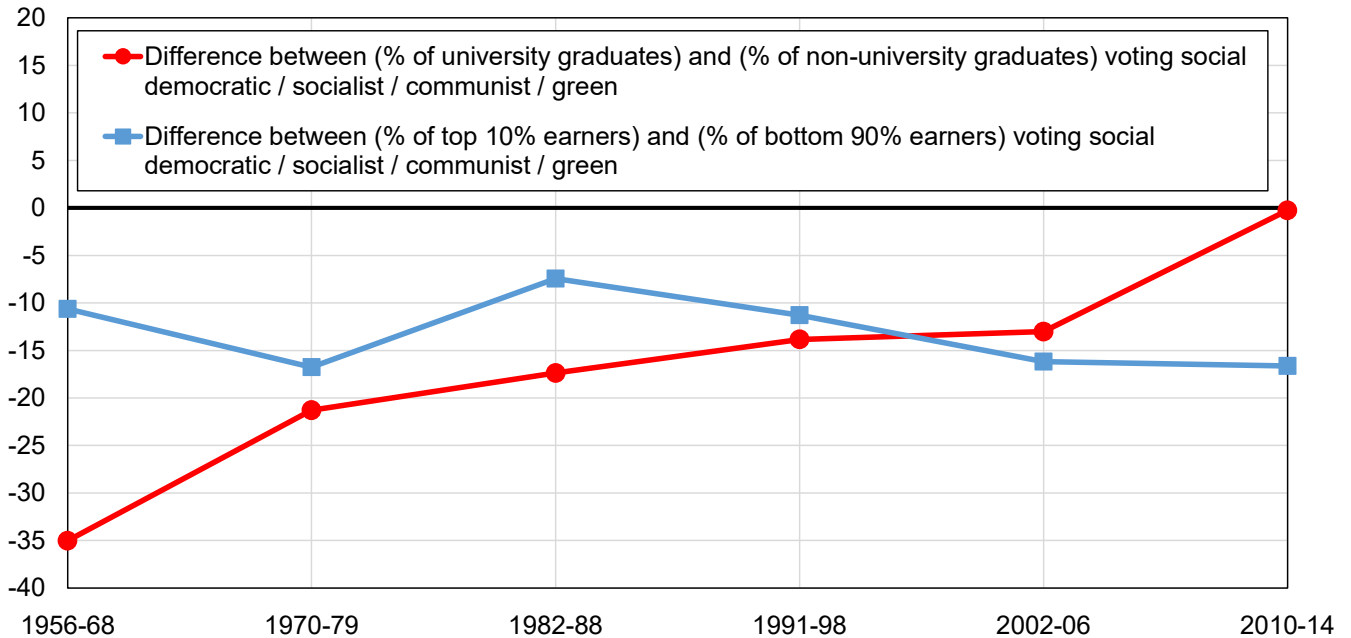
**Figure 7 - Election results in Sweden, 1948-2018**



**Source:** authors' computations using official election results.

**Note:** the figure shows the share of votes received by selected political parties or groups of parties in general elections held in Sweden between 1948 and 2018. The Social Democratic Party received 28% of votes in 2018.

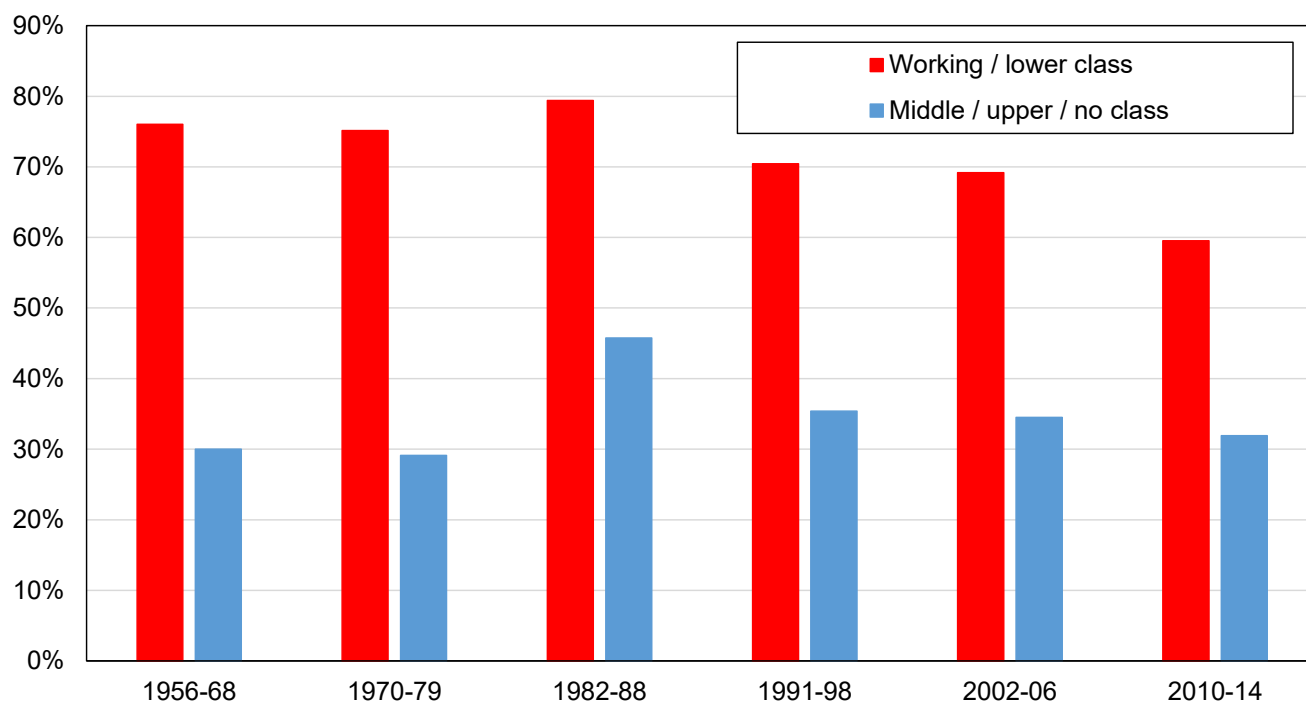
**Figure 8 - Towards a multi-elite party system in Sweden, 1956-2014**



**Source:** authors' computations using Swedish electoral surveys.

**Note:** the figure shows the relative support of top-income and highest-educated voters for the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party, the Green Party, and affiliated parties. In the 1950s-1960s, highest-educated and top-income voters were less likely to vote social democratic / socialist / communist than low-income and lower-educated voters. The social democratic / socialist / communist / green vote has become increasingly associated with higher-educated voters, leading Sweden to get closer to becoming a multi-elite party system. Estimates control for income/education, gender, age, marital status, employment status, union membership and region.

**Figure 9 - Class voting in Sweden, 1956-2014**



**Source:** authors' computations using Swedish electoral surveys.

**Note:** the figure shows the share of votes received by the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party, the Green Party, and affiliated parties by subjective social class. In the 1950s-1960s, 76% of voters identifying with the "working class" or "lower class" voted for these parties, compared to 60% in the 2010s.

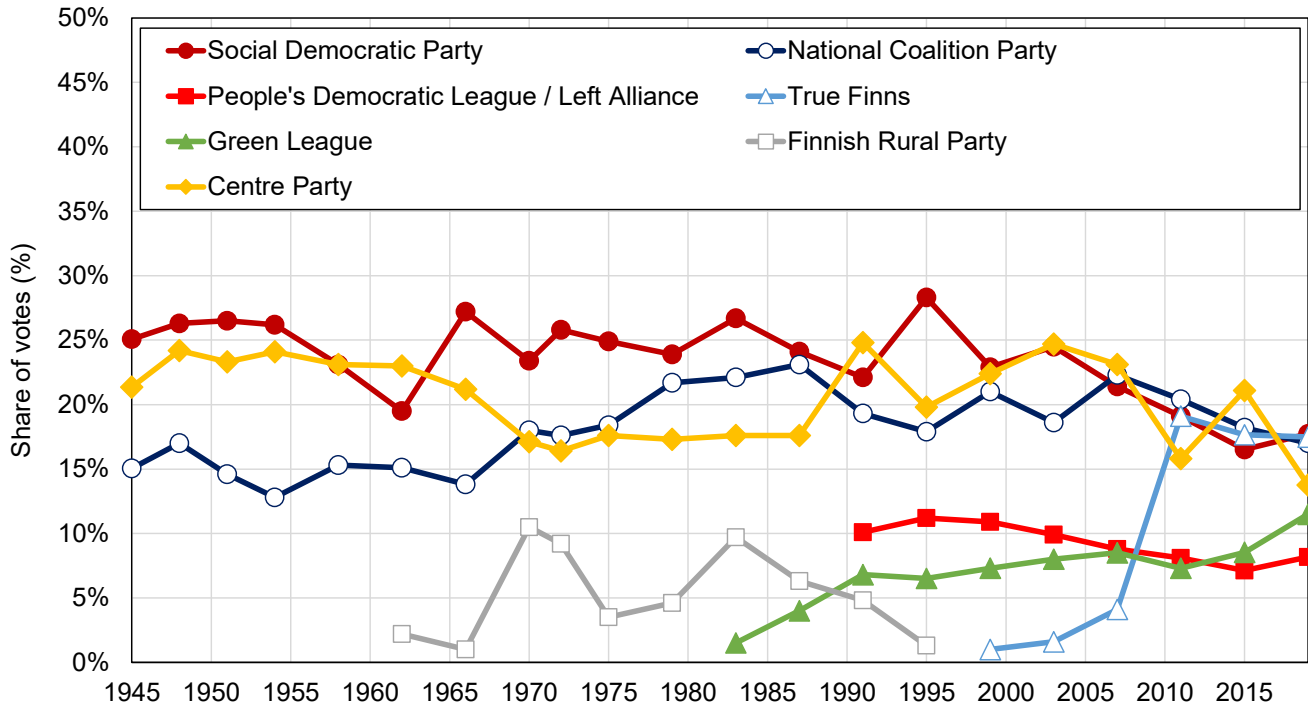
**Table 3 - The structure of political cleavages in Sweden, 2010-2014**

	Share of votes received (%)				
	Left Party	Green Party	Social Democrats	Alliance	Sweden Democrats
<b>Education</b>					
Primary	5%	4%	38%	37%	12%
Secondary	6%	7%	31%	46%	9%
Tertiary	8%	15%	18%	53%	2%
<b>Income</b>					
Bottom 50%	7%	9%	33%	37%	10%
Middle 40%	5%	8%	28%	51%	6%
Top 10%	5%	6%	16%	67%	4%
<b>Gender</b>					
Women	6%	11%	28%	47%	5%
Men	6%	6%	30%	46%	10%
<b>Age</b>					
20-39	7%	12%	25%	44%	6%
40-59	6%	8%	27%	50%	7%
60+	6%	6%	34%	44%	9%
<b>Sector</b>					
Private/Mixed	4%	9%	22%	54%	8%
Public	10%	12%	30%	42%	4%

**Source:** authors' computations using Swedish electoral surveys.

**Notes:** the table shows the average share of votes received by the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party, the Green Party, the Alliance Coalition (Moderate Party, Centre Party, Christian Democrats, and Liberals) and the Sweden Democrats over the 2010-2014 period. 38% of primary-educated voters voted for Social Democrats during this period, compared to 18% of university graduates.

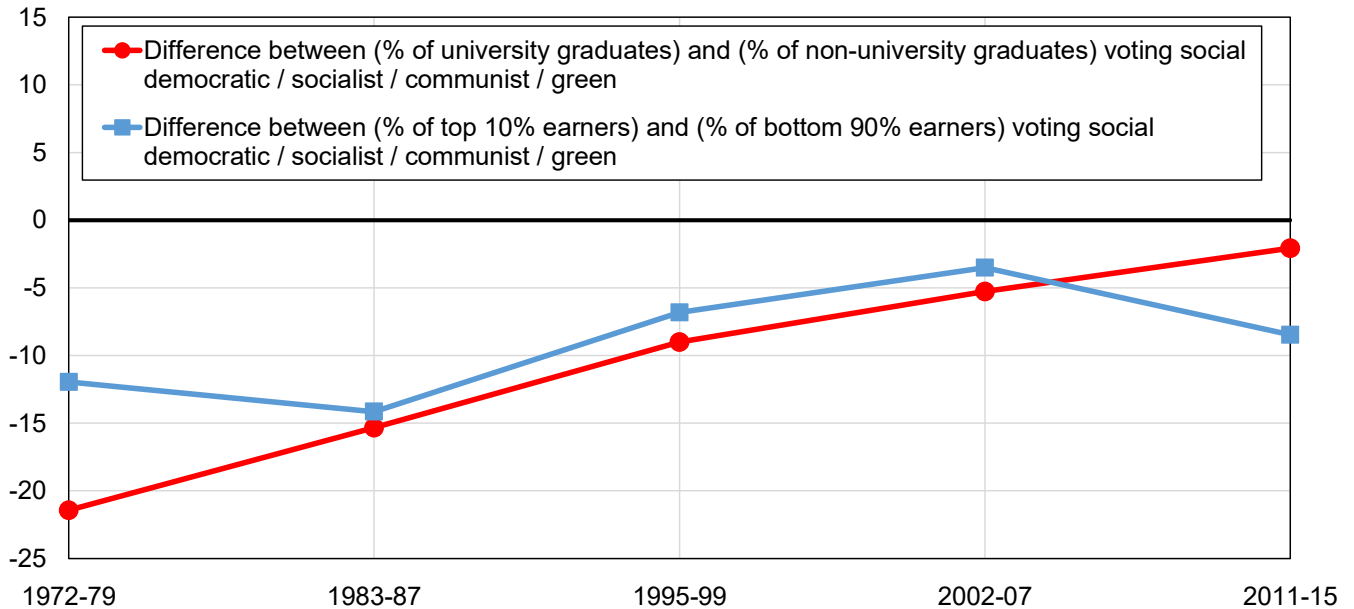
**Figure 10 - Election results in Finland, 1945-2019**



**Source:** authors' computations using official election results.

**Note:** the figure shows the share of votes received by selected political parties or groups of parties in parliamentary elections held in Finland between 1945 and 2019. The Social Democratic Party received 18% of votes in 2019.

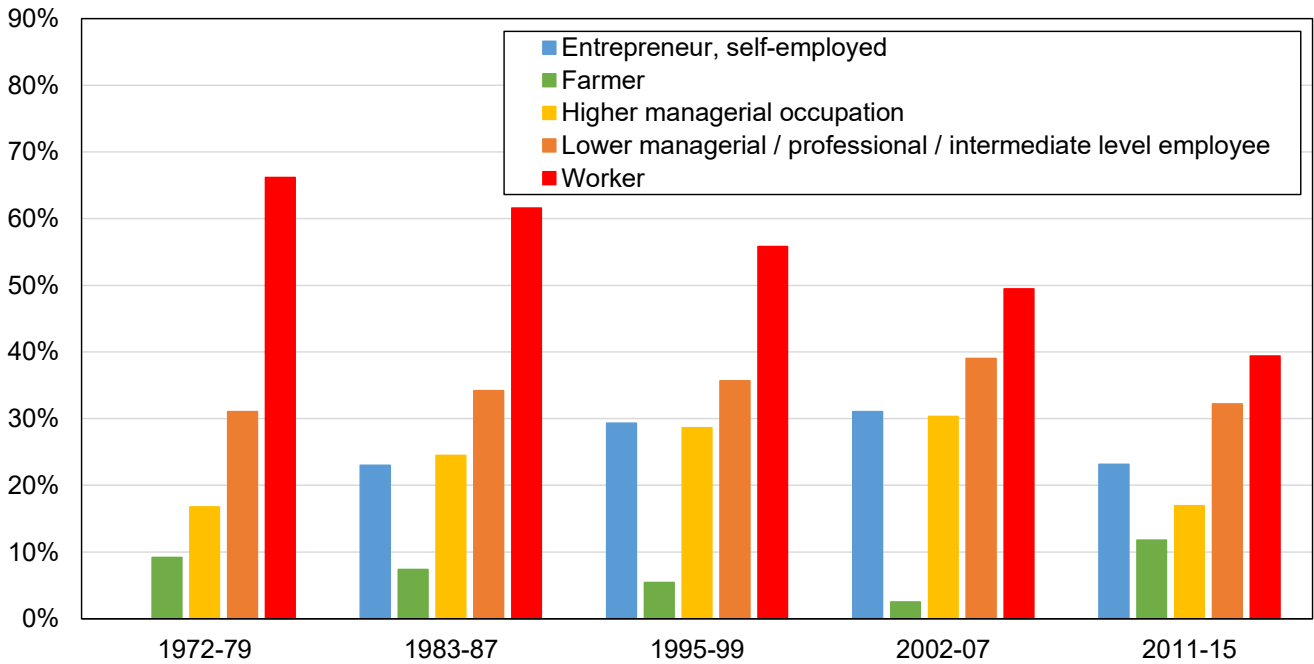
**Figure 11 - Towards a multi-elite party system in Finland, 1972-2015**



**Source:** authors' computations using Finnish electoral surveys.

**Note:** the figure shows the relative support of top-income and highest-educated voters for the Social Democratic Party, the Finnish People's Democratic League / Left Alliance, the Green League, and affiliated parties. In the 1970s, top-income and highest-educated voters were less likely to vote social democratic / socialist / communist than low-income and lower-educated voters. The social democratic / socialist / communist / green vote has increasingly become associated with higher-educated voters, leading Finland to get closer to becoming a "multi-elite party system". Estimates control for income/education, gender, age, employment status, union membership, and region.

**Figure 12 - Vote for Social Democrats / Communists / Socialists / Greens by occupation in Finland, 1972-2015**



**Source:** authors' computations using Finnish electoral surveys.

**Note:** the figure shows the share of votes received by the Social Democratic Party, the Finnish People's Democratic League / Left Alliance, the Green League, and affiliated parties by occupation. In the 1970s, 66% of workers voted social democratic / communist / socialist, compared to 9% of farmers. The "Entrepreneur and self-employed" category is not reported separately from other categories during the 1972-1979 period.

**Table 4 - The structure of political cleavages in Finland, 2011-2015**

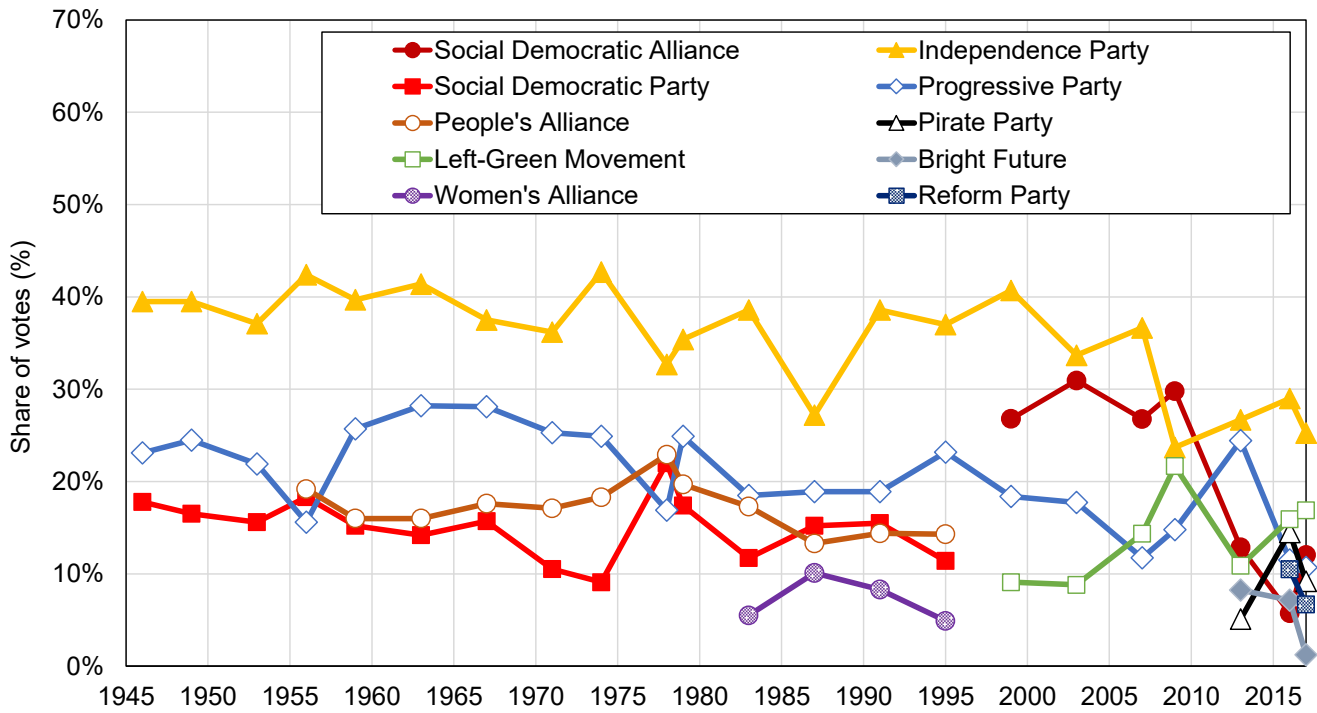
	Share of votes received (%)					
	Left Alliance	Green League	Social Democrats	Centre Party	National Coalition Party	True Finns
<b>Education</b>						
Primary	5%	3%	28%	19%	10%	24%
Secondary	8%	5%	21%	20%	14%	22%
Tertiary	8%	13%	10%	17%	31%	10%
<b>Income</b>						
Bottom 50%	9%	8%	20%	21%	12%	20%
Middle 40%	7%	8%	17%	17%	23%	18%
Top 10%	6%	9%	11%	16%	32%	15%
<b>Age</b>						
20-39	15%	17%	12%	17%	4%	9%
40-59	7%	15%	17%	20%	4%	8%
60+	3%	23%	23%	20%	6%	6%
<b>Gender</b>						
Women	9%	10%	17%	18%	18%	16%
Men	7%	6%	18%	19%	20%	21%
<b>Location</b>						
Urban	8%	9%	18%	15%	22%	17%
Rural	6%	4%	16%	28%	13%	22%

**Source:** authors' computations using Finnish electoral surveys.

**Notes:** the table shows the average share of votes received by the main Finnish parties by selected individual characteristics over the 2011-2015 period. 28% of primary-educated voters voted for Social Democrats, compared to 10% of university graduates.



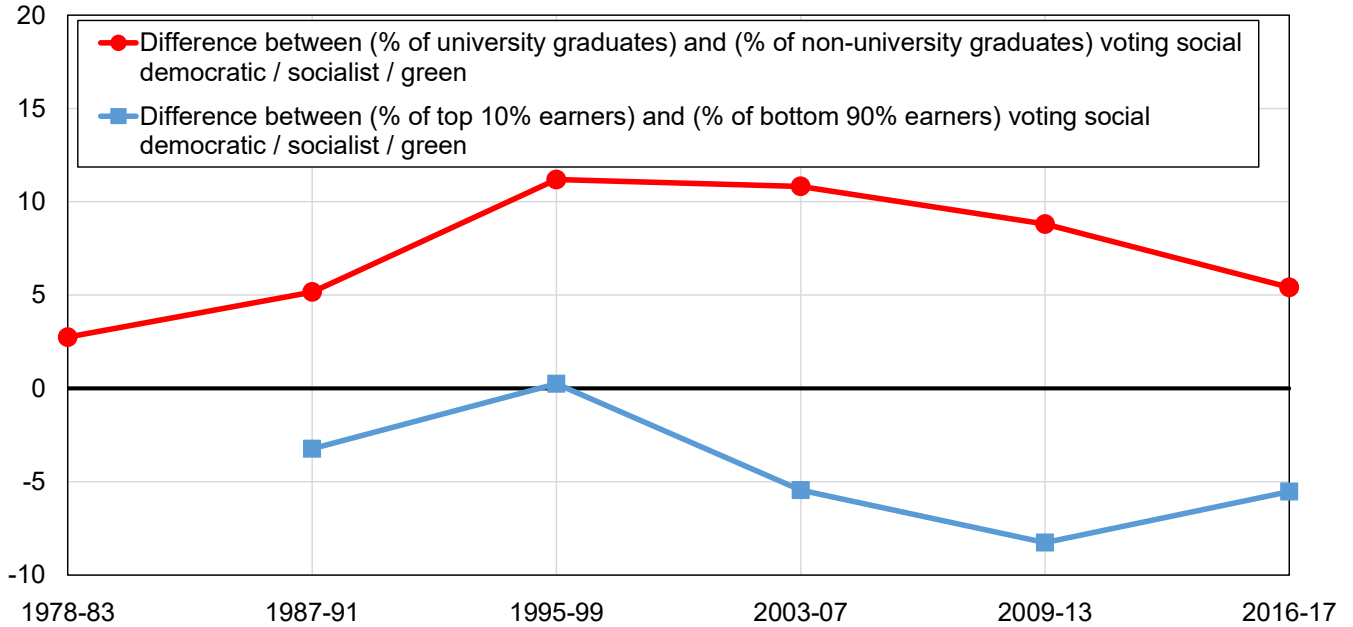
**Figure 13 - Election results in Iceland, 1946-2017**



**Source** : authors' computations using official election results.

**Note** : the figure shows the share of votes received by selected political parties or groups of parties in parliamentary elections held in Iceland between 1946 and 2017. The Independence Party received 25% of votes in 2017.

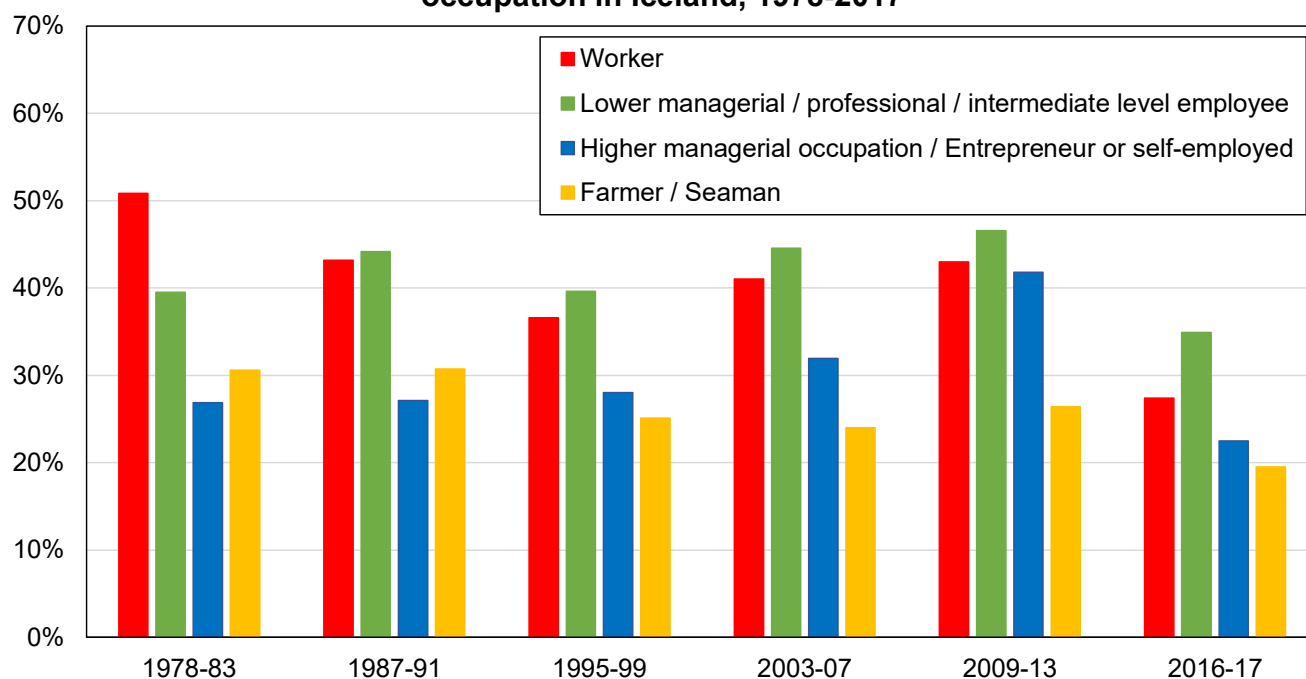
**Figure 14 - The persistence of a multi-elite party system in Iceland, 1978-2017**



**Source:** authors' computations using Icelandic post-electoral surveys.

**Note:** the figure shows the relative support of top-income and highest-educated voters for the Social Democratic Alliance, the Left-Green movement, and affiliated parties. Since the 1970s-1980s, the social democratic / socialist / green vote has always been associated with higher-educated voters, while top-income voters have remained more likely to vote for right-wing parties. Iceland has thus been characterized by a "multi-elite party system". Estimates control for income/education, gender, age, employment status, marital status, union membership, and region. The 1983 survey does not contain information on income.

**Figure 15 - Vote for Social Democrats / Socialists / Greens by occupation in Iceland, 1978-2017**



**Source:** authors' computations using Icelandic post-electoral surveys.

**Note:** the figure shows the share of votes received by the Social Democratic Alliance, the Left-Green movement, and affiliated parties by occupation. In the 1970s, 51% of workers voted social democratic / socialist / green, compared to 27% of voters employed in higher managerial occupations or who were entrepreneurs or self-employed.

**Table 5 - The structure of political cleavages in Iceland, 2016-2017**

	Share of votes received (%)						
	Left-Green Movement	Social Democratic Alliance	Pirate Party	Bright Future	Reform Party	Progressive Party	Independence Party
<b>Education</b>							
Primary	15%	6%	8%	3%	5%	16%	27%
Secondary	16%	9%	9%	3%	7%	12%	30%
Tertiary	20%	12%	8%	6%	13%	7%	24%
<b>Income</b>							
Bottom 50%	21%	9%	10%	3%	6%	13%	23%
Middle 40%	15%	10%	8%	5%	11%	12%	28%
Top 10%	12%	12%	7%	4%	17%	11%	32%
<b>Gender</b>							
Women	23%	10%	6%	4%	8%	11%	24%
Men	12%	9%	10%	3%	10%	12%	30%
<b>Location</b>							
Urban	18%	9%	9%	5%	12%	7%	27%
Rural	16%	9%	7%	2%	4%	18%	28%
<b>Sector</b>							
Private/Mixed	14%	7%	9%	4%	12%	12%	30%
Public	26%	13%	7%	5%	8%	11%	19%
<b>EU Membership</b>							
Against	13%	3%	6%	2%	5%	16%	40%
Pro	18%	22%	16%	8%	17%	6%	7%

**Source:** authors' computations using Icelandic post-electoral surveys.

**Notes:** the table shows the average share of votes received by the main Icelandic parties by selected individual characteristics over the 2016-2017 period. 22% of voters favorable to Iceland joining the European Union voted for the Social Democratic Alliance during this period, compared to 3% of voters opposed to Iceland joining the EU.

## Methodological Note

This section aims to provide some insights on the research design that lies behind the presented results. From the choice of data sources to the implementation of the empirical strategy, we have strictly followed [Piketty \(2018\)](#).

For all the five countries, we have relied on pre- and post-electoral surveys, which are particularly suitable to explore the evolution of the mechanisms behind electoral behavior. Indeed, they allow to directly link voters' political preferences with their socio-economic characteristics, such as education, income, wealth, religious affiliation, social and occupation class. They also provide a means to analyse voters' attitudes towards country-specific events, from the Icelandic financial crisis, to the referendum for the European Communities membership, to the dissatisfaction with the welfare or immigration policies.

One possible drawback when dealing with electoral survey data is the misreporting of the actual vote for a certain party. In this case, the shares of votes obtained from the surveys do not match with the official election results, providing a distorted picture of the evolution of voting behavior. In order to deal with this issue, the sample weights are re-scaled following the formula below:

$$\hat{w} = w \frac{v}{v_{svy}}$$

where  $w$  is the original sample weight,  $v$  the official vote share registered for a given political party, and  $v_{svy}$  the proportion of interviewees declaring to vote for that specific party.

The majority of the presented results derive from the estimation of the following Linear Probability Model:

$$v_{it} = \alpha + \beta_t x_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

where the dependent variable  $v_{it}$  takes the value 1 if the individual has voted for

a given party or party group (i.e. left, right, center) and 0 otherwise. In the case in which  $v_{it}$  takes 1 if the individual votes left,  $\hat{\beta}$  simply captures the differences (expressed in percentage points) in left-vote among voters belonging to different socio-economic categories represented by several binary variables  $x_{it}$ .

Among the rich set of variables included in the analysis, income deserves particular attention. Since the variable is usually available already in brackets, the deciles reported in analysis are an approximation obtained through the expansion of the datasets and a reweighing procedure of the observations which relies on the assumption that voting patterns are constant within brackets (Piketty, 2018; Banerjee et al., 2019). To provide an example, we apply this methodology to the income variable in the Danish post-electoral survey in the 1970's. The lower bracket covers the 6% of the population, whereas the second lowest bracket covers individuals between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> percentile. Thus, the bottom 10% income earners is approximated by taking the weighted average between the share of individuals belonging to the first bracket voting for a given party and the share of individuals voting for the same party within the second bracket. The first category belongs to the bottom 10% and thus has a weight of 1, the second, instead, has a weight equal to  $\frac{0.06}{0.15-0.06} = 0.55$ .