

# Brahmin Left versus Merchant Right? Education, class, multiparty competition, and redistribution in Western Europe

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## Abstract

In this article, we revisit the main claims of Part Four of Thomas Piketty's *Capital and Ideology* and especially the changing support coalitions for parties of the left. Piketty's core argument in this part of the book is that the left now represents the highly educated and that, as a result, the redistributive preferences of the working class do not find representation in today's party systems. We address these claims building on existing political science research that has investigated the transformation of politics in advanced capitalist societies. We argue, first, that the educational divide cannot be adequately analyzed by looking at a left and a right bloc, but crucially needs to pay attention to the rise of green/left-libertarian and radical right parties. Second, we contend that the new middle classes that support parties of the left are largely in favor of economic redistribution. Analyzing data from the European Social Survey in 11 West European countries from 2002 to 2018, we show that the effect of education on voting left or right is indeed largely driven by green/left-libertarian and radical right parties, while there is little empirical evidence that social democratic parties represent the educational elite. We also find that redistributive preferences remain at the heart of voting behavior and that, especially for educated voters, these preferences determine whether someone votes for a party of the left rather than the right.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Part four of Thomas Piketty's *Capital and Ideology* (CaI) (Piketty, 2020), on "Rethinking the Dimensions of Political Conflict," looks at the transformation of electoral politics in advanced democracies since the 1960s (focusing mainly on France, the United Kingdom, and the United States). The main claim in this part of the book is that the dominant class-based structure of political contestation has radically transformed. In the middle of the 20th century, the working classes overwhelmingly supported parties on the left: the Democrats in the United States, the Labour Party in the United Kingdom, the Socialists and Communists in France, and socialist, labor, social democratic, or communist parties in other advanced industrial societies. By the early 21st century, in contrast, these leftwing parties now mainly represent higher educated groups, and in some places even voters with higher incomes and greater wealth. The main driving force for this transformation, Piketty contends, has been the transformation of political conflict, from a class-based conflict about redistribution, to an education-based conflict about borders (which others might call "identity"). The result, as Piketty provocatively attests, is that modern electoral politics in many democracies is now a battle between a "Brahmin Left" and a "Merchant Right," with neither political force representing nor appealing to the economic interests of lower income group; and, as a corollary, mainstream left parties are no longer committed to the redistribution of wealth.

As political scientists of electoral politics we recognize many aspects of Piketty's argument in this part of the book. Indeed, since the 1960s, political scientists have attempted to identify and explain these electoral transformations, and Piketty acknowledges his connection to the work of Kitschelt (1994) and others. However, our understanding of the established scholarship in political science on parties and elections leads us to challenge several elements of Piketty's argument. First, by focussing on "the Left" versus "the Right" as two coherent political blocs, Piketty misses another dimension of the transformation of politics in most democracies across the world: the growing fragmentation of party systems. This is directly relevant to Piketty's argument about the new education divide, as higher educated voters tend to support new green/left-libertarian parties while lower educated voters tend to support new populist/radical right parties. As a result, education may divide the left and right as single blocs, but is not the main dividing line between the mainstream left and mainstream right. Second, and related to this, the changing relationship between education and left-right voting does not necessarily mean that the groups who vote for the left are not in favor of redistribution of income or wealth, which Piketty implies in his argument about a "divorce" between the working class and the left. Indeed, in purely numerical terms, with the decline of manufacturing since the 1970s, the traditional working class now makes up only a small proportion of the electorate (15%–20%) in most democracies. Hence, to remain competitive, center-left parties have reached out to other classes and groups, such as the new middle classes (in the public sector as well as sociocultural professionals), the new precariat, younger voters, and also to women and ethnic minorities. Most of the people in these groups support the redistribution of wealth and power in society. So, the fact that the center-left no longer mainly represents the traditional working class, does not mean that there is not broad support in society for income or wealth redistribution, or that these groups could not potentially be mobilized by a new "redistributive political coalition."

Our different understanding of the recent history of electoral behavior, and particularly the changing structure of electoral support for parties on the left, leads to a different set of normative inferences. Piketty infers from his results that left-wing parties have abandoned support for redistribution and reducing economic inequality because they no longer represent working class and lower educated voters. In contrast, our results suggest that mainstream left parties still mainly secure the support of these voters, while other parties on the left—especially green/left-liberal parties—appeal to the growing group of highly educated, and particularly younger, voters. Furthermore, the deep underlying structural changes that most Western societies have experienced over the past 40 years—the decline of manufacturing, the mass expansion of higher education, the emancipation of women and sexual minorities, mass global migration, climate change, and so on—means that the "second dimension" of modern politics is not going to disappear any time soon. As a result, any broad center-left coalition, that could unite the

(old) mainstream left and the (new) green/left-libertarian parties, needs to combine commitments to economic redistribution as well as commitments to environmental protection, gender and race equity, and individual social and personal emancipation.

To illustrate these points we organize the paper as follows. In the next section we summarize some of the key evidence and explanations in recent political science research on electoral politics that we feel are relevant for Piketty's arguments. We then illustrate some of the main points by undertaking an empirical analysis of voting patterns in 11 Western European countries, using data from the European Social Surveys from 2002 to 2018. We look at three types of relationships in the data: (1) between educational level and party support, (2) between social class and party support, and (3) between education/class/party support and attitudes toward redistribution. The final section contains a short conclusion.

## 2 | THE POLITICAL SCIENCE OF ELECTORAL POLITICS SINCE THE 1960S

The changing support coalitions of parties of the left lie at the core of Piketty's argument. His interpretation of electoral politics in advanced democracies is consistent with some key elements of how political scientists understand electoral behavior and the transformation of party systems since the 1960s. For example, like Piketty, a standard understanding in political science is that there has been a transformation of the political "space" of electoral politics from a one-dimensional space, based on an economic left-right dimension, to a two-dimensional space, where a sociocultural libertarian-authoritarian dimension now exists orthogonally to an economic socialist-capitalist dimension (Kitschelt, 1994). Also, within this new two-dimensional space, many possible new political positions can exist in particular national and electoral contexts: such as the four positions Piketty (pp. 788–794) identifies in the 2017 French Presidential election (egalitarian-internationalist, inegalitarian-internationalist, inegalitarian-nativist, and egalitarian-nativist), or the three "poles" that Oesch and Rennwald (2018a) describe (liberal-left, liberal-right, and traditionalist radical-right). Piketty also sees contemporary party competition as a battle between two groups of elites. While Piketty's labels for these elites—"Brahmin Left" and "Merchant Right"—are new and powerful descriptions, the conception of democracy as a battle between rival groups of elites has a long history in political science, from Michels (1911), to Schumpeter (1950), Downs (1957), Schattschneider (1960), Katz and Mair (1995), and many others in between and since.

That said, we see several key differences between Piketty's story and a "standard" political science understanding of the transformation of electoral politics over the past few decades. This understanding starts by recognizing the profound socioeconomic transformations of post-industrial societies that have affected the socio-structural foundations of party competition since at least the 1970s. Against the backdrop of these transformations, the political science literature makes three core arguments that run counter to some of Piketty's assumptions and conclusions. First, party competition in post-industrial societies should not be understood as between left and right, as coherent blocs, but necessarily needs to additionally take into account the different developments of the new-left (green and left-libertarian parties) and new-right (populist radical right parties) (e.g., Kriesi et al., 2008). Second, a simple hierarchical understanding of class groups (bottom vs. elites) does not explain the underlying shifts of parties' socioeconomic support bases. Horizontal differentiation is key here, such as new versus old middle class, public versus private sector, and growing fragmentation of experiences and interests among the working class (Oesch, 2006). Third, while educated middle class voters may now constitute the main support group for parties of the left, it is misleading to see the redistributive and social policy preferences of this group as simply favoring less redistribution (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2019; Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015). In contrast, the new middle class is a strong supporter of the welfare state (Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015).

If we want to understand the changing support coalitions of political parties in advanced capitalist societies, we need to take into account how socioeconomic transformations and political legacies shape the demand side of

political competition. Piketty's focus on ideology should be applauded because it avoids a functionalist or socio-structural determinism in explaining political outcomes. However, analyzing parties' (and indeed voters') policy preferences purely through a lens of ideology, as based on class interest, runs the risk of behavioral reductionism. In line with Beramendi et al. (2015), we take a perspective of constrained partisanship that does not fully endogenize political preferences (or ideology) but regards them as at least partially determined by social and economic developments beyond political choice. This is indeed a core assumption of a long tradition of political sociology literature, such as Lipset (1960) and Lipset and Rokkan (1967).

Advanced capitalist societies have undergone tremendous socioeconomic changes, such as increases in automation and digitization, more global integration of capital and labor, demographic changes (e.g., female emancipation), expansion of education, and an overall transformation to what has been labeled the knowledge economy (Beramendi et al., 2015). These transformations have led to profound changes in the socio-structural make-up of electorates in post-industrial societies. The old working class, largely employed in the production sector, has dramatically decreased in size, while new middle class groups (such as sociocultural professionals) have in turn increased (Oesch, 2006). Combined with a politicization of issues beyond economic redistribution concerned with the basic principles of how societies are organized (e.g., gender equality, LGBTI rights, and immigration), these changes have led to a transformation of the demand side of the political space, that is what people want from politics (Kitschelt, 1994). Mainstream parties have often struggled to integrate these new preferences and movements and we have thus seen the rise of new political forces, most notably green/left-libertarian and radical right parties.

If we want to evaluate the ideological positions of political parties as well as the socio-structural make-up of their support coalition, it is crucial to take these transformed context conditions into account. If we observe that the left or right has changed in this regard, we need to take into account that both of these blocs now include fundamentally different party families,—greens on the left and radical right on the right—whose support bases do not simply consist of former, or “traditional,” mainstream left and right voters, but who have mobilized other parts of the electorate and have incorporated new generations of voters, as well as citizens who did not participate in elections.

Within these changed socioeconomic structures, we also need to re-evaluate what redistributive politics means and which groups support which policies. Welfare politics faces different challenges and conflicts today, such as over labor market insiders and outsiders (Rueda, 2005), new social risks (Bonoli, 2005; Häusermann, 2010), or over social investment versus consumption (Beramendi et al., 2015). If we want to understand political parties' differing stances on social policy and indeed their electorates' preferences for redistribution, we need to incorporate these structural conditions and should not reduce our evaluation to questions of ideology (and particularly ideology as it relates to income or wealth redistribution). Most importantly, we should not infer the social policy preferences of changing electorates today based on assumptions about class-based preferences in the industrial age.

In sum, the political science perspective challenges Piketty's line of argumentation in the following ways:

1. Political competition and representation in advanced capitalist societies cannot be reduced to a simple notion of a left bloc versus a right bloc. This means that in order to understand the transformations of support coalitions it is not enough to focus on the mainstream left and right. This also provides a challenge to Piketty's methodology that largely relies on explaining vote choice based on a dichotomous measure of left and right support. By not identifying pluralism within these two blocs, potential between-bloc effects identified by Piketty (e.g., relating to education) might in fact be driven by 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. More specifically, Piketty strongly relates the growing support for the left (relative to the right) among higher educated groups to changes in socialist and social democratic parties, whereas we expect that this empirical regularity is mainly driven by higher educated groups increasingly supporting green/left-libertarian

parties and lower educated groups increasingly supporting radical right parties, rather than any major changes in the educational basis of support for the mainstream center-left relative to the mainstream center-right.

2. A large amount of research on social policy preferences in post-industrial societies documents that we cannot infer preferences for redistribution from class positions in a way that equates lower classes with demand for more redistribution and middle classes with demand for less redistribution. This is especially true for the new middle classes, such as sociocultural professionals, as well as public sector employees, who very much favor redistribution. As a consequence, we cannot draw the conclusion that higher support from educated middle class voters means that parties of the left are no longer a key part of an electoral and political coalition that favors redistribution and tries to reduce economic and other inequalities in society.

In our empirical analysis we investigate these two arguments. We first analyze how education and class affect party support in the new multiparty contexts of advanced capitalist societies. We show that taking into account growing pluralism within the left and right gives a profoundly different picture of the socio-structural base of mainstream left support than the key claims in *Capital and Ideology*. In addition, we demonstrate that attitudes toward redistribution remain at the heart of the support coalition of the left.

### 3 | DATA AND METHOD

We empirically demonstrate these changing patterns of political behavior in post-industrial societies by looking at the nine waves of the European Social Survey (ESS) in 11 West European countries, from 2002 to 2018. The countries in the analysis are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. So, these cases include two of the three cases Piketty focusses on (France and the United Kingdom), as well as most of the other countries in Western Europe that have had a long history of democracy and have traditionally had large socialist, social democratic, or labor parties.

The ESS has been widely used to understand voting behavior in Europe (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2019; Ivarsaten, 2007; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018b). Based on the question of which party a respondent voted for in the last election, we first create a choice variable of Left versus Right vote similar to the one used in *Capital and Ideology*. We code as parties of the left traditional social democratic and socialist parties, such as the French PS and German SPD, but also new left and green parties. On the right, we have conservative and Christian democratic parties, such as the British Conservatives and Dutch CDA, some right-wing liberal parties, such as the Danish Venstre and Dutch VVD, and populist radical right parties, such as the French FN and Dutch PVV. However, for an additional set of analyses we use a dependent variable that categorizes vote choice into four party family groups: mainstream left, mainstream right, radical right, and green/left-libertarian. In this fourth category, we include green parties, such as the German, French, Swedish, Dutch, and Belgian greens, as well as liberal-left parties, such as the Dutch D'66 or the Danish Radikale Venstre. These latter parties usually broke from more traditional liberal parties, with greater commitments to gender and race equity, environmental protection, and social solidarity, and hence are politically close to green parties. We exclude traditional liberal parties, such as the German FDP or British Liberal Democrats, as well as new liberal/centrist parties, such as Macron's *La République En Marche!*, as these parties tend to combine liberal social policies with classical liberal economic policies. A full list of the parties we include in each of these categories is contained in the online Appendix.

To measure education, we use the ISCED categorization with seven categories: less than lower secondary, lower secondary, lower tier upper secondary, upper tier upper secondary, advanced vocational, lower tertiary, and higher tertiary. We are also interested in people's preferences for redistribution and use two different variables to capture these preferences. The first of these asks people if large differences in income are acceptable. The second asks if governments should reduce differences in income. In additional analyses we also use a class-scheme

explicitly developed for post-industrial societies based on occupational groups (Oesch, 2006) as well as a coding of public versus private sector employees that follows Benedetto et al. (2020).

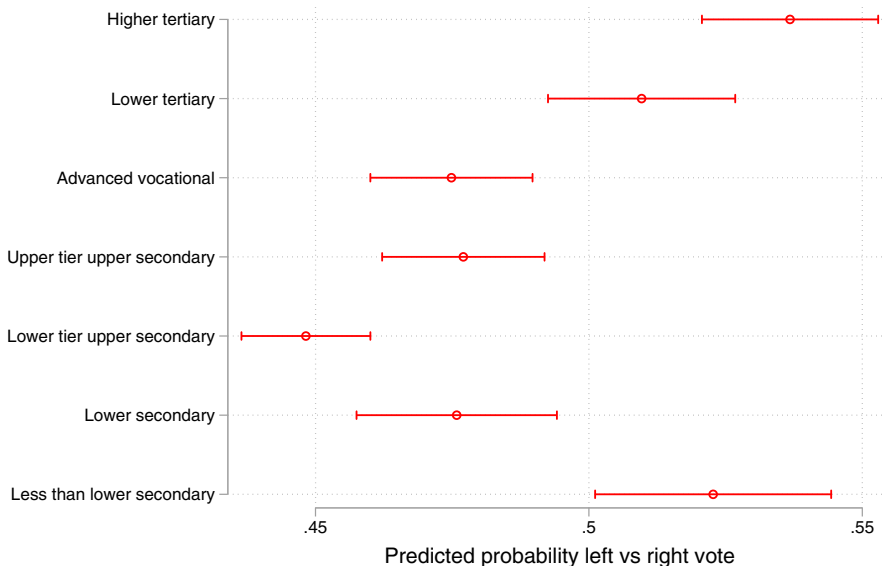
Our models include a number of control variables: age, gender, income, and residence (urban vs. rural). We estimate logit and multinomial logit models with country fixed effects and standard errors clustered by country. We use the ESS's post-stratification weights. The full regression results tables are in the online Appendix.

## 4 | RESULTS

In Figure 1 we show the predicted probability of voting for either a left (1) or right (0) party based on a voter's education.<sup>1</sup> A core argument in Cal is that while lower educated voters were the core group of the left in the 1960s, the left now mainly represents the educational elite. Piketty links this transformation to an ideological shift of mainstream left parties that, especially after the 1990s, have become more centrist on economic policy questions, and hence appeal more to higher income and higher educated groups, and appeal less to lower income and lower educated groups.

Empirically, Piketty shows for France and the United Kingdom that there is now a positive education gradient for voting for the left (instead of the right). Figure 1 shows a similar, although already more nuanced, picture (the regression results are presented in Table A2 in the Appendix). While we find that people with higher tertiary education are generally more likely to vote for the left (taken as a single bloc) instead of the right, we do not necessarily see a linearly declining effect with less education. In particular, people with less than secondary education have a higher probability of supporting a left over a right party than several other groups with higher levels of education.

As outlined earlier, a common theme in modern scholarship of electoral politics in political science is that the binary distinction between left and right parties, as two distinct electoral blocs, does not adequately capture dynamics of party competition in post-industrial societies and is also insufficient to study transformations in recent decades, in particular with the growing fragmentation of many party systems (which Piketty himself acknowledges in his analysis of French voting patterns in recent elections). Hence, we next look at the predicted

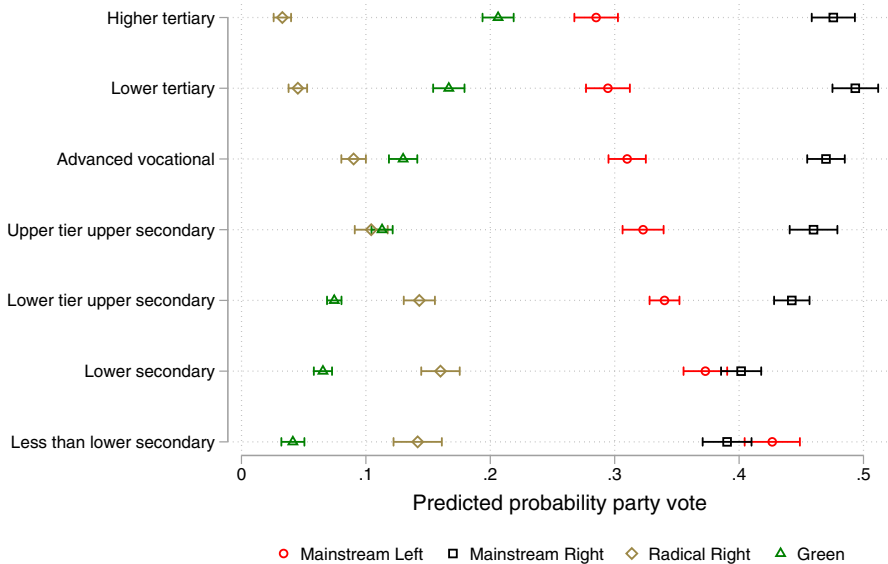


**FIGURE 1** Predicted probability of voting for left versus right party based on education [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

probability of voting for one of four party families conditional on a voter's education: mainstream left, mainstream right, radical right, and green/left-libertarian.

Figure 2 shows a much more differentiated picture of the relationship between education and vote choice (regression results in Table A3). Several points seem particularly noteworthy here. First, if we now focus on mainstream left and mainstream right parties, we see a picture that is completely reversed to the evidence presented by Piketty. With increasing levels of education, support for mainstream left parties *declines* and support for mainstream right parties *increases*. So, if we focus on mainstream parties, the relationship we find between education and support for the mainstream left and right is consistent with the pattern described by Piketty for the 1950s and 1960s. But, in contrast to Piketty's claims about recent transformations, we do not find much evidence that mainstream social democratic parties have become the party of the educational elite. In online Appendix A4 we document this relationship for four single countries: France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands. Although the two countries with majoritarian electoral systems (France and the United Kingdom) show generally higher levels of support for the mainstream left (and less for green and left-libertarian parties) among more educated voters, even in these cases we do not find evidence of the mainstream left being significantly stronger than the mainstream right among the most highly educated.

Second, though, if we look at the radical right and green/left-libertarians, we see that it is actually these parties who represent a potentially new cleavage based on education. With higher levels of education, the predicted probability to vote for a radical right party strongly decreases, yet strongly increases for green and left-libertarian parties. What this tells us is that the overall education effect for voting for a left or right party is largely driven by green and radical right parties and not by the mainstream left and right. This has several implications. If we want to study the sources of this educational divide, focusing on the ideological choices of the mainstream left (such as their Third Way policies) will only provide us with very limited explanatory leverage. In contrast, a stronger focus needs to be placed on green and radical right parties and their capacity to mobilize different and new socio-economic groups in the electorate. In this regard it is important to see that green and radical right voters are not simply former social democratic and mainstream right voters, respectively. Generational replacement has played a crucial role to understand the support for these new parties, particularly within the left, with green and left-libertarian parties appealing to younger more highly educated voters. On the right, there is also some generational



**FIGURE 2** Predicted probability of voting for a party based on education [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

replacement, with radical right parties appealing to new groups of younger voters but also especially mobilizing people who have been non-voters for a long time.

In sum, our analysis thus far shows that a core finding of *Capital and Ideology*, that educated voters are now more likely to support parties of the left, is driven more by support for green and radical right parties and has relatively little to do with a transformation of support for the mainstream left itself. In contrast, the socio-structural transformations of advanced capitalist societies have created new socioeconomic groups that are often more highly educated. These groups, however, in many cases have not found a home with social democratic parties but instead support green and left-libertarian parties. This pattern may be less clear in the United Kingdom and the United States, where single-member simple plurality (first-past-the-post) electoral systems make it difficult for a green/left-libertarian party to emerge as a major competitor to Labour or the Democrats, respectively. But, our results suggest that it is not possible to generalize the patterns Piketty observes in these two cases to other advanced democracies.

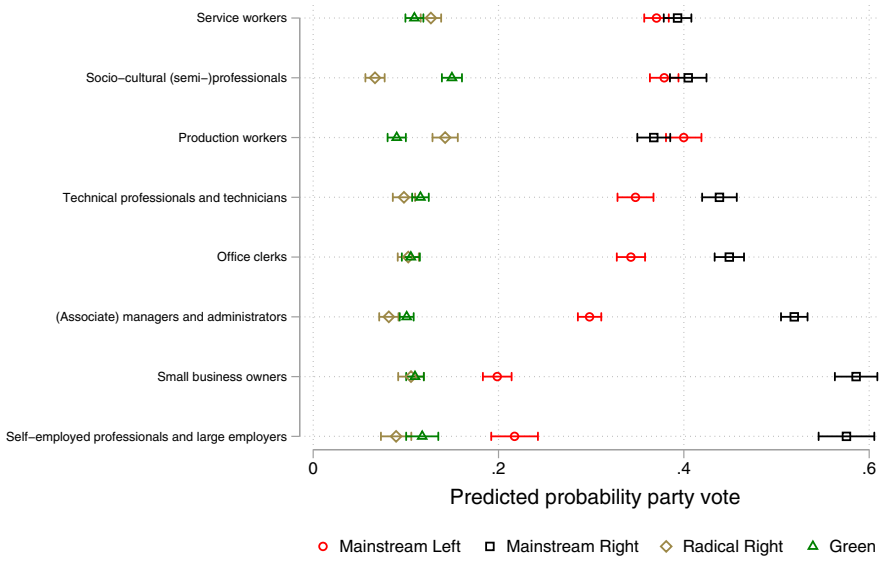
Furthermore, while new and old left parties thus rely on substantial support from educated voters, this should not necessarily lead us to the same conclusions about a changing support base of the welfare state as outlined in *Capital and Ideology*. First, these educated voters (and particularly younger voters, women and ethnic minorities) do not necessarily constitute the “elite.” Instead, in line with much political science work, we show that the new and old left support coalition among their educated voters predominantly relies on sociocultural professionals and public sector employees. Second, these voters do not oppose redistribution. In contrast, these groups form the core supporters of the welfare state in post-industrial societies.

Figure 3 (regression results Table A4) shows the predicted probability of voting for one of the party families based on the occupational class scheme proposed by Oesch (2006). The key idea behind this scheme is that occupation constitutes a main locus of preference formation in post-industrial societies (see also Kitschelt & Rehm, 2014). Importantly, this class scheme does not only take into account vertical differentiation but also horizontal differentiation based on, for example, distinctions of more inter-personal or technical professions.

The results in Figure 3 show several things that are noteworthy for our argument. First, social democratic parties receive their highest levels of support among three class groups: service workers, production workers, and sociocultural (semi-) professionals. Hence, it is not at all the case that the social democratic coalition is only dominated by an educated elite, unless one counts nurses, teachers, and social workers as such. Second, production workers still show the highest predicted probability of supporting social democratic parties. And while radical right support among this group is high compared to other social groups, describing the radical right as the “new workers party” seems highly exaggerated. Third, among class groups that should be counted as the elite (managers, self-employed professionals, and large employers), we find lower levels of support for parties of the left. In contrast, and in line with Oesch and Rennwald (2018b), these groups remain the strongholds of the mainstream right. In this sense, this result is consistent with Piketty’s “Merchant Right” claim, but, again, we find little evidence that the main bases of support for the left are “Brahmins.” Sociocultural professionals, such as lawyers, academics, journalists, and other professionals in the creative industries, might well be considered to be modern-day “Brahmins.” But, a substantial share of support for the left remains service sectors and production workers, who are certainly not part of the educational elite that the Brahmin moniker implies.

Another key socioeconomic distinction with political implications is the distinction between public and private sector employment. This might be an instrumental division, in that public sector workers are more likely to support center-left parties than private sector workers, because these parties promise to maintain or expand the public sector. However, this division might also be the result of self-selection effects, in that people who are more motivated by public service and/or are seeking more secure employment are more likely to be employed in the public sector; and these personal preferences then correlate with political preferences. Either way, public sector employees remain a core pillar of support for the left in most advanced post-industrial democracies. This is illustrated in Figure 4 (regression results Table A4), which shows the predicted probability of voting for a mainstream left party for all occupational class groups but split into public and private sector.<sup>2</sup> We find that for all class groups,

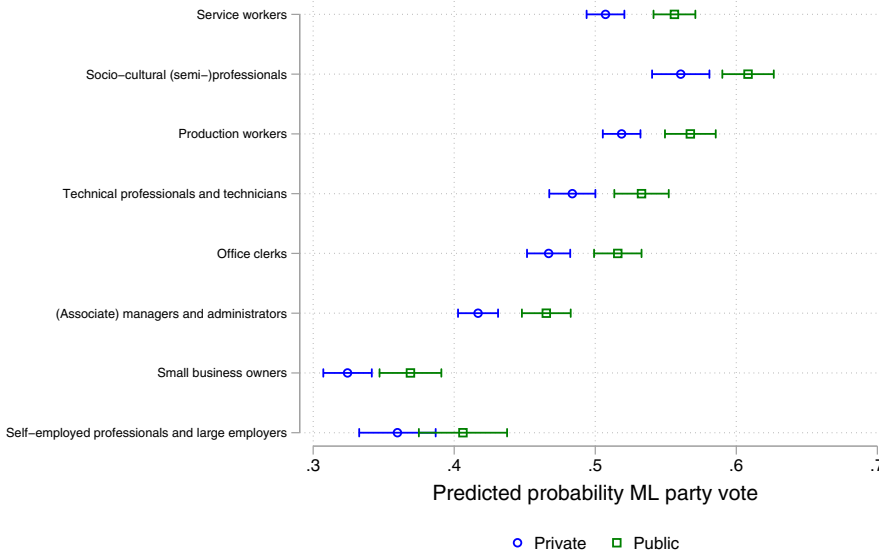




**FIGURE 3** Predicted probability of voting for a party based on class [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

support for mainstream left parties is higher among those employed in the public sector than those employed in the private sector. Indeed, among production workers in the public sector—such as builders and fitters for schools, hospitals, public housing, roads, and public transport—support for the mainstream left reaches nearly 50%. Again, our findings demonstrate that describing the mainstream left as a party of the elite profoundly mischaracterizes the socioeconomic composition of their electorate.

This is not to say that educated middle class voters have not become a more important part of the left support coalition. This is well-documented but needs to be seen against the background of a socio-structural change that

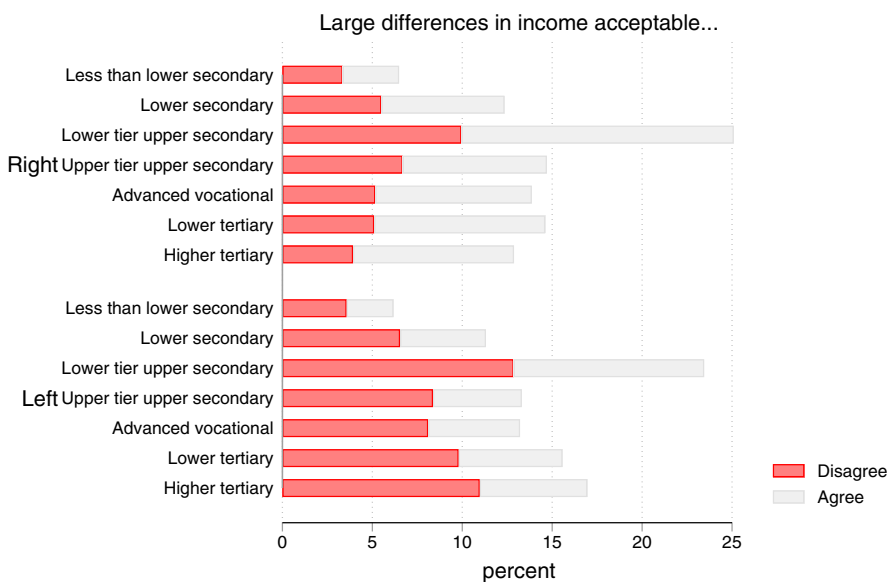


**FIGURE 4** Predicted probability of voting for SD party based on class and public sector employment [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

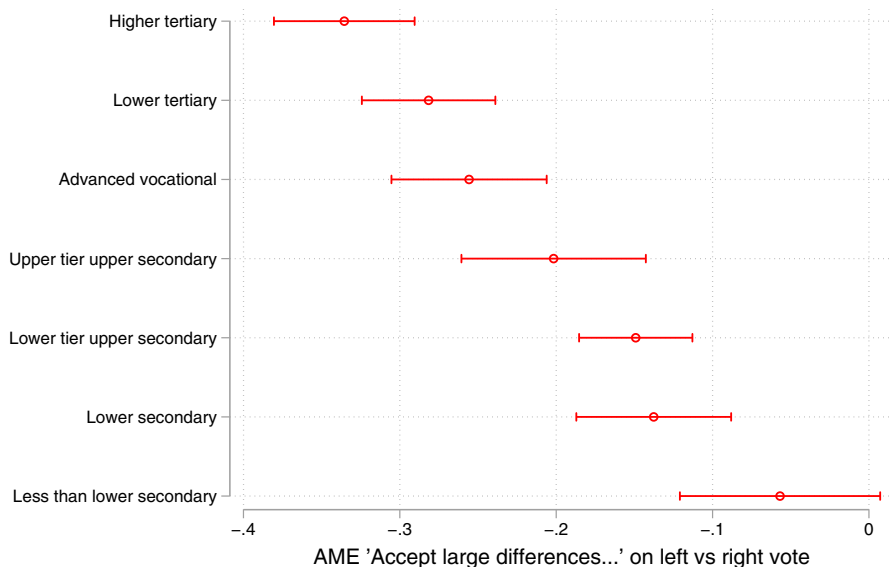
has seen a strong increase in educated voters (Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015). Crucially, however, the new educated middle class voters that support parties of the left should not be seen as less in favor of redistribution than the working class. We illustrate this in Figure 5, that shows agreement with the statement that “large differences in income are acceptable,” split by a respondent's level of education and the party they voted for in the previous election. Disagreeing with the statement clearly signals a strong preference for redistribution and state intervention to correct market outcomes. In the online Appendix, we show that the results do not change if we use the survey item “Governments should reduce differences in incomes” instead.

Several results from this analysis seem noteworthy to us. First, general levels of support for redistribution strongly vary between those favoring a left or a right bloc party, with those supporting the left showing much higher levels of support for redistribution. Second, support for redistribution varies with education. However, and crucially for considering Piketty's argument, the direction of this relationship is very different between left and right supporters. For people supporting a party on the right we see similar levels of support for redistribution among people with lower and higher levels of educated. Those with upper secondary education show the highest level of support for redistribution. Among left party supporters, in contrast, we find that those with higher levels of education actually show *more* support for redistribution than those with less education—with the exception of voters with lower upper secondary education. This again shows that it is precisely educated voters who support redistribution that are attracted to parties of the left in post-industrial societies.

Figure 5 also indicates another important element of the puzzle: that attitudes toward redistribution are a core determinant of choosing between a left and right party, particularly for higher educated voters. We formally test this expectation and run our original regression for left/right vote but include an interaction between redistributive preferences and education. Figure 6 (Table A5) shows the main results from this analysis: the average marginal effect of agreeing that large differences in income are acceptable on voting for the left conditional on education. Generally, we find a negative marginal effect, which indicates that people who do not find large differences in income acceptable (who support redistribution) are more supportive of the left. In addition—and here is the crux—this effect strongly increases with education: higher educated voters who are in favor of redistribution are more than 30% more likely to support a party of the left than a party of the right. In other words, for those “Brahmin” who decide to vote for the left, a key reason for doing so is that they support economic redistribution. This hence



**FIGURE 5** Redistributive preferences by education and party vote [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



**FIGURE 6** Average marginal effect of redistributive preference on left versus right vote by education [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

turns Piketty's argument around: rather than assuming that the reason the left appeals to higher-educated voters is because center-left parties no longer support redistribution, our evidence suggests that those higher-educated voters who support the left do so *because* they support redistribution.

In sum, our analysis of electoral behavior in 11 Western European countries suggests that increasing support for the left by educated voters does not imply that parties of the left have stopped being the parties of those voters who are in favor of redistribution. In contrast, left parties attract those educated voters who also favor redistribution. In an electorate where education per se is generally a bad predictor of redistributive preferences, this clearly indicates that parties of the left remain the political vehicle for people who favor redistribution of income or wealth. In addition, attitudes toward redistribution remain a decisive factor in determining whether someone chooses to vote for a party on the left as opposed to the right.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Overall, we applaud Thomas Piketty's effort to connect growing economic inequality to democratic politics, and share his belief that part of the explanation for growing wealth and income inequality must surely be found in electoral politics no longer being exclusively centered on a battle between “the haves” on the right and “the have nots” on the left—although most political scientists would point out 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. Piketty seeks to explain the reason for the transformation of electoral politics away from redistributive conflicts by demonstrating that mainstream left parties increasingly represent higher-educated groups, and, in turn, that center-left parties have gained support among these groups by moderating their support for redistributive policies. This seems consistent with the observation that when center-left parties were in power in many advanced post-industrial societies in the late 1990s—led by politicians like Clinton, Blair, Schroeder, Jospin, Prodi, and Kok—economic inequality either continued to increase or did not decline significantly.

Yet, as political scientists of electoral politics, we are unconvinced by the implied causal mechanisms in this argument. The standard explanation in political science of the transformation of electoral politics—from a single economically determined left–right battle into a more complex multidimensional space—is that this is driven more by radical changes in society and the economy than by the behavior of party elites: the decline of manufacturing, the expansion of the public sector, the expansion of higher education, the emancipation of women, technological change, climate change, the emergence of *de facto* multiethnic and multireligious societies, and so on. In this sense, the emergence of voters' concerns on issues like environmental protection, women's rights, gay rights, and minorities' rights, are not driven by the behavior and policy positions of parties and party leaders, but by exogenous structural changes beyond the realm of electoral politics. Hence, if center-left parties choose to re-emphasize economic inequality at the expense of these other issues, they are likely to lose (or fail to gain) support among younger, urban, educated voters, as well as among women and racial and religious minorities—who are now significant pillars of the electorate on the center-left in many democracies.

In our empirical analysis of voting behavior in 11 Western European countries, we find some support for Piketty's claim that the most highly educated voters tend to support the left today rather than the right. Yet, in contrast to Piketty, our results suggest that this left/right pattern is mainly driven by changes within the left and right: with more highly educated voters supporting green/left-libertarian parties, and voters with lower levels of education increasingly supporting radical right parties. Meanwhile, as in the era before the dramatic expansion of higher education, voters with high levels of education are still more likely to support mainstream right parties than mainstream left parties. Related to this, we find evidence that new sociocultural professionals—such as lawyers, academics, journalists, and employees in the creative industries (who Piketty might characterize as modern “Brahmins”)—are more like to support the left than the right. In addition, the other social groups who make up the electoral support base for the modern mainstream left—service workers, production workers, and public sector employees at all levels—can hardly be described as “Brahmin.”

We also find that at all levels of education, people who vote for parties on the left are more supportive of redistribution than people who vote for parties on the right. In addition, among the most highly educated people, support for redistribution is a stronger predictor of voting for the left than it is for people with any other level of education. This reverses Piketty's causal mechanism, in that we see more highly educated voters supporting the left because these voters support redistribution, as opposed to these types of voters supporting the left because left-wing parties no longer support redistribution. In a sense, given the profile and policy preferences of these voters, these new groups on the left are perhaps best characterized as “Brahmin green left,” as distinct from a more “traditional left,” which still represents a significant, although shrinking, proportion of the electorate.

These findings present a conundrum, though: if the left still represents many lower income groups, and if higher educated people who now vote for the left do so because they support redistribution, then why have we seen growing economic inequality, even when the left has been in power? An answer to this question must consider at least two factors.

First, as a result of the growing fragmentation of party systems across most democracies in the world, mainstream left parties have been unable to be dominant forces in democratic politics, or even hegemonic forces within a broader left or “progressive” bloc. Indeed, as Benedetto et al. (2020) show, across 31 democracies, support for the mainstream social democratic left fell to 15% of the total electorate across Europe in 2017. Together these factors suggest that in most advanced democracies, mainstream left parties are unlikely to be able to form a majority-winning pro-redistributive coalition by themselves, but will have to build alliances with other parties and groups, to enable this coalition to appeal to a more pluralist and complex set of social groups than they did in the 1950s and 1960s—except perhaps in the two-party system in the United States, where the Democrats are already a *de facto* social and political coalition.

Second, as a result of dramatic economic, social, and technological change, electoral politics is no longer dominated by battles over economic redistribution, but is also about other forms of emancipation, equality, and identity. This means that in order to build a coalition for redistribution, parties of the left will have to appeal to voters'

preferences on these issues as well (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2019). In contrast to much public debate, it cannot be the goal of the left to somehow reduce democratic competition to an economic dimension again. Instead, calls for more gender equality, to tackle climate change, to confront racism, and for more inclusive and open societies, need to be taken seriously—they are as much part of a social democratic ideal of the 21st century as economic redistribution. Only when the left incorporates these progressive values often decried as “identity politics” will it be able to form a coalition broad enough to create the institutional change that is necessary to sustainably reduce economic, social, and political inequality.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Replication material for this article can be found at Harvard Dataverse <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/4JYGMB>

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In online Appendix A5 we show the results of a multinomial logit that also includes non-voting as a category of the dependent variable. Our findings remain largely unchanged.

<sup>2</sup> We additionally show the results of this relationship for the general left–right vote in the online Appendix.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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