

Linus Westheuser and Thomas Lux

Class consciousness and voting

Class as a political compass?

FES diskurs

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INTRODUCTION

Which is the »natural« party for workers to turn to? In whom do voters place their trust when it comes to representing the interests of wage earners? And who speaks for the »fighters« at the lower end of social hierarchies? These questions are central both to the classical canon of political sociology and to the self-understanding of social democratic parties. Today they are taking on a new political virulence: Recent elections and surveys have revealed a growing legitimisation crisis of the party system that has its social epicentre in the working class. Here, support for established parties, including those left of the centre, has been eroding much more starkly than in the rest of society. And it is primarily the radical right that is filling the gap. In post-election polls for the 2024 European elections in Germany the AfD won 33 per cent of the vote among respondents who gave their occupational category as »worker«. By contrast, the four parties that might be described as being left of centre – SPD, Greens, BSW and Die Linke – together attracted only 27 per cent of their votes. The traditional catch-all parties CDU and SPD combined won only slightly more worker votes than the AfD alone. The governing parties of the so-called »traffic light coalition« lagged far behind on a combined 21 per cent.

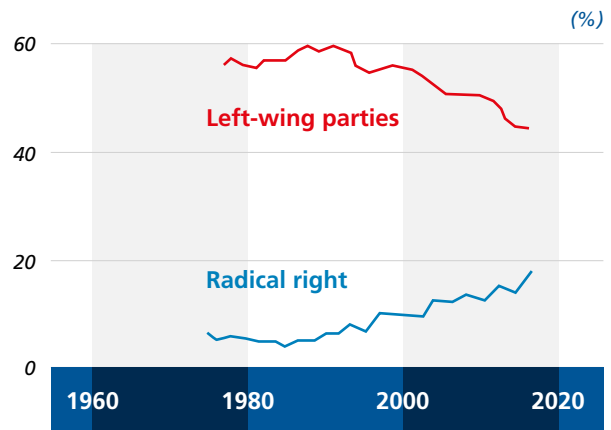
This continues a trend that has been observed for decades now. As part of the demobilisation of democratic class conflicts, workers' affiliation to political parties has become much more tenuous than that of the rest of the population (Dörre 2020; Beck and Westheuser 2022). Younger generations of workers in particular have lost their connection to the left-wing parties that had once emerged from the historical process of democratic mobilisation in the working class (see Evans and Tilley 2017 and Figure 1). Privatism, retreat, political mistrust and increasing abstention from voting have increasingly edged out this traditional political attachment (Rennwald 2020: Chapter 4). On top of that, radical right parties have gradually been able to win over a notable and growing minority of the working class. Between the European elections of 2014 and 2024, the AfD's voter share in the working class more than tripled, while that of the SPD more than halved during the same period. Furthermore, a right-wing drift became manifest not only among those who were classified as working class by occupation, but also among those who – according to their subjective assessment – have »a low standard of living«. What this illustrates is that right-wing tendencies correlate not only with an objective position in the working class but also with subjectively experienced forms of deprivation and social devaluation (see Gidron and Hall 2017). A sense of being materially at the bottom of society or in terms of social recognition seems increasingly to go hand in hand with a political turn to the radical right.

Heterogeneous political tendencies among the working class are by no means new. Although historically it was mainly social democratic and socialist parties that mobilised the working class, this class has always been divided

Voting behaviour of the working class in Europe 1978–2014

Figure 1

Voter share of left-wing parties (Social Democrats, Socialists, Communists, Greens, left-wing parties) and radical right parties



Source: Gingrich 2017, p. 48.

into different ideological factions and »socio-moral milieus« (Lepsius 1993; Bartolini 2000). Conservative and Christian Democratic parties also cultivated a specifically conservative working-class identity, which was defined, for example, by a religiously framed understanding of the dignity of work, the role of the working man as family provider, or a paternalistic pact between workers and employers (Stjerno 2010: Chapter 6; Arndt and Rennwald 2017). Similarly, there have always been authoritarian and extreme right-wing tendencies, as evidenced by the support for fascism among parts of the working class (see, for example, Jünger 1932; Lipset 1959; Vester et al. 2001). Historically, far right elements mostly remained a minority in the working class. This is changing today in places like Austria and Switzerland, where we see how a crisis of left-wing political representation in the working class can lead to a consolidated hegemony of the radical right. In these countries some elections saw *absolute* majorities of workers voting for right-wing populist parties, reaching a level at which an association between class affiliation and far right politics becomes part of the common sense. Under these circumstances, it increasingly becomes »normal«, or even »self-evident« that people who see themselves as working class or think of themselves as in the lower echelons of the social hierarchy would vote for the radical right; or that it's the right-wing populists who represent workers' interests. This amounts to a phenomenon that is not unprecedented but historically rare: namely the hijacking of the workers' class consciousness from the right.

How far has this process advanced in Germany? How strong is the remaining link between class consciousness and left political tendencies? Does a sense of class consciousness immunise people against right-wing extremism? And to what extent are the parties of the centre right also able to mobilise some sort of working class consciousness? In what follows we intend to examine these issues empirically on the basis of survey data. We shall look into the extent to which identification with the working class and its interests may function as a kind of political compass – in other words, whether it goes hand in hand with specific voting preferences. More precisely we identify three dimensions of class consciousness: class interests, class identity and a kind of subjective positioning in social status hierarchies, which we term »subordination consciousness« or sense of being at the bottom (*Unten-Bewusstsein*). For all three we look at how they correlate with objective class positions and different political tendencies. In this we are following recent research that frames political space as structured not simply along left and right lines but in terms of the constellation of three poles (Oesch and Rennwald 2018): a centre-left camp comprising the SPD, the Greens and Die Linke; a centre-right camp with the CDU and the FDP; and the radical right camp, represented by the AfD.¹ We first trace the relationship between class consciousness and voting intentions for the population as a whole and then take a closer look at the working class.

¹ The party BSW is not yet included in our data.

CLASS FORMATION AS A LEARNING PROCESS

As mentioned at the outset, issues of class consciousness, its formation, and political mobilization are longstanding subjects in sociology (see, for example, Marx [1852] 2009; Weber [1922] 1985: Chapter 4; Mannheim 1929). This concept largely emerged from efforts to provide a theoretical social science perspective on the historical experience of the workers' movement. Through a process of historical learning, this movement empowered millions of ordinary people worldwide to question the very foundations of their living and working conditions and to unite in collective action for their shared interests (Vester 1970). One of the most significant political identities of the modern era emerged from a diverse range of local, sectoral, and occupational self-conceptions of working people coalescing under the banner of the "working class" or "proletariat." In sociology, class consciousness was thus generally identified with the working class's social awareness of its collective interests, as well as a form of identification and group formation through which class members learned to act in solidarity with one another, while opposing other classes (Mann 1973; Wright 1997: 379).

Class formation was the term by which sociology and social history studied the complex mechanisms involved in translating shared objective conditions into a collective and politically salient class consciousness (Butler and Savage 2013; Fantasia 1995). The British historian E.P. Thompson described this formation as an »event«:

class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs... Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms.
(Thompson 1987: 7f)

Consciousness was thus attributed a key intermediary role between objective relations and joint action. Pierre Bourdieu (1987), for example, spoke of the classes identified by sociological analyses as mere »classes on paper«, which remain empty of reality until they are filled with life through the subjective processes of identity formation and political organisation. Calhoun (1982) even argued that material class positions can have political effects only if the members of classes also perceive themselves as such (see also Steinberg 1994).

At the same time, research from early on also observed instances in which objective class position and identity do not coincide (see Achterberg and Houtman 2006), such as when members of dominated classes act against their own interests or identify with the ruling classes (see, for exam-

ple, Gramsci 1971; Jackman and Jackman 1983; more recently Sosnaud et al. 2013; D'Hooghe et al. 2018). This topic came to particular prominence in Marxism. Contrary to parodies of Marx's political analyses, according to which the political class consciousness of the proletariat and bourgeoisie arises »automatically« from their social position, Marx – and many Marxists after him – were keenly interested in processes of *failed* consciousness formation. They tried to understand the unsuccessful translation of objective class interests into political class action, or the displacement of class by other identities, e.g. based on religion, ethnicity or nationality. In a paradigmatic formula Marx wrote as early as *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* about French smallholders in the mid nineteenth century that insofar as »the identity of their interests forms no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, *they do not constitute a class*. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name« and thus formed a collective »as much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes« (Marx (1852) 1961: 198, our emphasis). Subsequent research identified this demobilisation of classes as the historical norm, while the development of class consciousness, by contrast, has come to be regarded as a political and organisational achievement (Dörre forthcoming).

3

IDENTITY, INTEREST, STATUS: THREE DIMENSIONS OF CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

But what does it really mean to see oneself as a member of a class? Research has distinguished between a number of dimensions (Mann 1973; Pérez-Ahumada 2014; Stubager and Harrits 2022), each one focusing on different aspects. We focus here on the three dimensions already mentioned above: *class identity*, *class interest* and *low subjective status* [Unten-Bewusstsein].

— **Class identity** refers to a sense of social positioning and group affiliation based on economic positions. At the most basic level, it concerns the question of whether one's self-image is related to economic conditions at all, whether they be conditions of production, income distribution or occupational structure, or whether one fundamentally rejects this logic of self-placement (Mann 1973: 13). More broadly, it is a question of the extent to which one feels an affinity with others who live and work in a similar position, for example because one assumes that they share key experiences, values and interests. Class identity can assume the form of a deeply felt sense of belonging that inspires pride and solidarity and facilitates collective action. But it can also designate a rather loose form of self-categorisation. How central a person's class identification is to their self-understanding may vary. A category such as »working class« can be the linchpin of a person's identity. Or it can become relevant to one's identity only in certain situations – for example, when standing up to employers at a May Day demonstration – while hanging in the closet unused the rest of the time.

Recent research shows that people still use class categories to describe themselves and others. Decisive anchor points for such descriptions include income and occupation, but also the social position of a person's family (Stubager et al. 2018; Evans et al. 2022; Friedman et al. 2021; Surridge 2007). At the same time, qualitative studies describe today's class identity as rather loose, ambivalent and defensive (Savage 2005). Belonging to the working class is associated not only with a person's occupational position, but also with lifestyles and other cultural references, such as that of an »ordinary life« (Savage 2005; Savage et al. 2001; Sachweh and Lenz 2018).

— **Class interest** (or more precisely, in Erik Olin Wright's (1997: 501) words, »class interest consciousness«) refers to the extent to which wage earners perceive a contrast between their own interests and those of employers, corporations, or more generally the capi-

tal side of wage relations. In other words, the term refers to »the way people define who are their potential friends and potential enemies within the economic system« (Wright 1997: 396). If class identity is more about how someone's class relations shape their cultural self-understandings and group affiliations, class interest has more to do with the collective consciousness of class members with regard to common economic interests and the antagonistic relationships of these interests to those of other classes. Thus Michael Mann defines workers' consciousness of their interests as »the perception that the capitalist and his agents constitute an enduring opponent to oneself« (Mann 1973: 13). As the term »agents« implies, class interests are often perceived in the form of organisations that articulate and organise class interests. For wage earners, a positive attitude towards the power of trade unions and a critical view of the organised power of employers and corporations can thus be read as a sign of class interest consciousness.

Assumptions about class-specific interests are important for research on redistribution attitudes (see below and Eidheim 2024). However, interests are here often simply deduced from objective factors such as people's income. Much more rarely do researchers investigate whether people are actually aware of their own class interests and how these contrast with the interests of other classes. An important exception are Erik Olin Wright's comparative studies (1997: ch. 13-16). For the USA, Sweden and Japan, Wright shows that awareness of class interests is most pronounced among those wage earners most affected by exploitation. In the USA specifically there is also an ethnic component, as a result of which black workers have a significantly stronger class interest than white workers. He also shows, however, that certain members of the middle class, who have high educational qualifications but lack ownership of productive or financial assets, also have a pronounced sense of class interest that can come to form an alliance with working class interest consciousness. Holtmann et al. (1988) replicated these findings for West Germany in the 1980s.

— **Low subjective status**, or, more precisely, a consciousness of standing at the bottom of societal hierarchies [Unten-Bewusstsein] describes a third dimension of class consciousness sometimes discussed as the subjective side of stratification. This term looks at a specific sense of being in a comparatively disadvantaged and

devalued social position, a form of consciousness that has been important to two recent scholarly debates: first, the discussion on status loss as an explanation of populism (see Gidron and Hall 2017), and second the observation of a »dichotomous« structure of workers' consciousness, commonly made in labour studies, i.e. the observation that workers frequently reconstruct their social position by reference to a distinction between »those above« and »those below« (Popitz et al. (1957) 2018; Kudara et al. 1979). This form of class consciousness taps into relations of social recognition, e.g. in the context of a declining status of manual and non-graduate work over the past few decades (see Nolan and Weisstanner 2022; for a different view Oesch and Vigna 2022), or a transposition of workplace command hierarchies to society as a whole: people who have no say in the workplace also perceive themselves as generally powerless in society.

In both cases, status consciousness draws on a hierarchical grammar of what Bourdieu called the »social sense«. This dimension of class consciousness can be analytically distinguished from identity and interest, even though the three are often intertwined. More than »who you are« or »what benefits you«, this dimension of class consciousness revolves around »where you stand«. This position is perceived comparatively, by determining who is above and who is below you in a mental map of the social hierarchy (Geißler and Weber-Menges 2006; Schultheis 1996).

4

THE POLITICS OF CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

We know relatively little about the political significance of class consciousness in Germany. This is despite the fact that a whole series of important case studies have made it clear how important subjective forms of consciousness are for the relationship between class position and politics in general, and for the relationship between the working class and right-wing populism in particular (see, for example, Dörre et al. 2013, 2024). It is well known that attitudinal patterns that are key to the election of extreme right-wing parties – above all: nativism, authoritarianism and populism – are much more prevalent among the working class than in other classes (Rydgren 2012; Arzheimer 2018), and that a skeptical view of immigration is comparatively more widespread in this class (Lindh and McCall 2020). On the other hand, studies show that there tends to be stronger support in the working class for redistributive policies. Overall, the opinions in the working class are particularly heterogeneous, including on questions of migration (Teney and Dochow-Sondershaus 2024; Mau et al. 2023). As workers are much less involved in formal politics than members of the middle class, their attitudes often evade the coherent systems of political ideologies (Damhuis and Westheuser 2024). The electoral consequences of particular attitudes depend much more decisively on the changing salience of different issues in voters' minds. For example,

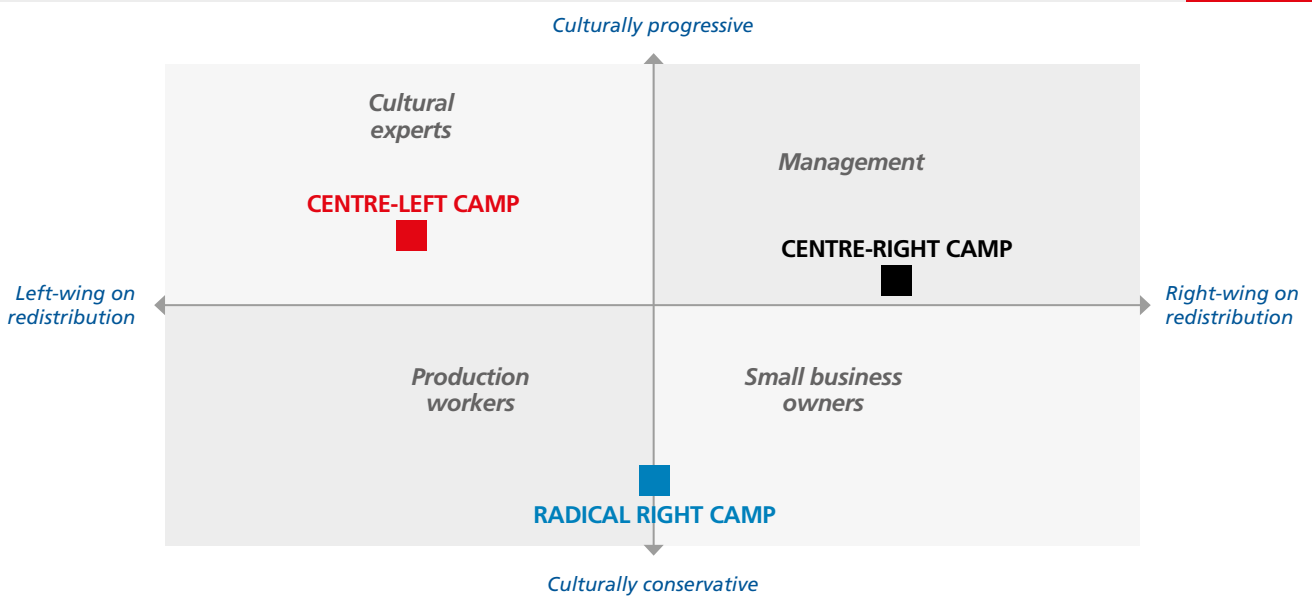
Abou Chadi et al. (forthcoming) show that workers prefer social democratic parties if they adopt left-wing economic positions, even if these parties also simultaneously take more open positions on immigration. Class interest trumps migration skepticism, at least in this case.

As implicit in the contradictory pull of the issues of redistribution and migration, it is very difficult to capture the post-industrial constellation of classes and politics in terms of a one-dimensional right-left distinction. Instead, recent political science looks at party positions and attitudes in terms of two different dimensions: first, the traditional right-left axis centered on questions of economic distribution, which distinguishes egalitarian pro-redistribution from more neoliberal pro-market orientations. The second is a newer axis often associated with the degree of cultural liberalism. It distinguishes progressive attitudes for example, on questions of inclusion, minority rights, and immigration from conservative ones. In combination, the axes yield a two-dimensional political space, which is shown in Figure 2.

Following Oesch and Rennwald (2018), Germany's three main party-political camps can be located in this space: at the more redistributive and culturally progressive pole is the centre-left camp of the SPD, the Greens and The Left; at the redistribution-sceptical, culturally more cen-

Schematic presentation of political space with political camps and classes

Figure 2



Source: Authors' presentation, adapted from Oesch and Rennwald 2018

trist pole is the centre-right camp of the CDU and the FDP; and at the culturally very conservative pole is the radical right-wing camp represented by the AfD. Based on their own research and a large number of studies on recent class voting behaviour, Oesch and Rennwald (2018) also position some classes and class segments in this space on the basis of their ideal-typical attitudinal profiles (see also Achterberg 2006). What one might call the cultural middle class of the so-called socio-cultural professional occupations (such as teachers or social workers) stands closest to the progressive-left pole in terms of attitudes, and the centre-left camp when it comes to voting. The economic bourgeoisie of higher management employees, business owners (entrepreneurs) and self-employed professionals (for example, lawyers and doctors with their own practices), on the other hand, tends to be closer to the centre-right due to its free-market pro-business policies. Positioned in the culturally more conservative half of the space are workers and small business owners (such as restaurant owners or shopkeepers). According to this model, both of these classes politically fall between two stools: among small business owners, there are tendencies towards both the radical right and the centre-right, while workers find themselves between their traditional political home on the centre-left and the radical right.

Oesch and Rennwald's model helpfully summarizes findings of a larger research stream (see also Bornschieer et al. 2021; Zollinger 2022). It is a handy schema that depicts general tendencies and relations in the class-political constellation but should not replace more in-depth class analyses. The abovementioned findings on the heterogeneity of political attitudes among the working class, for example, already make it clear that it would be wrong to slot workers too neatly into one political camp or the other. Nevertheless, the model can be very useful for comparing the political positions of classes and parties, as Aiko Wagner (2024) has confirmed using the same data as we draw on here. At the same time, the model only takes into account »classes on paper«, in the sense of averaged attitudes and voting intentions across objective occupational classes. The question of class consciousness, i.e. what class the interviewees themselves feel they belong to and the extent to which this shapes what they perceive to be their interests, is left out of the picture. In what follows, we add some preliminary insights about this piece of the puzzle, asking about the significance of class consciousness with regard to positionings in the contemporary political space. How are class identity, class interests and status beliefs related to voting for the centre-left, the centre-right and the radical right political camps?

The existing evidence on this question is rather limited, but there is a whole series of assumptions and indications, some of which are quite contradictory. For example, it has long been assumed that an active class consciousness tips people towards left-wing political attitudes and immunises them against right-wing extremism. The underlying assumption is that an understanding of common class interests is conducive to solidarity with other wage-earners, and that a strong class identity counteracts nationalist or eth-

nocentrist divisions (see, for example, Sohn-Rethel 1973; Bithymitris 2020). This would lead one to think that respondents with a strong class consciousness are less likely to vote for the far right. An awareness of common class interests should also tend to steer wage earners away from centre-right parties and towards left-wing parties on the grounds that they represent wage earners' interests. Indeed, studies show that material interests are in fact the most important factor encouraging workers to favour redistribution (while among members of the middle class ideologies and values are more influential; Armingeon and Weisstanner 2022).

At the same time, research also shows that workers' »objective« interest in redistribution policies is often over-written by mentalities that undermine solidarity (Cavaillé 2023; Langsæther and Evans 2020). Especially where the development of militant interest-based politics against the rich and powerful seems to be thwarted, »being a worker« is often defined by the demarcation against those below (e.g. benefit claimants) and against outsiders (e.g. migrants and minorities). In other words, politically right-wing logics of competing entitlements and exclusionary solidarity may come to prevail over a consciousness of common interests (see Mau et al. 2023: Chapter 3; Engler and Weisstanner 2020). Studies on the political consequences of class identity have come to similarly ambivalent findings. McDermott et al. (2019) show that white US workers whose class identity is based strongly on opposition to the interests of the rich and powerful tend to be more open to migrants and ethnic minorities (see also Prasad et al. 2009). Those whose identity as a worker is defined by a sense of who stands above them are less inclined to »kick down« against groups below. A recent study on eastern Germany points in a similar direction, showing that trade union participation and workers' ability to assert their own interests in the workplace significantly reduces exclusionary and extreme right attitudes (Kiess et al. 2023). By contrast, the findings of a comparative study on working class identification in Denmark and the United Kingdom are more mixed (Evans et al. 2022): while in Denmark such an identity goes hand in hand with pro-redistributive attitudes and a propensity of voting for left-wing parties, in the United Kingdom there is a strong connection between working class identity and hostility to migration. In this case, class identity goes hand in hand with right-wing voting intentions. In other contexts, social identity categories such as »being down to earth« and meritocracy, which are prominent in the working class, have been shown to increasingly be politicised by the radical right (Zollinger 2022; Bornschieer et al. 2021).

Although classic studies of the post-war period found a close link between workers' consciousness of being at the bottom of society and social democratic claims to representation (Popitz et al. 1957), later studies as early as the 1970s described an erosion of this link (Kudera et al. 1979; Kern and Schumann 1985). According to more recent studies, the sense of being at the bottom of social hierarchies today seems to be channeled into regressive and exclusionary attitudes (Dörre et al. 2018) or into apathy and

political withdrawal (Wimmer 2023). Particularly among men with a low sense of subjective status there is stronger support for right-wing populism (Gidron and Hall 2017). At the same time, there are also some indications that workers' consciousness of being at the bottom can be converted into practices of self-assertion and social demands if it becomes articulated in the context of top-bottom conflicts over material distribution.²

² One illustration of this is the statement by a Berlin bricklayer documented by Beck and Westheuser (2022: 300): »Those at the bottom are the foundation of society. It's as simple as that. And these are the people with the normal jobs. [...] You know, bakers, hairdressers, bin men, street cleaners, bus drivers, truck drivers. People you can't do without.« Other studies describe similar re-evaluations of those at the bottom as »fighters« (Rehbein et al. 2015) or »misrecognised essential workers« (Mayer-Ahuja/Nachtwey 2021; see also Plenter 2024).

5 DATA AND OPERATIONALISATION

In what follows, we make use of specially collected data to systematically explore the relations between class identity, class interests and workers' sense of being at the bottom and voting behaviour in the population as a whole and among workers. More precisely, we use data from the "Mapping the Working Class" survey, a mixed-mode survey conducted by Kantar Public on behalf of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Germany in the summer of 2023, in which around 5,000 German-speaking adults were asked about their working and living conditions, attitudes and political orientations (Engels et al. 2024). All findings are based on weighted analyses.

We operationalise objective class situations by means of Oesch's class schema (Oesch 2006). Occupational positions are thus differentiated not only in terms of their relationship to the means of production and their expertise and human capital, but also according to the specific work content (work logics) associated with these occupations (see Figure 3). Such differentiation has proven to be particularly fruitful for researching political orientations (Oesch and Rennwald 2018), as such attitudes are also shaped by the extent to which people's specific work content is geared towards corporate profitmaking (administrative and management occupations), technical expertise (production occupations) or dealing with clients (social and cultural occupations). For us, the working class objectively speaking includes (qualified and unqualified) production and service workers. The latter include industrial workers, carpenters or bricklayers, but also sales assistants, geriatric nurses

and cleaning staff. Respondents are assigned to a class according to their current employment. For retired people, we use their last occupation as the basis for classification. This means that around 30 per cent of respondents belong to the »objective« working class.

We measure class consciousness in three dimensions: when it comes to working class identity, we rely on the question »There is a lot of talk today about the so-called working class. Do you feel that you belong to the working class yourself?« (possible answers: »rather yes« and »rather no«). This is a fairly rough operationalisation. It still provides an approximation of the subjective dispositions we are interested in, however. Having said that, it is likely to lead to a fairly optimistic estimate of the prevalence of a working class identity, as even respondents with only a rather vague sense of belonging could answer yes. In our data, a full 53 per cent of respondents answered this question in the affirmative.

Status is measured in terms of respondents' subjective affiliation with a social stratum [Schicht]. The relevant question is: »There are various strata in our society. Some position themselves towards the top of society, others rather towards the bottom. Where do you position yourself on a scale of 1–7, where 1 is the »bottom«, 4 the »middle« and 7 the »top.« This scale is converted into three categories: bottom (1–3), middle (4) and top (5–7). We classify respondents who answered 1, 2 or 3 as people with a low sense of subjective status. Overall they made up 13 per cent of respondents.

Class schema based on Daniel Oesch with sample occupations

Figure 3

	Self-employed	Dependent employees		
	Independent work logic	Technical work logic	Organisational work logic	Interpersonal work logic
Higher qualifications	Employers and self-employed professionals e.g. notaries, entrepreneurs, dentists	Technical experts e.g. architects, engineers, programmers	Middle or upper management e.g. controllers, CEOs, business consultants	Sociocultural experts e.g. teachers, hospital doctors, social workers
Lower qualifications	Small business owners e.g. kiosk owners, solo self-employed	Production workers e.g. industrial mechanics, carpenters, masons	Lower office clerks e.g. secretaries, clerical workers, receptionists	Service workers e.g. sales staff, geriatric nurses, cleaning staff

Source: Authors' presentation based on Oesch 2006.

When it comes to measuring class interest consciousness we used an index based on Wright (1997) and Erbslöh et al. (1987). This encompasses agreement with two items: »Employees in our society need trade unions to assert their interests« and »Big corporations have far too much power in Germany« (response options: »strongly agree«, »somewhat agree«, »neither agree nor disagree«, »somewhat disagree«, »strongly disagree«). This index also includes the respondent's assessment of the following hypothetical situation: »Imagine a long strike about wages and working conditions that has a massive impact on daily life in Germany. What kind of outcome would you like to see?« (response options: »the workers achieve most of their demands«, »the workers achieve only a few of their demands« or »the workers return to work without having their demands met«). A class interests index was constructed based on these items and question (cf. Engels et al. 2024). As we use it, this index has three levels: low, medium and strong class interest. Strong class interest means that the respondent fully or partially agrees with both items and is on the strikers' side in the fictitious labour dispute. Around 33 per cent of respondents show a strong class interest according to this measure.

To analyse voting behaviour we rely on the question: »Which party would you vote for if the Bundestag elections were held next Sunday?«. We grouped the respondents' answers into three camps in line with Oesch and Renwald's reasoning, outlined above: »centre-left« (SPD, Greens, Die Linke), »centre-right« (CDU-CSU, FDP) and »radical right« (AfD), supplemented by voters for other parties and non-voters (»would not vote«).³ As already mentioned, this approach ties in directly with current debates in political science. For the centre-left camp in particular, however, it is notable that this includes parties with sometimes very different class profiles in their electorates: while the workers' vote is well below average for the Greens, this is not the case with regard to the SPD and Die Linke (Abou Chadi and Hix 2021; Braband 2024). Due to the small number of respondents, a separate analysis of voting intentions for individual parties would not be sufficiently robust.⁴

³ Respondents stating that they still didn't know which party they were going to vote for or that they would spoil their ballot were excluded from our analysis.

⁴ At the same time, it is already noteworthy that the left of centre parties exhibit a non-uniform class specificity in their electorates.

6 FINDINGS: CLASSES AND POLITICAL CAMPS

The presentation of our findings is divided into two parts:

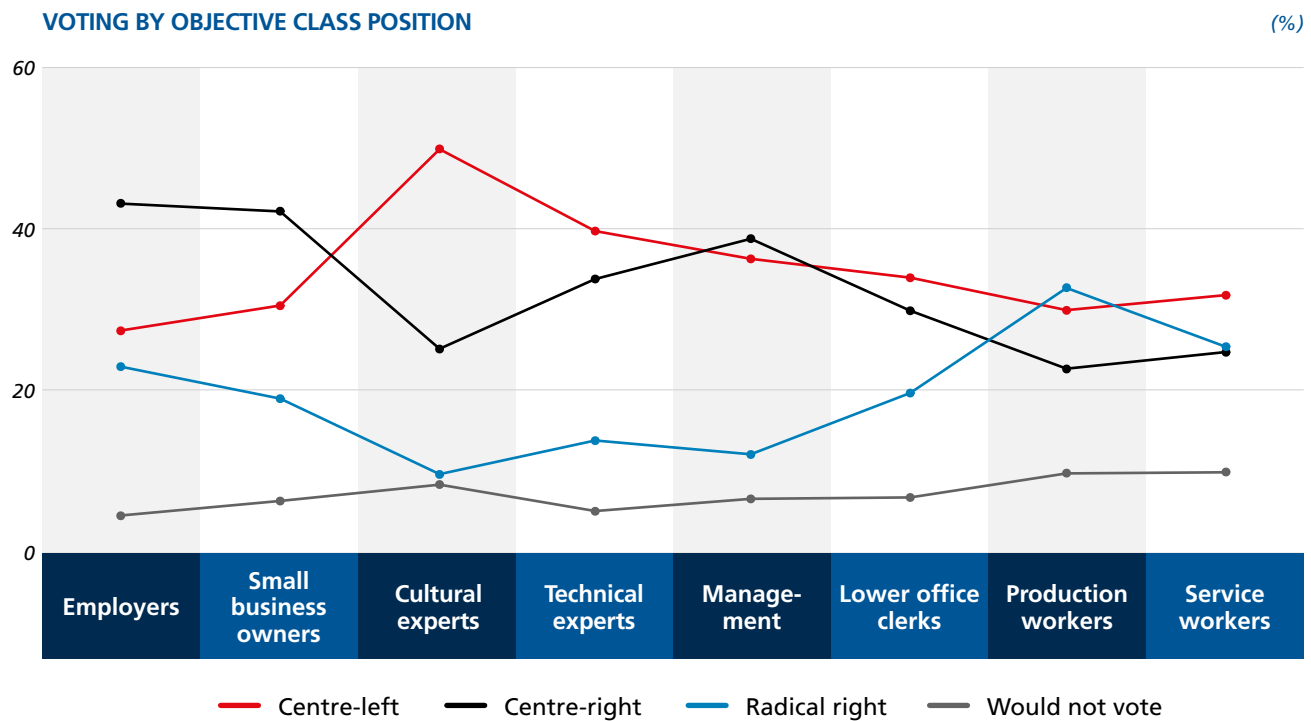
— First, we use our data to confirm the model of class in the political space presented above: We show that the centre-left, centre-right and radical right political camps each have their strongholds in different classes. We also demonstrate that class identity, class interests and consciousness of being at the bottom are linked in different ways to voting for these camps: all forms of class consciousness are associated with a significantly reduced likelihood of voting centre-right. But while people with a working class identity and low subjective status are more likely to vote for the radical right, those with an awareness of an antagonism between the interests of wage earners and employers are more likely to vote centre-left.

— Second, we take a closer look at the working class. We show that all forms of class consciousness are particularly common among the working class and that awareness of common class interests opens up the potential for coalitions between workers and middle class graduates. Beyond this, we see similar correlations between consciousness and voting intentions among workers as among the rest of the population. A working class identity and low status are associated with a stronger preference for the radical right, while class interests are associated with a stronger preference for centre-left parties.

We begin with the link between class and voting in the population as a whole. Figure 4 shows voting intentions for the three political camps by objective class position. For

**Where are the class bases of the political camps?
Voting intentions among occupational classes**

Figure 4



Reading example: 43 per cent of employers say they would vote for a centre-right party, 27 per cent would vote for a centre-left party, 23 per cent for the AfD and 5 per cent would not vote at all.

Source: Authors' presentation (missing to 100%: other parties).

some classes clear party preferences emerge. In accordance with Oesch and Rennwald's model presented above the economic middle class of employers, small business owners and self-employed professionals, such as lawyers or private doctors, are most likely to vote for centre-right parties, followed by higher management employees. Teachers, journalists and social workers, by contrast – that is, members of the cultural middle class – are much more likely to vote for centre-left parties. These parties are also favoured among technical experts, such as architects and engineers. The findings for production and service workers as well correspond to the position described by Oesch and Rennwald as being »between the two stools« of the left and radical right. The AfD and centre-left parties are almost on a par. In comparison with the other classes, this speaks of a strong inclination towards voting radical right. Our data thus largely confirm previous research findings: The contemporary political class constellation spans three social and political poles. Voters for the centre-left, centre-right and radical right parties are found in all classes, but the political camps each have clearly distinct social strongholds: the cultural middle class (centre-left), the economic middle class (centre-right) and the working class (radical right).

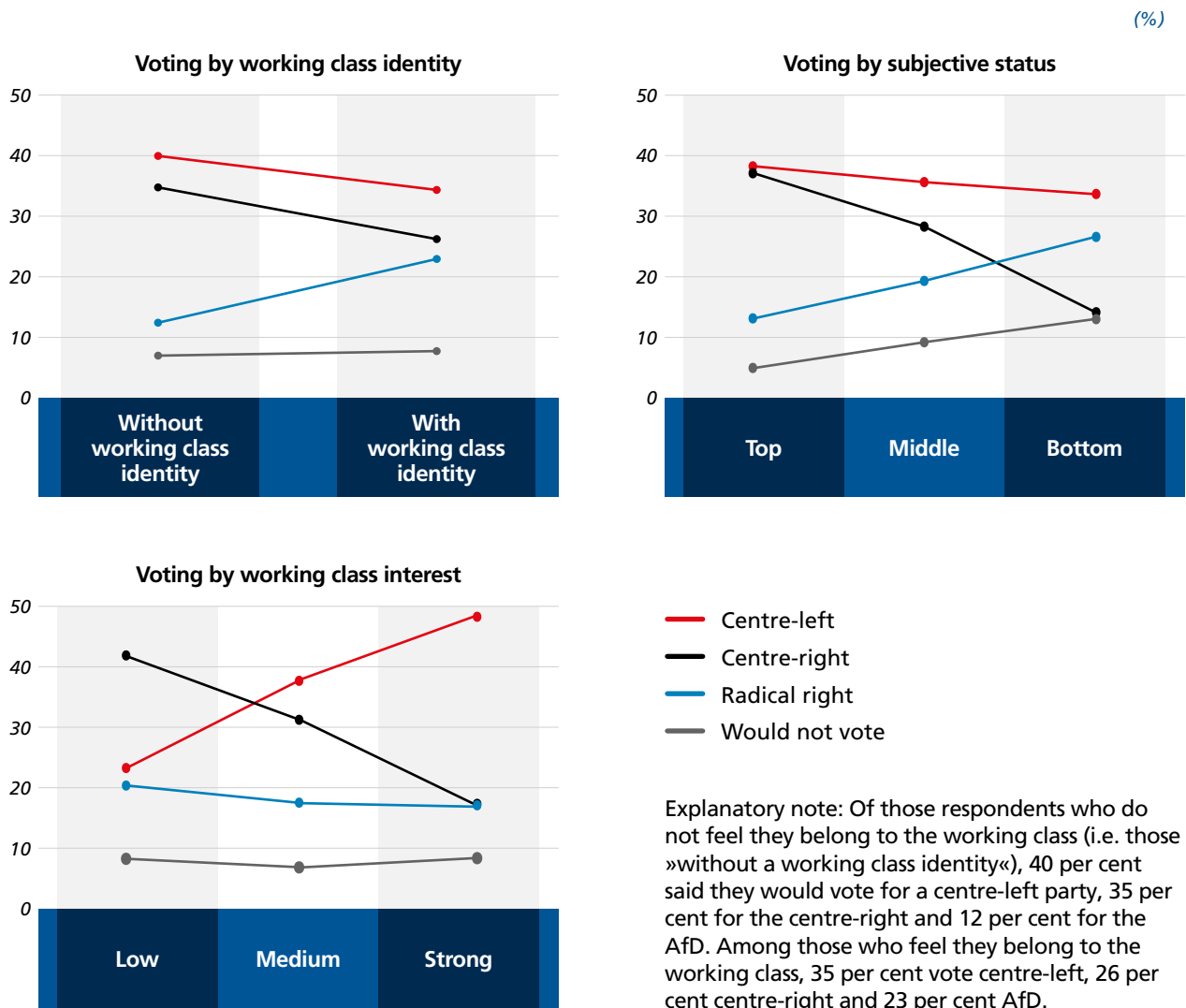
7 LEFT- AND RIGHT-WING FORMS OF CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS?

The next step goes beyond existing research. Here we look at the correlation between class consciousness and voting behaviour (Figure 5). It is immediately notable that all forms of class consciousness go hand in hand with a lower likelihood of voting for *centre-right* parties. People are less likely to vote CDU or FDP the more they identify with the

working class, the lower they position themselves in society, and the more emphatic their consciousness of antagonistic class interests is. This shows that a central political divide of the twentieth century persists at the level of people's consciousness. The nature of this division was sum-

Voting for the three political camps by class identity, class interests, and subjective status

Figure 5



Source: Authors' presentation (missing to 100%: other parties).

marised by a worker in one of the focus groups of our study (not analyzed here):

»The SPD was always for the ordinary people. The CDU was always for those at the top, the rich.«

At the same time, our analyses show for class identity and low subjective status that a diminished centre-right vote does not entail a shift to the *left*, but instead a significantly increased tendency to vote for the AfD.⁵ A similar picture emerges for self-positioning in social space: here, the further down respondents position themselves, the higher their likelihood of voting AfD. The proportion of centre-right voters decreases accordingly, while the centre-left share remains unchanged. To put it differently, this contains two insights: First, people with or without a working class identity vote for centre-left parties at almost the same rate (this is not a trivial finding in light of the history of the political left). Second, the composition of the right-wing vote changes drastically between people with and without class consciousness. In the higher status, non-worker space, right-leaning voters choose CDU and FDP. But among those who feel themselves to be at the bottom and as part of the working class, right-leaning voters often opt for the AfD. This could be an indication that the moderate right remains dominant in those social groups in which the legitimacy of the party system remains intact, while the AfD is poised to become the hegemonic right-wing force where 'politics as usual' has lost legitimacy.

It is also interesting to note, however, that it is not only the AfD vote that shoots up among people with a sense of low status, but also abstentionism. This is consistent with studies that indicate a close connection between class, low status, and political exclusion (Elsässer and Schäfer 2023). Turning one's back on democracy is particularly common among people who feel they are on the lower end of the pecking order. These findings may make rather sobering reading for parties on the left. These parties must ask themselves why a sense of class identity and of being at the bottom of society are no longer clearly left-wing forms of consciousness, as they had been from the beginning of the modern party system, and why the radical right-wing has been able to take over their representation, at least in part (see also the discussion below).

By contrast, a different picture emerges for the political correlates of class *interest* consciousness. Here, our descriptive analysis suggests that an awareness of working people's shared interests and the antagonism of these interests to those of employers and large corporation forms an aspect of class consciousness that remains very clearly linked to the political left. Respondents who clearly show solidarity with the employees' side in top-bottom conflicts between employers and workers, or trade unions and corporations, are significantly more likely to vote for left-wing parties. Neither the centre-right nor the radical right can make much headway on this issue.

⁵ The CDU, FDP and AfD together have almost exactly the same share of voters among respondents with and without a working-class identity. However, among those who identify with the working class, there is a clear shift away from the centre-right and towards the far-right.

8 THE POLITICS OF THE WORKING CLASS »IN AND FOR ITSELF«

In a second analytical step, we now look more closely at the working class. Is class consciousness still – as in the words of E.P. Thompson quoted above – anchored in objective class experiences? Or is it a free-floating ideological construct that depends more on people's personal opinions than on their social position? This question is crucial for two reasons: first, it makes clearer what significance is attached to class consciousness today and with which groups political appeals to class consciousness could resonate. Second, we can minimise so-called composition effects, namely the possibility that it is not the identified forms of consciousness that makes the difference politically, but only the composition of the relevant social groups. To do so, we now look at the political effects of class consciousness only among respondents who belong objectively to the working class.

If we look at how class position and class consciousness fit together (Figure 6), we see that working class respondents have a particularly strong sense of belonging to the working class: 83 per cent of production workers and 70 per cent of service workers declare such identification (both figures are well above the population average). At the other end of the class structure, however, among employers and self-employed professionals, the proportion is only 29 per cent. Objective and subjective class situations therefore largely coincide. The social meaning of the term »working class« is still understood with relative precision today. This is important because it tallies with findings indicating that members of the working class are more likely to become politically mobilised when they are explicitly addressed as workers (Robison et al. 2021; Ares 2021).

A sense of being at the bottom is also comparatively strong among workers, although here, as in all classes, only a minority position themselves at the lower levels of the status scale. This indicates a strong middle class or middle orientation also among workers: someone may be working class and feel that they belong to it, but when it comes to placing themselves in a status order, which can also be understood as an order based on value and merit, they are likely to see themselves nevertheless as in the middle.⁶ Being a worker is not necessarily associated with a low social position, as it used to be in older understandings of the proletarian condition. Also with regard to a sense of being at the bottom, however, objective and subjective situations align: between self-declared top and bottom there is a clear income gap.⁷ In other words: people's »social sense« is rela-

tively accurate, both when it comes to their position in the class structure and their situation in social hierarchies.

For class interest, finally, we again find a differing and particularly interesting pattern: Again production and service workers both exhibit a strong sense of class interest, but both are superseded by the middle class group of socio-cultural experts. When it comes to disagreements between employees and corporations or criticisms of the excessive power of big business, interest-conscious workers and many members of the cultural middle class stand on the same side of the struggle. As we know from other studies a sense of social justice in this portion of the middle class is often central to someone's sense of self (Damhuis and Westheuser 2024). This pattern thus points towards a potential for coalitions between two classes that form the core electorates of left-wing parties (see also Wagner 2024).

These patterns raise the question of whether the differences we have observed for class identity (associated with far right voting) and for class interests (associated with left voting) simply stem from the fact that in each case different social groups have a strong working class identity or a strong working class interest. Could it be that the political effect of this class interest manifests itself only among middle class members of the socio-cultural occupations? In that case we are dealing with so-called composition effects.

In order to exclude this possibility in a final step we limit our analyses only to production and service workers.⁸ If the findings presented above are based on composition effects the results here should be different from those for the population as a whole. But, as Figures 6 and 7 show, this is not the case. Also among the working class, an identification with the working class and low subjective status go hand in hand with a stronger preference for the AfD, while a developed class interest consciousness makes people more likely to vote for centre-left parties. Class consciousness also significantly weakens the vote for centre-right parties among workers. The links between politics and class consciousness found for the population as a whole also appear in the working class.

One extremely important political difference between workers and the rest is the different baseline levels of support for the three political camps. Since the AfD is unusually strong overall in the working class, it is also on a par with the three left-wing parties among workers with a class identity. The working class »in and for itself« therefore falls between two stools politically. It votes for the left and

⁶ For example, around 60 per cent of production workers and service workers choose the middle option from the seven response categories.

⁷ Average household income varies between 2,300 euros (self-positioning at the bottom), 3,000 euros (middle) and 3,500 euros (top).

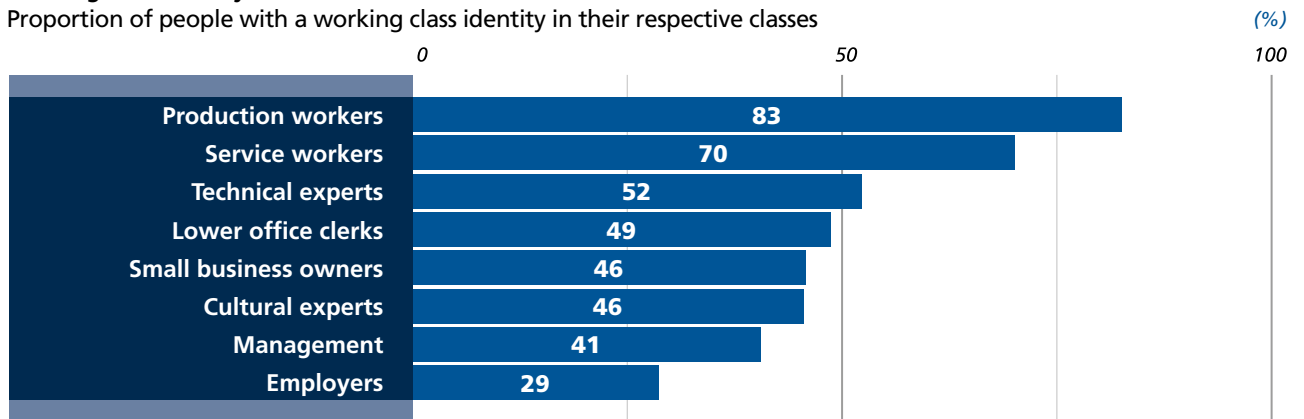
⁸ We dichotomise our indicators of class awareness (see »Data and operationalisation«). A presentation with confidence intervals can be found in the Annex.

Distribution of forms of class consciousness across occupational classes (Oesch): class identity, class interest and sense of being at the bottom

Figure 6

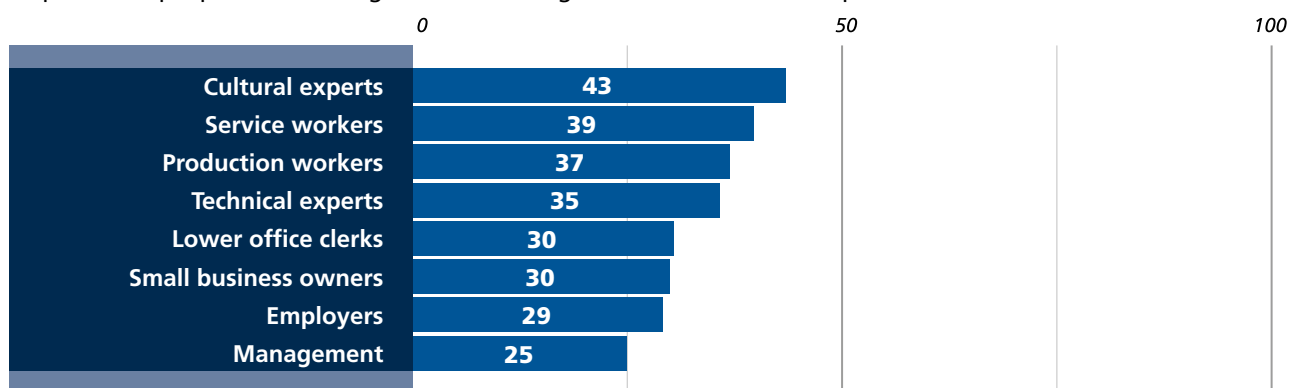
Working class identity

Proportion of people with a working class identity in their respective classes



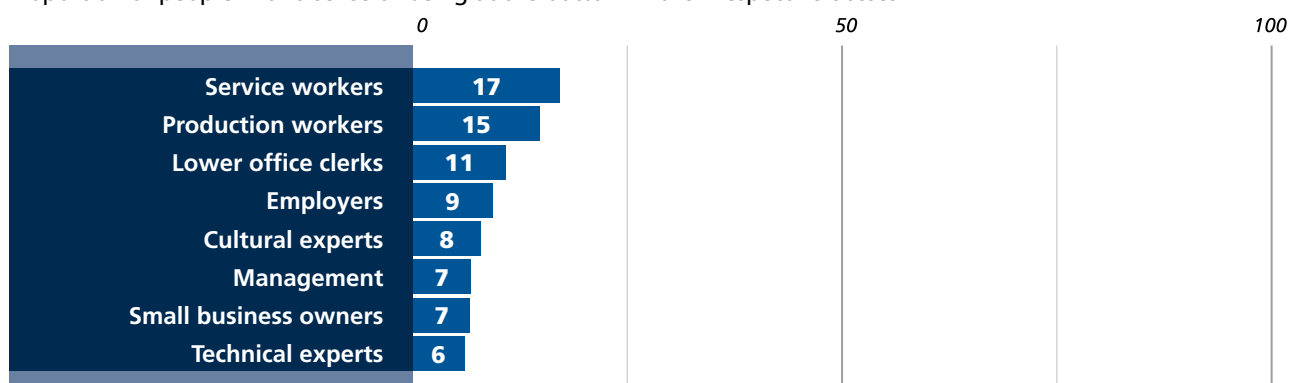
Working class interests

Proportion of people with a strong sense of working class interests in their respective classes



Sense of being at the bottom

Proportion of people with a sense of being at the bottom in their respective classes



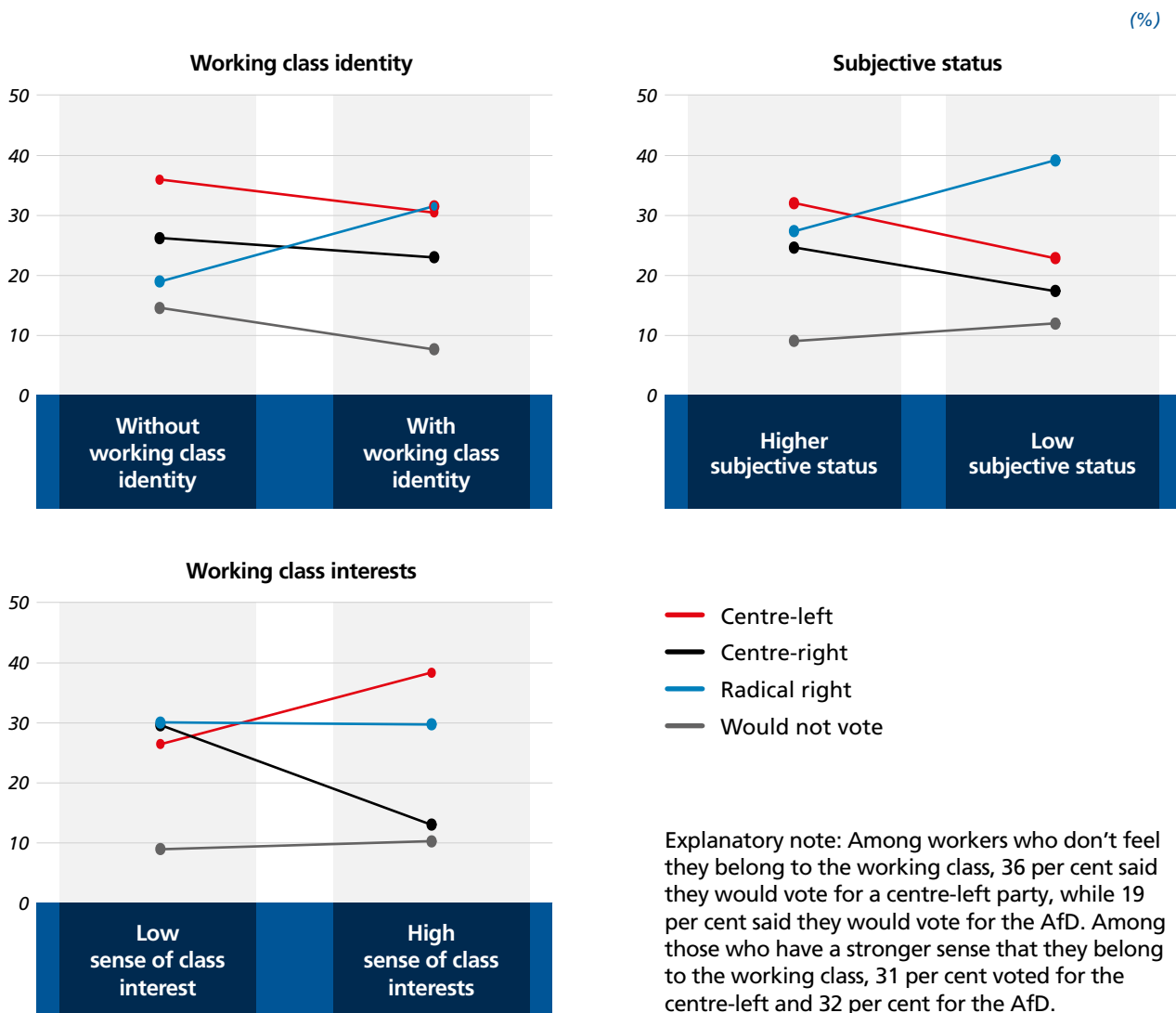
Explanatory note: 83 per cent of production workers, but only 29 per cent of employers, feel that they belong to the working class; 43 per cent of socio-cultural experts have a strong consciousness of interest, while 17 per cent of service workers place themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Source: Authors' presentation.

the far right in equal measure. Among workers who position themselves socially rather on the bottom, the AfD clearly ranks first. Just under 40 per cent of those in this group say they intend to vote for this party. It appears that the radical right has become a political home for that part of the working class that feels devalued in the social status order, in addition to strengthening a sense of devaluation and resentment among its supporters. The left camp clearly prevails only among workers with a pronounced sense of class interest. As in the population as a whole, centre-left and centre-right mirror one another here: While the voter share of the CDU and FDP among interest-conscious workers falls off a cliff, the left vote grows substantially. AfD voting, by contrast, appears unaffected by class interest consciousness.

Production and service workers' voting intentions by class identity, subjective status, and class interest

Figure 7



Source: Authors' presentation (missing to 100%: other parties).

SUMMARY: RIGHT-WING IDENTITY, LEFT-WING INTERESTS

Our study provides new findings on a classic, but recently rather neglected topic of political sociology, namely the relationship between class consciousness and political orientation. We distinguish between identity, interest and subjective status as three dimensions of class consciousness. All three are specific ways of translating shared objective situations into shared subjective self-understandings. For each form of consciousness we examined how widespread they are in different classes and to what extent they are linked to particular voting patterns. Based on original survey data our analysis shows first that forms of class consciousness are widespread in post-industrial German society and remain clearly anchored in the objective class structure. People who work in low to medium-skilled jobs show a significantly stronger identification with the working class and its interests. Although the term »working class« tends not to have much currency in public opinion today, people continue to have a rather precise understanding of its social meaning. At any rate, they know how to apply the term when they are confronted with it. Interestingly both the »old« predominantly male working class of production workers and the »new« feminized service proletariat consider themselves as part of the working class.⁹

The main focus of our analysis lay on the electoral significance of identification with the working class and its interests, as well as a sense of low social status. Picking up on recent political science research we traced the effects of class consciousness on voting for three political camps: centre-left (SPD, Greens, Die Linke), centre-right (CDU, FDP) and radical right (AfD). We first showed that the social strongholds of the three camps each lie in different classes: the cultural middle class (centre-left), the economic middle class (centre-right) and the working class (far right).

Second, our analysis provided evidence of the continuing relevance of class consciousness for voting behaviour. All varieties of class consciousness go hand in hand with a substantially lower likelihood of voting for centre-right parties. Conservatives and economic liberals in Germany seem unable to link their political project with forms of class consciousness. On the contrary, it appears that precisely a lack of class consciousness makes people more likely to vote for the centre-right. Beyond this, our findings point in two directions: working class identity and a sense of low social status are linked to a stronger likelihood of voting AfD. An awareness of antagonistic class interests, by contrast, is associated with a clear preference for centre-left parties. This is as true for the population as a

whole as it is for workers: workers who position themselves in solidarity with the employees' side in top-bottom conflicts between trade unions and employers are much more likely to vote for left-wing parties.

Contrary to the assumptions of some observers quoted above, it therefore has to be said that a sense of class identity in itself does not immunise citizens against right-wing extremism. Instead, the AfD also seems to offer a political home at least to some of those who identify with the working class and locate themselves closer to the bottom of society. We interpret this as indicating that a working class identity can be politicised in a variety of ways: as an inclusive, solidarity-based vertical demarcation from the rich, bosses and owners; or as an exclusionary demarcation from other groups of wage earners (such as migrants, social benefit recipients or social outsiders). The right can colonise the working class based on a distinction between hard-working (and native) »makers« and alleged »takers« living parasitically at the expense of other people (Rathgeb 2024). It should set alarm bells ringing for the left that the AfD, which has not been around for very long, has already made such inroads in the working class; not least because the radical right's capacity to achieve hegemony for its interpretation of what being working class means signals the weakness of left-wing alternative interpretations. For a long time it was central to the self-understanding of left-wing parties that they represented the identity, interests and grievances of workers and other wage-earners and were able to channel this into a solidarity-based politics for society as a whole. Our findings display the symptoms of a neglect of this political anchoring.

A left-wing politicization of class consciousness – both in the working class and in the population as a whole – currently seems to work best on the basis of common class interests. This kind of approach also appears strategically promising insofar as we could show that the left does still have a potential for forging a class alliance between interest-conscious workers and justice-oriented middle classes. A great deal of commentary in recent years has pointed to a growing cultural and political alienation between the working and middle classes that has fueled conflicts over migration, recognition and climate policy. Our findings suggest that this divide may be reversed through a politics that centers on wage earners' common interests and their opposition to the interests of employers and large corporations. This is a point that unites groups with different class positions and lifestyles.

Our data also contain a number of interesting findings on the general state of class formation. The most funda-

⁹ Being a worker is less associated with self-positioning at the bottom of society; many see themselves both as working class and as part of the middle of society.

mental may be that the phenomenon of class consciousness retains political significance even in a post-industrial class structure with a growing service sector and higher levels of qualification. Although for decades now class issues have been marginalised in Germany, and class identity – in contrast to, say, national identity – has received little political attention, people’s social sense of their position in the class structure remains astonishingly clear. How this sense manifests itself politically, however, is anything but straightforward. This can also be seen in the surprising finding that class identity and class interest are linked to diverging political dynamics today. Formerly, both were closely tied to the political left, in the sense that identification with the working class entailed an identification with its interests and its political representation. If nowadays the logics of class identity and class interests diverge, this may result from the fact that many people no longer construe working class identity in terms of workers’ interests in conflicts between the top and bottom of society.¹⁰ It also seems that the left has lost its monopoly over the interpretation of class identity. Instead the radical right has been able to present distribution conflicts as a zero-sum game between established and outsider groups.

We thus find ourselves in a new, politically highly dangerous phase of the political battle over the meaning of class, work, and the self-conception of ordinary wage earners. As Philipp Rathgeb (2024) shows, this phase is characterised by the fact that the radical right – in Germany as in the rest of Europe and the United States – has been constructing a coherent political project to address workers. It pits the image of a native and particularly »deserving« part of the workforce threatened by migration and the transition to a post-industrial knowledge economy against migrants, supposed layabouts and outsiders. The promise is that if these outsider groups are disenfranchised and taken down a peg or two, this will enhance the status and protection of the insider groups. The radical right project leans on symbols of workers’ pride, hones in on workers’ sense of disaffection and even at times uses an older social democratic rhetoric. At the same, the divisions sown among wage earners erode solidarity and weaken this class, making this project attractive also to capital elites, some of whom have eagerly been funding the radical right. The right can thus play a double game: They present themselves as representatives of ordinary people. At the same time they make policy in the interest of the economic elites and weaken the organisational power, security and social rights of working people.

If left-wing parties want to counter this double game, it is not enough for them to decry the radical right as “populists” and present themselves as a moderate, statesman-like voice of reason. Doing so allows the right to monopolize a sense of popular anger, the valuable resource of political emotions, and the representation of anti-establishment attitudes, which are particularly ubiquitous among the working class (Beck and Westheuser 2022). Similarly, a political

opponent cannot be defeated by adopting its political paradigm. When, for example, social democrats get on board with demands to take a tougher line against welfare claimants because they’re afraid of a hostile press, when they declare migration to be a social evil, ethnicise social problems and stir up competing claims between groups of wage earners, they are taking up an approach to politics that renders them superfluous. In an effort to avoid appearing weak themselves, they end up strengthening their political opponents. Many studies have shown that this kind of politics is extremely counterproductive (see, for example, Abou-Chadi et al. forthcoming). It robs forces to the left of the centre of breathing space, while handing the right political capital.

If the centre-left is to have any chance of prevailing under today’s hostile political conditions, it needs to ensure that the conflict between the interests of the top and those of the rest, as well as the legitimate demands of the less well-off majority are at the heart of public debates. They need to understand that naming and politicizing this antagonism of interests is their particular point of strength. Class interest consciousness is widespread in the population, particularly among potential left voters, and it can bring together two important voting blocs: workers and the cultural middle class. To realize this potential, however, left parties need to understand that conflicts are inevitable, make it much plainer than they have so far in whose name and for whose interests they are fighting, and also *against* which competing interests their programme will have to be implemented. As Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez once put it: »If you try to please everyone, no one will vote for you«.

To clarify what is at stake in left-wing politics, it is also inevitable to clearly name opponents and »villains« among the economic elites. This is because problems caused by humans seem much more solvable by humans than seemingly automatic processes without actors, such as »the rise in poverty levels« or the »widening gap between high and low earners«. Abstractions of this kind are boring in comparison with the much more attention grabbing right-wing narrative of a nation overrun from outside and brought to its knees by greedy politicians from within. Identifying self-serving elites at the top as the opponent does not require lumping all the rich together in a demagogic fashion. Instead, the centre-left can argue that the vast majority of well-off people are honest, pay their taxes and contribute to society, and that it is only a small group of rich people who avoid taxes and hoard their wealth, egoistically unconcerned about the good of society. A small number of shareholders are raking in record gains, while the workers who, day in day out, create company profits with their own hands, are compelled to top up their paltry wages with social benefits. This cannot go on. The high approval rates on issues of corporate power and workers’ interests seen above indicate that such a political approach would be popular, above all among potential centre-left voters.

¹⁰ As many as a quarter of people who say they belong to the working class appear to have only a modest awareness of class interests. Conversely, a third of those who don’t consider themselves working class nevertheless strongly support the interests of workers and trade unions.

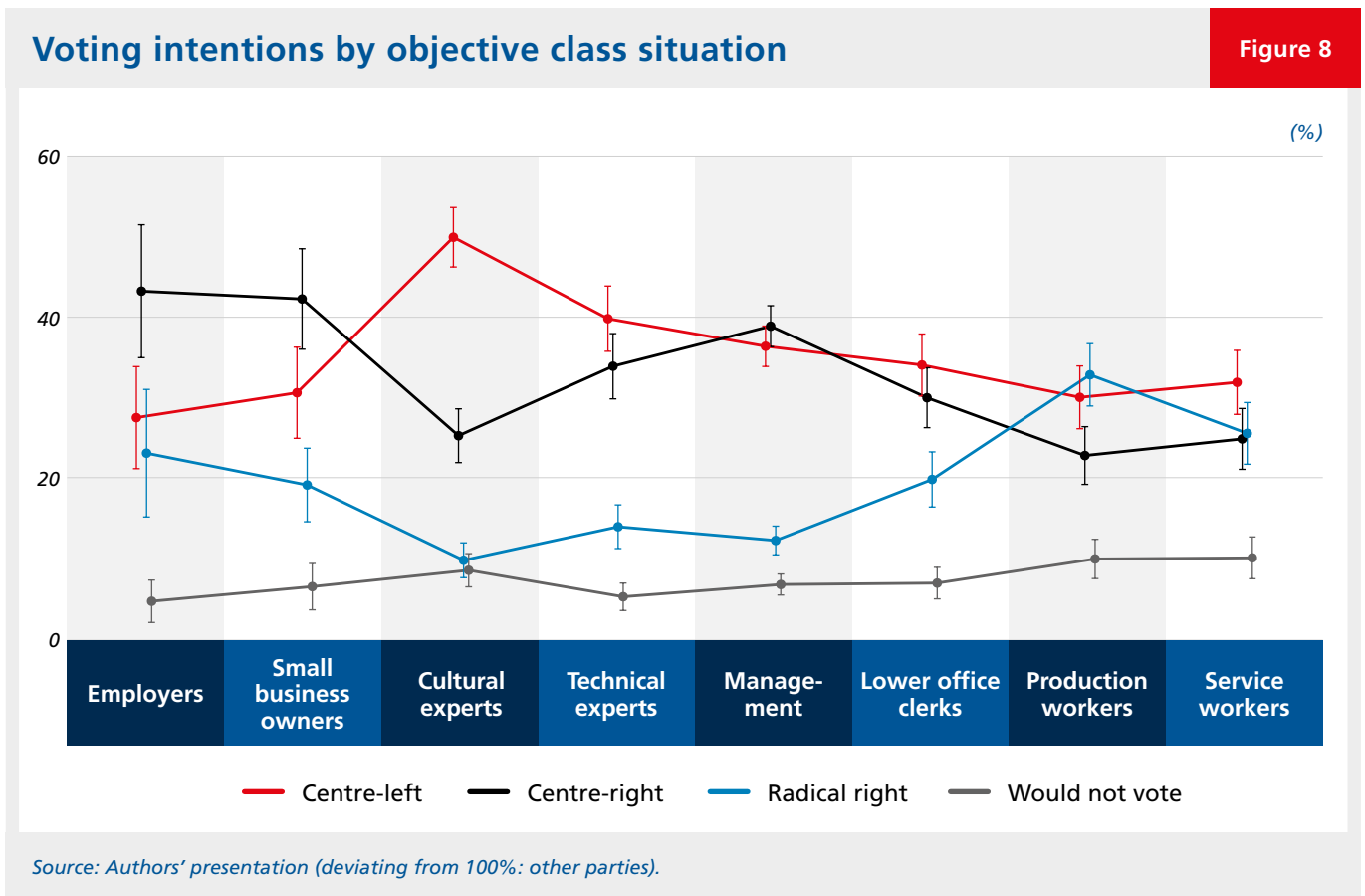
On the other hand, workers and members of the lower middle of society need to be offered an inclusive and positive relationship to their own group which is more persuasive than the right's exclusionary approach. This cannot be done by resorting to generalities («the people of this country») or avoiding all references to social groups in order to include everyone. As already mentioned, studies show that workers are much more susceptible to mobilisation for parties that address them explicitly *as* workers (Robison et al. 2021; Ares 2021). If the centre-left would like to bring the working class together with the progressive middle class it would make sense to focus once again on the fact that the public infrastructure of the common good, the regulation of profitmaking for the benefit of employees and also the achievements of the welfare state, such as pensions and housing benefit, were the proud result of a historic mobilisation of ordinary people and that these efforts towards social progress are ongoing.

Put differently, what is needed is a revival of the vocabulary of democratic class politics that forms the heart of the social democratic and left-wing traditions. For social democracy in particular this entails a tough, but essential re-orientation. For a long time, social democracy could successfully ride high economic growth rates to dodge distribution conflicts. But this model has foundered, together with the narrative that we already live in a society »beyond class and status«. In the coming years, distributional and recognition struggles between social groups are more likely to increase than to diminish, and are sure to find expression in heated political conflicts. In order to prevent the right from exploiting this situation of tension and crisis, left-wing parties need to develop a renewed language lending expression to people's keen sense of social injustice and conflicting interests. Where the right wants to turn one part of the working class against the other, the left needs to offer them a unifying sense of class interests as an alternative political compass. ←

10 ANNEX

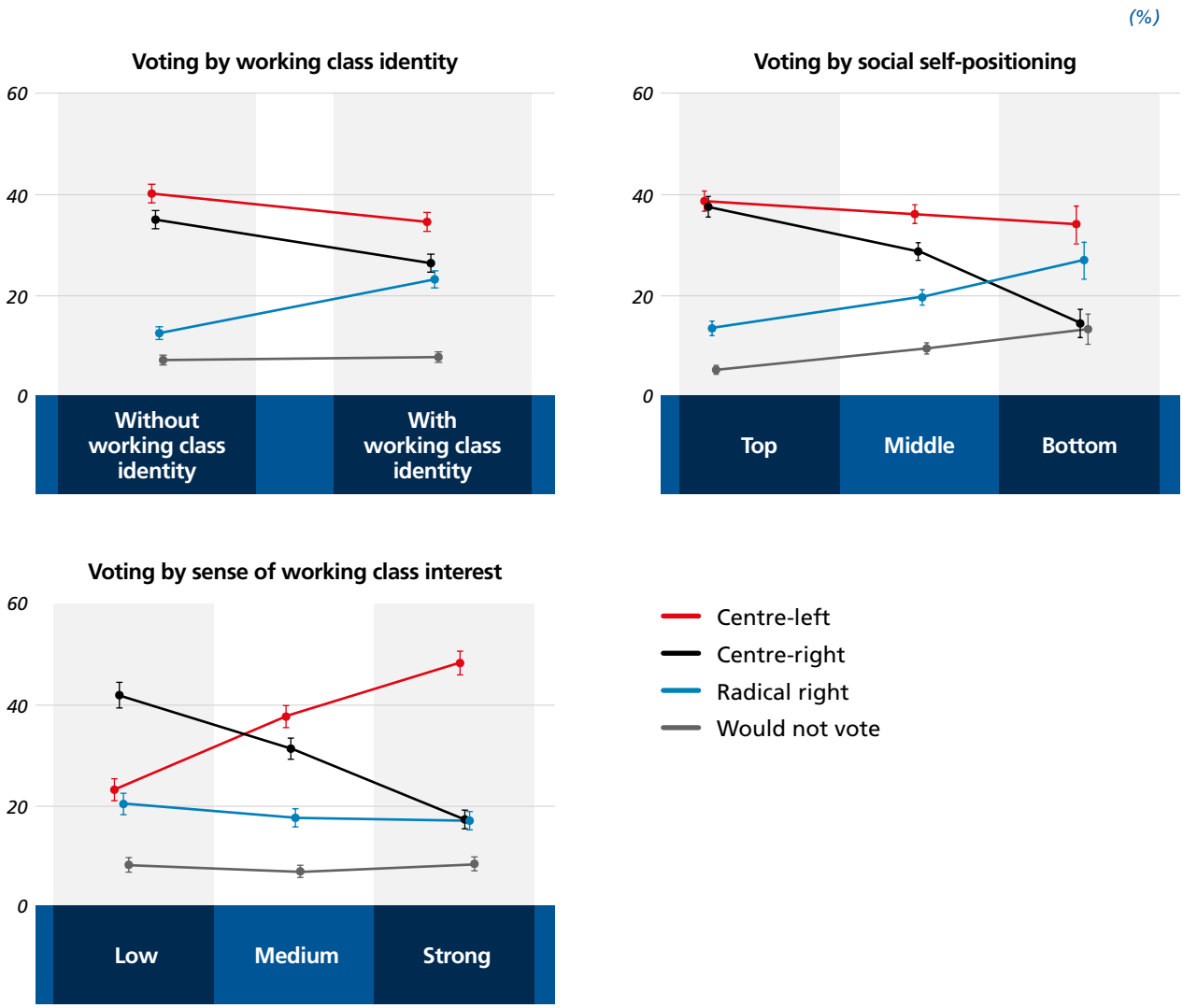
The percentages are shown with an 83 per cent confidence interval (Payton et al. 2003). If the intervals of two classes do not overlap, the class difference in relation to the respective party is significant at the 5 per cent level. If the two intervals overlap, the class difference in relation to the

respective party is not significant at the 5 per cent level. When comparing voting intentions for different parties within a given class, the voting intentions are significantly different if the confidence intervals for the respective parties are relatively far apart.



Voting intentions for political camps by class identity, social self-positioning and class interests

Figure 9



Source: Authors' presentation (deviating from 100%: other parties).

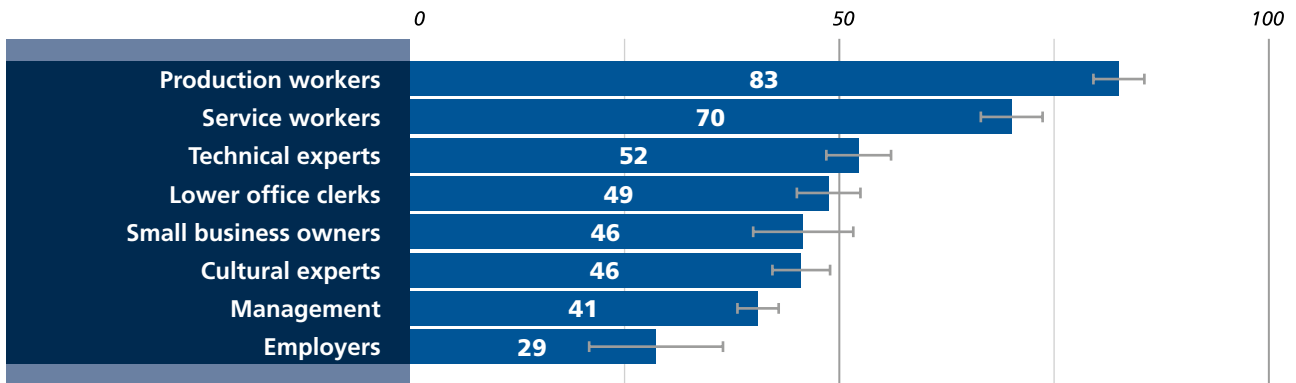
Distribution of forms of class consciousness across occupational classes (Oesch): class identity, class interest and sense of being at the bottom

Figure 10

Working class identity

Proportion of people with a working class identity in their respective classes

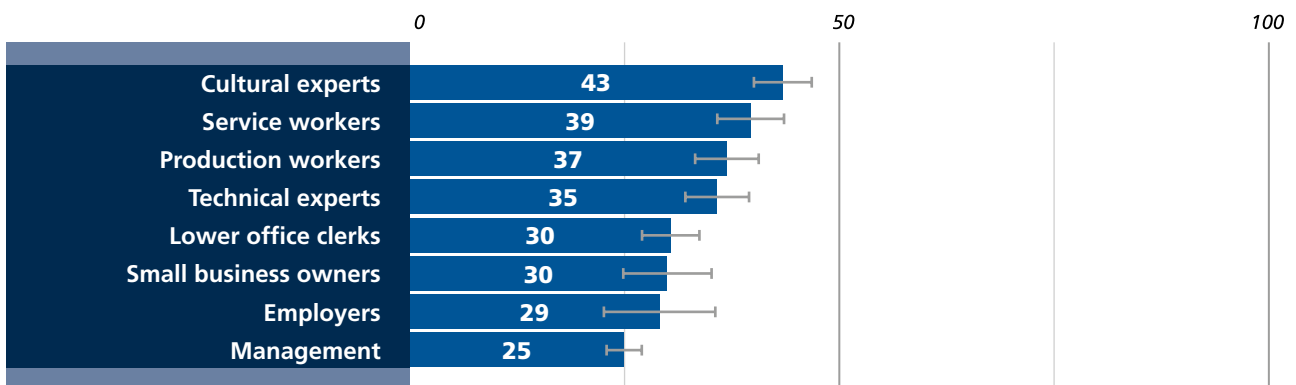
(%)



Working class interests

Proportion of people with a strong sense of working class interests in their respective classes

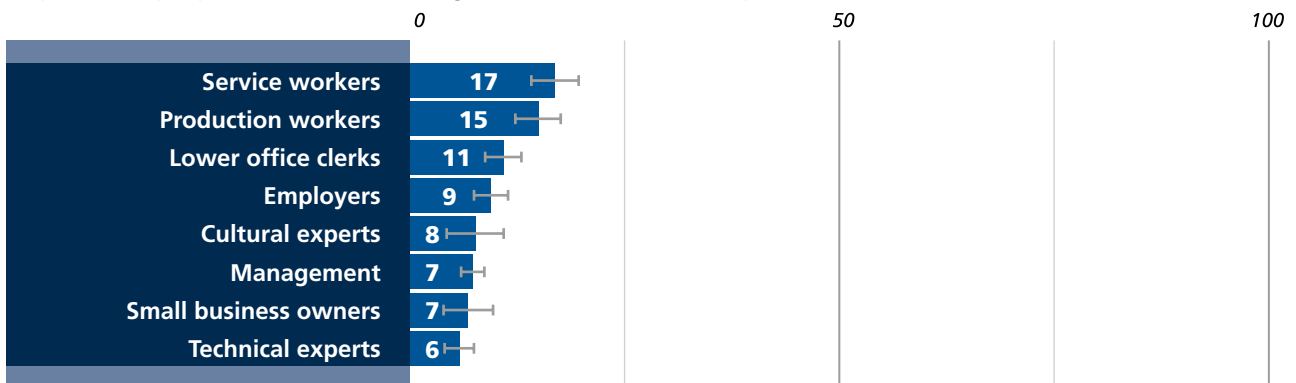
100



Sense of being at the bottom

Proportion of people with a sense of being at the bottom in their respective classes

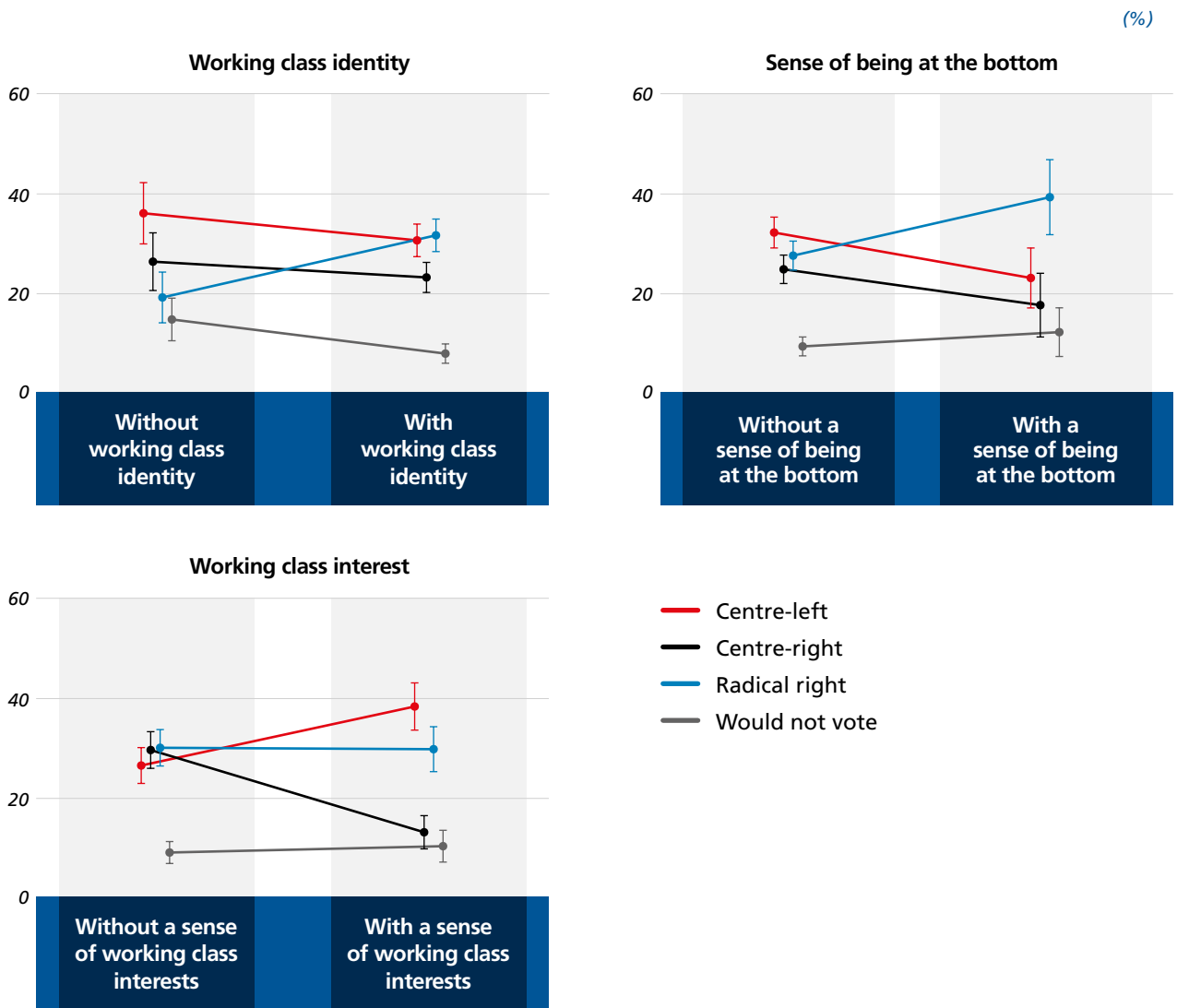
100



Source: Authors' presentation.

Workers' (production and service) voting intentions by class identity, sense of being at the bottom and class interest

Figure 11



Source: Authors' presentation (deviating from 100%: other parties).

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Which parties are seen as representing the interests of the working class today? Is there still a link between class consciousness and left political orientations? And does an active class consciousness immunise citizens against the appeals of the radical right? As sections of the working class flock to radical right parties, these questions are of renewed importance. To find answers, Linus Westheuser and Thomas Lux take an empirical look at original survey data.

The two authors explore whether class consciousness goes hand in hand with specific voting preferences. They distinguish between three dimensions of class consciousness: class interest, class identity and status. The results indicate that left and right politics are grounded in distinct forms of class consciousness: While having a working class identity and a low sense of social status makes people more likely to vote for the radical right, people are more likely to vote centre-left if they perceive an antagonism between the class interests of wage earners and employers. This points to important differences in the way class can become politicised today.

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