

# Diluting the Social Democratic Brand: Salience, Convergence, and Political Support

Jacob R. Gunderson  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
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## ABSTRACT

The electoral decline of social democratic parties in Europe has been the focus of substantial scholarly debate. In particular, explanations focused on large-scale social change—such as the declining share of blue-collar manual workers and falling union density—and ideological convergence with conservative and Christian democratic parties have been of particular prominence. While these explanations focus on critical features to understand social democratic party support, extant research has yet to consider the implications of issue salience divergence in this area. This is a potentially important oversight because the issues parties emphasize are critical to their brand. So, converging issue emphasis is likely to undermine social democratic support, just as ideological convergence has. In this paper, I focus on the extent to which the working class has declined within the social democratic electorate relative to manual working class' absolute size. In doing so, I focus on the moderating role of union density as well as the dilution of social democratic party brands.

Key Words: Social Democrats, Cleavage Theory, Class Voting, Convergence, Issue Salience.

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## Introduction

Across much of Western Europe, social democratic parties are struggling to maintain their vote share and position as the leading political party of the left (Benedetto, Hix, and Mastrorocco 2020). These struggles coincide with seismic changes in the demographic composition of European societies, political crises, and increasingly volatile electorates (Dassonneville 2023; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Lipset and Rokkan 1967). For social democratic parties, the declining share of voters in manual labor—the party family’s historic base—is particularly consequential. Typically, investigations of class voting find that the predictive power of class position has generally declined, though the degree and rate of this effect have varied substantially across countries (Best 2011; Elff 2007; Evans 2000).

In this paper, I aim to synthesize existing explanations for these broad changes. In particular, I argue that understanding the relationship between the size of social groups and party social embeddedness necessitates the integration of both demographic factors, integrative institutions, and party brands. The size of social groups plays an important part in parties’ political calculus. As a group’s size declines, a party may have to look for support from other segments of society to maintain its position and ability to influence policy. However, there is no guarantee that a party will become less rooted in that segment of society as a result of its decline.

I argue that the strength of social institutions that integrate voters of a specific class into a political party will moderate the relationship between social structure and party social embeddedness. In the case of social democratic parties specifically, labor unions organize and inform workers about public policy and politics (Bartolini 2000; Rennwald and Pontusson 2021). As a result, I expect the relationship between the size of the manual working class and the degree

to which social democratic parties disproportionately draw their support from manual workers will be stronger as union density increases. If union density is low, manual workers will lack the intermediaries articulating their political interests and connecting them to the political system, so the relationship between group size and social embeddedness will be tenuous (Bremer and Rennwald 2022). Where unions are strong, however, I anticipate a more robust relationship.

Second, this paper attempts to better understand the relationship between cleavage group size and brand distinction. Previous research has situated demographic change and party strategy as separate—or even competing—explanations for the decline in cleavage voting (Evans and Tilley 2012; Jansen, Evans, and Graaf 2013). I aim to integrate them into a single framework. Of course, Przeworski and Sprague (1986) already identifies the inability of socialist parties to achieve majorities with support from workers may push them to broaden their appeal in a catch-all direction. This insight into the connection between group size and party brands, however, has yet to be integrated into our understanding of party brands (Lupu 2016). Furthermore, existing research on the role of party strategy on class voting has focused exclusively on issue positions, while neglecting the salience component of party brands (Gunderson 2023b, 2023a). I argue that as social democrats’ issue salience divergence—the degree to which they emphasize issues dissimilarly to other parties in their party system—decreases, their core demographic group will come to make up a less distinct component of their voters.

This paper also contributes to the state of the art in this area by approaching the question of social structure from the party perspective (Marks et al. 2022), rather than that of the individual. Drawing on recent research, I take the overrepresentation of manual workers as my outcome variable. In other words, to what extent does a party’s vote share consist of manual workers *in excess* of the share of manual workers in the entire population? This is a more

meaningful metric in this context than the share of manual workers supporting social democratic parties. A party may receive thirty percent of its votes from manual workers, for example, but if manual workers make up forty percent of voters in the system, then the party is actually underperforming in comparison to a situation where class position has no effect on vote choice.

Although still a very early draft, I find some evidence in support of my argument and some in contrast. First, it does appear that there is a general positive relationship between the size of the manual working class the degree to which manual workers are overrepresented among social democratic parties' voters. This positive relationship is also evident among radical left parties. Among all other party families, there is no significant positive relationship, suggesting that, although group size matters, so does the identity of the party.

Focusing specifically on social democrats, I find that taking account of the interaction between the size of the manual working class and union density is essential. Indeed, moving from one standard deviation below the mean level of union density to one standard deviation above the mean level of union density is associated moving from a statistically insignificant, slightly *negative* slope to a highly significant relationship of substantial magnitude. This demonstrates that, in agreement with other research (Rennwald and Pontusson 2021), we must consider the size of a social group *and* the extent to which that group is organized, particularly by politically affiliated actors, to understand trends in party social structuration.

In terms of party brands, the results are mixed. I find that party social structuration declines as social democratic parties move to the left, suggesting that brand dilution does undermine social democrats' capacity to mobilize manual workers to their side. However, the effect of issue salience divergence goes against my expectations. It seems that parties with increasingly distinct issue emphases is related to *decline*, rather than an increase in social

structuration. This may be the result of the measure not distinguishing between issue salience divergence between the radical left and parties on the right. This dynamic should be investigated more closely in future research.

More broadly, this paper contributes to our understanding of the relationship between sociological developments in society, voting behavior, and party competition. Cleavage group size, organization, and party strategy may also prove helpful in understanding contemporary and future change in party competition. As the educational cleavage becomes more pronounced the degree to which parties succeed in cultivating those voters may likely rely on the extent to which parties can distinctly incorporate these growing demographics' key issues into their existing brand.

## Party Social Structuration, Party Brands, and the Decline of the Working Class

### *Cleavage Group Size and Party Structuration*

Cleavage theory argues that European political parties can trace their roots to the historical crises and revolutions that divided European societies (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). The protestant reformation, foundation of nation-states, and the industrial revolution, in particular, created long lasting fissures in European polities. Many of today's mainstream political parties (social democrats, Christian democrats, conservatives, liberals, and many regionalist parties) based their appeals around the organization and mobilization of these large, relatively homogenous social groups. For social democrats, this primarily meant the manual working class.

Today, many of the central groups to these societal divisions have declined in size. The growing secularization of European societies and the transition away from manufacturing-based economies to post-industrial knowledge economies are not recent developments. Across West

European economies, the share of the population employed in industrial production has fallen, though not homogenously (Thelen 2019). Simultaneously, the predictive power of class position and income as a predictor vote choice has declined (Evans 2000; Goldberg 2020), leading to larger discussions of whether we are witnessing a dealignment of parties' social bases or the first step in a larger realignment (Dalton 2018; Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; Garzia, Ferreira da Silva, and De Angelis 2022; Hagevi et al. 2022; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Kitschelt and Rehm 2019).

The general expectation is that as group size declines, parties will place try to replace a broader electorate, diminishing the degree to which they are social rooted in their core cleavage groups (Benedetto, Hix, and Mastrorocco 2020). Indeed, Przeworski and Sprague (1986) argue that the necessity of appealing to broader electorates was already present because workers neither made up a majority of national electorates nor did they vote uniformly for socialist parties. Subsequent studies have identified that the electoral potential of manual workers as a core group of supporters for social democratic parties has continued to decline due both to continued decline in the size of group as well as an increasing propensity for manual workers to vote for non-social democratic parties (Best 2011; Elff 2007; Marks et al. 2022). As a result, I expect that—from the party's perspective—there will be a positive relationship between the overrepresentation of manual workers in social democratic electorates and the absolute size of the manual working class. That is, as the manual working class shrinks, they will not only comprise a smaller proportion of social democratic voters in absolute terms, but this proportion will converge on the size of the group in society as a whole.

H<sub>1</sub>: Among social democratic parties, there will be a positive relationship between the proportion of the population engaged in manual labor and the over-representation of manual workers as a share of party support.

### *Cleavage Group Organization*

However, I do not expect this effect to hold across all contexts. Although the size of the manual working class is in decline in most European states, the political and economic organization of these workers varies substantially. Although also in decline in many European countries, unions may fulfill a crucial role in structuring the relationship between manual workers and social democratic parties. I expect higher levels of union density to strengthen the relationship between the size of the manual working class and their overrepresentation in social democratic electorates.

There are several reasons to expect this relationship. First, unions are a crucial conduit for political information to workers coordination around their political and class interests (Iversen and Soskice 2015). Unions have an incentive to keep their members well-informed about the political issues affecting them as individuals and as members of a collective bargaining unit. Unions' capacity to influence policy through engagement in the electoral process also hinges on their ability get their members to participate in elections and vote for the candidate or party in the unions' interests. Historically, this has been social democratic parties. While, it is the case that some of the ties connecting unions to social democratic parties have frayed, cross national analysis has found that, "In short, left-of-centre parties and unions that were once close are rarely completely estranged and a few remain almost as bound up with each other organizationally as they ever were" (Allern and Bale 2017, 307).

The continued relevance of the union-social democratic party relationship is also evident at the level of individual political behavior. In their analysis of core, distant, and demobilized supporters of social democratic parties, Bremer and Rennwald (2022) find that manual workers outside of unions are relatively more likely to be demobilized supporters, the group of individuals

who consider themselves close to the social democratic party yet do not vote in elections. That is, they constitute a potential but untapped source of political support. In contrast, union members are much more likely to both support social democratic parties and participate in elections. Furthermore, Rennwald and Pontusson (2021) find that unionization is important for the political mobilization of the manual working class, even if they stop supporting social democratic parties, in which case union workers are more likely to support other left parties rather than parties on the right.

Therefore, I expect the connection between group size and manual workers' overrepresentation in social democratic electorates will be stronger when union density is higher. This is a hypothesis about structure. When workers are un- or only weakly organized, I expect there to be little systematic variation between the size of a group and its political behavior. When the group is highly organized, however, I expect the expected positive relationship to emerge.

H<sub>2</sub>: The relationship between cleavage group size and party social structuration will be stronger when union density is higher.

### *Party Brands and Political Loyalty*

The arguments discussed above primarily relate to the large-scale demographic changes tied to the transition to the post-industrial knowledge economy. As such, they mostly exist outside of parties' agency. In the short-term, parties cannot meaningfully manipulate the number of people employed in industry. However, I argue that parties are not completely at the fate of demographic destiny. In particular, I argue that capacity for holding on to their core cleavage groups depends on the maintenance of a clear brand.

Existing research has argued that brand dilution leads to voter disaffection and defection (Lupu 2014, 2016). We can think of party brands as the mental models of who and what parties stand for. These heuristics build up over time when voters observe parties' actions in government, campaign promises, manifestos, etc. However, actions that undermine an existing brand undercuts voters' interpretation of their political environment. Where there were once distinct political actors tied to differentiated programmatic offers, now there may be uncertain about which actors will support which groups or even a sense of betrayal. Such actions, like ideological convergence by social democratic parties with the center right, may lead to short term gains, but they may undermine party support and class voting in the long-run (Jansen, Evans, and Graaf 2013; Karreth, Polk, and Allen 2013). Muted differences between parties can also lead lower rates of electoral participation and party identification (Gunderson 2023a; Lupu 2015).

While convincing, this research has been focused on the positional component of party brands. I argue that a party's brand also incorporates the issues that the party makes salient. Party positions are clearly a crucial component of party's programmatic offer (Downs 1957), but Issue salience is also a fundamental component of political competition (Dennison and Kriesi 2023; Gunderson 2023b; Petrocik 1996; Riker et al. 1996; Schattschneider 1975). Parties can distinguish themselves from their competition through both taking distinctive issue positions and maintaining a distinct issue focus (De Vries and Hobolt 2020).

In the context of class voting, I expect convergence on issue salience to matter for party behavior in a similar fashion to positional convergence. When social democratic parties maintain a distinct issue salience profile, voters—including manual workers—know which issues matter to them and where they are likely to focus should they enter government. A social democratic party that dilutes the salience component of its brand and converges with other parties undermines both

citizens' perceptions of what that party stands for and the added utility of supporting it over another competitor. Therefore, I expect social democratic parties that dilute the salience component of their brand to experience a decline in the degree to which the manual working class is overrepresented in their electorate.

H<sub>3</sub>: Social democratic parties will be more socially rooted in manual workers when they have distinct issue emphases and positions.

## Data and Methods

### *Dependent Variable*

There are many potential ways of measure the social structuration of political parties (Alford 1962; Best 2011; Goldberg 2020; Lachat 2007; Langsæther 2019). The outcome variable for all three of my hypotheses is the overrepresentation or strength of social structuration of social democratic parties among the manual working class. As mentioned above, this paper takes the perspective of political parties, not individual voters. I, therefore, follow Marks et al. (2022, 4) in measuring party social structuration with  $P_{i,j}^S$ , where:

$$P_{i,j}^S = 100 * (\pi_{j|i}^S - \pi_j^S)$$

In this formula,  $S$  refers to a social class,  $j$  indicates a value of  $S$  (manual worker in this case), and  $i$  indicates a party (social democrats).  $P_{i,j}^S$  is equal to the difference between the proportion of social democratic party supporters who are manual workers and the overall prevalence of manual workers in society. Positive values indicate an overrepresentation of that social group among a party's voters relative to the society as a whole. To keep this value distinct from other statistical terms like p-values, I will refer to  $P_{i,j}^S$  party social structuration or overrepresentation interchangeably.

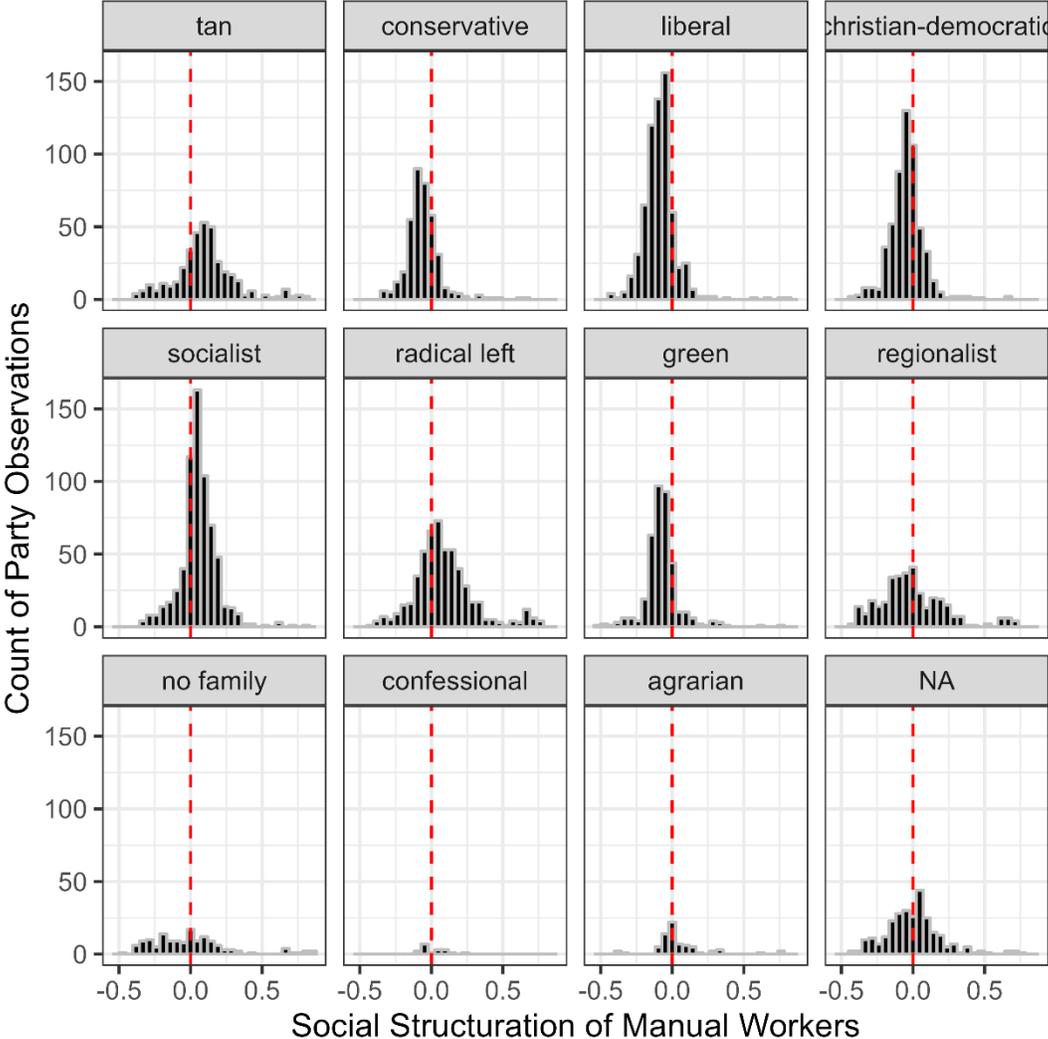


Figure 1: Histograms of social structuration of manual workers by party family. Data from Marks et al. (2022).

Figure 1 plot the distribution of values for social structuration of manual workers by party family. The red vertical dashed line is at 0. Values at zero indicate that the party received a proportion of its vote from manual worker that is equal to their prevalence in society as a whole. In general, the data are relatively normally distributed. There are also meaningful differences between party families. Most relevantly for this paper, socialist, radical left, and TAN parties tend to have support bases that overrepresent manual workers. This is in line with previous research on these party families (Oesch and Rennwald 2018). In contrast, liberals, conservatives, Christian democrats, and green parties tend to gain a smaller proportion of their support from manual workers than would be expected if voters chose randomly.

Although I will briefly return to a comparison between party families in the Results section, the primary focus on this paper is on social democratic parties. Specifically, I use data from nineteen major political parties going forward that overlap with the sample included in Benedetto, Hix, and Mastrorocco (2020). I limit the scope to West European cases in recognition of the distinct political legacy of the Soviet Union, which has profoundly affected party competition in Eastern Europe (Vachudova and Hooghe 2009). Additionally, focusing on these major parties ensures that the results will not be unduly affected by a large number of very small parties. The parties and countries are listed in footnote 1 below.<sup>1</sup> Future research should both consider the extent to which less dominant social democratic parties and radical left parties display similar

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<sup>1</sup> SAP (Sweden), SD (Denmark), DNA (Norway), SSDP (Finland), Labour (UK), Labour (Ireland), PSB-PBS/PS/SP (Belgium), PS-LSAP (Luxembourg), SPD (Germany), SPÖ (Austria), SPS-PSS (Switzerland), SFIO-PS (France), PSOE (Spain), PSI/PDS-DS-PD (Italy), PASOK (Greece), SDAP-PVDA/SP (Netherlands).

logics, or if the intra-bloc competition between social democrats and the radical left result in differing relationships.

### *Independent Variables*

The primary independent variable of this study is the size of the manual working class. I also get this variable from Marks et al. (2022).<sup>2</sup> They use survey data from the Eurobarometer and European Social Survey to categorize workers as manual laborers as those in industry or as production workers, respectively.

Figure 2 plots the over-representation and size of the manual working class for the social democratic parties included in my main sample. In agreement with the general demographic trends, the size of the manual working class (in blue) decreases in all cases from the beginning to the end of the available time period. The overrepresentation of those manual workers in social democratic vote shares also generally declines, but it is much more volatile. This is what we should expect. While employment in production and manufacturing is mainly driven by macroeconomic trends and long-run economic development, who those workers vote for is subject to a wide variety of other factors, resulting in more volatile values. Lastly, there are notable differences between parties in terms of the overall strength of social structuration.

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<sup>2</sup> As stated in the equation above, the size of the working class is one factor in calculating in the dependent variable. This obviously raises some concerns of endogeneity. However, this does not seem to be a major concern. It is the case that the size of the manual working class delimits the potential range of the outcome variable. If one hundred percent of people in a society were manual workers, no score above zero would be possible. Similarly, if there were an infinitesimal number of manual workers, but a party received all of their votes from those few workers, they would have a structuration score of 100. In practice, neither of these cases are present in the data, and—more importantly—the observed correlation between the size of the manual working class and social structuration for social democrats is positive, i.e., the reverse of the endogenous direction. This evidence is sufficient for me to continue knowing that the observed values of the dependent variable are simply manufactured results of the independent variable.

Values in France and Germany, in particular, are quite low throughout the entire period included in these data.

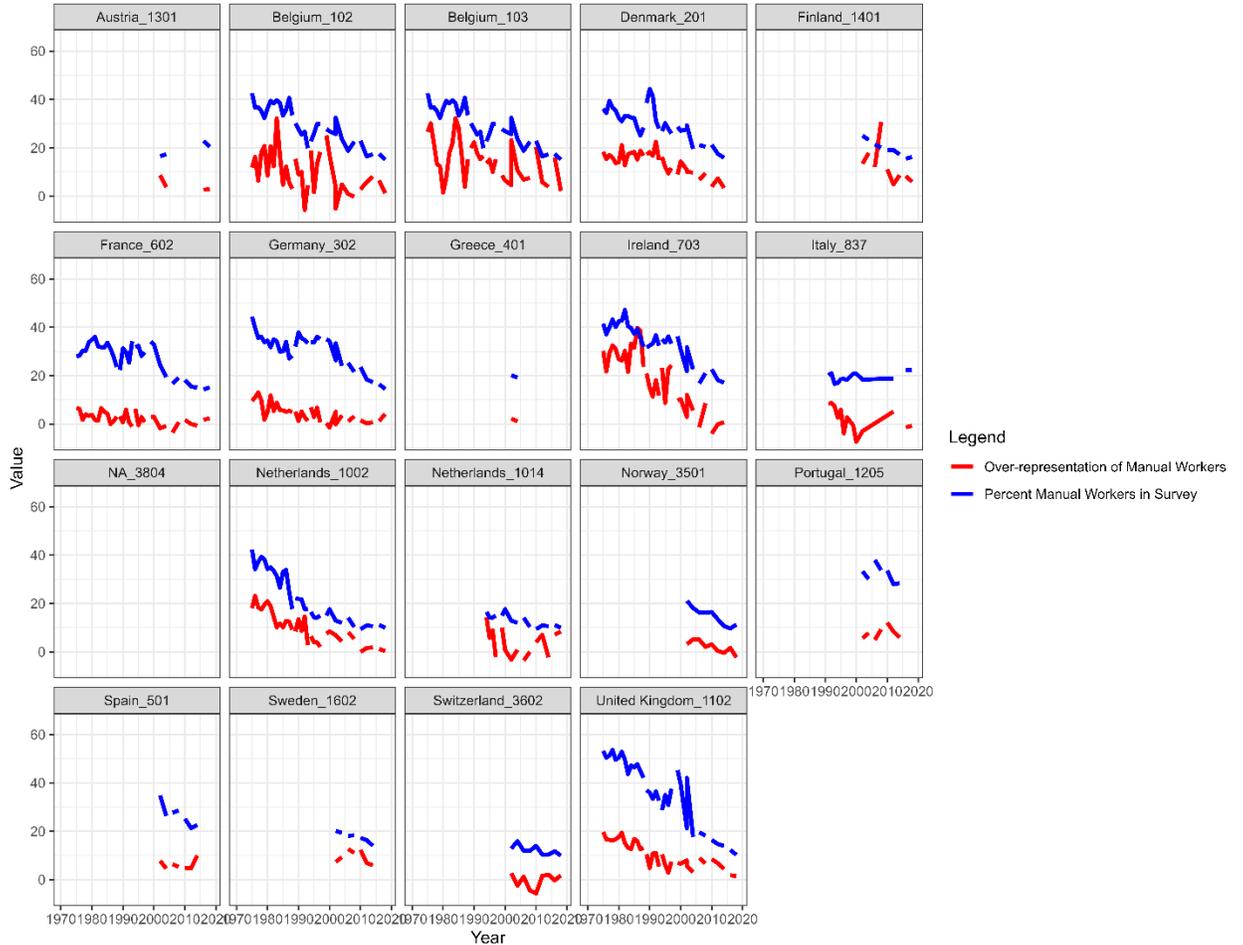


Figure 2: Comparison of over-representation and overall proportion of manual laborers for social democratic parties. Numbers refer to party ID codes. Data from Marks et al. (2022).

$H_2$  posits a significant, positive interaction between the size of the manual working class and union density. I measure union density as net union membership, i.e., excluding those outside the labor force, as a proportion of wage and salary earners. I gather these data from the Comparative Political Dataset (Armingeon et al. 2020), which in turn collected the data from Visser (2019).

Lastly, H<sub>3</sub> argues that the overrepresentation of manual workers in social democratic vote shares should be sensitive to their degree of brand distinction. That is, when social democratic parties provide clearly differentiated programmatic appeals, their supporters should be more heavily manual workers. If they converge with other parties, however, I anticipate that their supporters will come to mirror the society overall. I operationalize brand distinction with both a positional and salience component. Positionally, I measure each parties left-right position on economic issues using MARPOR data and the categorization scheme from (Volgens and Merz 2018). For each issue set, I calculate the party's position using the method advocated by Lowe et al. (2011), and then I take the average of the positions on each issue to create an overall economic left-right position. I expect a negative relationship between this economic position measure and overrepresentation. In other words, the social democratic party moving to the right should weaken its social structuration among manual workers.<sup>3</sup>

Using the same issue categories, I calculate issue salience divergence (Gunderson 2023b, 2023a). The idea behind this measure is to capture the extent to which a party's issue emphases differ from other parties. Parties do not only build their reputations and voter bases through taking positions but also by electing which issues are the most important and emphasizing them. This measure calculates the salience of each issue bundle in Volgens and Merz's (2018) issue scheme. It then takes the correlation for each party-dyad. To calculate issue salience divergence for a single party from these dyads, I take the average of the dyadic values for all of the dyads a

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<sup>3</sup> In principle, this is not a measure of distinction but absolute position. In a future version of this research, I would ideally have measures of average distinction from all other parties in the party system as well as separate measure distinguishing positional differentiation from right parties or a single major right-wing competitor as well as from other parties on the left-bloc. For the time being, this measure captures rightward movements that deviate from the traditional ideological appeal of social democratic parties.

party is in weighted by the vote share of the other party. Weighting by vote share minimizes the extent to which a small, radical party can exercise undue influence on the measure. This value is then multiplied by negative one, so higher values indicate more distinct issue salience. Therefore, H<sub>3</sub> anticipates a positive relationship between issue salience divergence and social structuration among manual workers. See Gunderson (2023b) for additional details regarding the measure.<sup>4</sup>

### *Controls*

In addition to the primary explanatory variables above, I also include several control variables. First, I control for the progression of time by including the year as well as squared and cubed polynomials (Carter and Signorino 2010). Because the dependent variables—as well as many of the independent variables—trend downwards over the included time period, it is important to control for this to prevent the results from merely proxying for the passage of time.

I also included additional economic variables which may influence the propensity of manual laborers to continue support social democratic parties. These include social spending as a percent of GDP (Loxbo et al. 2021), the inflation rate, and the unemployment rate. All of these are lagged to avoid any possibility of simultaneity, as is the size of the manual working class and the other primary independent variables.

I also control for the disproportionality of the electoral system using Gallagher's disproportionality index and the effective number of political parties to capture the fragmentation of the political system (Gallagher 1991; Laakso and Taagepera 1979). These variables are meant

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<sup>4</sup> Currently, this measure does not differentiate the source of issue salience divergence. That is, it does not distinguish between divergence from parties in the left bloc or the right bloc. As with positional distinction, I intend to include dyadic relationships in future versions of this research.

to capture the degree to which manual workers have an incentive to vote strategically and the number of other options available to these voters. Finally, I also include a non-economic position calculated in the same way from the economic position. All of these variables are lagged as well. The political and economic controls come from Armingeon et al. (2020). Of the economic and political control variables, none of them achieve standard levels of political, except for the non-economic positions, which lose significance in the final, preferred model.

### *Model*

My data consist of a time-series cross-sectional dataset where each row is an observation of a social democratic party. Because my interest is primarily in the effect of the size of the manual working class, union density, and brand distinction across time—rather than between parties—I include party fixed effects with clustered standard errors using the `estimat` package in R. These effects capture the time-invariant differences between parties, leaving within-unit variation for the time-varying predictors. I use fixed effects instead of first-differencing the data because I expect the effects to be felt over long-time frames rather than just the next observation. Although the outcome variable is, in principle, bounded between negative one hundred and one hundred, neither of these extremes are remotely present in the data. Therefore, I use OLS regressions and treat the outcome as continuous rather than an alternative modeling strategy that would take the bounds into account.

### Results

First, I investigate  $H_1$ —the expectation that there will be a positive relationship between cleavage group size and overrepresentation—with a simply scatterplot of the size of the manual

labor force against the degree of overrepresentation in party vote share by party family (Figure 3). In these plots, the red line with a gray confidence interval is the linear line of best fit. It is only among the social democratic and the radical left party families that a positive slope is evident. Among most families, there is simply no meaningful variation. Among TAN parties, the slope is significant and negative.

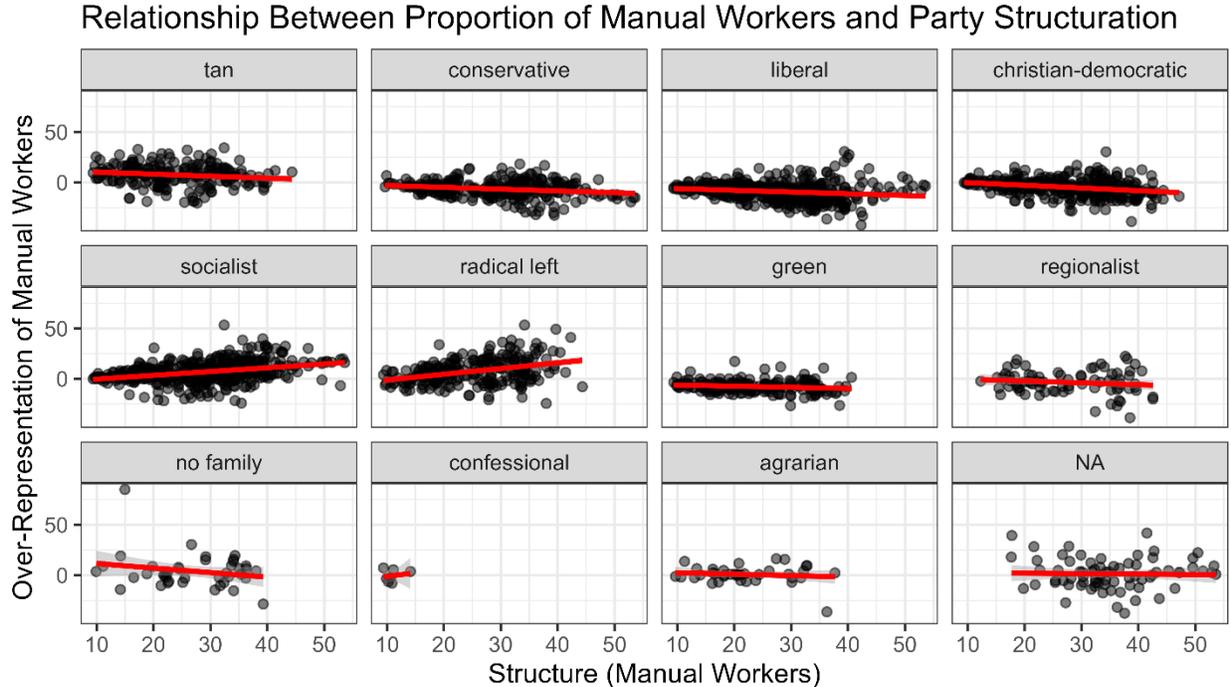


Figure 3: Scatterplot and linear line of best fit of the size of the manual working class and the overrepresentation of that class among voters for each party. Observations are split by party family. Data from Marks et al. (2022).

To confirm this optical validity test, I run a simple OLS regression predicting social structuration with the size of the manual working class, country fixed effects, party family fixed effects, and an interaction between the size of the manual working class and the party family indicators. Table 1 displays the results of these interactions with the TAN party family as the

baseline.<sup>5</sup> The only party families with significant, positive interactive effects are the social democrats and the radical left, which has a coefficient nearly twice the size of the social democrats. No other party family has a significant effect. I take this result as initial support for H<sub>1</sub>. It also suggests there is something particular that creates this relationship among the radical left and social democrats, but not other party families.

Table 1: OLS Model Predicting Cleavage Structuration on full Marks et al. (2022) sample.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Social Structuration
Size of Manual Working Class	-0.182* (0.107)
Size:Conservative	-0.102 (0.138)
Size:Liberal	-0.034 (0.128)
Size:Christian Democratic	-0.179 (0.133)
Size:Socialist	0.365*** (0.127)
Size:Radical Left	0.662*** (0.134)
Size:Green	-0.031 (0.143)
Size:Regionalist	0.214 (0.148)
Size:No Family	-0.396** (0.196)
Size:Confessional	1.058 (2.662)
Size:Agrarian	0.107 (0.255)
Constant	15.089*** (2.983)
Observations	4,115
R <sup>2</sup>	0.190
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.181
Residual Std. Error	16.117 (df = 4068)
F Statistic	20.724*** (df = 46; 4068)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
	Country and family fixed effects omitted for space

<sup>5</sup> This would probably be better visualized as predicted values from a random intercept and random slope multilevel model. In the sake of time, I have not made that plot, but the model results were not substantively different.

Table 2 consists of OLS models with party fixed effects predicting social structuration among social democratic parties. Model 1 includes only the size of the manual working class, and each additional variable adds additional variables. Model 2 adds the temporal controls. Model 3 adds the other predictors of interest. Model 4 adds the other political and economic controls. Model 5 is my preferred model including all of the variables under consideration here as well as the interaction between the size of the manual working class and union density ( $H_2$ ).

Table 2: OLS Models with Party Fixed Effects Predicting Over-Representation of Manual Workers among Social Democratic Parties

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Structure for Manual Workers (Lagged)	50.85*	26.53*	23.70*	10.07	-28.33*
	[42.24; 59.45]	[15.42; 37.64]	[11.53; 35.87]	[-3.00; 23.15]	[-48.48; -8.18]
Year		0.23	0.98	-0.14	-0.49
		[-0.61; 1.08]	[-0.03; 2.00]	[-2.82; 2.54]	[-3.11; 2.14]
Year-Squared		-0.03	-0.06*	-0.02	0.00
		[-0.06; 0.01]	[-0.10; -0.02]	[-0.11; 0.08]	[-0.09; 0.09]
Year-Cubed		0.00	0.00*	0.00	0.00
		[-0.00; 0.00]	[0.00; 0.00]	[-0.00; 0.00]	[-0.00; 0.00]
ISD (Lagged)			-8.17*	-10.16*	-10.35*
			[-15.48; -0.85]	[-19.13; -1.20]	[-18.92; -1.78]
Econ. Pos. (Lagged)			-2.63	-3.35	-3.42*
			[-5.26; 0.00]	[-6.78; 0.08]	[-6.74; -0.09]
Non-Econ. Pos. (Lagged)			4.31*	4.04*	2.73
			[1.63; 6.99]	[1.08; 7.00]	[-0.15; 5.60]
Union Density (Lagged)				-0.04	-0.29*
				[-0.28; 0.20]	[-0.58; -0.01]
Social Spending (Lagged)				0.17	0.22
				[-0.18; 0.52]	[-0.11; 0.54]
Disproportionality (Lagged)				-0.05	-0.09
				[-0.37; 0.27]	[-0.39; 0.22]
Inflation (Lagged)				0.35	0.26
				[-0.05; 0.75]	[-0.16; 0.67]
Unemployment (Lagged)				0.40	0.34
				[-0.01; 0.81]	[-0.05; 0.73]
ENEP (Lagged)				-0.37	-0.44
				[-1.60; 0.85]	[-1.63; 0.75]
Structure * Union Density					0.98*
					[0.52; 1.44]
R <sup>2</sup>	0.63	0.67	0.67	0.67	0.68
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.61	0.64	0.63	0.62	0.64
Num. obs.	280	280	247	211	211
RMSE	5.44	5.19	5.18	5.17	5.05

95 % CI in brackets. \* = Null hypothesis value outside of CI.

Across the models the size of the manual working class is significant and in the predicted direction until Model 4 when it loses significance. In Model 5, the main effect is even negative and significant. However, it is important to remember that, as a result of the interaction effect, that coefficient corresponds to the effect of the size of the manual working class when union density is zero (Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006). Empirically, this value is not present in the data, so that coefficient should not be directly interpreted. The same is true of the main effect on union density, which is also negative and statistically significant. Again, that value only depicts the effect of union density when there are no manual workers in a society, which is outside of the realm of observed cases.

To better contextualize the effect of the size of the manual working class on social structuration, I plot predicted values of the overrepresentation of workers in social democratic parties' vote shares in Figure 4. The red line and 95% confidence interval correspond to the situation when union density is one standard deviation below its mean (20.5 percent of workers are in a union). The blue line and 95% confidence interval correspond to the situation when union density is one standard deviation above its mean (58.9 percent of workers are in a union). The rug plot along the bottom indicates the distribution of observed cases.

When union density is below the mean, there is no statistically significant effect. That is, the size of the manual working class has no bearing on the degree of overrepresentation in social democratic electorates. This is essentially the same situation as for the other party families in Table 1 and Figure 3. When union density is above the mean, however, there is a significant, positive effect of the size of the manual working class. The positive significant slope of the interaction and the substantive importance of the size of the manual working class support  $H_1$

and  $H_2$ . There is a positive relationship between group size and party social structuration, but it is not unconditional. It depends on the degree to which workers are embedded in organizations that coordinate and provide them political information.

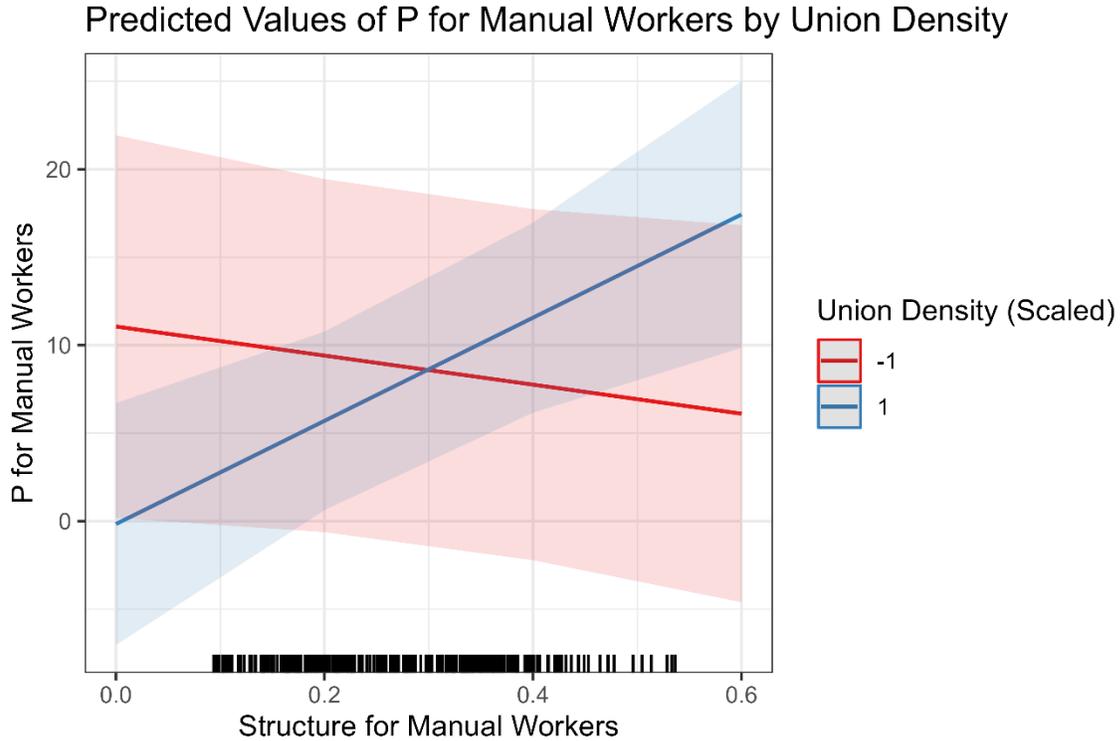


Figure 4: Predicted values of social structuration of social democratic parties for manual workers. The shaded regions are 95% confidence intervals, and the colors indicate the value of union density (scaled to mean zero and standard deviation 1). The rug plot along the x-axis displays the observed values of size of the manual working class. The figure is based on Model 5 from Table 2.

Turning to  $H_3$  and the role of party brand distinction, the results are mixed. In Model 5, the coefficient on economic position is statistically significant and in the expected direction. Social democratic parties that moderate their economic positions decrease the share of the of their supporters from the manual labor force. Issue salience divergence is also statistically significant, but it is in the opposite of the intended direction. The negative coefficient suggests that parties

increase their social structuration among the manual working class by *converging* their issue emphases with other parties.<sup>6</sup>

## Discussion

This paper investigates the relationship of the size of the manual labor force, union density, and brand distinction to the overrepresentation of manual workers among social democratic party voters. As European economics have transitioned away from the manufacturing economies of the thirty golden years of capitalism towards a post-industrial knowledge based economic with a growing emphasis on the service sector, social democratic parties' core demographic—manual workers—have declined as a share of the population. The question remains, however, whether a smaller number of manual workers necessarily means the group will become less important to social democratic parties in terms of social structuration.

Using data from seventeen West European countries, I find that the size of the core cleavage group does matter, but that the quality of the cleavage group moderates this affect. First, a discernable positive relationship between group size and overrepresentation of manual workers is only present among social democratic parties and far left parties, the two party families most closely connected to this social milieu. For most other party families, there appears to be no relationship between the changing size of the manual workforce and the share of their voters who

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<sup>6</sup> As I referenced in an earlier footnote, I suspect this may be due to not disentangling issue salience divergence with other left parties from right parties. A similar dynamic also be at play in positional distinction, though to a lesser degree. It may also signal that the effect depends on the set of issues upon which issue salience divergence is calculated.

are manual workers. The only exception to this is the TAN party family, who become more dependent on the manual working class as the size of the group declines.

Focusing only on the major social democratic parties in Western Europe, I find that union density moderates the relationship between cleavage group size and overrepresentation. That is, such a relationship only exists when union density is above the mean. Of course, union density has declined in many of the countries under investigation just as the manual workforce. However, the importance of union density indicates that the capacity for social democratic parties to remain embedded in the manual working class depends on the degree to which that manual working class is embedded in organizations that inform, organize, and mobilize manual workers in the political realm. When these institutions weaken, the working class appears to behave less cohesively in terms of providing disproportionate support to social democratic parties.

Lastly, I find mixed results for the role of brand distinction. In line with my expectations, a social democratic party moving to the right on economic issues is associated with a decrease in the overrepresentation of manual workers among their electorate. This is in line with previous research that has argued the decline of class voting is not only the result of the demographic trends above, but also programmatic decisions by social democratic parties to appeal to a broader pool of supporters. However, distinction in terms of issue salience seems to have an inverse effect. Parties with more distinct issue emphases appear to be less socially embedded in manual working class than those with more convergent emphases.

As an early working paper, there are several avenues of improvements that I intend to pursue as next steps. First, I hope to better incorporate the competition and programmatic distinctions between social democratic parties and the radical left. These two parties appear to be

the most closely tied to the manual working class, so explaining the social embeddedness of a single party family without considering the programmatic appeal of the primary competition for manual worker support likely attenuates (or even obscures) important dynamics.

Second, by better disentangling the effect of the radical left, I can also better isolate the role of distinction from conservative and Christian democratic parties. Recent arguments of social democratic policy convergence—particularly in connection with third way social democracy—have not been with the far left, but with the mainstream right. As such, measures of brand distinction from these groups specifically may help to explain the contradictory results from the party brand indicators currently included in my models.

Lastly, it may be beneficial to further substantiate the role of cleavage quality through directly measure the degree to which social democratic parties gain a disproportionate amount of their support from union members. That is, in addition treating union density as a moderating factor, I could investigate it directly. One benefit of doing so is that not all union members are actually manual workers (Rennwald and Pontusson 2021). Public sector employees as well as many professionals are also union members, so directly capturing social structuration within unionized workers may provide better insight into the role of cleavage organization.

With these caveats and next steps in mind, this paper still contributes to our understanding of the relationship between the powerful demographic trends that have remade the West European societies as well as the extent to which those changes depend on or are mediated by policy and programmatic decisions. It also expands earlier work by focusing on the party perspective—how much greater is the share of social democratic support from manual workers than the aggregate size of the group—rather than the voter perspective—what percent of manual

workers support social democratic parties. Both are valuable questions and outcomes of study. The party perspective is particularly interesting in this context as it better captures the extent to which the party draws support from a social group in comparison to a clear benchmark. If social structure has no effect on voting decisions and the size of the manual working class is large, just calculating the share of manual workers supporting the social democratic party gives relatively little information. Benchmarking to the size of the group in question captures the extent to which a party overperforms in that group, and better measures the degree to which class structures its support. Continuing to hone and nuance our understanding of the causes of growing and declining social structuration of party support in this way will not only clarify how we have arrived at many of the challenges of contemporary politics, but also how voting behavior and party politics may change in the future.

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