

## Book Reviews

### **Partis Socialistes et Classe Ouvrière: Ruptures et continuités du lien électoral en Suisse, en Autriche, en Allemagne, en Grande-Bretagne et en France (1970-2008)**

Line Rennwald

*Neuchâtel, Editions Alphil (2015), 308 p., ISBN 9782889300303*

Line Rennwald's "Partis Socialistes et Classe Ouvrière" (thereafter PSCO) offers an in-depth study of class-voting in five European countries: Switzerland, Germany, Austria, the UK, and France. The book provides a detailed descriptive account of the electoral connection between the working classes and Socialist, Social Democratic and Labour parties covering a time period spanning 30 years of electoral history, ranging from the mid-1970s to the mid-2000s. Rennwald's careful and nuanced study, which is based on her doctoral thesis, succeeds at situating the Swiss case in comparative perspective and raises intriguing questions related to the causes of the declining electoral connection between workers and the parties that were founded to represent their interests. Rennwald argues that the case of the Swiss Social Democratic Party is particular in that it is characterized by an unusually steep decline in support from manual workers compared to the Austrian and German Social Democrats, British Labour, and the French Socialist Party (p. 94). This decline can neither be understood, she argues, by relying on common supply-side ("bottom-up"), nor demand-side ("top-down") explanations, the former centred around convergence on economic issues. Instead she offers an alternative explanation that emphasizes the increased salience of cultural issues related to 'new social movements' and immigration. Her book should appeal to students and scholars of class voting, political parties, and social cleavage politics. Rennwald will also find a thankful audience among interested political practitioners and the wider socialist and Labour movement.

While the first three chapters of the book set out theory, data and research design, chapters four and five offer descriptive accounts of the changing class structure (chapter 4), and the relationship between social class and vote choice over time and across the five countries (chapter 5). The subsequent three chapters constitute an attempt at testing the explanatory power of three theories that may explain change in class voting: Change in the class environment, changes in attitudes (bottom-up theories), and changes in the political offer (top-down). Although Rennwald does not define it as her explicit aim, PSCO is a serious attempt at integrating continental European political scientists' longstanding focus on cultural issues as represented in the early work of Herbert Kitschelt, and later by Hanspeter Kriesi, Daniel Oesch, and Simon Bornschier, into the supply-side perspective as advanced by Geoffrey Evans and his collaborators in the UK. Compared to Evans and de Graaf's (2013) "Political Choice Matters", Rennwald includes two different countries, Switzerland and Austria, into her analysis, uses the Oesch instead of the Goldthorpe class scheme, and media-based data on party positions and issue salience instead of relying on textual analysis of manifestos – such as the comparative manifesto group (MARPOR) data.

Her book is based on the quantitative analysis of various national election studies, complemented, when national election data was unavailable, with data from the European Social Survey. The data on party positions and issue salience used in chapter 8 is based on

the newspaper content analysis conducted by Kriesi et al. (2006), which spans most of the aforementioned time period. To her credit, Rennwald also provides helpful historical and political context when comparing her cases, context that is often missing from comparable quantitative studies of class voting. Rennwald should also be commended for paying attention to an often-understudied aspect of class-voting: class non-voting. While political sociologists and behaviourists have studied this subject extensively in the context of unequal participation, integrating it into the class-voting framework is a laudable aim. Moreover, she goes to some length to address the question of over-reporting of turnout behavior. But I wish the author had dedicated more space to the analysis of class non-voting, testing her competing hypotheses that apply just as well to the decision to abstain from voting for Socialist parties than to voting for a rival party.

The choice of time frame of course limits Rennwald's analysis to the pre-crisis period, excluding all national elections that took place at the turn of the decade, a choice that I wish the author would justify in more detail since national election studies and ESS data for this period should be accessible. In chapter 5, Rennwald shows the stability of the class-vote correlation in Britain and Austria when comparing the early 2000s to the mid-1970s, a weak decline in Germany, and a steeper decline in France and particularly in Switzerland (p. 94). Rennwald's UK findings are in contrast to Evans and Tilley's (2012a, 2012b), who point to a much steeper decline of the class-party relationship in Britain, occurring mostly during the mid-1990s. Britain is a well-studied case of declining class voting, and one question arising from the book is why Rennwald's findings appear to diverge from previous studies. Are the divergent findings a function of using the Oesch instead of the Goldthorpe class scheme? Or are they a function of using a different dependent variable – in this case vote choice instead of party support? Hence a further discussion of her finding in light of the literature and further robustness checks would have benefitted her analysis. Although not the main focus of her book, the apparent stability of the class-vote relationship in the UK, and the relatively weak decline she registers in Germany, might also be exaggerated due to the specific start and end periods of Rennwald's time period, the UK time series ending with the 2001 UK General Election, and the German time series ending with the 2002 German federal elections. Much of the German working class for instance appears to have left the SPD *after* the implementation of Schroeder's reform Agenda 2020. And while there was a steep decline in the first years of Blair's party leadership, increasing concerns with migration might have led to a new, more recent wave of declining working class support.

Chapter 8 offers the most novel contribution, and an important initial finding: Rennwald shows, based on media data, that the absolute positioning of Socialist Parties, with the one exception of the Austrian Social Democrats, on the cultural axis appears not to have changed over the last thirty years. She therefore concludes that this constant cannot explain the steep decline in class voting observed in Switzerland and elsewhere. According to Rennwald, change is driven by the relative salience of cultural issues, particularly immigration and Europe, in the political discourse of rival parties, particularly the radical right, as reported by the media. While stability in party positions towards immigration and other cultural issues is an important finding in its own right, I think that the conclusion that party positions on cultural issues and particularly immigration cannot explain changes in class voting is probably too strong. Assuming that there really was no change in absolute party position on cultural issues – a key finding, which could have been further backed up by using alternative data sources such as MARPOR or Chapel Hill expert survey data – the observation that the *absolute* position of Socialist parties on the

cultural axis has not changed leads to the question if the position of the party has changed *relative to other parties*. With the emergence of the Swiss People's Party, the Freedom Party of Austria, and the French National Front, it appears that the gap between left and right on cultural issues and immigration has increased over time – not because, as Rennwald points out, Socialist parties have changed, but because serious competitors have emerged on the radical right. An analysis that also takes relative positions on these issues into account would also fit her analysis on economic issues, which are operationalized as relative, not absolute positions. Moreover, an interaction between issue salience and relative issue position might also explain the observed patterns in the data. While Rennwald shows in chapter 7 that manual workers were always more hostile to immigration and more culturally conservative than the overall population, being out of touch with workers' attitudes on the cultural dimension might only have started to impact upon the class-vote relationship once this very dimension increased in salience.

PSCO is hence a welcome addition to the class-voting literature, which should be lauded for its comparative perspective and its incorporation of issue salience and cultural issues into the top-down model of class-voting. Rennwald's book raises intriguing questions that are well worth pursuing. As she points out, convergence on economic issues appears to be an important explanatory factor, but does not suffice in order to explain why some of the parties studied managed to retain significant working class support while others, such as the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland, did not. Thanks to recent political developments, not least in the UK, where Jeremy Corbyn's Labour is about to subject top-down theory to a new empirical test by moving leftwards on both dimensions, one wishes that PSCO will soon become available in English.

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## Literature

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## Theorising Decentralisation – Comparative Evidence from Sub-national Switzerland

Mueller, Sean

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The Swiss federation, in which the cantons successfully resisted centralisation, is said to be one of the most decentralised states of the world. On the sub-national level, however,