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# 7 The Social Basis of the Vote

## Class Voting in Finland

*Aino Tiihonen and Peter Söderlund*

### Introduction and theory

Some of the most influential political parties have been organized around coherent social class identities and interest, particularly in West-European multiparty systems. In addition, voters' class positions have historically correlated strongly with their party choice in Western democracies (Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Knutsen, 2006; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Nieuwbeerta, 1995; Nieuwbeerta & Ultee, 1999). Working-class voting is the epitome of class voting. The socio-economic class cleavage emerged from the industrial revolution and the confrontation between the owners of the means of production and the workers in the 19th century. Studies show, however, that voters' class positions have become less relevant determinants of electoral behaviour over the past decades (Butler & Stokes, 1974; Dalton, 1984; Clark & Lipset, 1991; Knutsen, 2006; Evans & Tilley, 2012). This trend has been more pronounced among working-class voters (Evans & Tilley, 2017; Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015; Rennwald, 2020). Class voting has not disappeared, however. Studies attest that working-class voting still matters, particularly in the Nordic countries (Bengtsson et al., 2014; Oskarson & Demker, 2015).

How strong is class voting in Finland? This chapter examines the level of class voting – working-class voting in particular – in Finland over time. Traditionally, social class has determined voters' party choices in Finland similarly as in other West-European multi-party systems. Social cleavage has been one of the key political cleavages in Finnish political system.

A recent comparative study on social structure's effect on party choices in West European democracies has shown that in the 21st century the correlation between social class and party choice has been the highest in Finland compared to 17 other Western European countries (Knutsen, 2018).

Class voting is relevant to study given the general decline in the predictive power of class in contemporary democracies. Both an objective measure and a subjective measure of class identification are used. While the objective measure of occupational class has been the predominant indicator, subjective class position has gained more and more attention in the international literature on class voting (Ares, 2020; Langsæther, 2019; Langsæther et al., 2021; see also Knutsen, 2018).

Two datasets are analysed in this chapter: Finnish National Election Studies (2003–2019) and EVA Surveys on Finnish Values and Attitudes (1984–2019). These data, thus, enable us to detect trends in class voting from the 1980s up to 2019.

What do we mean by class voting? Class voting refers to the tendency of social classes to direct their vote to certain candidates or parties which represent the interests of these social classes. In other words, one's position in the social class structure increases the likelihood to vote for a certain party (Evans, 2017; Knutsen, 2018). Scholars focusing on class voting have distinguished between “traditional class voting” and “total class voting”. Traditional class voting is the tendency of blue-collar employees to vote for left parties (as well as the tendency of the middle class to side with bourgeois or conservative parties). Total class voting, on the other hand, is not limited to the extent to which members of the working-class vote for left parties. Instead it refers to the overall predictive power of social class to explain party choice; that is, how people of different classes systematically vote for certain parties because they are thought to represent different social classes (Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015, 52).

Cleavage theories are essential to understand class voting. These theories assert that citizens are divided into opposite groups with different interests. This leads to political conflicts between these groups. According to Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan (1967), in their seminal theory on the social divisions and cleavages, the cleavages are anchored to two historical developments: the industrial and national revolutions in earlier centuries. Lipset and Rokkan argued that these revolutions gave rise to four important cleavages, which paved the ground for political parties in Western democracies and shaped the party systems: (1) religion-cleavage, (2) centre/periphery-cleavage, (3) rural/urban-cleavage, and (4) class-cleavage among employers and workers.

Bartolini and Mair (1990) refined the thinking of Lipset and Rokkan and presented their theory of cleavages. More specifically, they sought to explain why certain cleavages become political, i.e. widely accepted cleavages in society and, thus, they illustrated a “cleavage typology”. The typology presents three elements of political cleavage: (1) structural and empirical element, (2) psychological and normative element, and (3) organizational element. From the definition of Bartolini and Mair, a cleavage cannot exist without fulfilling all these three elements. Many other cleavage studies in the 21st century have adopted the cleavage typology (Dalton, 2002; Deegan-Krause, 2007 and Enyedi, 2005, 2008). Figure 7.1 illustrates how social class becomes a political cleavage in society by fulfilling the three elements.

In this chapter, focus is primarily on the first two elements. Regarding the first cleavage element – the structural element – the general assumption is that society's social structure reflects and contains class divisions. Various class indicators, for instance occupation, income, and education, are the key factors shaping these divisions. The most common of them is occupation, which is used in most class-voting studies. Second, this chapter also accounts for the second element – the psychological and normative element – as voters form their own independent class identification (i.e. subjective class position).

1) Structural element

- Society's class structure: class labels

2) Psychological element

- Class identification as a form of class consciousness

3) Organisational element

- Political parties and trade unions

*Figure 7.1* Social class becoming a political cleavage.

*Source:* The three elements of a cleavage are adapted from Bartolini and Mair (1990) and elaborated by Tiihonen (2021).

### **Descriptive trends**

In Finland, the class cleavage is reflected in the socioeconomic left-right cleavage. Historically, working-class voters have been on the left of the spectrum and supported socialist ideologies, whereas the bourgeois has been on the right of the spectrum. While modernisation and industrialisation occurred relatively late in Finland, a class cleavage between owners and workers did occur in the same way as in many other Western democracies. The class cleavage became ever so salient over a century ago due to the Finnish civil war in 1918 between the socialist Reds and the bourgeois Whites. This class cleavage remained highly contentious until the 1960s (Karvonen, 2014; Pesonen & Riihinen, 2002).

In later decades, there has been a weakening of the class cleavage in Finland. For instance, effective government cooperation between the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Centre Party (KESK) in the post-war period dispelled the class cleavage in daily politics. Likewise, the collapse of the Soviet Union in the beginning of the 1990s rasped off the sharpest edges of the class cleavage in Finland. Especially in the 21st century, globalisation, occupational change, changes in work-life culture, and increasing multipolarity in the world economy have created pressures for traditional class cleavage and reshaped it (Paloheimo & Sundberg, 2005; Karvonen, 2014; Westinen, 2015). Both blue-collar employees and farmers in the agriculture and forest sectors have significantly decreased since the 1960s. The share of the working-class among all employees has decreased from 45 per cent to 24 per cent between years 1970 and 2020 (Statistics Finland, 2022). Simultaneously, new occupations outside the traditional class cleavage have emerged. All this has undoubtedly affected class voting in Finland (Pesonen, 2001, 121–125; Karvonen, 2014; see also Tiihonen, 2021).

The generally accepted convention in class-voting studies is to measure social class by a respondent's occupation (Alford, 1963; Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Dalton et al., 1984; Franklin et al., 1992; Knutsen, 2006). However, occupational class represents only one dimension of social class. In the recent international literature on class voting, voters' values and attitudes have been increasingly emphasised. An alternative measure for social class rests on subjective class consciousness

simply by asking the respondents to which social they feel they belong to (Ares, 2020; Langsæther, 2019; Langsæther et al., 2021; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008, 339). Combining both objective and subjective class position together with voter's attitudinal orientations, gives the most comprehensive approach to working-class voting (Tiihonen 2021). Social class is still relevant if we are to believe survey responses "regarding their class identification". (Oskarson, 2015; Bengtsson & Berglund, 2010; Brady et al., 2009) and scholars have observed that voters' attitudinal orientations, which can have a strong effect on their party choices, are influenced by their class identification. (Bengtsson et al., 2014; Oskarson, 1994, 2015). A class identification question is also found in the Finnish post-election surveys. In terms of Finnish voters, the large majority identify with a social class. Approximately nine out of ten eligible voters identify with a specific social class, which indicates that social class – people's position in the social structure, is still a relevant source of identification (Tiihonen, 2021).

We begin by describing the distribution of Finnish voters in terms of their occupational class and class identification. The data come from five Finnish National Election Studies (2003–2019, see technical appendix). The number of respondents for occupational class is lower since people who are pensioners, on parental leave, students, and unemployed are excluded. For subjective class identification, we have a much larger number because very few respondents refused to give a response to the question. In addition, the respondents were offered to answer that they do not consider themselves to belong to any particular social class (i.e. "no class"). Cannot say responses (0.5–4.0 percent depending on the year of survey) are included in the "no class" category.

Table 7.1 reports the distribution of respondents' occupational group and class identification in each Finnish National Election Study. About a half of the respondents say they are blue-collar employees and the share has not declined from 2003

*Table 7.1 Occupation and class identification in the Finnish electorate (percent by column)*

	2003	2007	2011	2015	2019
Occupational class					
Blue-collar employee	54	51	50	54	54
White-collar employee	19	18	16	13	15
Senior white-collar employee	10	12	16	12	15
Manager or executive	4	5	4	5	4
Entrepreneur/Farmer	14	14	13	16	12
(N)	(762)	(902)	(729)	(914)	(879)
Class identification					
Working class	33	35	37	35	31
Lower middle	14	15	13	17	13
Middle	35	35	33	30	35
Upper middle/Upper	7	7	9	7	9
No class	11	8	9	11	12
(N)	(1270)	(1422)	(1298)	(1587)	(1598)

*Sources:* FNES 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.

to 2019. Respondents were also asked to select their own subjective class, i.e. class identification, from a list of five social-class categories: working class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, and upper class. The sixth alternative was that they do not feel they belong to any particular social class. Roughly one-third describe themselves as working-class. The distributions differ in the sense that respondents are more inclined to report they are blue-collar employees rather than reporting they identify with the working class. Overall, the invariability especially in class identification is interesting. Despite the ongoing debates about disappearing, weakening, or alternating classes, Finnish voters seem to still identify with them and rather steadily. The fact that approximately nine out of ten Finnish voters have class identification with a certain social class in the 21st century is exclusively interesting.

Apparently, there is a disjuncture between the objective and subjective measures, which can be used to determine class position. Upon closer inspection of the data in terms of the congruence and incongruence between voters' objective and subjective class-positions (not reported in any table), 57 percent of blue-collar employees identify themselves as being working-class. Among the remaining blue-collar employees, most identify as being middle class (21 percent) or lower middle class (12 percent). Twenty-one percent of entrepreneurs identify as working-class and 17 percent of white-collar employees did the same.

Next, we describe which parties working-class people vote for based on responses in the Finnish National Election Studies. The time span is, indeed, short – five elections and 16 years between the first and the last election – but these surveys have asked for both the respondent's occupation and self-identification. In Figures 7.2 and 7.3, the parties for whom the respondents voted for are arranged according to their position on the left-right ideology scale. The parties' ideological positions are based on expert judgment data reported in *The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* (Module 5, 2016–2021) which collects national election studies around the world (<https://cses.org/>). The Left Alliance (VAS), the SDP, and the Green League (VIHR) receive the scores 2, 3, and 4 on the 11-point scale running from 0 to 10. The Left Alliance and the Social Democratic Party, in particular, are regarded as left parties in terms of the socioeconomic ideological dimension. The Finns Party (PS) and the Christian Democrats (KD) score 6, and the Centre Party (KESK) and the Swedish People's Party (RKP) score 7, on the left-right scale. The National Coalition Party (KOK) is the party farthest to the right on the socioeconomic scale with a score of 8.

Figure 7.2 shows the share of blue-collar employees voting for any of the eight largest party by election year. What is most striking among the three left-wing parties is that the support for the SDP has diminished among blue-collar employees over the course of nearly two decades. While 30 percent of the blue-collar employees voted for the party in 2003, 21 percent did so in 2019. Interestingly, a similar secular decline cannot be detected for the other leftist party, the Left Alliance (VAS), which has in most elections been supported by more than ten percent of the blue-collar employees. In 2019, the Green League also saw a smaller boost of support from blue-collar employees, from well below ten percent to 12 percent.

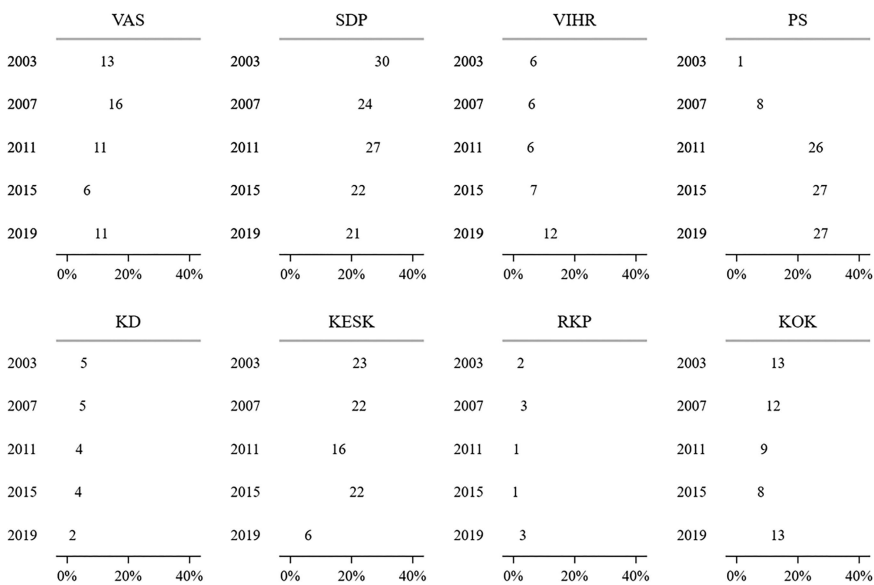


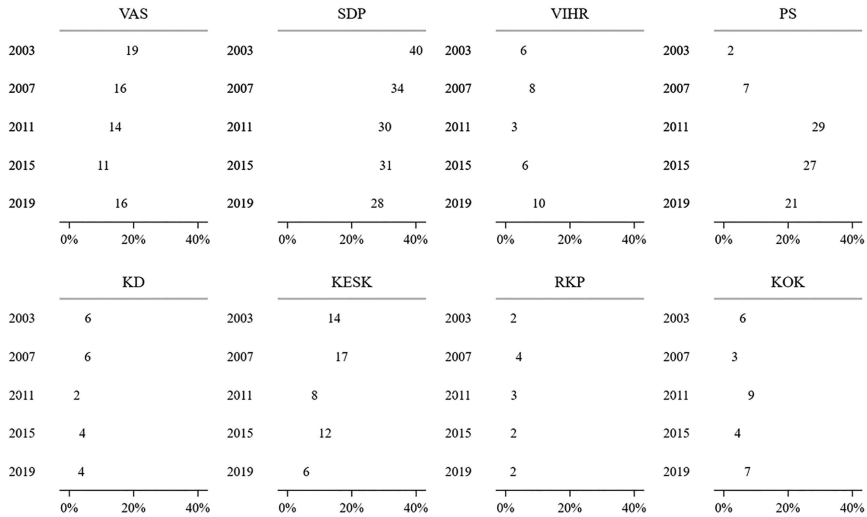
Figure 7.2 Electoral support for Finnish parties among blue-collar employees over time (percent).

Source: Finnish National Election Studies 2003–2019.

A new strong contender for the working-class vote arose in the middle of the period as the Finns Party (previously known as the True Finns) gained popularity. Overall, the party has won between 17.5 and 19 per cent of the vote in the three parliamentary elections 2011, 2015 and 2019. The Finns Party (PS) has attracted a great deal of electoral support from blue-collar workers. A steady number – over a quarter of blue-collar employees – have voted for the Finns Party in 2011, 2015, and 2019.

Initially, the Centre Party (KESK) appears to have had solid support among blue-collar workers with around 20 percent of the support from 2003 to 2015. However, according to our available data, this support plummeted in 2019 when only six percent of the blue-collar workers voted for the party. The National Coalition Party (KOK) has had a support of somewhat below and above ten percent from blue-collar workers. The Christian Democrats and the Swedish People’s Party are the smallest parties in this group, and therefore, their support among blue-collar workers is also small.

Figure 7.3 summarises party choice by subjective class identification and year. Around three-fourths of the voters who claim working-class identity have voted for the SDP, Left Alliance (VAS), the Finns Party (PS), or the Centre Party (KESK) in the 2000s and 2010s. Most of these voters having working-class identity chose a candidate who represented the SDP. However, over the past two decades, the share of social democratic voters within this class identification category has decreased from 40 to 28 percent. The Left Alliance (VAS) saw its support decrease as well



*Figure 7.3* Electoral support for Finnish parties among the self-identified working class over time (percent).

*Source:* Finnish National Election Studies 2003–2019.

among people who feel they belong to the working class between 2003 and 2015, from 19 to 11 percent, but this number bounced back to 16 percent in 2019. The Centre Party (KESK) also initially drew considerable support from the working class, around 15 percent, but the share dipped below ten percent in the 2010s.

The results indicate that to a considerable extent, the decline in working-class support for the two leftist parties and the Centre Party can be explained by the fact that almost a third of the people identifying with the working class in 2011 voted for the Finns Party (PS). In the two subsequent elections (2015 and 2019), this share decreased first to 27 percent and then to 21 percent. Hence, there has been a decline of working-class voting for the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, and the Finns Party (since 2011), when voters' class-positions are measured subjectively, with their class identification. In contrast, the Left Alliance and the Green League are the two parties, which have managed to garner greater support in the 2019 parliamentary election compared to the previous election. At the same time, middle-class identification among the Finns Party supporters has increased from the 2011 election to the 2019 election. The same trend can be found among the supporters of the Green League.

### Explanatory analyses

This empirical section assesses how well social class explains party choice over time. The first set of data consists of the five Finnish National Election Studies (2003–2019) analysed above. A second set of data is included to extend the time



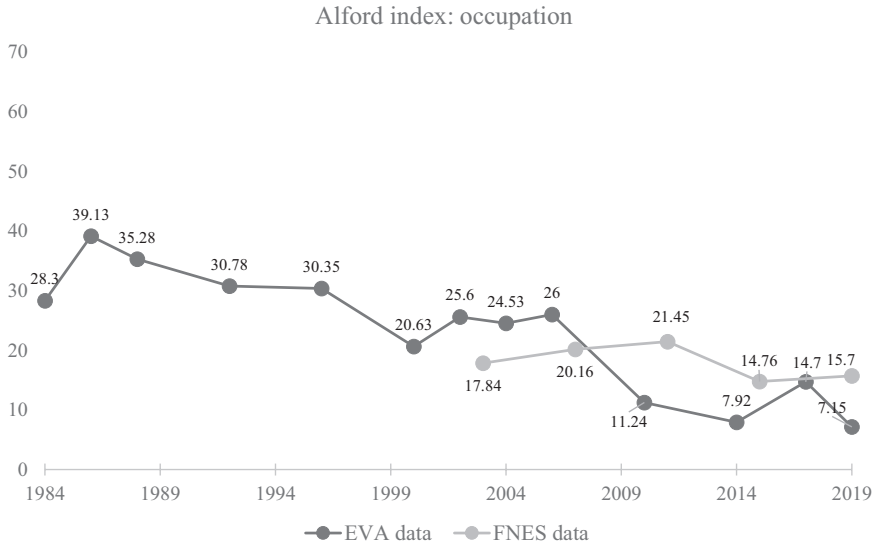
period. The Finnish Business and Policy Forum (EVA) has in a series of surveys asked about views on Finnish society since 1984. Data from thirteen EVA surveys between 1984 and 2019 are analysed here. Party choice in the latter data is based on the question which political party the respondent would vote for if parliamentary elections were held now.

As mentioned in the introduction, class voting can be conceptualised as both “traditional” left-right class voting and “total” class voting which accounts for how all types of class differences (based on a detailed class schema) explain party choice. Different types of indexes capture different types of class voting.

The most common index has been the Alford index, named after its inventor Robert Alford in the mid-60s (Alford, 1962, 1963). Since then, the index has been used widely in many class-voting studies globally (Nieuwbeerta, 1996, 1995; Nieuwbeerta & Ultee, 1999; Lijphart, 1971; Clark et al., 1993). The Alford index measures class voting as the difference in support for left-wing parties between working-class and non-working-class voters. First, the share of working-class voters who report they voted for any of the left-wing parties is calculated. In the second step, the share of non-working-class voters who voted for the same left-wing parties is computed. Finally, the difference between the two numbers (or shares) is taken to arrive at the index score. The higher the index score, the greater the number of working-class voters who supported a left-wing party relative to non-working-class voters doing the same.

More recently, Lachat has proposed an alternative index, the so-called lambda index, to measure the extent to which there are differences in voting behaviour between social groups in general. Lachat argued that previous class-voting indexes, such as the Alford index, have not managed satisfactorily to take into account that the size of social groups change over time. The relative size of parties in multiparty systems may also bias index scores. To be able to adequately compare the strength of a given cleavage over time, a more intricate measure such as the lambda index is needed. Its calculation involves running a multinomial regression with party choice as the dependent variable and summarizing weighted deviations from the average distribution of votes per group and party. The index, thus, sums to what extent people belonging to each class homogeneously vote for a specific party. The absolute lambda index that we use can range between 0 and 0.5 where higher values indicate that certain groups of voters (according to occupation and class identification) more homogeneously vote for certain parties (Lachat, 2007).

Figure 7.4 reports the impact of occupation on class voting according to the Alford index. Each number is the proportion of blue-collar employees voting for any of the left parties (the Social Democratic Party and the Left Alliance) minus the proportion of respondents in other occupational groups voting for any of the same left parties. Judging from the EVA data, the decline in the predictive power of class since 1984 is beyond dispute. The lower Alford index in 1984 might be connected to the Finnish Rural Party’s (FRP) victory in the 1983 parliamentary election, which has been regarded as a protest election. The FRP ideology’s core lay in anti-elitist views, criticizing other politicians and government and highlighting the benefits of ordinary people and rural entrepreneurs. In the 1983 election, all major



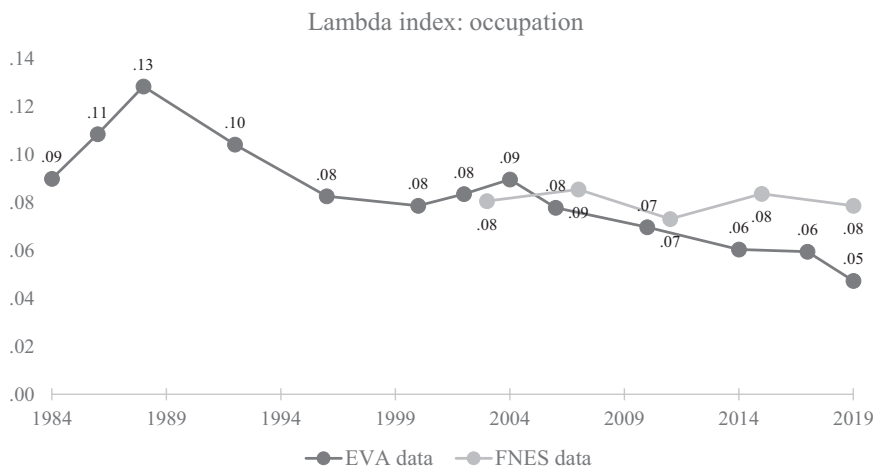
*Figure 7.4* Impact of occupation on party choice: Alford index.

*Source:* EVA (Finnish Business and Policy Forum) Surveys on Finnish Values and Attitudes 1984–2020 and Finnish National Election Studies 2003–2019.

Finnish parties, except the Social Democratic Party, lost several seats in the Finnish parliament, whereas the FRP increased its support by 5.1 percentage points and gained 10 more seats and got in the government coalition.

While it appears that the decline was gradual from the 1980s to the 2000s, a larger decrease in the Alford index can be detected in the 2010s. The explanation to this decline is the aforementioned rise of the Finns Party which managed to attract a great deal of voters from the working class. Class voting has not disappeared, far from it, but being working class does not predict voting for a left party as strongly as before. The decline is not, however, as dramatic if we look at the extent of class voting according to the FNES data. Yet the index values for 2015 and 2019 are lower than in the previous three elections. A possible explanation to why the index scores differ is that the FNES surveys ask for party choice in the most recent parliamentary election, while the EVA surveys ask for the party the respondent is most likely to vote for in the next parliamentary election.

Figure 7.5 is based on the second index, the lambda index, which measures total class voting. Here, the EVA data also suggest that the decline in class voting since the 1980s. The index accounts for how homogenously respondents belonging to different occupational classes (blue-collar employee, white-collar employee, senior white-collar employee, manager or executive, and entrepreneur/farmer) vote for any of the major parties represented in parliament. The higher the index score, the greater the covariation between social class and party choice. On the other hand, the FNES data does indicate that there has been a decline in class voting since 2003.



*Figure 7.5* Impact of occupation on party choice: Lambda index.

*Source:* EVA Surveys on Finnish Values and Attitudes 1984–2020 and Finnish National Election Studies 2003–2019.

Finally, we test the relevance of subjective class identification. Overall, the covariation between class identification and voting for a left party is considerably higher than the covariation between occupation and voting for a left party. This is apparent if we compare the magnitude of the scores of the Alford index, which distinguishes between manual and non-manual occupations and whether they voted for a left party or not (Figure 7.4 versus Figure 7.6). This finding supports the point of using subjective class identification in addition to occupation as a measure for social class in studies of class voting. On the other hand, the magnitude of the lambda scores do not markedly differ depending on whether occupation or class identification is used to explain total class voting (Figure 7.5 versus Figure 7.7).

Figure 7.6 affirms a long-term decline of working-class voting over the past four decades: respondents who identify with the working class are today less likely to vote for a left party relative to respondents who identify with another social class. The Alford index score has decreased from being well above 50 to being well below 30 if we rely on the EVA data. Although the index scores from the two different datasets differ, the FNES data do suggest that the traditional cleavage has become less salient. The trends in Figure 7.7 are very similar to those in Figure 7.5. This implies that there is a decline in total or overall class voting, but the decline is much more subtle, and the negative trend is only visible in the EVA data.

Figure 7.5 is based on the second index, the lambda index, which measures total class voting. Here, the EVA data also suggest that the decline in class voting since the 1980s. The index accounts for how homogeneously respondents belonging to different occupational classes (blue-collar employee, white-collar employee, senior white-collar employee, manager or executive, and entrepreneur/farmer) vote for

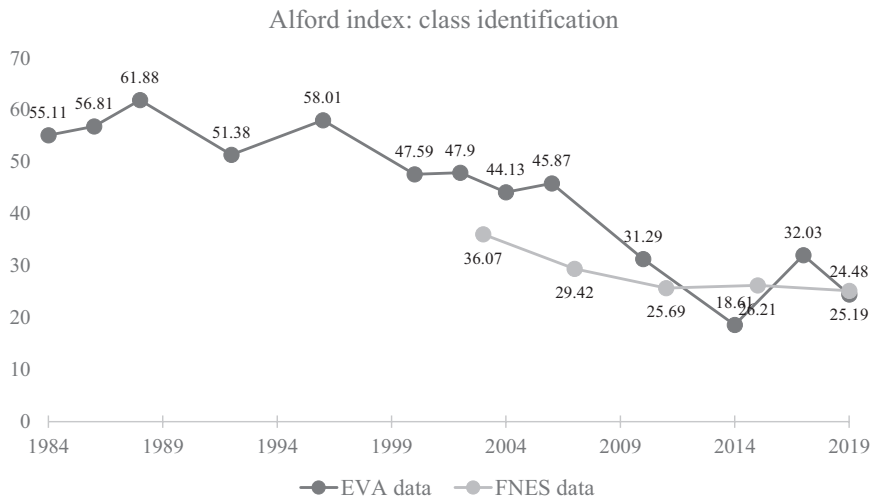


Figure 7.6 Impact of class identification on party choice: Alford index.

Source: EVA Surveys on Finnish Values and Attitudes 1984–2020 and Finnish National Election Studies 2003–2019.

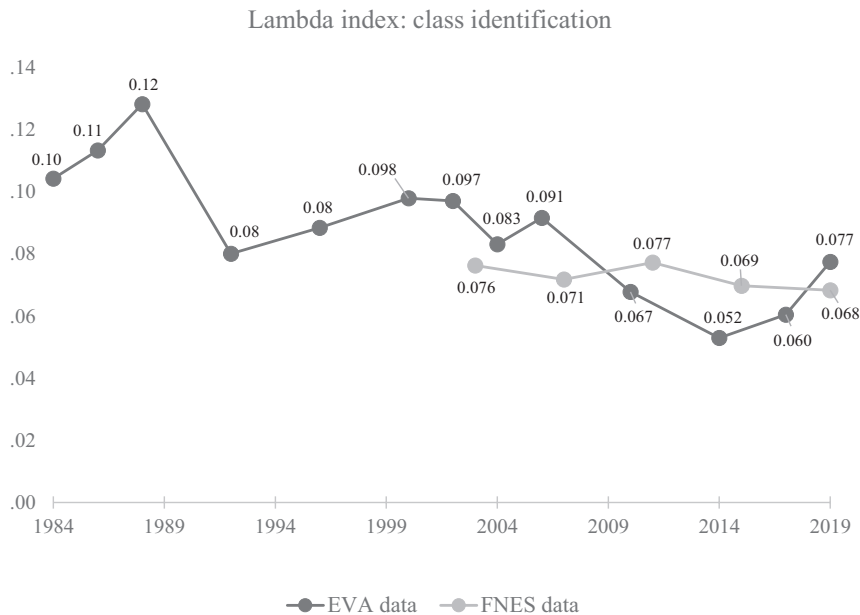


Figure 7.7 Impact of class identification on party choice: Lambda index.

Source: EVA Surveys on Finnish Values and Attitudes 1984–2020 and Finnish National Election Studies 2003–2019.

any of the major parties represented in parliament. The higher the index score, the greater the covariation between social class and party choice. On the other hand, the FNES data do indicate that there has been a decline in class voting since 2003.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has examined the social basis of party choice in Finland by assessing the strength of class voting over the past decades. Both occupation and class identification were used as measures for social class. The results first of all showed that the relationship between class position and party choice varies depending on the class indicator. Subjective class identification was a stronger predictor than objective occupational class when it comes to explain working-class voting (i.e. the share of working-class voters who vote for left-wing parties). The subjective and objective measures of class did not differ when it came to explaining class voting in general (i.e. total class voting).

Overall, this chapter provides evidence that social class voting still contributes to explain party choice. Especially the working-class voters' tendency to vote for the two left-wing parties – the Left Alliance or the Social Democratic Party – makes sure that class remains an important factor in determining the results of general elections. When using class identification as an indicator of class position rather than occupation, the level of class voting is relatively high. This finding is in line with the recommendation in the class-voting research that scholars should be more attentive to voters' subjective class positions.

Social structure determines relatively strongly voters' party choices in Finland. Compared to Sweden, the level of traditional left-right class voting is not as strong in Finland and it has never been (Wessman, 2021). However, the results regarding Swedish voters are based on voters' occupation, not their class identification. Total class voting – when all classes and all parties are examined – has been high in Finland in an international perspective. Knutsen (2018, 161) found that the correlation between social class and party choice was the highest in Finland compared 17 other Western European countries. However, his data for Finland was from a single point of time, the 2008 European Values Study.

This chapter was a longitudinal study in the sense that the impact of social class on party choice over time was assessed. There is unquestionably a declining trend in class voting in Finland in terms of both traditional left-right and total class voting since the 1980s. This is in line with the development in most Western democracies over the past decades. Especially in the 2010s, the share of working-class voters voting for any of the left-wing parties has been lower. A large part of the working class in Finland in recent years has turned to a new party family – the populist radical right – unaccounted for by the Alford index which measures voting for left parties. However, the future of class voting in Finland does not look completely dark, that is to say voters' class positions keep determining their party choices. Especially if voters' class positions are also considered with subjective indicators. Since a remarkable share of the Finnish voters keep identifying themselves with a social class, it is justifiable for future class-voting studies to pay more attention on voters' class identification.

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