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## **On the Relationship Between Economic and Political Inequality**

*What Do We Know and Where Do We Go from Here?*

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## Abstract

Building on research in progress, this paper summarizes political science literature on income bias in political representation in OECD countries and explores questions raised by this literature. A number of recent studies show that policy preferences of elected officials are more closely aligned with the policy preferences of affluent citizens than poor citizens, and that government policy is more responsive to the demands of affluent citizens. This is most obviously the case for the United States, but it is also true for the European countries that have been analyzed. The paper sketches a research program that seeks to further the understanding of unequal representation by engaging in cross-national comparison and by addressing the question of whether or not unequal representation has increased as income and wealth inequality has risen over the last 20-30 years.

## Keywords

Income inequality; policy preferences; political participation; political elites; policy responsiveness

## Bio

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## Introduction

This “proto-paper” reflects on two literatures that have developed in parallel over the last 10-15 years, the literature on preferences for redistribution and the literature on unequal representation by income (and class), and sets out the intellectual rationale for my current research agenda, which builds on and seeks to integrate insights from both literatures. I want to make three basic points. First, unequal representation by income can arise either because parties and politicians (also unelected policy-makers) become more responsive to affluent citizens (and corporate interests) or because the policy preferences of affluent citizens diverge from those of poor and middle-income citizens. We should try to disentangle these two dynamics. Second, cross-national comparisons and cross-temporal comparisons, preferably in combination, provide a means to shed new light on the phenomenon of “unequal democracy.” We know that democratic politics and policy-making in the US tend to favour the affluent and that this holds for other “advanced democracies” as well, but we do not, as yet, have the conceptual tools to compare the extent of “pro-rich bias” across countries. And we don’t really know whether or not “pro-rich bias” has increased over time. And, third: union decline and long-term changes in the organization and strategic orientation of mainstream Left parties are an important part of the story of how citizens respond to rising inequality and how rising inequality affects the way democracies work.<sup>1</sup>

## Inequality and redistribution over time

A large body of comparative literature demonstrates that OECD countries with more equal distributions of market income typically have more redistributive tax-transfer systems (e.g. Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Iversen and Soskice 2009). On the other hand, Kenworthy and Pontusson (2005) show that inequality and redistribution were quite strongly correlated within countries over the period 1970-2000 (except in the case of the US).

Focusing on change over time, the core puzzle that I want to address can be stated as follows. By aggregate measures such as the Gini coefficient, inequality of market income has increased substantially in most OECD countries since the late 1980s. In particular, top income shares increased sharply in the 15 years preceding the financial crisis of 2007-08 (and, in most countries, recovered their 2007 levels by 2012). Based on Meltzer and Richard’s (1981) canonical model but also conventional wisdom, we might have expected democratically-elected governments to compensate for this development by increasing income transfers to poor- and middle-income households, financed by taxes on the rich, but this did not happen. Restricting the analysis to working-age households, the combined redistributive effect of taxes and transfers actually declined in most countries over the period 1994-2007 (Pontusson and Weisstanner 2017). Built-in welfare-state equalizers kicked in as low-income households lost jobs in 2008-12, but, due to reforms undertaken in the 1994-2007 period, their effects were far weaker than they had been during the employment crisis of the early 1990s.

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<sup>1</sup> Like most of the existing literature on these topics, my discussion will focus on preference polarization and representation by income rather than social class or other categorical distinctions. It is an open question, I think, whether or not income bias, as measured by many recent studies, boils down to bias against immigrants and/or unskilled workers, but I must set this question aside for the time being. I must also set aside the question of whether or not wealth inequality has effects that are distinct from those of income inequality.

One strand of the growing literature on the politics of inequality essentially attributes the lack of compensatory redistribution in the contemporary era to the lack of demand for such policies by citizens. Another strand instead invokes lack of government responsiveness to low- and middle-income citizens or, in other words, unequal democratic representation to explain the puzzle. Both lines of arguments invite the question of whether or not inequality – the level and/or the structure of inequality (Lupu and Pontusson 2011) – plays a causal role. As noted by a number of recent studies (e.g. Fernandez-Albertos and Kuo 2015), citizens’ knowledge of where they themselves fall in the income distribution and what has happened to income distribution is, at best, quite imperfect. And it may well be that many citizens do not perceive inequality as illegitimate (or unfair) or, in any case, that they care more about other issues (for example, immigration). The obvious question becomes whether these observations hold more under conditions of high inequality – in particular, perhaps, under conditions of high top-end inequality – and, if so, why this is the case. Similarly, much of the literature on unequal representation suggests that representation becomes more unequal as income and wealth inequality rises, but the exact mechanisms involved here have not been fully specified. The alternative view, that democratic politics have always been biased in favour of the affluent, should be taken seriously.

As commonly noted, unequal representation by income presupposes preference polarization by income. If low-income and high-income citizens agree, we cannot tell whether or not government is more responsive to one or the other. Observing an increase in unequal representation over time is consistent with two quite different scenarios: (a) preference polarization is unchanged, but government has become more responsive to affluent citizens; or (b) government responsiveness is unchanged, but preferences have become more polarized. To my mind, it is important to try to parse between these scenarios or, alternatively, to sort out the relative importance of changes in polarization and responsiveness. More broadly, my research program seeks to integrate insights from aforementioned literatures on preferences for redistributive policy (or policies) and policy responsiveness. While there has been a great deal of debate about the extent of preference polarization in the US, neither side in this debate seems terribly interested in how inequality influences political attitudes and policy preferences.

## Preferences for redistributive policies

For reasons of time and space, my reflections on the extensive literature on preferences for redistribution that has emerged over the last 10 years will be very brief (and will skip over many important contributions to this literature). Empirically, much of this literature has focused on explaining general support for redistribution, as captured by the standard (recurring) question asking respondents whether or not they agree with the proposition that “government should reduce income differences.” In summary, the literature shows that relative income is a strong predictor of general support for redistribution (controlling for any number of other socio-demographic and political variables at the individual level), but also that the coefficient for relative income varies a good deal across countries. As for change over time, support for redistribution among middle-income respondents appears to have held steady or declined in most OECD countries from the mid-1990s to the outbreak of the financial crisis of 2007-08 (Pontusson and Weisstanner 2017:50).<sup>2</sup> This period was characterized not only by rising top

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<sup>2</sup> Kenworthy and McCall (2008) present descriptive data on average support for redistribution for a selection of countries in the 1980s and 1990s: the overwhelming impression conveyed by their data is stability over time.

income shares, but also be falling poverty rates and increasing concentration of poverty and unemployment risk among immigrants and citizens with low education. The distance between the middle and the affluent increased, but so did the distance between the middle and the poor and these developments arguably offset each other (cf. Lupu and Pontusson 2011).

The Great Recession appears to have reversed trends towards declining support for redistribution in many countries (see Gonthier 2014; Rosset and Pontusson 2014). In some countries, notably Portugal, Ireland and Spain, we observe a significant increase in the percentage of citizens who support redistribution from 2008 to 2012. It is surely not a coincidence that these are countries that experienced dramatic increases in unemployment and inequality during the crisis. However, we do not find any association between changes in inequality and support for redistribution across all countries included in the ESS. Most importantly for present purposes, there is precious little evidence of any income polarization of preferences for redistribution during or immediately following the crisis. In countries where support for redistribution increased, it appears to have increased more or less proportionately across the income distribution (Gonthier 2014).

Though I am not aware of any systematic analysis of this, it seems likely that preference polarization by income has occurred on other issues, notably immigration and support for European integration (or, in the American case, free trade), over the last decade. As emphasized by Häusermann and Kriesi (2015), also Kitschelt and Rehm (2015), citizens' policy preferences are multi-dimensional.

Much of the literature on preference for redistribution (including my own work) might be faulted for not taking other policy dimensions into account. This line of criticism applies equally – perhaps more – to the literature on unequal representation.

The rise of “populist” parties suggests that a growing number of citizens feel poorly represented by mainstream parties of the Center-Left and Center-Right. To the extent a “representation gap” has emerged over the last 10-15 years, and to the extent that this gap is a result of preference polarization, it seems plausible to suppose that the gap pertains primarily to the “universalism-particularism dimension” rather than the distributive dimension of politics. In particular, conventional wisdom (and a good deal of evidence) suggests that citizens who favor redistribution and restrictions on immigration are not well represented by mainstream parties.<sup>3</sup>

That said, the question of preference polarization on the distributive dimension remains, I think, an important question in need of further theorizing and empirical research. To reiterate, preferences for redistribution *are* polarized by income in most countries. Arguably, “pro-rich” bias in the redistributive policy domain becomes a problem, from the point of view of low- and middle-income citizens, when inequality increases, whether or not preferences become more polarized. Moreover, polarization may occur with respect to the salience assigned to redistributive policy even if relative levels of support for redistribution remain constant.

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<sup>3</sup> Kitschelt and Rehm (2015) present evidence suggesting that European parties are, broadly speaking, representative of the citizens who vote for them, especially on the distributive policy dimension. Three problems with their analysis might be noted: first, the data refer to 2006-08; second, the analysis ignores non-voters; and, third, radical Left and Right parties are included in the estimates of congruence. To mind, the critical question is (ought to be) how well “mainstream parties” represent all citizens and whether or not this has changed over time.

Most importantly, I have become increasingly convinced that the standard ISSP/ESS question about support for redistribution is too broad (vague) to capture how citizens respond to rising inequality. Drawing on an extensive literature in social psychology, Condon and Wichowsky (2018) argue that most people are averse to engage in “upward comparison” and show, based on a US survey experiment, that eliciting upward comparisons triggers support for specific redistributive policy measures, but does not have any effect on responses to the standard question about support for redistribution in general. Based on an ESS module with more specific policy questions fielded in 2008, Cavaillé and Trump’s (2014) important analysis also highlights the need to go beyond the focus on general support for redistribution in the existing literature.

The 2008 ESS module was replicated in 2016 and, in collaboration with Nathalie Giger, I plan to replicate some of the questions from this module in another cross-national survey fielded in 2019. Based on these three surveys, it will be possible to analyze how preferences for specific redistributive policies respond to changes in the level and structure of inequality. My expectation is to find evidence of preference polarization by income with respect to some policies and not others. Our survey will also probe for the salience assigned to inequality as a social and political problem.

While 2008-19 is a relatively short period of time, it is arguably an important time period for our purposes. While top shares recovered, income stagnation and rising insecurity spread into the middle class over this period. Following Lupu and Pontusson (2011), I would expect the preferences of middle-income citizens to converge with those of poor citizens and to diverge from those of affluent citizens under these conditions. If I am right about that, these are also the conditions under which “pro-rich” bias in the political system becomes less contestable from a conceptual point of view and more problematic from a normative point of view.

## Unequal representation in comparative and historical perspective

Gilens (2012) demonstrates convincingly that policy-making in the US caters primarily to the preferences of the affluent when their preferences diverge from those of poor and middle-income citizens (see also Bartels 2008). His findings regarding the lack of responsiveness to the preferences of middle-income voters are particularly striking. By my reading, the debate surrounding Gilens’ work pertains primarily, if not entirely, to the question of the extent to which the policy preferences of different income groups diverge or, in other words, the overall political importance (the scope) of the unequal responsiveness identified by Gilens.<sup>4</sup>

As Gilens clearly recognizes, his study leaves something to be desired in terms of parsing between competing explanations of unequal representation by income (or, in other words, the causal mechanisms involved). To recap very quickly, at least four different explanations of income bias in American politics have been advanced. To begin with, there is unequal turnout: as low-income citizens are less likely to vote, it stands to reason that elected politicians will tend to discount their representation. A second line of argument pertains to the information available to elected politicians and their perceptions of what constituents want. Quite plausibly, the preferences of more affluent citizens are more accessible to elected politicians, because affluent

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<sup>4</sup> Soroka and Wlezien 2008; Enns 2015a, b; Gilens 2009., 2015a.

citizens are more likely to be actively involved in politics (not just more likely to vote) and because they are better organized and make their preferences known through interest groups.<sup>5</sup> Third, as emphasized by Carnes (2013), unequal responsiveness might be attributed to the fact that most elected politicians are drawn from the upper middle class and, perhaps increasingly, the economic elite. Finally, of course, there is the influence that affluent/rich citizens enjoy by virtue of the costs of election campaigns and the way in which they are financed (see Hacker and Pierson 2010, as well as Gilens 2012, 2015b).

These explanations are not mutually exclusive and I do not want to propose a horse race between them, but parsing among them – assigning relative importance to each – strikes me as an important step in advancing our understanding of unequal representation. Cross-national comparison provides one obvious way to advance this agenda (see Gilens and Page 2014 for an alternative approach).<sup>6</sup>

Let me briefly review some of the comparative literature on unequal representation by income. To date, most of this literature conceives unequal representation in terms of (differential) congruence of ideological dispositions and/or policy preferences of elected representatives and citizens rather than policy responsiveness in the manner of Gilens (2012). Based on Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) data for 24 countries over the period 1996-2007 (49 elections in total), Rosset et al. (2013) explore the congruence of citizens' self-placement on the Left-Right scale, sorted into income quintiles, with the Left-Right position of governments, as coded by experts. In the majority of the country-years covered by their analysis, the ideological position of the government is significantly closer to the self-placement of citizens in the middle quintile than that of citizens in the bottom quintile. Rosset et al. (2013) also show that the ideological position of governments is closer to citizens in the top quintile than to citizens in the middle quintile.

For present purposes, two limitations of Rosset et al.'s (2013) study deserve to be noted: first, they treat parties as unitary actors and, second, they assume that political preferences are one-dimensional.<sup>7</sup> Addressing the former issue, Lupu and Warner (2017) match surveys of national elected representatives and citizen surveys in some 52 countries over 30 years and estimate measures of congruence between elected representatives and citizens sorted by wealth and occupational status, and show that the ideological distance between elected representatives and citizens declines with the affluence of citizens. (Note, however, that differences in congruence between the top three quintiles of citizens are not statistically significant).

For 20 European democracies, Rosset and Stecker (2018) address the issue of multi-dimensionality by matching the positions of government parties in several policy domains (based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey) and citizens' answers to ESS questions pertaining to these policy domains. Their main conclusion is that poor citizens are particularly

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<sup>5</sup> See Walgrave et al. (2018) for an interesting comparative study of the accuracy of politicians' perceptions of citizens' issue priorities (in Belgium, Canada and Israel). The evidence suggests that perceptions of the issue priorities of citizens with low education are almost as accurate as perceptions of the issue priorities of citizens with high education.

<sup>6</sup> A comparative perspective might also generate explanations of unequal representation that do not feature in the literature on the US. In particular, it is tempting to suppose, as suggested by Bussemeyer and Tober (2017), that the transfer of policy-making to the EU favors the preferences of affluent voters relative to poor and middle-income voters.

<sup>7</sup> Related to the first issue, Rosset et al. (2013) research design conflates cross-national and cross-party variation in congruence by income in a way that strikes me as somewhat problematic.

underrepresented in the redistributive policy domain and that citizens with low education are particularly underrepresented with respect to policies pertaining to European integration.

Finally, two recent studies that replicate Gilens' analysis of policy responsiveness are noteworthy: Elsässer et al.'s (2018) analysis of German data for 1980-2013 and Persson and Gilljam's (2017) analysis of Swedish data for 1956-2014. Comparing responsiveness to the preferences of citizens in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> percentiles of the income distribution, as well as the preferences of unskilled workers and the self-employed, Elsässer et al. report biases that are strikingly similar to those reported by Gilens for the US. For the Swedish case, Persson and Gilljam also show that government policy is most responsive to the policy preference of the affluent and least responsive to the policy preferences of the poor. Interestingly, the differences between Social Democratic and Center-Right governments in this respect are not very large.

It should be noted that only about 13 percent of the policy proposals included in Persson and Gilljam's analysis were implemented, as compared to 59 percent of the policy proposals included in Elsässer et al.'s analysis and some 32 percent of the proposals in Gilens' analysis. The discrepancy between Germany and the US might be explained in terms of institutional differences (greater status quo bias in the US), but this does not obviously hold for the discrepancy between Sweden and Germany. More likely, the discrepancy between Sweden and Germany has to do with the kinds of policy proposals that were put to citizens in the surveys that provide the foundation for the analyses presented in these studies. To compare policy responsiveness across studies of this kind, it would seem to be imperative to somehow standardize the set of policy proposals considered.

The literature reviewed above demonstrates that unequal representation by income (and class) is by no means a uniquely American phenomenon. Some of this literature also demonstrates that the extent of unequal representation varies across countries, but it is fair to say, I think, that the question of why unequal representation varies across countries has not yet received much attention. As noted by Elsässer et al. (2018), the fact that unequal responsiveness in Germany is comparable to that in the US calls into question the importance assigned to campaign finance in the literature on the US. What, then, of the factors invoked in the literature on the US? I hasten to point out that Rosset et al. (2013) present evidence suggesting that unequal representation tends to be higher in country-years with higher levels of (post-fisc) income inequality, but this evidence is far from definitive and there is obviously an endogeneity issue here (causality might run in either direction).

Going forward, the growing availability of candidate surveys, asking more specific policy questions that are also asked in citizens surveys, presents an exciting opportunity to explore congruence between elected representatives (also candidates who did not win) and different categories of citizens in a more detailed and systematic fashion.<sup>8</sup> Since some of the candidate surveys include information about the occupational background of candidates and their income, the data source is particularly suited for assessing the significance of "descriptive misrepresentation" by income and social class for unequal substantive representation (Carnes 2013; Carnes and Lupu 2015).

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<sup>8</sup> The first module of Comparative Candidate Survey (CSS) project includes data for 35 elections (mostly European elections) that took place between 2005-2013, with a second module currently in the field ([www.comparativecandidates.org](http://www.comparativecandidates.org)). Note that Lupu and Warner (2017) also analyze candidate survey data from Latin America.

An important limitation of candidate surveys is, of course, that they are relatively recent and do not allow us to address whether (or why) unequal representation has increased since, say, the 1960s or 1970s. Responsiveness studies of the kind pioneered by Gilens strike me as the most obvious way to tackle this critical question. Indeed, Gilens himself addresses “responsiveness across time” in chapter 7 of his book, adding a smaller dataset covering the Johnson administration (1964-68) to his main dataset (1982-2006). The results are ambiguous in the sense that responsiveness to the affluent has clearly increased over time, but responsiveness to middle-income citizens does not appear to have declined.<sup>9</sup> With survey data going back to 1956, Persson and Gilljam (2017) would seem to miss a golden opportunity to identify changes in responsiveness over time. In particular, it would be very interesting to explore, with their data, whether partisan differences in responsiveness to the preferences of low-income and high-income citizens have changed over different.<sup>10</sup> One of my near-term goals is to identify at least a couple of other countries that might lend themselves to longitudinal analyses of policy responsiveness. The UK is an obvious candidate.

## A crude model of (contemporary) democratic politics

I now want to propose a stylized model of democratic politics that captures insights by Gilens (2012) and Enns (2015a, b) alike and, arguably, takes us beyond the debate between them. (The next iteration of this paper will include a more detailed discussion of this debate). By my reading, Gilens and Enns both conceive responsiveness to middle-income and affluent voters as directly comparable to each other and set up a horse race between them. While Gilens shows that policy-makers are more responsive to the preferences of affluent citizens than to the preferences of middle-income citizens, Enns suggests that the alignment of preferences is such that a majority of middle-income citizens would be satisfied with the policy choices determined exclusively by the preferences/demands of affluent citizens (even when there is significant disagreement between middle-income and affluent citizens). In both cases, the impact of the preferences of middle-income citizens on the probability of policy change is estimated while controlling for the preferences of affluent citizens, and vice-versa, but there is no interaction between the preferences of the two groups.

The model that I have in mind proceeds from the idea that elected politicians have little incentive to cater to poor citizens in the absence of disruptive behaviour (“poor people’s movements”) and, more importantly, that middle-income and affluent voters play qualitatively different roles in the decision-making calculus of elected politicians (and other policy-makers). Differences in electoral turnout between middle-income citizens and affluent citizens are not sufficiently large to render elected politicians more responsive to affluent citizens, but the personal preferences/dispositions of elected politicians tend to be more closely aligned with those of affluent citizens because of their social/occupational backgrounds, their current income (also their future income prospects), and their social networks. In addition, the preferences of

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<sup>9</sup> Curiously, the policy under the presidency of George W. Bush appears to have been uniquely responsive to middle-income as well as high-income citizens (an issue on which they disagree). Here too the problem of comparability of policy proposals across contexts (countries or presidencies) may be in play.

<sup>10</sup> I imagine that Persson and Gilljam might have opted against this line of inquiry on an account of the small number of pre-1990 survey questions in their dataset (ca. 80). While I do not wish to dismiss concerns about statistical significance, I do not think they should stop us from asking substantively important questions (and addressing these questions with available data, however imperfectly).

affluent citizens are expressed more effectively through media and various forms of lobbying. Finally, affluent citizens are an important source of political donations to parties and political campaigns.

For any and all of these reasons, elected politicians respond directly to the preferences of affluent citizens. By contrast, the preferences of middle-income citizens – or, in other words, the infamous “median voter” – primarily represent a constraint on elected politicians. Holding the preferences of affluent citizens constant, an increase in support for a policy among middle-income citizens (say, from 40 percent to 55 percent or from 50 percent to 65 percent) does not affect the probability that the policy will be adopted. However, elected politicians will be reluctant to adopt policies that run against the preferences of the majority of middle-income citizens, for fear of losing the next election. In this sense, elected politicians are not completely oblivious to the median voter.

The simple prediction of my model is that the level of support for a policy among affluent citizens provides a good predictor of policy adoption *so long as a majority of middle-income voters are not opposed to the policy* (and that the level of support among middle-income citizens is only a good predictor of policy adoption to the extent that the preferences of middle-income citizens are aligned with the preferences of affluent citizens). I hasten to add that the constraint represented by the preferences of middle-income citizens presupposes that the policy in question is salient to middle-income citizens. Ideally, salience should be taken into account in testing the prediction of my model with the kind of data created by Gilens and other responsiveness scholars.

It goes with saying, I think, that politicians have the capacity to shape the way that citizens think about issues/policies and the priorities that they assign to different issues/policies. Politicians seek the support of affluent citizens – their support as “opinion leaders” as well as their financial support – in order to shape public opinion, participation and vote choice. Within the framework sketched here, it seems plausible to suppose that politicians’ efforts to shape public opinion is targeted on middle-income citizens. In a sense, their main objective is to “neutralize the median voter.”

## Unions and Left parties

In my view, the crude model sketched above captures contemporary political dynamics in many democracies, not just the US. But if democratic politics had always worked in this manner, we would never have ended up with progressive taxation and redistributive transfer systems. Something must have changed in the way that democratic politics works. Let me briefly try to articulate why I think that union decline and the transformation of mainstream Left parties over the last 20-30 years deserve a prominent role in our account of how democratic politics have changed.

### Unionization

As documented by Pontusson (2013), union density has declined sharply in most OECD countries since the 1980s. Less commonly known, but equally important, the socio-economic characteristics of union members have changed as union membership has held up better in the public sector than the private sector and among skilled workers (including white-collar

employees) than among unskilled workers (Becher and Pontusson 2011; Mosimann and Pontusson 2017). De-unionization is closely related to the expansion of low-skill private service employment and the expansion of fixed-term employment in the public as well as the private sector. In most countries, union members today are relatively better paid and more likely to belong to narrower unions than they were 20 or 30 years ago.

The relevance of these developments for unequal representation are as follows. First, we know that union membership is associated with higher levels of electoral turnout and other forms of political participation among citizens with low education and low pay (see, e.g., Kerrissey and Schofer 2013). Second, Mosimann and Pontusson (2017, 2018) demonstrate that union membership is associated with support for redistribution among citizens with income above the median, but this “solidarity effect” is conditional on encompassment (inclusiveness). The policy preferences of professionals who belong to narrow occupational unions are not significantly different from professionals who are not unionized. Third, unions promote the salience of distributive politics to their members and enable citizens with pro-redistribution preferences to connect preferences with vote choice in a more rational manner. Finally, I think that a strong case can be made that unions serve as a crucial channel whereby the preferences of low- and middle-income citizens are conveyed to elected representatives.<sup>11</sup>

## Left parties

The electoral decline of mainstream Left parties has been quite dramatic since the 1990s and represents, in my view, an important reason for the rise of “populist” parties (rather than being a result of the latter). The story of Left parties seeking to offset the decline of the industrial working class by mobilizing middle-class electoral support is a familiar one. In so doing, these parties seem to have lost their ability to appeal effectively to workers, notably workers who are not union members (Rennwald 2015; Rennwald and Pontusson 2018). Aside from the programmatic commitments that were embraced as part of the effort to mobilize middle-class support (including the embrace of the “European project”), the changing composition of active party members and, especially, candidates in national elections has arguably played a key role in this respect. Needless to say, the professionalization of politics is by no means unique to mainstream Left parties, but a case can be made, I think, that its consequences for these parties have been particularly important

In closing, let me clarify three things. First, it goes without saying that union decline and the transformation of the mainstream Left are closely related to each other. Second, the argument sketched here is not simply an argument about the Left. The presence (or absence) of Left parties with a “special relationship” to the working class affects the positions and behaviour of other parties that seek to appeal to low- and middle-income citizens, most obviously, in the European context, Christian Democratic parties. Finally, let me emphasize that the extent of union decline and transformation of the mainstream Left parties varies a great deal across countries. My working hypothesis is that this variation sheds light on the cross-national variation in the “pro-rich bias” of politics and policy-making in Western Europe (and perhaps more generally).

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<sup>11</sup> Based on a very clever research design, and painstaking data collection, Becher et al. (2018) show that roll-call voting by US congressmen (House) become less biased in favor of the affluent as union density in their district increases. According to their analysis, this effect holds for Republicans as well as Democrats.

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