Does symbolic representation through class signalling appeal to voters? Evidence from a conjoint experiment

David Weisstanner
Sarah Engler

University of Zurich UZH

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David Weisstanner
University of Lucerne
david.weisstanner@unilu.ch

Sarah Engler
Leuphana University Lüneburg
sarah.engler@leuphana.de

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David Weisstanner

University of Lucerne
david.weisstanner@unilu.ch

Sarah Engler

Leuphana University Lüneburg
sarah.engler@leuphana.de

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Abstract

Affluent voters are over-represented in politics. The persisting lack of descriptive representation even among left parties with strong working-class ties or populist radical right parties continues to puzzle researchers. In this paper, we provide a novel explanation for the under-representation of voters from lower socio-economic backgrounds. We focus on symbolic representation and argue that political elites can engage in symbolic representation through class signalling to compensate for lack of descriptive representation. Using original survey data from a conjoint experiment in Switzerland in 2023, we find that many voters are biased in favour of politicians from less affluent backgrounds and class-neutral cultural consumption. More importantly, we demonstrate that both types of symbolic class signalling increase support for affluent politicians among less affluent voters. Hence, symbolic representation can "compensate" for lack of descriptive representation. This contributes to our understanding of the puzzle why descriptive misrepresentation persists.

Introduction

The democratic ideal relies of the idea that politics reflects the preferences of individuals of which society consists of (Dahl 1971). However, reality is far away from this ideal. Recent research on class representation shows that working-class voters are substantially under-represented in national parliaments in all OECD countries (Carnes and Lupu 2023, forthcoming). This lack of descriptive representation may be normatively concerning (Elsässer and Schäfer 2022; Mansbridge 1999), but also has real-world policy consequences as more affluent politicians implement less working-class-friendly policies (Carnes 2013; Curto-Grau and Gallego forthcoming; O'Grady 2019). Accordingly, the lack of descriptive representation of working-class individuals in parliament has been proposed as a core explanation for unequal policy responsiveness (Elsässer, Hense, and Schäfer 2020).

As Carnes and Lupu (2023: p. 11.9) point out, while class-based descriptive representation and its consequences are now well-documented, the causes of this (mis)representation are less often studied. Experimental studies show that voters are neither indifferent to class characteristics of politicians, nor do they have a clear bias against working-class politicians (Carnes and Lupu 2016, 2023; Vivyan et al. 2020; Wüest and Pontusson 2022). Yet, although this suggest that people prefer to be represented by politicians with similar socio-economic characteristics as themselves, these survey preferences do not seem to translate into actual descriptive representation. This has also not changed with the rise of populist radical right parties that are popular with parts of the electorates of the lower and lower-middle class. On the contrary, many successful populist radical right movements were led by very affluent individuals, such as Donald Trump in the United States, Christoph Blocher in Switzerland, or Silvio Berlusconi in Italy.

In this paper, we build on this emerging literature and provide a novel explanation for the puzzling lack of descriptive representation of voters from lower socio-economic backgrounds. We take into account representation as a multidimensional concept consisting not only of descriptive and substantive, but also *symbolic* representation (Pitkin 1967). We argue that politicians can use symbolic representation through class signalling to compensate for the lack of descriptive representation. They can do so in two ways: First, by signalling a "modest" class background. Politicians can highlight certain biographical elements, for example a parent's working-class occupation or the neighbourhood in which the politician grew up. This allows even politicians from affluent backgrounds to signal to voters that they (still) feel as part of the working class. A second, even stronger, form of symbolic representation is the reference to the cultural understanding of class (Westheuser 2020; Westheuser and Zollinger 2021; Zollinger 2022). Politicians can highlight different cultural consumption preferences, for example drinking beer in a pub as opposed to fine arts or classical music (Bourdieu 1998; Prieur and Savage 2013), and gain recognition for a symbolic working-class or upper-class identity.

We test the role of symbolic representation through class signalling using original survey data from a conjoint experiment conducted in Switzerland in January 2023. Echoing previous studies, we find that many voters are biased against politicians from affluent economic backgrounds and cultural consumption associated with the upper classes. Our

more novel finding is that these two types of symbolic representation can compensate for the lack of descriptive representation of under-represented groups. For example, we show that non-tertiary-educated voters tolerate or even actively choose tertiary-educated candidates as long as these candidates are not associated with upper-class family origins or upper-class cultural consumption. We further show that the effects of symbolic representation are driven by parties competing on the cultural dimension of political conflict and that symbolic representation may compensate even for non-class-based descriptive misrepresentation.

These findings contribute to several literatures. First, we provide a novel explanation for the puzzle of lack of descriptive representation focusing on symbolic aspects of representation. We are not aware of other attempts to systematically integrate the role of different forms of symbolic representation into the study of descriptive representations. Our findings suggest that this is a fruitful avenue to explain the puzzling lack of descriptive representation all over the world. Second, our findings have implications for various strands of the literature on voting behaviour, including class voting, electoral realignment, and populism. The strong effects of symbolic representation through class signalling show that class still matters, but perhaps differently than in the past through strategic symbolic class appeals that are often culturally connotated. Consistent with previous studies (e.g. Westheuser 2020), radical right parties in particular excel in this symbolic signalling of working-class identities, compensating for the often glaring lack of descriptive representation of their working-class voters.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we provide a brief overview of the literature on descriptive representation and the main explanations for the lack of descriptive representation of voters from lower socio-economic backgrounds. We then present our own novel argument about the role of symbolic representation through class signalling and its potential to compensate for the lack of descriptive representation. The empirical sections describe our conjoint survey experiment and present our findings. Finally, we conclude with discussing some broader implications of the study.

The lack of descriptive representation

The idea of descriptive representation rests on the assumption that citizens are more likely to support political elites with similar socio-economic characteristics as their own. Yet all over the world, the representation of voters with different socio-economic characteristics is highly unequal. Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu summarise this lack of descriptive representation as follows:

> "To our knowledge, every study ever published in this literature—every country, every time period, every institutional context, every measure of economic status—has uncovered the same basic descriptive inequality: Politicians everywhere are significantly better off than the people they govern" (Carnes and Lupu 2023: p. 11.4)

Recent literature has explored several potential explanations for the lack of descriptive representation of voters from lower socio-economic backgrounds. A first influential argument holds that voters may be "biased" against politicians from lower socio-economic backgrounds, for example because they may be seen as less qualified or competent. Indeed,

Wüest and Pontusson (2022) find a "bias" against working-class candidates among non-working-class voters in a conjoint experiment from Switzerland. However, many other studies from varying countries have not found robust evidence for the voter bias hypothesis. For example, Carnes and Lupu (2016) show that working-class voters are just as likely to support working-class politicians and to view them as equally qualified. Carnes and Lupu (2023: p. 11.11) suggest that "this hypothesis is a dead end".

Another explanation is that voters are uninformed and indifferent about the under-representation of voters from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Carnes and Lupu (2022) find that voters in Argentina, the UK and the US underestimate the under-representation of working-class voters in parliaments. They also find that voters who prefer greater working-class representation do not vote differently from other voters. At the same time, social class remains a strong predictor of voting in Western democracies (Evans and Tilley 2017; Oesch and Rennwald 2018). The experimental literature also highlights that voters are not indifferent over the class background of politicians. Vivyan et al. (2020), for instance, highlight that voters care about the class roots of politicians. They find an affinity among working-class voters for candidates from working-class origins and/or in working-class occupations.

A third line of explanations focuses on macro-level factors. Voter turnout – and institutional factors related to the electoral system – could be a cause of descriptive misrepresentation due to the lower turnout of voters from low socio-economic backgrounds compared to more affluent voters. Turnout inequality across socio-economic groups is indeed well-documented, but also shows large variation across countries, for example correlating with income inequality (Anderson and Beramendi 2008; Schäfer and Schwander 2019). Hence, although unequal turnout is a promising explanation, the problem with it is that it fails to explain the uniform lack of descriptive representation present in all countries. Voters from low socio-economic backgrounds are underrepresented even in countries with high and relatively equal turnout across socio-economic groups (Carnes and Lupu 2023, forthcoming).

Neither of these existing explanations fully explains the lack of descriptive representation. In their review article, Carnes and Lupu (2023) emphasise the need for further research on the causes of descriptive misrepresentation. In this paper, we attempt to contribute to this call. Our angle to this problem is to conceptualise representation as a multidimensional concept, consisting not only of descriptive and substantive, but also *symbolic* representation (Pitkin 1967). A lack of representation on one dimension may be compensated by representation on another dimension. In the next section, we argue how politicians can use symbolic representation through class signalling to compensate for the lack of descriptive representation.

The compensation effect of symbolic representation

Symbolic representation concerns the ways that a representative "stands for" those he/she represents (Pitkin 1967: ch. 5). It depends on "the activity of making people believe in the symbol, accept the political leader as their symbolic representative." (Pitkin 1967: 102) In the context of class representation, the "symbol" relates to the social class background of

political leaders. We hypothesize that symbolic representation through signalling of social class characteristics can happen in two ways:

Class origin. Signalling a "modest" class background can increase support for politicians by encouraging class affinity (Vivyan et al. 2020). Politicians can highlight certain biographical elements, for example a parent's working-class occupation or the neighbourhood in which the politician grew up. This allows even high-educated politicians with high socio-economic status to signal to voters that they still feel as part of the working class. This first type of signalling is a "weak" form of symbolic representation: The emphasis lies on characteristics closely related to actual socio-economic conditions and actual descriptive representation.

Cultural consumption. A second possible form of symbolic representation makes reference to cultural understandings of class (Westheuser 2020; Westheuser and Zollinger 2021; Zollinger 2022). Politicians can use highlight different cultural tastes and consumption preferences, for example drinking beer in a pub as opposed to fine arts or classical music (Bourdieu 1998; Prieur and Savage 2013), and gain recognition for a symbolic working-class or upper-class identity. Although the signalling of "cultural consumption" evokes class associations, these associations are not necessarily based on an economic understanding of class. Indeed, the sociological literature around the concept of cultural consumption is strongly influenced by Bourdieu and his notion of cultural capital (for an overview, see Katz-Gerro 2004). Moreover, cultural consumption is more closely related to Weberian social status than with class (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007). Hence, cultural consumption, our second type of class signalling, is a "strong" form of symbolic representation: The emphasis is on characteristics that are used to evoke class associations for instrumental reasons. Signalling attachment to a certain class with cultural consumption can be far disconnected from actual descriptive representation.

Two clarifications about our conceptualisation of symbolic representation through class signalling are in order. First, it is important to note that "neutral" categories of symbolic representation can also be signalled. (e.g. "middle-class origin" or "class-neutral cultural consumption"). Second, there are obviously country-specific connotations of both types of symbolic representations. For example, it is well known that a much larger share of people in Britain identifies with the "working class" than in Denmark or other European countries. This may be explained by cultural aspects of class identification, such as the relative weight of class origin over current class (Evans, Stubager, and Langsæther 2022). Likewise, connotations regarding cultural tastes and consumption behaviour must be interpreted carefully in each specific context.

Having noted these clarifications, our first main hypothesis is that signalling of working-class characteristics is particularly effective among voters from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This is because among these voters, symbolic representation resonates with descriptive representation: Signalling working-class origins or cultural consumption strengthens the credibility that the representative actually "stands for" the working class. Accordingly, our first hypothesis is:

> *H1: People with lower socio-economic background are more likely to support a candidate who...*
> > *...signals working-class origin (H1a)*

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…signals working-class cultural consumption (H1b)

More ambitiously than this general hypothesis, we can also test whether symbolic representation makes voters more likely to support the "wrong" candidate from the criteria of descriptive representation. We know from the experimental literature that a politician from affluent socio-economic backgrounds may face severe bias, especially among voters from less affluent backgrounds (Carnes and Lupu 2023). However, affluent leaders might refer to symbolic class signalling in order to obfuscate their affluent economic socio-economic background and thereby reduce the bias they are facing especially among less affluent voters. Hence, our novel (to our knowledge) second hypothesis is that affluent politicians "compensate" their lack of descriptive representation with voters from lower socio-economic backgrounds by engaging in symbolic representation through class signalling.

> *H2: People with lower socio-economic background are more likely to support a candidate from affluent background who…*
> > *…signals working-class origin (H2a)*
> > *…signals working-class cultural consumption (H2b)*

If there is widespread working-class affinity or a widespread "bias" against upper-class political leaders in the population, it could be added that this compensation effect can apply (to some extent) even to people from higher socio-economic backgrounds. In this case, they may dislike candidates from upper-class origin and/or candidates that display an upper-class cultural consumption. In contrast, they would prefer candidates engaging in symbolic representation through signalling working-class or middle-class (as opposed to upper-class) origin and/or through signalling working-class or class-neutral (as opposed to upper-class) cultural consumption.

Variation across party families

We expect that the effectiveness of symbolic representation varies across political parties. On the one hand, this is due to a purely mechanical effect. Party constituencies have different class profiles. A party with a large working-class constituency will almost certainly gain more from the symbolic signalling of working-class attachment than a party with mostly upper-class voters. On the other hand, however, there is also a strategic effect. While we expect that symbolic representation is an effective tool for all parties, and explains the misrepresentation of workers class interests, the main centre-left and centre-right parties can nevertheless rely on their reputation to substantially represent the economic preferences of their core constituencies. Challenger parties which mainly compete on the cultural dimension, on the other hand, do not have a long-standing history of class conflict (De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Meguid 2005). They thus need to re-define the meaning of class if they wish to appeal to their voters from certain class backgrounds. As a result, we particularly expect symbolic class signalling to matter for voters of radical right and green parties.

Compensating non-class descriptive misrepresentation

Descriptive representation can be assessed by other criteria than class and other socio-economic characteristics. We therefore explore, in an exploratory way, whether the effect of symbolic representation generalises to other under-represented groups, in particular groups that are not defined by economic characteristics. We focus on gender, where women are equally under-represented in most Western democracies (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2020). To see whether symbolic representation matters for this group, we can leverage cross-pressured groups: women from low socio-economic backgrounds, who are under-represented on both dimensions (gender and class). Among these women, we may expect symbolic representation through class signalling to make a difference, perhaps even obscuring the overall preference of women for female politicians. We will thus test the expectation that symbolic representation moderates the effect of gender of party leader candidates among non-tertiary-educated women.

Data and methods

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an original conjoint survey experiment in Switzerland. Switzerland has a fragmented and strongly realigned multi-party system, and is a highly relevant case in the context of this study due to the strong class divisions between the New Left (represented by the social democratic and green parties) and the Populist Right (Swiss people's party), primarily based on cultural values rather than economic resources (Oesch and Rennwald 2010). Notably, Switzerland has witnessed real-world examples of socio-economic incongruence between party leaders and their working-class voters, such as in the case of the Swiss People's Party (SVP). Between the 1990s and 2010s, the SVP's *de facto* party leader was Christoph Blocher, an industrialist with an estimated family wealth of 15 billion Swiss francs (roughly 15.5 billion Euro) in 2022.[1] Although this makes Switzerland a unique and "most likely case", its party system context and degree of underrepresentation of working-class voters (Carnes and Lupu 2023: Figure 1) is well comparable to other European multi-party systems.

The survey experiment consisted of a representative sample of 1,550 voters eligible to vote in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The fieldwork was carried out by the survey company Bilendi from January 27th to February 20th, 2023. Quotas for party strength, age, gender, and education were implemented. The sample excluded non-voters and included only individuals who voted for one of the six major parties in Switzerland: The Swiss People's Party (SVP, 25.6% vote share in 2019), the Social Democratic Party (SP, 16.8%), the Liberals (FDP, 15.1%), the Centre (Mitte, 11.4%), the Green Party (13.2%), and the Green Liberal Party (GLP, 7.8%).

The survey flow followed a structured sequence of questions. First, participants were asked to provide socio-demographic variables, followed by questions regarding voting behaviour in the 2019 national election and party affiliation and additional socio-demographic variables. An attention check was included to ensure respondents' attentiveness and data

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[1] https://www.handelszeitung.ch/people/bilanz-300-reichste-2022-familie-blocher

quality. Then followed the main component of the survey, the conjoint experiment involving a choice of political leaders (described below). After the conjoint experiment, participants were asked several attitudinal variables (left-right self-placement, policy preferences, institutional trust, most important problem).

The conjoint experiment

The conjoint experiment presented participants with hypothetical scenarios involving two fictious politicians competing for party leadership in the upcoming campaign for the national parliamentary elections on 22 October 2023. All participants received the following prompt, referring to respondents' own party.[2] "*The [PARTY] is preparing for the 2023 election campaign. Please imagine that there are new elections for the party leadership before the election. We will present several hypothetical scenarios in which two politicians stand for the election.*" Respondents were then asked to make choices based on different attributes of the party leaders. Specifically, they were asked to choose how likely it is that they would vote for their party in the upcoming 2023 elections if candidate 1 or candidate 2, respectively, would become party leader. In addition, they were asked which of the two candidates they preferred as party leader. These two types of choice questions are our dependent variable.

Table 1 summarises the six attributes used in our conjoint experiments for selecting a candidate for party leadership. The gender attribute considers whether the hypothetical candidate is a man or a woman. Education examines whether the candidate holds a university degree or a vocational degree. Economic attitudes / cultural attitudes determine if the candidate positions themselves on the left or right wing of the party regarding economic and social policies / societal issues such as migration or social equality. The final two attributes are our main interest in this study: Class origin describes the candidate's family background, i.e. growing up in wealthy circumstances (with lawyer and doctor parents), in a teacher family, or in a working-class family with a construction worker and a supermarket employee as parents. Cultural consumption describes the candidate's preferences in their leisure time, such as enjoying classical music with a glass of wine, meeting friends, or going to a favourite pub (Swiss German: *Lieblingsbeiz*) for a beer.

The six attributes were fully randomised, except keeping economic and cultural attitudes next to each other to reduce complexity. The Supplementary Materials A provide screenshots of the conjoint experiment.

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[2] Based on information about the party that they voted on in the last election in 2019. In a few cases, where this information was missing but information on party affiliation was available, we used party affiliation instead of vote choice.

Table 1: Conjoint attributes

| Attribute	Candidate for [PARTY] leadership:
Gender	▪ Is a man ▪ Is a woman
Education	▪ Has a university degree ▪ Has a vocational degree
Economic attitudes	▪ Positions himself/herself on the left wing of the party on economic and social policy ▪ Positions himself/herself on the right wing of the party on economic and social policy
Cultural attitudes	▪ Positions himself/herself on the left wing of the party on societal issues (e.g. migration, equality) ▪ Positions himself/herself on the right wing of the party on societal issues (e.g. migration, equality)
Class origin	▪ Grew up in wealthy circumstances as daughter/son of a lawyer and a doctor ▪ Grew up in a teacher family as daughter/son of a primary teacher and a primary teacher ▪ Grew up in a working-class family as daughter/son of a construction worker and a supermarket employee
Cultural consumption	▪ Enjoys hearing classical music with a glass of wine in his/her spare time ▪ Enjoys meeting friends in his/her spare time ▪ Enjoys going to drink a beer in favorite pub [*Lieblingsbeiz*] in his/her spare time

Statistical approach

We follow the recommended approach by Leeper et al. (2020) and use marginal means to evaluate the impact of different party leadership candidate attributes on vote choice probability. To calculate the marginal means, we employ OLS regression with clustered standard errors. This approach allows us to estimate the relative importance of each attribute level while accounting for potential clustering effects within the data.

Findings

Figure 1 presents the baseline findings from our conjoint experiment. The red estimates in the left panel show the predicted probability (marginal means) of choosing a party leader with given characteristics. Overall, voters prefer female over male party leaders (53.0% vs. 46.9%). They have a slight preference for leaders with left-wing attitudes on economic and cultural issues, although this effect is substantively small. Furthermore, they are indifferent between university-educated leaders and leaders with a vocational education. However, when we look at the panel on the right, we see that overall, voters aim for descriptive representation: Voters with tertiary education prefer candidates with a university degree, while voters with no tertiary education prefer candidates with vocational degree.

Our main interest is in the effect of symbolic representation. Across all voters, respondents strongly prefer leadership candidates from working-class origin (55.5%), followed by candidates from middle-class families (50.8%). All else equal, only 43.7% of voters choose candidates from wealthy occupational backgrounds. The second form of symbolic representation, cultural consumption, also has a strong effect: Voters are less likely to choose leaders with upper-class cultural consumption (portrayed as enjoying to hear classical music with a glass of wine). Somewhat surprisingly, the preferred choice is for candidates with class-neutral cultural consumption (meeting friends), rather than working-class cultural consumption (drinking beer in favourite pub).

Figure 1: Effects of party leader attributes on choice probability
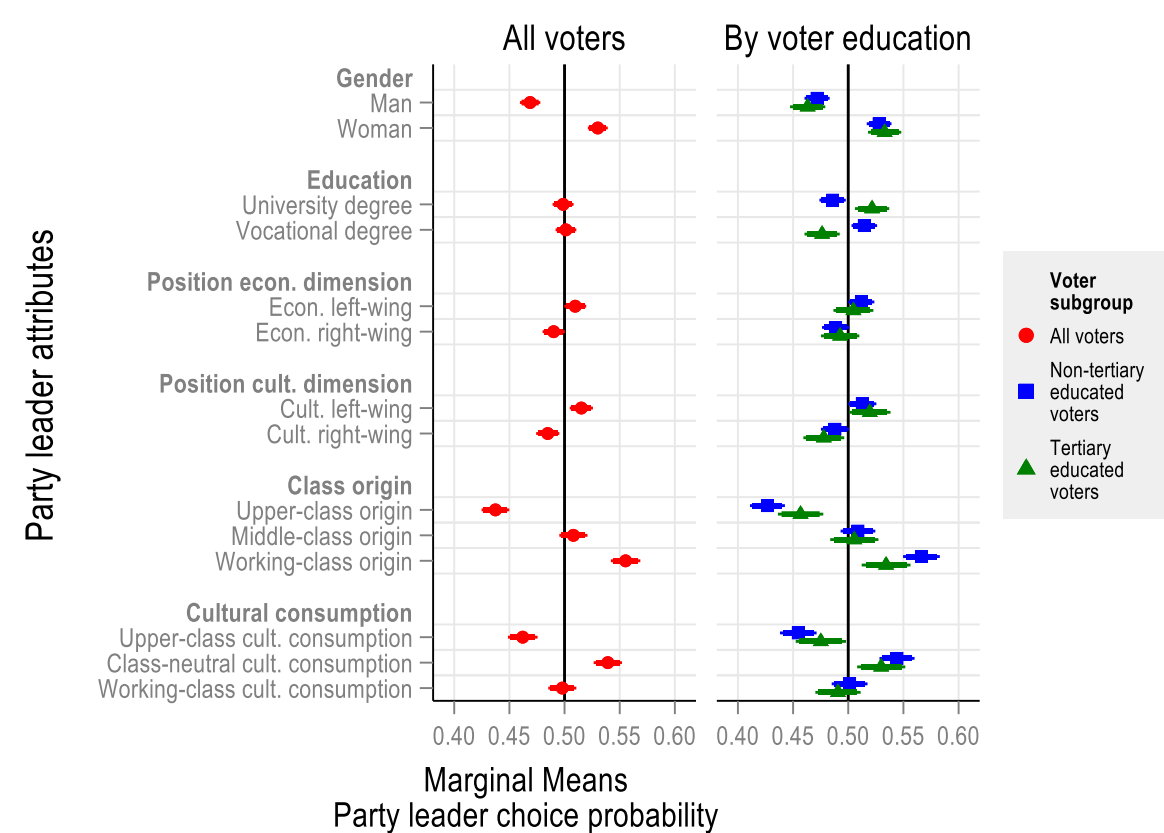

Note: Conjoint estimates with 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

If our hypothesis that symbolic representation allows compensating for lack of descriptive representation is true, under-represented voters from low socio-economic backgrounds should be especially susceptible to the two types of class signalling. The right panel of Figure 1 shows that this is indeed the case. Non-tertiary educated voters are more likely to choose candidates from working-class origins and less likely to choose upper-class origin candidates or candidates with upper-class cultural consumption. Surprisingly, even voters without tertiary education are indifferent to candidates with working-class cultural consumption. Moreover, the green estimates show that even candidates with tertiary

education are susceptible to symbolic representation, although the effects are weaker than for non-tertiary-educated candidates.

Figure 2 provides additional evidence that symbolic representation can compensate for lack of descriptive representation. The figure is based on an interaction between party leader education and class origin (top panel) and party leader education and cultural consumption (bottom panel). Overall, we had seen in Figure 1 that non-tertiary-educated voters are significantly less likely to vote for a university-educated leader than a leader with vocational education (48.6% vs. 51.5%). However, Figure 2 shows that this overall preference is strongly conditioned by class origin: Non-tertiary-educated voters may have a high likelihood to vote even for university-educated candidates if those candidates signal working-class origin (55.6%). In contrast, they are indifferent to university-educated leaders from middle-class origin, and the choice likelihood drops to 40.6% for university-educated leaders from upper-class origin.

Figure 2: The compensating effect of symbolic representation


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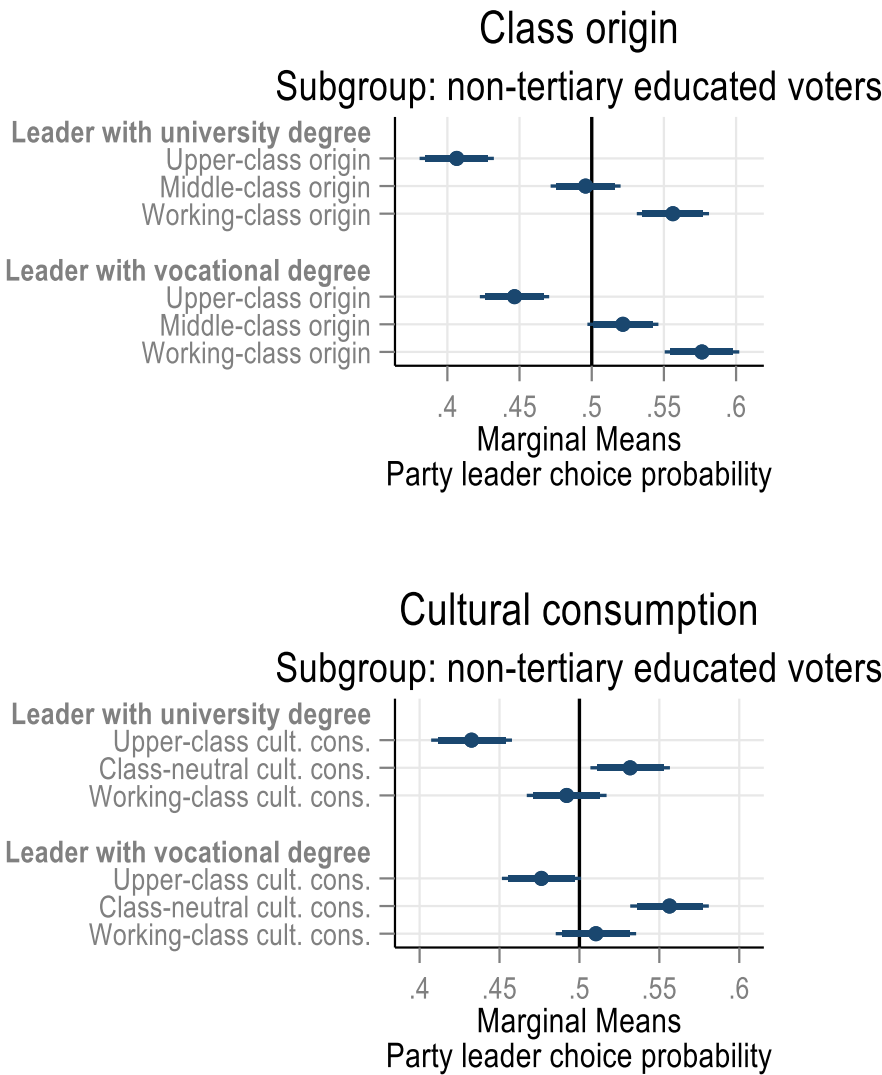
In the bottom panel of Figure 2, we find similar evidence that cultural consumption may compensate for the lack of descriptive representation. Non-tertiary educated voters are generally less likely to choose university-educated leaders (Figure 1), but they may do so for candidates with class-neutral behaviour (53.2%). Moreover, there is no statistically significant punishing effect for university-educated leaders with working-class cultural consumption.

Variation across party families

Figure 3 shows interesting variation in the effect of class signalling across political parties. The interaction terms with party family are statistically significant for both class origin and cultural consumption (p=0.015 and p=0.015). There are some important similarities across parties: Supporters of all parties punish upper-class origin candidates and they reward working-class origin candidates. However, Figure 3 highlights several important differences between the parties, especially between the populist radical right (SVP) and the green parties (Greens and Green Liberals). First, the SVP is the only party that punishes candidates from middle-class (teacher family) origin, Second, the SVP is the only party that rewards working-class cultural consumption. Third, the Greens/Green Liberals are the only party that does not punish upper-class cultural consumption. Fourth, the Greens/Green Liberals are the only party that does not significantly reward class-neutral cultural consumption. In line with our expectations, this clearly shows that the parties who compete most distinctly on the cultural dimension of political conflict also have the most distinct effects of symbolic class signalling.

**Figure 3: Effect heterogeneity by party family**
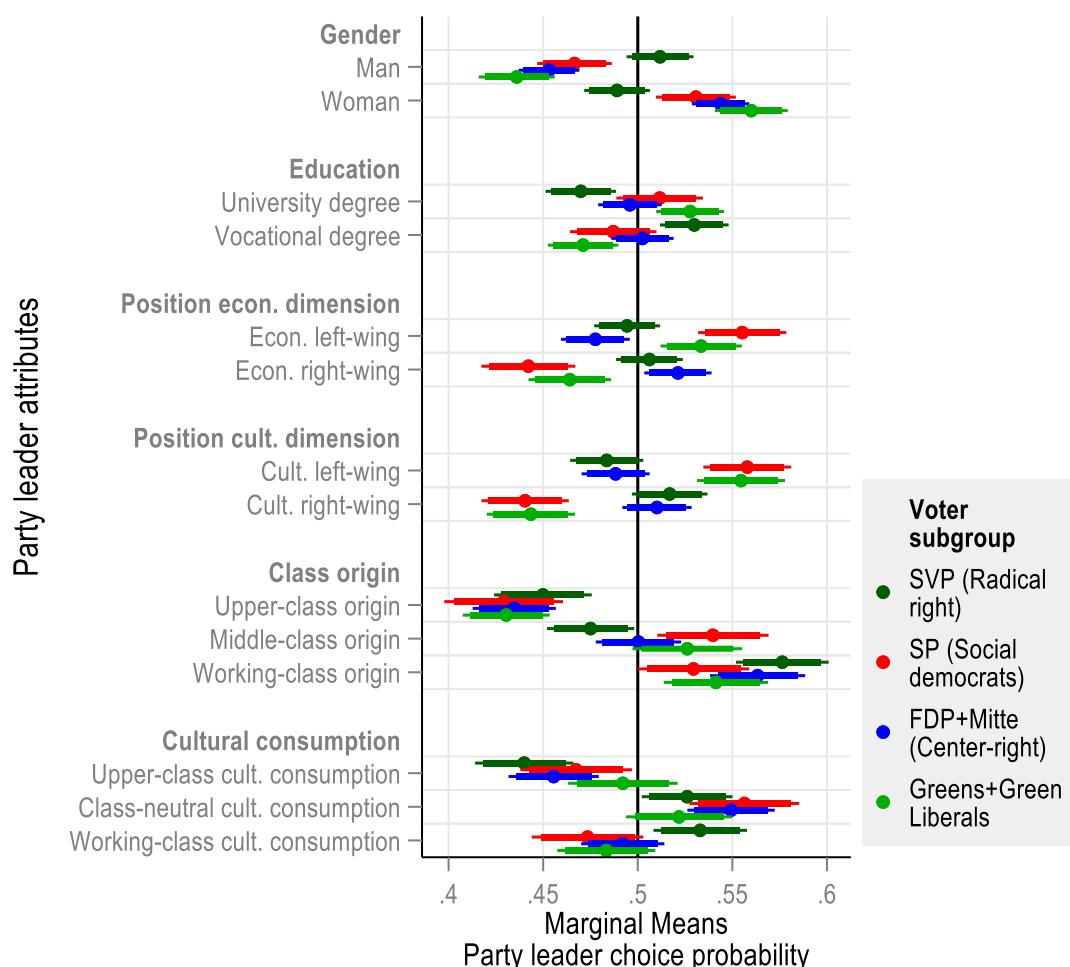
Non-class related descriptive representation

Our final analysis is more exploratory and investigates whether the effect of symbolic representation generalises to other under-represented groups, in particular groups that are not defined by economic characteristics. We focus on gender, where women are equally under-represented in most Western democracies (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2020). To test the potential impact of class signalling against the potential role of non-class representation, we focus on the voter subgroup of non-tertiary-educated women. The results in Figure 4 show that non-tertiary-educated women's preference for female leaders is strongly conditioned by symbolic representation through class signalling. Although women are overall more likely to prefer female leaders, they reject candidates both female and male from upper-class origin or with upper-class cultural consumption. In contrast, they may even be more supportive than average for male leaders with working-class origin. This final – admittedly explorative – analysis suggests that compensation through symbolic representation can work even in non-class contexts of descriptive misrepresentation. These

findings also point to the growing importance of the issue of intersectionality as a priority for further research (see also Carnes and Lupu 2023: 11.13).

Figure 4: Compensation effect by gender
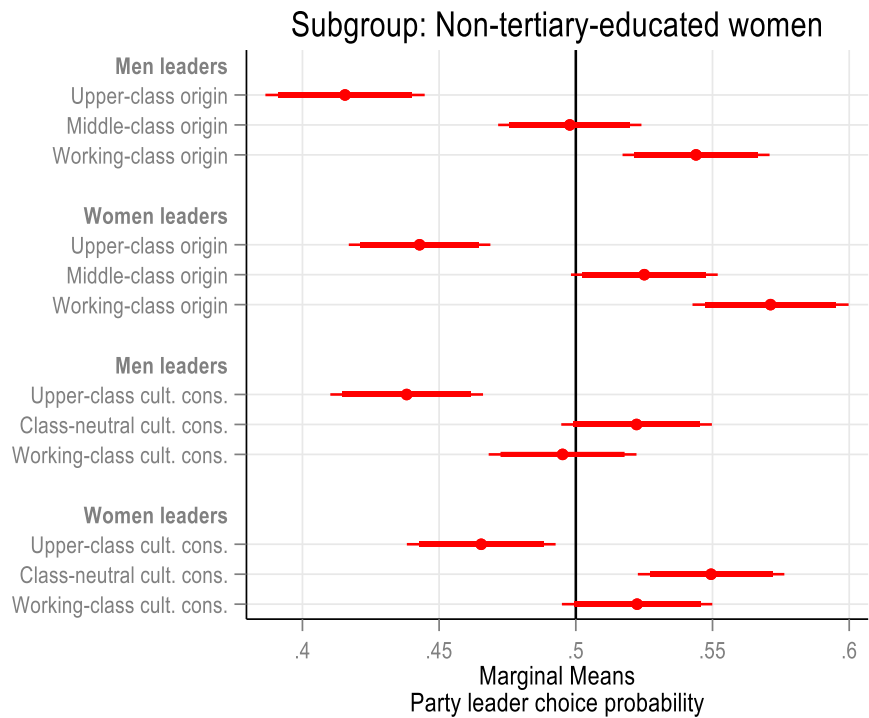
Conclusion

In this paper, we aim to better understand why the working class is underrepresented in almost all democracies. This fact is even more puzzling as many studies (including ours) find that voters generally, and working-class voters in particular, prefer candidates with a similar socio-economic profile. However, this does not translate into actual politics.

We provide one possible explanation for the continuing underrepresentation of the working class: the compensating effect of symbolic representation. Politicians do not only represent their parties' political program, but they can symbolically indicate affinity to the working class either by highlighting biographical elements that fit a "modest" social background or by referring to activities that are associated with the working or middle class (cultural consumption).

We tested the compensation argument in a conjoint survey experiment conducted in Switzerland where both the traditional left-right dimension and cultural issues structure party competition. While descriptive representation matters to all voters, we also find a strong effect of class signalling which in the case of working-class voters (here: non-tertiary

educated voters) leads to a compensation effect. Instead of voting for someone *like* them, they can also choose to vote for someone *pretending* to be like them. Since an upper-class background and behaviour does also not resonate with individuals that have a university degree, this is an appealing strategy for affluent politicians. First, they get support by affluent citizens because of their educational background, and second, they are able to attract working-class individuals by signalling working-class belonging.

We also found some interesting preliminary findings when it comes to the question whether the compensation strategy works better for some parties than for others. While voters of the populist radical right *Swiss People's Party* (SVP) are most strongly reacting to working-class signalling, voters of green parties are the only group which does not react to class signalling through cultural consumption. We also know, however, that these two parties diverge strongly regarding the educational composition of their electorate (Hooghe and Marks 2022), meaning that most likely the mechanical effect is at work in this case. However, more research is needed to further understand these differences. Research on unequal policy responsiveness mostly focuses on the traditional mainstream parties on the centre-left and the centre-right. Populist radical right parties and green parties, however, have become influential actors in national parliaments and even governments (such as in our case, Switzerland). Their stances on questions of redistribution thus matter, as do their strategies to appeal to individuals with lower socio-economic resources. If symbolism trumps substantive representation, unequal policy responsiveness will persist or even increase. Furthermore, we also see that individuals that are underrepresented in various aspects, such as working-class women, also react to class signalling. This may imply an additional obstacle to social equality as working-class women face some of the highest poverty risks in many Western societies (e.g. European Institute for Gender Equality 2020: ch. 3.3).

While our findings might overall not be surprising, our study is one of the first that shows that not just descriptive representation, but also symbolic representation matters. It thus bridges the literature on the lack of policy responsiveness of the working class with the many individual-level studies that show that people care about descriptive representation. The study does not answer *why* symbolic representation is important to many voters. While we cannot test this empirically, one assumption is the role that status plays in voting decisions. Previous studies have shown that social status and the fear of status decline is a strong predictor of vote choice (Engler and Weisstanner 2021; Gidron and Hall 2020; Kurer 2020). Status correlates with economic factors, but not only. Addressing the social identity of economic groups can thus enhance the status of voters, without addressing their challenging economic situations.

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Supplementary Materials

A. Screenshots of the conjoint experiment

Wahl des "Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP)"-Vorsitzes

Die "Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP)" bereitet sich auf den Wahlkampf 2023 vor. Stellen Sie sich vor, dass vor den Wahlen noch die Neuwahl des Parteipräsidiums der "Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP)" anstehen. Wir stellen Ihnen nun mehrere hypothetische Szenarien vor, in welchem sich jeweils zwei Politiker(innen) zur Wahl stellen.

Bitte lesen sie die Profile der zwei Kandidierenden und beantworten sie die drei untenstehenden Fragen.

Szenario 1 von 5

Kandidat(in) 1 für den Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP)-Vorsitz:

- Ist ein Mann
- Geht in der Freizeit gerne ein Bier in der Lieblingsbeiz trinken
- Ist aufgewachsen in einer Lehrerfamilie als Sohn eines Primarlehrers und einer Primarlehrerin
- Besitzt einen Universitätsabschluss
- Positioniert sich in der Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik eher am rechten Rand der Partei
- Positioniert sich bei gesellschaftspolitischen Fragen (u.a. Zuwanderung, Gleichstellung) eher am rechten Rand der Partei

Kandidat(in) 2 für den Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP)-Vorsitz:

- Ist eine Frau
- Hört in der Freizeit gerne klassische Musik bei einem Glas Wein
- Ist aufgewachsen in einer Arbeiterfamilie als Tochter eines Bauarbeiters und einer Supermarktangestellten
- Besitzt einen Universitätsabschluss
- Positioniert sich in der Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik eher am gemässigten Rand der Partei
- Positioniert sich bei gesellschaftspolitischen Fragen (u.a. Zuwanderung, Gleichstellung) eher am rechten Rand der Partei

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Wie wahrscheinlich ist es, dass Sie in den kommenden Nationalratswahlen die "Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP)" wählen, wenn Kandidat(in) 1 Parteipräsident(in) wird?

☐ Weiss nicht

Wie wahrscheinlich ist es, dass Sie in den kommenden Nationalratswahlen die "Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP)" wählen, wenn Kandidat(in) 2 Parteipräsident(in) wird?

☐ Weiss nicht

Wenn Sie sich entscheiden müssten, welchen Parteipräsident(in) würden Sie bevorzugen?

○ Kandidat(in) 1
○ Kandidat(in) 2
○ Weiss nicht

Weiter »

Wahl des "Sozialdemokratische Partei (SP)"-Vorsitzes

Die "Sozialdemokratische Partei (SP)" bereitet sich auf den Wahlkampf 2023 vor. Stellen Sie sich vor, dass vor den Wahlen noch die Neuwahl des Parteipräsidiums der "Sozialdemokratische Partei (SP)" anstehen. Wir stellen Ihnen nun mehrere hypothetische Szenarien vor, in welchem sich jeweils zwei Politiker(innen) zur Wahl stellen.

Bitte lesen sie die Profile der zwei Kandidierenden und beantworten sie die drei untenstehenden Fragen.

Szenario 1 von 5

Kandidat(in) 1 für den Sozialdemokratische Partei (SP)-Vorsitz:	Kandidat(in) 2 für den Sozialdemokratische Partei (SP)-Vorsitz:
•Positioniert sich in der Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik eher am rechten Rand der Partei	•Positioniert sich in der Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik eher am rechten Rand der Partei
•Positioniert sich bei gesellschaftspolitischen Fragen (u.a. Zuwanderung, Gleichstellung) eher am linken Rand der Partei	•Positioniert sich bei gesellschaftspolitischen Fragen (u.a. Zuwanderung, Gleichstellung) eher am rechten Rand der Partei
•Geht in der Freizeit gerne ein Bier in der Lieblingsbeiz trinken	•Trifft in der Freizeit gerne Freunde
•Ist aufgewachsen in einer Lehrerfamilie als Sohn eines Primarlehrers und einer Primarlehrerin	•Ist aufgewachsen in einer Lehrerfamilie als Tochter eines Primarlehrers und einer Primarlehrerin
•Ist ein Mann	•Ist eine Frau
•Besitzt einen Universitätsabschluss	•Besitzt einen Lehrabschluss

Wie wahrscheinlich ist es, dass Sie in den kommenden Nationalratswahlen die "Sozialdemokratische Partei (SP)" wählen, wenn Kandidat(in) 1 Parteipräsident(in) wird?

☐ Weiss nicht

Wie wahrscheinlich ist es, dass Sie in den kommenden Nationalratswahlen die "Sozialdemokratische Partei (SP)" wählen, wenn Kandidat(in) 2 Parteipräsident(in) wird?

☐ Weiss nicht

Wenn Sie sich entscheiden müssten, welchen Parteipräsident(in) würden Sie bevorzugen?

○ Kandidat(in) 1

○ Kandidat(in) 2

○ Weiss nicht

Weiter »

Wahl des "FDP.Die Liberalen"-Vorsitzes

Die "FDP.Die Liberalen" bereitet sich auf den Wahlkampf 2023 vor. Stellen Sie sich vor, dass vor den Wahlen noch die Neuwahl des Parteipräsidiums der "FDP.Die Liberalen" anstehen. Wir stellen Ihnen nun mehrere hypothetische Szenarien vor, in welchem sich jeweils zwei Politiker(innen) zur Wahl stellen.

Bitte lesen sie die Profile der zwei Kandidierenden und beantworten sie die drei untenstehenden Fragen.

Szenario 1 von 5

Kandidat(in) 1 für den FDP.Die Liberalen-Vorsitz:	Kandidat(in) 2 für den FDP.Die Liberalen-Vorsitz:
•Positioniert sich in der Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik eher am linken Rand der Partei	•Positioniert sich in der Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik eher am linken Rand der Partei
•Positioniert sich bei gesellschaftspolitischen Fragen (u.a. Zuwanderung, Gleichstellung) eher am rechten Rand der Partei	•Positioniert sich bei gesellschaftspolitischen Fragen (u.a. Zuwanderung, Gleichstellung) eher am linken Rand der Partei
•Ist aufgewachsen in einer Lehrerfamilie als Tochter eines Primarlehrers und einer Primarlehrerin	•Ist aufgewachsen in wohlhabenden Verhältnissen als Sohn eines Anwalts und einer Ärztin
•Besitzt einen Universitätsabschluss	•Besitzt einen Universitätsabschluss
•Geht in der Freizeit gerne ein Bier in der Lieblingsbeiz trinken	•Hört in der Freizeit gerne klassische Musik bei einem Glas Wein
•Ist eine Frau	•Ist ein Mann

Wie wahrscheinlich ist es, dass Sie in den kommenden Nationalratswahlen die "FDP.Die Liberalen" wählen, wenn Kandidat(in) 1 Parteipräsident(in) wird?

☐ Weiss nicht

Wie wahrscheinlich ist es, dass Sie in den kommenden Nationalratswahlen die "FDP.Die Liberalen" wählen, wenn Kandidat(in) 2 Parteipräsident(in) wird?

☐ Weiss nicht

Wenn Sie sich entscheiden müssten, welchen Parteipräsident(in) würden Sie bevorzugen?

◯ Kandidat(in) 1

◯ Kandidat(in) 2

◯ Weiss nicht

Weiter »

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