

Original Article

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Class Voting in Croatia

DANIELA ŠIRINIĆ, VIŠESLAV RAOS

University of Zagreb, Faculty of Political Science

Summary

This paper examines whether class influences vote choice in Croatia, a least-likely case for class voting given three decades of cultural cleavage dominance and party convergence on economic policy. This relationship remains understudied in post-socialist contexts where class mobilization was historically suppressed, and parties never supplied class-differentiated choices. Using original data from the 2024 Croatian National Electoral Study, we test whether subjective class position affects party choice independently of objective material status and whether this effect operates through value orientations. We show that subjective class identification significantly predicts vote choice even after controlling for income, wealth, education, left-right ideology, and value orientations, while objective economic position shows no effect. The analysis reveals that values have an effect on the class-vote relationship for some parties, but class also conditions how values translate into partisan preferences, particularly among working-class voters. These results show that class remains politically relevant even when parties do not mobilize it.

Keywords: Class Voting, Subjective Class Identification, Value Orientations

1. Introduction

Researchers working across different periods and using various methods have reached remarkably similar conclusions regarding the impact of socioeconomic cleavage in Croatia (Šiber, 1991; 1997; Zakošek, 1994; 1998; Henjak, 2007; 2018; Henjak *et al.*, 2013; Raos, 2020). Despite economic hardship and substantial economic inequalities, socioeconomic conflicts did not structure political competition. After the democratic transition, explicit class discourse disappeared not only from political life but also from academic agendas (Grdešić, 2015). The way Croatia's post-Yugoslav democratization unfolded shaped how social inequality could be discussed. During the 1990s, national identity became the central organizing principle of political life. Governing elites systematically discouraged public discourse on

socioeconomic inequalities, at times characterizing such discussions as acts of disloyalty to the nation (*ibid.*). Parties converged on economic policy, while dividing sharply on history and religion. After 2000, market-oriented economic policies further pushed class-based discussions off the public agenda.

Previous studies on the impact of socioeconomic position on voting in Croatia reveal patterns that diverge significantly from the historical development in Western Europe. Yet Croatia fits comfortably within the broader group of post-communist countries where dominant explanations of voting behavior revolve around non-economic cleavages. Many studies confirm that economic interests and distributive preferences had a negligible influence on Croatian voting behavior for many years (Šiber, 1993; 2001; Zakošek, 1994; 1998; Bagić, 2007; Ferić, 2008; Henjak, 2007; Henjak and Vuksan-Ćusa, 2019). The socioeconomic position did not significantly influence left-right self-identification, party affiliation, or vote choice. More striking still, opinions on economic issues were heavily conditioned by prior partisan alignment rather than the reverse. Henjak (2007) explicitly concludes that economic attitudes, such as views on taxation or government intervention, were largely shaped by the party which the voters already supported. This demonstrates top-down structuring of opinion rather than bottom-up interest representation.

Viewed in a broader context, Croatia's trajectory of socioeconomic development produced a political system that managed to accommodate significant inequality and economic insecurity without triggering a meaningful class-based political response. As Dolenc (2012) observes, despite stark material divides, successive Croatian governments, including those led by the nominally left-leaning SDP, advanced social policy reforms with little organized opposition. A broad consensus formed among political elites in favor of market-oriented reformism, and it went largely uncontested. The absence of strong class-based organizations capable of articulating distributive demands or challenging austerity meant that little stood in the way of this agenda. With societal resistance weak or diffuse, deepening economic inequalities failed to crystallize into a class cleavage comparable to those found elsewhere in Europe.

Against this backdrop, it would be reasonable to assume that class identification had largely faded, mirroring its weak imprint in voting behavior. Yet recent evidence suggests it has endured. Three decades after the transition from socialism to a democratic market economy, roughly one third of Croatians still describe themselves as working class, while another third identifies as middle class (Doolan and Tonković, 2021). Croatia still shows sharp class inequality: a small elite of managers and professionals holds substantial capital, while most industrial and lower status workers possess very little. The educational background shows that these inequalities are being passed on across generations (*ibid.*).

This creates a puzzle. Class identities clearly matter to citizens, but how do they matter politically? Either class has become politically meaningless despite its social salience, or it operates through mechanisms we have not yet understood. This paper pursues the second possibility.

Some scholars anticipated that patterns of political competition would eventually shift. As Zakošek and colleagues noted, Croatia underwent an economic transition involving the largest redistribution of economic resources in its history. By the 2010s, fundamental issues of statehood had largely been settled, and as the legacies of the War of Independence gradually faded, space might open for mobilization around economic interests. The arrival of new voters socialized after the transition would presumably pull in the same direction, weakening traditional cleavages (Henjak *et al.*, 2013). The predicted emergence of a socioeconomic cleavage was also grounded in observable structural changes. The economic transition since the early 1990s had drastically redistributed resources, producing distinct groups of transitional “winners” and “losers” (Henjak, 2007). However, at the same time, Croatian citizens demonstrated high perception of inequality, persisted in egalitarian values, and frequently supported redistributionist and protectionist policies (Dolenec, 2012, Henjak and Vuksan-Ćusa, 2019).

Some recent evidence suggests that economic grievances may be gaining political traction, albeit not along traditional class lines. Younger voters, urban professionals, and culturally liberal voters have become more sensitive to perceived inequality. The emergence of the New Left, particularly We Can! (*Možemo!*), highlights this shift. Although its electorate is culturally liberal and highly educated, support for it is also driven by the belief that the gap between rich and poor has increased (Petrović, 2024). This represents a form of subjective economic hardship, something that earlier theories of class dealignment did not fully anticipate.

This paper examines how class shapes voting behavior in Croatia. Building on previous research, which has shown that objective economic positions do not matter directly, we ask whether self-perceived social class position influences vote choice through values rather than through direct material interests. We focus on both objective and subjective social class. Recent comparative research shows that a measure of self-reported class identification often predicts political behavior more strongly than objective class indicators (Romero-Vidal, 2021). This occurs because class identity serves as both a cognitive heuristic and a social identity that structures political worldviews, helping voters navigate complex political choices (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In post-socialist contexts, like the Croatian one, where rapid transition disrupted traditional class structures, subjective class may be especially salient as citizens use class identity to make sense of new economic realities and electoral supply.

We show that subjective class identification matters for voting behavior in Croatia even when objective class does not, and this effect operates through value orientations. Our findings demonstrate that class identity remains politically relevant even in the absence of party mobilization, which complicates assumptions about class dealignment derived from Western European cases.

The paper proceeds as follows. Sections 2 and 3 review the literature on class voting, covering its rise and decline in Western democracies, the distinctive trajectory of post-communist countries, and the specific Croatian case. In section 4 we explain the mechanisms through which subjective class may influence voting behavior and we present our hypotheses. Section 5 describes our data and methods. Section 6 presents the results and discusses the findings considering existing research.

2. Theoretical Framework: Class Voting, Values and Subjective Identification

Class Voting in Western Democracies: Rise and Decline

For much of the twentieth century, class voting, the tendency for individuals in a given social class to vote for political parties at higher rates than voters in other classes, was a defining feature of democratic politics (Nieuwbeerta and Ultee, 1999; Evans, 2017; 2000). Working-class voters supported left parties, and middle-class voters supported the right. This alignment rested on connections between objective class positions, material interests, and party programs (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Butler and Stokes, 1974).

From the 1970s onward, extensive research found decline in class voting across Western democracies. Clark and Lipset (1993) argued that post-industrial transformation, educational expansion, and welfare state development had dissolved traditional class boundaries. Evans (1999) countered that apparent decline resulted from measurement error and that class effects remained substantial when properly specified. Most recent scholarship supports fluctuation rather than linear decline, with class voting varying by institutional context and party strategies (Evans and Tilley, 2017).

Part of the disagreement in this debate reflected different concepts of class voting (Oesch, 2008). For some, class voting is simply working-class support for left parties, for others, class voting occurs whenever there is empirical presence of systematic links between different classes and various parties irrelevant of which social groups prefer which (Evans, 2000; Oesch, 2008). What was often misinterpreted as decline of class voting was when economically powerful classes such as salaried professionals began voting for the left. Scholars such as Oesch (2008) argue that these are new forms and patterns of class voting, and not evidence of decline. Class voting occurs every time individuals in a given class location systematically support a given party.

Class voting has been realigned; it did not disappear. Old ties between classes and parties may have become weaker or are not present anymore, but new linkages have emerged (Evans, 2017; Marchesi, 2022; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). Yet even where class voting has weakened in Western democracies, it typically followed decades of class-based mobilization that had already shaped party systems and policy regimes.

The Supply Side: Party Strategy and Political Choices

The British case illustrates an important mechanism. Labour's transformation into New Labour involved policy convergence with the Conservatives, abandonment of working-class appeals, and recruitment of middle-class elites. Perceptions that Labour "looks after working-class people" declined sharply, and class voting collapsed accordingly (Evans and Tilley, 2017). According to Evans and Tilley, the collapse of class voting in Britain happened because political parties deliberately removed class-differentiated choices from the agenda. What is crucial in this analysis is that economic left-right values, i.e., support for redistribution, public ownership, and welfare provision, did not stop being sharply differentiated by class. The collapse of class voting occurred because political parties deliberately removed class-differentiated choices from the floor.

This pattern is not limited to Britain. Elff (2009) showed that when parties' political positions are considered, inter-group differences in voting intentions remain remarkable. Using data from seven Western European countries over nearly three decades, he finds that citizens' class differences are closely related to their responses to parties' positions on economic policy. Manual workers favor leftist parties, while service class and self-employed voters favor parties positioned to the right. These differences persist over time. The appearance of decline emerges only when parties converge, reducing voters' ability to translate class-based preferences into differentiated choices.

Since political convergence results from party decisions, the pace and direction of change in class voting is contingent on party strategies and is by no means irreversible. This perspective from the supply-side is important theoretically, as it shows that class is not only politically relevant as an automatic consequence of social structure but that it highly depends on party actions and mobilization tactics.

The Demand Side: Values as a Mechanism

Contemporary scholarship understands class voting through the mechanism of values: different classes hold distinct attitudes, values, and ideologies, and political parties appeal to these differences (Evans, 2017). Electoral competition is no longer defined solely by the traditional economic axis, the cultural dimension has become

equally important (Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). The economic dimension reflects classic conflicts over redistribution, state intervention, and social equality (Marchesi, 2022). The cultural dimension involves issues that cut across economic divides, such as questions of environmental protection, immigration, traditional morality, and sexuality norms (Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). Oesch (2008) identifies these dimensions as two distinct cleavages running through society. The first is economic, originating in the Industrial Revolution and pitting manual labor against holders of organizational power. Blue-collar workers, possessing few socioeconomic resources and strongly exposed to labor market risks, turn to the state to safeguard their interests. Groups with larger market power, namely employers and managers, favor market mechanisms and oppose redistribution. The second cleavage is cultural. It sets classes apart based on differences in work logic and educational attainment. Occupational groups in interpersonal work settings hold more libertarian views than those in object-related tasks (Oesch, 2008).

The interaction between these dimensions creates cross-pressures. Class positions shape both economic and cultural attitudes, but not always in the same direction (Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). Working-class voters tend to hold progressive socioeconomic values favoring redistribution, yet often adopt conservative positions on cultural issues. Highly educated middle-class voters tend toward cultural liberalism but may hold more conservative economic views (Oesch, 2008). This divergence has also disconnected income and education politically (Gethin and Martínez-Toledano, 2026). Education has gained more traction. Historically, left parties drew support from low-income and lower-educated voters alike. In recent decades, the left vote has become associated with higher education. High-income voters continue to support the right, while highly educated voters have shifted toward the left.

These new political spaces have reshaped political competition into a tripolar structure in many Western European countries, with distinct left, center-right, and radical right blocs (Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). The electoral base of left parties now increasingly consists of sociocultural professionals whose support is motivated by culturally liberal values (*ibid.*; Gethin and Martínez-Toledano, 2026). Radical right parties have challenged the left for working-class support, appealing to production and service workers through cultural attitudes: opposition to immigration, anti-elite sentiment, and authoritarianism (Oesch and Rennwald, 2018; Marchesi, 2022).

Class Voting Persists Through Values

For our purposes, the central take from this literature is that class influences voting through value orientations. Economic left-right values – support for redistribution, public ownership, and welfare provision – remain sharply differentiated by

class (Evans and Tilley, 2017; Elff, 2009). What changes is not the presence of class-based values but their ability to translate into distinct voting patterns when parties converge. When the variability of parties' political positions is considered, traditional social cleavages have not lost their impact on electoral behavior (*ibid.*). Classes increasingly differ in how they react to parties' positions on economic policy.

This body of literature emphasizes a two-step process: class influences voting through value orientations, but this requires political articulation by parties to have electoral consequences, as shown by evidence from Britain (Evans and Tilley, 2017) and seven Western European countries (Elff, 2009). This matters fundamentally for understanding situations where class mobilization never occurred. If class-based value differences persist independently of party mobilization, then class may influence political attitudes and behavior even where parties have not articulated class appeals. However, this happens through different, perhaps less visible, channels.

How Can Class Identity Remain Politically Relevant in the Absence of Party Mobilization?

Classic models posit that class voting emerges when three conditions align: objective differences in material interests based on economic position, subjective awareness of shared class identity, and political parties mobilizing class coalitions around redistributive conflicts (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Bartolini and Mair, 1990). Together, these factors make class position the central organizing principle of political competition. However, post-industrial transformations have eroded these alignments in many Western democracies since the 1970s, producing class dealignment (Clark and Lipset, 1991). Even where class voting has declined, it typically emerged first and shaped party systems before weakening (Bartolini and Mair, 1990). Post-communist Eastern European countries present a divergent trajectory where class mobilization has been inhibited from the outset. The absence of socioeconomic cleavages is rooted in the institutional and social legacies of state socialism (Ost, 1993; Kitschelt *et al.*, 1999). Post-communist societies inherited weak and poorly articulated interest structures because socialism prevented the development of autonomous class actors (Ost, 1993). Socialism created groups whose expectations were anchored in the state rather than in market competition. When the regime fell, social groups in post-communist society could not easily transform into interest-based organizations. It was hard to determine what was in their interest and what was not. Communist legacies produced party competition where left-right economic and cultural positions are misaligned. Former communists embraced market liberalism, while anti-communists combined cultural conservatism with mixed eco-

conomic positions. This configuration inhibited class mobilization (Kitschelt *et al.*, 1999 in Dolenc, 2012) and in many contexts, instead of structuring party competition, socioeconomic grievances remained politically under-articulated (Ost, 1993).

However, recent studies record significant cross-national variation in the structuration of party competition across Central and Eastern Europe, and challenge earlier assumptions of uniform class demobilization in the region. For instance, Borbáth (2026), analyzing programmatic competition in Hungary, Latvia, Poland, and Romania from the 1990s to 2023, finds that the extent of programmatic structuration varies substantially across countries depending on historical legacies and regime trajectories. Contrary to legacy-based predictions (Kitschelt, 1995), Latvia exhibits higher levels of programmatic competition than initially expected, while Romania lags. Cultural issues dominate party competition in Hungary and Poland; economic issues remain more salient in Romania, where a nationalist left converged with the right on cultural dimensions; and both dimensions structure competition in Latvia (Borbáth, 2026). Lindner, Novokmet, Piketty, and Zawisza (2021) similarly find distinct trajectories in how electoral cleavages developed in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. Former communist parties embraced pro-market policies which alienated them from the predominantly lower-income electorate. These findings suggest that the relationship between class and voting in post-communist contexts is not uniformly absent but rather dependent on specific national trajectories of party system development, the strategic choices of political elites, and critical junctures in the early transition period.

Why, then, would we expect social class to matter for political behavior in settings where parties have not mobilized class divisions? The answer lies in the fact that class can shape voting through several distinct mechanisms, not all of which depend on explicit party mobilization.

The existing literature identifies four pathways. Firstly, class shapes material interests. Individuals in different class positions face different economic circumstances and therefore hold different preferences regarding redistribution, welfare, and state intervention (Evans and Tilley, 2017). These economic interests exist irrespective of the fact that parties might not choose to mobilize voters around them. Secondly, social class shapes values and attitudes. Beyond immediate material concerns, one's class position influences one's broader orientations toward economic and cultural issues (Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). Working-class voters are generally more supportive of redistribution, yet they often hold more conservative cultural attitudes. Middle-class voters, by contrast, tend to pair economic conservatism with greater cultural liberalism. These value configurations endure even in the absence of explicit party appeals. Thirdly, class functions as a social identity. Social identity theory holds that people derive part of their self-understanding from the groups

to which they belong (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). When individuals identify with a social class, they tend to support parties they perceive as advancing the interests of their in-group (Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Greene, 2004). This dynamic can operate independently of material considerations, grounded instead in the psychological rewards that come from group affiliation. Fourthly, class identity can function as a cognitive shortcut. Most voters do not possess detailed policy knowledge, so class provides a familiar lens through which they interpret political options (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Class identity distils complex issues into a familiar schema, allowing voters to infer which party speaks for “people like me”. This heuristic role remains even when parties move toward ideological convergence or largely abandon explicit class-based appeals (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001).

The crucial implication is that while party mobilization strengthens the translation of class into voting behavior, the underlying class-based differences in interests, values, and identities exist prior to and independent of party strategy. In post-communist contexts, where class mobilization has been inhibited, these demand-side factors may still shape political behavior – but through different, perhaps less visible, channels.

When political parties do not mobilize along class lines, we argue that subjective class identification shapes voting behavior indirectly, by informing citizens’ value orientations. Faced with this ambiguity, individuals lean more on their values to interpret their social position and to navigate political choices. How people see their own class position becomes a way of expressing broader value commitments rather than a direct mirror of their material circumstances.

Hypotheses

Because class identity serves as a cognitive heuristic and social identity, self-perceived class position should influence voting behavior even when objective indicators do not. Based on the theoretical expectation that working-class identification is associated with preferences for redistribution and state protection, while middle-class identification aligns with market-oriented positions, our first hypothesis is:

- H1: Working-class identification will increase support for left parties, while middle-class identification will increase support for right parties, independent of objective class position.

In Western democracies, class voting emerged through decades of sustained party mobilization, union organization, and class rhetoric. In contexts where this institutional infrastructure is absent, the situation is different. When political parties are not differentiated on economic issues and class-based political discourse is marginalized, voters do not have the necessary cues needed to connect their class position to a particular party. To demonstrate that class still influences voting behavior

in such circumstances would be a significant finding. Such a finding would indicate latent potential, since stronger patterns of class voting could still emerge if parties choose to articulate and mobilize class divisions.

We also expect that subjective class identification and value orientations jointly shape voting behavior. Working-class identifiers who also hold egalitarian economic values should be more supportive of left parties. The effect of class identification would then be weaker for those whose values do not correspond to their class identity. Our second hypothesis is:

H2: The effect of subjective class identification on left-right party support will depend on economic value orientations: working-class identification combined with pro-redistribution values will be associated with stronger left party support than either factor alone.

3. Case Selection: Croatia

Croatia provides a valuable case for testing how subjective class operates in the absence of party mobilization. It represents an extreme case of class demobilization, where suppression of class discourse combined with rapid economic transition produces status inconsistency. This makes Croatia a least-likely case for class voting. If we show that class shapes vote choice even under these adverse conditions, that would strengthen expectations of similar patterns elsewhere in the post-socialist and post-industrial world (for a comparable approach, see Romero-Vidal, 2021). At the same time, the recent emergence of the New Left offers an opportunity to examine whether subjective class is gaining new political relevance. Croatia thus allows us to examine mechanisms of class influence that may be obscured in contexts where class mobilization occurred historically.

Historical Context

In Croatia, specific historical factors intertwined with these general post-communist patterns. Nation-building imperatives and ethnic conflict in the 1990s made discussing economic divisions a threat to national unity (Grdešić, 2015). The long-lasting and traumatic legacy of World War II created political identities based on historical memory rather than contemporary interests (e.g. Šiber, 1997). Instead of interest-based mobilization, political parties competed primarily through identity-based appeals grounded in the same historical narratives: nationhood, religion, and interpretations of the socialist past. Henjak (2007) captures this dynamic in a clear way. In the early years after independence, Croatian politics revolved around attitudes toward history, religion, and tradition, while political identities were rooted in wartime biographies and collective memory rather than socioeconomic interests. In this environment, redistributive conflicts or class-based appeals were largely absent

because political parties never supplied clearly distinguishable policy choices. Later, European integration further constrained the economic policy space, with major parties converging on neoliberal prescriptions (Grdešić, 2015; Dolenc, 2012).

The Structure of Political Competition

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated that the structuring of political competition and voting behavior in Croatia has been defined by the dominance of non-economic political cleavages. Cultural cleavages based on attitudes toward history, ideology, and religion rather than divisions stemming from economic or distributive issues define political competition. On the individual level, socioeconomic factors and distributive concerns played a minimal role in determining voter support for the two main political parties, the HDZ and the SDP (Henjak, 2007). The overall explanatory power of socioeconomic position in explaining variation in economic attitudes is not absent but is extremely low (Henjak and Vuksan-Ćusa, 2019). A significant finding was also that economic positions, such as opinions on taxation or evaluation of economic conditions, are primarily conditioned by a voter's existing political party affiliation (Henjak, 2007). Voters use their party identification as an information shortcut to orient themselves within the abstract world of ideological positions and economic ideas.

This specific development is also visible in the non-traditional profile of the mainstream parties' electorates. The HDZ, a historically right-wing nationalist party, captured the allegiance of working-class voters and lower socioprofessional groups in the 1990s (Grdešić, 2015; Zakošek, 1994; Šiber, 2001). This alignment produced what Zakošek and Čular (2003) called an anomaly where working-class socialists are linked more to the right political bloc. Meanwhile, the SDP, the successor party to the reformed communists, increasingly adopted market-oriented policies after 2000 and drew its strongest support from the educated urban middle class: professionals, intellectuals, managers, and officials (Bagić, 2007; Grdešić, 2015; Zakošek, 1994). This is why the traditional working class is generally not considered the natural constituency of left-wing parties in Croatia (Grdešić, 2015).

Party Strategy and the Absence of Class Appeals

In line with comparative research emphasizing the top-down nature of class voting, Croatian parties have not developed stable programmatic divides around redistribution, labor market regulation, or welfare provision (Dolenc, 2012). The legacy of war and the predominance of cultural identity issues in the electoral discourse have rendered electoral mobilization along socioeconomic lines challenging, discrediting the left for its link with Yugoslavia and depicting it as anti-Croatian (Glaudić and Vuković, 2016). The first decades of Croatian multiparty politics were shaped by political identities formed during wartime violence and state disintegration. This

provided a powerful reservoir of symbolic issues for party mobilization. The resulting early left-right divide was grounded in attitudes toward history, religion, and the socialist past rather than in distributive or class-based interests. The absence of policy differences among parties was also evident in the practice of governing coalitions to start their mandates with policy-blind agreements or to present very general policy objectives in coalition manifestos (Kasapović, 2005; Petković, 2009).

Dolenec's analysis of ISSP 2009 data shows that Croatian citizens express egalitarian and redistributive preferences which are stronger than in many Western European countries (2012). However, these attitudes do not align with left-right partisan divides. Despite a population that is objectively and subjectively aware of inequalities, political parties rarely frame economic issues as class issues, and the media likewise focuses predominantly on symbolic or identity-based controversies. This disconnect between public preferences and partisan supply reflects what Dolenec calls a failure of political representation, where the socioeconomic cleavage exists in society but not in the parliamentary arena (2012).

Existing Evidence on Class and Voting in Croatia

Empirical studies in Croatia consistently find a weak direct relationship between socioeconomic status and party preference or left-right orientation, regardless of how status is measured (Henjak, 2007; Dolenec, 2012; Henjak and Vuksan-Ćusa, 2019; Raos, 2020). But class might still matter indirectly. Income, occupation, and education shape how citizens think about economic and distributive issues, even when these factors do not determine which party they vote for. The most direct evidence, though not recent, comes from Dolenec (2012). She found that self-positioning with respect to social class yielded significant differences in economic preferences. Party affiliation did not translate into meaningful left-right socioeconomic preferences. But self-identification with a social class showed clear coherence in attitudes toward socioeconomic questions. Several sociological studies confirm this pattern. Individuals who are less educated, have lower incomes, and live in smaller localities are more inclined to endorse egalitarian values (Štulhofer and Burić, 2015; Vuković *et al.*, 2017, both cited in Henjak and Vuksan-Ćusa, 2019). Economic attitudes do have some roots in social structure.

Henjak and Vuksan-Ćusa (2019) examined this question more closely. They analysed national surveys following the 2011, 2015, and 2016 parliamentary elections. Their analysis confirmed two stable dimensions of economic attitudes: economic protectionism (support for limiting bank rights, progressive taxation, protecting domestic companies) and economic liberalism (easier dismissals, privatization, budget reductions). But the strongest predictors were not permanent elements of socioeconomic status like education or occupation. They were variables measur-

ing immediate social vulnerability: credit debt exposure, unemployment risk, and household dependency burden. Even these effects remained substantively weak. The researchers concluded that this absence of clear linkage between economic attitudes and socioeconomic status makes the emergence of class-based political identities highly improbable in Croatia.

More recent evidence complicates this picture. Supporters of the New Left party *Možemo!* tend to be highly educated middle class, especially sociocultural professionals. They hold culturally liberal attitudes. For these voters, perception of inequality is a statistically significant predictor of vote choice (Petrović, 2024). Class position correlates with liberal cultural values and concerns over inequality. These values then influence support for the New Left. The pattern mirrors developments in Western Europe documented by Oesch (2008), as well as Gethin and Martínez-Toledano (2026). Sociocultural professionals in healthcare, education, and social services disproportionately support left-libertarian parties across multiple countries (Oesch, 2008). Their class position shapes their values, and their values shape their votes. The emergence of similar patterns in Croatia suggests that class-based political differentiation may be developing along the cultural axis, even though the traditional economic cleavage remains politically inactive.

As previously mentioned, we also know that class identity itself has not disappeared. Doolan and Tonković (2021) demonstrated a meaningful overlap between objective class position and class identity, whether measured through Bourdieusian capitals or occupation-based approaches. Working-class identity remains meaningful for nearly one third of the population. Among skilled industrial workers, 48% identify as working class. Among lower-status employees, 42% identify so (*ibid.*). Both measurement approaches return similar results. Class identity reflects meaningful social categorization, not mere survey artifacts. Grdešić argues that popular discourse also exhibits class awareness (2015). Croatians resent tycoons and sympathize with ordinary people (*ibid.*). Waves of popular protest between 2009 and 2011 explicitly raised class-based grievances against neoliberalism (*ibid.*).

In short, traditional socioeconomic indicators have failed to explain voter choice in Croatia's party system (Henjak, 2007; Henjak and Vuksan-Ćusa, 2019). However, it is possible that social class retains relevance in shaping fundamental economic and cultural values among citizens (Dolenec, 2012; Petrović, 2024). These values create latent socioeconomic cleavages. They could be activated if parties chose to articulate them. The question is not whether class matters in Croatia, but through which channels its influence operates when parties do not mobilize it directly.

Croatia's multiple concurrent transitions, from socialism to capitalism, from authoritarianism to democracy, and from Yugoslav to Croatian national identity,

created widespread status inconsistency. Rapid economic restructuring disrupted traditional class structures, while nationalist discourse in the 1990s actively suppressed class-based identities in favor of national unity (Grdešić, 2015). Objective class positions and subjective class identities gradually drifted apart. The outcome is a kind of dual society. Economic stratification persists, but it rarely translates into political conflict, while cultural competition takes center stage. Class identities still resonate culturally, yet they have little direct political expression. Rather than edging toward a Western European pattern, Croatia's experience points to an alternative trajectory in which class politics repeatedly fails to materialize. This leaves the political field open for other forms of ideological and populist mobilization.

4. Data and Methods

Our empirical analysis relies on original data from the 2024 nationally representative post-election survey conducted as part of the Croatian National Electoral Studies (CroNES). The CroNES series, fielded since the spring of 1990 by the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, represents the longest-running academic infrastructure for the study of political behavior in Croatia (Bovan *et al.*, 2024). The 2024 survey was administered face-to-face using computer-assisted personal interviewing (F2F CAPI) during the fall of 2024, less than six months after the 17 April parliamentary election.¹

To identify the relationship between subjective and objective class positions and vote choice, conditioned by value orientations, we test a range of multinomial regression models, with vote choice as dependent variable, class position as explanatory variable, value orientations in interaction effects, with left-right self-orientation and sociodemographic characteristics as control variables.

Measures of Social Class

Multiple studies show that subjective and objective class position do not match (for a review, see Evans and Kelley, 2004; for Croatia specifically, see Doolan and Tonković, 2021). This was one of the reasons why subjective social class got a bad reputation, and many argued that self-reported class was not a good measure of someone's life chances. The operationalization of social class is still very debated, objective indicators such as occupation, income, and education have been used much more compared to measures of expressed subjective class identity we advocate here (Romero-Vidal, 2021). In a recent study, Romero-Vidal (2021) argues that subjective class measures are more robustly associated with political preferences

¹ The final sample includes 1,020 respondents, with item-level missingness handled through listwise deletion in multivariate models.

and behavior than objective indicators. This is mainly because people interpret their own objective life conditions and these interpretations are what matters when they make electoral decisions. However, we use both subjective and objective measures in our models.

Subjective class identification is here understood as a person's perception of their position within the social class hierarchy. It involves much weaker assumptions regarding the individual's identification with social class or shared interests or class consciousness. Subjective class identification is measured using a standard self-placement item widely employed in comparative research (Evans and Kelley, 2004): "People sometimes describe themselves as belonging to different classes. Which class would you say you belong to: Upper class, upper middle class, lower middle class, and below middle class?" In the survey, 9.9% self-identified as below middle class, 56.7% as lower middle class, 28.3% as upper middle class and 1% as upper class. We decided to recode responses into three categories: working class (consisting of "below middle class" responses), lower middle class, and upper middle class (joining responses for "upper middle class" and "upper class" due to small cell sizes in the highest category). The clustering of respondents in the middle-class categories confirms middle-class identity bias, as described by Doolan and Tonković (2021).

For objective social (class) position, we used monthly household income and divided respondents into three categories (lower income category, lower middle income category, upper middle income category) as in the subjective class variable, with 60% of the national median monthly income (1.200€)² as a cut-off for (objective) working class, 60-100% of the median for lower middle class, and above 100% of the median for upper middle class. This measure allowed us to test whether subjective class has effects on voting independent of material position, but also if the null findings for objective class in previous research hold when both measures are included simultaneously (Henjak, 2007; Henjak and Vuksan-Ćusa, 2019).

Vote Choice

Vote choice is operationalized as a six-category nominal variable. Survey respondents reported which party list they supported in the April election, and these responses were coded into the following categories: HDZ *et al.*, SDP *et al.*, the Homeland Movement (*Domovinski pokret*) together with its allied lists, We Can! (*Možemo!*), The Bridge (*Most*), and abstaining voters. The "*et al.*" refers to smaller coalition parties (of the center and center-right for HDZ and center and center-left for SDP) appearing on joint coalition lists alongside the two largest parties, HDZ and SDP.

² See Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2025.

For readers less familiar with Croatian politics, HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union) is the dominant center-right party with Christian democratic and nationalist roots; SDP (Social Democratic Party) is the main center-left party, successor to the reformed communist party; the Homeland Movement (Domovinski pokret) is a radical right nationalist party that split from HDZ; We Can! (Možemo!) is a green-left party aligned with the European New Left, drawing support from urban educated professionals; and The Bridge (Most) is an anti-establishment party that rejects traditional left-right positioning while appealing to culturally conservative voters dissatisfied with mainstream options.

The HDZ-led coalition, as the leading vote choice in the election and the modal category in the data, serves as the reference category in multinomial regression models. This specification enables the analysis to assess the extent to which class identities, objective socioeconomic conditions, and value orientations distinguish voters for specific parties relative to the incumbent conservative bloc. Since the categories correspond to meaningful ideological and organizational clusters in Croatian politics, the operationalization provides a suitable basis for evaluating class voting patterns and their conditioning by economic and cultural values. We retain abstaining voters as a separate category rather than excluding them from the analysis. While it is not our primary interest, abstention may itself reflect class-based disengagement from a party system that fails to represent economic interests.

Other Relevant Predictors

A set of control variables is included in all multivariate models to account for socio-demographic characteristics and material conditions that are found to be important in predicting vote choice in Croatia (for a review, see Širinić *et al.*, 2024). Economic resources are captured through a wealth index, constructed as an additive index of four indicators: ownership of residential property, ownership of rental property, personal savings, and financial investments such as stocks and bonds. Higher values on the index indicate greater asset accumulation and economic security. Age is measured continuously, allowing for non-linear generational differences in voting to emerge empirically. Gender is coded as a binary indicator distinguishing men and women. Education is measured on a multi-level scale reflecting completed educational attainment, ranging from basic schooling to tertiary qualifications (1-7 scale). Religiosity is operationalized as a continuous measure of religious commitment or practice (1-6 scale), capturing an important cultural and ideological cleavage in Croatian politics. Finally, settlement size is coded on a four-level scale ranging from rural areas (1) to large urban centers (4), ensuring that the models reflect spatial and structural differences in political behavior. Together, these controls help isolate the unique contribution of subjective class identity, objective class position, and value orientations in predicting vote choice.

In addition to class position and value orientations, the analysis includes left-right self-placement as a key explanatory variable (*ibid.*). Respondents were asked to locate themselves on a standard left-right ideological scale (0 to 10), with higher values denoting a more right-wing position. This measure is widely used in comparative electoral research as a parsimonious summary of ideological orientation, and in the Croatian context it has been shown to correlate in the expected direction with support for major ideological families such as socialism, social democracy, liberalism, Christian democracy, and conservatism (cf. Raos, 2024). Studies of Croatian students and citizens demonstrate that respondents possess a meaningful understanding of the left-right continuum and that their self-placement aligns systematically with their positions on specific policy issues and ideological batteries, confirming the construct validity of the measure in this context (see Runje *et al.*, 2020). Incorporating left-right self-placement alongside class and value scales therefore allows the models to distinguish the impact of more abstract ideological self-identification from concrete economic and cultural attitudes, and to assess whether class-based differences in voting are already “absorbed” by an ideological left-right dimension or remain visible irrespective of ideological self-placement.

Economic and Cultural Value Orientations

The choice of variables in this study reflects several strands of the Croatian literature on party competition and voter behavior. More recent studies based on the Croatian National Electoral Studies have mapped the profiles of voters of the main parties and coalitions, showing that economic and cultural value orientations jointly differentiate party electorates, with the conservative-nationalist right drawing more authoritarian and religious voters, while the center-left and green-left parties rely more heavily on egalitarian and culturally liberal segments of the electorate (Raos, 2019).

The structure of economic value orientations (see more in Raos, 2020) in the dataset was examined using principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation, based on a set of items capturing attitudes toward redistribution, taxation, welfare provision, state regulation, privatization, and inequality (Table 1). Prior to extraction, the factorability of the correlation matrix was assessed. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistic for the seven economic items was 0.71, which indicates an acceptable level of sampling adequacy for exploratory factor analysis. Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(21) = 1434.33$, $p < 0.001$, confirming that the items share sufficient common variance for factor analysis.

The analysis shows a clear two-factor solution. The first factor, which captures redistributive egalitarianism, consolidates items expressing support for a stronger welfare state, greater social protection, progressive taxation, and state action to re-

duce inequality. Items indicating that the state should provide adequate unemployment benefits, restrict banks' ability to penalize indebted citizens, tax wealthy individuals more heavily, and reduce income inequalities loaded strongly on this factor. The second factor reflects economic liberalism, capturing the preference for market-oriented policies, privatization, and reduced state participation in the economy. Items endorsing easier dismissals for companies, the privatization of state-owned enterprises, and cuts to government spending loaded on this factor. Together, these two dimensions account for the majority of shared variance among the economic items, with the first factor explaining approximately 60% and the second factor 40%. The relatively clean loading pattern, with minimal cross-loadings, indicates that the two factors represent empirically distinct but theoretically complementary dimensions of economic policy attitudes in the Croatian context.

Table 1. Economic Values, Principal Axis Factoring, Oblimin Rotation

	Redistributive Egalitarianism	Economic Liberalism
Government spending should be reduced, even if this means lowering wages, pensions, and social benefits.	0.11	0.54
The state should provide all unemployed citizens with unemployment benefits sufficient to cover basic living needs.	0.64	0.05
The state should restrict banks' right to collect loan repayments from citizens who are in financial difficulty.	0.61	0.02
Companies should be allowed to lay off employees more easily in order to reduce operating costs when necessary.	-0.06	0.82
The state should tax the property and income of wealthy individuals more heavily.	0.68	-0.00
State-owned enterprises should be privatized because the state cannot manage them efficiently.	0.12	0.50
The state should act to reduce income inequalities.	0.74	-0.04
<i>Proportion explained</i>	<i>0.60</i>	<i>0.40</i>
<i>KMO</i>	<i>0.71</i>	
<i>Bartlett's test</i>	<i>$\chi^2(21) = 1434.33, p < 0.001$</i>	

A similar procedure was used to explore the structure of sociocultural value orientations (see previous discussions on such values in Raos and Zakošek, 2024; Raos, 2020). Ten items capturing authoritarianism, conformity, moral conservatism, and ethnoreligious nationalism were subjected to principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation (Table 2). The diagnostic tests indicated excellent factorability for

this battery: the KMO statistic was 0.88, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was again highly significant, $\chi^2(45) = 3098.76$, $p < 0.001$, confirming robust inter-item correlations. The analysis revealed a three-factor structure that corresponds closely to established theoretical expectations in the study of cultural and moral attitudes in post-socialist societies.

The first factor, authoritarianism, comprises items that emphasize obedience, strong leadership, social discipline, and the need for decisive figures to steer society. Statements suggesting that social progress depends on respect for authority, that young people require strict discipline, or that firm leadership is essential in challenging times load strongly on this dimension. The second factor, which captures social conformism, reflects orientations toward deference, passivity, and avoidance of conflict. Items advising people not to antagonize those in power or not to voice their own opinions for fear of disrupting social harmony show the highest loadings on this factor. The third factor represents moral conservatism, encompassing traditional gender norms, religious moral expectations, and ethnonational homogeneity. Items asserting that states with a single ethnicity and religion are more stable, that Croatia would benefit if citizens adhered to Christian values, and that women demand special privileges loaded on this factor.

Table 2. Cultural Values, Principal Axis Factoring, Oblimin Rotation

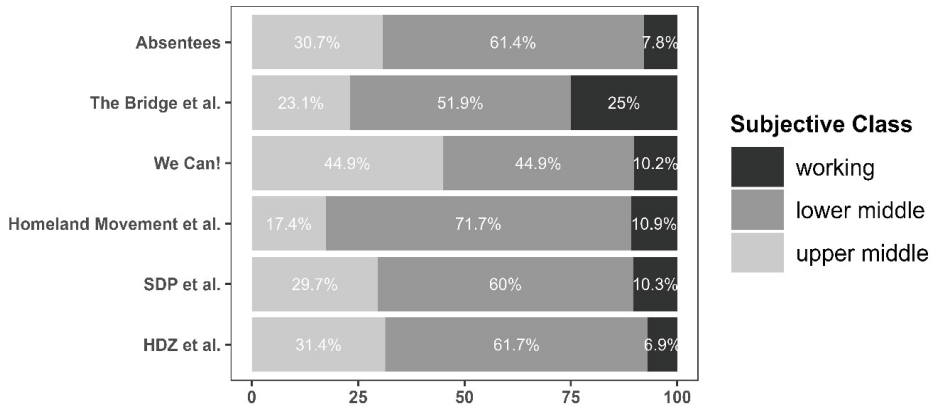
	Authoritarianism	Social Conformism	Conservatism
The opinion of the majority is always the best one.	0.18	0.41	0.16
What this country needs more than laws and political manifestos is a few brave and resolute individuals whom the people can trust.	0.52	0.05	0.09
One should not express one's own opinion, because one never knows what harm may come from it.	0.02	0.70	0.03
One should not antagonize those in power.	0.01	0.78	-0.04
What young people need most is strict discipline, determination, and the will to work and fight for their family and homeland.	0.60	0.13	0.03
There can be no social progress without respect for authority in the family, school, and the state.	0.82	-0.03	-0.00
Conflicts among different interest groups in our society harm the general interests of the state.	0.32	0.06	0.21
Croatia would be better off if all citizens followed Christian moral values.	0.13	0.07	0.50

States in which a single ethnicity and religion constitute the overwhelming majority are more stable than states with multiple ethnicities and religions.	0.06	-0.17	0.77
Under the pretext of seeking equality, women are in fact asking for special privileges.	-0.19	0.23	0.46
<i>Proportion explained</i>	<i>0.36</i>	<i>0.34</i>	<i>0.30</i>
<i>KMO</i>	<i>0.88</i>		
<i>Bartlett's test</i>	<i>$\chi^2(45) = 3098.76, p < 0.001$</i>		

The three cultural factors explain roughly equal shares of the variance: authoritarianism 36%, social conformism 34%, and conservatism 30%. The factors are correlated but distinct, confirming that cultural orientations in Croatia are multidimensional. Citizens who score high on one dimension do not necessarily score high on the others. The clear loading patterns suggest that cultural attitudes, like economic attitudes, cluster in coherent and interpretable ways.

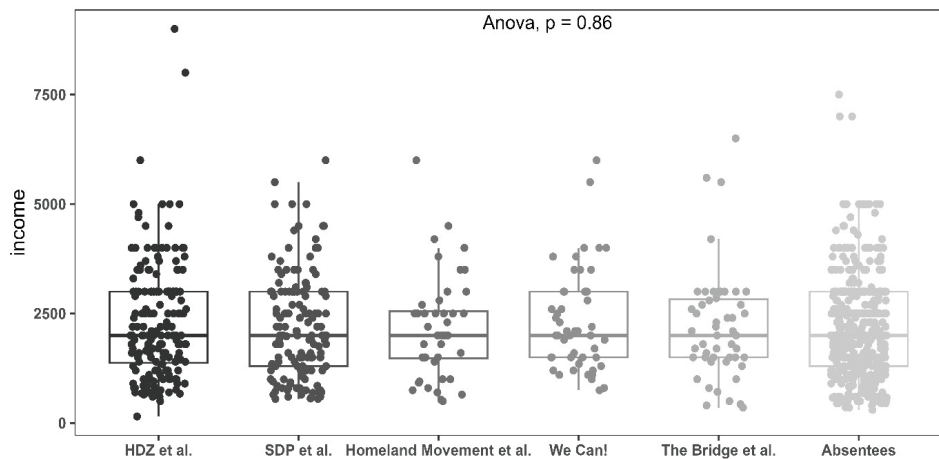
5. Multivariate Analysis

Before turning to the multivariate analysis testing our main two hypotheses, Figures 1 and 2 present descriptive associations between social class – measured both objectively with income and subjectively as self-perception – and vote choice. Subjective class composition varies across party electorates, though not in ways that align with traditional left-right expectations (Figure 1). We Can! stands out with the highest share of upper-middle-class identifiers at 45%, evenly split with lower-middle-class, and only 10% working-class. This profile is consistent with research on New Left parties in Western Europe, where support comes disproportionately from educated professionals who identify with higher social strata. The Homeland Movement has the lowest upper-middle-class share at 17% and the highest concentration of lower-middle-class identifiers at 72%. Its voters see themselves as neither privileged nor disadvantaged, which fits the populist appeal of nationalist parties to those who feel squeezed in the middle. The Bridge attracts the highest share of working-class identifiers at 25%, suggesting its anti-establishment message resonates with voters who see themselves at the bottom of the class hierarchy. HDZ, SDP, and abstainers have nearly identical profiles, clustering around 30% upper middle and 60% lower middle. The two dominant parties draw from the same subjective class pool, reinforcing the argument that they do not differentiate along class lines. Perhaps most striking is how few voters across all categories identify as working class. Even among abstainers, only 8% do so. This suggests that working-

Figure 1. Subjective Social Class and Vote Choice

class identity has weak political resonance in Croatia, either because citizens avoid the label or because the category lacks meaning in post-socialist political discourse.

The second figure displays the distribution of income across parties. The comparison is not perfect, as income is not the only possible indicator of the objective material position, but we show it because the pattern is striking for its uniformity. All party electorates look remarkably similar. The overall pattern suggests that objective class does not strongly segment the Croatian electorate, nor does it align clearly with any party bloc. What matters is how voters interpret their position.

Figure 2. Distribution of Household Income and Vote Choice

To assess how class position and value orientations shape electoral behavior, the study estimates a series of multinomial logistic regression models with vote choice as the dependent variable and with HDZ *et al.* serving as the reference category.³ This specification allows all other outcomes to be interpreted relative to the main governing party, which is also analytically convenient given its dominant role in Croatian party politics. The analysis proceeds in steps, adding blocks of variables sequentially. This approach allows us to see how subjective class operates on its own before introducing controls. If class effects disappear once we add income or education, this would suggest that subjective class is simply a reflection of objective material position. If the effects persist, subjective class captures something independent. Also, sequential modeling reveals which factors matter most for explaining vote choice. Each new block of variables improves model fit by some amount. Comparing these improvements shows the relative explanatory power of material resources, education, sociodemographics, and left-right self-identification. In Croatia, we expect ideology and cultural variables to dominate given the historical weakness of class politics.

The baseline model includes only subjective class (Table 3). Subsequent models add income and wealth, then education, then age⁴, gender, religiosity, and settlement size, and finally left-right self-placement (Tables 4 and 5). As HDZ serves as the reference category throughout, all coefficients indicate how a variable changes the odds of supporting a given party compared to supporting HDZ. The full regression tables for all models are available in the Appendix. Here we only summarize the key findings. The first model tests whether subjective class identification alone predicts vote choice. The results show weak effects where most coefficients do not reach statistical significance. The exception is The Bridge, whose voters are significantly less likely to identify as lower or upper middle class compared to

³ Multinomial logistic regression is appropriate because the dependent variable is nominal with more than two unordered categories, and the method yields a set of logit equations comparing each non-reference outcome to the reference category. Models are estimated using maximum likelihood. Coefficients are converted to odds ratios for easier interpretation. An odds ratio above one means higher values of the predictor increase the odds of choosing that party over HDZ. An odds ratio below one means the opposite. Nagelkerke pseudo- R^2 and AIC are reported to assess model fit. Listwise deletion is applied to missing data, so sample sizes vary slightly across models.

⁴ Age is used as a continuous variable; following the reviewer suggestion, we have tested polynomial specifications (quadratic and cubic) and categorical age groups across all models. Model fit statistics indicate only marginal improvements when moving from a quadratic to a cubic specification (BIC penalizes the additional complexity). The estimated effects of both objective and subjective class remain substantively unchanged across age specifications, which shows that our main findings are not sensitive to the functional form of age.

working class. The model explains very little variance overall.⁵ The weak baseline establishes the starting point: subjective class has limited direct influence on voting when considered in isolation.

Table 3. Model 1, Multinomial Regression

	<i>SDP et al.</i>	<i>Homeland Movement et al.</i>	<i>We Can!</i>	<i>The Bridge et al.</i>	<i>Absentees</i>
Intercept	1.15	0.38	0.38	1.00	2.77**
Subjective class: Lower middle class	0.65	0.74	0.49	0.23**	0.88
Subjective class: Upper middle class	0.63	0.35	0.97	0.20**	0.86
N	939				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R²	0.009				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R² adjusted	0.008				
AIC	2678.369				

Note: Ref. category: HDZ *et al.*, *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

In the second model we add income and wealth and expectedly find that income has no effect on vote choice for any party.⁶ An odds ratio of 1 across parties indicates that the odds remain unchanged as income increases. Rich and poor voters are equally likely to support any given party. This null finding confirms that material resources, at least as measured by income, do not structure partisan preferences in Croatia. Wealth matters only at the margins: voters with more assets are less like-

⁵ Models estimate between 50 and 105 parameters depending on specification, corresponding to approximately 7.8 to 16.0 observations per parameter. VIFs for all predictors remained below 5, indicating no severe multicollinearity, except for the interaction model (Model 7), where VIFs were above 5 but still below 10. Key findings for subjective class and value interactions are consistent across nested models with fewer predictors, suggesting overfitting does not drive our conclusions.

⁶ We have compared parallel models using (A) only objective class (income), (B) only subjective class, and (C) both measures. The model including both income and subjective class demonstrated the best fit (AIC = 2572.50, BIC = 2668.40) compared to the income-only (AIC = 2655.20) and subjective class-only (AIC = 2678.40) models.

ly to support The Bridge or to abstain. This is consistent with the descriptive finding that The Bridge attracts the highest share of working-class voters by objective measures. After controlling for objective economic position, subjective class effects become stronger and more consistent. This pattern suggests that how people see themselves matters independently of how much they earn or own.

Table 4. Model 2, Multinomial Regression

	<i>SDP et al.</i>	<i>Homeland Movement et al.</i>	<i>We Can! et al.</i>	<i>The Bridge et al.</i>	<i>Absentees</i>
Intercept	1.02	0.35***	0.46***	2.52***	6.13***
Subjective class: Lower middle class	0.63***	0.90**	0.46***	0.19***	0.79**
Subjective class: Upper middle class	0.59***	0.41***	1.05	0.20***	0.86
Income	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Wealth Index	1.14	1.02	1.03	0.63***	0.74***
N	882				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R²	0.019				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R² adjusted	0.019				
AIC	2524.996				

Note: Ref. category: HDZ *et al.*, *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Education produces clearer differentiation (Table 5). Higher education significantly increases support for We Can! and, to a lesser extent, SDP. The effect on The Bridge is positive but small, and education appears to exert almost no influence on HDZ or Homeland Movement support. These results confirm earlier findings that educational attainment plays a clearer role than income or wealth in differentiating voter party preferences. Also, this aligns with patterns across post-industrial democracies where education predicts cultural liberalism and openness to progressive parties. Coming back to our first hypothesis, even after accounting for education, class identity continues to distinguish party electorates.

Table 5. Model 3, Multinomial Regression

	<i>SDP et al.</i>	<i>Homeland Movement et al.</i>	<i>We Can!</i>	<i>The Bridge et al.</i>	<i>Absentees</i>
Intercept	0.27***	0.20***	0.03***	1.28***	5.05***
Subjective class: Lower middle class	0.50***	0.82***	0.29***	0.17***	0.75***
Subjective class: Upper middle class	0.36***	0.34***	0.40***	0.16***	0.79***
Income	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Wealth Index	1.13	1.02	1.01	0.62***	0.74***
Education	1.57***	1.22*	2.32***	1.26*	1.07
N	881				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R²	0.035				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R² adjusted	0.034				
AIC	2493.455				

Note: Ref. category: HDZ *et al.*, *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Adding age, gender, religiosity, and settlement size substantially improves explanatory power (Appendix, Table A2), and adding ideological self-placement on the left-right scale produces the largest improvement in model fit (Nagelkerke pseudo-R² = 0.22 in Appendix, Table A5). Left-right self-placement produces the clearest effect across the Croatian party system. The probability of supporting HDZ rises sharply with movement toward the right pole of the ideological scale, while support for SDP and We Can! declines. Homeland Movement voters are also concentrated on the right, and the Bridge attracts most support around the midpoint of the ideological scale. Subjective class effects survive. Lower-middle-class and upper-middle-class identifiers remain less likely than working-class identifiers to support several parties. This means class captures something that ideology alone does not, it carries independent weight.

Adding Value Orientations

The next model adds economic and cultural value orientations: redistributive egalitarianism, market liberalism, authoritarianism, social conformism, and conservatism (Table 6). Model fit improves further (Nagelkerke pseudo-R² = 0.26), confirming that values matter for vote choice beyond what sociodemographics and

left-right self-placement capture. Substantially, we see that the traditional left has failed to own the redistributive agenda. Voters who favor redistribution are no more likely to support Social Democrats than to support HDZ. Instead, egalitarianism increases support for newer actors, We Can! and The Bridge. Also, market liberalism shows an unexpected pattern, the dominant conservative party attracts voters skeptical of markets, perhaps because HDZ has historically combined nationalism with clientelism and state intervention rather than economic liberalism.

Table 6. Model 6, Multinomial Regression

	<i>SDP et al.</i>	<i>Homeland Movement et al.</i>	<i>We Can!</i>	<i>The Bridge et al.</i>	<i>Absentees</i>
Intercept	77.39***	1.03*	71.26***	78.43***	2151.15***
Subjective class: Lower middle class	0.62***	1.02	0.37***	0.19***	0.66***
Subjective class: Upper middle class	0.32***	0.33***	0.45***	0.16***	0.57***
Income	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Wealth Index	1.26*	1.12	1.56**	1.04	0.83*
Education	1.49**	0.99	1.29.	0.64*	0.90
Age	0.99	0.99	0.96***	0.98*	0.97***
Gender: Male	1.28***	1.16***	1.42***	1.21***	0.88
Religiosity	0.77**	1.01	0.77*	0.93	0.79***
Settlement Size	1.18	0.86	1.24	1.04	1.10
Left-right Self- placement	0.34***	0.92	0.38***	0.66***	0.56***
Redistributive Egalitarianism	0.92	0.54***	1.74***	1.20***	0.89
Market Liberalism	1.57***	1.55***	2.02***	1.24**	1.58***
Authoritarianism	1.36**	2.48***	0.90	0.67***	0.59***
Social Conformism	1.50***	0.45***	0.74***	0.56***	1.09
Conservatism	0.51***	1.19	0.50***	3.68***	0.75*
N	822				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R²	0.257				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R² adjusted	0.256				
AIC	1961.054				

Note: Ref. category: HDZ *et al.*, *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

As expected, cultural values produce the largest differentiation. Authoritarianism is the strongest predictor of Homeland Movement support, with an odds ratio of 2.48. This is the second largest effect in the model. The nationalist right draws voters who favor strong authority, obedience, and hierarchy. We also see that SDP's broad catch-all strategy may attract authoritarian voters who reject HDZ for reasons unrelated to cultural liberalism. More conservative voters are more likely to support The Bridge, with a very large odds ratio of 3.68. Conservative voters dissatisfied with the mainstream do not turn to the nationalist right, instead they turn to an anti-establishment party that positions itself outside the traditional left-right spectrum. The Bridge evidently appeals to a culturally traditional constituency that rejects both HDZ and its nationalist challengers. Social conformism divides the electorate in a different way. Conformist voters either support SDP or stay with HDZ. Non-conformists scatter across challenger parties: We Can!, The Bridge, and the Homeland Movement. Rejection of social norms is a common thread uniting voters for otherwise ideologically disparate alternatives.

Values as Moderators of Class Effects

The second hypothesis proposes that class and values interact to shape party support. To test this, we add an interaction effect between subjective social class categories and value dimensions. If the expectation is valid, we should see that the effect of class identification on vote choice varies depending on a voter's position on relevant value dimensions. Models are presented in the Appendix⁷ (Models 7 and 8). Here we show the marginal effects plots of predicted probabilities of voting for each party across the range of a given value dimension, with separate lines for working-class, lower-middle-class, and upper-middle-class identifiers.

Redistributive egalitarianism shows a clear class change for some parties. Higher egalitarianism increases working-class support for The Bridge. For SDP, the pattern reverses: working-class identifiers with low egalitarianism are more likely to support SDP, but this advantage disappears as egalitarianism increases. Support for We Can!, HDZ and the Homeland Movement shows no meaningful variation. Abstention declines with egalitarianism, especially among working-class voters.

Market liberalism produces a different pattern. Working-class identifiers who embrace market liberalism become substantially more likely to support SDP and especially We Can!, with probabilities rising at higher values. For The Bridge, the op-

⁷ Using the estimated multinomial models, predicted probabilities of voting for each party (or abstaining) are computed across the observed range of key predictors while holding other covariates at their mean or reference values. Predicted probabilities are then displayed graphically to give representation of how changes in class position and value orientations are associated with shifts in the probability of supporting particular parties.

Figure 3. Predicted Probabilities of Subjective Social Class and Redistributive Egalitarianism on Vote Choice

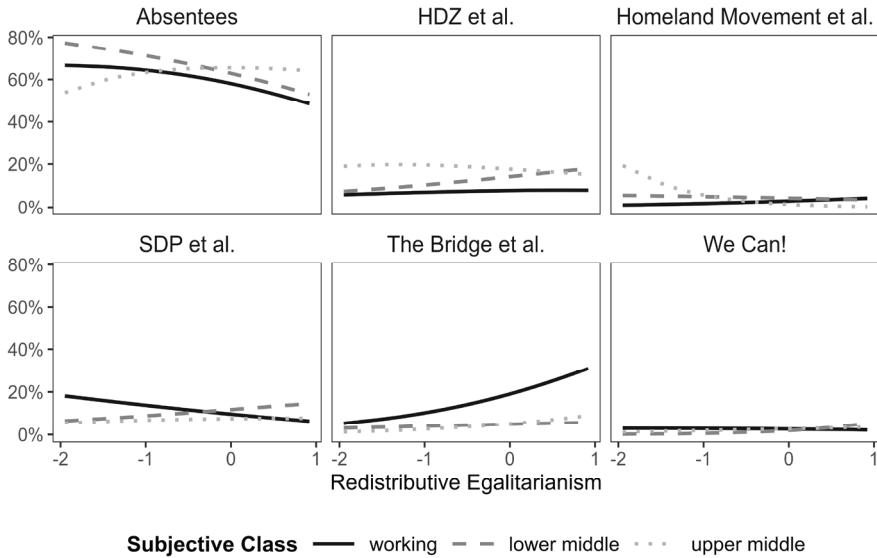


Figure 4. Predicted Probabilities of Subjective Social Class and Market Liberalism on Vote Choice

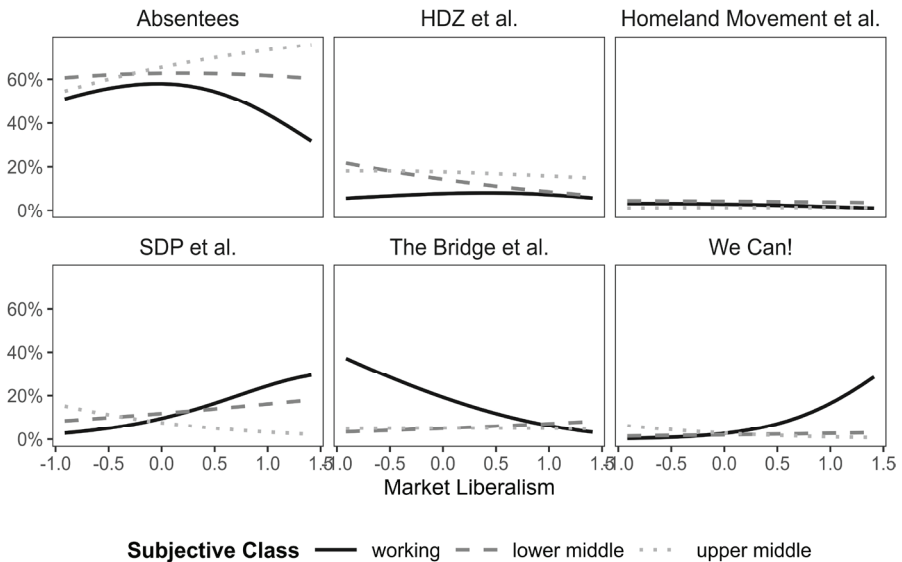
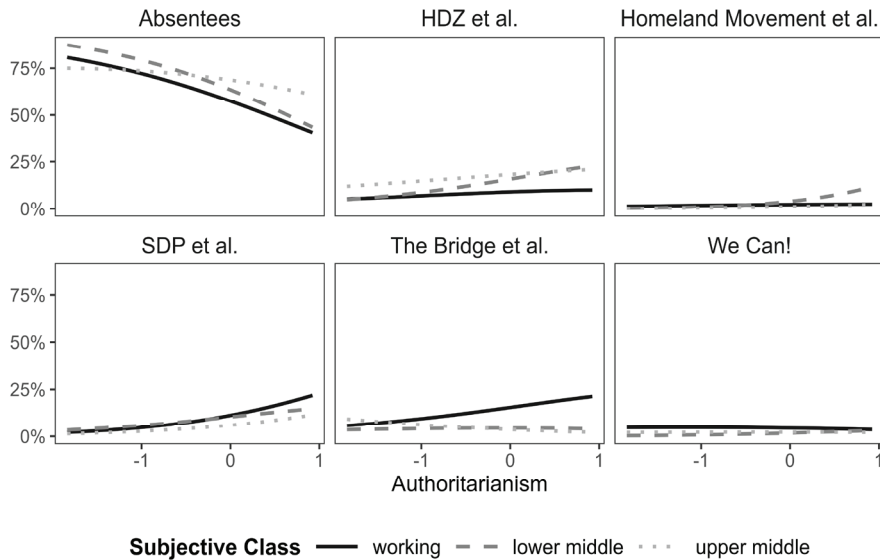


Figure 5. Predicted Probabilities of Subjective Social Class and Authoritarianism

posite holds: working-class support declines sharply as market liberalism increases. HDZ support increases modestly with market liberalism among middle-class identifiers but not among working-class voters. Abstention drops for working-class respondents as market liberalism rises, suggesting that pro-market working-class voters are more politically engaged.

The working class is split by authoritarianism in unexpected ways. Those with authoritarian values participate but scatter across parties in unpredictable ways. Those without authoritarian values withdraw. For HDZ and the Homeland Movement, higher authoritarianism modestly increases support among middle-class identifiers. SDP gains from authoritarianism among working-class voters, which is counterintuitive but may reflect the party's broad catch-all appeal. We Can! shows no relationship with authoritarianism for any class group.

Social conformism shows a similar pattern for abstention: higher conformism reduces non-voting, especially among working-class respondents. The Bridge loses working-class support as conformism rises, dropping from over 35% to below 10%. This suggests that working-class voters who reject social conformity are drawn to anti-establishment politics. Other parties show little variation.

Conservatism produces the most dramatic class differentiation. Working-class conservatives become substantially more likely to support The Bridge, with pro-

Figure 6. Predicted Probabilities of Subjective Social Class and Social Conformism

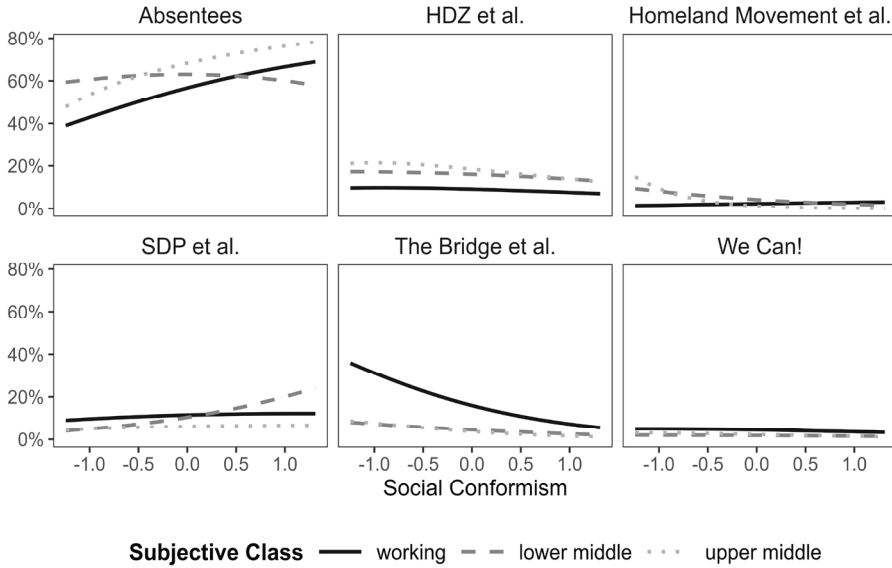
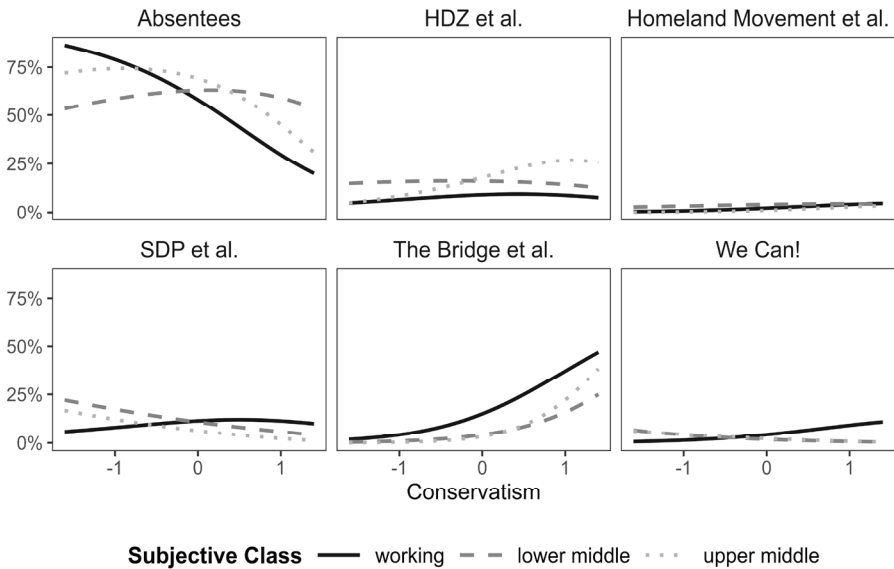


Figure 7. Predicted Probabilities of Subjective Social Class and Conservatism



babilities approaching 50% at the highest conservatism levels. This effect is weaker for middle-class identifiers. For We Can!, conservatism increases working-class support modestly while leaving middle-class support unchanged. SDP shows slight gains from conservatism among upper-middle-class identifiers. Abstention declines steeply with conservatism for working-class voters.

The hypothesis that values moderate class effects receives support. The relationship between class identification and vote choice varies substantially depending on value orientations; for The Bridge, the effect of working-class identification is strongly conditional on conservatism. Also, working-class identification interacts with redistributive egalitarianism to increase Bridge support and with market liberalism to increase We Can! and SDP support. These patterns show that class and values jointly shape vote choice in ways that neither factor alone would predict.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine whether class matters for voting in a context where it should not. Croatia represents an extreme case of class demobilization. Cultural and historical cleavages dominated political competition for three decades. If class voting were to appear anywhere, Croatia would be among the last places to look. Yet we find that subjective class identification does predict vote choice, even after controlling for income, wealth, education, sociodemographics, left-right ideology, and value orientations. The effects are not large. They would not satisfy anyone looking for the robust class-party alignments that characterized mid-twentieth-century Western democracies. But they are consistent, and they persist across model specifications.

The findings go against two assumptions in comparative literature. Firstly, they challenge the view that class becomes politically irrelevant when parties do not mobilize it. The supply-side argument – that class voting depends on parties articulating class appeals – captures an important truth. Party strategy matters enormously for how strongly class translates into vote choice. But the demand side does not simply wait passively for political entrepreneurs. Class identities persist. They shape values. They influence how citizens interpret their political options. Even without partisan cues, voters who identify as working class behave differently from those who identify as middle class. The effect is attenuated, not absent. Secondly, the results suggest that objective and subjective class operate through different mechanisms. Income has no effect on party choice in Croatia. Wealth matters only at the margins. But how people see themselves – whether they consider themselves working class or middle class – predicts vote choice even after accounting for their actual economic circumstances. People vote partly based on who they think they are, not only on what they have.

We expected working-class identification to increase support for left parties and middle-class identification to increase support for right parties. The results reveal that working-class identification does not significantly increase support for the traditional center-left party – SDP. Quite the opposite, working-class voters, especially those with conservative or anti-conformist values, are drawn to The Bridge. Also, We Can!, the New Left party, draws disproportionately from upper-middle-class identifiers rather than working-class voters. We also found that the working-class egalitarians do not support the traditional left, and that working-class authoritarians do not support the nationalist right. This suggests that subjective class identification shapes vote choice in ways that do not follow traditional left-right expectations. These counterintuitive results also reflect a party system where class has never been politically articulated. Voters lack clear signals about which party represents their class interests. In the absence of such cues, they combine class identity with value orientations in idiosyncratic ways.

An interesting ancillary finding concerns abstention: working-class voters with moderate or liberal values are far more likely to disengage from politics than their middle-class counterparts. Across all value dimensions, the probability of abstaining is highest among working-class respondents who do not hold traditional or authoritarian attitudes. This pattern suggests that the Croatian party system systematically fails to represent a substantial segment of the working class – precisely those whose values might incline them toward progressive politics, but who find no party that speaks to their combination of class position and cultural orientation. The working class, particularly those who do not hold authoritarian or conservative values, is not represented through political parties. From the perspective of democratic theory and the e(quality) of representation, we should be worried.

It is important that we highlight several methodological limitations. It is possible that party identification shapes class identity rather than the other way around, particularly in a context where parties have not mobilized class divisions and where class categories are not clearly differentiated in meaning. At present, with cross-sectional survey data, we have no way of testing that possibility. Similarly, the sequential modeling approach provides at best suggestive evidence that values partially mediate the relationship between class and vote choice. We must also add that our measure of subjective class is simple and not nuanced enough to capture the fine differences in social position that might matter for political behavior. In this paper we do not address the importance of detailed occupational schemas that capture horizontal as well as vertical differentiation. However, in light of our findings, it seems clear that alternative approaches to measuring class deserve greater scholarly attention in the Croatian context.

In conclusion: voters and non-voters have declared some form of class identity, and, while that is not class consciousness, we can say that class is present. In the

Croatian context, where everything conspires against class voting – party convergence, weak unions, the dominance of cultural conflict – any residual class effect carries theoretical weight. Parties still converge on economic policy and cultural debates mostly dominate political space. We do not know whether this latent demand will ever find a political outlet. Demand exists. Supply does not.

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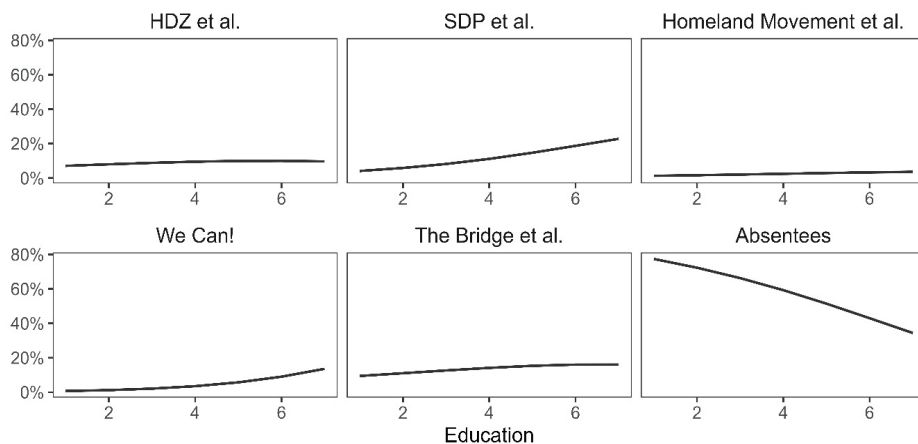
APPENDIX

Table D1. Descriptive Statistics, Continuous Variables

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Income	955	150.00	9000.00	2233.58	1205.45
Education	1018	1.00	7.00	4.07	1.08
Wealth Index	990	1.00	5.00	2.55	0.93
Age	1020	18.00	90.00	47.62	17.13
Religiosity	1011	1.00	6.00	3.00	1.74
Settlement Size	1020	1.00	4.00	2.33	1.23
Left-right Self-placement	941	0.00	10.00	5.19	2.53
Redistributive Egalitarianism	1020	-1.95	0.92	0.00	0.56
Market Liberalism	1020	-0.92	1.41	0.00	0.53
Authoritarianism	1020	-1.84	0.92	0.00	0.56
Social Conformism	1020	-1.25	1.31	0.00	0.62
Conservatism	1020	-1.61	1.40	0.00	0.71

Table D2. Descriptive Statistics, Categorical Variables

	N	%
Gender	1020	
Female	539	52.8
Male	481	47.2
Subjective Class	965	
Working Class	90	9.3
Lower Middle Class	579	60.0
Upper Middle Class	296	30.7
Vote Choice	994	
HDZ <i>et al.</i>	189	19.0
SDP <i>et al.</i>	150	15.1
Homeland Movement <i>et al.</i>	47	4.7
We Can!	52	5.2
The Bridge <i>et al.</i>	52	5.2
Absentees	504	50.7

Figure A1. Education, Marginal Effects**Table A1.** Model 4, Multinomial Regression

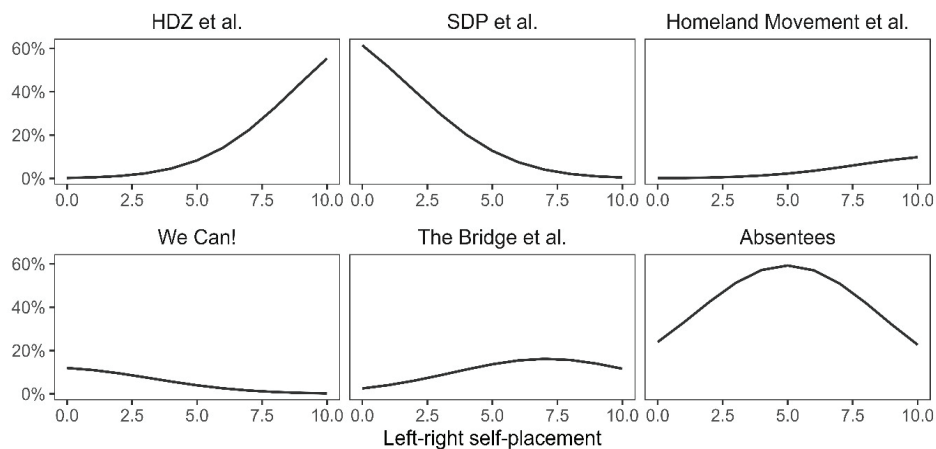
	<i>SDP et al.</i>	<i>Homeland Movement et al.</i>	<i>We Can! et al.</i>	<i>The Bridge et al.</i>	<i>Absentees</i>
Intercept	0.83***	0.68***	0.71***	8.84***	177.59***
Subjective class: Lower middle class	0.41***	0.79***	0.24***	0.15***	0.62***
Subjective class: Upper middle class	0.28***	0.30***	0.31***	0.14***	0.59***
Income	1.00	1.00	1.00*	1.00	1.00
Wealth Index	1.47***	1.25	2.03***	1.19	0.97
Education	1.26*	1.03	1.26	0.69*	0.87
Age	1.00	0.99	0.97***	0.98**	0.97***
Gender: Male	0.78	1.16***	0.89*	1.06	0.60***
Religiosity	0.67***	0.98	0.60***	0.89	0.66***
Settlement Size	1.24*	0.79	1.28	0.96	1.01
N	877				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R²	0.090				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R² adjusted	0.090				
AIC	2388.766				

Note: Ref. category: HDZ *et al.*, *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table A2. Model 5, Multinomial Regression

	<i>SDP et al.</i>	<i>Homeland Movement et al.</i>	<i>We Can!</i>	<i>The Bridge et al.</i>	<i>Absentees</i>
Intercept	124.33***	0.81***	94.82***	60.47***	2489.11***
Subjective class: Lower middle class	0.62***	0.84***	0.31***	0.14***	0.64***
Subjective class: Upper middle class	0.34***	0.33***	0.34***	0.11***	0.54***
Income	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Wealth Index	1.23.	1.20	1.74***	1.07	0.84*
Education	1.37**	1.02	1.37*	0.70*	0.93
Age	0.99	0.99	0.96***	0.98*	0.97***
Gender: Male	1.21**	1.15***	1.29***	1.35***	0.85
Religiosity	0.76***	0.99	0.67***	0.99	0.76***
Settlement Size	1.18	0.79	1.23	0.99	1.08
Left-right Self- placement	0.34***	0.98	0.36***	0.71***	0.55***
N	822				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R²	0.223				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R² adjusted	0.222				
AIC	1994.602				

Note: Ref. category: HDZ *et al.*, *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Figure A2. Left-right Self-placement, Marginal Effects**Table A3.** Model 7, Multinomial Regression

	<i>SDP et al.</i>	<i>Homeland Movement et al.</i>	<i>We Can!</i>	<i>The Bridge et al.</i>	<i>Absentees</i>
Intercept	164.48***	0.81***	105.04***	65.72***	3240.77***
Income	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Wealth Index	1.22.	1.19	1.68***	1.06	0.82*
Education	1.36**	0.99	1.39*	0.65*	0.92
Age	0.99	0.99	0.96***	0.98*	0.97***
Gender: Male	1.18*	1.09***	1.35***	1.25***	0.83
Religiosity	0.75***	1.00	0.67***	1.00	0.75***
Settlement Size	1.19	0.83	1.19	1.03	1.13
Left-right Self- placement	0.34***	0.98	0.36***	0.70***	0.55***
Subjective class: Lower middle class	0.67***	0.80***	0.41***	0.14***	0.59***
Subjective class: Upper middle class	0.34***	0.21***	0.47***	0.12***	0.50***
Redistributionist Egalitarianism	0.63***	1.46***	0.81***	1.67***	0.81*
Market Liberalism	2.75***	0.63***	6.78***	0.34***	0.81*

Subjective class: Lower middle class * Redistributionist Egalitarianism	1.55***	0.43***	2.90***	0.54***	0.80
Subjective class: Upper middle class * Redistributionist Egalitarianism	1.95***	0.18***	1.93***	1.31***	1.42**
Subjective class: Lower middle class * Market Liberalism	0.83*	2.36***	0.33***	7.00***	2.02***
Subjective class: Upper middle class * Market Liberalism	0.17***	1.87***	0.06***	3.15***	1.55***
N	822				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R²	0.240				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R² adjusted	0.239				
AIC	2012.233				

Note: Ref. category: HDZ *et al.*, *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table A4. Model 8, Multinomial Regression

	<i>SDP et al.</i>	<i>Homeland Movement et al.</i>	<i>We Can!</i>	<i>The Bridge et al.</i>	<i>Absentees</i>
Intercept	63.62***	1.13***	68.07***	94.50***	1700.73***
Income	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Wealth Index	1.33*	1.14	1.79***	1.03	0.83*
Education	1.52***	1.03	1.30.	0.66*	0.91
Age	0.99	0.98.	0.96***	0.98*	0.97***
Gender: Male	1.36***	1.17***	1.46***	1.21***	0.90
Religiosity	0.77**	0.99	0.74*	0.92	0.79***
Settlement Size	1.14	0.80	1.23	1.02	1.08
Left-right Self- placement	0.34***	0.94	0.37***	0.66***	0.57***
Subjective class: Lower middle class	0.53***	1.04	0.24***	0.16***	0.62***

Subjective class: Upper middle class	0.28***	0.25***	0.27***	0.12***	0.60***
Authoritarianism	1.83***	0.97	0.72***	1.26***	0.62***
Social Conformism	1.28*	1.54***	0.96	0.55***	1.42***
Conservatism	1.03	1.91***	2.20***	2.56***	0.53***
Subjective class: Lower middle class *	0.53***	2.23***	1.73***	0.47***	0.73***
Authoritarianism					
Subjective class: Upper middle class *	0.96	2.05***	1.14**	0.38***	1.23***
Authoritarianism					
Subjective class: Lower middle class *	1.76***	0.36***	1.02	1.22***	0.78**
Social Conformism					
Subjective class: Upper middle class *	1.12	0.10***	0.89*	1.03	1.05
Social Conformism					
Subjective class: Lower middle class *	0.59***	0.64***	0.20***	1.65***	2.00***
Conservatism					
Subjective class: Upper middle class *	0.24***	0.94***	0.11***	1.72***	0.83**
Conservatism					
N	822				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R²	0.262				
Nagelkerke pseudo-R² adjusted	0.261				
AIC	1988.862				

Note: Ref. category: HDZ *et al.*, *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Daniela Širinić, Associate Professor, University of Zagreb, Faculty of Political Science. *E-mail*: daniela.sirinic@fpzg.hr

Višeslav Raos, Associate Professor, University of Zagreb, Faculty of Political Science. *E-mail*: viseslav.raos@fpzg.hr