

Two-dimensional political competition and the party politics of the welfare state: How voter turnout, class voting and the salience of cultural issues condition party effects on welfare state generosity

Inauguraldissertation
zur Erlangung des Akademischen Grades
eines Dr. phil.,

vorgelegt dem Fachbereich 02: Sozialwissenschaften, Medien und Sport
der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität
Mainz

von

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Mainz
2022

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Tag des Prüfungskolloquiums: 18.08.2022

Meinen Eltern und meiner Schwester gewidmet

Abstract

Does it (still) make a difference to welfare policy whether left or right parties hold government? Do left governments pursue more expansionary policies than their right counterparts? This dissertation project investigates these familiar yet still contested questions with a focus on how political competition shapes the effects of government partisanship. Drawing on the premise that political parties cater to the preferences of their core voters, it argues that attributes of political competition which have a bearing on how and why social classes align with parties—such as voter turnout and issue salience—drive the way left and right governments influence social policy. Of particular interest in this context are the consequences of political competition on more than one policy dimension (i.e., not all controversial policy issues align with each other, forming a single left-right dimension) for individuals' voting behavior and political support on the one hand and for macro-level partisan effects on the welfare state on the other hand.

Table of Contents

List of submitted publications.....	1
1. Introduction	2
2. Previous research and individual contributions of the four studies	11
2.1 Party politics and the welfare state.....	12
2.1.1 Challenges to the welfare state	12
2.1.2 Partisan politics in welfare state research.....	14
2.1.3 The “interactive” and the “new” partisan theory.....	16
2.2 The two-dimensional policy space and the voting behavior of individuals and classes	22
2.2.1 Left-authoritarians in the two-dimensional policy space	25
2.2.2 Class voting in the two-dimensional policy space	29
2.3 The two-dimensional policy space and the party politics of the welfare state	34
3. Results of the four studies	36
4. Concluding remarks	40
References.....	45

Study I: The consequences of supply gaps in two-dimensional policy spaces for voter turnout and political support: The case of economically left-wing and culturally right-wing citizens in Western Europe (with appendix)

Study II: „Nur wer wählt, zählt“? Eine Analyse des Zusammenhangs von Wahlbeteiligung und arbeitsmarktbezogenen sozialen Leistungen linker Parteien in OECD-Ländern (with appendix)

Study III: Die Klassenzusammensetzung der Regierungswählerschaft: Soziale Klassen, Parteidifferenz und Sozialstaatstätigkeit

Study IV: Economy or culture? How the relative salience of policy dimensions shapes partisan effects on welfare state generosity (with appendix)

List of submitted publications

- **Study I:** Hillen, Sven and Nils D. Steiner. 2020. “The consequences of supply gaps in two-dimensional policy spaces for voter turnout and political support: The case of economically left-wing and culturally right-wing citizens in Western Europe.” *European Journal of Political Research* 59(2): 331-353.
- **Study II:** Hillen, Sven. 2017. „‘Nur wer wählt, zählt‘? Eine Analyse des Zusammenhangs von Wahlbeteiligung und arbeitsmarktbezogenen sozialen Leistungen linker Parteien in OECD-Ländern.“ *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 58(4): 533-559.
- **Study III:** Hillen, Sven. 2018. „Die Klassenzusammensetzung der Regierungswählerschaft: Soziale Klassen, Parteiendifferenz und Sozialstaatstätigkeit.“ *Zeitschrift für Sozialreform* 64(4): 399-429.
- **Study IV:** Hillen, Sven. 2022. “Economy or culture? How the relative salience of policy dimensions shapes partisan effects on welfare state generosity.” *Socio-Economic Review*, available online before inclusion in an issue at URL: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwac005>.

1. Introduction

This introductory chapter accompanies the four articles that I submit to the Faculty 02: Social Sciences, Media and Sports at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science. In this cumulative dissertation in comparative politics, I connect research on political competition in a two-dimensional policy space with questions on partisan effects on welfare state policy. The chapter at hand mainly serves as an introduction to the four studies, but also contains some concluding remarks on the studies' findings and their implications. Its main intention is twofold: First, I will take this opportunity to explicate how the individual studies build upon and contribute to the existent literature in more detail than I was able to do within the usual word limits of political science journals. Second, I aim to clarify how the individual studies relate to each other and how they, jointly, provide us with a clearer picture of the party politics of the welfare state. In the remainder of this accompanying chapter's introduction, I first position my research within the literature on partisan theory. Then I turn to literature on the two-dimensionality of the policy space. Finally, I give a short preview of the four individual studies.

The question of whether it matters to welfare policy if left or right parties hold government has been debated for decades. Starting in the 1970s, research has begun to systematically address this question and soon it became one of comparative welfare state research's most influential ideas that the ideological leaning of the presiding government does indeed make a difference. Scholars tend to agree that government partisanship has shaped the size, institutional design, and generosity of post-World-War-II welfare states during what is called the 'golden age' of the welfare state. In line with partisan theory, left governments were identified as spearheading the expansion of social benefits and redistribution (e.g., Allan & Scruggs 2004; Esping-Andersen 1990; Hicks & Misra 1993; Hicks & Swank 1992; Huber et al. 1993; Huber & Stephens 2001; Korpi 1989). Partisan theory posits that left parties pursue more expansionary

policies because they cater to the working class and lower-income voters. Right parties, on the other hand, are less favorable towards social security and especially redistribution because they rely on a core clientele of economically better-off voters (Hibbs 1977; Schmidt 1996).

However, as the ‘golden age’ ended in the mid-1970s and the welfare state was confronted with post-industrial transition processes and globalization, the general consensus on the relevance of government partisanship faded (Bandau & Ahrens 2020; Häusermann et al. 2013; Potrafke 2017). Notwithstanding proponents of partisan theory still finding partisan effects (Allan & Scruggs 2004; Bradley et al. 2003; Korpi & Palme 2003), economic and socio-structural pressures are argued to undermine the fiscal sustainability of the welfare state, thus confining governments’ room to maneuver, or even pushing parties—regardless of their ideological denomination—to retrench welfare benefits (Boix 2000; Huber & Stephens 2001; Strange 1995). The prominent ‘New Politics of the Welfare State’ theory extends this claim by arguing that governments are torn between tight budgets and the popularity of the matured welfare programs which makes cutbacks electorally risky (Pierson 1994, 1996, 1998). Moreover, the changed class structures (Oesch 2006) and dualized labor markets (Rueda 2007) of post-industrial democracies challenge partisan theory’s premise of left and right parties each mobilizing well-defined core clienteles that are divided over social policy preferences. The electoral dealignment thesis even holds that class lost its significance for vote choice and predicts a highly volatile electorate without stable linkages to specific parties (Dalton et al. 1984; Franklin et al. 1992). Confirming the thrust of these arguments, several studies either fail to detect meaningful effects of partisan government (e.g., Busemeyer 2009; Garrett & Mitchell 2001) or find evidence for a weakening of partisan effects over time (e.g., Huber & Stephens 2001; Kittel & Obinger 2003; Kwon & Pontusson 2010).

This backdrop fueled two strands of research on partisan politics. First, going toe-to-toe with the dealignment thesis, the literature calling for an “electoral turn” (Beramendi et al. 2015:

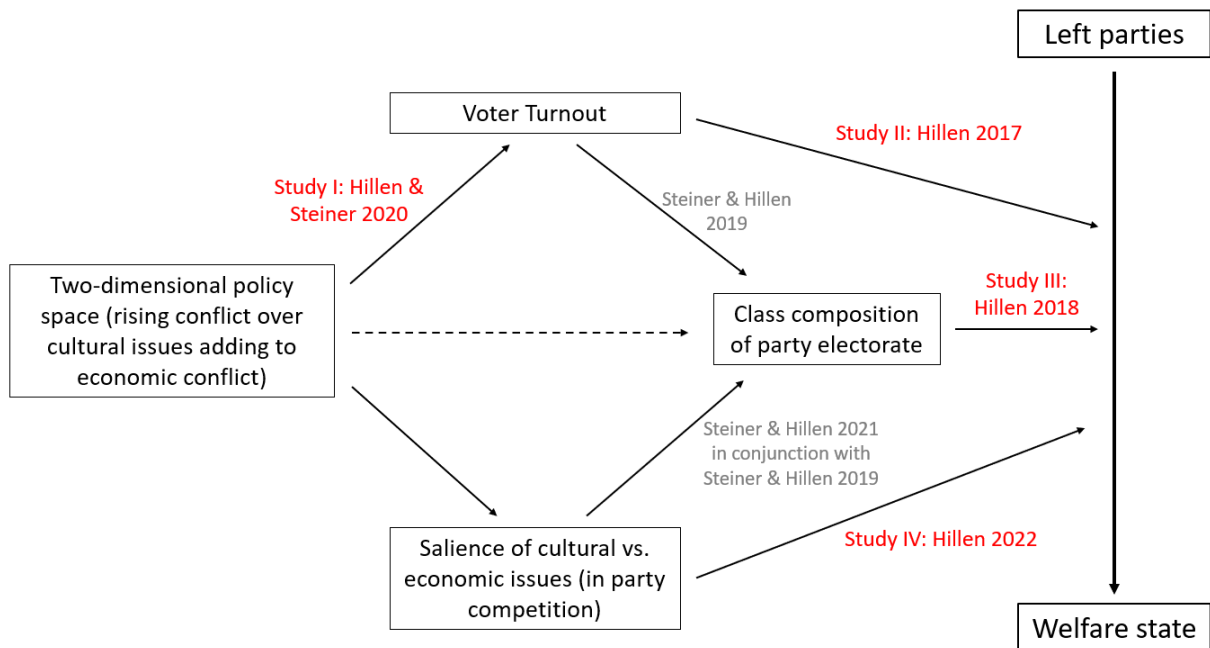
25) argues that class continues to matter for vote choices and parties continue to represent class interests. However, since social classes have realigned, we need to update our assumptions on what parties want to do when holding government (Häusermann et al. 2013: 227-229). Second, an “interactive approach” (Jakobsson & Kumlin 2017: 187) emphasizes that parties’ ability to steer policy in specific directions—no matter which one exactly—depends on contextual conditions (cf. Zohlnhöfer 2019: 146-148). Collectively, these increasingly influential lines of research are as much concerned with the theoretical underpinnings of partisan theory as with its empirical scope (Häusermann et al. 2013: 223). This dissertation is situated in the context of these works. Its main endeavor is to assess how political competition shapes the effects of government partisanship. Drawing on the premise that political parties cater to the preferences of their core voters, it argues that attributes of political competition (such as voter turnout and issue salience) which have a bearing on how and why social classes align with parties, determine the way left and right governments influence social policy. Thus, the answer to the defining puzzle of this dissertation—the familiar yet notoriously contested question whether it (still) makes a difference to welfare policy if left parties rather than their right counterparts hold government—presumably hinges on the context political competition provides. If so, long-term trends in certain attributes of political competition, for example the broad decline in voter turnout across established democracies (Blais & Rubenson 2013; Gray & Caul 2000; Hooghe & Kern 2017), may also help explain the empirical evidence for partisan effects dwindling over time, a phenomenon which is not fully understood yet (Zohlnhöfer 2019: 149-152).

Political competition is, of course, a broad concept, and how its different aspects condition partisan differences in social policy has been studied before. Partisan theory itself is, as already stated, based on the assumption that a class cleavage dominates electoral behavior. Consequently, reacting to the weakening of this cleavage, the perspective of an “electoral turn” emphasizes that the actual (class-)composition of parties’ electorates should be considered

when analyzing the effects of government partisanship, and there are some initial studies that have done so (Gingrich & Häusermann 2015; Engler & Zohlnhöfer 2019). Furthermore, the interactive approach recently identified the salience of welfare issues as a potentially moderating factor of partisan effects (Jakobsson & Kumlin 2017; Jensen & Seeberg 2015).

However, a lot remains to be gained from continuing down these paths. I contribute to the existing research from the angle of political competition in a two-dimensional policy space. With the rising salience of cultural issues over the last decades, political conflict in Western Europe and beyond has become increasingly two-dimensional. Controversial issues no longer closely align with each other, making it difficult to capture them with a single left-right axis (Dalton 2018; Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008). Under these conditions, voters as well as parties have to make choices on two conflict dimensions. A second, cultural dimension—referring to matters such as ethnic diversity, immigration and national belonging as well as international political integration—adds to the established economic opposition between the state and the market. Due to its non-economic content, the cultural dimension triggers realignments between social classes and political parties; at the same time, multidimensional political competition also makes it more complicated for voters to arrive at a party choice and might thus prompt abstention, as will be evidenced below. Since these dynamics affect the electorates of parties—including those that regularly hold government—these parties’ impact on social policy should differ from what partisan theory traditionally expects of government partisanship. Figure 1 contains a schematic representation of how political competition in a two-dimensional policy space might influence partisan effects on the welfare state and highlights where the four studies of this dissertation are located within the overall argument. The figure will be helpful to depict the individual studies’ contributions and how they relate to each other.

Figure 1: Two-dimensional political competition and the party politics of the welfare state
– The research program



The first article of this dissertation (**Study I: Hillen & Steiner 2020**) studies the consequences of two-dimensional political competition at the micro level. More specifically, it shows that if political competition is characterized by more than one conflict dimension, it becomes likely that some individuals combine positions on these dimensions differently from any of the parties. In Western Europe, this pertains primarily to a large group of citizens with left-wing views on economic policy combined with right-wing, i.e., authoritarian, conservative and nationalist, stances on cultural issues. These individuals regularly do not find a political party that represents their views reasonably well on *both* these dimensions (Lefkofridi et al. 2014; Thomassen 2012; van der Brug & van Spanje 2009). Recent research has investigated the consequences of this left-authoritarian supply gap for party choices (Gidron 2022; Lefkofridi et al. 2014; Kurella & Rosset 2017, 2018; Steiner & Hillen 2021). Yet, citizens whose position bundle is not met by any party inevitably face trade-offs when called to the ballot boxes, and they might become frustrated with political supply. Therefore, left-authoritarians might be less likely to participate in elections in the first place. By studying connections between left-authoritarian

policy positions and electoral participation, Study I demonstrates that left-authoritarians are indeed less likely to vote (see also: Kurella & Rosset 2018; Steiner & Hillen 2019). In addition, it shows that left-authoritarians are less satisfied with democracy and less trusting of its institutions (see also: Hakhverdian & Schakel 2021), and substantiates that these connections between individuals' preferences and their participation and political attitudes are indeed contingent on the existence of a supply gap. Hence, with its first article, this dissertation also adds to the literature on the consequences of political competition in multidimensional policy spaces at the individual level, thereby studying the underpinnings of the macro-level research in the remaining three articles.

In parallel research, not included in this dissertation and indicated by a grey font in Figure 1, Nils D. Steiner and I also contributed to investigating how left-authoritarians cast their vote if they do decide to turn out (Steiner & Hillen 2021) and asked who these left-authoritarians are (Steiner & Hillen 2019). Consistent with Lipset's (1959) early claims about the authoritarianism of the working class, we find—utilizing data from Germany—that having a low income, being less educated, and belonging to the working class or identifying oneself as working class (still) begets left-authoritarian policy positions (see also: Rosset & Kurella 2021). As the left-authoritarian supply gap forces these voters to privilege either economic or cultural congruence with the party they choose, the salience they attach to the different dimensions assumes a vital role for the left-authoritarian vote. Left-authoritarians who weigh their economic preferences more heavily will likely vote for a left party, while those for whom their cultural preferences are more important will rather choose a (radical) right party (see also: Lefkofridi et al. 2014; cf. van der Brug & van Spanje 2009). Related work on the voting behavior of the working-class similarly implies that the increasing macro-level salience of cultural issues is key to understanding the reorientation of working-class voters from the mainstream left to the radical right (Arzheimer 2013; Bornschieer & Kriesi 2013; Oesch & Rennwald; Spies 2013). Accordingly, if political

competition can no longer be conceptualized as taking place along one single left-right dimension, this does not remain without consequences for the electoral participation and the party alignment of the lower strata of society that traditionally belonged to the left's core clientele. On the one hand, via the left-authoritarian supply gap, the rise of the cultural dimension appears to add to the well-known lower turnout rates among economically vulnerable groups. This fits the observation that besides declining overall turnout, we observe a growing participation gap between lower and higher classes (Armingeon & Schädel 2015; Dassonneville & Hooghe 2017; Goldberg 2020). On the other hand, cultural issues incentivize particularly working-class voters to change their voting behavior in favor of the radical right.

In this dissertation's second article (**Study II: Hillen 2017**), I shift the focus of the empirical analysis from the micro-level of individual voting behavior and political attitudes to the macro-level of public policy, asking whether turnout in national elections affects partisan effects on the welfare state. I refer to the empirical evidence showing that low turnout is biased against low-status citizens to argue that this makes them less relevant in the eyes of politicians facing re-election and thus renders left parties less eager to represent progressive social policy preferences in case turnout rates are low (cf. Lijphart 1997; Mahler 2008). The results demonstrate that the magnitude of the positive effect of left parties' cabinet strength on traditional compensatory social policy depends on voter turnout: If voter turnout declines, the effect diminishes and eventually partisan differences dissipate.

The third article (**Study III: Hillen 2018**) analyses the effects of the class composition of governing parties' electorates. The rising salience of cultural issues did not only affect the voting behavior of the (left-authoritarian) working-class that traditionally supported left parties but also played an important role in forging an electoral alliance between the expanding new middle-class and parties of the left (Häusermann & Kriesi 2015; Kitschelt 1994; Oesch & Rennwald 2018). Therefore, since the electorates of political parties have been reshuffled by the electoral

realignment and dealignment of social classes, Study III asks how this impacts on the policies of government parties. Using an alternative, conceptually different measure of the electoral relevance of social classes, my empirical analysis of conditional partisan effects corroborates the result from a previous study by Gingrich and Häusermann (2015) that left governments expand traditional decommodifying transfer programs more if they *actually* mobilize a working class-based electorate. By contrast, governments that are not dominated by left parties neither significantly expand such programs nor do they react to the working-class share in their electorates. Additionally, the study reveals that governments with a balanced power between left and right parties are particularly prone to invest in family policy services. Corresponding policies are most popular with the middle class (Garritzmann et al. 2018; Häusermann et al. 2021), and the study fittingly finds that the share of the middle class in the government's electorate moderates the policy effect.

Study II and III, *inter alia*, imply that left political parties are responsive to their actual constituencies. However, the economic interests of lower classes may nevertheless end up being underrepresented since either right parties are not responsive to the working-class share among their voters or because the members of these classes participate less. The lower participation rate of the economically less-well off potentially even initiates a vicious circle of underrepresentation and abstention (c.f. Evans 2017: 189; Piven & Cloward 1988; Quaile Hill & Leighley 1996). Regarding the shape of the welfare state as such, the findings of both studies help to explain the move towards a social policy that is less geared towards passive social protection and more focused on social investment and labor market activation (Elsässer 2018: 536).

The fourth and final article (**Study IV: Hillen 2022**) turns its attention to issue salience and argues that the relative salience of the economic policy dimension *vis-à-vis* the cultural dimension in party competition influences partisan differences in social policy. To make its case, the article draws on the dynamics of two-dimensional electoral politics exemplified in

Figure 1 and described thus far. Since, on the one hand, partisan theory is predicated on the assumption that parties mobilize voters around their economic preferences while, on the other hand, foremost cultural issues are deemed responsible for classes to align with new parties, the *relative* salience of the two dimensions appears to be relevant for the partisan politics of the welfare state. So, how are partisan effects affected when economic and cultural issues rival for voters' and parties' attention? The content of party competition, the argument goes, determines *who* votes for a party and *why*: If economic issues are relatively more salient, voters with economically left (right) preferences vote for left (right) parties and they do so primarily because they want them to implement economically left policies—and not because they share their cultural outlook, which they may or may not do. Accordingly, I hypothesize left parties to expand welfare benefits in case the salience of the economic dimension trumps that of the cultural dimension. Otherwise, if the cultural dimension is more important, I anticipate less of a difference in the social policy output of left and right parties. My results confirm these expectations. This finding has implications for several questions such as, for example, the prominent puzzle of why democracies do not redistribute more in the face of rising inequality (Bonica et al. 2013; Finseraas 2010; Iversen & Goplerud 2018; Shayo 2009; Meltzer & Richard 1981; Piketty 2020; Roemer 1998). In short: Left parties refrain from expanding progressive social policies if cultural issues outweigh economic ones.

In sum, with the research program illustrated in Figure 1, this cumulative dissertation aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how partisan differences in social policy come about. The central findings indicate that government partisanship can make a difference under the right circumstances. Yet, it is crucial to take political competition, specifically its two-dimensionality, into account when analyzing partisan effects.

The rest of this introductory chapter is structured as follows: In the next section, I position the dissertation within the existent literature and point out how the individual studies contribute

to this literature in more detail. Subsequently, I describe the empirical results of the four individual studies. In the final section, I give some concluding remarks on the studies' implications and limitations.

2. Previous research and individual contributions of the four studies

As indicated in the preceding section, in this dissertation, I engage with aspects of three broad research fields. For one thing, I am interested in partisan theory, which is an influential theoretical strand in comparative welfare state research (Häusermann et al. 2013: 221). For another, I investigate how constrained party supply in a two-dimensional policy space can affect individuals' participation and political support. The 'policy space' is an important concept in party competition and electoral behavior research (Reinermann 2020: 1-3). Moreover, I draw on insights from these two latter fields to better grasp under which conditions government partisanship has a significant impact on the welfare state. This agenda establishes the following structure for this section: I first revisit the literature on the partisan politics of the welfare state (2.1). This review closes with noting recent scholarly interest in how two-dimensional political competition affects parties' constituencies and consequently partisan effects; this is where studies II and III are situated. Subsequently, I introduce the concept of the 'policy space' and the notion of its two-dimensionality (2.2). Within this subsection, I review findings on electoral behavior that are important with regard to the partisan theory of the welfare state. I start with research on individuals with left-authoritarian policy preferences, describing the contributions of Study I and then move on to the issue of class voting. The final subsection (2.3) returns to the partisan politics of the welfare state and pinpoints how Study IV builds on the previously outlined findings to conduct an analysis of partisan effects conditional upon the relative salience of the policy space's two dimensions.

2.1 Party politics and the welfare state

As mentioned above, the relevance of government partisanship went from being relatively well established to being highly controversial among scholars when the Western welfare states transitioned from manufacturing to service economies and entered a ‘silver age of permanent fiscal austerity’ (Pierson 1998). Several challenges for the advanced welfare states that developed during the first three decades after World War II were identified and argued to restrain governments’ room for maneuver as they put downward pressure on social protection schemes. Before turning to the literature on partisan politics, I will briefly sketch the most prominent challenges to the welfare state to give an impression of the economic and social context.¹

2.1.1 Challenges to the welfare state

The transformation from industrial to post-industrial economies entails shrinking employment in the industrial sector and in exchange expanding employment in both the low- and the high-skilled service sectors (Oesch 2006). However, since they devalue the skill sets of industrial workers, such changes in the occupational structure enhance unemployment risks and fuel the demand for social protection. Simultaneously, they undercut state revenues because the service sector possesses a more limited capacity for productivity gains that, *ceteris paribus*, results in slower overall economic growth (Baumol 1967; Iversen & Cusack 2000; Iversen & Wren 1998; Pierson 1998: 541-545). Besides tertiarization, welfare states confront additional domestic challenges coming mainly from changes in the social structure: (1) Population ageing induced an increase in the ratio of people aged 65 and above over individuals aged 15 to 64. This means that there are more pensioners for every person of working age in a given country—i.e.,

¹ For more detailed and more comprehensive overviews see e.g., Ferrera 2008; Pierson 1998, 2001; Obinger & Schmidt 2019: Section 5.

the old-age dependency ratio is higher—and, with that, higher pension liabilities of the state (Armingeon 2019: 386-388; Bonoli 2000: 7-23; Meier & Werding 2010; Pierson 1998: 550-551). (2) Due to the maturation of welfare programs, welfare state clients—such as the elderly or employees laid off in the process of deindustrialization—are entitled to much higher benefits after the ‘golden age’ of welfare expansion than they were before, putting additionally budgetary stress on the welfare state (Pierson 1998: 545-547; Stephens et al. 1999: 166-167). On top of that (3), population ageing and particularly technological progress in the medical sector rapidly raise social spending on health care (Meier & Werding 2010: 660-662; Pierson 1998: 550-551). While it thus became increasingly demanding for welfare states to insure their populations against ‘old’ social risks, (4) the tertiarization of the workforce as well as changing family and gender relations contributed to the emergence of ‘new’ risks that need to be met by social policy (Armingeon 2019: 392-393; Esping-Andersen 1999; Taylor-Gooby 2004). Examples of this new kind of risks are single-parenthood, the need to reconcile work and family life, or insufficient social security coverage (Bonoli 2006: 6; Taylor-Gooby 2004: 5). The latter is related to post-industrial labor markets because non-standard and discontinuous employment—i.e., employment that is not full-time and permanent (Hipp et al. 2015)—is prevalent in the service sector (Oesch 2006).

These domestic transformations take place in an international context marked by globalization. The globalization of production contributes to the decline of manufacturing employment in developed countries by moving jobs abroad. Meanwhile, the globalization of labor threatens low-skilled employees from within via the inflow of low-skilled migrant workers (Dancygier & Walter 2015). Furthermore, proponents of the ‘efficiency thesis’ expect regulatory and tax competition between states (for a discussion of the thesis see Genschel 2004). Spurred by the abatement of barriers to international trade and cross-border capital flows, governments would engage in a ‘race to the bottom’ in regulation levels, tax rates, and social

contributions to attract mobile capital. This would prevent governments from efficiently raising enough revenue to fund the welfare state and eventually force them to cut back on welfare spending (Brady et al. 2005: 922-923; Garrett & Mitchell 2001: 149-151; Genschel 2002; Steiner 2015: 13-15). Although this thesis somewhat overstates the case, after carefully reviewing the empirical evidence, Nils D. Steiner (2015: 27-28) concludes that

“the large empirical literature on tax competition does not leave serious doubts that increasing international mobility associated with rising economic integration has constrained national tax policy autonomy in serious ways. The findings with regard to the welfare state and public spending are more mixed. [...] Nonetheless, there seems to be an emerging consensus that economic globalization has constrained and shaped the development of the welfare states in established OECD democracies as well.”

2.1.2 Partisan politics in welfare state research

In consequence of the challenges facing the welfare state, it seemed questionable whether partisan differences would still be manifest in policy (Huber & Stephens 2001: 221). The theory of a “new politics” (Pierson 1994, 1996, 1998) of the welfare state accentuates this by arguing that the suffocating fiscal stress which puts welfare retrenchment on the political agenda encounters a welfare state that is very resilient because its programs entrenched support for their own continuance among their clients. Hence, even though left parties might want to expand welfare benefits, in the climate of permanent austerity, they lack the financial latitude to do so. Conversely, while right parties would maybe be pleased to give in to the fiscal pressure, they are hindered by the welfare state’s popularity that makes retrenchment electorally risky.

Numerous empirical studies address the question of whether government partisanship is still relevant to explanations of welfare state development after the postwar expansion of benefits came to a halt (for recent reviews see Bandau & Ahrens 2020; Häusermann et al. 2013;

Horn 2017: 59-94; Potrafke 2017; Schmidt 2021; Wenzelburger 2015; Zohlnhöfer 2019).² Some of them, primarily after analyzing social expenditures, come to skeptical conclusions—either confirming the thesis of a decline of partisanship or refuting the relevance of the partisan composition of government altogether (Busemeyer 2009; Castles 2001; Garrett & Mitchell 2001; Huber & Stephens 2001; Kittel & Obinger 2003; Kwon & Pontusson 2010; Potrafke 2009; Stephens 2015). In contrast, studies analyzing welfare state entitlements or overall redistribution rather than social spending do find distinct partisan effects (Allan & Scruggs 2004; Amable et al. 2006; Bradley et al. 2003; Iversen & Soskice 2006; Korpi & Palme 2003; Negri 2020; Zohlnhöfer et al. 2012). Thus, it seems as if the dependent variable a study employs matters a great deal to its conclusion on whether or not partisan theory’s expectation of left and right governments pursuing different social policies holds up (cf. Bandau & Ahrens 2020; Zohlnhöfer 2019: 149).

However, the dependent variable choice does not single-handedly resolve the issue. To begin with, the divide between expenditure-based and entitlement-based accounts is not as clear cut: There are also more optimistic studies concerning the role of the partisan composition of government for social expenditure changes during the decades after 1980 (Amable et al. 2006; Emmenegger 2007; Negri 2020). Conversely, government partisanship does apparently not matter to entitlements in all welfare programs. Reimut Zohlnhöfer and colleagues (2012), for instance, uncover partisan differences as regards sick pay and unemployment benefits but not in the realm of old-age pensions. The key point to be taken away from this is that social policies that insure against labor-market risks (primarily unemployment) should be kept apart from those that insure against life-course related risks (e.g., failing health and old age)—especially when analyzing partisan effects, as neither party would face clear political demand to cut

² I provide a detailed review in Study II myself. In this introductory chapter, my endeavor is foremost to introduce and summarize the two streams of literature this dissertation contributes to, i.e., studies that analyze partisan effects conditional upon characteristics of the party system and those that consider changes in parties’ constituencies.

benefits of life course-related social programs (cf. Jensen 2012, 2014).³ I pay heed to this advice in all three of my macro-level studies of welfare policy. As to the general question of how best to capture the content of welfare policies, measures based on entitlements have often been described as superior to social expenditure (e.g., Allan & Scruggs 2004; Bolukbasi & Öktem 2018; Esping-Andersen 1990; Korpi & Palme 2003; Olaskoaga et al. 2013; Scruggs 2007) and seem particularly useful when analyzing transfer programs like unemployment protection (Jensen 2012: 281). Therefore, I primarily refer to this kind of data to test my theoretical expectations about partisan effects.

With regard to the research design, Carina Schmitt (2016) recently argued that the appropriate unit of observation to test partisan influences with panel data is cabinets as opposed to country-years—which are usually used as periodization. Implementing a corresponding analysis, she shows that effects of government partisanship are still evident even in social spending. I follow her advice in Studies II (in the robustness section) and IV below. However, the analysis of more fine-grained dependent variables and methodological refinements notwithstanding, partisan theory’s expectation of significant differences between political parties of different ideological denominations has certainly become more controversial over recent decades.⁴ In the next section, I review two substantive responses.

2.1.3 The “interactive” and the “new” partisan theory

Partly in reaction to the supposedly constrained room to maneuver of national governments as well as to the inconclusive results regarding associations between government

³ Similarly, Castles (2009) posits that total social expenditure should be disaggregated to program-specific expenditure to identify diverse spending priorities.

⁴ In fact, the discussions on measures of the welfare state and on methodology were themselves to some extent reactions to the questioning of partisan effects (e.g., Allan & Scruggs 2004; Korpi & Palme 2003; Schmitt 2016).

partisanship and social policy, the literature has headed towards an interactive approach, claiming that partisan effects depend on contextual factors (Häusermann et al. 2013; Jakobsson & Kumlin 2017: 187; Zohlnhöfer 2019: 149-153). By now, a considerable amount of research has paid attention to (potentially) moderating factors such as the institutional configuration of political systems (Becher 2010; Emmenegger 2007; Hübscher 2017; Kittel & Obinger 2003; Schmidt 1996; Zohlnhöfer et al. 2012) as well as of economic systems and labor markets (Jensen 2011; Swank 2013), the quality of government (Rothstein et al. 2012), the economic problem pressure (Amable et al. 2006; Korpi & Palme 2003; Lipsmeyer 2011; Savage 2019) including the pressure emanating from globalization (Engler 2021; Garrett 1998; Kwon & Pontusson 2010; Jensen 2012; Potrafke 2009; Schmitt & Zohlnhöfer 2019), and—most relevant to the agenda pursued in this dissertation—different attributes of political competition.

Studies on how political competition matters for government parties' influence on welfare policy have examined the impact of the parliamentary opposition (Hicks & Swank, 1992; Horn & Jensen 2017; Jensen & Seeberg, 2015), the polarization of the party system (Finseraas & Vernby, 2011), the salience of welfare state issues (Jakobsson & Kumlin, 2017), and the intensity of electoral competition (Abou-Chadi & Immergut 2019). These studies implicitly or explicitly consider that parties compete on multiple issues and therefore do not necessarily have to differentiate themselves from each other in terms of social policy to attract voters. Accordingly, they expect partisan differences to hinge on the degree to which the welfare state is openly contested. Finseraas and Vernby (2011) analyze the consequences of party polarization on the economic dimension. They find that right governments affect the generosity of welfare programs negatively only at high levels of polarization. Two studies look at the issue attention to the welfare state. Jakobsson and Kumlin (2017) register the systemic salience of welfare issues during election campaigns and study how it interacts with government partisanship to affect welfare generosity. They find that welfare salience facilitated partisan effects before the mid-

1990s, but ceased to do so afterwards. Focusing on the parliamentary arena, an analysis by Jensen and Seeberg (2015) indicates that left opposition parties can block welfare cutbacks of right governments by placing the welfare state high on the political agenda. Horn and Jensen (2017) underline the influence of the parliamentary opposition by showing that governments regularly disregard their welfare pledges and deliver less generous policies than promised unless they confront a decisively pro-welfare contender. In a similar vein, Hicks and Swank (1992) hypothesized in an early study that “contagion from the left” leads right governments to act more welfare friendly than they otherwise would, while left governments’ welfare effort gets dampened by strong right oppositions. An additional study on the role of the party system by Abou-Chadi and Immergut (2019) is less concerned with party positions but rather with the intensity of electoral competition which is defined as “the probability that a vote shift will occur that changes a party’s bargaining position in parliament” (Abou-Chadi & Immergut 2019: 698). The study indicates that electoral competitiveness affects the behavior of parties in government. At low levels of electoral competition, left-wing incumbents are unlikely to reduce pension rights generosity. With increasing competitiveness, however, they become more likely to implement pension cuts and favor programs for social investment instead. Yet, as also shown, this effect largely depends on the absence of a radical right challenger party.

By taking into account that political competition is not just all about traditional class politics, the studies cited here are closely related to another recent approach to partisan theory that is also crucial for this dissertation. It focuses less on contextual conditions that help or hinder incumbents reaching their social policy goals, but more on an “electoral turn” (Beramendi et al. 2015: 25) that demands renewed expectations of what to expect from political parties in the first place. In line with traditional partisan theory, this approach contends that parties translate their voters’ social policy preferences into public policy. However, since social structural changes and changes in voting behavior suggest that the class composition of parties’

electorates has been subject to profound transformations, this “new partisan theory” (Wenzelburger & Zohlnhöfer 2021: 1056; cf. Häusermann et al. 2013: 226-229) urges us to “update our assumptions regarding the interests parties actually represent” (Häusermann et al. 2013: 229).

Essentially, the transformation of electoral constituencies follows two common trends that hint at how to update the assumptions of partisan theory. First, as touched upon above, deindustrialization and tertiarization initiated a decline of the industrial working class on the one hand and an expansion of the middle-class employed in the high-skilled service sector as well as of a new working class that includes low-skilled service workers on the other hand. As the relative size of the social group traditionally seen as the left’s voter base is thus decreasing, these parties are in need of a substitution. Second, accompanying the sectoral shift of the workforce, the rise of cultural issues complements well-established political competition on the economic dimension. The next section delves into the topic of two-dimensional competition. At this point, suffice it to say that the cultural dimension cuts across the traditional class cleavage: It incentivized working-class voters to opt for the right due to their culturally authoritarian preferences while the libertarian preferences of certain parts of the middle class—notably sociocultural professionals (i.e., professionals working in interpersonal service occupations in e.g. the health care, education, social welfare, and media sectors)—make them a natural ally of left parties.

Against this backdrop of a weakening electoral relevance of working-class voters for left parties specifically and of the economic class cleavage more generally, the new partisan theory postulates that “only if we formulate expected party policies based on their current and empirically established electoral basis can we test whether parties still fulfil their representative functions or not” (Häusermann et al. 2013: 229). So far, two large-n comparative studies set out to examine whether the behavior of parties differs depending on the class composition of their electorates. In their pioneering study, Gingrich and Häusermann (2015) argue that as left parties

lose support among the shrinking working class and compensate for that with votes from the middle class, they adapt their social policy stances now promoting social investment instead of compensatory transfer programs. In contrast to the working class, the middle class favors social investment policies aimed at preventing the emergence of social risks rather than compensating for income losses ex post (Garritzmann et al. 2018; Häusermann et al. 2021). Empirically, Gingrich and Häusermann show that left parties in government pursue more generous unemployment insurance replacement rates if they gain more support from the working class. They do not find a conditional effect on family policy. Analyzing economic intervention, Engler and Zohlnhöfer (2019) similarly find that the share of working-class voters among left party voters conditions the effect these parties exert on subsidy spending when they hold office. This conditional partisan effect matches the authors' preceding micro-level analysis where the working class has been shown to support state interventions more than the middle class does. On the policy-level, left parties with strong backing from the working-class reflect this demand for intervention by pursuing higher subsidies.

This dissertation adds additional studies to the research strands reviewed in this section. Since the 1980s, modern democracies not only encounter decreasing industrial sector employment and electoral realignment, but also declining voter turnout (Blais & Rubenson 2013; Gray & Caul 2000; Hooghe & Kern 2017). However, to the best of my knowledge, the second study contained in this dissertation is the first one to explicitly link turnout rates to partisan differences. In the spirit of the interactive approach and consistent with the new partisan theory's argument that changes in parties' voter bases yield differing policy outputs, **Study II** (Hillen 2017) shows that voter turnout moderates partisan effects. Left parties expand unemployment protection less if turnout is low. The reason, I argue in the article, is that low turnout is biased against the low-status citizens. The less educated, the lower occupational class groups, the so-called labor market outsiders, and the less wealthy are far more likely to abstain than upscale

groups (Armingeon & Schädel 2015; Dalton 2017; Dassonneville & Hooghe 2017; Elff & Roßteutscher; Evans & Tilley 2017; Gallego 2007; Goldberg 2020; Heath 2018; Rovny & Rovny 2017; Schäfer 2015; Schäfer et al. 2020; Verba et al. 1978). Abstention renders them less important in the eyes of parties facing re-election. High turnout, in contrast, does not leave much room for unequal participation. Thus, left parties will be more likely to follow their traditional policy goals and provide welfare protection to those facing the risk of unemployment.

Study III (Hillen 2018) corroborates the results from Gingrich and Häusermann (2015) using a different measure of working-class support. Gingrich and Häusermann's measure is based on the Alford-Index and therefore well-suited to capture how closely the working class is aligned with the left, as compared to non-working-class voters. Yet, since the working class is in decline, workers might vote for left parties in disproportionately high numbers and still be negligible within these parties' electorates. Therefore, I assess the class composition of parties' electorates directly. My main independent variables are the respective shares that the working class and the middle class contribute to the electorate of the parties in control of the national government. I would argue that this operationalization is superior if we want to know whether parties cater to the interests of their electoral basis (see also Engler & Zohlnhöfer 2019 who use a similar measure of working-class support). My study also sheds some light on right government partisanship and on the policy strategies of coalition governments with about equally strong partners from the left and the right.

This section already brought up that with the rising salience of cultural issues, political conflict in established democracies has become increasingly two-dimensional, which stirred up electoral competition. The next section describes this phenomenon in more detail.

2.2 The two-dimensional policy space and the voting behavior of individuals and classes

The concept of the ‘policy space’ is based on the assumption that specific issue preferences—for instance on the amount of social spending or the subsidization of industries—are systematically linked to one another such that knowing an individual political actor’s position on one of these issues gives a reasonable estimate of her position towards the others. By virtue of this consistency—or “constraint” (Converse 1964)—in internal preference structuration a diversity of aligned political issues is collapsible to a single underlying dimension. Therefore, even though, in reality, we are confronted with a myriad of political issues, it is possible to position citizens as well as parties in a policy space comprised of a manageable number of salient issue dimensions. The idea behind the spatial model is that political competition revolves around these dimensions and that political actors’ positions on these dimensions determine their political behavior (Downs 1957; Rosset et al. 2016: 118-120).

For a long time, political scientists and commentators have been accustomed to conceptualizing the policy space as a unidimensional divide between the left and the right and voters have been able to locate themselves and the parties in their system on a left-right scale (Downs 1957; Fuchs & Klingemann 1990; Inglehart & Klingemann 1976; Mair 2007; Reinermann 2020; Steiner 2021; van der Eijk et al. 2005). Because of the high salience and omnipresence of distributive class conflicts in Western European countries, the content of this dimension has regularly been tied to socio-economic policy (Budge & Robertson 1987; Downs 1957: 116; Fuchs & Klingemann 1990: 222-228; Huber & Inglehart 1995; Kriesi et al. 2006: 923; Steiner 2021: 8; van der Brug 1999)—especially in comparative political economy research (Häusermann & Kriesi 2015: 202).⁵

⁵ At the same time though, there is a huge literature highlighting the variability in the issue content ascribed to the left-right dimension across individuals and contexts (e.g., Fuchs & Klingemann 1990; De Vries et al. 2013; Nasr 2020, Reinermann 2020: Chapter 3, Steiner 2021).

However, there is now a growing consensus in the literature that policy positions do not align on one single dimension and that the economically imprinted left-right model has become an increasingly insufficient approximation of political competition over time. To just give a short sketch of some prominent reasons, note, first of all, that the upsurge of postmaterialist values in the late 1960s raised non-economic issues. These were picked up by new left and green parties who were equally concerned with a libertarian commitment to individual autonomy as with a leftist quest for redistribution (Kitschelt 1994; Inglehart 1984). From the beginning, these parties attracted a substantial share of culturally liberal middle-class voters, mainly among the sociocultural professionals. Hence, the social structure of their electoral base diverged from the left's traditional class profile and simultaneously established an electoral divide within the middle class, with the "old middle class" continuing to turn to the right (Kriesi 1998). The advocacy of libertarian and universalistic values from the left encountered—somewhat delayed—opposition by populist radical right parties (Bornschieer 2010; Oesch 2013: 34-35). The salience of cultural issues was further spurred by the processes of globalization and European integration, that additionally put questions about immigration and community on the political agenda (Hooghe & Marks 2009; Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008) and allowed radical right parties to attract substantial numbers of working-class voters (Arzheimer 2013; Bornschieer & Kriesi 2013; Ivarsflaten 2005; Oesch 2008a). Moreover, in conjunction with the other challenges of the welfare state outlined in the last section, globalization constitutes a demanding context for public management of the economy and seems to take some economic policies off the table. Consequently, the overall differences between parties' positions on economic policy decline (Steiner & Martin 2012). This, in turn, further encourages parties to politicize non-economic issues (Ward et al. 2015) and voters to consider these issues in their voting decisions (Hellwig 2015; Spies 2013).

As a result of these developments scholars commonly describe political competition in contemporary Western Europe with a two-dimensional spatial model (e.g., Bornschier 2010; Dalton 2018; Gethin et al. 2021; Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008; Mader et al. 2020; Oesch & Rennwald 2018; Piketty 2020). This conception holds that key controversial issues align with either an economic or a (socio-)cultural dimension and parties as well as voters can be positioned in the policy space according to their stances on these dimensions. The economic dimension differentiates between left-wing attitudes, such as support for redistribution, social security and market regulation, and right-wing attitudes that combine opposition to redistribution and market regulation with support for tax cuts and a lean role of the state in the market. On the cultural dimension⁶, libertarians support individual freedoms as well as cultural and ethnic diversity, while authoritarians value traditional morality, law and order, and cultural conformity. It also integrates conflicts on new issues related to globalization dividing supporters and opponents of immigration and international political integration, particularly European integration.

To see how voting behavior is affected if political competition is characterized by more than one conflict dimension, I next turn to the case of individuals who combine economically left with culturally authoritarian policy preferences. Afterwards, I lay out what the salience of the cultural dimension entails for class voting.

⁶ While it is, for the most part, undisputed that, alongside the economic left-right axis, a second dimension is required to reconstruct the policy spaces of Western European countries, the issues connected with this dimension are relatively diverse. Owing to its multifaceted content, the second dimension is not labelled consistently (Rovny & Polk 2019: 12). Throughout this dissertation and all its individual studies, I follow Kitschelt (1994) and speak of it as a “cultural dimension” that sets “libertarians” apart from “authoritarians”.

2.2.1 Left-authoritarians in the two-dimensional policy space

When it comes to electoral behavior, the spatial model goes along with the assumption that voters prefer parties that hold similar positions in the policy space, where similar can be understood in two different yet related ways. Conceptualizing the policy dimensions as continuous, the classical Downsian (1957) proximity perspective assumes voters to minimize policy distances. The directional model (Matthews 1979; Rabinowitz & MacDonald 1989) emphasizes that policy direction matters more than policy distance: voters look for parties that are on the same side on the dimensions, even if these parties hold more extreme positions than the voters themselves. From both perspectives, voters might find it more challenging to decide for a party in a policy space that has more than one dimension for the sheer reason of increased complexity. More importantly though, if key policy positions do not align on one single axis, this opens the possibility that voters hold a combination of positions that is not reflected in the party system. These voters face an even more difficult choice.

Based on the two-dimensional conception of the policy space above, four combinations of policy positions can be identified: right-authoritarian, left-authoritarian, left-libertarian, and right-libertarian. Empirical studies—including Study I of this dissertation (Hillen & Steiner 2020)—show that these four opinion packages are all widespread among voters in Western Europe, and beyond. In contrast, parties rarely offer a blend of left stances on economic policy and authoritarian positions on cultural issues whereas the other three combinations are regularly to be found on the political supply side (Kriesi et al. 2008; Lefkofridi et al. 2014; Steiner & Hillen 2019, 2021; Thomassen 2012; van der Brug & van Spanje 2009). Nils D. Steiner and I label this mismatch between left-authoritarian policy demand and supply the “left-authoritarian supply gap” (Hillen & Steiner 2020).⁷ Figure 2 shows the two-dimensional model of the policy

⁷ Since the left-right organization did, after all, have a strong impact on Western European party systems and since there are generally good theoretical reasons for parties to pursue one-dimensionality (van der Brug & van Spanje 2009: 311), it does not come as a surprise that we can occasionally observe a shortage in right-libertarian

space, as described in the last section, with stylized party positions and the resulting supply gap in the left-authoritarian quadrant (cf. Kriesi et al. 2006). Because of this gap, when making a voting choice, voters with economically left and culturally authoritarian preferences must decide between left-libertarian parties with which they are congruent on economic issues and right-authoritarian parties that represent them on the cultural policy dimension; they are attitudinally cross-pressured in the sense that their policy preferences across the two dimensions push them in the direction of different parties.

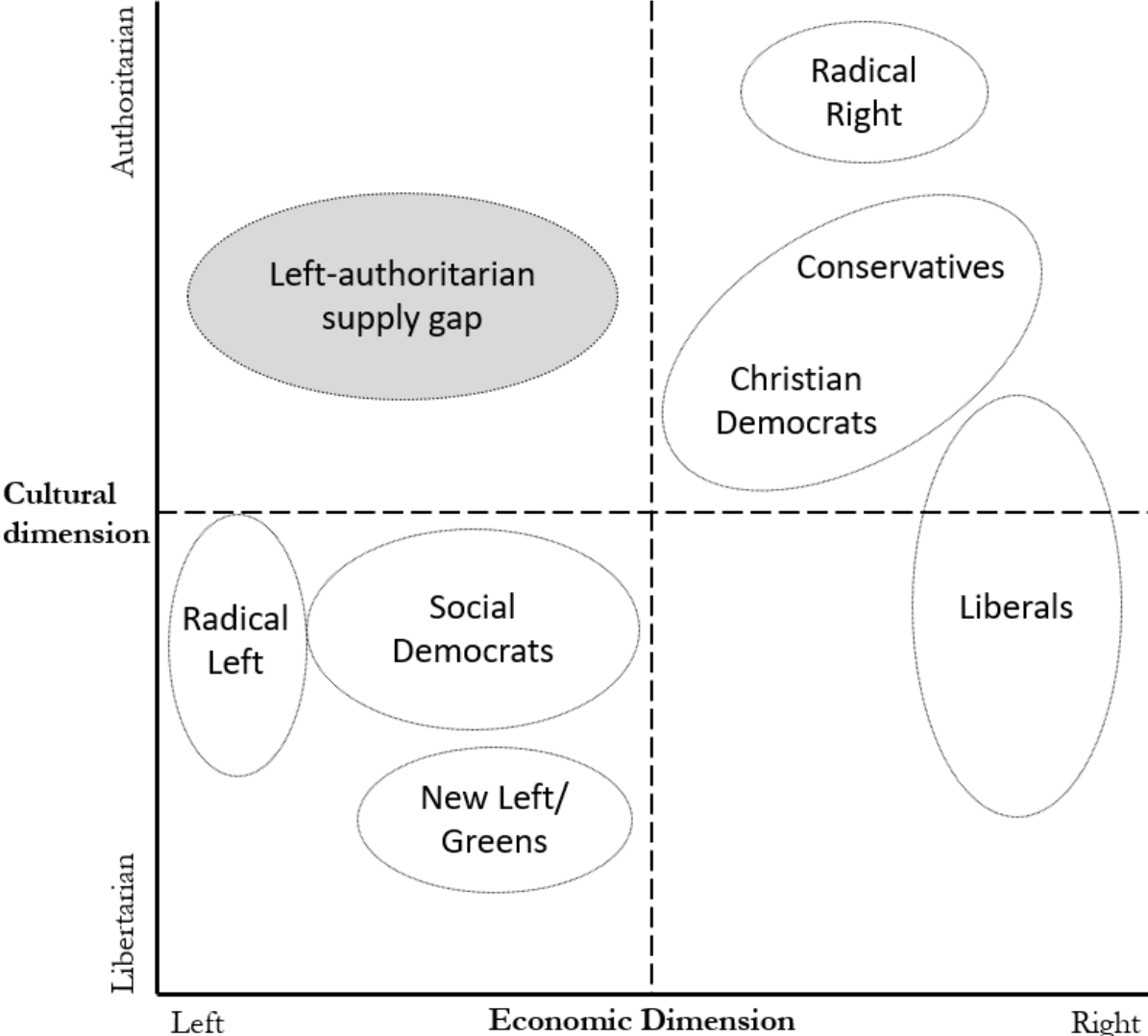
In a prominent study on the structure of the policy space at the demand and supply side, van der Brug and van Spanje (2009: 329) suggested that left-authoritarians resolve this trade-off by privileging congruence on the dimension that is more salient. The empirical analyses carried out by Zoe Lefkofridi and colleagues (2014) and by Nils D. Steiner and myself (Steiner & Hillen 2021, not part of this dissertation) demonstrate that left-authoritarians' vote choices do indeed hinge upon individual-level issue salience. Accordingly, left-authoritarians who find economic matters most important cast their vote for left-libertarian parties (or at least parties that they *perceive* to be economically left-wing). Left-authoritarians who care most about cultural issues choose (or intend to choose) right-authoritarian parties, tolerating the incongruence on the economic dimension (if they recognize it).⁸ Furthermore, analyzing the 2015

party supply as well (Kurella & Rosset 2017; Steiner & Hillen 2021: 6-7). That being said, many countries do host parties that belong to the liberal party family which traditionally advocates pro-market policies as well as progressive cultural policies. Not least because of this, left-authoritarian supply gaps arise far more frequently. What is more, considerable evidence indicates that there are far more citizens situated in the left-authoritarian quadrant of the policy space than in the right-libertarian quadrant (Hakhverdian & Schakel 2021: 5; Lefkofridi et al. 2014: 72; Steiner & Hillen 2021: 6-7; van der Brug & van Spanje 2009: 324-325) making it the empirically more relevant phenomenon.

⁸ The main contribution of our study (Steiner & Hillen 2021) is to include that individuals' perceptions of parties' policy positions are not necessarily accurate and to analyze the joint effects of issues salience and *perceived* congruence. For this purpose, we rely on the Campaign Panel 2017 of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) (Roßteutscher et al. 2018) that allows us to measure how voters subjectively positioned the parties instead of referring to 'objective' party positions—as, e.g., measured in expert surveys. Our analysis reveals that issue salience matters more to left-authoritarians if they actually recognize that no party represents their preferences on both policy dimensions. If they are aware, they are willing to accept perceived incongruence on secondary issues. Lefkofridi et al. (2014: note 13), too, acknowledged that it might be consequential to consider policy congruence as perceived by voters but were not able to do so in their cross-national study.

parliamentary election in Switzerland, Kurella and Rosset (2018) confirm the relevance of issue salience at the macro level. They point out that the election was marked by a left-authoritarian supply gap and a high salience of cultural issues. In this context, left-authoritarian voters preferred right parties that represented them on the cultural dimension (see also: Kurella & Rosset 2017).

Figure 2: Party positions in the two-dimensional policy space



Note: The figure is an adapted version of the one shown in Kriesi et al. 2006: 925

However, while these studies help us understand left-authoritarians' decisions of *whom* to vote for, this is not the first decision they have to make during the electoral process. **Study I** of this dissertation (Hillen & Steiner 2020) argues that the difficulties left-authoritarians regularly experience when trying to identify an adequate party supply affects their decision *whether* to vote at all. Rather than facing the inevitable trade-offs involved in choosing a left-libertarian or right-authoritarian party, they decide not to participate. Following a similar reasoning, we additionally investigate whether the misfit between their individual policy demand and parties' policy supply leaves left-authoritarians less supportive of the political system, its institutions, and authorities. We study left-authoritarians in settings with and without a left-authoritarian supply gap to substantiate the argument that abstention and discontent are repercussions of an insufficient political supply—and do not merely derive from the left-authoritarian attitude package *per se* (Malka et al. 2020). Jointly, the results of our analyses corroborate that left-authoritarians are, on average, less likely to vote and exhibit lower levels of political support than individuals holding other opinion packages and that these dissimilarities are to a substantial degree contingent on the existence of a supply gap. In case a viable party with a left-authoritarian policy profile stands for election, the political behavior and support of left-authoritarians differs less from that of the rest of the electorate. Since the publication of the article, our findings on the disproportionately large abstention from voting and the dissatisfaction with democracy among left-authoritarians have been validated by a case study of the 2017 Dutch parliamentary election (Hakhverdian & Schakel 2021; see also for Germany: Steiner & Hillen 2019; and for Switzerland: Kurella and Rosset 2018).

Given the underrepresentation and the resulting peculiarities of citizens with left-authoritarian policy preferences, “exploring the socio-economic background of this group [...] seems an important topic” (van der Brug & van Spanje 2009: 329). The empirical evidence, going back to Lipset's (1959) research on “working class authoritarianism”, indicates that this

combination of attitudes is not randomly distributed among individuals but particularly common among members of lower classes, and the working class specifically (Kriesi et al. 2008; Oesch & Rennwald 2018; Rosset & Kurella 2021; Steiner & Hillen 2019). Noam Gidron (2022) draws on this evidence to spell out the consequences of issue salience for left-authoritarians' party preferences more concretely, expecting them to resolve the cross-pressures they experience in favor of the right. Referring to the work of Shayo (2009), he presumes voters' demographics to influence the salience they attach to each of the two policy dimensions. Since being poor significantly determines their economic policy preferences but simultaneously confers low status, left-authoritarian voters would prioritize their cultural 'identity' and attach greater salience to congruence on the cultural dimension. Therefore, left-authoritarians would systematically prefer right-authoritarian over left-libertarian parties.

This discussion leads us to the voting behavior of social classes under the outlined conditions of the two-dimensional policy space to which I now turn.

2.2.2 Class voting in the two-dimensional policy space

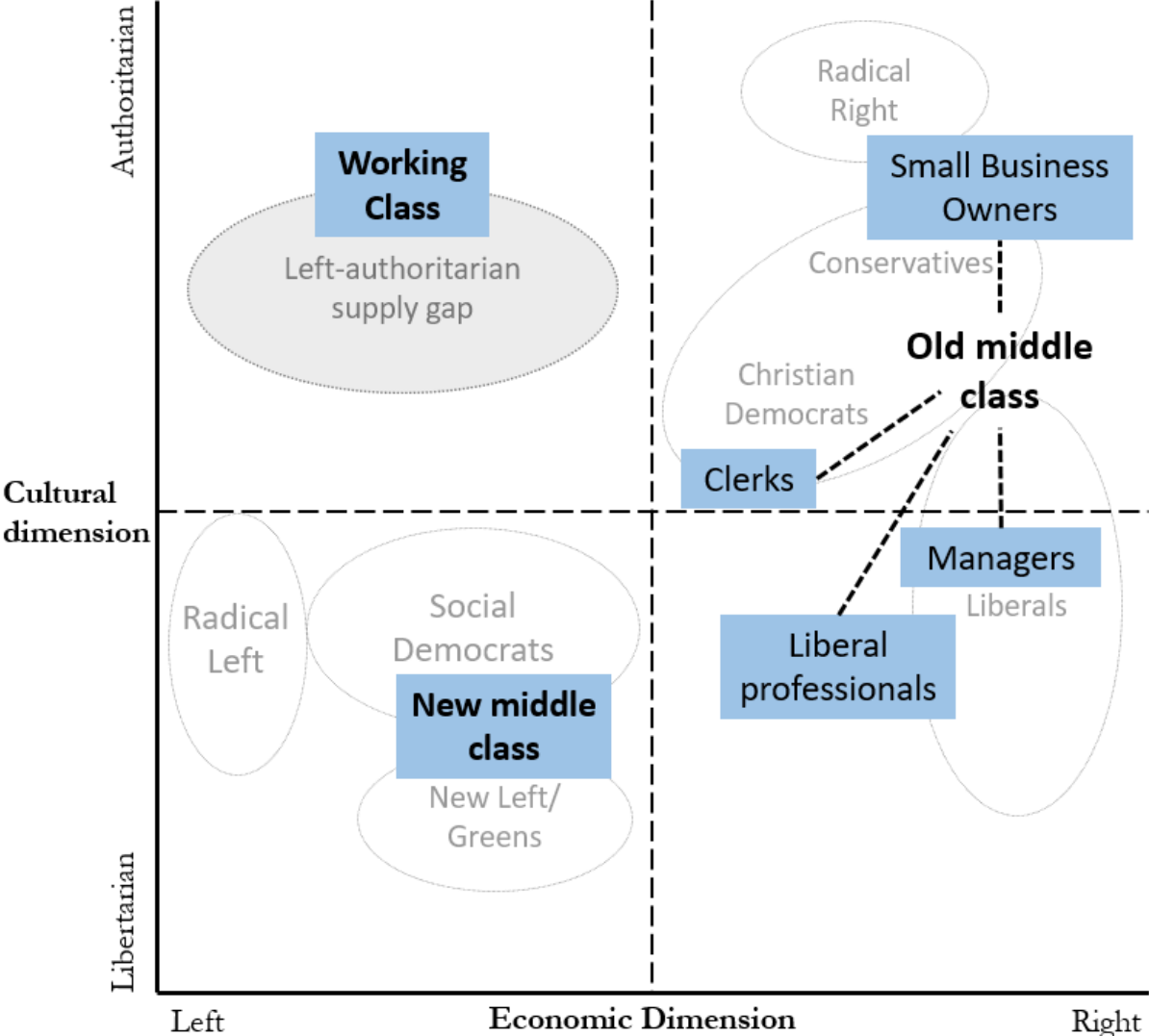
Since at least two dimensions are needed to describe the preference structure of Western European electorates, it is crucial to note, at the outset, that occupational class groups can be located in the two-dimensional policy space—class positions account for political preferences on economic as well as cultural matters and there are meaningful rifts between classes on both issue dimensions (Ares 2022; Evans & Langsæther 2021: 9; Evans & Tilley 2017: Chapter 4; Häusermann & Kriesi 2015; Kitschelt & Rehm 2014; Lindh & McCall 2020; Oesch 2013; Oesch & Rennwald 2018; Steiner & Hillen 2019). The partisan dealignment thesis refers to developments such as educational upgrading, fading hierarchical social differentiation (“*em-bourgeoisement*”), and electoral volatility in general as well as decreasing differences of manual and nonmanual classes in their proclivity to vote for the left in particular (i.e., traditional class

voting) to proclaim that class positions are today largely unrelated to voting decisions (Clark & Lipset 1991; Dalton et al. 1984; Franklin et al. 1992). In contrast, many studies bear witness to the continued relevance of class voting—defined as “the predictive power of occupational class on vote choice” (Gingrich & Häusermann 2015: 52; see also Oesch 2008b: 330-331) (i.e., total class voting).⁹ Yet, these studies show that classes have realigned (e.g., Arzheimer 2013; Dalton 2018; Gethin et al. 2021; Oesch 2013; Oesch & Rennwald 2018; Piketty 2020).

The concept of realignment can generally be defined as “a significant shift in the impact of long-term predictors of the vote” (van der Brug & Rekker 2021: 777; cf. Kriesi et al. 2008). It happens “when some long-term and stable determinants of the vote are losing their ability to create stable connections between parties and voters, and are being replaced by other stable factors that connect (groups of) voters to parties” (van der Brug & Rekker 2021: 777). With respect to classes, it can be taken to mean that “old ties between classes and parties have loosened and been replaced by new ties” (Oesch & Rennwald 2018: 786; see also Oesch 2013: 31). Scholars now agree that realignment has happened, chiefly as a result of the rise of cultural issues. Figure 3 builds on the research on class realignment to include the positions of classes in the model of the two-dimensional policy space shown in Figure 2 (see especially the model of electoral competition in the two-dimensional policy space in Oesch & Rennwald 2018: 787). It visualizes the positional (in-)congruence between classes and parties on the two dimensions. This dissertation is not the place to delve to deeply into these matters, let alone to review the vast amount of research on class voting (for reviews see e.g., Evans 2000, 2017; Evans & Langsæther 2021; Evans & Opacic 2022; Knutsen 2007). Instead, in the following, I will foreground three central findings on specific party alignments of social classes that are of interest to the empirical studies of this dissertation.

⁹ The distinction between “traditional” and “total” class voting was introduced by Michael Hout and colleagues (1995; see also Knutsen 2007: 460-461).

Figure 3: Party and class positions in the two-dimensional policy space



Note: The figure adds class positions to the policy space shown in Figure 2. It thus draws on the model of party supply expected by Kriesi et al. (2006: 925) and combines it with considerations of the demand side of political competition (see especially the graphical representation offered by Oesch and Rennwald (2018: 787)).

The first central finding in studies of class voting is the partial realignment of working-class voters. As mentioned in the previous section, working-class voters typically hold left-authoritarian policy preferences—and have done so for a long time. In the past, however, they ignored their stances on cultural issues and voted for left parties that match their economic position in favor of a strong welfare state (Evans 1999; Knutsen 2006; Piketty 2020). This behavioral pattern has changed with the rising salience of cultural issues. Increasingly, the working-class reoriented itself from left parties towards the radical right that represents its demand

for culturally authoritarian policies (Arzheimer 2013; Spies 2013). As a consequence, the left and the radical right compete for the support of the working-class (Oesch & Rennwald 2018). The *salience* individuals and parties attach to either dimension of the policy space is pivotal for the outcome of this competition over the working-class vote: Members of the working class who vote for a left party do so for economic reasons while cultural reasons drive the decision for a right party, i.e., working-class voters vote right (left) because they are culturally authoritarian (economically left) (Achterberg & Houtman 2006; Bornschier & Kriesi 2013; Ivarsflaten 2005; Oesch 2008a; Oesch 2013; Oesch & Rennwald 2018; Piketty 2020; Rennwald & Evans 2014; Spies 2013). Nevertheless, parties' *positions* in the policy space are also not fixed. Several studies speculate that the (potential) inflow of left-authoritarian working-class voters motivates radical right parties to shift their economic positions to the left (Afonso & Rennwald 2018; De Lange 2007; Hartevelde 2016; Lefkofridi & Michel 2017). Others point to the (ideological polarization of the) policy choices offered to voters to explain variations in class voting in general and to more centrist economic positions of left parties in particular to account for the detachment of the working class from these parties (Evans & Tilley 2012a, 2012b, 2017: Chapter 7; Karreth et al. 2013; Spies 2013).

The second central finding in studies of class voting is the realignment of middle-class voters, who predominantly voted for center-right parties in the early postwar decades (Knutsen 2006). However, with the expansion and diversification of the middle class, parties from the left increasingly compete with right parties for the middle-class vote. In fact, the still growing so-called “new middle-class” of sociocultural professionals disproportionately votes for the left and has become a key constituency of these parties (Abou-Chadi & Hix 2021; Gingrich & Häusermann 2015; Kriesi 1998; Oesch & Rennwald 2018). Conversely, substantial parts of the “old middle-class”, notably large employers, managers, and liberal professionals, continue to support center right parties and are still overrepresented within their electorates (Abou-Chadi &

Hix 2021; Oesch & Rennwald 2018). As to why sociocultural professionals prefer left over right parties, it can first be noted that they are more economically left-wing than their fellow middle-class members—probably because the interpersonal and caring profile of their occupations fosters (or reflects) universalistic and egalitarian values, but potentially also because they oftentimes work in nonstandard (e.g., temporary) and less-secure employment (Gingrich & Häusermann 2015; Häusermann & Kriesi 2015; Häusermann et al. 2015; Kitschelt 1994; Kitschelt & Rehm 2014; Kriesi 1998; Lindh & McCall 2020: 422-423). Second, many studies share the argument that the new middle classes' liberal cultural preferences account to a large extent for their endorsement of the left (Gingrich & Häusermann 2015: 53; Häusermann & Kriesi 2015; Inglehart 1984; Kitschelt 1994; Oesch 2013; Oesch & Rennwald 2018).

A third finding on classes' voting behavior is that of turnout differences between the upper and the lower strata. Since class affects electoral participation as well as party choice, with the lower classes being more likely to abstain from voting (Verba et al. 1978; Weakliem & Heath 1999), the broad decline in electoral participation over the last decades made way for an increasing class divide in voter turnout (Armingeon & Schädel 2015; Dassonneville & Hooghe 2017; Elff & Roßteutscher 2016; Evans & Tilley 2015, 2017: Chapter 8; Goldberg 2020; Heath 2018; Rennwald 2020; Schäfer 2015: Chapter 6). As with party choice, the policy positions taken by parties have been argued to influence this class divide in non-voting. Evans and Tilley (2015; see also Evans and Tilley 2017: Chapter 8), for example, submit that the working class's decreasing size leads to a vicious circle in which parties stop representing the interests of this class, whereupon its members stop turning out to vote, thereby further reducing the incentive for parties to appeal to them. The widening participation gap is likely connected to the rise of cultural issues as well. As mentioned, left parties have always been more culturally liberal than significant parts of their core clientele. With the respective issue dimension gaining in salience,

it could be the case that the cultural positions taken by mainstream left parties converted the previous voters of these parties into non-voters.

Below, I return to the macro level of social policy and lay down how I expect the two-dimensionality and the resulting electoral alignments reported in this section to shape the partisan politics of the welfare state.

2.3 The two-dimensional policy space and the party politics of the welfare state

Having reviewed the discussion and findings on two-dimensional political competition, I now build on this evidence to point out the contribution of the fourth and final study of this dissertation to the field of welfare state research. The subsequent section summarizes all four studies.

As described in section 2.1 above, a few studies following an interactive approach to partisan theory acknowledge that multiple issues matter in political competition and suggest that partisan differences wither away if open contestation over the welfare state diminishes. However, they do not consider the relative salience of policy dimensions. Their empirical reaction is to pay closer attention to economic policy issues. Finseraas and Vernby (2011) analyze whether partisan effects on social policy depend on party polarization over economic issues. Jensen and Seeberg (2015) as well as Jakobson and Kumlin (2017) identify the salience of welfare issues—either in the parliamentary or in the electoral arena—as a moderating factor. As much as these studies need to be applauded, given the two-dimensionality of the policy space, focusing solely on economic issues might not suffice to evaluate conditional partisan effects. Accordingly, I argue in **Study IV** below that it is instructive to consider how important second dimension politics is compared to economic issues. That is, the study models the effect

of government partisanship as a function of the relative salience of the two policy dimensions in party competition.

The argument for doing so rests on the insights into individuals' and classes' policy preferences and voting behavior from above. Depending on which dimension of the policy space is more salient, the electorates of left and right parties should either disagree mainly on economic issues or on cultural issues respectively. If economic issues take center stage, the left-authoritarian working-class votes left while the right-libertarian middle class turns right. Hence, left parties' voters cluster at the left-hand side of the policy space while comprising a wide array of cultural stances; what sets them apart from right voters are their progressive economic preferences.

What is more, not only is there more internal agreement on economic issues than on cultural issues within each party families' electorate in this scenario, economic issues were probably also decisive in bringing this agreement about. Take the case of a left-libertarian new middle-class voter as an example: she will always favor the left regardless of whether economic or cultural congruence matters. The question is not if she votes for the left but why she does so. Left-libertarians, too, should be likely to expect their party of choice to promote their preferences on salient issues—just that the ideological leaning of their party of choice does not vary depending on which dimension they privilege in their voting decision.

This means that if the economic dimension of the policy space is relatively more salient, left parties receive a clear *and* loud signal to pursue economically left policies. This is basically the structure of political competition the traditional approach to partisan theory has in mind: economically left voters vote for left parties to obtain redistribution. My study shows that its expectations still hold under these conditions: Left government partisanship influences the generosity of welfare programs positively. The more economic issues dominate, the more government partisanship matters.

In contrast, in case cultural issues are relatively more important, the working class defects to the radical right but left parties can extend their grasp on the culturally liberal middle-class even into economically right-leaning segments. Now, parties' electorates are internally divided on economic issues and the major positional difference between electorates pertains to the cultural dimension. Here, there seems to be less reason to expect partisan conflict over economic issues and, indeed, my empirical analysis shows that partisan differences in social policy dissipate the more important cultural issues are vis-à-vis economic issues.

3. Results of the four studies

In this section, I summarize the results of the four empirical studies that constitute the core of this dissertation in turn.

Study I, which is co-authored with Nils D. Steiner, contends that many citizens do not follow a coherent left-right ideology but are left-wing on some issues and right-wing, or authoritarian, on others. In case no party matches their mixed set of views on salient political issues, choosing between political parties is tough for such citizens. As a result, they might become frustrated with political supply and avoid voting altogether. Using data for 14 Western European countries from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) 2006 and the European Social Survey (ESS) 2008 we support previous evidence identifying a “left-authoritarian” supply gap, that is, a mismatch between citizens who frequently combine economically left with culturally authoritarian policy preferences on the one hand and parties who largely shun a left-authoritarian position on the other. Left-authoritarian citizens thus often face trade-offs when choosing a party. They have to either privilege their economic or their cultural concerns, while sacrificing the other. Following up on research analyzing left-authoritarians' voting decisions, we are interested in the consequences for voter turnout and satisfaction with politics. Our analysis shows

that left-authoritarians participate less in elections and are less satisfied with representative democracy and its institutions than individuals with other combinations of issue attitudes. To substantiate that these differences are indeed contingent on the absence of a successful left-authoritarian party, we additionally turn to data from the Finnish National Election Study and carry out a case study of the rise of the Finns Party—one of the few Western European parties that holds a decisively left-authoritarian position. We take advantage of the party's breakthrough in the 2011 parliamentary election, where it was able to almost quintuple its vote share compared to the previous election in 2007 (from 4.1% to 19.1%). We find that the negative association between left-authoritarian positions and turnout as well as political satisfaction diminish to a large extent with the electoral rise of the Finns Party. The article was published in the *European Journal of Political Research*.

In **Study II**, I analyze whether partisan effects on unemployment replacement rates hinge on voter turnout in 18 OECD member states between 1980 and 2011. Voter turnout is of key interest in political science research and has been extensively investigated. We know that turnout rates have declined in many advanced democracies since the 1980s, thus widening the participatory gap between lower and higher social class groups. From this inequality in voter turnout researchers deduced that lower turnout means less support for economically left policies (Bechtel et al. 2016) and ultimately a less progressive social policy (Hicks & Swank 1992; Mahler 2008; Larcinese 2007). However, mine is the first study to combine the claims of partisan theory with the evidence on low turnout in a comparative large-n study. The empirical results demonstrate that left parties expand unemployment protection if voter turnout is high, otherwise the effect of left government partisanship disappears. Complementing the studies of direct effects of voter turnout on social policy, the study suggests a mechanism of this relationship: left government parties are sensitive to voter turnout and adapt their social policies accordingly; if lower class groups abstain in high numbers, the traditional representatives of these

classes' social policy preferences fear for their re-election prospects and move on to pursue a different agenda (see also Pontusson & Rueda 2010). This article was published in *German Political Science Quarterly*.

While Study II is still close to traditional partisan theory, **Study III** is about the consequences of realignment. It refers to partisan theory's assumption that the social policies of governments differ because parties' electorates divide over social policy preferences, and each party caters to its respective supporters' class-interests: Left parties pursue expansionary social policies in accordance with the preference of their working-class core-clientele for redistribution while right parties elicit the support of upscale groups and consequently retrench welfare benefits. Yet, what if the social structure of parties' electorates differs from this stylized traditional account? The study combines survey data from the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey (ESS) with macro-level information on government partisanship and welfare state benefits in 16 West-European countries between 1975 and 2011 to test the effects of the working-class share and the middle-class share in the government's electorate on the corresponding social policy output. The findings show that left governments raise unemployment replacement rates if they actually have a relatively strong working-class base. However, confirming my theoretical expectation, their positive influence diminishes and ultimately vanishes as their reliance on the working class declines. There are no significant effects of right governments on pro-worker policies, regardless of the degree of support from the working class. I suppose the reason is that workers choose right parties predominantly for their cultural rather than their economic policy positions. Finally, governments with a balanced power between left and right parties expand parental leave replacement rates more than other government types; their positive influence accelerates as the share of middle-class voters increases. The article's general insights are in line with partisan theory: Left parties respond to their working-class voters—and parties more generally respond to electoral groups—if their interests constitute key

concerns within their electorates. In consequence, government partisanship (still) matters for social policy. The article was published in the *Journal of Social Policy Reform*.

Study IV draws on research that describes political competition with a two-dimensional spatial model to investigate how the relative salience of the economic vis-à-vis the cultural conflict axis shapes partisan effects on social policy. Issue salience has, in general, hardly been considered in empirical studies of partisan differences. Moreover, since partisan theory's idea that government partisanship matters for social policy is based on the assumption that parties mobilize voters around their economic preferences, an important question is whether the rise of a second, noneconomic dimension has consequences for partisan effects. To assess the relative salience of the two policy dimensions, the study relies on parties' emphases on economic issues compared to cultural issues from election manifestos gathered by the Manifesto Project (MAR-POR). As expected, the partisan effects on welfare benefits in 16 West-European countries between 1970 and 2011 are shown to depend on the relative salience of economic issues in party competition: with increasing dominance of economic issues, the positive effect of left parties on welfare state generosity increases while partisan effects dissipate after elections dominated by cultural issues. As studies II and III before, these results indicate that government partisanship still matters when partisan theory's scope conditions are considered. To uncover partisan effects, however, we should go beyond a one-dimensional conception of the policy space and pay attention to the relevance of different political conflicts. Collectively, the three studies suggest that even though (left) parties react to the interests of their core voters realignments, disengagement, and rivaling issues may nevertheless undermine redistributive social policies. Study IV was published in *Socio-Economic Review*.

4. Concluding remarks

What remains of partisan theory in comparative welfare state research? Silja Häusermann and colleagues (2013: 240) closed their outstanding review article on the topic with the advice that “welfare state research can benefit greatly from adopting insights of electoral studies and party research”. Subsequent research has followed up on this advice (e.g., Beramendi et al. 2015; Manow et al. 2018). This dissertation project tried to add to this broader research agenda. In line with the conclusions drawn by Häusermann et al. (2013) from the studies they discussed, my findings suggest that the expectation of partisan differences in social policy between left and right governments is warranted within certain scope conditions. Left government partisanship, for instance, matters for compensatory social policy if substantial numbers of these parties’ votes stem from the working class, if voter turnout is high, and if political competition is dominated by economic instead of cultural issues. These restrictions are, however, not completely unknown to traditional partisan theory which essentially assumes a unidimensional policy space separating social classes according to their redistributive preferences. So, if we take partisan theory’s premises about political competition seriously, we have good chances to find that the theory still carries empirical relevance even in the demanding economic and social contexts of globalized, postindustrial democracies. Still, these premises are less likely to hold today than they were in the past. As Häusermann et al. (2013: 234) state, “the traditional partisan politics approach applies to a more limited set of empirical cases than previously thought.” The old working class, employed in the industrial sector, has decreased in size, and established Western democracies have shifted to a two-dimensional space of political competition where a sociocultural dimension exists alongside the economic left-right dimension. Also, turnout rates have declined in many of these countries since the 1980s, to the detriment of low status citizens. My studies give clear indications that these trends can help to account for dwindling partisan effects over time (cf. Zohlnhöfer 2019: 150).

The two-dimensional model of the policy space assumes a key role in this. We can record that the evidence gathered in this dissertation generally substantiates views according to which the rise of the cultural dimension impacts partisan effects on the welfare state. Additionally, Study I pinpoints consequences of supply-gaps in two-dimensional policy spaces for individuals' electoral participation and political support. The study illuminates a fundamental challenge for representative democracy. When multiple issues are important to voters and when they combine positions on these issues differently than any of the parties, frustration with party supply and politics more broadly may arise. In the context of this dissertation, it also informs the macro-level studies by confirming that party and voter positions are structured along an economic and a cultural dimension, outlining the substantive content of different positions within this two-dimensional policy space, and by revealing that a large group of voters with left-authoritarian policy preferences is not represented in the party system and consequently abstains from voting in disproportionately large numbers.

Finally, I would like to sketch some implications and limitations of my dissertation that point towards avenues for future research. Note that the conclusions of the individual studies already contain some related material. Here, I try to add some additional, broader points.

That I do not find stable partisan differences in welfare state generosity between left and right parties but partisan effects that depend on attributes of political competition does not mean that government parties do not represent their voters anymore, as some studies suggest (cf. Häusermann et al. 2013: 227). On the contrary, a large body of research—partially reviewed above—informs us about transformations in the socio-structural makeup of the electorate as a whole and about new links between parties and electoral groups. If partisan differences remained unaffected by such changes, *this* would raise doubts over the representative capacities of political parties. The reassuring news emerging from my findings is that overall parties

appear to react to these realignments and to be responsive to the social policy preferences of significant groups of their electorates.

Nevertheless, as we have seen in Study I, parties' policy positions are regularly biased insofar as they do not cover the left-authoritarian corner of the two-dimensional policy space. Citizens holding this specific preference configuration simply cannot vote for a party that represents them on both dimensions simultaneously; and even though they often do find ways to deal with this situation and to cast a vote anyway (Kurella & Rosset 2017; Lefkofridi et al. 2014; Steiner & Hillen 2021), they are less likely to turn out than other citizens. This way, economically left policy preferences are withdrawn from the political process and, as Study II suggests, disappear from the line of sight of (left) government parties. More broadly, as there is an overrepresentation of poor citizens among the left-authoritarians (Rosset & Kurella 2021; Steiner & Hillen 2019), the left-authoritarian supply-gap might go some way in accounting for the finding of unequal representation of rich and poor citizens, as suggested by recent contributions (Rosset & Kurella 2021, c.f. Elsässer et al. 2021: 1893). A limitation of Study I though is that we do not capture whether left-authoritarians actually recognize that they are underrepresented.

In a similar vein, skewed voter turnout, with the poor participating less, has also been considered as a mechanism of unequal representation (c.f. Elsässer 2018: 554-555; Elsässer et al. 2021: 1892-1893; Rosset & Kurella 2021: 786). Since parties strive to win elections, they are unlikely to be interested in chasing the votes of groups that do not turn out. Study II indicates that left government parties do indeed react to turnout rates, thereby implying that they stop representing the social policy preferences of low-status citizens if these citizens do not vote. This, in turn, can result in a vicious circle where the poor's lack of representation reinforces their incentives to turn their backs on politics (c.f. Evans 2017: 189; Evans & Tilley 2015; Piven & Cloward 1988; Quaille Hill & Leighley 1996). However, we need to keep in mind that overall

voter turnout cannot be more than a proxy for how heavily turnout is actually skewed to the disadvantage of the less-well off—an obvious limitation of my study (c.f. Mahler et al. 2014). Moreover, Study II is still rather strongly embedded in traditional partisan theory. In fact, while the two-dimensionality of the policy space affects voter turnout and fosters the political disengagement of certain groups, as argued by Study I and throughout this accompanying chapter, the study's argument about the effect of low turnout on partisan differences might actually be less straightforward in a *realigned* two-dimensional setting.

Another limitation of my studies on the partisan politics of the welfare state is that they do not differentiate between parties within the left or the right bloc. Thus, Study III, for instance cannot make inferences on whether radical right parties might pursue more generous welfare policies than center right parties when holding government or on whether the radical right, specifically, might react to the working-class share within its electorate. Both assumptions would not be too far-fetched, as the working class constitutes a key electoral clientele of the radical right but not the center right. Similarly, the new middle class is the single most important voter group of Green parties, whereas social democratic parties (still) collect a large vote share among the lower classes (Oesch & Rennwald 2018). In studies III and IV, I apply robustness checks to ensure that such dynamics do not tamper with the conclusions on the studies' theoretical expectations, but I do not provide a systematic analysis of the policy impact of smaller parties' government participation. The severe bottleneck that quantitative social policy research based on time-series cross-section data is confronted with is that the smaller parties have usually only played a minor role when it comes to controlling the national government—which, on the other hand, reins in potential biases from disregarding divides within the left and the right bloc. However, more recently (erstwhile) small parties assumed a bigger role and have taken government responsibility more regularly. Correspondingly, quantitative macro-level studies have started

to investigate the social policy impact of radical right (Chueri 2020; Röth et al. 2018) and Green (Röth & Schwander 2021) parties partaking in government.

Overall, my results give some indication why democracies do not redistribute more even though they faced mounting inequality over the past decades. Those groups that would profit the most from redistribution have to increasing degrees stopped participating in the electoral process. Simultaneously, the rise of the cultural dimension incentivized them to prioritize their non-economic preferences and vote for parties that do not stand for redistribution (Kurella & Rosset 2017; Spies 2013; Steiner & Hillen 2021). Under these circumstances, left governments abandon their role as a driving force of welfare state expansion and opt for less progressive social policies. Since radical right parties might be able to (re-)mobilize lower class citizens, the question might come to mind whether radical right parties could step up and revive the quest for welfare state expansion. However, coalition politics renders this far-fetched: Even if lower class voters vote for radical right parties that have moved to the left on economic issues (Afonso & Rennwald 2018; Lefkofridi & Michel 2017), left parties are unlikely to join forces with a (transformed) radical right in pursuit of a redistributive agenda, given the deep cultural rift that divides the two party families. In fact, in Western Europe, radical right parties have thus far almost exclusively participated in governments led by (moderate) right parties and have, at best, only been able to rein in their partners ambitions to retrench welfare benefits (Chueri 2020; Röth et al. 2018). Thus, from the perspective of partisan theory, I conclude that over time, political competition moved away from the key conditions that need to apply for left parties to effectively redistribute wealth—i.e., that the lower classes turn out to vote and that they vote left based on their economic interests—and that an effective replacement is short of sight.

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