

How politics became a contest dominated by two kinds of elite

Sunday 8 August 2021, by [GETHIN Amory](#), [MARTINEZ-TOLEDANO Clara](#), [PIKETTY Thomas](#) (Date first published: 5 August 2021).

Studying hundreds of elections, we found that political parties increasingly cater to only the well educated and the rich.

Given the steep [rise](#) in economic inequality in many parts of the world since the 1980s, one might have expected to see increasing political demands for the redistribution of wealth and the return of class-based politics. This didn't quite happen – or at least not straightforwardly.

To make sense of the big picture, we studied the long-term evolution of political divides in 50 western and non-western democracies, using a new [database](#) on the vote that covers more than 300 elections held between 1948 and 2020.

One of the most striking results that emerges from our analysis is what we propose to call the transition from “class-based party systems” to “multi-elite party systems” in western democracies. In the 1950s and 60s, the vote for leftwing parties in western democracies was “class-based”, in the sense that it was strongly associated with a lower income and less educated electorate. Since then, it has gradually become associated with more highly educated voters, giving rise in the 2010s to a remarkable divergence between the effect that income and education has on how people vote. People with high incomes continue to vote for the right while people with high levels of education (such as those with university degrees) have shifted to the left. This separation is visible in nearly all western democracies, despite their historical, political and institutional differences.

What explains this remarkable transformation? First, the classic answer invokes the increasing prevalence of identity politics. As questions related to environmentalism, gender equality, the rights of sexual and ethnic minorities and, more recently, immigration have taken a growing importance in political debates, new green and anti-immigration parties have risen in the polls. While income continues to differentiate social democratic parties from conservative parties, it is education that most clearly distinguishes the supporters of green and anti-immigration parties today.

A second mechanism that can potentially explain this long-run evolution has to do with the process of educational expansion itself. In the 1950s and 60s, the majority of voters had primary or secondary education at most. In this context, parties seeking to reduce social inequalities could simply aim to ensure everyone went through primary and secondary school. With the rise of tertiary education, things have become more complicated. Leftwing parties, which were once seen as defending greater equality of access to the education system, have increasingly been viewed as parties defending primarily the winners of the higher education game. This arguably contributed to growing resentment among those who do not benefit from it, and a shift of some of them towards anti-immigration parties or abstention. As a result, the voting bases of social democratic parties have become increasingly restricted to the most educated parts of the electorate.

A third related mechanism involves the ascendancy of a global ideology that puts private property interests above all else, abandoning any sense that capitalism can be radically transformed. The moderation of traditional leftwing parties' platforms since the 1980s (think of New Labour), as well as in some cases their shift to promoting neoliberal policies, directly contributed to the decline of class divisions being perceived as politically salient, the subsequent demise of these parties, and the rise of identity-based conflicts.

Regardless of its causes, the consequences of this profound transformation are quite clear. As political systems have effectively come to represent two kinds of elites – the well-educated and the rich – they have left little space for the expression of the interests of the most disadvantaged citizens. Abstention, in Britain as in the majority of western democracies, has [skyrocketed](#) among low-income and lower-educated citizens in the past decades. In a remarkable book, Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley [show how](#) this “political exclusion of the British working class” was triggered by political parties and the mass media giving an ever-decreasing attention to questions of inequality. Class is not dead, as three political scientists [emphatically stated](#) 15 years ago: it has been buried alive.

There is, however, at least one object of political conflict that continues to clearly divide voters along class lines in one part of the world: Europe. Our analysis showed that in every referendum held in the European Union since the 1970s, low-income and less well-educated voters have converged in expressing their opposition to further supranational integration. In some sense, this is not surprising. In a union focused almost exclusively on the liberalisation of human and capital flows and the imposition of stringent fiscal rules, there is little to gain for those workers who most suffer from the shocks induced by the unregulated global capitalism of the 21st century. Brexit represented the culmination of this long-run process. In 2016, only 35% of the poorest 10% of UK voters [voted remain](#), compared to nearly two thirds of those belonging to the richest decile. For the first time in several decades, many citizens who had been both politically and socially left behind – including those who [bore the burden](#) of the post-2008-crisis austerity measures – were able to voice their concerns.

Many worry that in this age of globalisation, economic insecurity and cultural anxiety has allowed “populism” to irrevocably take root in our political systems. Our findings suggest that the groundwork for this may have been laid, in part, by the rise of a new form of “elitism” over several decades. Tackling the political crises faced by western democracies will require giving back a voice to the many citizens who do not feel represented by existing democratic institutions. Above all, it will require designing sufficiently ambitious and credible platforms to convince them that globalisation and technical change can serve the interests of more than a narrow minority.

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P.S.

- The Guardian. Thu 5 Aug 2021 12.45 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/05/around-the-world-the-disadvantaged-have-been-left-behind-by-politicians-of-all-hues>
- Amory Gethin, Clara Martínez-Toledano and Thomas Piketty are the authors of Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities: A Study of Fifty Democracies, 1948-2020

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