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Do the self-employed still vote for centre-right parties? The cases of Italy, Spain and the UK

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Abstract

The disappearance of class voting in post-industrial societies has often been announced in recent decades. Few studies, however, have focused on the self-employed, an occupational category which tends to combine the properties of a social class and a status group. The UK, Italy, and Spain present different traditions but similar levels of class voting in the early 2000s, with a persisting tendency of the self-employed to vote for centre-right parties. These three countries also saw the subsequent growth of “third” parties. Using data on parliamentary elections from the 2004, 2009, and 2014 European Election Studies, we continue to find evidence of this form of class voting, which we relate to the specific political and social dispositions of the self-employed. But we also find a decline during the decade considered, which we impute to ideological convergence of the mainstream left and right parties along the fundamental “workers vs. owners” class cleavage.

Keywords

Social class; voting behaviour; self-employed; Italy; Spain; UK.

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Abstract: The disappearance of class voting in post-industrial societies has often been announced in recent decades. Few studies, however, have focused on the self-employed, an occupational category which tends to combine the properties of a social class and a status group. The UK, Italy, and Spain present different traditions but similar levels of class voting in the early 2000s, with a persisting tendency of the self-employed to vote for centre-right parties. These three countries also saw the subsequent growth of “third” parties. Using data on parliamentary elections from the 2004, 2009, and 2014 European Election Studies, we continue to find evidence of this form of class voting, which we relate to the specific political and social dispositions of the self-employed. But we also find a decline during the decade considered, which we impute to ideological convergence of the mainstream left and right parties along the fundamental “workers vs. owners” class cleavage.

Introduction

From a classical perspective analysing the social bases of politics and party choice (Berelson et al., 1954; Lipset, 1960, Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), the association between class and voting has long been scrutinized (Alford, 1962; Barnes, 1977; Dalton et al., 1984). It has been so especially with reference to the propensity of the working class, as compared to the middle-higher classes, to vote for left-wing parties. Since the 1980s, comparative research has generally shown a declining relation between class and vote (Dalton et al., 1984; Knutsen, 2006), that is, a “dealignment” between voters and parties along class lines. This decline apparently results from broad processes of social modernization affecting post-industrial societies (Inglehart, 1977; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Dalton and Klingemann, 2007).

Some studies, however, have criticized these findings. They instead cite empirical examples that point to trendless fluctuations in class voting (Evans, 1999; Goldthorpe, 2001) or suggest a trend of re-alignment, that is to say, a changing voting pattern due to the emergence of new parties and the use of more refined class schemas (Manza et al., 1995; Oesch, 2008; Gringrich and Hauserman, 2015). Other studies point out that, while the association between class and political preferences in left/right self-positioning continues to be meaningful, this does not imply that voting behaviours show the same pattern over time; in effect, they may have changed as a result of alterations in the supply side of electoral competition (Barone et al., 2007; Evans and de Graaf, 2013).

In this article we focus on the voting behaviour of the self-employed, an occupational category which well approximates the second side of the famous cleavage – that between workers and employers/owners – indicated by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) as giving birth to Labour and Socialist parties, as well as to their pro-market counterparts. Typically represented by small entrepreneurs and shopkeepers, but also artisans, craftsmen, and independent farmers, the self-employed constitute one of the few groups that could also be considered a class in the Weberian sense, to the extent that “property and lack of property are the basic categories of all class situations” (Weber, 1946 (1922), p. 182). But, as Max Weber also pointed out, “an occupational group is also a status group” (ibid., 193), that is, a group characterized by specific social practices, preferences, dispositions, and - as the German sociologist put it - a certain “style of life” (ibid., 191), virtually

that of the so-called *petty bourgeoisie*. And since “the differences between classes and status groups frequently overlap” (ibid., 193), the self-employed, in the more general understanding of “small owners” within the economic order, seem quite effectively to combine the notions of ‘occupational group’, ‘class position’, and ‘status group’. As we shall see, this theoretical premise is important for our study, even though it clearly applies to the “established” self-employed much more than it does to new forms of self-employment characterized by growing heterogeneity and precariousness (Emmenegger, 2012; Jansen, 2016; Standing, 2016).

The scholarly literature shows that, in many countries, the self-employed have generally preferred to vote for centre-right parties (Hix, 1999; Pisati, 2010; Jansen et al. 2011).¹ This is consistent with the sociological properties of their occupational category (small business), class position (proprietary – i.e. non-employee – middle-class), and status group (*petty bourgeoisie*), as well as with their location along the worker vs. owner cleavage in the traditional structure of European party systems (Lipset and Rokkan, cit.). However, in recent years their voting behaviour may have changed, mainly as a result of homologous changes at the level of partisan supply, such as an ideological convergence of the mainstream parties along the left/right axis (Evans and de Graaf, 2006) and a growing fragmentation of national party systems, namely with the rise of new third “populist” forces such as the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy (Biorcio, 2014; Diamanti, 2014), Podemos in Spain (Rodon and Hierro, 2016), and United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the UK (Clarke et al., 2016). Of course, both socio-structural change (e.g. the shrinking working class) and contingent events (i.e. the Great Recession of 2008) also affect voting behaviours and election outcomes. However, this impact is not only a direct one; it is also mediated by political parties and their strategies of adaptation to the changing compositions, demands, and moods of their electorates. Hence, as has been clearly theorised (Evans and de Graaf, 2013; Mayer, 2016), class positions matter if political parties emphasize their differences in the economic sphere, whereas the association between class and voting is likely to weaken when parties tend to converge on economic issues, so that the competition is displaced, for instance, to the domain of moral values.

The main hypothesis of this article is that, given the fundamental persistence – although it is increasingly challenged by on-going social change – of self-employment as a relatively specific class position in the structures of West European societies, there is still a significant relationship between self-employment and voting for the main centre-right parties. We believe, in other words, that the structuring power of societal cleavages on voting has not completely vanished. In a longitudinal perspective, however, we also think that in the past decade, this specific form of class voting should have weakened further for the reasons outlined above (partisan strategic convergence and systemic fragmentation).

Moreover, we will hypothesize that the propensity of the self-employed to vote for centre-right parties is not entirely mediated either by their specific socio-demographic composition or by their explicit ideological orientations. This is because we assume that their voting propensity is directly associated, at least in part, with the specific dispositions of this “status group” in the social, cultural, and economic dimensions (e.g. valuing entrepreneurial autonomy and perceiving the State more negatively). In other words, a self-employed (in the countries considered) should be more likely – all else being equal – to vote for centre-right parties even in the absence of an explicit right-wing ideological self-positioning and, also, of any significant political involvement.

¹ It has also been noted that, throughout history, the self-employed have supported extreme right parties, like the Nazis in Germany and Poujadists in France (Lipset, 1960; Childers, 1983). However, for both theoretical reasons and methodological constraints, this issue falls outside the scope of this article.

Using data from the 2004, 2009 and 2014 European Election Studies (EES), we analyse voting behaviour in the UK, Italy and Spain. In effect, while the UK has been extensively studied with regard to class voting, which has long been present in that country, Italy and – even more – Spain have been less often considered by comparative research. In Italy, class voting was of scant importance for many years (Bellucci, 2001), and only with Silvio Berlusconi's reconfiguration of Italian politics did a clear class voting pattern become apparent (Itanes, 2001; Caciagli and Corbetta, 2002, Maraffi, 2008). In Spain, class voting strongly emerged in the 1980s due to a party realignment that polarised class-related choices, followed by a period of stability until the 1990s when, according to some studies, it started to decline (Orriols, 2013). Therefore, overall levels of class voting will appear to be comparable across these three countries in our first time-period considered (i.e. the early 2000s), and they can be expected to exhibit a similar downward trend over the following decade, for the supply-side-related reasons that we will better elucidate in the next section.

This article is structured as follows. In the next section, we will briefly review the literature on class voting, together with measurement issues concerning both classes and party systems. At the end of this theoretical discussion, we will formulate our specific hypotheses. In the second section, we will describe the three national contexts and party systems that we analyse: Italy, Spain and the UK. Thereafter, we will present data and methods before setting out the results, which will focus on voting patterns of the self-employed and their changes over time.

Class Voting and the Self-employed: Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

The social and economic conflict among social groups (classes) in the market finds its political expression in the competition between parties which represent opposing socio-economic interests (Bellucci, 2001, Ballarino et al., 2009). This belief is clearly expressed by the owner vs. worker class cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) which is at the basis of studies on class voting. The first studies on the subject focused on the voting behaviour of the working class. A tool once commonly used to study this relation was the Alford index (Alford, 1962), i.e. the percentage difference in support for the Left or socialist parties between the manual and the non-manual social classes. This absolute measure of class voting has been recently replaced by relative class voting measures, like the Thomsen and Kappa indexes (Knutsen, 2006), and some scholars have also used a more complex class schema, the EGP (Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero) classification (Evans, 1999; Knutsen, 2006; Jansen et al., 2013). This choice, however, has not produced dramatic changes in the empirical findings (Evans, 1999). Moreover, the increasing use of new detailed measures or overall indexes reduces the comparability of empirical findings, generates confusion, and decreases the level of consensus in the field. As Manza et al. clearly stated: '*We conclude that despite the absence of a clear consensus in the field, theories asserting a universal process of class dealignment are not supported*' (Manza et al. 1995, p.137).

Nevertheless, the use of a more complex class schema has helped to shed light on the voting behaviour of the middle class, which has increasingly attracted attention within voting research since the 1980s, due to its growing size and importance in contemporary society (see, for example, Brooks and Manza, 1997; Kriesi, 1998; Gayo, 2008; 2013). Moreover, some scholars have studied the different voting choices of different groups within the middle class (Kriesi, 1998; Oesch, 2008). Generally, emphasis has been placed on different skill levels, in connection with the idea that traditional cleavages have lost their importance in favour of other aspects, such as education (Kriesi,

1998; Oesch, 2008; Jansen et al., 2011), professionalism (Mayo, 2013), cultural aspects (Achterberg and Houtman, 2006) or postmaterial values (Dalton, 2013).

By contrast, less attention has been paid to the self-employed, often treated as a marginal class due to the restricted number of its members and to its distinctive position in the labour market. This has favoured the focus on either the working class or the middle class. However, self-employed and small owners are one of the few groups that could be considered not only a class, but also a ‘status group’ in the Weberian sense (Weber, 1946, 1922). As such, they tend to be endowed with specific attitudes and dispositions that stem from their position both in the social structure and in the labour market, and which will lead them, for instance, to value entrepreneurial autonomy and propensity to risk, while being more distrustful of the state (perceived as a tax collector for welfare benefits, which they enjoy possibly less than others). If these value orientations tend to coincide with the political discourse of “centre-right” parties (or “conservative” in the economic dimension), status group members will be facilitated in recognizing “their” parties even when they are uninterested in politics and unwilling to locate themselves on the right of the ideological spectrum.

Indeed, their political choice has been quite stable over the years, since many studies have shown that their voting preferences are constantly in favour of conservative/centre-right parties (Hix, 1999; Barone et al., 2007; Corbetta and Cavazza, 2009; Pisati, 2010; Jansen et al., 2011). Over the years, however, the gap in their political preferences towards the right-wing parties compared to the working class has narrowed. The odds of the self-employed voting for a right-wing party *‘when compared with those for the manual working class, have decreased over the last four decades: class voting has converged over time. Despite this decline, the pattern of right wing voting between classes for the most part persists: in 2000-5 the self-employed are most different from the manual working class’* (Evans and De Graaf, 2013; p.63).

This explanation of the quite stable voting preference of self-employed workers introduces another important issue in studies on class voting: the supply side of party politics (Evans, 1999). While, on the class side, attention has focused on the working class, on the party side research and measures have for long privileged the vote for left parties, as exemplified by the Alford and Thomsen indexes (Knudsen, 2006). However, in many countries the party system has profoundly changed over the years (this is most blatantly the case of Italy), with new parties either replacing old ones or managing to attract a growing share of voters. Hence, continuing to focus on left-wing parties and neglecting other significant voting options may produce a misrepresentation of the trend of class voting over time (Elff, 2009). Recent studies have analysed class voting by widening the range of party choice (de Graaf et al., 2001; Brooks et al., 2006; Knutsen, 2006; Oesch, 2008; Jansen et al., 2011; Evans and de Graaf, 2013). The different matching between classes and political parties over time favours, at least in some national cases, the realignment hypothesis: that is, changing class-based voting patterns due to the emergence of new parties and the use of more refined class schemas (Evans, 1999; Oesch, 2006). Closer attention to parties and their power to attract voters has also furnished empirical evidence on the decline of class voting as in some countries the mainstream parties of the centre-left and centre-right tend to become less polarized and shift to the centre of the political spectrum (Evans et al., 1999; Elff, 2009; Evans and Tilley, 2011). On the contrary, it is partisan polarization along the left/right dimension that should be associated with substantially higher levels of class voting (Jansen et al., 2013).

To be sure, attempting to reflect on national party systems in more detail makes the comparison among countries more complicated. Most research tends to use general indexes or simplified measures to overcome this difficulty (Evans, 1999; Knutsen, 2006), or it compares countries in

more detailed terms, but allowing some space for distinctive national features thus promoting a comparison based more on common assumptions and hypotheses than on “native” comparative data (Evans and de Graaf, 2013). Moreover, when comparing different countries over time the initial level of class influence on voting should be taken into account. For example, Scandinavian countries and the UK have traditionally recorded very high levels of class voting, while Mediterranean countries (France, Italy, Greece, Italy and Spain) have a generally lower level of class voting, and the US and Canada have the lowest (Nieuwebeerta and Ultee, 1999; Evans, 1999). Evans and de Graaf (2013) report similar findings using more or less the same countries (except Canada) with comparative data covering the period until the year 2000, even if the analysis of the national cases covers more recent periods.

These different levels of class voting have played an important role in our choice of the countries to analyse. Indeed, we compare a country where class voting was very high in the past but has recently declined – the UK – with two Southern European countries, Italy and Spain, where the existence itself of class voting was previously disputed, but where it has latterly exhibited a fluctuating pattern, as we will discuss in the next section. Overall, these three national cases appear to be sufficiently homogenous in the early 2000s in terms of patterns of class voting: that is, in the relationship between the dependent variable (voting) and our main independent variable (employment status). Moreover, the strategies of the main party elites also present clear similarities across the three countries, at least in terms of an ideological convergence on economic issues, between the mainstream centre-right and centre-left parties in the decade considered. Hence, the set of hypotheses which follows applies to the three countries together, while evidence of national variations will be discussed in the results section.

H1 (Class voting hypothesis). The odds of the self-employed voting for the main centre-right party, compared to the main centre-left party, should be significantly higher than among employees and the inactive/unemployed overall, in the three countries considered.

Instead of measuring the gap in voting preferences between the self-employed and the working class – an approach which tends to emphasize inter-group differences – we compare the self-employed with other more general occupational categories, in order better to capture the specificity of this class position. If the main hypothesis is that in general, in the three countries considered, there is still a significant association between being self-employed and voting for the main centre-right party, we also take into account the odds of voting for the third forces, which for comparative and longitudinal purposes consist of all other (non-far-left) parties. Indeed, we also consider the possibility that the self-employed opt relatively more often for the third forces than for the main centre-left party. It is however in H4 that the “third forces” option will acquire a more central position in our theoretical expectations.

H2 (Social composition hypothesis). Class voting – as operationalized in H1 – should still be significant when controlling for the voters’ main socio-demographic characteristics, i.e. gender, age, and level of education.

The aim of the social composition hypothesis is to discard the possibility that the self-employed vote more often for centre-right parties just because they are, on average, more often males and older than the average population.² Indeed, it is well known that women tend to vote more frequently for centre-left parties in contemporary democracies (see for instance the vanished

² Our data also show that their level of education is slightly above the average. Income level was not included in the dataset.

“traditional gender gap” in support of Berlusconi’s parties in Italy; Barisione, 2014), whereas older men often have politically more conservative attitudes. Moreover, as already suggested, recent studies have underlined the growing importance of education in shaping party choice. All these factors, however, should not jeopardize the overall significance of the relationship between class position (self-employed) and voting (centre-right) because, in our view, the tendency of the self-employed to vote for centre-right parties is more ‘dispositional’ than ‘compositional’.

H3 (Political mediation hypothesis). While political involvement and, to a much greater extent, left/right ideological self-placement are generally strong predictors of voting behaviour, we anticipate that there will still be a significant association between class and vote that is not mediated by individual political attitudes.

Ideological self-placement on the left/right continuum is traditionally associated with class identities (Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976) and it tends to be weakly affected by the contingences of the political supply (Barone et al., 2007). However, we posit that the specific position of the self-employed in the labour market and within society affects their voting behaviour in a way that is not entirely mediated by “ideology”. A first reason why it is important to control for this element is that left/right ideology is relatively orthogonal to class-based socio-economic issues, and thus does not entirely overlap with them. In other words, the left/right axis tends to incorporate other value-related dimensions (such as, for instance, moral conservatism vs. liberalism) which make a right-wing self-placement viable, for instance, for a so called “welfare chauvinist” (i.e. combining economic “left” and cultural “right”). But even more importantly in the theoretical perspective of this study, we posit that the self-employed as a status group will exhibit a social disposition to vote for centre-right parties even when politically uninvolved and/or lacking an explicit right-wing ideological self-positioning.

H4 (Class dealignment hypothesis). We expect the association between self-employed workers and voting for the main centre-right party to decrease, and the association both with the main centre-left party and with other non-far-left parties to increase within the decade considered (2014 vs. 2004).

Even if self-employed workers have been loyal partisans of centre-right parties for many years, recent research (Evans and de Graaf, 2013) has suggested that this association may be declining in many countries. In recent years, the increased fragmentation of some national party systems (as in Italy for example) and the growing appeal of radical right and populist parties may have reduced the centre-right parties’ capacity to attract self-employed workers. This may result in a de-alignment process that involves the self-employed as a class that may be sensitive to the appeal of populist and/or radical right parties. On the other side, in these countries – especially in the UK and in Italy – centre-left parties have been tempted to seek consensus from a wider range of social classes and to shift their positioning more towards the centre, thus emphasising their “catch-all party” dimension. This overall declining effect will be tested by controlling not only for the individual countries, but also for the socio-demographic and political characteristics addressed in the previous hypotheses.

The National Contexts: Italy, Spain and the UK

Italy and Spain, but to some extent also the UK, have been characterized by controversial results concerning the importance and trends of class voting. Moreover, all three political systems have been marked by the presence – at least during the years covered by our study – of two main parties

or coalitions alternating in office, with minor parties as third players. However, in recent years new actors have challenged this common bipolar pattern.

The political system in Italy has been characterized by instability and frequent changes, especially since the 1990s. In this period, Italy has experienced a re-structuring of party competition: new parties have emerged, while old ones have changed their names and – at least partially – their positioning. Moreover, other parties have disappeared or have fragmented into smaller parties. Most scholars agree that until 1994 – the start of the so-called “Seconda Repubblica” – the class cleavage had a very limited influence on electoral behaviour, while party identification, the territorial dimension, and the religious cleavage (Itanes, 2001; Biorcio, 2003; Maraffi, 2007; Bellucci and Segatti, 2010) were more relevant to explaining voting preferences. Moreover, the main parties were characterized by low polarization on economic issues (Bellucci, 2001; Heath and Bellucci, 2013). Admittedly, if class voting measured with the Alford index appeared to be weaker in Italy than in other European countries (Bellucci, 2001), the use of other measures portrayed a different reality, where class voting was very strong from the end of the 1940s to the 1970s, while it declined thereafter (Pisati, 2010). However, self-employed workers, who had always been quite polarized in their voting choices (Caciagli and Corbetta, 2002; Pisati, 2010), after 1994 clearly started to show a preference for the main centre-right party, Forza Italia – Freedom Party (PDL) after 2007 - whose leader was a leading national entrepreneur (Itanes, 2001; Maraffi, 2008; Barisione, 2013; Heath and Bellucci, 2013). In the 2013 general elections, however, self-employed workers voted more frequently for the Movimento 5 Stelle, a populist and anti-establishment party founded in 2009 (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013), which emerged as the most voted single party in the Chamber of Deputies. As a second choice, self-employed workers chose PDL, but the gap with the centre-left party, Democratic Party (PD), was not as wide as it had been previously (Maraffi, Pedrazzani and Pinto, 2013). Drawing on studies not specifically focused on the self-employed, however, these findings are usually based on bivariate relationships between employment status and vote choice, without accounting for the role of other socio-demographic and political control variables.

Also in the case of Spain, important changes have occurred in recent years and, similarly to Italy, there is no clear consensus in Spain on patterns and trends of class voting. In regard to the latter aspect, as Orriols (2013) states: *‘The literature on class voting has reached different, and even sometimes contradictory, conclusions about the importance of social class in citizens’ vote choices and about its evolution [...] This is partly due to the use of different research strategies and methodologies and, in particular, due to the way social class has been measured’* (pp. 362-363). However, in general it may be assumed that class voting has been present in Spain at least since 1989, when the adoption of fiscal and distributive policies by the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) increased the salience of social class in politics (Chhibber and Torcal, 1997). In regard to self-employed workers, empirical evidence indicates that over the years this class has shown a higher propensity to vote for the centre-right main party (Cabaña, 2001; Cainzos, 2001). The Spanish party system has been characterized since the 1980s by a main centre-right party, Popular Party (PP), one centre-left party (PSOE) and a left-wing party, United Left (IU). Other smaller political forces have been regionalist or nationalist parties. PP and PSOE have alternated in government over the years, thus creating a stable arena in which the main political actors have sometimes been supported by some of the minor parties. However, in recent years the combination of the effects of the economic crisis and a number of corruption scandals concerning politicians have favoured the ascent of two new parties, Podemos and Ciudadanos, both presenting themselves as corruption-free and as renewing the political system. While Podemos may be classified as a left-

wing party, Ciudadanos may be considered a centre-right one (Rodon and Hierro, 2016), and thus more directly challenges the long-standing association between self-employed workers and PP.

While trends of class voting in Italy and Spain are more controversial and unstable, a general decline in class voting in the UK has been documented by various studies (Manza et al., 1995; Nieuwbeerta and Ultee, 1999; Knutsen, 2006; Evans and Tilley, 2011; 2013). Class voting in the UK has been very strong for years, but has started to decline since the 1970s. Among the explanations proposed for this decline are the reduction of union density (Nieuwbeerta and Ultee, 1999), but also the growing importance of value change and the rise of new value-based cleavages (Knutsen, 2006; Elff, 2009). However, also in the case of the UK it should be stressed that not all scholars agree on class voting decline, with some studies furnishing evidence of a trendless fluctuation (Goldthorpe, 1999; Barone et al., 2007). In regard to the specific class that we intend to study, empirical evidence shows that self-employed workers have always been more likely to vote for the Conservative Party compared to manual workers. At the same time, the party system has been quite stable, with Conservative and Labour being the main two parties, and the Liberal Democrats typically performing as a third party. Other parties have been mainly regionalist and nationalist, as in Spain. In recent years, however, the UK has also seen the emergence and growth of a right-wing populist party, UKIP, which has gained consensus especially in the 2014 European parliamentary elections. In a longer-term perspective, the main change in the political arena has been the shift towards the centre of New Labour under Blair's leadership, and this decrease in the polarization of the main parties has been used to explain the decline of class voting (Evans et al., 1999; Elff, 2009; Evans and Tilley, 2011).

Data, Variables and Methods

In this article, we study class voting in three countries, Italy, Spain and the UK, by means of a pooled dataset created using the European Election Studies – Voter Study collected in 2004, 2009 and 2014.

While theoretical reasons for choosing these countries were discussed in the section immediately preceding the hypotheses, as well as in the section on the national contexts, further reasons are empirical in nature and relate to the limitations of the dataset. Indeed, the choice of EES data has the twofold advantage that it enables a cross-country and a longitudinal comparison. However, these data also have some drawbacks, such as the impossibility of using other European countries with party systems originated from the same cleavage structures, such as France or Germany, because of the too limited number of cases or the fact that not every wave distinguished between self-employed and employees.³

³ Not only was it methodologically not viable to incorporate all other European nations, due to major inconsistencies in the EES datasets across countries and waves, but our choice of comparing the UK, Italy, and Spain was driven by a comparative assessment of the national political contexts: More in particular, we point to the similar evolution of the party systems in the last 15 years (left and right alternating in office, ideological convergence of mainstream parties as regards the economic dimension, emergence of “populist” third forces) and the presence of comparable patterns of class voting in 2004 (the starting year of our analysis). The other countries potentially available would have undermined the context-based coherence of the study without substantially improving the number of cases. More generally, we believe that our emphasis on the specificity of national contexts makes this study less appropriate to an approach based on a “big N” of countries.

In our analysis, the dependent variable was based upon the following survey question: “Which party did you vote for in these last parliamentary elections?”. This variable was operationalized in three categories: vote for the main centre-right party (PDL/PP/Conservative), for the main centre-left party (PD, PSOE, Labour), or for other non-far-left parties. These last thus formed a sort of residual category of “other” parties which included emerging third forces such as M5S, UKIP and Podemos, but which for longitudinal comparative purposes – these parties were not present or were marginal in the previous elections considered – was needed to consider the overall block of parties alternative to the two main centre-left and centre-right parties. Far-left and green parties were excluded, however, from this residual category, because we had no theoretical reasons to assume that parties of this kind could attract self-employed voters to the same extent as other centre, right, or populist parties.

It is also important to bear in mind that the last parliamentary elections referred to in the EES data were held in the following years: in Italy in 2001, 2008 and 2013; in Spain in 2004, 2008 and 2011; in the UK in 2001, 2005 and 2010. Of course, the problem of possible bias in recall of past voting behaviour is a well-known concern in electoral studies (Himmelweit et al., 1978; Van Elsas et al., 2013). However, the alternative option of using the most recent vote in the European Parliament elections would have introduced two greater biases to the purposes of our study: first, the size of our sample would have dropped to half or less of the overall respondents, due to the much lower turnout at the EP election, thus making the number of self-employed voters too small for statistical analysis; second, interpreting voting behaviour would have required adopting the theoretical framework of the “second-order national elections” (Reif and Schmitt 1980), which points to the specificity of the EP elections also in terms of typically favouring the appeal of third forces and protest parties. All in all, this temporal mismatch must be considered an unavoidable cost in comparative studies based on general elections, which best capture the more profound ties between groups of voters and political parties, but which by definition occur in different years in different countries.

Political attitudes, i.e. interest in politics and self-positioning on the left/right scale, were considered as control variables in H3, thus making it possible to disentangle the effect of class voting from that of more general political orientations, which are considered to be more stable over time and therefore less dependent on changes in the political system (Freire and Costa Lobo, 2005; Barone et al., 2007).

Finally, our key independent variable was the voter’s occupational position on the labour market. In the EES data, employment status is self-declared and defined in broad terms⁴. This means that it is not possible to verify the extent to which the specific occupations of the interviewees related to self-employment in an entrepreneurial sense or, on the contrary, they were in an occupational situation closer to a “non-standard” work relationship (Jansen, 2016, 2017).

The variable was operationalized in three categories: employee, self-employed and inactive/unemployed. Our main focus was on self-employed workers and their voting gap with respect to employees, whereas inactive and unemployed people acted as a control group. The share of self-employed was similar in all countries in 2004 (9% in Italy, 7% in Spain and the UK) and in

⁴ In the 2004 questionnaire, for instance, while in Italy there were three categories (entrepreneur, freelance professional and self-employed), in Spain there were only two (entrepreneur/freelance professional and self-employed), and in the UK only the last option was available. In the 2009 questionnaire, only the option “self-employed” was available for all three countries. While in the 2014 questionnaire the categories were more numerous, we were nonetheless obliged, for comparability reasons, to use only a broad and general “self-employed” option.

2009 (12% in Italy and Spain, 10% in the UK), but in 2014 the share of self-employed in Italy (15%) was twice as big as in the other two countries (7% each). This non-perfectly balanced distribution of the self-employed in the pooled dataset is taken into consideration by the systematic inclusion of “Country” and “Wave” as control variables.

To test H2, we used the following socio-demographic variables: gender, age and education (age when stopped full time education). All the relevant variables are presented in Table 1.

In the analysis, multinomial logistic regression models were used. The models will be presented considering the pooled data. However, we also ran separate models for each country. Country-specific differences will be highlighted and discussed whenever present.

[table 1 about here]

If our focus was on the voting preference for the main centre-right party, the multinomial model allowed us to test whether self-employed workers are more likely to vote either for the main centre-left party or for other centre or right parties, consistently with our hypotheses.

For H1 a basic model was used. It included the independent variable and country and year as controls, thus accounting for contextual (i.e. country- or election-specific) variations in the distribution of votes across employment categories.

To test H2, we simply added gender, age and education as control variables, while in model 3 we further controlled for interest in politics and self-positioning on the left/right scale. Finally, H4 was tested by means of an interaction model where the relevant outcome was the interaction between employment status and year of the survey, using the same variables as in model 3 as covariates.

Before presenting and discussing the empirical results concerning our specific hypotheses, we provide a descriptive overview of the trend in party voting by self-employed workers in the decade considered (Figure 1).

[figure 1 about here]

More specifically, the figure shows the relative importance of the self-employed within the electorates of the main centre-left, centre-right, and other (non-far-left) parties in the three countries at the three national elections considered. In the 2004 EES study, in all three countries voters from this employment-based category were relatively more numerous in the electorates of centre-right parties – of which they constituted 8% in the UK, 10% in Spain, and 12% in Italy – than in those of centre-left parties. Even though in the case of Labour vs. Tories the gap does not appear to be statistically significant, the very similar pattern across the three countries in 2004 (the starting point of our analysis) confirms our assumption of the fundamental comparability of these three national cases overall, given the clear convergence resulting from the opposite trends detected by the scholarly literature in the previous decades (decline of previously high class voting in the UK, emergence of this previously marginal phenomenon in Italy and Spain). In longitudinal terms (2004-2014), we are interested in observing whether the gap not only between centre-right and

centre-left, but also between centre-right and other parties, changes over time within each country. From this compositional point of view (share of self-employed within the electorates of the main parties), the graph suggests that class voting as operationalized here has declined in Italy, resists in Spain, and is virtually over, if not reversed, in the UK. Moreover, the relative appeal of third parties among the self-employed is clearly corroborated by this general overview, which confirms that it is essential not to limit the analysis to the main centre-left or centre-right parties, but to consider the growing fragmentation and the changes in party systems over time, and especially in recent years.

Above and beyond this descriptive level, however, our set of hypotheses hinges on comparison between the voting behaviours of self-employed workers and employees. Hence, the questions are these: does the voting behaviour of the self-employed significantly differ from that of employees? Does the owners/workers cleavage still maintain its importance in political choice? And is the relationship between this cleavage and party voting mediated by compositional socio-demographic and ideological characteristics of the employment groups?

Results: Class Voting in Italy, Spain and the UK

Overall, we find clear evidence of class voting defined as the gap between self-employed and employees in the vote for mainstream left-wing vs. right-wing parties. The first regression model presented in Table 2 shows that there is a fully significant positive association between employment status and vote for the main centre-right party compared to the main centre-left party ($p < 0.001$). In more substantive terms, and having estimated from these coefficients the predicted probabilities for each quantity of interest, the self-employed are significantly less likely than employees to vote for a left-wing party (-13.3 percentage points, with estimated probabilities being 37.6% for the former and 50.9% for the latter) and, conversely, more likely to vote for a right-wing party (+13.9 points: 42.1% vs. 28.2%). This significant gap resulting from the basic model includes controls for the different survey years and countries. By contrast, both self-employed persons and employees are much less likely to vote for other parties, with estimated probabilities being around 20% for each category and marginal effects of class positions on voting thus not reaching statistical significance.⁵

In models 2 and 3 our “social composition” and “political mediation” hypotheses were successively tested. As the parameter estimates for the self-employed (as compared to employees) show, coefficients remained negative and fully significant across the three models when comparing the odds of voting for the main right-wing and left-wing parties. Therefore, hypotheses 2 and 3, which posited the permanence of a significant relationship even when introducing socio-demographic and political controls, were statistically corroborated. However, the power of these coefficients was virtually unaffected in model 2, but clearly decreased in model 3. Hence, we were interested in a more substantive understanding of the predictive power of the “sheer” class cleavage in voting. On computing the predicted probabilities and marginal effects of voting for left- and right-wing parties, the gap between self-employed and employees still amounted to 13 percentage points (as in model 1) when controlling for socio-demographics, but dropped to 6 percentage points when holding political interest and left-right ideology constant. In other words, class voting appears to be mediated for around half of its size by the ideological orientations of the self-employed and employees, yet it maintains a fully significant power in predicting patterns of party voting even on

⁵ The negative and statistically significant coefficient (-0.430***) here points to a larger decrease among self-employed persons than employees in the probabilities of voting for parties other than right-wing ones.

accounting for the fact that the self-employed more often lean to the right and employees to the left of the political spectrum.

Consistently with the descriptive data presented in the previous section, country-specific models confirmed that the self-employed, in Italy and Spain, are less likely than employees to vote for left and third parties than to vote for a centre-right party, whereas in the UK no significant difference emerges between self-employed persons and employees in their voting preferences towards the Conservative Party, in the overall time period considered. When introducing political controls (model 3), Spain remains the only country that features a statistically significant difference in the voting behaviour of the self-employed, which reflects the outcome of the general model, with a significant lower probability of voting PSOE rather than PP ($p < 0,01$). In Italy, the decrease in the gap between PD and PDL makes the association between voting behaviour and self-employment slightly non-significant, whereas the UK once again confirms the pattern already observed in model 1, i.e. a non-significant association between voting for Conservatives (rather than Labour) and the self-employed (vs. employees).

[table 2 about here]

Finally, the class de-alignment hypothesis (H4) involves a time perspective based on a comparison of the period 2004-2014 (even though, as already stated above, voting behaviour in the last parliamentary election covered a period from 2001 to 2013, depending on the country). The multinomial regression model (table not reported) presented a significant coefficient ($p = 0,005$) for the interaction of the self-employed (vs. employees) in 2014 (vs. 2004) in regard to the odds of voting for the main left-wing party rather than for the main right-wing party, whereas in 2009 the propensity of the self-employed to vote for the main centre-right party did not differ from that in 2004. Conversely, the results of the regression model do not show any significant change over time concerning the voting behaviour of the self-employed when the centre-right is compared with other parties.

Figure 2 reports the estimated marginal effects of the above-mentioned statistically significant interaction between employment status and survey year as regards voting for the centre-left or centre-right. The figure clearly shows the decrease in the distance between the two groups' voting preferences. While in 2004 the self-employed had a clearly higher probability than employees of voting centre-right – and a clearly lower one of voting centre-left – in 2009 the difference between the two occupational categories is lower for the centre-right and statistically non-significant for the centre-left. But it is in 2014 that the two options come to overlap: in our overall sample, the self-employed no longer differ from employees in their voting preferences. Therefore, our data support H4, which posited a progressive de-alignment between social class and political party over the time period considered, due to partisan fragmentation and ideological convergence of the two mainstream parties.

At the national level, to be noted is that the only case presenting significant interaction coefficients is that of the UK. This means that, while the decline over time of voting preferences for centre-right parties by the self-employed does not reach statistical significance in Italy and Spain – even though the trend is visible, the problem being also due to the relatively small number of cases – in the UK the self-employed have significantly increased their propensity to vote for the Labour Party over time ($p < 0,05$), probably encouraged to do so by New Labour's well-established pro-market orientation. Further discussion of the national cases follows in the conclusion.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to contribute to the debate on the importance of, and changes in, class voting in Europe. Accordingly, we have decided to focus on the voting behaviour of the self-employed as a paradigmatic social class with a well-documented preference for centre-right parties.

Indeed, the overall conclusion reached by our research strategy centred on the self-employed suggests that the role of social class in predicting voting behaviour is still not trivial, at least not in Italy and Spain. We also found that the association between class and voting does not depend on the specific socio-demographic composition of these employment-based groups, and it is only partly mediated by their ideological orientations. In our understanding, the propensity of the self-employed to vote for centre-right parties is thus more “dispositional” than “compositional”, and at least as much “social” as “political”. However, class voting declined over the decade considered, due to a gradual ideological convergence of the mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties, on the one hand, and to fragmentation of the party systems and the growing importance of third parties, on the other. Investigating the possible role played by the changing – and increasingly heterogeneous (Jansen, 2016) – composition of self-employment (as well as of the employees category, with manual workers shrinking in number) would require an *ad hoc* survey containing much more detailed information about professional categories and job occupations than that available in the EES datasets. Also on the basis of a quantitative assessment of the constellation of old and new occupations characterized by some form of business ownership, it should be easier to define and construct “self-employment” as a more precise and renewed sociological object.

More specifically, we sought first of all to assess the basic association between self-employed workers and the propensity to vote for centre-right parties. Our data show that this association is present and statistically significant, if not substantively strong, thus confirming the findings of other studies (Manza et al., 1995; Kriesi, 1998; Evans, 1999; Brooks et al., 2006; Oesch, 2008; Pisati, 2010; Jansen et al., 2011; Evans and de Graaf, 2013). Moreover, since studies referencing a “social group model” of voting (Dalton, 2013) often point to the importance of mechanisms of social composition and mediation in the relationship between social groups and voting patterns, we were induced to discard the hypothesis that socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age and education affect the association between being self-employed and voting for centre-right parties.

Evidence of class voting also resisted controls for political attitudes and left-right ideology, which proved to mediate the association between class and voting only partly. Being self-employed, in other words, does make a significant difference in voting, because this increases the odds of voting for a centre-right party, even for those voters who do not necessarily place themselves on the right or centre-right of the ideological spectrum. In the theoretical framework of this study, this is interpreted as evidence of a practical disposition to voting resulting from the specific social and market-related position of the self-employed as a Weberian ‘status group’.

Finally, we also found that the association between self-employment and voting for the centre-right has actually been declining over time, especially when comparing 2014 and 2004. Rather than interpreting the virtual disappearance of this gap in 2014 as a final stage in the long-term erosion of class voting in post-industrial societies, we suggest that it results from changes on the supply-side of politics, i.e. from the party elites’ strategic choices in terms of post-ideological convergence towards the centre, as well as from the increasing presence/appeal of populist third forces. As such,

it may well re-emerge, or be found to matter more, in political contexts characterized by more polarized competitions between left- and right-wing parties.

Besides considering the three countries as a whole, we also investigated possible national differences. In effect, the two South European countries display significant class voting both in hypothesis 1 (basic model) and hypothesis 2 (social composition hypothesis), while in hypothesis 3 (political mediation hypothesis) only Spain reveals a statistically significant effect, with the self-employed voting more than proportionally for PP even when controlling for their ideological orientations. This suggests that in Italy the impact of political identifications – i.e. self-placement on the left/right scale – is comparatively stronger. As indicated by previous studies (Caciagli and Corbetta, 2002; Biorcio, 2003), issues of ideological identity are traditionally important in Italian politics, with “left” and “right” categories being particularly meaningful in structuring partisan competition. This has been at least the case until recent years, when M5S has represented a growing political force not easy to locate along the left/right spectrum (Bellucci and Pellegata, 2017). Given that partisan polarization along the left/right dimension is associated with substantially higher levels of class voting (Jansen et al., 2013), the growing appeal of M5S and similar anti-establishment parties in the other countries (Ciudadanos and Podemos in Spain, UKIP in the UK) might contribute to reducing the level of class voting over time. However, our data do not cover the emergence of Podemos in the Spanish political system and the shift of Ciudadanos from the local to the national level. Moreover, compared to M5S or UKIP, Podemos and Ciudadanos have a clearer and more specific placement on the left/right continuum (Rodon and Hierro, 2016).

As regards the British benchmark-case, not only is a pattern of class voting in favour of the self-employed not detectable in the 2000s, but there is evidence of a tendency towards its reversal, with this employment-based category being increasingly attracted to the Labour Party. As we suggested, possible explanations relate mostly to changes in party positioning and party systems, which reflect, in turn, strategies of adaptation to structural changes in labour markets and society at large. The Labour Party’s already documented shift towards the centre (Evans et al., 1999; Evans and Tilley, 2011) helps to explain the ever-weakening relation between self-employment and voting Conservative in the UK. A similar process, however, may also occur in Italy, where since 2014 the PD leader Matteo Renzi has provided a post-ideological type of leadership that cannot be easily accommodated with the cultural and organisational roots of the centre-left (Bordignon, 2014).

All three countries have to face the rise of anti-establishment parties that exploit the increasing distance between citizens and political institutions. Cross-country comparative data endowed with more fine-grained occupational categories should be analysed in the coming years in order to determine whether what we are witnessing is, rather than a de-alignment in class voting, a re-alignment or a trendless fluctuation. However, we suspect that any kind of class re-alignment may be difficult as long as parties do not support clear and simple economic issues, but increasingly base their platforms upon anti-establishment discourses and populist messages exploiting a widespread sentiment among voters, which can only be sharpened by the consequences of economic crises and recessions.

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Table 1 – Description of variables and summary statistics

Variable	Modalities	Mean	SD	N	Min	Max
Party voted for in last election	1=right, 2=left, 3=other centre-right parties	1,84	0,72	6,626	1	3
Employment status	1=employee, 2=self-employed, 3=inactive/unemployed	2,42	0,65	10,710	1	3
Gender	1=male, 0=female	0,48	0,50	10,710	0	1
Age	(discrete value)	49,28	17,20	10,710	15	96
Education	1=lowest level, 4= highest level	2,13	0,85	10,710	1	4
Interest in politics	1= very interested, 4=not at all interested	2,66	0,91	10,710	1	4
Self-placement on the left-right scale	1=left, 10=right	5,26	2,25	10,710	1	10

Table 2 – Multinomial regression parameter estimates (logit coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis) for propensity of the self-employed to vote for centre-right parties

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Class voting hypothesis	Social composition hypothesis	Political mediation hypothesis
Right-wing parties			
(omitted)			
Left-wing parties			
Employee	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
Self-employed	-0.709*** (0.10)	-0.681*** (0.10)	-0.393*** (0.12)
Unemployed/inactive	-0.445*** (0.06)	-0.353*** (0.07)	-0.182* (0.08)
Italy	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
Spain	0.149* (0.07)	0.133+ (0.07)	-0.263** (0.08)
UK	-0.068 (0.07)	-0.044 (0.07)	-0.037 (0.08)
2004	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
2009	-0.362*** (0.07)	-0.359*** (0.07)	-0.197* (0.08)
2014	-0.161* (0.07)	-0.149* (0.07)	0.105 (0.08)
Gender		0.011 (0.06)	-0.027 (0.07)
Age		-0.006** (0.00)	-0.003 (0.00)
Education		-0.020 (0.04)	-0.080+ (0.04)
Left-right ideology			-0.604*** (0.02)
Political interest			-0.014 (0.04)
Intercept	0.713*** (0.07)	1.015*** (0.16)	4.203*** (0.24)
Other parties			
Employee	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
Self-employed	-0.430*** (0.12)	-0.390** (0.13)	-0.231+ (0.13)
Unemployed/inactive	-0.522*** (0.08)	-0.311*** (0.09)	-0.217* (0.09)
Italy	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
Spain	-0.828*** (0.10)	-0.796*** (0.10)	-1.066*** (0.10)
UK	-0.164* (0.08)	-0.067 (0.08)	-0.165+ (0.09)
2004	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
2009	-0.155+ (0.09)	-0.202* (0.09)	-0.064 (0.10)
2014	0.920*** (0.08)	0.930*** (0.09)	1.089*** (0.09)
Gender		0.103 (0.07)	0.068 (0.08)

Age		-0.009*** (0.00)	-0.007* (0.00)
Education		0.214*** (0.05)	0.174*** (0.05)
Left-right Ideology			-0.334*** (0.02)
Political interest			-0.062 (0.04)
	Intercept	-0.279** (0.09)	-0.463* (0.20)
			1.661*** (0.27)
N	6626	6626	6626
p	0.000	0.000	0.000
aic	13323.5	13276.6	11457.7

List of figures

Figure 1 – Share of self-employed workers among voters for the main centre-left, centre-right, and other parties among the self-employed in the last national parliamentary elections (0-1 scale, \pm standard error)

(under the figure)

Source: 2004, 2009 and 2014 European Election Studies

Figure 2 – Marginal effects of self-employment on voting for centre-right or centre-left parties (2004, 2009 and 2104)

(under the figure)

Source: 2004, 2009 and 2014 European Election Studies



