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# America's rusted families: working-class political participation through three biological generations (1965–1997)

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## ABSTRACT

Has social reproduction through families preserved unequal political participation amongst the working class in post-industrial society? This article builds on both political and sociological traditions to consider the family as a tenacious social structure that reproduces political participation from one generation to the next. In order to answer this empirically, the study uses a longitudinal panel data of political behaviour across three biological generations in the United States (1965–1997). The findings show that respondents who grew up in working-class families are less likely to vote as adults regardless of whether they have working-class occupations or not. The transmission of un-equal participation is partially mediated by the voting behaviour of the parent who models this behaviour to their children. The study also shows that the second generation of respondents transmits low political participation to their offspring in the third generation. This study implies that occupational structures of a past industrial society are still politically relevant and that inequalities in political participation remain a legacy amongst the biological descendants of working-class families from the 1960s.

**KEYWORDS** Class politics; working class; deindustrialisation; political participation; family politics

The deindustrialisation of the American economy has changed working-class politics. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, increasing consumer demand for services, automation, global trade and the practicing of offshoring have brought about a substantial decline in industrial employment in the United States (Kollmeyer 2009). As a result, scholars have documented the breakdown of party loyalty between the Democratic party and the working class while manufacturing plants closed, industrial blue-collar jobs were lost (Lindh and McCall 2020). The perceived social status of the working class has declined (Nolan and Weisstanner 2021)

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along with a sense of being represented in politics (Rennwald and Pontusson 2021). Moreover, the trade unions that had once drawn the working class into politics (Leighley and Nagler 2007) have been declining sharply in density since 1970 (OECD 2021).

In addition to the vast research into the changing party preferences of the working class and its effect on electoral outcomes in advanced democracies (see Evans 1999), there is also evidence that the American working-class participation in politics has been dwindling for decades (Vanneman and Cannon 1987; Hout *et al.* 1995) as in European countries (Rennwald 2014; Evans and Tilley 2017). Political participation refers to formal aspects such as voting and informal forms of participation such as engaging in campaign activities. Political participation is crucial to the functioning of a democratic society yet it depends on a person's choice to do so. As Campbell and colleagues famously noted in *The American Voter*, 'the act of voting requires the citizen to make not a single choice but two. He must choose between rival parties or candidates. He must also decide whether to vote at all' (Campbell *et al.* 1960, p. 89).

So, if industrial occupations in the economy have declined, is the unequal political participation of the working class less consequential? While some may dismiss the influence of old industrial structures as increasingly marginal to politics, this study is interested in understanding how and why these can continue to persist. This article argues that while manufacturing decline erodes an economic structure, the working class still remain an established social structure with political relevance. In particular, I set out to empirically investigate how the role of the family propagates the salience of the past working class to contemporary political participation. I draw from both political science and sociological traditions to build a framework for how the family socially reproduces political participation amongst the working class which is transmitted from one generation to another regardless of the occupation of their offspring.

By doing so, this study contributes to the ongoing debate on class politics in several ways. I draw on the existing understanding of family transmission to build a theoretical argument that explains how and why the relevance of working class persists in American politics despite economic restructuring. To investigate this empirically, I use data from the Youth Parent Socialisation Survey, a longitudinal panel study of political behaviour in three biological generations in United States over three decades of the deindustrial period (1965–1997). Using an inter-generational approach, I empirically demonstrate that the offspring of the working class in post-industrial life carry similar patterns of unequal political participation regardless of whether they themselves hold working-class occupations compared to individuals without working-class origins. The results of mediation analysis show that the transmission can be partially

attributed to the non-voting behaviour that working-class parents model for their children growing up. By doing so, this study overcomes the limitations of existing research which typically use current occupation to categorise individuals as working class which biases our empirical understanding. It omits individuals who are part of the working class but that, as a result of dwindling manufacturing jobs are simply less likely to hold such a job. In other words, to fully understand the role of working class in post-industrial society, one must consider that economic restructuring causes traditional working-class jobs to disappear but not the working-class people who held (or would have held) those jobs. Such individuals from industrial working-class families and their political participation are the subject of this investigation.

## Theoretical framework

### *The working class and political participation*

A person's occupation is widely considered to be the basis for their social class (see Wright 1980), a force that shapes political behaviour (Goldthorpe 2001). According to this occupational model, the conception of social class is based on a person's current job. On one hand, a person's occupation structures their material interests which predicts whether they vote at all (Manza *et al.* 1995). Yet, working-class occupation also functions differently from other socio-economic aspects such as low-income or low educational attainment. While occupation is naturally related also to human capital and earnings, it also exerts a separate influence on political behaviour (see McCall and Manza 2011). According to this logic, working-class people participate in politics differently due to the fact that they have working-class jobs. Generally speaking, labour market participation bestows individuals with skills, knowledge and broader a social network which all increase the likelihood of participating in politics (Thomson and Eichler 1985) but these resources are differentially distributed across the occupational hierarchy (Brady *et al.* 1995). Working-class jobs also have less autonomy compared to managerial or professional occupations. Job autonomy means that a person has less control over the work they do, its pace, the order in which one conducts tasks, and decision-making. Working-class occupations also have less flexible working hours than middle-class occupations, limiting the time resources which can be dedicated to political activity (Wright 1980).

Due to these factors, the American working class have traditionally participated less in political life than the middle class. A pattern of vote abstention existed prior deindustrialisation (see Verba and Nie 1972; Verba *et al.* 1979). This is also consistent with evidence from European

countries where working-class vote abstention can be attributed to a perceived sense of alienation from the political system (Heath 2018). 'The world of politics is culturally closer to middle-class experience, and arguably increasingly so, while individuals socialised in the working-class culture are alienated from it' (Lahtinen *et al.* 2019, p. 706). In the United States, citizens are less likely to vote in an election if they feel alienated from the positions that candidates take on policy issues (Plane and Gershtenson 2004). The working class are also less likely to participate in informal forms of participation, such as activism, which typically involve the upper middle class (Sherkat and Blocker 1994).

Deindustrialisation has led to a decline in traditional industrial working-class occupations and this has implications for class politics. It is widely acknowledged that the occupational hierarchy has evolved considerably in the last decades in wealthy democracies (Oesch 2006) and that the role of class in political behaviour has changed (Evans 2000; Flanagan and Dalton 1984; van der Waal *et al.* 2007). Following an occupational model, working-class status would be expected to become increasingly obsolete to a persons' political participation, as these jobs are becoming scarcer and there are fewer individuals that hold these occupations. This reasoning is consistent with a body of the literature that argues a decline in the importance of social class in political behaviour, a position which has been vigorously debated (for an overview see Clark 2003). Yet the 'decline of class' perspective implicitly assumes that the politically germane norms and behaviours which accompanied working-class jobs would somehow disappear along with the occupations in a post-industrial society. I take issue with this assumption and argue that a persistence of working-class participation in politics through enduring social structures should be considered.

### ***Family and the reproduction of working-class participation***

Without refuting the occupational model, we should also consider the important ways that social class was embedded in advanced industrial societies. As industrial occupations declined, the family is a social structure that preserves working-class relevance. The work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is particularly useful to help explain how class structures, in contrast to economic structures, tend to be very stable due to the phenomenon of social reproduction, where behaviours and norms are passed on between parents and children. Bourdieu (1977) stresses the symbolic dimension of working-class life, which goes beyond the narrow confines of the economy whereby classes actively seek to reproduce this behaviour to distinguish themselves from one another in social relations. This behaviour also extends to political behaviour. For instance, a study by Walsh, Jennings and Stoker (2004) demonstrates that Americans

who identify as working class due to their family origins (rather than their objective occupation) are less likely to participate in politics.

The transmission of political behaviour from parent to child is well established in the literature (Hyman 1959; Sapiro 2004; Dalton 1982; Kroh and Selb 2009). Parents have an important influence on the future political behaviour of their offspring (Campbell *et al.* 1960; Jennings, Stoker and Bowers 2009; Jennings and Niemi 2016). As Jennings *et al.* (2009) point out, parents are a fundamental part of political socialisation and impart legacies which influence how their children participate in politics as adults. As voting behaviour cannot be genetic, the family of origin exerts an environmental influence on political orientations in adulthood (Beck and Jennings 1991).

Following a family transmission model of political participation, a parent and child are expected to share similar political behaviours. Inter-generational transmission is generally understood as ‘the transfer of individual abilities, traits, behaviours, and outcomes from parents to their children’ (Lochner 2016, p. 1). There is evidence that documents the inter-generational transmission in political participation in the United States (Verba *et al.* 2005; Brady *et al.* 2015; Jennings and Niemi 2016; Plutzer 2002) as well as in European contexts (Gidengil *et al.* 2016; Bhatti and Hansen 2012; Quintelier 2015).

Assuming the inter-generational transmission within families, I expect working-class inequalities to persist in the political participation of adult children. I do not intend that participation behaviours are transmitted as a kind of carbon copy but that certain proclivities are instilled which impact the likelihood of engaging with the political world. For individuals that grow up outside of the middle class, politics appears to be ‘more remote from experience, more abstract and detached from ordinary realities’ (Bourdieu 1984, p. 400). If parental working-class occupation is expected to influence participation, then we should expect this to occur regardless of whether their adult children are employed in a working-class occupation themselves. In fact, there is evidence of a pattern of voting participation by parental social class in different European countries (Denny and Doyle 2009, 2008; Lahtinen *et al.* 2017) although this work does not consider the working class in particular.

Drawing on what we currently know about working-class participation and the inter-generational transmission of political behaviour, I formulate the following hypothesis for empirical testing:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): *Individuals with a working-class family background participate less in politics compared to those who did not grow up in a working-class family.*

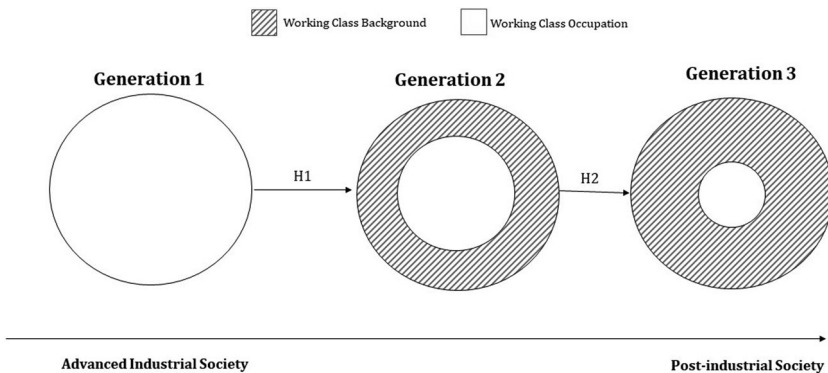
Typically, studies of family transmission of political behaviour include two generations (parents and their adult children) and tracing the

transmission across three generations is rare (for notable exceptions see (Jennings *et al.* 2009; Beck and Jennings 1975). Beck and Jennings (1975) urge scholars not to conceive of family transmission in a vacuum between a single parent and child. Rather, ‘socialisation within the family is not simply a two-generation phenomenon’ but as a three generational phenomenon (Beck and Jennings 1975, p. 83). Yet the practicality of considering three generations is often hindered by the lack of readily available data and the resources required to trace families over a long time period. This has limited our understanding of inter-generational transmission beyond more than two generations. Even if there is sparse evidence for third generation family transmission, there is some related evidence that supports the reproduction of political behaviours in more than two family generations. For instance, important experiences of events such as war or political violence can create a familial legacy that influences the political orientations through the third biological generation of descendants (Lupu and Peisakhin 2017; Dinas *et al.* 2021).

Drawing on the evidence of long-term familial legacies in political behaviour, I also present the following exploratory hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2 (H2): Individuals with parents from a working-class family background are less likely to participate in politics compared to those whose parents do not have a working-class background.*

The overall theoretical model and the two hypotheses are presented visually in the diagram shown in Figure 1. The x axis represents time, showing the transition from an advanced industrial society to a post-industrial society through the process of deindustrialisation. The circle labelled G1 shows the first generation of working-class families in an advanced industrial society who were working class due to their occupations. At this time, these occupations were concentrated in



**Figure 1.** A stylised model of transmission of political participation across biological generations of working class in the deindustrial period.

traditional manufacturing industries. The next generation (G2), the offspring of G1, is shown in the middle circle. The white part of the circle indicates a sub-group of G2 who are offspring of working-class G1 and who also hold working-class occupations. In other words, not only do they come from a working-class background but they also have working-class jobs. The shaded part of G2 represents individuals who have a working-class background, as descendants of G1 but that do not hold working-class occupations themselves. The white part of the circle is comparatively smaller in G2 and even smaller in their offspring (G3) since the availability of traditional working-class jobs is shrinking due to economic restructuring. Overall, the expected trend is that the reduced propensity to participate in politics is transmitted from the first generation of working class (G1) to *both* the shaded and white parts of the second generation of working class (G2). It also posits that low political participation is further transmitted from the second generation to their offspring (G3).

The model postulates how political behaviour can be transmitted through working-class families despite the decline in working-class occupations, as is visualised by the reduced size of the white portion of the circles in the diagram.

Going a step further, I explore possible theoretical explanations for *why* working-classed participation can persist through family transmission.<sup>1</sup> I propose two possible mechanisms, the first of which is a behaviour modelling mechanism. A well-acknowledged principle of social behaviour is that parents model behaviour for their children who, through their observation, learn to adopt similar behaviours in adulthood (Bandura 1977). This interpretation would be consistent with the widespread acknowledgement of habit formation in voter behaviour (Plutzer 2002; Denny and Doyle 2009). For instance, Plutzer (2002) finds that if parents have the habit of voting, their children also tend to form this voting habit as adults.

Another possible reason is via the locus of control mechanism. As working-class jobs disappeared, a non-material subculture carries on through families (Weis 2005, 2013). A political subculture comprises norms, values, beliefs, tastes and traditions (Miller and Riessman 1961), which underpin political behaviour. Working-class sub-culture in advanced industrial societies was characterised by a 'highly distinctive set of values and behavioural traits which stand in contrast to those in the middle class (...) and the dominant social order' (Parkin 1967, p. 283). As Parkin (1967) notes, it is not working-class occupations *per se* that became the crucial determinant of political behaviour but rather the persistence of their 'normative sub-systems'. For instance, American working-class families were more concerned with 'getting by', focussing on immediate survival



and material issues when compared to the middle-class concerns of 'getting ahead' which involved deferring gratification and addressing long-range issues (Miller and Riessman 1961). The working class tended to have narrow views of the world (Knupfer 1947) which are antithetical to fostering a deeper engagement with the political system. According to qualitative research, working-class Americans perceive that political opinions and influencing politics is only for others who are better off (Croteau and Croteau 1995; Eliasoph and Alexander 1998; Halle 2014). Moreover, some scholars have found that the working class lack a strong 'locus of internal control', in other words the belief that he or she can 'influence events and outcomes' in life (Betthäuser *et al.* 2020, p. 351). This is highly pertinent since individuals who have a weaker locus of internal control are less likely to engage with politics than individuals who do not (Marsh 2016).<sup>2</sup>

## Data and method

### Data

I use data from the Youth-Parent Socialisation Panel, a longitudinal survey of political behaviour across three biological generations (1965–1997) in the United States. The original wave was a face-to-face survey of a nationally representative sample ( $n=1669$ ) of high school seniors approximately aged 18 years old and their parents.<sup>3</sup> Follow-up surveys of these respondents later in adulthood were conducted in 1973 (approx. 25 years old), 1982 (approx. 35 years old), and 1997 (approx. 50 years old). Taking into account panel attrition (retention rate = 56 per cent), the resulting four-wave panel of respondents is comprised of 935 individuals. In 1997, the final wave of the survey, any offspring of the panel respondents aged 15 years old or older are also surveyed ( $n=769$ ). The survey of the third generation should be considered a lineage cohort and is not intended to be nationally representative.

This data has several properties that make it appropriate for this study. Firstly, it has the rare feature of surveying the political behaviours and attitudes of three biological generations: the parents of the high school seniors (1st generation, designated G1), following the high school cohort through adulthood (2nd generation, designated G2), and surveying their offspring (3rd generation, designated G3). Additionally, the historical timing and uniquely long time frame facilitates the analysis of working-class political participation as the US transitioned from an advanced industrial society to a post-industrial society (1965–1997). Overall, it is suited to the study of the long term effects of working-class origins in political behaviour within families.

## **Measures**

### ***Independent variable***

The independent variable in this analysis is a binary measure for having a working-class background (0=no, 1=yes). In the G2 cohort, having working-class background is operationalised as having a father who holds a working-class occupation in 1965, the first wave of the survey. In the case of the G3 cohort, having a working-class background means having a parent who holds a working-class occupation in 1997, during the fourth wave of the survey.

There is no definitive way to measure social class and the term 'working class' is an amorphous and historical term. The definition of working-class occupations is also quite challenging in the context of this study, as the measure must adequately span a period of considerable occupational re- structuring (1965–1997). I rely on the occupational class schema proposed by Oesch (2006).<sup>4</sup> I classify the fathers who are not currently employed, using their last occupation. According to the Oesch (2006) schema, working-class occupations are characterised by their low skill requirements and the fact that the job tasks are mostly of a routine nature. These occupations are found in the industrial or factory occupations traditionally associated with the working class but not exclusively. They are comprised of routine and unskilled workers that includes routine operatives (e.g. assemblers, machine operators), routine agriculture labourers (e.g. farm hands, loggers), routine office workers (e.g. mail sorting clerks, call centre employees), and routine services employees (e.g. retail assistants, hotel cleaners).<sup>5</sup> A detailed list of the occupations and how they have been mapped to working-class status is available in the online appendix.

Using this classification, approximately 19 per cent of the sample of high school seniors in 1965 are from a working-class family background.<sup>6</sup>

These individuals are slightly more likely to be female (58 per cent) and are pre- dominantly white (only approximately 5 per cent of are black). About 88 per cent of students with a working-class background have parents that did not attend college.

### ***Dependent variables***

The first dependent variable is a measure of formal political participation, which is indicated by whether or not the respondent reports voting in the last national election (0= did not vote, 1=voted).<sup>7</sup> So, for instance, an individual who is surveyed in 1982 is asked if they have voted in the last presidential election in 1980. The second dependent variable is a measure of informal participation which is measured as composite index of participating in the following activities: donating to a political

campaign, wearing a political button or sticker, attend a rally, influencing others in a political campaign, or other activities related to political campaigning. The same survey instrument is used for all biological generations of the study.

### **Mediator variables**

I test two possible mediating variables in the analysis. The first mediating variable is the parental voting behaviour. I measure this with a dichotomous variable which indicates if the parent (G1) reported voting (1 = yes) in the last national presidential election in the 1965, the first wave of the survey.

For the second mediating variable, locus of control in politics, I follow common practice and capture this using an indicator of political efficacy. Internal efficacy is measured as the number of the following statements the respondent agreed with: 'Voting is the only way that people like me can have any say about how the government does things' and 'sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't understand what is going on'. Individuals who agreed with both statements are coded as having low perceived efficacy, individuals who agreed with one statement are coded as having a medium level efficacy, and individuals who disagreed with both statements are coded as having a 'high' efficacy.

### **Control variable**

Working-class people also tend to have other compounding socio-economic characteristics which make them less likely to participate in politics. People in working-class occupations also tend to have a lower level of education, which make them less politically knowledgeable (Hyman and Sheatsley 1947). Working-class families live on a lower income which reduces their resources to participate informally in politics (e.g. campaign contributions) and also to make certain economic sacrifices required to vote (Beeghley 1986). To account for this spuriousness, it is necessary to consider these confounding factors which might affect a person's propensity to participate politically.

Based on extant literature, I introduce a set of control variables to take a respondent's socio-economic background into account: gender (female = 1), race (black = 1), age, education level (high school or less, some college, college degree or higher), respondent's household income decile, employment status (employed = 1) and if the respondent has a working-class occupation (1 = yes).<sup>8</sup> I also account for the material resources (or lack thereof) and human capital transmitted from parents which reduce participation (Verba *et al.* 2005; Akee *et al.* 2018). For this reason, the models also control for the parent's (G1) educational

attainment and the household income decile in the family of origin in 1965 (G1 income).

I also include a set of controls regarding a person's beliefs and attitudes towards politics which influence their propensity to participate. The first of these is political knowledge, which is measured as an additive index of how many questions about political affairs the respondent correctly answers. The next two controls are a perceived internal and external political efficacy.<sup>9</sup> Next, I control for the strength of partisanship by constructing a categorical measure for how attached a person is to the Republican or Democratic party (strong, weak, or not at all).<sup>10</sup> Finally, since parental propensity to vote predicts voting in adulthood, I control for whether the respondents' parent (G1) reported voting in the last national presidential election in the 1965 wave of the survey (1=yes).

### **Estimation strategy**

The analysis begins by estimating a logistic model of whether the respondent has voted in a national election (voted) in year  $t$ . In addition to the main predictor of interest, working-class occupation, the model includes parent (G1) and respondent (G2) controls as well as including year dummies for the different survey years. Then, in a further series of models, I estimate a regression with random effects to model the relationship between a working-class family background (G1) and informal political participation in the second (G2) and third generation (G3).

The models employ a random effects framework. Random effects are preferred over fixed effects in this instance since the predictor variable of interest (working-class background) is time-invariant and this difference would be absorbed by the intercept in a fixed effect approach (see Bell and Jones 2015) for an overview). Naturally, the drawback of employing a random effect framework is the potential for omitted variable bias. Although I include a battery of control variables, I cannot eliminate the possibility that there may be unobservable individual factors which are unaccounted for by the model. Following the regression analysis, I conduct a mediation analysis to test the two possible mechanisms for parent-child transmission of political participation in working-class families. Mediation analysis is one of the tools political scientists can use for exploring causal pathways (see Imai *et al.* 2011). Mediation analysis seeks to quantify the effect of a treatment that operates through a specific mechanism by estimating the average causal mediation effect (ACME) (Hicks and Tingley 2011). We should understand mediators as transmitting effects compared to moderators which augment or weaken them (Bullock and Ha 2011).

## Results

### *First and second generation working class*

Table 1 models how having a working-class family of origin shapes adult propensity to vote in the deindustrial period (1973–1997).<sup>11</sup> This analysis tells us how having a working-class family background (G1 working class) predicts a person's propensity to vote (G2 vote) even when controlling for whether he or she has a working-class occupation (G2 working class).

**Table 1.** The role of working-class family origins and the odds of voting in adulthood, 1973–1997.

|                                     | (1) G2 Men and Women | (2) G2 Men and Women | (3) G2 Men Only     |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| G1 working class                    | 0.535*<br>(-2.52)    | 0.591*<br>(-2.16)    | 0.330***<br>(-3.62) |
| G1 education level (ref=no college) |                      |                      |                     |
| some college                        | 0.815<br>(-0.63)     | 0.777<br>(-0.79)     | 0.887<br>(-0.27)    |
| BA or higher                        | 1.528<br>(1.00)      | 1.165<br>(0.36)      | 0.661<br>(-0.91)    |
| G1 household income                 | 1.228***<br>(3.61)   | 1.174**<br>(2.90)    | 1.060<br>(0.78)     |
| G2 female                           | 1.062<br>(0.28)      | 1.336<br>(1.35)      |                     |
| G2 black                            | 14.88**<br>(3.06)    | 11.39**<br>(2.82)    |                     |
| G2 age                              | 0.875<br>(-0.67)     | 1.041<br>(0.21)      | 0.680<br>(-1.83)    |
| G2 education level (ref=no college) |                      |                      |                     |
| some college                        | 1.595*<br>(2.08)     | 1.154<br>(0.63)      | 1.122<br>(0.38)     |
| BA or higher                        | 2.731***<br>(3.64)   | 1.613<br>(1.65)      | 1.354<br>(0.85)     |
| G2 employed                         | 1.115<br>(0.46)      | 1.143<br>(0.57)      | 1.512<br>(0.75)     |
| G2 working class                    | 0.491***<br>(-3.45)  | 0.423***<br>(-4.18)  | 0.348***<br>(-3.89) |
| G2 household income                 | 1.076*<br>(2.01)     | 1.038<br>(1.00)      | 1.026<br>(0.50)     |
| G1 voted                            |                      | 3.371***<br>(4.41)   | 4.850***<br>(4.52)  |
| G2 internal efficacy                |                      | 1.292*<br>(1.99)     | 1.079<br>(0.47)     |
| G2 external efficacy                |                      | 1.675***<br>(4.44)   | 1.321<br>(1.82)     |
| G2 political knowledge              |                      | 1.259**<br>(2.93)    | 1.046<br>(0.45)     |
| G2 partisanship                     |                      | 0.660*<br>(-2.26)    | 0.636<br>(-1.91)    |
| Insig2u                             | 2.814***<br>(4.79)   | 2.461***<br>(3.98)   | 0.996<br>(-0.01)    |
| year dummies                        | Yes                  | Yes                  | Yes                 |
| Observations                        | 2275                 | 2275                 | 1019                |

Exponentiated coefficients; *t* statistics in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Proceeding in a stepwise fashion, Model 1 introduces the baseline model which includes the dependent variable (G1 working class) and controls for parental socio-economic background (G1) and the respondent's socio-economic status (G2) as well as introducing year dummies. Model 2 introduces a dummy variable for the voting behaviour of the parent (G1) and controls for the respondents' perceived political efficacy (both internal and external), their political knowledge and their strength of partisanship (all G2). Finally, Model 3 is the same as Model 2 except that it restricts the model to male respondents only.

The findings in [Table 1](#) demonstrate that there are, indeed, two distinct ways in which being working class becomes negatively related to voting in the deindustrial period. The first way is through the respondents' own occupation: respondents employed in working-class occupations are significantly less likely to vote than those employed in other occupations. In Model 2, the odds ratio for G2 working class is 0.423 and is highly statistically significant. This relationship is significant even though it takes into account confounding socio-economic factors such as educational attainment or income. In Model 2, unlike education and income, a persons' working-class occupation remains statistically significant when including a further set of controls which include: a person's beliefs about their efficacy in politics (G2 internal efficacy and G2 external efficacy), partisan attachment (G2 partisanship), political knowledge (G2 political knowledge) and their parents' voting participation (G1 voted). This finding is consistent with the occupational model of social class, whereby it is a person's current working-class occupation which structures their propensity to vote.

Importantly, Model 2 also demonstrates that being a biological descendent of the 1960s industrial working class influences a person's voting propensity in its own right. As hypothesised (H1), I find a negative relationship between having a working-class background (G1 working class) and voting in adulthood, regardless of whether or not the respondent is employed in a working-class job. In [Table 1](#), the odds ratio in Model 2 with the full set of controls is 0.591. Model 3 predicts the same model as Model 2 but restricts the sample to only male respondents. This is done as a more stringent test of the family transmission hypothesis based on the assumption that there should be a stronger transmission between fathers and sons as children's' behaviour tends to mimic more closely the parent of the same gender. As expected, we observe in Model 3, that when looking only at the male respondents, the relationship continues to be negative and is more highly statistically significant even if halving the sample size reduces statistical power.

In order to interpret the coefficients from a substantive point of view, I use the model estimates to calculate predicted probabilities. Using these, we can ascertain that individuals who came from a working-class family background but who do not work in working-class occupations have a 0.81 probability of voting, holding the other covariates of the model constant at their means. Individuals who both come from a working-class family background and also are themselves employed in a working-class occupation as adults have a 0.62 probability of voting. Both of these probabilities are statistically and substantively lower than the probability of voting of a person that has neither a working-class family background nor is employed in a working-class occupation (0.92).

Next, I analyse the relationship between the working class and informal political participation. Informal political participation is a continuous variable so I apply linear models rather than logistic models. The results of the linear regression models with random effects are displayed in [Table 2](#). As in the previous analysis, the year dummies and sets of control variables are introduced in a series of models. Model 2 in [Table 3](#) shows that individuals who are employed in working-class occupations, G2 working-class occupation, are not significantly less likely to participate informally in politics in contrast to individuals in other occupations (coefficient =  $-0.089$ ). Unlike with formal political participation (voting), the occupational model of working-class politics does not explain informal forms of political participation in activities such as campaigning.

However, the results do support the claim that descending from a working-class family predicts a lower level of informal political participation. [Table 2](#) also displays the coefficients for having a working-class background, i.e. parents who were employed in working-class occupations G1 working-class occupation. In Models 2, applying the full set of controls, there is a statistically negative relationship between having a working-class background and participating in politics informally with a coefficient of  $-0.240$ . The model includes a control for the parental informal political participation (G1 political participation) and the coefficient for G1 working class is still statistically significant. In Model 3, when the sample is restricted only to male respondents, the coefficient is much stronger (increasing to  $-0.709$ ) and more highly statistically significant.<sup>12</sup>

In a next step, the mediation analysis tests two possible mechanisms for the transmission of low political participation through working-class families. There are two possible mediators that are tested: the behaviour modelling mechanism and the low locus of control mechanism. The mediation analysis has been conducted for both dependent variables: voting in presidential election and informal political participation. All of the control variables from the previous analysis are included in the mediated models.

**Table 2.** The role of working-class family origins on informal political participation in adulthood (1973–1997).

|   | (1) G2 Men and Women | (2) G2 Men and Women | (3) G2 Men Only      |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| G1 working class                                    | -0.243*<br>(-2.42)   | -0.240*<br>(-2.52)   | -0.709***<br>(-4.59) |
| G1 education level (ref=no college)<br>some college | 0.178<br>(1.49)      | 0.121<br>(1.07)      | 0.295<br>(1.65)      |
| BA or higher  | 0.0528<br>(0.39)     | -0.0827<br>(-0.64)   | 0.101<br>(0.51)      |
| G1 household income                                 | -0.0212<br>(-0.96)   | -0.0464*<br>(-2.20)  | -0.132***<br>(-3.92) |
| G2 female   | -0.0733<br>(-0.92)   | -0.0268<br>(-0.35)   |                      |
| G2 black  | 0.934***<br>(3.65)   | 0.651**<br>(2.66)    |                      |
| G2 age  | -0.0828<br>(-1.05)   | -0.0430<br>(-0.58)   | -0.0988<br>(-0.97)   |
| G2 education level (ref=no college)<br>some college | 0.295**<br>(3.26)    | 0.153<br>(1.74)      | 0.516***<br>(3.69)   |
| BA or higher  | 0.602***<br>(6.01)   | 0.313**<br>(3.09)    | 0.433**<br>(2.83)    |
| G2 employed   | 0.197*<br>(2.41)     | 0.214**<br>(2.66)    | -0.417<br>(-1.70)    |
| G2 working class                                    | -0.0898<br>(-1.08)   | -0.0892<br>(-1.10)   | -0.120<br>(-1.02)    |
| G2 household income                                 | 0.0356**<br>(2.72)   | 0.0168<br>(1.30)     | -0.0351<br>(-1.80)   |
| G1 political participation                          |                      | 0.119***<br>(5.01)   | 0.154***<br>(4.20)   |
| G2 internal efficacy                                |                      | 0.319***<br>(7.31)   | 0.259***<br>(4.16)   |
| G2 external efficacy                                |                      | 0.122**<br>(2.98)    | 0.146*<br>(2.41)     |
| G2 political knowledge                              |                      | 0.0686**<br>(2.58)   | 0.00612<br>(0.15)    |
| G2 partisanship                                     |                      | -0.436***<br>(-7.12) | -0.470***<br>(-5.47) |
| Constant  | 3.114<br>(1.51)      | 2.127<br>(1.08)      | 5.344<br>(1.96)      |
| year dummies  | Yes                  | Yes                  | Yes                  |
| Observations  | 2267                 | 2221                 | 1025                 |

*t* statistics in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

The results confirm a behaviour modelling mechanism but do not support a locus of control mechanism. In Table 3, the ACME (the average causal mediating effect) for G1 voting in the election is negative and statistically significant. More telling, is that nearly 20 per cent of the total effect (TE) is explained by this mediator. This is evidence of a partial mediation, with the remaining 80 per cent attributed to the direct effect (DE) of parental working-class occupation. In other words, parental working-class occupation still has a direct negative relationship with



**Table 3.** Causal mediation analysis.

| G2 voted in last election           |                  |                  |                  |               |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|---------------|
| Mediator                            | AMCE             | ADE              | TE               | % TE Mediated |
| G1 vote in last election<br>(1965)  | -0.009           | -0.037           | -0.047           | 19.96%        |
|                                     | (-0.016, -0.004) | (-0.074, -0.003) | (-0.083, -0.011) |               |
| G1 locus of control<br>(1965)       | 0.000            | -0.042           | -0.043           | 0.00%         |
|                                     | (-0.002, -0.002) | (-0.042, -0.080) | (-0.081, -0.006) |               |
| G2 informal participation           |                  |                  |                  |               |
| Mediator                            | AMCE             | ADE              | Total Effect     | % TE Mediated |
| G1 informal participation<br>(1965) | -0.007           | -0.266           | -0.273           | 2.62%         |
|                                     | (-0.026, 0.11)   | (-0.409, -0.120) | (-0.416, -0.122) |               |
| G1 locus of control<br>(1965)       | 0.000            | -0.266           | -0.266           | 1.26%         |
|                                     | (-0.028, -0.030) | (-0.409, -0.120) | (-0.416, -0.116) |               |

Note: The total, average direct, and average causal mediation effects of working-class family origins (G1) on voting and informal political participation in G2. Models are linear regressions and parentheses display 95% confidence intervals. Models also include a full set of controls and year fixed effects.

voting even when taking into account the role of parental voting behaviour. This is likely due to other aspects of parental occupation which could influence transmission such as social networks through employment or the types of skills which are acquired through tasks associated with routine industrial work.

There is no evidence that G1 informally participating in politics mediates the effect on G2 informal participation nor that G1 locus of control mediates the effect on either dependent variable. This can be observed by the non-significant AMCEs and also the low percentage of total effect that is mediated.

### **Third generation working class**

I now examine the effect of a working-class background (G2) on their offspring (G3) in the sample. The data on the political participation of their offspring is only available in the final wave of the survey, 1997. Unfortunately, when analysing this sample (G3) it is not possible to control for current occupation or their level of political knowledge as these items were not included on the survey.

The models in Table 4 test the relationship between having a working-class background (G2 working-class occupation) and the log odds of voting. In all three models the log odds are above 1.0 but they are not statistically significant. In other words, voting behaviour in the third biological generation shows no difference between those who have parents (G2) in working-class occupations than those that do not. The findings regarding

**Table 4.** Working-class family origins and the odds of voting in G3, 1997.

|  | (1)                | (2)                | (3)                 |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| G2 working class                                   | 1.229<br>(0.68)    | 1.192<br>(0.57)    | 1.221<br>(0.64)     |
| G2 household income                                | 1.097*<br>(1.99)   | 1.097<br>(1.96)    | 1.106*<br>(2.07)    |
| G2 education level (ref = no college)              |                    |                    |                     |
| some college                                       | 0.817<br>(-0.93)   | 0.802<br>(-1.00)   | 0.722<br>(-1.43)    |
| BA or higher                                       | 0.762<br>(-1.17)   | 0.686<br>(-1.59)   | 0.588*<br>(-2.12)   |
| G3 female  | 1.567**<br>(2.65)  | 1.577**<br>(2.66)  | 1.641**<br>(2.81)   |
| G3 black   | 0.658<br>(-0.75)   | 0.613<br>(-0.86)   | 0.481<br>(-1.26)    |
| G3 age   | 1.071*<br>(2.45)   | 1.069*<br>(2.36)   | 1.089**<br>(2.91)   |
| G3 education level (ref = no college) some college | 2.191**<br>(3.13)  | 2.139**<br>(3.01)  | 1.759*<br>(2.13)    |
| BA or higher                                       | 2.491***<br>(3.47) | 2.474***<br>(3.41) | 1.743<br>(1.90)     |
| G3 marital status                                  | 1.275<br>(1.01)    | 1.367<br>(1.29)    | 1.427<br>(1.41)     |
| G2 voted in last pres election                     |                    | 2.569***<br>(3.37) | 2.706***<br>(3.49)  |
| G3 internal political efficacy                     |                    |                    | 0.945<br>(-0.43)    |
| G3 external political efficacy                     |                    |                    | 1.376**<br>(2.67)   |
| G3 partisanship strength                           |                    |                    | 0.565***<br>(-4.95) |
| Observations                                       | 661                | 661                | 661                 |

Exponentiated coefficients; *t* statistics in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

informal forms of political participation in [Table 5](#) are similar: there is no statistical relationship between having parents who have working-class occupations and the level of participation of their adult offspring (G3).<sup>13</sup> Taken together, these findings are not supportive of Hypothesis 2.

Yet, the working-class families can nonetheless pass on a legacy of unequal political participation to the third generation. The results do show that the propensity to participate politically is transmitted from G2 to G3, indicating that there is an indirect influence of working-class background on G3 if G2 respondents that have working-class origins are less likely to vote. In [Table 4](#), a variable for whether G2 votes is included in Model 2 and it is highly positive and significant. This means that respondents in G3 were significantly more likely to vote if their parents (G2) voted, and less likely not to vote if their parents did not vote. The substantive effect of size of having had a parent that votes is considerable (log odds = 2.706) which is considerably larger than, for instance, the

**Table 5.** Working-class family origins and informal political participation in G3, 1997.

|  | (1)                  | (2)                 | (3)                  |
|--|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| G2 working class                                 | -0.0520<br>(-0.30)   | -0.00848<br>(-0.05) | 0.0177<br>(0.11)     |
| G2 household income                              | 0.0293<br>(1.06)     | 0.00408<br>(0.16)   | 0.00851<br>(0.33)    |
| G2 education level (ref=no college)              |                      |                     |                      |
| some college                                     | 0.0181<br>(0.14)     | 0.0336<br>(0.28)    | -0.0222<br>(-0.19)   |
| BA or higher                                     | 0.171<br>(1.24)      | 0.0923<br>(0.71)    | 0.0167<br>(0.13)     |
| G3 female  | 0.0257<br>(0.26)     | 0.0243<br>(0.26)    | 0.0446<br>(0.48)     |
| G3 black   | 0.478<br>(1.41)      | 0.546<br>(1.70)     | 0.420<br>(1.34)      |
| G3 age   | -0.0148<br>(-0.92)   | -0.0250<br>(-1.64)  | -0.0156<br>(-1.05)   |
| G3 education level (ref=no college) some college | 0.264<br>(1.72)      | 0.361*<br>(2.53)    | 0.208<br>(1.46)      |
| BA or higher                                     | 0.337*<br>(1.99)     | 0.530***<br>(3.54)  | 0.268<br>(1.71)      |
| G3 marital status                                | -0.220<br>(-1.55)    | -0.233<br>(-1.73)   | -0.205<br>(-1.56)    |
| G3 internal political efficacy                   | 0.107<br>(1.45)      |                     | 0.0943<br>(1.39)     |
| G3 external political efficacy                   | 0.219**<br>(3.25)    |                     | 0.142*<br>(2.26)     |
| G3 partisanship strength                         | -0.387***<br>(-6.17) |                     | -0.319***<br>(-5.46) |
| G2 participation                                 |                      | 0.376***<br>(11.35) | 0.343***<br>(10.50)  |
| Constant   | 1.293*<br>(2.40)     | 0.824<br>(1.72)     | 1.018*<br>(2.04)     |
| Observations                                     | 658                  | 658                 | 658                  |

*t* statistics in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

coefficient for having a university degree 1.74. A similar pattern emerges in Table 5, where Model 3 shows that the informal political participation of the parent (G2 participation) is significantly and positively associated with informal political participation in their offspring. Since respondents in G2 from a working-class family were less likely to vote and participate in politics overall (as demonstrated in the previous section), this shows an important way in which class-based political inequalities can persist from one generation to the next.

### Limitations

The results in the study have several limitations which need to be considered. While the data study of the political behaviour of three biological generations, the sample is not nationally representative. The

sample is strictly representative of high school seniors in 1965, their parents, and their off- spring. Second, the use of random effects rather than a fixed effects frame- work as an empirical strategy means that there is a potential for endogeneity. This means that unobservable factors cannot be ruled out as alternative explanations. For instance, the role of union membership and the decline of union density cannot be taken into consideration as this question was not consistently asked throughout the waves of the panel study. Another aspect which has not been considered in this analysis, is the possible role of local communities and geographic context in explaining patterns of working-class political participation. The findings from the causal mediation analysis must be interpreted with the same caution given that this is not an experimental design and the ‘treatment’ of parents having a working-class occupation has not been randomly allocated to the respondents.

The validity of the results pertaining to the third generation should be interpreted with a greater deal of caution for several reasons. First, as previously mentioned, information on the current occupation and political knowledge of the third biological generation are not available. Therefore, the results are not able to take into account the possible influence of the respondents’ current working-class occupation. Furthermore, the mean age of this third generation is 23 and it may be that these respondents have not had enough time to develop established adult patterns of political participation at the time of the survey. Regrettably, the last wave of the survey was in 1997 and no follow up surveys were conducted.

While this research design does have the aforementioned limitations, the fact that it examines the role of a generation’s characteristics on the subsequent generation’s outcomes ensures a fixed temporal ordering. This rules out the possibility of reverse causality which typically plague observational studies. This type of reasoning, known as ‘granger causality’, is not sufficient to prove causality but does demonstrate a temporal ordering which is consistent with a causal argument.

## Discussion and conclusion

The objective of this study has been to understand if social reproduction within families has preserved working-class patterns of political participation in the transition to post-industrial society. The findings confirm the well- documented transmission of political participation within families (Beck and Jennings 1991; Verba *et al.* 2005; Jennings and Niemi 2016) but also demonstrate the role of parental occupation as having its own influence in this transmission. This is a complimentary explanation to existing explanations which emphasise the role of education as in prominent works (Brady *et al.* 2015; Schlozman *et al.* 2020).

Using a sample of political behaviour in three biological generations in the United States over the early to mid-deindustrial period (1965–1997), I report several important findings. First, I find that high school seniors who grew up in working-class families in the 1960s were less likely to vote as adults and participate in other informal aspects of politics. I find that this holds regardless of whether these second-generation biological descendants have working-class occupations or not. Finally, the study shows that a low political participation (both voting and informal) in this second generation of respondents is transmitted to their offspring in the third biological generation. Compared to the findings about voting, the findings regarding informal forms of political participation are somewhat weaker. One reason for this perhaps has been the transformation of informal political participation since the late 1960s America (Putnam 2000). While voting in presidential elections has remained very similar due to its formal aspects, ways of informally participating in American politics have been evolving and new forms of engagement have emerged (Bennett *et al.* 2013).

Importantly, the findings also inform our understanding about how parental occupation influences the transmission between parent and child. It further considers parental occupation as a ‘pathway to participation,’ a reference the seminal work by Beck and Jennings (1982) that considers how socio-economic family background can influence political participation beyond the traditional socio-economic material explanations. The results support the notion that voting is a learned behaviour (Plutzer 2002), which observing children learn from watching their parents and then are more likely to replicate in their adult life.

This study implies that occupational structures of industrial society are still politically relevant and that inequalities in political participation are a legacy in the biological descendants of working-class families of the 1960s. By conceiving of working class not only as those who hold working-class jobs, I am able to study the family members whose life trajectories have also been affected by manufacturing decline. The findings do not dispute the unequal political participation of individuals with working-class occupations but compliment this with explaining how these inequalities are passed down through families. This refutes traditional bottom-up approaches which argue the decline of class voting in post-industrial life (Clark *et al.* 2001; Clark 2003; Nieuwbeerta 1996). Instead, I find evidence of the social reproduction of social class in political participation. Such a process maintains the political relevance of the working class in post-industrial society as features of industrial societies remain embedded in social structures such as the family.

Reckoning with this, as I do in this study, only augments the importance of the working class in politics and calls for renewed attention to the social processes which cause this to persist. This presents several fruitful avenues for future research. The findings in this study show transmission between parent and child but no direct transmission between grandparent and child, which is not surprising since transmission is expected to decay from generation to the next (Beck and Jennings 1975). This raises questions about whether working-class-based inequalities in participation will dwindle as social structures align with economic restructuring over the long term. Or perhaps the rise of class-based social identification in political behaviour as documented by Walsh, Jennings and Stoker (2004), will keep allow these inequalities to persist? While this study observes a relationship between descending from the 1960s industrial working class and political participation, we still do not know if these individuals are conscious of their own working-class origins. Much is to be learned about the role of these origins in developing political consciousness and how this affects engaging in political life.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes

1. As a clarification, I am interested in isolating the effect of working-class occupations, not the possible effect of low education or income though I do acknowledge that these are confounding effects in inter-generational transmission of political participation.
2. This concept is often referred to as political efficacy (Finkel 1985).
3. While the sample was designed to be nationally representative of high school seniors in 1965, it should not be considered nationally representative of all 18 year-olds. The sample is upwardly biased based on education as it does not include individuals who did not attend the final year of high school.
4. To ensure that the analysis is not sensitive to the selection of class-occupational schema, I also conduct the analysis while applying a Goldthorpean class schema. According to a Goldthorpean schema, working-class occupations are considered to be workers who are involved in industrial skilled, semi-skilled, or unskilled labour and excludes those who work in the agricultural sector. The results, which are available in the online appendix, are consistent with those found applying the Oesch (2006) class schema and do not alter the findings of this study.
5. In rare cases of office or service work where the extent of routine tasks was not clear (e.g. other clerical), the occupation was designated as working class if the person did not hold a tertiary degree.
6. Considering the time period of the survey, these occupations can be considered as part of the 'old' or industrial working-class occupations rather

than the 'new' working-class occupations which involve routine service work (see Oesch (2006)).

7. Self-reported participation has the limitation of introducing social desirability bias, as some respondents may perceive voting and other forms of political participation to be duties that must be performed according to social norms.
8. I use the same occupational classification as for the independent variable.
9. Internal and external efficacy are categorical variables provided by the Youth-Parent Socialization Panel survey. A description of internal efficacy measurement has been described in the mediating variable section above. External efficacy is measured as an index based which of the following statements the respondents agrees with: 'I don't think public officials care much what people like me think' and 'people like me don't have any say about what the government does.' For both measures, individuals who agreed with both statements are coded as having 'low' perceived efficacy, individuals who agreed with one statement are coded as having 'medium' perceived efficacy, and individuals who disagreed with both statements are coded as having 'high' perceived efficacy.
10. Partisanship measures how strongly the person feels attached to a given party but not which party they are attached to.
11. I do not include the propensity of G2 respondents voting in 1965 since many respondents were not above the voting age of 18.
12. The coefficient for 'black' is not included in the model because there are no black males in the sample. This is due to the fact that very few original respondents in 1965 identified as black and this was further reduced by attrition in the panel over time.
13. A separate analysis did not find a direct relationship between G1 working-class occupation and G3 political participation. Results available upon request.

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