




Class, subjective status, and turnout in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by Weber's distinction between class and status, the paper explores the independent and joint role of social class and subjective social status in shaping electoral participation in contemporary European democracies. While social class has long been established as a predictor of political behaviour, less attention has been paid to the influence of subjective status, an individual's self-assessed position within the social hierarchy. Drawing on nineteen waves of data from the International Social Survey Program from 2002 to 2021 across twenty-five European countries, this paper examines how social class and subjective status independently and jointly influence electoral participation. The findings indicate that while social class remains a significant determinant of electoral participation, subjective status offers further insight. Individuals with higher subjective status are more likely to vote, regardless of their social class. Moreover, within social classes, particularly the working class, participation rates are stratified by subjective status, with a notable gap between individuals with high and low subjective status. By employing Linear Probability Models with Country-Year Fixed Effects, the study accounts for cross-national differences and provides a robust analysis of electoral participation in Europe. These results contribute to a deeper understanding of political inequality, suggesting that subjective aspects of social stratification should be considered alongside traditional class-based analyses to fully grasp the factors influencing political participation in European democracies.

1. Introduction

The distinction between class and status, as articulated by Weber (1922 [1968]), is central to political sociological research, underscoring the complex interplay between social inequality and political behaviour (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2004, 2007). Whereas social class is often understood in terms of objective economic indicators, status reflects individuals' relative social standing, shaped by social networks and individual comparisons. Chan and Goldthorpe (2007) argued that class and status should be regarded as distinct yet interrelated dimensions of social stratification, and examining these two factors together provides a more detailed understanding of political dynamics. Class and status, although overlapping, operate through different channels and influence political outcomes through distinct processes. While social class has long been shown to influence political behaviours, including turnout (Anduiza, 2002; Evans & Tilley, 2017), less is known about how social status stratifies electoral participation within social classes. This study will answer this call, analysing the stratification of electoral participation in relation to both subjective status and social class, separately and jointly.

The paper will focus on subjective social status, defined as

individuals' self-assessment of their standing within the social hierarchy (Gidron & Hall, 2017). Status is a relational concept, emerging from individuals' comparisons with others and the social groups to which they do or do not belong (Runciman, 1966). Subjective status captures individuals' perceptions of their relative social standing, thereby broadening the traditional analysis of class-based electoral behaviours to encompass the distinct influence of perceived status, alongside objective stratifiers. Research indicates that individuals' perceptions of their status relative to others can shape political attitudes and behaviours in ways that may parallel or diverge from class-based patterns (Bobzien, 2020; Duman, 2020; Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2020; Melli & Scherer, 2024; Nolan & Weisstanner, 2022).

Low electoral turnout is regarded as a potential threat to democratic systems, as it can exacerbate social inequalities by excluding marginalised groups from political representation (Verba & Nie, 1972). Electoral participation serves as a crucial mechanism for mitigating social inequalities, as low turnout among lower strata of the population may perpetuate cycles of political disengagement and alienation, undermining the inclusivity of democratic processes (Anduiza, 2002; Tuorto, 2011). Turnout thus has implications not only for the distribution of political influence but also for the perceived legitimacy of the

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democratic system itself. Given that both objective and subjective aspects of social stratification are likely to shape individuals' political engagement, this paper investigates whether and how subjective status stratifies electoral participation within and across social classes, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of political inequality in electoral participation. This study focuses exclusively on European countries, which share relatively common cultural norms related to inequality and electoral participation, along with similar historical patterns in political engagement. This allows for a more rigorous examination of the relationship between class, subjective social status, and electoral participation by reducing potential confounding factors that might arise when including regions with greater cultural and political diversity. This paper aims to answer to the research question: *To what extent do social class and subjective social status shape electoral participation in Europe, both independently and jointly?*

Using nineteen waves of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) from 2002 to 2021 across twenty-five European countries, this study employs Linear Probability Models with country-year Fixed Effects, effects decomposition techniques, and meta-analysis to examine electoral participation. The findings reveal that turnout in Europe is stratified by both social class and subjective social status, with these two dimensions operating both independently and jointly. When analysed together, a subjective status stratification emerges within classes. Individuals with high subjective social status exhibit a high likelihood of voting, and the differences in voting propensity between such individuals across classes are relatively small. In contrast, individuals with low subjective social status are less likely to vote, and a clear class-based gradient emerges within this group. The gap in voting propensity between high and low subjective-status individuals is more pronounced within the working class, though it remains present in the more affluent classes. Notably, working-class individuals with high subjective social status show a higher likelihood to vote compared to lower subjective-status individuals in the upper classes. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of electoral participation and political inequality, showing that subjective perceptions are as influential as objective socioeconomic conditions in shaping electoral participation in Europe.

2. Background

2.1. Class, status, and politics

The relationship between social class and political behaviour has long been recognised (Butler & Stokes, 1969; Lipset, 1960), with scholars viewing the development of electoral politics in modern democracies as a democratic expression of class-based struggles (Korpi, 1983). Social class remains a central factor in shaping political behaviours, even in contemporary post-industrial democracies (Evans, 2000). In recent years, however, the focus has shifted from 'class voting' to 'class non-voting,' reflecting the growing disengagement of the working class from electoral participation (Evans & Tilley, 2017; Rennwald, 2020). At the same time, scholars argued that status politics has gained prominence, adding complexity to the influence of social stratification on politics (Carella & Ford, 2020; Chan et al., 2020; Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007; Gidron & Hall, 2017).

Both class and status are central to understanding political dynamics and their connections with social stratification. In his class-status-parties theory of power, Weber distinguish class and status as relevant, partially overlapping, but separate aspects of social stratification (Weber, 1922 [1968]). Chan and Goldthorpe (2007) argue for treating these as distinct forms of stratification that operate through different social processes. Although class and status partially overlap (Bihagen & Lambert, 2018), they capture distinct dimensions of social stratification, both of which are crucial for understanding the social order. As outlined by Weber, 'whereas the genuine place of classes is within the economic order, the place of status groups is within the social order [...]. From within these spheres, classes and status groups influence one another [...]' (Weber,

1922 [1968], p. 938). Analysing variation in status within the class structure can reveal insights into social stratification's complexities (Chan, 2019; Chan & Goldthorpe, 2004, 2007).

Class (*Klasse*) is defined as a grouping based on life chances tied to economic opportunities. A class structure is formed through social relations within the economy, particularly within labour markets and production units. Class structures are grounded in these objective relations, which frame risks, constraints, and opportunities in market societies (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007). Although classes are stratified by economic relations, they are not inherently hierarchical. For Weber, classes are not social communities (*Gemeinschaften*), but groups of individuals sharing similar economic conditions that shape their life chances (Weber, 1922 [1968]). Prominent class schemas, such as the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero schema (1979) and its subsequent evolution, the European Socio-Economic Classification (Rose & Harrison, 2007), define class positions based on social relations within employment, without necessarily implying a strict hierarchy (Goldthorpe, 1986).

In contrast, social status (*Stände*) or 'social order' captures hierarchical relations that represent widely 'perceived' and typically accepted' levels of 'social superiority, equality, or inferiority' (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2004, p. 383, emphasis added). This form of stratification tends to be associated not only with individual achievements, but with broad, often ascribed, social attributes linked to particular social positions. Stratification by status thus relies on a subjective component, i.e., the social standing individuals assign both to their own group and to others (Runciman, 1966, pp. 36–52). Status distinctions exist across and within classes (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2004). Accordingly, status not only stratifies society broadly but also creates distinctions within the class structure itself (Runciman, 1966).

This study examines a specific dimension of status, namely subjective social status, which is partially distinct from, yet related to, the broader concept of social status outlined above. Subjective social status, the perception of one's place within the social hierarchy, is inherently relational, shaped by individuals' assessments of their status relative to others (Gidron & Hall, 2017). A frequently used approach to gauge subjective status involves asking individuals to rank themselves on a social ladder (Adler et al., 2000), a method that has gained widespread application across societies due to its universal 'top' and 'bottom' reference points, facilitating cross-national comparison (Evans & Kelley, 2017; Raudenská, 2024). However, some scholars question whether this measure accurately captures perceptions of prestige or social standing (Evans & Tilley, 2017).

Research has explored the primary factors shaping subjective status within social stratification. These factors encompass objective socioeconomic indicators, such as income, occupation, and education, as well as social background, peer influences, and broader social and economic contexts (Buchel et al., 2021; Centers, 1949; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). For instance, occupation not only takes up a significant portion of an individual's life but also plays a critical role in shaping one's social integration and hierarchical position, thereby conferring various advantages and disadvantages (Durkheim, 1933; Weber, 1922 [1968]). Similarly, individuals' backgrounds, including the socioeconomic conditions of early life, profoundly shape political attitudes and perceptions of social standing (Curtis, 2016). These early influences endure over time, as individuals rely on familial and social reference points from childhood when assessing their own social position (Irwin, 2015).

The subjective perception of social status is further shaped by social networks and reference groups, which often provide an inaccurate image of the broader social structure. Individuals tend to use their social circles as samples of the wider population, resulting in a biased perception of social standing. This reliance on non-representative networks partly explains why many individuals position themselves at the midpoint of the social ladder (Kelley & Evans, 1995). Subjective status is not only derived from one's position in the status hierarchy, but is also influenced by the socioeconomic status of one's acquaintances (Hodge &

Treiman, 1968; Tajfel, 1974). Subjective social status often diverges from objective indicators, shedding light on why some individuals advocate for redistributive policies that may not serve their own 'objective' economic interests (Duman, 2020). This underscores the partial alignment of subjective social status with Chan and Goldthorpe's conceptualisation of social status (2004, 2007).

The relationship between subjective status and objective class position has been a matter of recent debate. Contrary to claims that the working class has experienced a general decline in both objective and subjective status (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2017), some recent studies argue otherwise. Oesch and Vigna (2022) found no significant downward trend in the subjective social status of workers or widening class disparities over time. Nolan and Weisstanner (2022) similarly observe that there has been no absolute decline in the working class's subjective status over the last four decades.

While objective stratifiers, such as social class, capture the structural conditions and associated advantages or disadvantages tied to a particular occupation or social position, subjective factors of social stratification, such as subjective social status, focus on individuals' perceptions of these conditions, offering greater insight into personal evaluations and political preferences (Bobzien, 2023; Oesch & Vigna, 2023). Subjective social status has proven valuable in studies on populism (Gidron & Hall, 2020; Melli & Scherer, 2024), support for radical right parties (Gidron & Hall, 2017), and redistribution preferences (Bobzien, 2020; Duman, 2020). Crucially, Gidron and Hall (2020) viewed subjective social status as an indicator of social marginalisation, linked to individuals' perception of their value and inclusion in society. Their findings suggest that those with lower subjective social status are more likely to exhibit political alienation and disengagement from mainstream politics, making them more inclined to support left and right radical parties.

2.2. Social stratification and turnout

Stein Rokkan (1962) identified three crucial elements of electoral participation in contemporary democracies: the universality of access, meaning that all individuals with full political rights can participate; the equality of influence, which means that the influence of each vote on the outcome is the same regardless of who casts the vote; and the 'irresponsibility' of the acts, since it is up to individuals to take responsibility for their own choice, which is otherwise devoid of individual consequences (Rokkan, 1962, p. 67). A low turnout poses a threat to the democratic system: given that voting can contribute to compensating the negative effect of socioeconomic inequalities (Verba & Nie, 1972), low turnout, by the exclusion of marginal groups from political participation, generates skewed representation and perpetuates a vicious cycle of political alienation and inequality. Abstention can represent a symptom of 'apathy, dissatisfaction, and alienation on the citizen's part' (Anduiza, 2002, p. 645). Furthermore, political participation has been identified as an essential mechanism that can help mitigate the impact of socioeconomic inequalities (Verba & Nie, 1972). Accordingly, a low turnout rate may be taken to indicate that a considerable proportion of the population has been effectively disenfranchised from participation in the political system, while a high turnout is indicative of a greater number of engaged citizens using the available channels to exert influence over the decision-making processes (Anduiza, 2002).

Electoral participation is shaped by objective stratifiers such as class and education (Anduiza, 2002; Evans & Hepplewhite, 2022; Maraffi et al., 2011; Tuorto, 2011). Evans and Tilley (2017) show that, in Britain, the working class is significantly less likely to vote, exhibiting a sustained pattern of abstention over the past two decades. Similar patterns can be found in other European countries (Rennwald, 2020). However, there remains a significant gap in the literature on whether the same patterns apply to subjective dimensions of social stratification. Insights from related fields, including social psychology (Balch, 1974), relative deprivation studies (Runciman, 1966), and reference group

theory (Merton & Kitt, 1950), may offer valuable perspectives and support the argument that comparable stratified patterns could also be observed with respect to subjective social status.

In social psychology, political efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs that their actions can have a meaningful impact on political process (Balch, 1974). This concept encompasses the sense that fulfilling civic duties is worthwhile, as social and political change is possible, and individual participation plays a role in achieving it (Campbell et al., 1954). Those with low political efficacy are typically less inclined to engage in political activities (Marx & Nguyen, 2016; Verba & Nie, 1972). Additionally, research suggests that electoral participation itself has the potential to bolster political efficacy, fostering a stronger sense of agency and active engagement within the political community (Anduiza, 2002).

The perception of occupying a subordinate position within society might be associated with a sense of low political efficacy, and may serve to reinforce feelings of limited influence, as individuals may perceive others as having greater power or standing, thereby diminishing their own perceived capacity to shape political outcomes. This perspective aligns with Almond and Verba's (1963) concept of the 'self-confident citizen,' characterised by a strong belief in their capacity to influence political change. Conversely, low political efficacy may lead individuals to see themselves and those like them as marginalised or excluded from decision-making processes, associating this disempowerment with lower social standing (Gidron & Hall, 2020). This lack of perceived influence can foster a sense of alienation from the political, creating a reinforcing cycle where subjective status and political efficacy shape and reinforce each other over time, potentially affecting political engagement and electoral participation. Although examining this relationship lies beyond the scope of the present study, this parallel association between political efficacy and subjective status provides a valuable analytical lens.

Insights from research on relative deprivation indicate that individuals' subjective evaluations of their own circumstances are not always aligned with objective measurements (Crosby, 1976; Hirschman & Rothschild, 1973). Additionally, subjective assessments exert a considerable influence on the perception of relative deprivation (Olson et al., 1995). Subjective social status incorporates social comparison and a deductive process of subjective evaluation of one's social standing. This concept strongly resonates with theories on social identity, which underline the relevance of subjective interpretations and evaluations of sociality and status quo (Ellemers, 2001; Tajfel, 1974; Thomas & Thomas, 1928), and with theories of social evaluation (Pettigrew, 1967). Runciman (1966) argues that subjective social stratification is rooted in the concept of 'relative deprivation of status,' meaning that 'people may be wrong about "subjective" status in the sense that their own prestige is not what they think it is, but the status-structure of their society is in fact determined solely by the feelings of its members' (Runciman, 1966, p. 43). This perspective underscores the importance of subjective evaluations, as they significantly influence individuals' feelings of inequality and discontent, potentially exerting a greater impact than objective measures of stratification.

When individuals perceive themselves as disadvantaged or lower in status relative to others, they may engage in a process of attributional search, seeking explanations for this perceived unfavourable position (Walker et al., 2001). If this search reinforces their sense of deprivation, they may attribute their perceived disadvantage to external factors beyond their control. Conversely, when individuals experience success, they are likely to credit it to their own accomplishments, skills, efforts, or innate qualities – a pattern known as the 'self-serving bias in causal attribution' (Arkin et al., 1980; Larson Jr., 1977; Miller & Ross, 1975). Labour market adversity and economic hardship dampen participation, as they increase the opportunity cost of voting (Emmenegger et al., 2015; Marx, 2016), while experiences of unemployment, particularly at young age, are associated with lower propensity to vote (Azzollini, 2021, 2023). Furthermore, experiencing a lower social status than expected based on one's background is associated with a higher likelihood

of abstaining from voting in Germany (Kurer & Van Staaldin, 2022).

Reference Group Theory further elaborates on how individuals form their views of social position, suggesting that these views are shaped by the experiences of those within their immediate social circle, such as family, friends, and colleagues, rather than broader societal measures or abstract standards (Merton & Kitt, 1950; Mezulis et al., 2004). Individuals form their social position by distinguishing between the social group they belong to and those they do not (Runciman, 1966; Tajfel, 1974). From this viewpoint, social identity is shaped not only by an individual's own position within the status hierarchy but also by the socioeconomic status of their acquaintances (Hodge & Treiman, 1968). This process aligns with the availability heuristic, a cognitive tendency whereby individuals derive impressions of their own social standing from the experiences of their close networks (Evans & Kelley, 2017). Thus, individuals conduct informal assessments of their social connections, often generalising these observations to their broader social context. This lends further support to the argument that subjective aspects of social stratification, here examined in terms of subjective social status, are relevant in shaping the political preferences and behaviour of individuals.

2.3. Research question and expectations

The aim of this paper is to advance our understanding of the complex relationships between social stratification and electoral participation, focusing particularly on how social class and subjective social status influence individuals' likelihood to vote. Specifically, building upon the existing literature, it is anticipated that electoral participation in Europe will be stratified along class lines, with *individuals from more advantaged social classes being more likely to vote than those from less advantaged classes* (H1). Furthermore, it is expected that electoral participation will also be stratified along subjective status lines, with *individuals with higher subjective status being more likely to vote than those with lower subjective status* (H2), net of individual objective characteristics.

Additionally, it is anticipated that social class and subjective social status will interact in shaping electoral participation, leading to a stratification of subjective status within social classes. Consequently, *individuals with higher subjective social status are expected to be more likely to vote than those with lower subjective status within the same class* (H3), thus introducing an added layer of complexity to the stratification of electoral participation in contemporary European democracies.

3. Methodological approach

3.1. Data and measures

This paper employs data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) for European countries. All waves conducted between 2002 and 2021 have been selected, as they include the variables of interest. This selection results in a final sample of twenty-five European countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.¹ As ISSP waves are conducted over multiple calendar years, each respondent was assigned to the year corresponding to the period in which their data collection occurred.² This structure results in individuals grouped within 287 unique country-year units. The final sample includes more than 270,000

¹ Further details regarding the availability of data can be found in the [Supplementary Materials](#).

² In instances where data collection spanned more than one year, the modal year was employed. Information on dates of ISSP data collection reported in Tables A2 and A3.

individuals with complete information on all variables of interest.³

The dichotomous dependent variable is derived from the ISSP Background Questionnaire, which is administered in every wave, and asks, 'Did you vote in the last [country] national election in [month/year]?' It is well documented that surveys measuring voter turnout are subject to overreporting bias (Karp & Brockington, 2005; Sciarini & Goldberg, 2016; Selb & Munzert, 2013). As literature also suggests that the relationship between the likelihood to abstain from voting and not participating in survey might be considerable, it is reasonably expected that survey participation will be stratified in a manner similar to voting behaviour across different social groups.⁴ This suggests that individuals from less advantaged groups, such as members of the working class, individuals with lower levels of education, and residents of rural areas, are not only less likely to vote but also less likely to participate in surveys. As illustrated in Figure A1 in the [Supplementary Materials](#), the magnitude of overreporting of turnout is greater in elections with lower turnout among the electorate, yet overall, there is a strong correlation (0.74) between reported turnout and actual participation rates.⁵

Social class is measured using the European Socio-Economic Classification (ESeC, Rose & Harrison, 2007), which is based on the EGP class scheme (Erikson et al., 1979) and validated for country comparisons (Smallenbroek et al., 2024). The five-class structure employed includes: High-grade Managers and Professionals, Lower-grade Managers and Professionals, Intermediate Occupations, Self-Employed, and Working Class.

Subjective social status is measured through a 10-step scale, where respondents are asked to position themselves in relation to others in their society. The question posed is: 'In our society there are groups which tend to be towards the top and groups which tend to be towards the bottom. Below is a scale which runs from top to bottom. Where would you put yourself now on this scale?'. This variable has been validated for cross-national comparisons, confirming its reliability for conducting comparative research (Raudenská, 2024). Consistently with the literature, this variable will be treated as continuous.

All models will account for age, age squared, gender, and educational attainment. Only individuals between 18 and 64 years old are included in the analysis. The relationship between age and electoral participation is curvilinear, with participation rates reaching their peak among middle-aged individuals (Smets, 2016). Gender has been shown to influence status rankings across Europe (Gérxhani, 2020), and thus warrants consideration as a control variable. Additionally, individuals with higher levels of education tend to have greater electoral participation (Anduiza, 2002; Evans & Hepplewhite, 2022), making education an additional stratifying factor that should be accounted for.

3.2. Analytical strategy

The method employed in the main analysis is Linear Probability Regression Models with Fixed Effects for country-year and standard errors clustered at the country-year level. This approach effectively rules out the influence of time-invariant factors that may affect the outcome, such as the time between the most recent election and the data collection period,⁶ as well as national characteristics that are correlated with voter turnout.

To validate the findings from the regression models, the analysis is supplemented with two alternative approaches. First, the Karlson-Holm-

³ Descriptive statistics are reported in Table A1.

⁴ ISSP does not include reliable and consistent measure of the level of interest in politics.

⁵ Figures A2 and A3 illustrate the absence of a correspondence between the proportion of middle- and working-class members in a society and the turnout of the electorate. Figure A6 presents the class-based turnout levels in every country, while Figure A7 depicts the status-based turnout.

⁶ Dates of elections reported in Table A4.

Breen decomposition technique (Breen et al., 2013, 2021; Karlson et al., 2012) is applied to evaluate and quantify the moderating role of subjective social status in the relationship between social class and electoral participation. Second, the analysis will be replicated for each individual country, followed by a meta-analysis (Higgins et al., 2003), which will provide insight into whether the relationship between subjective social status holds consistently across all countries or if any outliers emerge.

4. Results

The match between objective social class and subjective social status is far from perfect in Europe. Fig. 1 illustrates that approximately two-thirds of the members of the working class self-identify as belonging to middle- and high-status social groups. Conversely, between 8 % and 13 % of those in Higher- and Lower-grade Professional classes perceive themselves to be situated at the lower rungs of the social ladder.

As anticipated, there is a clear stratification in the probability of voting according to class membership. Panel A of Fig. 2 illustrates the predicted likelihood of voting by social class, as computed from Linear Probability Models with country-year Fixed Effects that control for age, age squared, gender, and level of education. Members of the Higher- and Lower-grade Managers and Professionals show the highest propensity to vote, at around 0.85. This is approximately eight percentage points (Effect Size 21 % SD) lower than the propensity to vote observed among the working class. This supports H1. Nevertheless, the stratification by subjective status reveals a greater degree of polarisation in participation between individuals with high and low subjective social position, as illustrated in Panel B of Fig. 2, lending support to H2.

Fig. 3 illustrates the existence of a stratification within social classes based on subjective status in Europe. The gap in the propensity to vote between individuals with higher and lower subjective status within the same class is more marked in the Working Class (~15 percentage points, 37 % SD) than among Higher-grade Professionals (~10 percentage points, 24 % SD), though in both cases, the discrepancy is substantial, supporting H3.

Individuals with high subjective status are more likely to vote, regardless of social class. At lower level of subjective status, however, a sharper polarisation between classes emerges, largely due to the moderating effect of subjective social status on the working class, as indicated by its steeper beta coefficient (Fig. 4). Class-based disparities in electoral participation diminish significantly among individuals with high subjective status. Specifically, the difference in voting propensity between high-subjective-status individuals from the Working Class and those from Higher-grade Professional occupations is approximately 4.4 percentage points (11 % SD). In comparison, the difference in voting propensity between low-subjective-status individuals from the Working Class and those from the Higher-grade Professional class is approximately 10 percentage points (25 % SD). These findings underscore the critical role of subjective status in moderating class-based polarisation in electoral participation.

Examining the distribution of subjective status within social classes reported in Fig. 1 highlights the relevance of these findings. Around 8 % of higher-grade professionals consider their social status to be low (4 or below), whereas this figure rises to 36 % among the working class. This indicates that abstention rates are significantly influenced by individuals positioned at both a low subjective status and a lower social class. Such patterns contribute markedly to the abstention trends observed in contemporary democracies. As outlined above, individuals from less advantaged groups, such as those from the working class, individuals with lower levels of education, and residents of rural areas, are not only less likely to vote but also less likely to participate in surveys (Karp & Brockington, 2005; Sciarini & Goldberg, 2016; Selb & Munzert, 2013). This suggests that, if anything, the results are conservative, and the gap in participation observed between individuals with high and low subjective social status within the working class is likely to be even more pronounced in the broader population, in line with findings from Evans

and Tilley (2017) and Rennwald (2020)

To quantify the extent to which subjective social status mediates the relationship between social class and electoral participation, the Karlson-Holm-Breen (KHB) decomposition technique is employed (Karlson et al., 2012). The technique allows the examination of the difference between the estimated coefficients of social class in two nested models, a reduced model without mediator, in this case subjective social status, and a full model where the mediator is included. The same set of control variables of in the main analysis is included.⁷

Logistic regressions were employed, and selected results are reported in Table 1. The first column presents the difference between the coefficients on the log-odds scale, indicating the change in the coefficient of social class attributable to the confounding factor of subjective social status. This value expresses the extent to which the effect of social class is confounded by subjective social status. The differences between the coefficients of the various social class categories are significant between the full and reduced model. The second column reports the confounding ratio, which is a scale-free measure of confounding. The third column reports the percentage change in the coefficients attributable to the confounding role of subjective social status. The ratio and the percentage 'measure change in the underlying partial effects on the latent propensity rather than in the logit coefficients' (Karlson et al., 2012, p. 294). The influence of social class on electoral participation is mediated to a considerable extent by subjective social status. For the intermediate and working classes, this accounts for approximately 20–25 % of the effect, while for the self-employed, it accounts for approximately 15 %.

Subsequently, a meta-analysis is conducted to ascertain whether the correlation between subjective status and electoral participation, when adjusted for social class, remains consistent across all countries under consideration. A meta-analysis is a statistical technique that allows for the examination of whether the estimate of interest exhibits significant variation across countries (Liefbroer & Zoutewelle-Terovan, 2021). The main model without interaction between class and subjective status is run separately for each country, with the coefficients of subjective social status being collected.

The coefficient of subjective social status is positive and statistically significant (up to 10 % SD for one step increase in subjective status) in all countries but Cyprus, Bulgaria, Belgium, and Portugal. The results are in general consistent with those of the main analysis, and no countries can be identified as outliers in the relationship. Furthermore, no discernible pattern emerges with regard to the relationship between subjective status and electoral participation when social class is held constant.

A series of robustness checks were conducted to ensure the reliability of the results reported in the main analysis. First, the analysis is replicated by treating subjective social status as a categorical variable, with the results presented in Table A8 of the [Supplementary Materials](#). The results are supported, although a minimum of dispersion at the extremes emerges given the few individuals at the extremes of the subjective status scale. The second set of robustness checks addresses an additional stratifier in contemporary democracies, income. ISSP does not include a uniform measure of income; rather, it is a country-year specific variable, which makes its comparison particularly challenging. In order to analyse stratification by income, each country-year-specific measure was recorded into country-year tertiles, thus creating a uniform income measure across all waves and countries. Individual income was selected as the variable of interest, as it has a lower incidence of missing data than household income. The income measure is included as a control in Table A9, and the results remain unchanged. Table A10 presents the results of a substitution of income for social class as the primary stratifying variable. The results are consistent with those previously discussed, albeit with a reduced magnitude. This lends further support to

⁷ The technique is performed in Stata 18.5 using the *khb* command (Kohler & Karlson, 2010)

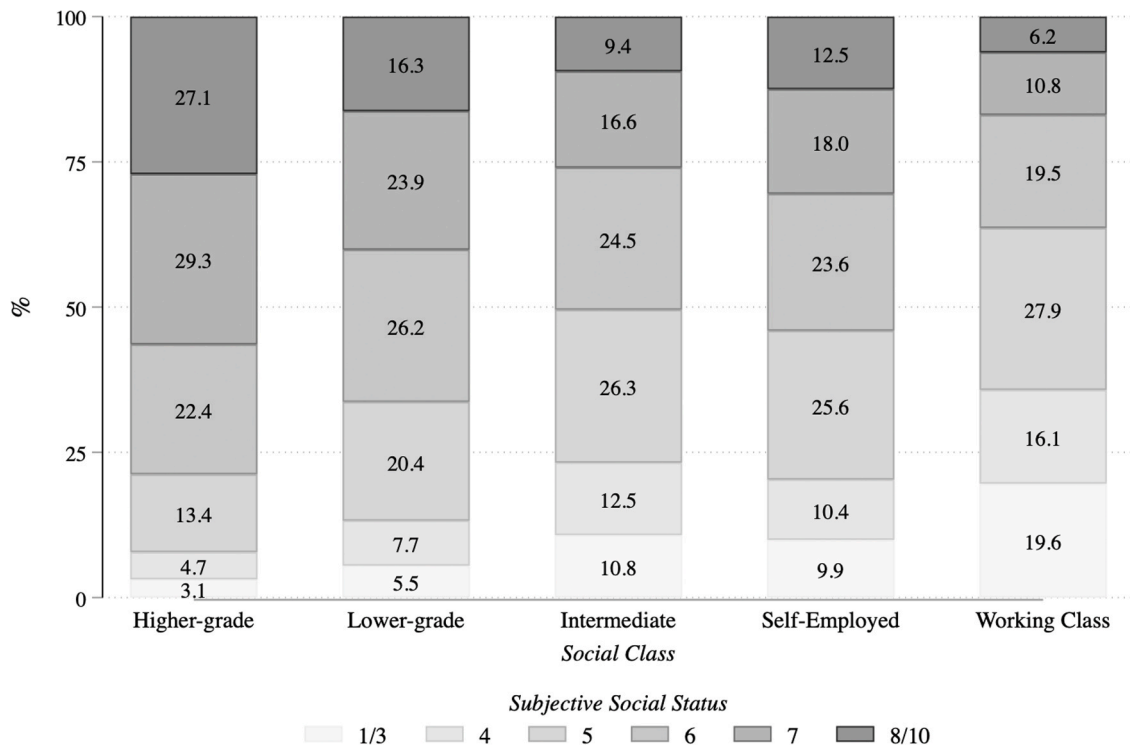


Fig. 1. Distribution of Subjective Social Status by Social Class. Note: ISSP (2002–2021), weighted.

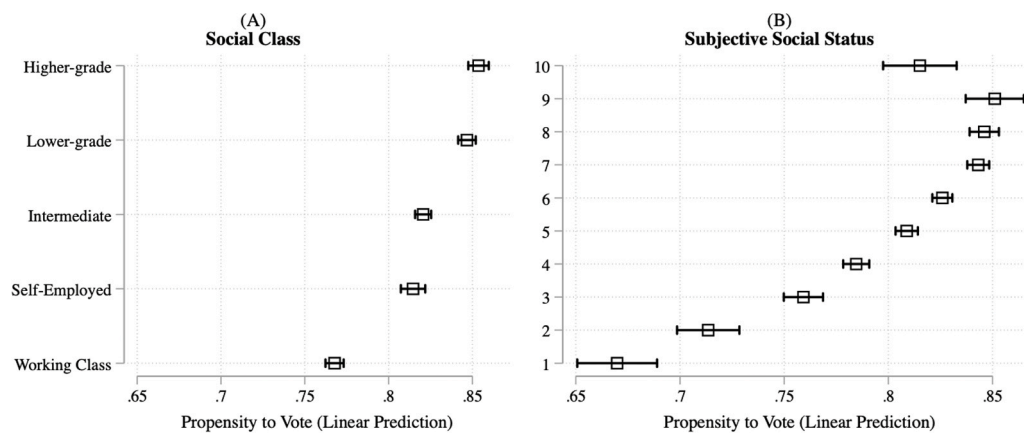


Fig. 2. Predicted Electoral Participation by Social Class and Subjective Social Status. Note: ISSP (2002–2021), weighted. Computed from Model 1 in Table A5 (Panel A) and Model 2 in Table A8 (Panel B). 95 % confidence intervals displayed. Controls include age, gender, level of education, and in Panel B, also social class. Country-year fixed effects are included. All variables in the model are held at their average values. Descriptives in Fig. A4.

the view that this income measure is relatively weak and that the empirical choices implemented are appropriate. Third, we employ subjective social class in lieu of subjective social status. Among the waves in our dataset, this measure was only collected in 2009 and 2019, which considerably reduces the available sample size. Nevertheless, the results remain largely unaffected by this change.

Fourth, the analysis is replicated using the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI; Ganzeboom et al., 1992) as the main independent variable instead of the ESeC social class classification. Unlike class-based schemes, ISEI provides a continuous measure of stratification. However, while widely used, ISEI does not conceptually align with the Weberian notion of status considered in this study. Continuous measures of stratification might be able to capture finer distinctions, but it remains unclear what specific aspect of social position they primarily reflect. Despite this, the results remain consistent when ISEI is used, as shown in Table A16 of the [Supplementary](#)

[Materials](#). Finally, Oesch's (2006) social class schema is applied, as it accounts for horizontal differentiation within class structures and reflects changes in occupational hierarchies in post-industrial societies. The results of this replication, presented in Table A17 of the revised [Supplementary Materials](#), further reinforce the main findings.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Political sociological research has traditionally focused on the relationship between class structure and political behaviour. However, emerging research suggests that stratification by status (Carella & Ford, 2020; Chan et al., 2020; Chan & Goldthorpe, 2004; Gidron & Hall, 2017) may be a significant factor influencing political outcomes such as populism (Gidron & Hall, 2020; Melli & Scherer, 2024), support for radical right parties (Gidron & Hall, 2017), and redistribution (Bobzien, 2020; Duman, 2020). Building upon Weber (1922 [1968]) theory of

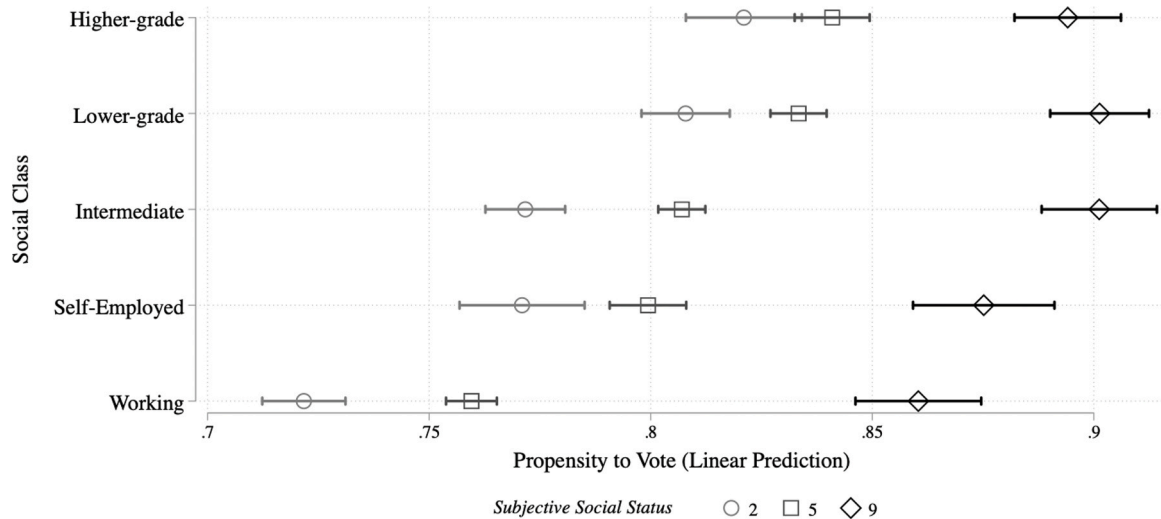


Fig. 3. MEMs for Electoral Participation by Social Class and Subjective Social Status. Note: ISSP (2002–2021), weighted. Computed from Model 3 in Table A5. All levels of subjective status shown in Fig. A8. 95 % confidence intervals.

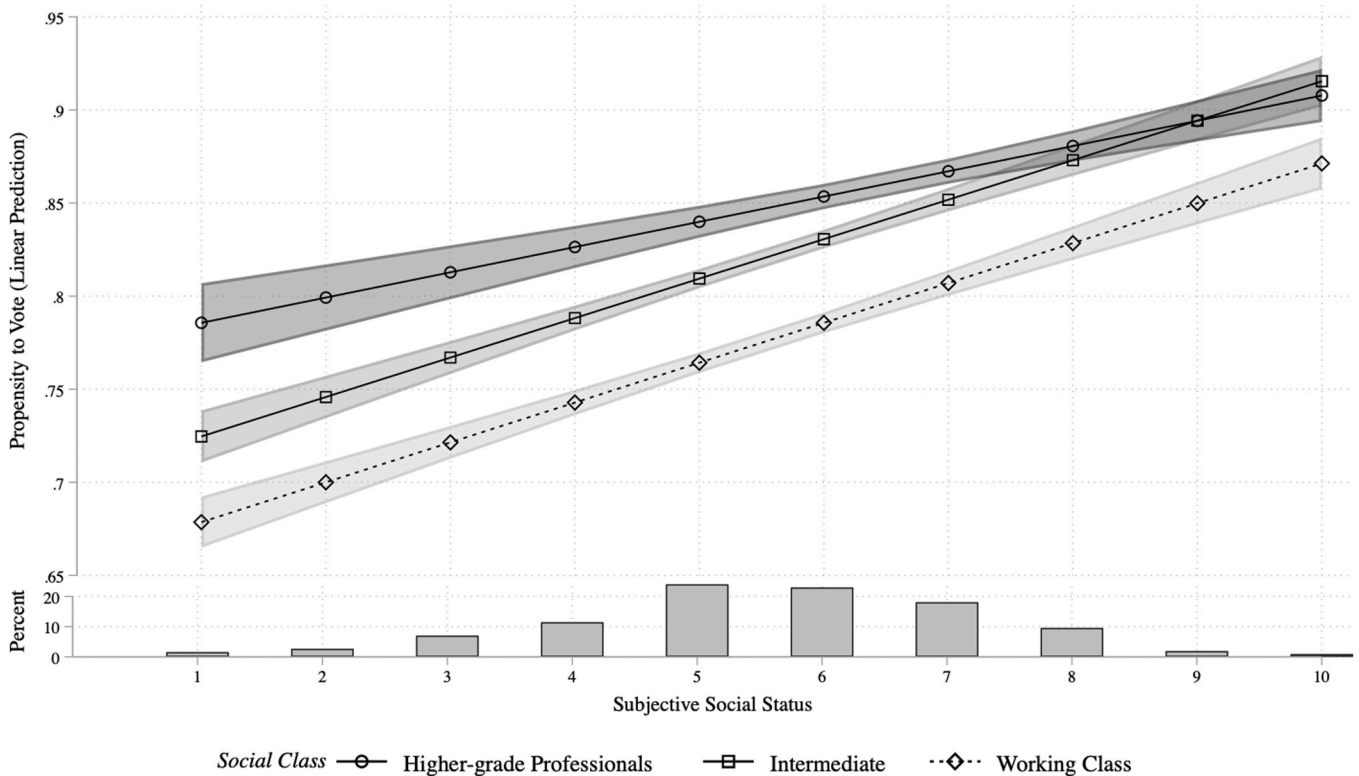


Fig. 4. MEMs for Electoral Participation by Social Class and Subjective Social Status. Note: ISSP 2002–2021, weighted. Computed from Model 3 in Table A5. All variables in the model are held at their average values. All social classes shown in Fig. A9. 95 % confidence intervals.

power and stratification, this paper examined the independent and combined effects of class and status in shaping electoral participation in contemporary European democracies. In particular, the focus was on subjective social status, a specific component of social status which measures individuals’ perceived social standing. While social class has long been established as a key predictor of electoral participation (Anduiza, 2002; Evans & Hepplewhite, 2022; Lipset, 1960), the introduction of subjective status introduces a more nuanced, relational dimension to the study of political participation (Gidron & Hall, 2017). However, the implications of this for electoral turnout remain largely underexplored. Subjective status, emerging from social comparisons and

affiliations, has the potential to influence political attitudes and behaviours in ways that extend beyond objective socioeconomic indicators alone.

This research, which draws on data from the International Social Survey Program spanning 2002–2021 across twenty-five European countries, showed that electoral participation is shaped by both objective class and subjective social status, with each playing a distinct role in influencing turnout. While members of higher social classes exhibit a consistently strong propensity to vote, significant variation emerges when subjective perceptions of social status are considered. The findings indicate that individuals across all social classes who perceive

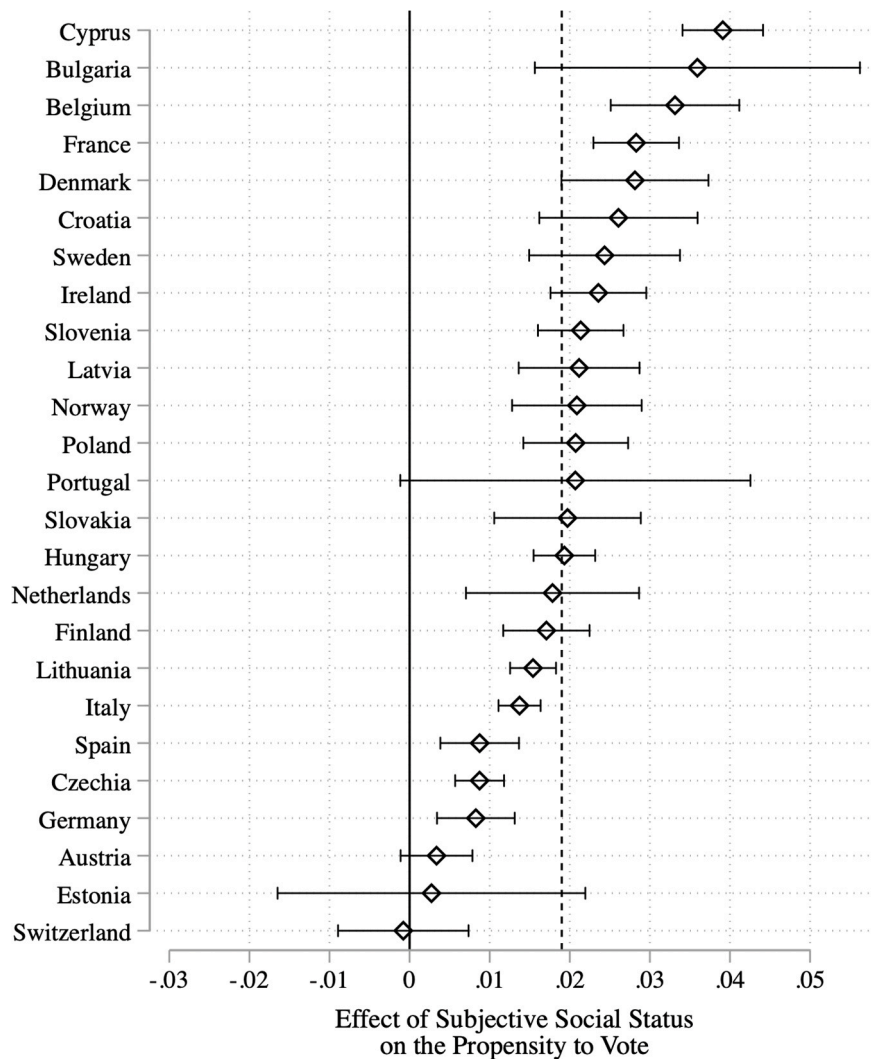


Fig. 5. Forestplot of the Coefficients of Single Country Regression of Subjective Social Status on Electoral Participation. Note: ISSP (2002–2021), weighted. Linear Probability Models by country controlling for social class, age, age squared, gender, and year. The dashed vertical line represents the coefficient of subjective social status reported in Model 2 of Table A5.

Table 1
Summary of Confounding of the KHB Decomposition Method, Social Class as key variable, Subjective Social Status as mediator of interest.

	Coefficient Difference between Full and Reduced Model (Log Odds)	Confounding Ratio	Reduction due to Confounding (%)
Higher-grade professionals	<i>base outcome</i>	<i>base outcome</i>	<i>base outcome</i>
Lower-grade professionals	-0.043*** (0.003)	1.91	47.66
Intermediate	-0.084*** (0.005)	1.35	25.98
Self-Employed	-0.051*** (0.004)	1.17	14.59
Working Class	-0.129*** (0.007)	1.26	20.48

Note: ISSP (2002–2021), weighted. N = 272,340. Full results reported in Tables A6 and A7. Logistic regression models, controlling for age, age squared, gender, education, and country-year. Robust standard errors cluster by country-year in parentheses. + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

themselves to have a higher status are more likely to participate in elections. This suggests that subjective perceptions can mitigate traditional class-based differences in turnout and patterns of working-class abstention (Evans & Tilley, 2017; Rennwald, 2020). Nevertheless, individuals who perceive themselves to be of a lower social standing are significantly less likely to participate in the electoral process. This pattern is particularly prevalent among the working class, where those with a low subjective status exhibit a notable disengagement from political participation. This suggests that low turnout rates might be largely driven by those situated at lower levels of both objective and subjective social stratifications.

The main limitations of this study relate to the data, particularly its reliance on a repeated cross-sectional design. While this approach allows for analysis over an extended time span, future research would benefit from longitudinal data to explore how the relationship between class, status, and turnout evolves at the individual level. A further limitation concerns the geographical scope, which is restricted to European countries. Expanding the analysis to non-European contexts where relevant data are available would be a valuable direction for future research. Additionally, the analytical framework developed here could be applied to other political outcomes, such as party affiliation or political ideology.

These findings underscore the importance of addressing both

objective socioeconomic inequalities and subjective perceptions to understand political inequality. Fostering a sense of social inclusion and addressing perceived social inequalities may be as crucial to increasing turnout rates as addressing economic disparities alone. By understanding how subjective status affects political engagement, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape electoral participation and identifies new avenues for addressing political inequality in Europe.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Giacomo Melli: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization, Validation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.rssm.2025.101039](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2025.101039).

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