It's the Proletariat, Stupid! The 'Property Owning Democracy' and Working Class Voting

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ABSTRACT: This paper clarifies the significance of class indicators by identifying internal differences amongst the general working class, particularly that between a secure and propertied working class and a disadvantaged core in low-skill and relatively insecure employment. Lacking such 'middle class' assets this core working class also has lower electoral participation. Because they are less likely to vote, Left parties tend to avoid the more radical social and economic policies that would improve these non-voters' lives. However, evidence from recent UK and US elections suggests that renewed policy commitments to combat economic insecurity, coupled with sustained efforts to increase core working class electoral engagement, might raise participation, gain votes, and increase left parties' prospects of electoral success.

KEYWORDS: Working Class; Political Engagement; Social Democracy; UK Elections

Introduction

Until their acceptance of neo-liberal policies and interests, the manual working class vote was the bedrock of support for socialist and social democratic parties. There is now a near-consensus across the post-industrial West that these parties have abandoned the policies most relevant to this class. Central tenets of social democracy: public ownership; fiscal redistribution through taxation to equalise incomes and provide public services; state intervention to manage the economy have ben diluted, marginalised or rejected. This shift has been accompanied by, or resulted in, a decline in working class participation in democratic processes, with corresponding declines in voting. Finally, it is believed, the resulting political vacuum has been filled by authoritarian populists who now rival or replace erstwhile social democratic parties as contenders for government (cf. inter alia, Jones 2020). The specific contours of this new landscape vary between countries. However, elements of these trends beset most liberal democracies.

Yet the exact strength of the interaction between social democratic decline and the political behaviour of working-class citizens is often based on conjecture and conceptual generalisations rather than precise evidence and analytically-sound identification of political participation and class composition. A broad cross-national survey suggested that 'the young, rural living, and lower educated, especially since the financial crisis abandon social democrat parties'. Moreover, within the 'manual working class' insecurity was linked to 'a higher probability of voting for the radical left' (Polacko 2020). However, such shifts have not involved decisive numbers of working-class voters. Usual they have been insufficient to boost these other left parties' prospects of governing. This limited shift raises questions as to the numbers of allegiance-shifters involved and whether working-class voters in particular are re-aligning or simply continuing long-running trends, especially in the Anglosphere states, of not voting at all (Schaffer and Schwander, 2019). Polacko's study asked whether low socioeconomic status and rural voters are significantly deserting the party for the far right and abstention (Polacko, 2020). This study also recommended a more detailed analysis of economic insecurity than only insecure employment.

I would argue, firstly, that we need a more precise conceptualisation of 'the working class' that is not restricted to occupational or gross income criteria but does unpack variations

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in economic security/insecurity. For example, home ownership in neoliberal economies tends not only to give more material security it may also help generate financial resources. At least in Britain it has been found that home ownership correlates with greater electoral participation, often, though increasingly less so, as Conservative voters (Mau, 2015). In other European countries it: 'de-aligns' voters to more 'bourgeois' instrumental voting (Hadziabdicz and Kohl, 2022). This instrumental participation is, supposedly, in order to protect these assets (Ansell and Gingrich, 2022). The importance of this correlation for
working-class   voters   is   pursued   in   section   3   below.

A second analytical requirement is to problematize further the assumed transfer of support by insecure working-class voters from social democratic to authoritarian parties (Sipma *et al* 2023). Here I argue that most such voters are simply disengaging for mainstream political processes rather than actively supporting 'the new Right'. Thirdly and relatedly, we should question the claims of the revisionist social democrats that such voters have lost interest in the ideas, and ideals, of socialism or social democracy. Of course, this same strand of opinion could argue that it is not necessary to gain electoral support from the disadvantaged working class in order to enact policies to improve their condition. The important thing, on this argument, is to win elections, by whatever means, in order to be able to so govern. Comfortable opinion poll leads and continuing macro-management failures by right-wing governments, as currently in the UK, are sufficient to win an election. This line of argument is examined in the concluding section below.

To develop these hypotheses, the following analysis proceeds through four stages. In the first, I define a 'core working class' on the basis, not of occupation – a standard approach – but of relative deficiencies in economic assets; distinguishing this stratum from others who may share characteristics such as occupational titles. Property ownership, principally of housing assets may contribute to a de-alignment of working-class members away from Left parties. Forty years of neoliberal restructuring of national economies and ideologies of individual responsibility has encouraged more reliance on such ownership not only as more practical option than vanishing public housing, but also as a hedge against financial insecurity.

Secondly, I examine correlations between the relatively 'propertyless' core and their political disengagement, mainly in terms of participation in the electoral process. This analysis shows that these voters are as, or more likely to have abdicated from support from any political party rather than supported right-wing populists. These reviews are based mainly on data and examples from UK elections, although connections with, and inferences to other liberal democracies such as the USA and Canada are referenced. The third, section focuses on local data on voting and non-voting in UK constituencies where voters appear to have deserted a left-wing Labour Party for the nationalist populism adopted by the successful Conservative Party. After establishing that abstention from voting played a critical part in the collapse of this 'Red Wall' of former Labour constituencies, the Conclusion argues for a political focus on the propertyless that would also appeal to other strata who have been disadvantaged by the economics of neoliberalism.

Class as a Multi-Dimensional Spectrum

Studies of working-class political behaviour typically relate it to data from occupational classifications. So that the working class is usually taken to mean those in jobs classified as 'manual' or 'routine' office or service work, such as retail assistants or cleaners. However, there are many such occupations which may involve higher technical skills, or supervisory functions. Some studies use educational level as a proxy for class membership; assuming that individuals with only basic school qualifications will either come from or end up in low grade working conditions. However, individuals may ascend the social hierarchy

without higher formal educational levels and, conversely, some with, e.g. college degrees or diplomas, may end up in manual or routine service work. More importantly occupational and educational criteria are not guides to the status of work and employment in those positions. Even in the same occupational category, economic livelihood can differ substantially. For example, between those in secure, tenured employment, or those in self-employment with their own business, who may have the same kind of occupation but struggle with insecure or temporary employment contracts. Moreover, the type of work or employment status says little or nothing about possession of economic and financial assets. A construction worker may own their own house and a salaried clerical worker for a large corporation may have pension or health care plans.
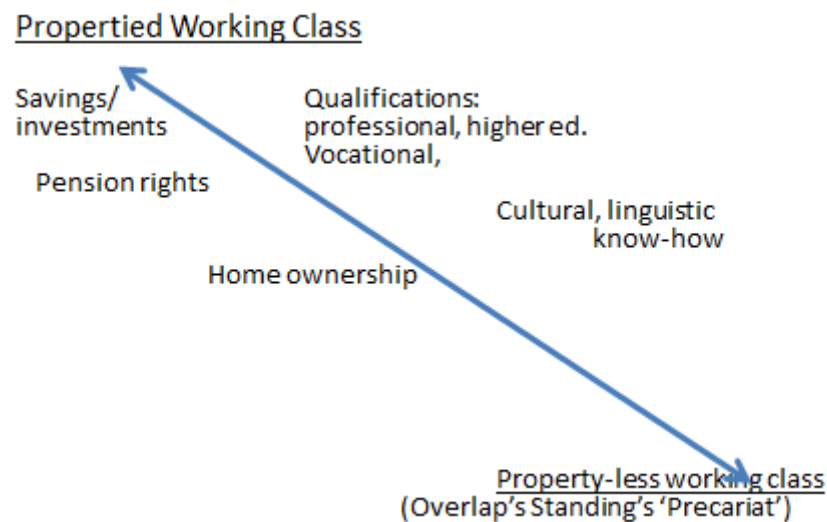
Relying on occupational titles can lead to inaccurate interpretations of the economic and political dimensions of 'working classness'. For example, separate UK research by Clare Ainsley and Deborah Mattinson used voter polling data or focus groups in a range of occupations classed by official and market research institutions as the C2 or D working class. That is, broadly skilled and semi-/unskilled working-class jobs. Ainsley and Mattinson, both of whom subsequently obtained influential positions in Keir Starmer's neoliberalised Labour Party, claimed that their resulting samples of voters were unconcerned about the fundamentals of economic inequality. They were, allegedly, more interested in and, indeed defined themselves in terms of, localised and community issues, patriotic values and disdain for 'scroungers' (welfare recipients) and the intelligentsia.

Such interpretations led to recommendations for the Labour Party to focus on community and 'family and flag' type sentiments to win back working-class voters. However, these authors' methodology of occupational surveys and focus groups mixed together people with potentially quite different economic statuses. For example, reputedly skilled working-class plumbers might in reality run their own business and have significant financial resources. The different market situations and financial standing is concealed by these methodologies. Those lacking educational or skill assets in the labour market, and in menial or low status work, were not separately identified. As a result, specifically working-class interests that may be potentially politically relevant remain shrouded in the obscurity to which parties such as New Labour consigned them.

In classical theories and early 'welfare state' policies it was assumed explicitly, or tacitly, that the disadvantaged working class member would be 'propertyless'. That is they would own nothing but their capacity to labour; often in the most basic forms of work. Working from this basic condition various additional features of class division can be identified. For example, in the UK, Mike Savage and his collaborators have worked out a multi-dimensional scale of class attributes, covering financial assets and 'cultural capital', such as leisure activities or internet proficiencies, as well as occupation. (Savage *et al* 2013). Unfortunately, these ideas have not been applied systematically to class differences in voting behaviour.
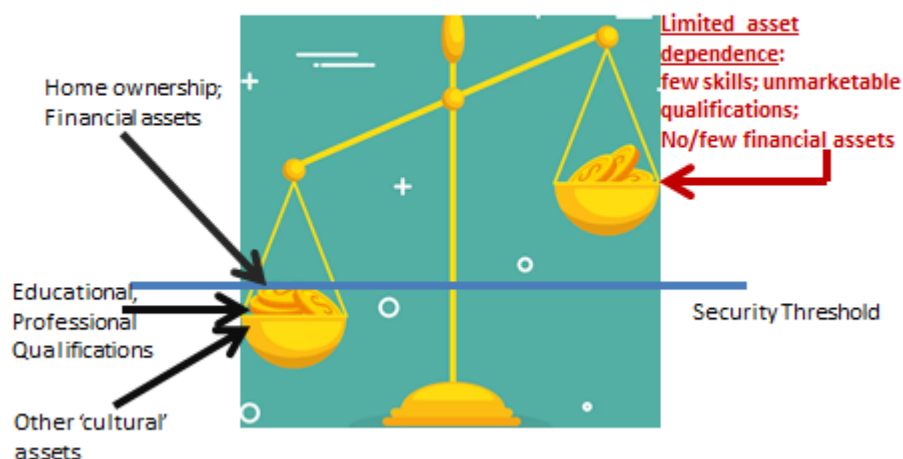
The additional distinctions proposed here are principally economic ones. It is argued that financial assets, such as home ownership and 'saleable' educational qualifications, will separate a more secure working-class stratum from those who are, essentially, propertyless and therefore inhabit an insecure and, literally, dis-advantaged economic way of life. But the variety of potential assets means that these divisions form more of a spectrum than a dichotomy, as depicted in Figure 1, where the accumulation of assets lifts 'workers' above the insecurity threshold sown in Figure 2. Bear in mind these segmentations within the broadly defined working class when we examine their participation in elections and support for left- and right-wing parties.

Figure 1: Class Segmentation by Assets

Properted Working Class

Savings/
investments

Qualifications:
professional, higher ed.
Vocational,

Pension rights

Cultural, linguistic
know-how

Home ownership

Property-less working class
(Overlap's Standing's 'Precariat')

Figure 2: Asset Accumulation and Class Position

Asset Accumulation and Class Position

Home ownership;
Financial assets

Limited asset
dependence:
few skills; unmarketable
qualifications;
No/few financial assets

Educational,
Professional
Qualifications

Security Threshold

Other 'cultural'
assets

Political Participation and Class Inequality

Psephologists and pollsters tend to ignore the significance of non-voting in most elections, unless levels of voter turnout are dramatically low. For obvious reasons it is difficult, almost impossible to identify precise reasons for abstention, or the political values behind the inactivity. Yet levels of non-participation can be substantial. In the 2010 UK general election the three main parties received 10.7, 8.6, and 6.8 million votes. The 15.9 million eligible voters who did not vote dwarfed these totals (Figure 3); as they did in 2024.

Figure 3: Relative Proportions of Non-Voters in 2010

NON-VOTERS OUTNUMBERED THE SUPPORTERS OF
EVERY SINGLE POLITICAL PARTY IN 2010

15.9m

THESE PEOPLE COULD CHANGE
EVERYTHING

10.7m

8.6m

6.8m

3.5m

DID
NOT
VOTE

TORIES   LABOUR   LIB DEMS   OTHER
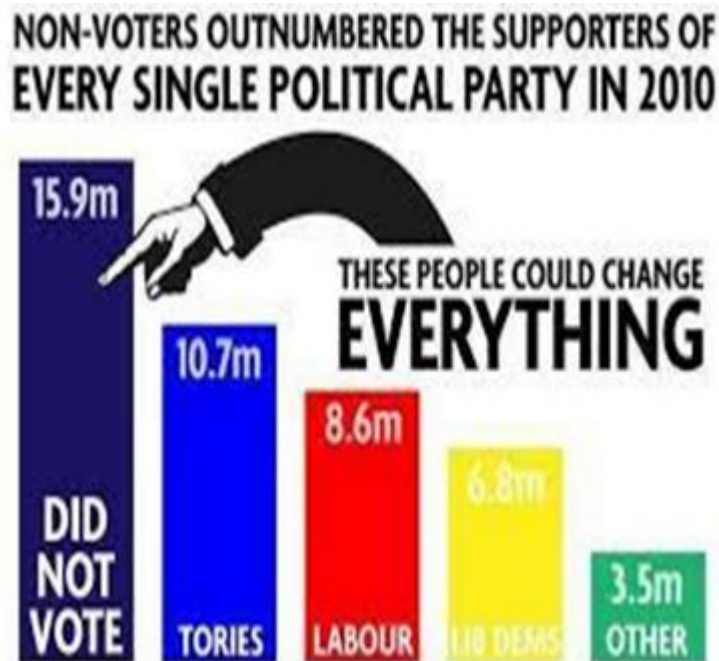
In 22 democracies Schaffer and Streeck record that voter turnout declined steadily from an average 82% in 1970s to 72% by 2010 (Schaffer and Streeck, 2013). But turnout decline has been particularly acute in Switzerland and three Anglo-Saxon countries: U.K., U.S.A. and Canada. Schaffer and Schwander (2019) have identified a clear correlation between rising inequality – in terms of poverty levels and declines in voting. We know from survey evidence that voters with the lowest levels of education, house ownership and occupational status, have both the least trust in political efficacy and least engagement with political processes. They are less likely to register to vote, or to turn out to vote.

Building on these data two propositions can be advanced. 1) The non-participants will be mainly the property-less working class. 2) Left parties' electoral failures are linked to a tendency for the propertied working class to support Right populism. In Canada, for example, if relevant parties move from most leftward to most rightward position, there is a 1 standard deviation increase in inequality (measured according to income or wealth) but an approximate 1.7 percentage point decrease in turnout. (Polacko, 2020). The point can be partly confirmed from the 2017 UK general election, when the Labour Party was led by left-winger Jeremy Corbyn, it increased its share of working-class voters for the first time in decades. We need then to clarify from which sections of the working class these extra votes are likely to come. Further analysis of recent UK elections can shed light on this question.

Working Class Divisions and Fluctuating Votes in UK Elections

After the startling near-success of Corbyn's Labour in 2017 - coming within 2.3% of the governing Conservatives' total vote - the 2019 election saw significant reversals. The most noteworthy and publicised of these was Labour's loss of a slew of decades-long safe seats: a

phenomenon dubbed the 'collapse of the Red Wall'. A fall that media commentators associated with the social and economic malaise of Britain's Rust Belt towns in the north and midlands and the after-effects of the divisive 2016 referendum on a proposal for the UK to leave the European Union. For that referendum the Labour Party had officially backed a 'Remain' vote. While the Conservative leadership also supported continued membership, some of its most prominent MPs were vocal in urging a 'Leave' vote and tacitly allied themselves with the populist right-wing party United Kingdom Independence Party.

Votes from depressed Midlands and Northern town contributed substantially to the victory of the 'Leave' campaign and probably inclined many voters there to favour both UKIP and the new right-wing leadership of the Tory Party that had effectively replaced the party's previous pro-EU administration. As negotiations over the exact form of the UK's new relationship with the EU dragged on for three years, hostility to politicians deemed to be failing to implement the 'Brexit', that a majority of voters had called for in the referendum, focussed mainly on Labour. As part of this electoral re-alignment some observers claimed, wrongly, that it was the 'working class' vote that decided the referendum result. Therefore the argument went, that class was now swinging decisively behind the Tories and abandoning Labour. It is in this broader political-ideological context that the 2019 general election needs to be considered. The class desertion claim is understandable given that the Red Wall belt has higher proportions of working-class voters than most other areas of the country. Moreover, Labour's losses there were undoubtedly crucial in deciding the scale of the Labour defeat. The 48 Red Wall seats lost by Labour between 2017 and 2019 made up 60% of the Tory majority.

However, and here is the key factor, average voter turnout in most Red Wall constituencies in that last election was around 60%. That is below, sometimes significantly below, the national average of 68.8%. Analyses of the 2019 election results at the level of individual constituencies suggests that *Labour would have won most Red Wall seats had the turnout amongst working class voters been higher*. So which segments of the working class were the most disengaged? To assess degrees of propertylessness we have to use proxy indicators in available data-sets; particularly ethnicity, education and types of housing tenure. *Ethnicity* is chosen because most, though not all, ethnic minority voters are in low-skill, less secure employment. Their educational qualifications are generally lower and they have more difficulty obtaining mortgages to buy housing. *Education* level is not a certain indicator of economic deprivation: it is possible in some industries and trades to secure relatively lucrative work and start one's own business. Conversely, a point which will be explored later, some higher education graduates may have insecure terms of employment; or have recourse to low-skill or low pay work. Nevertheless, the majority of people in low-grade and insecure employment will have only basic schooling.

As in several other countries, as *housing* provision has become increasingly privatised and financialised, so home ownership – whether through outright ownership, or bank mortgages – has become less attainable. Secure and relatively well-paid employment is a precondition for mortgage eligibility. This is not completely beyond the reach of all those in working class jobs, especially 'dual-earner' couples. However, home ownership not only signifies a level of personal wealth but provides a resource that can leverage further financial advantage – as security for loans etc. Credit institutions typically look more favourably on

home owners when assessing loan applications. Conversely, recourse to private rented accommodation can also generate further insecurity. At least in the UK, landlords can end tenancies relatively easily: forcing the renters back into an increasingly competitive search for new accommodation, often at higher rents. So how do these three indicators – ethnicity, education and type of housing tenure – correspond to voter participation in elections?

Ethnicity. Table 1 shows the percentage differences in votes and voter turnout, by party support and ethnicity in the 2019 UK general election. The turnout figures in the final three columns represent the increase or decrease since the 2017 election. These show that amongst former Labour supporters, the party lost nearly as many Black and Minority Ethnic voters to abstentions as it did white voters. By contrast the BME turnout for Conservative and 'other' parties remained the same or increased. It is known from other research that BME voters are much less likely to turn out than white voters. So, Labour here lost almost 10% more at this 2019 election.
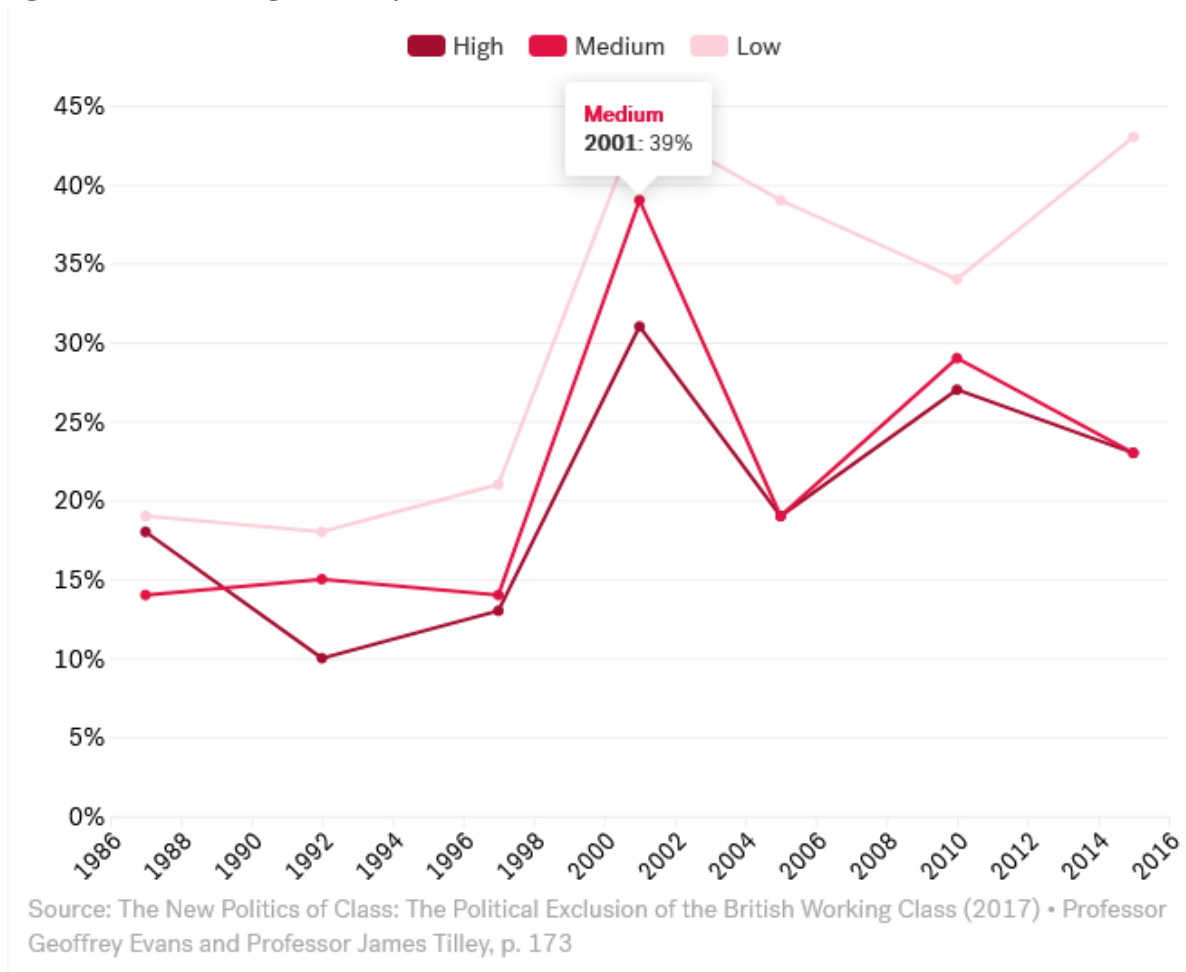
Table 1: Turnout by Ethnicity (2019)

Ethnicity	Con vote	Labour	Lib-Dem	Other		Con Lead	Cons	**Turnout** +/- Lab	Other
White	48	29	12	11	19	**63%**	+3	-10	+4
All BME	20	64	12	4	- 44	**52%**	+1	-9	+6

Source: IPSOS (2019) How Britain voted in the 2019 election

Education. As Figure 2 shows, in UK elections between 2001 and 2016 voting amongst adults with low or no educational qualifications never rose above 55%, compared to the 60% - 70% range for graduates. At the 2019 election turnout was 69% amongst graduate and 59% amongst those with 'other' or no qualifications (House of Commons 2020). Abstentions from the less educated would not have affected Labour more than they did in previous recent elections. However, the figure does continue a trend amongst this demographic that began in the years when Labour turned away from overt class politics, under its New Labour brand in the early 2000s. In that period the 'less educated' abstention level then rose from 15% to nearly 45%.

Figure 3: Non-voting Rates by educational level 1985-2015

Source: The New Politics of Class: The Political Exclusion of the British Working Class (2017) • Professor Geoffrey Evans and Professor James Tilley, p. 173

Home Ownership. Voters' housing status – whether they own or rent their living accommodation – correlates with voting patterns, across different parliamentary democracies. Participation is significantly associated with home ownership. In Canada, for example, a higher proportion of home owners (71%) are likely to vote than renters (54%); with similar figures in the USA. Further distinctions can be made between outright ownership and ownership through loans such as mortgages; and between those who rent from private landlords and those in the public or social housing sectors (Uppal and LaRochelle-Côté, 2012). Ownership tends to be linked more to voting for conservative, right-wing parties than their left-wing counterparts. This is presumed to be because right-wing parties promote private ownership above state provision and because home ownership breeds an aversion to bold economic policies that might threaten the housing market. So, type of housing tenure also influences propensity to vote or abstain.

Comparison of turnout according to housing status in the 2017 and 2019 UK general elections confirms this. In 2017 Labour was seen as a credible alternative to the Tories. Amongst other policies it promised to build more homes for rent and controls on the powers landlords had over tenants. In 2019 after a confused and unpopular approach to Brexit, allegations of antisemitism and a manifesto widely denounced as economically unrealistic the Party's credibility sank. While these flaws affected Labour's support in all categories of

housing occupant the impact on turnout was more distinct. As Table 1 shows turnout amongst Labour supporters fell by 12% and 8% for those in social and private rented premises. Turnout for renting Conservative voters, on the other hand, was either unchanged or improved slightly. Overall, amongst the voters who stood to gain most potentially from a Labour government almost a half did not vote. Contrast that figure with the 70% and 64% turnout rates for those with mortgaged or fully owned homes. If the general class model proposed here is correct, then these figures would be another expression of the different political orientations of the propertyless vs the propertied working-class.

Table 2: Differential Voting and Turnout by Housing Status, 2019 Election Compared to 2017

Housing Status	Con	Lab	LD	Other	Con Lab lead	Turnout			
						(T.O.) All	Con T.O.	Lab T.O.	Lib Dem
	%	%	%	± %		± %	± %	± %	± %
Owned	57	22	12	9	+35	70%	+2	- 8	+5
Mortgaged	43	33	14	10	+10	64%	0	- 7	+5
Social renter	33	45	7	15	-12	52%	+7	-12	+3
Private renter	31	46	11	12	-15	51%	0	-8	+4

SOURCE: https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2019-election

More generally it seems that these significant, though incomplete, indicators of propertylessness show that, excepting 2017, the general trend of abstention from voting is greater amongst this group. This alienation from electoral politics is one of the major causes of the left's failure to win elections decisively by garnering sufficient votes. We can now check this trend through the UK election results in constituencies that decided the Labour defeat at the hands of populistic Conservatism in the UK.

The Red Wall Revisited: Desertion, Abstention and the Core Working Class

Turnout. How far was Labour's lost 2019 vote because working class Labour voters switched to the Tories and how much because these voters either switched to other 'protest' parties, like Brexit, or simply abstained from voting? A 2014 study of the predominantly working-class part of the Red Wall constituency of Blackley and Broughton – adjacent to the Gorton constituency described here later - commented on how few (33%) voted at the local elections. The authors forecast then that non-voters 'provide future unpredictability and display a deep sense of alienation from the political process …'. (*At Home in Europe* 2014). The Blackley and Broughton Labour MP did keep his seat at the 2019 election, but with a significantly reduced majority on a turnout of under 53%. Similar patterns appear in the Red Wall seats that Labour actually lost. *Reduced turnouts and Brexit popularity lost Labour nine out of ten of the highest voting pro-Brexit seats*.

In many of its lost seats, of course, Labour's incoherent and perceived anti-Brexit stance was a handicap; but it was not the only negative. Table 4 shows correlations between turnout, presence of a Brexit Party candidate and changes in turnout in the ten seats with the highest pro-Brexit vote in the 2016 referendum.

Table 3: Turnout and Brexit Party Factors in Ten Highest Brexit Voting Constituencies, 2019

Constituency	2019 Election result	Brexit Party candidate?	2019 Election turnout	Increase(+) or decrease (-) on 2017 turnout
Bassetlaw	Labour to Conservative	Yes	59%	- 3.2%
Bishop Auckland	Labour to Conservative	Yes	65%	+ 1.8%
Bolsover	Labour to Conservative	Yes	61%	-2.2%
Don Valley	Labour to Conservative	Yes	60%	-1.9%
Dudley North	Labour to Conservative	No	59.2%	- 3.5%
Leigh	Labour to Conservative	Yes	60.7%	- 0.8%
Sedgefield	Labour to Conservative	Yes	64.6%	- 0.5%
Wakefield	Labour to Conservative	Yes	64.1	- 1.7%
Workington	Labour to Conservative	Yes	67.8%	- 1.44%
Ashfield	Labour to Conservative	Yes	62.6%	-1.4%

SOURCE: calculated from BBC (2019).

In these seats, turnout had been reducing since 1997 during the years of New Labour's turn away from class politics. However, in 2019 it was the progressive loss of just a few thousand former Labour voters to abstentions, plus the Brexit Party, that sufficed to stop Labour retaining such 'legacy' seats. In Leigh, for example where the Labour candidate lost by 3,630 votes there were 1431 abstentions and an unknown number of defections to the Brexit Party. These defeats could owe more to pro-Brexit sentiments and, in all except one case, the siphoning of votes to the Brexit Party than to 2017 supporters abstaining. However, the *cumulative* decrease in voting over several elections deprived Labour of thousands of potential working-class votes. In Don Valley, for example, turnout declined at almost every general election in the two decades from 1997. 2019's final addition of only a few more thousand 'stay-

at-homes' cost Labour seats such as Don Valley. 61% of households in this constituency fall within the top five classification of deprived areas (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019).

Exceptions to the 'Red Wall Rule'?

Tom Hazeldine's historical overview, *The Northern Question* (2020) provides a closer focus on Red Wall demographics. He compared a constituency loyal to Labour (Gorton) with one that went Tory - Bishop Auckland, which seems to exemplify this stereotypical 2019 Red Wall phenomenon. Labour lost 4,703 votes and the Tories gained 3,761, 6.8% of the vote. However, the other 1,000 lost Labour votes probably went to the Lib Dems whose total increased by almost 1,000 votes. (Presumably EU 'Remainers', dissatisfied with Labour's lack of full support for EU membership.) Turnout increased slightly by an extra 1,227 voters compared to 2017.Where these 'extra' votes went is unknowable, but most likely they split between the Brexit Party and the Lib Dems. On a narrow media definition, Gorton is another classic Red Wall seat. Yet here the Labour share of the vote actually *increased*, if only by 1.3%, cementing a majority of 24,621. The Conservatives' vote also increased slightly by 2.2%. Turnout was marginally lower by 2.7% than in 2017; probably reflecting abstention by some of the 2,165 who voted for the maverick anti-EU (and pro-Muslim) independent George Galloway in that year. How to account for the contrast in Red Wall behaviour in these two seats?

Hazeldine hypothesises that fine-grained intra- class differences explain these contrasting outcomes; see Table 4. If viewed only through the lens of occupational class differences, both seats have majority working class populations, but 'Bishop' has more employment in large manufacturing firms – entailing more general security and better terms and conditions of employment. It also has a higher proportion (65%) of home ownership and, correlating with that, financial security and more residents in older age groups. Also, Bishop's ethnic composition is 99% 'white', compared to Gorton's 52% and 29% of Asian heritage. In addition, Gorton has a much younger age profile and much less home ownership; with many younger, home-renting, possibly 'precariat' workers amongst Gorton's former graduate voters. Manchester Council's 'Mosaic' analysis of Gorton shows 10.7% of the population were 'private urban renters', mainly 'educated young people', 41.4% were 'Transient Renters' - single people privately renting low-cost homes for the short term. While 14.0% were 'families with limited resources who have to budget to make ends meet'. By contrast only 2.3% were 'mature homeowners of value homes enjoying stable lifestyles'. Less than 2% were either: 'mature suburban owners living settled lives in mid-range housing', or 'elderly people with assets (in) comfortable retirement'.

Despite the negative impact of voter abstention reflected in the turnouts in most recent elections, Labour seemed to succeed in Gorton because of its recent electoral appeal to the social composition of its working class: a mixture of low-waged, or insecure employment of younger graduates and, Asian and white workers without much financial security in the form of home ownership. This case indicates that a there is an embryonic kind of 'new working class' with political orientations that contradict the conservative ones ascribed to it by, for example, current and recent Labour Party strategists such as Ainsley (2018) and Mattinson

(2020). Overall, it's likely that Labour failed to mobilise many abstaining working class voters, as well as some that did vote but who opted for pro Brexit parties: the Conservatives and the former UKIP, Brexit Party.

TABLE 4: 2019 Constituency Comparison Bishop Auckland-Gorton (Adapted from Hazeldine 2020)

'Red Wall': Bishop Auckland	**Gorton: Manchester Periphery:**
C2, DE = 51%	C2, DE = 60%
99% white ethnicity	52% white ethnicity
14% manufacturing jobs	4% manufacturing jobs
Median age = 46	Median age = 29
House ownership =65%	House ownership = 42%
Renting = 35%	Renting = 58%
2017 election 48% Labour: majority 500 =35%	2017=76% Labour: Maj.31,230
2019 =48%	2019=77.6%.
2016 Referendum 60.9% LEAVE	Referendum 62% REMAIN

Another check on this hypothesis of a class insecurity influence is outside of the Red Wall belt, in the Greater London constituency of Dagenham and Rainham. In 2019 Labour retained this one-time Labour stronghold with a tiny 293 majority: another near collapse of a southern Red Wall seat? Or a seat retained for reasons like Manchester Gorton? As elsewhere, Labour's majority and turnout had been reducing for decades. Since its new constituency boundaries in 2010 Labour survived declining turnout in the 'Corbyn-May' election of 2017 Labour's John Cruddas gained an extra 5,000 votes; outpolling the combined UKIP Tory vote by 1500 votes. A turnout increase of almost 3,000 suggests there is a substantial, latent 'left-wing' Labour vote dependent, as in the northern seats, on willingness to vote. Demographic similarities with Gorton, a growing minority of Asian voters, are also relevant. Moreover, despite some privatisation of a formerly huge council-owned housing stock, more residents live in social housing or privately rented accommodation than those owning or buying homes: 53% to 47% at the 2011 census. Ratios which have probably increased even more due to the effects of the 2008/9 financial crash. 'Working class' groups C2 (skilled manual occupations), D (semi-skilled & unskilled manual occupations) and E (unemployed and lowest grade occupations make up the largest socio-economic grouping at 39%, closely followed by the C1, lower-level white collar and 'intermediate occupations' totalling 35%. These social groups correspond closely to the proportions of residents without any qualifications or the minimal NVQ Level 1, totalling 43% of Dagenham and Rainham's adult population (London Borough of Barking, 2013). These housing and educational characteristics show that something approaching a majority of this constituency's potential working class electorate can be regarded as insecure, 'core' working class lacking 'middle class' attributes and assets and receptive to the kind of policies that improved Labour's vote in the 2017 election.

Comparisons and Conclusions

If the logic of the UK case is generalizable it seems to confirm that core sections of the working class are not being directly won over to Right-populism. The evidence from the UK's 2017 general election and from Gorton and Dagenham shows, many in the core working class will vote for a party that prioritises solutions to labour market, housing and financial insecurity. This applies especially where this historic working class, with low-skills and social capital is being augmented by a more educationally qualified 'precariat' (Standing 2018) which is being drawn into similar economic conditions. This combined, heterogeneous 'new working class' may lack the cultural solidarity and collective identity often reported for the traditional industrial proletariat; but this is not the key issue. Though they may lack subjective class identity, its different occupational, demographic and ethnic elements are objectively similar in several respects. Political campaigning that goes beyond point-scoring competition for votes can help to define and articulate this condition.

The preceding analysis argued that social democratic parties such as Labour have lost many of these potential supporters in the core working class, not to right-wing populism, but because they do not vote at all, or even get on the electoral register. As the Gorton case, Dagenham and several other constituencies seem to suggest, this abstention need not always be inevitable. However, if non-participating voters had been mobilised and incentivised to vote they could have made a difference in many Red Wall seats; almost all of which only continued longer-standing trends of political disengagement. The 2017 UK General Election and President Biden's 2020 US election shows re-engagement can happen if a sharper tranche of policies to improve employment, welfare and economic security; notwithstanding culture war issues, such as Brexit. Economically struggling and marginalized voters may have *agreed* with populistic memes, such as Brexit and immigration curbs, 'but were more likely to vote for Labour … for economic redistribution and to endorse Labour's anti-austerity platform' (Heath and Goodwin, 2017). However, if a potentially central demographic lacks the propensity even to vote then there is no opportunity to contest or persuade on such issues.

Therefore, Labour and 'progressive' parties in other parliamentary democracies need to combine policy agendas that combat economic insecurity as well as working on political mobilisation: campaigning for voter registration and engagement amongst the core working class. Recent successes by other, often more radical parties provide pointers to the electoral rewards from reaching out to areas with low economic security and low political engagement. In Salzburg, in 2023, the Austrian Communist party (KPO) with its Young Left section, focussed on districts where voter turnout was low and campaigned on issues such as inadequate housing. Campaigning as 'KPO Plus' (KPO proper with its Green youth wing) it increased its vote share by almost 200%, coming a close second in the Salzburg city elections (Fuentes and Zeller 2023). After elections in 2020 and 2022, the formerly hard-line Irish unification party, Sinn Fein, became the largest party in the North of Ireland and equal first in the South after campaigning on an anti-austerity programme and for social and affordable housing. Experts have associated an increase in working class voter turnout with the emphasis that Sinn Fein and other left parties placed on these issues (Kavanagh and Durkan, n.d.).

Pragmatists could argue that parties such as Labour can still govern in the interests of this core working class, even if they do not come to power through its support. Yet even this 'back door' type of concern seems unlikely to happen without electoral links between working class interests and party agendas; at least in the case of the British Labour Party, after the next general election. Since he became Party Leader in 2020, Labour leader Keir Starmer has dropped several pledges. Firstly, the principal of providing universal benefits has been superseded by ideas for a contributions-based system. Secondly, the former centrepiece of Labour's economic policy, a well-funded Green New Deal that would have brought jobs for manual workers and insulated their sub-standard homes has been compromised by reducing its funding. Thirdly, proposals for higher taxes on property and high incomes were dropped. This in spite of the fact that without such revenues there is unlikely to be sufficient funds to repair the enormous holes in public services on which the poorest – but not the privately-served wealthy – disproportionately depend.

Although its ecological aims might have been difficult to promote as beneficial to core working class voters, the prospects of jobs, warmer homes and reduced heating bills would have had some resonance with them. Backtracking on the scale of the Deal diminishes even this limited type of vision for progress and improvement. For property-less voters the political trade-off - that government borrowing will be restrained and upper- and middle-class taxes kept low - has all the visionary appeal of an accountants' balance sheet. Labour, like other social democratic parties, currently lacks a vision to overcome the sense of marginalization that fuels disengagement from politics.

This is not to deny that a reforming party such as Labour cannot make marginal and piecemeal improvements to the insecurity that defines the core working. Labour has not, yet at least, abandoned a commitment to reducing insecure employment by: 'banning zero-hours contracts, ending fire and rehire, and scrapping [up to two years of] qualifying periods for basic rights [covering]. . . unfair dismissal, sick pay, and parental leave.' On trade union rights the Party is more circumspect. It says that it will only 'update trade union legislation so it is fit for a modern economy' and 'strengthen the law to enforce workplace rights' (Labour Party 2024). However, once in government, countervailing pressure from the business lobby, which Starmer's Labour proclaims itself the champion, may well weaken this commitment. Of course, the union movement, with its presence in various sectors of the Party and its not inconsiderable financial donations could challenge such dilutions. Labour has also made promises to strengthen trade union rights for recognition, workplace organising and strike actions. However, expert legal opinion holds that the scale and impact of such reforms, as promised, is likely to be low (Hopper and Brown, 2023).

The prospects for some restoration of pre-austerity levels of spending on welfare, health and public services – on which the insecure working class is especially dependent - seems equally slim. With Labour committed to stringency in government borrowing – to re-assure the business lobby – only significant tax increases are likely to secure the necessary revenues. Yet Labour has dropped plans for various taxes on businesses, wealth and capital. All that remains is a commitment to abolish non-domicile tax status (country-hopping elites) and charge VAT and business rates on the private schools that educate children of the elites; higher land tax surcharges on overseas buyers; and an extension to the windfall tax on energy companies.

Instead, the emphasis will be on 'tax cuts to put more money in the pockets of working people' (Pickard and Fleming 2024). An ambition that many deem implausible for an economy with low growth prospects and public debt of almost 100% of GDP.

Arguably, the Democrats achieved victory in the 2020 US presidential election because they appeared to diverge from this strategic path of re-heated neoliberalism. Biden only increased the Democrats' share of the white non-college vote (a partial indicator of class) by 1% but that tiny increase, by taking his share up to 37 percent, probably made the difference between defeat and victory (Procock 2021). Biden's campaigns, unlike Hillary Clinton's in 2016, made unequivocal pitches to working class voters on wages and social security (BBC 2021; Williams 2020). With voter turnout in 2020 at its highest since 1900, easier voting procedures (mail-ins) and Democrats in some states, such as Georgia, mounting concerted efforts to raise turnout, the proportion of low-income voters was 7.5% greater than in states whose voting procedures were left unchanged.

Like Labour, other erstwhile left-wing parties may believe that it is sufficient to manage a neoliberal economy more efficiently than right-wing regimes. However, if as many believe, the crisis of neoliberalism is now systemic some radical reforms are essential. The most likely supporters of radical change remain those in the insecure and propertyless working class. Therefore, their re-engagement with the democratic process is critical. The challenge remains as old as the struggle for egalitarianism through liberal democracy. How to convince left politicians and a majority of the voting public that to campaign and govern for the benefit of the most disadvantaged groups will also improve society for all? A stiff challenge, but right-wing parties with no interest in systemic reforms can always outbid parties of the Left if the latter rely only, or principally on the votes of the propertied middle and working class. De-radicalised left parties may edge temporary electoral successes playing to the propertied gallery. Yet such a skewed voter base that excludes, perhaps, 20% of the electorate will provide only a temporary and fickle support as they confront the fall-out from a failing neoliberal economic order.

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