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Preface

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Preface

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This special issue assembles a set of articles that address different aspects of ‘working-class politics’ in Western Europe and the US at the beginning of the 21st century. The articles all emanate from a workshop that was conceived as part of the Joint Sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research in April 2020, that had to be postponed on account of the pandemic, and ultimately took place, online, in November 2020.

How should we think about ‘the working class’ in contemporary capitalist societies in Western Europe and North America? Mindful of divisions within the working class, what are the grievances that might account for the distinctive political attitudes and behaviour of production and service workers? How do these grievances manifest themselves in politics? Who speaks for the working class? Questions such as these featured prominently in political science and political sociology in the 1960s and 1970s. The then-dominant approach to electoral behaviour emphasised ‘class voting’, conceived, in the first instance, in terms of the distinction between working-class voters and other voters. At the same time, class conflict and trade unions emerged as a major focus of attention in a nascent subfield of political science that would subsequently come to be known as ‘comparative political economy’.

For reasons that are not hard to fathom, scholarly work on the working class faded into the background in the 1990s and 2000s. The industrial working class has become less important as an electoral constituency, union membership has declined dramatically in most OECD countries and the capacity of unions to make demands on parties and governments has decreased with their membership and their influence over wage formation. More recently, however, rising inequalities of income and wealth and the concomitant rise of populist parties and new protest

movements have stimulated renewed interest in working-class politics among social scientists as well as political pundits.

Like earlier literature on working-class politics, we conceive this topic as an opportunity to bridge different 'sub-fields' within political science and political sociology: identity and preference formation, political behaviour (in a broad sense), political economy and political representation. At the same time, we seek to avoid the old-fashioned notion of the working class as 'unionized production workers', let alone the currently popular notion of the working class as 'uneducated angry white men'.

The articles that we have assembled fall into three groups. The first cluster addresses the sociological foundations of working-class politics. While the article by Evans, Stubager and Langsaether explores how class identification matters to political preferences and participation and why it is that class identification differs across West European countries, the article by Weisstanner and Nolan analyses trends in perceived social status by occupational class in Germany and the US since the early 1980s. Jeannot's analysis of the inter-generational reproduction of class identification and class differences in political participation in the US rounds off this cluster.

The two articles in the second cluster revisit classic themes in the 1980s literature on working-class politics. While Neimanns and Baccaro's comparative analysis provides a novel take on the political economy of wage restraint, exploring individual- and country-level determinants of wage (dis)satisfaction, Perra and Pilati's study of post-2008 Italy explores the role of social class and unions as collective actors in contentious politics.

The third cluster connects the study of working-class politics to recent literature on preferences for redistribution and unequal political representation. Mosimann and Pontusson's article proceeds from the observation that unions have not only become weaker but also less representative of the working class and demonstrates that this 'narrowing' affects support for redistribution among middle-class as well as working-class citizens. Rennwald and Pontusson's article in turn explores perceptions of political voice by social class over the period 1974–2016. Finally, Elsässer and Schäfer summarise empirical evidence of unequal representation by social class and identify this as a key problem for empirical democratic theory.

In light of the above, it is hardly necessary to point out that the special issue is not meant to present a unified approach to the study of working-class politics. Its goal is rather to bring the topic of working-class politics to the fore and to illustrate some of the theoretical and empirical questions that it encompasses. We hasten to add that there are many questions about working-class politics that deserve more attention than they receive here. In particular, we regret that none of the contributions to this special issue address the role of women and immigrants in contemporary working-class

politics in a systematic fashion. And while there are already quite a few studies that explore working-class support for right-wing populist parties, this, too, is a topic that surely deserves more attention.

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