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The Swiss Middle Class and the Populist Right: Occupational Change and SVP Support, 1999–2024

Abstract

This article examines changes in the size, composition, and populist-right voting patterns of the Swiss occupational middle class between 1999 and 2024. Using 26 waves of the Swiss Household Panel and European Social Survey robustness analyses, we distinguish an upper-middle class, a middle class, and skilled and low-skilled working classes. The results show occupational upgrading: the upper-middle class expanded from 21% to 36%, the skilled working class declined from 40% to 28%, and the middle class remained close to one-third of the workforce. SVP support follows a persistent occupational ordering, with the lowest levels among the upper-middle class, higher levels among the middle class, and the highest levels among the working classes. Within the middle class, interpersonal occupations show substantially lower SVP support than organizational occupations, while independent occupations show higher support. The Swiss case shows that class-patterned populist-right support can persist amid prosperity and occupational upgrading.

Keywords: Occupational class, Middle class, Switzerland, Populist right, Voting

Introduction

Post-industrial transformation has reshaped both the occupational structure of Western societies and the political expression of social class. Class voting therefore remains a central debate in political sociology (Manza et al., 1995; Evans, 2000). Modernization theories expected individualization, rising affluence, and the erosion of traditional hierarchies to weaken class-based political alignments (Clark & Lipset, 1991; Clark et al., 1993). Subsequent research has shown, however, that class differences have not disappeared. Instead, they have been reorganized around cultural conflict and an emerging tripolar political space comprising the left, the center-right, and the populist right (van der Waal et al., 2007; Jansen et al., 2013; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). The electoral success of populist-right parties has renewed interest in these alignments because such parties attract substantial support from voters who feel economically, culturally, or socially disadvantaged by post-industrial transformation (Rydgren, 2007; Bornschier & Kriesi, 2013; Aktas, 2024). This paper focuses on middle-class voting because feelings of disadvantage, occupational risk, and relative status anxiety increasingly extend to intermediate social strata (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Kurer, 2020), sparking renewed interest in the electoral links between the middle class and the populist right (Derndorfer, 2025).

Evaluating these societal transformations requires distinguishing occupational upgrading from the contraction of the middle class. Public debate frequently invokes a “middle-class squeeze” in which technological change and globalization hollow out the center of the employment structure. Much of this literature, however, defines the middle class through income or social status rather than occupational positions and employment relations (Barbieri et al., 2020). Research based on occupational class schemes instead points predominantly towards upgrading: professional and managerial employment has expanded, while skilled and low-skilled working-class occupations have declined (Oesch & Rodríguez Menés, 2011; Smallenbroek et al., 2024). Recent comparative evidence similarly questions the idea of a

generalized decline of the occupational middle class (Moawad & Oesch, 2025). Educational expansion has contributed to this restructuring, although similar qualifications do not necessarily translate into equivalent occupational outcomes across social groups and institutional contexts (Nennstiel & Becker, 2025).

Occupational upgrading does not necessarily imply that the middle class itself is expanding. Employment growth may be concentrated in professional and managerial upper-middle-class positions, while the occupational middle class remains stable or contracts. Distinguishing these groups is therefore essential for identifying where upgrading occurs. It is also politically relevant because groups benefiting from occupational expansion may differ from those exposed to technological displacement, declining relative status, or uncertainty about future mobility (Im et al., 2019; Kurer, 2020).

The occupational middle class is also unlikely to constitute a homogeneous political group. Occupations at similar vertical levels may involve different employment relations, work environments, and forms of social interaction. Oesch's (2006) concept of work logics distinguishes organizational, technical, interpersonal, and independent occupational settings. Sociocultural professionals in interpersonal occupations tend to hold more universalistic and culturally liberal positions, whereas managers and employers are more closely associated with economic conservatism (van de Werfhorst & de Graaf, 2004; Güveli et al., 2007). Small business owners, technicians, associate managers, and sociocultural semiprofessionals may therefore occupy similar positions in a vertical hierarchy while dividing their support between the green-left, center-right, and populist right (Oesch & Rennwald, 2010, 2018). Concerns about anticipated downward mobility and relative status loss may further make sections of the middle class receptive to populist-right appeals before they experience material deprivation (Engler & Weisstanner, 2021; Im et al., 2023).

Switzerland provides a strategically informative case. Over the past quarter-century, it has combined sustained employment growth, high aggregate affluence, and an expansion of professional and high-skilled service occupations (Oesch, 2023). At the same time, it is home to one of Europe's most electorally successful populist-right parties, the Swiss People's Party (SVP). This coexistence makes Switzerland a demanding case for explanations that derive populist-right support primarily from aggregate economic crisis or a numerical collapse of the middle class. Swiss class voting was already being reorganized before the present observation period, as the SVP developed a substantial working-class constituency and blurred the traditional opposition between a working-class left and a bourgeois right (Rennwald, 2014). The party's continued politicization of immigration, European integration, and national sovereignty may sustain such alignments by activating differences between occupational groups (Ares, 2022).

Previous research has also identified mechanisms that may stabilize SVP support over time. Parental support for the party increases the probability that children subsequently support it (Coffé & Voorpostel, 2010), while class origins continue to shape political preferences after intergenerational mobility has occurred (Ares & van Ditmars, 2023). Less is known, however, about the long-term structural development of the Swiss occupational middle class and whether changes in its size and composition have been accompanied by changes in its relationship with the populist right.

This article makes three contributions to research on occupational change and populist-right voting. First, it provides a long-term mapping of the Swiss occupational class structure between 1999 and 2024. By distinguishing the occupational middle class from professional and managerial upper-middle-class positions above and working-class positions below, it shows whether post-industrial change has produced a contraction of the middle tier or whether occupational upgrading has instead been concentrated at the top of the class structure. Second,

it connects these structural developments to 26 years of prospective SVP support. The analysis therefore moves beyond documenting established class differences in populist-right voting to examine whether their occupational ordering persists while classes change in size and composition and under conditions of economic prosperity. Third, it identifies political heterogeneity that broad class categories may conceal by distinguishing work logics within the middle class and assessing the occupational gradient using continuous measures and an alternative class classification. The principal analyses use the Swiss Household Panel from 1999 to 2024; while independent European Social Survey data are used to assess the robustness of the descriptive structural trends.

Theoretical Framework

Social class is understood here as an occupation-based structural position reflecting employment relations, skill requirements, authority, autonomy, and control over productive resources. This differs from approaches based exclusively on income or occupational prestige. Individuals with similar incomes may occupy positions characterized by different employment security, workplace autonomy, career prospects, and exposure to market risks. Occupational class therefore captures durable differences in material interests and social experiences that may shape political orientations and voting behavior (Oesch, 2006; Rose & Harrison, 2010; Barbieri et al., 2020).

The transition from industrial to post-industrial economies has altered the distribution of these positions. Technological change, educational expansion, and the growth of high-skilled services have expanded professional and managerial employment while reducing many traditional working-class occupations (Oesch & Rodríguez Menés, 2011). Comparative studies consequently find more evidence of occupational upgrading than of uniform polarization (Smallenbroek et al., 2024). Moawad and Oesch (2025) further show that growth may be

concentrated in the upper-middle class while skilled and low-skilled working-class employment declines.

This distinction is central to debates about the middle class. An expansion of professional and managerial occupations does not necessarily increase the occupational middle class itself. The four-class scheme used in this study therefore distinguishes an upper-middle class of professionals and managers from a middle class comprising technicians, associate managers, sociocultural semiprofessionals, and parts of the self-employed. It also separates skilled from low-skilled working-class positions (Moawad & Oesch, 2025). The scheme designates the highest occupational tier as the upper-middle class rather than an upper class. In post-industrial societies, higher-grade managers and professionals constitute 20 to over 40 percent of the active labor force. Applying the label upper class to this broad segment of salaried employees would conflate standard professional employment with the small elite (e.g., people considering themselves upper-class), which remains largely uncaptured in standard sample surveys (Oesch & Vigna, 2023; Moawad & Oesch, 2025). This classification allows us to examine whether structural change has eroded the middle tier or primarily shifted employment from working-class to upper-middle-class positions.

Occupations are politically relevant not only because they distribute economic resources. They also expose individuals to recurring patterns of authority, autonomy, social interaction, competition, and insecurity. Occupations locate individuals within workplace networks and status hierarchies through which political values and interpretations of social change may be transmitted. Bengtsson et al. (2013) show that occupational class remains associated with political attitudes in post-industrial societies. Kitschelt and Rehm (2014) therefore conceptualize occupations as sites of political preference formation, while Selenko et al. (2025) emphasize the political relevance of workplace experiences.

The continuing importance of occupations is consistent with research showing that class voting has been reorganized rather than eliminated. The weakening of traditional class-party alignments did not remove occupational differences in political behavior (Brooks & Svallfors, 2010). Instead, political competition increasingly takes place within a tripolar space comprising the green-left, center-right, and populist right (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). Professional and sociocultural occupations tend to support the green-left, traditional managerial and business groups lean towards the center-right, and substantial segments of the working class support the populist right (Bornschier & Kriesi, 2013). The occupational middle class may divide between these poles.

A vertical class hierarchy may nevertheless conceal differences among occupations located at similar levels. Oesch (2006) distinguishes four work logics. The interpersonal logic characterizes occupations based on direct interaction with clients, patients, or students. The organizational logic concerns administrative coordination and delegated authority. The technical logic centers on technical expertise and the manipulation of objects, while the independent logic characterizes employers and self-employed workers.

These work logics are associated with different political orientations. Interpersonal occupations emphasize communication and responsiveness to individual needs and are generally associated with cultural liberalism and green-left support (van de Werfhorst & de Graaf, 2004; Güveli et al., 2007). Organizational occupations are more closely associated with administrative authority and center-right preferences. Technical occupations may combine support for economic protection with conservative cultural positions, while employers and the self-employed have distinctive interests in taxation, regulation, and market autonomy (Oesch & Rennwald, 2010, 2018). The aggregate orientation of the middle class may therefore conceal differences between its interpersonal, organizational, technical, and independent segments.

Populist-right support among the middle class need not depend on immediate material deprivation. Political discontent may emerge among individuals whose occupations remain intact but appear vulnerable to automation or future displacement (Im et al., 2019). Workers in declining routine and middle-skilled occupations may also experience insecurity regarding their relative occupational position (Kurer & Palier, 2019; Kurer, 2020). Perceived threats of social decline can increase radical-right support even without an immediate deterioration in material circumstances (Engler & Weisstanner, 2021), while expectations of future status loss may matter independently of experienced decline (Im et al., 2023). Derndorfer (2025) similarly connects the risk of downward mobility among middle-class groups with radical-right support.

These concerns are relational. Individuals evaluate their position relative to other groups, previous generations, and their own mobility expectations. Falling behind—or expecting to fall behind—may generate dissatisfaction even when living standards remain comparatively high (Burgoon et al., 2019). Economic vulnerability may also become linked to concerns about recognition, national belonging, and established social boundaries (Gidron & Hall, 2017). Status-based and cultural explanations therefore complement rather than replace accounts based on economic interests.

The Swiss case allows us to test whether these alignments persist under favorable economic conditions. During the observation period, the country combined high employment and affluence with an expansion of professional and high-value-added service occupations (Oesch, 2023). Swiss class voting had nevertheless already been reorganized around a strong populist-right party before 1999. Rennwald (2014) shows that the traditional cleavage between workers and owners weakened, but occupational differences did not disappear. Instead, the SVP developed a substantial working-class electorate, transforming rather than dissolving Swiss class voting.

The conversion of occupational experiences and status concerns into SVP support also depends on political supply. Parties intensify class differences when they emphasize issues on which occupational groups hold distinct preferences (Ares, 2022). The SVP has consistently politicized immigration, European integration, national sovereignty, and distrust of political elites, connecting structural and cultural change to conflicts over national closure. Political socialization may reinforce these alignments: parental SVP support shapes the later preferences of children (Coffé & Voorpostel, 2010), and class origins continue to influence voting after occupational mobility (Ares & van Ditmars, 2023). Downward intergenerational mobility may further increase far-right support when accompanied by insecurity and dissatisfaction (Gugushvili et al., 2026).

Based on this literature, we expect structural change in Switzerland to be characterized primarily by an expansion of the upper-middle class and a contraction of working-class employment rather than an unequivocal hollowing out of the occupational middle class. We also expect a persistent occupational ordering in SVP support: support should be lowest in the upper-middle class, intermediate in the occupational middle class, and highest in the skilled and low-skilled working classes.

The aggregate position of the middle class should conceal internal heterogeneity. SVP support is expected to be lowest among respondents in interpersonal occupations and higher among those in the independent work logic. Technical and organizational occupations should occupy intermediate positions, although their relative ordering is less clear. Finally, because Swiss class voting was already reorganized around a strong populist-right party before the observation period, the relative ordering of occupational groups is expected to remain broadly persistent between 1999 and 2024.

Data and Methods

We utilize data from the Swiss Household Panel (SHP), a longitudinal survey that has followed a random sample of households in Switzerland since 1999 (Tillmann et al., 2016; SHP Group, 2026a, 2026b).¹ The SHP provides high-quality data on social dynamics and political attitudes, allowing us to track changes over a quarter of a century (Marquis et al., 2022). For this analysis, we use the cumulative file provided by the data provider (data version 12.0), treating the data cross-sectionally for each survey year to map broad structural trends over time from 1999 to 2024. To compensate for panel attrition and changes in the resident population, the original SHP sample was supplemented with refreshment samples in 2004, 2013, and 2020. We apply the cross-sectional weights provided by the SHP to ensure representativeness of the Swiss residential population.

Although the refreshment samples and cross-sectional weights improve the representativeness of the annual SHP samples, estimates derived from a long-running household panel may still be affected by selective attrition, sample ageing, and changes in population coverage. We therefore assess the robustness of the descriptive trends using Rounds 1–11 from the European Social Survey (ESS), an independent repeated cross-sectional survey based on probability samples of national resident populations. Switzerland participated in all 11 ESS rounds conducted between 2002/03 and 2023/24. The results, presented in Section 2 of the Online Appendix, reveal broadly similar temporal patterns across the two data sources.

Variables

The central variable in this study is occupational class. We operationalize class using the four-class scheme developed by Moawad and Oesch (2025). This classification distinguishes occupational positions according to the productive resources individuals possess, particularly

¹ This study has been realized using data collected by the Swiss Household Panel (SHP), which is based at the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences FORS. The project is supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

their occupational skills and employment status. It combines information on one-digit ISCO occupation, educational requirements, and whether respondents are employees, employers, or self-employed. Occupation codes and occupational measures were generated using the Stata package *crosswalk* (Jann, 2025), after which we applied the allocation rules presented in Table S1 in the Online Appendix.²

The scheme distinguishes an upper-middle class, a middle class, a skilled working class, and a low-skilled working class. The upper-middle class comprises professionals and higher-level managerial positions characterized by advanced occupational skills, tertiary qualifications, or control over productive resources. The middle class includes technicians and associate professionals, lower-level managerial positions, semiprofessional occupations, and selected employers and self-employed workers. The skilled working class consists primarily of clerical, service, sales, craft, and production occupations that require vocational or upper-secondary training or comparable occupational skills. The low-skilled working class comprises elementary occupations and other positions with low formal skill requirements that can generally be entered with limited training or learned through relatively short periods of on-the-job instruction.

The dependent variable is voting intention. This is operationalized using the survey question: “If there was an election for the National Council tomorrow, for which party would you vote?” Respondents who indicated the SVP were coded as 1, while those indicating any other party were coded as 0. Respondents who did not answer, did not know, or named no party were treated as missing values. The analysis focuses specifically on the SVP as the principal party of the populist right in Switzerland rather than on right-wing voting more broadly.

² There are alternative occupation-based classes used in the literature. To assess whether the findings depend on the selected classification, we replicate the principal analyses in Section 3 of the Online Appendix using an ESeC-based alternative following Barbieri et al. (2020), with the salariat divided into higher and lower segments. We retain the terminology used by Barbieri et al. in presenting these analyses, although their intermediate or middle-class category is not conceptually identical to the middle class in our primary classification. The substantive temporal patterns are broadly similar across the two specifications.

Several additional variables are used to describe changes in the composition and political orientation of the occupational middle class. Gender is self-reported as male or female. Age is measured in years. Education is measured using the years of education variable derived from the SHP, ranging from 8 to 21 years. Nationality is determined based on reported citizenship, where individuals reporting having a Swiss citizenship are considered nationals.

Sample Selection

We restrict our sample to individuals aged 18 to 60 who completed the personal interview in their respective wave, resulting in a total of 145,811 person-years. This age range focuses specifically on the active workforce, where occupational class is most salient. For the first part of our analysis concerning the mapping of the class structure, we include all individuals with valid ISCO codes, which yields a sample of 122,025 person-years.

The second part of our analysis focuses on voting intention. This subsample is restricted to Swiss citizens who indicated a valid party preference, as only citizens are eligible to vote in national elections. This results in an initial voting sample of 72,865 person-years. Missing values for the control variables within this analytical sample are minimal. Specifically, there are no missing values for gender or age. After excluding these cases, the final analytical sample for the regression analysis consists of 72,865 person-years.

Analytical Strategy

The analytical strategy for this study is conducted using Stata version 19.0 along with the community-contributed packages *estout* and *coefplot* (Jann, 2007, 2014). The analytical process proceeds in two distinct stages. The first stage consists of bivariate analyses based on the full sample of individuals aged 18 to 60 with valid ISCO codes, totaling 122,025 person-years. This stage involves four sequential steps. First, we calculate the proportion of each occupational class for every survey year to map the evolution of the class structure over time, as shown in

Figure 1 (and Figure S1 in the Online Appendix for the ESS data). Second, we examine the composition of the middle class by calculating the annual shares of women and Swiss nationals, as well as the mean years of education, to contextualize the changing demographics of this group in Figure 2 (and Figure S2 in the Online Appendix for the ESS data). Third, to assess the intention to vote for the SVP across the occupational classes, we calculate the respective shares across all survey waves in Figure 3. Fourth, using the regression sample of 70,410 person-years, we calculate the annual share of respondents intending to vote for the SVP within each of the four occupational classes. Figure 4 thereby illustrates the development and persistence of class differences in SVP support over time.

In the second stage, we conduct multivariate analyses using the regression sample of 72,865 person-years (regression results). We estimate separate logistic regression models for each survey year, with prospective SVP support as the dependent variable. To facilitate the interpretation of class differences, we calculate and report average marginal effects (see Figure 4). The middle class serves as the reference category, allowing direct comparisons with the upper-middle class and the skilled and low-skilled working classes. We estimate two specifications. The first is an unadjusted model containing only occupational class. The second model adjusts for gender and age, both of which are associated with populist-right voting and may differ systematically across occupational classes (Jansen et al., 2013; Nennstiel & Hudde, 2025). To account for a potentially nonlinear relationship between age and SVP support, age is entered categorically, distinguishing respondents aged 18–29, 30–39, 40–49, and 50–60. Education is not included because it is closely intertwined with occupational class and contributes to the assignment of some occupational positions. Political ideology is likewise not included because it is understood as a potential pathway linking occupational position to vote choice rather than as an exogenous confounder. The complete regression results, including

average marginal effects for all variables and survey-year-specific sample sizes, are reported in Tables S2 to S27 of the Online Appendix.

Finally, we conduct two sets of supplementary analyses to examine occupational heterogeneity that may be concealed by the four-class classification (further analyses). First, we restrict the sample to members of the occupational middle class and distinguish between the organizational, independent, technical, and interpersonal work logics proposed by Oesch (2006). We estimate pooled logistic regression models for the period 1999–2024, using the organizational work logic as the reference category. All models include survey-year fixed effects. Model 1 estimates differences between the work logics without demographic adjustment, while Model 2 additionally includes interactions between work logic and survey year to assess whether these differences vary over time. Model 3 adjusts for gender and categorical age, and Model 4 combines the demographic covariates with the interactions between work logic and survey year. Table 1 reports the corresponding average marginal effects. To examine temporal variation more directly, we additionally estimate separate unadjusted and demographically adjusted models for each survey year; the resulting average marginal effects are presented in Figure S9 of the Online Appendix.

Second, we assess whether the aggregation of occupations into four broad classes obscures finer-grained or nonlinear differences in SVP support across the occupational hierarchy. For this purpose, we replace the categorical class measure with two alternative occupation-based scales: Occupational Earning Potential (OEP), which ranks occupations according to their median earnings expressed as percentiles of the overall earnings distribution (Oesch et al., 2026), and the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI), which locates occupations within a hierarchy based on their typical educational and income characteristics (Ganzeboom et al., 1992). OEP is grouped into ten-point intervals ranging from 0–9 to 90–100, while ISEI is grouped into intervals ranging from 10–19 to 80–89. For each

measure, we first estimate a pooled logistic regression model covering 1999–2024 that adjusts for gender, categorical age, and survey-year fixed effects, with standard errors clustered at the respondent level. We use these models to calculate the predicted probability of SVP support for each occupational-score category. We then estimate corresponding models separately for each survey year to assess whether the shape of the occupational gradient remains stable over time. The pooled and year-specific results are presented in Figures S10 to S13 of the Online Appendix.

Results

Bivariate results

Figure 1 presents the development of the occupational class structure in Switzerland between 1999 and 2024. The most pronounced change is the expansion of the upper-middle class, whose employment share increased from 21% in 1999 to 36% in 2024. This expansion was accompanied primarily by a contraction of the skilled working class, which declined from 40% to 28%. The low-skilled working class remained comparatively small throughout the observation period and decreased modestly from 7% to 5%. By comparison, the occupational middle class changed little in size. Its share fluctuated between approximately 29% and 34% and was almost identical at the beginning and end of the observation period, accounting for 32% of the workforce in 1999 and 31% in 2024. The results therefore do not indicate a pronounced hollowing out of the middle tier. The overall class structure underwent substantial upgrading, but this upgrading was concentrated in the expansion of professional and managerial upper-middle-class positions and the contraction of skilled working-class employment. These structural trends are corroborated by robustness analyses using data from the ESS (see Figure S1 in the Online Appendix). Although the overall trajectories across both datasets are highly consistent, some level differences emerge. The SHP yields a somewhat larger upper-middle-class share and a smaller low-skilled working-class share than the ESS.

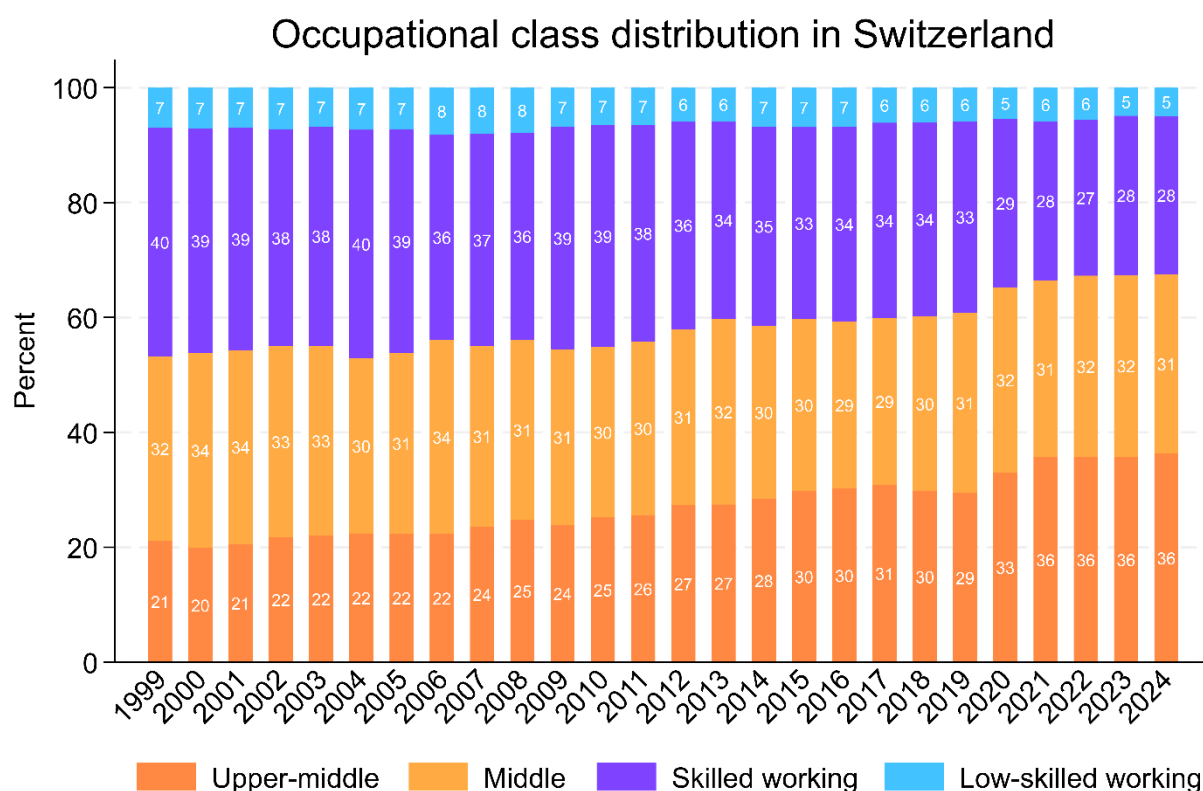


Figure 1. Evolution of the occupational class structure in Switzerland, 1999–2024

Data source: Swiss Household Panel (1999–2024), weighted data, our own calculations.

Figure 2 turns from the size of the middle class to its internal composition. The proportion of women increased from 47% in 1999 to 54% in 2024. Apart from an unusually low estimate in 2021, the series indicates a gradual feminization of the middle class, particularly from the early 2000s onwards. The proportion of Swiss nationals declined from 85% to 78%, although the series contains a marked increase to 92% in 2013. This discontinuity coincides with the introduction of an SHP refreshment sample and should therefore not be interpreted as a substantive short-term change in the occupational composition of the middle class. Mean educational attainment increased more consistently, from 13.1 to 14.6 years. Benchmarking these developments against the composition of the entire working-age sample qualifies the interpretation of the middle-class trends (see Figure S7 in the Online Appendix). Across the full sample, the share of women increased from 44% to 49%, the share of Swiss nationals fell from

79% to 72% and mean educational attainment rose from 13.1 to 15.2 years. The feminization of the occupational middle class was therefore somewhat stronger than the corresponding development in the working-age population. By contrast, the decline in the proportion of Swiss nationals largely mirrors the broader diversification of the workforce. Educational attainment increased substantially within the middle class, but less strongly than in the working-age population as a whole. The middle class has consequently become more female, more internationally composed, and more highly educated, although not all of these developments are specific to the middle class.

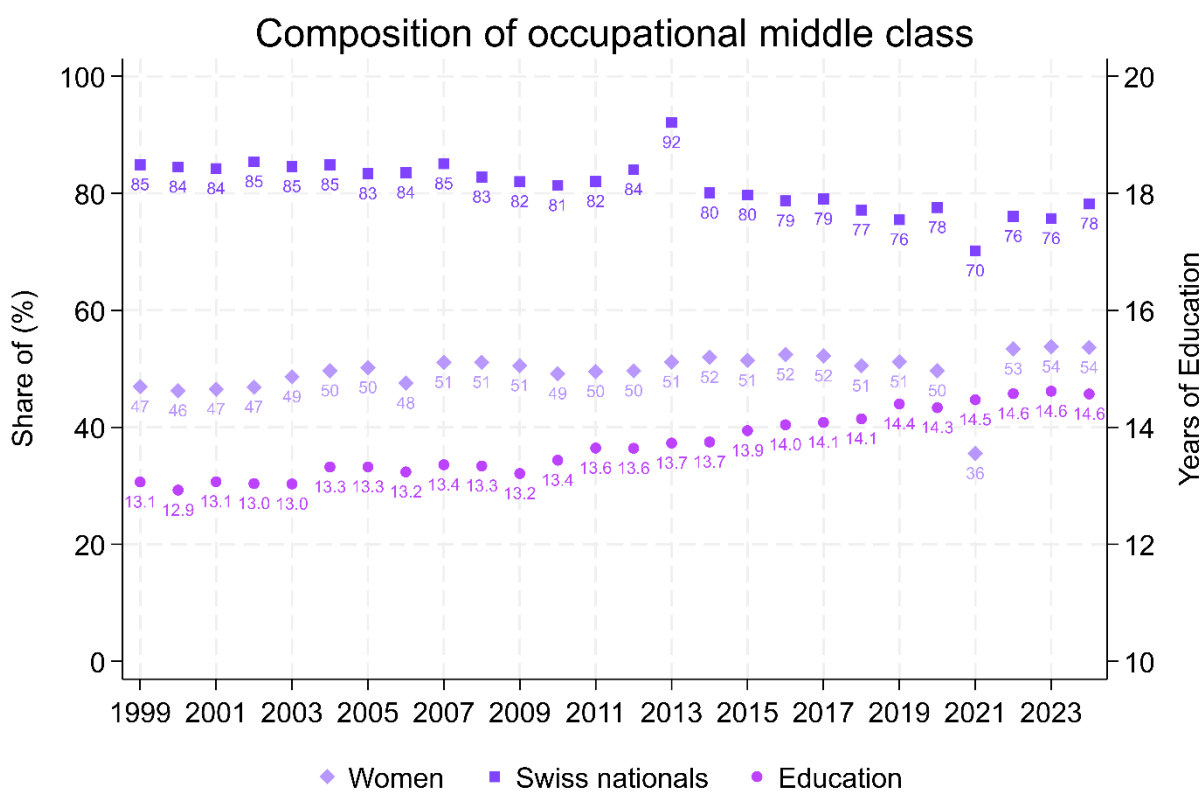


Figure 2. Composition of the middle class by gender, nationality, and education, 1999–2024

Data source: Swiss Household Panel (1999–2024), weighted data, our own calculations.

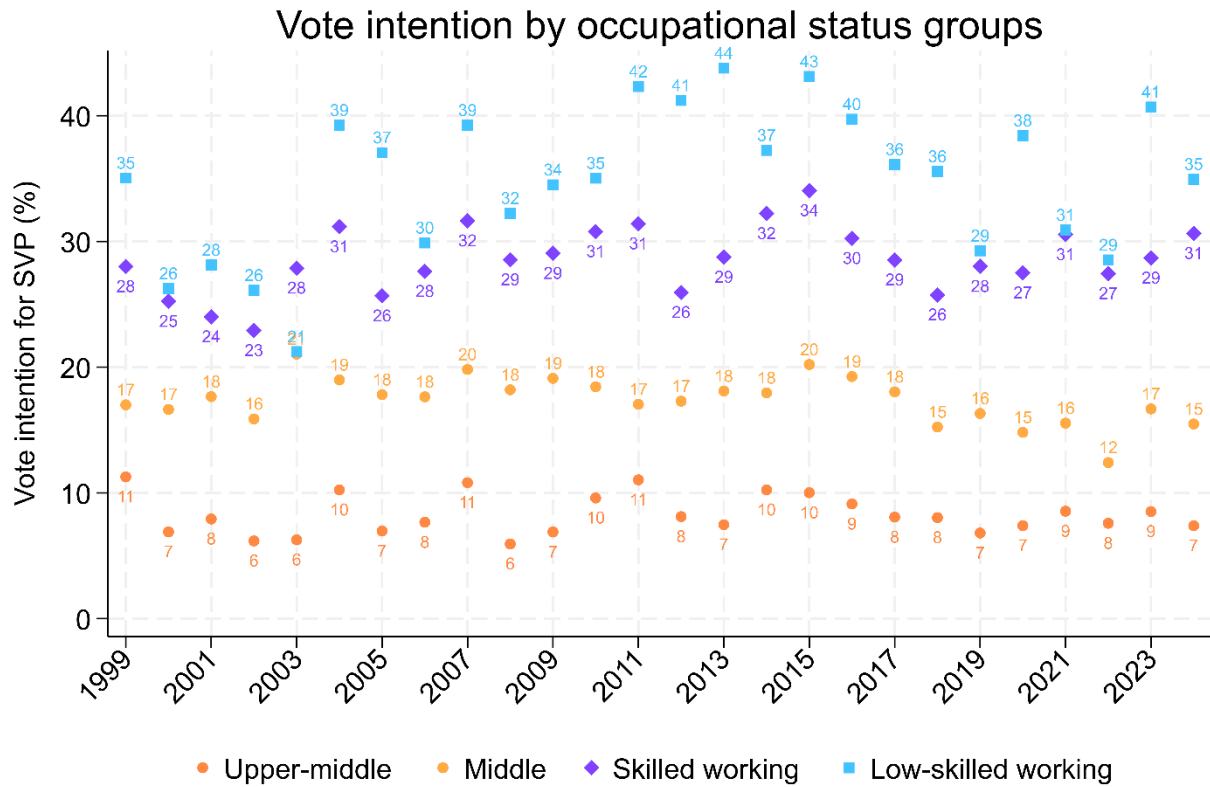


Figure 3. SVP vote intention by occupational class, 1999–2024

Data source: Swiss Household Panel (1999–2024), weighted data., our own calculations.

Figure 3 presents the annual proportion of respondents intending to vote for the SVP in each of the four occupational classes. The ordering of the classes remains broadly consistent throughout the observation period. SVP support is lowest among members of the upper-middle class and highest among members of the skilled and low-skilled working classes. Support among middle-class respondents lies between these groups in each survey year. Among the upper-middle class, SVP support remains comparatively low throughout the period. The corresponding share is consistently higher among the occupational middle class and increases further among the skilled working class. Estimates for the low-skilled working class are generally the highest, although they fluctuate more strongly across survey years because this group contains fewer observations.

Regression results

Figure 4 examines whether these differences persist after accounting for gender and age. The unadjusted and adjusted estimates are highly similar, indicating that the observed class differences are not primarily attributable to differences in the age and gender composition of the occupational groups. Compared with the middle class, members of the upper-middle class are approximately 6 to 15 percentage points less likely to intend to vote for the SVP in the adjusted models. This difference is statistically significant in every survey year. Members of the skilled working class are approximately 6 to 16 percentage points more likely than middle-class respondents to support the SVP after adjustment. This contrast is also statistically significant throughout the observation period. The estimated differences between the low-skilled working class and the middle class are generally larger but less precise because of the comparatively small size of the low-skilled working-class group. The differences are not statistically significant in several of the earliest survey years but become more consistently positive and statistically significant during the later part of the observation period.³

³ Annual model-fit tests (McFadden's pseudo-R²) indicate that the capacity of occupational and demographic characteristics to predict SVP support has tended to increase rather than decline between 1999 and 2024. For the full trajectory of annual model-fit estimates, see Figure S8 in the Online Appendix.

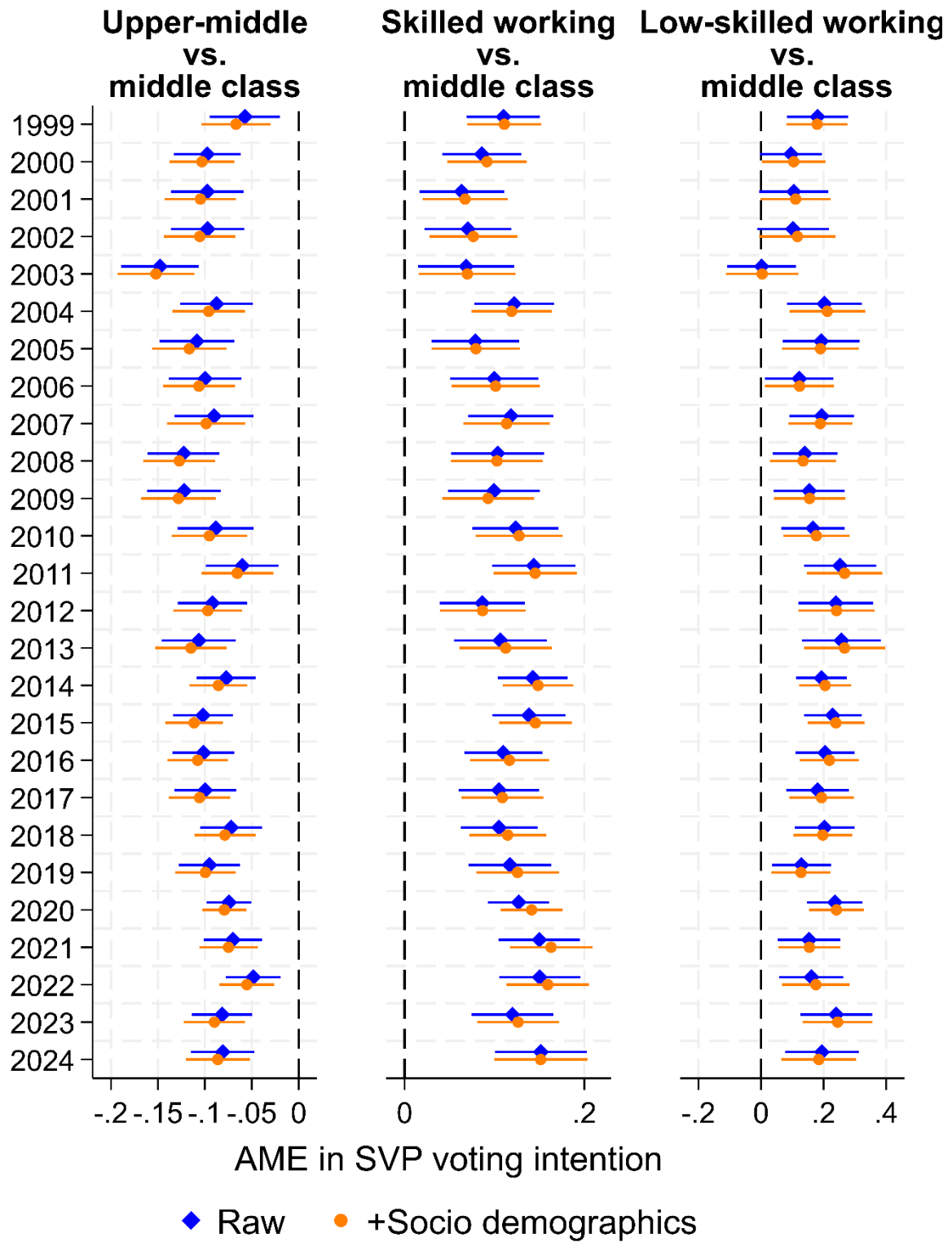


Figure 4. Average marginal effects of occupational class on the probability of voting SVP, across different statistical models from 1999–2024

Data source: Swiss Household Panel (1999–2024), weighted data, our own calculations.

Further analysis

Table 1 examines heterogeneity within the occupational middle class by work logic. Compared with respondents in the organizational work logic, those in the independent work logic are approximately 4–5 percentage points more likely to support the SVP. No statistically significant difference is observed between the technical and organizational work logics. Respondents in the interpersonal work logic, by contrast, are approximately 9–10 percentage points less likely to support the SVP. These differences remain largely unchanged after accounting for gender and age. The year-specific estimates in Figure S9 in the Online Appendix generally reproduce this pattern, although the estimates vary more strongly across individual survey years.

Figures S10 to S13 in the Online Appendix present the results using OEP and ISEI instead of the four-class classification. Both measures reveal a clear but nonlinear occupational gradient. Predicted SVP support is highest among occupations in the lower parts of the OEP and ISEI distributions, declines across intermediate occupational positions, and is lowest among occupations with high earnings potential or socioeconomic status. The year-specific estimates broadly reproduce the pooled patterns.

Table 1. Average marginal effects (based on logistic regression predicting SVP vote intention for middle class members (pooled data 1999-2024))

	M1	M2	M3	M4
<i>Work logics (ref. Organizational)</i>				
Independent	0.05** (0.02)	0.05* (0.02)	0.04** (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)
Technical	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)
Interpersonal service	-0.10*** (0.01)	-0.10*** (0.01)	-0.09*** (0.01)	-0.09*** (0.01)
Women			-0.06*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.01)
<i>Age group (ref. 18–29)</i>				
30–39			0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
40–49			-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
50–60			-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Work logic × year fixed effects	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	23,405	23,405	23,405	23,405
Pseudo R ²	0.033	0.036	0.041	0.044

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Source: Swiss Household Panel (1999–2024), our own calculations.

Conclusion

This study examined the structural and political development of the Swiss occupational middle class between 1999 and 2024.

First, the results show occupational upgrading rather than generalized polarization. The upper-middle class expanded from 21% to 36% of the workforce, while the skilled working class declined from 40% to 28%. The occupational middle class remained close to one-third of the workforce, accounting for 32% in 1999 and 31% in 2024. Structural change was therefore concentrated in an expansion of professional and managerial employment and a contraction of skilled working-class positions, consistent with broader evidence on occupational upgrading (Oesch & Rodríguez Menés, 2011; Moawad & Oesch, 2025).

Second, the middle class changed internally despite its relative numerical stability. The share of women increased from 47% to 54%, the proportion of Swiss nationals declined from 85% to 78%, and mean education rose from 13.1 to 14.6 years. Comparison with the full working-age sample shows that some of these changes were specific to the middle class, whereas others reflected broader demographic and educational developments. These trends are in line with results from studies based on administrative data (Nennstiel & Becker, 2025).

Third, the voting analyses reveal a persistent occupational ordering in SVP support. Support remained lowest among the upper-middle class, higher among the middle class, and highest among the skilled and low-skilled working classes. These differences changed little after adjusting for gender and age. The association between occupational position and SVP support therefore persisted throughout a period of substantial structural and compositional change, corroborating and extending earlier patterns documented for the mid-2000s (Oesch & Rennwald, 2010) and the mid-2010s (Rennwald, 2014; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018).

Fourth, the middle class is politically heterogeneous. Respondents in interpersonal occupations were approximately 9–10 percentage points less likely to support the SVP than respondents in organizational occupations. Members of the independent work logic were approximately 4–5 percentage points more likely to support it, while technical and organizational occupations did not differ consistently. These findings accord with approaches that conceptualize occupations as sites of political preference formation and distinguish their horizontal work logics (Oesch, 2006; Kitschelt & Rehm, 2014).

The analyses using OEP and ISEI reinforce the main conclusion. Both measures reveal a nonlinear occupational gradient in which SVP support is highest in lower occupational positions, remains elevated across parts of the middle, and declines sharply among higher-status occupations. The association is therefore not an artefact of the four-class specification, although its precise magnitude depends on how occupational position is measured.

By extending the observation window to 2024, these results build on earlier research that analyzed data up to the mid-2010s (Rennwald, 2014; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). The findings suggest that clear class differentials in populist right voting intentions between the middle class, the upper-middle class, and the working classes remain evident. Since the early 2000, these occupational class gaps appear to show relative stability rather than a further decline in populist right voting differences.

The Swiss case is informative beyond its national context. Occupational differences in populist-right support persisted despite high aggregate affluence and occupational upgrading. Macroeconomic prosperity and an expanding upper-middle class are therefore not sufficient to eliminate class-patterned electoral alignments. Comparative research suggests that relative status concerns (Kurer, 2020), perceived threats of decline (Engler & Weisstanner, 2021), and anticipated mobility risks (Im et al., 2023) may sustain populist-right support among groups that are not experiencing absolute deprivation. Their electoral consequences also depend on

whether parties connect these concerns to salient political conflicts, as the SVP has done through the politicization of immigration and national sovereignty (Ares, 2022). The present study does not test these mechanisms directly, but it shows that the occupational pattern they seek to explain persists in an affluent and structurally upgrading economy.

Several limitations remain. Although SHP refreshment samples, cross-sectional weights, and the ESS robustness analyses increase confidence in the structural trends, panel attrition and changes in population coverage cannot be excluded. The outcome captures prospective SVP voting intentions rather than validated votes, and the focus on a single party does not describe the full distribution of middle-class support across the Swiss party system. The numerical development of the middle class is partly classification-dependent, and the observational analyses cannot distinguish between workplace socialization, economic interests, status concerns, and intergenerational transmission.

Future research should combine detailed occupational classifications with direct measures of perceived mobility, employment risk, and social status and should compare how different middle-class work logics divide their support across the green-left, center-right, and populist right. The present study nevertheless shows that the occupational middle class remains structurally important and politically heterogeneous. Its numerical stability does not imply political uniformity, and occupational upgrading does not imply the disappearance of class-patterned voting.

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