

The Anxious Middle Class: Risk of Downward Mobility and Support for Radical Right Parties across Western Europe

Derndorfer, Judith

DOI:
[10.57938/38a304e3-7fd1-4075-9db7-9de891a45a58](https://doi.org/10.57938/38a304e3-7fd1-4075-9db7-9de891a45a58)

Published: 01/04/2023

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Derndorfer, J. (2023). *The Anxious Middle Class: Risk of Downward Mobility and Support for Radical Right Parties across Western Europe*. WU Vienna University of Economics and Business. INEQ Working Paper Series No. 28 <https://doi.org/10.57938/38a304e3-7fd1-4075-9db7-9de891a45a58>



Working Paper Series

#28

Judith DERNDORFER

The Anxious Middle Class: Risk of Downward Mobility and Support for Radical Right Parties across Western Europe

Original Citation:

Derndorfer, J. (2023) The Anxious Middle Class: Risk of Downward Mobility and Support for Radical Right Parties across Western Europe. *INEQ Working Paper Series*, 28. WU Vienna University of Economics and Business, Vienna.



The Anxious Middle Class: Risk of Downward Mobility and Support for Radical Right Parties across Western Europe

Judith Derndorfer¹

¹Research Institute Economics of Inequality, WU Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria

Abstract

This paper studies the link between economic insecurity of the middle class and radical right party (RRP) support in 13 Western European countries. Economic insecurity is conceptualised as the occupational risk of downward mobility. To capture the potential mitigating effects of prospects of upward mobility and increasing middle class on economic insecurity, I compute a novel index which in addition to the risk of downward mobility accounts for the other two dynamics. I find that economic insecurity is distinct for occupational groups and varies by country. Both measures are positively correlated with RRP support. The results highlight that the decline of the middle class impacts the political sphere. The paper contributes to the research on economic insecurity by proposing a new measure to capture economic insecurity of the middle class and to the literature on investigating the role of latent economic threat, as opposed to economic hardship, on RRP support.

Keywords: economic insecurity, middle class, electoral behaviour, radical right

JEL Classification: D63, D72, I31

1 Introduction

The recent hollowing out of the middle class in many Western European countries has been portrayed as a threat to democracy. One reason being that radical right parties (RRP), whose ideology often stands in contrast to liberal democracy (Mudde, 2007) allure to voters, who are discontent with the established mainstream parties. With an eroding middle class, RRP may find an even growing pool of discontent voters susceptible to their policy proposals. The root cause for the success of populist parties has been at the center of an ongoing controversy in social sciences. Two theories are at the core of the debate: the *cultural backlash thesis* and the *economic insecurity thesis*. The former argues that voters favour RRP because they oppose progressive cultural values, such as multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and tolerance towards sexual liberty (Inglehart and Norris, 2016, 2017; Halla et al., 2017; Mutz, 2018). The latter starts out by discussing several economic causes that push voters towards extreme parties. First, the most prominent economic reason for the political backlash is attributed to shocks of globalization, such as increased immigration and refugees, job displacement by trade, and distributional struggles between winners and losers of globalization (Rodrik, 2018). Second, scholars discuss the role of increased labor market polarization and automatization leading to the loss of jobs for certain occupational groups (e.g., routine jobs) and middle-educated workers (Im et al., 2019; Kurer and Palier, 2019). Last and more recently, scholars point towards the fact that rising income inequality increases the threat of social decline, which then prompts voters to express their discontent by voting for populist parties (Engler and Weisstanner, 2021). If the last proposition is correct, we can expect that this fear of decline is

particularly relevant for middle-class voters. As people are generally loss averse (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984), losing one’s position and moving down the social ladder has more far reaching consequences than keeping up or improving one’s standing in society. Those who are already left behind, e.g., the losers of economic modernization, those having great difficulties living on their current income or being in poor labour market situations are more likely to either abstain from voting or vote for (radical) left-wing parties, who they expect to redistribute more (Bornschier and Kriesi, 2012; Emmenegger et al., 2015; Rovny and Rovny, 2017; Gidron and Hall, 2020). Middle-class voters have a middle-class lifestyle, prestige and social standing to lose in comparison to those already at the bottom. Moreover, if middle-class voters are insecure about their future position in society, this may yield in discontent with mainstream parties, who have been in charge for the developments in the last decades, and hence may lead to support RRP. Last, the middle class has been in decline in many countries (Derndorfer and Kranzinger, 2021), which means that the fear of decline is not unfounded. Hence, the middle class is a perfect group to study whether increased economic insecurity increases the probability to support RRP.

The aim of this paper is to examine whether economic insecurity of middle-class voters affects the support of RRP.¹ For the empirical analysis, I operationalize latent economic insecurity as occupational risk of downward mobility. The approach uses past experience from similar peers as proxy for the probability of falling out of the middle class next. I further construct a novel economic insecurity index (EI), which in addition to downward mobility (increasing EI) also takes the prospect of upward mobility (decreasing EI) and the rise (decreasing EI) or decline (increasing EI) of the middle class into account. The measures of economic insecurity used in this paper are agnostic to the reasons on why households move into the lower-income class. The concept applied is thus more encompassing than solely focusing on unemployment risk, which is one important dimension of economic insecurity but by far not the only one. It is important to stress that the household level is of great importance for this research for two reasons: First, household income is the most relevant level when talking about the middle class, as individual income is typically shared with other members of the household. Hence, a person currently not working for pay due to care responsibilities can still enjoy a middle-class lifestyle depending on the income of the other members of the household (usually the spouse or partner). Second, it is of great relevance to integrate the economic risk at the household level when studying voting behaviour, given that individual political preferences are not formed in isolation but embedded in the social context of the voter. Abou-Chadi and Kurer (2021) have shown that unemployment risks within the household affects voting for RRP and that ignoring the contextual factor might lead to underestimating the effect of economic risk on the support of RRP. The paper shows that occupational economic insecurity is positively associated with supporting RRP. Hence, the hollowing out of the middle class has potential detrimental effects on the well-being of democracy in Western Europe.

Overall, the paper contributes to the literature in several ways: First, the study focuses on the latent economic insecurity of the middle class, a group where economic stability plays a vital role. Second, it proposes a novel way to measure economic insecurity by taking the risk of downward mobility into the lower-income class, the chance of upward mobility into the upper-income class and the changing size of the middle class into account. Third, it has a broad understanding of economic insecurity beyond unemployment and automation risks.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 starts out by reviewing how economic insecurity can be conceptualized and why economic security is such an important part for the middle class. I follow by explaining potential reasons for RRP support of anxious middle-class voters and summarize the findings of the literature on economic insecurity and electoral behaviour. In Section 3, I outline the empirical strategy, data, and method. Last, Section 4 shows and discusses the results. Finally, I conclude with summarizing the main findings.

¹This is not to say that cultural issues play no role in the formation of political preferences, but that this is beyond the scope of this paper.

2 Background

2.1 Economic insecurity

What is meant by *economic insecurity* often remains vague, since different concepts are subsumed under the term. The conceptualisation of economic insecurity can be separated into two categories: (a) manifest and (b) latent economic insecurity. Manifest economic insecurity deals with economic hardship, such as low income, unemployment, or having difficulties to pay the bills, while latent economic insecurity can be understood as the "risk of economic loss faced by workers and households as they encounter the unpredictable events of social life" (Western et al., 2012, p. 342). Such unpredictable events include job loss, health problems, and other life events, including divorce and/or becoming a single-parent. Rohde and Tang (2018) specify that it is not the exposure to risk *per se* that defines economic insecurity, but the involuntary exposure that creates anxiety about the future. Again others go further and argue that not only the risk of potential adverse economic events is of relevance, but also the (anticipated) economic capability to deal with such shocks (Bossert and D'Ambrosio, 2013; Osberg, 2015). Families or individuals can protect themselves from economic hardship through wealth (Weller and Logan, 2009; Bossert and D'Ambrosio, 2013), but also the strength of the welfare state plays a vital role in determining feelings of insecurity about the future (Mau et al., 2012).

Economic insecurity involves the past, present, and future. As Bossert and D'Ambrosio (2013, p. 1018) convincingly point out: "Our past experiences play a role in shaping our self-confidence on how well we can do in case of an adverse event". But our past also informs us how likely some events (e.g., unemployment) will (re-)occur and its potential duration. Our present circumstances, such as type of occupation and contract, income, savings also shape our belief on how the future will pan out (Mau et al., 2012; Bossert and D'Ambrosio, 2013). Not only our past experience form our perceptions, but also economic conditions of people similar to us. Ansolabehere et al. (2014) asked respondents to guess the unemployment rate for the US in 2008. They show that groups which are more likely to be unemployed also report higher unemployment rates. Similarly, Bisgaard et al. (2016) examine for Denmark how higher unemployment in neighbourhoods impacts the perceptions of the national economic conditions. Their results show that even after controlling for individual and household characteristics (such as unemployment within the household) exposure to unemployment within the residential area affects the satisfaction with the present state of the economy. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that economic hardships – whether stemming from unemployment or other adverse events – from peers will also influence the potential anxieties about one's future. It is important to stress that fear of future economic hardship and the concern of being unable to cope with them can be detrimental, even if they are unfounded and do not materialize (Bieber and Moggia, 2021).

2.2 Economic (in)security and the middle class

Similarly to the concept of economic insecurity, there is no consensus on how the middle class should be defined. Definitions vary depending on the discipline: Economists mostly categorize middle-class households depending on the households income in relation to the median income or by considering the households in the middle of the income distribution (e.g., the middle six deciles) (Atkinson and Brandolini, 2013). Sociologists have a broader understanding on what belonging to the middle class entails and also include occupation and education in their definition (Gornick and Jäntti, 2013). In addition to income, economic stability and a secure lifestyle can be seen as one of the main characteristic of the middle class. As Banerjee and Duflo (2008, p. 26) put it, "nothing seems more middle class than the fact of having a steady well-paying job". The authors further add that "[p]erhaps the sense of control over the future that one gets from knowing that there will be an income coming in every month – and not just the income itself – is what allows the middle class to focus on building their own careers and those of their children" (Banerjee and Duflo, 2008, p. 26). Similarly López-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez (2014) argue that the middle class is defined by

enjoying economic security, which they measure as having a low probability of becoming poor.²

The literature on the economic insecurity of the middle class is relatively scarce. Ranci et al. (2021) study several dimensions of economic insecurity³ for eight European countries (Denmark, Sweden, UK, France, Italy, Spain, Hungary and Poland) between 2007 and 2012 and find that economic insecurity, in particular financial strain and over-indebtedness extends well into the middle class. They point out that the problem is not low income *per se*, but expense or debt-levels which are responsible for economic insecurity during the economic crisis. Although the authors study manifest and retrospective economic insecurity, I expect that the experience of middle-class households during the crisis will influence the perception of future economic uncertainties. Kohlrausch (2018) uses the share of respondents agreeing with the statement *I fear that I am not able to upkeep my standard of living in the long term* (translation by the author) as proxy for fear of decline. The author finds that in Germany fear of decline extends to those having a decent income, albeit showing that it is most pronounced in groups at the bottom of the income distribution. Derndorfer and Kranzinger (2021) examine how the middle class fared across 26 European countries between 2004 and 2014, showing that in a majority of countries the middle-income class declined. Overall, there are signs that the middle class is not as economically stable as its members might wish for. This raises the questions whether and how this impacts insecure middle-class voters in terms of political behaviour.

2.3 What explains RRP support of the anxious middle class?

Reasons why RRP might appeal to middle-class voters who fear downward mobility are manifold. Literature has shown that voters with pessimistic views are more susceptible to supporting RRP (Mayer, 1993; Gest et al., 2018; Steenvoorden and Harteveld, 2018). Pessimism or declinism (i.e., feeling negatively about the direction that society is going) is not necessarily rooted in personal experience, but takes social change at large into account (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016). Thus, anxieties of falling into the lower-income class might foster declinism and the feeling of the lost 'heartland', which Taggart (2002) describes as a nostalgic view of an idealized past that is favourable to the present. This, in turn, is likely to lead voters to blame mainstream parties and the (corrupt) political elite for their potential falling out of the middle class. RRP attract their votes by campaigning on reinstating the lost 'heartland' and the restoration of a glorious past, where the social order was intact (Capelos and Katsanidou, 2018). In a similar vein, the threat of downward mobility might spur distrust in mainstream parties. Supporting RRP can partly be attributed to the expression of loss of trust and disillusionment with national and European politics. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily imply that supporters agree with RRP policies (Ivarsflaten, 2008). Moreover, personal economic decline can be seen as an injustice and a broken promise, and the fear thereof can lead voters to support parties or movements, who present themselves as avenger of past wrongdoings (Maurin et al., 2009). RRP do not refrain from linking the positional deprivations of the 'common' and 'ordinary' voter to the alleged preferential treatment of other groups, such as minorities, immigrants, asylum seekers, and women (Kurer and Van Staaldunin, 2022), which might appeal in particular to voters in search of scapegoats for their insecurity about their future economic position in society.

Two recent studies (Ballard-Rosa et al., 2021, 2022) on the electoral success of Donald Trump in the United States and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom argue that sustained economic decline induced by globalization adversely impacts the social identity of historically dominant groups. In order to cope with anxieties from negative economic shocks, individuals adopt more authoritarian values, which in turn are closely linked to RRP. In theory, this should also apply to anxious middle-class voters. Another important strand of literature deals with the fierce anti-immigration policies by RRP and their appeal to voters, who believe that immigrants should not be entitled to the same welfare benefits and services as native citizens. This opposition is referred

²More precisely, López-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez (2014) use panel data to define an amount of income associated with a 10 % probability of falling into poverty as a lower-threshold of belonging to the middle class.

³Ranci et al. (2021) analyze temporary poverty as result of downward volatility, financial strain and over-indebtedness, as the three main dimensions of economic insecurity.

to in the literature as *welfare chauvinism* (Kitschelt, 1997). Even though Mewes and Mau (2012) show that working class members are more inclined to support welfare chauvinism than members from higher classes, their findings also reveal that perceived material risk has a significant impact on opposing equal rights to welfare benefits and services as citizens. The concern about overcrowding of welfare services might thus foster anti-immigrant attitudes among natives with lower incomes (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010), which in turn might have contributed to the success of the Leave campaign in the United Kingdom (Colantone and Stanig, 2018). Hence, middle-class voters threatening social decline might fear that once belonging to the lower class, they will have to compete with immigrants over scarce resources, such as welfare benefits, housing, and other services and therefore – in their self-interest – support RRP. Overall, the literature on electoral behaviour shows various ways on how RRP might be alluring to middle-class voters who fear losing their economic position.

2.4 Economic insecurity and voting behaviour

A growing body of research has shown that RRP support cannot be primarily attributed to manifest economic insecurity (i.e., materialized hardship), such as unemployment (Rovny and Rovny, 2017; Burgoon et al., 2019; Engler and Weisstanner, 2021; Kurer, 2020; Abou-Chadi and Kurer, 2021), social benefits’ dependency (Inglehart and Norris, 2016), or having great difficulties living on current household income (Gidron and Hall, 2020). Instead, studying latent economic insecurity seems to offer a more compelling explanation. Many studies turn to analysing the effect of unemployment risk as proxy for economic insecurity. While Halikiopoulou and Vlandas (2017) find that individuals reporting high subjective unemployment risk⁴ are less likely to support the Brexit, Abou-Chadi and Kurer (2021), analysing eleven countries in Western Europe, show that the likelihood of voting for RRP increases with the respondents’ own and her/his partners’ occupational unemployment risk. Even when individuals themselves face a very low risk of unemployment, having a partner with a high risk is associated with a substantially greater probability to vote for RRP. Thus, the authors stress that voting decisions are rarely formed in isolation, as individuals are embedded in households and society. Other studies focus on the overall unemployment rate of the region or municipality as important contextual factors, where individuals reside. Voters living in areas with higher unemployment rates might experience a greater economic insecurity than those living in areas with lower unemployment rates. On the aggregate level (national or sub-national), there is little support for the hypothesis that a higher share of unemployment rate is associated with a higher vote share of RRP, as shown in the meta-analysis by Amengay and Stockemer (2019). The analysis on individual voting behaviour when taking contextual variables (e.g., unemployment rate) into consideration remain inconclusive. Some find a positive relationship between living in a neighbourhood with higher unemployment rate and support for RRP (for the Netherlands, see De Blok and van der Meer, 2018), others find no significant link in multilevel models including contextual variables on the sub-national level (for Germany, Belgium and France, see Lubbers et al., 2000; Lubbers and Scheepers, 2000, 2002), whilst other authors report a negative effect of the country-specific unemployment rate (for a cross-country analysis including Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and Norway, see Arzheimer and Carter, 2006).

Latent economic insecurity can also be conceptualized beyond unemployment risk. Not only fear of job loss can lead to frustration but also experiencing one’s relative economic and social position declining can fuel resentment driving RRP support. Automation has led to a relative decline of middle-skilled routine work (Kurer and Palier, 2019), occupations with wages that used to ensure a (lower-)middle class lifestyle (Oesch, 2015). A recent study by Kurer (2020) analyses the voting behaviour of routine workers, who remain (*survive*) in an occupational environment susceptible to automation (as opposed to *upgrading* to non-routine cognitive work, *downgrading* to non-routine manual work, or becoming *unemployed*). The authors’ findings suggests that, in light of technological change, remaining in routine work creates status anxiety related to labor market prospects

⁴Subjective unemployment risk is measured by respondents stating that it is fairly or very likely that they will be out of work in the next twelve months.

which spurs RRP support. More generally, the findings are supported by Im et al. (2019), who show that there is a positive relationship between risk of automation and voting for RRP. More recently, a widely discussed working paper by Guiso et al. (2022) construct a single composite index of economic insecurity to study its role on the demand for RRP (for a critical review, see Margalit, 2019). They use three measures to capture the extent of economic insecurity: any period of unemployment within the last five years, how easy or difficult it is to live on the current household income, and exposure of globalization⁵. Hence, the authors conflate the past (unemployment), present (household income), and future (employment threats from globalization) into one index. Using a 2-step Heckman probit model, they find that economic insecurity fosters abstention and increases the likelihood to vote for RRP, conditional on participating. In a similar vein, Bossert et al. (2022) also propose a new measure of economic insecurity based on the evaluation of annual household income streams over the past 5 years. Applying their measure on panel data including political preferences for the United States and the United Kingdom, they find evidence that greater economic insecurity increases the probability to vote for Trump and support the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. Using subjective measures of short-term and long-term economic insecurity⁶, another study also finds a significant correlation between economic insecurity and voting for Trump (Rebecchi and Rohde, 2022). Additionally, rising income inequality has been conceptualised as spurring threat of social decline. As the gaps in the economic and social hierarchy widen, the possibility of a steep decline increases. Han (2016) shows that income inequality increases the support for RRP among manual-workers and routine-non manual workers, but decreases the support among managers and professionals. This is largely confirmed by Engler and Weisstanner (2021), whose findings indicate that rising income inequality, particularly in the long-run, is positively associated with supporting RRP and that the effect is most pronounced among those with lower-middle incomes.

3 Empirical strategy

For the study at hand, I operationalise the occupational risk of middle-class households moving down the ladder into the lower-income class as latent economic insecurity for middle-class voters. This approach uses past experiences of similar groups of households, but is inherently forward looking. In other words, if more and more households similar to mine lose their middle-class position, I will become anxious whether my household will be next to move down the economic ladder. This paper is agnostic to the reasons on why households fall out of the middle class. Unemployment is one important source, but as mentioned above, other adverse life events also impact the financial well-being of households. Thus, this study is more encompassing than other papers that focus solely on the latent threat of becoming unemployed. In addition, I construct an economic insecurity index by occupational class, which takes the risk of downward mobility as well as prospects of upward mobility and overall stability of the middle class into consideration.

3.1 Risk of downward mobility

To compute the risk of downward mobility, I make use of the EU-SILC longitudinal dataset for the years 2005 – 2018⁷, which follows each household and its members for four consecutive years. I exclude unstable households where members moved out, died, or became no longer in-scope for other reasons during the four years. I further exclude households with missing income data and only keep those with positive household incomes in all four years for the computation of downward mobility. I differentiate the risk of downward mobility by occupational class and use the 5-class

⁵Indicating a high risk of exposure to globalization if respondent is a blue-collar worker in the manufacturing sector.

⁶Short-term economic insecurity: people reporting that their family are financially worse off compared to the one year ago. Long-term economic insecurity: people reporting that life in America is worse today, than it was 50 years ago for people like them (Rebecchi and Rohde, 2022).

⁷To be precise, I use EU-SILC 2009 – 2019, where the reference income period is the previous calendar year, with the exception of the United Kingdom, for which the income reference year is the current year.

schema (Higher-grade service class, lower-grade service class, business owners, skilled workers, and unskilled workers) proposed by Oesch (2006). Unfortunately, I cannot distinguish between small business owners (with one to nine employees or without employees) and large employers (> 10 employees), who are part of the higher-grade service class since the SILC questionnaire does not include the number of employees. The highest occupational class within a household is chosen to be representing the occupational class for the entire household.⁸ As falling out of the middle-class when retiring is not the scope of this paper, only households, where the household head belongs to the working age population (18–64) and is not in retirement, are included in the sample. I define the middle-income class as individuals living in households with an equivalised disposable income between 75 % and 150 % of the national median income. The lower-income class and the upper-income class have incomes below 75 % and above 150 % of the national median income. It is important to stress that the middle class does not begin where poverty ends. I have introduced a margin of 15 percentage points (between the common poverty threshold of 60 % and the lower threshold of 75 % of median income for the middle-income class). Hence, falling out of the middle class does not imply that households immediately are income-poor. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that relative thresholds can also account for positional deprivation. In other words, a household can have a stable income without any negative income shocks but can still move from the middle class into the lower-income class, if the other households experience a rise in their income over the years. Thus, in absolute terms nothing changed for the said household, but in relative terms, the household is outpaced by the income growth of others. After having categorised each household and its respective members to one of the three income classes for the first three years and the last year in the panel data, I compute transition matrices.⁹ This approach is similar to the method used by Jenkins and Van Kerm (2014) to define persistent poverty. Using EU-SILC 2008 longitudinal dataset the authors define persistent poverty as people who are currently poor in 2007, i.e., the last year of the four-year panel and were also poor in two or all three preceding years between 2004 and 2006. To increase size of observations per occupational class, I pool the data for three consecutive years. Table 1 shows an example for a transition matrix for the UK for skilled workers. For the year 2018, the risk of falling into the lower-income class for a household that belonged to the middle-class in the previous three years is 23 %.

Table 1: Example: Transition matrix for skilled workers in the United Kingdom

		Income class 2018		
		Lower (43 %)	Middle (50 %)	Upper (7 %)
Income class 2015 - 2017	Lower (40 %)	76 %	24 %	0 %
	Middle (55 %)	23 %	71 %	6 %
	Upper (5 %)	1 %	32 %	67 %

Note: Own calculation, EU-SILC longitudinal data.

Lower-income class: < 75 %, middle-income class: 75 % – < 150 %, upper-income class: ≥ 150 % of the national median income.

3.2 Economic insecurity index

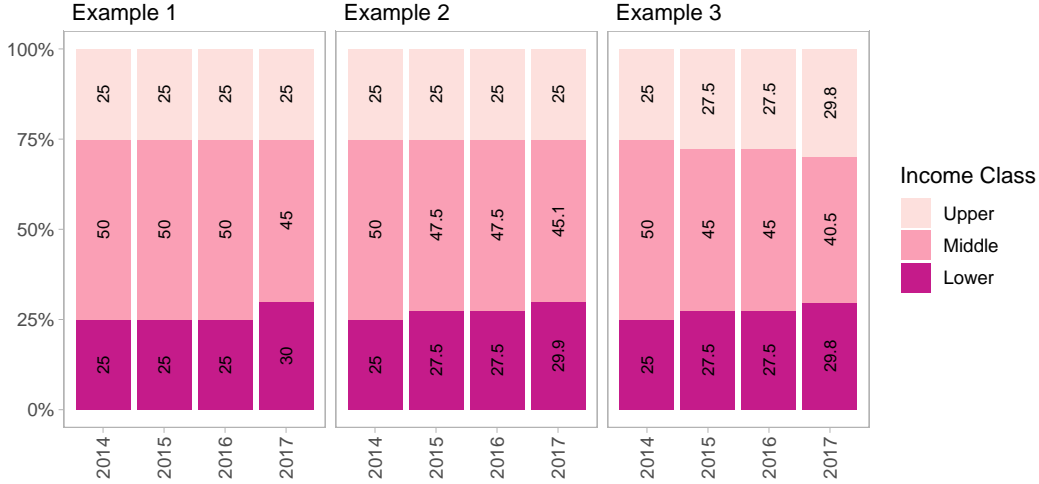
The threat of falling out of the middle class may not only depend on the risk of downward mobility, but also on the past decline or growth of the middle class, as well as potential opportunities

⁸If two or more members have the same occupational class, I choose the one with the highest working hours and age. If this procedure still leads us to multiple household heads per household, I simply take the first one. By doing so, I ensure that there is only one household member representing the entire household.

⁹To define the income class for the first three years, I first compute how much income the household has in relation to the yearly median national income for each year. Next, I take the average of these three ratios to establish the income class for the household according to the definition above.

to rise into the upper-income class. Figure 1 shows three scenarios of the development of the middle class in a 4-year time period. Example 1 shows a stable middle class in the first three years with a subsequent decline of the middle class and a stable upper-income class throughout the whole period. In example 2, the middle class steadily decreases throughout the four years. Again, the upper-income class is stable. Last, example 3 shows a declining middle class due to an increasing lower- and upper-income class. Let us assume that in all three examples, the share of individuals living in middle-income households in the first three years and moving down into the lower-income class is 10 %. Ceteris paribus, the economic insecurity in example 2 should be larger than in example 1, as there was already a decline in the middle class in the preceding years. Thus, an overall decrease (increase) of the size of the middle class fosters (mitigates) economic insecurity. However, in the case of upward mobility, as shown in example 3, I assume that the threat of decline and hence the economic insecurity of middle-income households is lower. The fact that some formally middle-class households have managed to move up into the upper-income class should give the remaining households a positive outlook on what may materialize in the future.

Figure 1: Three scenarios for the level of economic insecurity



Based on these considerations, I construct an index of economic insecurity (EI) for every country and occupational class to include the mitigating effect of upward mobility, as well as the decline/rise of the size of the middle class in recent years. Economic insecurity $EI_{c,t,o}$ for country c at time t for occupational class o is measured as,

$$EI_{c,t,o} = D_{c,t,o} - \gamma_u U_{c,t,o} - \gamma_m \Delta M_{c,t,o} \quad (1)$$

where D indicates the rate of downward mobility, as explained in Section 3.1; U refers to the rate of upward mobility, which is analogously computed as the rate of downward mobility. Last, ΔM measures the change of the size of the middle class by calculating the average size of the middle class in the first three years of the examined time period and comparing it with the size of the middle class in the last period. In the theoretical case of no upward mobility ($D = 0$) and a stable middle class ($\Delta M = 0$), the economic insecurity index equals the rate of downward mobility ($EI = D$). To reflect the loss aversion of individuals (i.e., deriving greater disutility from loss than utility from gain), the risk of downward mobility is given more weight than upward mobility, $\gamma_u < 1$. Furthermore, the economic insecurity index is constructed such that the stability of the middle class is also given less weight compared to rate of downward mobility, $\gamma_m < 1$. In the empirical

analysis, I set γ_u and γ_m to 0.5. I also compute an unweighted economic insecurity index where γ_u and γ_m are set to 0. Table 2 shows the descriptive table of the variables used for constructing the index and the weighted and unweighted economic insecurity index.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics - Economic insecurity index

Variable	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Downward mobility, D	12.37	7.51	0.32	39.34
Upward mobility, U	9.53	6.19	0.00	49.82
Change middle class, ΔM	-0.75	4.97	-18.90	16.56
Economic insecurity index weighted, EI_w	7.98	9.64	-24.06	37.81
Economic insecurity index unweighted, EI_{uw}	3.58	13.00	-54.92	44.79

Note: Own calculation, EU-SILC longitudinal data.

3.3 Economic insecurity of middle-class voters

To study the voting behaviour, I use electoral survey data from the European Social Survey (ESS) for six rounds (ESS 4 – ESS 9) and 13 Western European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and United Kingdom). For the analysis of middle-class voters, I restrict the analysis to ESS respondents living in middle-class households. The ESS asks respondents for their household’s total income (i.e., after tax and compulsory deductions, from all sources) by showing them cards with income brackets representing the ten income deciles of the respective country. To derive an estimate for the household income, I take the mid-point for the first nine deciles. For the top decile (which has no upper bound), I follow Donnelly and Pop-Eleches (2018) and add the income range of the ninth decile to the lower threshold of the top decile. In order to adjust for different household sizes, I then apply the OECD equivalence scale and end up with an estimate of the equivalised household income for each respondent. Based on these estimates, I compute deciles for each country and survey round. I categorize respondents as middle-class voters when their households belong to deciles four to eight. In the appendix, Figure A1 shows that for the 13 Western European countries, individuals living in middle-class households based on the relative income thresholds of 75 % and 150 % of the national median equivalised household income are on average part of the income deciles four to eight. Next, I exclude all voters below 18 and above 64 or ineligible to vote. Last, I match the occupation-specific risk of downward mobility and economic insecurity index to individual voters. The economic insecurity measures are matched according to the survey year of the ESS and occupational class of the respondent or the respondent’s partner, depending on whose occupational class is higher. For instance, a respondent from the UK – who answered the ESS in 2018, whose households belongs to decile four to eight and to the occupational group of skilled workers – has a risk of falling out of the middle class of 23 % (see example in Table 1). The approach is similar to the study of Abou-Chadi and Kurer (2021), who combine occupational unemployment rates (using ISCO one digit groups) obtained from the EU-SILC and match these to individual survey data from the ESS. For Spain, the last data available from the EU-SILC data refers to the income year 2018, whereas the survey for the ESS round 9 took place primarily in 2019. Therefore, I add the economic insecurity measures of 2018 to the survey year 2019.

3.4 RRP support

The ESS asks respondents whether they voted in the last election and, if so, for which party. In addition, the survey includes a question whether respondents feel close to a particular party. I combine these two items to measure RRP support. If the respondent has voted for a RRP in the last election or feels close to a RRP, the dummy variable measuring RRP support is one and zero otherwise. Individuals who preferred not answering the two ESS items were excluded from the

sample. Table 3 shows the list of parties classified as RRP, while Figure 2 shows the support of these parties in each ESS round for middle-class voters in the sample.

Table 3: Radical Right Parties (RRP) in Western Europe

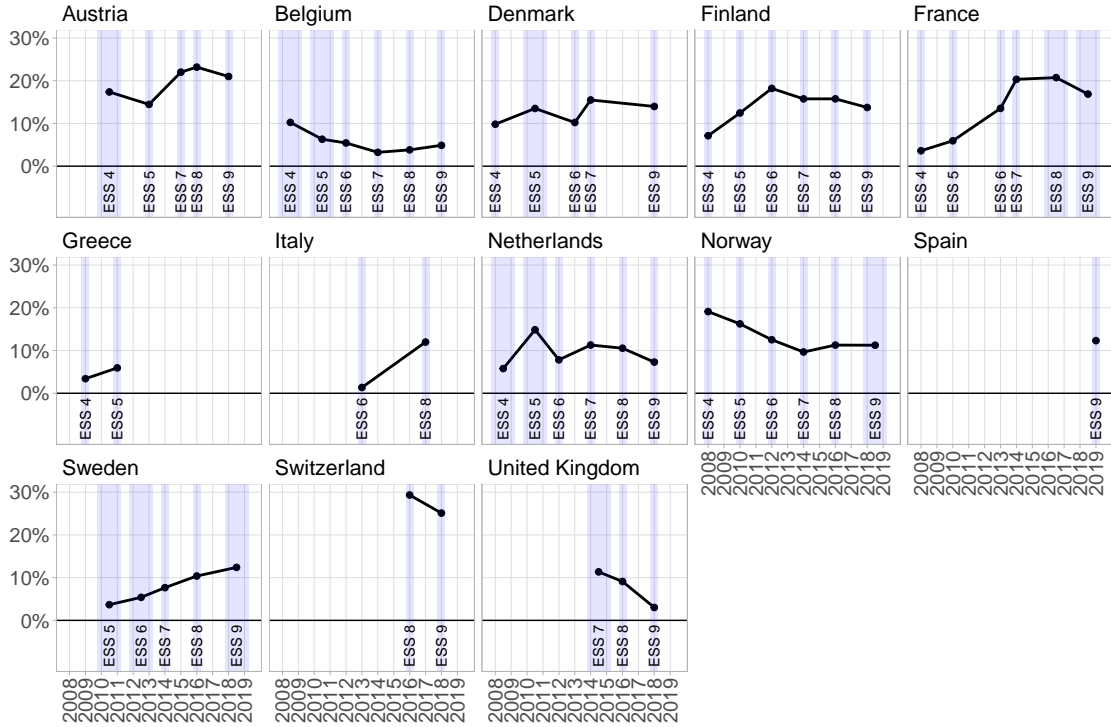
Country	Party name	ESS
Austria	Alliance for the Future of Austria (Bündnis Zukunft Österreich, BZÖ)	4–8
Austria	Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ)	4–9
Belgium	Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang, VB)	4–9
Belgium	National Front (now: Démocratie Nationale, DN)	4–9
Denmark	Danish People’s Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF)	4–9
Finland	True Finns (now: Finns Party, Perussuomalaiset, PS)	4–9
Finland	Freedom Party (Vapauspuolue Suomen tulevaisuus, VP)	6–9
France	National Front (Front National, FN)	4–9
Greece	The Popular Orthodox Rally (Laikós Orthódoxos Synagermós, LAOS)	4–5
Greece	Golden Dawn (Xrusi Augi, XA)	5
Italy	Northern League (Lega Nord, LN)	6, 8
Italy	Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d’Italia , FdI)	6, 8
Netherlands	Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV)	4–9
Netherlands	Pim Fortuyn List (Lijst Pim Fortuyn, LPF)	4
Norway	Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet, FRP)	4–9
Spain	VOX	9
Sweden	Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD)	5–9
Switzerland	Swiss People’s Party (Schweizerische Volkspartei, SVP)	8, 9
Switzerland	Federal Democratic Union (EDU/UDF)	8, 9
Switzerland	Ticino League (Lega dei Ticinesi)	8, 9
Switzerland	Movement of the Citizens of French-speaking Switzerland (MCR)	8, 9
United Kingdom	UK Independence Party (UKIP)	7–9

Note: The list is based on the classification of Mudde (2007, 2017); Oesch and Rennwald (2018); Armingeon et al. (2020); and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al., 2022).

3.5 Control variables

I include a set of socio-demographic variables and the respondent’s left-right self-placement (0 = *left*, 10 = *right*). I control for the respondent’s age (in years), gender (1 = *male*), and education (0 = *lower education* (lower secondary education and below), 1 = *medium education* (upper secondary and advance vocational training), 3 = *higher education* (tertiary education)). I further include two control variables for unemployment: first, whether the respondent is currently unemployed (1 = *unemployed*), and second, whether the respondent was recently unemployed within the last five years (1 = *unemployed within last five years*). The level of manifest economic insecurity is measured by the survey question concerning how the respondent feels about his/her household’s income nowadays (0 = *Living comfortably on present income*, 1 = *Coping on present income*, 2 = *Difficult on present income*, 3 = *Very difficult on present income*). Last, I control whether the respondent, one parent, or both parents were born in a foreign country (1 = *foreign*), the respondent’s religiosity (0 = *not religious at all*, 10 = *very religious*) and whether they live in a urban or rural area (1 = *urban*). Table 4 shows the means, standard deviations for the main variables of interest, the control variables, and occupational groups of the households heads for the sample used in the regression analysis.

Figure 2: RRP support of middle-class voters in the ESS



Note: Own calculation, ESS.

3.6 Method

The empirical analysis is based on a logit model to test whether latent economic insecurity increases the likelihood of supporting RRP.

$$\text{RRP Support}_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{EI}_i + \beta_2 X_i + \gamma_c + \theta_s + \epsilon_i, \quad (2)$$

where RRP Support is the binary variable for supporting RRP for individual i . The main explanatory variable is economic insecurity (EI_i), conceptualised as risk of downward mobility in Model (1) and the economic insecurity index in Model (2). Vector X_i includes all individual control variables listed in 3.5. Last, I use country and ESS-round fixed effects (γ_c and θ_s) and cluster the standards errors by country wave in order to correct for potential non-independence between observations. The coefficients of the logistic regressions are estimated by maximum likelihood estimation.

4 Results

4.1 The changing middle class

Figure 3 shows that for the 13 Western European countries the middle class slightly declines from 2005 to 2014-15 and increases thereafter, but does not reach the level of 2005. However, these results disguise different trends by occupational class. For the higher-grade service class, there is a marked increase in households belonging to the middle class. This increase is accompanied by a large

Table 4: Descriptive statistics

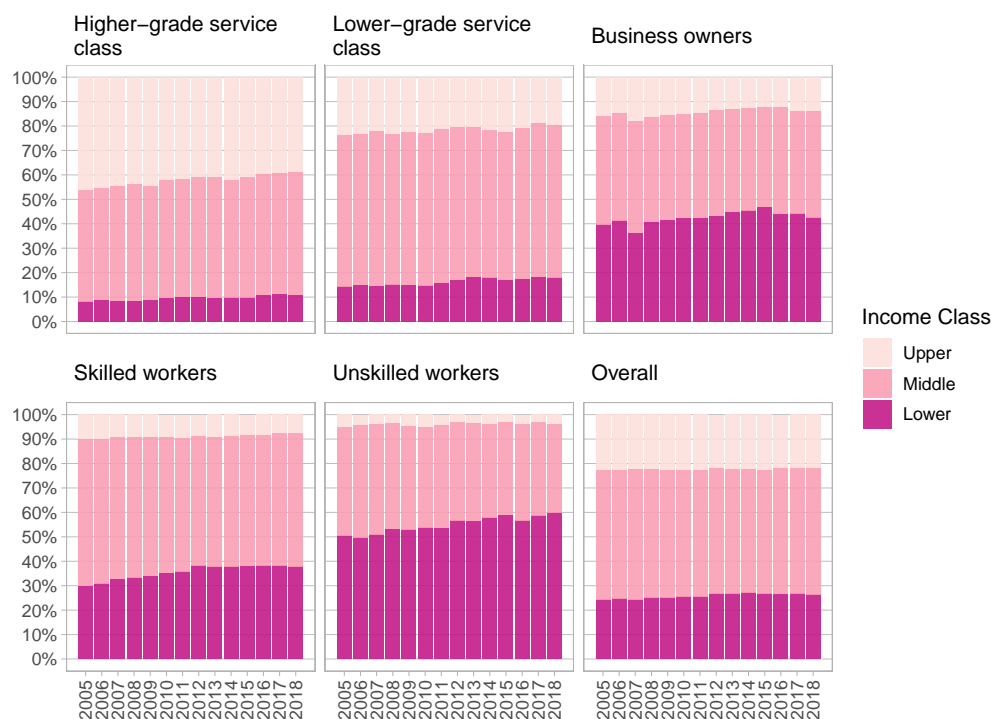
Variable	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max	Obs.
RRP support	0.12	0.32	0.00	1.00	22522
Risk of downward mobility	8.36	5.57	1.48	35.48	22522
Economic insecurity index	4.27	7.50	-15.16	34.41	22522
Age	44.42	12.07	18.00	64.00	22522
Female	0.50	0.50	0.00	1.00	22522
Lower education	0.13	0.34	0.00	1.00	22522
Medium education	0.54	0.50	0.00	1.00	22522
Higher education	0.33	0.47	0.00	1.00	22522
Unemployed	0.03	0.18	0.00	1.00	22522
Unemployed within last five years	0.11	0.32	0.00	1.00	22522
Living comfortably on present income	0.46	0.50	0.00	1.00	22522
Coping on present income	0.45	0.50	0.00	1.00	22522
Difficult on present income	0.08	0.27	0.00	1.00	22522
Very difficult on present income	0.01	0.11	0.00	1.00	22522
Foreign	0.13	0.33	0.00	1.00	22522
Religious	4.02	2.91	0.00	10.00	22522
Urban	0.60	0.49	0.00	1.00	22522
Left-right scale	5.07	2.16	0.00	10.00	22522
Higher-grade service class	0.36	0.48	0.00	1.00	22522
Lower-grade service class	0.21	0.41	0.00	1.00	22522
Business owners	0.08	0.27	0.00	1.00	22522
Skilled workers	0.28	0.45	0.00	1.00	22522
Unskilled workers	0.07	0.26	0.00	1.00	22522

Note: Own calculation.

decline of the upper-income class, whereas the lower-income class slightly increases. Turning to the lower-grade service class, I observe that around 60 % of these households belong to the middle class and that there is little change between 2005 and 2018 in the middle of the distribution. Concerning the poles, a decline of the upper-income class and a rise of the lower-income class is notable. Skilled workers are the occupational class with the second largest middle class after the lower-grade service class. The share of middle-income households within the group of skilled workers declines between the beginning of the 2000s and 2012/13. This is mainly due to an increasing share of households belonging to the lower-income class. The trend reverses after 2013 but the middle class by the end of 2010s is still smaller in comparison to the beginning of the 2000s. The unskilled workers are the occupational class with the largest decline in the middle of the income distribution. Around 45 % of households in this occupational group belong to the middle class between 2005 and 2007. By 2019, only 36 % of households fall into the middle class. The rise of households being part of the lower-income class is substantial. In 2005, 50 % of households being part of the unskilled workers are lower-income class. 13 years later, the share increases by almost 10 percentage points. Last, I turn to the self-employed occupational group, where I find that the share of middle-class households in this occupational class is quite similar to the higher-grade service class in terms of size. However, Figure 3 reveals that many more households are part of the lower-income class than compared to the higher-grade service class and that there is an increase regarding this group between 2005 and 2014.

Overall, I find that the likelihood of belonging to the middle class greatly differs by occupational group and that unskilled workers in particular, but also to some extent skilled workers, are more likely to live in households who belong to the lower-income class in 2019 than compared to the beginning of the 2000s. There are country-specific variations, but the overall conclusion holds that

Figure 3: Evolution of the middle class in 13 Western European countries by occupational class



Note: Own calculation, EU-SILC cross-sectional data.

Lower-income class: $< 75\%$, middle-income class: $75\% - < 150\%$, upper-income class: $\geq 150\%$ of the national median income.

the decline of the middle class varies by occupational class. The figure for country-specific changes of the middle class by occupation can be found in the appendix (see Figure A2).

Next, I turn to the evolution of the risk associated for middle-class households to fall into the lower-income class. Table 5 and Figure 4 show how this risk is distinct for different occupational classes and countries. In almost all countries, unskilled workers and business owners face the greatest risk of losing their middle-class position with around 18%. In Greece, Spain, and the United Kingdom the downward mobility on average ranges between 20% (United Kingdom) and 25% (Greece). In the Scandinavian countries the risk is in part substantially lower and varies between 12% (Norway) and 17% (Finland). Similarly, on average, the risk of downward mobility for households with business owners as household heads is higher in Spain (28%) and France (25%) than those living in Norway, Sweden and Finland (around 13%). Skilled workers in the middle class face lower risks of falling into the lower income-class, with an overall risk across all countries of around 12%. In the United Kingdom skilled workers households are confronted with the largest risk of 17%, followed by Spain and Greece with 15%. Again, skilled workers in Denmark (7%) and Finland (8%) enjoy greater stability in terms of remaining in the middle class. Turning now to the lower-grade service class, I find that the risk of falling out of the middle class is on average for the lower-grade service class (7%) is almost half of that of skilled workers. The risk of downward mobility is highest at around 11% in the United Kingdom and Greece and lowest in Denmark and Belgium at 4%. Last, I turn to the higher-grade service class, who exhibit the greatest stability. The average risk of falling out of the middle class is 5%, ranging from around 3% in Sweden and Finland to 8% in the United Kingdom and 10% Greece. Hence, I find that the risk of downward mobility for middle-income class households varies not only greatly between countries, but also within countries. Looking at the years between 2008 and 2018, I also see different trends

for different countries and occupational classes. While the risk of downward mobility for higher- and lower-grade service class is relatively stable in most countries, it increases in some countries (e.g., Greece, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) and decreases in other (e.g., Spain and France). Business-owners face relatively high risk of downward mobility with great volatility. In most countries, an increasing instability among middle-class households belonging to the group of skilled workers is notable (e.g., Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom). Interestingly, the opposite is true for unskilled workers, who on average face higher risk of falling into the lower-income class, but the share of households moving out of the middle-class has decreased over time in most countries. One explanation might be that the size of middle class for unskilled workers has declined over the years (see Figure 3, meaning that those still left in the middle-class are relatively secure). Those that are economically insecure are no longer part of the middle class.

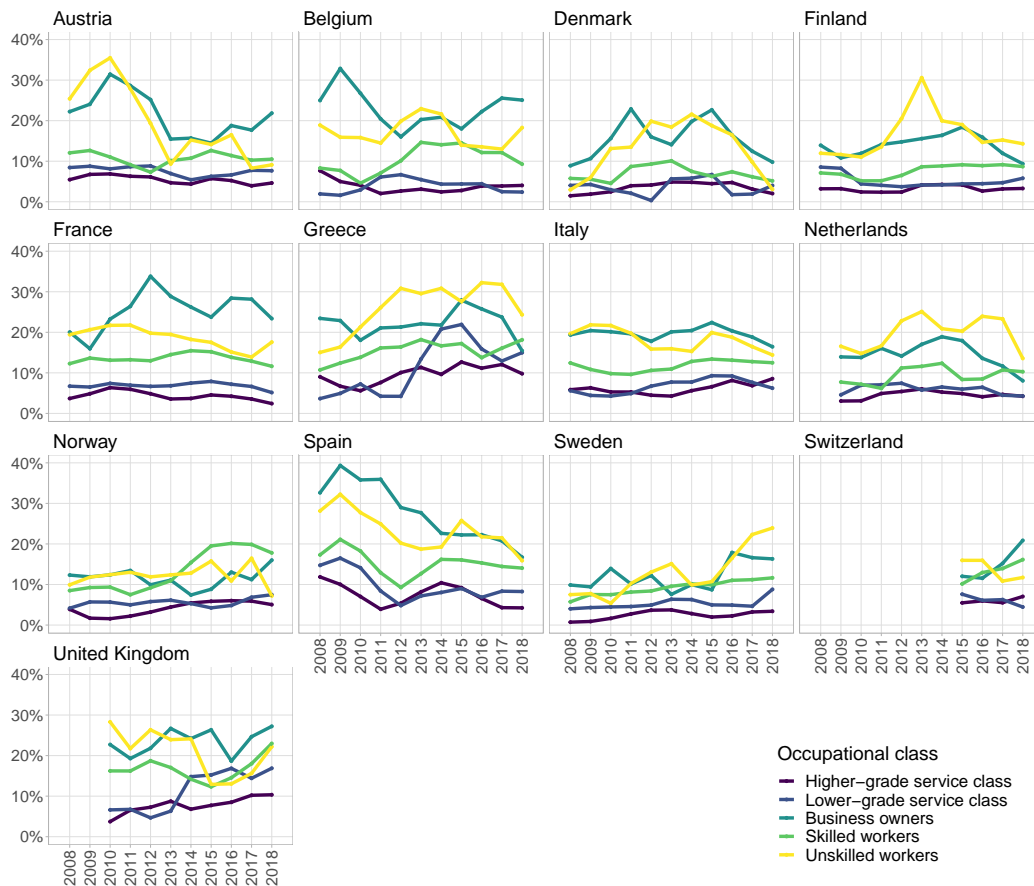
Figure A3 in the appendix additionally plots the results for the economic insecurity index. It is no surprise that the overall trend is largely the same as for the risk of downward mobility, since this measure accounts for half of the index. It is notable that the economic insecurity index is almost identical to the risk of downward mobility for business owners, as well as skilled and unskilled workers. This is due to the fact that there is only little upward mobility from the middle-class to the upper-income class for these occupational classes. Generally, the economic insecurity index is lower than the risk of downward mobility, as upward mobility mitigates the fear of moving down the economic ladder. This is particularly the case for the lower-service and the higher-service class. However, there are some points in time (e.g., Sweden in the mid-2000s for the unskilled workers) when the economic insecurity index is greater than the risk of downward mobility, which can be explained by a marked decline of the middle class in the three preceding years.

Table 5: Average risk of downward mobility by country and occupational class in percent

Country	Higher-grade service class	Lower-grade service class	Business owners	Skilled workers	Unskilled workers	Total
Austria	5.50	7.60	21.40	10.70	19.40	10.80
Belgium	3.80	3.90	23.00	10.40	17.10	8.60
Denmark	3.30	3.60	15.00	6.90	12.20	7.30
Finland	3.20	5.10	13.90	7.60	16.60	7.30
France	4.30	6.90	25.30	13.50	18.70	10.70
Greece	9.80	10.60	22.40	15.00	25.00	17.40
Italy	6.10	6.70	19.60	11.70	18.10	12.50
Netherlands	4.60	5.90	14.50	9.40	19.80	8.10
Norway	4.10	5.50	12.10	13.00	11.90	9.10
Spain	7.40	9.70	27.70	15.20	23.30	17.00
Sweden	2.50	5.30	12.10	9.20	12.90	6.40
Switzerland	6.00	6.10	14.90	13.30	13.60	8.60
United Kingdom	7.80	11.40	23.50	16.70	20.90	13.90
Total	5.20	6.80	19.00	11.60	17.80	

Note: Own calculation, EU-SILC longitudinal data.

Figure 4: Risk of downward mobility by country and occupational class in percent, 2008–2018

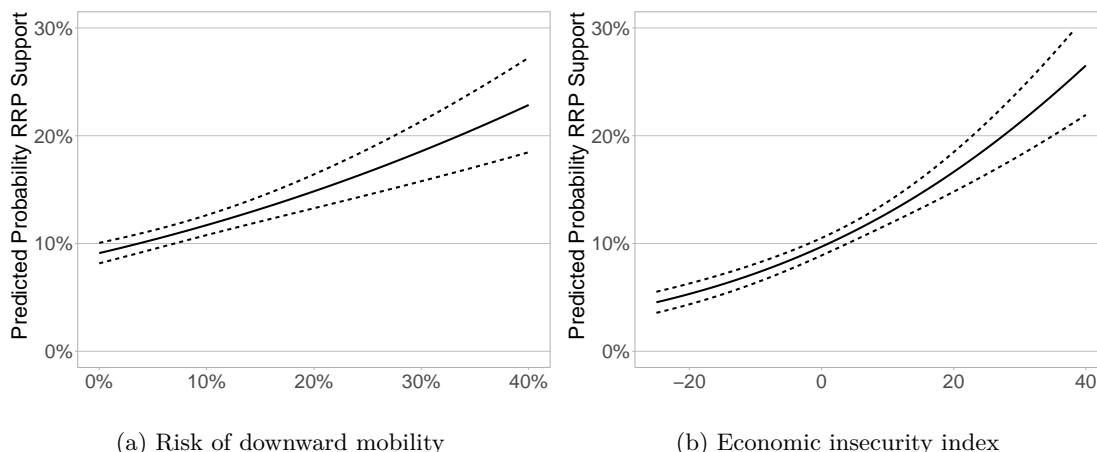


Note: Own calculation, EU-SILC longitudinal data.

4.2 Voting behaviour of the anxious middle class

Having established that the risk of downward mobility out of the middle class is not spread equally across occupational classes, I examine whether economic insecurity affects the likelihood for voters living in middle-class households to support RRP. Table 6 summarizes the main findings and reports changes in odds ratios. In Model 1, the risk of downward mobility is used for measuring the latent economic insecurity. In Model 2, the effect of the economic insecurity index is analyzed. The models show that the risk of falling out of the middle class positively correlates with the support for RRP. I find that a one-unit increase of the risk of downward mobility increases the odds of supporting RRP by 3.3 %. The effect is slightly larger for the economic insecurity index and corresponds to 3,6 %. Figure 5 displays the predicted probability to support RRP for different levels of economic insecurity based on the estimates from Table 6. It demonstrates that for both measures a higher risk of economic insecurity increases the probability of supporting RRP. Taking into account the (lack of) upward mobility and changing size of the middle class accentuates the different insecurity exposures between occupational classes.

Figure 5: Effect of economic insecurity on RRP support



Hence, voters who live in a middle-class household at the time of the survey are more inclined to support RRP if a higher share of households similar to theirs (in terms of occupational class) have experienced downward mobility out of the middle class. Based on the literature, the RRP support of the economically anxious middle class can be explained by growing discontent with mainstream parties and the political elites and the wish to return to an idealized past with intact social order. Moreover, RRP present themselves as making policies for the 'ordinary' people and highlight how other groups supposedly are given preferential treatment. The control variables show the expected signs in line with earlier research. Middle-class voters who support RRP are more likely to be male, native-born, less-educated, less religious, and place themselves on the right of the political spectrum. I find no statistically significant effect of being unemployed on supporting RRP. However, the results show that those who experienced unemployment within the last five years are more prone to vote or feel close to RRP. This might be explained by the fact that past economic insecurities can foster feelings about potential future adverse economic events. The assessment of the respondents' current income situation of the respondent seems to follow a U-shaped curve. Whereas respondents living comfortably on present income are less prone to support RRP, the likelihood increases when respondents state that they cope or find it difficult to live on the current household income. Conversely, respondents with great difficulties are not more likely than those living comfortably to support RRP. Overall, I find no statistically significant effects for those who face economic hardships, such as being unemployed or having great financial problems living on their present household income, to be more likely to support RRP. Apart from fostering RRP support, economic insecurity can also lead to discontent with the political system as a whole and spur abstaining from the political process altogether. Table A1 in the appendix shows the results for a separate model analyzing whether economic insecurity is positively associated with not having voted in the last election. For this analysis, the dummy variable *abstain* measures whether the voter has voted in the last election (zero) or not (one). The measures of economic insecurity at the time of the last election is taken into account. It might be the case that the occupational class has changed since the last election, unfortunately it is not possible to control for such occupational changes. The results show that economic insecurity of middle-voters is not only positively linked to RRP support but also to not voting at all.

As robustness checks, I estimate the model with the unweighted economic insecurity index (Table A2), excluding Spain (Table A3), matching the economic insecurity measures to the year prior of the survey, $t - 1$ (Table A4) and to the year of the last election, instead of the survey year t (Table A5), and last, using deciles three to eight to define middle-class voters in the ESS (Table A6). Overall, the results are robust to the different specifications, except for the effect of living in an urban area, and having great difficulties living on the current household income, which becomes highly significant when choosing different deciles to represent the middle class.

Table 6: Economic insecurity and support for RRP

	<i>Dependent variable: RRP support</i>	
	<i>Model 1</i> Risk of downward mobility	<i>Model 2</i> Economic insecurity index
Economic insecurity	1.032*** (1.005)	1.036*** (1.004)
Age	0.989*** (1.002)	0.989*** (1.002)
Male	1.322*** (1.075)	1.321*** (1.076)
Medium education	0.698*** (1.078)	0.727*** (1.080)
Higher education	0.209*** (1.112)	0.238*** (1.113)
Unemployed	1.061 (1.148)	1.057 (1.148)
Unemployed within last five years	1.190*** (1.053)	1.175*** (1.053)
Coping on present income	1.303*** (1.051)	1.283*** (1.052)
Difficult on present income	1.726*** (1.122)	1.679*** (1.123)
Very difficult on present income	1.665* (1.341)	1.589 (1.348)
Foreign	0.766*** (1.081)	0.767*** (1.082)
Religious	0.960*** (1.010)	0.960*** (1.010)
Urban	0.918 (1.055)	0.921 (1.056)
Left-right scale	1.430*** (1.038)	1.433*** (1.037)
Constant	0.046*** (1.351)	0.047*** (1.340)
<i>N</i> Respondents	22,522	22,522
<i>N</i> Countries	13	13
<i>N</i> Survey-round	6	6
Pseudo R-squared	0.164	0.168
Log Likelihood	-6,725.5	-6,695.6

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Odds ratios ($\exp(\beta)$) with clustered country-wave standard errors in parentheses and country- and survey-round fixed effects.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I examine whether the risk of falling out of the middle class impacts voters to support RRP in Western Europe. Economic security, stability, and the ability to upkeep a certain middle-class lifestyle are seen as important pillars for the characterisation of the middle class. In this paper, I conceptualise the occupational risk of downward mobility from the middle class into the lower-income class as latent economic insecurity. Seeing other households similar to one's own household move into the lower-income class, can increase anxiety to be the next one to follow. It is important to stress that even if the envisioned scenario of downward mobility does not materialize, it can still have an impact on the political behaviour of voters. Moreover, I construct a new economic insecurity index for the middle class that takes into account not only the risk of falling out of the middle class but also the potential prospect of moving into the upper-income class and the change of the size of the middle class. This new index provides a more complete picture of what it means for middle-class households to be economically insecure. Before examining the impact of economic insecurity on RRP support, I show that occupational classes face different levels of risk to move out of the middle class into the lower-income class and that it also varies across countries. While the higher- and lower-grade service class face relatively low risks of downward mobility, the risk is substantially higher for business owners, skilled, and unskilled workers. Examining the economic insecurity index reveals that this widens the gap between relatively secure and less secure occupational classes, as there is generally higher upward mobility for higher- and lower-grade service class workers than for the other occupational groups which mitigates the effect of economic insecurity associated with the risk of downward mobility. Turning to the political behaviour, the literature has identified on why RRP might appeal to anxious middle-class voters. Possible explanations range from promising to reinstate an idealized past, where the social order was still intact; capturing the disillusionment and discontent from mainstream parties and the 'elites' to arguing that immigrants are the reason for the economically threatened 'ordinary people'. The analysis of RRP support in 13 Western European countries between 2008 and 2018 provides empirical evidence that greater latent economic insecurity of middle-class voters increases the likelihood of supporting RRP. In line with past research, I confirm that economic insecurity and not economic hardship seems to impact voters to support RRP. Moreover, this paper contributes to the literature by studying economic insecurity more broadly than only focusing on unemployment or automation risks, and thus neglecting other life events that can lead to economic decline. By focusing on economic insecurity, this study does not claim that cultural issues are irrelevant to understanding RRP support. As it is empirically very difficult to disentangle economic from cultural issues, the analysis does not include attitudinal variables. It may well be that the risk of downward mobility spurs anti-immigration sentiments, which leads voters to support RRP. Conversely, higher immigration rates and globalization shocks can increase economic insecurity, which in turn pushes voters to RRP. Further research could look deeper into the reasons for explaining different patterns in economic insecurity across countries and occupational classes and examines whether the threat of moving out of the middle class is associated with greater rejection towards immigrants and/or more authoritarian values. Further studies would have to examine the different pathways on relationship between economic insecurity and cultural issues, and vice versa. Concerning the extent of economic insecurity of the middle class and RRP support, future research could examine 1) the role of welfare state policies on the risk of downward mobility and 2) the role of wealth. The paper finds that the risk of downward mobility is lower in Scandinavian countries compared to South European countries (Greece and Spain). It would therefore be worthwhile to gain further knowledge into which policies prevent middle-class households from falling into the lower-income class and whether these factors (e.g., social benefits such as unemployment replacement rates or family benefits) in-turn have an impact on RRP support. One limitation of this article is that it cannot control for wealth in the regression model. Future studies could therefore study whether and at which level wealth can offset the threat of falling into the lower-income class on the support of RRP.

References

- Abou-Chadi, T. and Kurer, T. (2021). Economic risk within the household and voting for the radical right. *World Politics*, 73(3):482–511.
- Amengay, A. and Stockemer, D. (2019). The radical right in western europe: A meta-analysis of structural factors. *Political Studies Review*, 17(1):30–40.
- Ansolabehere, S., Meredith, M., and Snowberg, E. (2014). Meco-economic voting: Local information and micro-perceptions of the macro-economy. *Economics & Politics*, 26(3):380–410.
- Armingeon, K., Wenger, V., Wiedemeier, F., Isler, C., Knöpfel, L., Weisstanner, D., and Engler, S. (2020). Codebook: Comparative political data set 1960–2018.
- Arzheimer, K. and Carter, E. (2006). Political opportunity structures and right-wing extremist party success. *European Journal of Political Research*, 45(3):419–443.
- Atkinson, A. B. and Brandolini, A. (2013). On the identification of the middle class. In Gornick, J. C. and Jäntti, M., editors, *Income inequality: Economic disparities and the middle class in affluent countries*, pages 77–100. Stanford University Press Stanford, CA.
- Ballard-Rosa, C., Jensen, A., and Scheve, K. (2022). Economic decline, social identity, and authoritarian values in the united states. *International Studies Quarterly*, 66(1):sqab027.
- Ballard-Rosa, C., Malik, M. A., Rickard, S. J., and Scheve, K. (2021). The economic origins of authoritarian values: evidence from local trade shocks in the united kingdom. *Comparative political studies*, 54(13):2321–2353.
- Banerjee, A. V. and Duflo, E. (2008). What is middle class about the middle classes around the world? *Journal of economic perspectives*, 22(2):3–28.
- Bieber, F. and Moggia, J. (2021). Risk shifts in the gig economy: The normative case for an insurance scheme against the effects of precarious work. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 29(3):281–304.
- Bisgaard, M., Sønderskov, K. M., and Dinesen, P. T. (2016). Reconsidering the neighborhood effect: Does exposure to residential unemployment influence voters’ perceptions of the national economy? *The Journal of Politics*, 78(3):719–732.
- Bornschieer, S. and Kriesi, H. (2012). The populist right, the working class, and the changing face of class politics. In Rydgren, J., editor, *Class politics and the radical right*, pages 28–48. Routledge.
- Bossert, W., Clark, A., d’Ambrosio, C., and Lepinteur, A. (2022). Economic insecurity and political preferences. *Oxford Economic Papers*.
- Bossert, W. and D’Ambrosio, C. (2013). Measuring economic insecurity. *International Economic Review*, 54(3):1017–1030.
- Burgoon, B., van Noort, S., Rooduijn, M., and Underhill, G. (2019). Positional deprivation and support for radical right and radical left parties. *Economic Policy*, 34(97):49–93.
- Capelos, T. and Katsanidou, A. (2018). Reactionary politics: Explaining the psychological roots of anti preferences in european integration and immigration debates. *Political Psychology*, 39(6):1271–1288.
- Colantone, I. and Stanig, P. (2018). Global competition and brexit. *American political science review*, 112(2):201–218.
- De Blok, E. L. and van der Meer, T. T. (2018). The puzzling effect of residential neighbourhoods on the vote for the radical right an individual-level panel study on the mechanisms behind neighbourhood effects on voting for the dutch freedom party, 2010–2013. *Electoral Studies*, 53:122–132.

- Derndorfer, J. and Kranzinger, S. (2021). The decline of the middle class: New evidence for europe. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 55(4):914–938.
- Donnelly, M. J. and Pop-Eleches, G. (2018). Income measures in cross-national surveys: problems and solutions. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 6(2):355–363.
- Elchardus, M. and Spruyt, B. (2016). Populism, persistent republicanism and declinism: An empirical analysis of populism as a thin ideology. *Government and Opposition*, 51(1):111–133.
- Emmenegger, P., Marx, P., and Schraff, D. (2015). Labour market disadvantage, political orientations and voting: how adverse labour market experiences translate into electoral behaviour. *Socio-Economic Review*, 13(2):189–213.
- Engler, S. and Weisstanner, D. (2021). The threat of social decline: income inequality and radical right support. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(2):153–173.
- Gest, J., Reny, T., and Mayer, J. (2018). Roots of the radical right: Nostalgic deprivation in the united states and britain. *Comparative Political Studies*, 51(13):1694–1719.
- Gidron, N. and Hall, P. A. (2020). Populism as a problem of social integration. *Comparative Political Studies*, 53(7):1027–1059.
- Gornick, J. C. and Jäntti, M. (2013). Introduction. In Gornick, J. C. and Jäntti, M., editors, *Income inequality: Economic disparities and the middle class in affluent countries*, pages 1–47. Stanford University Press Stanford, CA.
- Guiso, L., Herrera, H., Morelli, M., Sonno, T., et al. (2022). Economic insecurity and the demand of populism in europe. *Einaudi Institute for Economics and Finance*.
- Hainmueller, J. and Hiscox, M. J. (2010). Attitudes toward highly skilled and low-skilled immigration: Evidence from a survey experiment. *American political science review*, 104(1):61–84.
- Halikiopoulou, D. and Vlandas, T. (2017). Voting to leave: Economic insecurity and the brexit vote. In Leruth, B., Startin, N., and Usherwood, S., editors, *The Routledge Handbook of Euroscepticism*, pages 444–455. Routledge.
- Halla, M., Wagner, A. F., and Zweimüller, J. (2017). Immigration and voting for the far right. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 15(6):1341–1385.
- Han, K. J. (2016). Income inequality and voting for radical right-wing parties. *Electoral Studies*, 42:54–64.
- Im, Z. J., Mayer, N., Palier, B., and Rovny, J. (2019). The “losers of automation”: A reservoir of votes for the radical right? *Research & Politics*, 6(1):1–7.
- Inglehart, R. and Norris, P. (2017). Trump and the populist authoritarian parties: the silent revolution in reverse. *Perspectives on Politics*, 15(2):443–454.
- Inglehart, R. F. and Norris, P. (2016). Trump, brexit, and the rise of populism: Economic have-nots and cultural backlash.
- Ivarsflaten, E. (2008). What unites right-wing populists in western europe? re-examining grievance mobilization models in seven successful cases. *Comparative Political Studies*, 41(1):3–23.
- Jenkins, S. P. and Van Kerm, P. (2014). The relationship between eu indicators of persistent and current poverty. *Social indicators research*, 116:611–638.
- Jolly, S., Bakker, R., Hooghe, L., Marks, G., Polk, J., Rovny, J., Steenbergen, M., and Vachudova, M. A. (2022). Chapel hill expert survey trend file, 1999–2019. *Electoral studies*, 75:102420.

- Kahneman, D. and Tversky, A. (1984). Choices, values, and frames. *American psychologist*, 39(4):341.
- Kitschelt, H. (1997). *The radical right in Western Europe: A comparative analysis*. University of Michigan Press.
- Kohlrausch, B. (2018). Abstiegsängste in deutschland: Ausmaß und ursachen in zeiten des erstarkenden rechtspopulismus. Technical report.
- Kurer, T. (2020). The declining middle: Occupational change, social status, and the populist right. *Comparative Political Studies*, 53(10-11):1798–1835.
- Kurer, T. and Palier, B. (2019). Shrinking and shouting: the political revolt of the declining middle in times of employment polarization. *Research & Politics*, 6(1):1–6.
- Kurer, T. and Van Staalduinen, B. (2022). Disappointed expectations: Downward mobility and electoral change. *American Political Science Review*, 116(4):1340–1356.
- López-Calva, L. F. and Ortiz-Juarez, E. (2014). A vulnerability approach to the definition of the middle class. *The Journal of Economic Inequality*, 12(1):23–47.
- Lubbers, M. and Scheepers, P. (2000). Individual and contextual characteristics of the german extreme right-wing vote in the 1990s. a test of complementary theories. *European Journal of Political Research*, 38(1):63–94.
- Lubbers, M. and Scheepers, P. (2002). French front national voting: a micro and macro perspective. *Ethnic and racial studies*, 25(1):120–149.
- Lubbers, M., Scheepers, P., and Billiet, J. (2000). Multilevel modelling of vlaams blok voting: individual and contextual characteristics of the vlaams blok vote. *Acta Politica*, 35(4):363–398.
- Margalit, Y. (2019). Economic insecurity and the causes of populism, reconsidered. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 33(4):152–70.
- Mau, S., Mewes, J., and Schöneck, N. M. (2012). What determines subjective socio-economic insecurity? context and class in comparative perspective. *Socio-economic review*, 10(4):655–682.
- Maurin, É. et al. (2009). La peur du déclassement. *Seuil: La République des Idées*.
- Mayer, N. (1993). Le vote front national ou le syndrome de la peur. *International Review of Community Development/Revue internationale d'action communautaire*, (30):117–122.
- Mewes, J. and Mau, S. (2012). Unraveling working-class welfare chauvinism. In *Contested welfare states: Welfare attitudes in Europe and beyond*, pages 119–157. Stanford University Press Stanford, CA.
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge university press.
- Mudde, C. (2017). *The populist radical right: A reader*. Taylor & Francis.
- Mutz, D. C. (2018). Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(19):E4330–E4339.
- Oesch, D. (2006). *Redrawing the class map: Stratification and institutions in Britain, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland*. Springer.
- Oesch, D. (2015). Occupational structure and labor market change in western europe since 1990. In Beramendi, P., Häusermann, S., Kitschelt, H., and Kriesi, H., editors, *The politics of advanced capitalism*, pages 112–132. Cambridge University Press.

- Oesch, D. and Rennwald, L. (2018). Electoral competition in europe’s new tripolar political space: Class voting for the left, centre-right and radical right. *European journal of political research*, 57(4):783–807.
- Osberg, L. (2015). How should one measure economic insecurity? *OECD Statistics Working Papers*, 2015/01.
- Ranci, C., Beckfield, J., Bernardi, L., and Parma, A. (2021). New measures of economic insecurity reveal its expansion into eu middle classes and welfare states. *Social Indicators Research*, 158(2):539–562.
- Rebecchi, A. and Rohde, N. (2022). Economic insecurity, racial anxiety, and right-wing populism. *Review of Income and Wealth*.
- Rodrik, D. (2018). Populism and the economics of globalization. *Journal of international business policy*, 1(1):12–33.
- Rohde, N. and Tang, K. K. (2018). Economic insecurity: Theoretical approaches. In *Handbook of research on economic and social well-being*, pages 300–315. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Rovny, A. E. and Rovny, J. (2017). Outsiders at the ballot box: operationalizations and political consequences of the insider–outsider dualism. *Socio-Economic Review*, 15(1):161–185.
- Steenvoorden, E. and Harteveld, E. (2018). The appeal of nostalgia: The influence of societal pessimism on support for populist radical right parties. *West European Politics*, 41(1):28–52.
- Taggart, P. (2002). Populism and the pathology of representative politics. In *Democracies and the populist challenge*, pages 62–80. Springer.
- Weller, C. E. and Logan, A. M. (2009). Measuring middle class economic security. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 43(2):327–336.
- Western, B., Bloome, D., Sosnaud, B., and Tach, L. (2012). Economic insecurity and social stratification. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 38(1):341–59.

Appendix

Tables

Table A1: Economic insecurity and abstaining

	<i>Dependent variable: Abstain</i>	
	<i>Model 1</i> Risk of downward mobility	<i>Model 2</i> Economic insecurity index
Economic insecurity	1.036*** (1.004)	1.031*** (1.003)
Age	0.959*** (1.002)	0.959*** (1.002)
Male	0.992 (1.033)	0.991 (1.033)
Medium education	0.598*** (1.066)	0.613*** (1.065)
Higher education	0.311*** (1.087)	0.337*** (1.086)
Unemployed	1.067 (1.087)	1.062 (1.087)
Unemployed within last five years	1.208*** (1.046)	1.200*** (1.046)
Coping on present income	1.262*** (1.051)	1.248*** (1.051)
Difficult on present income	1.563*** (1.073)	1.531*** (1.073)
Very difficult on present income	1.790*** (1.157)	1.737*** (1.157)
Foreign	2.751*** (1.086)	2.764*** (1.086)
Religious	0.974*** (1.007)	0.975*** (1.007)
Urban	1.031 (1.053)	1.029 (1.053)
Left-right scale	0.997 (1.011)	0.998 (1.011)
Constant	0.934 (1.269)	1.047 (1.269)
<i>N</i> Respondents	26,547	26,547
<i>N</i> Countries	13	13
<i>N</i> Survey-rounds	6	6
Pseudo R-squared	0.143	0.145
Log Likelihood	-9,497.2	-9,479.4

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Odds ratios ($\exp(\beta)$) with clustered country-wave standard errors in parentheses and country- and survey-round fixed effects.

Table A2: Robustness check: Comparison weighted and unweighted economic insecurity index

	<i>Dependent variable: RRP support</i>	
	<i>Model 1</i> EI (weighted)	<i>Model 2</i> EI (unweighted)
Economic insecurity	1.036*** (1.004)	1.030*** (1.003)
Age	0.989*** (1.002)	0.989*** (1.002)
Male	1.321*** (1.076)	1.323*** (1.076)
Medium education	0.727*** (1.080)	0.736*** (1.081)
Higher education	0.238*** (1.113)	0.248*** (1.115)
Unemployed	1.057 (1.148)	1.054 (1.149)
Unemployed within last five years	1.175*** (1.053)	1.168*** (1.054)
Coping on present income	1.283*** (1.052)	1.276*** (1.052)
Difficult on present income	1.679*** (1.123)	1.661*** (1.124)
Very difficult on present income	1.589 (1.348)	1.565 (1.351)
Foreign	0.767*** (1.082)	0.769*** (1.082)
Religious	0.960*** (1.010)	0.961*** (1.010)
Urban	0.921 (1.056)	0.919 (1.055)
Left-right scale	1.433*** (1.037)	1.435*** (1.037)
Constant	0.047 (1.340)	0.052 (1.336)
<i>N</i> Respondents	22,522	22,522
<i>N</i> Countries	13	13
<i>N</i> Survey-rounds	6	6
Pseudo R-squared	0.168	0.169
Log Likelihood	-6,695.6	-6,682.5

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Odds ratios ($\exp(\beta)$) with clustered country-wave standard errors in parentheses and country- and survey-round fixed effects.

Table A3: Robustness check: Excluding Spain

	<i>Dependent variable: RRP support</i>	
	<i>Model 1</i> Risk of downward mobility	<i>Model 2</i> Economic insecurity index
Economic insecurity	1.032*** (1.005)	1.036*** (1.004)
Age	0.989*** (1.002)	0.989*** (1.002)
Male	1.327*** (1.076)	1.325*** (1.077)
Medium education	0.709*** (1.078)	0.739*** (1.080)
Higher education	0.213*** (1.112)	0.241*** (1.114)
Unemployed	1.073 (1.148)	1.069 (1.149)
Unemployed within last five years	1.197*** (1.053)	1.182*** (1.054)
Coping on present income	1.316*** (1.051)	1.295*** (1.051)
Difficult on present income	1.728*** (1.125)	1.681*** (1.125)
Very difficult on present income	1.710* (1.342)	1.629 (1.349)
Foreign	0.764*** (1.082)	0.765*** (1.082)
Religious	0.960*** (1.010)	0.961*** (1.010)
Urban	0.918 (1.056)	0.922 (1.056)
Left-right scale	1.422*** (1.038)	1.425*** (1.037)
Constant	0.046*** (1.353)	0.047*** (1.342)
<i>N</i> Respondents	22,266	22,266
<i>N</i> Countries	12	12
<i>N</i> Survey-rounds	6	6
Pseudo R-squared	0.162	0.166
Log Likelihood	-6,670.6	-6,641.1

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Odds ratios ($\exp(\beta)$) with clustered country-wave standard errors in parentheses and country- and survey-round fixed effects.

Table A4: Robustness check: Economic insecurity matched to year of last election

	<i>Dependent variable: RRP support</i>	
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>
	Risk of downward mobility	Economic insecurity index
Economic insecurity	1.028*** (1.006)	1.034*** (1.004)
Age	0.990*** (1.003)	0.990*** (1.002)
Male	1.297*** (1.084)	1.296*** (1.085)
Medium education	0.678*** (1.087)	0.704*** (1.087)
Higher education	0.192*** (1.132)	0.218*** (1.131)
Unemployed	1.032 (1.170)	1.036 (1.171)
Unemployed within last five years	1.227*** (1.058)	1.218*** (1.059)
Coping on present income	1.327*** (1.053)	1.303*** (1.053)
Difficult on present income	1.766*** (1.109)	1.715*** (1.109)
Very difficult on present income	1.592 (1.375)	1.520 (1.381)
Foreign	0.740*** (1.085)	0.740*** (1.086)
Religious	0.947*** (1.009)	0.948*** (1.009)
Urban	0.870** (1.064)	0.874** (1.064)
Left-right scale	1.466*** (1.042)	1.467*** (1.042)
Constant	0.040*** (1.342)	0.041*** (1.323)
<i>N</i> Respondents	18,879	18,879
<i>N</i> Countries	12	12
<i>N</i> Survey-rounds	6	6
Pseudo R-squared	0.179	0.188
Log Likelihood	-5,617.7	-5,592.8

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Odds ratios ($\exp(\beta)$) with clustered country-wave standard errors in parentheses and country- and survey-round fixed effects.

Table A5: Robustness check: Lag of one year

	<i>Dependent variable: RRP support</i>	
	<i>Model 1</i> Risk of downward mobility	<i>Model 2</i> Economic insecurity index
Economic insecurity _{<i>t</i>-1}	1.033*** (1.005)	1.036*** (1.004)
Age	0.990*** (1.002)	0.990*** (1.002)
Male	1.322*** (1.081)	1.321*** (1.081)
Medium education	0.678*** (1.085)	0.70*** (1.085)
Higher education	0.197*** (1.125)	0.223*** (1.125)
Unemployed	1.058 (1.153)	1.056 (1.153)
Unemployed within last five years	1.195*** (1.056)	1.183*** (1.057)
Coping on present income	1.310*** (1.052)	1.289*** (1.053)
Difficult on present income	1.710*** (1.106)	1.661*** (1.107)
Very difficult on present income	1.508 (1.359)	1.444 (1.367)
Foreign	0.748*** (1.082)	0.749*** (1.083)
Religious	0.949*** (1.009)	0.949*** (1.009)
Urban	0.895* (1.060)	0.900* (1.060)
Left-right scale	1.459*** (1.039)	1.461*** (1.039)
Constant	0.038*** (1.380)	0.039*** (1.353)
<i>N</i> Respondents	20,758	20,758
<i>N</i> Countries	13	13
<i>N</i> Survey-rounds	6	6
Pseudo R-squared	0.178	0.181
Log Likelihood	-6,166.6	-6,138.2

Note:

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Odds ratios ($\exp(\beta)$) with clustered country-wave standard errors in parentheses and country- and survey-round fixed effects.

Table A6: Robustness check: Middle class = D3 – D8

	<i>Dependent variable: RRP support</i>	
	<i>Model 1</i> Risk of downward mobility	<i>Model 2</i> Economic insecurity index
Economic insecurity	1.031*** (1.004)	1.035*** (1.003)
Age	0.989*** (1.002)	0.989*** (1.002)
Male	1.341*** (1.068)	1.339*** (1.069)
Medium education	0.681*** (1.076)	0.709*** (1.077)
Higher education	0.202*** (1.109)	0.228*** (1.110)
Unemployed	1.048 (1.123)	1.041 (1.123)
Unemployed within last five years	1.217*** (1.054)	1.201*** (1.054)
Coping on present income	1.339*** (1.045)	1.314*** (1.045)
Difficult on present income	1.757*** (1.101)	1.700*** (1.101)
Very difficult on present income	2.139*** (1.234)	2.031*** (1.238)
Foreign	0.763*** (1.076)	0.763*** (1.076)
Religious	0.957*** (1.008)	0.958*** (1.008)
Urban	0.917** (1.051)	0.921** (1.051)
Left-right scale	1.439*** (1.035)	1.442*** (1.035)
Constant	0.043*** (1.345)	0.044*** (1.332)
<i>N</i> Respondents	31,823	31,823
<i>N</i> Countries	13	13
<i>N</i> Survey-rounds	6	6
Pseudo R-squared	0.171	0.174
Log Likelihood	-9,233.2	-9,193.8

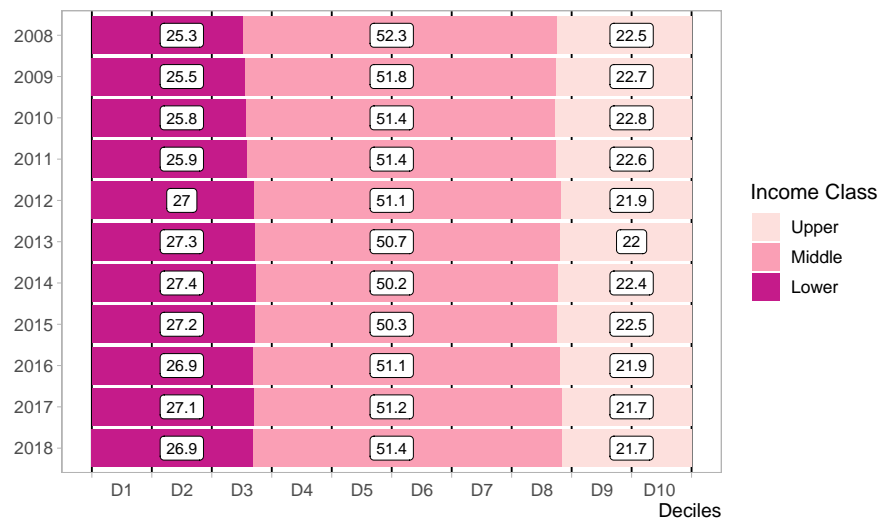
Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Odds ratios ($\exp(\beta)$) with clustered country-wave standard errors in parentheses and country- and survey-round fixed effects.

Figures

Figure A1: Income deciles and classes across 13 Western European countries

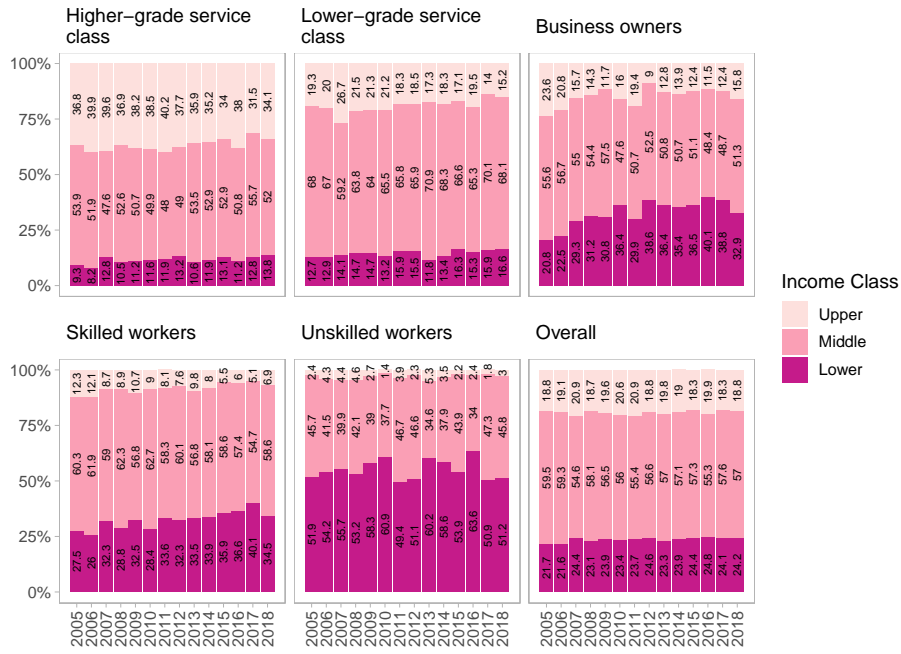


Note: Own calculation, pooled EU-SILC cross-sectional data.

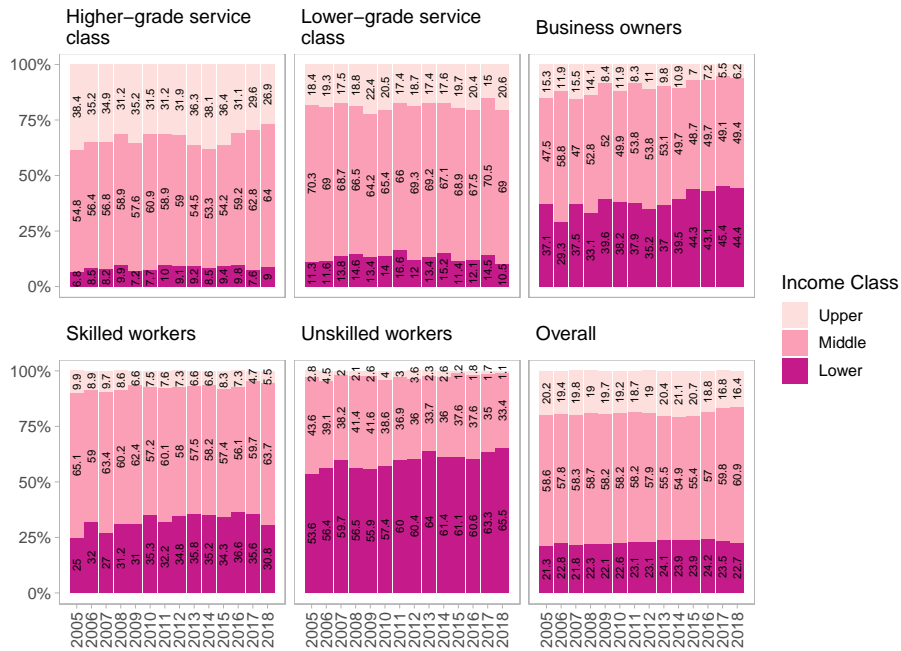
Lower-income class: < 75 %, middle-income class: 75 % – < 150 %, upper-income class: \geq 150 % of the national median income.

Figure A2: Evolution of the middle class by country

(a) Austria



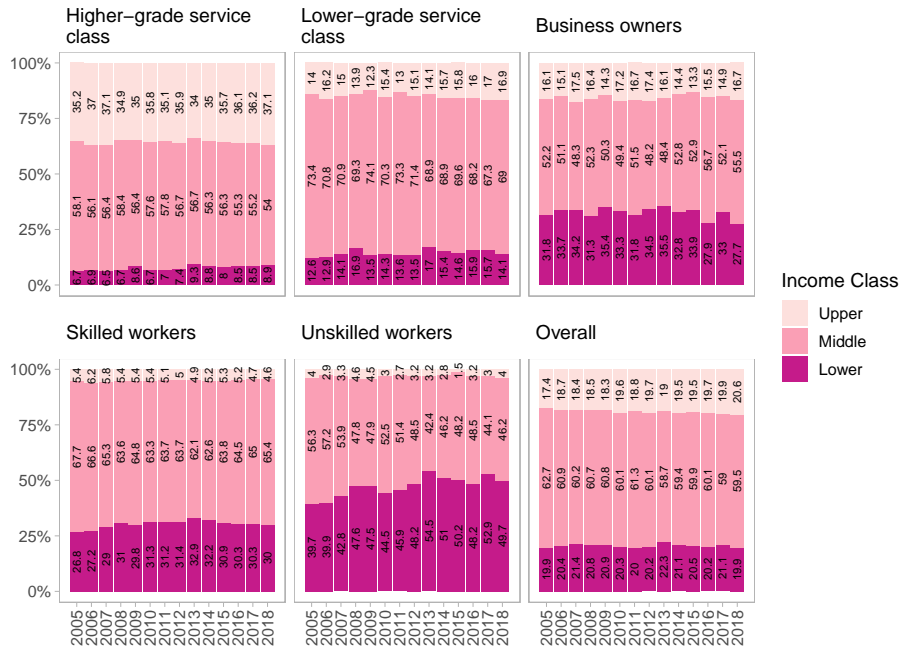
(b) Belgium



(c) Denmark



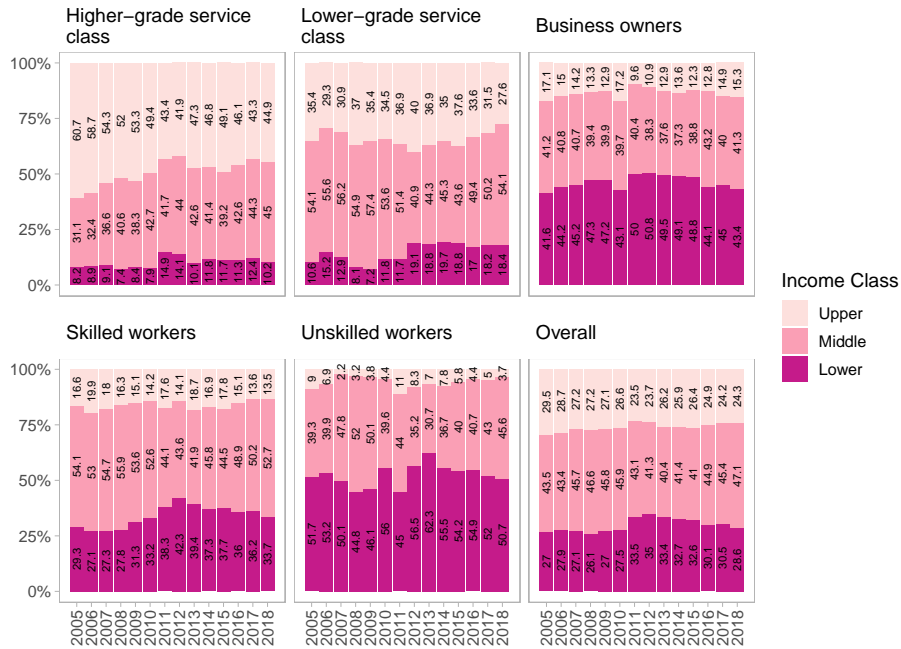
(d) Finland



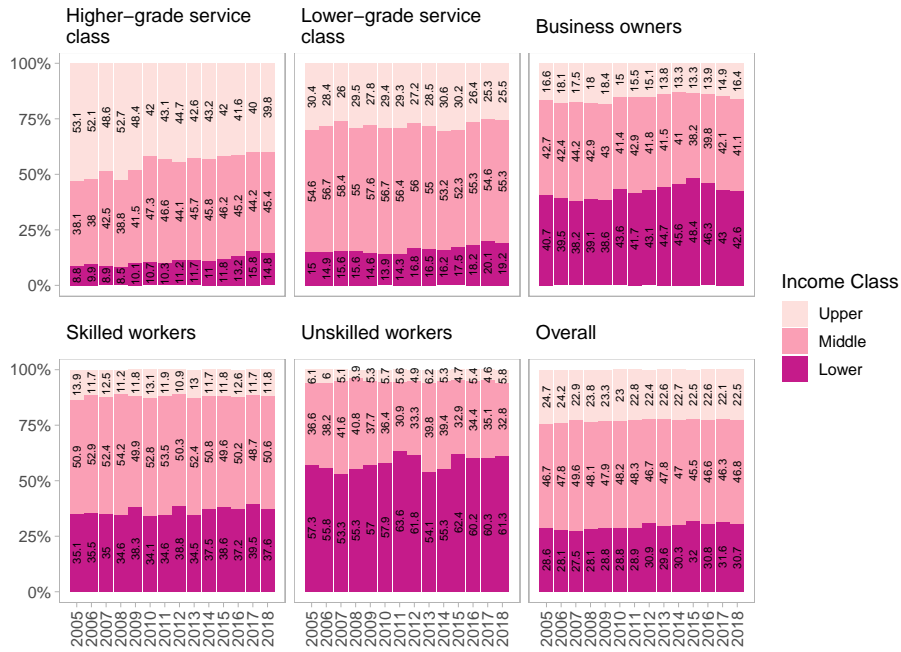
(e) France



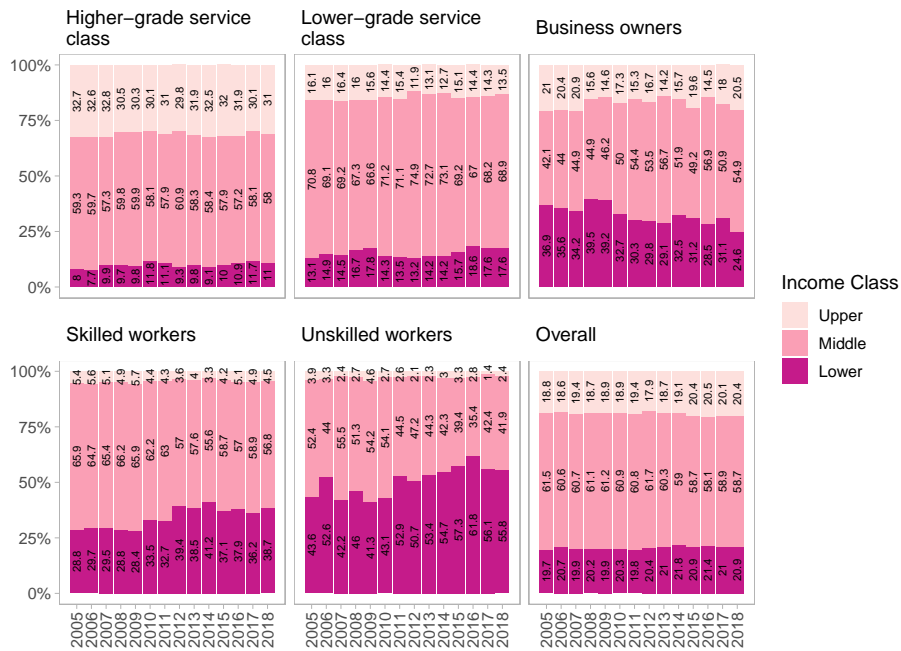
(f) Greece



(g) Italy



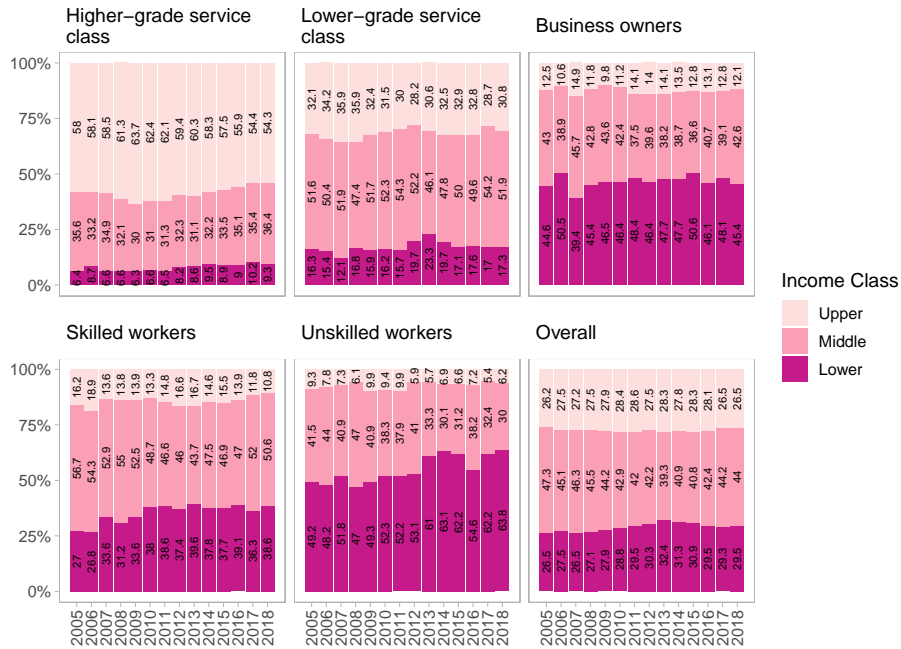
(h) Netherlands



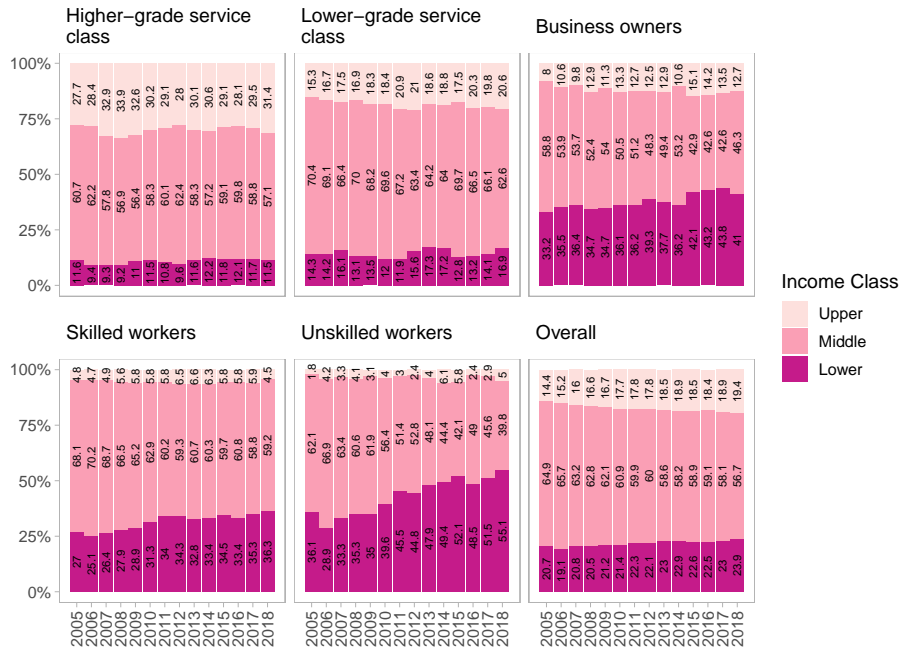
(i) Norway



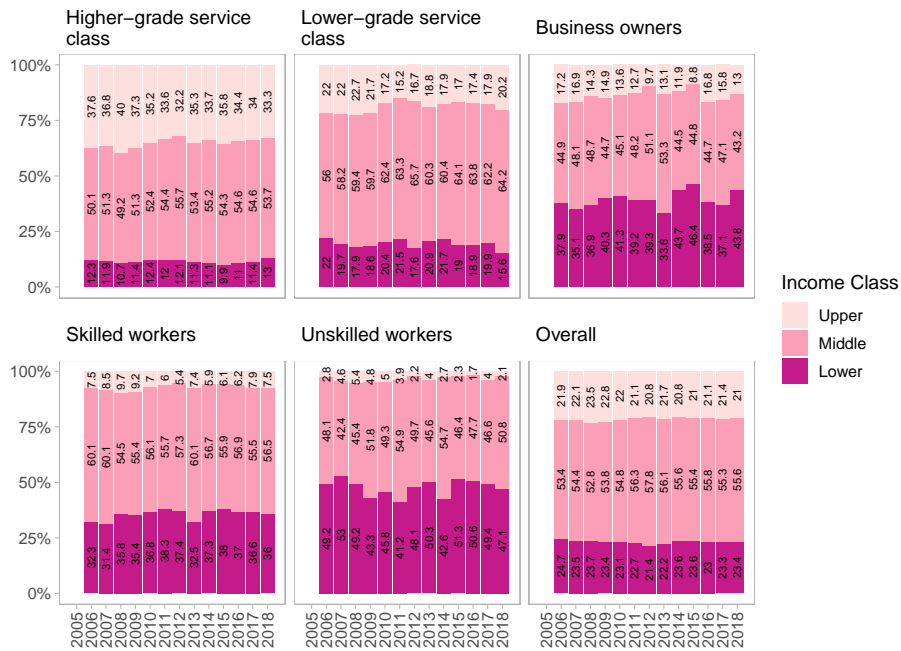
(j) Spain



(k) Sweden



(l) Switzerland



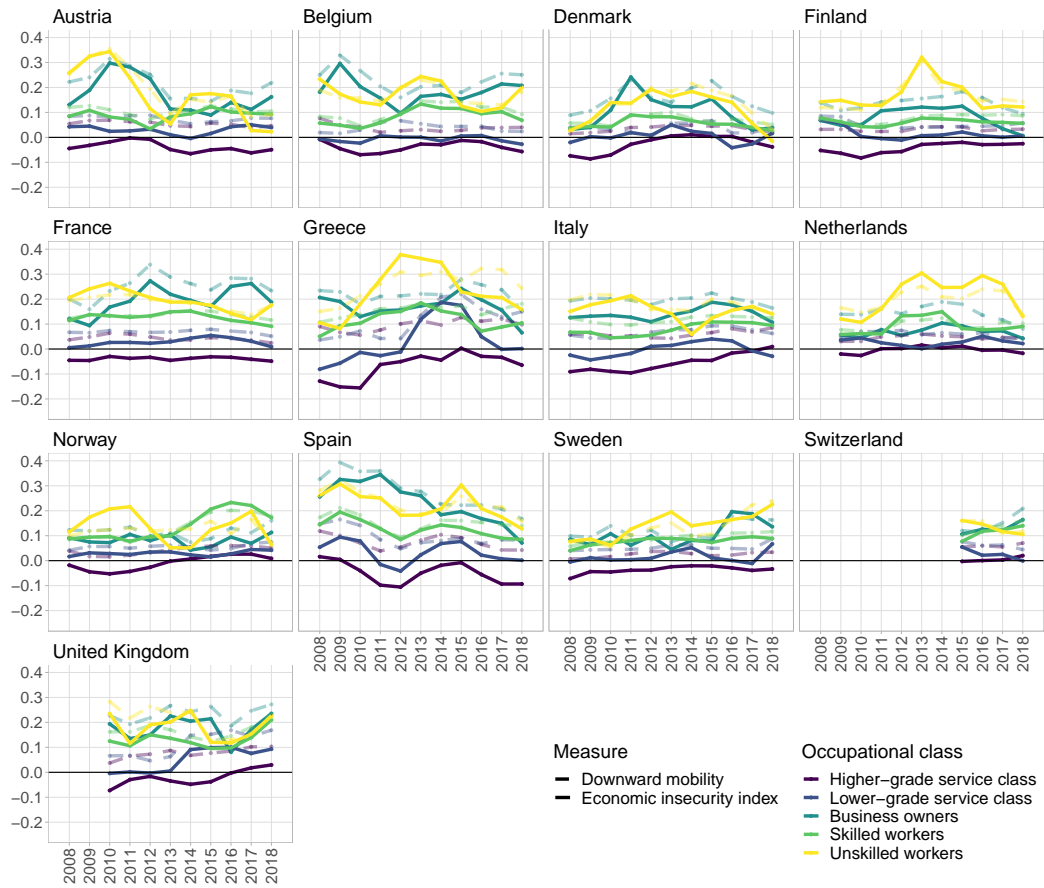
(m) United Kingdom



Note: Own calculation, EU-SILC cross-sectional data.

Lower-income class: < 75 %, middle-income class: 75 % – < 150 %, upper-income class: ≥ 150 % of the national median income.

Figure A3: Risk of downward mobility and economic insecurity index



Note: Own calculation, EU-SILC longitudinal data.

The solid lines show the economic insecurity index, while the dashed lines show the risk of downward mobility for different occupational classes.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Mathias Moser, Karin Heitzmann, Wilfried Altzinger and Mathias Schnetzer for their careful reading, helpful comments and discussions. I am also grateful for the feedback received by the participants and discussants at the 2023 Winter School on Researching Social Insecurity in Europe: Measures, Drivers, Policies in Milan, Italy. Any errors are the authors' responsibility.