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Careerism and working-class decline: The role of party selectorates in explaining trends in descriptive (mis-)representation

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ABSTRACT

Recent decades have seen a growing underrepresentation of working-class legislators and the parallel rise of professionalized "career politicians", especially in centre-left parties. While this changing class composition of parliaments has implications for representational inequality, we know little about its reasons. I focus on the candidate nomination processes in the German Social Democratic Party to understand the priorities and practices of party selectors. Drawing on interview data with key actors in the nomination processes for the 2021 federal election, I show that the representation of marginalized groups becomes more important, but class representation is excluded from party debates. Although many selectors share the view that the candidates' narrowing class backgrounds impede the representation of lower-class constituents, they see the reasons for this development mainly in individual obstacles beyond their control. Thus, while the nomination procedures disadvantage working-class people, they do so in a more complex way than previous studies suggest.

1. Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed two (interrelated) trends in the occupational composition of parliaments: the large and growing underrepresentation of parliamentarians from working-class backgrounds (Best, 2007; Cairney, 2007; Wauters, 2012; Carnes, 2018) and the parallel rise of "career politicians" (Cairney, 2007; Henn, 2018; O'Grady, 2019), meaning parliamentarians with little work experience outside politics-related jobs before entering parliament. This narrowing class profile risks undermining the quality of democratic representation and has been discussed as one potential mechanism for unequal policy responsiveness. Recent empirical work shows that working-class legislators tend to act more in line with working-class interests than their white-collar colleagues (Carnes, 2013; Borwein, 2021; Alexadiou, 2022; Hemingway, 2022), while "careerists" seem to adopt policy positions for strategic reasons (O'Grady, 2019). While this suggests that the changing composition of parliaments has important implications for representational inequality, we know little about the reasons for these trends.

In particular, the role of parties in recruiting and nominating candidates from different occupational backgrounds remains poorly understood, even though parties are central gatekeepers to parliament and the attitudes and behaviour of selectors are key 'demand factors' in theories of recruitment (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). Leftist parties are of particular importance for these developments since both the rise of careerism and the decrease of working-class representation – albeit starting from a much higher level - seems more prevalent among the Left than among the Centre-right. The few existing studies support the idea that the nomination process inside parties is an important explanatory factor and suggest that workers experience less support by party elites than other potential candidates (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Carnes, 2018; Hemingway, 2020; Rehmert, 2022), while having an occupational biography of a "careerist" is an advantage that can even overcome discrimination due to other social characteristics (Durose et al., 2013; Murray, 2023). However, this evidence is still sketchy and focuses mostly on the US and UK.

Focusing on candidate selection processes in the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany, this paper aims to advance our understanding of the role of leftist parties for the changing class backgrounds of policymakers. Drawing on interview data with key actors in the nomination processes of the federal election 2021, the paper shows that the descriptive representation of social groups is generally becoming more important in the nomination strategies of the party, but efforts and party debates centre around age, gender and migration background. Issues of class representation, in contrast, are almost absent from party debates,

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thereby disadvantaging people from working-class backgrounds. This is particularly striking as party selectors are not only aware of the narrowing class composition of their political candidates, but also share concerns about its representational implications. I argue that this seeming paradox can be explained by two factors: first, dominant debates on youth representation partly obscure the awareness of occupational trends, and second, party selectors see the reasons for the lack of working-class candidates mainly in 'supply factors' beyond their control. Thus, while the party selection procedures do indeed foster the narrowing class composition, they do so in more complex ways than studies on attitudinal biases of party selectors suggest.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the next section gives a brief overview over the literature on trends and causes of descriptive (mis-)representation of class in contemporary democracies. Based on an original dataset on the social and occupational backgrounds of German Members of Parliament (MPs), I then show that the trends of rising careerists and disappearing workers are also prevalent in Germany, especially in the SPD. The next section provides information on the research design and interview data, followed by the empirical analysis. The last section concludes.

2. Literature

Across contemporary OECD democracies, people from the working class are vastly underrepresented in national parliaments. The average share of working-class people across OECD parliaments is around 5 percent, compared to 58 percent in the labour force (Carnes and Lupu, 2024). While workers have never been proportionally represented in parliament, they enjoyed somewhat better descriptive representation in the past, but their share in legislatures has further decreased over the last decades (Norris, 1997; Best, 2007; Wauters, 2012; Carnes, 2013; O'Grady, 2019). This trend seems to be mostly driven by changes in recruitment patterns within social democratic parties, which used to send more workers to parliament than their conservative and liberal counterparts (and still do, even though differences today are small on average (Carnes and Lupu, 2024)). In the UK, for instance, the share of working-class legislators in the parliamentary Labour party fell from 30 percent in the mid-1980s to 8 percent in 2015, showing a rapid decline over the last three decades (O'Grady, 2019).

Paralleling this trend, the share of 'career politicians' rose in many parliaments, and the shrinking share of working-class MPs has often been attributed to this professionalization of politics (Norris, 1997; Best and Cotta, 2000; Allen et al., 2020). The notion of a 'career politician' is ambiguously used, but here understood as a parliamentarian with little occupational experience outside politics-related jobs prior to entering parliament (Cairney, 2007; O'Grady, 2019).[2] Following this definition, careerism tends to be stronger in leftist parties than among conservatives, but evidence so far is mostly restricted to the UK (Cairney, 2007; Henn, 2018). In the British Labour party, the share of career politicians rose from 10 to 30 percent between the mid-1980s and 2015, thus mirroring the decrease of working-class MPs (O'Grady, 2019).

While these trends have thus been described in the political recruitment literature for some time, recent findings from the literature on (unequal) representation have spurred new interest in understanding *the causes of* these changes, since they show that the occupational composition of parliaments has profound implications for representational inequality (Elsässer and Schäfer, 2022; Carnes and Lupu, 2023). Concerning the substantive representation of interests, the underrepresentation of marginalized groups risks that important perspectives on political problems are absent from the legislature, thus leading to biased decision-making (Mansbridge, 1999). Political theorists have long rejected that this argument also holds for the working class, since party systems were historically structured by the class cleavage and issues regarding class politics were highly "crystallized" (Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 2015). However, changing political-economic contexts and party systems have altered the circumstances for working-class representation, and recent theoretical and empirical contributions argue that the parliamentary representation of the *contemporary* working class improves its substantive policy representation (see Elsässer and Schäfer (2022) for a detailed discussion). Empirical research shows that (the few) working-class legislators tend to share priorities of poorer citizens and behave in their parliamentary work more in line with working-class interests than their white-collar colleagues, in particular with regard to economic and redistributive policy issues (Carnes, 2013; Carnes and Lupu, 2015; Borwein, 2021; Hemingway, 2022; Curto-Grau and Gallego, 2024). Careerists, in turn, seem to adopt policy positions mainly for strategic reasons, sacrificing working-class interests when it benefits their careers (O'Grady, 2019). The reason for their more strategic behaviour is seen in the strong dependence on their party and their political career.

Concerning implications for symbolic representation, citizens perceive parliaments with more working-class legislators as more legitimate (Barnes and Saxton, 2019), while the perception of politicians as increasingly professionalized and academic increases political alienation, in particular among lower social classes (Heath, 2018; Noordzij et al., 2021). Heath (2018) strengthens the argument of political alienation by showing for the British context that the declining share of elected representatives from working-class backgrounds is strongly associated with the rise of working-class abstention, contributing to the trend of a strong class divide in participation.

Against this background, research on the causes for the descriptive (mis-)representation of class has surged in recent years, but the evidence is still scarce and inconclusive (Carnes and Lupu, 2023). Theories of recruitment typically distinguish between "demand" and "supply" factors influencing the outcome of recruitment processes (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). Supply factors influence the willingness and ability of potential candidates to pursue elected office and are often studied at the individual level, with "nascient political ambition" and individual resources, such as time and money, being the most important ones (Fox and Lawless, 2004, 2010; Murray, 2023; Carnes and Lupu, 2024). Demand factors, in turn, focus on the attitudes and behaviour of key gatekeepers who select from the pool of aspirational candidates, most importantly the party selectorate and voters, but also influential interest groups such as unions. These processes are in turn shaped by the institutional context of a country (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995).

Recent research aiming to explain the underrepresentation of workers in parliament has often focused on voter preferences towards candidates from different social classes, mostly deploying survey-experimental research designs. Voter bias potentially matters via two channels: first, and depending on the electoral system, voters can influence the choice of political candidates directly through the ballot box (e.g. in open list systems or plurality voting with single member districts). Second, voters' preferences might shape the views of party elites of who is a viable candidate, leading to "imputed discrimination" against candidates with certain characteristics in the party nomination process (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). However, the bulk of research on voter preferences finds no systematic evidence for voter discrimination against political candidates from working-class occupations

[2] The term "career politician" was first introduced by King (1981), although for him, the defining characteristic of a career politician was the commitment to politics. He already noted, however, that an important political consequence of the rise of careerism was "that politicians without a great deal of first-hand experience of the world outside politics are running the country" (King (1981, p. 278), thus acknowledging the narrowing occupational experience this development implied. As Allen et al. (2020) point out, most empirical scholars today use occupational background and/or life experience outside politics to measure the concept.

(Campbell and Cowley, 2014; Carnes and Lupu, 2016; Vivyan et al., 2020; Kevins, 2021), but rather indifference or even favourable views of working-class candidates.[3]

Supply side explanations are also frequently examined in the literature, most notably the lack of financial resources and/or time as structural obstacles keeping workers from running. Regarding financial resources, Hemingway (2020) shows for 10 European countries that candidates from working-class occupations have lower campaign budgets and start to campaign full-time later in the electoral race than candidates with professional backgrounds, in particular those from the business sector. Carnes (2018) shows for the US that workers are more worried about the loss of income that comes with running for office than non-workers, given the uncertainty of succeeding. In addition to a lack of financial resources, working-class occupations are often characterised by inflexible and long working hours, which means a structural disadvantage to those who work in professional occupations with flexible hours, higher autonomy and sympathetic employers (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995, pp. 110–113; Murray, 2023). This disadvantage might be especially strong compared to candidates from "politics-facilitating" occupations with direct links to politics, the typical occupations held by career politicians (Cairney, 2007). However, even though these individual resource disadvantages certainly play an important role, they are not necessarily suited to explain major shifts over time or instances where over-time trends differ across parties.

This rather points to the pivotal role of parties and other actors with gatekeeper functions, such as trade unions, as more promising explanations (Carnes and Lupu, 2023). Unions, traditionally mobilizing and supporting the political participation of working-class people, can influence political officeholding both by encouraging working-class people to aspire for office and by influencing the nomination process inside – mainly social democratic – parties directly (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Durose et al., 2013; Sojourner, 2013). In the OECD countries, union density and working-class officeholding are indeed positively correlated (Carnes and Lupu, 2024), but the exact mechanisms behind these findings are not clear, in particular regarding the way unions and parties interact in nomination processes.[4]

Regarding the role of parties, recent research suggests that party selectors responsible for recruitment and nominations tend to disadvantage working-class candidates. Focusing on the attitudes of party selectorates, studies from different country contexts suggest that party elites tend to be biased against potential candidates from working-class backgrounds and prefer candidates with high formal education (Durose et al., 2013; Carnes, 2018; Rehmert, 2022), but this evidence is still sketchy and confined mostly to Anglo-Saxon countries with plurality voting systems. Carnes' (2018) research on the US, for instance, shows that recruiters do not consider qualified workers as equally suitable since they do not think they want to run or, if they did, could raise enough funds or were good at campaigning. Durose et al. (2013) report for the UK that university educated professionals enjoy advantages in the selection process, and that an occupational biography of a "careerist" is an advantage in the eyes of selectors that can even overcome discrimination due to other social characteristics. For Germany, Rehmert (2022) shows that party delegates deciding on party list positions prefer candidates with higher formal education, in particular when they are highly educated themselves, but Berz and Jankowski (2022) do not find a similar bias for nominations at the district level. Concerning the outcomes of the actual nomination processes, Buisseret et al. (2022) show for the universe of Swedish municipal elections from 1990 to 2014 that parties systematically assign candidates with lower formal education to lower list rankings, especially those parties with strong electoral prospect of controlling the executive. In sum, while this research points to systematic attitudinal biases of party selectors, it tells us less about how (and to what extent) these biases play out in the actual practice of candidate recruitment and nomination.

Candidate nominations and list rankings are complex processes in which different interests have to be balanced and competition between different claims for group representation are common, in particular in proportional voting systems with closed lists (Reiser, 2014). Focusing jointly on the "universe" of selection criteria and their relative importance is thus the most appropriate research strategy to better understand whether and why certain groups are (dis)advantaged. Following this line of reasoning, this paper adopts a qualitative approach and focuses on the selection processes in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). As will be shown in the next section, in Germany, too, trends towards strong careerism and working-class decline in parliament are especially driven by leftist parties. Understanding the recruitment processes in the Social Democratic Party is thus crucial to understand the narrowing class composition of the parliament.

Drawing on interview data with key actors in the nomination and list-building process of the 2021 federal election, the paper aims at answering two related research questions. First, *which (informal) selection criteria for group representation are adopted by party selectors, and what role does social class background play relative to other criteria?* The focus here is on the selection practices and trade-offs within the party and the priorities of the 'selectorate' when different goals and rules are in conflict with each other. Second, *why do certain claims for group representation prevail over others?* This second part of the analysis focuses on the *perceptions and attitudes* of party selectors, analysing how the trends of decreasing working-class MPs and an increasing share of careerists are perceived and assessed by (local) party elites. The analysis builds on existing research on selection criteria in German parties (Wessels, 1997; Reiser, 2014, 2023; Steg, 2016), but with a stronger focus on class. Before we turn to the interview evidence, the next section examines the changes in the social and occupational composition of the German parliament.

3. Empirical trends in Germany

The German parliament has seen major changes in its occupational composition over the past five decades, most notably with regard to working-class decline and the rise of careerism. The data presented in this section comes from the *German Candidates and Members of Parliament (GerCaMP) database* (Elsässer and Wenker, 2024) which contains information on socio-demographic characteristics of all German national MPs from 1969 to the present legislature. An MP is coded as 'working class' if he or she has worked more than five years in a working-class occupation before first entering parliament. Working-class occupations are defined according to the Oesch class scheme (Oesch, 2006), thus including manual, service sector and office task occupations.[5] Based on O'Grady (2019), an MP is coded as 'careerist' if he or she has no more than 5 years' job experience outside politics-related occupations (party workers, political advisors, NGO or pressure group activists) before entering parliament for the first time.

As can be seen in Fig. 1, careerism is on the rise in the German parliament, a trend that has been noted already in the 1990s (Wessels, 1997), but has even more accelerated since then. The share of career

[3] Wüest and Pontusson (2022) find a bias against routine manual workers, but only among upper-middle class respondents.

[4] The UK is an exception in this regard, where union influence on nominations in the Labour party has been well documented (Lovenduski and Norris (1994).

[5] We focus on the whole occupational biography because we believe this is a more accurate indicator of occupational background than focusing only on the last position held before entering office (as is done in most other studies on the topic). Taking only the last occupation into account is especially problematic with regard to working-class MPs, since many MPs with a working-class background took up a politics-related occupation short before becoming candidates themselves (such as a position in local politics or assisting an MP).

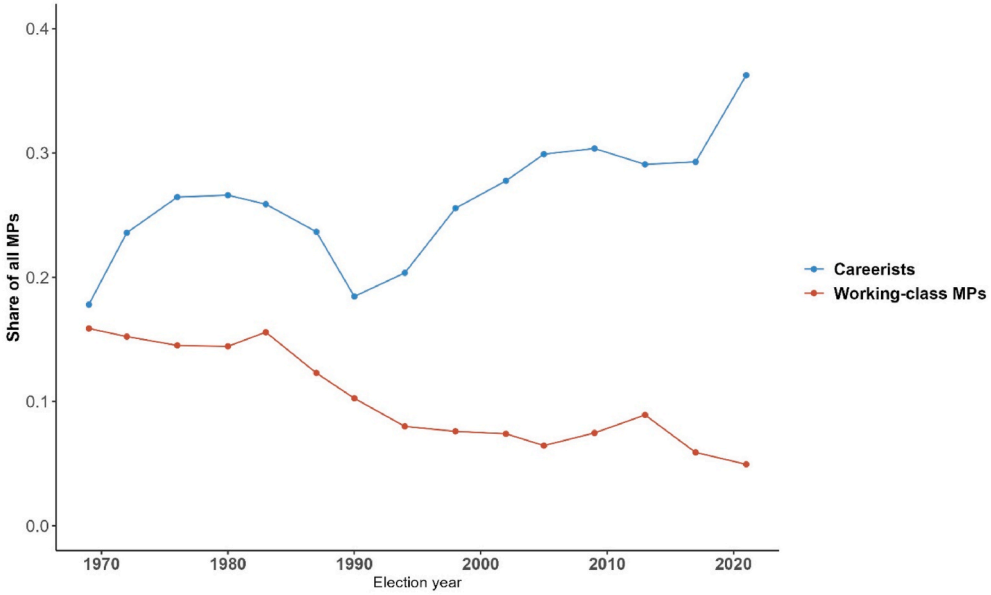

Fig. 1. Share of workers and careerists in the German parliament, 1969–2021.

politicians rose from 18 percent in 1969 to 36 percent after the last General election, while the share of legislators with a working-class background fell from 16 to 5 percent over the same period.

These two trends are not uniform across parties, however. Comparing the two catch-all parties SPD (Social Democrats) and CDU-CSU (electoral alliance of Christian Democrats and its Bavarian sister party CSU), we see that these trends are mostly driven by the SPD (Fig. 2). As might be expected, the SPD has a higher proportion of working-class MPs, which continues to distinguish it from the Conservatives. However, the proportion has fallen from around 22 percent in the 1970s to 11 percent in 2021, while the number of careerists has risen spectacularly over the same period. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, there were as many careerists as workers among Social Democratic MPs, but the proportion of careerists has more than doubled - with particularly large increases in the last two elections - and is at 41 percent. Within the Conservative parliamentary group, changes have been more modest. The share of workers also fell – to an extent that today there are virtually no CDU-CSU legislators with a working-class background in the German Bundestag - but it started at a much lower level. The share of careerists rose to 34 percent but remains relatively stable since the 2000s. This rather stable share of career politicians is a phenomenon that extends to the mainstream Right in general (see figure A-1 in the appendix), while careerism is on the rise in all leftist parties (most pronounced among the Greens). Parliamentarians with a working-class background, however, are mostly found in the SPD and among the much smaller party The Left, but not among the Greens. The Social Democratic party is thus the party in which both trends can be observed jointly.

Against the backdrop of changing party systems and party competition, one could assume that the shrinking share of working-class MPs in the SPD simply resembles patterns of electoral realignment. Social Democratic parties increasingly appeal to the 'new middle classes', while the radical right (and the new Left) competes with the Old Left for the working-class vote (Oesch and Rennwald, 2018) - which in turn could be reflected in the social backgrounds of their political candidates. However, both voting patterns in Germany and the trends of working-class representation across parties raise doubt that the decrease of working-class MPs in the SPD is the consequence of electoral realignment alone. First, as can be seen from Fig. 2, the decline in social democratic working-class MPs has started long before both the party the Left and the radical right Alternative for Germany (AfD) have gained political relevance, which happened in the mid-2000s and mid-2010s, respectively.[6] What is more, the share of working-class MPs in the AfD parliamentary group has not exceeded 5 percent since the party entered the Bundestag in 2017 (see figure A-1 in the appendix), suggesting that this new radical right party is not a 'new working-class party' regarding its MPs.[7] Second, even though working-class support for the SPD has decreased since the 1970s, service and production workers still make up more than a third of the SPD electorate, more than any other occupational class (Rennwald, 2020). Vote abstention is also particularly high among the working classes, meaning that choosing not to vote is a more frequent choice than voting for the new radical left and right parties (Elff and Roβteutscher, 2016; Rennwald, 2020). Against this background, it seems unlikely that the shrinking share of working-class MPs reflects a strategic adaptation of the party to patterns of realignment, since working-class citizens still constitute an important part of their electorate and the new competitors (in particular the Greens and the AfD) are not sending more working-class MPs to parliament.

As discussed in section 2, claims for group representation may be in competition with each other, and the inclusion of one formerly excluded group might come at the expense of another. This point has been raised in the literature regarding the question whether the increasing share of

[6] The Greens, the other main competitor on the Left, sends almost no working-class MPs to parliament and is widely perceived as a party of university-educated upper-middle class citizens.

[7] Matthews and Kerevel (2021) estimate that the Left and the AfD nominate more working-class candidates than the Social Democrats, which seems contradicting to this observation. However, they focus on subnational elections in German states and do not look at the list rankings and districts the candidates were nominated in by each party. It may thus be possible that the AfD nominates more workers, but only on "unsafe" seats. The Left, in turn, sends more workers to parliament, but its political relevance is much weaker, especially in the West of Germany.

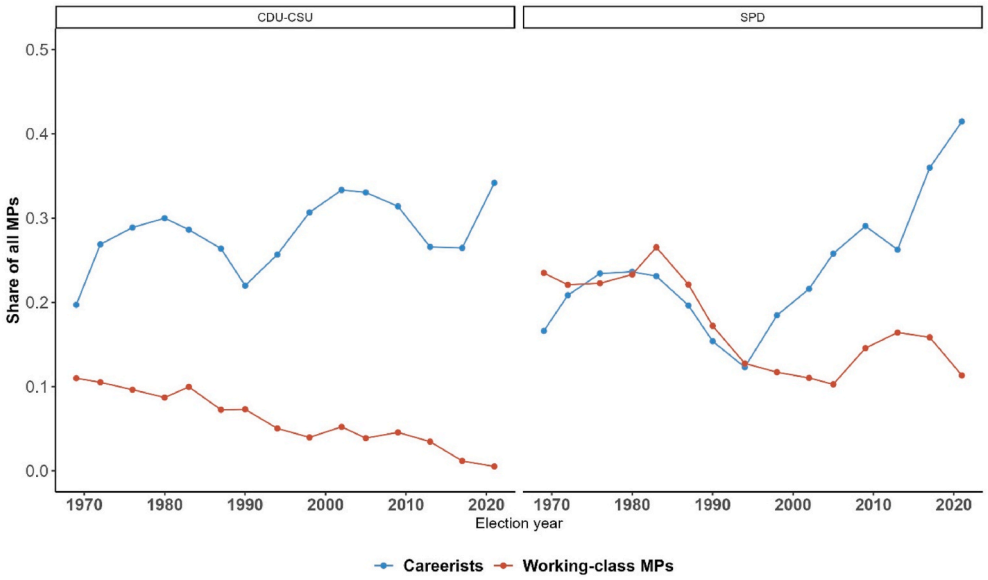

Fig. 2. Workers and careerists among social democratic and conservative MPs.

female legislators has come at the expense of male working-class MPs (Barnes and Holman, 2020; Ray, 2022).[8] Turning to the intersection of class and gender in the German parliament, we do not see that women and (male) workers are crowding out each other. As Fig. 3 shows, working-class MPs do not differ much in their gender composition from the average MP, and this has not changed much over the last fifty years. The increase of female MPs over the last decades is resembled among working-class MPs to the same extent than in other occupational groups, implying that working-class men are not being crowded out more than men from other social classes. Careerists, in turn, used to be a more male-dominated group than the parliament on average, even though this seems to be changing in recent years. The picture is similar when we look only at social democratic MPs (see figure A-2 in the appendix).

When we turn to the intersection of age and class, however, there are substantial differences between career politicians and working-class legislators. Career politicians are much younger than the average parliamentarian and, in particular, those with a working-class background (Fig. 4). This is generally not surprising, since entering political office at a young age and without much prior occupational experience is one typical career path of careerists. However, the difference in age has increased by 10 years since the 1990s, with the average careerist today being fifteen years younger than a working-class politician (40 vs. 55 years old). This is mainly because careerists are entering parliament at an ever-younger age, while the number of newly elected workers tends to decrease over time, meaning that many are incumbents who have been elected in earlier legislatures.

Taken together, the class composition of the German Bundestag has changed over the past five decades, pointing to more narrow and socially exclusionary routes into parliament. The share of legislators from working-class occupations has been falling in all parties, and several parties have no single working-class legislator in their parliamentary group anymore (FDP, CSU, Greens). At the same time, careerism is on the rise, above all in leftist parties. These findings closely resemble those from other countries like the UK. Apart from their different class background, socio-demographic differences between working-class legislators and careerists are biggest regarding age, a point we will return to later.

4. Research design

Germany's mixed-member electoral system gives parties multiple possibilities to foster the social representation of different groups (Reiser, 2014). Around half of the candidates are elected by plurality voting in 299 single-member districts. The other half is elected by a proportional representation system on closed state party lists (every *Land* constitutes one multi-member district). The final distribution of parliamentary seats is based on the vote share in the party list vote, with a five percent threshold nationwide. For the nomination process, this means that there are two types of candidacies with two levels of selection. *District level candidates* are selected by the local party organisations, and party executives of the local party branch (*Kreisverband, Unterbezirk*) have a large impact on recruiting and selecting potential candidates (Steg, 2016; Berz and Jankowski, 2022; Reiser, 2023). The final decision is made by a nominating convention at the district level. The nomination and ranking of *list candidates* formally occurs at nominating conventions at the state level. However, the delegates normally vote on a pre-proposed list of candidates which is compiled beforehand by regional and state party leaders, in particular in the two large catch-all parties (Wessels, 1997; Reiser, 2014; Steg, 2016). The two forms of candidacy are formally independent, but the most common form of running is the "double candidacy", that is running under both formulas simultaneously. Over the past decades, the two forms of candidacies became more interlinked, and all parties deploy a strong priority rule for district candidates, which means that being nominated at district level is basically a precondition for getting a winnable slot on a state party list (Reiser, 2014; Ceyhan, 2018).

While selection criteria and quotas are most important for the list-building, the two selection processes are highly interdependent. Concerning the social representation of candidates, this interdependence has two important implications. First, regional party selectors can only – with few exceptions - choose and rank candidates from the pool of nominated district candidates, whose nomination is beyond their direct control and takes place before the lists are compiled. Second, selection criteria for balancing the state party list can in turn (indirectly) influence district nominations. If certain selection criteria for balancing the list are deployed, districts can profit from nominating a candidate with the "right" social characteristics, as this enhances the chance to be placed on a promising list position. To get a full picture of these intraparty

[8] The evidence is mixed, but more strongly suggests that more inclusive parliaments tend to improve the descriptive representation of different marginalized groups, as opposed to the crowding-out hypothesis (Barnes and Holman (2020).

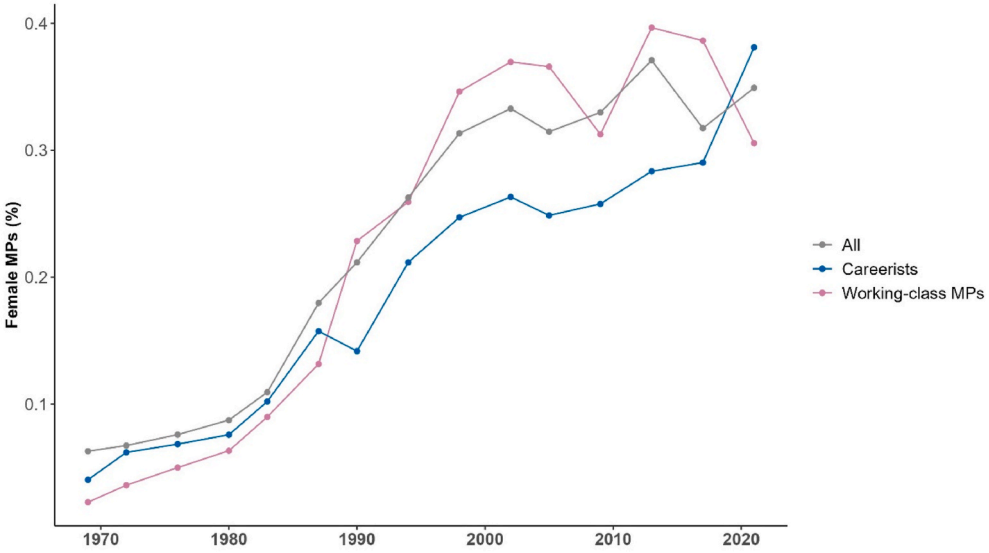

Fig. 3. Female legislators among different occupational groups.

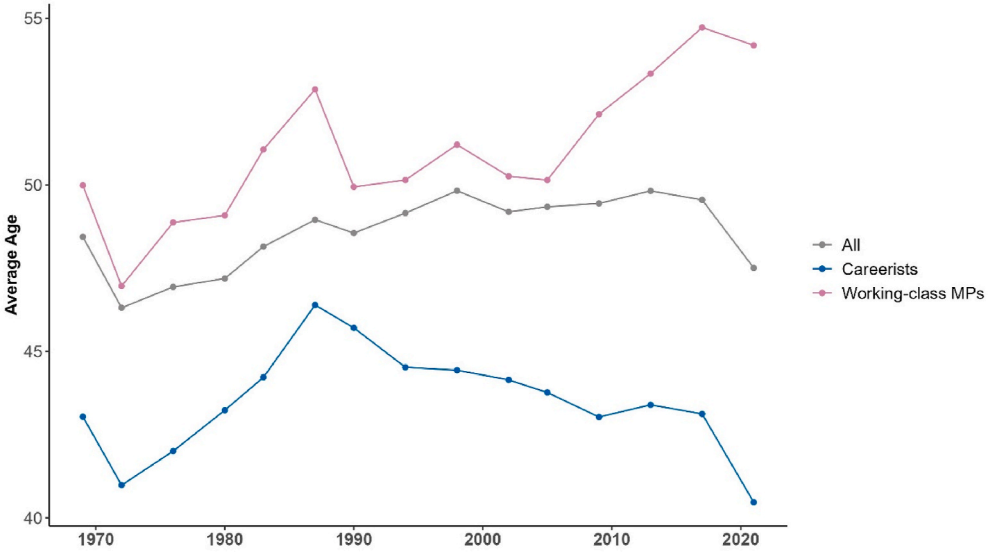

Fig. 4. Average age of different occupational groups in parliament.

dynamics in the selection process, I interviewed party selectors at both the regional and the local party level, even though the focus is on those selectors who are responsible for the state party lists.

4.1. Data and methods

The analysis draws on 20 in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews with regional and local party leaders of the Social Democratic Party in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. The bulk of the interviews (16) were conducted between January and March 2022, short after the last general election (September 2021). Four additional interviews with leaders from intraparty organisations for the support of women (*Arbeitskreis Sozialdemokratischer Frauen (ASF)*), people with migration background (*AG Migration und Vielfalt*) and the youth organisation (*Jusos)* were conducted between May and August 2023. All but one interviewee were involved in the selection process of the candidates for the 2021 election. As explained in more detail below, however, questions were not only confined to the 2021 election, but aimed at understanding the nomination processes more generally.

The SPD in North Rhine-Westphalia is organized in four regional chapters, each of which compiles its own regional list, which are then merged into the state-level list. Most interviewees were board members of the regional party branches, among them three regional party leaders, and thus key actors in the selection and ranking of candidates on the party list. Local leaders were selected from districts where a new candidate, as opposed to an incumbent, was chosen to run in 2021. Since party gatekeepers tend to prefer candidates socially similar to themselves (Cheng and Tavits, 2011; Rehmert, 2022), I further sought to choose interview partners with diverse socio-demographic backgrounds. The sample thus includes party selectors with diverse social backgrounds in terms of age (28–64 years, with the average age being 45), gender (9 female), occupational biography and, to a lesser extent, migration background. In terms of their relation to the party, eleven interviewees were elected parliamentarians (either members of the state or federal parliament), while seven had jobs outside politics and two had other party-related positions. Table A-1 in the Online Appendix gives an anonymized overview over the interviewees and their backgrounds.

North Rhine-Westphalia is the German state with the largest district

magnitude in electoral terms, with 123 seats (out of 598) in 2021, compared to 5 seats for the smallest state Bremen. Hence, party selectors have opportunities to balance different interests/groups on the party lists, since there are comparatively many winnable list positions (Reiser, 2014). This makes it a good case for studying hierarchies and priorities regarding different selection rules and criteria. Moreover, since the state includes both traditional strongholds of the SPD and the CDU, both district and list candidacies are important routes into parliament. The list placement is becoming more important, however, because in light of the decreased electoral success of the Social Democrats, only few districts remain "safe seats".

At the beginning of the interviews, I asked the deliberately broad question: *how does the list-building (district nomination) process works in practice?* Depending on whether and how detailed respondents spoke about specific selection criteria, I then asked which selection criteria are important, whether these have changed over time and which obstacles they observe for potential candidates. Starting with these broad questions allows to analyse priorities and trade-offs by analysing the criteria that selectors come up with on their own, without being directly asked. While the selectors were involved in the candidate selection in 2021, almost all of them had also been involved in earlier general or state-level elections. This was particularly valuable to assess changes over time, as the interviewees often drew on examples from earlier nomination processes or used them as comparisons. To foster comparability across respondents, the last part of the interviews included two specific questions on working-class candidates and careerists. For each of these groups, I presented the actual share in the German national parliament and the trend of decreasing/increasing representation, then asking how these trends are perceived and assessed within the party.

To systematically analyse the interview material and assess the relative importance of different selection criteria, I coded the interview data in an iterative process using categories corresponding to the main selection criteria (Gerson and Damaske, 2020). The initial codes were mainly derived from the existing recruitment literature and distinguish between criteria aiming at promoting certain candidate types (e.g. incumbents) and those promoting the representation of *social* groups (Reiser, 2014). While my research focus is on the latter, all criteria mentioned by the selectors needed to be categorized to analyse priorities. I further coded all statements including the (positive or negative) judgement of working-class underrepresentation and careerists' overrepresentation, respectively, as well as the selectors' own explanations for these phenomena. Drawing on a systematic comparison of interviewees' own accounts (seeing through "their eyes") and placing them in social context makes it possible to explore the reasons for their behaviour (Gerson and Damaske, 2020).

5. Empirical results

I first analyse the different selection criteria and rules adopted by the party in the process of list-building, focusing on hierarchies between selection criteria and priorities of selectors concerning the representation of different social groups, with a particular focus on class. As explained above, I assess the relative importance of different criteria primarily by analysing which selection criteria were mentioned spontaneously by the interviewees when describing the nomination process, focusing also on the frequency of the mention and the importance the interviewees attached to different representational claims.

5.1. Dominant claims for group representation in the nomination process

The most important and highly institutionalized quotas and rules are not necessarily those aiming at guaranteeing the representation of *social* groups, but rather those safeguarding the (re-)election of certain candidate types (district candidates, incumbents) and guaranteeing regional proportionality (Reiser, 2014).[9] Regarding the candidate types, the most important rule is the preferential treatment of incumbents, in particular those with important positions in the parliamentary group and/or the government, meaning that they are generally placed before newcomers. The regional proportionality is guaranteed through strict quotas allocating a certain number of seats to each region, which are ranked by a fixed order.[10]

Regarding the representation of social groups, the most important rule is the formal gender quota of 50 percent, which has gained importance over the past years and is now strictly applied with a 'zipper system', an alternation between men and women on the list. Women's representation continues to be a debated topic in the party, however. Several interviewees (both male and female) report that it is still more difficult for women to be nominated in safe districts (Interview-8, Interview-12, Interview-20) and that gender-related obstacles for women, such as discrimination or disadvantages due to family obligations, exist despite progress (Interview-4, Interview-7, Interview-13, Interview-6).

In addition to gender, most interviewees mention by their own accord that placing candidates from underrepresented social groups on the list is generally becoming more important, even if this challenges existing rules and practices in the list-building process: "*What we have experienced more and more in recent years is that … I just said that, questioning the incumbency principle, and that other criteria are mentioned more frequently in the discussion and are becoming more important. I'd put that under the heading of diversity" (Interview-9)*. While selection rules for other social groups are (still) less institutionalized than the gender quota, the following quotes illustrate the increased importance of social representation:

> "And the second thing [besides regional proportional representation], that's at least as important to me, to be as colourful as the country. So the question of balancing men and women. So to make sure that the respective underrepresented gender gets additional opportunities, but also just the question of how to realize the participation of younger people in the political process, the participation of people with a migration background in the political process." (Interview-18)

> "… so in terms of the ratio between young and old, male and female, and now additionally migration background and sexual orientation, I think we as a party have improved a lot." (Interview-20)

In a similar vein, another interviewee described that the regional board explicitly supported the representation of people with a migration background on the state part list (Interview-13). This increased importance of social representation is often directly linked to the idea that a diverse legislature is improving the quality of political representation. As one interviewee put it: *"I think there is an increased awareness that it is a problem if the people on the list are not representing the society" (Interview-*

[9] Even though regional representation may be seen as a form of social representation, this is less clearly so than for other social characteristics. From the party's perspective, regional proportionality also has an important *strategic* component, because districts with elected MPs get additional resources and political visibility, and balancing regional representation in parliament thus means a geographically broad presence and campaign capacity of the party (Interview-10, Interview-19).

[10] More specifically, the list is divided in blocks of 10 places. Within each block, each region gets a fixed number of slots based on the size of their memberships.

1). These debates on underrepresented social groups, however, are mostly confined to women, young people and people with a migration background, often mentioned together as goal of enhancing 'diversity'. All but one interviewee mention migration background as an increasingly important selection criterion, and eighteen interviewees mention age. Class background, in contrast, is mentioned by only three regional board members on their own accord when being asked openly about the list-building process (Interview-2, Interview-15, Interview-10).[11] Only two of them (one of them being a working-class politician, the other being a union official) state that it is an important goal for them to increase the number of candidates without university education. While some others mention that a candidate's connection to unions can be an advantage in district nominations or list discussions (Interview-14, Interview-11, Interview-19), unions and the party are described as increasingly detached (Interview-10, Interview-15, Interview-12, Interview-17). Most selectors do not mention class background at all when it comes to selection criteria and social representation. When directly asked, the overwhelming majority confirms that it plays no or only a marginal role in discussions of selection committees, as the following quotes illustrate:

> "Not at all [does it play a role] when it comes to the list ranking. I've never heard anyone say, oh look, he's a baker, we should move him further up the list … the occupation doesn't play a role." (Interview-6)

> "Yes, from time to time, complaints come up that there are too many university graduates in the SPD and that they usually get the seats […]. But therefore, we do not nominate a person who has completed a vocational training [instead of a university education]. No, that doesn't happen. So I definitely haven't experienced it that way." (Interview-4)

> "Yes, this has certainly been a subject of discussion before, but that we are really problematizing it, that is not really the case." (Interview-14)

Moreover, several interviewees directly compare the occupational background to other selection criteria, stating that it has no priority and is clearly less important:

> "I would say that this [occupational background] is a very soft selection criterion. We are aware of it, but in comparison to the other criteria that we have spoken about, it is clearly secondary." (Interview-1)

> "… [it is] not one of these central topics like bringing people with migration background, young women and so forth in candidacies, but it is discussed from time to time, but as I said, not in the focus at the moment." (Interview-16)

While the representation of some social groups has thus clearly become more important and seems, in principle, to be supported by most interviewed selectors, this process is not free of conflict. In these struggles for social representation, intra-party associations play a growing role. For many, the increased importance of age debates is due to the growing power of the intra-party youth organization (Jusos), which is increasingly well organized and willing to push their candidates in advantageous positions (Interview-19, Interview-10, Interview-2), even if this entails conflicts with the regional party leaders and the violation of other established criteria (Interview-1). The relatively new association in support of diversity and people with a migration background (AG Migration und Vielfalt) is less powerful, but increasingly supported by the Jusos in what they perceive as a joint struggle for more diverse candidates (Interview-1, Interview-2, Interview-3). The intra-party association for women tends to become less important, but due to the quota, the topic of women's representation is still high on the agenda. The following quote illustrates the role of the intra-party associations, underscoring that no organized voice within the party claims group representation for people with a working-class background:

> "And the strongest [intraparty groups], the ones with the biggest lobbies within the party, are the one for young people and the one for people with a migration history. So there are several intraparty groups in our party. [description of existing associations] But there is no organization within the SPD that takes care of non-academics or something. That's why they don't have an organized lobby." (Interview-2)

Taken together, and in line with previous research for earlier years, I thus find that the Social Democratic party adopts a complex set of selection criteria and quotas when compiling the state party lists, most notably district candidate priority, incumbency rule, regional quotas and gender parity. However, since most of these rules are highly institutionalized, but not formally written into party statutes (apart from the gender quota), they are open for contestation and change. The last years have seen an increasing importance in the group representation of socially underrepresented groups, in particular women, young people and those with migration background, also compared to other established and institutionalized rules and quotas. Even if this development is not free of conflict within the party, and several interviewees report discriminatory obstacles for the above-mentioned groups, the trend is one of increasing inclusion. The opposite is true for people from lower-class backgrounds, however, whose underrepresentation is not high on the party agenda and plays only a marginal role in the candidate selection and list-building process. To better understand these discrepancies, the next sections turn to the selectors' perceptions and assessment of the changing occupational backgrounds.

5.2. The selectorate's views on the narrowing class profile

One reason why working-class underrepresentation is hardly on the party's agenda could be simply a lack of awareness of the changing class backgrounds of candidates and MPs. When asked about the shrinking share of working-class MPs and the increase of careerism, however, the answers revealed that selectors are well aware of both of these trends. Remarkably, many of them voice concerns about the narrowing class profile that closely resemble main arguments from the academic literature on descriptive representation.[12] Concerning *symbolic representation*, working-class MPs are described as resonating and communicating better with ordinary people, especially compared to career politicians, and that the fact that there are only so few of them might lead to citizens' alienation (Interview-10, Interview-20, Interview-18, Interview-19). Several interviewees mentioned one of the few current MPs who has worked in elderly care before entering parliament (Claudia Moll), as one prominent example of this. Referring to a radio interview she gave, one interviewee describes how *"she speaks just like she is, like 50 percent of the population. But I'm sure that both the radio moderator and the intellectuals*

[11] Apart from the criteria and mentioned and discussed here, no other important criteria or selection rules emerged from the interview data. One interviewee mentioned the activities in local civic associations as advantageous for candidates (Interview-5), and another reflected on the fact that in earlier years, the balancing of different ideological party factions used to play a more important role than today (Interview-6). However, these were single observations.

[12] While a large majority expressed the view that the shrinking working-class representation had problematic implications, few believed that workers had not been better represented in the past or were still relatively well represented. The overall judgement was more ambivalent regarding careerists. Four interviewees, e.g., explicitly stated that they did not share a negative image of that group but reported criticism from other party members. In many cases, the political competence of careerists were recognized, but people also shared concerns.

were thinking: what's that? But she was just like an ordinary woman who – as the new nursing commissioner – just spoke clearly about what her colleagues need, what needs to be done.… You simply notice that these people, who are so important for democracy if we want to reach out to all people, that - that they are missing." (Interview-17).

Careerists, in contrast, are described as speaking a language that often does not reach out to ordinary citizens and/or the party base:

> "it's not the fault of the citizens who didn't understand the guy, but it's the fault of the parties with exactly this recruitment process [advantaging career politicians], where the question 'how will he perform in parliament' was the more important one than 'how will he resonate with the citizens'?" (Interview-18)

> "they know a lot of things, are quick in understanding complex issues … but they don't have … there is no attachment to the party base." (Interview-10)

> "It is smart to have worked outside of our political bubble and our party bubble, because then you know other points of view and the language that is spoken outside of our political business." (Interview-19)

Another local leader raises concerns about the legitimacy of careerists in the eyes of citizens: "*I don't know if that discredits the political establishment a bit, I wouldn't go that far, but it gives it an image that is not an advantage. (…) the image that they only promote themselves and they all only think about themselves."(Interview-20*).

Regarding the link between descriptive and substantive representation, several interviewees mentioned that without 'ordinary' people among their ranks, they lacked important perspectives and problem perceptions (Interview-13, Interview-15, Interview-18, Interview-10). One regional board member admitted: "*But in fact, I also see this as a problem, that this [the small number of working-class MPs] gives us only a very limited view of the everyday experiences of the people that the Bundestag is supposed to represent" (Interview-5)*. Others describe how the party valued new party members from working-class occupations at the local level because they brought important perspectives into party debates: "*We were more than happy because we knew that now we have people who work in places with problems. They know where the problems are, they know what works well, we really need their expertise" (Interview-13)*. In a similar vein, one local leader describes how the working-class legislator with the background in elderly care *"was celebrated like – like the Messiah, because there was finally someone who wasn't like a blind person speaking of colour when she said, look, that's what's actually happening in elderly care work" (Interview-6)*.

While the experience in working-class occupations is generally valued as enriching an increasingly academic party, several interviewees voice concerns about the potentially narrow viewpoints of careerists. Remarkably, the lack of occupational experience outside politics is directly linked to potentially 'bad' policy choices, as the following examples illustrate:

> "I think that's pretty bad, and especially when they transition from university directly into politics, I don't think that's a good choice. So not because they aren't competent, but because they … because they then naturally make a policy that is not shaped by … their life in the … in the working environment." (Interview-10)

> "And we often have, let's say, members of parliament who come from school, go to university and then directly to parliament. They have little professional experience of their own or insights into the realities of life. And I think it's sometimes difficult to derive good policy from that." (Interview-7)

> "What they don't have is life experience in a "normal" profession. Working for a parliamentarian is also a normal profession nowadays, but it is a profession in a somewhat narrow milieu, where they reproduce themselves a bit." (Interview-20)

In addition, there are widespread concerns about careerists' structural dependence on the party, and some interviewees see this dependence as potentially leading to opportunistic behaviour in office (Interview-13, Interview-15, Interview-14, Interview-5, Interview-1). One interviewee describes that *"many of them are very adapted, but also interchangeable" (Interview-17)*.

Taken together, there is a stark tension between selectors' assessment and the actual nomination procedure: selectors are not just aware about the changing occupational backgrounds of MPs, they also share important concerns regarding the implications for political representation. What is more, they see that some of its implications, in particular the growing distance between voters and legislators, may be electorally harmful. Despite this assessment, however, the occupational background is hardly taken into account in the nomination process. How can we understand this puzzle?

5.3. Understanding the 'little effort' puzzle

To understand why there is so little party effort to represent people with different occupational backgrounds despite the awareness of its implications, two factors stand out from the interview evidence. First, the dominant debates on youth representation within the party partly obscure the awareness of occupational trends, since potential conflicts over narrowing occupational profiles are often perceived as generational conflicts rather than class issues. One party selector in his mid-30s, for example, makes this very explicit:

> "I think it's a generational question. My generation finds the change quite positive, because of course it stands for a successful social and educational policy of the SPD.(…) Those who have been SPD members for many years, for decades, such as my first mentor, who is over 80 and still learned to be a lathe operator, a profession that no longer exists today, see it more critically and say that it is a pity that the classic craftsman or the worker is no longer so represented."(Interview-16)

Another describes that (young) careerists are mostly judged negatively by older party members with working-class jobs: "*This [careerism] is discussed very critically in the party, especially among older people. Interestingly, I feel that those with vocational training, without university education, see this more critically than university graduates" (Interview-12)*. Another describes that *"especially older comrades see this critically, because they say, you also need life experience" (Inteview-8)*. One regional leader complains that prejudices against career politicians at the local level discriminate mainly against young, professional women (Interview-19). This shows that in conflicts over nominations, career politicians – which are indeed increasingly young when running for office – are predominantly perceived in terms of their age, which is further fostered by the fact that the vast majority of young party members have a university education (Interview-1, Interview-6).

Second, party selectors mainly see the reasons for the shortage of working-class candidates in supply side factors beyond their control. The most frequently mentioned reason in the eyes of the party selectors is the lack of individual resources, both financially and timewise, which was mentioned by eleven interviewees. Jobs with inflexible working hours and unsympathetic employers are seen as one major obstacle to intensive party activism, holding people back from even trying to run for office (Interview-2, Interview-9, Interview-6, Interview-4, Interview-12, Interview-14). Illustrating the burden of full-time campaigning, one selector uses the following example: *So if I'm an employed tiler, and I say to my boss, "By the way, I won't be around for the next five weeks," he says, "It's nice that you want to do that, but then I'll look for someone else. […] You'll never get the idea of running for office" (Interview-6)*. Structural changes in the labour market and the accompanying loss of large factories with politically organized employees are further aggravating these factors (Interview-18, Interview-2). In addition to these material resource constraints, the lack of internal efficacy is perceived as another

obstacle that keep working-class people from running (Interview-6, Interview 10, Interview-19) – or even participating at the local level: *"They also have less confidence in themselves because they think, man, the other guy has a high school diploma and I haven't. He's probably smarter than I am*" (Interview-5). Career politicians, in contrast, are seen as having important advantages in terms of individual resources, since due to their politics-related jobs and/or their university education they enjoy higher time flexibility, insider knowledge and accession to intra-party networks.

This individual-level perspective locates the problem one step before the actual nomination and recruitment process, thus – at least implicitly - discharging the selectors themselves from the responsibility for the recruitment outcome. Accordingly, interviewees frequently argue that there are already few working-class people among the ordinary party members (Interview 1, Interview-8, Interview-9) and that they can only chose and rank those people who made it to the "pool" of candidates, meaning that the reasons for the narrowing class profile *"… does not start with the selection of candidates, but lies far before that. It lies in the question of how political commitment as a whole is organized or not organized."* (Interview-18). Although some local leaders describe that they deliberately encourage working-class people at the local level to run (Interview-6, Interview-17), the majority seems to see the main reasons for the changing class backgrounds in 'external obstacles' they cannot change.[13] While these perceived time and financial resource constraints are certainly very important and resemble findings from the recruitment literature (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Carnes, 2018; Murray, 2023), other marginalized groups face supply side constraints, too, and are also underrepresented in the pool of potentially eligible party members (Fox and Lawless, 2004; Tee et al., 2018). Regarding party membership, it is noteworthy that the share of party members without university education is still around 33 percent in the SPD, even if we exclude older party members and those totally inactive who are unlikely to belong to the potential pool of candidates (figure A-4 in the appendix). While people with working-class backgrounds are thus indeed underrepresented relative to their population share, they are still numerous enough to be – at least theoretically – mobilized to run for office in higher numbers than they currently do. It thus remains striking that selectors see it as their responsibility (and as a possible thing to do) to increase the representation of other marginalized groups, but not the representation of those from lower-class backgrounds.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Why are parliaments across contemporary democracies becoming socially more homogenous? This paper sheds light on this question by focusing on the recruitment and nomination processes within parties. Focusing on the German Parliament, I first show that the share of MPs with prior working-class job experience has halved over the past fifty years, while the share of careerists rose to almost forty percent in the current *Bundestag*. Like in other countries, these trends are mainly driven by the Mainstream Left, making the Social Democratic party a key actor to understand these developments. Based on interview evidence with key social democratic party selectors, the paper shows that the way the party selectorate thinks about and addresses social group representation contributes to the working-class decline. While claims for social representation are becoming more important in the party, they are confined to women, young people and those with a migration history, thereby (unconsciously) disadvantaging people from lower social classes.

However, different from what research on attitudinal biases suggest, the party selectorate does not perceive working-class people as less competent or not suited for the tasks of a legislator. Quite to the contrary, selectors emphasize their ability to communicate well with ordinary voters and value their potential to bring important problem perceptions into debates, both crucial functions in the process of representation (Mansbridge 1999). Instead, the paper reveals a puzzling tension: Although many selectors share the view that the narrowing class profiles of candidates and legislators might impede the symbolic and substantive representation of people from lower social classes – and thus of their (former) core constituencies -, the occupational background of candidates is hardly considered in the recruitment and list building process. This stands in sharp contrast to party efforts fostering the representation of other social groups, and to the finding that social representation generally is becoming *more* important in the party's nomination strategy.

I argue that this puzzling discrepancy is mainly due to two reasons. First, potential conflicts over narrowing occupational profiles are often perceived as generational conflicts rather than class issues and the increasingly strong debates on the underrepresentation of young people dominate the perceptions of selectors. This is also fostered by intra-party power changes, with the intra-party Youth association gaining importance, while unions seem to have lost influence. Second, party selectors perceive the main obstacles for workers to run for office in individual constraints beyond the party's control, thereby shifting the responsibility for recruitment outcomes away from the intra-party nomination process. This is particularly interesting, since other groups face similar challenges (such as women's time constraints due to care work), but the party still sees it as their responsibility to increase their representation, and party selectors are held accountable for that.

Taken together, these findings bear several important implications. The increased emphasis on youth representation could paradoxically lead to an increasing political alienation of *young* working-class voters, if they perceive 'their' generation of MPs as highly professionalized and out of touch with their work and life realities. Existing research on unequal participation shows that social inequalities in voter turnout have grown over time and are much larger among today's younger generations than among older ones (Schäfer et al., 2020). If the 'social alienation' (Heath, 2018) between working-class citizens and MPs is one reason for this trend, the current recruitment patterns – with young MPs being predominantly university-educated with streamlined party-professionalized careers - could further aggravate this inequality among younger generations. This also calls for a stronger focus on the intersectionality between class and other characteristics when studying candidate recruitment.

Concerning the broader research agenda on the causes for the descriptive underrepresentation of workers, this paper supports the notion that the shrinking working-class representation is not simply driven by supply-side obstacles, but also by the way parties think about and act upon different claims for group representation. One obvious limitation is the focus on a single country. However, existing research on other countries shows that parties of the Mainstream Left are central drivers of the changing parliamentary class composition in other places, too, and unions have likewise lost influence in intra-party debates (Lovenduski and Norris, 1994). While it thus seems plausible that similar intra-party shifts in social democratic parties are responsible for these common trends, future research should comparatively test this claim.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Lea Elsässer: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing –

[13] Some of the interviewees, however, also described a (growing) "cultural detachment" between the party organization and working-class people as a potential explanation for the growing misrepresentation. In these accounts, party debates were described as very academic and party engagement as time-consuming and centered around theoretical discussions (rather than hands-on activities) (Interview-1, Interview-6, Interview-15, Interview-18). While these accounts go beyond supply-side obstacles, they were only mentioned by four interviewees and party culture was perceived as hard to change.

review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix

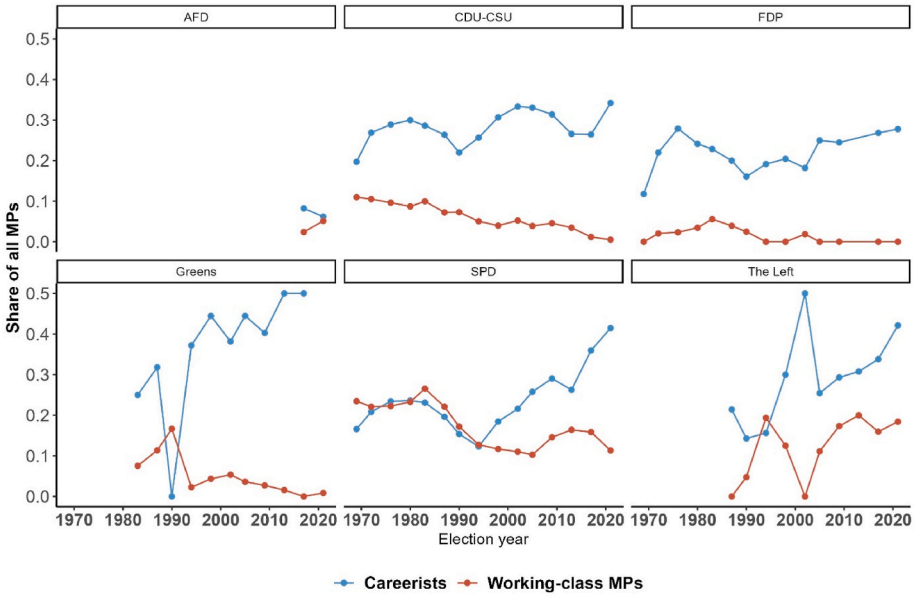

Fig. A-1. Workers and careerists in the German parties, 1969–2021.

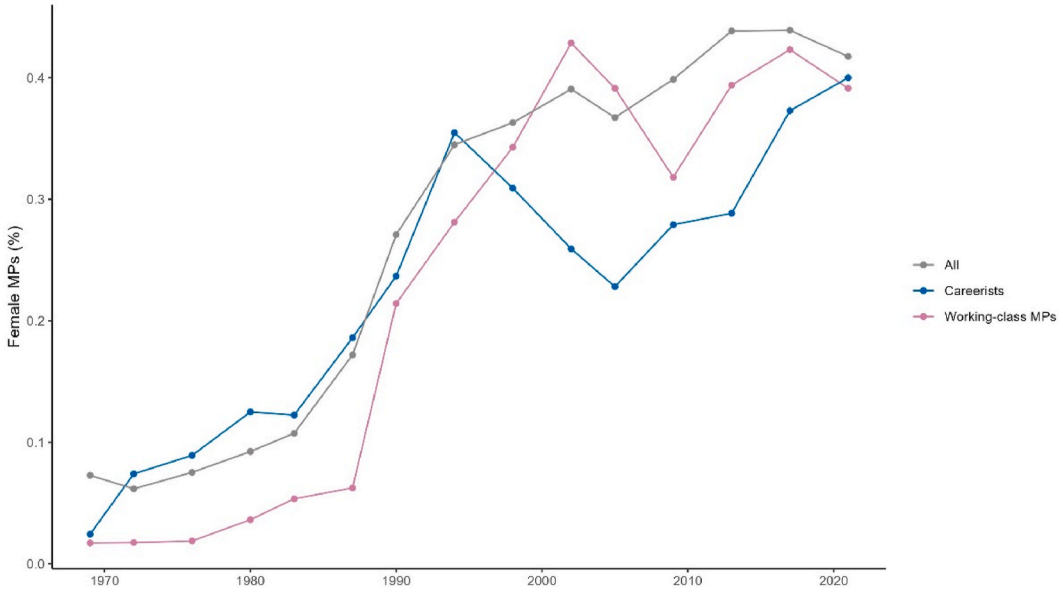

Fig. A-2. Share of female MPs among different occupational groups in the SPD.

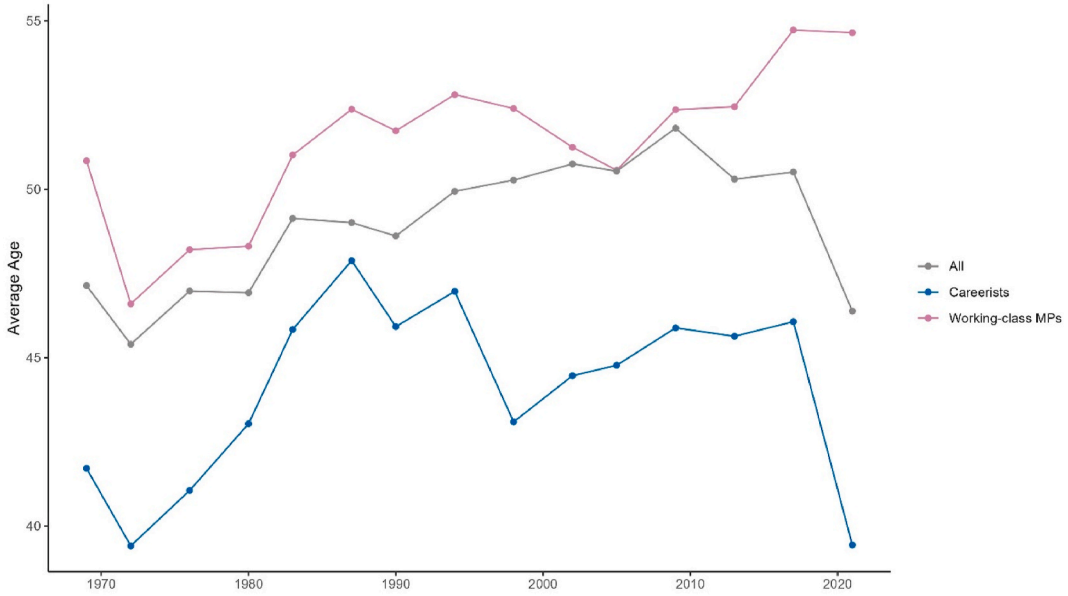

Fig. A-3. Average age of MPs with different occupational backgrounds, SPD.

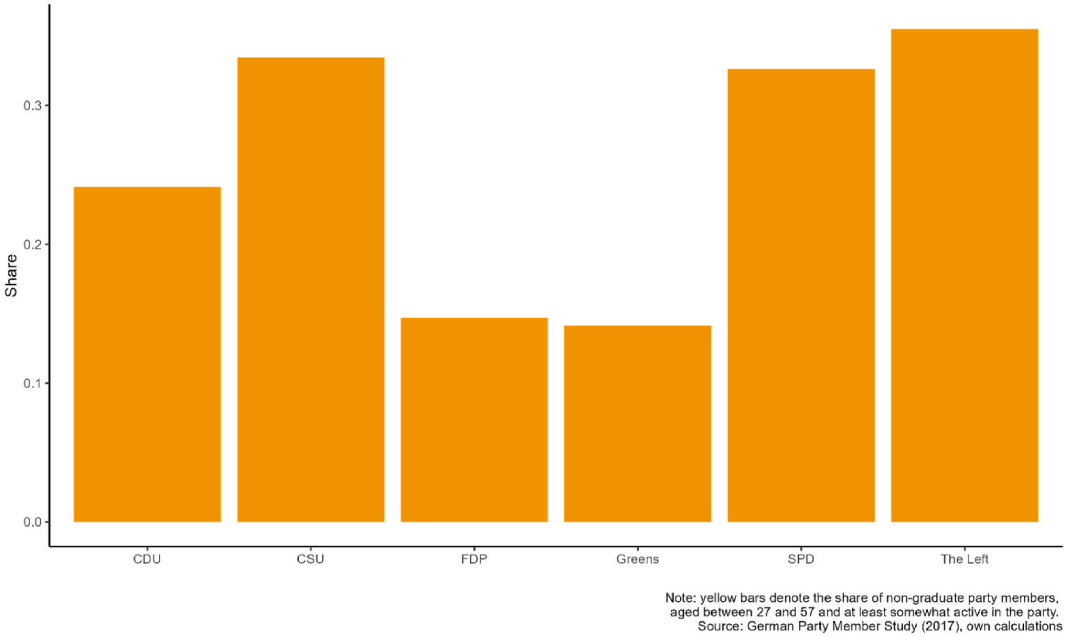

Fig. A-4. Party members (aged 27–57) without university education, across parties

Table A-1
Interview Sample

Interview Nr.	Age	Position in selectorate	Gender
1	28	Chair of Youth Organization (Jusos)	male
2	37	Chair of Youth Organization (Jusos) (2017)	male
3	46	Vice Chair of Intraparty Organization for Migration and Diversity, federal level	female
4	32	Vice Chair of Intraparty Organization for Women (ASF), federal level	female
5	44	Member of state party board, former member of regional party board	female
6	45	Local party leader	male
7	64	Member of regional party board	female
8	58	Local party leader	male
9	33	Member of regional party board, local party leader	male
10	56	Member of regional party board, local party leader	male
11	41	X	male
12	35	Member of regional party board	male

(*continued on next page*)

Table A-1 (*continued*)

Interview Nr.	Age	Position in selectorate	Gender
13	X	Member of regional party board	female
14	X	Local party leader	female
15	41	Member of regional party board	female
16	34	Member of regional party board, local party leader	male
17	47	X	male
18	47	Regional party leader	male
19	57	Regional party leader	female
20	X	Local party leader	female

Notes: In order to guarantee the desired anonymization of the interview partners, some information is not displayed.

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