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Between Market and Morals: How Political Socialization Shapes the Divided Voting Preferences of the Dutch Upper-Class

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**Between Market and Morals: How Political Socialization Shapes the
Divided Voting Preferences of the Dutch Upper-Class**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the fragmented voting alignment of the Dutch upper class (*de werkende bovenlaag*) by analyzing how political socialization shapes ideological orientation. While traditional class-based voting models have lost explanatory power, the divide within the Dutch upper class remains striking. Individuals vote for either economically liberal parties such as the VVD, culturally progressive parties like GroenLinks-PvdA, or centrist liberal parties like D66 that fall somewhere in between. The literature review discusses existing theories, such as rational choice theory and post-materialism, which offer important context for understanding upper-class political behavior. However, this study adopts the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework (Gethin et al., 2022) as its main conceptual lens, combined with the theory of political socialization, to explore the underlying motivations behind voting choices within this social group. Using a qualitative methodology, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who meet the Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau's criteria for upper-class status. Thematic analysis reveals that participants' political identities are shaped by childhood upbringing, education, and especially professional environments. An individuals' class background and sector of employment emerge as the most influential factors in shaping political preferences among the upper class. While some participants aligned their vote with economic self-interest, others emphasized values such as solidarity, environmentalism, or cultural openness. Many described internal tension between these influences, showing that political identity is often shaped by both personal values and social context. This research contributes to the understanding of elite political behavior by emphasizing the role of life course and personal narrative in shaping voting decisions. It offers qualitative depth to frameworks often analyzed quantitatively and suggests new pathways for studying ideological division among socioeconomic elites.

Keywords: Dutch upper class, voting behavior, class-based politics, ideological division, Rational choice theory, economic self-interest, Post-materialism, Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right, political socialization, qualitative research.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, class-based voting behavior has shifted away from the patterns once typical in Western democracies. Across Europe, long-standing working-class parties have lost ground to newer movements that prioritize identity, cultural liberalism, or nationalism. At the same time, educational attainment and urban cosmopolitanism have become stronger indicators of progressive voting (de Dominicis et al., 2022; Ivarsflaten & Stubager, 2012). These broader transformations are a reflection of larger shifts in the traditional understanding of class-based voting. Economic class no longer serves as the dominant indicator of political alignment, giving way to more complex and ideological based voting. As developing societies continue to evolve, evidently, cultural values have become of increasing importance in shaping political behavior. While this development is well-documented across many Western nations (Strenze, 2021) and has also been observed in the Netherlands more broadly (Inglehart, 1971), the extent to which this shift has occurred within the Dutch upper class remains explicitly underexplored.

According to the Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (SCP)¹ the Netherlands has seven social classes all of which are predominantly associated with a certain specific political party. These parties mostly align with a political party that is deemed to be in the best interest of this specific social class (see Appendix A; Dekker, 2023). The Dutch upper class (*de werkende bovenlaag*) stands out in its divided vote between parties that do not uniformly ideologically align. According to the SCP (2023), People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), Democrats 66 (D66) and Groenlinks-Labour Party (Groenlinks-PvdA) are the parties most voted for by this social class. These three parties represent varying positions across the political spectrum. VVD is traditionally a right-liberal party that has a pro-business agenda and prioritizes economic liberalism (Voerman, 2019). In contrast, Groenlinks-PvdA, formed by two left-wing parties joining together, promotes redistributive policies, environmental protection, and a strong welfare state (Groenlinks-PvdA, 2023). D66, positioned at the center or center-left, embraces socially liberal values while maintaining a commitment to market efficiency and European integration (Voerman, 2019).

It is striking how wide the ideological spread is within the upper class, despite all individuals in this class possessing high levels of capital. The shift towards more ideological ways of voting is observed in the Dutch upper class with substantial support for left oriented

¹ The Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (SCP) is the Netherlands Institute for Social Research. It is a government agency that conducts independent research into the social aspects of Dutch society and advises policymakers based on its findings.

parties (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2023). At the same time, economic self-interest and market-oriented preferences remain powerful motivations for many within this group. This raises the main question of this study: what drives the political preferences of the Dutch upper class (economic interests, ideological values, or a combination of both), and how are these preferences shaped across the life course? This puzzle lies at the heart of this study, which aims to unpack the underlying motivations, identities, and rationalizations behind voting patterns in the Dutch upper class. In pursuing this question, the study aims to (1) analyze the motivations that underpin voting behavior in this group, (2) identify significant formative influences on political identity, and (3) evaluate how participants' political orientations reflect the broader Brahmin Left-Merchant Right divide.

In order to uncover the motivations behind the voting behavior of the Dutch upper-class the study conducts semi-structured interviews. This qualitative approach is guided by two central theoretical frameworks, uncovered by the limitations of traditional theories. The literature review analyzes two relevant traditional theories: rational choice theory (RCT) and post-materialism. Following the literature review, the theoretical framework will dive into two theories that aim to explain the ideological divide in a qualitative manner. The first is Thomas Piketty, Clara Martinez-Toledano and Amory Gethin's (2018) work on the *Brahmin Left* and the *Merchant Right*, which proposes that modern party systems are increasingly split between high-education, progressive elites and economically driven, market-oriented elites. The second is the theory of political socialization, which examines how political attitudes are shaped by early life experiences, family influence, education and profession. Together these frameworks offer a deeper understanding of ideological spread amongst the elites. The *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* model provides a macro-level structure for interpreting the ideological divide within the upper class, while political socialization theory helps trace the formation of these orientations over time. A more detailed explanation of these frameworks follows in the theoretical framework chapter, where their relevance to the case of the Dutch upper class will be further elaborated on.

This study's contribution lies in its qualitative exploration of elite political behavior in the Netherlands. The topic is often quantitatively explored, but through interviews this study has the ability to discuss the underlying motivations of individuals through dialogue. It adds empirical depth to the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework and provides an understanding of how fundamentally formative moments in someone's life can retain a large impact on their voting behavior. Furthermore, this research helps zoom into another angle in

sociopolitical trends in Western democracies, highlighting the fragmentation of party systems, the increasing polarization around values, and the reconfiguration of elite identities.

This thesis starts off by zooming into class-based voting literature, with the help of two traditional theories: RCT and post-materialism. These theories help determine the appropriate theoretical framework for this thesis to utilize, which is a combination of the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework and political socialization theory. Following this establishment, the study outlines how the data will be collected in the methodology section. This section is of importance as it operationalizes the upper-class and *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework, alongside developing a coding scheme through which the interviews are analyzed. The fourth chapter presents the empirical findings, organized thematically around the formative life stages and the participants' narratives of class, identity, and political justification. Lastly, these key findings are discussed in light of the theoretical frameworks and the chapter reflects on this study whilst proposing several directions for further research.

2. Theory

2.1 Introduction

The relationship between social class and voting behavior has been a long subject of debate. Evans (2017) describes this relationship as a tendency for individuals in a specific social class to vote for a certain political party. Scholars have sought to determine if class remains a significant predictor in voting behavior or whether other factors like ideology, identity and issue-based voting have changed its level of influence. Traditionally, class-based voting was strongly associated with economic self-interest, where the working class primarily supported left-wing parties that advocated for redistributive policies and state intervention (D'Hooge, 2016; Svallfors, 1997, 1999). However, recent studies have shown that this alignment has weakened. Instead, in many Western democracies, the working class has shown increasing support for populist and radical right parties, mostly driven by ideological and cultural concerns over national identity rather than economic concerns (Betz, 1994; Houtman, 2003; Knutsen, 2007; Rydgren, 2012). This is also because the working class feels as if the leftist parties are no longer representative of them. The individuals in power leading these parties are now more middle-class politicians who have had a high level of education and are non-reflective of the working class (Carnes, 2012; Evans and Tilley, 2017; Heath, 2015).

It is evident that while a significant portion of the research conducted has focused on the working class and their evolving political preferences, the upper class remains significantly understudied. The upper class, characterized by high income, wealth, and economic security, has traditionally been associated with support for center-right parties that advocate for free-market policies (Marchesi, 2022; Rennwald, 2020). However, it is evident that in the Netherlands, the upper class is divided, some individuals vote for market-oriented parties like the VVD, others prioritize issues such as environmental sustainability, social justice, and liberal cultural policies by supporting parties like GroenLinks-PvdA, while some float in between, aligning with centrist options like D66.

To explain upper-class voting behavior, two key theoretical perspectives emerge from existing research on class-based voting: RCT and post-materialism. This literature review will first examine RCT, which argues that economic self-interest drives political preferences (Downs, 1957). Since, historically, the working class has voted for a party that most serves their own interest, this thesis will assess whether the same logic applies to the upper class.

Additionally, this literature review will examine Inglehart's (1981) post-materialism theory, which suggests that ideological and cultural values influence voting decisions. Given the rise of issue-based voting among the working class, this theory will explore whether similar patterns exist within the upper class. The following sections explore these frameworks in detail.

2.2 Literature Review

2.2.1 Rational Choice Theory: Voting as Economic Self-Interest

Rational choice theory (RCT) is a foundational framework in political science used to understand how individuals make voting decisions based on perceived personal benefit. The theory assumes that individuals are rational actors who make decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis to maximize their self-interest. In the context of elections, this means that individuals tend to vote for the party that, according to their analysis, will be of greatest advantage. Whether it is voting for abortion rights as a woman facing uncertainty, voting for farmland protection as a farmer, voting for border control as a nationalist, or voting for European integration as a pro-EU advocate, voters ultimately base their decisions on what they perceive will maximize their personal benefit. While self-interest can manifest in various forms, economic self-interest is one of the factors influencing voting behavior and underpinning the theory of rational choice. Just as consumers make financial choices based on expected utility, voters engage in a similar process when selecting political candidates or parties (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). This is particularly relevant when analyzing voting patterns in the upper class, where it can be assumed that economic incentives play a large, decisive role.

The foundation of RCT in political behavior was laid by Anthony Downs in *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957). He describes a twofold process in which voters first assess which policies align with their self-interest and then choose the party that offers the highest perceived benefit. Where on the other hand, parties act as vote-maximizing firms, attempting to shape policies that will attract the interests of voters the most. Downs (1957) emphasizes the importance of the rationality of these actors, or as he calls it the "efficiency" (p. 149). He argues that because all the voters are rational creatures, "each of them views elections strictly as means of selecting the government most beneficial to him" (Downs, 1957, p. 138). According to Downs (1957), this selection procedure is done by estimating the amount of utility each party could provide an individual, and then based on that, they would

select “which one would provide [them] with the highest utility income from government action” (p. 138). Buchanan and Tullock (1962) further argued that individuals engage in self-interested exchanges, reinforcing the strategic nature of decision-making

The perspectives laid out by scholars so far all, to a certain degree, argue that individuals will vote in a way that benefits them financially, which is commonly referred to as "pocketbook voting". Whether this is by evaluating past policies (retrospective) or anticipating future gains (prospective), the assumption that individuals vote based on self-interest remains consistent (Elinder et al., 2015). Downs's (1957) twofold dynamic is reinforced by these authors, as they state that politicians also choose to target voters that they know will vote with their pocketbooks. Despite Elinder et al.'s (2015) study being conducted in Sweden, they argue that pocketbook voting is more apparent in countries where a significant portion of election promises are frequently fulfilled, something Mansergh and Thomson (2007) identified as being characteristic of Dutch politics.

The link between economic self-interest and voting behavior becomes even clearer when examined through the lens of class-based voting. Different social classes prioritize different policies that can benefit their own economic status. Weakliem and Heath's (1994) analysis of British Election Study highlights that working-class voters tend to prioritize policies aimed at reducing unemployment, while middle-class voters focus more on controlling inflation, reflecting their class' economic needs. As a result it could be assumed that the upper class, with its higher income levels, is likely to support political parties that advocate for policies such as low taxation, deregulation, and limited government intervention in the market. This guiding assumption would support why the upper class in the Netherlands commonly votes for VVD.

Theoretical Expectation (rational choice): If RCT holds, then upper-class individuals in the Netherlands will primarily vote for parties that align with their economic self-interest, such as the VVD, due to their support for low taxation, deregulation, and market liberalism.

While it seems that RCT offers a simple explanation for why individuals vote for what parties they vote for, the works of these authors have been challenged by several scholars that argue that this theory oversimplifies the complex aspects of decision making. Scholars have argued that moral, ideological or group-based considerations often override economic self-interest (Feldman, 1984; Kiewiet & Lewis-Beck, 2011). Simon (1986)

discusses that we cannot assume that all individuals will behave rationally. Young et al. (1987) found that individuals who act in their self-interest are those who personally prioritize economic issues over other concerns. Additionally, research on sociotropic voting suggests that many individuals do not predominantly look at their own personal financial situations but rather on their perceptions of the national economy's overall health (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1979). This undermines the assumption that pocketbook voting is universally applicable. Lipset (1983) further argues that self-interest is only activated once people believe that the policies of political parties will impact their lives in a meaningful way. If competing parties offer policies that are of greater interest to the individual, they will then vote in self-interest, but if all parties offer similar policies, voters may not choose to self-maximize and instead vote in the interest of the whole population on other concerns. These various critiques highlight that RCT might be limited in its ability to understand the true underlying motivations behind individuals' voting behavior.

While RCT has proven to provide a compelling explanation for why the upper class in the Netherlands may vote in line with their economic interests, particularly the VVD, the critics of this theory have illustrated how not all voting decisions are made purely based on self-interest. As critics have argued, ideology, group identity, and broader societal concerns can sometimes outweigh financial considerations in political decision-making. D66 illustrates the complex balance between these elements, as it is a party that has gained substantial support among highly educated, affluent voters who are motivated by economic interests to a certain extent but also increasingly drawn to progressive stances on education and sustainability. If economic self-interest does not solely determine voting behavior, post-materialism provides a different perspective, suggesting that part of the upper class prioritizes non-economic issues such as environmentalism, social justice, and cultural values. The following section provides a detailed exploration of this framework.

2.2.2 Post-materialism: Voting Based on Ideological & Cultural Values

Post-materialism is a concept developed by political scientist Ronald Inglehart that observed a shift in prioritized values from more economic ones to values beyond material concerns, such as environmental sustainability, equality, and social justice. This shift in values, according to Inglehart, arose from growing economic security within society following the post-war period (Inglehart, 1977). This revolutionary but non-violent shift, Inglehart (1977) refers to as the 'silent revolution'. The intergenerational divide between materialists and post-materialists is a key feature of this theory. As generations got wealthier,

there was an evidential increase of post-materialists that grew up in affluent families with educated backgrounds and often prioritize values related to self-actualization and social equality. However, the post-war period did not mean the eradication of materialists as many individuals still exist within less economically secure backgrounds, and continue to emphasize economic security and traditional societal structures (Booth, 2020; Inglehart, 2020). This divide has translated itself into contemporary voting patterns, where post-materialist values correlate with voting for more progressive parties.

Post-materialism is largely shaped by an individual's comfort whilst growing up. Inglehart (1977) argues that individuals who grew up in environments which were less economically secure are found to prioritize material concerns later in life. This framework is heavily influenced by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which suggests that individuals must first satisfy basic physiological and safety needs before they can focus on other 'higher' goals, such as self-expression and social activism (Booth, 2021). Inglehart (1977) applies this psychological model to political behavior, arguing that once these needs are met, individuals are more likely to be seen caring about post-materialist values. This is particularly relevant in affluent families. Inglehart (1977) hypothesizes that individuals tend to prioritize values that were absent or less critical during their formative years. While age can influence how individuals perceive current economic and social conditions, Booth (2021) argues that their core values tend to remain stable over time, especially those formed during their formative years. Inglehart's (1977) hypothesis suggested that as societies become wealthier and younger generations grow up without experiencing extreme levels of economic insecurity, society will gradually transform more towards caring for post-materialist values (Booth, 2021; Inglehart, 1977). This transformation is particularly relevant in industrialized nations with developed economies.

In industrialized countries, there is a clear relationship between class and post-materialism. Inglehart (1977) first observed that economic security influences value shifts. This was particularly noticeable among the middle class, who began to prioritize post-materialist concerns such as environmentalism and social justice. When revisiting this argument decades later Inglehart (2020) notes that the political left, once mainly supported by the working class, increasingly attracts middle-class voters aligned with post-materialist values. As left-wing parties moved closer to the political center, these voters were drawn to them for their emphasis on progressive, post-materialist values. Western political parties have found this transition particularly challenging, as they struggle to navigate the balance between appealing to young post-materialist voters whilst not isolating from their traditional

working-class voting base. If these parties move too slowly in this transition they risk losing progressive support, while moving too quickly could drive away working-class voters who remain focused on economic security. Therefore, as Inglehart (1977) already warned, class-based campaigning has become an increasingly complex challenge.

Post-materialism and its emphasis on concerns beyond economic self-interest, such as sustainability, have attracted a wave of supporters who prioritize issues like climate change. These values align well with GroenLinks-PvdA. Inglehart (1977) argued that once societies become more wealthy, their concerns for environmental protection become more prominent, creating a transition to voting for parties that align with this interest. As Professor Jeroen van der Waal outlined, political divisions today are not just about economic self-interest but also cultural identity and education (Uijtewaal, 2023). The rise of post-materialist values among the ‘educated’ upper class has contributed to their preference for progressive parties like GroenLinks-PvdA. This party appeals to voters who, due to their economic security, have had the ability to prioritize issues beyond financial concerns. This supports the hypothesis that the upper class votes in alignment with post-materialist values, explaining why GroenLinks-PvdA (alongside D66 and VVD) are among the most popular parties for the upper class in the Netherlands.

Theoretical Expectation (post-materialism): If post-materialist holds, upper-class individuals in the Netherlands will increasingly vote for parties that prioritize cultural and ideological values, such as Groenlinks-PvdA.

Despite growing concern for voting behavior beyond economic self-interest, there are still scholars who critique the validity of Inglehart’s (1977, 2020) theory. Middendorp (1992) argues that post-materialism only has a modest influence on voting behavior. He suggests that other ideological dimensions, such as libertarianism-authoritarianism and religion, play a larger role in predicting political preferences. In Middendorp’s (1992) view post-materialism overlaps with these other ideological dimensions in its explanatory value, therefore undermining its individual strength as a theory. Moreover, Booth (2021) points out that there are right-wing post-materialists and they often prioritize issues like national defense, which compete with the strength of left-wing post-materialists that Inglehart (1977) highlights. Therefore, it would not be correct to immediately link liberal and progressive values to post-materialism. This ideological division complicates the idea of a cohesive political preference around post-materialism.

Despite these critiques, Inglehart's theory of post-materialism remains a useful hypothesis, particularly in explaining voting behavior among the upper class. The rise of post-materialist values among affluent, highly educated voters has contributed to increased support for progressive parties. However, this support is ideologically different. While both GroenLinks-PvdA and D66 attract post-materialist voters, they do so through two differing channels. GroenLinks-PvdA focuses more on social equality and climate action, often through policies that involve economic reform and redistribution. D66, on the other hand, supports similar progressive values like sustainability and education but takes a more moderate, economically liberal approach. It appeals to voters who care about social progress while also valuing a market economy and responsible government spending. This helps explain why the upper class, even if they share post-materialist values like environmentalism and internationalism, still vote for different parties. Some support GroenLinks-PvdA for its focus on social change, others prefer D66 for its more liberal and centrist approach, and some continue to vote for VVD because of its focus on the economy. To better understand this relationship a different framework is needed to analyze the upper class's voting behavior in the Netherlands.

2.2.3 Research Gaps

Despite extensive research conducted on class-based voting behavior, the existing theories both experience shortcomings in their ability to explain the ideological divisions within the Dutch upper class. RCT and post-materialism offer valuable theoretical lenses and provide useful expectations for interpreting voting motivations. RCT makes the assumption that individuals vote predominantly out of economic self-interest by calculating which party would best maximize their utility. This would align well with the upper-class voters in the Netherlands that vote for VVD because of its pro-market policies, low taxation, and limited government intervention. In contrast, post-materialism emphasizes the growing importance of cultural and ideological values (e.g., environmentalism and social equality) amongst affluent voters, aligning with the support for Groenlinks-PvdA. However, D66 neither fits into RCT nor post-materialism neatly. While it shares post-materialistic values like education reform, sustainability, and international cooperation, it also embraces economically liberal, pro-market policies.

This reveals two issues with the existing theories. Firstly, using only RCT or post-materialism creates a scenario where not all Dutch upper class individuals are taken into consideration. At the same time, neither theory fully accounts for a party like D66, which can

be categorized more as a ‘floater’ party that straddles economic and cultural dimensions. To better account for this ideological spread, this thesis turns to the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* model (Gethin et al., 2022), which more effectively accommodates the coexistence of both economically and culturally driven motivations among affluent voters. This model will be elaborated in Section 2.3.1. It is important to note that this framework builds on the contributions of RCT and post-materialism rather than replacing them. It provides a more comprehensive lens for interpreting upper-class voting behavior by integrating the insights of both perspectives into a broader analysis of capital and ideology.

Beyond these theoretical limitations, most research on class-based voting has relied heavily on quantitative methods, such as surveys and large-scale electoral studies. These approaches are beneficial in capturing voting patterns and large-scale trends, but they fail to capture the deeper motivations, narratives, and justifications that shape political choices. Moreover, both RCT and post-materialism tend to conceptualize voting behavior as static, either rooted in self-interest or in ideological values. These theories overlook the role of political socialization and how these preferences are developed across the life course, including the influence of family, education, and professional environments across an individual’s life. To better understand these processes, a qualitative approach is essential to explore how individuals make sense of their political identities. Interviews specifically provide a space for reflection. This makes them suited for this study that explores *why* individuals vote for what they vote for.

These challenges require the need for an approach that captures both the ideological diversity of the upper class and the formative process that shapes political identity over time. This thesis responds by employing the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework that can explain the ideological divide within the upper class. Alongside that, it draws on political socialization theory, which examines how these divisions surface over time. By conducting a qualitative study, this study aims to address this gap by providing a more in-depth understanding of the different ideologies and underlying motivations that shape the upper class’ voting behavior in the Netherlands. Rather than focusing solely on the ideological positions of the individuals, this study explores the lived experiences, such as family background, educational pursuits, and professional environments, that influence political attitudes over time.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

2.3.1 The Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right Model

As identified in the research gaps, existing theoretical frameworks like RCT and post-materialism are beneficial in explaining certain aspects of the upper class voting behavior but fail to capture the full divide that exists within the Dutch upper class. To address these shortcomings, this study draws on the groundbreaking work of Thomas Piketty, Clara Martinez-Toledano, and Amory Gethin, *Brahmin Left versus Merchant Right: Changing Political Cleavages in Western Democracies 1948-2020*. This framework argues that political divisions are shaped by a divergence between economic capital (wealth) and human capital (education) (Gethin et al., 2022). This provides a more nuanced understanding of why the Dutch upper-class voters are divided, with some voters prioritizing economic policies (VVD) and others emphasizing cultural and environmental issues (GroenLinks-PvdA) and others a combination of both (D66).

Two dominant groups are established in their text: the “Merchant Right” and the “Brahmin Left”. The Merchant Right refers to the wealthy individuals and business elites who usually prioritize low taxation, economic liberalism, and deregulation. On the other hand, the Brahmin Left refers to highly educated professionals, academics and cultural elites who prioritize progressive social policies, environmental protection, and human rights. While the authors do not explicitly define an “upper class”, both groups can be seen as part of the broader economic and social elite. However, they differ in the type of capital they possess, economic (Merchant Right) or human (Brahmin Left). This distinction is particularly relevant in the Dutch context, where VVD would be seen as aligning with the Merchant Right, while GroenLinks-PvdA with the Brahmin Left. D66, however, exhibits characteristics of both groups Gethin et al. (2022) identify. Therefore, D66 voters in this study can identify with both groups depending on the amount of importance they assign to economic liberalism or cultural progressivism.

According to the authors, the class-based voting model, where working-class voters supported left-wing parties while upper-class voters supported conservative parties, has evolved into a multi-elite party system (Gethin et al., 2022). In this multi-elite system, education, rather than just income, has become a primary driver of left-wing support, while high-income individuals in the upper class continue to support economically conservative parties. The authors align this shift with Inglehart’s (1977) post-materialism theory which describes this societal transition towards caring for cultural and environmental issues more

than economic ones. However, the authors emphasize that this shift is primarily driven by highly educated elites rather than by the broader population (Gethin et al., 2022; Inglehart, 1977).

This shift is particularly noticeable in the Netherlands, as demonstrated by the authors' analysis of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies data set (Gethin et al., 2022). By the authors' statistical analysis of voting patterns through the lens of income and education, we can see how this multi-elite divide manifests in the Dutch political landscape. The first statistical analysis conducted highlights that there is a persistent gap between high-income (top 10%) and low-income (bottom 90%) voters in their support for left-wing parties. In the Netherlands, high-income voters have historically been less likely to vote for left-wing parties than low-income voters, although this gap has narrowed over time (see Appendix B; Gethin et al., 2022). Furthermore, the data highlights that in the Netherlands recent trends have shown that highly educated individuals have become increasingly likely to vote for left-wing parties compared to their lower-educated counterparts (see Appendix C; Gethin et al., 2022). These findings illustrate how political preferences among the Dutch upper class are shaped not only by economic status but also increasingly influenced by educational levels and cultural values, reaffirming the importance of employing this framework.

The *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* model proves a more inclusive framework than RCT and post-materialism due to its ability to account for both parties voted for in the upper-class. It contributes to a more comprehensive explanation that accounts for both economic and ideological motivations, showing that elite political divisions are shaped by the interaction between wealth, education, and cultural values. While this framework offers a useful model to interpret the ideological divide within the Dutch upper class, it functions here primarily as a conceptual lens. This is because there is a high degree of homogeneity in educational attainment and economic capital among participants, which limits its use as a source of predictive hypotheses. In this study, the framework is used to understand whether participants relate more to the values of the Merchant Right or the Brahmin Left. It helps show how their background, such as their job, family or education, influences whether they focus more on economic issues or cultural and social values. This gives insight into the differences and similarities within the Dutch upper class.

2.3.2 Political Socialization

To complement the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework, this study incorporates the theory of political socialization to explore how individuals acquire the political values that lead them to align with either the economically conservative or culturally progressive camp. While the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework helps capture the divide in contemporary patterns of upper-class voting behavior, political socialization helps account for how individuals come to hold these preferences. Throughout an individual's lifespan, their engagement with politics is shaped by key socialization stages such as childhood, education, and occupational development (Ares & van Ditmars, 2024; Jennings & Niemi, 1968). As Ares and van Ditmars (2024) outline, the attitudes shaping a class's behavior are not purely based on their current material conditions but emerge through these various phases. By integrating this process-oriented perspective, the thesis moves beyond asking *what* upper-class individuals vote for and instead explores *why* and *how* these political orientations form over time. The following sections introduce three hypotheses that reflect these stages of political socialization and guide the empirical analysis.

Firstly, family background plays a fundamental role in shaping political orientations and ideology. The transmission of these political beliefs is not only about values and behaviors being taught but also about the class-based environments in which children are raised. Both classic studies on family influence (Hyman, 1959; Jennings & Niemi, 1968) and more recent research continue to support the idea that family remains a crucial context for political development (Kuhn et al., 2021; Neundorf & Smets, 2017). The transmission of political values happens through both direct and structural mechanisms. Direct transmission refers to children adopting political views via observation, role modelling, and explicit communication (Bandura, 1977; Jennings & Niemi, 1974). The second mechanism is structural, often referred to as the social-milieu pathway. Rather than focusing on direct political communication, this mechanism emphasizes how parents transmit their social class position and place children in environments shaped by income, education, religion, and region that indirectly influence political attitudes over time (Dalton, 1982; Glass et al., 1986). Together, these mechanisms help explain the persistence of class-based voting across generations.

Hypothesis 1: Individuals from upper-class families with culturally progressive parents are more likely to vote for left-wing progressive parties, while those from families emphasizing economic self-interest are more likely to vote for economically

conservative parties, due to direct and structural political transmission during childhood.

Once young adults enter into specific educational disciplines, scholars illustrate how these can shape particular political ideologies. Social science, humanities, and liberal arts students have been shown to correlate more closely with progressive political values, whereas students in business, economics, or engineering tend to lean more towards conservative ones (Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015; Kriesi et al., 2008; SurrIDGE, 2016). Despite the influence of course content on political ideology, it is mostly interactions with peers that steer political affiliation (Hastie, 2007). While it is important to acknowledge that many individuals in the upper class are already highly educated, shaping a certain political inclination, the discipline studied may further influence that affiliation.

Hypothesis 2: Individuals who pursued disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, or liberal arts are more likely to develop progressive political orientations, whereas those who studied business, economics, or engineering are more inclined toward economically conservative ideologies.

After an individual has completed their education, scholars observe a common change in values, often sparked by an increasing awareness of labour market competition. As individuals enter the workforce, they are directly confronted with the material realities of their occupation and their social and economic position within society, which in turn tends to shape specific political views (Lipset, 1960). Beyond these confrontations, interactions with colleagues, the work environment, and the goals set by a company also shape political ideologies (Kitschelt & Rehm, 2014). Therefore, due to a significant portion of an individual's life being dominated by their occupation, their political values may also align with the interests or knowledge developed in the workplace.

Hypothesis 3: Confrontation with labour market dynamics and workplace environments reinforces political behavior among upper-class individuals, pushing them toward either economic self-interest or progressive cultural values depending on their occupational sector and perceived class identity.

During the data collection process, participants will be asked about their experiences during crucial political socialization stages to assess whether this plays a central role in their current voting behavior.

2.4 Overview

This theory chapter outlines the radical transformation of class-based voting behavior over the years, with traditional economic self-interest explanations, such as RCT, and an increasing trend in cultural and ideological perspectives playing a role as shown in post-materialism. While RCT would help to explain the economically driven voters in the upper class it falls short in explaining voters who vote for Groenlinks-PvdA and D66. On the other hand, Post-Materialism explains that cultural shift towards more progressive party voting but then suffers in explaining voters that align with more conservative economic policies.

To address these shortcomings, this study incorporates the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework proposed by Gethin et al. (2022). This model provides a more comprehensive understanding of upper-class voting behavior, distinguishing between economic capital (wealth) and human capital (education) as drivers of political alignment. The division within the Dutch upper class, where some voters prioritize economic values and other cultural ones, aligns with this framework and reflects broader trends in Western democracies.

However, to understand *how* individuals come to these political preferences, this framework is complemented by the theory of political socialization. Drawing on literature that emphasizes the importance of family upbringing, educational and work environments, this perspective helps explain the long-term development of political identity. It helps shift the focus from *what* they vote for to *why* they vote for what they do.

Together, these two frameworks form one theoretical analysis guiding this research that attempts to discover the discrepancy in the Dutch upper class' political alignment. They guide the empirical approach of this thesis by informing the interview structure, the coding of motivations, and the interpretation of ideological narratives. Through this dual-theoretical lens, this thesis aims to uncover the factors that motivate the voters to explain the ideological divergence within the upper class.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design in an attempt to understand why a political divide existed within the upper class. It explores this through conducting semi-structured interviews where individuals reflect on their political identity, background, and lived experiences. This design was appropriate as it allowed for an understanding of not only *what* people vote for, but also *how* their political preferences developed over time and *why* a specific party was more appealing to the participant, captured through an intersubjective exchange between the interviewer and participant (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

The decision to employ interviews for this study was because of its strength in studying political identity and social meaning. As Brinkmann (2022) notes, qualitative interviews provide access to individuals' "life world", which refers to the everyday world as they personally experience it before it is analyzed or explained by theories or science (p. 19). Interviews, for this reason, allowed us to not only understand what the participants think, but also why they hold these views. Unlike surveys, which are often more static reflections, interviews create an environment for participants to reflect (Brinkmann, 2022). For this reason, interviews are particularly suited for a study that aims to explore political identity formation through a life-course process.

As Roulston (2019) outlines, interviews have been broadly accepted as a legitimate and crucial means of knowledge production for decades on end now. They outline how many researchers work from what is called a "romantic" language ideology, where interviews are seen as an approach to surface the "authentic" voices of participants (Koven, 2014, p. 504). This approach aligns closely with the aim of this study, which does not want to interpret political orientation as a singular choice but more as an evolving identity.

In addition to the benefits of semi-structured interviews on a large scale, when studying the specific demographic of this study, the elites, interviews are crucial. As Li (2024) emphasizes, the elites are a particular demographic of society that often occupy unique and present roles, particularly in shaping public discourse, policy and economic structures. Whilst the participants of this study are not part of the top elites in society, they often do have/are given a certain level of influence that distinguishes them from other members of society. Interviews offer a "firsthand understanding of their roles in these processes" and help address "elite experience-oriented research" questions that are often

inaccessible through other methods (Li, 2024, p. 183, 185). For this reason, qualitative semi-structured interviews are not just appropriate methodologically, but also crucial for capturing the complex lived experiences of the elites through which political identities are formed.

This methodological section starts by operationalizing the upper-class and the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework in order to make these measurable. Subsequently, it discusses how the study collected this data by discussing the interview process, selection and ethical considerations. Then, it touches upon how this study made sense of this data and presents a coding scheme for the thematic analysis that follows. Lastly, the methodological section recognizes the internal and external validity of this study and its reliability.

3.2 Operationalization of Concepts

3.2.1 The Upper-Class

This research follows the SCP's definition of upper-class in order to define who will be part of the research scope or not. The SCP identifies the Netherlands as a country divided by seven social classes, of which it is reigned by *de werkende bovenlaag*. Around 20% of the Dutch population belongs to this social class (Oving, 2023). Based on the multidimensional classification approach that the SCP adopts, there are four types of capital that determine an individual's social class: economic, cultural, social, and personal. It is important to note that individuals in *de werkende bovenlaag* must not possess extremely high capital in all aspects, but this class has the most total capital (see Appendix D). These concepts will be operationalized based on the updated indicators established by the SCP in 2019/2020 (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2021).

Rather than going through each indicator specifically, the interviews adopted a qualitative approach to assess the individuals' upper-class status. In line with the semi-structured interview format, respondents were asked to reflect openly on their occupation, education and lifestyle. These responses are analyzed with the SCP criteria to ensure the participant aligns with the characteristics that are typically associated with *de werkende bovenlaag*.

- Economic capital was measured through indicators such as educational attainment, employment status, income, and wealth. Participants were asked to reflect on their professional role, perceived financial comfort and educational background.

- Cultural capital was evaluated through lifestyle-related questions, such as how participants describe their leisure time. References to cultural activities, travel habits, and the importance they placed on well-being served as indicators for high cultural capital.
- Social capital was assessed through an individual's reference to professional and personal networks, social affiliations and the role this played in shaping their life course. When a participant mentioned memberships to certain social, athletic or professional clubs that contributed to a high social capital.
- Personal capital involved the participant's self-assessment of their health, self-confidence and aesthetics. Rather than being quantified, this was measured through the exploration of a participants' description of their routines, values and personal development.

By interpreting participants' stories through the SCP framework, this study ensured a standardized definition of the Dutch upper class whilst maintaining methodological consistency and respecting the complexity of individuals' lived experiences.

3.2.2 The Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right Framework

While the SCP classification establishes who classifies as upper-class, the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework (Gethin et al., 2022) must also be operationalized in order to analyze the political divisions within this social group. This framework distinguishes between two forms of elite subgroups based on their dominant form of capital. The Merchant Right consists of business elites who prioritize low taxation, economic liberalization and deregulation. Economic capital was measured based on participants' perspectives on these topics. On the other hand, the Brahmin Left is composed of individuals that are educated professionals, academics and cultural elites who emphasize progressive policies on climate change and human rights. Human capital was measured based on investigating the attachment of values for the educated elites.

Voting behavior was analyzed by examining the voter's past and current voting preferences and how those align with the Merchant Right (VVD), the Brahmin Left (Groenlinks-PvdA) or a blend of both value systems (D66). Furthermore, voters who prioritize economic concerns during elections will also be seen to align more with the Merchant Right, whereas voters who prioritize cultural and social issues will align more with the Brahmin Left.

3.3 Method of Data Collection

The empirical data of this study was collected through conducting semi-structured interviews. This approach was chosen for its ability to capture the nuances in how upper-class individuals understand their political identities, social backgrounds, and voting preferences. These topics are often based on personal narratives that require an informal interview procedure. While all participants were asked a certain set of guiding questions, this method gave space for follow-up questions and the participants to elaborate where they deemed necessary. It is important to note that this study recognized the potential for social desirability bias in semi-structured interviews. The respondents of this study may have been inclined to present themselves in a more favorable light, particularly when discussing politically sensitive topics. This could have affected the authenticity of the data and should be considered a limitation of the study.

The interview questions were developed in order to reflect the theoretical foundations of this thesis (see Appendix E). The interview was divided into three main parts: (1) background and social positioning, (2) voting behavior and political affiliation and (3) political socialization phases. Firstly, participants were asked to elaborate on their education, employment, lifestyle and family background in order to sketch their alignment with SCP criteria for *de werkende bovenlaag*. In order to analyze whether the participant aligns with the Merchant Right (economically driven) or the Brahmin Left (culturally driven), the interviewees were then asked about their political preferences, affiliation and the changes over time in this regard. Lastly, the interview dove into how these political values were shaped by asking about the extent to which their upbringing, education or occupation had an influence.

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling in order to ensure that individuals aligned with the SCP criteria of *de werkende bovenlaag*. The recruitment took place through personal professional and personal networks, alongside snowball sampling, where individuals would refer other participants. The study includes a relatively balanced group of VVD (5 participants) and GroenLinks-PvdA (7 participants) voters. The 2023 general election saw relatively low support for D66, which secured only 9 seats in the House of Representatives, compared to 24 for VVD and 25 for GroenLinks-PvdA (Kiesraad, 2023). This lower level of support was also reflected in the study sample, with only one participant identifying as a D66 voter.

This study interviewed 13 participants, mostly individuals ranging from age 40 to 65, to reflect the predominant age group of *de werkende bovenlaag*. However, there was also one participant in their mid 20s that matched the criteria of *de werkende bovenlaag*. The study also ensured diversity across gender and occupation differences. A full overview of participant demographics, occupations, sector types, and political affiliations is included in Appendix F.

Out of the 13 interviews that were conducted, 10 were held over the phone, and 3 were conducted in person in order to ensure flexibility for the participants. However, it is important to note this as it presents potential limitations in terms of data richness and interactional depth. As Irvine et al., (2013) show in their comparative study, interviews conducted through the phone tend to include less vocal acknowledgements from the researcher, more requests for clarification by the participant and are typically shorter in length than in-person interviews. The absence of visual cues requires more “effortful listening”, which could possibly explain why interviews were shorter, and there were more requests for clarification (p. 101). Therefore, it was important to acknowledge this limitation here, and in attempts to lessen the harm, the study guides were consistently used across both methods to maintain reliability.

This study followed the ethical considerations for qualitative research (Ahlin, 2019). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Prior to recording, verbal informed consent was obtained. Because the study is entirely anonymous, participants were asked whether they were comfortable being referred to by their first-name initial (e.g., “Participant R”). Furthermore, they were asked to confirm their comfort with disclosing their age range, gender, and region or city of residence. Although the interview questions were not highly sensitive, they did address topics such as political beliefs and values. Therefore, participants were informed that they could skip any question they did not feel comfortable answering. In order to ensure a safe environment for the participant, care was taken to create a respectful and non-judgmental atmosphere during the interviews. Finally, all interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely in a password-protected database and labeled anonymously (e.g., “Participant R.m4a”) to ensure data protection and confidentiality (Ahlin, 2019).

3.4 Method of Analysis

Building on the operationalized concepts defined in Section 3.2, this study employed a thematic analysis approach to examine how the Dutch upper class rationalized and articulated their political preferences. This method was considered appropriate as it allowed the data to be interpreted based on recognizable patterns. Because the interviews were semi-structured, the study drew on both inductive and deductive insights. Deductive codes were guided by the core theoretical frameworks of this study: the Merchant Right, the Brahmin Left, and the stages of political socialization. Inductive codes emerged from unexpected patterns in participants' narratives. To ensure consistency, the study developed a coding framework to establish indicators aligned with specific themes. Table 1 below outlines the thematic structure that guided the analysis process.

Table 1

Thematic Coding Framework for Interview Analysis

Theme	Sub-theme	Description / Focus	Example Indicators
Political Alignment	Merchant Right	Economic capital focus; preference for market liberalism, low taxes, deregulation	Mentions VVD; low taxation; entrepreneurship; economic freedom
	Brahmin Left	Human/cultural capital focus; progressive social and environmental values	Mentions GroenLinks-PvdA; climate policy; diversity; social justice
	Crossover/Uncertainty	Mixed political views; ideological inconsistencies or multiple priorities	Mentions D66; Supports VVD but values sustainability; hesitant voter
Family Background & Upbringing	Parental Influence	The transmission of political values from parents or family setting	“My parents always voted VVD”; “We talked about politics a lot at home”
	Class of Origin	Socioeconomic background during upbringing; early experiences with class	Grew up in poverty/wealth; “I wasn’t always in this position”
Educational Experiences	Peer Influence & Socialization	The transmission of political values from	“University opened my eyes”; reference to

		the educational environment	political debates in school
	Discipline-Specific Political Orientation	Field of study shaping political preferences	Humanities/social science = left-wing orientation; Business/tech = right-wing orientation
Workplace Environment	Economic Self-Perception	Reflections on one's economic role, risk, and interest alignment	"As an entrepreneur..."; "Taxes is an important topic to me"
	Organizational Culture / Professional Networks	Influence of professional setting or social circles on political attitudes	"My colleagues are mostly center-right"; membership in elite networks
Voting Logic	Key Issues Driving Voting	What issues are prioritized and why	Climate, immigration, economy, healthcare, Europe
	Justifications & Self-Positioning	How the participant rationalizes their vote in relation to self-interest or societal values	"I vote for what's best for the Netherlands"; "I vote for my business interests"

Note. The themes and sub-themes were developed through a combination of deductive and inductive coding techniques.

3.5 Validity & Reliability

To enhance the internal validity of the data selection process, this study applied several safeguards. Firstly, the participants were recruited based on several SCP criteria (economic status and educational background) to ensure a consistent sampling frame. The interviews provided another opportunity to check if the participant was applicable to the study by starting with identification questions that aimed to shape their profile in more depth. The semi-structured format allowed participants to go in detail freely while still guiding the conversation toward the core themes of the study. In addition, internal validity was strengthened by emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation, which aimed to reduce social desirability bias, especially when discussing sensitive political beliefs.

While this study does not seek external validity in the statistical sense, it ensures transferability by providing enough contextual details about each participant's social background to help others see how the findings might apply in similar contexts. That said, several challenges remain that are of the essence to acknowledge. The sample size (13 participants) and recruitment method (purposeful and snowball sampling) mean that the findings are not fully representative. Although generalizability is not the main aim of a qualitative study, which instead seeks to explore deep motivations that quantitative data may not capture, it is still important to recognize these limitations. Most participants were aged 40-60, with only one younger respondent, limiting generational comparison. The sample also included a larger number of GroenLinks-PvdA and VVD voters than D66 supporters, potentially underrepresenting centrist perspectives. Finally, as interviews were conducted nearly two years after the 2023 general election, both the political climate at the time and developments since then may have influenced how participants reflected on their choices.

To enhance the reliability of the study, a consistent interview guide was used across all sessions. While semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility, they also introduce the possibility of inconsistency. This was addressed by maintaining the same structure in all interviews, regardless of whether they were conducted in person or over the phone. The use of a guide helped ensure comparability between modes, even though phone interviews may reduce conversational nuance due to the lack of visual cues (Irvine et al., 2013). Furthermore, for analysis, a systematic manual coding procedure was employed, informed by the theoretical frameworks and hypotheses of the study. Emerging themes were repeatedly compared against earlier interviews to ensure interpretive consistency. Lastly, reflexivity was practiced throughout the whole process, particularly in recognizing how the researcher's own background may influence the interpretation of politically sensitive narratives.

4. Results & Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the thematic analysis done on the 13 semi-structured interviews conducted. Using the coding scheme (Table 1), all interviews were thematically analyzed in order to help establish interesting insights developed during the discussions. Drawing on the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework and theories of political socialization, this chapter examines how participants formed, justified and expressed the development of their political preferences in various stages of life. By analyzing these themes, we can better understand the underlying motivations behind ideological divides within the upper class.

In order to contextualize the analysis that follows, a short background summary of each participant is provided below. The table allows the reader to better situate the perspectives discussed in the analysis (See Table 2).

Table 2

Short Background of Participants

Participant ID	Short Background
A	Male, 60-70, living in Warmond. Former banking executive with international experience, now semi-retired and self-employed as a financial and organizational advisor for startups. Studied economics in Rotterdam and holds a Master's in business economics. Leads a flexible lifestyle with a mix of work, golf, travel, and social clubs, some with business overlaps. Politically engaged and well-informed. Previously voted VVD, D66, and Volt, but expresses regret when voting for VVD. Influenced by an international upbringing, liberal family values, and close personal experiences with immigration.
A2	Female, 40-50, living in Houten. Head of the legal department at a multinational company. Holds a Master's degree in Law after completing VWO. Leads an active and socially engaged lifestyle, enjoying sports, festivals, cultural outings, and time with her partner and children. Raised in a low-income, single-parent household. Identifies with center-left values and votes either Groenlinks-PvdA or D66.
B	Female, 50-60, living in Enschede. Studied medicine and currently works as a general practitioner. Raised in a Catholic and Korean household. Lives a balanced lifestyle between a demanding medical career and social weekends. Politically left-leaning, voted Groenlinks-PvdA in the 2023 general election, shaped by working-class family roots and a strong sense of social responsibility.

C	Female, 50-60, living in Heemskerk. Employed as a nurse. Previously worked as a trainer and coach for young nurses after completing a Bachelor of Education at Hogeschool Leiden. Recently started a floral design training program. Enjoys reading, walking and being outdoors. Raised in a Catholic environment, where voting for CDA (Christian Democratic Appeal) was the norm. Consistent Groenlinks-PvdA voter.
D	Female, 50-60, living in Rotterdam. Works in primary education as a giftedness specialist, supporting both in-school and out-of-school highly gifted children. Holds an HBO degree and recently completed a Master's at Radboud University. Enjoys travelling, theatre, reading, and spending time with family and friends. Her voting preference is D66.
D2	Female, 50-60, living in Aerdenhout. Entrepreneur in luxury vacation rentals, managing a high-end villa in Puglia, Italy, including local teams, marketing, and daily operations. Studied physiotherapy but built her career through hands-on experience in sales, marketing, and design, including previously owning a successful business in Hong Kong. Leads an active and creative lifestyle with interests in padel, yoga, tennis, skiing, and floral design. In the 2023 general election, she voted for VVD.
E	Male, 50-60, living in Heemskerk. Works in logistics at a major car company. Holds an HBO degree in logistics. In his free time, he spends most of his time outside enjoying activities like walking and cycling. The environment is of extreme importance to him. Consistently voted for GroenLinks, now GroenLinks-PvdA.
G	Male, 50-60, living in Heemskerk. Studied International Management (HBO) in Amsterdam and has worked for over 25 years in the financial banking sector. Leads an active lifestyle with regular gym sessions, padel, and spends time watching his son's football games. Also enjoys reading, particularly about current political events, finance, football, and music. A long-time VVD voter.
I	Female, 50-60, living in Amsterdam. Works as a strategic advisor in ICT and data for the education division of the municipality. Studied Economics and IT and previously worked in the consultancy sector, which did not suit her desires. Enjoys reading, quiet weekends, and travelling. Politically left-leaning, consistently voting for GroenLinks-PvdA in the past decade.
J	Female, 50-60, living in Warmond. Studied Law and completed additional economic training at a bank. Currently serves on several boards, including for Make-A-Wish and an art history institute. Leads an active and cultured lifestyle with interests in sports, cooking, travelling, and playing the saxophone. A consistent VVD voter, but also explored D66 and Volt.
O	Male, 50-60, living in Amsterdam. Studied philosophy and social

psychology and currently works in Data and Statistics for the Dutch Probation Service. Having lived in Amsterdam for over three decades, he enjoys the urban culture, including theatre, film, and outdoor activities. He is a consistent Groenlinks-PvdA voter.

T Male, 50-60, living in Hilversum. He has had a long career in asset management and financial services, including executive roles such as CEO and Head of Sales & Marketing for the Asia region. He studied Law and began his professional journey via a management traineeship at a bank. Due to a lack of jobs available in his industry, he is currently semi-retired, and he leads an active lifestyle involving sports like padel, running, and football and follows political and economic news closely. His international upbringing as an expat child has shaped his worldview and political preference towards VVD.

Y Female, 20-30, living in Amsterdam. A Dutch/Mexican PhD candidate researching economic inequality and diversity policy, with an academic background in neuroeconomics and Liberal Arts and Sciences. Highly politically engaged, actively involved with GroenLinks-PvdA and feminist organizations. Regularly attends party congresses and participates in discussion groups on social issues. Lives an active lifestyle and values social justice, inclusivity, and civic engagement.

Now that a clearer picture has been shaped of who the participants are, this section turns to the thematic findings, which explores how these individuals make sense of their political identities and what factors have shaped them over time.

4.2 Theme 1: Political Alignment

This theme discusses the political alignment of the participants and how that coincides with the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework. The Merchant Right voter tends to prioritize economic self-interest, low taxation and minimal government regulation. These individuals are usually business elites or entrepreneurs that emphasize the importance of creating an environment that supports economic growth and self-sufficiency. They often look at how policies would impact their economic capital. For example, one participant (VVD voter) expressed:

“One of my priorities is entrepreneurship... people sometimes don't really realise what it's like for self-employed entrepreneurs.” (*author's translation*)² (Participant D2)

² Original quote in Dutch: “Een van mijn speerpunten is het ondernemen... mensen realiseren zich soms ook niet even goed wat het is voor zelfstandig ondernemers.”

This quote directly highlights the importance of entrepreneurship to this participant, and their concern for the impact of certain economic policies on business owners, and the desire for political recognition in this field. Similarly, another participant stated:

"I'm opposed to simply redistributing wealth... we should make work more attractive." (*author's translation*)³ (Participant A)

This comment illustrates a preference towards creating policies to make work more attractive, potentially in the form of tax reductions or deregulation, aligning with the Merchant Right's focus on economic freedom. The quote also underscores a belief that success is earned, which is a model that closely aligns with the Merchant Right model. Another participant further elaborated on the importance of their economic self-interest. When asked if they would ever vote against their own economic self-interest if a party conflicted with other moral values, they responded:

"Yes, I think so - of course you vote with your own economic interests in mind, but not only that. If you're voting for a party where you don't benefit personally, and everyone else ends up worse off, and the country goes downhill - of course you wouldn't do that. In the end, I'd choose differently if things headed that way. I think the balance is important: for myself economically, but also for the bigger picture." (*author's translation*)⁴ (Participant G)

Whilst this participant expressed nuance in their response and concern for the broader societal implications, the participant still acknowledged the importance of voting for their own economic benefits in their decision-making process. Even the broader concern for national implications is still filtered through the lens of personal economic stability.

The Brahmin Left voters place voting for society as a whole as their larger priority, especially through caring about values such as social justice, equality, education and

³ Original quote in Dutch: "Ik ben namelijk tegen het verdelen van de poen... werken moet je aantrekkelijk maken."

⁴ Original quote in Dutch: "Ja, ik denk het wel. Natuurlijk kies je voor je eigen portemonnee, maar niet alleen dat. Als ik bijvoorbeeld op een bepaalde partij stem, en zelf word ik er niet beter van, en de rest wordt er slechter van, en het land gaat naar de knoppen. Ja, natuurlijk doe je dat niet. Uiteindelijk denk ik dat ik wel die keuze op een andere partij zou maken als het die kant op gaat. De combinatie vind ik belangrijk, dus voor mijzelf en economisch."

environmental sustainability. One participant underscores how these values create a safe and comfortable living environment for them:

“The most important thing is: how do I feel comfortable in this society?... I am an advocate of having that bar as high as possible for everyone.” (*author’s translation*)⁵
(Participant O)

This comment reflects a collectivist orientation rooted in egalitarian ideals. The respondent prioritizes systemic equity and shared prosperity, which aligns with the values of the Brahmin Left. Another participant expressed actively voting against their own economic self-interest:

“I vote for what I think is good for society... I don’t vote for my own wallet... I believe that in a civilization, you have to vote left.” (*author’s translation*)⁶ (Participant B)

This participant expresses a feeling shared amongst many Brahmin Left voters that voting for more left-wing policies is a civic duty, reflecting the participants’ strong value-based relationship with left-oriented parties. Together, these quotes reflect the division in ideological beliefs between Brahmin Left and Merchant Right voters.

During the interviews, it was also evident that some participants felt ideologically conflicted and did not neatly fit into either the Brahmin Left or Merchant Right. Several interviewees debated which party to vote for, often swinging between D66 and VVD. These "crossover" voters illustrate how political identities are often fluid and negotiated rather than fixed, especially within a class that navigates privilege. One participant captured this tension explicitly, describing their discomfort with voting VVD despite leaning that way on economic issues:

“I voted for VVD with a heavy heart.” (*author’s translation*)⁷ (Participant A)

⁵ Original quote in Dutch: “Het belangrijkste is hoe voel ik me fijn in deze samenleving?... Ik ben voorstander om dat niveau zo hoog mogelijk te krijgen voor iedereen.”

⁶ Original quote in Dutch: “Ik stem waarvan ik denk dat het goed is voor de maatschappij... ik stem niet voor mijn eigen portemonnee... Ik geloof dat je in een beschaving links moet stemmen.”

⁷ Original quote in Dutch: “Ik heb met pijn in mijn buik VVD gestemd.”

This comment reflects the moral conflict that this participant was feeling and a key tension between economic self-interest and ideological commitments that several participants expressed (Participant A, D, D2, G, J and T). While this participant's financial interests aligned with VVD, they particularly expressed discomfort with the party's stance on issues like climate policy and social equity. This suggests that while many participants prioritize economic self-interest, there is a limit to this logic. When a party's stance conflicts too strongly with their moral or cultural values, those values begin to outweigh financial considerations in the voting decision. This participants' regret hints at the fragility of this pure economic self-interest logic once other values enter the consciousness. Another participant shared the same concern:

“I used to always vote VVD, then I shifted a bit to D66 and Volt. Last time I voted for VVD again, I regret it, but that's something else.” (*author's translation*)⁸ (Participant J)

This reflects a common trajectory among upper-class voters: a history of economically motivated voting, followed by growing alignment with centrist or progressive parties, and the occasional reversion to older patterns, sometimes accompanied by doubt or dissatisfaction. The back-and-forth movement suggests that political alignment within the upper class is often responsive to changing life circumstances or political climates. These internal conflicts within the participants complicate the binary Merchant Right and Brahmin left and illustrate that the decisions are not always of one singular identity but instead represent fluctuating feelings.

4.3 Theme 2: Family Background & Upbringing

The second theme recognized is the role of an participants' family background and upbringing in shaping their current political views. During the interviews, it was evident that family background emerged as a significant factor in shaping their political orientations. This influence manifested itself in two forms, both in terms of their parents' political beliefs transmission and their class of origin. For many participants, political socialization started at home. While some participants experienced open political discussions at home with their parents, others experienced a subtle transmission of values from their parents that they carried with them. These exposures set the tone for future political beliefs, either in the way that they

⁸ Original quote in Dutch: “Vroeger stemde ik altijd VVD, toen ben ik een beetje uitgeweken naar D66 en Volt. De laatste keer toch weer VVD. Spijt, maar dat is wat anders.”

are reinforcing inherited values or consciously stepping away from them. One participant traced their current alignment with Groenlinks-PvdA with her father's long-standing working-class values:

“If I look at my family of origin, my father was also left-leaning. So kind of a Korean PvdA, very much for the working class and very aware of that. He strongly disapproved of right-wing policies. That stuck with me.” (*author's translation*)⁹
(Participant B)

Another participant outlined how their religious upbringing influenced their initial inclination towards a more Christian-oriented party, despite their parents not voting for a Christian party. This indicates how religious values can be transmitted independently of political alignment and still influence political attitudes:

“I think I was raised fairly Catholic, but my parents never voted for Christian parties. Still, I was quite anti-abortion when I first left home, probably because my mother was.” (*author's translation*)¹⁰ (Participant Y)

This quote not only highlights the subtle influence of family values, but also points toward the religious climate in which some participants were raised. Although religion may not have remained a central factor in their adult political choices, it played an important role in shaping early morals that this participant carried with them. Furthermore, several participants discussed how being raised in expat or international households shaped their open-mindedness and pro-European political values:

“I was raised internationally, more than the average Dutch person, I think. My parents were always very liberal. They weren't afraid of change or of other people or cultures, they found them interesting. That definitely influenced my pro-European outlook.”
(*author's translation*)¹¹ (Participant A)

⁹ Original quote in Dutch: “Als ik naar het gezin van afkomst kijk, was mijn vader ook links georiënteerd, een soort Koreaanse PvdA, zeg maar. Hij was voor de arbeidersklasse en hier zeer uitgesproken over. Het rechtse beleid, dat keurde hij heel erg af. Dat is wel iets wat duidelijk bij mij is gebeven.”

¹⁰ Original quote in Dutch: “Ik denk dat ik vanuit huis uit best wel katholiek ben opgevoed, maar niet dat mijn ouders ooit christelijke partijen stemden. Ik was best wel anti-abortus toen ik jong was, toen ik net uit huis kwam, omdat mijn moeder dat ook is.”

¹¹ Original quote in Dutch: “Ik denk dat ik altijd meer internationaal ben opgevoed dan de gemiddelde Nederlander. Mijn ouders waren ook altijd heel liberaal. Zij zijn niet bang voor verandering en niet bang voor

“I was an expat kid, and that put me in a certain position where some issues felt more important than they might have felt for others. That definitely had an effect.”

*(author's translation)*¹² (Participant T)

Another participant described how his center-right environment during his upbringing shaped his political attitudes subtly:

“My father was almost always a VVD voter... We talked about politics at home, and there were opinions about it. Certain comedians were liked or not liked based on the political color they had, that kind of thing shaped me. And I grew up in Castricum, a neighborhood where a lot of people voted center-right, so that was around me too.”

*(author's translation)*¹³ (Participant G)

These comments all illustrate the influence of the environment they grew up in as a child on their current political beliefs.

During the interviews, it also became apparent that the social class participants grew up in had an influence on their current political beliefs. Participants who experienced upward mobility, moving from a lower-income or working-class to the upper-class, demonstrated more political tendencies towards the left. These narratives suggest that experiencing hardship early in life can foster stronger support for redistributive policies and social equality. One participant explained how growing up in poverty had an impact on their political views:

“I do vote differently than my parents, but I did grow up in relative poverty. I didn't get new clothes until I was ten, going to a store for clothes was completely new to me.

andere mensen en andere culturen. Dat vinden ze juist interessant en boeiend. Ik denk dat dat zeker van invloed is geweest op mijn pro-Europese instelling.

¹² Original quote in Dutch: “Ik was zelf een expat kind, waardoor ik misschien bepaalde onderwerpen belangrijker vond dan iemand die niet zo'n opvoeding heeft gehad. Dat heeft zeker effect gehad.”

¹³ Original quote in Dutch: “Mijn vader was vrijwel altijd een VVD-stemmer...Wij bespraken vroeger de politiek en er werden meningen gedeeld. Bepaalde cabaretiers waren goed of niet goed en dat was politiek gekleurd en daar werd je in meegenomen Ik woonde ook in Castricum, een buurt waar ook heel veel meer centrum-rechts stemmende mensen waren, dus dat speelde ook wel om mij heen.”

Experiencing that kind of poverty really shaped me.” (*author’s translation*)¹⁴

(Participant O)

Another participant reflected on how their single mother’s sacrifices and the opportunity to access higher education inspired a sense of duty to vote for societal equality:

“We lived just above welfare level. My mother was a single parent who worked seven days a week in a cheese shop and didn’t have an education. So politics wasn’t really discussed, but I did grow up in a society where I could study because of the certain level of social equality that does exist within the Netherlands. The chance to climb the social ladder on my own is something I consider incredibly valuable. These kinds of factors definitely influence how I view society and politics.” (*author’s translation*)¹⁵

(Participant A2)

Similarly, a participant expressed that putting her background into perspective with her current privilege informed progressive values:

“My mom always said... you're incredibly privileged compared to the poverty in Mexico. That always made me vote left.” (*author’s translation*)¹⁶ (Participant Y, 20-30)

Together, these reflections illustrate how early life circumstances, both economic and ideological, provide a crucial lens through which individuals interpret their political roles. Particularly, class mobility seemed to be a strong factor for why many upper-class individuals had left leaning tendencies.

¹⁴ Original quote in Dutch: "...Ik stem wel anders dan mijn ouders, maar wel op basis van de omstandigheden waarin ik opgegroeid ben. Ik ben in relatieve armoede opgegroeid. Nieuwe kleding kreeg ik voor het eerst toen ik 10 was, naar een winkel gaan om dat te kopen was echt nieuw voor mij. Dus ja, echte armoede meemaken, dat is wel vormend.”

¹⁵ Original quote in Dutch: “Ik kom uit een gezin dat net boven het bijstandsniveau leefde. Mijn moeder was alleenstaand, werkte zeven dagen per week in een kaaswinkel en had geen opleiding. Er werd thuis niet over politiek gesproken, waardoor ik niet ben opgegroeid met politieke keuzes. Wel heb ik ervaren hoe het is om op te groeien in een samenleving waarin een bepaalde mate van sociale gelijkheid heerst, en dat heb ik als prettig ervaren. Ik heb de kans gekregen om te studeren. De mogelijkheid om zelf de maatschappelijke ladder te beklimmen, zie ik als een ontzettend waardevolle kans die mij geboden is. Zulke factoren beïnvloeden zeker hoe ik naar de samenleving en de politiek kijk.”

¹⁶ Original quote in Dutch: “Mijn moeder zei altijd... je bent enorm bevoorrecht vergeleken met armoede in Mexico... dat heeft me altijd links gemaakt.”

4.4 Theme 3: Educational Experiences

This theme explores how the educational experiences, particularly their field of study and peer networks, shaped or reinforced the participants' political orientations. The various educational experiences of the participants illustrated that for some participants, this was a relevant factor in their political socialization journey, but overall, not an extremely significant one. Several participants stated it was their peer groups or academic disciplines that shaped or turned their political ideologies, while others said that their educational background reinforced and strengthened certain political ideologies they already had. This section examines how the educational environments of the participants, field of study and the interaction with their peers shaped their political orientation. One participant reveals how going to a liberal arts college where students were extremely socially engaged and progressive shaped her political orientation further towards the left:

“My bachelor's was quite a progressive, left-wing bubble. I had a lot of conversations with my friends about issues like abortion, etc... the discussions I had during my studies with progressive people definitely contributed to my political views.”

*(author's translation)*¹⁷ (Participant Y)

In line with the predictions of Häusermann & Kriesi (2015), the educational disciplines studied also had an impact on the political socialization of several participants. A participant reflected on the fact that their business study yielded more conservative beliefs based on the fact that politics was not often discussed and they were taught more market-oriented ideologies:

“I studied international management and business, and it was definitely leaning in that direction [more right-wing]. There were some discussions about politics, but it certainly wasn't left-leaning.” *(author's translation)*¹⁸ (Participant G)

Another participant who studied Law stated that their studies reinforced their commitment to constitutional principles, something they still prioritize in their political preference today:

¹⁷ Original quote in Dutch: "Mijn bachelor was natuurlijk best wel een progressief linkse bubbel. Ik had toen ook wel veel gesprekken met mijn vriendinnen over bijvoorbeeld kwesties zoals abortus, etc. De gesprekken die ik tijdens mijn studie met progressief linkse mensen heb gehad, hebben sowieso bijgedragen aan mijn politieke voorkeur, ja."

¹⁸ Original quote in Dutch: "Ik heb international management business gedaan, dus dat is ook wel vrij die kant op. Daar werd ook wel over de politiek gepraat en dat was zeker niet links georiënteerd."

“I always saw the Constitution as an important instrument, even growing up. I think my choice of study only strengthened that. It didn't change it, but it reinforced it.”
(*author's translation*)¹⁹ (Participant A2)

Similarly, another participant, who pursued psychology and philosophy, spoke about how these fields deepened their understanding of social and political theories and which ones they felt most affiliated with and wanted their political party to practice:

“In psychology and philosophy, I was drawn towards social psychology, social philosophy, and political philosophy. That's no coincidence. I found theories like liberalism, socialism, and mass psychology fascinating. I learned and read a lot about it, and it definitely shaped my worldview.” (*author's translation*)²⁰ (Participant O)

One participant noted how their early academic experiences sparked interest in political issues and awareness, even though their academic path later was less politically oriented:

“It's more that certain subjects, like history, appealed to me. Of course, in my logistics bachelor, you didn't study history. But from high school (VWO), I always found history and geography interesting. I've read a lot about 19th and 20th-century history, and that shaped my opinions, as I am seeing certain patterns repeating.” (*author's translation*)²¹ (Participant E)

These findings illustrate that the effects of education on someone's political orientation happen in both a direct and indirect manner. Direct, through the interaction with peers at their study and indirect, through the shaping of critical thinking skills and exposure to historical and social frameworks. However, it is evident that the extent to which education

¹⁹ Original quote in Dutch: “Ik heb altijd al de grondwet een heel belangrijk instrument gevonden, ook toen ik opgroeide. Dat is, denk ik, door mijn studiekeuze alleen maar versterkt. Niet veranderd, maar wel versterkt.”

²⁰ Original quote in Dutch: “In de studie psychologie en in de filosofie heb ik de richting van sociale psychologie, sociale filosofie en politieke filosofie gekozen. Dat is niet voor niets. Dat is omdat ik dat interessant vond. Ik vind vooral de theorieën zoals liberalisme, socialisme, communisme, heel interessant. Ik heb er veel over geleerd en over gelezen en dat heeft nadrukkelijk ook wel mijn wereldbeeld gevormd.”

²¹ Original quote in Dutch: “Het is meer dat bepaalde vakken mij aanspraken, bijvoorbeeld geschiedenis. Uiteindelijk, in mijn logistiek bachelor, kreeg ik natuurlijk geen geschiedenis, Het was meer op de middelbare school (VWO). Ik vond geschiedenis heel interessant en aardrijkskunde. Ik heb heel veel gelezen over geschiedenis, 20e eeuw en 19e eeuw. Dat vormt wel mijn mening, want je ziet bepaalde patronen terugkomen.”

plays a role is contingent on the field of study and the extent to which the individual remains politically engaged during academic life. Thus, education served more as a site of gradual reinforcement than one of dramatic political transformation.

4.5 Theme 4: Workplace & Professional Culture

The professional environment in which the participants were working emerged as a very important indicator of their affiliation with certain values, which then transferred to a specific political party. Individuals who worked in more private and corporate sectors found themselves more concerned with economic issues, whereas individuals who worked in the private sector, like in education and healthcare, strongly prioritized social values. One participant explained how she experienced this changing sense of values when moving from a profit-driven consultancy environment into a role more closely aligned with education and social impact. Reflecting on this transition, the participant stated:

“In my previous job, at a consultancy firm, it was such a different world compared to where I am now...I found it very difficult, because there was no safe environment to express myself there....Now, I feel like this fits perfectly—this is exactly what I was always looking for.” (*author’s translation*)²² (Participant I)

This quote highlights the importance of the work environment on the influence of participants' political alignment; whilst this participant may not have transferred ideological beliefs in the private sector, her struggle with the environment illustrates the high level of influence. Similarly, Participant C, a nurse, emphasized how her work in healthcare shaped her voting priorities. When asked what values she prioritizes when voting she responded :

“Yes, the climate is of course the most important thing for all of us, but healthcare and education too, really. And healthcare even a bit more, because I’ve been working in it for years.” (*author’s translation*)²³ (Participant C)

²² Original quote in Dutch: “In mijn vorige werk, in de consultancy bijvoorbeeld. Dat is zo'n andere wereld dan waar ik nu in zit . Ik vond het daar heel lastig, want er was gewoon geen veilige omgeving om mij uit te spreken. Ik denk nu dit past gewoon zo goed, dit is gewoon waar ik altijd naar op zoek ben geweest.”

²³ Original quote in Dutch: “Ja, het klimaat is natuurlijk het allerbelangrijkst voor ons allemaal, maar zorg en onderwijs natuurlijk ook eigenlijk. Maar de zorg nog eens een beetje extra, omdat ik natuurlijk al jaren in de zorg werk.”

This quote reinforces how long-term involvement in her profession shaped her values towards policies that support public policies. In contrast, the interplay between economic expertise and political awareness surfaced among participants in the financial sector. One participant reflected on how working in finance naturally kept political and economic issues interconnected in their daily life:

"I always enjoy reading about it, like the *Financieele Dagblad*, but mostly in terms of finance. But politics and finance are very much intertwined, so it definitely relates to my daily work." (*author's translation*)²⁴ (Participant G)

The level of influence of the workplace environment, specifically the private versus the public sector, was apparent when comparing all the participants (see Table 3).

Table 3

Participant Careers and Political Orientation (Workplace Influence)

Participant	Occupation	Sector Type	Political Party (based on 2023 general elections)
Participant A	CEO of a private financial firm	Private / financial sector	VVD
Participant A2	Head legal advisor	Private / corporate	Groenlinks-PvdA
Participant B	General practitioner	Public / healthcare	Groenlinks-PvdA
Participant C	Nurse	Public / healthcare	Groenlinks-PvdA
Participant D	Gifted Education Specialist / Teacher	Public / education	D66
Participant D2	Private property owner / Entrepreneur	Private / self-employed	VVD
Participant E	Logistical advisor at a major car company	Private / corporate	Groenlinks-PvdA

²⁴ Original quote in Dutch: "Ik vind het altijd wel mooi om er veel over te lezen, bijvoorbeeld het *Financieele Dagblad*, maar dat is vooral op financieel gebied. Politieke en financiële werelden zijn heel erg met elkaar verweven, dus politiek heeft ook zeker met mijn dagelijkse werk te maken."

Participant G	Network manager at a major bank	Private / finance	VVD
Participant I	Strategic advisor, education directorate at a municipality	Public / education	Groenlinks-PvdA
Participant J	Vice-president for a major bank & Fundraiser for Make a Wish	Private / finance & non-profit	VVD
Participant O	Manager, Probation Data and Statistics	Public / social services	Groenlinks-PvdA
Participant T	Board Member (Investment Management)	Private / financial sector	VVD
Participant Y	PhD Student	Public / academia	Groenlinks-PvdA

Table 3 illustrates a clear trend between sector type and political affiliation. Participants working in the public sector (e.g., in healthcare, education, and social services) predominantly favored progressive parties like GroenLinks-PvdA or centrist-liberal options such as D66. In contrast, the participants in the private sector, particularly in finance and entrepreneurship, were more likely to align with right-leaning parties like VVD. With the exception of Participant A2 and Participant E, this whole chart aligns with that distinction, suggesting that the nature of participants' professional environments has a large effect on their political orientation.

4.6 Theme 5: Voting Logic and Justification

Beyond analyzing the various phases of the participants' lives that have shaped their political affiliation, it is also of relevance to dive into how the participants justified voting for their party. Through thematically analyzing this data it helps conclude *how* participants make sense of their own political affiliations in their own words. Participants strongly identifying with the values of the Merchant Right were seen justifying their economic self-interest by elaborating on how they earned their economic capital:

"I worked extremely hard for it, and I'm fine with giving part of it away, but I also believe that there should be a certain level of appreciation in return, one that

distinguishes me from an average person, for example." (*author's translation*)²⁵

(Participant D2)

Another participant illustrated nuance, acknowledging the importance of social responsibility but still, in the end, prioritizing personal financial well-being:

"Of course, I look at our own situation and what is good for our own wallet. But I also think we live in a very rich country, and we have to share that a little bit. So the social aspect certainly counts, but the individual comes first." (*author's translation*)²⁶

(Participant G)

During the interviews with the various VVD-voters it was evident that a recurring tension emerged between the values they claimed to prioritize and the actual parties they voted for. Many participants who voted for VVD said issues like climate change and solidarity were important to them, though when it came to voting, economic issues always prevailed. One participant, when asked whether they would vote against their own economic interests in favor of a party that aligned more with their social values, described this internal conflict:

"Yes, the answer is yes, but within a certain bandwidth. If you look at the example of Timmermans²⁷, who wants to introduce a wealth tax so significant that no matter what you do, your wealth eventually evaporates. That's going too far, I won't vote for that. Even if I agree with him on other topics. Giving up a portion of your own earnings to help others? Yes, absolutely. But there are limits." (*author's translation*)²⁸ (Participant J)

²⁵ Original quote in Dutch: "Ik werkte er keihardvoor en ik vind ik het prima om een deel af te staan. Wel vind ik ook dat er een bepaalde waardering tegenover moet staan, die mij onderscheidt van Jan-modaal bijvoorbeeld."

²⁶ Original quote in Dutch: "Lekker makkelijk antwoord, maar natuurlijk kijk ik naar de eigen situatie en wat goed is voor onze eigen portemonnee. Daarnaast vind ik dat we in een heel rijk land wonen en dat we dat ook voor een gedeelte moeten delen met elkaar. Het sociale aspect telt zeker mee, maar het individuele belang staat voorop."

²⁷ Frans Timmermans is a Dutch politician and former European Commissioner. At the time of the 2023 elections, he was the lead candidate for the joint GroenLinks-PvdA list.

²⁸ Original quote in Dutch: "Het antwoord is ja, maar wel binnen een bepaalde bandbreedte. Als je kijkt naar het voorbeeld van Timmermans die vermogensbelasting wil invoeren, die zodanig is dat wat je ook doet, je vermogen dan gewoon op een gegeven moment verdamppt. Dat gaat wel heel ver, daar ga ik niet op stemmen. Ook al ben ik het met hem misschien eens op andere thema's. Om een deel van jouw eigen verdiensten af te staan om te zorgen dat anderen beter krijgen. Jazeker, het moet wel, maar er zijn wel grenzen."

On the other hand, a participant who voted for Groenlinks-PvdA recognized the economic efficiency of more center-right parties policies but voiced skepticism about market fairness:

“A free market doesn't work when there's inequality in market power. That's why we have to look at how to distribute wealth more fairly, even if it's less efficient.”

*(author's translation)*²⁹ (Participant Y)

This illustrates that not all Dutch upper-class individuals with economic expertise align with parties that prioritize pro-market policies; in some cases, their knowledge even leads them to critique such policies. This highlights a counterintuitive finding that rather than reinforcing Merchant Right orientation, Participant Y's knowledge supported their moral rationale for redistribution. To conclude, the analysis of participants' voting logic reveals a layered relationship between their values and their electoral decisions. Voting decisions are deemed not purely ideological but also in a complex interplay with their self-interest, moral values and social responsibility.

²⁹ Original quote in Dutch: "Een vrije markt werkt niet als er ongelijkheid in marktmacht is. Daarom moeten we kijken hoe we vermogen eerlijker kunnen verdelen, zelfs als dat minder efficiënt is."

5. Discussion & Conclusion

5.1 Revisiting Theory

This chapter discusses the broader implications of the findings outlined in the previous chapter by analyzing how the voting patterns align with the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* (Gethin et al., 2022) and political socialization theories. These theories are used as a lens to help conceptualize the political divide within the Dutch upper class and how these preferences are shaped across an individual's life course—through their family, education, and career experiences. In doing so, the chapter addresses the central research question: What drives the political preferences of the Dutch upper class (economic interests, ideological values, or a combination of both), and how are these preferences shaped across the life course? The chapter concludes by highlighting the study's contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

The findings of this study broadly support Gethin et al. (2022), which outline a growing divide between elites who derive their status from economic capital (Merchant Right) and those who hold cultural and educational capital (Brahmin Left). This model provides a valuable contextual backdrop for understanding voting trends within the Dutch upper class. However, this research emphasizes that while many participants held overlapping forms of capital, it was the type of capital most central to their professional identity that appeared to shape their political alignment. Participants who worked in finance, entrepreneurship, or private enterprise often identified with VVD, as these roles are typically associated with economic capital. Participants employed in academia or healthcare, professions more closely linked to human and cultural capital, tended to align more strongly with GroenLinks-PvdA or, in some cases, D66. While VVD voters generally prioritized economic liberalism and deregulation, GroenLinks-PvdA voters emphasized education, healthcare, and social welfare. D66 supporters often fell somewhere in between, blending market-oriented priorities with progressive social and environmental values.

These patterns reflect the theoretical expectations of earlier theories: RCT, which emphasizes economic self-interest, and post-materialism, which centers cultural and ideological values. Some participants displayed clear signs of pocketbook voting, prioritizing their financial self-interest when making electoral decisions, an expression of RCT logic (Elinder et al., 2015). Others, however, leaned more heavily on post-materialist or cultural values, suggesting that these motivations may override economic concerns in certain contexts (Inglehart, 1977). While neither theory (RCT or post-materialism) can account for the

multifaceted ideological diversity found within the Dutch upper class, they both touch upon dimensions that are integrated within the broader *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework. In this way, the findings suggest that economic and cultural motivations coexist, often simultaneously influencing upper-class political alignment.

Yet, neither occupational affiliation nor individual motivations fully determine political alignment. Several participants explained various conflicting values or evolving political identities. These findings reiterate the importance of integrating political socialization theory to explain how these political orientations are formed. The three hypotheses proposed in this study that discuss family transmission, educational discipline and the influence of entering the job market help unpack the life-course processes that lead the Dutch upper class to adopt different political positions, even within similar economic or educational brackets. To understand how these political positions come to be, the study relied on political socialization theory, which helps explain how values, attitudes, and ideological preferences are formed across the life course, starting in childhood, reinforced or challenged during education, and adapted in the workplace. This framework guided three hypotheses on the impact of parental influence, educational environment, and occupational socialization towards more center-right, center-left or left-leaning political orientation.

Hypothesis 1 outlined that political preferences would align with those of one's parents, for which the study found only limited support. There were relatively few signs of the drastic impact the direct transmission (explicit transmission of beliefs through observation and communication) of values from parents had on the participants (Bandura, 1977; Dalton, 1982; Jennings & Niemi, 1974). However, indirect socialization through class background was significant. The participants discussed the impact of the upward mobility they experienced, often expressing a lasting commitment to the values of social equality and redistribution. These findings support Dalton's (1982) and Glass et al.'s (1986) findings that the class environments children grow up in continue to shape political outlooks in the future. Several Groenlinks-PvdA supporters expressed that growing up in the working or middle class shaped their outlook on the social welfare system in the Netherlands. These participants felt a stronger incentive for redistribution as they experienced the benefits of it first-hand while growing up. Many participants described experiencing upward mobility as transformative in their outlook on politics, reinforcing the belief that an individual's class of origin shapes their political beliefs. This pattern aligns more closely with an adapted version of Hypothesis 1, in which the early socio-economic environment, rather than explicit parental ideology, influences long-term political beliefs.

Contrary to expectations in the literature (e.g., Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015; Stubager, 2010) that shaped Hypothesis 2, education did not emerge as a transformative political force in this study. The findings suggest education served more as a site of reinforcement for individuals to reaffirm their political beliefs. For instance, individuals who were already more progressively oriented found validation in particular disciplines where peers often had similar beliefs. Similarly, in business-related studies, participants experienced more market-oriented thinking, which still guides their orientation towards VVD in the present. It was often the participant's personal will to engage with political topics, rather than education level itself, that mattered more in shaping viewpoints. Therefore, this study does not prove Hypothesis 2, and instead suggests that when looking at how education shapes political ideology, it focuses more on the disciplinary culture and the peer environment than formal education alone.

This study reinforces and goes beyond the theoretical insights from Lipset (1960) and Kitschelt & Rehm (2014). These scholars argued that entering the labour market is a significant factor in shaping an individual's political preferences as they are confronted with material realities, class positions, and the cultural environment of their profession. This shaped Hypothesis 3, which proposed that political preferences are shaped by occupational environment. The participants reaffirmed this view, often referencing how their daily work environment, sector values, and even colleague interactions shaped or affirmed their political alignment. The results of this study also extend this hypothesis by demonstrating that political alignment is not only about material interest; it is also tied to the purpose and moral identity of the individual's profession. Participants in the public sector (e.g., education, healthcare, civil service) often referenced the importance of helping people and equity, values which aligned with left-wing political preferences. On the other hand, participants in the private sector focused more on values like entrepreneurial freedom, efficiency, and economic meritocracy, aligning more with the policies of right-wing parties. These responses illustrate that occupational values also act as a form of political socialization. Whilst this reinforces the claim by Kitschelt and Rehm (2014) that the workplace is a place for ideological development, it also suggests how future studies should dive into the ethics of working in the public versus private sector to help define broader political orientations.

To conclude, these findings illustrate that political preferences amongst the Dutch upper class are shaped by professional alignment and the socialization process and cannot be reduced down to simple binaries of economic and cultural capital. While trends exist between left-oriented and right-oriented voters, it is evident that political identities are formed through inherited environments and workplace dynamics. Alongside these socialization phases are

personal values, morals and lived experiences that help shape these phases but also separately establish a certain political identity. By using a qualitative lens, this study was able to uncover how Dutch upper-class voters construct their political identity and sometimes question it, showing that ideological alignment is not fixed but continuously reshaped across one's life. In doing so, the study bridges earlier theoretical frameworks such as RCT and post-materialism with newer models like the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* and political socialization. This demonstrates how economic interests and cultural values remain central yet intertwined in shaping political behavior. Ultimately, the findings suggest that both economic and ideological motivations contribute meaningfully to the political orientations of the Dutch upper class. Rather than being driven by a singular logic, their political identities emerge as layered and evolving, shaped by values acquired throughout key phases of life.

5.2 Contributions, Limitations & Future Research

This study offers a unique contribution by applying the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework and political socialization theory qualitatively to the Dutch upper class. Within social class research, there has been a large focus on quantitative survey data in order to detect trends between various classes. By conducting semi-structured interviews, this study had the opportunity to move beyond income and education and instead explore how individuals rationalize and narrate their political choices. This approach reveals the moral and experiential dimensions behind voting behavior, particularly the influence of an individual's class of origin and professional identity. This study also provides nuance to the Merchant Right and Brahmin Left concepts by revealing several crossover voters who describe a tension between economic concerns and progressive values. Whilst these crossover voters ultimately prioritized economic concerns, in line with the Merchant Right predictions, it is important to take note of their internal conflict.

While the following methodological limitations were acknowledged in Chapter 3, it is important to briefly restate their significance in shaping the scope of this study's findings. Despite this study being rich in its qualitative insight, it presents limited scope and generalizability. The sample size of the study is 13 participants, which is relatively small to detect trends that are reflective on a larger scale. While this study did not aim to produce generalizable results but rather looked for a deeper exploration of participants' underlying motivations, it is still important to acknowledge the limitations of the small sample size. The participants were also recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, which may have

skewed the sample towards more politically or socially engaged respondents. Furthermore, the study includes a large number of GroenLinks-PvdA and VVD voters, while D66 voters are significantly underrepresented, partly reflective of broader national trends at the time. This limited the study's ability to account for more centrist perspectives, which often struggle with the divide between economic and cultural voting motivations. Greater representation of D66 voters could have been particularly beneficial in capturing nuance and showing that elite political preferences exist on a spectrum rather than fitting neatly into either the Merchant Right or Brahmin Left.

Another important limitation to note is the possibility of social desirability bias during interviews. Given that this study discussed sensitive topics like class position, political affiliation, wealth, and privilege, participants may have shaped their answers in order to appear more socially responsible or morally justified. This was particularly evident as many VVD voters emphasized the importance of climate change or solidarity to rationalize their economic vote. While this does not invalidate their perspectives, it does suggest that certain justifications may be strategically framed, complicating the ability to fully assess the sincerity of certain motivations. Finally, the study may also have suffered from retrospective rationalization. Participants may have reinterpreted their past to align with current political beliefs, potentially causing an inaccurate explanation of their experiences growing up and during their education. This could have been harmful to the interpretation of how significant certain political socialization phases were.

In order to address these limitations and expand the current findings, future research could adopt a mixed-method analysis and investigate trends in Dutch upper class voting behavior on both a quantitative and qualitative scale. This could help provide broader generalizability while still maintaining a rich understanding of an individual's motivations and ideological narratives. Furthermore, the trends identified in this research could become even more significant if compared with countries experiencing similar political elite fragmentation. Given the international relevance of value-based voting among affluent and educated voters, it would be interesting to note if the motivations would be mirrored in another country. This would not only help test the external validity of the *Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right* framework but also help a more global understanding of the upper class' voting behavior.

Another important addition to this study could be the role of media in influencing the voting behavior of Dutch upper-class individuals. During the interviews, participants often explained how they established their voting preferences through mechanisms like *de*

*StemWijzer*³⁰, party programs, and televised debates. While this was not deemed relevant to explore in relation to the main theory of political socialization, it could provide valuable insights for further research into how political values are shaped through the media. Moreover, some participants mentioned the influence of the region they grew up in, particularly whether it was urban or rural, in shaping their political vote. These regional differences appeared to shape exposure to certain values, which may have contributed to early socialization patterns. While not the central focus of this study, regional differences could be an interesting avenue for future research. Finally, given the importance of professional identity in this study, it is recommended that future research continues exploring the values that shape certain professions, particularly within the sector divisions outlined in this study. Ultimately, this study invites a reconsideration of how we conceptualize elite political behavior. It is not simply a reflection of privilege or ideology but a reflective process shaped by lived experience, moral values, and professional identity.

³⁰ *De StemWijzer* refers to a Dutch online platform that helps users compare their views with political parties' positions by answering a series of policy-related questions. <https://home.stemwijzer.nl/>

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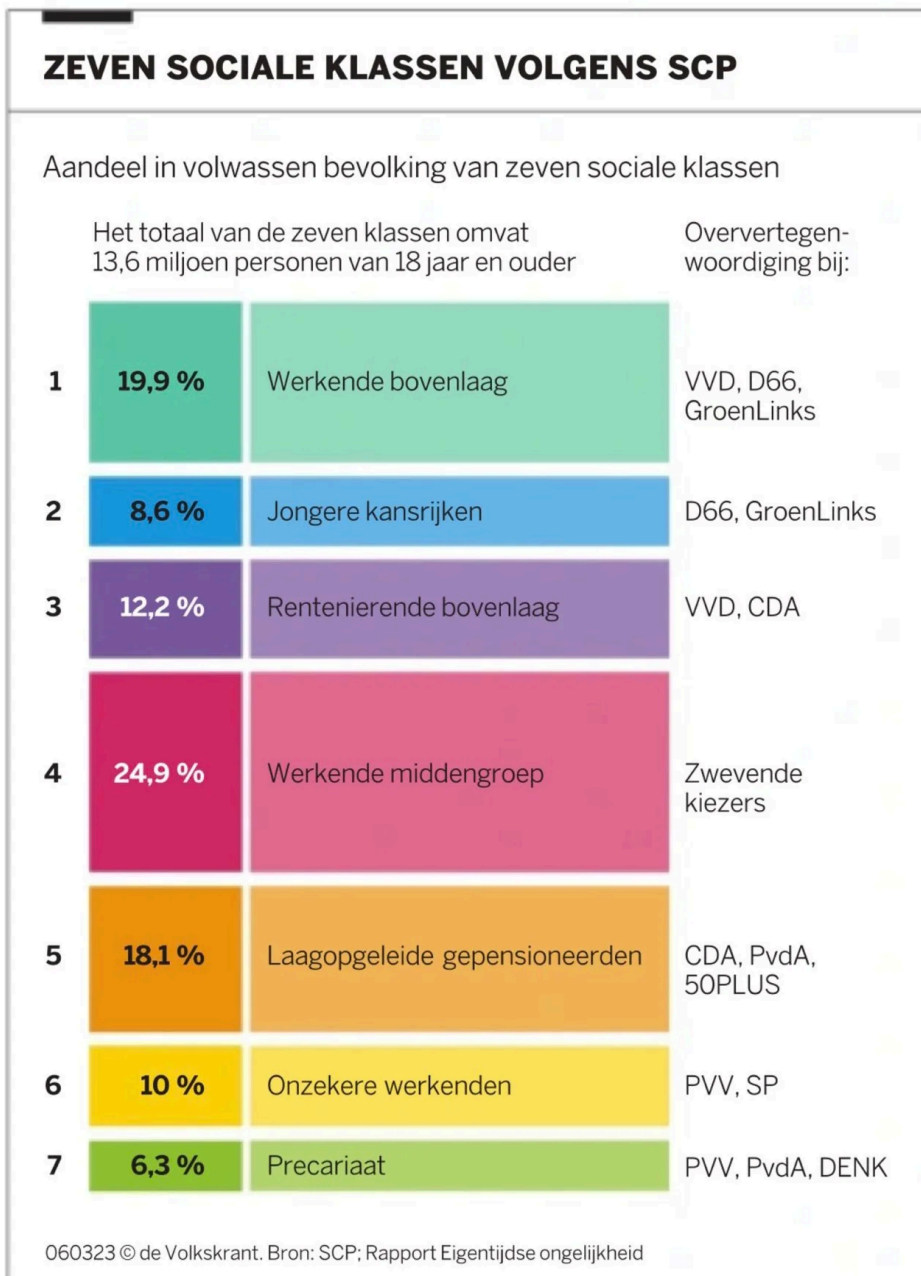
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7. Appendices

Appendix A

The Seven Social Classes According to the SCP

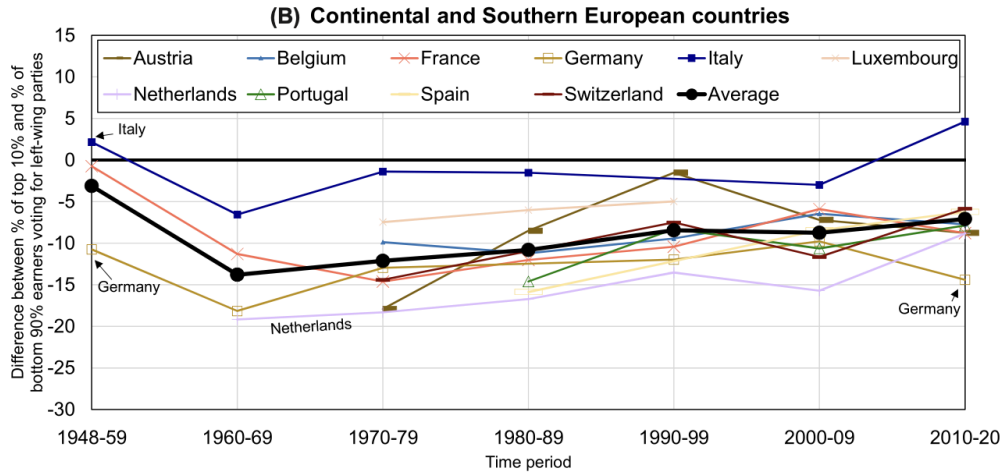
Adapted from Dekker (2023).



Appendix B

Income-Based Support for Left-Wing Parties (Top 10% vs. Bottom 90%) in Continental and Southern Europe (1948–2020)

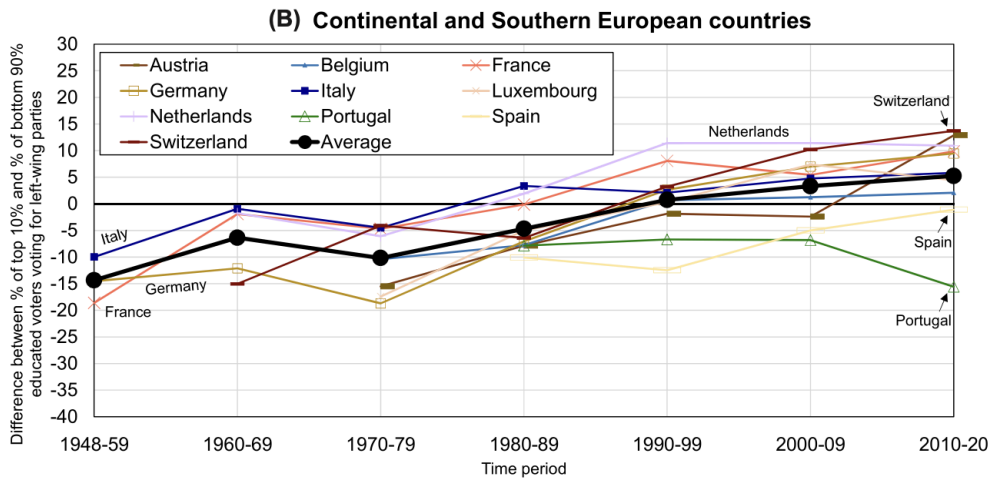
Adapted from Gethin et al. (2022).



Appendix C

Education-Based Support for Left-Wing Parties (Top 10% vs. Bottom 90%) in Continental and Southern Europe (1948–2020)

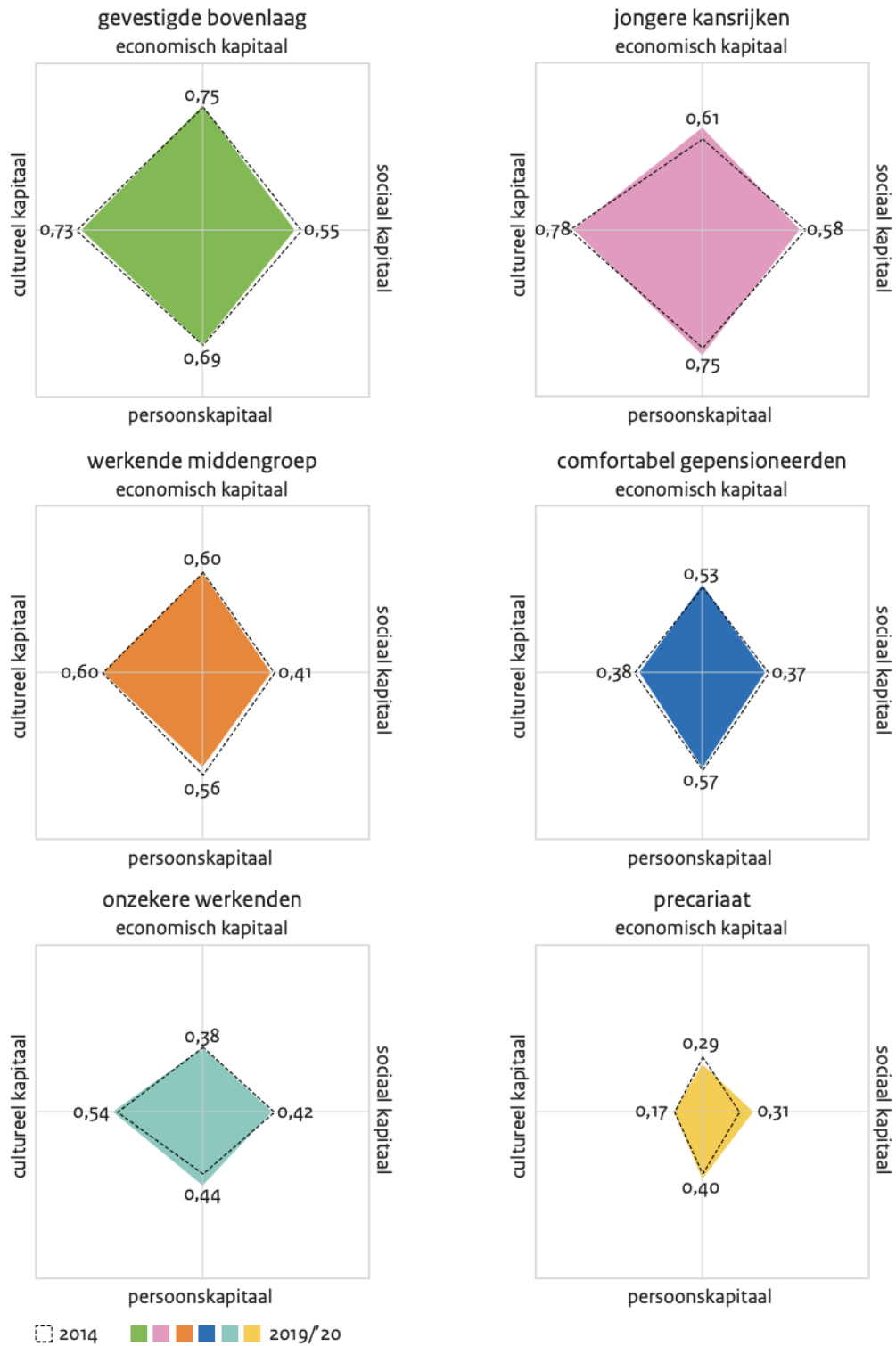
Adapted from Gethin et al. (2022).



Appendix D

The Four Forms of Capital per Social Class

Adapted from Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (2021).



Appendix E

Interview Questions

Identificatie de werkende bovenlaag

1. Kunt u iets vertellen over uzelf en wat u in het dagelijks leven doet?
(Could you tell a little bit about yourself and what you do in your daily life?)
2. Wat is uw opleidingsachtergrond, en hoe bent u gekomen waar u nu bent?
(What is your current occupation and how did you come to the position where you are now?)
3. Hoe zou u uw levensstijl omschrijven, zowel doordeweeks als in uw vrije tijd?
(→ Vrijtijdsbesteding, reizen, cultuur, consumptie, gezondheid)
(How would you describe your lifestyle, both during the week and in your free time?)
(→ Leisure activities, travel, culture, consumption, health)
 - a. Hoe vergelijkt u zichzelf met leeftijdsgenoten of mensen in uw omgeving?
 - i. *How do you compare yourself to peers or people in your surroundings?*
4. Welke rol speelt uw familieachtergrond in wie u nu bent?
(→ Opvoeding, sociaal en cultureel kapitaal, netwerk, waarden)
What role does your family background play in who you are today?
(→ Upbringing, social and cultural capital, network, values)

Politieke voorkeur & stemgeschiedenis

5. Hoe betrokken bent u bij de politiek? Zou u zichzelf als politiek actief beschouwen?
How involved are you in politics? Would you consider yourself politically active?
 - a. Volgt u het nieuws, gaat u gesprekken aan met vrienden en familie, of bezoekt u politieke evenementen?
Do you follow the news, have discussions with friends or family, or attend political events?
6. Stemt u altijd bij nationale verkiezingen, of slaat u soms een keer over?
 - a. *Do you always vote in general elections, or do you sometimes skip them?*
7. Op welke partij heeft u bij de laatste verkiezingen gestemd, en steunt u deze partij altijd?
Which party did you vote for in the last election, and do you consistently support this party?

8. Heeft u ooit van partij gewisseld? Zo ja, wat was de reden daarvoor?
Have you ever switched parties? If so, what was the reason for that?
9. Hoe bepaalt u welke partij u op stemt?
 (→ Stemwijzer? Krant? Debatten? Partij boekjes?)
How do you decide which party to vote for?
(Vote match tools? Newspapers? Debates? Party manifestos?)

Motivaties achter stemkeuzes

10. Welke kwesties zijn voor u het belangrijkste bij het bepalen van uw stem? Waarom?
 (→ Economie, belastingen, klimaatverandering, onderwijs, gezondheidszorg, immigratie, etc.)
Which issues are most important to you when deciding your vote? Why?
(Economy, taxes, climate change, education, healthcare, immigration, etc.)
- a. Zijn dat altijd al dezelfde thema's geweest?
Have those always been the same issues for you?
11. Zou u ooit tegen uw eigen economische belangen stemmen als een partij beter aansluit bij uw andere waarden?
Would you ever vote against your own economic interests if a party better reflects your other values?
12. Ziet u zichzelf als iemand die stemt op basis van beleid dat u persoonlijk ten goede komt, of eerder op basis van beleid dat goed is voor de samenleving als geheel?
 Waarom?
Do you see yourself as someone who votes based on policies that benefit you personally, or more based on what's good for society as a whole? Why?
13. Houdt u bij het stemmen vooral rekening met de lange termijn effecten van het beleid, of meer met directe voordelen?
When voting, do you mostly consider the long-term effects of policies or more the immediate benefits?
14. Op welke manier heeft uw opvoeding, en bijvoorbeeld hoe er thuis over politiek werd gesproken, invloed gehad op uw huidige stemgedrag?
In what ways has your upbringing, for example how politics was discussed at home, influenced your current voting behavior?
15. Hoe heeft uw opleiding invloed gehad op uw politieke overtuigingen of stemgedrag?
How has your education influenced your political beliefs or voting behavior?

16. Op welke manier speelt uw huidige baan een rol in hoe u over politiek nadenkt en stemt?

In what ways does your current occupation shape how you think about politics and vote?

Politieke percepties & identiteit

17. Wat denkt u dat de belangrijkste verschillen zijn tussen kiezers die op de VVD stemmen en kiezers die voor D66 of GroenLinks kiezen?

What do you think are the main differences between voters who support the VVD and those who vote for D66 or GroenLinks?

Appendix F

Participant Overview

Participant ID	Age Range	Gender	Occupation	Sector Type	Political Affiliation (2023)	City/Region
A	60-70	Male	CEO of a private financial firm	Private / financial sector	VVD	Warmond
A2	40-50	Female	Head legal advisor	Private / corporate	Groenlinks -PvdA	Houten
B	50-60	Female	General practitioner	Public / healthcare	Groenlinks -PvdA	Enschede
C	50-60	Female	Nurse	Public / healthcare	Groenlinks -PvdA	Heemskerk
D	50-60	Female	Gifted Education Specialist / Teacher	Public / education	D66	Rotterdam
D2	50-60	Female	Private property owner / Entrepreneur	Private / self-employed	VVD	Aerdenhout
E	50-60	Male	Logistical	Private /	Groenlinks	Heemskerk

			advisor at a major car company	corporate	-PvdA	
G	50-60	Male	Network manager at a major bank	Private / finance	VVD	Heemskerk
I	50-60	Female	Strategic advisor, education directorate at a municipality	Public / education	Groenlinks -PvdA	Amsterdam
J	50-60	Female	Vice-president for a major bank & Fundraiser for Make a Wish	Private / finance & non-profit	VVD	Warmond
O	50-60	Male	Manager, Probation Data and Statistics	Public / social services	Groenlinks -PvdA	Amsterdam
T	50-60	Male	Board Member (Investment Management)	Private / financial sector	VVD	Hilversum
Y	20-30	Female	PhD Student	Public / academia	Groenlinks -PvdA	Amsterdam