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Social Structure and Voting Behaviour in Denmark since 1920

Soeren Risbjerg Thomsen

Introduction

This is a report from a part of The Danish Ecological Election Project at the Institute of Political Science concerning the relation between the Danish class structure and voting behaviour since proportional representation was introduced in 1920. In this same year Denmark found its current geographical shape, when the Danish speaking part of Schleswig was united with the kingdom.

The results presented is based on a controversial methodology called "ecological inference" that has been subject to much debate since Robinson in 1950 denounced it as an "ecological fallacy". Simply put the problem of ecological inference is to estimate individual behaviour from purely geographically aggregated statistics. For example within electoral research the aim of ecological inference is to estimate tables of individual voter mobility and class voting from official geographical election and census statistics.

Although the practice of ecological inference is daring and risky it is at the same time very tempting because it holds the promise of providing electoral research with information that under normal circumstances when the ballot is secret is only possible to get with personal interviews. Especially in historical research the need for ecological inference is great, simply because we do not have information about past individual behaviour. Unfortunately to this day electoral research has not been very successful in designing valid methods for ecological estimation of individual voting behaviour 1).

In this perspective the present article presents estimates of class voting with an uncertain scientific status, since they are based on ecological inference.

A latent structure method for ecological inference

The methodology for ecological inference applied in this paper was developed by the author 2). It differs from the contemporary very prominent regression approach by applying correlations instead of regression coefficients. This is an unusual procedure because even among researchers indulging in the practice of ecological inference the consensus is that there is no certain relation between individual and ecological correlations.

In my opinion this consensus is only justified when applying the Pearson correlation on the individual as well as on the ecological level. On basis of a la-

1) Soeren Risbjerg Thomsen, *Danish Elections 1920 - 79. A Logit Approach to Ecological Analysis and Inference* (Aarhus, 1987), pp. 38 - 45.

2) *Ibid.*

tent structure theory of voting behaviour it can be shown that under certain circumstances the individual tetrachoric correlation is approximating the ecological Pearson logit correlation within a homogenous political region 3).

The following results is produced by a computer program, which by an iteration procedure constructs individual tetrachoric (four-fold) tables that simultaneously satisfy the hypothesis of identical individual and ecological correlation within homogenous political regions 4). Comparison with interview results since 1957 shows quite good correspondence between ecological estimates of class voting and interview results 5).

The Danish social structure since 1920

In this context social structure is narrowly defined as class relations. In comparison with most European countries the development of class relations in this century was rather peaceful in Denmark. The damages from the two world wars were limited and at least the urban industries endured the crises in international trade during the 1920's and 1930's. However, the strong reliance on agricultural export made the farmers vulnerable, when international demand on agricultural products was weak. Especially in the 1930's and the 1960's this explained the "escape to the city" of the farming population. After the Second World War this was not a very great problem, because the urban industries could employ most of the vacant labour. The development of the relative size of the social classes among all voters appear in figure 1.

The decrease of the farming population is intensified in the 1930's and the 1960's and most pronounced for farm labourers. The same pattern, but less strong, also holds for self-employed in urban industries. However, the strong reliance on agricultural export and the fact that the Danish industrial production was mainly oriented towards the home market until the 1960's, meant that the urban working class remained relatively small compared to other European countries. As we shall see this produced a serious problem for the Social Democratic Party which originally identified with the urban working class.

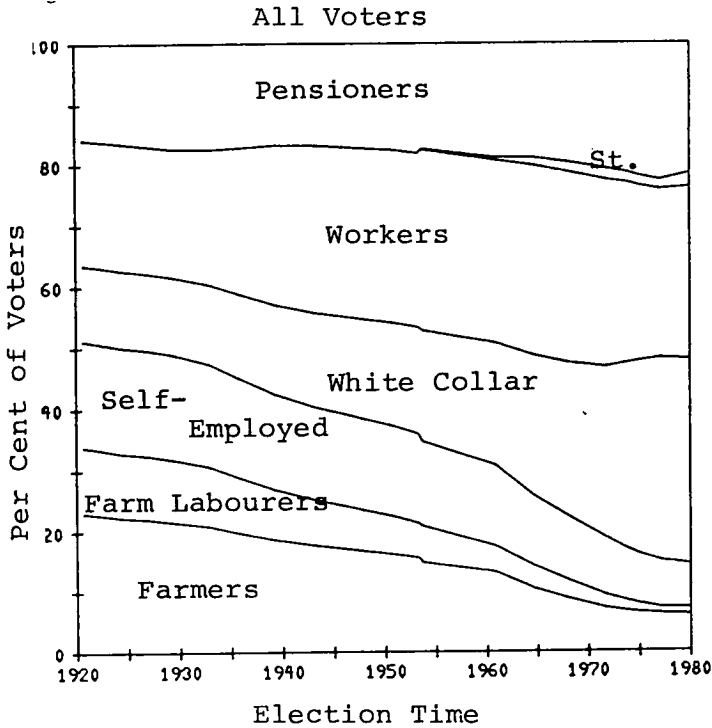
In the first few years after the Second World War intensified industrial production increased the urban working class. But in the 1960's growing industrial production, now also for export, mostly came about by increasing the productivity without increasing the relative size of the working class. Full employment was now sustained by vigorous growth in the public sector and witnessed by the growing number of people in white collar positions. This trend continued in the 1970's, but the size of the public sector was now threatening the national economy and employment.

3) *Ibid.*, pp. 48 - 63

4) Soeren Risbjerg Thomsen, *ECOL* version 1.1. A program for Ecological Inference, Reference Manual (Aarhus, 1987b).

5) S. R. Thomsen, *Elections*, pp. 92 - 97.

Figure 1: Development of the Danish Class Structure 1920 - 79



When considering the interaction between development of class relations and politics it is important to ask if the development of real income is parallel with a converging tendency among the different classes. The question is not finally answered by students of Danish social history, but the main impression is that this is what actually happened in Denmark - if one is prepared to overlook a few good and some bad years for the Danish farmers in comparison with the other social classes.

This main impression of relatively peaceful economic class relations in Denmark during this century is in the following text complemented by a main impression of relatively peaceful political relations - at least until it became difficult to handle the economic problems associated with the large public sector in the 1970's and 1980's.

The Danish party system since 1920

At the beginning of this century "the four old parties", Agrarian Liberals, Conservatives, Radical Liberals and Social Democrats, represented important social groupings in the Danish society. The rural part of the middle class (farmers) was represented by the Agrarian Liberals while the urban part of the

middle class (self-employed and white collar) was represented by Conservatives. The Social Democrats had very strong connections to the labour movement - particular within the urban industries - while the Radical Liberals spoke for the less well to do parts of the rural population (smallholders and farm labourers) but also for some segments of the urban middle-class (e.g. school-teachers and intellectuals). On basis of the cleavage between the working class and the middle class the left-right dimension was dominating Danish politics with the Social Democrats to the left, the Agrarian Liberals and Conservatives to the right, and the Radical Liberals in an intermediary position.

The introduction of proportional representation in 1920 can be considered as a compromise within the existing four party system. Against the opposition from the former dominating Agrarian Liberal Party, which benefited from the first-past-the-post system, the fast growing Social Democratic Party agreed with the two minor parties, Radical Liberals and Conservatives, to introduce proportional representation on the Social Democratic condition that the voting age was lowered from 30 to 25 years.

Proportional representation and the maximum 2 per cent threshold made it fairly easy for small parties to enter the Danish parliament (Folketinget), but until the Socialist People's Party was elected to the parliament in 1960 these small parties played only a minor role in Danish politics. In the 1970's three more parties, Christian People's Party, Center Democrats and the Progress Party became important political players.

The Danish multi-party system was in contrast to many other parliamentary democracies characterized by broad cooperation between most of the elected parties 6). This was not only a necessary deed to form majorities for legislation and government support - often more parties than necessary for gathering a majority participated in negotiations and compromises. Hence most legislation was supported by a very broad majority 7).

The typical Danish government since 1920 has been headed by a Social Democratic prime minister and has been supported by one or more of the small parties (very often the Radical Liberals) while the opposition has been headed by the two largest bourgeois parties, Agrarian Liberals and Conservatives. The opposition often termed themselves "the responsible opposition" because they participated in negotiations and compromises without being direct supporters of the government. When the Social Democrats were not in power, the government was usually based on cooperation between Agrarian Liberals and Conservatives,

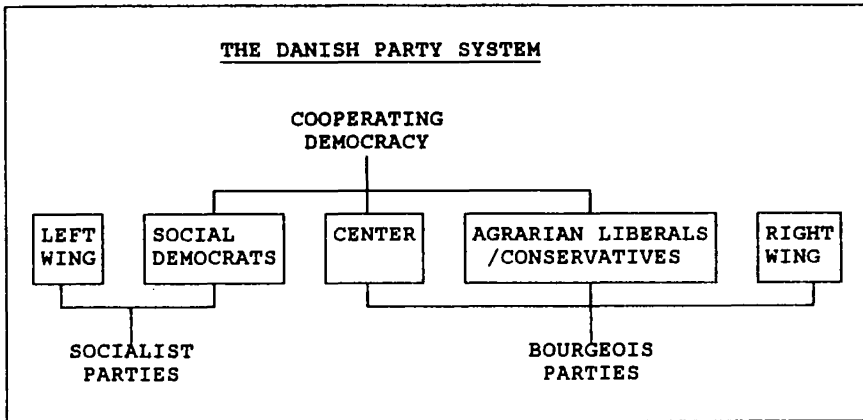
6) Erik D a m g a a r d , "Stability and Change in the Danish Party System over Half a Century", in: *Scandinavian Political Studies* 9 (1974), pp. 103 - 125; Mogens N. P e d e r s e n , "The Danish 'Working Multiparty System': Breakdown or Adaption?", in: H. D a l l e r (ed.), *Party Systems in Denmark, Austria, Switzerland, The Netherlands, and Belgium* (London, 1987), pp. 1 - 60.

7) Palle S v e n s s o n , *The Crisis of Democracy or the Democracy of the Crisis?* (Aarhus, 1983).

sometimes supported by one or more of the small parties - and now the Social Democratic Party was heading "the responsible opposition". It is the main impression, that until the beginning of the 1980's the Social Democrats were more skilled in "cooperation across the center" and thus most often acquired the government responsibility.

This dominating mode of cooperation in the Danish party system made room for three main groupings of small parties which shall be termed "the left wing", "the right wing" and "the center". The left and the right wing were the only groupings, which from each end of the left-right dimension criticized the cooperation across the center, while the center saw it as an important obligation to mediate between the Social Democrats on the one hand and the Agrarian Liberals and the Conservatives on the other hand.

Figure 2: The Danish Party System



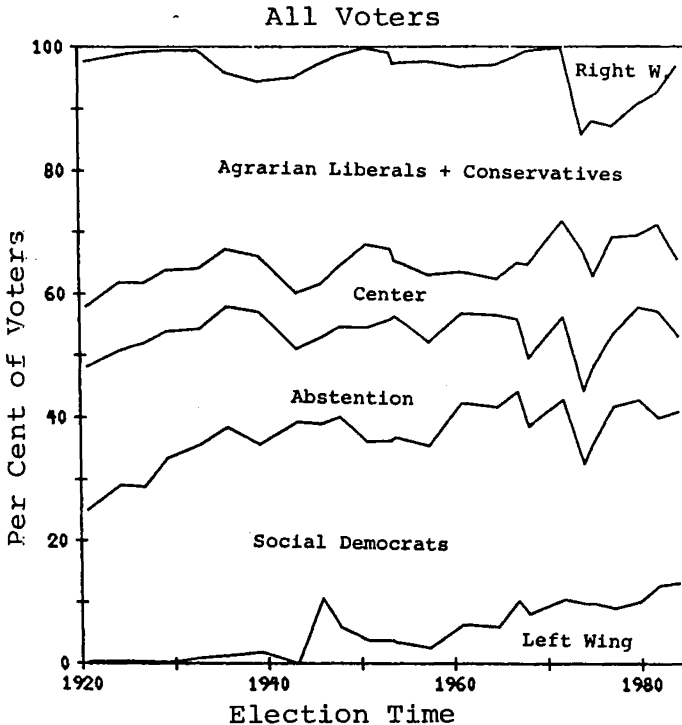
The "5 party-group-system" is pictured in figure 2. The three "responsible" groups of parties Social Democrats, center, and Agrarian Liberals/Conservatives are in Danish politics often called "the cooperating democracy" (det samarbejdende folkestyre) as indicated in the upper part of figure 2. Only on rare occasions did members of the cooperating democracy venture into parliamentary cooperation with members of the wings, and these attempts were usually rather unsuccessful regarding legislative results as well as subsequent voter support.

It is however important to stress, that the notion of cooperating democracy was much more important in the minds of the Danish politicians than in the minds of the Danish voters. From the point of view of the voters, the main distinction was between on the one hand "the socialist parties" (Social Democrats and left wing) and on the other hand "the bourgeois parties" (center, Agrarian Liberals, Conservatives and right wing) as indicated on the lower part of figure 2. So from the point of view of the politicians the opportunity of cooperation

across the center always entailed the risk of loosing votes to the wings conveyed by either the most socialist oriented or the most bourgeois oriented parts of the voters.

This is a well known dilemma in politics that in order to get practical political results by bargaining and compromising you face the risk of loosing votes at the next election. The extraordinary feature of the case of Denmark was that the extensive cooperation across the center for a very long period did not generate very much voter support for either the left or the right wing.

Figure 3: Support for Party Groups among all Voters 1920 - 84



The national election results since 1920 in percentages of valid votes are shown in table 1. The party groups are ordered according to the mentioned left-right dimension and within each group the parties are chronological ordered according to first time of appearance at general elections.

Figure 3 shows the development of the support for the five party groups together with abstention as percentages of all voters. The development shows a quite stable pattern in the relative strength of the different party groups. The steady growth of support for the Social Democratic Party since the 1890's continued until 1935 when a certain level of socialist support was set for many

years to come. Until the 1960's the support for both wings was either modest or short-lived but since then the peaceful pattern of cooperation in Danish politics has been threatened by several good elections for the right wing represented by the populist Progress Party and also threatened by a steady increasing support for the left wing, mainly gained by Socialist People's Party.

The declining opportunities for the "cooperating democracy" to form lasting majorities of government support explains the very frequent elections especially in the 1970's where election were held every second year. In the 1980's the bourgeois government led by the conservative prime minister Schlüter managed to isolate the Social Democratic Party which was troubled by the electoral successful Socialist People's Party.

For the rest of this paper we shall investigate the development of the social basis for the Danish five party group system by analyzing the support in different social classes for the different party groups as estimated by ecological inference.

Support for the socialist parties

Figure 4 shows the support for the socialist parties as percentages of valid votes in 8 geographical regions 1920 - 84.

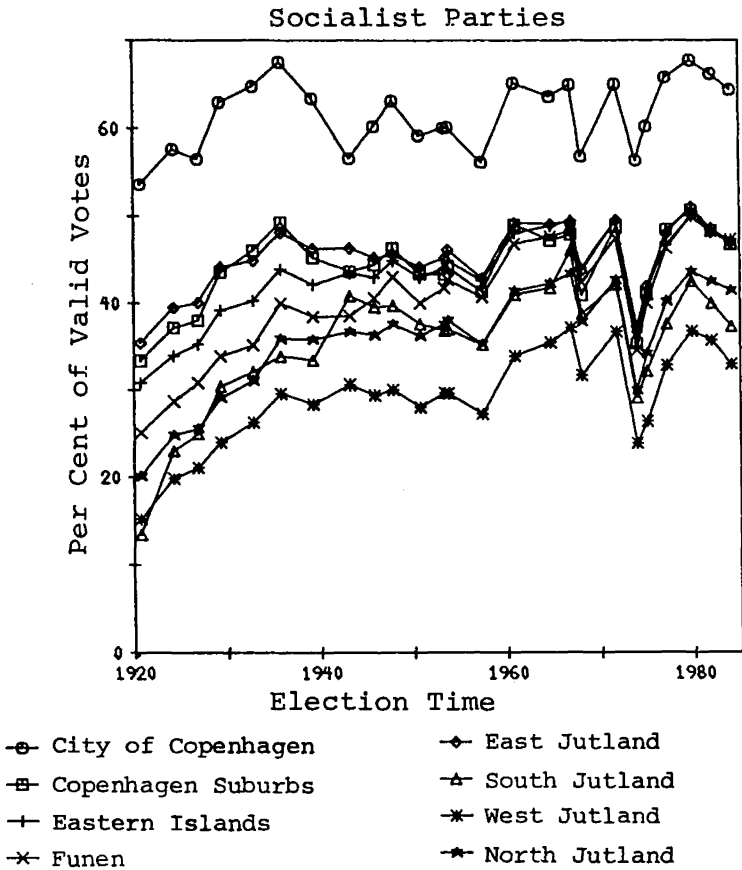
The pattern in figure 4 is similar to the pattern found in many other countries in that the change of support tends to be nearly parallel for all regions. The most important deviation from this tendency is presented by the region of South Jutland which after the unification with the kingdom in 1920 and until 1943 shows relatively steeper increase in the support for socialist parties than the other regions.

Apart from this deviation the parallel pattern suggests the interpretation made by other students of Danish political geography that major social factors, supposed to be uneven distributed across regions, only plays a minor role in explaining the outcome of the different elections 8). In other words: change of support seems rather determined by consensus between social groups than by antagonistic social interests.

This conclusion seem however to be a typical "ecological fallacy" when considering figure 5 which shows the development of the support for the socialist parties within different classes, estimated by the referred Latent Structure Method. As mentioned these ecological estimates is obtained by considering the variation between smaller areas within the different geographical regions indicated in figure 4.

8) Jan Stehouwer, "Long Term Ecological Analysis of Electoral Statistics in Denmark", in: *Scandinavian Political Studies* 2 (1967), pp. 94 - 116 ; Jan Stehouwer and Ole Børre, "Four General Elections in Denmark 1960 - 68", in: *Scandinavian Political Studies* 4 (1969), pp. 133 - 148.

Figure 4: Support for Socialist Parties in 8 Regions 1920 - 84

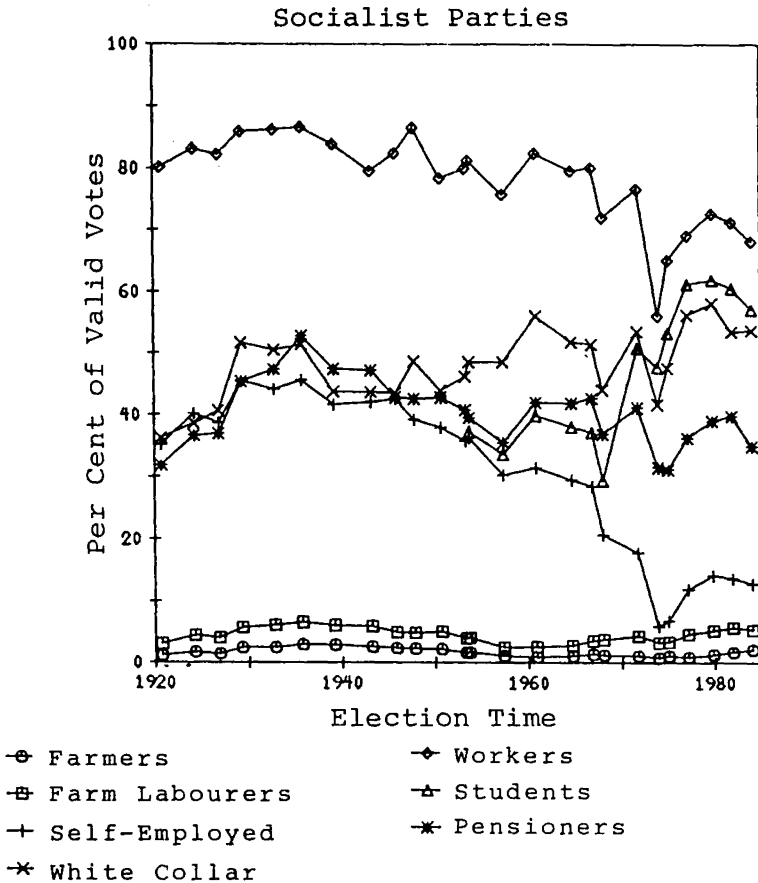


According to figure 5 the pattern of development of support for the socialist parties is very different from the parallel pattern found in figure 4, a finding which has been corroborated by results from interview research since 1957 9). The explanation of the parallel pattern in figure 4 is simply, that the most important variation between the different regions concerns the rural-urban dimension and that very few in the farming population ever voted for the socialist parties.

Apart from the low support for the socialist parties among farmers and farm labourers figure 5 shows decreasing socialist support among self-employed, workers and pensioners since the Second World War. The only classes with a trend

9) Goul A n d e r s e n, Reformismens krise og Socialdemokratiets diskursive potens (Aarhus, 1986); S. R. T h o m s e n, Elections, pp. 96 - 97.

Figure 5: Support for Socialist Parties within 7 Classes 1920 - 84
Ecological Estimates



of increasing socialist support since 1945 are white collar occupations and students.

Since the working class is the main identificatory basis for the socialist parties in Denmark it is especially interesting to analyze the percentage support for the socialist parties among workers in contrast to the percentage socialist support among all other social classes. Alford suggest the difference between these two percentages as an index of the amount of class-antagonism or "class-polarization" 10) but the present author suggests that logit transformations of these percentages should be computed before the difference is found 11). This is done

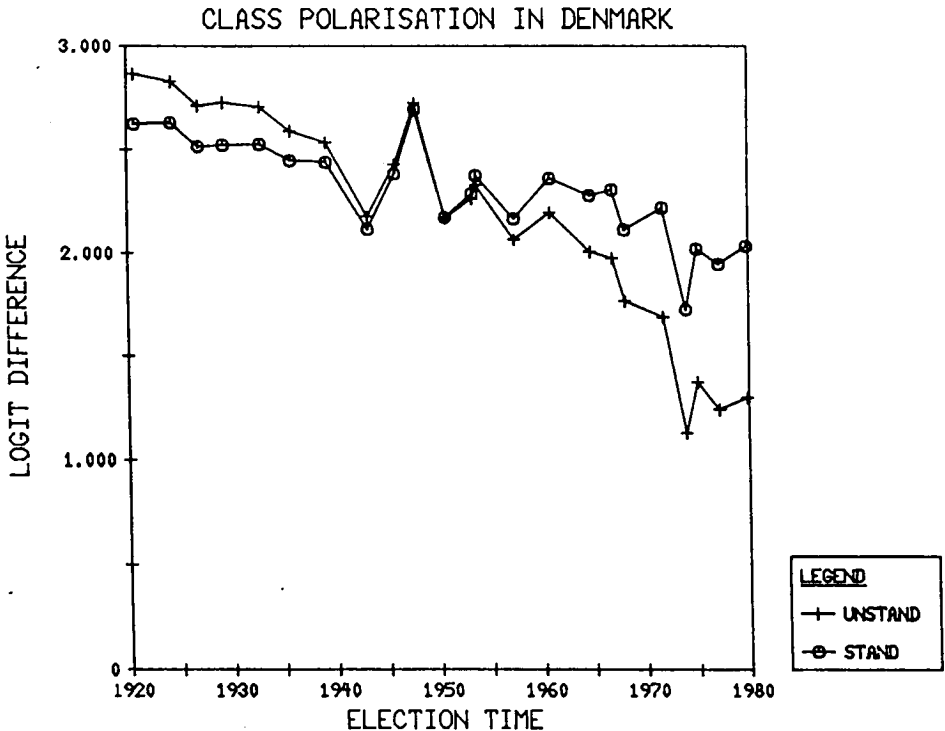
10) R. R. Alford, *Party and Society* (Chicago, 1963).

11) S. R. Thomsen, *Elections*, pp. 101 - 105.

to prevent unwanted "floor" and "ceiling" effects from percentages close to either 0 or 100.

Figure 6 shows class-polarization in Denmark 1920 - 79, measured as logit differences of socialist support between workers and non-workers (including farm labourers). The support among non-workers is computed as well unstandardized as standardized. The percentage unstandardized support among non-workers for the socialist parties is simply computed as the percentage support of all valid votes among non-workers regardless of the size of the different social classes, while the standardized support is computed by weighing the support from each class with the same weight throughout the whole period 1920 - 79. As weights for the different classes was chosen the relative size of each class in the middle of the period (1950). With this procedure the standardized socialist support is computed as if the internal relative class-composition among non-workers was unchanged (and the same as in 1950) for the whole period 1920 - 79 12).

Figure 6: Unstandardized and standardized Class Index 1920 - 79



12) Ibid. pp. 101 - 105.

In figure 6 the index for unstandardized class polarization is graphed together with the index for standardized class polarization. The curves shows that the decrease of class polarization in Denmark is much steeper when the unstandardized index is considered instead of the standardized. The interpretation of this result is that the decrease of class polarization is as well attributed to decreasing psychological antagonism between the working class and the middle class as to the changing class structure of the Danish society.

It is interesting to note that the standardized curve in the period 1920 - 79 is only (but not always) decreasing if the government was headed by the Social Democratic Party as was the case in 1924 - 26, 1932 - 35, 1935 - 39, 1939 - 43, 1947 - 50, 1953 - 57, 1960 - 64, 1966 - 68, 1971 - 73, and 1975 - 77, while the curve is never decreasing if the government was bourgeois as in 1920 - 34, 1926 - 29, 1945 - 47, 1950 - 53, 1968 - 71, and 1973 - 75.

This finding indicates that Social Democratic governments have played an important role in the decrease of class-antagonism in this century 13). The finding is also nicely in tune with the referred main impression, that the social democrats were more skilled in parliamentary cooperation across the center than the bourgeois opponents.

Because of still missing social and electoral data for the 1980's, the indices of class-polarization for the most recent elections has not yet been reliable computed, but some preliminary results suggests that the decrease of class-polarization for the first time since 1920 continued under the electoral periods with bourgeois government (since 1982). These preliminary results probably indicates that the general public opinion regarding public spending in the 1980's is more in line with the austere position of the bourgeois parties just as well as the general public opinion until the 1970's was more in line with the socially concerned position of the socialist parties.

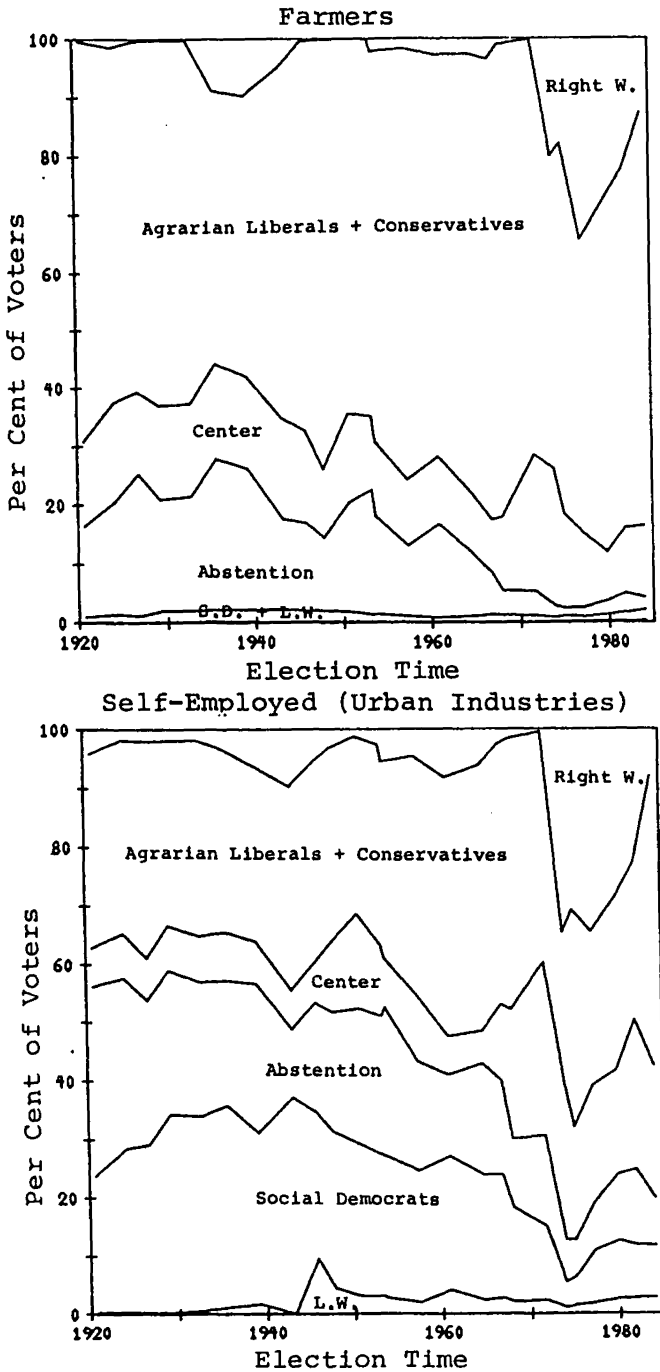
Support for the party groups

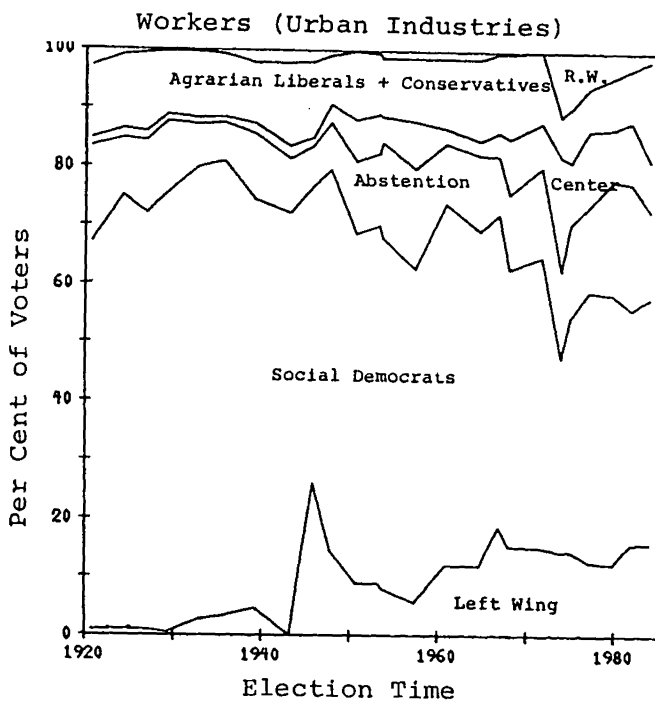
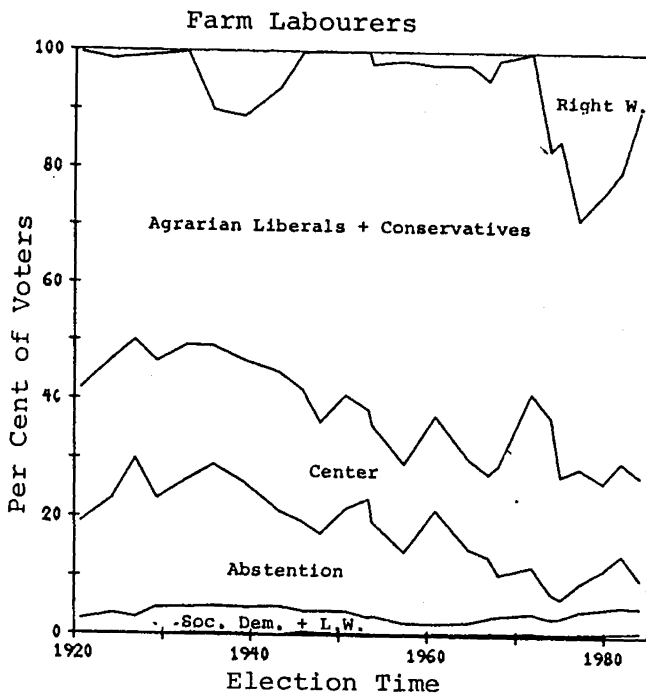
The general picture of decreasing class polarization is considerable modified and refined when looking at the development of support for the different party groups within each of the classes as shown in figure 7.

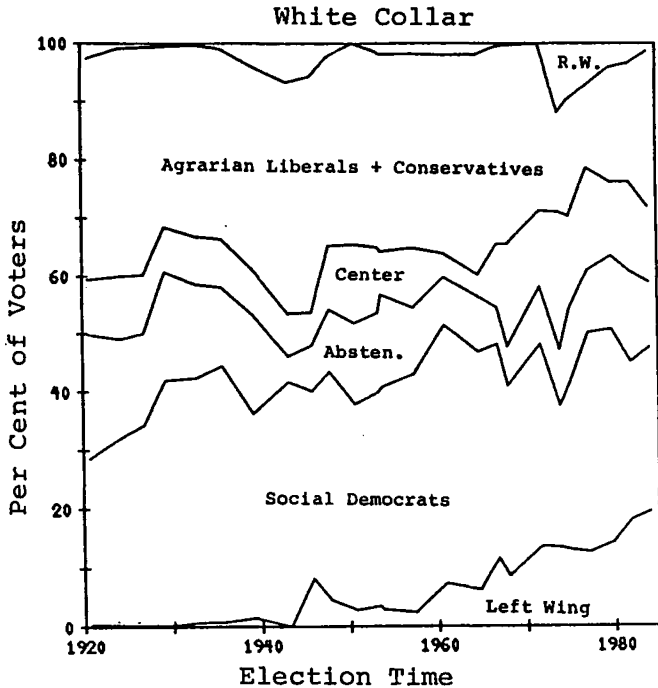
The two upper graphs in figure 7 show that the development for the farming population after 1935 was characterized by increasing participation (decreasing abstention) and by very little support for the socialist parties. The only difference between farmers and farm labourers was slightly more support for center parties and for the Social Democratic party among farm labourers than among farmers. Thus the development for the farming population can be described as

13) Soeren Risbjerg Thomsen, "Udviklingen under forholdstalsvalgmaaden (1920 - 84)", in: J. Elklit and O. Tonsgaard (eds.), Valg og Vaelgeradfaerd 2 (Aarhus, 1986)

Figure 7: Support for Party Groups within 6 classes 1920 - 84. Ecological Estimates.





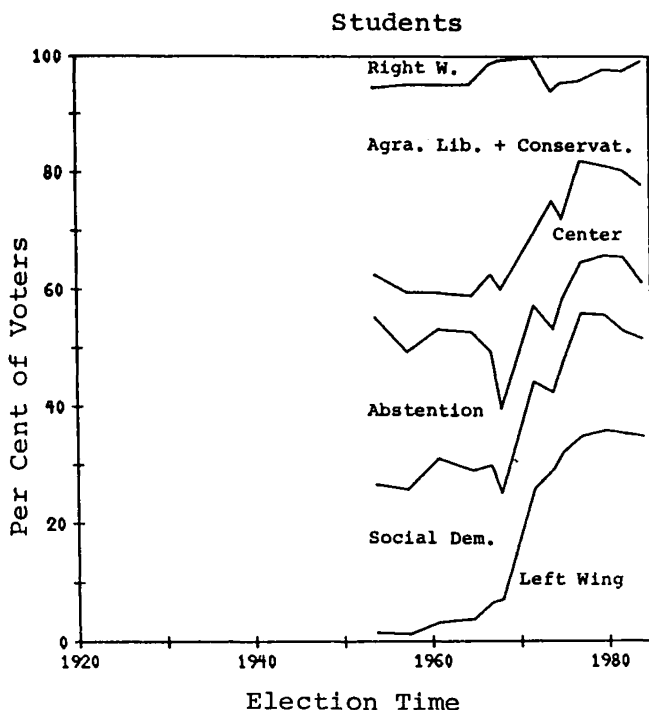


broad mobilization of the non-socialist vote with a potential for growing antagonism towards the working class.

A similar pattern holds for the self-employed (urban professions) in the middle-left graph in figure 7. The between-war years were marked by mobilization of Social Democratic support, but after the Second World War the socialist vote gradually disappeared among the urban self-employed. The most likely explanation is that many of the very small shops and factories with socialist owners simply disappeared during the industrial development towards growing capital concentration and larger firms. It is interesting to note that the self-employed class generally was more inclined to right wing support than all other classes.

While the development for the three mentioned classes is towards increasing distance to the socialist parties, the previous mentioned general decrease of class polarization must be explained by the development in the other three classes.

The working class (urban industries), pictured in the middle-right graph, had very high support for the socialist parties in the between war years, but contributed after the Second World War to declining class polarization by decreasing support for the socialist parties similar to the other "vanishing" classes. A common explanation of the weakening socialist support within the working class is the improved standard of living for the working class after the Second World



War, but other factors may also be important such as the geographical redistribution of the manufacturing industry from the urban centers to the smaller towns, and the growing scepticism regarding public spending in some parts of the working class such as workers in the geographical periphery. In the same period a stable left wing faction was formed within the working class which according to the graph did not contribute to the new working class support for the center and the right wing in the 1970's. Instead these movements seem to be transmitted by former Social Democratic voters.

Like the self-employed and the workers the white collar occupations, pictured in the lower left graph, had increasing socialist support until 1935, but it is extraordinary that the socialist support also increased after the Second World War, mainly by growing support for the left wing. Survey results and some preliminary ecological estimates indicates clearly that this increase in socialist and especially left wing support happened for certain kinds of educated public employed occupations such as teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers and civil servants 14). It is tempting to point out that these occupations had an interest in a growing public sector as a more or less hidden motive for socialist support.

14) Goul Andersen, "Klasseløse vælgere?", in J. Elklit and O. Tonsgaard (eds.), *Valg og Vælgeradfærd* (Aarhus, 1984), pp. 105 - 131.

The students, pictured in the lower-right graph, can be viewed as occupants of tomorrows educated white collar occupations, and the development shows strong increase in left wing support, to no surprise especially in connection with the student rebellion in 1968.

Conclusion

Ecological inference is a controversial methodology for inferring individual behaviour from purely geographically aggregated statistics, but in Denmark at least until the late 1950's it is the only methodology for assessing voter mobility and class voting. The method developed by the present author gives results that add up to the following story concerning class voting since 1920:

At the beginning of this century the important social cleavage between the working class and the rest of the society formed the social basis for the dominant left-right political dimension in Danish politics. This assumption is validated by the finding, that the ecologically estimated working class-support for the socialist parties highly differed from the estimated socialist support in the other classes.

Since 1920 an index of class polarization based on this difference shows a considerable decrease. This is explained by the peaceful development of economic class relations and by the dominating mode of cooperation across the center in the Danish party system. The impression that the Social Democrats were more skilled in parliamentary cooperation than the bourgeois opponent is substantiated by the finding that decrease of class polarization only occurred during Social Democratic governments, and never if the government was bourgeois. In the 1980's some preliminary results indicates that decrease of class polarization also happened under the bourgeois government. This might explain why the bourgeois parties managed to keep the Social Democrats out of office since 1982.

The general pattern of decreasing class polarization is modified by looking at the development of voting behaviour within the different classes. In fact the ecological estimates show that the development of the three "vanishing" classes, farmers, farm labourers, and urban self-employed, is towards increasing support for the non-socialist parties. Hence the decrease of class polarization is mainly explained by decrease of socialist support within the working class and the increasing socialist support among certain public white collar occupations.

It is possible that this development can be explained by the difficult problems for the Danish economy associated with the very large public sector since the 1960's, and it is conceivable that the cleavage between those who are benefitting from the public sector and those who don't will form the new social basis for the left-right dimension in Danish politics.