



Far from the Ballot Box: The Political Exclusion of the Working Classes in France

Camille Peugny

Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

Following the French presidential and parliamentary elections of 2017, the question of equal access to the electoral process once again came to the fore. Sociologist Camille Peugny, who has exhaustively measured different forms of non-participation (linked to nationality, non-registration or abstention), reveals the extent to which political exclusion affects working-class populations, and underlines the role of collective work in the (uneven) politicization of these populations.

Each time the results of an election appear to confound the predictions, political commentators turn their gaze to the “working classes”. This has been the case in France, ever since the Front National (National Front) made it to the second round of the 2002 presidential election and the rejection of a proposed European constitution in 2005; in the United States in 2016, when commentators sought to understand Donald Trump’s victory; and in Europe, with the Brexit referendum and the actual or anticipated successes of various far-right parties. Each of these votes gave rise to sometimes heated debates on the political consequences of the increasingly precarious living conditions of a growing fringe of the working classes. Gradually, the idea has taken hold that these “losers of globalization” (Kriesi *et al.* 2008), who could formerly be relied upon to vote for left-wing parties, now form the new electoral battalions of far-right parties everywhere that claim to offer an outlet for their legitimate anger. Without discussing these theories in detail,¹ we hope to present certain results here that will bring a degree of nuance to the debate: the fact is that a large proportion of service-sector employees and manual workers continue, in reality, to remain significantly distanced from the electoral process.

The sociological determinants of abstention have been known for a long time. Participating in a vote requires resources and skills that are shaped by one’s social background. The phenomenon of “hidden disenfranchisement” (in French, *le cens caché*; Gaxie 1978) takes effect to the detriment of those with the least educational capital, who are inclined to exclude themselves from a political sphere that seems to distance them – all the more so when subjective incompetence and indifference form invisible barriers, perpetuating mass abstention among dominated populations (Collovald and Sawicki 1991).

While this sociological model has been enriched by works that highlight the need to take account of factors such as voter mobilization processes (Braconnier and Dormagen 2007; Verba *et al.* 1995), the stakes of a particular vote (Franklin 2004), and measures taken to facilitate voter access (Braconnier *et al.* 2013), there nevertheless remains a close link between levels of educational attainment and electoral participation.

¹ This theory, termed *gaucho-lepénisme* in France (literally “left-wing-LePenism”), has been significantly amended by the works of Florent Gougou and Nonna Mayer, who have shown that the Front National’s success among manual workers is also partly due to already right-leaning workers shifting even further to the right (Gougou and Mayer 2012).

And yet, over recent decades, working-class contexts have been largely transformed by the continual rise in school enrolment and attendance rates. For example, between 1987 and 2012 in France, the proportion of high-school graduates (i.e. who had obtained the *baccalauréat* qualification) among economically active manual workers increased from 4% to 20%. But has this educational “acculturation” process among the working classes (Schwartz 1998) been reflected by a decline in self-exclusion from the electoral process? To answer this question, we shall consider the results from the 2012 survey on electoral participation conducted by INSEE (the French national statistics office). This survey is an ideal resource, as it records actual electoral practices using very large sample sizes that enable the analysis of many different categories of manual and service-sector workers in fine detail.² These data are thus much more reliable and robust than the declarative data resulting from pre- and post-election polls upon which rushed media commentary is all too often based.

The social gradient of abstention

An examination of turnout rates in the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections in France bring to light three key results. First of all, among salaried workers, the higher up individuals are in the job hierarchy, the less likely they are to abstain. So, for example, while presidential elections still enjoy the highest turnout rates of all elections in France, only 77% of manual workers who were registered to vote actually chose to vote in both rounds of the 2012 election, compared with 81% of service-sector employees, and 85% of intermediate professions³ and senior managers (see Table 1 in the appendix). The disparities between occupational categories are noticeably higher at parliamentary elections, which tend to mobilize fewer voters, as they are scheduled immediately after the presidential elections (following the harmonization, in 2002, of presidential terms – previously seven years – with parliamentary terms – five years – and an adjustment of the electoral calendar so that both elections fall in the same year). In 2012, 43% of manual workers voted in both rounds of the parliamentary election, compared with 49% of service-sector employees, 56% of intermediate professions, and 59% of senior managers. Lastly, 11% of manual workers who were registered to vote chose to abstain in both rounds of both elections in 2012, compared with 8% of service-sector employees, 6% of intermediate professions, and 4% of senior managers.

The second key result is that these average values mask significant differences in turnout that become apparent when we consider more detailed categories, particularly among service-sector employees and manual workers. At the presidential election, among manual workers, 10 percentage points separated skilled workers in industry (81% of whom voted in both rounds) and unskilled workers in the trades (71%); among service-sector employees, a difference of five points was observed between private-sector administrative employees (83%) and retail employees (78%). Within this same group, the disparities were even higher for the parliamentary election, with 15 points separating retail employees and public-sector employees, for example. These figures reflect a well-established hierarchy among service-sector employees, from those in the least-qualified jobs up to public- and private-sector administrative employees. When it comes to manual workers, however, in addition to the distinction between skilled and unskilled jobs, a sectoral

² These data were not obtained by means of retrospective declarations made by respondents. Instead, INSEE investigators consulted electoral registers and official voter attendance records (in France, all voters must sign against their name on the copy of the electoral register held in each polling place) in order to compile two datasets. The “registration” database (used to measure rates of enrolment on electoral registers) includes approximately 280,000 individuals in total, and the “participation” database (used to measure turnout) almost 40,000. This article presents certain results that are explained in greater detail elsewhere (see Peugny 2015).

³ Translator’s note: In France, the category of “intermediate professions”, created in 2003 following an overhaul of the occupational categories used for statistical purposes, includes middle-management posts in the service sector, supervisors (foremen/forewomen) in industry, technicians, and public-sector workers such as nurses, primary-school teachers and “category B” administrative staff.

gradient appears quite clearly, with higher turnouts recorded in industry than in the trades or in farming.

Lastly, the third key result is that there is not an absolute hierarchy between service-sector employees and manual workers: in particular, the least-qualified fringe of service-sector employees exhibited lower turnout than certain categories of skilled manual workers.

These initial results underline not just the heterogeneity of the salaried working classes, but also the extremely poor quality of the analyses – frequently aired in the course of public debate – that present these diverse categories as a single homogeneous group that exhibits a single form of political behaviour.

Producing an exhaustive estimate of electoral non-participation

The figures mentioned so far were calculated, as is customary, on the basis of registered voters. This choice of approach leads to an overestimation of electoral participation, as it does not take account of two other sources of non-participation. The first concerns those without French nationality, who cannot vote in presidential or parliamentary elections (among others). Failure to take this factor into consideration leads to a distortion of the working-class landscape. It ignores the fact, for example, that over 10% of the least-qualified economically active workers in the service sector and the trades do not have French nationality, compared with just 3% of economically active individuals in intermediate professions. The second source of non-participation – this time only among economically active French citizens – is absence from the electoral register. Once again, this concerns the working classes more than other socioeconomic categories: 9% of manual workers and 6% of service-sector employees are not registered to vote, alongside 4% of those in intermediate professions and 2% of senior managers. In order to exhaustively estimate electoral non-participation by occupational group, it is therefore necessary to consider three factors (see Table 2 in the appendix): (1) nationality; (2) electoral registration; and (3) abstention.

Calculations of this kind show that social inequalities related to electoral participation are in reality much greater than when we only focus on abstention among registered voters. While electoral non-participation stands at 18% on average for all salaried workers, the percentages for specific occupational categories range from 10% for senior managers to 28% for manual workers. In terms of political participation and representation, a variation of this magnitude is not trivial when it comes to the relative influence of different occupational groups in the electoral process: while there are more manual workers (22%) than senior managers (17%) in the French population as a whole, and therefore among the pool of potential voters, the electoral weight – and therefore influence – of senior managers is ultimately greater. Therefore, if we consider politics as a means of regulating conflicts between social groups, and elections as moments of confrontation between diverging interests, in part structured by the occupational situations of the individuals who live and work in a country, these results highlight the degree of domination that still exists in the electoral system, to the detriment of the working classes.

Furthermore, these estimates confirm the magnitude of disparities among service-sector employees and manual workers. Only 13% of administrative employees are concerned by non-participation, whereas this rate is twice as high among individuals employed in the social and personal services sector. Among manual workers, the non-participation rate ranges from 20% for the most highly skilled workers in industry to 40% for unskilled workers in the trades. This league table of non-participation shows that entire swathes of service-sector and manual workers remain distanced from the electoral process. In parallel, it also reveals the internal stratification of the working classes, with marked zones of vulnerability among the least-qualified service-sector employees and tradespeople.

The influence of collective work on politicization

In addition to the political exclusion of the most vulnerable sections of the working classes, a comparison of occupations within this population also underlines the importance of professional spheres and collective work contexts in politicization processes. First, our observations show that the type of employment contract can have a significant effect on electoral participation – for instance, manual and service-sector workers on fixed-term or temporary contracts are much more likely not to vote than those on permanent contracts. More specifically, they are less likely to be registered to vote, and those that are registered tend to vote less often at elections (see Table 3 in the appendix).⁴ If we take into account non-registration and abstention in at least one round of the 2012 presidential election, there is around a seven-point difference between service-sector employees on permanent contracts (29%) and those on fixed-term or temporary contracts (22%). Among manual workers, the disparity is greater, at 10 percentage points (38% versus 28%), and even rises above 10 points among public-sector employees, retail employees, and several categories of manual workers.

This under-participation among the most vulnerable service-sector and manual workers remains significant even when we control for the effects of other variables such as age, gender and educational attainment. All else being equal, the likelihood of abstention is three to five points higher for those on fixed-term and temporary contracts, depending on the type of election.

Second, the low level of participation among the least-qualified service-sector employees is an indication of the positive effects of long-term belonging to a collective work context. In this regard, the situation of those employed in social and personal service seems to be particularly instructive. This category primarily includes nannies and childcare assistants, home helps for elderly people, and cleaners. The official figure for their participation in both rounds of the presidential election – almost 82% – appears high at first glance, placing them among the most “civic” service-sector employees (see Table 1). This result is counter-intuitive, given the low levels of educational attainment and the sociodemographic characteristics exhibited by this group (they are mostly women and often immigrants), which typically foster abstention. In reality, this figure masks certain factors: first and foremost, non-registration rates are particularly high for this category of employee (8.4%). Once this is taken into consideration, the actual proportion that voted in both rounds falls to 75%, which is lower than the equivalent rates for public-sector employees (79%) and private-sector administrative employees (81%). Furthermore, it must be borne in mind that the average age of employees providing social and personal services is relatively high, at 42, and age is a factor closely correlated with turnout rates. By restricting our analysis across all categories to only those individuals under 40, in order to eliminate this age effect, and by taking account of non-registration rates, it becomes clear that employees in the social and personal services sector are in fact the group that voted least in both rounds of the presidential election (63%, compared with 68% on average for all service-sector employees).

What is more, this under-participation of employees in the social and personal services sector can also be observed in statistical models that seek to control for variables typically linked to turnout. Results of this kind illustrate the importance of professional spheres and contexts in constructing one’s relationship with politics (Michelat and Simon 1985; Paugam 1999); specifically, integration into a stable context of collective work encourages participation. It is for this reason that the industrial sector, despite its rapid decline in numerical terms, is still essentially a context where large companies dominate and where trade unions are present. Conversely, the professional isolation of the majority of employees in the social and personal services sector – who typically work alone in people’s homes – deprives them of this aspect of political socialization.

⁴ For reasons related to sample size, it is not possible to reliably verify the link between contract type and turnout for other categories of service-sector and manual workers. Moreover, for employees in the social and personal services sector, contract type is not a good indicator of job stability (Devetter and Rousseau 2011).

The way work is organized, including the existence of collective bodies for salaried workers, thus appears to be a determining factor in the processes of politicization of the working classes, which explains why certain categories of rank-and-file workers, whom one might typically think of in terms of domination (e.g. metalworkers, who operate in a sector exposed to cut-throat international competition), are actually among the most politicized groups within the working classes. By contrast, for those salaried workers in the least prestigious service-sector jobs – a group that is rapidly increasing in number – the opposite is true: in addition to their socioeconomic vulnerability (job insecurity, strenuous working conditions, fragmented working time, multiple employers, etc.), their professional isolation reinforces their political invisibility. As a result, even though the educational level of service-sector and manual workers has risen considerably, changes in employment structure could well cancel out the expected benefits in terms of participation in the national political debate. More specifically, numerous dynamics currently at play are destroying collective work contexts: increased outsourcing, the encouragement of self-employment, and the “uberization” of a growing proportion of economic activity all produce professional isolation. To put it another way, we would be wrong to minimize the effects of labour policies which, by encouraging or limiting the growth of these forms of employment, play a key role in the process of political exclusion affecting the working classes.

Appendix: Tables 1, 2 and 3

Table 1. Occupational categories and turnout in the 2012 elections

	Presidential election			Parliamentary election			Both rounds of both elections	
	Voted in both rounds	Abstained in one of the two rounds	Abstained in both rounds	Voted in both rounds	Abstained in one of the two rounds	Abstained in both rounds	At least one abstention	Constant abstention
Public-sector employees	82.9	9.8	7.3	54.0	18.3	27.8	49.0	6.5
Police and military	74.1	11.1	14.9	44.1	17.1	38.8	59.0	14.2
Private-sector administrative employees	83.5	9.9	6.6	51.2	20.1	28.8	51.8	5.4
Retail employees	77.5	10.5	12.0	38.3	19.3	42.5	63.3	11.6
Social and personal services employees	81.7	9.0	9.3	48.1	18.1	33.8	54.1	8.9
All service-sector employees	81.3	9.9	8.9	49.0	18.7	32.3	53.6	8.1
Skilled manual workers in industry	81.3	11.3	7.4	46.3	20.6	33.1	55.5	6.8
Skilled manual workers in the trades	77.0	10.8	12.2	42.9	16.6	40.6	60.1	11.5
Drivers	78.6	12.2	9.2	47.0	19.9	33.2	56.7	8.6
Skilled manual workers in the logistics and transport sectors	76.2	10.8	13.0	45.2	16.6	38.2	57.6	13.0
Unskilled manual workers in industry	77.0	9.9	13.2	43.0	15.5	41.5	59.2	12.8
Unskilled manual workers in the trades	71.3	13.3	15.4	37.1	16.9	46.0	64.3	14.9
Farm workers	76.7	12.1	11.2	37.7	17.0	45.3	65.5	10.3
All manual workers	77.2	11.2	11.6	43.2	17.5	39.2	59.2	11.1
All intermediate professions	84.6	8.9	6.4	55.5	18.0	26.5	47.6	5.9
All senior managers	85.2	10.0	4.8	59.2	20.4	20.4	44.5	4.3
All salaried workers	81.7	10.0	8.3	50.7	18.5	30.8	52.1	7.7

Source: 2012 Electoral participation survey (INSEE).

Example interpretation: of those public-sector workers who were on the electoral register, 82.9% voted in both rounds of the 2012 presidential election.

Table 2. Estimate of electoral non-participation by occupational category

	Not of French nationality	Not on the electoral register	Constant abstention	Total
Public-sector employees	2.8	5.0	6.5	13.7
Police and military	6.7	6.1	14.2	24.8
Private-sector administrative employees	3.0	4.6	5.4	12.5
Retail employees	5.5	7.5	11.6	22.3
Social and personal services employees	12.1	8.4	8.9	26.6
All service-sector employees	6.0	6.1	8.1	18.9
Skilled manual workers in industry	7.4	6.9	6.8	19.8
Skilled manual workers in the trades	13.0	9.6	11.5	30.4
Drivers	5.0	8.8	8.6	20.8
Skilled manual workers in the logistics and transport sectors	5.0	9.3	13.0	25.0
Unskilled manual workers in industry	8.6	9.3	12.8	27.7
Unskilled manual workers in the trades	19.0	12.3	14.9	39.5
Farm workers	10.2	10.1	10.3	27.6
All manual workers	10.3	9.3	11.1	27.7
All intermediate professions	3.0	3.8	5.9	12.2
All senior managers	4.4	2.4	4.3	10.7
All salaried workers	6.1	5.7	7.7	18/04/18

Source: 2012 employment survey (column 1: nationality) and 2012 electoral participation survey (column 2: registration on the electoral roll; and column 3: abstention).

The total percentage is calculated as follows, using retail employees as an example: 5.5% of these employees are not of French nationality, to which are added those French nationals who are not on the electoral register (i.e. 7.5% of the remaining 94.5%) and those registered voters who abstained in both rounds (i.e. 11.6% of the remaining 87.4% [bearing in mind that $94.5 - (94.5 \times 0.075) = 87.4$]), giving a total of 22.3%.

Table 3. Employment contracts and distancing from the electoral process

	Non-registration	Abstention in at least one round of the presidential election	Total
Public-sector employees (permanent)	4.5	16.0	19.8
Public-sector employees (non-permanent)	7.1	26.2	31.4
Private-sector administrative employees (permanent)	4.4	15.6	19.3
Private-sector administrative employees (non-permanent)	5.9	20.4	25.1
Retail employees (permanent)	7.0	20.6	26.1
Retail employees (non-permanent)	9.6	30.6	37.3
Social and personal services employees (permanent)	8.5	17.9	24.9
Social and personal services employees (non-permanent)	7.6	15.2	21.6
All permanent employees	5.7	17.5	22.2
All non-permanent employees	7.6	23.6	29.4
Skilled manual workers in the trades (permanent)	9.1	21.2	28.4
Skilled manual workers in the trades (non-permanent)	11.9	32.7	40.7
Skilled manual workers in industry (permanent)	8.8	20.2	26.4
Skilled manual workers in industry (non-permanent)	12.5	30.4	39.1
All permanent manual workers	8.8	20.9	27.9
All non-permanent manual workers	12.2	29.1	37.7

Source: 2012 electoral participation survey (INSEE).

Example interpretation: in 2012, 4.5% of public-sector employees with French nationality were not on the electoral register. Of those who were registered to vote, 16% abstained in at least one of the two rounds of the presidential election. In total, 19.8% of public-sector employees were distanced in some way from the electoral process (either because they were not registered to vote or because they abstained at least once).

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Camille Peugny is a sociologist, an assistant professor at Paris-8 University, and a researcher within the CSU laboratory (Cultures et Sociétés Urbaines – Urban Cultures and Societies), a component of the CRESPPA mixed research unit (Centre de Recherches Sociologiques et Politiques de Paris – Paris Centre for Sociological and Political Research; UMR CNRS 7217). His works seek to analyse social stratification and inequalities. In particular, he has published two books on social mobility: *Le Déclassement* (Grasset, 2009) and *Le Destin au berceau. Inégalités et reproduction sociale* (Seuil, 2013). His recent research focuses on the transformation of the working classes, and on the social and personal services sector.

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