

# Brahmins v merchants

## Educated voters' leftward shift

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**A new paper by Thomas Piketty makes the rise of right-wing populism look like a historical inevitability**

You could fill a small library with books on right-wing populism. Some authors argue that these movements emerged in reaction to relatively recent events, such as the financial crisis of 2007-09 or the advent of social media. Others look to longer-lasting regional trends, like European integration or racial politics in America.

Thomas Piketty, an economist, became famous for a book that analysed 200 years of data on wealth inequality in a wide range of countries. This month he published a paper, co-written by Amory Gethin and Clara Martínez-Toledano, which applies a similar approach to the relationship between demography and ideology. Its findings imply that the electoral victories of Donald Trump and the Brexit campaign in 2016 were not an abrupt departure from precedent, but rather the consequence of a 60-year-old international trend.

In a paper in 2018 Mr Piketty noted that elites in Britain, France and America were split between intellectuals who backed left-of-centre parties—he dubbed them the “Brahmin left”—and businesspeople who preferred right-wing ones (the “merchant right”). His new work expands this study from three Western democracies to 21. It combines data on parties' policy positions with surveys that show how vote choices varied between demographic groups.

The paper finds that income and education began diverging as predictors of ideology long ago. In 1955 both the richest and the most educated voters tended to support conservative parties. Conversely, both poorer and less-educated people mostly chose labour or social-democratic ones.

Today, wealthy people still lean to the right. In contrast, the relationship between education and ideology began to reverse as early as the 1960s. Every year, the 10% of voters with the most years of schooling gravitated towards left-wing parties, while the remaining 90% slid the other way. By 2000, this had gone on for so long that, as a group, the most educated voters became more left-wing than their less-educated peers. The gap has only grown since then.

This trend is strikingly consistent. It developed just as fast in the 20th century as in the 21st, and appears in almost every Western democracy studied. This includes both two-party systems and proportional ones, in which green parties now lure educated voters, and nativist parties attract the less educated. Such breadth and regularity make the rise of right-wing populists like Mr Trump—and of left-of-centre technocrats like Emmanuel Macron or Justin Trudeau—look like a historical inevitability.

Although the authors do not identify a cause for this trend, the simplest explanation is that it stems from growing educational attainment. In 1950 less than 10% of eligible voters in America and Europe had graduated from college. Any party relying on this group for support would have had scant hope of winning elections. In contrast, more than a third of Western adults today have degrees, which is enough to anchor a victorious coalition. And once candidates and parties began catering to educated voters—who often put living in a liberal

society above lowering their tax bills—rival politicians could start winning elections by taking the opposite position.■

Source: “Brahmin Left versus Merchant Right”, by Amory Gethin, Clara Martínez-Toledano and Thomas Piketty (working paper, 2021)

*This article appeared in the Graphic detail section of the print edition under the headline "Brahmins v merchants"*