Chapter 2

Political cleavages in contemporary democracies

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1 Introduction

Elections are vital moments of modern democratic systems. By legitimizing and renewing political power, they provide a crucial opportunity for citizens to seek representation. One way democracy creates this representation is by institutionalizing preexisting social divides. Political parties play a central role in this process, attracting voters by positioning themselves on various social and economic issues. This inherent multidimensionality of political conflict generates many potential electoral configurations, which can vary across countries and over time within the same country. These coalitions result in varying degrees of polarization, with major implications for the sustainability of democracy itself. In the words of Adam Przeworski, "democracy works well when the stakes entailed in institutionalized conflicts are neither too small nor too large [. . .]. The stakes are too low when results of elections have no consequences for people's lives. They are too high when results of elections inflict intolerable costs on the losers." (Przeworski, 2019).

This chapter revisits evidence on the transformation of political cleavages in contemporary democracies. Our objective is threefold. First, we provide a descriptive overview of the structure of political divides and their transformation in the past decades. We draw on the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database (WPID), a new microdatabase covering the determinants of voting behavior in 55 democracies (Gethin et al., 2021; see wpid.world). The WPID reports how vote choices vary by income, education, and other socioeconomic characteristics in over 550 elections held since 1948, providing a unique snapshot on political conflict in contemporary democracies. Second, we review the literature on the causes and consequences of changing political cleavages. We pay special attention to the interplay of economic and cultural change, the role played by supply versus demand factors in fueling voter realignment, and the rise of new authoritarian and green movements. Third, we propose a

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new empirical analysis of the drivers of political realignment in 21 Western democracies, combining our microdatabase with manifesto data, survey data on political opinions, and other sources. We also highlight the diversity of cleavage structures in non-Western democracies, where socioeconomic and sociocultural divides take very different forms. We conclude with a number of open questions and suggest avenues for future research.

We start with a brief conceptual background. The modern concept of political cleavage goes back to Lipset and Rokkan (1967), who argued that four major divides emerged from the national and industrial revolutions in Western Europe: a center-periphery cleavage, a religious cleavage, a sectoral cleavage, and a class cleavage. The political science literature has dedicated considerable effort to study these cleavages, notably thanks to the multiplication of post-electoral surveys in recent decades. A general finding is that traditional divides have declined over the course of the past century, although they remain significant. At the same time, the literature has extensively documented the emergence of a new "libertarian-authoritarian" dimension of political conflict, materialized by the growing success of green and radical right movements in many countries. Different dynamics prevail outside of Western democracies, where party systems can be more unstable and other factors related to decolonization, ethnicity, and clientelistic relationships have often been found to play a more important role.

We then turn to a historical perspective on changing political divides in 21 democracies in Western Europe, Northern America, and Oceania. Drawing on the WPID, we document a striking common transformation in these democracies: the disconnection of divides related to income and education. In the 1950s–1960s, the vote for social democratic and affiliated parties was "class-based," in the sense that it was associated with the lower-income and lower-educated electorate. It has gradually become associated with higher-educated voters, giving rise in the 2010s to a divergence between the influences of income and education: high-income voters continue to vote for the "right," while high-education voters have shifted to supporting the "left." This separation is visible in nearly all countries, despite their major political, historical, and institutional differences. We also describe changes in the relationship between voting behavior and other socioeconomic characteristics such as age, gender, religion, and geography. With the exception of gender divides, which have undergone a reversal comparable to the one observed in the case of education, we find no evidence of a generalized realignment of voters along these other dimensions of political conflict.

We review recent attempts at identifying the factors underlying these changes. There is considerable evidence linking the reversal of the educational cleavage to the emergence of a new sociocultural dimension of political conflict, both on the demand side (educated voters being more liberal on this dimension) and on the supply side (more liberal parties on this dimension disproportionately attracting educated voters). Radical right parties, whose

support tends to be concentrated among lower-educated voters, have received special attention in the recent political economy literature. Important questions remain, however, regarding the origins of this change and the exact nature of this new dimension of political conflict. We discuss recent work unveiling different aspects of this transformation, including the relative importance of political supply and demand, and the interactions between economic and cultural factors.

We then propose a novel analysis of the drivers of political realignment in Western democracies, combining our database with evidence from manifesto data on political programs and survey data on political opinions. We document three key facts. First, education is a strong determinant of liberal opinions related to the environment, immigration, and traditional morality, but this relationship has remained remarkably stable over the past twenty years. This suggests that social divides over sociocultural issues have not grown. Second, in contrast to this stability, there has been a dramatic rise in cultural divides between political parties. Third, growing party polarization over sociocultural issues is strongly associated with the reversal of educational divides, suggesting that supply dynamics have played a key role in fueling voter realignment. However, we also find evidence in favor of ideological convergence on economic policy, party system fragmentation, economic development, and educational expansion itself contributing to this transformation, highlighting that the disconnection of income and education divides probably cannot be reduced to cultural polarization alone.

We then turn to documenting variations in political divides across non-Western democracies. Unlike Western democracies, non-Western democracies primarily stand out by their diversity of political cleavage structures. The data reveal large variations in the relationships between income or education and voting behavior, from persistently strong in some countries to almost insignificant in others. These variations can often be accounted for by the interaction between socioeconomic divides and other dimensions of political conflict. For instance, class voting is stronger in countries with both deep inequalities and deep divides between ethnic groups, such as South Africa or Nigeria. There are other countries, however, such as Brazil or Thailand, where class voting has arisen not as a by-product of other cleavages, but instead through a direct politicization of inequality by political parties. In contrast, class cleavages tend to be weaker in countries with fragmented and unstable party systems, such as Peru or the Philippines. We also find that dominant party systems often display strong rural-urban cleavages, mainly because dominant parties rely on rural clientelistic networks, while educated voters of urban areas tend to be more critical of the ruling coalition. Generational divides are rare in non-Western democracies; two notable exceptions include Hong Kong and South Korea, who display intense generational conflicts over political integration comparable to those that prevailed during the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom.

All in all, there has been no unique common trend across non-Western democracies, with increasing polarization occurring in some countries (e.g., Brazil, Nigeria) and a depoliticization of most electoral divides in others (e.g., Japan, Indonesia). Importantly, we observe no disconnection of income and education divides comparable to that observed in Western democracies. We propose three complementary explanations for this fact. First, education is a much weaker determinant of opinions on the environment, immigration, and traditional morality in non-Western democracies, as we show in a new analysis using the World Values Survey. Second, these issues are much less central to political competition in these countries. Third, other types of sociocultural conflicts related to ethnolinguistic identities, nationalism, or religion, which do not map onto educational divides, appear to be much more salient. In a number of countries, furthermore, deep class divides comparable to those observed in Western democracies in the 1940s–1950s have emerged, leading many low-income and lower-educated voters to unite in the same coalitions.

We conclude the chapter with a discussion of open questions and avenues for future research. Far from reaching a consensus, the political economy literature continues to be divided on the sources and nature of changing political divides. New theoretical frameworks and data sources, in particular on political supply, will prove essential to identify the respective importance of different factors in fueling political realignment. An important avenue lies in global analyses that go beyond the Western/non-Western dichotomy, in a world where political and economic phenomena are increasingly globalized. The rise of authoritarianism, which has concomitantly occurred not only in Europe and the United States, but also in Latin America and Asia, is an important object for future research in this direction.

Section 2 provides a conceptual background and presents the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database. Section 3 discusses the transformation of political cleavages in 21 Western democracies. Section 4 analyzes cross-country variations in the structure of the vote in non-Western democracies. Section 5 concludes and outlines avenues for future research.

2 Political cleavages: history, framework, and data

2.1 Defining political cleavages: the Lipset-Rokkan framework

The canonical concept of political cleavage originates in Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan's study on the formation of party systems in Europe (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Lipset and Rokkan argued that four fundamental divides emerged from the national and industrial revolutions. First, a *center-periphery cleavage* arose from oppositions between the nascent state and the diverse subject populations subdued by the central authority. Second, competition for political power led to the rise of a *religious cleavage* between the nation state and the Church. The industrial revolution, finally, generated two other

types of lasting conflicts in Western societies: a *sectoral cleavage* opposing agricultural and industrial interests, and a *class cleavage* opposing capital owners to workers.

More generally, political cleavages can be thought of as "a specific type of conflict in democratic politics that is rooted in the social structural transformations that have been triggered by large-scale processes such as nation building, industrialization, and possibly also by the consequences of post-industrialization" (Bornschier, 2009). While this conception leaves a certain degree of flexibility, it involves dimensions of political conflict that are durable, originated in large historical changes, and are not necessarily linked to the events that initiated them anymore. This "hysteresis" property was directly visible in the remarkable stability of Western democracies across the twentieth century: the original divides associated with the emergence of democratic competition led to the "freezing" of Western party systems. Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair thus proposed to define a political cleavage by three components: a characteristic distinguishing individuals (such as social class or religion), a sense of collective identity linking this characteristic to a social group, and an organizational manifestation of this group, translating this identity into collective action (Bartolini and Mair, 1990).

2.2 Lessons from the political science literature

A voluminous literature in political science documents the transformation of political cleavages in Western democracies. Starting in the 1960s, the collection of post-electoral surveys gave rise to studies describing the structure of electorates and the main determinants of voting behavior (Campbell et al., 1960; Butler and Stokes, 1969). Since then, the accumulation of surveys has formed the basis of many comparative and longitudinal studies aiming to track changes in the structure of political divides, yielding a number of well-established facts.

On the one hand, there is considerable evidence pointing to a gradual weakening of historical cleavages in many Western democracies, or *dealignment*. As secularization, urbanization, the decline of trade unions, and the tertiarization of the economy unfolded in the decades following World War II, traditional class and religious affiliations were found to have lost much of their initial influence (Alford, 1963; Clark et al., 1993; Franklin et al., 1992; Kriesi et al., 2008; Inglehart, 1997; Rose and McAllister, 1986). In many cases, partisan disaffection and the rising influence of short-run campaign factors, candidate appeals, issue-based competition, and challenger parties accompanied this transition (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020; Dassonneville, 2022; Green-Pedersen, 2019; Kitschelt and Rehm, 2015; Mair, 2013).

On the other hand, many studies have revealed a *realignment* of voters towards new dimensions of political conflict. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, new sociocultural issues related to gender equality, the rights of minorities, and the environment took on a growing importance in political

debates. Green parties and the "New Left" were among the first to put these issues at the center of their political agenda. As a result, the political space shifted from materializing one to two dominant dimensions: a socioeconomic dimension, reflecting the persistence of conflicts over the distribution of economic resources, and a new "libertarian-authoritarian" or "universalistic-particularistic" dimension, related to preferences over group identity, cultural values, and economic disaffections (Bornschier et al., 2024; Dalton, 2018; Hall et al., 2023; Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015; Kitschelt, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2008). The recent rise of anti-immigration movements has often been interpreted as a conservative response to these sociopolitical changes (Bornschier, 2010; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Importantly, class cleavages have increasingly mapped onto this new two-dimensional structure of political conflict. The new left and Green parties have attracted an increasing share of "sociocultural professionals", a broad category of highly educated workers involved in interactive and non-hierarchical tasks, including healthcare, social services, and the media. Blue-collar workers, meanwhile, have in many countries shifted away from the left to support radical right parties (Bornschier, 2012; Beramendi et al., 2015; Gingrich and Häusermann, 2015; Oesch, 2006, 2012; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018).

2.3 A new database on political cleavages in 55 democracies, 1948–2022

We now present the database used in the rest of this chapter to document stylized facts on political divides in Western and non-Western democracies. This database, which was first introduced in Gethin et al. (2021), consists in a set of electoral surveys covering approximately 550 elections conducted in 55 democracies between 1948 and 2022.[1] All these surveys report information on individuals' voting behaviors in national elections, together with sociodemographic characteristics such as income, education, religion, ethnicity, regional location, age, and gender. Thanks to a considerable data collection effort, each survey was harmonized following a similar and reproducible methodology, allowing for detailed comparisons of electoral divides in each country. To the best of our knowledge, this represents the first database tracking long-run changes in political cleavages in both Western and non-Western democracies.[2] The full database is freely available in the form of the World Political Cleavages and Inequality

[1] In using the term "democracy," we do not suggest that the countries covered in the database are perfect democracies, far from it. All these countries, however, have at some point held plural and disputed elections. This allows us to study how different social groups cast their votes for existing parties and coalitions, offering an imperfect yet tangible window on the structure of political cleavages in these various contexts.

[2] Our work directly draws on previous data collection and harmonization efforts. See in particular Franklin et al. (1992), Thomassen (2005), Elff (2007), Evans and De Graaf (2013), Bosancianu (2017), Schmitt (2021), and the collections of post-electoral surveys compiled by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (http://cses.org) and the Comparative National Elections Project (https://u.osu.edu/cnep/).

Database (wpid.world), which is regularly updated to cover additional elections and countries (see Krzyszczyk, 2024; Lonsdale, 2023; Tsoukalis, 2023).

As of February 2025, the database covers 17 democracies in Western Europe, 4 in Northern America and Oceania, 8 in Eastern Europe, 10 in Asia, 9 in Africa and the Middle East, and 7 in Latin America. In Western democracies, surveys allow us to cover most elections held since the 1960s–1970s, in some cases the 1940s–1950s. In some non-Western countries, we have had access to historical sources covering an equally long time span too, in particular in Japan, India, Pakistan, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Israel. Surveys start in the 1990s or 2000s in the majority of remaining countries, often because these years coincide with democratization.

3 Political cleavages in Western democracies

The aim of this section is to compare the long-run evolution of political cleavages in Western democracies—that is, those of Western Europe, the United States, and other Anglosphere countries. We first document a striking transformation common to nearly all these democracies: the divergence of divides related to income and education. We then turn to the analysis of other dimensions of political conflict, in particular generational, rural-urban, religious, and gender cleavages. We continue by surveying the literature on the causes behind the transformation of political cleavages. Finally, we empirically disentangle the roles played by institutional and historical factors, party system fragmentation, changes in citizen polarization, and changes in the structure of political supply in shaping the reversal of educational divides.

3.1 The disconnection of income and education cleavages

3.1.1 Party systems in Western democracies

Comparing the long-run evolution of political cleavages in Western democracies requires grouping political parties in such a way that the coalitions considered are as comparable across countries and over time as possible. To that end, we begin by making a distinction between two large groups of parties: social democratic, socialist, communist, and green parties ("left-wing" or "social democratic and affiliated" parties) on one side, and conservative, Christian democratic, and anti-immigration parties ("right-wing" or "conservative and affiliated" parties) on the other side. We also include parties commonly classified as liberal or social-liberal in this latter group, such as the Liberal Democrats in Britain, the Free Democratic Party in Germany, and the Liberal Party in Norway.

The main advantage of this binary classification is that it makes it possible to directly compare electoral divides in two-party systems, such as the UK or the US, to those observed in highly fragmented party systems such as France or Italy. These two groups of parties also correspond in many cases to the coalitions

of parties that have effectively built political majorities, whether in coalition governments or through direct parliamentary support. Having said that, this does not mean that these two groups are ideologically homogeneous in any way, neither internally nor over time. For this reason, we then turn to considering how specific subfamilies of parties, in particular green and anti-immigration movements, have contributed to reshaping electoral divides in countries with multi-party systems.

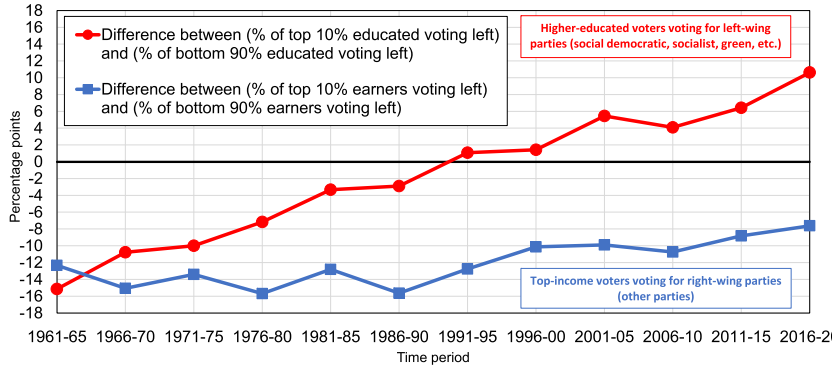
3.1.2 The divergence of income and educational divides

We start by providing an overview of income and education divides. We rely on a simple indicator: the difference between the share of richest (most educated) 10 percent voters and the share of poorest (least educated) 90 percent voters voting for social democratic and affiliated parties. This difference is negative when top-income (top-educated) voters have a lower likelihood to vote for these parties, and positive when they have a higher likelihood to do so.

Fig. 1 depicts the long-run evolution of these two indicators, taking their average values in the twelve Western democracies for which data is available since the 1960s. The evolution of income and education has been radically different. Top-income voters have always been less likely to vote for social democratic and affiliated parties and more likely to vote for conservative and affiliated parties. In the 1960s, the indicator was equal to −15: top-income voters had a probability to vote for social democratic parties lower than that of low-income voters by 15 percentage points. This gap has decreased slightly in the past decade, but it remains significantly negative. Top-income voters have thus remained more likely than low-income voters to vote for conservative and affiliated parties.

In contrast, highest-educated voters were less likely to vote for social democratic parties than lowest-educated voters by 15 percentage points in the 1960s, but this gap has shifted very gradually from being negative to becoming positive, moving from −10 in the 1970s to −5 in the 1980s, 0 in the 1990s, +5 in the 2000s, and finally +10 in 2020–2022. Higher-educated voters have thus moved from being significantly more right-wing than lower-educated voters to significantly more left-wing.

This analysis reveals a gradual process of disconnection between the effects of income and education on the vote. In the 1950s–1960s, the vote for social democratic and affiliated parties was "class-based," meaning that social democratic and affiliated parties represented both the low-education and the low-income electorate, whereas conservative parties represented both high-education and high-income voters. These party systems have gradually evolved towards "multidimensional" or "multiconflictual" party systems, in which income and education differentially structure support for competing political movements. One might also call these systems "multi-elite" party systems, in which coalitions alternating in power tend to reflect the views and



Source: Authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: in the 1960s, both higher-educated and high-income voters were less likely to vote for left-wing (social democratic / socialist / communist / green / other left-wing) parties than lower-educated and low-income voters by more than 10 percentage points. The left vote has gradually become associated with higher education voters, giving rise to a complete divergence of the effects of income and education on the vote. Figures correspond to five-year averages for Australia, Britain, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the US. Estimates control for income/education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

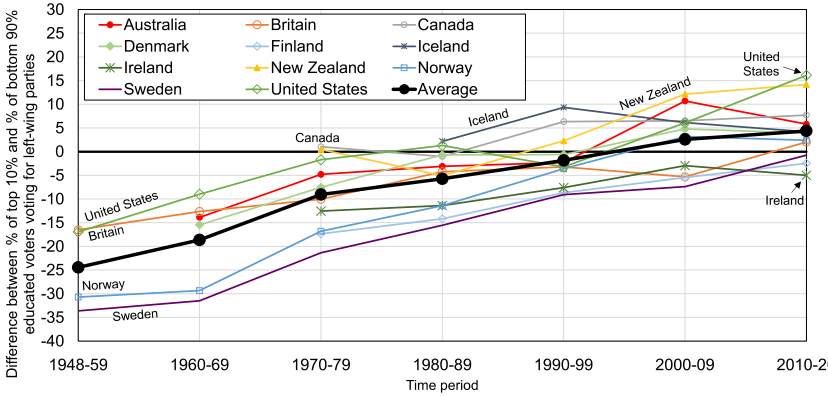
FIGURE 1 The Disconnection of Income and Education Cleavages in Western Democracies.

interests of a different kind of elite (an intellectual "Brahmin left" versus an economic "Merchant right").[3]

3.1.3 Cross-country heterogeneity

Although with different speeds and intensities, this transformation is visible in nearly all Western democracies, despite their major political, historical, and institutional differences. Figs. 2 and 3 plot the evolution of the education and income gradients in all 21 countries. Income divides were historically largest in Northern European countries, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, consistently with their histories of early industrialization and class polarization. They have declined in these countries since then, although income continues to be negatively associated with support for the left. In contrast, the income divide is less pronounced in some countries with weak historical class cleavages and crosscutting religious (Italy) or ethnolinguistic (Canada) cleavages (Bauluz et al., 2021; Gethin, 2021c). The United States is one of the only countries where a flattening of the income effect could well be underway: in 2016 and 2020, top

[3] In India's traditional caste system, upper castes were divided into Brahmins (priests, intellectuals) and Kshatryas/Vaishyas (warriors, merchants, tradesmen), a division that modern political conflicts in Western democracies therefore seem to follow to some extent.



Source: Authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: The figure represents the difference between the share of higher-educated (top 10%) and lower-educated (bottom 90%) voters voting for social democratic / socialist / communist / green / other left-wing parties in English-speaking and Northern European countries. In nearly all countries, higher-educated voters used to be significantly more likely to vote for conservative parties and have gradually become more likely to vote for left-wing parties. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

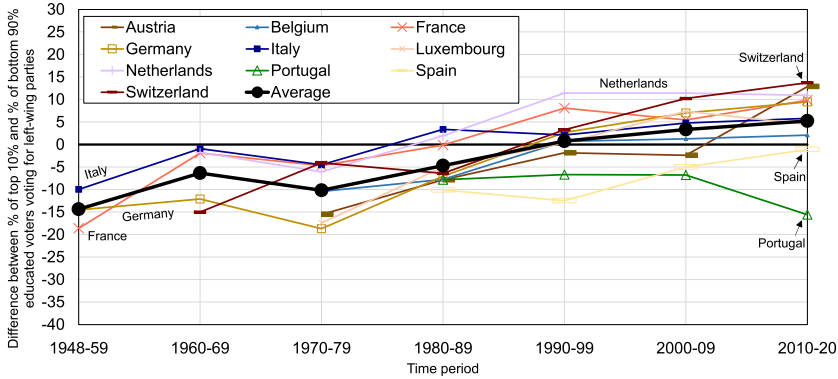
FIGURE 2 The reversal of educational divides in Western democracies. Panel A. English-speaking and Northern European countries.

10% earners became for the first time since World War II about as likely to vote for the Democrats as for the Republicans.

Educational divides were also strongest in Norway, Sweden, and Finland between the 1950s and 1970s, three democracies well-known for their historical class-based party systems. The reversal of the education cleavage has not yet been fully completed in these countries, as social democratic parties have managed to keep a non-negligible fraction of the low-income and lower-educated electorate (Martínez-Toledano and Sodano, 2021). This delay is also common to recent democracies such as Spain, where left-wing parties continue to be more class-based. The two major exceptions in our dataset are Portugal and to a lesser extent Ireland, where there is no evidence of a reversal of the educational divide, including in recent years.

We stress that our results are largely insensitive to the choice of alternative indicators and empirical specifications. In the Appendix, we report results using various definitions of educational and income divides, together with a number of figures showing their specific evolution in each country. Regardless of the indicator chosen, the emergence of "multiconflictual" party systems is found to have gradually taken place in almost all countries.[4]

[4] Appendix Figure A1 reproduces Fig. 1 but focusing on the top 50% instead of the top 10%. Appendix Figures A2 and A3 further plot the evolution of the educational and income divides for



Source: Authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: The figure represents the difference between the share of higher-educated (top 10%) and lower-educated (bottom 90%) voters voting for social democratic / socialist / communist / green / other left-wing parties in Continental and Southern European countries. In nearly all countries, higher-educated voters used to be significantly more likely to vote for conservative parties and have gradually become more likely to vote for left-wing parties. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

FIGURE 2 (*continued*) The reversal of educational divides in Western democracies. Panel B. Continental and Southern European countries.

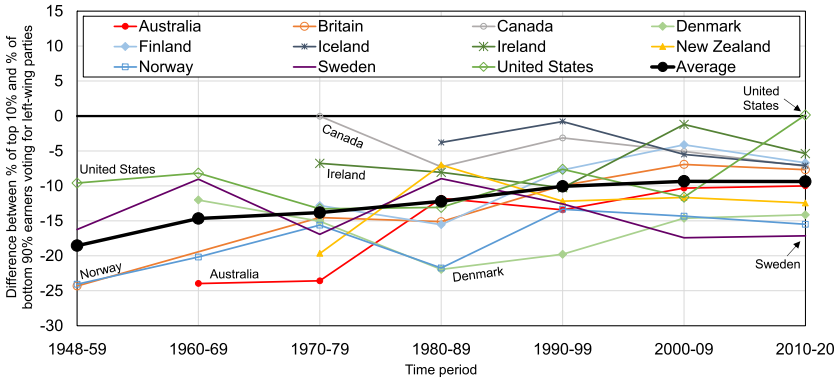
Fig. 4 maps the income and education gradients in each country in the 1970s and 2010s–2020s, providing a snapshot on the evolution of political divides.[5] In the 1970s, almost all countries were at the bottom left of the figure: both education and income were negatively associated with voting for social democratic and affiliated parties. Since then, most countries have migrated to the bottom right of the figure: education has become positively associated with left voting, while the opposite remains true of income. Portugal, Ireland, Finland, and Spain are the only countries where lower-educated voters are still more likely to vote left, while the United States and Italy are the only countries where income is not significantly associated with right-wing voting. The countries with the highest contemporary educational divides are the United States, Switzerland, Austria, and New Zealand.

3.1.4 *Other dimensions of political conflict: age, geography, religion, and gender*

We now turn to other determinants of electoral behavior included in the WPID, focusing on age, rural-urban location, religion, and gender.

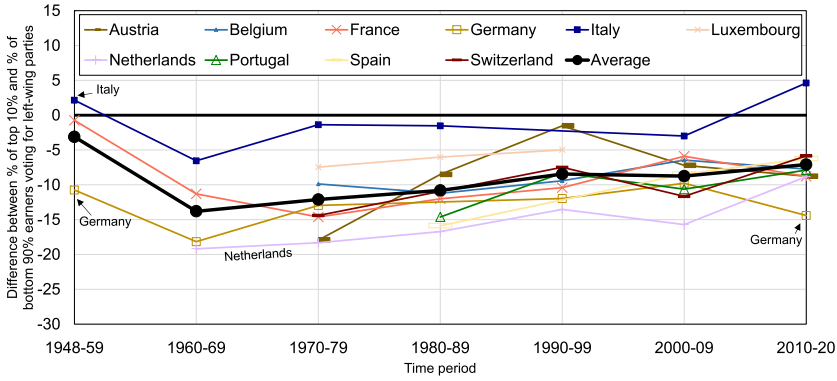
various cutoffs in the average country. Appendix Figures D1 to D42 present detailed results by country.

[5] Appendix Figures A4 to A8 reproduce this figure before versus after controls as well as for different cutoffs.



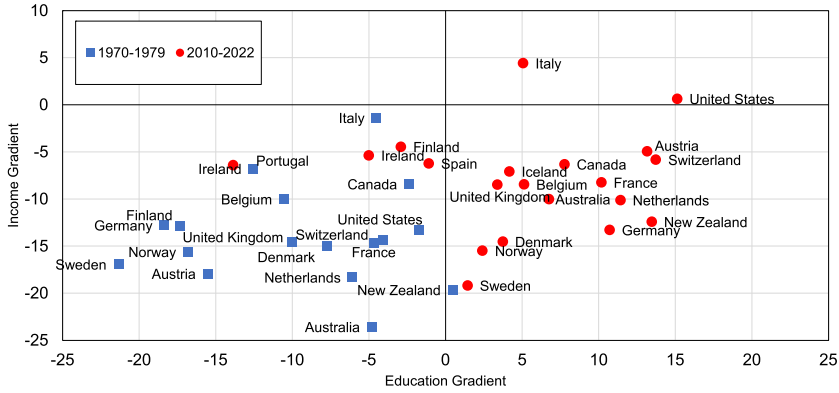
Source: Authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: The figure represents the difference between the share of high-income (top 10%) and low-income (bottom 90%) voters voting for social democratic / socialist / communist / green / other left-wing parties in English-speaking and Northern European countries. In all countries, top-income voters have remained significantly less likely to vote for these parties than low-income voters. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

FIGURE 3 The stability/decline of income divides in Western democracies. Panel A. English-speaking and Northern European countries.



Source: Authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: The figure represents the difference between the share of high-income (top 10%) and low-income (bottom 90%) voters voting for social democratic / socialist / communist / green / other left-wing parties in Continental and Southern European countries. In all countries, top-income voters have remained significantly less likely to vote for these parties than low-income voters. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

FIGURE 3 (*continued*) The stability/decline of income divides in Western democracies. Panel B. Continental and Southern European countries.



Source: Authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: The figure represents the difference between the share of high-income (top 10%) and low-income (bottom 90%) voters voting for left-wing parties on the y-axis, and the same difference between higher-educated (top 10%) and lower-educated (bottom 90%) voters on the x-axis, comparing voting patterns in the 1970s and the 2010s. Estimates control for income/education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

FIGURE 4 Income and educational divides in Western democracies: 1970s versus 2010s.

Young voters have always been more likely to vote for left-wing parties than older cohorts in the majority of Western democracies (by about 5 percentage points on average). There has been no clear trend in this divide.[6] This stability contrasts with studies arguing that political change in Western democracies would have a major generational dimension, and that the emergence of populist authoritarian leaders in recent years would have represented a "backlash" against social progress among the older generations (Inglehart, 1977; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

The rural-urban divide has also remained relatively stable, with rural areas voting between 5 to 15 percentage points more for conservative and affiliated parties in most Western democracies.[7] This pattern is also visible in countries with multi-party systems, which have experienced growing political fragmentation. The reason is that the reshuffling of votes has happened *within* rather than across left-right blocs. In particular, support for green parties tends to be concentrated in cities today, as is the case for other left-wing parties, while anti-immigration parties are more popular in rural areas, just like other conservative parties.[8]

6 See Appendix Figure A9.
7 See Appendix Figure A10.
8 There are important exceptions to this pattern, however. Data on local election results reveal a strong rise of rural-urban divides in the United States over the past century (Rodden, 2019). The rise of the far-right Front National in France has also been associated with a deepening of rural-urban

Religious divides do not seem to have undergone any clear reversal in the past decades either. Religious Christian voters have always been much less likely to vote for social democratic and affiliated parties than non-religious voters. This gap has slightly declined in most countries (from approximately 30 to 20 percentage points), but it remains strongly negative.[9] In line with the rural-urban cleavage, the reshuffling of religious divides has also happened *within* rather than across left-right blocs. In particular, support for green parties tends to be concentrated among non-religious voters, as is the case for other left-wing parties, while support for anti-immigration parties varies little across religious groups in most countries.[10]

The WPID also makes it possible to corroborate the well-known fact that women used to be more conservative than men and have gradually become more likely to vote for social democratic and affiliated parties across all Western democracies (Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014; Edlund and Pande, 2002; Inglehart and Norris, 2000).[11] Similar to the education cleavage, this transition has been very gradual and is visible as early as the 1950s. Much of the negative gradient of the early postwar decades can be explained by the fact that women used to be more religious than men (Blondel, 1970; Gethin et al., 2021; Goot and Reid, 1984). Together with education, gender is thus one of the only two variables in our dataset for which a complete reversal of electoral divides seems to have taken place.[12]

3.2 Drivers of realignment: a survey of the existing literature

We now turn to surveying the literature on the causes underlying the transformation of political cleavages in Western democracies, in particular the divergence of the effects of income and education. We pay particular attention to the distinction between demand factors, affecting the structure of voters' preferences for different types of policies, and supply factors, affecting the way parties represent and compete over these preferences.

cleavages since the 1990s (Cagé and Piketty, 2023). Unfortunately, the post-electoral surveys used in this chapter capture such divides only imperfectly.

[9] See Appendix Figure A11.

[10] Islam represents an important exception: in almost all Western democracies, the overwhelming majority of Muslims vote for left-wing parties, while almost none of them vote for anti-immigration movements. In the case of France, there is evidence that this divide has been deepening since the 1990s (Piketty, 2018).

[11] See Appendix Figure A12.

[12] Our dataset also makes it possible to study other socioeconomic cleavages related to union membership, sector of employment, and home ownership. Union members, public sector workers and homeowners have always been more likely to vote for social democratic and affiliated parties. There has been no clear trend in these divides.

3.2.1 Demand factors

A first candidate explanation for the reversal of educational divides is that political demand has changed, in the sense that voters have become increasingly polarized on issues and policies linked to education. As discussed above, a growing and extensive literature has emphasized sociocultural values related to identity and immigration, and more generally the emergence of a new "libertarian-authoritarian" dimension of political conflict, as key drivers of realignment in Western democracies (e.g., Bonomi et al., 2021; Alesina and Tabellini, 2024; Bornschier, 2010; Bornschier et al., 2024; Draca and Schwarz, 2024; Enke et al., 2025; Kitschelt, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2008; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Among other explanatory factors, scholars have highlighted the role played by structural transformations such as the rising importance of education, the generational experience of affluence and social stability (e.g., Dalton, 1984; Ford and Jennings, 2020; Inglehart, 1977; Knutsen, 2006), secularization, changing gender roles and family structures (e.g., Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014; Dalton, 1996; Edlund and Pande, 2002; Evans and De Graaf, 2013; Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Knutsen, 2004), the rise in house prices and housing unaffordability (e.g., Ansell and Cansunar, 2021; Schoch, 2021), globalization (e.g., Autor et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2024; Colantone and Stanig, 2018), and technological change (e.g., Anelli et al., 2019; Borwein et al., 2023; Gallego et al., 2022; Petrova et al., 2024) in shaping voters' preferences in the past decades.

In that context, education has indeed been shown to be a major determinant of liberal opinions (e.g., Abou-Chadi and Hix, 2021; Beramendi et al., 2015; Bovens and Wille, 2017; Dolezal, 2010; Duch and Taylor, 1993; Kalmijn and Kraaykamp, 2007; Kitschelt and Rehm, 2019; Kriesi et al., 2008; Rydgren, 2013; 2018; Scott, 2022; Stubager, 2009; 2010; Van der Waal et al., 2007; Weakliem, 2002). In addition, some studies have shown a widespread movement toward more cosmopolitan values over the last decades (Caughey et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2023). For changes in demand to generate the reversal of educational divides, however, it is not sufficient to relate education and sociocultural values at a given point in time: one should have observed a deepening of such divides over time. Here, empirical evidence is scarce. Several studies suggest that social divides between groups have remained stable on a number of issues (Bertrand and Kamenica, 2023; Boxell et al., 2024; Desmet and Wacziarg, 2018; 2021; Desmet et al., 2025; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Easterbrook et al., 2016; Evans and Tilley, 2017; Kuziemko et al., 2024).[13] This would rule out demand as a significant driver of realignment: higher-educated and lower-educated voters do not appear more divided on sociocultural issues than they used to. Nonetheless, this evidence is generally based on voters' positions on specific issues, not on the weight that they put on each of these issues. Hence, it is still an open

[13] Hall et al. (2023) have recently documented a mild deepening of the gap in cultural attitudes across education groups in recent years.

question whether the transformation of political cleavages has been driven at least partially by demand factors.

3.2.2 Supply factors

A second candidate explanation for the reversal of educational divides is that political supply has changed, in the sense that parties have increasingly emphasized issues that divide voters with different levels of education. A number of studies have emphasized the key role of supply factors in accelerating voter dealignment, in particular the decline of traditional class divides (e.g., Elff, 2009; Evans and De Graaf, 2013; Evans and Tilley, 2017; Rennwald and Evans, 2014). At the same time, the literature has highlighted the end of mass parties, the emergence of green and anti-immigration movements, changes in the issue basis of political competition, the increasing polarization of political parties along the sociocultural dimension, and growing party discipline as key drivers of the transformation of political cleavages (e.g., Ares, 2022; Bornschier, 2015; Canen et al., 2020; 2021; Gethin et al., 2021; Hix et al., 2019; Hobolt and De Vries, 2015; Klein, 2020; Kuziemko and Washington, 2018).

Scholars remain divided, however, when it comes to the exact nature and origin of this shift in supply. Beyond sociocultural issues, parties have also changed their positions on economic policy. The reversal of the education cleavage could be explained by the fact that left-wing parties have developed a more elitist approach to education policy, in the sense that they have increasingly been viewed by less educated voters as parties defending the winners of the higher education competition (Young, 1958; Piketty, 1995; 2018). In the United States, the Democratic Party has considerably reduced its supply of "predistribution" policies (such as minimum wages or support for union organizing), which are particularly favored by less-educated voters (Kuziemko et al., 2024). More generally, the moderation of left-wing parties' economic platforms could have contributed to the decline of class cleavages, the rise of identity-based conflicts, and the drop in turnout among lower-educated voters observed in many democracies (e.g., Anderson and Beramendi, 2012; Evans and Tilley, 2017; Gethin et al., 2021; Piketty, 2018).[14] This was evident in post-communist democracies such as Hungary and Poland, where the collaboration of communist and socialist parties to the process of market liberalization was followed by growing disillusionment and the emergence of new powerful right-wing coalitions (e.g., Lindner et al., 2021). The cases of Ireland and Portugal, where economic issues continue to decisively structure political conflicts and where left-wing parties have managed to keep a significant share of the lower-educated electorate, show that the reversal of educational divides in Western

[14] Unfortunately, the electoral surveys mobilized in this chapter do not allow for a reliable analysis of trends in turnout by socioeconomic characteristic. We leave this for future research (see Cagé and Piketty, 2023 for evidence on growing turnout inequalities in France using local election results data).

democracies is not an ineluctable or mechanical transition (e.g., Bauluz et al., 2021).

3.2.3 Joining supply and demand factors

Although concerned with the same empirical reality, the supply and the demand literatures have to some extent been talking past each other. A nascent literature has aimed to reconcile the two views regarding the transformation of political cleavages by focusing on the joint interaction between demand and supply and between the economic and the cultural dimension. Beramendi et al. (2015) propose a model of constrained partisanship where the demand side is based on an electoral politics structured by prevailing cleavages, along both a left–right spectrum and values-oriented divide, and the supply side is given by the policy options politicians can feasibly pursue, based on constraints on state capacities. In a similar vein, Bornschier et al. (2024) emphasize the important role of group identities as the intermediate level connecting social structure and the organizational expression of cleavages, as well as the alignments between identity-laden social groups and ideological blocks, rather than individual parties. Enke (2020) proposes a methodology for jointly studying the supply and demand sides of morality to formally study the hypothesis that voting decisions partly reflect the match between voters' and politicians' emphasis on universalist relative to communal moral values.[15]

Among recent attempts, Gennaioli and Tabellini (2024) and Longuet-Marx (2024) develop new frameworks to jointly study supply-demand and economic-culture interactions in the U.S. Gennaioli and Tabellini (2024) argue that new voter demands, induced by shifting social identities away from a "class struggle" to a "culture war," are an important driver of changing political divides. Politicians have thus adapted their platforms, rhetoric, and propaganda to voters' identities, and become actors in the culture war. In contrast, Longuet-Marx (2024) finds that most of the political realignment of low-education voters away from the Democratic Party can be attributed to changes on the supply side, with a differential polarization on cultural issues versus economic issues.

3.2.4 The political economy of radical right parties

Finally, the transformation of political cleavages has also been studied in the context of the recent rise of radical parties in the West (see Guriev and Papaioannou (2022), Noury and Roland (2020) and Rodrik (2021) for detailed reviews of the literature). Anti-immigration movements are an object of particular interest for understanding changing political cleavages, given their growing electoral importance and their potential role in accelerating the reversal of educational divides.

[15] Besley and Persson (2019) also model the two-way interaction between democratic values and institutions to explain the heterogeneity in democratic transitions.

Here again, the literature remains divided when it comes to the respective roles of supply, demand, sociocultural, and socioeconomic factors. A strand of the literature has focused on the importance of culture and identity, in particular on the role of terrorism (Giavazzi et al., 2024; Sabet et al., 2025), social capital (e.g., Giuliano and Wacziarg, 2020), and exposure to immigration (e.g., Bratti et al., 2020; Dustmann et al., 2019)[16] or emigration (Dancygier et al., 2025). Social media and internet have been shown to be important channels to radicalize and polarize voters on sociocultural dimensions too (e.g., Bursztyn et al., 2024; Giavazzi et al., 2024; Schneider-Strawczynski and Valette, 2023; Tabellini et al., 2023). On the supply side, the emergence of far-right parties has expanded the vote share of the right as a whole, suggesting that these parties capture different voters than those of just the classical right (Abou-Chadi et al., 2022; Fernández-Villaverde and Sanz, 2024). The success of far-right parties has been argued to be likely driven by their focus on sociocultural issues (e.g., Wagner and Meyer, 2017) and voters' changing priorities away from economics towards nativist cultural positions (e.g., Danieli et al., 2022).

Another strand of this literature has instead emphasized the role of economic factors such as positional deprivation (e.g., Burgoon et al., 2019), socioeconomic marginalization (e.g., Dal Bó et al., 2023), occupational change (e.g., Kurer, 2020), downward mobility and disappointed expectations (e.g., Häusermann et al., 2023; Kurer and Van Staalduinen, 2022), rental market risk and the rise in house prices (e.g., Abou-Chadi et al., 2023; Ansell et al., 2022), financial crises (e.g., Doerr et al., 2022; Funke et al., 2016), austerity and a decline in public service provision (e.g., Cremaschi et al., 2023; Fetzer, 2019; Gabriel et al., 2026), and economic distress and insecurity (Dehdari, 2022; Guiso et al., 2024) in explaining the radicalization of voters. Indeed, due to growing economic insecurity, short-term protection policies have been a successful tool for radical parties to meet voters' demand for immediate protection (Guiso et al., 2017).

Finally, there is another strand of this literature that has focused on the joint interaction between economic and sociocultural dimensions to explain the rise of populism and extreme voting and the heterogeneity across time and political systems. Indeed, Arzheimer (2009) and Cavaille and Ferwerda (2023) show that the level of support for anti-immigration parties is closely linked to the degree of resource competition and distributional conflict between natives and immigrants in countries with generous welfare programs. Abou-Chadi et al. (2022) also show that anti-immigration attitudes have become even more relevant as the main predictor for choosing a radical right party, but that economic grievances have also grown in importance. Gidron and Hall (2017) and Grossman and Helpman (2021) emphasize instead identity and status

[16] There is, however, no consensus in the literature on the effects of exposure to migrants or refugees on the vote for anti-immigrant parties, with some papers also finding negative (e.g., Gamalerio et al., 2023; Schneider-Strawczynski, 2021; Vertier et al., 2023) or mixed (e.g., Steinmayr, 2021) effects on the far-right vote share.

concerns among the losers of globalization to rationalize the rise of extreme voting and anti-globalization movements.

3.3 Drivers of realignment: an empirical investigation

To what extent is the divergence of education and income divides linked to socioeconomic and sociocultural factors, and what are the respective roles of demand and supply dynamics? In this section, we draw on our database to propose a new exploratory analysis of the drivers of electoral realignment. We study four sets of competing explanatory variables: institutional and historical factors, party system fragmentation and the rise of new green and anti-immigration parties, demand factors related to attitudinal polarization over sociocultural values, and supply factors related to party ideology and the structure of party competition. We find strong evidence in favor of supply factors playing a dominant role.

3.3.1 Institutional and historical factors

We start by documenting how the evolution of the educational divide, defined as the difference between the share of top 10% and bottom 90% educated voters voting left, varies across different regions, political systems, and historical contexts (see Table 1).[17]

We can first aggregate countries into four large regions: the Anglosphere, Central-Western Europe, Northern Europe, and Southern Europe. The educational divide is highest, and its reversal has been most pronounced, in Central-Western Europe. This includes a number of countries with highly fragmented party systems, such as France, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, which have seen a particularly rapid change in the education gradient in the past decades. In Northern Europe and the Anglosphere, the reversal of the educational divide has been slightly less pronounced, although still very significant. In Southern Europe, finally, it has barely changed since the 1980s, due to its muted evolution in Spain and Italy and the exceptional case of Portugal.

Another way to look at the data is to group countries depending on their voting system. We find little evidence of this being an important correlate of realignment: the reversal of educational divides has unfolded at about the same pace in countries with majoritarian and proportional representation systems. For instance, they followed a very similar trajectory in France and the United States, despite the much larger degree of political fragmentation observed in the former.

Finally, we study the role played by cross-cutting ethnic divides. We aggregate countries into two groups depending on the intensity of historical ethnolinguistic (e.g., Belgium, Canada, Switzerland) and ethnoracial (e.g., New Zealand, United States) divides. We find little evidence that these cross-cutting

[17] Appendix Figures B1 to B3 plot long-run time series grouping countries into these different categories.

TABLE 1 Cross-Country Heterogeneity in the Evolution of Educational Divides.

	Difference between (% Top 10%) and (% Bottom 90%) Educated Voting Left		
	1980–1989	2010–2022	Difference 2010s–1980s
By World Region			
Anglosphere	−4%	7%	10.8%
Central-Western Europe	−5%	10%	14.4%
Northern Europe	−8%	2%	9.6%
Southern Europe	−5%	−3%	1.6%
By Type of Political System			
Majoritarian	−1%	9%	10.1%
Proportional Representation	−7%	3%	10.3%
Mixed/Other	−4%	7%	10.7%
By Intensity of Ethnolinguistic/Racial Divides			
Weak	−5%	4%	9.1%
Strong	−5%	8%	13.0%
By Subgroup of Parties			
All Left vs. All Right	−5%	5%	10.4%
Traditional Left vs. All Right	−7%	3%	9.8%
Traditional Left vs. Traditional Right	−7%	1%	8.8%

Source: Authors' computations using the World Political cleavages and Inequality Database (see wpid.world).

Notes: The table reports the evolution of educational divides, defined as the difference between the share of top 10% and bottom 90% educated voters voting left, for different groups of countries. Anglosphere: Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States. Northern Europe: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden. Southern Europe: Italy, Portugal, Spain. Central-Western Europe: all other countries. Majoritarian: Canada, United Kingdom, United States. Proportional Representation: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland. Mixed/Other: all other countries. Strong Ethnic Divides: Belgium, Canada, New Zealand, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States. Weak Ethnic Divides: all other countries. All Left vs. All Right: compare all left-wing and all right-wing parties. Traditional Left vs. All Right: exclude green parties from the analysis. Traditional Left vs. Traditional Right: exclude both green and anti-immigration parties from the analysis.

divides play a significant role: if anything, the reversal of educational divides has been slightly faster in countries with strong ethnic conflicts. We also stress the considerable heterogeneity found within each group. For instance, the reversal of educational divides has been quite slow in Canada and extremely pronounced in Switzerland, despite the presence of major ethnolinguistic divides in both countries.

Together, these results suggest that institutional and historical factors are unlikely to be the main drivers of cross-country differences in realignment.

3.3.2 Party system fragmentation and the rise of new parties

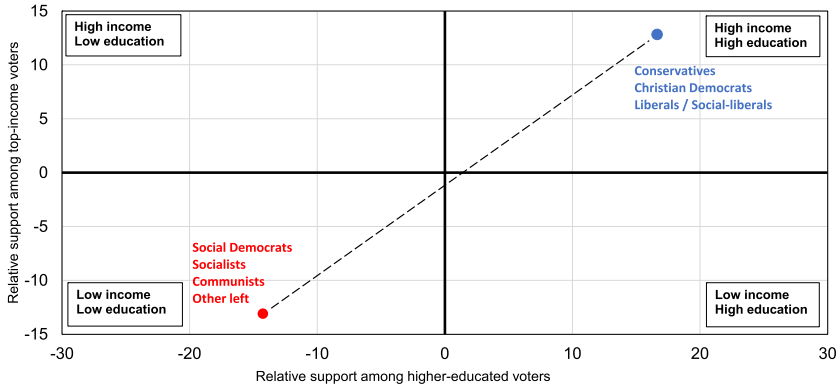
A second candidate explanation for the reversal of educational divides is that the structure of political competition has changed. Indeed, the shift from "class-based" to "multi-elite" party systems has coincided with a significant reshuffling of political forces in most Western democracies. The vote share obtained by traditional socialist and social democratic parties across Western democracies has declined from about 40% to 34% since the end of World War II, while that received by Christian democratic and conservative parties has decreased from 38% to 30%.[18] Communist parties had 7% of the vote in the 1940s, but they have progressively disappeared from the political scene. Green parties made their entry in the political landscape in the 1970s and have obtained increasing support, reaching on average 8% of votes in the past decade. Anti-immigration parties started to grow in the late 1970s and have seen their vote share increase uninterruptedly since then, reaching at present on average 11% of votes. Support for social-liberal and liberal parties has remained more stable at approximately 10%, but with important variations.

Fig. 5 displays the income and education gradients for each of these families of parties in a two-dimensional space in 1960–1965 (panel A) and 2015–2022 (panel B). In the 1960s, income and education were aligned: both top 10% income voters and top 10% educated voters were less likely to vote for social democratic and affiliated parties and more likely to vote for conservative and affiliated parties than other voters. By 2015–2022, income and education have opposite effects: income is associated with higher support for the right, while education is associated with higher support for the left.

Meanwhile, support for anti-immigration and green parties does not differ significantly across income groups, but it does vary substantially across educational categories (the two groups of parties are distant on the x-axis but not on the y-axis). However, these averages hide significant variations across countries. In particular, while nearly all green parties obtain better scores among higher-educated voters, they differ in their tendency to attract low-income voters. Similarly, anti-immigration parties have attracted a particularly high share of the lower-educated electorate, but there are significant variations in the income profile of far-right voting.[19] For instance, the Austrian Freedom Party, the French Front National, and the Danish People's Party have received significantly higher scores among the low-income electorate. In contrast, the Lega in Italy and VOX in Spain have obtained disproportionately more support among high-income voters, which can be explained by the interaction between anti-immigration issues and other dimensions of political conflict (e.g., the

[18] See Appendix Figure B5.

[19] See Appendix Figures B6 and B7.



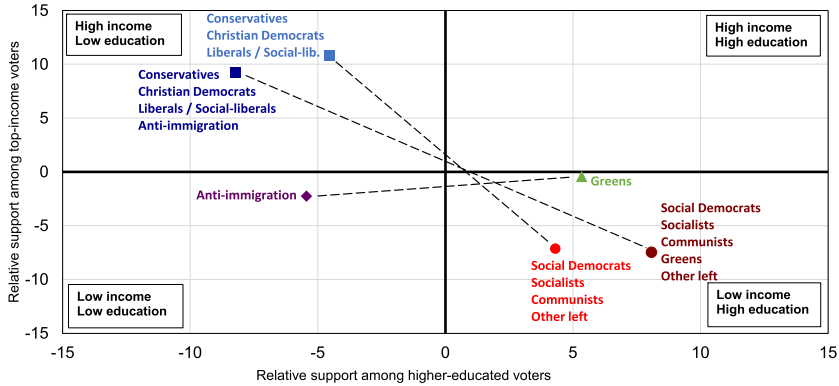
Source: Authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: The figure represents the difference between the share of high-income (top 10%) and low-income (bottom 90%) voters voting for selected groups of parties on the y-axis, and the same difference between higher-educated (top 10%) and lower-educated (bottom 90%) voters on the x-axis. In the 1960s, social democratic, socialist, and communist parties were supported by both low-income and lower-educated voters, while conservative, Christian, and liberal parties were supported by both high-income and higher-educated voters. Averages over all Western democracies. Estimates control for income/education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

FIGURE 5 The Fragmentation of Western Cleavage Structures. Panel A. 1960–1965.

Catalan independence movement in Spain or the concentration of Lega votes in the richer Northern region in Italy, see Bauluz et al., 2021; Rama et al., 2021; and Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020).

Given the particularly strong association between education and support for green and anti-immigration parties, we should expect their growing electoral weight to have played a significant role in shaping the reversal of the education cleavage. We formally quantify their contribution in Table 1 by comparing the evolution of the education gradient before and after removing green and anti-immigration parties from the analysis.[20] In the average country, the change reaches about 10.4 percentage points when including them, compared to 8.8 points when comparing only the electorates of traditional left and right parties. In other words, the rise of green and anti-immigration parties can account for a modest 15% of the overall reversal of educational divides observed since 1980. Changes in the vote structure of preexisting parties, including countries with highly fragmented party systems, thus appear to have played a dominant role in shaping electoral realignment. The fact that the reversal of educational divides has also taken place in two-party systems, such as the United States and

[20] Appendix Figure B4 plots the corresponding long-run time series.



Source: Authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: The figure represents the difference between the share of high-income (top 10%) and low-income (bottom 90%) voters voting for selected groups of parties on the y-axis, and the same difference between higher-educated (top 10%) and lower-educated (bottom 90%) voters on the x-axis. Education most clearly distinguishes anti-immigration from green parties, while both income and education most clearly distinguish conservative and Christian democratic parties from socialist, social democratic, and communist parties. Averages over all Western democracies. Estimates control for income/education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

FIGURE 5 (*continued*) The Fragmentation of Western Cleavage Structures. Panel B. 2015–2022.

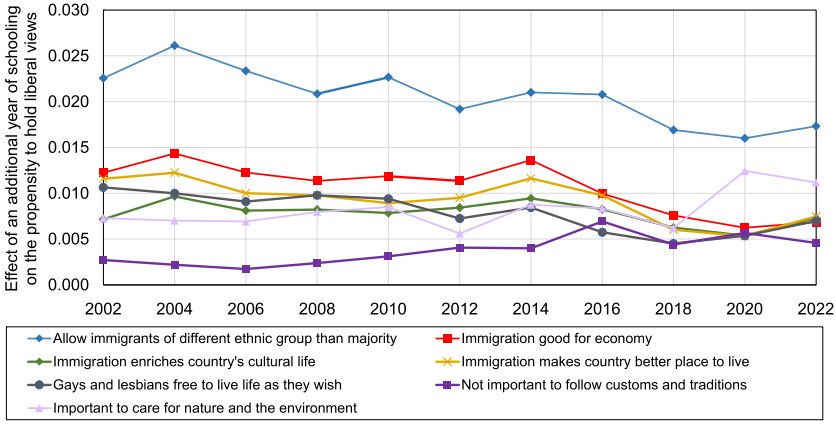
the United Kingdom, further demonstrates that political realignment cannot be solely explained by new parties.

3.3.3 Demand factors

A third candidate for the reversal of educational divides is that political demand has changed, in the sense that voters with different levels of education have become more polarized. Sociocultural issues related to environmental protection and immigration are of particular importance here, given evidence on the tight association between education and support for green and radical right parties.

To investigate the role played by demand factors, we searched for surveys reporting (1) comparable information on educational divides over sociocultural issues (2) in several countries (3) with some time dimension. The number of surveys satisfying these criteria is extremely scarce. We found the European Social Survey (2002–2022) to be the most suited database for this purpose.[21] It covers biennial data on political attitudes, together with detailed, carefully

[21] The European and World Values Surveys are also a precious source, but they only contain a couple of exploitable questions repeated at irregular intervals in various countries. Furthermore, educational attainment has been collected in very different ways in the various waves, making it difficult to construct indicators that are comparable over time. Post-electoral surveys do sometimes cover useful questions that can be tracked over time, but they are typically not comparable across



Source: Authors' computations using the European Social Survey.
Note: The figure represents the effect of an additional year of schooling on the propensity to hold liberal views (answer positively) to each question. Estimates control for age, gender, religion, church attendance, employment status, income, and country-fixed effects.

FIGURE 6 The Evolution of Educational Divides over Sociocultural Issues in Europe, 2002–2022.

harmonized educational attainment information, for 15 of the 21 democracies covered in our database. Scanning the questionnaire, we were able to identify seven questions, repeated in each wave, capturing individuals' opinions on immigration, the environment, LGBTQ+ rights, and traditional morality. Fig. 6 presents the results of regressions relating each of these questions to individual years of schooling in each survey wave, controlling for age, gender, religion, church attendance, employment status, income, and country-fixed effects. The dependent variables are dummies taking one if individuals hold liberal views on each question (e.g., are favorable to welcoming more migrants) and zero otherwise. Results of additional specifications, as well as country-specific results, can be found in the Appendix.[22]

Two results stand out. First, education is consistently associated with more liberal values on each of these issues. For instance, an additional year of schooling increases support for immigration of ethnic groups different from that of the majority by over 1.5 percentage points. Second, and most importantly, there is no evidence of growing educational polarization over the past twenty years. On all questions related to immigration, in particular, one even observes

countries. We thus view the harmonization and comparison of trends in answers to these questions across countries as an important avenue for future research.

[22] Appendix Figure B8 shows the results before controls, while Appendix Figures B9 and B10 show results before and after controls when using the full response scales available for each variable. Appendix Figures B11 and B12 show results of pooled regressions by country before and after controls.

a mild convergence of opinions between more and less educated voters. The exceptions are questions related to the importance of "following customs and traditions" and "caring for nature and the environment," for which we find a slight increase in the coefficient on years of schooling over time. This could point to growing educational divides related to the *salience* of these issues, rather than individuals' *positions* on them, although we should stress that this trend is not visible in all countries and does not always resist to controls.

Taken together, these results strongly suggest that changes in the structure of citizens' attitudes are not a good candidate for the striking divergence of income and educational divides observed over the past decades in the majority of Western democracies.

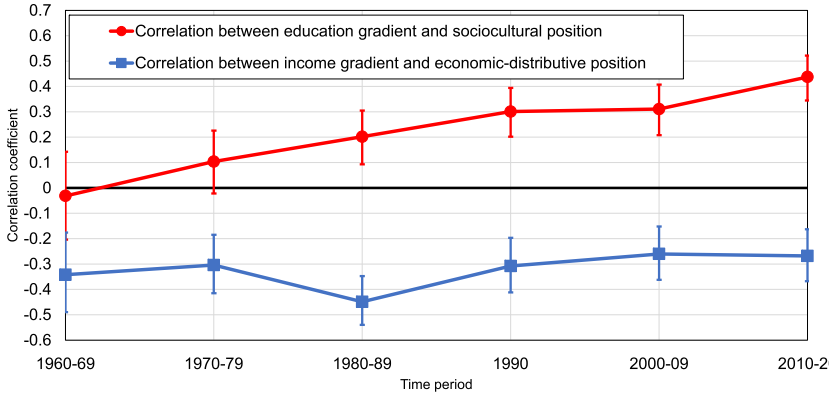
3.3.4 Supply factors

Lastly, we consider the role played by supply factors, that is, the structure of electoral competition and party ideology. We do so by matching the WPID with the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) database, the most comprehensive available data source on the evolution of political parties' programs since the end of World War II (Volkens et al., 2020). We draw on two indicators of party ideology from the political science literature, covering parties' relative positions on an "economic-distributive" axis and a "sociocultural" axis (Bakker and Hobolt, 2013). These indicators allow us to track how parties position themselves on these two axes in each country and over time, providing a unique perspective on the long-run evolution of Western democracies' political spaces. Given the large diversity of topics raised in each election and the difficulties in coding parties' positions on each topic, we do not view this database as particularly well suited for measuring parties' absolute positions and how they have changed on specific policies. Instead, we take these indicators as rough proxies for the intensity of divides over broad economic and cultural issues. We document three main facts.

1) *The Rise of Sociocultural Polarization*. First, we find that parties have become significantly more polarized on sociocultural issues, but not on socioeconomic issues.[23] Indeed, conservative and anti-immigration parties have always been more pro-free-market on economic issues than social democratic and green parties, but this gap has remained relatively stable over time in the average country. In contrast, there has been a growing gap in sociocultural positions between these two groups of parties, with the difference between anti-immigration and green parties being particularly pronounced.

2) *Sociocultural Issues and Educational Divides*. Next, we relate this growing importance of sociocultural issues to educational divides. To do so, we match each party in the CMP database with its voters in the WPID. This allows

[23] See Appendix Figures B13 and B14.



Source: Authors' computations combining the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database with Manifesto Project data.

Note: the upper line plots the raw correlation between the education gradient (defined as the share of top 10% educated voters within the electorate of a given party) and the sociocultural index across all parties in the database. The bottom line plots the raw correlation between the income gradient (defined as the share of top 10% income voters within the electorate of a given party) and the economic-distributive index (inverted, so that higher values correspond to greater pro-redistribution emphases). The unit of observation is the political party. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE 7 Multidimensional Political Conflict and the Divergence of Income and Education Cleavages.

us to directly map the ideology of any given party to the degree to which this party is biased towards high-income and higher-educated voters. Fig. 7 plots the resulting correlation between the education gradient and parties' positions on the sociocultural axis. This correlation has dramatically increased, from 0 in the 1960s to nearly 0.5 in the 2010s. In other words, parties promoting "progressive" policies have seen their electorate become increasingly restricted to higher-educated voters, while parties upholding "conservative" views on sociocultural issues have concentrated a growing share of the lower-educated electorate. Meanwhile, the correlation between parties' income gradient and their position on the economic-distributive dimension has remained very stable since the 1960s: parties emphasizing "pro-free-market" issues receive disproportionately more votes from high-income voters today, just as they used to sixty years ago. This evidence goes in line with recent work by Kitschelt and Rehm (2019; 2023) for the U.S. and Western democracies, respectively. Together with the absence of growing polarization among voters, this evidence strongly suggests that it is primarily parties, by emphasizing sociocultural policies that are disproportionately valued by higher-educated voters (although not much more now than in the past), that have been at the origin of the rise of educational divides.

3) *Sociocultural Polarization and Educational Divides*. Finally, we study the role played by supply dynamics in explaining cross-country differences in the reversal of educational divides. In particular, has this reversal been more pronounced in countries where parties compete more fiercely on sociocultural issues and less so on socioeconomic issues? We run variants of regressions of the form:

$$\text{Education}_{\text{ct}} = \gamma_1 \text{Socpolarization}_{\text{ct}} + \gamma_2 \text{Ecopolarization}_{\text{ct}} + X_{ct}\beta + \lambda_{\text{c}} + \varepsilon_{ct},$$

where $\text{Education}_{\text{ct}}$ is the education gradient in country c at time t, $\text{Socpolarization}_{\text{ct}}$ is the degree of party polarization over sociocultural issues, $\text{Ecopolarization}_{\text{ct}}$ is the degree of party polarization over economic issues, X_{ct} is a vector of controls, λ_c are country fixed effects, and ε_{ct} is an error term. Sociocultural and economic polarization are defined as the standard deviation of the sociocultural and economic indices, respectively, calculated across all parties in a given election and weighted by each party's vote share.

Table 2 presents the results. We start by pooling all elections and relating the education gradient to sociocultural and economic polarization, without country fixed effects. The dependent variable is the difference between top 10% and bottom 90% educated voters voting left, after controls. The coefficients on both sociocultural and socioeconomic polarization are large and statistically significant. In elections where parties compete more intensely on sociocultural issues, higher-educated voters disproportionately vote for social democratic and affiliated parties. In contrast, left-wing parties attract a greater share of lower-educated voters when parties are more divided over economic issues.

Column (2) adds country-fixed effects. Both coefficients remain significant. In countries where sociocultural polarization has grown and socioeconomic polarization has declined, educational divides have risen at a faster pace. Finally, column (3) adds controls for income, age, and gender divides, the effective number of parties, the log of real GDP per capita, and average years of schooling of the working-age population. The effect size is reduced, but the coefficient on sociocultural polarization remains significant. The only other variable that comes out is GDP per capita: countries with higher growth have seen a greater rise in educational divides.

Columns (4) to (6) reproduce this analysis when using the difference between the top 50% and bottom 50% educated voting left as the dependent variable. The results are qualitatively similar, except that economic polarization continues to have a significant effect even after all controls in this specification. The coefficient on the effective number of parties is also significant, suggesting that countries with growing political fragmentation have seen a stronger shift of higher-educated voters towards the left. In addition to GDP per capita, furthermore, average years of schooling now has an independent effect: countries with faster increases in educational attainment have seen a greater deepening of educational divides.

TABLE 2 The Determinants of Educational Divides, 1948–2022.

	Top 10% vs. Bottom 90% Educated Voting Left			Top 50% vs. Bottom 50% Educated Voting Left		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Party Sociocultural Polarization	3.884***	3.641***	1.049***	0.377***	0.330***	0.108**
	(0.555)	(0.527)	(0.397)	(0.054)	(0.049)	(0.042)
Party Economic Polarization	−1.565***	−0.937*	−0.314	−0.100*	−0.099*	−0.073*
	(0.556)	(0.550)	(0.396)	(0.054)	(0.051)	(0.042)
Income Divide			−0.310			0.035
			(0.424)			(0.045)
Age Divide			0.001			0.010
			(0.344)			(0.037)
Gender Divide			0.522			0.103*
			(0.539)			(0.057)
Effective Number of Parties			0.743			0.228***
			(0.747)			(0.080)
Log GDP Per Capita			5.153***			0.239**
			(0.905)			(0.097)
Average Years of Schooling			1.535*			0.250**
			(0.908)			(0.097)
Country Fixed Effects		X	X		X	X
R-squared	0.14	0.42	0.75	0.14	0.46	0.71
Observations	316	316	282	316	316	282

Source: Authors' computations using the World Political cleavages and Inequality Database (see wpid.world).

Notes: The table reports the results of regressions relating the educational divide to selected explanatory variables. The unit of observation is the country-year. The dependent variable is either the difference between the share of top 10% and bottom 90% educated voters voting left (columns 1 to 3), or the same difference between top 50% and bottom 50% educated voters, after controlling for income/education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available). Party sociocultural/economic polarization: vote-share-weighted standard deviation of sociocultural/economic scores, calculated over all parties in a given election. Income divide: difference between the share of top 10% and bottom 90% earners voting left, after controls. Age divide: difference between the share of young (below 25) and old (above 25) voters voting left, after controls. Gender divide: difference between the share of women and men voting left, after controls. Effective number of parties: one over the sum of the square of vote shares of each party. Average years of schooling calculated over the population aged 25–65.

Three results come out of this exploratory analysis of the determinants of realignment. First, there is strong evidence that the emergence of a new "sociocultural" dimension of political conflict has been a key determinant of the deepening of educational divides. The fact that attitudinal polarization on this dimension has remained stable, as discussed above, suggests that it was

primarily parties that were at the origin of this transformation. Understanding why party elites have decided to increasingly emphasize sociocultural issues, despite the relative stability of voters' beliefs and divides over these issues, remains a key open question for future research.

Second, there is evidence that the changing structure of economic cleavages has also played a role. In countries where parties have become less polarized on economic issues, left-wing parties have been less successful at keeping a large fraction of the lower-educated electorate. This lends support to the idea that the convergence of parties on economic policy, as well as the general moderation of left-wing parties' platforms in some countries, may have accelerated the emergence of multi-elite party systems (e.g., Kuziemko et al., 2024; Piketty, 2018).

Third, our results suggest that the reversal of educational divides has been more pronounced in countries with faster economic growth and educational expansion. This finding echoes with the literature on postmaterialism, which suggests that divides over sociocultural issues are more likely to emerge in countries with sufficiently high levels of affluence (Inglehart, 1977; Enke et al., 2025). The 2007–2008 financial crisis, which disproportionately hit Southern European countries and Ireland, arguably played a key role in putting economic issues at the center of the political agenda, thereby limiting the reversal of the educational cleavage. Finally, the fact that long-run educational progress itself correlates positively with the educational divide could indicate a role for deeper conflicts over education policy and intergenerational mobility, in line with the interpretations proposed by Young (1958) and Piketty (1995; 2018).

4 Political cleavages in non-Western democracies

We now turn to the analysis of political cleavages in African, Asian, Latin American, and Eastern European democracies. Unlike Western democracies, which have undergone many common changes, non-Western democracies primarily stand out by their large diversity of party systems and cleavage structures. We first provide stylized facts on democratic transitions and political parties, highlighting commonalities and differences in recent democratic experiences. We then provide a map of political divides in non-Western democracies, with a focus on the interactions between class, ethnic, and religious cleavages.

4.1 Defining political cleavages in non-Western democracies

Much of the analysis of the previous section relied on studying large coalitions, often aggregating them into two broad groups corresponding to "left" and "right." Such categories are more difficult to operationalize in the majority of non-Western democracies, where salient issues can be very different, parties are often weakly institutionalized, and electoral volatility can be high (Randall

and Svåsand, 2002; Katz and Crotty, 2006; Hicken and Kuhonta, 2014). Unlike in Western democracies, furthermore, the emergence of political divides in Africa, Asia, and Latin America did not generally coincide with the national or industrial revolutions. Instead, the majority of non-Western democracies transitioned to democracy either at the end of World War II (e.g., Japan, India), or at the end of the Cold War (most democracies in Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Southeast Asia).

In this context, the Lipset and Rokkan model is generally insufficient to study political divides in non-Western democracies, although it represents a useful starting point. In particular, church-state and center-periphery cleavages need to be extended to include competing confessional parties and ethnoregional conflicts (which, it should be noted, also exist in Western democracies). In many countries, another important divide relates to the division between the oppressed nation and the imperial power, which was behind the emergence of national liberation movements and led to the creation of powerful parties at the time of decolonization.

With high levels of industrialization and urbanization and the important influence of the Roman Catholic Church, Latin America is often considered the region that most closely resembles the Lipset and Rokkan model (Roberts, 2014). In Africa, ethnic divides, valence issues, and candidate effects have in many cases been found to be more salient than class (Bleck and van de Walle, 2018). In many democracies, clientelism also plays a major role in shaping electoral behaviors, often (though not always) at the expense of political programs and ideology (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007; Stokes et al., 2014; Kramon, 2017). In all cases, the division between "social democratic and affiliated parties" and "conservative and affiliated parties" used in the previous section is hard to apply to most non-Western democracies. This does not mean that political cleavages comparable to those found in Western democracies are absent in these democracies; simply, these cleavages interact with other sociocultural divides and are represented by parties in ways that do not fit as easily into "left" and "right" (Ufen, 2013).

4.2 Party systems in non-Western democracies

We start by providing an overview of the diversity of party systems in non-Western democracies, focusing on the 34 countries covered in the WPID. One can distinguish between three broad groups: dominant party systems, unstable and fragmented party systems, and stable two-party or multi-party systems, with different implications for the types and stability of political cleavages prevailing in each country.

At one end are countries with dominant party systems, in which opposition parties do not have a realistic chance of winning against the ruling party in the short run. Because these dominant parties rely on large coalitions, they tend to aggregate voters from a diversity of backgrounds, which may contribute

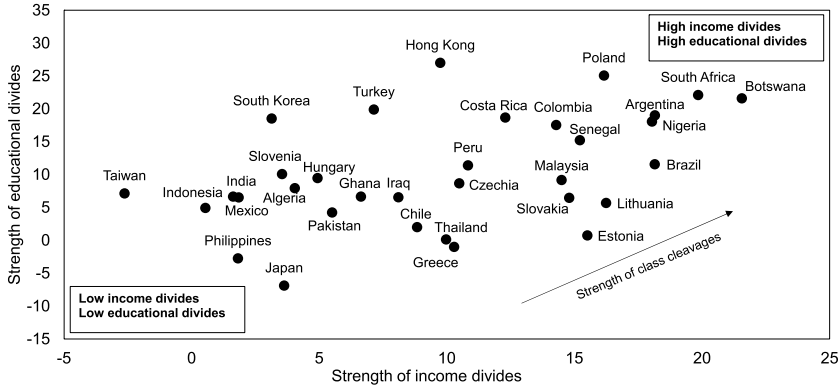
to limiting political polarization, at least on some dimensions of political conflict. Recent historical examples include the Indian National Congress, the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party, Malaysia's National Front, South Africa's African National Congress, and the Botswana Democratic Party. These parties dominate the political landscape immediately at the time of democratization; in many cases, their popular support is strengthened by their role in the national liberation process at the time of decolonization. In countries with free and fair elections, however, these party systems are not very stable, often because dominant parties struggle to accommodate voters with diverse sets of interests. In all of these countries, growing dissatisfaction with prevailing governments and rising tensions within the ruling coalition led to waning support for the dominant party. The transition from dominant- to multi-party systems paves the way for the emergence of new political divides, which can vary depending on which sections of the previously dominant party form the basis of the new opposition.

At another end are highly fragmented and unstable party systems, where many parties compete and are often replaced by new contenders. These party systems tend to display more muted political cleavages, as the representation of social divides is impeded by the lack of stable partisan affiliations. This could be said of several countries today, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Peru, where electoral instability, the proliferation of charismatic leaders, and a growing tendency toward the personalization of party politics have undermined the ability of party systems to represent social cleavages.

In between these two extremes lie a diversity of two-party and multi-party systems, more comparable to those found in Western democracies, where the ideological positions of political parties are more recognizable and form the basis of political conflict and electoral behavior. Recent examples include Brazil, Nigeria, Ghana, South Korea, Taiwan, and most Eastern European countries, where two broad parties or coalitions have taken relatively clear stances on relevant economic and sociocultural issues over the course of several elections. Electorates and political cleavages are more crystallized in these party systems, although they can change significantly over time, very much like in Western democracies. In particular, as we will see, economic and sociocultural issues can take varying importance and interact in complex ways, depending on the links between sociocultural identities and economic inequalities inherent to each country's history.

4.3 Mapping electoral divides in non-Western democracies

We now turn to documenting economic and sociocultural divides in non-Western democracies included in the WPID database. Such a comparative overview is challenging, given the large diversity of party systems and social divides observed across these countries. For this reason, we focus on



Source: Authors' computations using the World Political cleavages and Inequality Database (see wpid.world).
Note: The figure represents the difference between the share of low-income (bottom 50%) and high-income (top 50%) voters voting for selected "pro-poor parties" on the x-axis, and the same difference between lower-educated (bottom 50%) and higher-educated (top 50%) voters on the y-axis in non-Western democracies. South Africa and Botswana display particularly strong income and educational divides, while education and income only play a minor role in determining electoral behaviors in Japan, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Income and education are shown as identical for Botswana, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal given lack of data on income.

FIGURE 8 Income and Educational Divides in Non-Western Democracies.

highlighting the main differences and regularities observed; more detailed country-specific analyses can be found in Gethin et al. (2021).

4.3.1 Class cleavages

We begin with a description of class divides. For the sake of comparability, we group parties into two coalitions of approximately equal size in each country, in the same spirit as what was done for Western democracies. We then estimate the intensity of income and education gradients, focusing on the party receiving more votes from low-income or lower-educated voters (the "pro-poor" party). Fig. 8 plots the intensity of divides related to income and education on the x and y axes, respectively, for the last election available. There are large variations in the strength of class divides, from almost inexistent in Indonesia, India, Japan, and Pakistan to exceptionally intense in Argentina, Botswana, Brazil, and South Africa. Furthermore, income and education are closely aligned in determining electoral behavior in most countries: there are few cases of a complete disconnection between income and education comparable to the one documented in Western democracies.

Why is socioeconomic status a stronger correlate of voting behavior in some countries than in others? Two complementary factors can account for this diversity of patterns. In a first set of cases, socioeconomic divides are

more or less strong depending on how they interact with other dimensions of political conflict. In South Africa, for instance, class divides are large mainly because Black South Africans, who are substantially poorer than White South Africans and other minorities, form the backbone of support for the ruling African National Congress (Gethin, 2021a). Meanwhile, caste and religion are the dominant drivers of voting behavior in India. Because these two variables correlate only moderately with social class, income and education are poor predictors of voting behavior in Indian elections (Banerjee et al., 2021).

In a second set of cases, class cleavages are strong or weak mainly because of the ways political parties emphasize socioeconomic issues, independently from other dimensions of electoral politics. Brazil represents such a case of nearly "unidimensional" economic divides: low-income voters turned massively towards the Workers' Party following the implementation of redistributive policies by President Lula in the 2000s (Hunter and Power, 2007; Gethin and Morgan, 2021). In Japan, on the contrary, recent decades saw a depolarization of electoral divides, at the same time as a generalized perception of a lack of programmatic differences between the parties (Chiavacci, 2010; Gethin, 2021b; Hrebenar and Nakamura, 2015).

4.3.2 Ethnic and religious cleavages

Ethnic and religious affiliations play an important role in determining voting behavior in many non-Western democracies. A number of countries in our sample display strong religious-secular divides comparable to those observed in Western democracies. This is the case of Israel, several Muslim-majority countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, and Indonesia, and Christian-majority Latin American countries such as Costa Rica, Colombia, and Mexico, where voters with higher levels of religiosity tend to vote for different parties than non-religious voters.

In addition, several democracies display intense divides between linguistic or religious groups. Ethnic diversity, however, is far from being synonymous with ethnic conflict. A general finding is that these political divides tend to be greater when social groups differ not only in terms of religion, but also in terms of language, region of residence, and socioeconomic status. Nigeria is an extreme case of such overlapping cleavages, with strong and rising divides opposing poorer Muslim voters of the North to richer Christian voters of the South (Baleyte et al., 2021). Other examples include South Africa, Iraq, and Pakistan, where both ethnic inequalities and ethnic conflicts are pronounced. In several other countries such as Indonesia and Senegal, in contrast, ethnic divides are moderate despite significant ethnic diversity, and social groups are more weakly linked to regions, religions, or languages. These regularities resonate with the political economy literature linking violent conflict to the overlap between ethnicity and other dimensions of identity (Gubler and Selway, 2012; Desmet et al., 2017; Moscona et al., 2020).

4.3.3 Regional and rural-urban cleavages

Regional divides are also prevalent in many democracies. In many cases, as discussed above, they coincide with ethnolinguistic or ethnoreligious affiliations: Nigeria, Iraq, Pakistan, and India thus display some of the strongest geographical clustering of vote shares. In some cases, however, regional divides are class-based, in the sense that large regional inequalities generate political mobilizations on economic rather than sociocultural issues. The clearest example is Thailand, one of the countries with the highest level of regional inequality, where deep socioeconomic cleavages emerged between poorer northern regions and the capital region of Bangkok following democratization (Gethin and Jenmana, 2021).

Rural-urban divides are also very common in non-Western democracies, sometimes interacting with ethnic or class divides in the same way as in the examples above. An important stylized fact is that dominant party systems often display strong rural-urban cleavages. Dominant parties, thanks to clientelistic networks and social transfers, tend to have a strong grip on rural areas, especially in marginalized "captive constituencies" (Greene, 2007; Scheiner, 2009; Wahman and Boone, 2018). Meanwhile, cities tend to concentrate a greater share of young, educated citizens, who often form the core of support for rising opposition movements. Classic examples of dominant parties with strong support in rural areas include the Indian National Congress and the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party in the 1960s, Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party in the 1990s, and the Botswana Democratic Party in recent years.

4.3.4 Generational and gender cleavages

A last set of political divides relate to age and gender. As in Western democracies, intense generational cleavages are quite rare and are often trumped by other dimensions of political conflict outlined above. Major exceptions include South Korea and Hong Kong, where attitudes towards North Korea and mainland China have strongly diverged between young and old generations in recent years (Durrer de la Sota and Gethin, 2021). More generally, because they question the very definition of national sovereignty and sociopolitical identities, conflicts over political integration can produce some of the deepest generational cleavages observed in contemporary democracies. This mechanism was also visible in the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, with younger generations massively voting to remain in the European Union.

Finally, in contrast to Western democracies, there has been no clear trend in gender divides in non-Western democracies. Candidate effects are sometimes visible, with women being more supportive of female candidates, while women tend to be more religious and hence vote more for conservative parties in some Latin American countries. Among notable exceptions, Botswana presents one of the strongest gender divides of non-Western democracies. This divide can be related to recent efforts made by the dominant party to increase access to

top public positions for women, among other factors (Baleyte et al., 2021). This points to political supply playing a non-negligible role in shaping the representation of gender inequities.

4.4 Understanding the absence of multi-elite party systems in non-Western democracies

Taking stock of this evidence, a natural question is why the reversal of educational divides has been so unique to Western democracies. We discuss four complementary explanations.

4.4.1 Differences in the correlation between income and education

A first possibility is that income and education might be much more tightly associated in non-Western democracies. If these two dimensions of socioeconomic status are very strongly related, this would leave little space for them to have opposite effects on voting behavior. We investigate this possibility by correlating income and education ranks across all 54 countries in our database. We find little evidence in favor of this interpretation: the correlation is almost always below 0.5 and not significantly higher in poor countries.[24]

4.4.2 Differences in the intensity of educational divides over sociocultural values

A second candidate explanation is that educational divides are more likely to emerge when voters with different levels of education hold different views on modern liberal values. Our previous analysis has shown that this is not a sufficient condition, given the lack of relationship between attitudinal polarization and educational divides across Western democracies. However, it might still be a necessary condition, in the sense that educational divides are unlikely to emerge if voters with different education levels have the same opinions.

The World Values Survey provides us with a unique opportunity to test this hypothesis. The last wave, fielded between 2017 and 2022, covers comparable information on educational attainment and opinions on a number of topics in 66 developed and developing countries. We focus on four questions asking respondents whether one should protect the environment rather than increase economic growth, whether one should allow more immigrants in the country, and whether homosexuality and abortion are justifiable. We dichotomize these variables to make the scales comparable. We then run a pooled regression by country of the form:

$$\text{Liberal}_{iqc} = \alpha_c + \gamma_c \text{Educ}_{ic} + X_{ic}\beta_c + \lambda_q + \varepsilon_{iqc}$$

[24] See Appendix Figure C1, which plots the resulting correlation coefficients versus GDP per capita.

Where Liberal_{iqc} takes one if individual i in country c gives a liberal answer to question q, Educ_{ic} is years of schooling, X_{ic} is a vector of controls including age, gender, employment status, and rural-urban location, λ_q are question fixed effects, and ε_{iqc} is the error term. γ_c is the coefficient of interest, measuring the strength of the relationship between education and liberal positions on sociocultural issues in country c.

Fig. 9 plots the coefficients γ_c in all countries versus GDP per capita.[25] Three results stand out. First, education is positively related to liberal sociocultural values in a majority of countries, including in countries as different as Morocco, Colombia, China, and Russia. However, there are many developing countries where such relationship does not exist. Second, there is strong evidence that educational divides over sociocultural issues are larger in rich countries. In almost all countries with below $35,000 per capita at purchasing power parity, an additional year of schooling increases liberal opinions by less than 1 percentage point. Meanwhile, the United States stands out as the most polarized country in the sample, with a coefficient reaching almost 4 points. Third, there are important exceptions to this pattern. In particular, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore are highly developed countries, but do not display the degree of educational polarization observed in Western democracies.

4.4.3 *Differences in the salience of modern sociocultural issues*

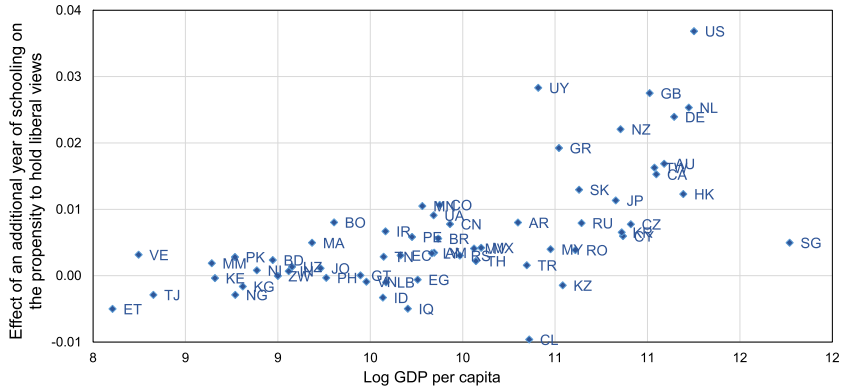
A third possibility is that sociocultural issues prevalent in Western democracies play a less important role in structuring political debates in non-Western democracies. The Comparative Manifesto Project data allow us to take a closer look at one of these issues: environmental protection.[26] As in the previous section, we construct an indicator for ideological polarization on environmental issues, defined as the standard deviation of environmental positions across all parties running in a given election, weighted by each party's vote share.[27] We then average this indicator over the 2010–2023 period. Fig. 10 plots the resulting score of each country versus GDP per capita. There is strong evidence that parties are on average much more polarized on environmental topics in Western democracies than in non-Western democracies. The exception is Mexico, where the environment does seem to play an important role in recent elections (as mirrored by the 5% vote share received by the Green Party in the 2018 elections).

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[25] Appendix Figures C2 to C5 reproduce this figure separately for each of the four underlying questions.

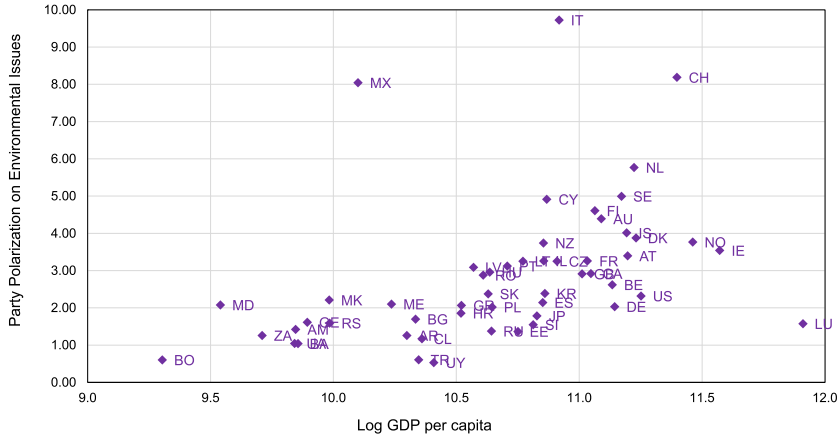
[26] Given the large diversity of topics raised in elections in non-Western democracies, we refrain from constructing a broad sociocultural index comparable to the one used in the previous section for Western democracies. Unfortunately, the topics covered in the CMP are too broad to allow for meaningful cross-country comparisons beyond environmental protection.

[27] Appendix Figure C6 plots the share of manifesto quasi-sentences dedicated to environmental topics for the average party in each country. A similar pattern arises: parties tend to emphasize environmental topics much more in Western democracies.



Source: Authors' computations using the World Values Survey.
Note: The figure represents the relationship between the strength of educational divides over sociocultural issues and GDP per capita. The y-axis coefficients are based on a pooled regression by country in which each position on sociocultural issues is regressed on years of schooling. The outcome variable is a dummy equal to 1 if the individual gives a liberal answer to the question and 0 otherwise. Estimates control for age, gender, employment status, rural-urban location, and question fixed effects. We pool responses to the following four questions: whether one should protect the environment rather than increase economic growth, whether one should allow more immigrants in the country, and whether homosexuality and abortion are justifiable.

FIGURE 9 Educational Divides over Sociocultural Issues over the Course of Development.



Source: Authors' computations using the Comparative Manifesto Project.
Note: The figure represents the relationship between ideological polarization on environmental issues, defined as the standard deviation of the share of manifestos dedicated to environmental topics across parties in each country, and GDP per capita. Average estimated over all elections held during 2010–2023 in each country.

FIGURE 10 Party Polarization on Environmental Protection Over the Course of Development.

4.4.4 *Differences in the nature of sociocultural conflicts and the intensity of socioeconomic divides*

Finally, a last complementary explanation is that sociocultural conflicts focus on very different issues in non-Western democracies, which do not necessarily correlate with education. While this is hard to test quantitatively, given the lack of comparative data on each of these issues, we view this as a likely important channel given the case study evidence on other political cleavages highlighted above. For instance, religious divides continue to strongly define party positions in Latin America and a number of Muslim countries, while ethnolinguistic appeals and rural-urban divides are prevalent in a number of Sub-Saharan African and South Asian countries. Several high-income countries, such as Japan and South Korea, also have deep sociocultural divides over political integration and national sovereignty, but these divides do not map onto educational attainment in the same way as in Western democracies. In addition, socioeconomic divides are very pronounced in a number of countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Thailand, which probably plays a role in coalescing low-income and lower-educated voters in the same coalitions.

In summary, our analysis suggests that the lack of multi-conflictual party systems in non-Western democracies likely results from a combination of demand and supply factors. On the demand side, education does appear to be a much weaker determinant of opinions on modern liberal values in non-Western democracies. Other types of sociocultural conflicts unrelated to education are also generally more prevalent in voters' minds. On the supply side, many new democracies have transitioned to stable party systems where ethnolinguistic, religious, geographic, or colonial and postcolonial issues are much more central to the structure of political competition than the environment, immigration, and traditional moral values. In a number of countries, finally, deep class divides comparable to those observed in Western democracies during the early postwar era have led low-income and lower-educated voters to unite in the same political coalitions. Together, these different sets of forces make a gradual divergence of income and education divides unlikely in the majority of non-Western democracies, at least in the short run.

5 Conclusion and avenues for future research

In this chapter we provided a new perspective on the structure and transformation of political cleavages across contemporary democracies. We introduced the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database (wpid.world), covering the socioeconomic determinants of voting behavior in 55 democracies. Our analysis revealed a number of striking facts. In the past decades, Western democracies saw a gradual decline of the historical divides that emerged from the national and industrial revolutions, at the same time as a divergence of the effects of education and income on the vote. We related this transformation to the emergence of a new "sociocultural" dimension of political conflict, superimposing preex-

isting socioeconomic divides, which has most clearly materialized in the form of new green and radical right movements. We highlighted the complex and multifaceted nature of this change, with recent studies emphasizing factors as diverse as globalization, austerity, access to public services, new technologies, immigration, terrorism, and political supply in shaping electoral realignment. In contrast to Western democracies, non-Western democracies distinguish themselves by a large diversity of cleavage structures and a lack of common trend. Among other regularities, we noted that deep ethnic or regional inequalities are often associated with intense class divides, although they are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for them to arise. We also related the structure of political cleavages to variations in postcolonial party systems, with some countries displaying dominant party systems with strong rural-urban divides, while others have witnessed high party system fragmentation and a lack of stable partisan affiliations.

Much remains to be done to deepen our understanding of changing political cleavages in contemporary democracies. We see avenues for future research in at least five directions.

First, there is a need to extend the scope of the analysis. We plan on continuing to update and expand the WPID, as more post-electoral surveys covering new countries and elections become available. We hope that it can be a useful source for researchers interested in the study of political cleavages. Beyond the socioeconomic characteristics of voters, the mobilization of survey questions related to ideological positions, opinions, and attitudes towards democracy could also contribute to deepening our understanding of global variations in the structure of social cleavages, including in non-democracies (see for instance Falk et al., 2018; Cappelen et al., 2025). Local election results combined with administrative data represent yet another source for research on changing political cleavages in the very long run (see for instance Jensenius, 2017; Rodden, 2019; Cagé and Piketty, 2023). Data on political supply is also bound to play a growing role in empirical research, as new sources and tools become available to track the characteristics and platforms of politicians (e.g., Cagé and Dewitte, 2024; Di Tella et al., 2023; Gentzkow et al., 2019; Kuziemko et al., 2024; Le Pennec, 2024; Le Mens and Gallego, 2024; Lehmann et al., 2024; Longuet-Marx, 2024; Ornstein et al., 2024; Savin and Treisman, 2024). Together, these data sources and approaches open new possibilities for a better understanding of worldwide changes in political conflict.

Second, several open questions relate to the sources of changing political cleavages in Western democracies. Why has the reversal of educational divides and the rise of green and radical right movements happened faster in some countries than others? Is this realignment primarily supply- or demand-driven? What are the respective roles of socioeconomic versus sociocultural factors? We surveyed the large literature studying aspects of these questions. Yet, with the exception of a handful of recent studies, empirical evidence resembles more an accumulation of facts than a proper assessment of competing explanations.

Our new empirical analysis pointed to the roles of both sociocultural and socioeconomic polarization, especially on the supply side, but also highlighted political fragmentation, long-run economic development, and educational expansion itself as relevant factors. We hope that future studies will contribute to building a broader consensus on the sources of political realignment and the respective importance of these different processes across Western democracies.

Third, other broader questions on political cleavages have only found limited answers in the literature. Why have class-based and identity-based divides risen in some countries but declined in others? What explains the recent success of authoritarian parties in both Western and non-Western democracies? To what extent do institutions, such as electoral rules, contribute to fueling specific types of political cleavages and movements rather than others? Answering these questions requires going beyond case studies to adopt large comparative and historical perspectives. This chapter made a first step in this direction by providing a descriptive overview of the relationship between socioeconomic characteristics and the vote in 55 democracies. Future research could adopt similar angles to improve our understanding of the drivers of political polarization, the rise of authoritarianism, and more generally the transformation of political representation in contemporary democracies. Crucially, in an increasingly interconnected world, many contemporary political phenomena extend beyond the boundaries of specific countries. This calls for more research adopting truly global scopes on the dynamics of political divides, beyond the Western/non-Western dichotomy (among recent attempts, see Aksoy et al., 2024; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012; 2019; Auerbach et al., 2022; Bardhan, 2022; Ferguson and Molina, 2021; Guriev et al., 2021; Rohner and Zhuravskaya, 2023; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). For instance, our analysis revealed a strikingly lower level of educational polarization on modern liberal values in non-Western democracies. Understanding why education is such a strong determinant of opinions on these issues in Western democracies but not elsewhere would represent an important contribution to our understanding of long-run political realignment in rich advanced democracies.

Fourth, another natural question relates to the relationship between cleavage structures and the success of democracy. As highlighted in the introduction of this chapter, democracies tend to function well when political polarization is neither too small nor too large. Yet the intensity and nature of political polarization is far from being deterministic; preexisting social divides and inequalities can generate very different political cleavages, depending on electoral rules, the interests of political elites in emphasizing some issues and deemphasizing others, and historical idiosyncrasies (Zielinski, 2003). In this context, an important avenue for research lies in understanding which political cleavage structures are most conducive to successful democracies, and how institutions can be designed to favor them.

Fifth, this chapter was primarily concerned with documenting changes in electoral divides, yet the effect of political conflict on economic outcomes

has also been the subject of growing interest in political economy. A large theoretical literature investigates the relationship between democracy and inequality, starting with the canonical Meltzer and Richard (1981) model relating democratization to lower inequality. An important finding is that multidimensional political conflict can lead to lower government redistribution (Alesina et al., 1999; Roemer, 1998; Roemer et al., 2007; see Acemoglu et al. (2015) for a review). Some studies have brought these insights to the data, directly relating the rise of economic inequality to identity-based conflicts and unequal political representation (e.g., Anderson and Beramendi, 2012; Barth et al., 2015; Kasara and Suryanarayan, 2015; Iversen and Soskice, 2015a; 2015b; Pontusson and Rueda, 2010). There is also a large literature relating sociocultural diversity to economic development, inequality, and public goods provision. The general conclusion is that more diversity has negative effects on these outcomes, especially when there is an overlap between several dimensions of identity (e.g., Achard and Suetens, 2023; Alesina et al., 2016; Desmet et al., 2017; Gubler and Selway, 2012; Spolaore and Wacziarg, 2019; Stichnoth and Van der Straeten, 2013).

Open questions remain, however, regarding the channels linking social divides to politico-economic variables. To what extent has the emergence of a new multidimensional structure of political conflict contributed to the rise of inequality in Western democracies? What are the economic and policy consequences of the different interactions between class-based and identity-based mobilizations documented in non-Western democracies? Most importantly, how could democratic institutions be designed to encourage political cleavage structures more conducive to positive outcomes? A central conclusion of the descriptive analysis conducted in this chapter is that a given set of social divides can generate many different types of electoral configurations. This calls for more theoretical and empirical work explicitly relating socioeconomic outcomes to the interaction between preexisting divides and the political systems institutionalizing them. We hope that the stylized facts and body of research covered in this chapter will contribute to stimulating new research in these multiple directions.

Appendix A Supplementary material

Supplementary material related to this chapter can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.hbpe.2026.09.007.

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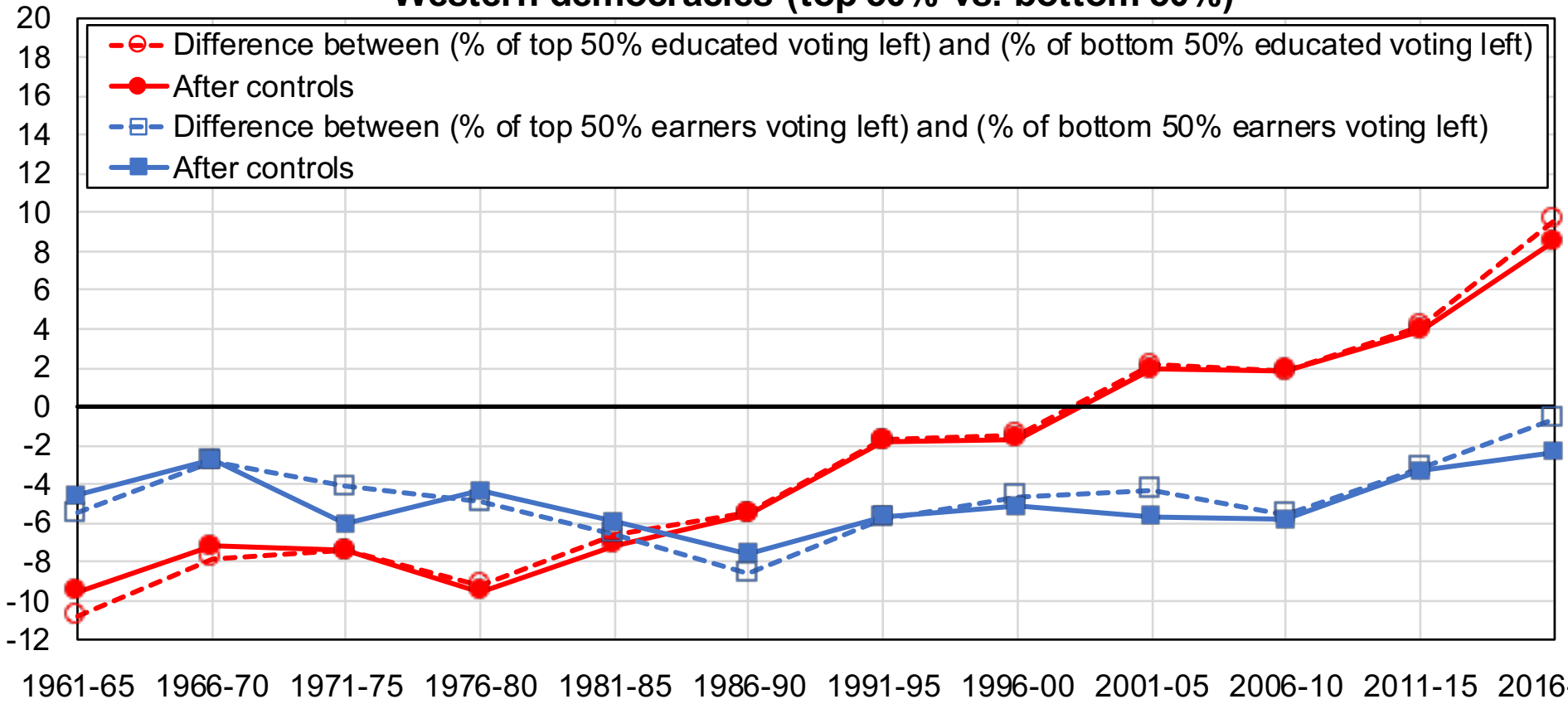
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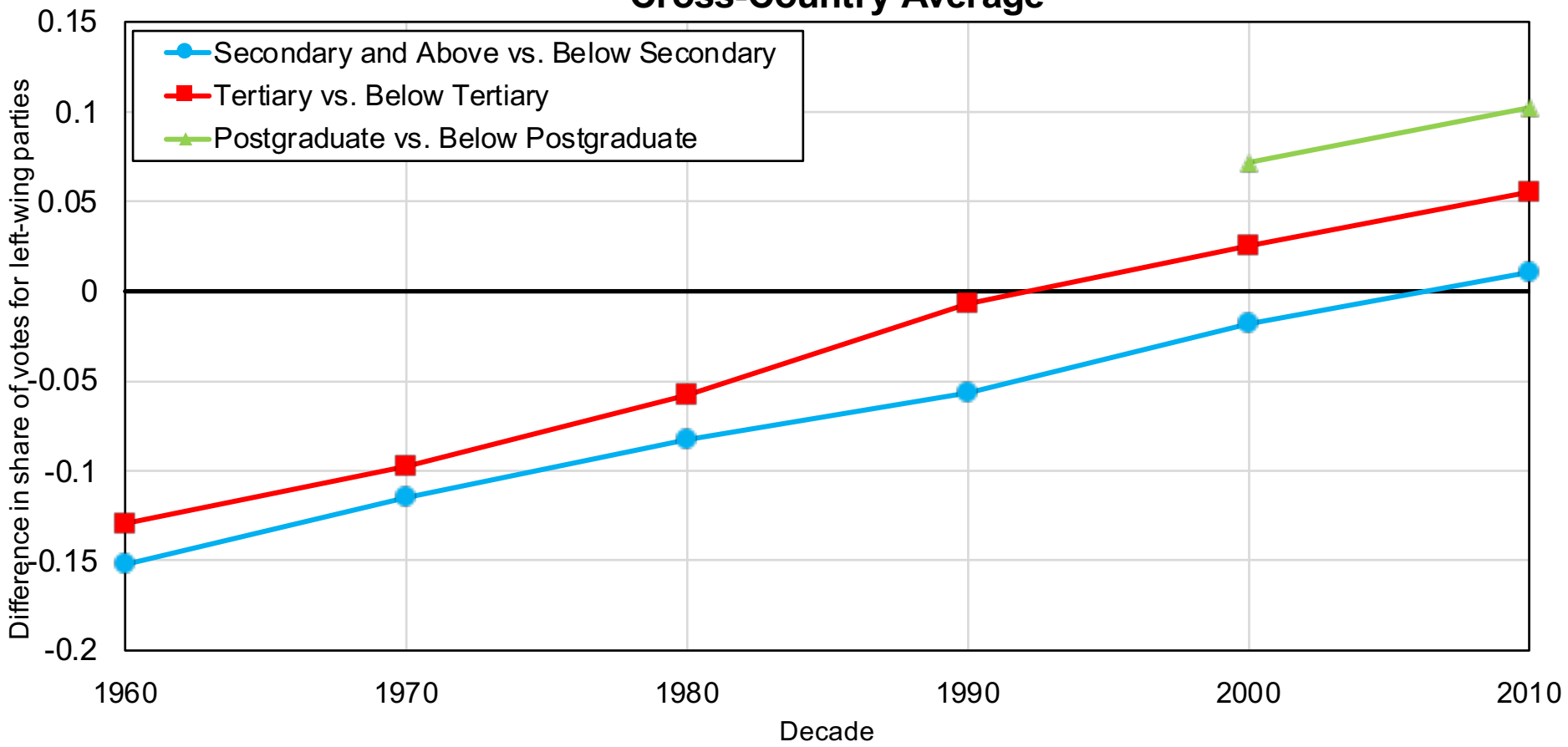
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Figure A1 - The disconnection of income and education cleavages in Western democracies (top 50% vs. bottom 50%)



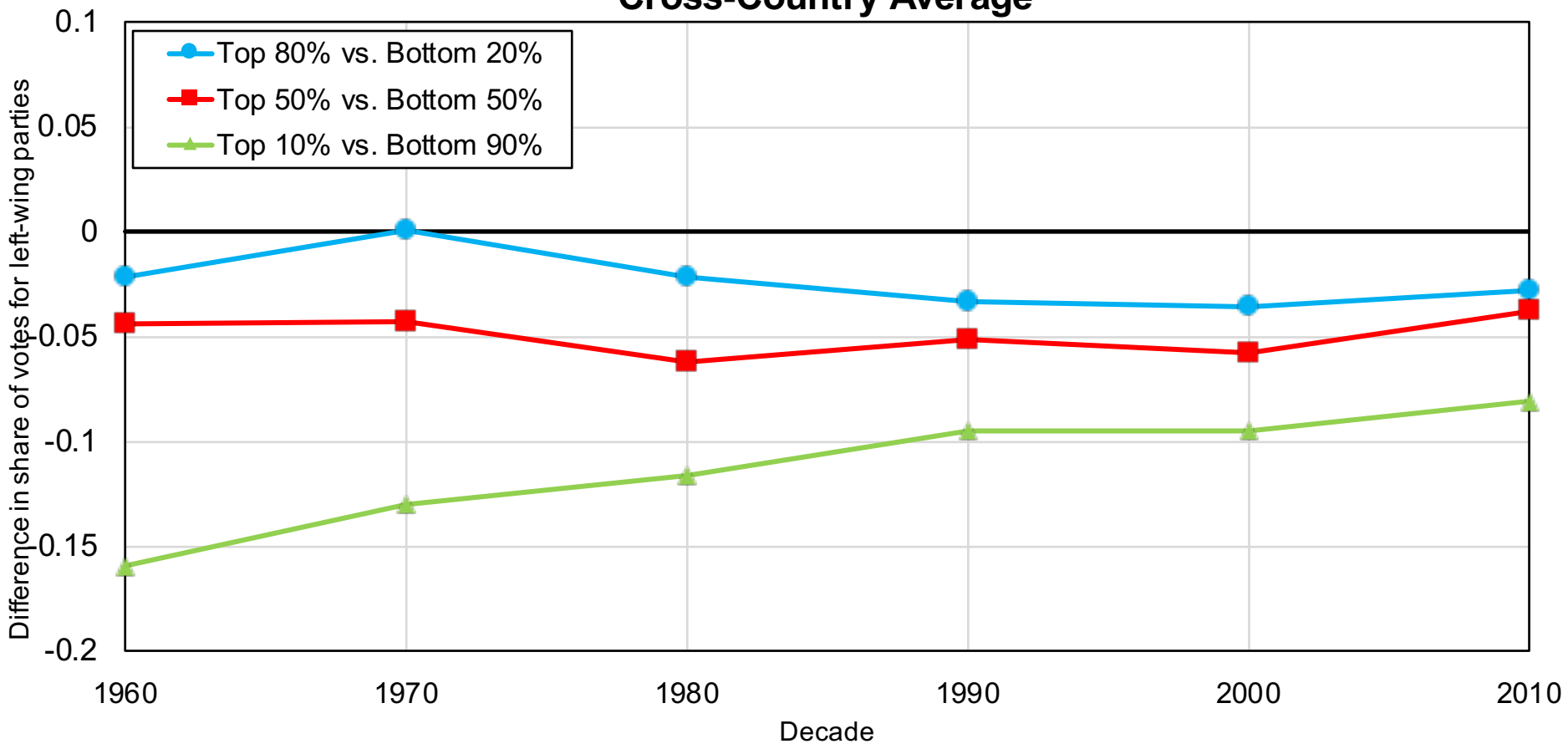
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: in the 1960s, both higher-educated and high-income voters were less likely to vote for left-wing (social democratic / socialist / communist / green / other left-wing) parties than lower-educated and low-income voters. The left vote has gradually become associated with higher education voters, giving rising to a remarkable divergence of the effects of income and education on the vote. Figures correspond to five-year averages for Australia, Britain, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the US. The estimates are presented before and after controlling for income/education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure A2 - The Evolution of Educational divides by Cutoff
Cross-Country Average



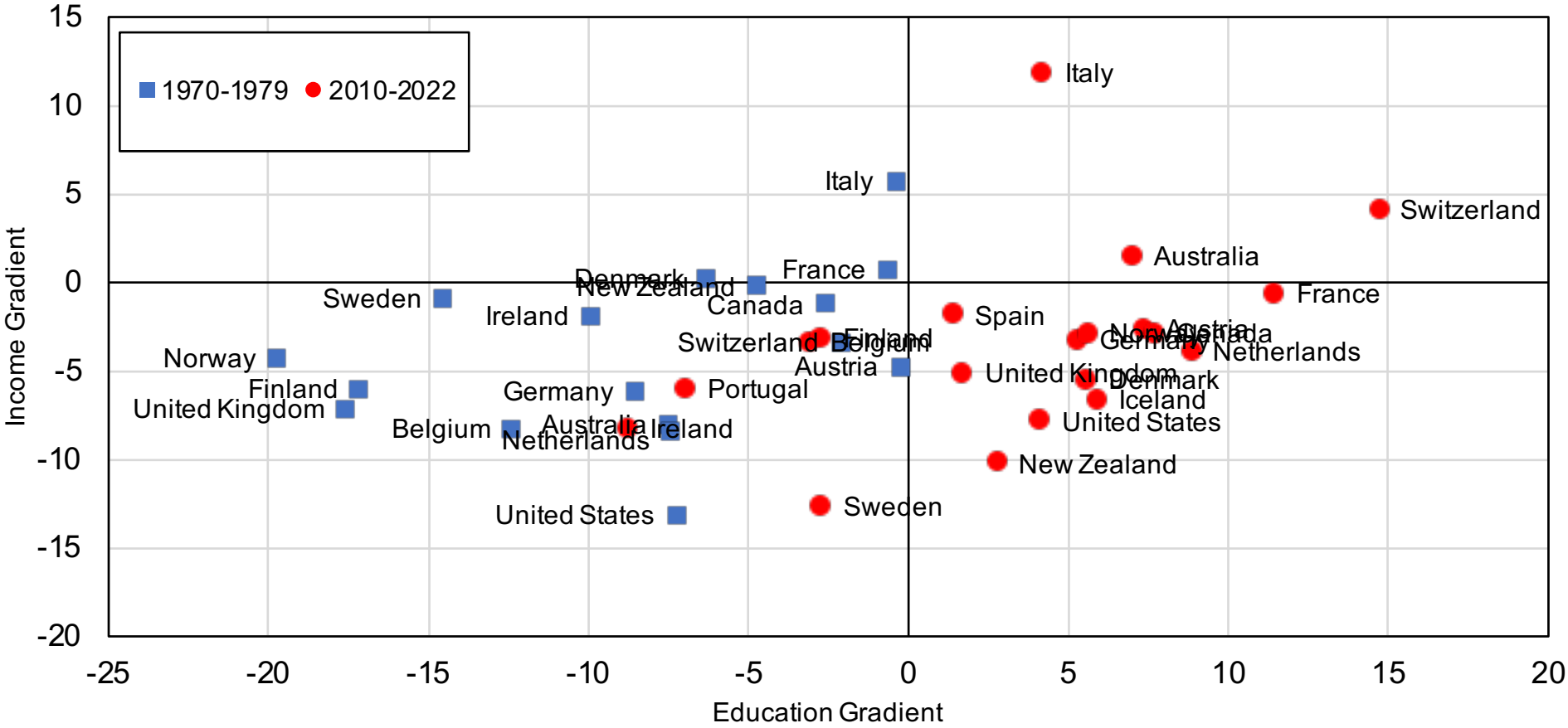
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time, conditional on available data. The three indicators compare voters with secondary education or above vs. below secondary education, voters with tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education, and voters with postgraduate education vs. voters without. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure A3 - The Evolution of Income Divides by Cutoff
Cross-Country Average



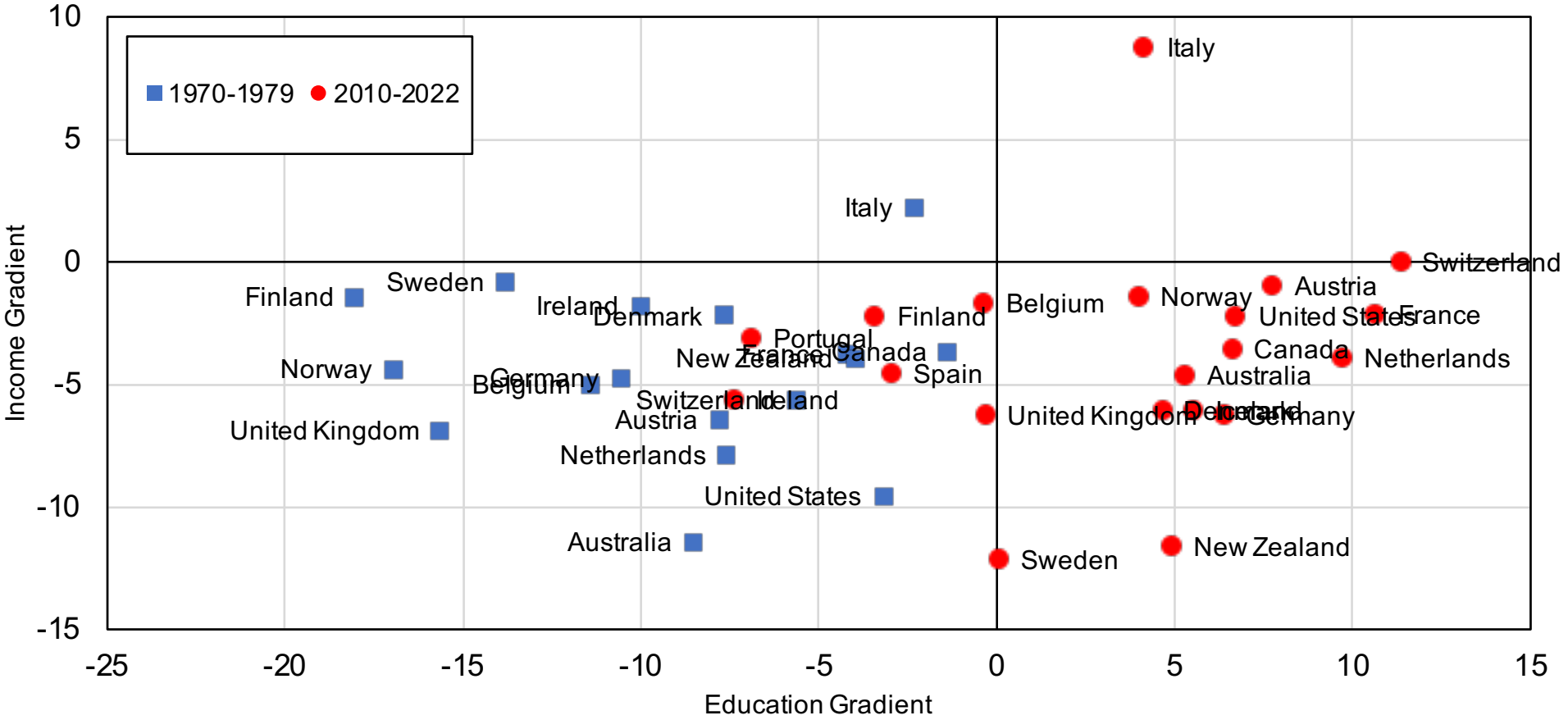
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time, conditional on available data. The three indicators compare voters belonging to the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50%, and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure A4: Income and educational divides in Western democracies
Top 50% vs. Bottom 50%



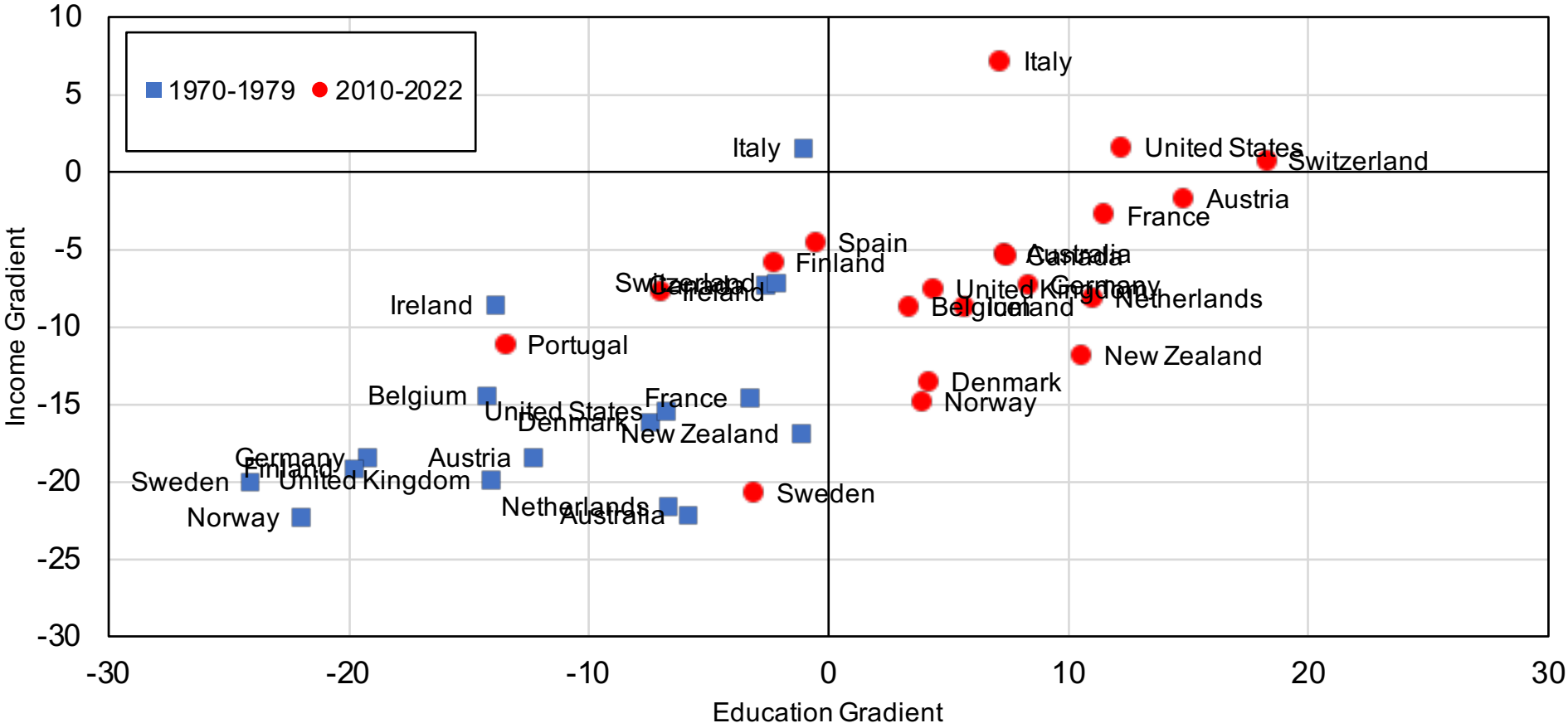
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure represents the difference between the share of high-income (top 50%) and low-income (bottom 50%) voters voting for left-wing parties on the y-axis, and the same difference between higher-educated (top 50%) and lower-educated (bottom 50%) voters on the x-axis, comparing the voting patterns of the 1970s and the 2010s.

Figure A5: Income and educational divides in Western democracies
Top 50% vs. Bottom 50%, with controls



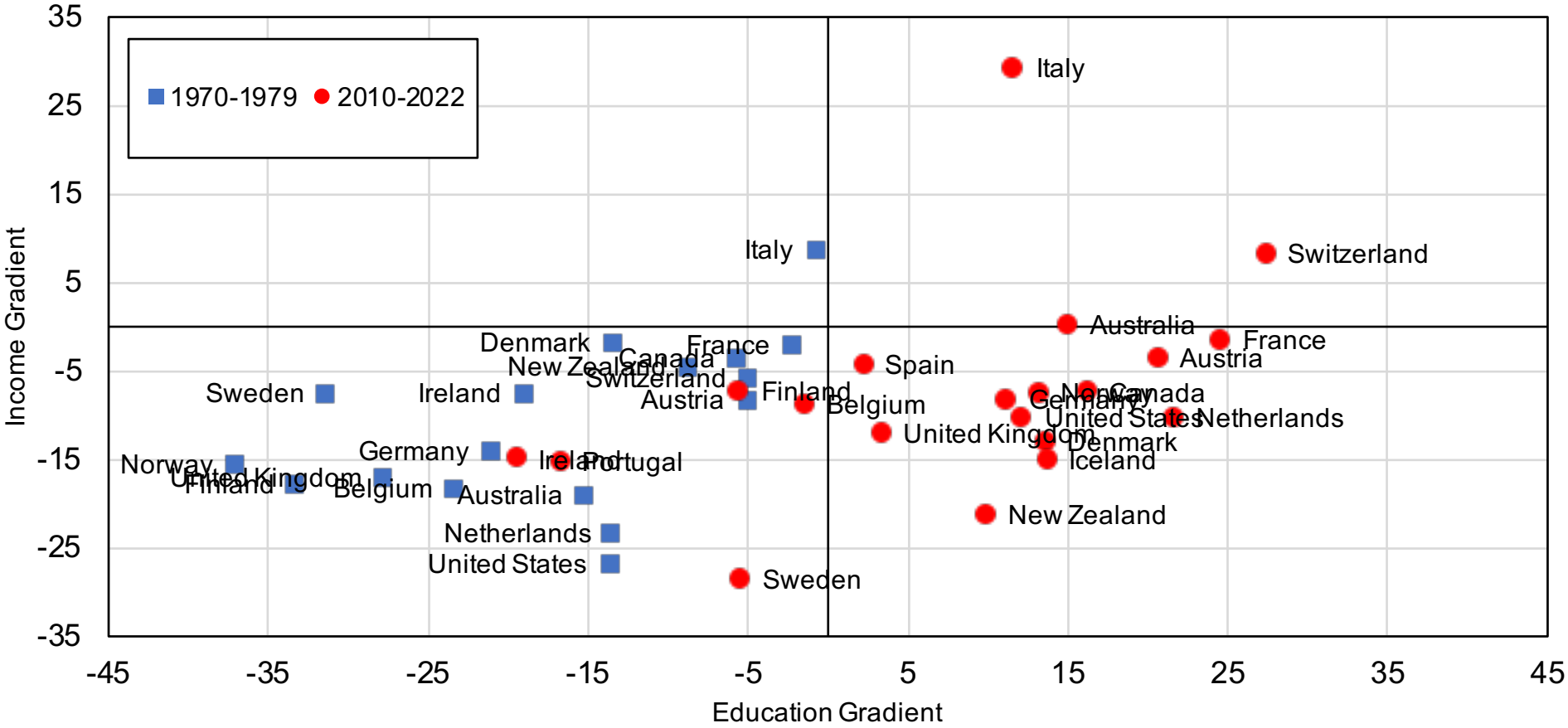
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure represents the difference between the share of high-income (top 50%) and low-income (bottom 50%) voters voting for left-wing parties on the y-axis, and the same difference between higher-educated (top 50%) and lower-educated (bottom 50%) voters on the x-axis, comparing the voting patterns of the 1970s and the 2010s. Estimates control for income/education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure A6: Income and educational divides in Western democracies
Top 10% vs. Bottom 90%



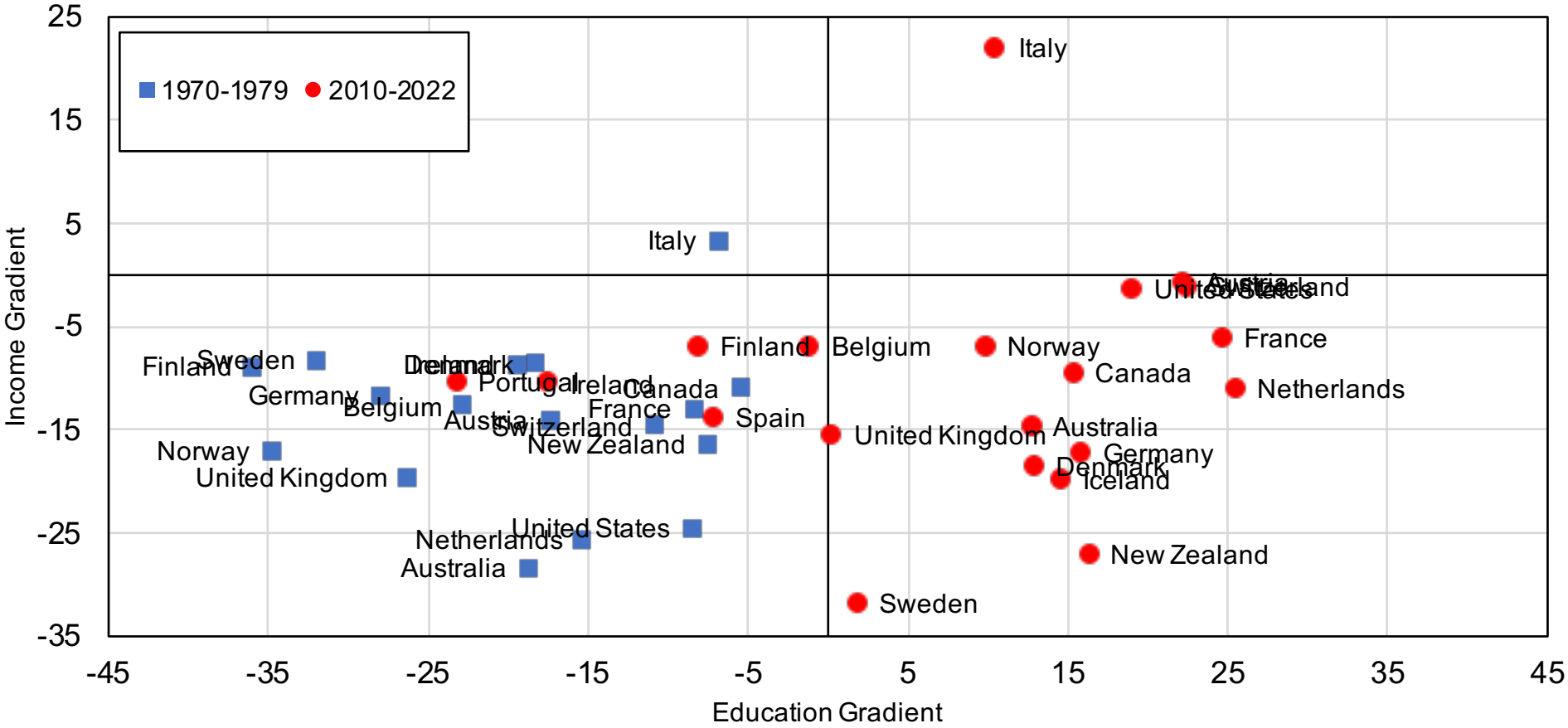
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure represents the difference between the share of high-income (top 10%) and low-income (bottom 90%) voters voting for left-wing parties on the y-axis, and the same difference between higher-educated (top 10%) and lower-educated (bottom 90%) voters on the x-axis, comparing the voting patterns of the 1970s and the 2010s.

Figure A7: Income and educational divides in Western democracies
Continuous variable



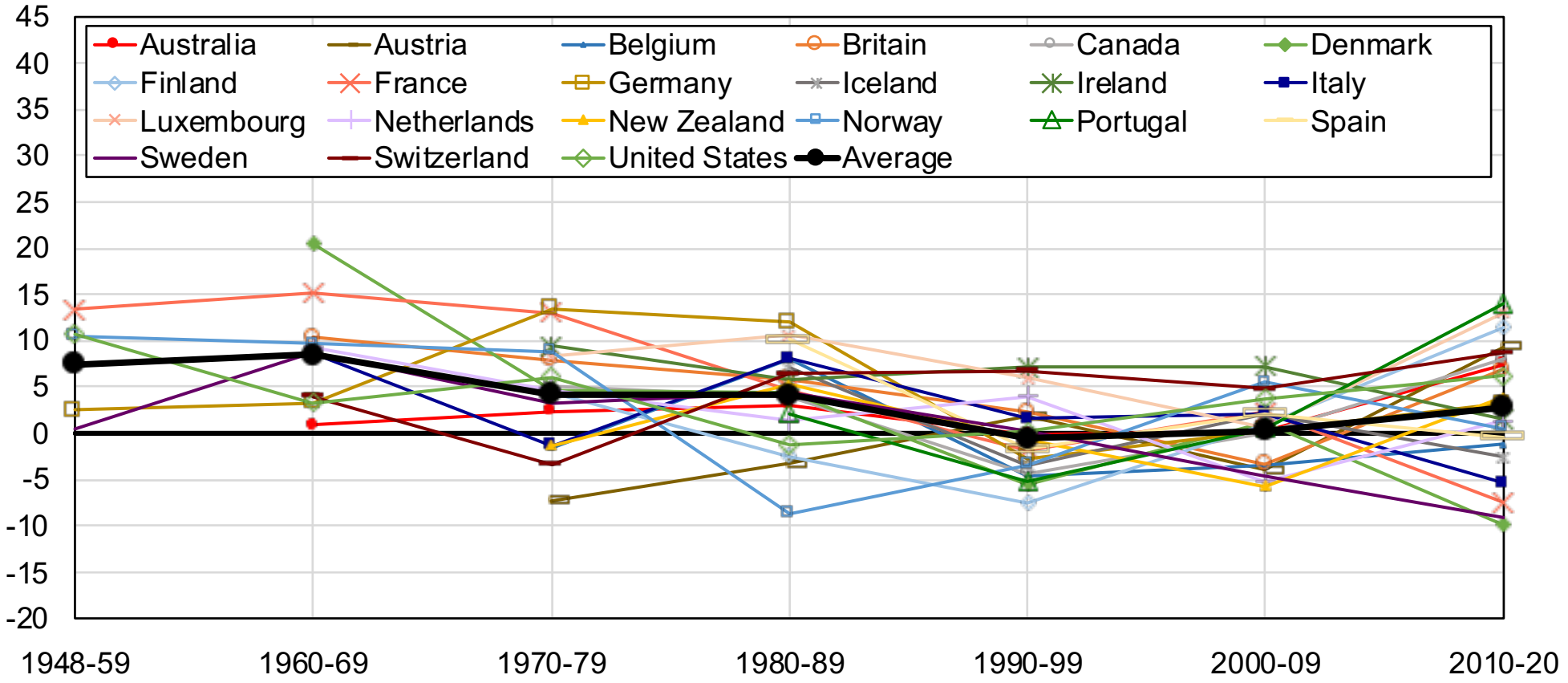
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure represents the marginal effect of the income rank of voters (quantile) on their support for left-wing parties on the y-axis, and the same marginal effect of their education rank (quantile) on the x-axis, comparing the voting patterns of the 1970s and the 2010s.

Figure A8: Income and educational divides in Western democracies
Continuous variable, with controls



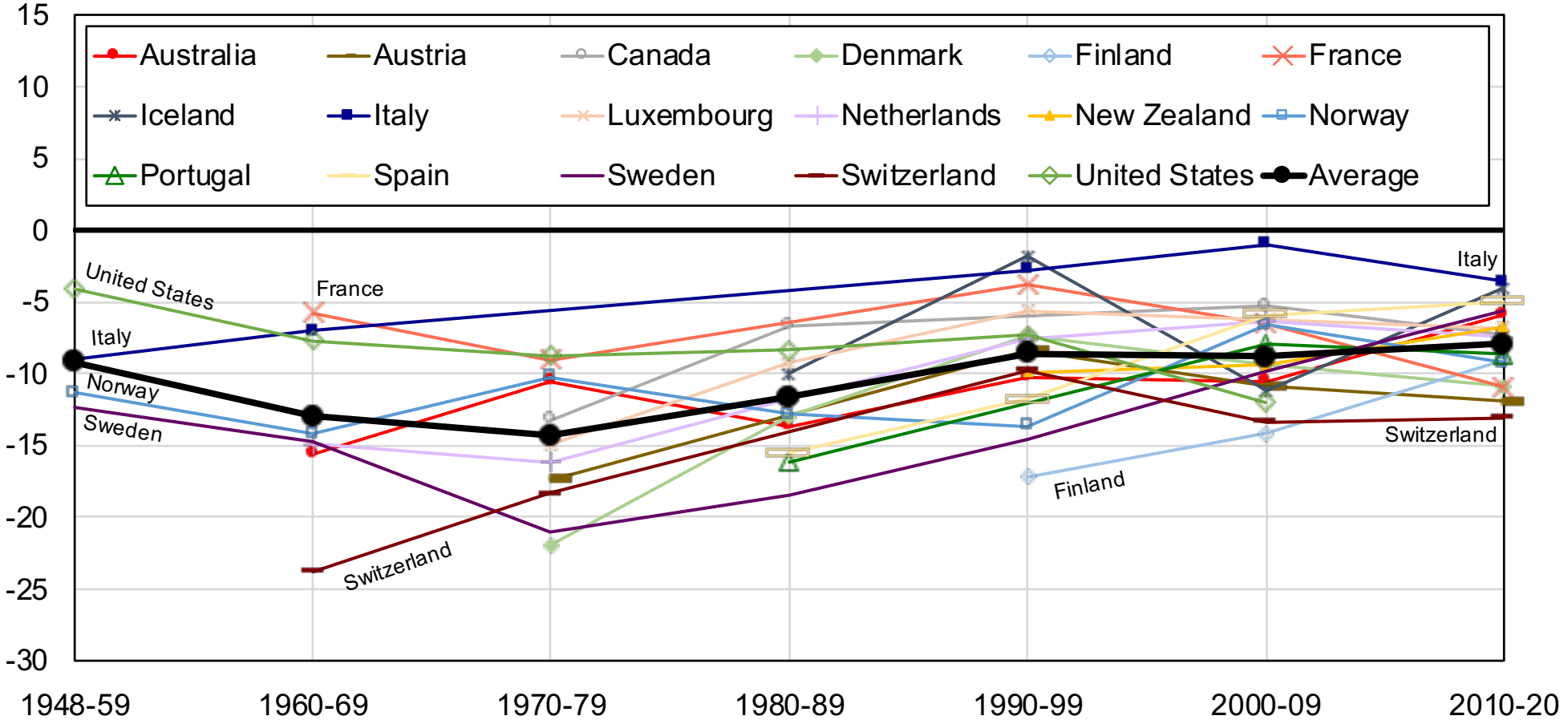
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure represents the marginal effect of the income rank of voters (quantile) on their support for left-wing parties on the y-axis, and the same marginal effect of their education rank (quantile) on the x-axis, comparing the voting patterns of the 1970s and the 2010s. Estimates control for income/education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure A9 - The Generational Divide in Western Democracies



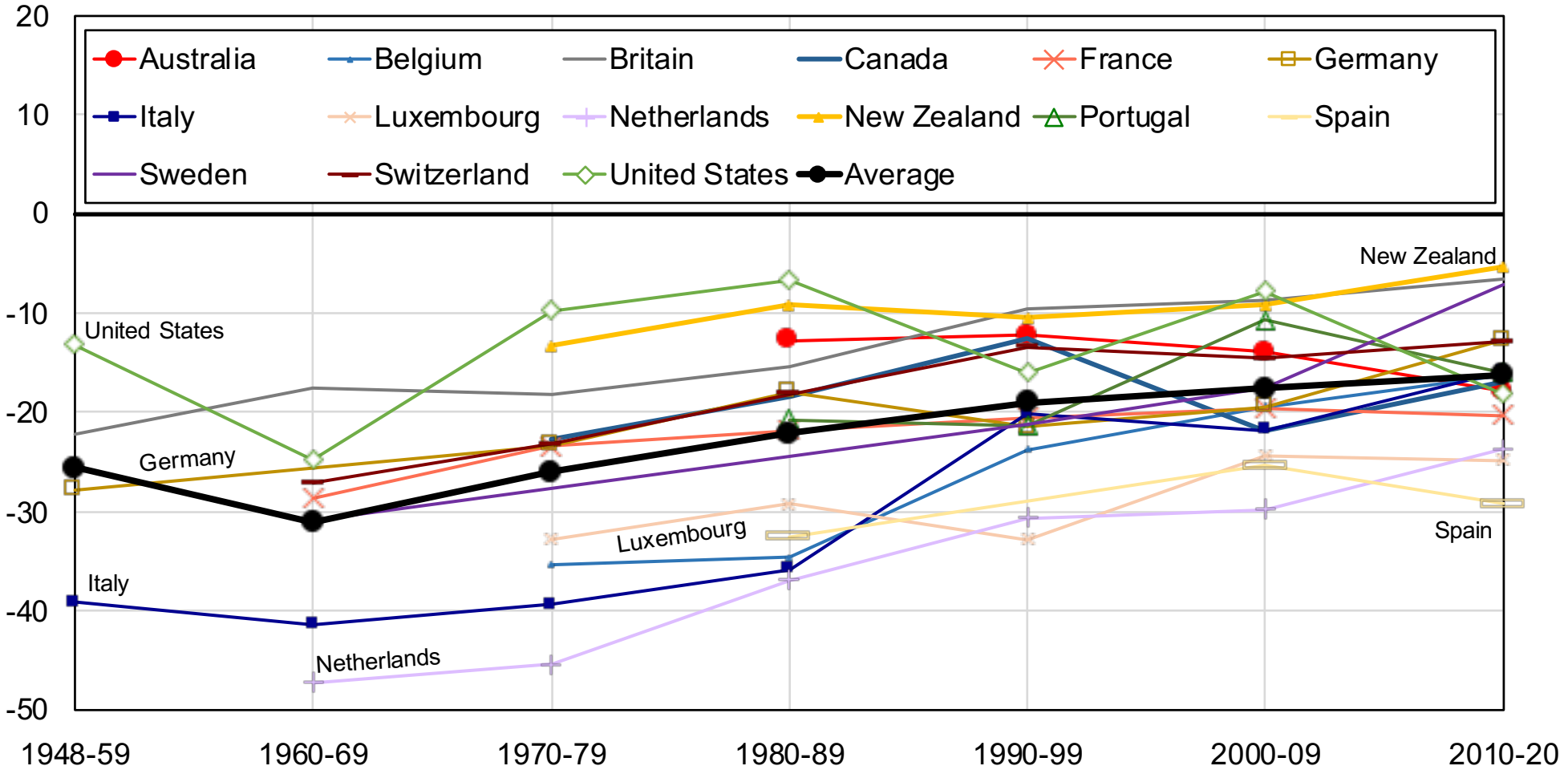
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure shows the difference between the share of voters younger than 25 and the share of voters aged 25 or above voting for left-wing parties in Western democracies, after controlling for income, education, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status.

Figure A10 - The Rural-Urban Divide in Western Democracies



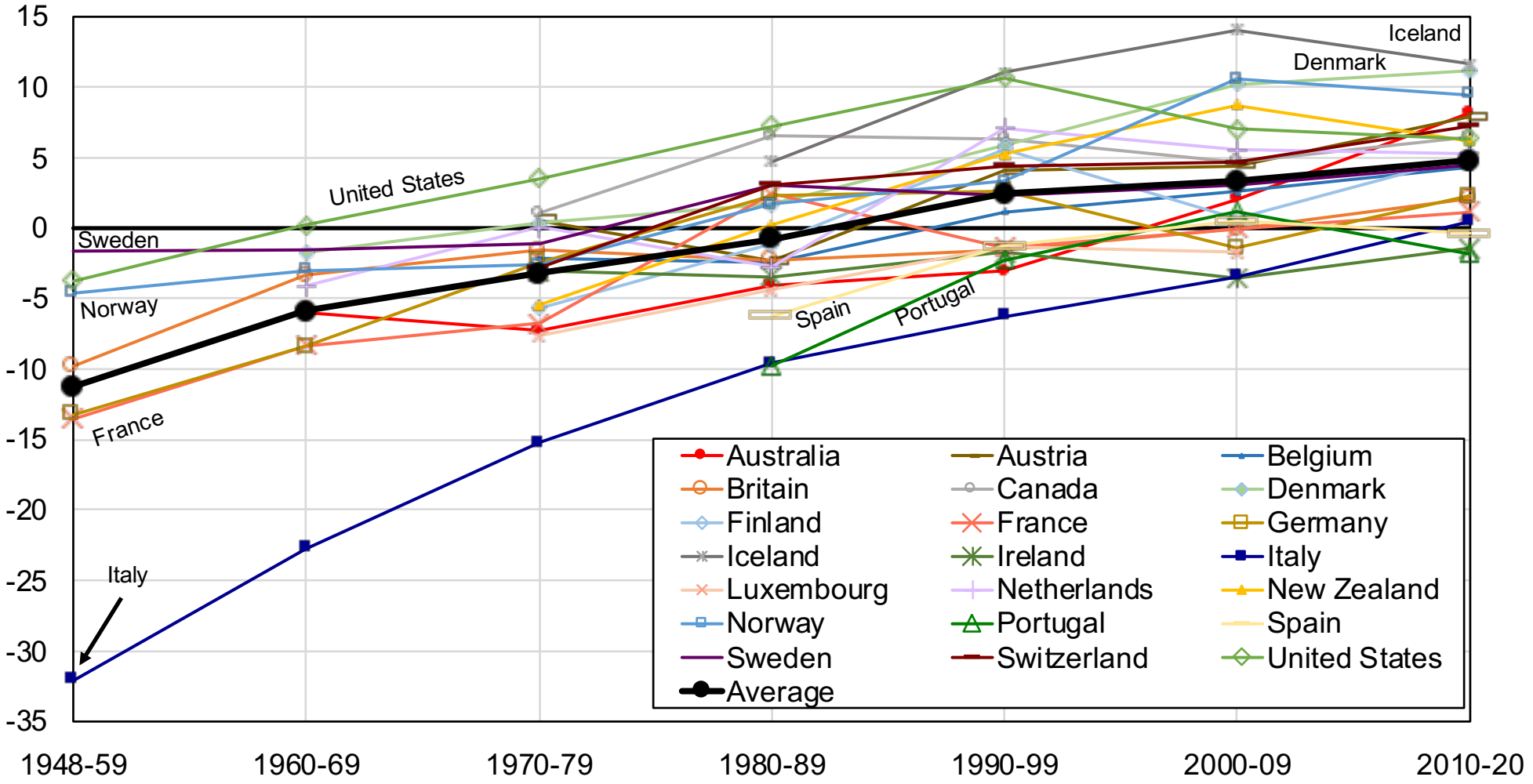
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure displays the difference between the share of rural areas and the share of urban areas voting for social democratic / socialist / communist / green parties. In all countries, rural areas have remained significantly less likely to vote for these parties than cities, with no clear trend over time. Estimates control for income, education, age, gender, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure A11 - The Religious Divide in Western Democracies



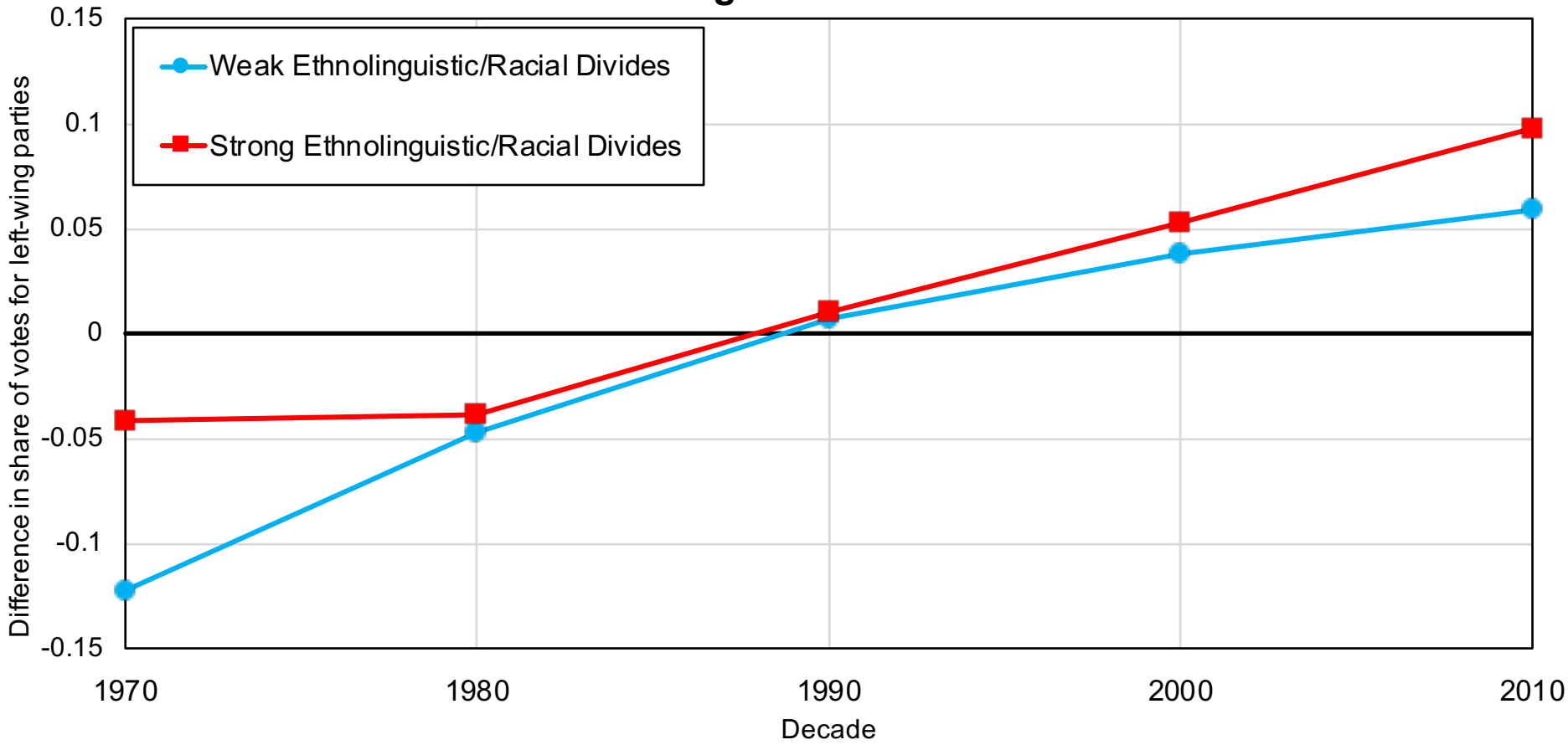
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure displays the difference between the share of Catholics (or Catholics and Protestants in mixed countries) declaring going to church at least once a year and the share of other voters voting for social democratic / socialist / communist / green parties. In all countries, religious voters have remained significantly less likely to vote for these parties than other voters.

Figure A12 - The Gender Divide in Western Democracies



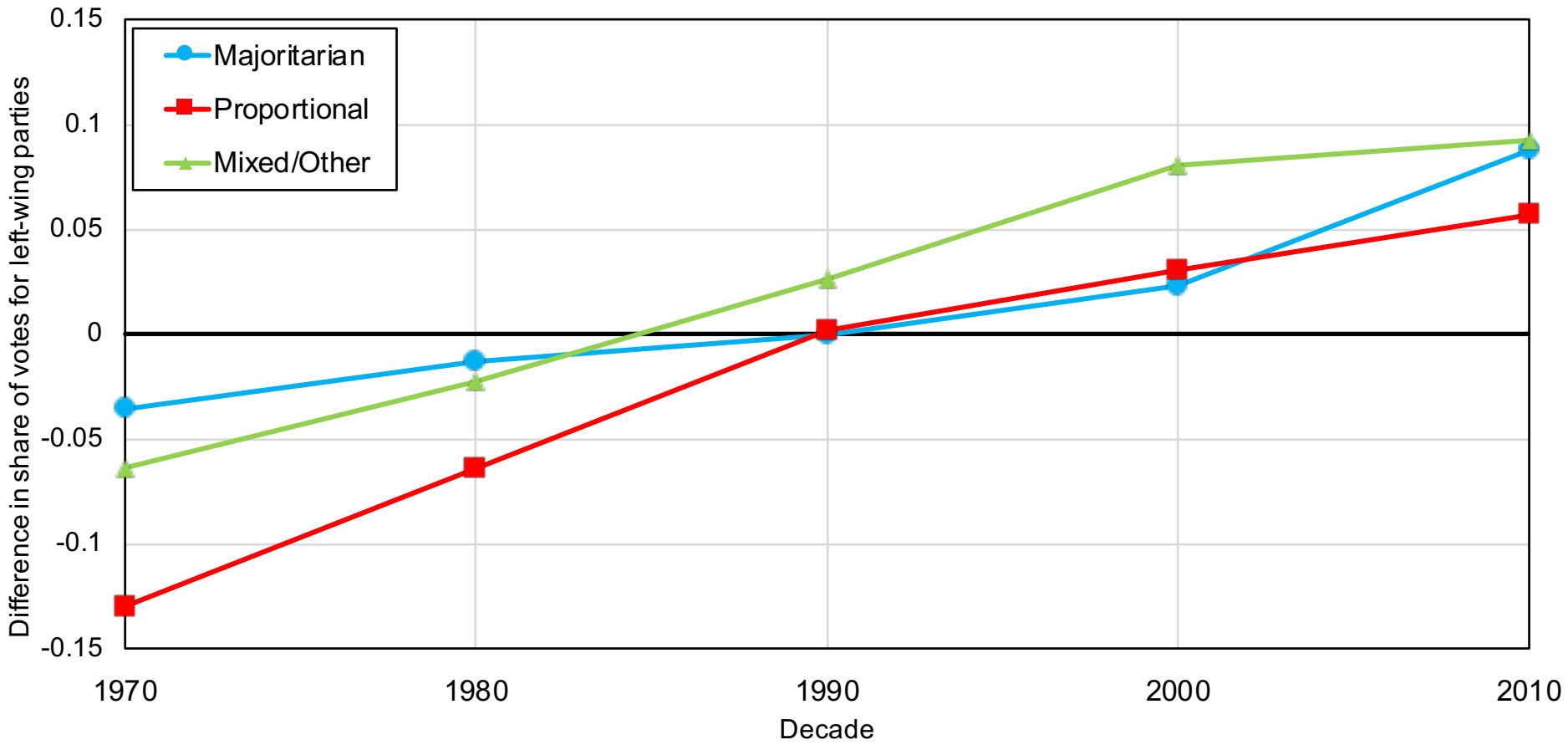
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure displays the difference between the share of women and the share of men voting for social democratic / socialist / communist / green parties in Western democracies. In the majority of countries, women have gradually shifted from being significantly more conservative than men in the 1950s-1960s to being significantly more left-wing in the 2000s-2010s.

Figure B1 - Educational Divides by Intensity of Ethnolinguistic or Racial Divides



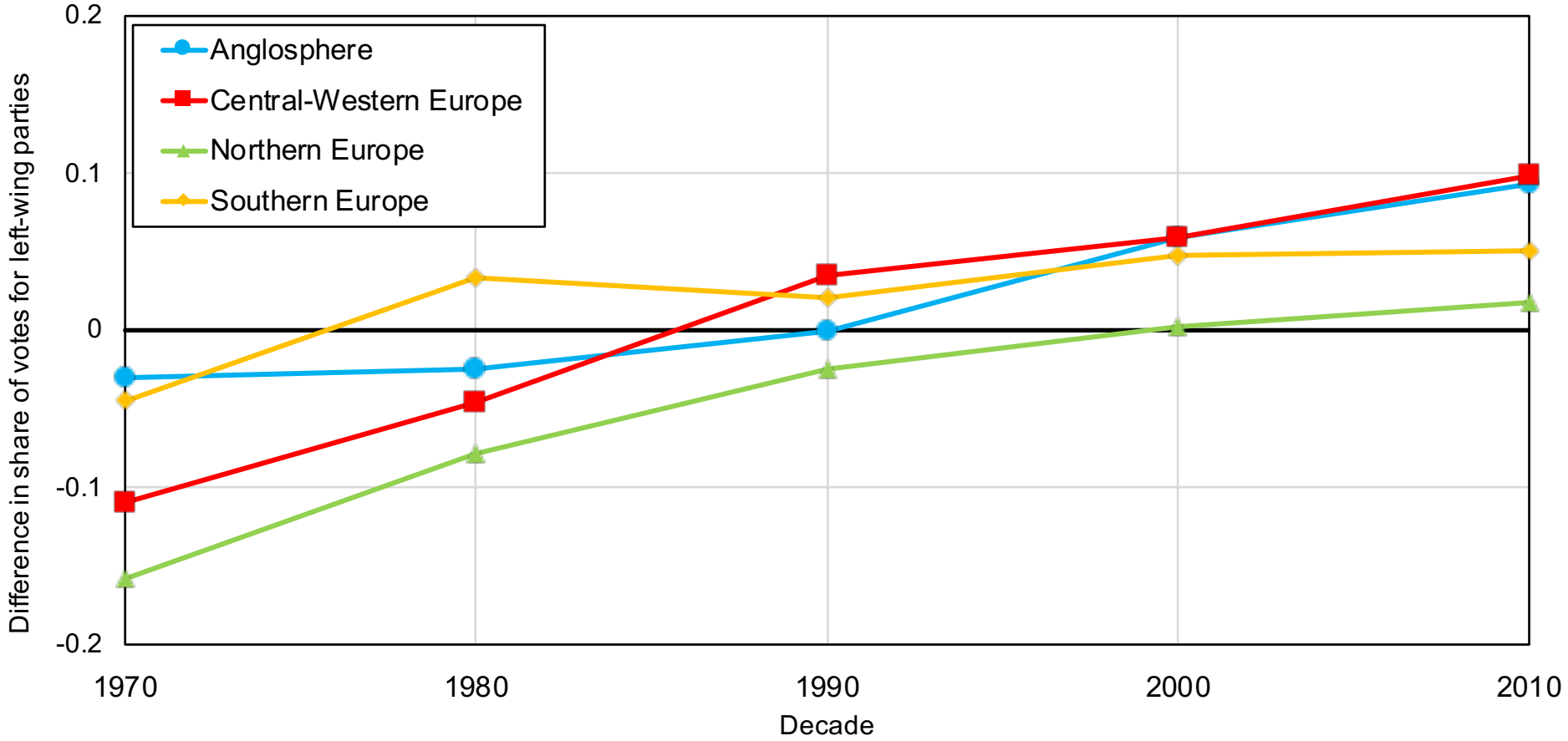
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure represents the difference between the share of higher-educated (top 10%) and lower-educated (bottom 90%) voters voting for left-wing (socialist, social democratic, communist, and green) parties in Western countries, grouping countries into those with weak or strong ethnolinguistic/racial divides. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available). Countries with strong ethnolinguistic/racial divides: Belgium, Canada, New Zealand, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States.

Figure B2 - Educational Divides by Type of Political System



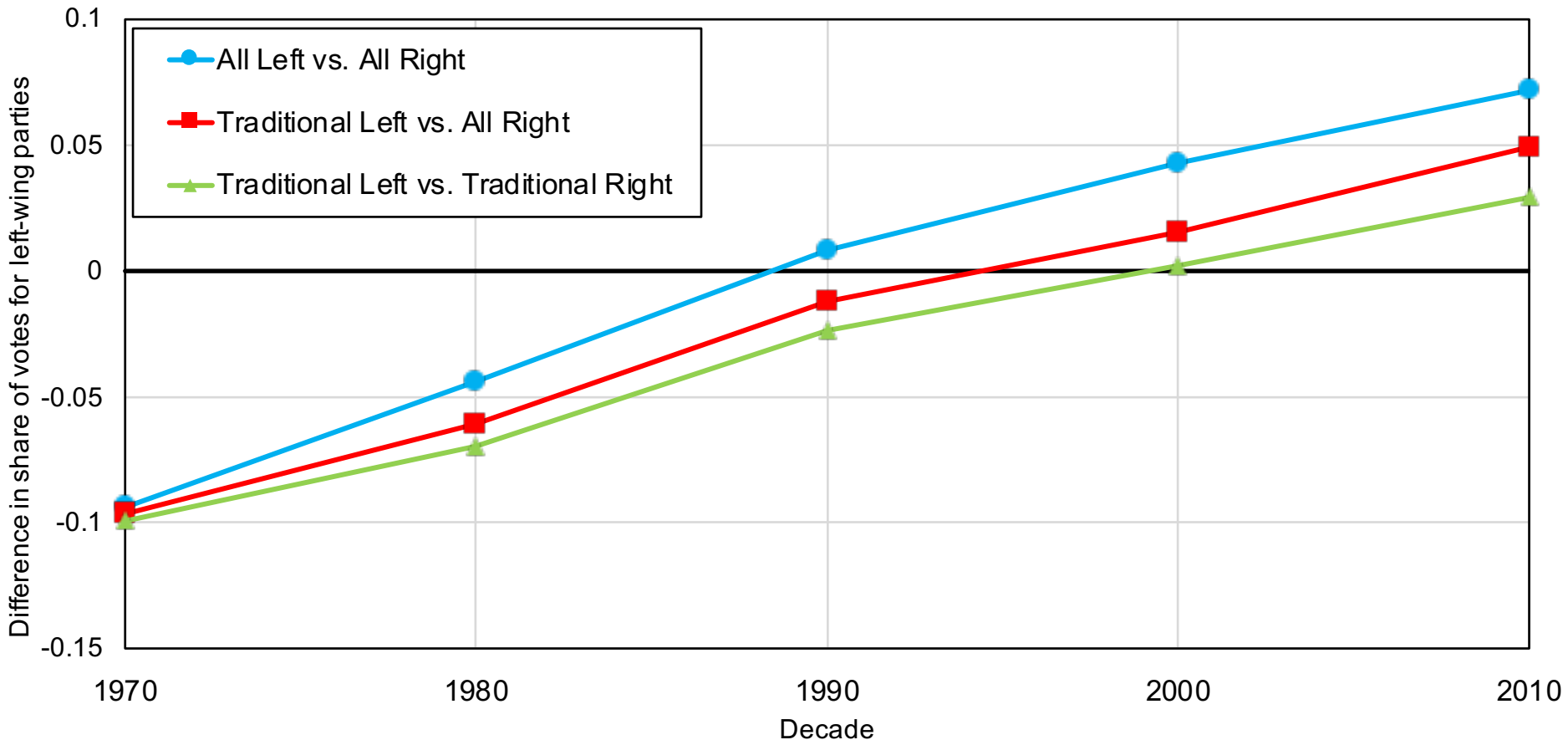
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure represents the difference between the share of higher-educated (top 10%) and lower-educated (bottom 90%) voters voting for left-wing (socialist, social democratic, communist, and green) parties in Western countries, grouping countries by type of political system. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available). Majoritarian: Canada, United Kingdom, United States. Proportional Representation: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland. Mixed/Other: all other countries.

Figure B3 - Educational Divides by World Region



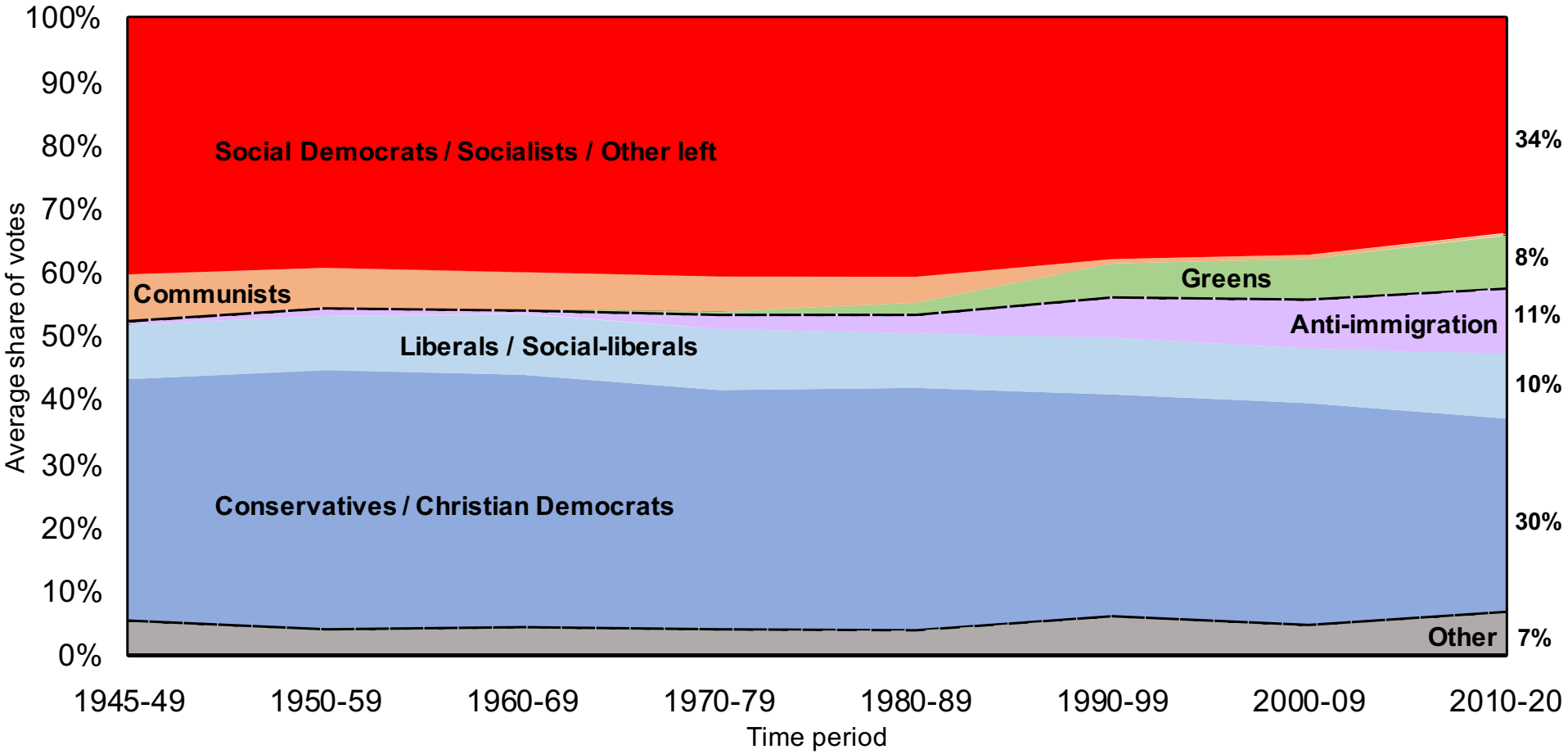
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure represents the difference between the share of higher-educated (top 10%) and lower-educated (bottom 90%) voters voting for left-wing (socialist, social democratic, communist, and green) parties in Western countries, grouping countries by world region. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available). Anglosphere: Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States. Northern Europe: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden. Southern Europe: Italy, Portugal, Spain. Central-Western Europe: all other countries.

Figure B4 - Educational Divides by Subgroup of Parties



Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure represents the difference between the share of higher-educated (top 10%) and lower-educated (bottom 90%) voters voting for left-wing (socialist, social democratic, communist, and green) parties in Western countries, before and after restricting the analysis to specific groups of parties. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available). All Left vs. All Right: compare all left-wing and all right-wing parties. Traditional Left vs. All Right: exclude green parties from the analysis. Traditional Left vs. Traditional Right: exclude both green and anti-immigration parties from the analysis.

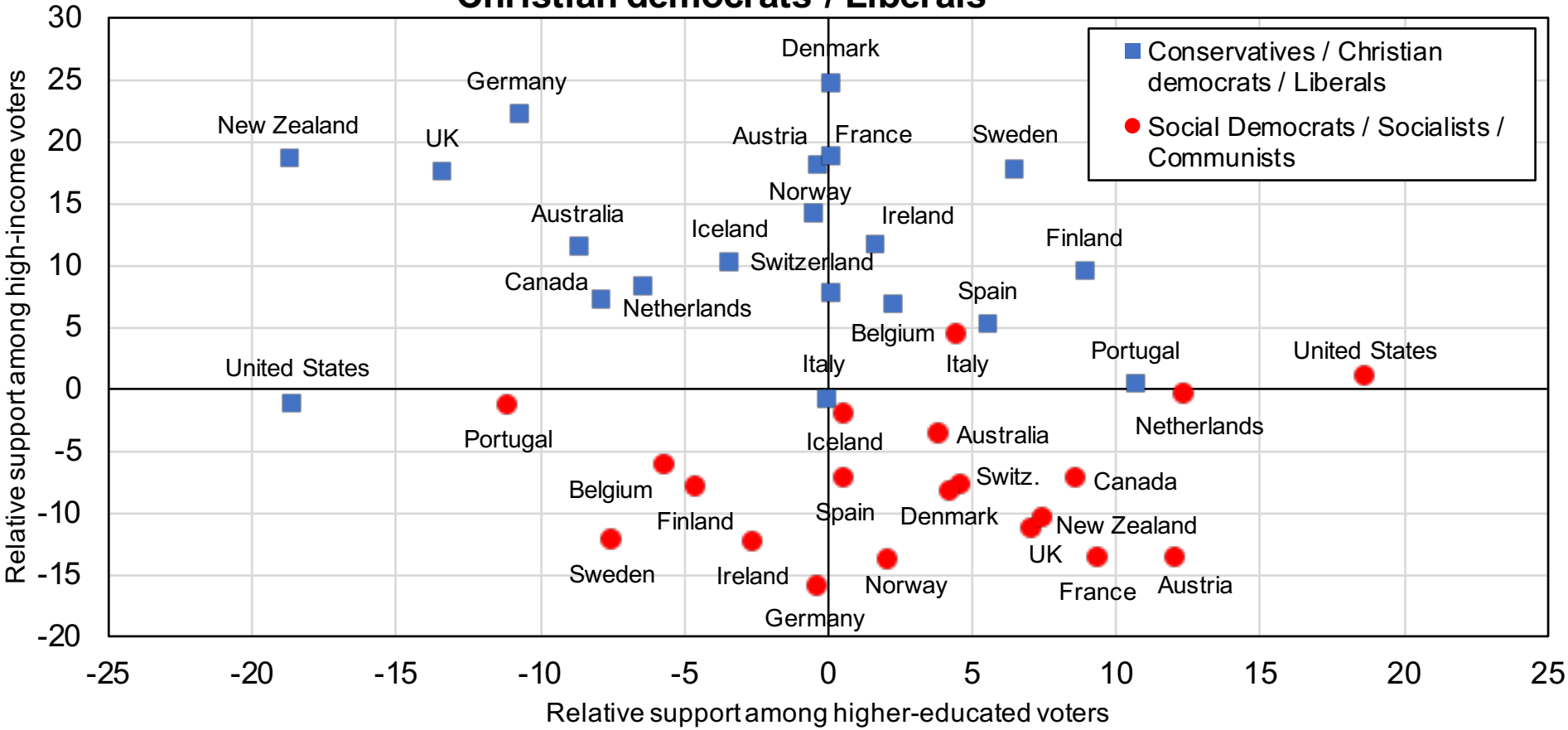
Figure B5 - The transformation of Western party systems, 1945-2020



Source: authors' computations using official election results data.

Note: the figure represents the average share of votes received by selected families of political parties in Western democracies between the 1940s and the 2010s. Communist parties saw their average scores collapse from 7% to less than 0.5%, while green and anti-immigration parties rose until reaching average vote shares of 8% and 11%, respectively. Decennial averages over all Western democracies except Spain and Portugal (no democratic elections before 1970s) and the United States and the United Kingdom (two-party systems). The dashed lines delimit the categorization of parties considered in the main specification (social democrats and affiliated, conservatives and affiliated, and other parties).

Figure B6 - Decomposing income and education cleavages Social Democrats / Socialists / Communists vs. Conservatives / Christian democrats / Liberals



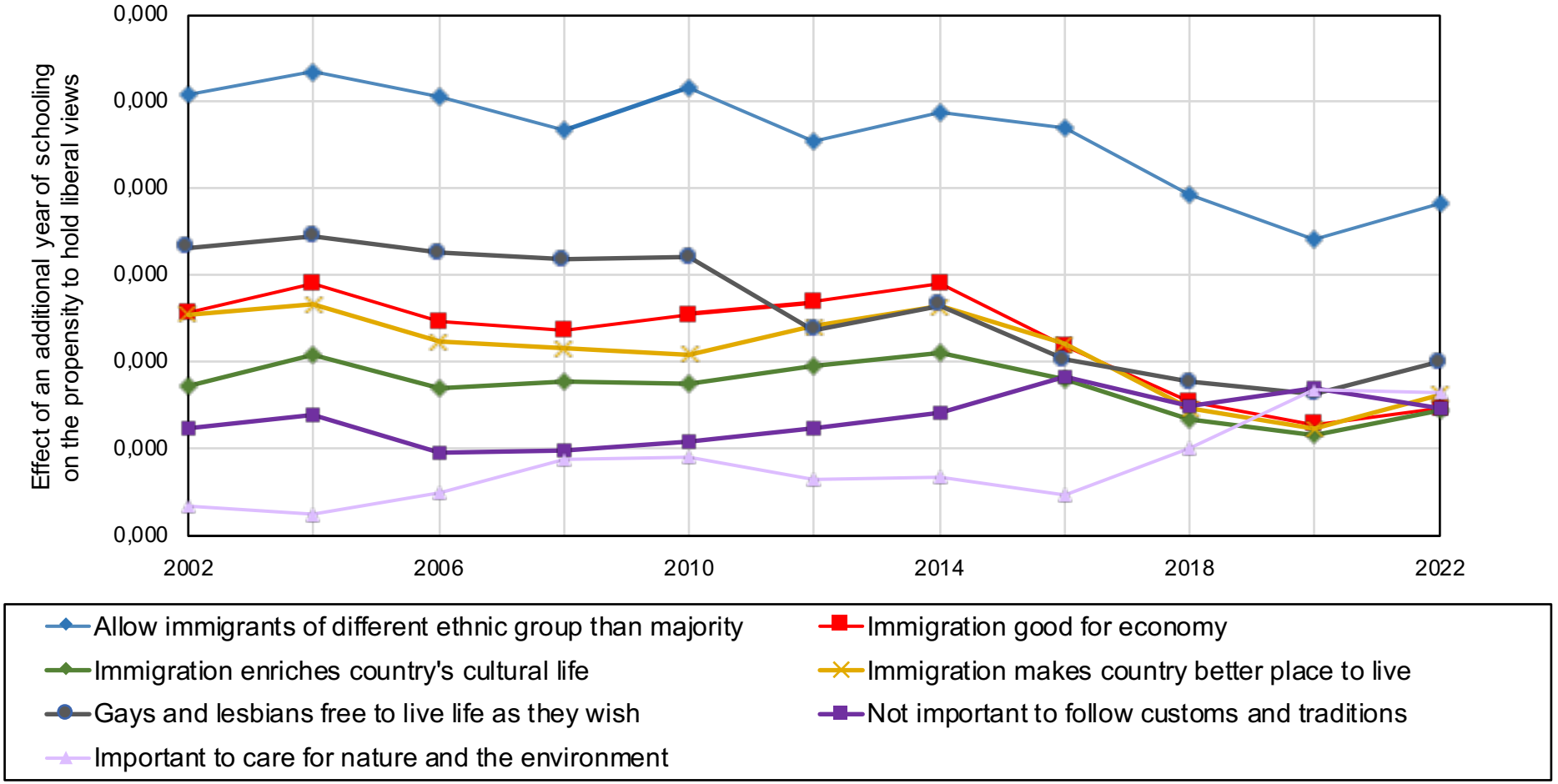
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure represents the difference between the share of high-income (top 10%) and low-income (bottom 90%) voters voting for selected groups of parties on the y-axis, and the same difference between higher-educated (top 10%) and lower-educated (bottom 90%) voters on the x-axis, in the last election available (between 2014 and 2020). Estimates control for income/education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure B7 - Decomposing income and education cleavages
Green vs. Anti-immigration parties



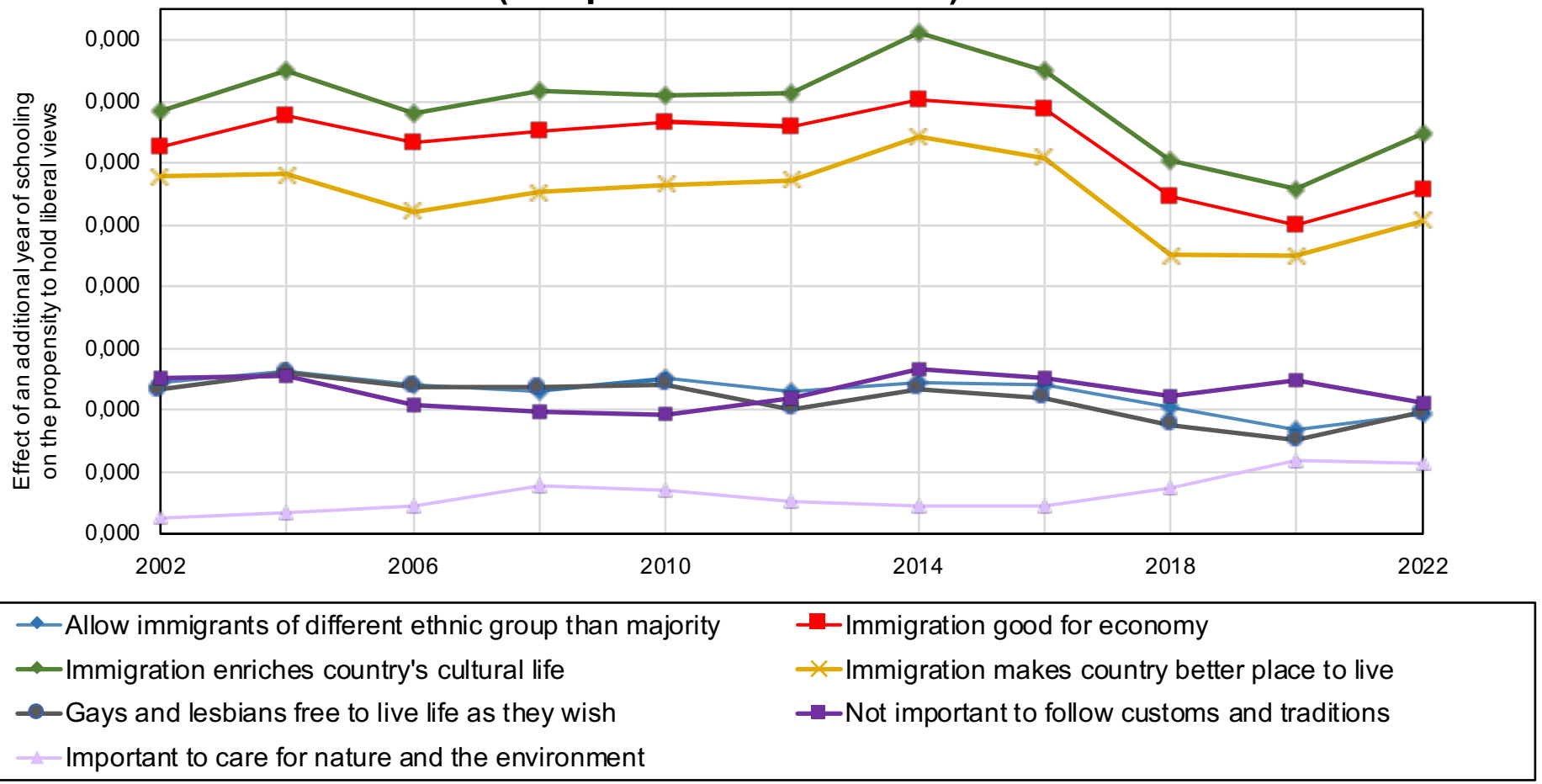
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure represents the difference between the share of high-income (top 10%) and low-income (bottom 90%) voters voting for selected groups of parties on the y-axis, and the same difference between higher-educated (top 10%) and lower-educated (bottom 90%) voters on the x-axis, in the last election available (between 2014 and 2020). Estimates control for income/education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure B8 - Educational divides over sociocultural issues



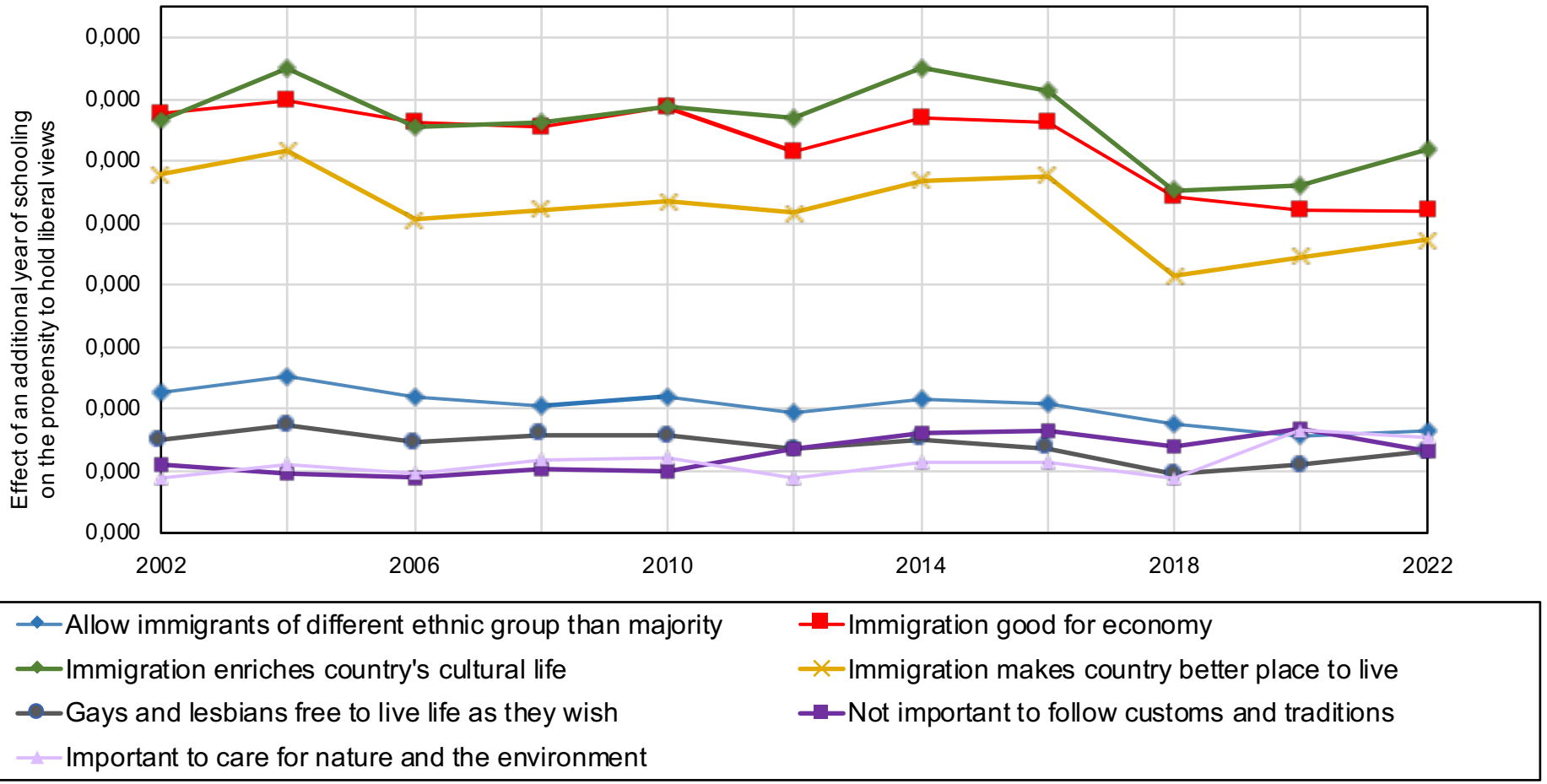
Source: authors' computations using the European Social Survey.
Note: the figure represents the effect of an additional year of schooling on the propensity to hold liberal views (answer positively) to each question. Estimates control for country-fixed effects.

Figure B9 - Educational divides over sociocultural values (complete variable scales)



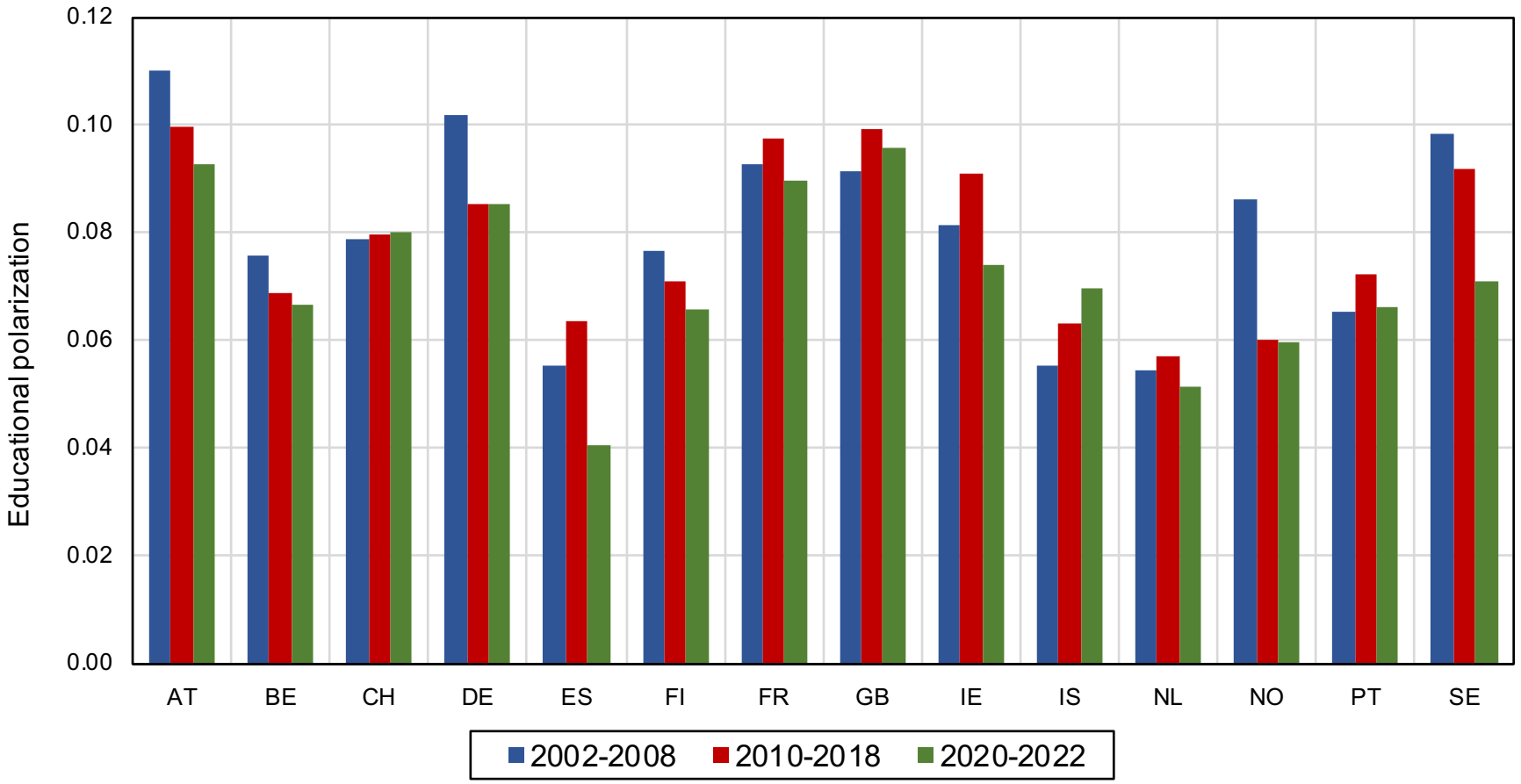
Source: authors' computations using the European Social Survey.
Note: the figure represents the effect of an additional year of schooling on the propensity to hold liberal views (answer positively) to each question. Estimates control for country-fixed effects. The complete original scale of each variable is used, ranging from 1 to 4 for "Allow immigrants...", 0 to 10 for other immigration questions, 1 to 5 for "Gays and lesbians", and 1 to 6 for the last two questions.

Figure B10 - Educational divides over sociocultural values, with controls (complete variable scales)



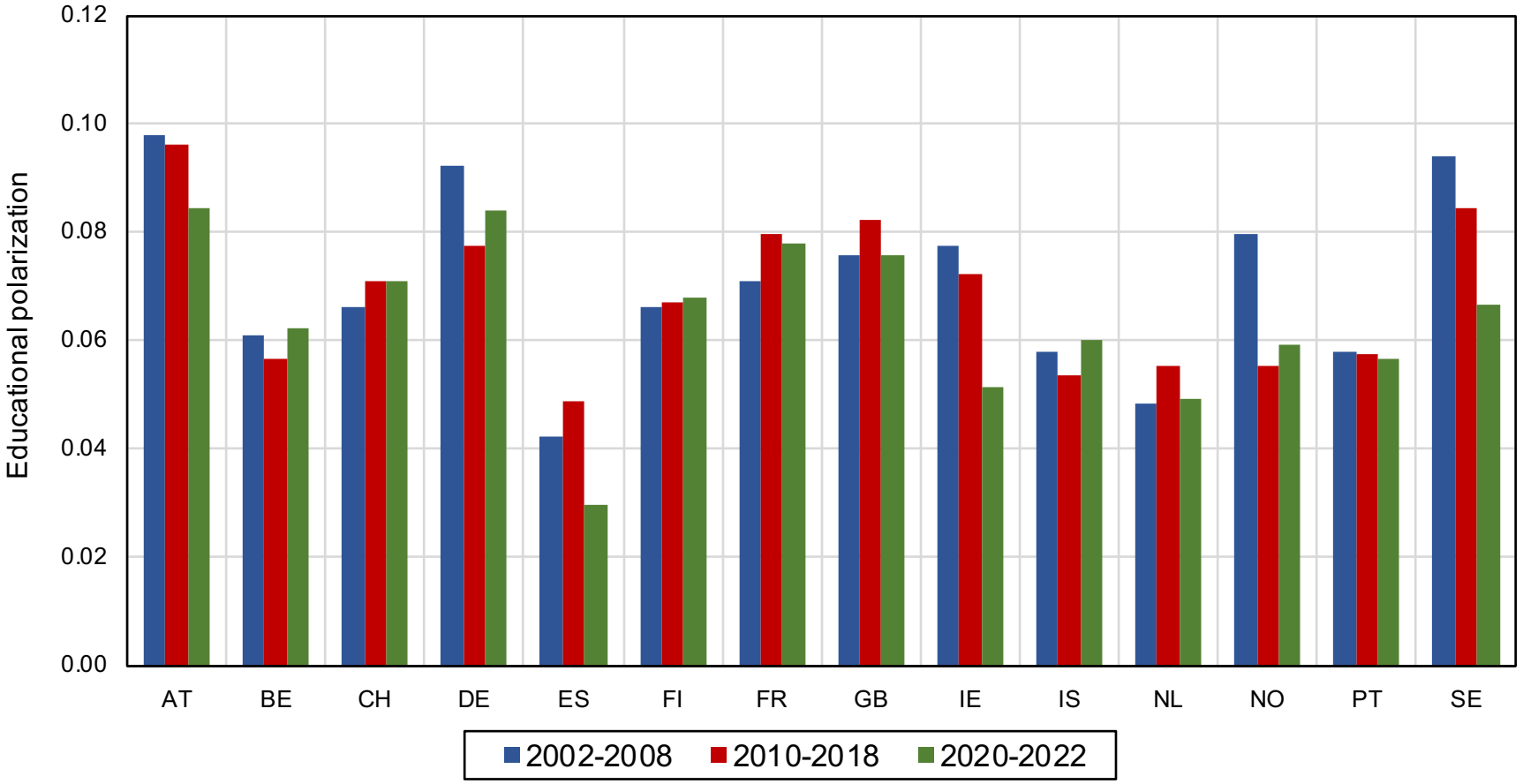
Source: authors' computations using the European Social Survey.
Note: the figure represents the effect of an additional year of schooling on the propensity to hold liberal views (answer positively) to each question. Estimates control for age, gender, religion, church attendance, employment status, income, and country-fixed effects The complete original scale of each variable is used, ranging from 1 to 4 for "Allow immigrants...", 0 to 10 for other immigration questions, 1 to 5 for "Gays and lesbians", and 1 to 6 for the last two questions..

Figure B11 - Educational divides over sociocultural issues by country



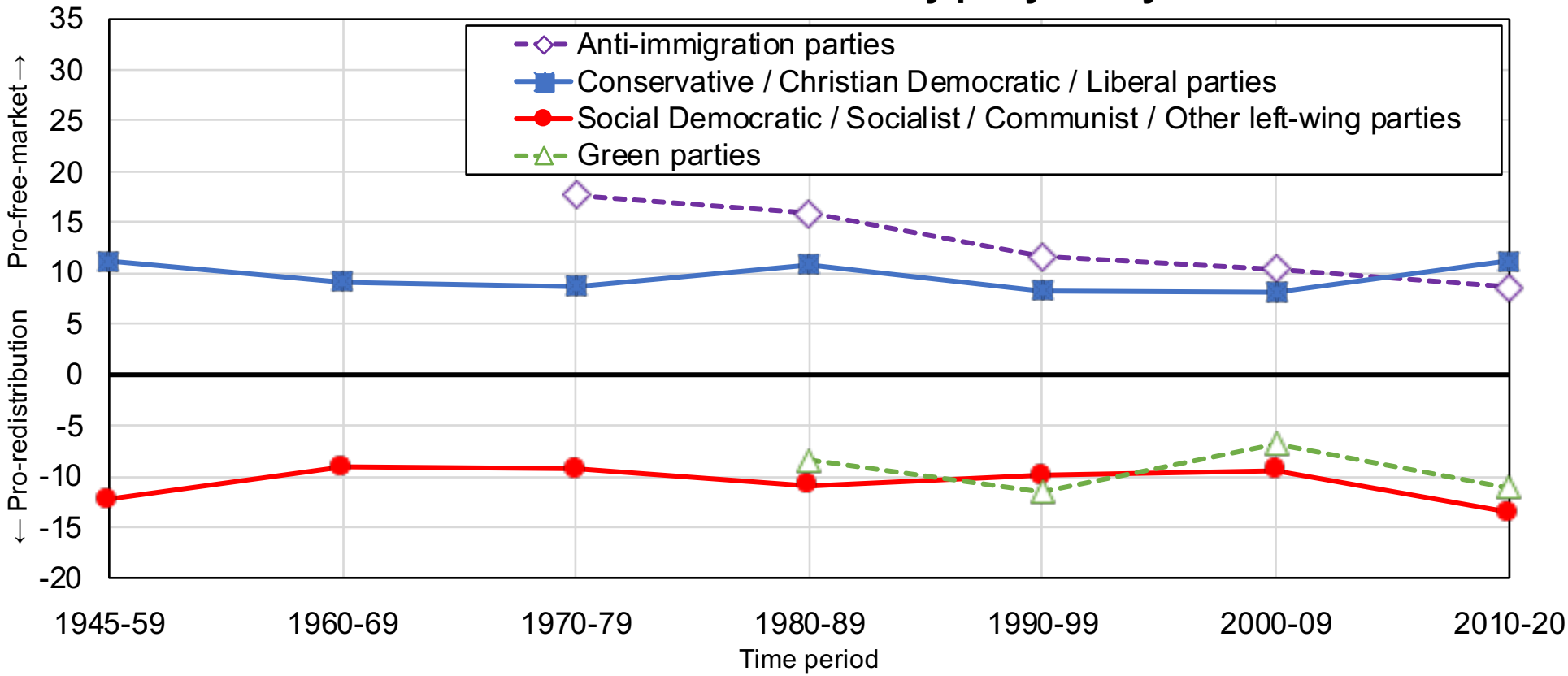
Source: authors' computations using the European Social Survey.
Note: the figure represents the effect of an additional year of schooling on the propensity to hold liberal views on sociocultural issues across European countries. The unit of observation is the country-year-variable. Seven questions on immigration, the environment, and traditional moral values are pooled. Answers to these questions are then regressed on years of schooling, controlling for question fixed effects. The figure plots the resulting coefficients on years of schooling in each country, capturing the degree of educational divides over sociocultural issues by education.

Figure B12 - Educational divides over sociocultural issues by country, with controls



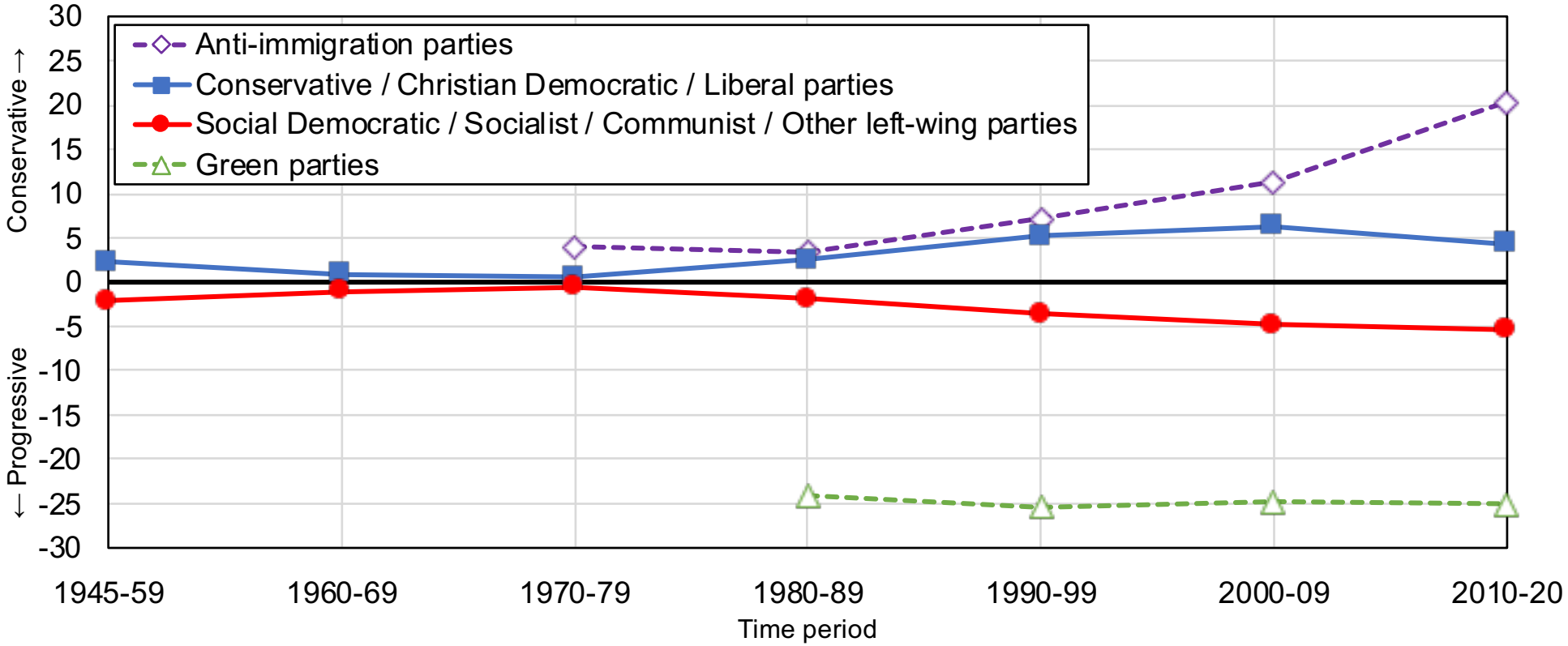
Source: authors' computations using the European Social Survey.
Note: the figure represents the effect of an additional year of schooling on the propensity to hold liberal views on sociocultural issues across European countries. The unit of observation is the country-year-variable. Seven questions on immigration, the environment, and traditional moral values are pooled. Answers to these questions are then regressed on years of schooling, controlling for age, gender, religion, church attendance, employment status, income, and question fixed effects. The figure plots the resulting coefficients on years of schooling in each country, capturing the degree of educational divides over sociocultural issues by education.

Figure B13 - The evolution of ideological polarization in Western democracies, 1945-2020
Economic-distributive score by party family



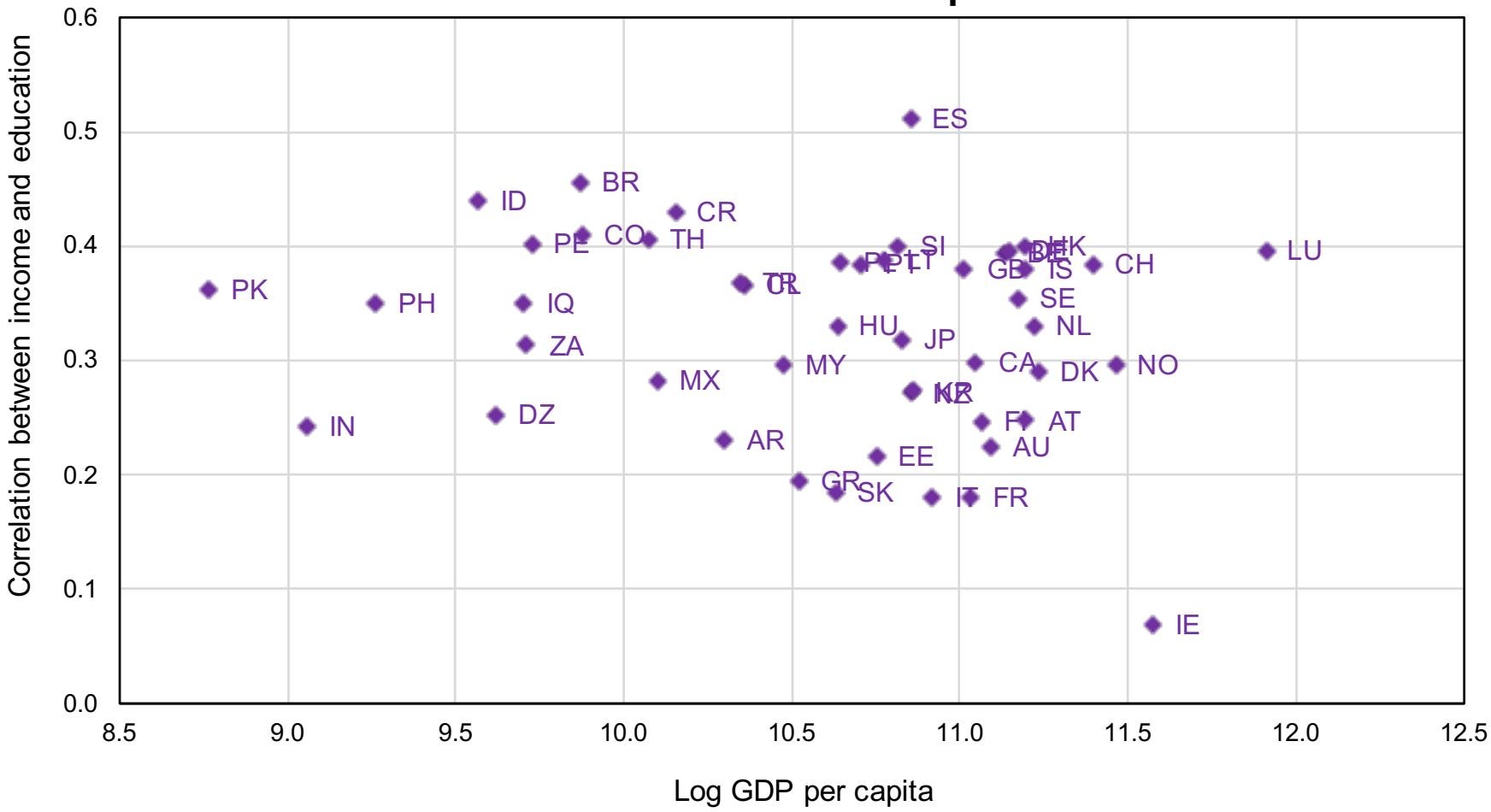
Source: authors' computations using the Comparative Manifesto Project database.
Note: the figure displays the average economic-distributive scores by decade for four families of parties across all Western democracies: social democratic, socialist, communist, and other left-wing parties; conservative, Christian democratic, and liberal parties; anti-immigration parties; and green parties. Negative values on the economic-distributive index correspond to greater proportions of pro-redistribution emphases relatively to pro-free-market emphases. Indices are normalized by the average score by decade so as to better highlight the dynamics of polarization.

Figure B14 - The evolution of ideological polarization in Western democracies, 1945-2020
Sociocultural score by party family



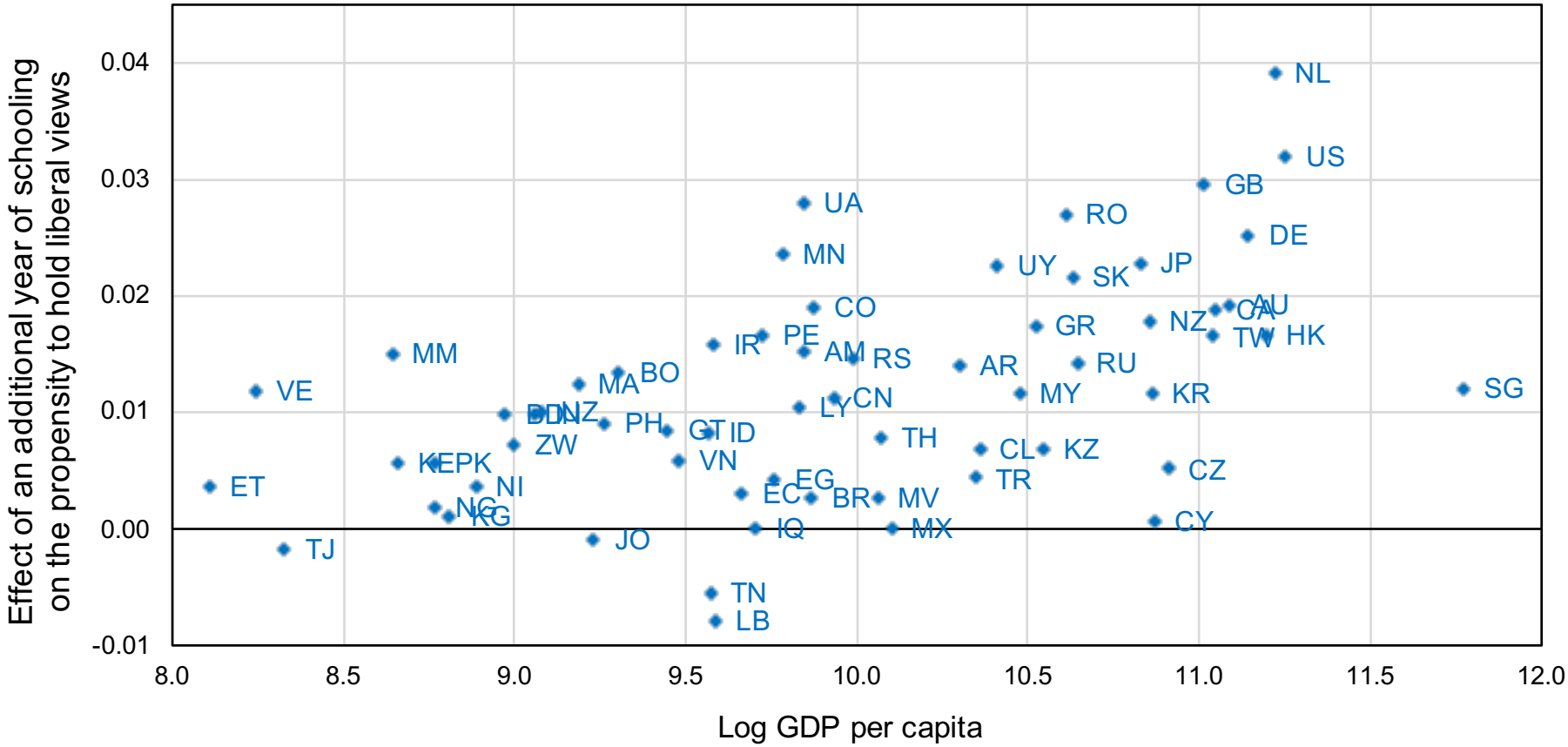
Source: authors' computations using the Comparative Manifesto Project database.
Note: the figure displays the average sociocultural scores by decade for four families of parties across all Western democracies: social democratic, socialist, communist, and other left-wing parties; conservative, Christian democratic, and liberal parties; anti-immigration parties; and green parties. Negative values on the sociocultural index correspond to greater proportions of progressive emphases relatively to conservative emphases. Indices are normalized by the average score by decade so as to better highlight the dynamics of polarization.

Figure C1 - The correlation between income and education over the course of development



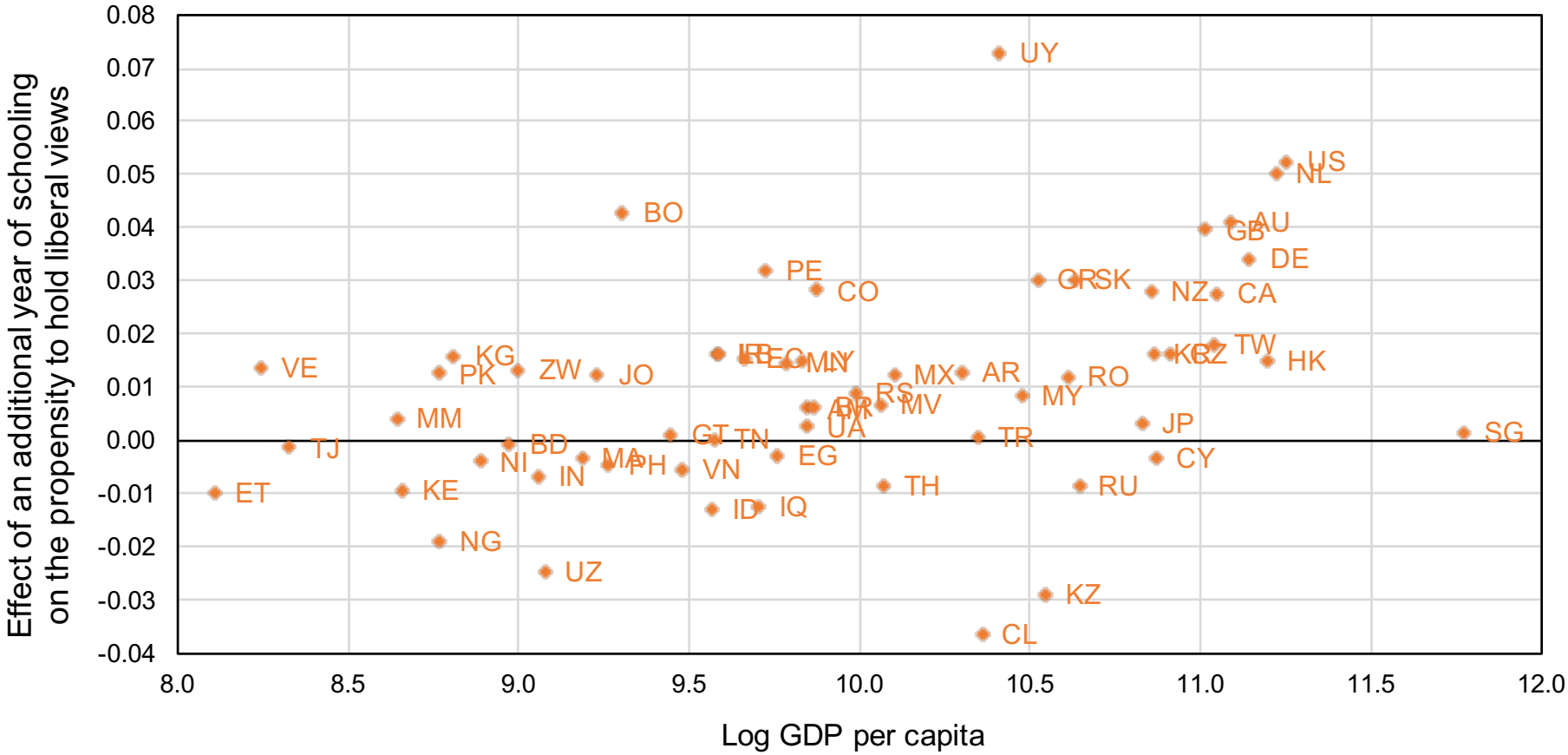
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: the figure represents the rank-rank correlation between income and education versus GDP per capita across countries.

Figure C2 - Educational Divides over Environmental Issues over the Course of Development



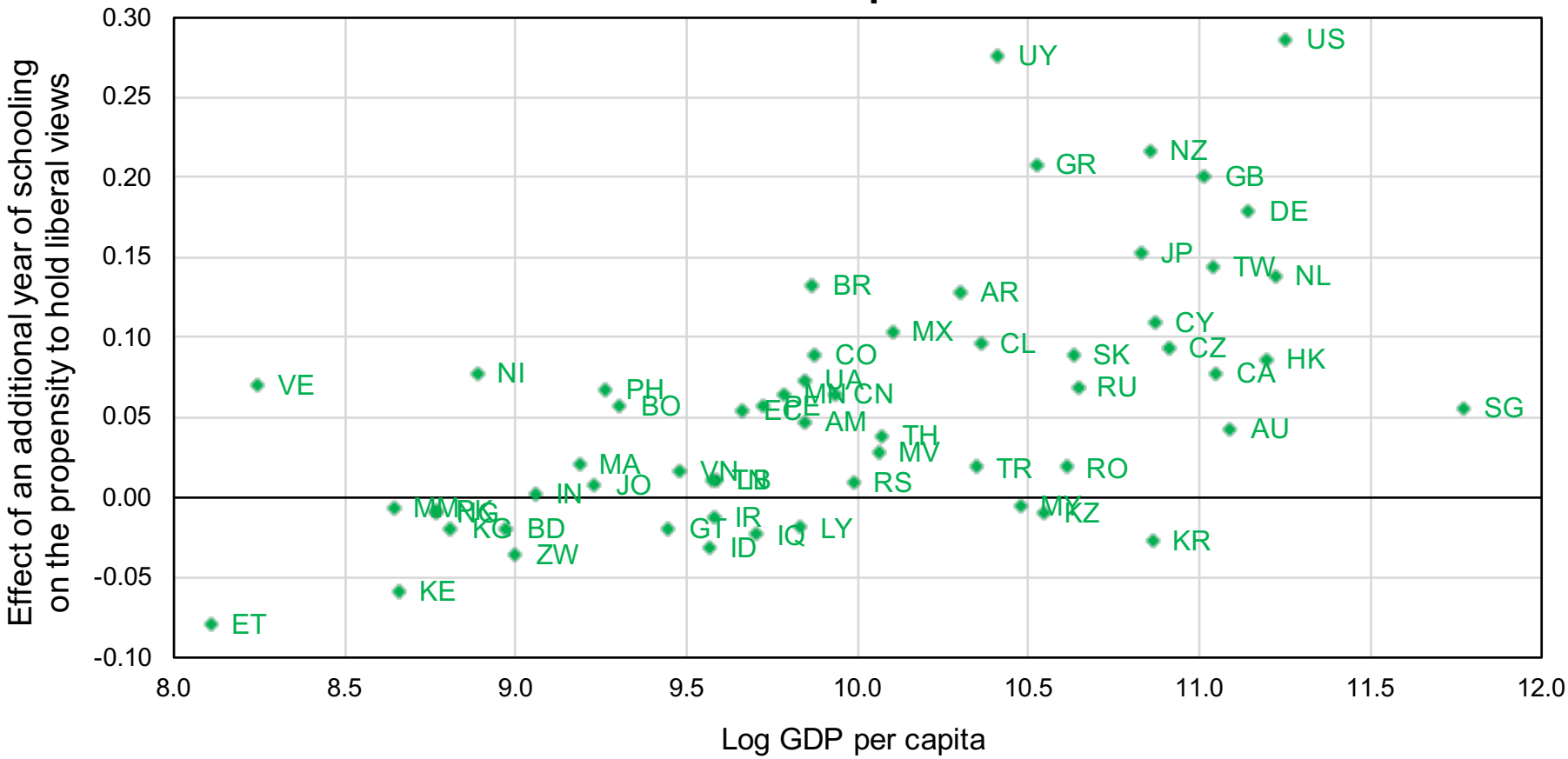
Source: authors' computations using the World Values Survey.
Note: the figure represents the relationship between the strength of educational divides over environmental protection and GDP per capita. The y-axis coefficients are based on a regression by country in which positions on environmental protection are regressed on years of schooling. The outcome variable is a dummy equal to 1 if the individual favors protecting the environment over economic growth and 0 if the opposite is true. Estimates control for age, gender, employment status, and rural-urban location.

Figure C3 - Educational Divides over Immigration over the Course of Development



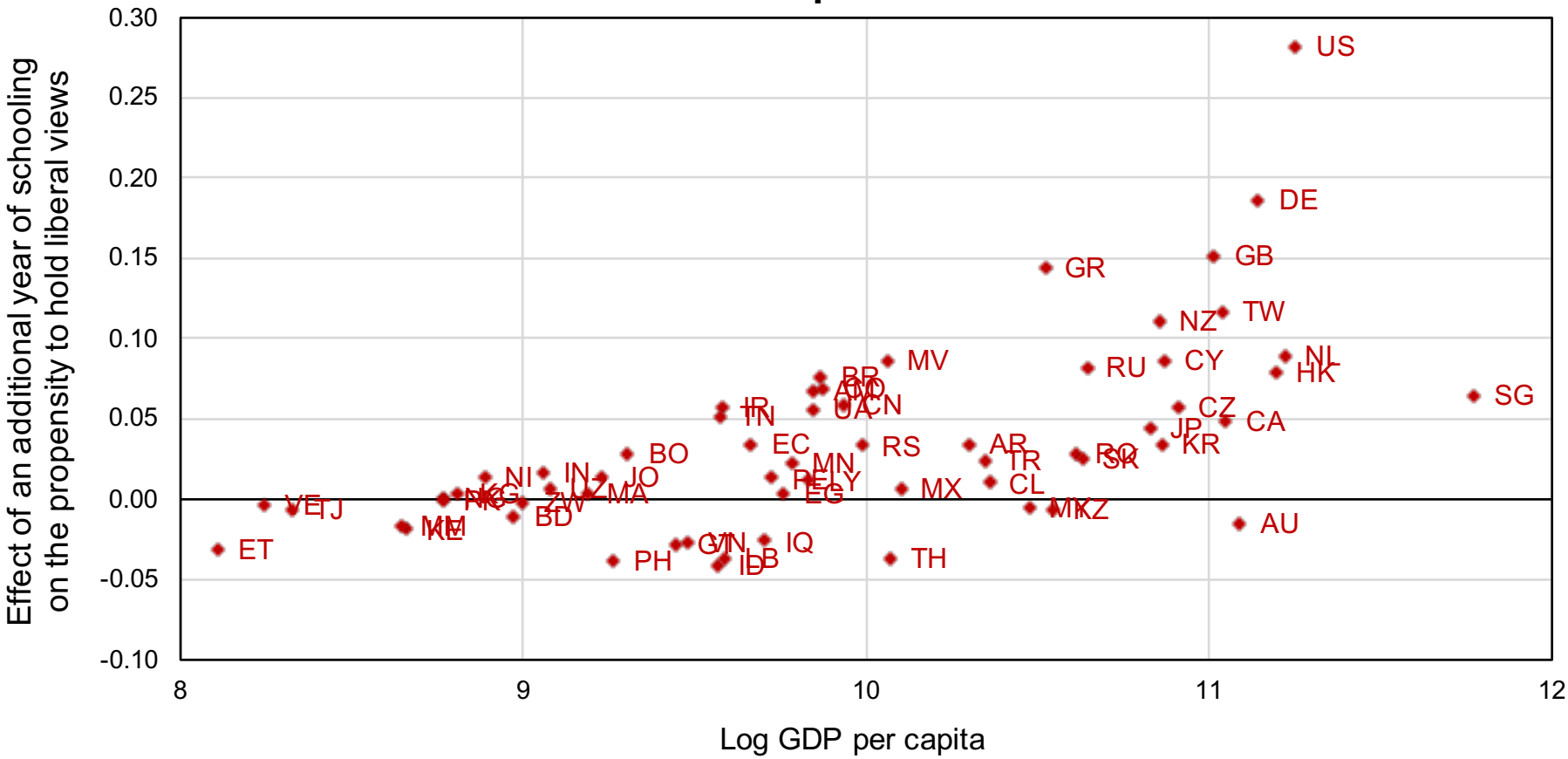
Source: authors' computations using the World Values Survey.
Note: the figure represents the relationship between the strength of educational divides over immigration and GDP per capita. The y-axis coefficients are based on a regression by country in which positions on immigration are regressed on years of schooling. The outcome variable is a scale ranging from 1 to 4, where 1 corresponds to "Prohibit people from coming here" and 4 to "Let anyone come who wants to". Estimates control for age, gender, employment status, and rural-urban location.

Figure C4 - Educational Divides over Homosexuality over the Course of Development



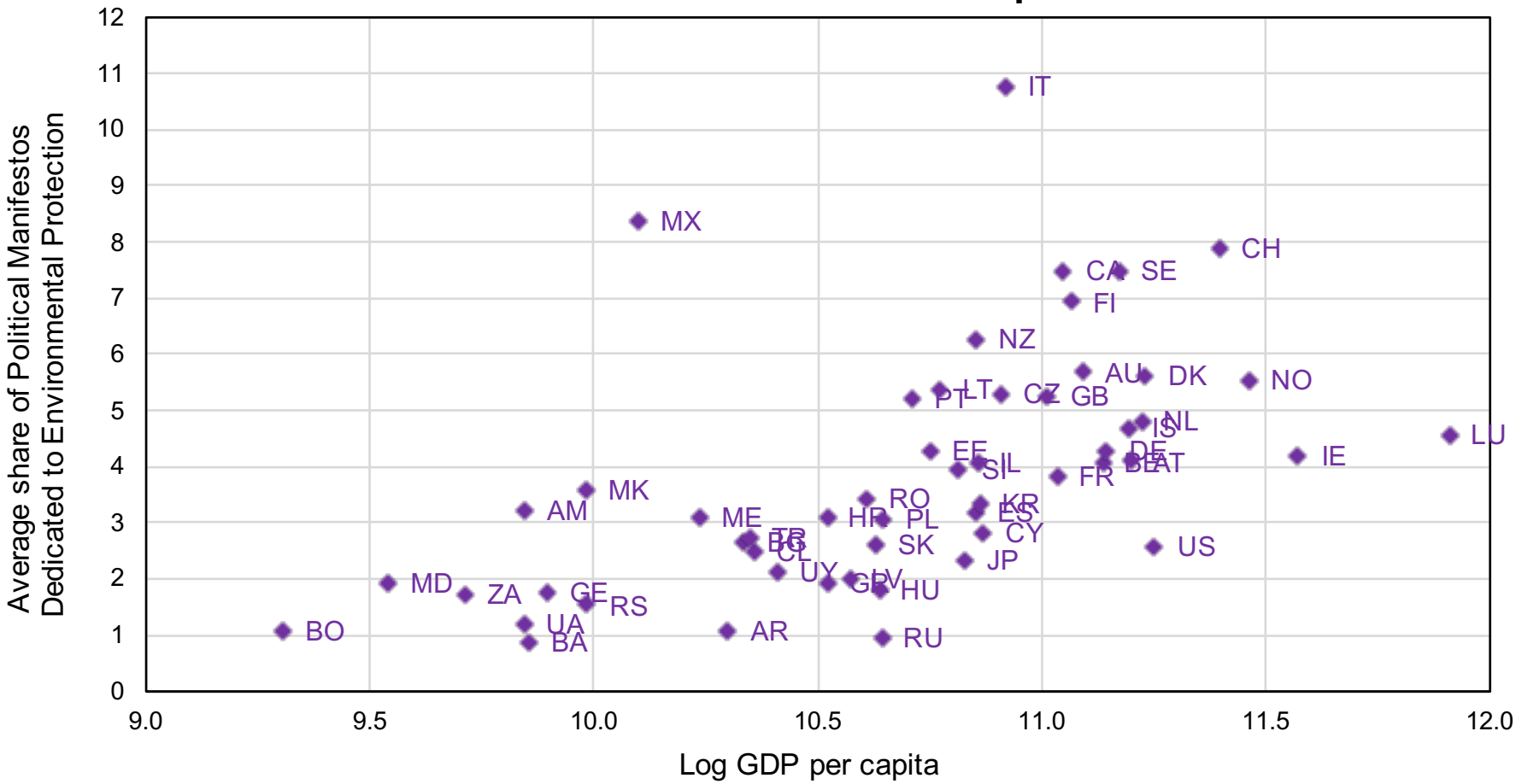
Source: authors' computations using the World Values Survey.
Note: the figure represents the relationship between the strength of educational divides over homosexuality and GDP per capita. The y-axis coefficients are based on a regression by country in which positions on homosexuality are regressed on years of schooling. The outcome variable is a scale ranging from 1 to 10, where 1 corresponding to homosexuality never being justifiable and 10 to it being always justifiable. Estimates control for age, gender, employment status, and rural-urban location.

Figure C5 - Educational Divides over Abortion over the Course of Development



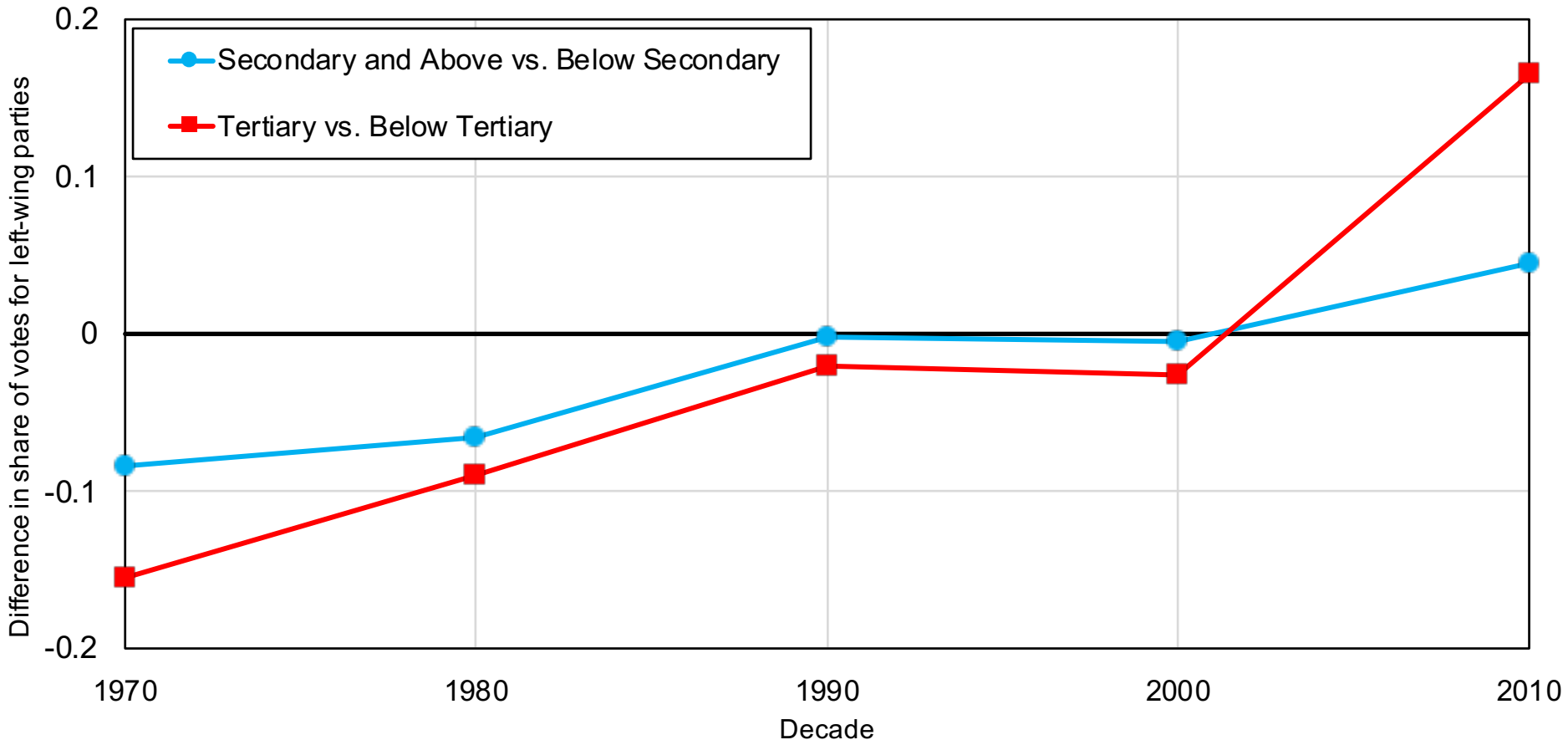
Source: authors' computations using the World Values Survey.
Note: the figure represents the relationship between the strength of educational divides over abortion and GDP per capita. The y-axis coefficients are based on a regression by country in which positions on abortion are regressed on years of schooling. The outcome variable is a scale ranging from 1 to 10, where 1 corresponding to abortion never being justifiable and 10 to it being always justifiable. Estimates control for age, gender, employment status, and rural-urban location.

Figure C6 - The Salience of Environmental Issues in Political Programs Over the Course of Development



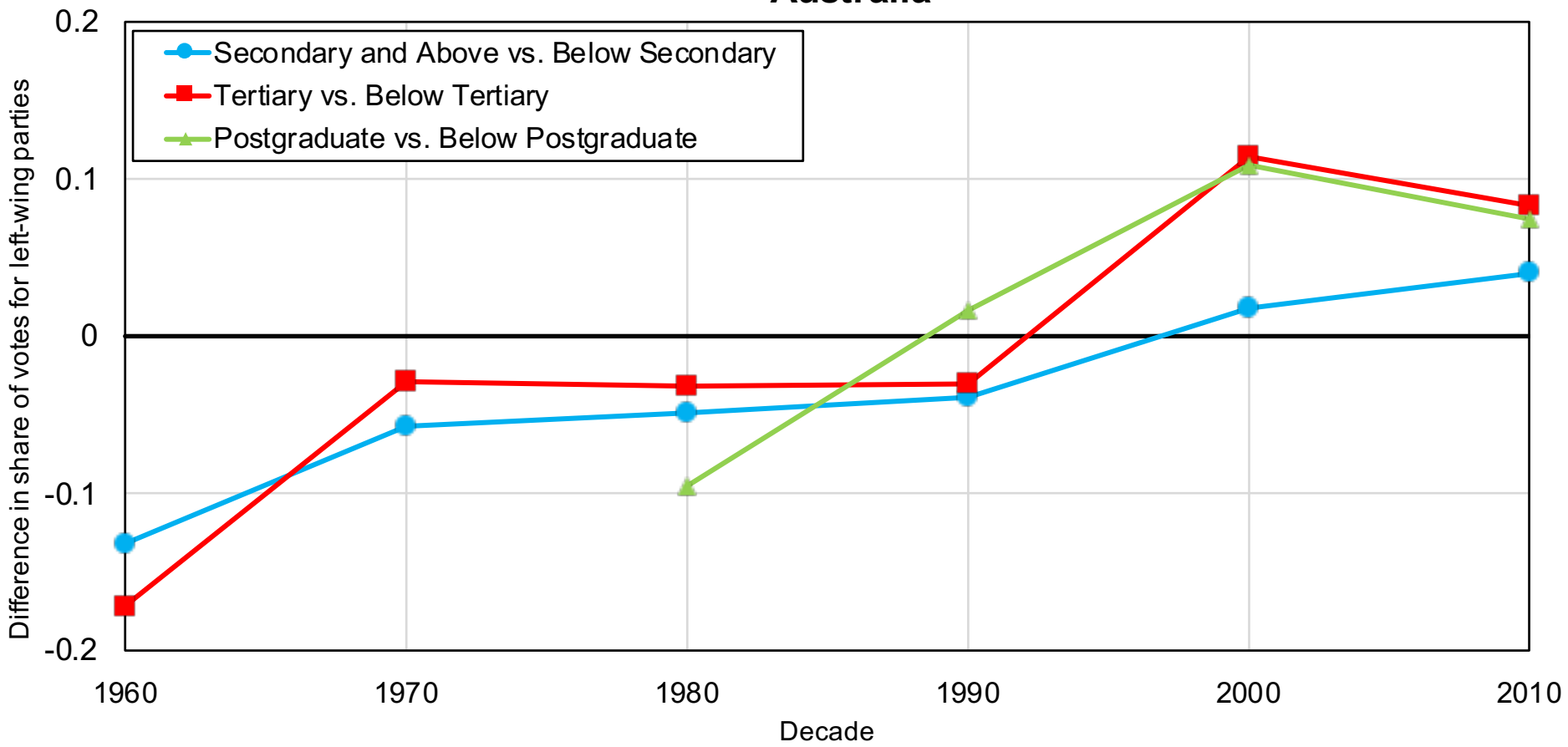
Source: authors' computations using the Comparative Manifesto Project.
Note: the figure represents the relationship between the salience of environmental issues in political programs, defined as the vote-share-weighted average share of political manifestos dedicated to topics related to environmental protection, and GDP per capita. Average estimated over all elections held during 2010-2022 in each country.

Figure D1 - Educational divides
Austria



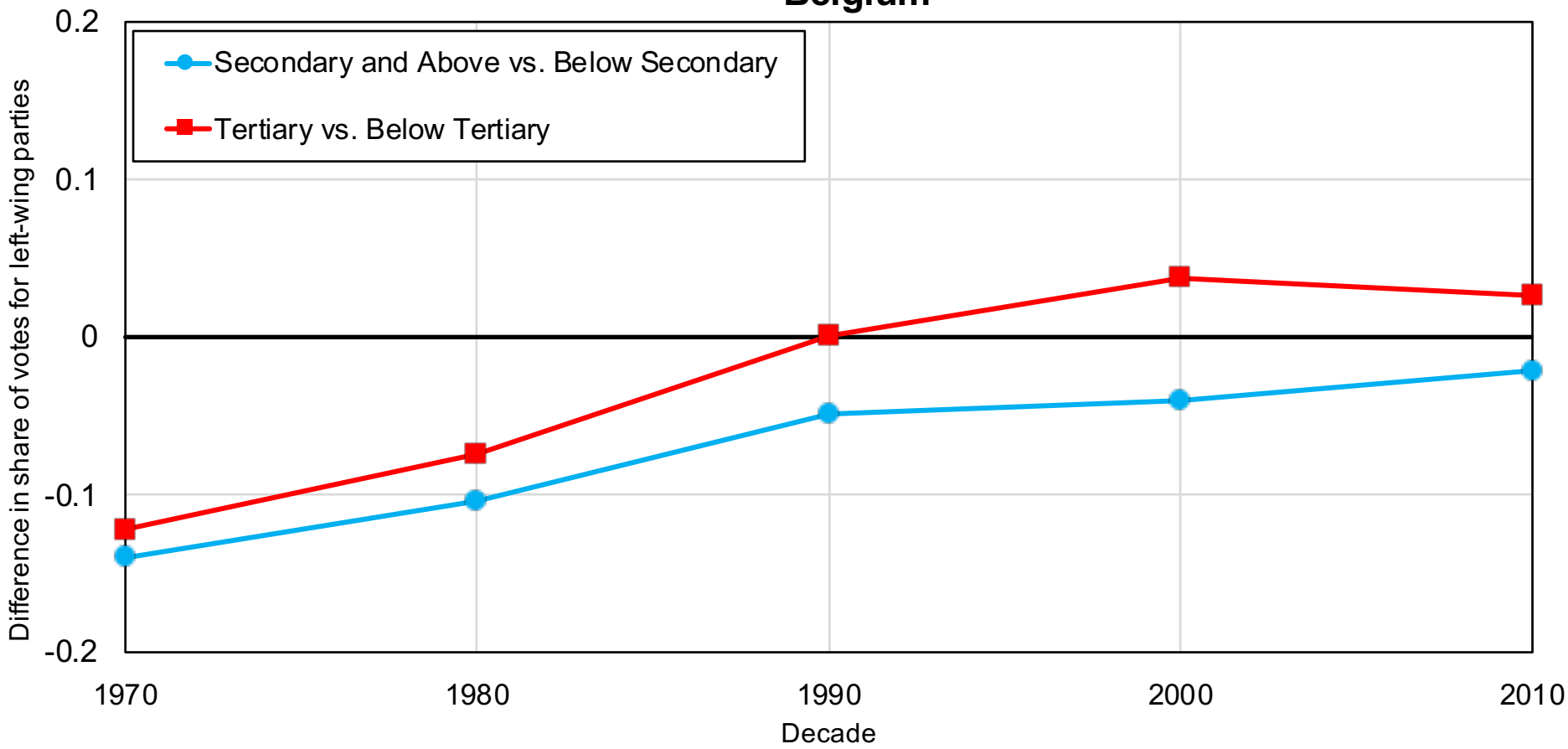
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education and voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D2 - Educational divides
Australia



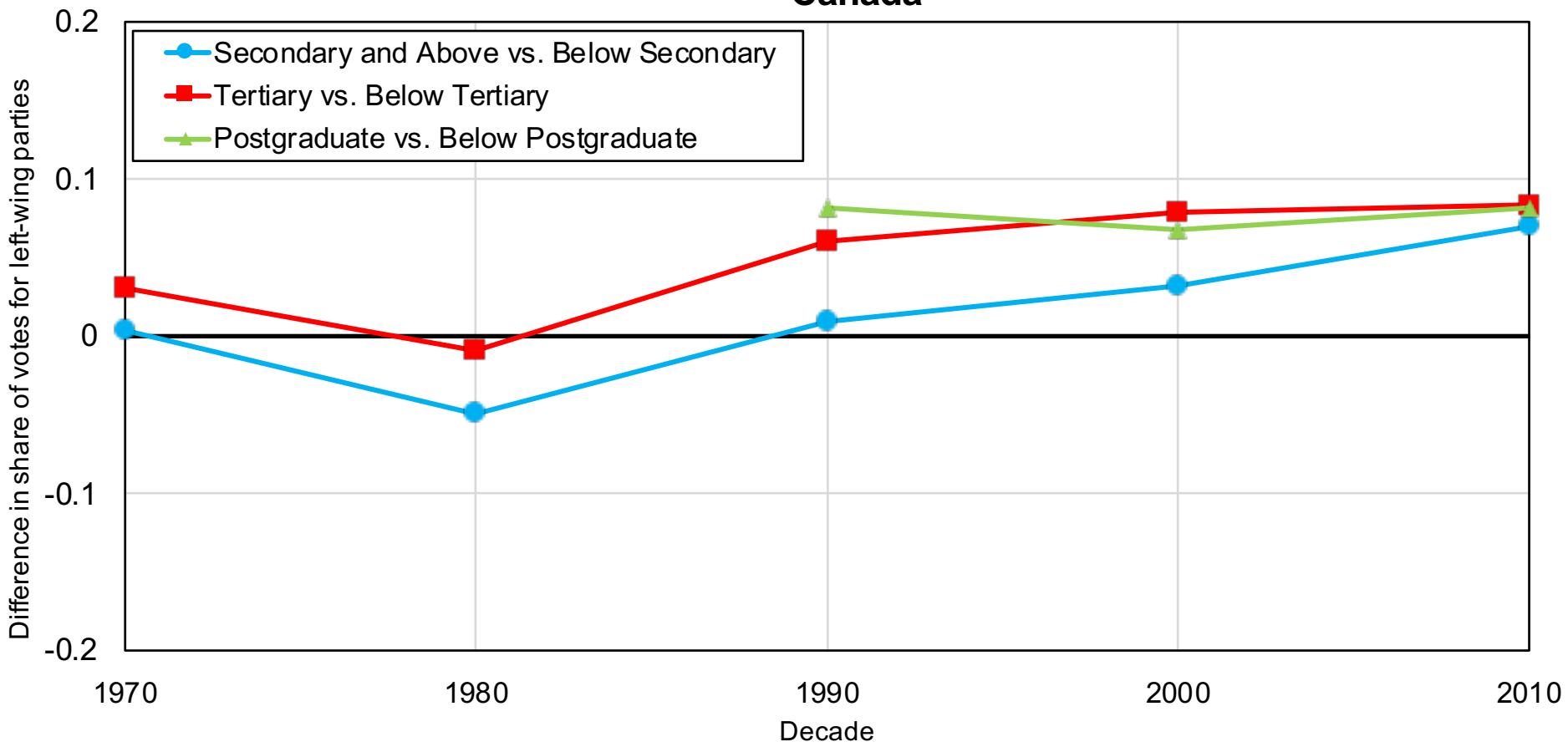
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education, voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education, and voters with a postgraduate education vs. voters without. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D3 - Educational divides
Belgium



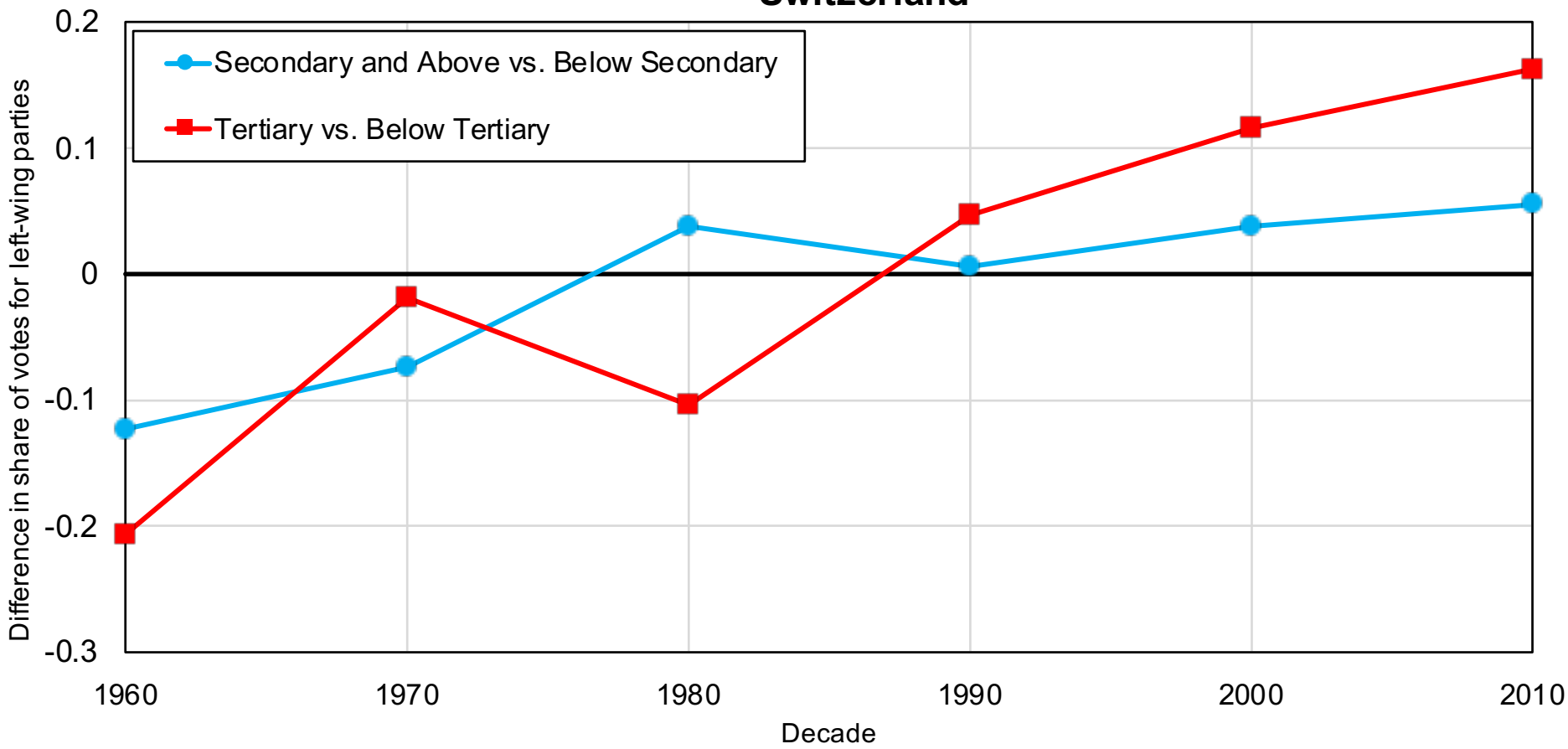
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education and voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D4 - Educational divides
Canada



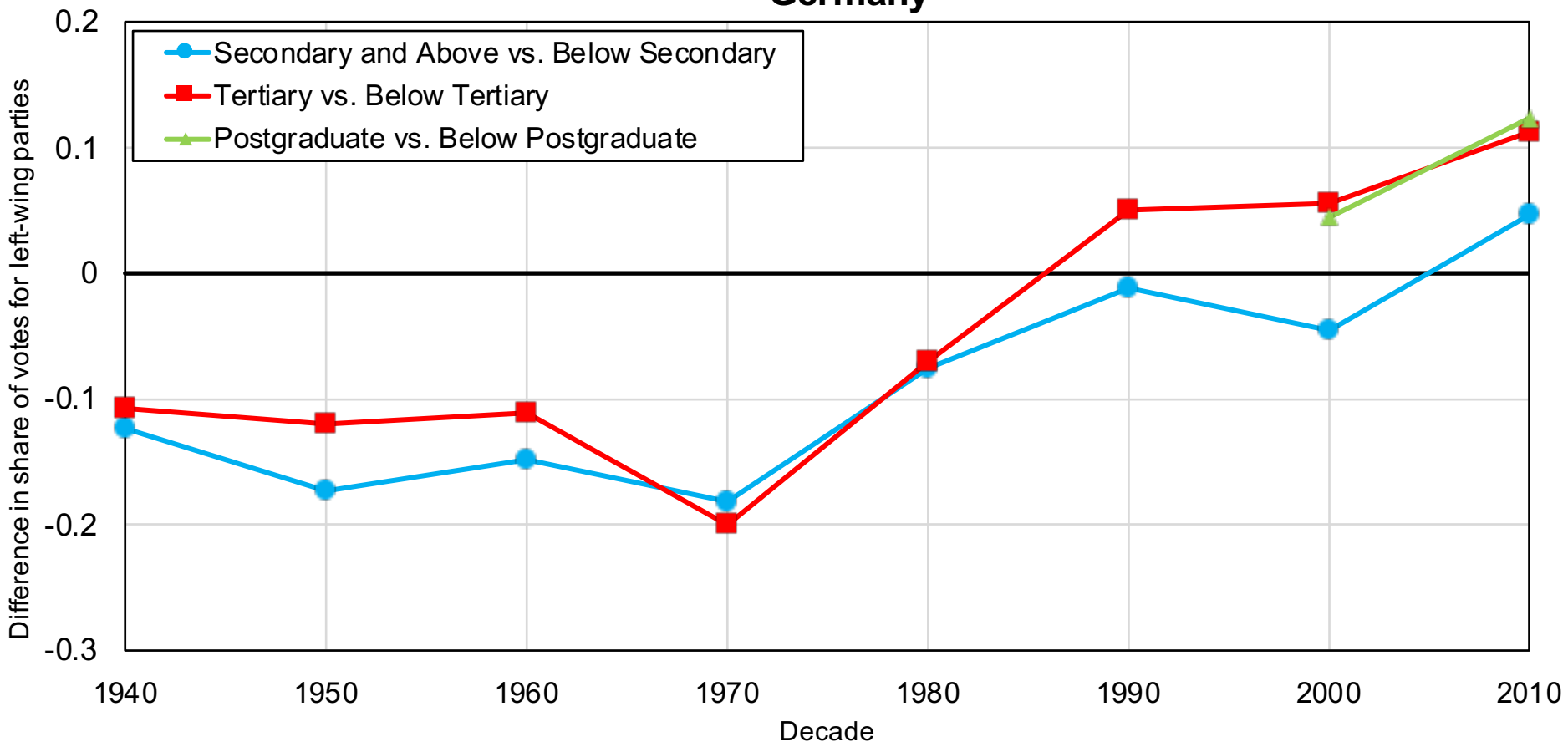
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education, voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education, and voters with a postgraduate education vs. voters without. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D5 - Educational divides
Switzerland



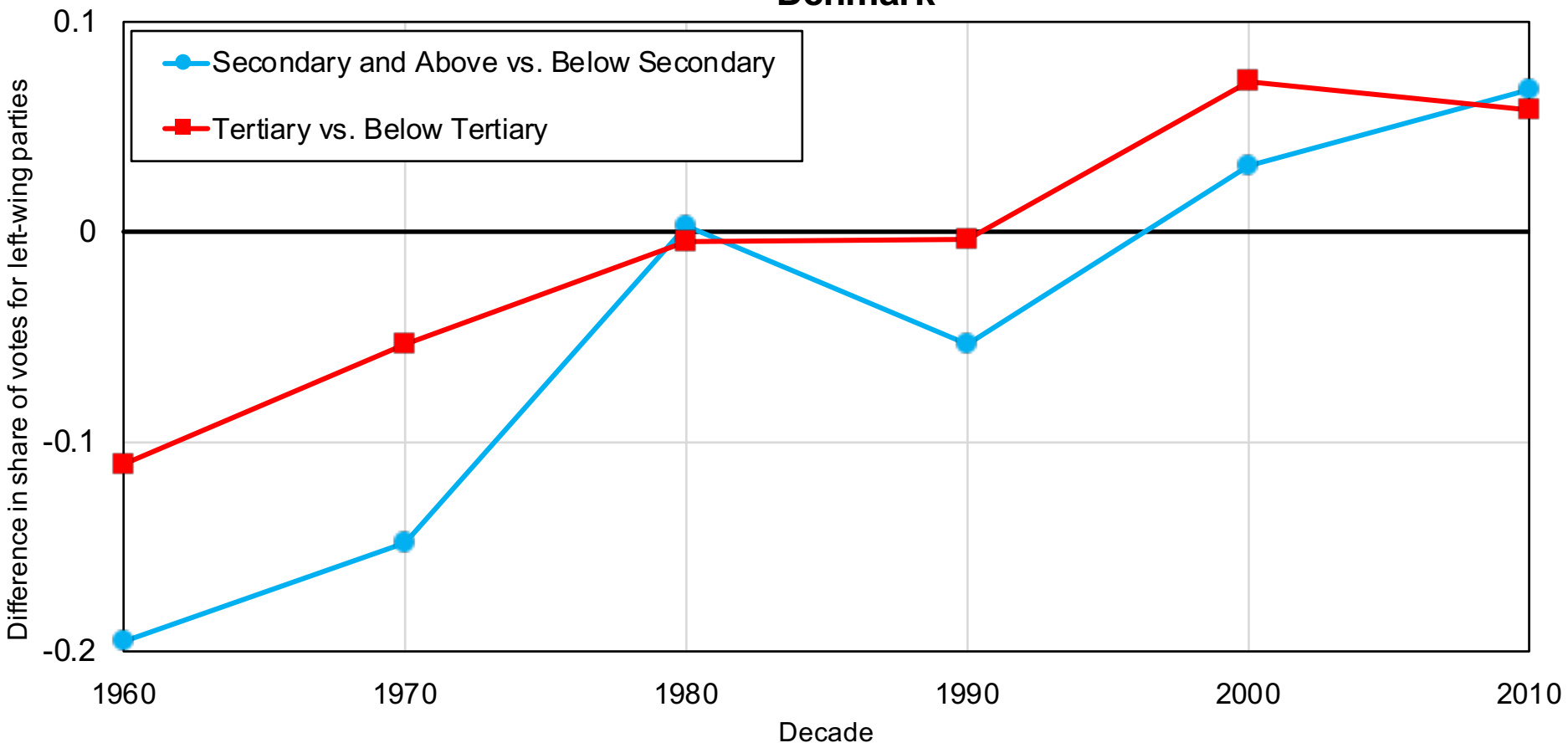
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education and voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D6 - Educational divides
Germany



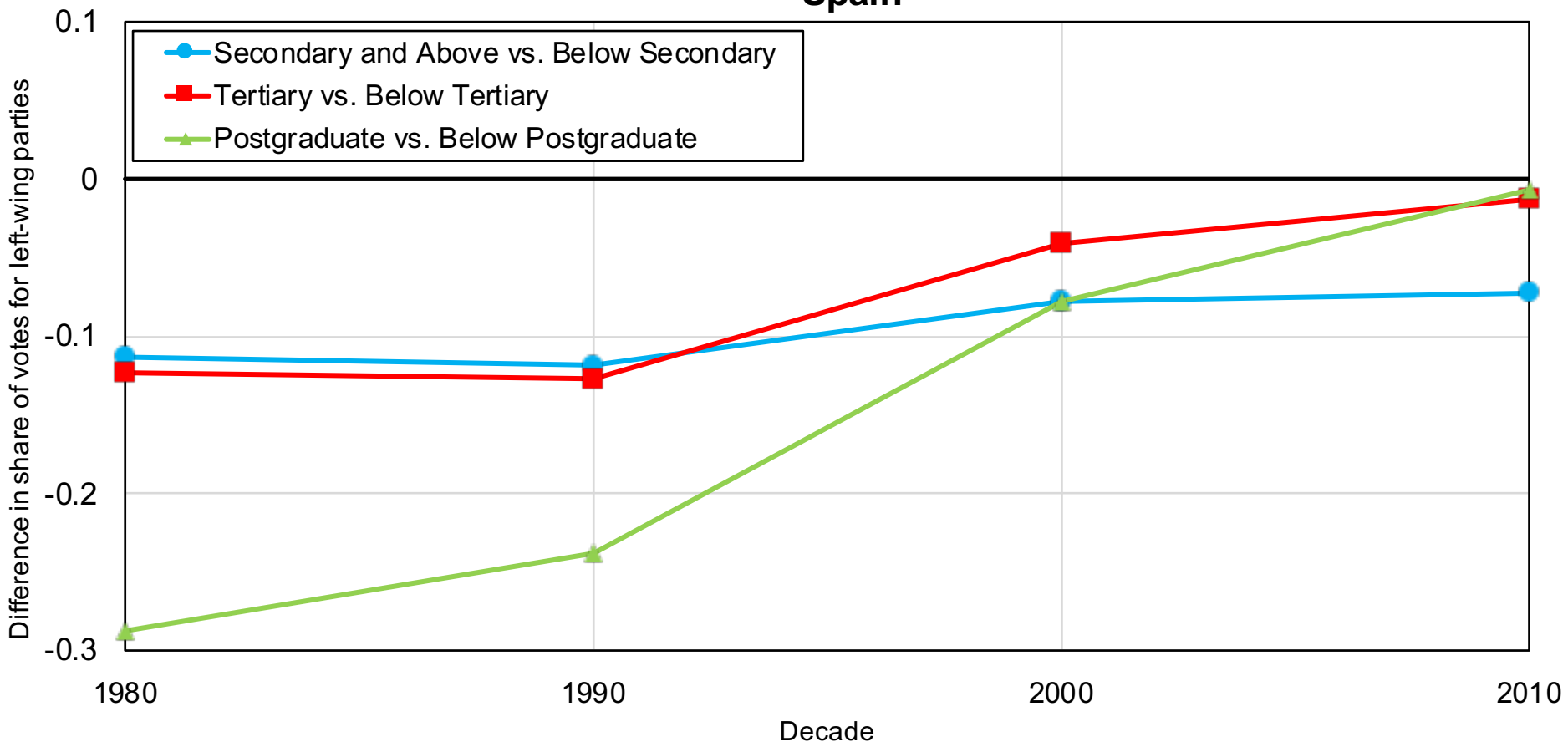
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education, voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education, and voters with a postgraduate education vs. voters without. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D7 - Educational divides
Denmark



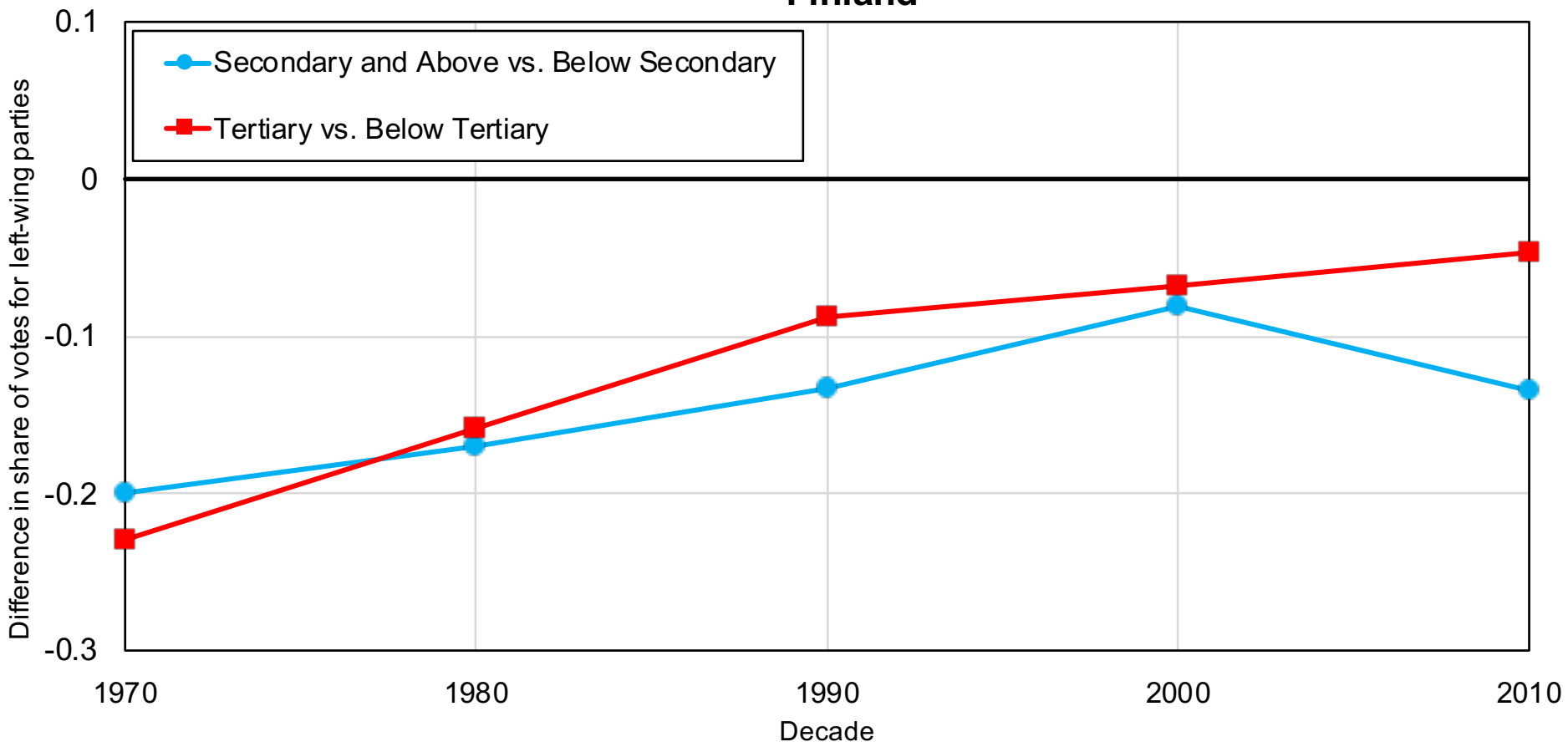
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education and voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D8 - Educational divides
Spain



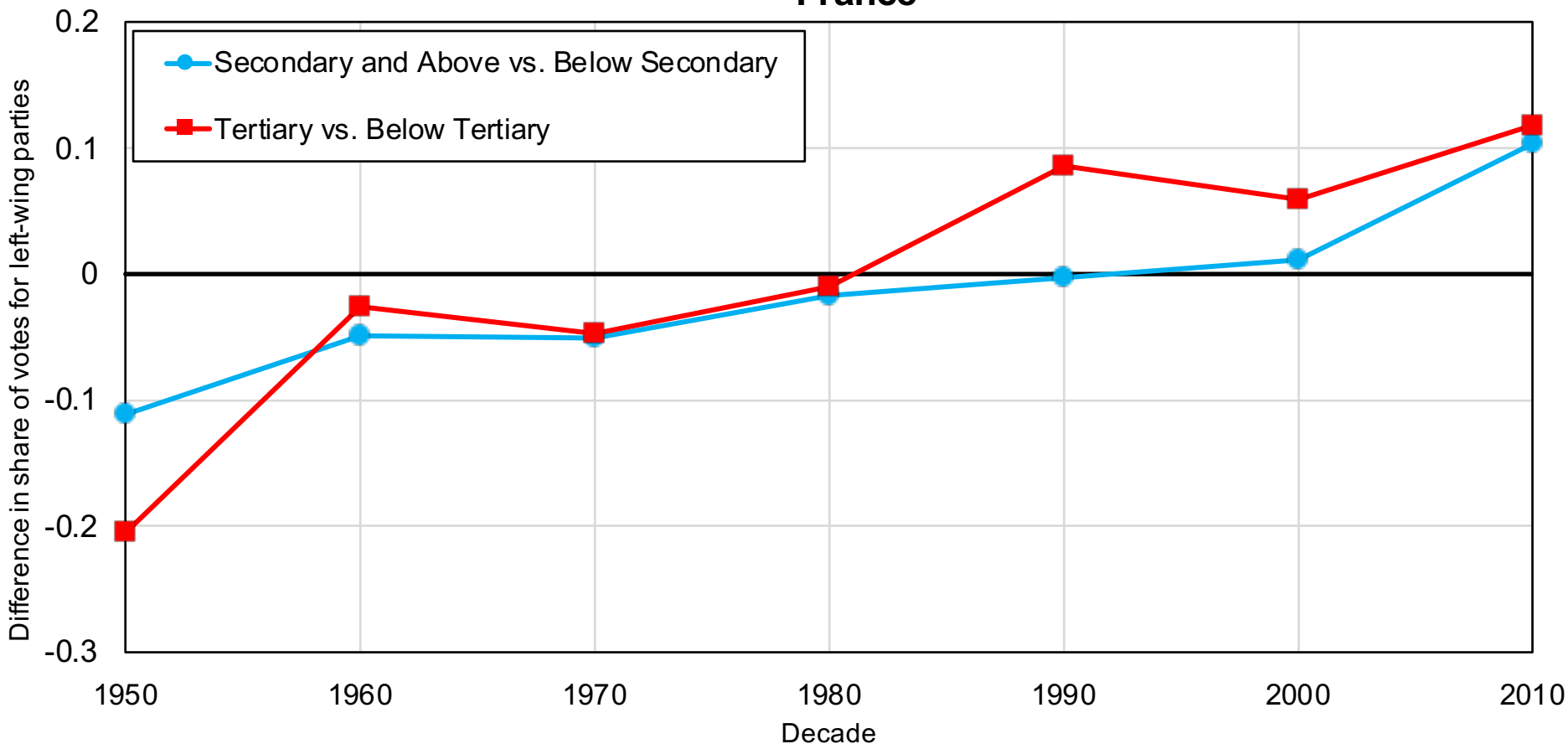
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education, voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education, and voters with a postgraduate education vs. voters without. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D9 - Educational divides
Finland



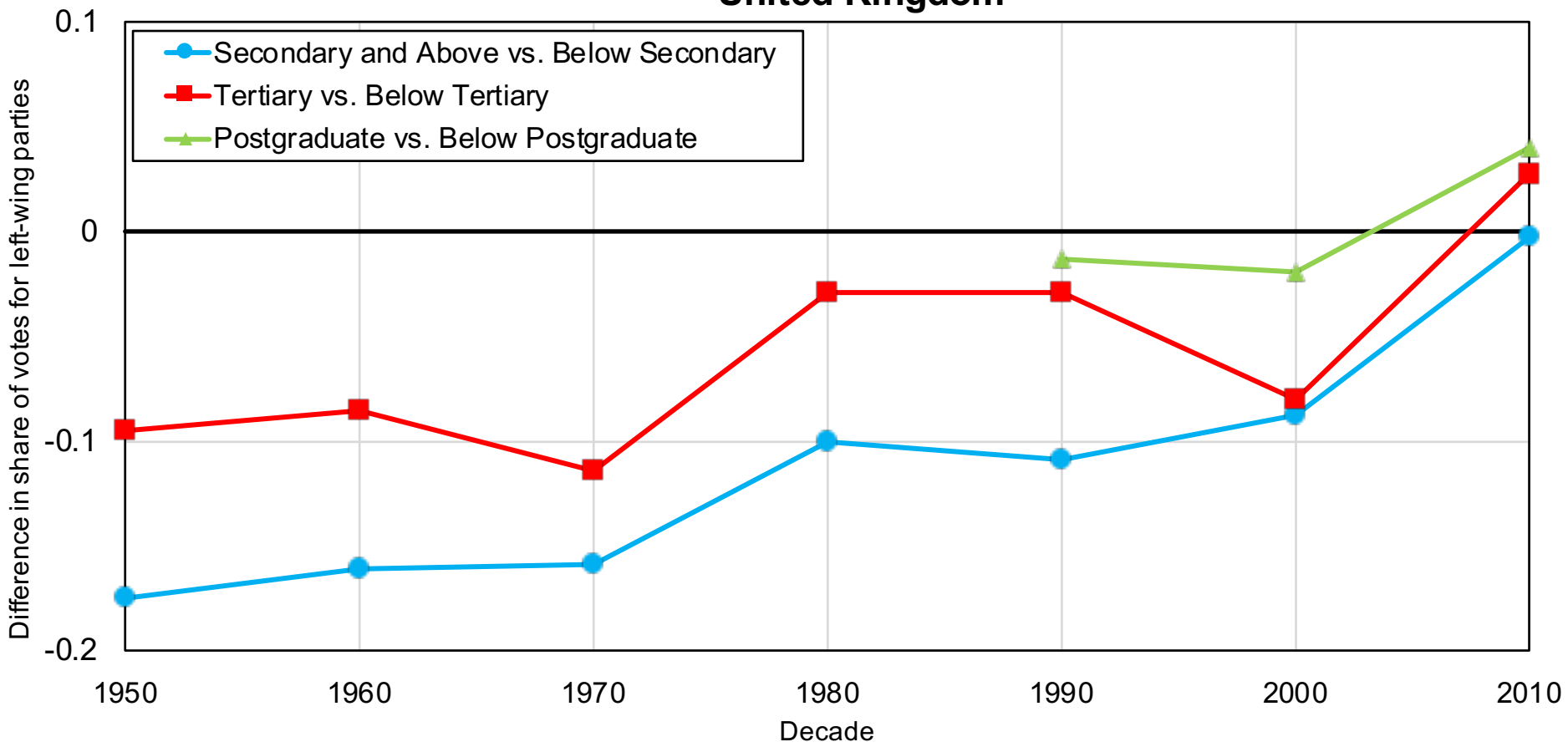
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education and voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D10 - Educational divides
France



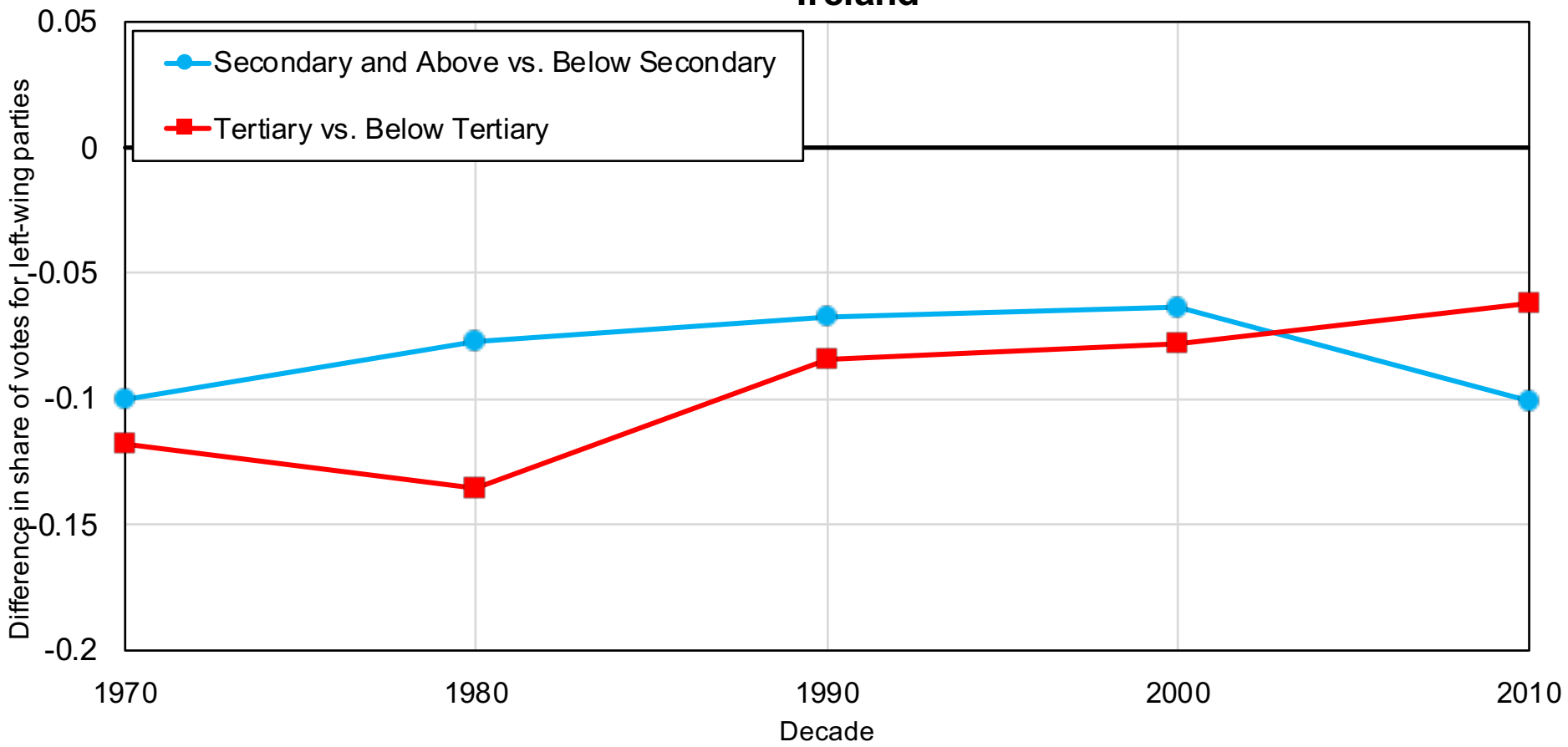
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education and voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D11 - Educational divides
United Kingdom



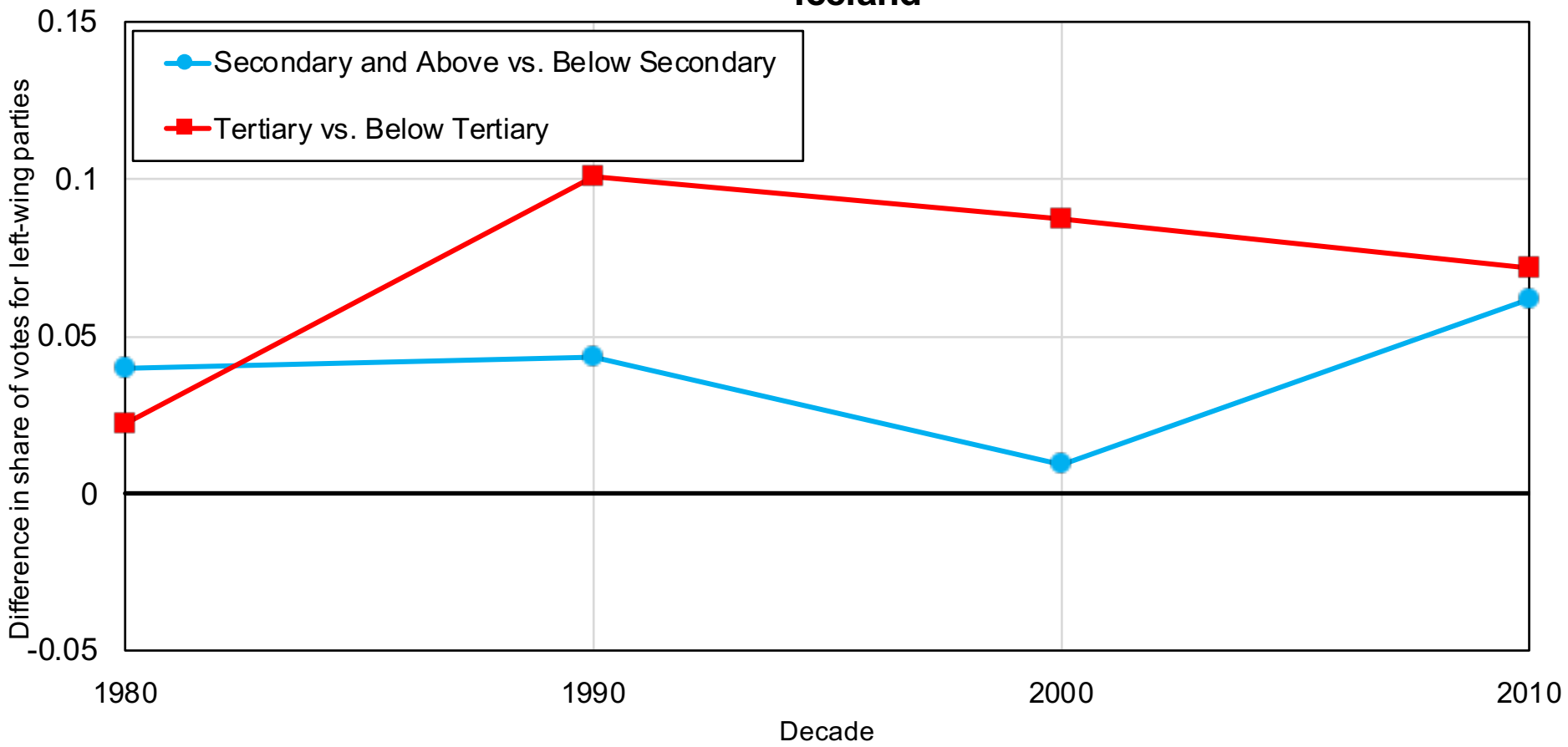
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education, voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education, and voters with a postgraduate education vs. voters without. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D12 - Educational divides
Ireland



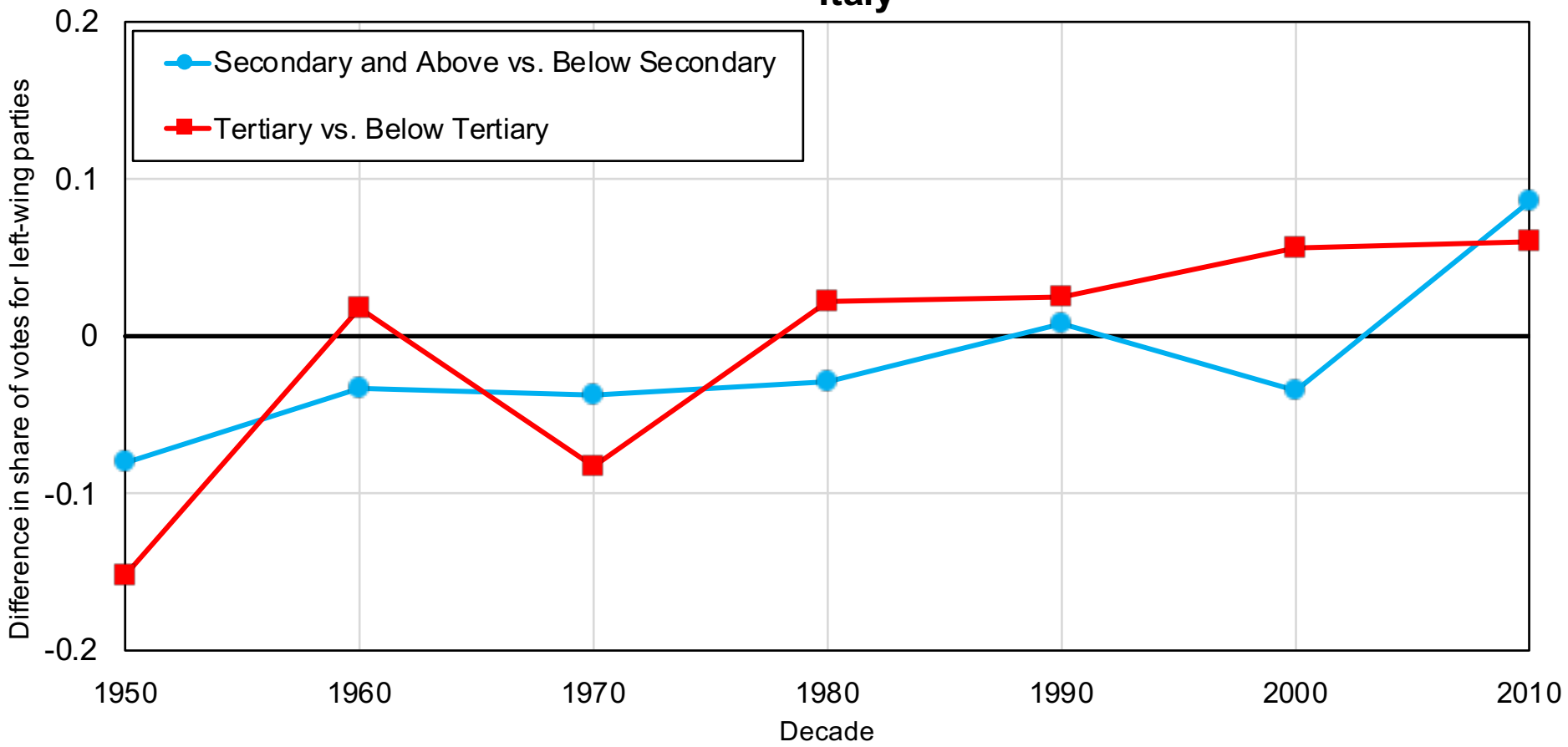
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education and voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D13 - Educational divides
Iceland



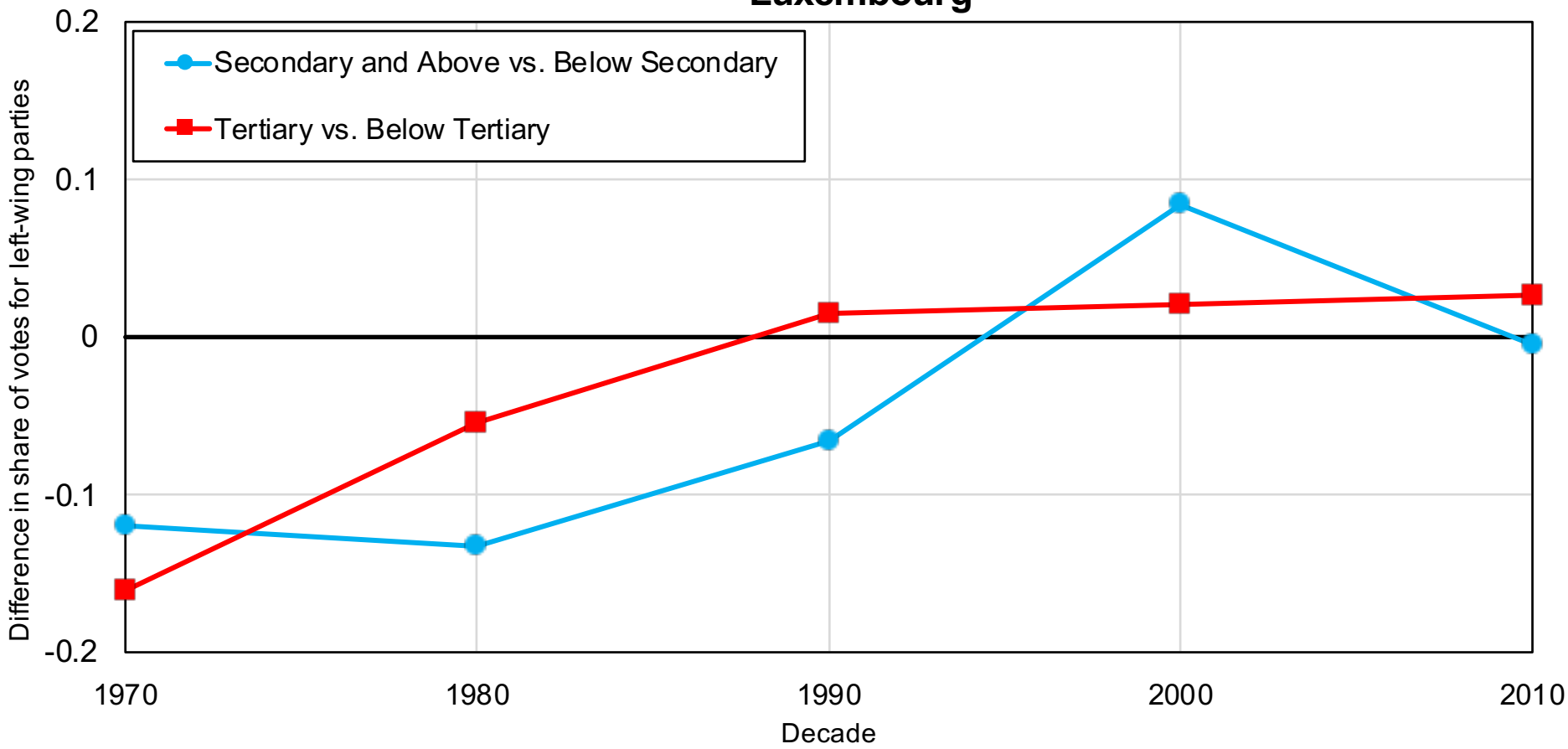
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education and voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D14 - Educational divides
Italy



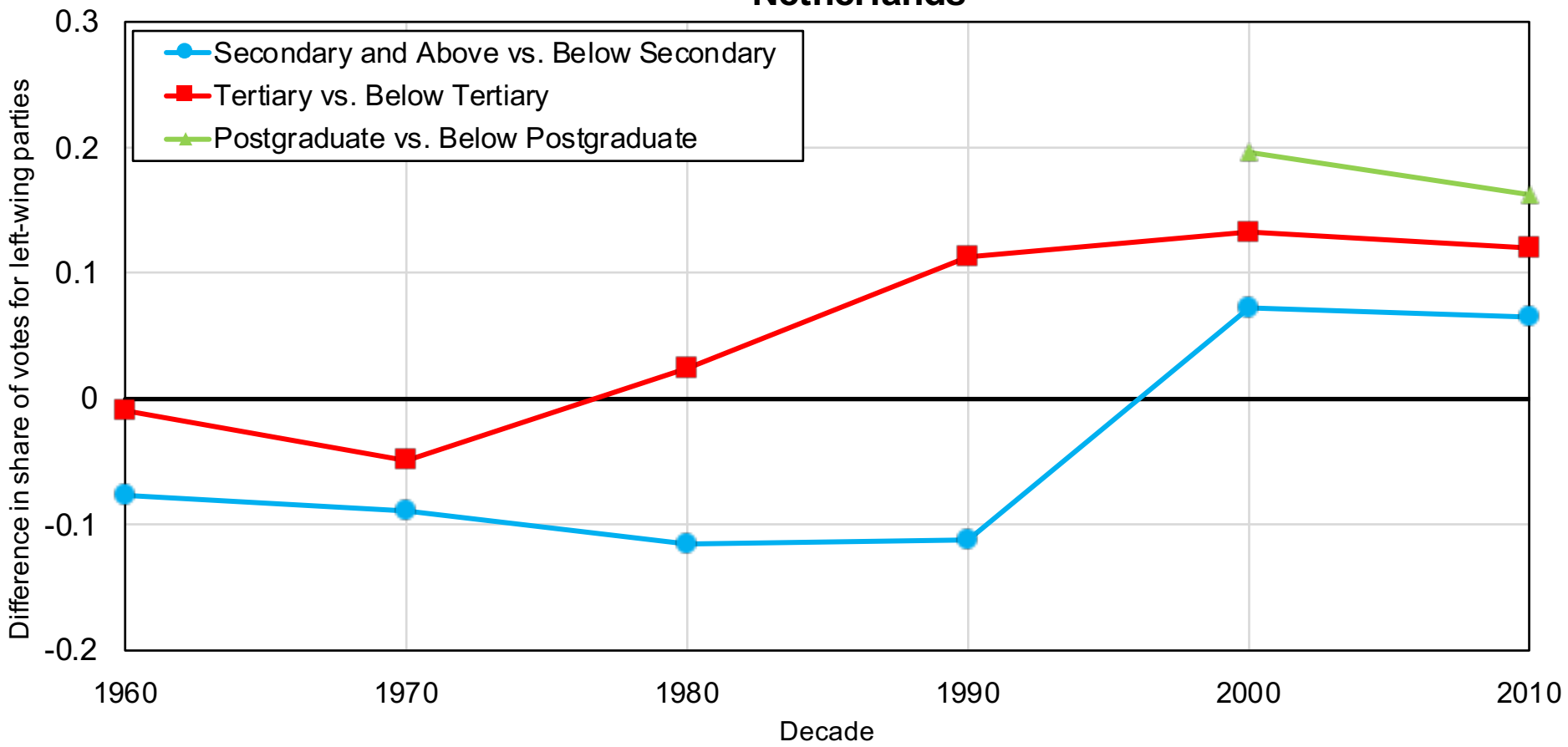
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education and voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D15 - Educational divides
Luxembourg



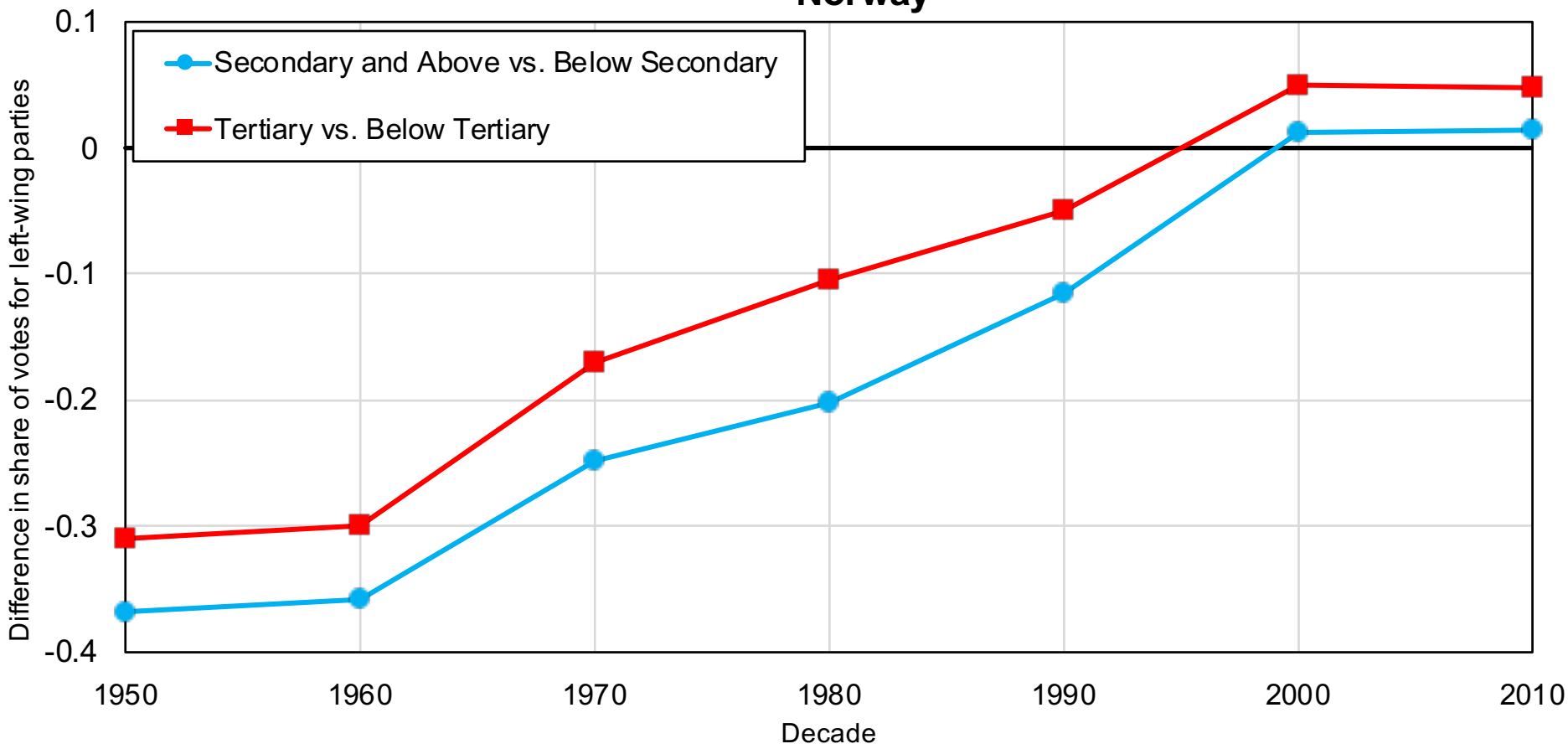
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education and voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D16 - Educational divides
Netherlands



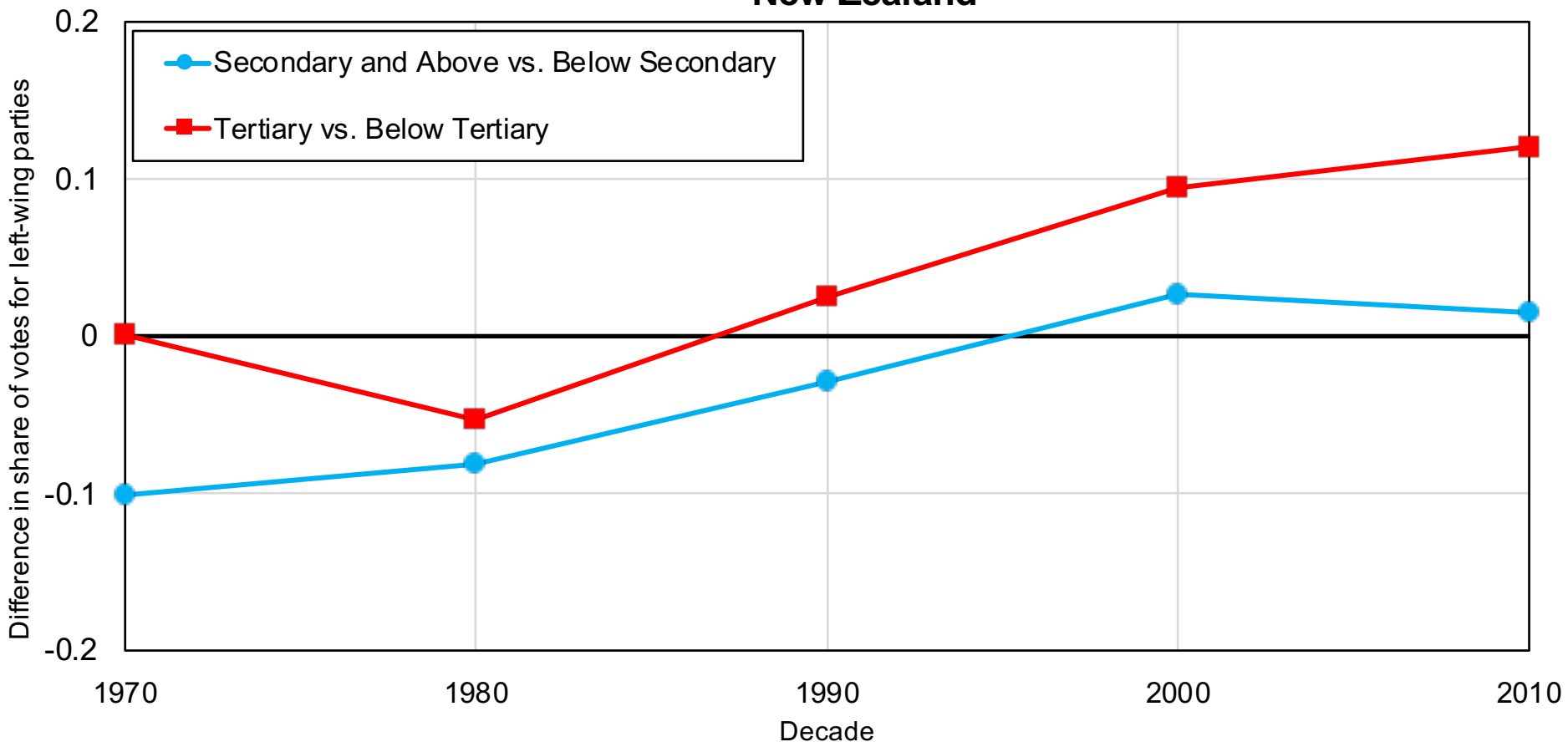
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education, voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education, and voters with a postgraduate education vs. voters without. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D17 - Educational divides
Norway



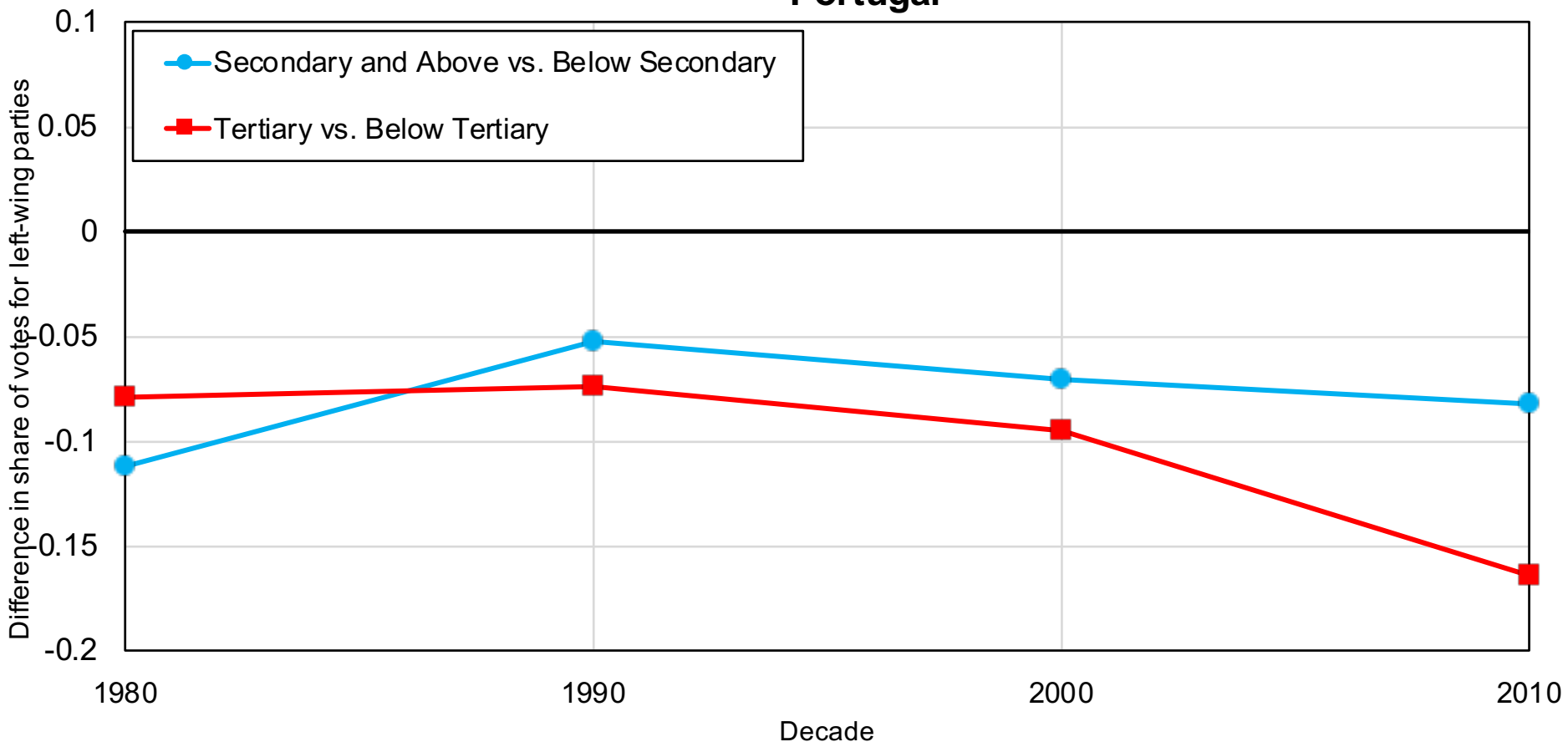
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education and voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D18 - Educational divides
New Zealand



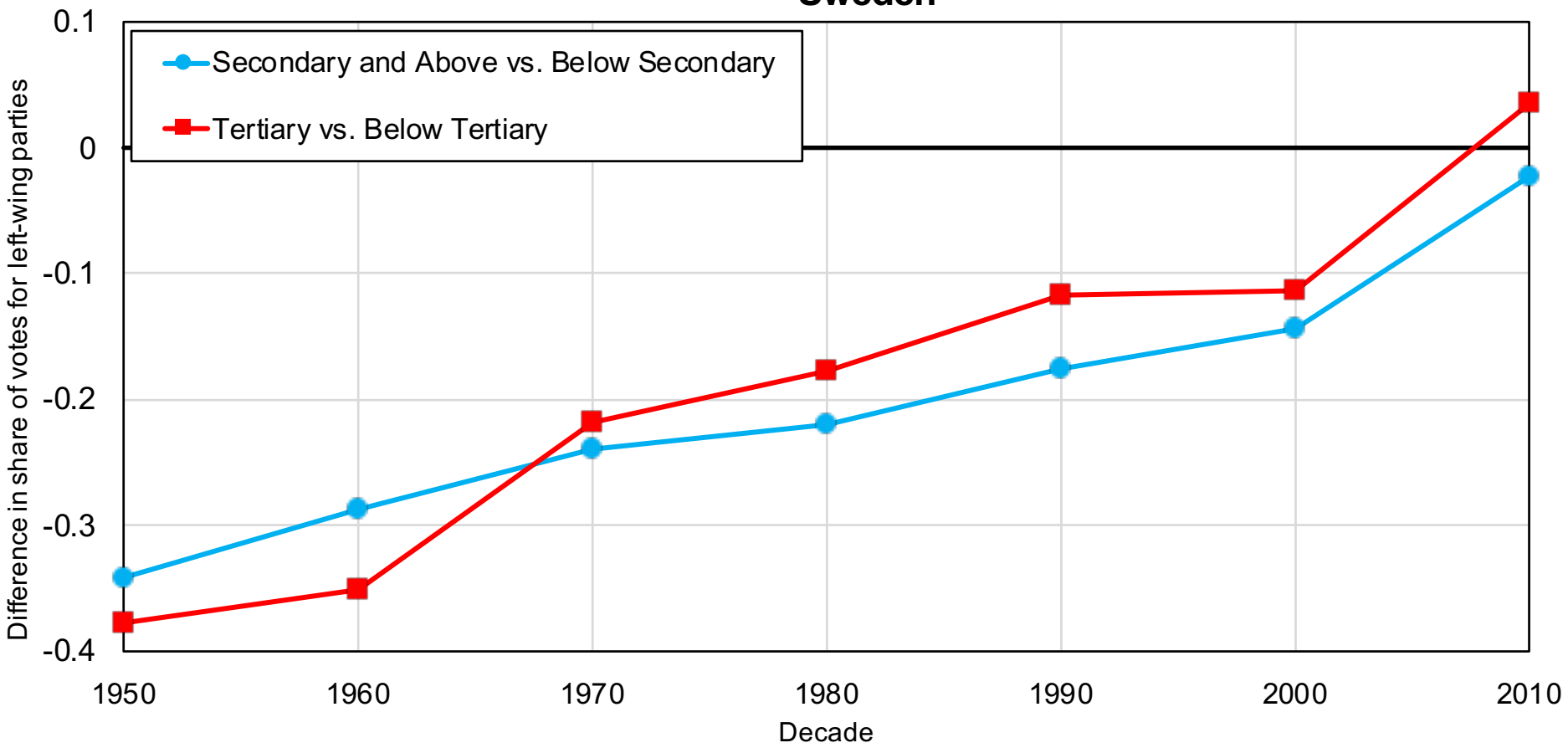
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education and voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D19 - Educational divides
Portugal



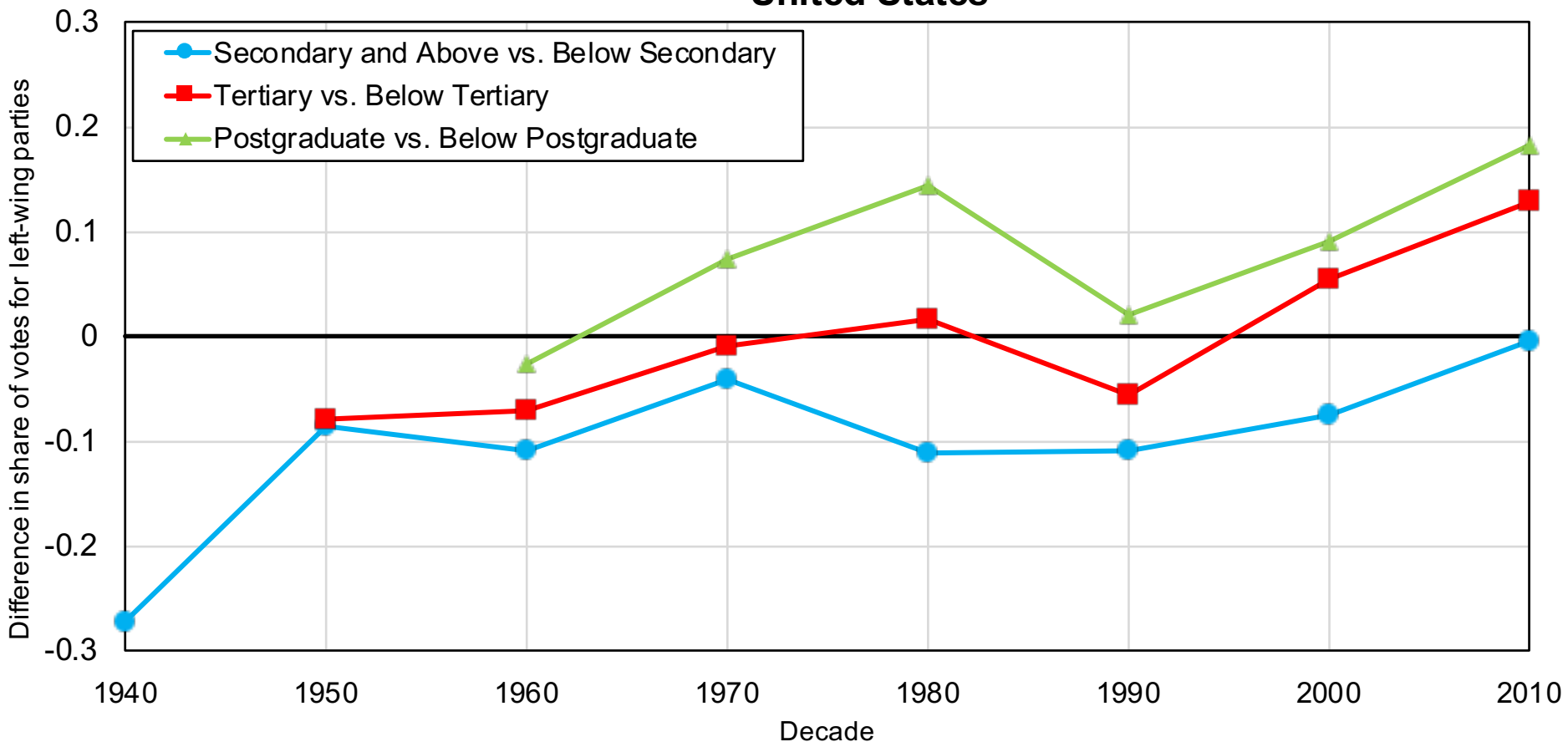
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education and voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D20 - Educational divides
Sweden



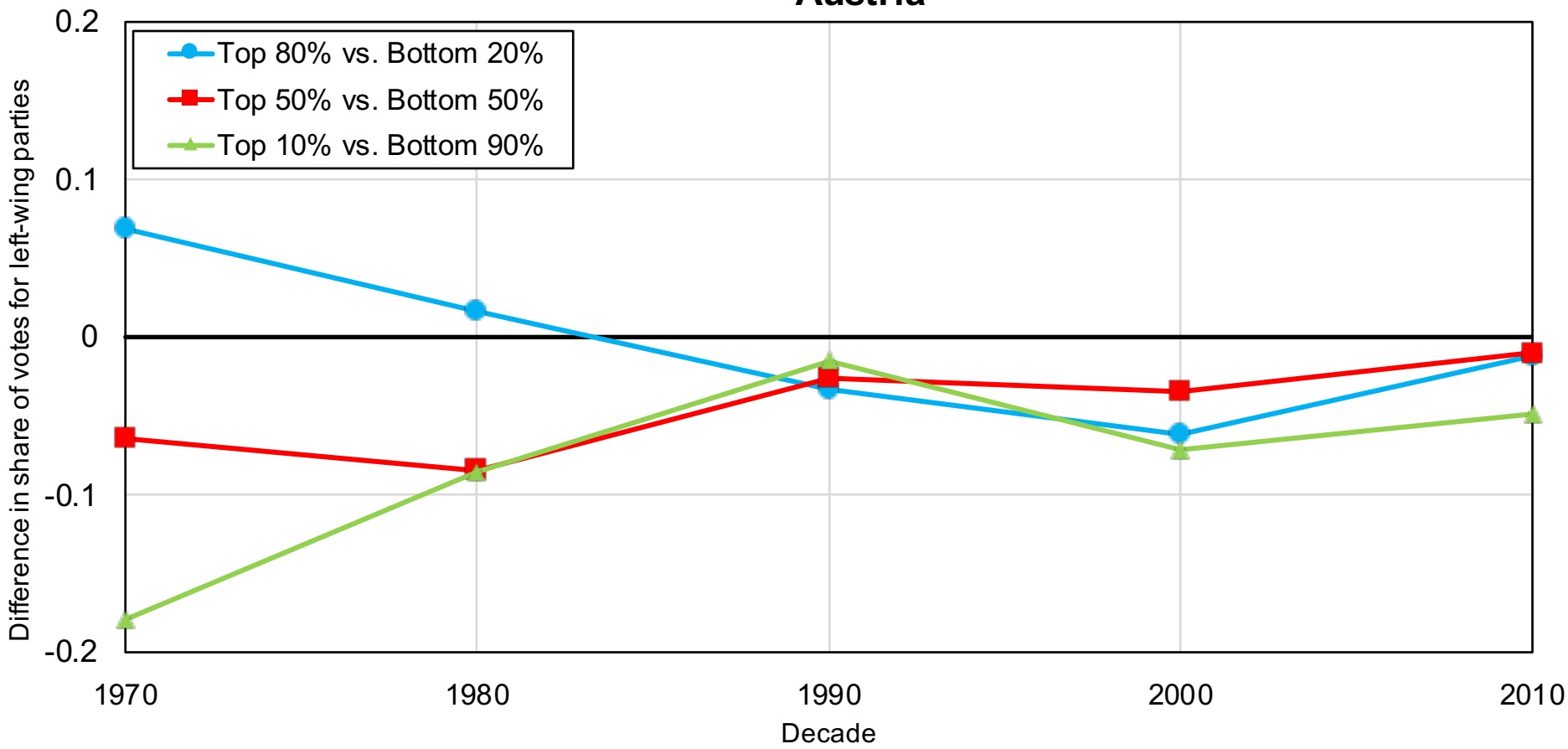
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education and voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D21 - Educational divides
United States



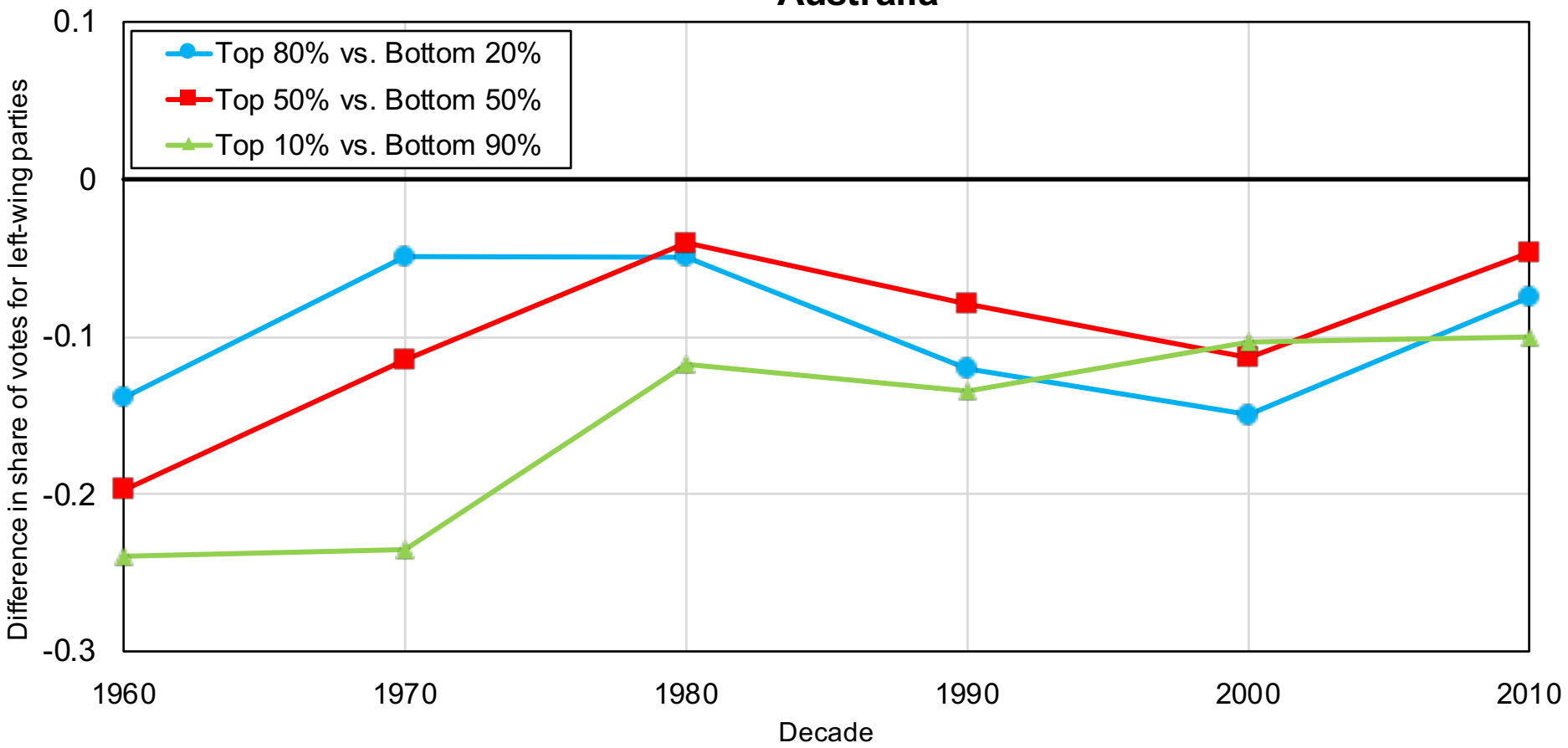
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different educational groups over time. The indicators divide voters with a secondary education or above vs. below secondary education, voters with a tertiary education or above vs. below tertiary education, and voters with a postgraduate education vs. voters without. Estimates control for income, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D22 - Income divides
Austria



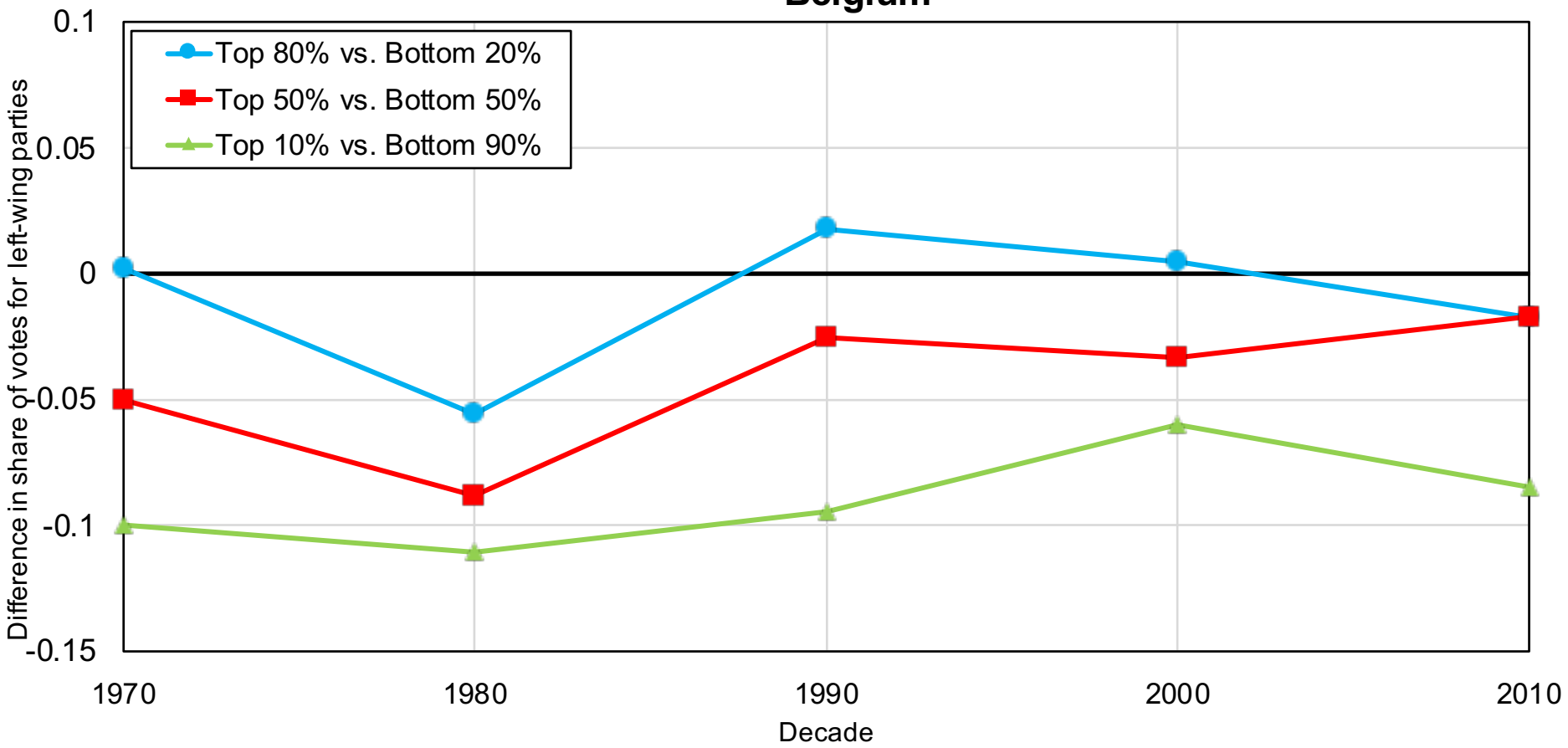
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D23 - Income divides
Australia



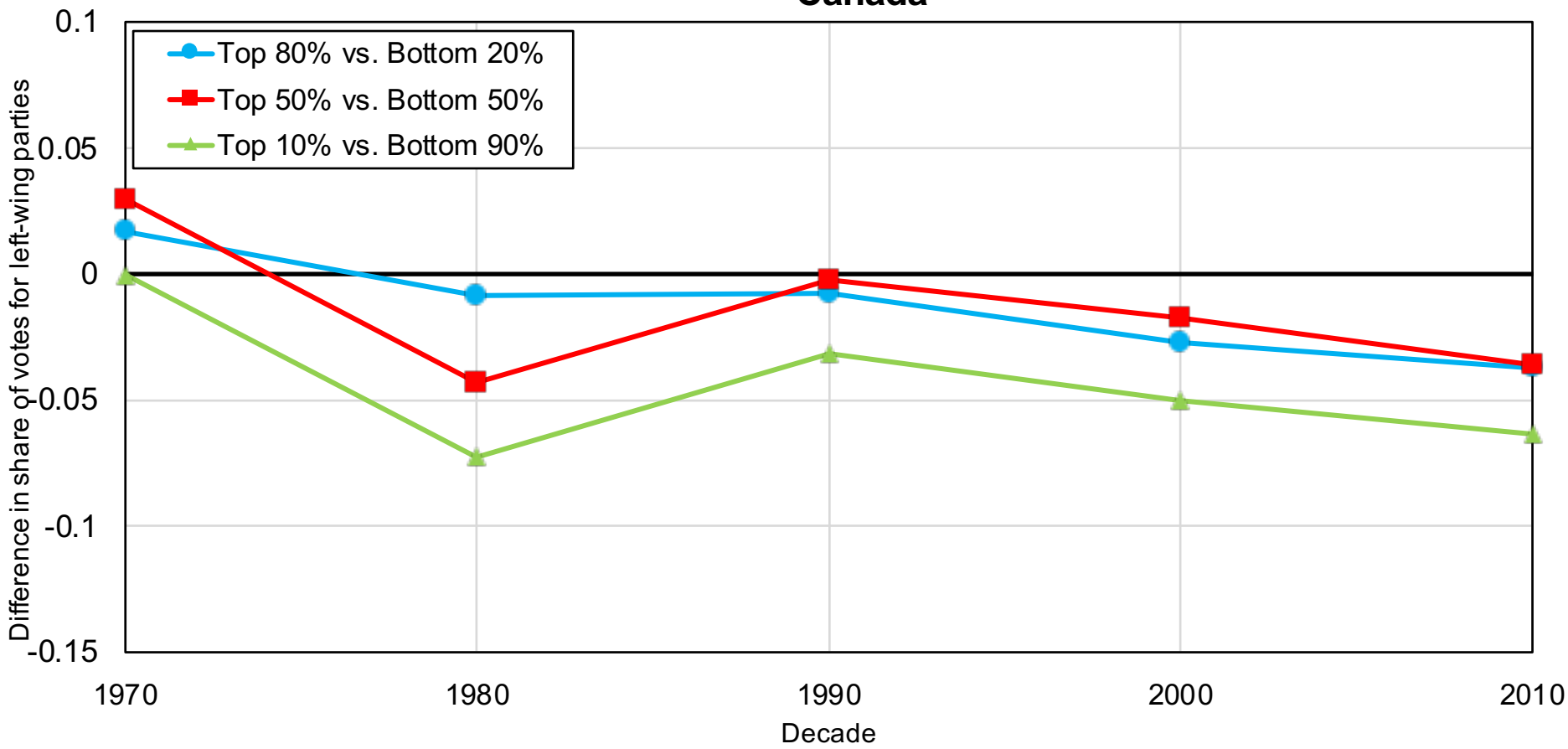
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D24 - Income divides
Belgium



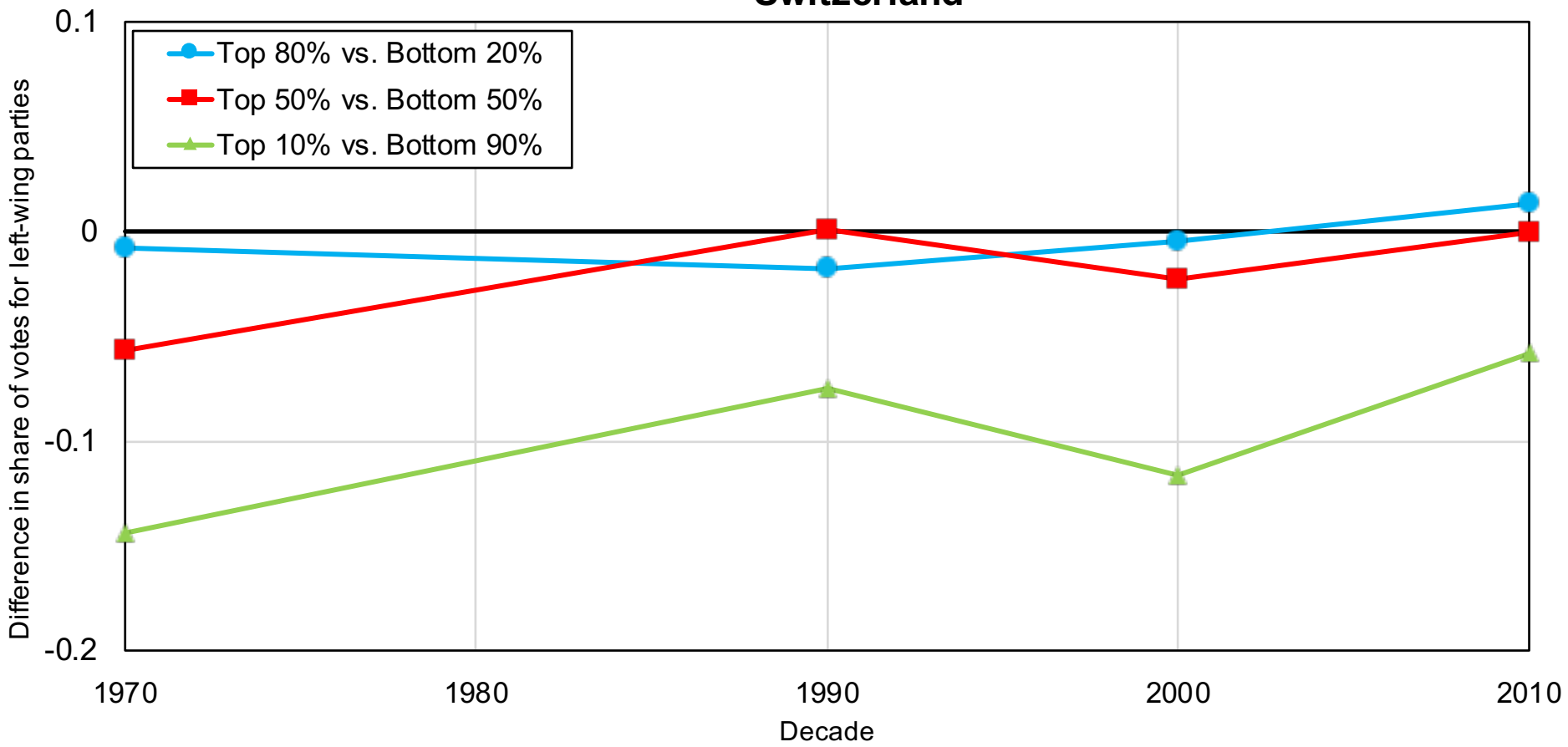
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D25 - Income divides
Canada



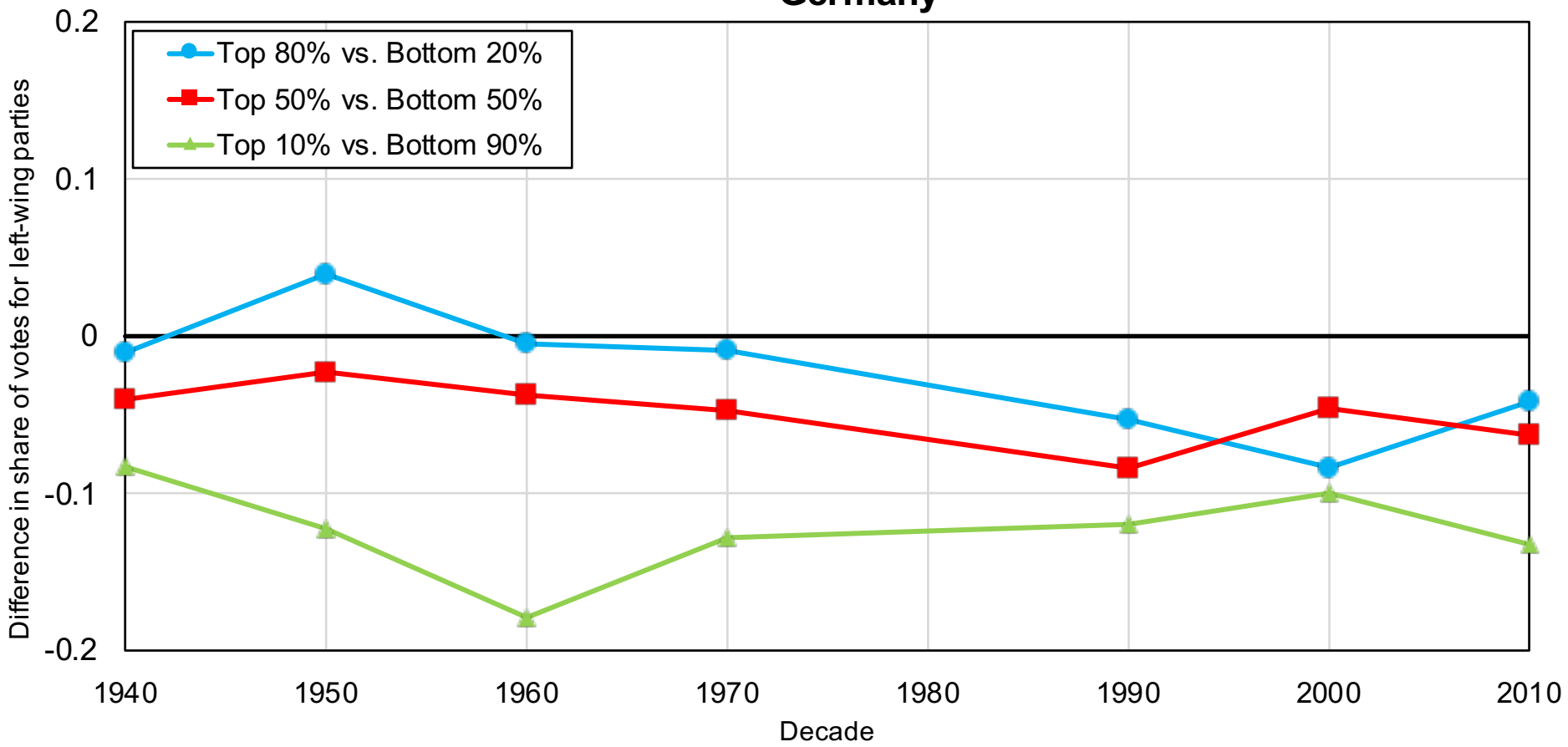
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D26 - Income divides
Switzerland



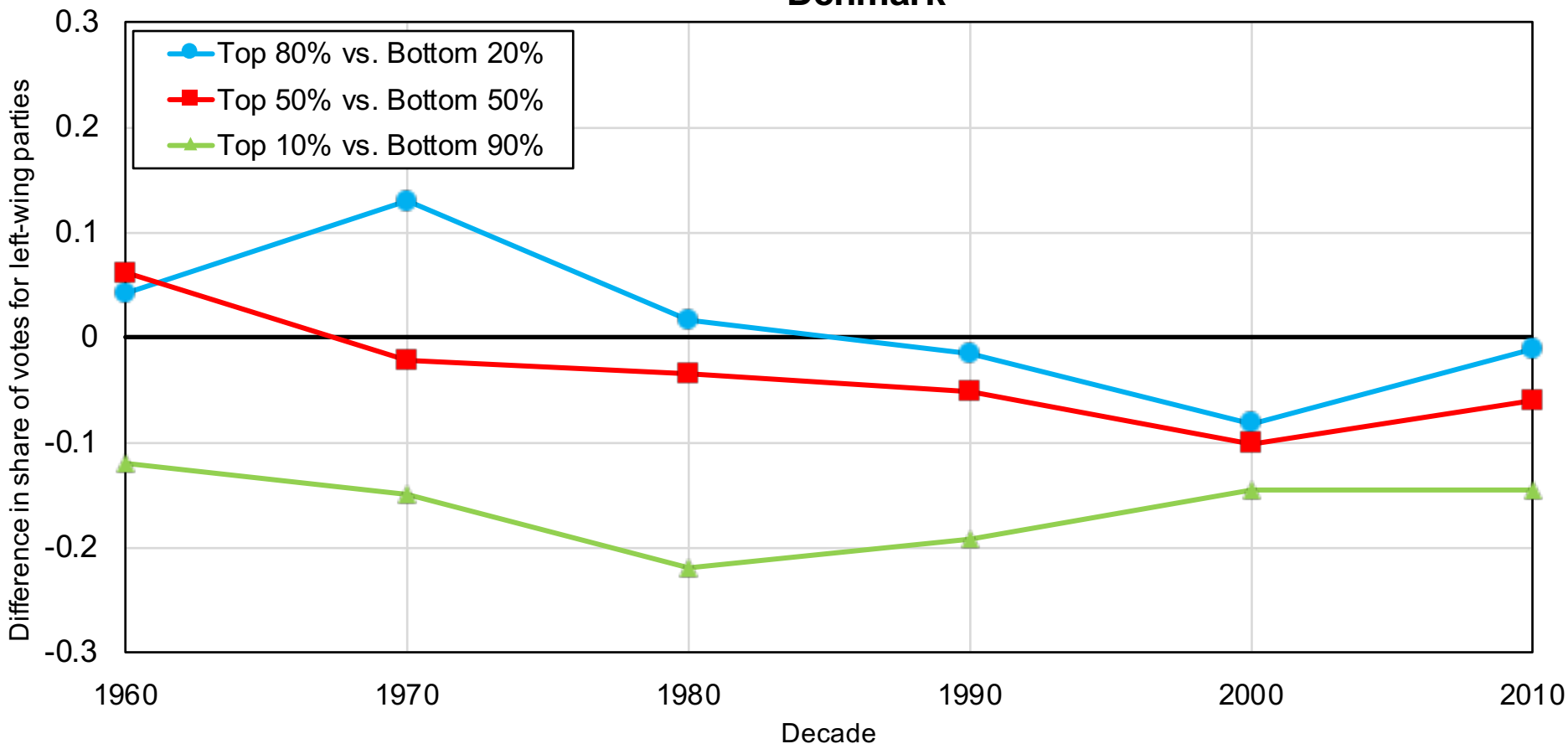
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D27 - Income divides
Germany



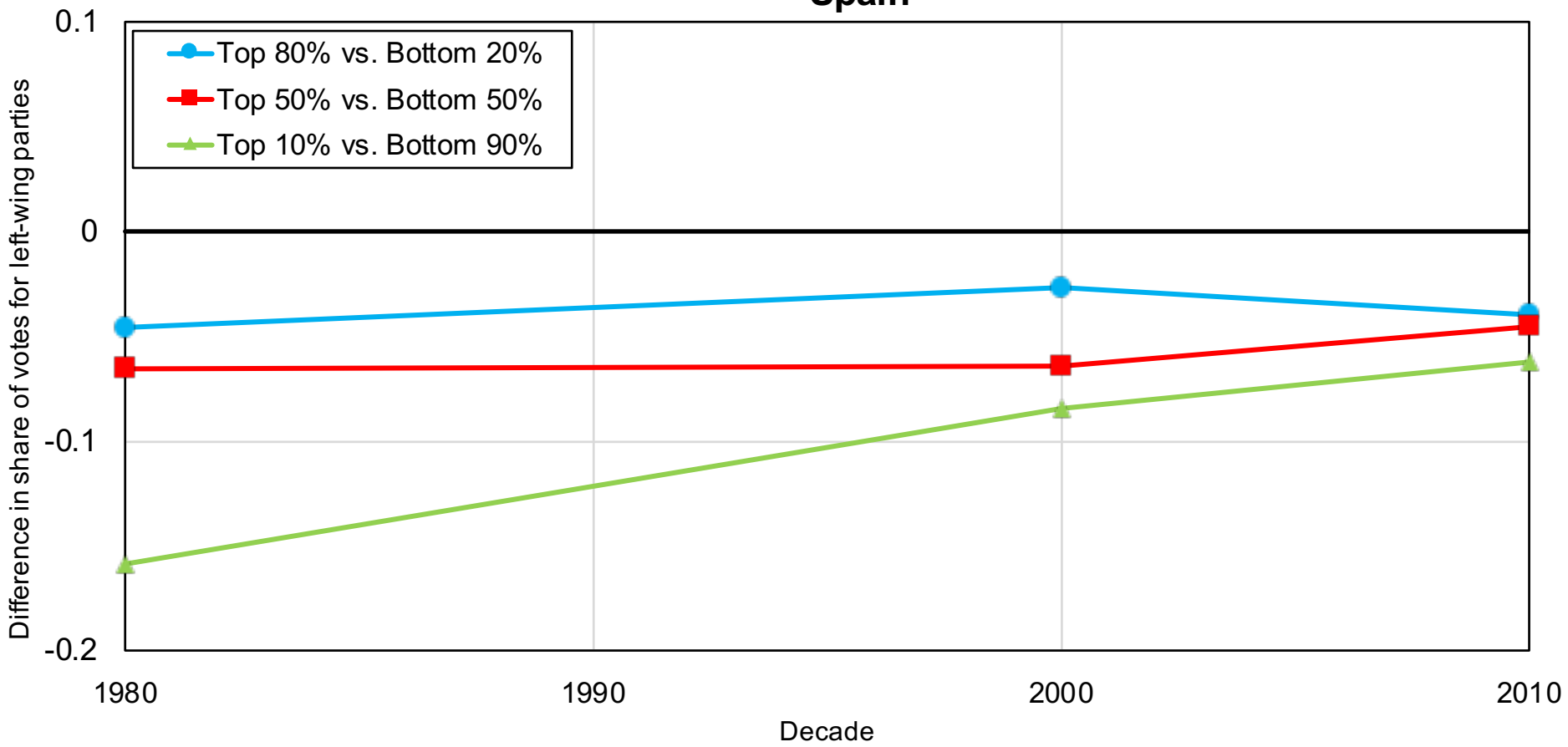
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D28 - Income divides
Denmark



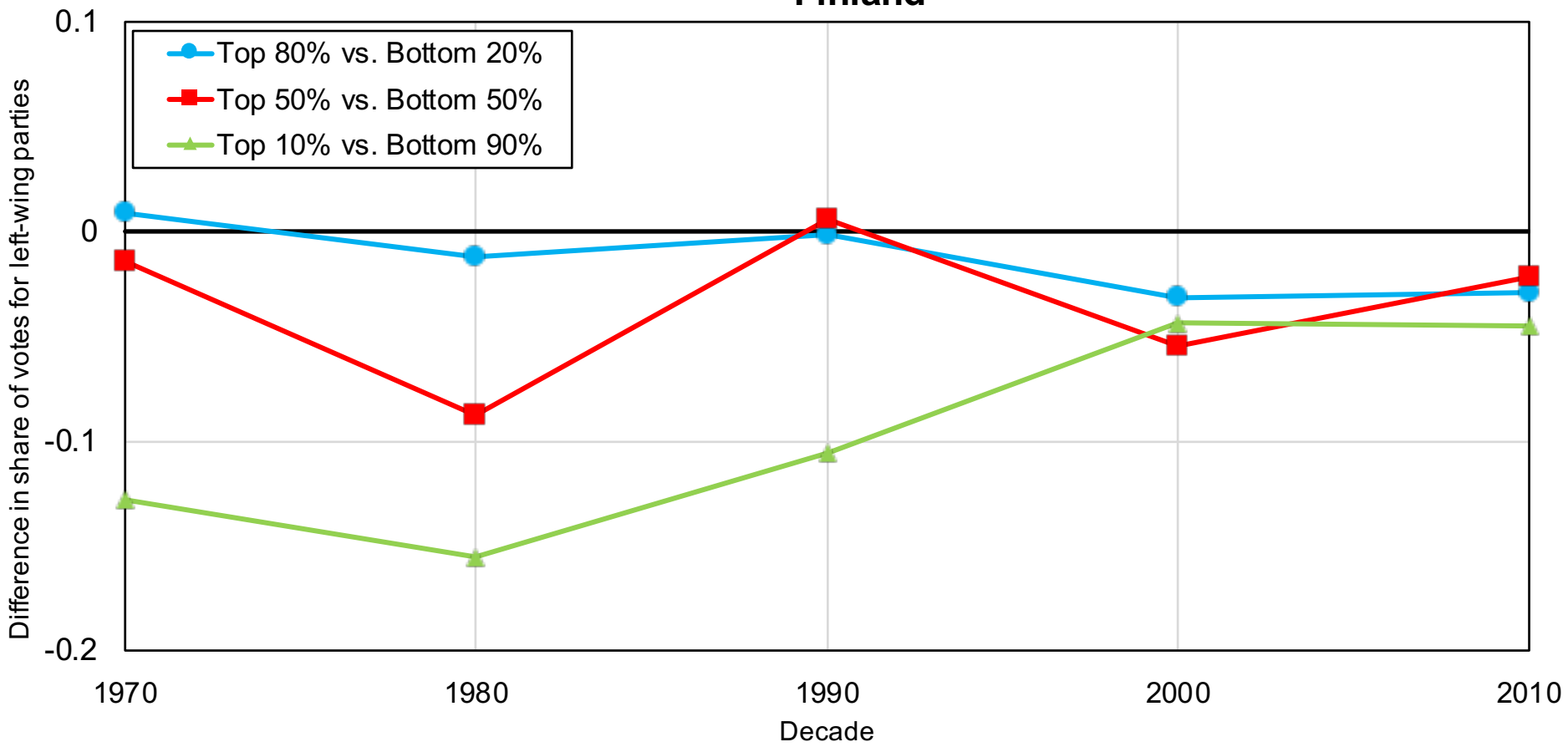
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D29 - Income divides
Spain



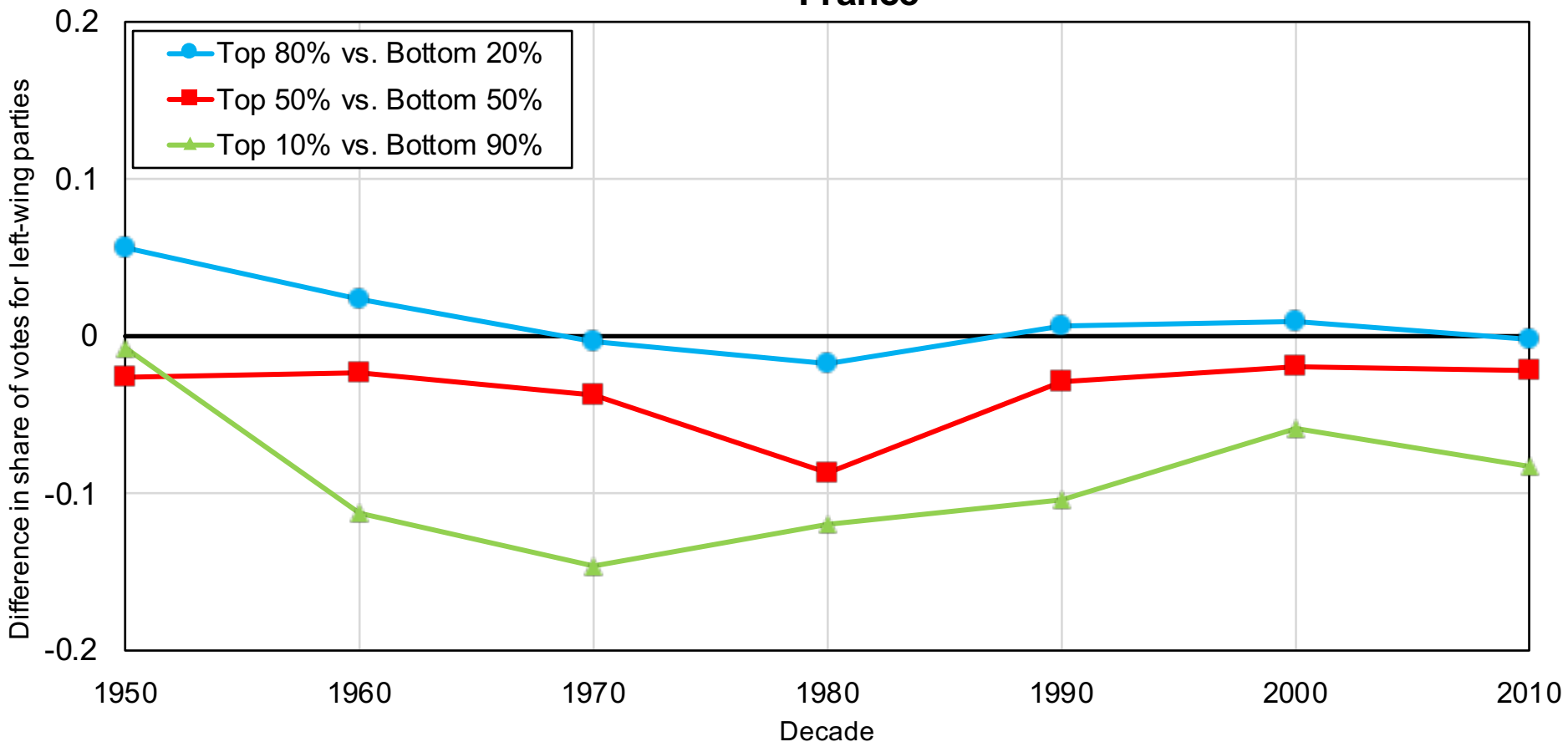
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D30 - Income divides
Finland



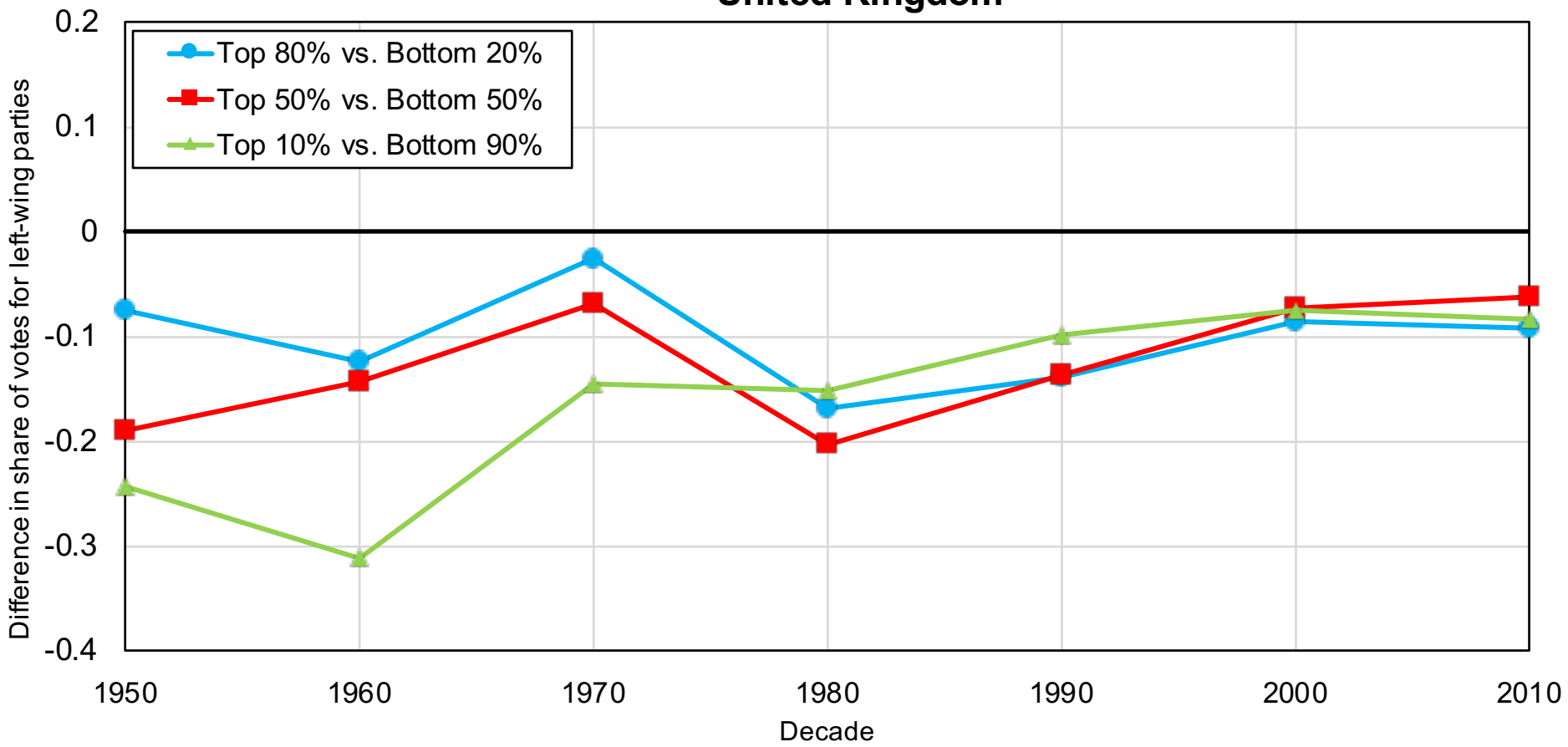
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D31 - Income divides
France



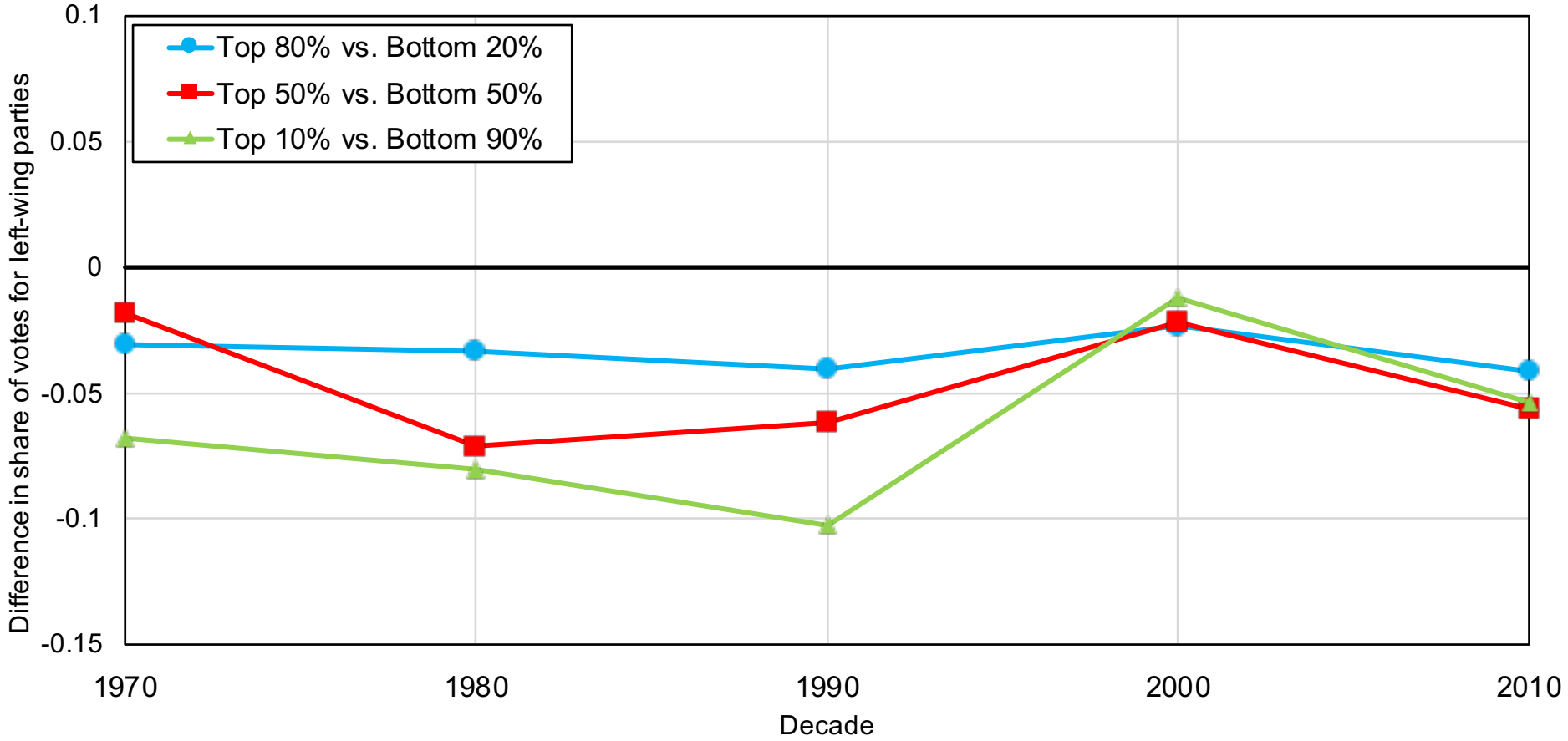
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D32 - Income divides
United Kingdom



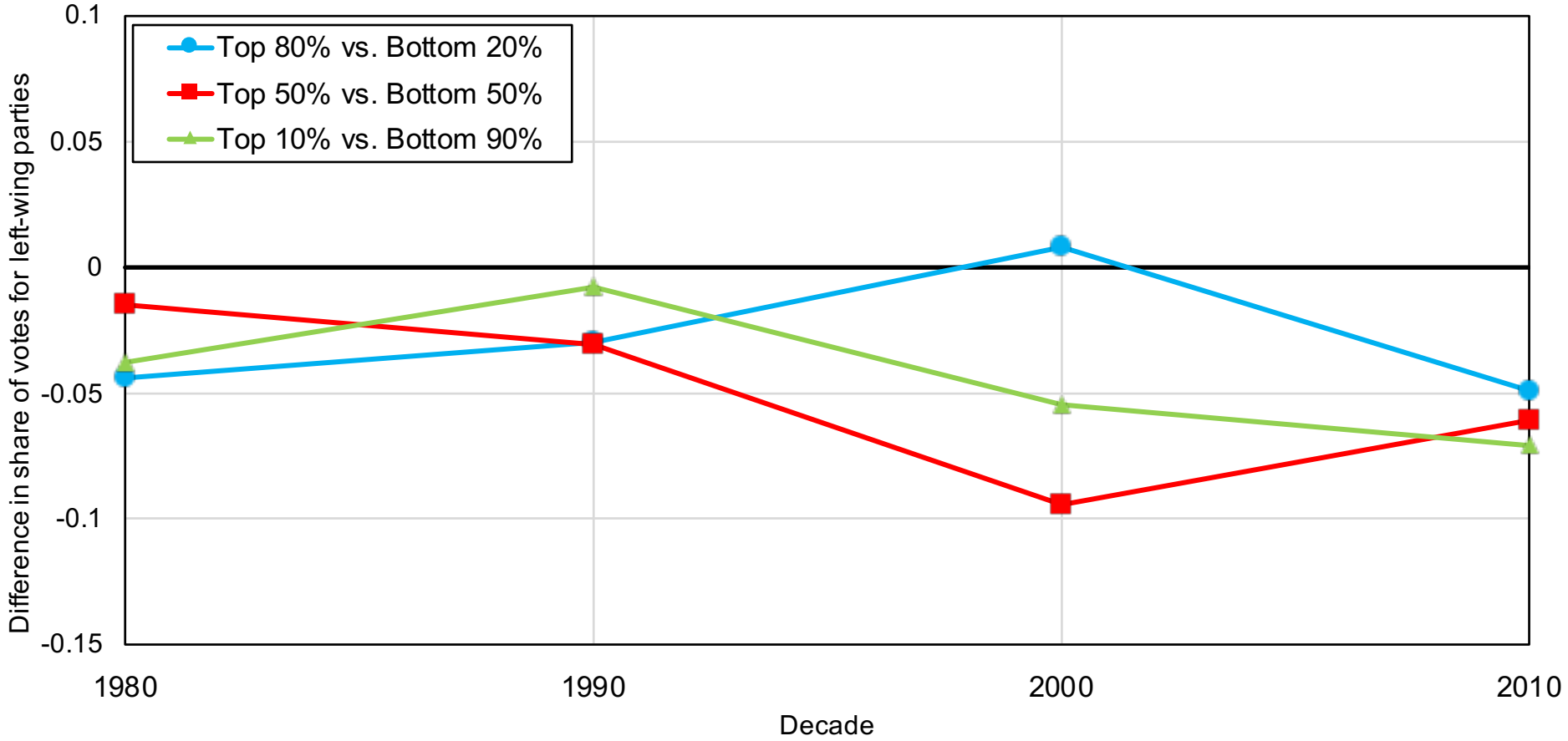
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Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D33 - Income divides
Ireland



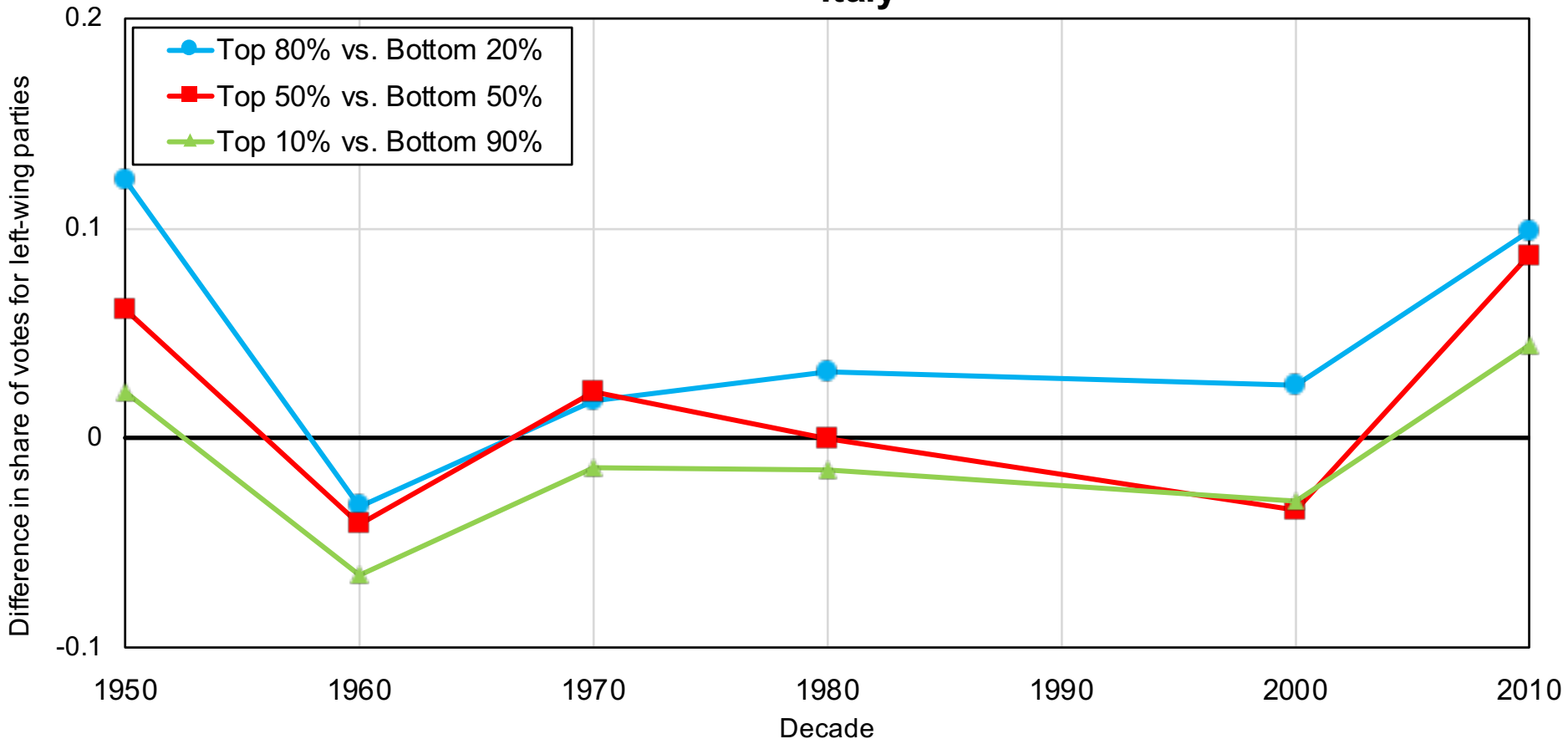
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D34 - Income divides
Iceland



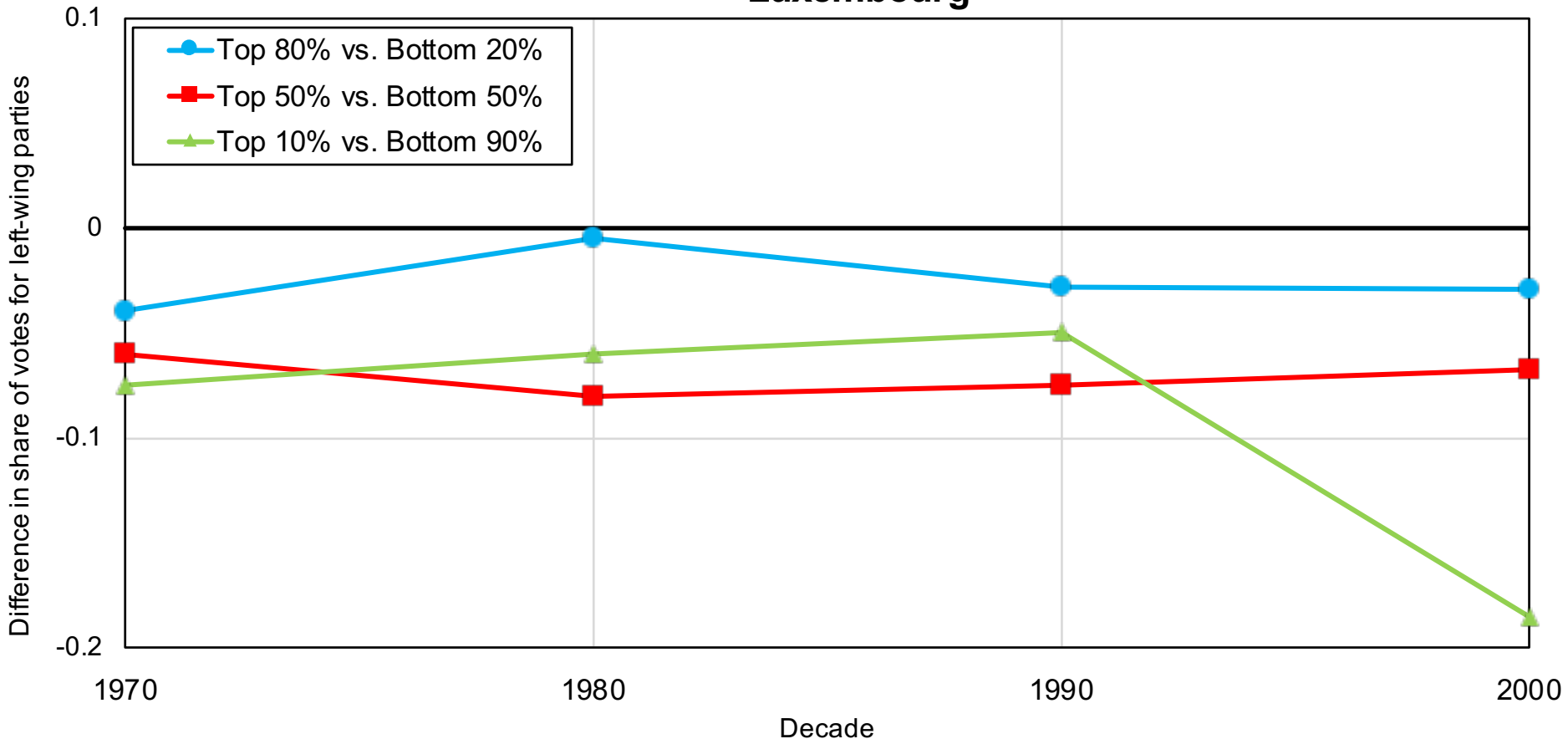
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Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D35 - Income divides
Italy



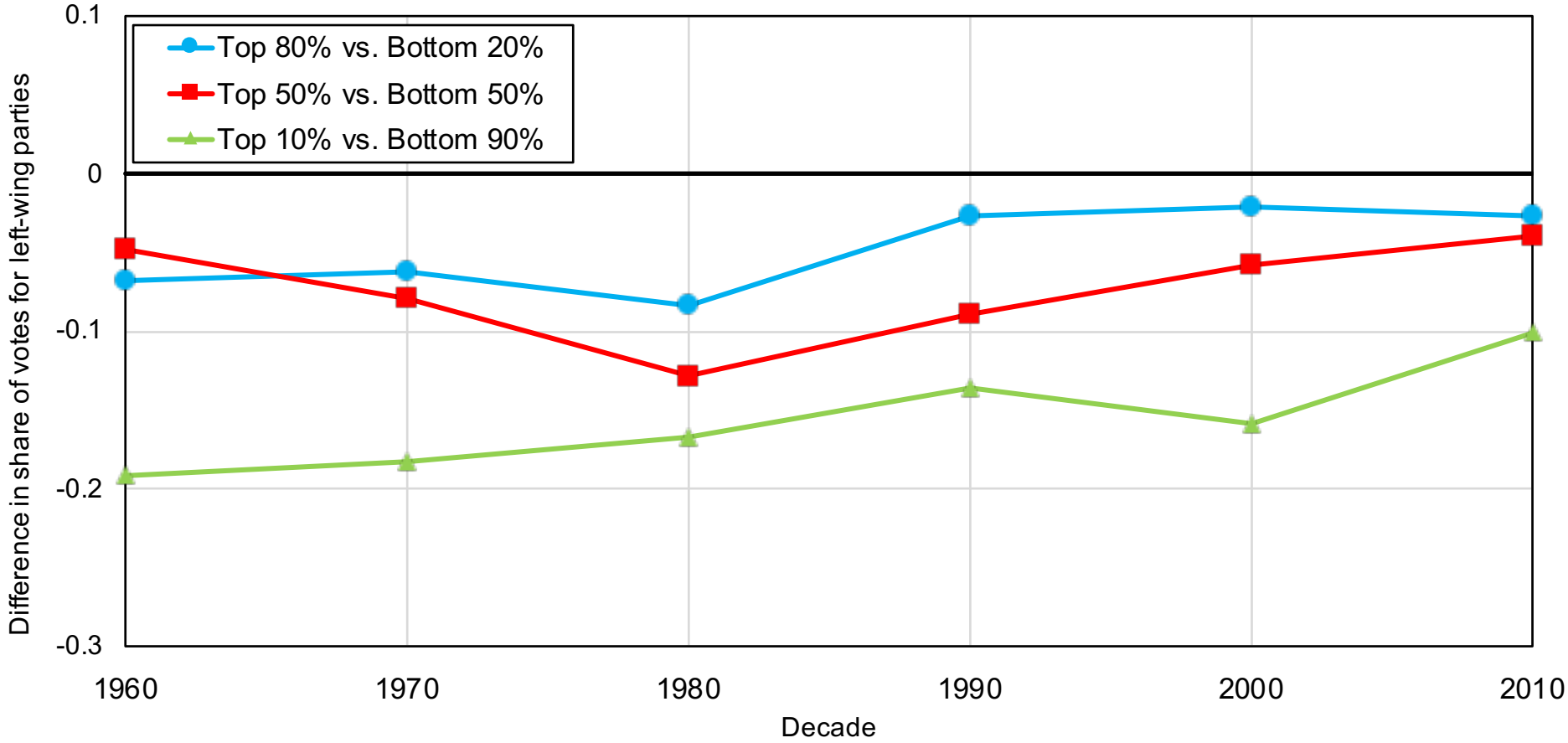
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D36 - Income divides
Luxembourg



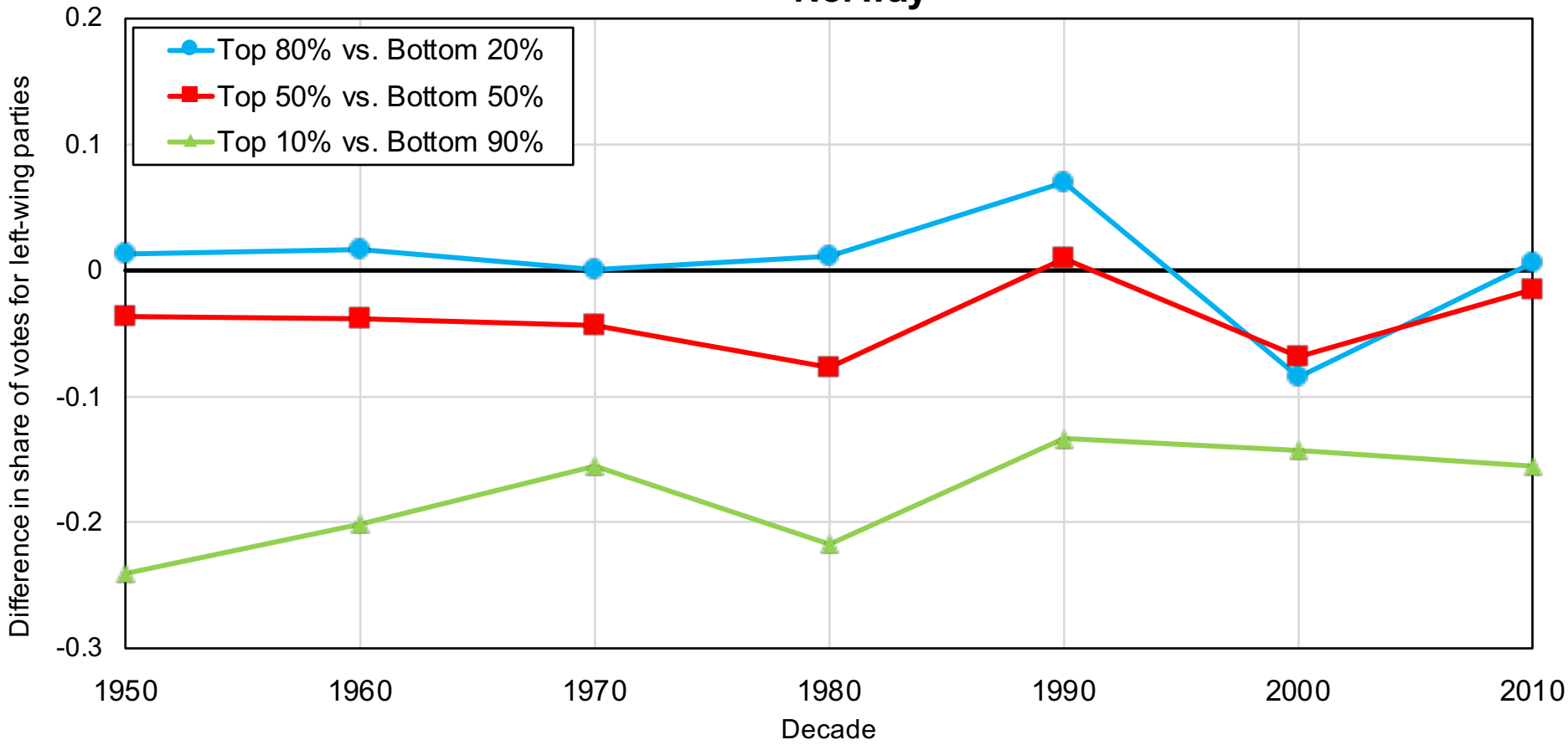
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D37 - Income divides
Netherlands



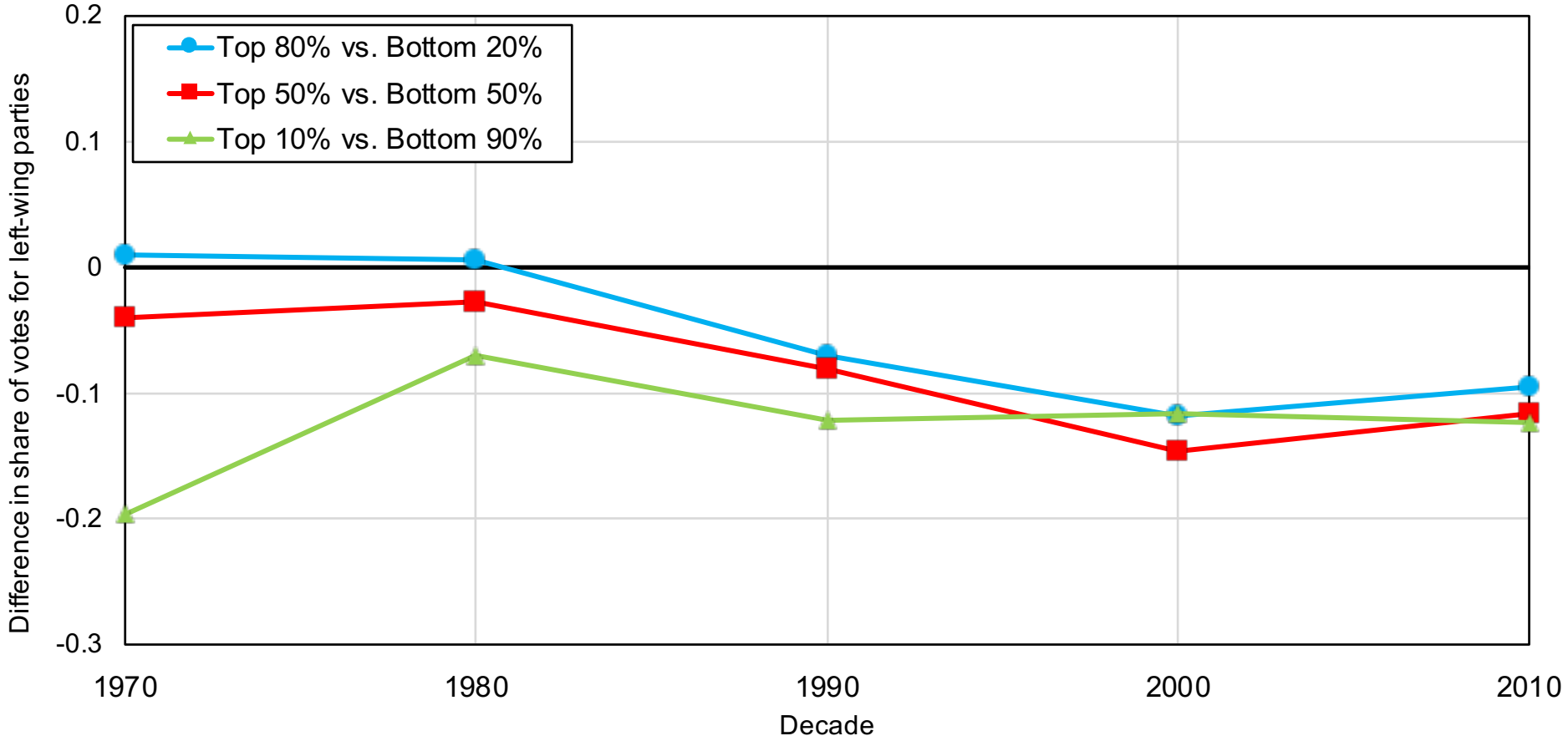
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D38 - Income divides
Norway



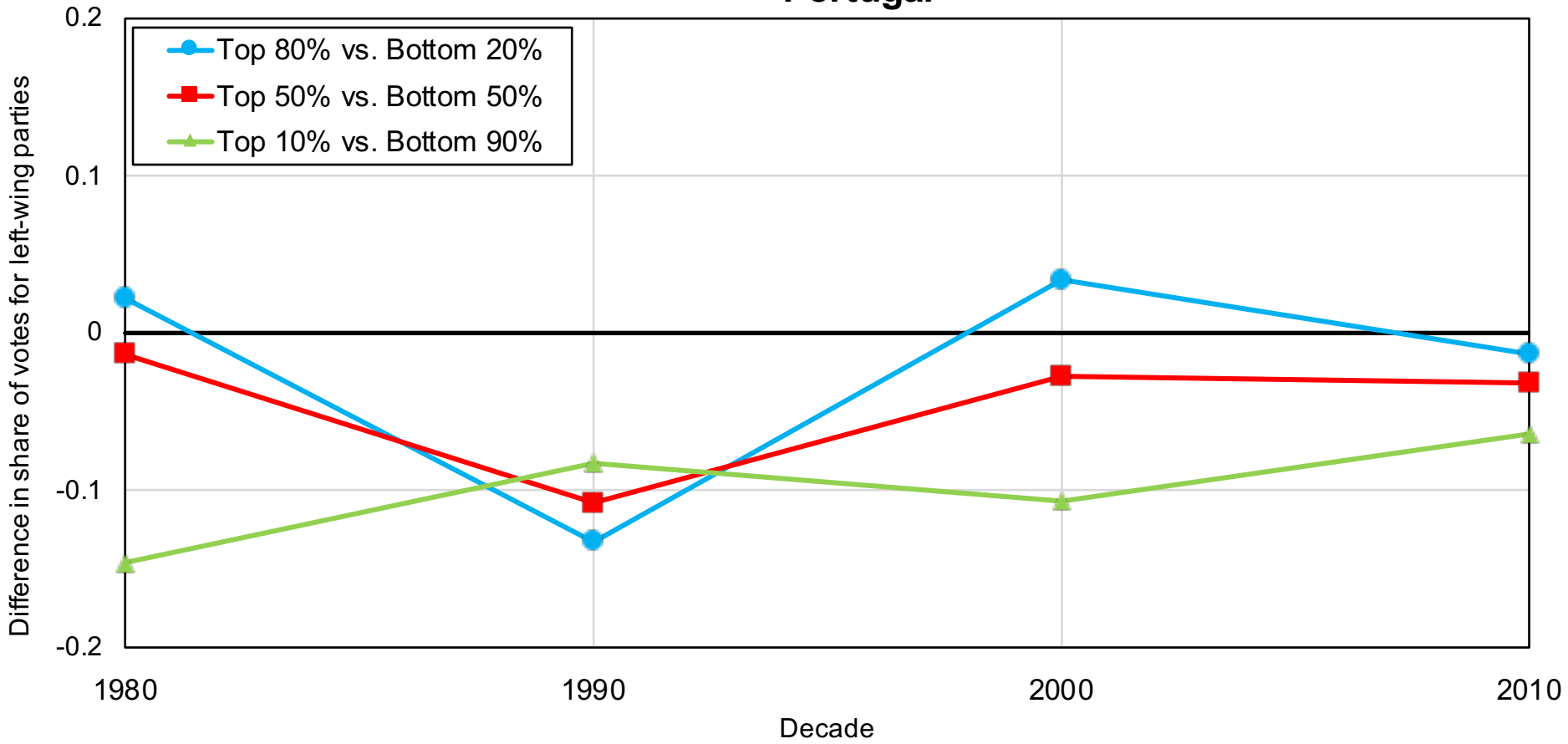
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D39 - Income divides
New Zealand



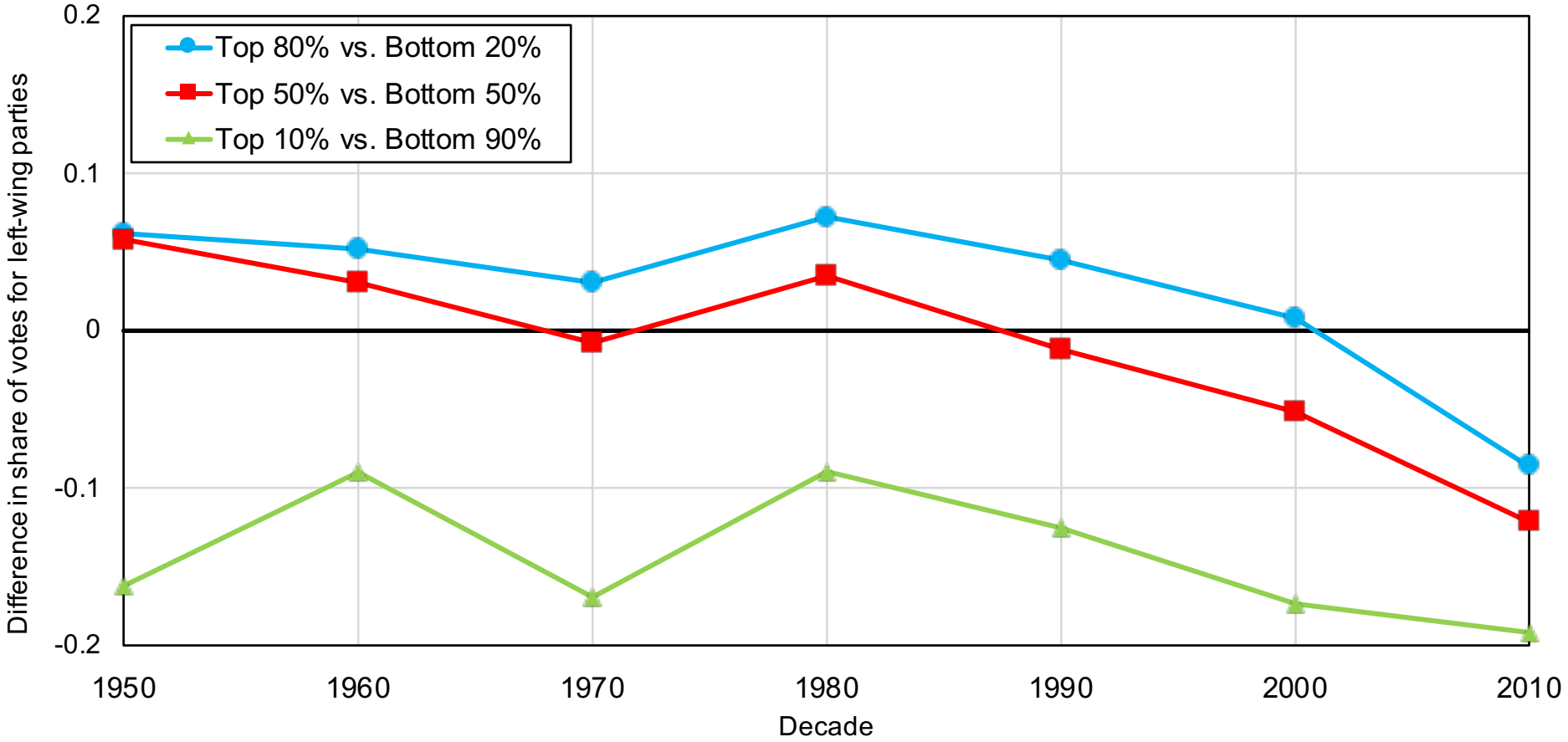
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D40 - Income divides
Portugal



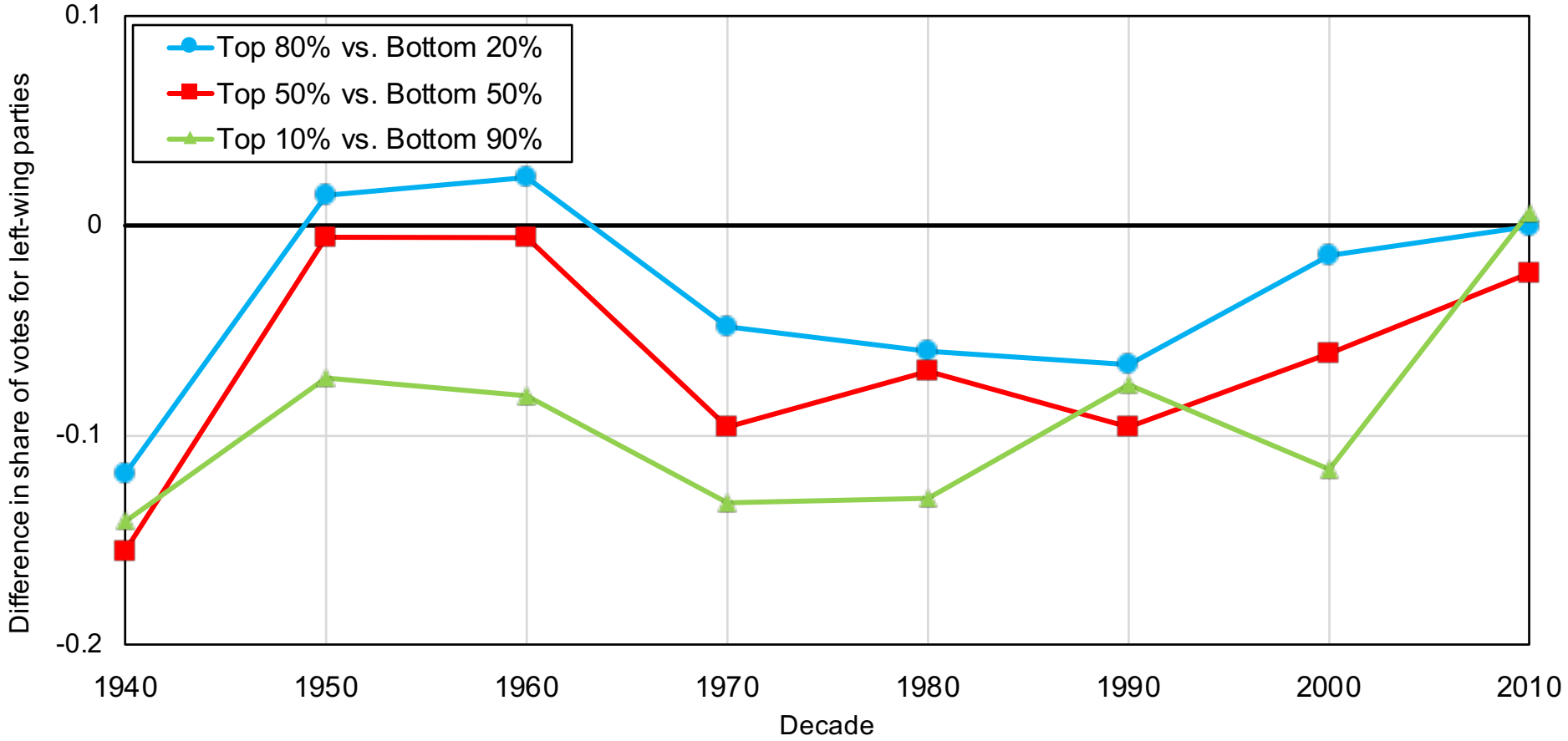
Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D41 - Income divides
Sweden



Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).

Figure D42 - Income divides
United States



Source: authors' computations using the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database.
Note: this figure represents the difference in vote share for left-wing parties across different income groups over time. The income divides are estimated for the top 80% of the income distributon vs. the bottom 20%, the top 50% vs. the bottom 50% and the top 10% vs. the bottom 90%. Estimates control for education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural/urban, region, race/ethnicity, employment status, and marital status (in country-years for which these variables are available).