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# Revisiting the Sectoral Cleavage in Canada: Evidence From the Canadian Election Studies

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## ABSTRACT

According to the budget-maximizing bureaucrat model, public sector employees should rationally seek to increase government budgets to increase their own power. In contrast to most advanced democracies, class and sectoral voting has largely been neglected in Canada. The ideological and voting preferences of the public sector has been unexamined since the 1980s. Using the Canadian Election Study (1968–2019), we revisit and expand on this literature. We find that the public sector holds more economically leftist attitudes than the public and that a sectoral cleavage has emerged, with public sector employees increasingly supporting the leftist New Democratic Party (NDP). We also find that social class moderates these two relationships, as professionals and managers in the public sector are significantly more likely to vote for the NDP and hold more leftist economic attitudes than their counterparts in both the private sector, and the routine non-manual and working class in the public sector.

## 1 | Introduction

Conservative-leaning columnist John Ibbitson (2020) portrayed contemporary Canadian politics as a battle between a "public class, who live on the avails of taxation, and a private class, who pay the taxes." His "public class" is largely made up of public sector workers who "would welcome an expansion of the state, which would benefit their class." More careful conservative commentary has likewise pointed to the public-private divide as a major political fault-line, especially due to differences in job security and benefits (such as 88% of public sector workers having registered pension plans vs. 22% in the private sector) (Speer 2021). The electoral behaviour of public sector unions in Canada points in a similar direction. While they may not always prescribe voting for the social democratic NDP, they have been active in third party campaigns to block the election of Conservative governments (Savage and Ruhloff-Queiruga 2017).

Sectoral voting is the pattern where people in different sectors of the economy (e.g., public vs. private sector) tend to vote for different political parties. The assumption of public sector workers forming an electoral bloc for the left is shared by social scientific discussions of electoral blocs and coalitions. In Beramendi et al.'s (2015) work on the politics of contemporary capitalism, they see socio-cultural professionals as being particularly reliant on public sector employment. This reliance, coupled with a universalistic-egalitarian value profile, makes them strongly supportive of greater state intervention, and thus a potential constituency for social democratic coalitions seeking to expand the state. Earlier, Craig and Porter (2006) had named public sector workers as a

component of a centre-left electoral bloc promoting an "inclusive neoliberalism" that would protect core aspects of the welfare state such as health care and education from cutbacks and privatization.

All of this is quite consistent with past work on the electoral participation of public sector voters in the "bureau voting model" (BVM) from the late 1970s to the 1990s. This model extended public choice assumptions about the "budget maximizing bureaucrat" to the electoral sphere. It posited that public sector voters had an instrumental interest in expanding the state, and so would be more likely to vote, and to vote for parties that supported expanding the state (namely parties of the left). Yet the studies of electoral blocs and coalitions invite us to look more closely at how occupational class position interacts with sectoral status.

This paper uses Canadian Election Study data for 16 elections between 1968 and 2019 to engage with the literature on sectoral voting. On the one hand, the "bureau voting model" continues as a touchstone for research, so we start from its core claims to see if they can be applied to the Canadian case over the long run. At the same time, this model has been subject to a variety of critiques, including for its tendency to flatten differences among occupations. We build on Tepe's (2012) and Knutsen's (2005) lead to pay more attention to the possibility of class differences in moderating the effect of sector. Canada provides a suitable test case for this purpose. Historically, class voting has largely been neglected in Canada due to a common belief that its politics is instead dominated by linguistic, regional and religious divisions (Alford 1963; Porter 1965). The last comprehensive studies of sectoral voting in Canada worked with data that stopped in 1984 (Blais et al. 1990) or 1988 (Langford 1996), and did not find particularly strong sectoral voting. However, recent research has documented that class is a discernible cleavage in Canadian politics, which appears to be gaining strength in recent years (Kiss et al. 2023; Polacko et al. 2022). The more recent election studies also allow us to consider a broader range of attitudinal variables than earlier studies that were limited to inconsistently asked economic attitudes (e.g., Blake 1991; Langford 1996).

Therefore, we use a half century of Canadian Election Studies to test three core claims of the bureau voting model around turnout, vote choice and political attitudes. First, we find that there is little difference between the public and private sector when it comes to turning out to vote. Second, we find that the public sector holds more economically leftist attitudes than the general public and that a sectoral voting cleavage has increased over time, with public sector employees increasingly supporting the leftist NDP. Third, we find that social class moderates these two relationships, as professionals and managers in the public sector are significantly more likely vote for the NDP and hold more leftwing economic attitudes than their counterparts in both the private sector, and the routine non-manual and working class in the public sector.

To illustrate these points, we organize the paper as follows. We first provide an overview of the relevant theoretical literature on BVM along with the key hypotheses. We then outline the data and methodology utilized in our analysis, followed by a presentation of our main results stemming from analysis of sectoral voting in the Canadian Election Study (CES) (1968–2019). Last, we conclude with a short discussion and implications for future research.

## 2 | Literature Review

Overall, the study of public sector voting has been motivated by Niskanen's theory of the "budget-maximizing bureaucrat" (Niskanen 1971). A landmark study in the public choice school of thought, the theory sought to raise the alarm about the future viability and the normative foundations of the Keynesian welfare state. It laid the groundwork for a generation of neo-conservative and neo-liberal arguments against the welfare state. Although Niskanen's theory was primarily about the information monopolization strategies of managers, rather than voters, the normative concerns were extended to public sector voters. If public sector voters were more supportive of government spending, more likely to vote and more likely to vote for the left, this would lead to the same outcome Niskanen feared: a government larger than warranted, without private sector economic activity to support it. This variant of the theory is often termed the "bureau voting model" (Garand et al. 1991).

There is some cross-national evidence to support these core contentions, but overall, it is quite mixed and somewhat contingent. Blais et al. (1991) found the strongest evidence for a sectoral voting cleavage in Australia, Japan, Great Britain and the Netherlands with more mixed evidence in Canada, France and the United States. Blais et al.'s (1990) work is the authoritative study on public sector voting in Canada. Looking specifically at Canada, they found a slight tendency by the public sector to vote at greater rates for the social democratic NDP than for other parties, and a slight tendency to vote against the Progressive Conservative party than for other parties. At the same time, they found evidence of a difference in attitudes whereby public sector workers were more supportive of government intervention and the left-wing, but this only emerged in 1984. They also found no evidence that this weak left-wing preference by the public sector was restricted to higher level occupations nor to occupations specific to the welfare state (such as teachers).

In the comparative literature since then, findings have evolved somewhat. In an 8 country European comparison, Knutsen (2005) found statistically significant sector voting in 7 of 8 cases, although it was very modest with the exception of Denmark. Jensen et al. (2009) find a good deal of variation across 18 country cases. They find that public sector employees are more likely to hold leftist attitudes, doing so in 10 countries studied. They could only find a statistically significant greater propensity to vote in 7 cases, and to vote for a left-wing candidate in four. For Canada, this sectoral cleavage exists even controlling for union status, suggesting that there is a direct sectoral effect on vote choice. However, their analysis groups the NDP in with the Bloc Québécois, and the Liberals with the Progressive Conservatives and Reform Party, which leads to no relationship between sector status and support for the left. These mixed findings about the BVM are joined by findings against the BVM. For instance, Bednarczuk (2015) finds that public sector employment has no effect on any level of ideological placement on a

liberal-conservative scale, and no impact on vote choice, across 14 American elections, from 1982 to 2012.

A number of more recent studies have also not found a greater propensity to vote by public sector employees. Bednarczuk (2017) found no effective difference in predicted probabilities of voting between public and private sector employees in the 16 American presidential and mid-term elections between 1982 and 2012. In the Canadian context, Rounce and Levasseur's (2015) study of provincial elections in 2011 and 2012, did not find a sectoral difference in voting, and if anything, public sector employees voted less.

Some have taken these mixed and contrary findings as an indication that the BVM rests on deficient micro-foundations. The instrumental linkage between one's employment and the expected benefits of electing a higher spending party is a bit fanciful, even before adding the complications of determining party viability in multiparty systems or of the impact of federalism (for instance, whether increasing the size of the central state helps public servants in sub-central jurisdictions) (Bednarczuk 2017; Jensen et al. 2009). Another view is that sectoral voting results from a generalized commonality of values whereby public sector workers embrace an activist role for the state out of sociotropic considerations. There is a literature on public sector motivation (PSM) that finds that public sector workers are more likely to be active in public affairs and to engage in political voice activities (Ertas 2014; Bednarczuk 2015). The causal process by which this is produced may be complicated. Voters with a left-wing disposition may choose to seek careers in the public sector (which is the more dominant interpretation); although occupations can also be sources of socialization (see Oberfield 2014). In that sense, spending time in the public sector may inculcate a left-wing worldview. It is exceptionally hard to disentangle this with observational data, and we shy away from making those claims in this paper. It is also very hard to disentangle the instrumental motivations of the BVM and the public good dispositions of the PSM models as they tend to point in the same direction of voting more, holding left wing attitudes and voting for left-wing parties.

We will note that the presence of the Bloc Québecois makes for an interesting consideration in this regard. On the one hand, studies of Quebec voting have long failed to find much working-class voting, in part from the historical absence of a leftist party associated with the working class (Pinard 1970). Even with the growth of the social democratic leaning Parti Québécois in the 1970s, class did not emerge as a salient division but instead was subsumed to the national cleavage (Rivard and McGrandle 2025). It does not seem to have become more important in recent elections despite the weakening of the sovereignist-federalist cleavage, and it is largely an afterthought in the leading syntheses of Quebec voting behaviour (Bélanger et al. 2022). On the other hand, the Quebec separatist movement has been seen as favourably predisposed to social democracy dominated not by the working class but by professions in the new middle class (McRoberts 1988; Renaud 1984). Reflecting this, Quebec's largest union, the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ), has a history of endorsing the Bloc Québecois in the 1993, 1997, 2000, 2006, 2008 and 2011 federal elections. Similarly, Pinard and Hamilton (1984) show the importance of intellectuals, and especially those in education in supporting sovereignty-association. Thus, if the pure instrumental version of the BVM is wrong, but an explanation from a commonality of values still holds, then we might still see public sector support for the Bloc Québécois even though the party promotes Quebec separation and would have no direct benefit in expanding the federal state. One could expect sectoral voting for the BQ reflecting the values preferences of public sector workers in Quebec, or one could posit the opposite based on the lack of direct instrumental benefits and the tendency of the national question to subsume class voting. It is difficult to assume a priori what this relationship might look like, but it is an open question. Consequently, we start our analysis with the simple hypotheses as follows:

**Hypothesis 1a.** *Public sector employees are more likely to vote for the NDP and Bloc Québécois than private sector employees.*

The particular situation of elections being about "electing your employer" should produce additional incentives to vote. Hence our second hypothesis, again in line with the BVM:

**Hypothesis 2a.** *Public sector employees vote at higher rates than private sector employees.*

Finally, the third core claim of the BVM can be formed into the third hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3a.** *Public sector employees are more likely to hold ideological orientations that are more leftist than private sector employees.*

This discussion of sector voting nevertheless sidesteps the diversity within the public and private sectors. Both the municipal recreational centre janitor and the deputy minister are in the public sector, but there are important differences in their occupational positions that are likely to affect their political outlooks. This has led to refinements in sectoral analysis that also try to capture occupational factors (Tepe 2012). For instance, Tepe (2012) found an important caveat in the 11 west European countries in his analysis when he replicated Jensen et al.'s (2009) analysis. Specifically, there was a horizontal differentiation whereby public sector workers in the health and education (welfare state) and service production (e.g., waste management, water supply and infrastructure) were most responsible for the tendency to vote for the left and for supporting the expansion of the state. Interestingly, however, public health workers did not have a greater proclivity to vote, although public sector workers in public administration did.

Class has been shown to be an important factor, with early findings showing that the ideological gap between sectors in Norway came mostly from differences in upper status occupational categories (Lafferty and Knutsen 1984), a result that Blake (1991) could extend to Canada, but not Sweden or the United States. Using Canadian data from the 1980s, Langford (1996) found that public and private sector working class respondents did not differ greatly on his measure of economic radicalism, with the public sector "new middle class" being close to the working class, and the private sector "new middle class" sharing views with owners. More recently, Knutsen (2005) finds that sectoral differences in voting are particularly driven by a "service class" and not the

working class or routine non-manual workers. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4.** *For both voting for the NDP and the Bloc Québécois, and for economic orientations, the class gradient will be steeper for private sector employees than public sector employees.*

These sectoral differences within classes nevertheless sit on top of longer-standing expectations of class behaviour. These include the expectation that working class voters are more likely to support parties of the left than professionals and managers, but that the latter, by dint of their education, are more likely to vote. These expectations yield the following hypotheses that layer a consideration of class over the earlier BVM hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1b.** *Higher occupational status public sector employees are less likely to vote for the NDP and Bloc Québécois than lower occupational status public sector employees.*

**Hypothesis 2b.** *Higher occupational status public sector employees vote at higher rates than lower occupational status public sector employees.*

Looking at a set of Canadian provincial elections, Rounce and Levasseur (2015) found that public sector workers were more ideologically to the left than private sector workers, although not on cultural issues. While earlier studies of sectoral attitudinal differences such as Blake's (1991) showed differences across economic attitudes (for instance public sector workers more strongly supported greater state responsibility but displayed less difference on questions of social assistance or redistribution) there has been less attention afforded to potential class differences in attitudes on the two-dimensional issue space. Certainly, the Canadian work of 40 years ago was working with a much more limited set of attitudinal issues, mostly related to economic questions.

Given recent emphasis on the "polarity reversal" in politics, where citizens with more education take on leftist cultural attitudes while remaining lukewarm on redistribution, while citizens with less education take left positions on redistribution but often right-wing positions on cultural issues (e.g., see Kitschelt and Rehm 2023), it is worth seeing if this is a feature of sectoral politics. Hence, we test for whether class matters for these competing priorities with the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3b.** *Higher occupational status public sector employees are more likely to hold economic orientations that are more rightist and socio-cultural orientations that are more leftist, than lower occupational status public sector employees.*

These two-dimensional predictions are nevertheless criticized in some more recent literature that considers more complex relationships between material interests and ideology. Education and income can have complex impacts on redistributive issues. For instance, wealthier people may oppose taxation as distributing income to others, but they may also be less resistant to taxation because they are in a better position to pay (Jacques 2023). In these cross-pressured situations, left-right ideology plays an important role in filtering material interest (Armingeon and Weisstanner 2022) and may lead education to have positive effects on welfare state related dependent variables among leftists. Nevertheless, these positive attitudes may still be shaped by material conditions. As Beramendi et al. (2015) and Häusermann et al. (2022) suggest, professionals supporting greater public spending prefer that it be spent on social investment rather than social consumption. They may favour public spending for its effects on maintaining a public sector labour market for professionals more than for its impact on redistribution. They are pro-state, more than pro-redistribution. That leads to our final hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 5.** *Higher occupational status public sector employees are more likely to diverge more from their private sector counterparts on issues of social investment and the size of the public sectors than on issues of social consumption and redistribution.*

## 3 | Data and Measures

To examine the political behaviour and attitudes of the public sector in Canada, this study relies on merged data from the Canadian Election Study (CES), which are the most extensive surveys on public opinion and voting in Canada. The dataset comprises 16 federal elections from 1968 to 2019.[1] For consistency, we utilize the telephone and interview mode of surveys.

### 3.1 | Dependent Variables

The analysis relies on three types of dependent variables. First, to measure party voting, we use the reported vote choice from the post-election wave of each CES for each of Canada's four main federal parties: Liberal, Conservative,[2] NDP and Bloc Québécois. *Party vote* consists of four binary dependent variables, with one party coded as 1 and all other parties a 0.

Canada's party system fits the standard left-right ideological schema, except when it comes to the Quebec nationalist Bloc. According to calculations using the popular left-right RILE ideological index scores from MARPOR, the NDP has consistently been the most leftist main party (Lehmann et al. 2024). The Liberals have largely been centrist with some periods on the centre-left, most notably in the 1980s and 2015. The Conservatives have consistently been the most right leaning party since the mid-1970s, while the Bloc began on the centre-right in the 1990s, before moving consistently to the centre-left, save for the 2011 election. For a more recent evaluation, the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), which estimated Canadian party positions on both the economic and socio-cultural dimensions in 2022, found that the Bloc is leftist on both dimensions, scoring roughly 4 on a 0–10 left-right scale (Dassonneville and Koedam 2024). This score is slightly more economically leftist than the Liberals but more centrist socio-culturally. As expected, the NDP is the most leftist party on both dimensions, and the Conservatives are by far the most right-leaning.[3] Thus, from this analysis and the earlier literature review, we expect that the NDP and Bloc are the parties most applicable to testing BVM theory in the context of party voting.

Second, to measure *turnout*, we rely on a question asking whether a respondent voted in the most recent federal election (coded 1

for yes and 0 otherwise).[4] Self-reported turnout has been found to be particularly affected by recall and social desirability bias (Karp and Brockington 2005), hence, reported turnout tends to have a considerable upward bias when compared to data on actual turnout. The CES reflects this with very high reported levels of turnout, therefore, to correct this, we weight turnout based on official figures.[5]

Third, to measure political ideology, we rely on questions measuring core attitudes that were consistently asked in the CES. This question type did not become available until the late 1980s and 1990s in the CES, but we are able to measure different aspects of the two dominant spheres of political conflict—the economic (state-market) and socio-cultural (authoritarian-libertarian) dimensions. For the economic dimension, we measure state responsibility, redistribution, welfare spending and childcare funding. *State responsibility* relies on a question asking if: "the government should leave it to the private sector to create jobs." Support for *redistribution* is based on variations of the question: "how much do you think should be done to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor in Canada." *Welfare spending* tolerance is based on variations of a question asking if the government should spend more on welfare, keep the same levels, or reduce welfare.[6] *Childcare* is based on the question: "should the government…fund public daycare, or give the money directly to parents."[7] As for the socio-cultural dimension, attitudes towards *racial minorities* and *women* are based on respondent answers to questions asking: "how much should be done for…" "racial minorities" and "women," respectively.[8] *Gay rights* measures attitudes towards gays and lesbians.[9] *Immigration* measures whether respondents believe immigration rates should increase, stay the same, or decrease. Each of the attitudinal variables are rescaled between 0–1 (left to right) for consistency (see Appendix A1).

### 3.2 | Independent Variables

Respondent self-classification of their employment status is our primary independent variable. *Public sector* is a binary variable coded 1 for public sector employees and 0 for private sector employees. We use a broad definition of public sector employment permitted by the data available. This is challenging in the pre-1988 period, due to the absence of a standard question asking respondents if they work in the public or private sector. Following Blais et al. (1990) we classify based on the "all government" category of responses to a question asking: "What does your company do?" supplemented by the teaching and nursing categories from Blishen score measures of occupational status.[10]

To measure social class, we draw on a four-class category schema modelled on the Erickson-Goldthorpe class schema. Because we are only interested in the voting patterns of public sector workers, self-employed voters are excluded from the class analysis, which is only available since 1979, nonetheless. This schema categorizes occupations along two dimensions: a hierarchy of authority and a logic of task structures (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014). Hence, working-class occupations are clustered in skill types that deal with things, while the routine non-manual class is clustered in occupations that deal with people and information.[11] To construct these class categories, we relied primarily on pre-existing categories provided in the early CES files. This ended in 2006, so for subsequent elections, we used Statistics Canada's National Occupation Classification (NOC) system. This matrix of occupations distinguishes two dimensions for occupations: skill level and skill type. Managers and professionals were distinguished by all those in the managerial and the professional skill levels (skill levels A and B, respectively).[12] The routine non-manual class was defined as being in skill levels B, C and D, but in occupational categories 1 through 6 (Statistics Canada 2021).[13] The working class was defined as workers in skill levels B, C and D, and occupational categories 7, 8 and 9, which effectively combines skilled and unskilled working-class occupations.[14]

### 3.3 | Controls

We rely on standard demographic controls known to affect political attitudes in the literature. Due to Canada's pronounced regional cleavages, *region* is coded as a 4-category variable (Atlantic, Ontario, Quebec and West). *Age* is included as a continuous variable.[15] Household *income* is measured in terciles (low to high),[16] and education is a dummy variable coded 1 for *degree* holders. Based on Canada's religious cleavage, *religion* is included as a four-category variable (no religion, Catholic, Protestant and other). We also include *male* and *union* dummy variables to measure gender and union household status.[17] Last, in the Bloc models we include attitudes towards Quebec *sovereignty* (against to support).

### 3.4 | Methods

We undertake graphical techniques and both logistic and linear regression for the analyses. The analysis focuses on the three predictions of the BVM, each with their own dependent variables. Logistic regression is used for the party voting and turnout dependent variables since they are dichotomous, and linear regression is employed for each of the attitudinal dependent variables, since they are ordinal. To test the moderating impact of class on the relationship between sector and each of the dependent variables, we estimate interactions and report the average marginal effects of the independent variables to ease interpretation. Full models are available in the Appendix.

## 4 | Results

### 4.1 | Descriptives

First, we explore the relationship of sectoral employment with each of our dependent variables. Table 1 displays the mean vote percentages and attitudinal scores across the entire sample by sector. The left-hand column displays the average vote share percentage for each of the main parties by sector, as well as weighted turnout by sector. The right-hand column displays the left-right (0–1) score of our political attitudes by sector.

There is little discernible difference in Liberal Party voting by sector, however, there is for the other three large parties. As expected, the conservative parties do very well among the private sector, which vote for them at a substantial 7.9 percentage

**TABLE 1** | Mean party vote %, turnout % and L-R score of dependent variables by sector.

| Dependent variable | Private | Public | Dependent variable | Private | Public |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| NDP vote | 15.4 | 20.8 | Public vs. private role | 0.43 | 0.35 |
| Liberal vote | 35.9 | 35.5 | Redistribution | 0.24 | 0.22 |
| Conservative vote | 39.1 | 31.2 | Welfare spending | 0.45 | 0.45 |
| Bloc vote | 5.3 | 8.3 | Childcare | 0.34 | 0.33 |
| | | | Racial minorities | 0.41 | 0.39 |
| Turnout | 67.4 | 69.9 | Women | 0.30 | 0.30 |
| | | | LGBTQ+ | 0.46 | 0.38 |
| | | | Immigration | 0.59 | 0.58 |

point margin more than public sector employees. In Quebec, both the NDP and Bloc fare disproportionately well among the public sector, as public sector employees vote for the Bloc by a margin of 3 percentage points versus the private sector, and by 4.2 percentage points for the NDP (not displayed). Overall, in Canada, public sector employees vote for the NDP 5.4 percentage points more than private sector employees.

Somewhat surprisingly, we do not find a substantial sectoral difference in *turnout*, as the public sector only votes 2.5 percentage points more than the private sector, which is statistically significant at ($p < 0.1$).

As for our six political attitudes, we also do not see significant sectoral differences except for views on *state responsibility* in the role of the private versus the public sector, and for attitudes towards *gay rights*. For both issues public sector employees are 0.08 more leftist on the (0–1) scale. There is a small difference of 0.02 for both *redistribution* and attitudes towards *racial minorities*, as again public sector employees are more leftist on these issues. However, there is no discernible sectoral difference on *welfare spending* or attitudes towards *women*, and very little difference on *childcare* and *immigration*.

Overall, we find some descriptive evidence in favour of each core BVM hypothesis. The preliminary evidence is strongest for party voting as the public sector significantly prefers the leftist NDP when we compare percentages. However, it should be noted that public sector workers do vote in much greater numbers overall for the Liberals and Conservatives. Public sector employees do vote in somewhat greater numbers than the private sector and public sector employees are more leftist in their political attitudes, which is equal in magnitude on the economic and socio-cultural dimensions, although constrained to only specific issues.

### 4.2 | Party Voting

Next, we examine the voting patterns of public sector employees from 1968 to 2019. The first hypothesis posits that public sector employees are more likely to vote for leftist parties. Therefore, Figure 1 shows the marginal effect of employment in the public sector on the probability of voting for the four largest parties, which contested national elections in this period. The effects from two models are shown. Small coefficient points show the effect of a logistic regression model with only respondents' sector status. Larger coefficient points show the effect for sector status but for a model that also includes respondents' union status as a control.

We draw the reader to three findings. First, Blais et al.'s (1990) findings of increased support for the NDP by public sector employees has grown since 1984 in recent years. This has been mirrored by decreasing support for the conservative parties. Second, although there is a reasonably persistent direct effect of public sector employment on support for the NDP, much, although not all of the effect is accounted for by respondent union status. However, this relationship is reversed for the Liberal Party. That is to say, when controlling for respondent union status, there is still residual support by public sector employees for the Liberal Party. This is consistent with what we know about the importance of the political relationship between the NDP and Canada's labour movement and the importance of Canada's primarily unionized public sector (Ross and Savage 2013). Third, public sector support for the Bloc has been limited to the 2008 to 2015 elections, which then disappeared in the 2019 election when controlling for union status. The Bloc likely benefitted from the very low support the NDP achieved in Quebec in the 2008 and 2015 elections. Overall, the sectoral effect sizes for NDP voting are in-line with Benedetto et al.'s (2020) European Social Survey (2002–2016) results for social democratic countries in 14 countries. However, they find that the effect has declined somewhat over time, in contrast to the NDP's increase that we detect in Canada.

Integrating findings by Tepe (2012) on the strong vertical and horizontal differentiation that leads particular sections of the public sector workforce to support the left, we now explore the moderating effect of occupational status on party voting. To do so, we first model support for the leftist NDP and Bloc as a function of public sector employment status and social class. According to (H1b), we expect lower-class public-sector employees to be more likely to vote leftist than higher-class public-sector employees, due to motivations for economic self-interest eclipsing BVM motivations for higher status public sector employees. Figure 2 plots the average marginal effects of voting for the NDP (left) and Bloc (right) by sector status and class, from a pooled logistic model with controls and election fixed effects.

Surprisingly, the likelihood of support for the NDP differs almost linearly by sector of employment. It is essential to note here,

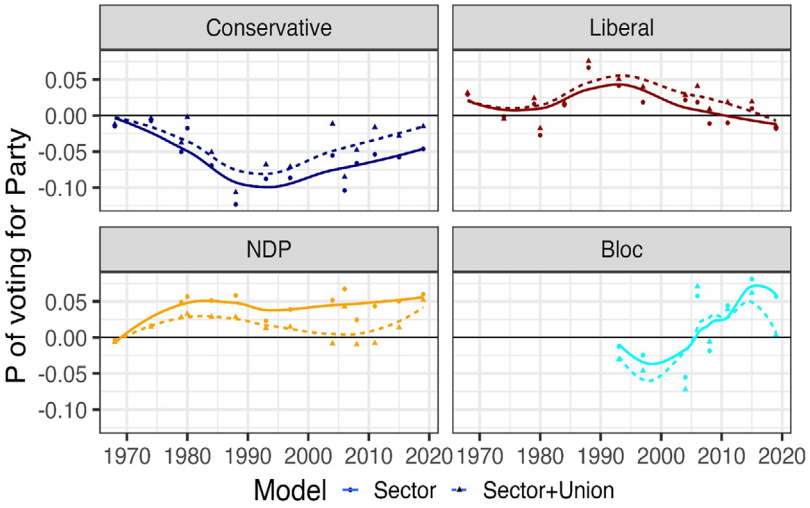


**FIGURE 1** | Effect of respondent public sector status on the probability of voting for Canada's four largest parties, 1968–2019, with 95% CIs. Small points are drawn from logistic regression models that contain sector status plus controls (age, gender, income, region, religion); large points come from models containing sector, controls, union status and sovereignty support (Quebec only). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

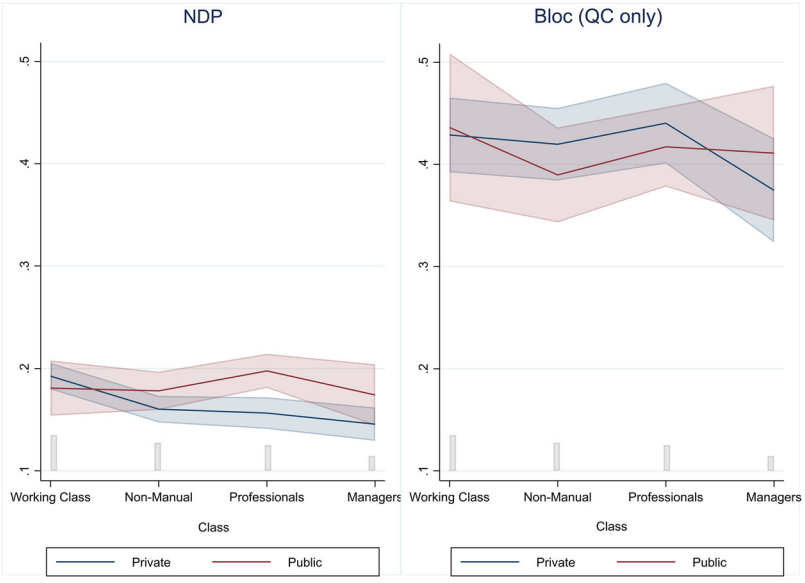


**FIGURE 2** | Marginal effects of an interaction predicting voting for the NDP (left) and Bloc Québécois (Right) by class and sector, 1968–2019, with 95% CIs. Values are drawn from logistic regression models with demographic controls including age, gender, income, region, religion, union status and sovereignty support (Quebec only). Full models are in Table A5 in the appendix. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

that this class categorization does not strictly differentiate class on a vertical basis. Our coding distinguishes routine non-manual workers vis-à-vis working-class workers only partially on higher levels of education in the former. But it equally distinguishes the two by sector of the economy, with routine non-manual workers located in service sector jobs. Managers and professionals, however, are distinguished from each other and the other two entirely on a vertical basis, without regard for sector of the economy. Importantly, the plot shows that there is no real differentiation in NDP voting for the working class by sector. There is greater likelihood to vote NDP among the routine non-manual in the public versus the private sector, although it is not statistically significant. However, we see a statistically significant likelihood to vote NDP in the public sector for professionals at roughly 5 percentage points, and a greater likelihood for managers at roughly 3 percentage points. Contrastingly, although managers are somewhat more likely to vote for the Bloc, we do not detect much class differentiation by sector in voting for the Bloc.

In addition, (H4) posits that the class gradient will be steeper for private sector employees than public sector employees for both the NDP and Bloc. We find no discernible difference for the Bloc since there is already a null class effect. But for the NDP we see that private sector managers and professionals are largely driving the voting patterns for the party. This is because the gradient is roughly four times as large for the private sector compared to the public sector in NDP voting, and as mentioned, private sector managers and professionals are comparatively highly averse to

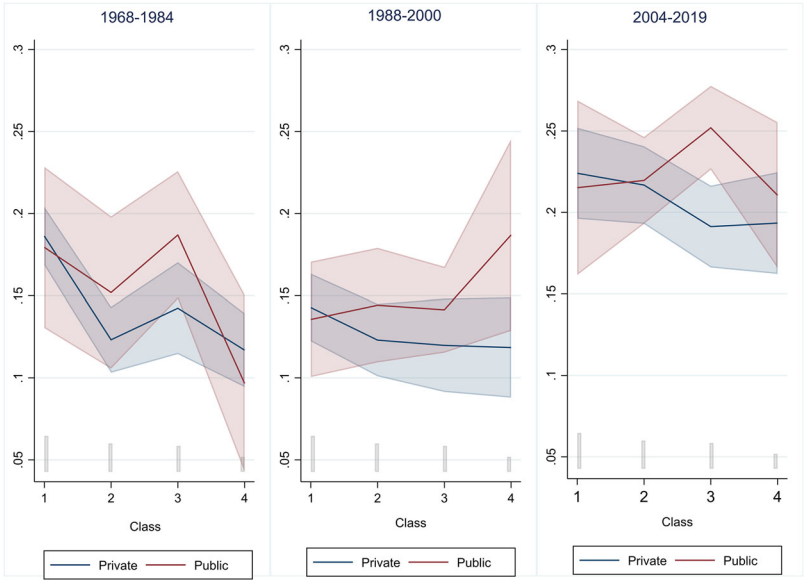


**FIGURE 3** | Marginal effects of an interaction predicting voting for the NDP by class and sector, with 95% CIs. Values are drawn from logistic regression models demographic controls including age, gender, income, region, religion and union status. Full models are in Table A6 in the appendix. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

the NDP compared to their public sector equivalents, while the sectoral difference for the working class and routine non-manual class is quite low.

When we further extend this analysis by time, some specific patterns emerge. Figure 3 shows the effect of sectoral employment by social class disaggregated into three time periods of roughly equal length. Election-specific analyses are not feasible since the occupational sample size is too small per election. From here we observe that the sectoral class pattern in support for the NDP only emerges in the late 1980s. Until 1988, class patterns of support for the NDP do not differ too much by sector and the interaction displays a fairly limited effect. However, after 1988 the interaction is statistically significant in both later periods at ($p < 0.1$), and a large gap emerges between managers by sector for the first time, which decreases after the 2004 election, but is replaced by a large gap emerging by professionals. We also see increasing support for the NDP in the public sector by class over time. In addition, no real difference between working class voting for the NDP by sector occurs over time and the small difference for the routine non-manual class, with public sector workers displaying greater support than the private sector holding until 2004, before disappearing.

## 4.3 | Turnout

We now turn to consider a different dependent variable—turnout (H2a) posits that public sector employees are more likely to vote than their private sector counterparts due in part to a heightened sense of civic duty. Figure 4 summarizes the independent influence of public sector status by displaying the sector point estimates of logit coefficients with their 95% confidence intervals (CIs), for each national election. We find decidedly mixed results. Overall, public sector employment is positively associated with higher turnout in seven elections, negatively associated in five elections, and null in two elections. As for the time trend, until 2004 public sector employment tended to be positively related, whereas it has been negatively related since. However, in only the 2019 election does sector attain statistical significance, via a negative association with turnout. Therefore, regression analysis reveals that sectoral employment does not affect turnout likelihood in Canada and we do not find evidence in support of (H2a). This aligns with the findings of Rounce and Levasseur (2015) at the provincial level in Canada.

Next, we consider the conditional effect of occupation status on sectoral turnout (H2b). We do so by estimating a pooled logistic regression model, which includes the same controls and election fixed effects, as well as an interaction between sector and class. Figure 5 displays the marginal effects of the interaction, which is negative but non-significant. We can see that working class individuals vote at significantly lower rates than the other classes, which aligns with the findings of Polacko (2025). However, most importantly, we can see that class does not moderate the relationship between sector and turnout, as the interaction varies very little by class. It shows that public-sector working-class individuals are marginally more likely to vote than private sector working class individuals, and that public sector routine non-manual, professionals, and managers are marginally less likely to vote than their counterparts in the private sector. Thus, in contrast to partisan voting, we do not find that class plays a moderating role in voting when it comes to political participation (H2b).

## 4.4 | Political Attitudes

While public sector employees are more likely to vote for the NDP than private sector employees (H1a), the third hypothesis seeks to answer if this is being driven by any specific political attitudes. To test this, we analyze the ideological orientations by sector, for 8 different key issues (*state responsibility*, *redistribution*,

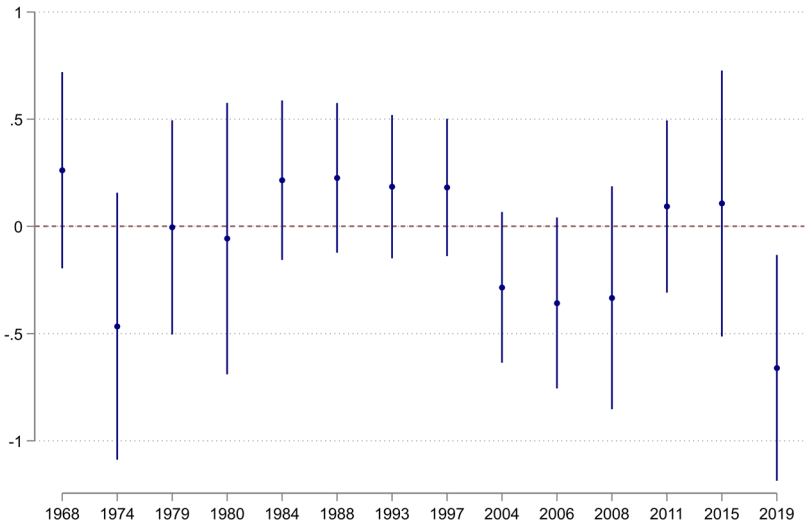


**FIGURE 4** | Logit coefficients with 95% CIs from regressions predicting turnout by election (1968–2019). Includes age, class, degree, gender, income, region, religion and union status as controls. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

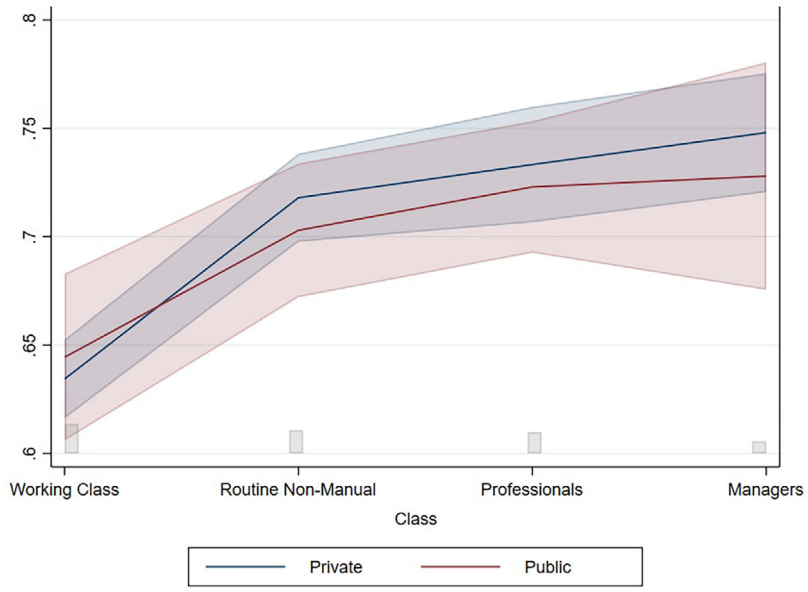


**FIGURE 5** | Marginal effects of interactions between class and sector on predicting turnout. Includes age, degree, gender, income, region, religion and union status as controls, with 95% CIs. From pooled logistic regressions. Full model in Table A7 in the appendix. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

*welfare spending*, *childcare*, *racial minorities*, *women*, *gay rights* and *immigration*). For each issue (rescaled 0–1, left-right) we undertake a pooled linear regression, with election fixed effects, of each issue in turn. Table 2 displays the results. We note three major findings. First, public sector employees are significantly more leftist on the economic dimension, as each of the three economic issues is negative and statistically significant. Second, the cultural dimension does not factor nearly as much, as only attitudes towards *racial minorities* are statistically significant. Public sector employees are more leftist on *racial minorities* and *gay rights*, but attitudes towards women displays a null effect. Third, *state responsibility* displays by far the strongest effect for the public sector, more than twice as large as any other issue, and is significant at ($p < 0.001$). This finding is unsurprising, considering the question directly mentions sector and pertains to the role of the public sector versus the private sector in job creation.

Next, we consider the conditional effect of occupational status by sector on political attitudes (H3b). We do so by estimating the same models from Table 2, except that we also include an interaction between class and sector. Figure 6 displays the marginal effects for each of the economic dimension interactions. We see similar effects for each case. We note four findings for the economic dimension. First, there is very little sectoral differentiation by class in economic attitudes for the working class. Second, there is a substantial linear leftward movement by class for all four economic variables, but most notably over

**TABLE 2** | Beta coefficients from pooled linear regressions predicting political attitudes, with standard errors in parentheses.

| | (1) Public vs. private | (2) Redistri-bution | (3) Welfare spend | (4) Childcare | (5) Racial minorities | (6) Women | (7) LGBTQ+ | (8) Immigr-ation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Public sector | −0.035*** | −0.013* | −0.013+ | −0.042** | −0.016** | −0.001 | −0.005 | −0.001 |
| | (0.007) | (0.006) | (0.007) | (0.016) | (0.006) | (0.004) | (0.007) | (0.007) |
| Age | 0.002*** | −0.001*** | −0.003*** | −0.003*** | 0.001** | −0.001*** | 0.003*** | −0.001*** |
| | (0.000) | (0.000) | (0.000) | (0.001) | (0.000) | (0.000) | (0.000) | (0.000) |
| Atlantic | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* |
| Quebec | 0.086*** | −0.015+ | 0.036** | 0.191*** | 0.004 | −0.015* | −0.039*** | 0.005 |
| | (0.011) | (0.009) | (0.011) | (0.023) | (0.008) | (0.007) | (0.011) | (0.010) |
| Ontario | −0.009 | 0.047*** | 0.096*** | 0.063** | 0.056*** | 0.022*** | 0.035*** | 0.057*** |
| | (0.010) | (0.008) | (0.011) | (0.021) | (0.008) | (0.006) | (0.011) | (0.009) |
| West | 0.037*** | 0.065*** | 0.070*** | 0.135*** | 0.090*** | 0.046*** | 0.052*** | 0.046*** |
| | (0.010) | (0.008) | (0.011) | (0.022) | (0.008) | (0.006) | (0.010) | (0.009) |
| Male | 0.057*** | 0.045*** | 0.015* | 0.039** | 0.019*** | 0.047*** | 0.075*** | −0.053*** |
| | (0.006) | (0.005) | (0.007) | (0.014) | (0.005) | (0.004) | (0.007) | (0.006) |
| Income | 0.005* | 0.030*** | 0.028*** | 0.011+ | 0.017*** | 0.014*** | −0.011*** | −0.008*** |
| | (0.003) | (0.002) | (0.003) | (0.006) | (0.002) | (0.002) | (0.003) | (0.002) |
| Degree | −0.046*** | 0.005 | −0.061*** | 0.006 | −0.050*** | −0.008 | −0.043*** | −0.112*** |
| | (0.008) | (0.006) | (0.008) | (0.016) | (0.006) | (0.005) | (0.008) | (0.007) |
| No religion | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* |

(Continues)

**TABLE 2** | (Continued)

| | (1) Public vs. private | (2) Redistri-bution | (3) Welfare spend | (4) Childcare | (5) Racial minorities | (6) Women | (7) LGBTQ+ | (8) Immigr-ation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Catholic | 0.035*** | 0.014* | 0.052*** | 0.108*** | 0.021** | −0.001 | 0.122*** | 0.066*** |
| | (0.009) | (0.007) | (0.009) | (0.018) | (0.007) | (0.005) | (0.009) | (0.008) |
| Protestant | 0.040*** | 0.049*** | 0.055*** | 0.122*** | 0.051*** | 0.040*** | 0.165*** | 0.079*** |
| | (0.009) | (0.007) | (0.009) | (0.018) | (0.007) | (0.005) | (0.009) | (0.008) |
| Other | 0.024 | −0.019 | 0.014 | 0.095** | −0.053*** | −0.018+ | 0.117*** | −0.040** |
| | (0.015) | (0.012) | (0.017) | (0.036) | (0.012) | (0.010) | (0.016) | (0.014) |
| Union | −0.043*** | −0.037*** | −0.018** | −0.028+ | −0.010* | −0.017*** | −0.030*** | 0.001 |
| | (0.007) | (0.005) | (0.007) | (0.015) | (0.005) | (0.004) | (0.007) | (0.006) |
| Working class | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* | *ref* |
| Routine NMC | −0.026** | 0.009 | 0.010 | −0.033 | −0.018** | 0.008 | −0.056*** | −0.030*** |
| | (0.009) | (0.007) | (0.009) | (0.020) | (0.007) | (0.005) | (0.009) | (0.008) |
| Professionals | −0.036*** | 0.024** | −0.031** | −0.024 | −0.027*** | 0.020*** | −0.076*** | −0.094*** |
| | (0.010) | (0.008) | (0.010) | (0.023) | (0.008) | (0.006) | (0.010) | (0.009) |
| Managers | 0.009 | 0.034*** | 0.001 | −0.032 | −0.021* | 0.020** | −0.088*** | −0.086*** |
| | (0.011) | (0.009) | (0.011) | (0.025) | (0.008) | (0.006) | (0.011) | (0.010) |
| Constant | 0.236*** | 0.205*** | 0.349*** | 0.320*** | 0.271*** | 0.180*** | 0.062** | 0.740*** |
| | (0.019) | (0.016) | (0.020) | (0.043) | (0.014) | (0.011) | (0.020) | (0.017) |
| *N* | 13,535 | 10,328 | 11,824 | 4936 | 13,189 | 15,557 | 12,296 | 13,994 |
| *Fixed effects* | YEAR | YEAR | YEAR | YEAR | YEAR | YEAR | YEAR | YEAR |
| $R^2$ | 0.05 | 0.10 | 0.05 | 0.04 | 0.08 | 0.06 | 0.18 | 0.15 |

$^{+}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

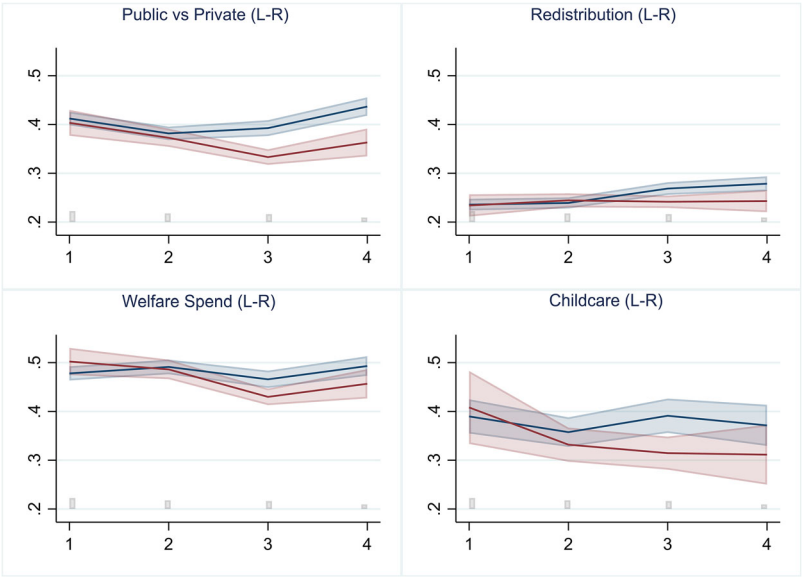


**FIGURE 6** | Marginal effects of interactions between class and sector on predicting economic attitudes. Includes age, degree, gender, income, region, religion and union status as controls, with 95% CIs. From pooled linear regressions. Full models available in Table A8 in the appendix. Blue = private sector; Red = public sector. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

*state responsibility*. Both professionals and managers in the public sector are significantly more leftist on *state responsibility* by roughly 0.07 points more than their counterparts in the private sector. They are also significantly more leftist than the working class and routine non-manual in the public sector on this attitude. Third, class does not moderate support for *redistribution* for the public sector, but it does so for the private sector, as professionals and managers are roughly 0.03 and 0.05 points respectively more right-wing here than the working class. Last, we find strong overall support that class moderates economic attitudes by sector, as professionals and managers in the public sector are significantly more leftist on the economy than higher status individuals in the private sector. This is even the case for routine non-manual public sector individuals when questioned on *state responsibility* and *childcare*.

Last, we examine occupational status by sector for socio-cultural attitudes. Figure 7 shows that the effects are much more limited for this dimension as only attitudes towards *racial minorities* displays a significant difference between the public and private sector. However, it does so only for professionals, and to a much lower extent than for *state responsibility* and *childcare*. Attitudes towards *women* displays a null effect. Attitudes towards *gay rights* and *immigration* display some class effect, similar to the economic attitudes, but they are not statistically significant. Here, public sector individuals in the working class are marginally more right-wing than their private sector counterparts, however, public sector professionals and managers are slightly more leftist than their private sector counterparts.

Overall, the political attitude results find support for the notion that class moderates sector status for economic attitudes, but not for socio-cultural attitudes. We also find that higher status public sector employees are more economically leftist than lower status public sector employees, except for attitudes towards redistribution. This shows that support for *redistribution* is more directly related to class status than *state responsibility* and attitudes towards *childcare* and *welfare spending*. Here, we see some evidence for (H5), as when it comes to *redistribution*, we see a steeper class gradient in the private sector because professionals and managers in the private sector are comparatively much less pro-redistribution than their counterparts in the public sector. However, we see that the class gradient is steeper for the public sector when it comes to *state responsibility* and *childcare*, as public sector managers and professionals are comparatively much more leftist on both issues compared to their private sector counterparts, while again the sectoral differences for the working class and routine non-manual class is quite low for both issues. Thus, for (H5), we find that higher occupational status public sector employees are more likely to diverge more from their private sector counterparts on issues of social investment such as *childcare* and the size of the public sector (*state responsibility*), than on issues of *redistribution*, and to a lesser extent social consumption (*welfare spending*).

We also examine the time trends in political attitudes by splitting the same analyses into pre- and post-2004 periods, similar to the party voting split analysis. The results find little difference in time period beyond the *gay rights* interaction being stronger and significant in the latter period. This is not surprising, since politicization and movement on this issue did not change much in the earlier period.

## 5 | Conclusion

This paper had two objectives. The first was empirical and descriptive. Despite the rhetoric about sectoral differences in compensation and job quality becoming central to the organization of politics, very little has been done in four decades to study the question in Canada. Using hypotheses drawn from the BVM, we find that the class voting that Blais et al. (1990) found emerging

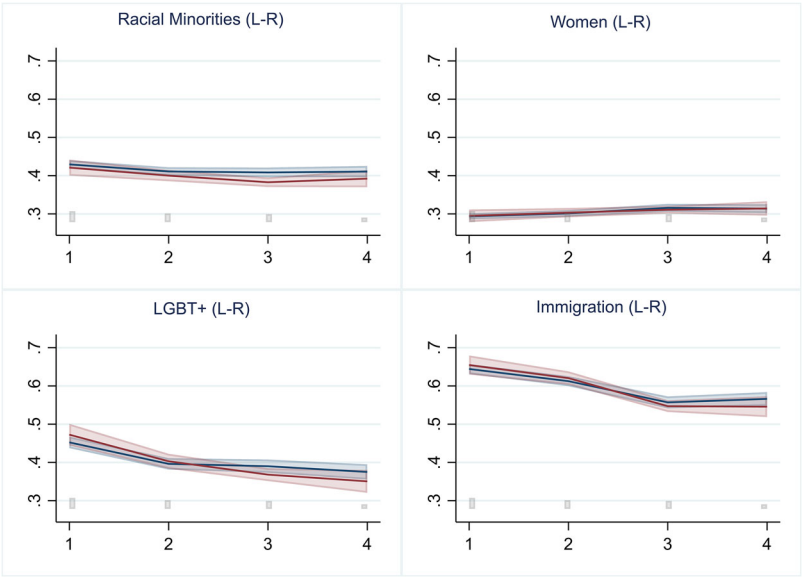


**FIGURE 7** | Marginal effects of interactions between class and sector on predicting socio-cultural attitudes. Includes age, degree, gender, income, region, religion and union status as controls, with 95% CIs. From pooled linear regressions. Full models available in Table A8 in the appendix. Blue = private sector; Red = public sector. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

in the 1980s has persisted and even grown over time. While this is consistent in direction, it is not of a sufficient magnitude to support the claims found in popular conservative commentary about the influence of a "public class" in politics. The presence of this vote for the typically third or fourth place NDP, and its absence for the more electorally viable Liberals, also complicates such arguments. Our finding that public sector workers do not vote at higher rates than private sector workers also temper the view that the electoral system is disproportionately influenced by self-interested public sector workers. The attitudinal differences between sectors are nevertheless clearly present, although these are clearest on economic rather than cultural issues. Beyond a slight difference in attitudes for racial minorities, the public sector workforce is not visibly driving the culture wars.

The paper's second objective was to engage with the literature on sectoral voting. In terms of the straightforward testing of the core BVM hypotheses, we note findings in support of public sector voting for the left and for public sector workers holding more leftist attitudes, but they are not more likely to turnout. The findings for turnout and attitudes are broadly in line with recent studies, but the strengthening of the sectoral vote stands out given the greater difficulty of finding this effect in other countries in recent years.

We followed more recent literature and complexified this analysis by considering the potential moderating effect of class. When it came to voting, this impact was evident for the NDP but not for the Bloc Québécois. The public/private differences are considerable for professionals but not for the working class. It would suggest that the NDP is a coalition of working-class voters and public sector professionals. Applying the interaction of class and sector to a battery of economic and cultural attitudes revealed a variegated picture. Higher status public sector workers proved to hold stronger left-wing views than working class respondents, or their private sector counterparts on issues of public sector responsibility and welfare spending, but not on redistribution. The interactions were much less successful in predicting socio-cultural attitudes. This finding is counterintuitive given work on the "polarity reversal," where the higher educated become the core electoral constituency for the left but are mobilized more by cultural than economic appeals (Kitschelt and Rehm 2023). It nevertheless is consistent with an understanding of sectoral voting being driven by the material interests of public sector professionals in seeing a larger state.

## Endnotes

[1] *Sector* status is not available in 1965, 1972, and 2021.

[2] Conservative vote is the amalgamated vote of right-wing parties that split off or merged with the Conservative Party—including Reform, Canadian Alliance, and the People's Party. The results do not change substantively when these parties are split out (see Appendix A3).

[3] See Appendix A4 for RILE and CHES calculations.

[4] *Turnout* is unavailable in 1972.

[5] This procedure allows for the calculation of turnout rates under the assumption that response and reporting bias is evenly distributed among sectoral groups. For example, official turnout in the 1993 election was 70.9% but in the CES it was 87.4%. Thus, voters are weighted downwards and receive a weight of 0.86, and non-voters are weighted upwards to 2.07.

[6] *Welfare spending* is not available in 2019.

[7] *Childcare* is only available from 2006 to 2015.

[8] For attitudes toward *women*, in 1984 the question differs slightly in asking whether the government should increase women's job opportunities.

[9] *Gay rights* is based on a question whether gays and lesbians should be allowed to marry (1993–2015). In 1988 it is based on whether they should

they be granted equal rights, and in 2019 based on the question "how much should be done for gays and lesbians?"

[10] The company type question was addressed only to nonmanual workers in 1974. Thus, we are only able to classify respondents who were later re-interviewed in the 1979 study (1974–1980 was a panel study) when measuring sector in 1974.

[11] *Class* is unavailable in 2000.

[12] The managers category includes anyone with self-reported managerial authority across the different skill types, including for example, school principals but also managers in manufacturing, retail, or sales sectors. Professionals includes teachers, university professors, judges, and social workers, etc.

[13] The routine non-manual category includes occupations such as property administrators, executive assistants, legal administrative assistants, cashiers, and retail salespeople, etc.

[14] The working-class category includes boilermakers, ironworkers, delivery, and courier drivers, etc.

[15] For 1972, *age* is only included as 11 categories; therefore, all respondents within a category are assigned the median of their respective category.

[16] Respondents were normally given the option of providing total household *income* or identifying their placement within categories. The coding of income is complicated for this reason, due to the lack of consistency in the inclusion of either option for each wave and due to the real value of the dollar changing substantially from 1968 to 2019. As a remedy, respondents are divided into roughly even terciles that come closest to matching the tercile boundaries provided by the nearest five-year census.

[17] Due to *union* status being inconsistently asked, the variable measures household union membership every election except in 1988 and 2019, where respondent status only is measured.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

**Supporting File 1**: cars70014-sup-0001-SuppMatt.docx