



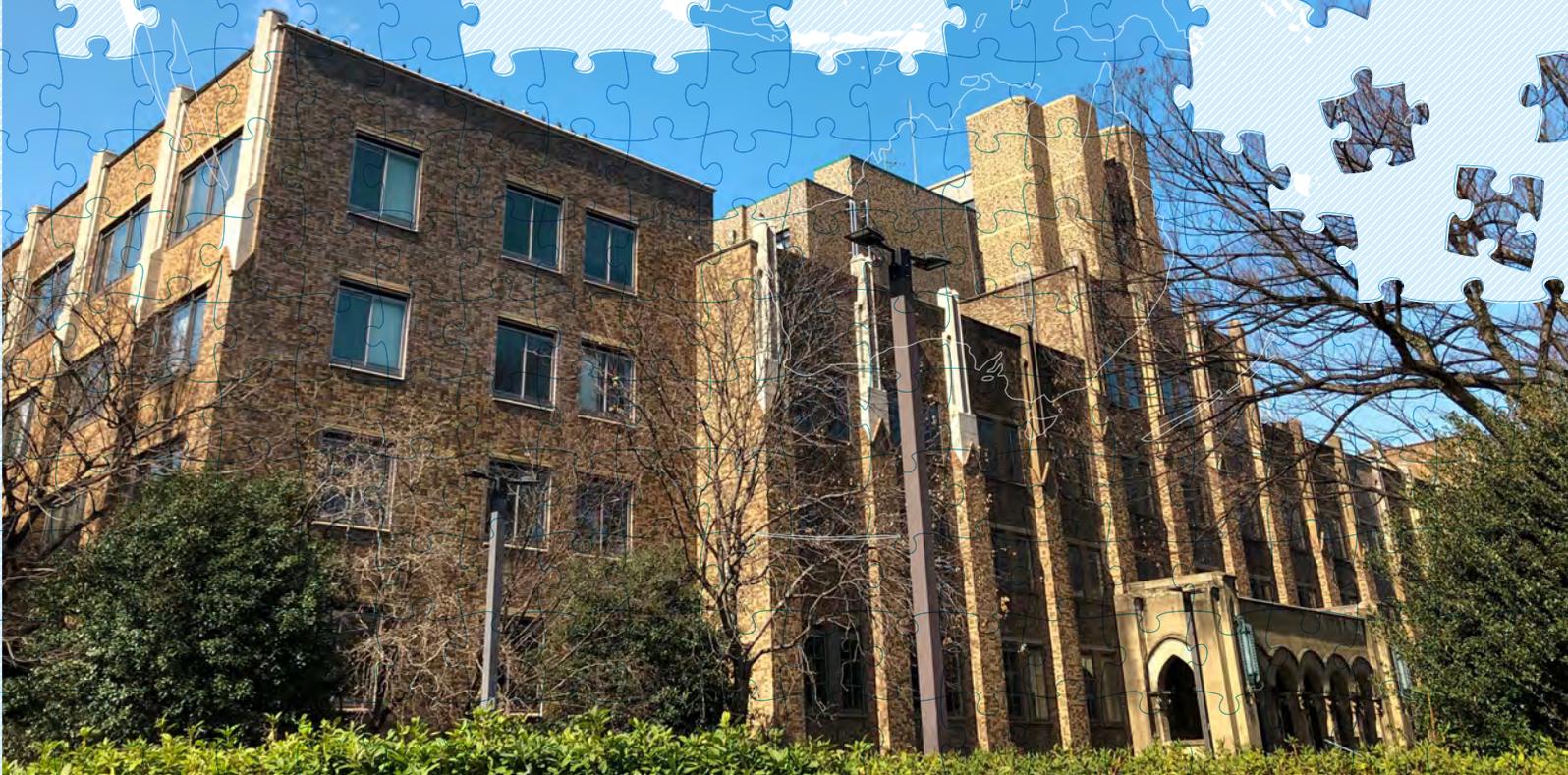
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Reconfiguring Class Voting in a Dominant-Party Democracy: Horizontal Differentiation and Value-Mediated Political Cleavages in Japan



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Reconfiguring Class Voting in a Dominant-Party Democracy: Horizontal Differentiation and Value-Mediated Political Cleavages in Japan

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Abstract

This study examines whether class voting persists in Japan, a dominant-party democracy characterized by weak ideological polarization and the absence of stable left–right competition. While conventional theories suggest that such institutional contexts weaken class politics, this paper demonstrates that class-based political divisions have been reconfigured rather than eliminated.

Using data from the Stratification and Social Psychology Survey (SSP) 2015 and applying Oesch’s occupational class schema, the analysis focuses on horizontal differentiation within the upper occupational strata. It investigates whether occupational differentiation shapes redistribution attitudes and whether these value orientations mediate the relationship between occupational position and party support.

The results reveal systematic differences in redistribution preferences across occupational groups. Socio-cultural elites exhibit stronger redistributive preferences, whereas managerial elites show weaker support, even after controlling for education, income and demographic factors. These differences extend to party support: socio-cultural elites are less likely to support the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), while managerial elites are more likely to do so. Structural equation modeling further confirms that redistribution preferences partially mediate the relationship between occupational differentiation and party support.

These findings demonstrate that class voting in Japan persists in a reconfigured form shaped by horizontal differentiation within the upper occupational strata. More broadly, the results suggest that apparent class dealignment may reflect the limitations of vertical class measures rather than the disappearance of class-based political conflict.

Keywords:

Class voting; Dominant-party democracy; Horizontal differentiation; Occupational class; Japan

1. Introduction

The relationship between social class and party support—commonly referred to as class voting—has long been central to political sociology. Yet whether class voting persists in political systems lacking clear left–right competition remains an open question.

This study argues that class voting in Japan has not disappeared but has been fundamentally reconfigured. Rather than declining under a dominant-party system, class-based political divisions persist in a form shaped by horizontal differentiation within the upper occupational strata.

Class voting was originally conceptualized in the context of industrial societies as a stable linkage between social structure and political alignment. The “freezing thesis” (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) and subsequent empirical work (Rose and Urwin 1970) suggested that party systems in Western democracies became structured around enduring class cleavages, particularly between manual workers and left parties and between the bourgeoisie and right parties.

Since the 1970s, however, this seemingly stable linkage has been increasingly questioned. Processes of deindustrialization, educational expansion, and value change have led scholars to debate whether class voting has declined (dealignment) or been transformed (realignment). The central issue is no longer whether class matters, but how class continues to shape political preferences in recent decades.

The transformation of advanced capitalist economies—characterized by the expansion of service-sector employment, educational upgrading, and rapid technological change—has fundamentally reshaped occupational structures. In particular, the growth of professional and interpersonal service occupations within the upper tiers of the occupational hierarchy has generated increasing heterogeneity within elite strata (Esping-Andersen 1999; Oesch 2013a). As a result, the traditional vertical divide between manual and non-manual workers has become insufficient for explaining contemporary political alignments.

In response, Oesch (2006, 2022) proposed a reconceptualization of class structure that emphasizes horizontal differentiation based on distinct “work logics” (technical, organizational, interpersonal, and independent). This framework reveals that professional and managerial occupations—often treated as a unified category—exhibit systematically different value orientations and political tendencies. Rather than indicating the disappearance of class voting, these developments suggest its reconfiguration along new axes within the upper strata.

However, much of the literature on class realignment has focused on competitive multiparty systems structured around programmatic left–right competition. The transformation of party systems in Western Europe has provided the empirical foundation for debates on the reconfiguration of class voting.

This raises an important question: can similar mechanisms operate in a dominant-party

democracy such as Japan? Japan is characterized by long-standing dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), relatively weak ideological polarization, and a large proportion of independent voters. The LDP's broad electoral coalition—including agricultural and self-employed sectors—has often been interpreted as evidence that European-style class cleavages are weak or absent (Estevez-Abe 2008; Pekkanen et al. 2016; Reed et al. 2013; Sheiner 2006).

Yet the absence of clear left–right competition does not necessarily imply the disappearance of class-based political differentiation. Instead, class divisions may operate through different mechanisms under a dominant-party system. In particular, post-industrial restructuring combined with rapid technological advancement in recent decades has expanded professional and managerial occupations in Japan in recent decades (Sano 2024), making horizontal differentiation within the upper strata theoretically central to understanding contemporary political conflict.

Against this backdrop, this study examines whether class voting persists in Japan in a reconfigured form. Specifically, it investigates whether horizontal differentiation within the upper occupational strata generates systematic variation in redistribution attitudes and whether these attitudes mediate party support.

This study makes three contributions. First, it advances the class voting literature by demonstrating that political differentiation emerges not only through traditional vertical class conflict but also through horizontal divisions within the upper occupational strata. Second, it contributes to Japanese political sociology by disaggregating professional and managerial occupations, thereby uncovering previously overlooked political divisions within elite strata. Third, it offers broader theoretical implications for the study of dominant-party democracies, showing that value-mediated class cleavages can persist even in the absence of stable programmatic competition.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework. Section 3 describes the data and analytical strategy. Section 4 presents the empirical results. Section 5 discusses the broader implications for understanding class voting in contemporary Japan.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Classical Class Voting and Its Reconsideration

Class voting has long been understood as a structural linkage between social stratification and party alignment: the tendency for people in a particular social class to vote for a given political party or candidate rather than an alternative option, when compared with voters in other classes, as defined by Evans (2017). In its classical formulation, Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) freezing thesis posited that party systems in Western democracies became institutionalized around enduring social cleavages formed during industrialization. Empirical studies such as Rose and

Urwin (1970) reinforced the view that political competition was structured primarily around the economic cleavage between manual workers and the bourgeoisie.

Beginning in the 1970s, however, this interpretation came under sustained critique. Inglehart's (1977) theory of value change and Clark and Lipset's (1991) thesis on the decline of class politics argued that deindustrialization, educational expansion, and the weakening of class identities eroded the once-stable link between class and party support. According to this "dealignment" perspective, voting behavior became increasingly detached from structural class position.

In contrast, proponents of the "realignment" thesis argue that class voting has not disappeared but has been reconfigured (Evans 1999; Evans and Tilley 2017). Rather than dissolving, class-based political divisions have shifted form as social structures themselves have changed.

Importantly, this debate hinges not only on empirical observation but also on conceptualization. As Hout and Laurison (2014) note, conclusions about the persistence or decline of class voting depend heavily on how class is measured. If class continues to be operationalized primarily through the industrial-era manual–non-manual divide, emerging patterns of stratification may remain undetected. Reassessing contemporary class politics therefore requires revisiting the classificatory frameworks used to capture occupational differentiation.

2.2 Post-Industrial Transformation, Recent Social Change, and Horizontal Differentiation

The reconsideration of class voting must be situated within broader structural transformations that have unfolded from the late twentieth century to the present. Since the late twentieth century, deindustrialization, service-sector expansion, educational upgrading, and rapid technological innovation have fundamentally reshaped occupational hierarchies in advanced capitalist societies (Esping-Andersen 1999; Oesch 2013a, 2022). The traditional vertical opposition between manual and non-manual workers no longer captures the multidimensional nature of contemporary stratification.

Esping-Andersen (1999) anticipated that post-industrial transitions would reorganize social stratification beyond the industrial working-class cleavage. Building on this insight, Oesch (2006, 2022) proposed an occupational schema grounded in differentiated "work logics"—technical, organizational, and interpersonal. This framework captures horizontal differentiation within occupational strata, particularly within the expanding upper middle class.

Unlike established occupational class schema developed by Goldthorpe and his colleagues (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Goldthorpe and McKnight 2006), which emphasize employment relations and vertical status differences, Oesch's schema highlights how differences in work content generate distinct social positions. Throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, skill-intensive and interpersonal service occupations have expanded substantially, producing increasing heterogeneity within the professional and managerial strata (Oesch 2006,

2022). Japan has experienced similar structural shifts in occupational structure (Sano 2024).

Empirical research in Europe demonstrates that socio-cultural professionals—whose work is grounded in interpersonal logics—tend to express more culturally liberal and redistributive preferences, whereas managerial occupations—rooted in organizational logics—are more likely to endorse market-oriented positions (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014; Oesch 2008, 2013b; Oesch and Rennwald 2018). These findings suggest that contemporary political cleavages increasingly emerge within upper strata along horizontally differentiated occupational lines. In other words, the expansion of the salaried middle class at the upper levels of the occupational hierarchy—jointly classified as Classes I and II in Goldthorpe’s schema (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992) —together with increasing internal heterogeneity, may have weakened their shared economic interests. As a result, this growing but internally differentiated segment of the electorate has become increasingly important for political parties, providing strong grounds for paying greater attention to horizontal heterogeneity in studies of class voting.

Thus, what has often been interpreted as the decline of class voting may instead reflect the inadequacy of purely vertical class measures. Political differentiation may persist, but through newly salient dimensions shaped by recent occupational restructuring.

2.3 A Mediated Model: Occupational Class, Redistribution, and Party Support

If horizontal occupational differentiation shapes political behavior, through what mechanisms does it operate?

Classical models assumed a relatively direct relationship between economic interests and party support. In Korpi’s (1983) formulation, redistributive conflict structured political alignment: working-class voters supported redistribution, which aligned them with left parties. Class position and party choice were expected to correspond directly.

However, in contemporary contexts, political conflict increasingly involves value-based dimensions that extend beyond material redistribution (Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008; Kitschelt and Rehm 2014). As party systems become less tightly “frozen,” occupational class may influence political behavior indirectly through value formation.

Evans (2017) argues that contemporary class voting should be modeled as a mediated process. Occupational positions provide social contexts that shape normative orientations—such as attitudes toward redistribution—which then influence partisan choice. In institutional contexts lacking strong class-based party structures, this mediation becomes particularly salient.

Applying this logic to horizontal differentiation within the upper strata, distinct work logics may generate systematically different redistribution orientations. Managerial elites may be structurally positioned closer to market-oriented perspectives, whereas socio-cultural professionals may be more supportive of redistribution. Political cleavage, in this view, operates

through a mediated pathway: Occupational class → Redistribution orientation → Party support. This mediated framework directly addresses the research puzzle posed in Section 1: whether class-based political differentiation can persist in a dominant-party democracy where left–right party competition is relatively muted.

2.4 Reassessing Class Politics in Japan

Theoretical developments in class voting have largely emerged from Western European multiparty systems. Japan, characterized by the long-standing dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), presents a distinct institutional setting. The LDP’s broad electoral coalition—including agricultural sectors and self-employed groups—has often been interpreted as evidence that European-style class cleavage is weak or absent (Estevez-Abe 2008; Pekkanen et al. 2016; Sheiner 2006; Reed et al. 2013, Tanabe 2011).

Nevertheless, some empirical research in Japan has demonstrated that class and political attitudes are not unrelated. Yoneda (2018) documents shifts in the composition of LDP supporters, while Tanabe (2018) shows that incorporating value orientations helps clarify the relationship between stratification and party support. Ito (2018) further demonstrates that while class-based alignments historically structured LDP support, more recent patterns reflect the growing importance of economic advantage and authoritarian attitudes rather than occupational class itself. Taken together, these studies suggest that class politics in Japan is more complex than previously assumed.

However, most existing research relies on vertical occupational classifications and treats professional and managerial occupations as unified categories. As a result, horizontal differentiation within the upper strata remains largely unexplored. Given Japan’s recent occupational expansion—particularly in professional and managerial sectors—the question arises whether internal differentiation within the upper strata generates distinct redistribution preferences and partisan alignments.

This study addresses this gap by introducing a framework that explicitly captures horizontal differentiation within the upper occupational strata. It asks whether occupational restructuring in contemporary Japan generates differentiated redistribution orientations and whether these orientations mediate party support under a dominant-party democracy.

By testing this mediated structure empirically, the study re-examines whether class voting persists in Japan—not in its classical vertical form, but as a reconfigured cleavage structured by horizontal occupational differentiation.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1 Data and Analytical Sample

This study uses microdata from the Stratification and Social Psychology Survey (SSP) 2015, a nationally representative cross-sectional survey designed to examine the relationship between social stratification and political attitudes in contemporary Japan. SSP 2015 is particularly well suited to the present analysis because it contains detailed information on political values, party support, and four-digit ISCO occupational codes.

The availability of detailed occupational codes enables the construction of occupational class categories based on Oesch's (2006, 2022) class schema. This schema was developed to capture horizontal differentiation within recent occupational structures, particularly within the upper strata. By applying the Oesch eight-class schema (Oesch 8) to the ISCO-based occupational codes in SSP 2015, this study constructs a modified five-category classification tailored to the research question.

The analytic sample is restricted to currently employed individuals aged 20–64. After excluding cases with missing values on key variables, the final sample consists of $N = 2,509$ respondents.

Importantly, this study deliberately focuses on the upper occupational strata. Recent social change such as technological development has primarily expanded professional and managerial occupations, making horizontal differentiation most theoretically salient within these groups. While horizontal divisions may also exist within lower strata, the present analysis concentrates on the upper segments of the occupational hierarchy, where the Oesch schema is particularly informative. This focus directly operationalizes the theoretical argument developed in Section 2, which posits that horizontal differentiation within the upper strata constitutes a central mechanism of contemporary class-based political division.

3.2 Occupational Class

The key independent variable is occupational class. The original Oesch eight-class schema (Oesch 2006) distinguishes occupations along two dimensions: a vertical dimension based on skill level and a horizontal dimension based on four types of work logic (technical, organizational, interpersonal, and independent). This corresponds to a 2×4 matrix combining skill levels and work logics.

Since the primary theoretical interest of this study lies in horizontal differentiation within the upper strata, the four lower-skill-level categories are consolidated into a single “non-elite” reference group. This results in five occupational categories including four elite groups and a non-elite group as follows:

1. Technical elites
2. Socio-cultural elites
3. Managerial elites

4. Independent elites
5. Non-elite (reference category)

This aggregation strategy serves two purposes. First, it sharpens analytical focus on heterogeneity within the upper occupational strata. Second, it ensures sufficient statistical power for comparison across elite categories.

Although the Oesch schema distinguishes independent occupations as a separate category, the relatively small number of independent elites in the present dataset limits detailed subgroup analysis. Therefore, while retained in descriptive and regression models, this group is not the primary focus of interpretation.

This approach differs from most previous research in Japanese political sociology, which typically treats professionals and managers as a single category or relies on vertical stratification indicators such as major occupational groups or employment status (employee vs. self-employed). By contrast, the present study explicitly captures horizontal differentiation within upper-level occupations.

3.3 Other Variables

Redistribution Orientation

Redistribution attitudes function as the mediating variable in the theoretical framework. A composite redistribution orientation index is constructed using items from the political attitude module of SSP 2015. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) is employed to extract the dominant latent dimension underlying these items. The first principal component accounts for the largest proportion of shared variance and is interpreted as a general redistribution orientation factor. The resulting standardized index is used in subsequent analyses.

Party Support

Party support is measured as a binary variable indicating support for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) versus all other options. This binary specification captures the primary cleavage between LDP supporters and all other respondents, including opposition party supporters and non-affiliates. Given Japan's long-standing dominant-party system, LDP support represents the primary axis of partisan alignment. While Japan does not exhibit a fully polarized left-right party structure comparable to Western Europe (Reed et al. 2013), LDP support remains the most meaningful indicator of partisan cleavage. In the context of a dominant-party democracy, variation in support for the LDP versus alternative parties and independent voters constitutes the primary observable expression of partisan differentiation.

Control Variables

The following control variables are included: Gender, age, educational attainment and individual

income. Education and income are particularly important, as they may independently shape redistribution attitudes and party preference.

3.4 Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeds in three stages.

First, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models estimate the relationship between occupational class and redistribution orientation. These models assess whether horizontally differentiated elite categories exhibit systematically different redistribution preferences, net of demographic and socioeconomic controls.

Second, binary logistic regression models examine the association between occupational class and LDP support. Models are estimated sequentially to assess whether the inclusion of redistribution attitudes attenuates the occupational class coefficients. This step provides preliminary evidence of mediation.

Third, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is employed to test the mediated structure explicitly. The SEM framework allows simultaneous estimation of: Occupational class → Redistribution orientation → Party support

This confirmatory modeling strategy directly tests the mediated framework proposed in Section 2, evaluating whether occupational class influences party support indirectly through redistribution orientation. By estimating direct and indirect paths simultaneously, the SEM approach allows a more precise assessment of whether class-based political differentiation in Japan operates through a value-mediated mechanism under a dominant-party system.

Together, this stepwise strategy enables a systematic evaluation of whether class-based political differentiation in Japan operates through a value-mediated mechanism within the upper occupational strata.

4. Results

4.1 Construction of Key Variables

Before conducting the empirical analysis outlined in the previous section, the key variables representing redistribution attitudes and occupational stratification were operationalized.

First, to construct an indicator capturing redistribution orientation, a principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted using survey items in SSP 2015 measuring attitudes toward inequality and redistribution as follows. Each item was recoded so that higher values represent stronger agreement with redistributive principles.

- q1. If equal opportunities are provided, income differences resulting from competition are acceptable
- q2. Reducing inequality is more important than free competition

- q3. It is acceptable if inequality increases in Japan in the future
- q4. The gap in wealth in Japan today is too large

The PCA results are presented in Table 1. A single dominant component with an eigenvalue greater than one was extracted¹. The items “reducing inequality over free competition” and “unacceptability of future inequality” display the highest factor loadings (0.778 and 0.775, respectively). The Cronbach’s alpha of the scale is 0.67, indicating acceptable internal consistency for a composite measure of redistribution attitudes. This index is used in subsequent analyses.

Table 1 PCA loadings of redistribution items

Factor Loadings	
q1	0.669
q2	0.775
q3	0.778
q4	0.606

Notes: eigenvalue greater than 1 and loading greater than 0.6.

Next, occupational stratification was operationalized using the class schema developed by Oesch (2006, 2022). This schema is particularly suited for examining horizontal differentiation within the upper occupational strata, which has expanded with the growth of the service sector. Using the four-digit ISCO codes available in SSP 2015, an eight-category Oesch schema was constructed. For analytical clarity, the four lower-tier occupational groups were combined into a single non-elite category.

The resulting five occupational class categories are shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Occupational class categories used for analyses

technical elites	organizational elites	interpersonal elites	independent elites
non-elites			

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for all variables used in the analysis.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics for variables used in the analysis

Variables	mean/counts (sd /%)	min	max
N		2,509	
Redistribution (higher = egalitarian)	-0.016 (1.005)	-3.4	2.273
LDP support			
Non-LDP(=0)	1,574 (62.7%)	0	1
Support LDP (=1)	935 (37.3%)	0	1
Elite type (4+non)			
technical elites	78 (3.1%)	0	1
managerial elites	112 (4.5%)	0	1
socio-cultural elites	92 (3.7%)	0	1
independent elites	31 (1.2%)	0	1
non-elites	2,196 (87.5%)	0	1
Sex			
male	1,279 (51.0%)	0	1
female	1,230 (49.0%)	0	1
Age		20	64
Education			
secondary	1,086 (43.3%)	0	1
tech_college	337 (13.4%)	0	1
2year_college	357 (14.2%)	0	1
university	653 (26.0%)	0	1
master_or_above	76 (3.0%)	0	1
years of education	13.691 (2.053)	9	21
income_of_respondents			
Bottom 20%	386 (15.4%)	0	1
2nd quintile	460 (18.3%)	0	1
Middle 20%	597 (23.8%)	0	1
4th quintile	563 (22.4%)	0	1
Top 20%	503 (20.0%)	0	1

4.2 Descriptive Patterns

Before turning to multivariate analyses, Table 4 and Table 5 present descriptive statistics of redistribution attitudes and LDP support across occupational class categories.

The descriptive patterns already suggest notable heterogeneity within the upper strata. In Table 4, socio-cultural elites exhibit stronger redistributive preferences compared with other elite groups, while managerial and technical elites display more market-oriented attitudes.

In terms of party support, in Table 5, socio-cultural elites show the lowest level of support for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), whereas managerial and technical elites display substantially higher support rates.

These descriptive patterns suggest that the upper occupational strata in Japan are not politically homogeneous. The following multivariate analyses examine whether these differences persist after controlling for demographic and socioeconomic factors.

Table 4 Redistribution attitudes by occupational class

	Elite groups					Total
	technical elites	managerial elites	socio-cultural elites	independent elites	non-elites	
Redistribution Preferences (higher=egalitarian) mean (sd)	-0.233 (1.052)	-0.484 (1.073)	0.162 (0.945)	-0.112 (0.999)	0.066 (0.969)	-0.016 (1.005)
N	230	284	274	31	1,690	2,509

Table 5 LDP support by occupational class

	Elite groups					Total
	technical elites	managerial elites	socio-cultural elites	independent elites	non-elites	
LDP support mean (sd)	0.430 (0.496)	0.454 (0.499)	0.270 (0.445)	0.258 (0.445)	0.370 (0.483)	0.373 (0.484)
N	230	284	274	31	1,690	2,509

4.3 OLS on Redistribution Attitudes

This section examines whether horizontal differentiation within the upper occupational classes translates into distinct redistributive orientations. Table 6 presents the results of OLS regression models predicting redistribution attitudes.

In Model 1, which does not include control variables, technical elites and managerial elites exhibit significantly weaker redistributive preferences relative to non-elites, whereas socio-cultural elites do not differ significantly from the reference group.

After controlling for demographic characteristics in Model 2 and for socio-economic resources such as education and income in Model 3, a clearer pattern of horizontal differentiation emerges.

In the fully specified model (Model 3), managerial elites display significantly weaker redistributive preferences, while socio-cultural elites exhibit significantly stronger redistributive orientations relative to non-elites. Technical elites occupy an intermediate position between these two groups.

Table 6 OLS regression on redistribution attitudes

Dependent variable=Redistribution preferences (higher=egalitarian)			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
technical elites	-0.299*** (0.073)	-0.155** (0.073)	0.045 (0.071)
managerial elites	-0.550*** (0.068)	-0.444*** (0.070)	-0.189*** (0.072)
socio-cultural elites	0.096 (0.062)	0.070 (0.060)	0.329*** (0.064)
independent elites	-0.178 (0.178)	-0.175 (0.174)	-0.082 (0.160)
non-elites	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
Gender			
men		0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
women		0.321*** (0.041)	0.153*** (0.046)
Age		0.015*** (0.002)	0.014*** (0.002)
Education			
secondary			0.000 (.)
tech_college			-0.198*** (0.058)
2year_college			-0.320*** (0.058)
university			-0.352*** (0.053)
master_or_above			-0.572*** (0.124)
Income			
bottom 20%			0.000 (.)
2nd quintile			0.007 (0.060)
middle 20%			-0.052 (0.060)
4th quintile			-0.299*** (0.066)
top 20%			-0.440*** (0.073)
Constant	0.066*** (0.024)	-0.781*** (0.083)	-0.404*** (0.100)
R ²	0.037	0.088	0.139
N	2509	2509	2509

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses

* p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

Figure 1 illustrates the marginal effects of occupational class categories based on Model 3². Within the upper strata, a clear contrast emerges between socio-cultural elites and managerial elites. Socio-cultural elites demonstrate stronger redistributive preferences, whereas managerial elites exhibit weaker support for redistribution.

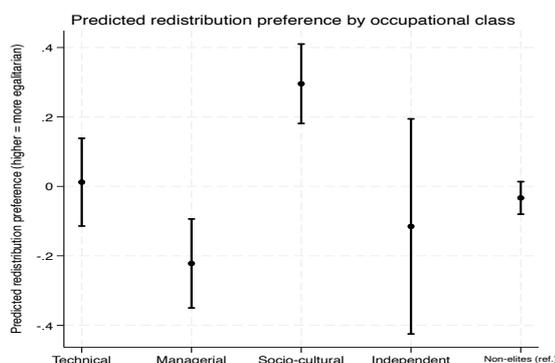


Figure 1 Predicted redistribution preference by occupational class

Notes: Points represent predicted values with 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are based on Model 3 in Table 6. Higher values indicate stronger redistributive preferences. The reference category for occupational class is non-elites. Estimates for the independent category should be interpreted with caution due to the small number of observations.

Importantly, educational attainment and income also remain statistically significant predictors of redistribution attitudes as shown in Model 3: Higher levels of education and income are both associated with weaker redistributive preferences. This indicates that redistributive orientation is shaped not only by vertical socioeconomic resources but also by occupational-cultural positioning. In other words, horizontal differentiation within the upper strata operates alongside traditional forms of stratification based on education and income.

Taken together, these findings provide empirical support for the horizontal differentiation thesis. The upper occupational strata in Japan are internally divided along distinct value orientations, a pattern consistent with findings from Western research (Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Kitschelt and Rehm 2014).

However, the political implications of this differentiation must be interpreted within the institutional context of Japanese party politics, which has long been characterized by dominant-party competition centered on the LDP.

4.4 Logistic Regression on LDP Support

Table 7 reports the results of binary logistic regression models predicting support for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Model 1 examines the bivariate association between occupational class categories and LDP support. Model 2 introduces demographic and socio-economic controls, and Model 3 adds redistribution attitudes to evaluate potential mediation effects.

Table 7 Logistic Regression Models on LDP support

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
technical elites	0.253* (0.142)	0.248 (0.152)	0.266* (0.154)
managerial elites	0.349*** (0.129)	0.314** (0.143)	0.264* (0.144)
socio-cultural elites	-0.461*** (0.145)	-0.420*** (0.155)	-0.326** (0.156)
independent elites	-0.523 (0.414)	-0.530 (0.412)	-0.557 (0.414)
non-elites	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
Gender			
men		0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
women		-0.162 (0.103)	-0.116 (0.104)
Age			
		0.009** (0.004)	0.013*** (0.004)
Education			
secondary		0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
tech_college		0.040 (0.134)	-0.018 (0.135)
2year_college		0.076 (0.132)	-0.020 (0.134)
university		-0.064 (0.113)	-0.172 (0.115)
master_or_above		-0.281 (0.271)	-0.453* (0.271)
Income			
bottom 20%		0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
2nd quintile		-0.203 (0.145)	-0.205 (0.146)
middle 20%		-0.327** (0.144)	-0.350** (0.144)
4th quintile		0.028 (0.151)	-0.063 (0.152)
top 20%		-0.147 (0.169)	-0.284* (0.171)
Redistribution (higher=egalitarian)			-0.302*** (0.046)
Constant		-0.702*** (0.227)	-0.836*** (0.230)
N	2509	2509	2509
BIC	3326.863	3382.74	3345.868

Notes: Reported as log-odds coefficients; robust Standard errors in parentheses.

* p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

In Models 1 and 2, clear occupational differences emerge. Relative to non-elites, socio-cultural elites are significantly less likely to support the LDP, whereas managerial elites are significantly more likely to do so.

When redistribution attitudes are introduced in Model 3, two important patterns appear. First, redistribution orientation exerts a significant negative effect on LDP support ($\beta = -0.302$), indicating that individuals with stronger redistributive preferences are less likely to support the LDP.

Second, the coefficients for managerial and socio-cultural elites decrease in magnitude after redistribution attitudes are included. This attenuation suggests that part of the occupational effect on party support operates through value orientations. This pattern is consistent with the interpretation that redistribution attitudes partially mediate the relationship between occupational class and party support.

Nevertheless, the persistence of statistically significant occupational coefficients indicates that occupational differentiation also influences party support beyond redistribution preferences alone.

These results point to a mediated structure linking occupational position, value orientation, and partisan alignment, which is examined more systematically using structural equation modeling in the next section.

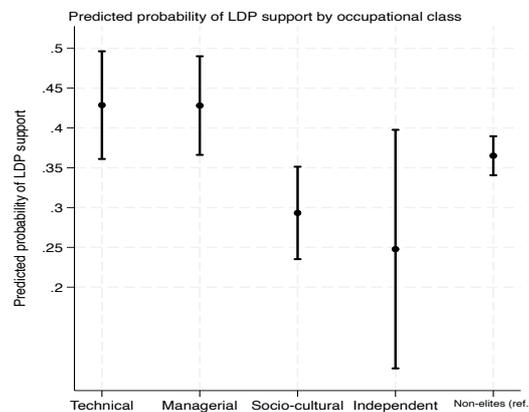


Figure 2 Predicted probability of LDP support by occupational class

Note: Based on Model 3 in Table 7. Estimates for the independent category should be

4.5 Structural Equation Modeling

4.5.1 Analytical Strategy

The regression analyses above suggest that redistribution attitudes may mediate the relationship

between occupational class and support for the LDP.

To evaluate this mediation structure more rigorously, a structural equation model (SEM) is estimated. The model simultaneously specifies three relationships below:

1. occupational class → redistribution attitudes
2. redistribution attitudes → LDP support
3. occupational class → LDP support (direct effects)

Because LDP support is a binary variable, the model is estimated using generalized structural equation modeling (gsem). For comparability, standardized coefficients from a linear SEM are also reported.

This specification corresponds to the mediated framework discussed in Section 2.3, where contemporary class politics operates through value orientations rather than through direct class–party alignment alone.

4.5.2 Results of SEM

The SEM results are presented in Table 8 and Figure 3. First, the path from occupational class to redistribution attitudes (see the upper half of Table 8) confirms the OLS findings. Socio-cultural elites exhibit significantly stronger redistributive preferences, while managerial elites show significantly weaker redistributive orientations relative to non-elites. Technical elites exhibit intermediate levels of redistributive preferences.

Second, redistribution attitudes have a significant negative effect on LDP support (see the lower half of Table 8) that is consistent with the logistic regression results. Individuals with stronger redistributive preferences are less likely to support the LDP.

Third, the direct effects of occupational class on LDP support in the upper half of Table 8 are attenuated once redistribution attitudes are incorporated into the structural model in the lower half of Table 8. This indicates that part of the occupational effect operates through value orientation.

The estimated indirect effects reported in Appendix Table A1 provide additional support for this interpretation. Socio-cultural elites are less likely to support the LDP partly because they exhibit stronger redistributive preferences, whereas managerial elites are more likely to support the LDP partly because they hold weaker redistributive preferences.

These findings are consistent with a pattern of partial mediation linking occupational class, value orientation, and party support.

Table 8 Structural equation model of occupational class on LDP support via redistribution attitudes

	gsem coefficient SE	standardized coefficient SE
Redistribution (higher=egalitarian)		
Occupational Class (ref=non-elites)		
technical elites	0.004	0.001
	-0.069	-0.02
managerial elites	-0.23 **	-0.073 **
	-0.065	-0.022
socio-cultural elites	0.285 **	0.088 **
	-0.064	-0.02
independent elites	-0.088	-0.01
	-0.17	-0.018
Female	0.182 **	0.091 **
	-0.044	-0.022
Age	0.013 **	0.154 **
	-0.002	-0.019
Education years	-0.086 **	-0.177 **
	-0.01	-0.021
Log income	-0.121 **	-0.131 **
	-0.02	-0.022
Intercept	0.957 **	0.953 **
	-0.21	-0.208
LDP Support		
Occupational Class (ref=non-elites)		
technical elites	0.256	0.036
	-0.151	-0.022
managerial elites	0.262	0.041
	-0.142	-0.022
socio-cultural elites	-0.311 *	-0.041 *
	-0.154	-0.02
independent elites	-0.61	-0.03
	-0.417	-0.018
Female	-0.086	-0.021
	-0.099	-0.023
Age	0.013 **	0.07 **
	-0.004	-0.02
eduyear	-0.047 *	-0.046 *
	-0.023	-0.022
Log income	-0.033	-0.016
	-0.046	-0.024
Redistribution (higher=egalitarian)	-0.309 **	-0.146 **
	-0.046	-0.021
Intercept	-0.174	0.94 **
	-0.475	-0.218
var(e.redistribution)	0.877	0.869
	-0.025	-0.012
var(e.ldp)		0.967
		-0.007
ll	-5010.686	-24744.6
Number of observations	2509	2509

* p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

Notes: Path coefficients from gSEM (logit) in the first column and standardized on estimates from SEM (OLS via linear approximation) in the second column for comparability.

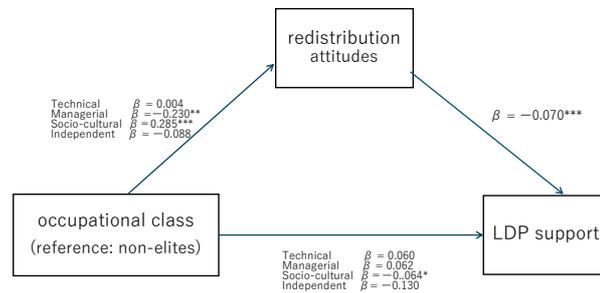


Figure 3 Structural model linking occupational class, redistribution attitudes, and LDP support

Notes: Reported coefficients are standardized estimates corresponding to the second column in Table 8. The reference category for occupational class is non-elites. (***) $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

4.5.3 Interpretation

Taken together, the SEM results demonstrate that occupational differentiation within the upper strata is systematically linked to political attitudes and partisan alignment in Japan.

The contrast between socio-cultural elites and managerial elites operates not only at the level of redistribution attitudes but also in shaping party support.

Importantly, this pattern does not replicate the classic left–right class alignment observed in many European multi-party systems. Instead, the mediated structure unfolds within the institutional context of Japan’s dominant-party system centered on the LDP.

In this sense, class voting has not disappeared in Japan. Rather, it has been reorganized through horizontal differentiation within the upper strata and operates through value mediation under a dominant-party political system.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that class voting in Japan has not disappeared but has been fundamentally reconfigured. It challenges the conventional view that the absence of stable programmatic left–right competition implies the decline of class politics. Rather than assuming dealignment under a dominant-party system, this study examined whether horizontal differentiation within the upper occupational strata generates systematic political divisions.

The findings can be summarized in three main points. First, redistribution attitudes vary systematically across upper occupational groups. Socio-cultural elites exhibit significantly stronger redistributive preferences, whereas managerial elites show weaker support, even after controlling for education, income and demographic factors. These patterns indicate that political value orientations are structured not only by vertical socioeconomic resources but also by horizontally differentiated occupational logics.

Second, these differences extend to party support. Socio-cultural elites are significantly less likely to support the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), whereas managerial elites are more likely to do so. The inclusion of redistribution attitudes attenuates these occupational effects, suggesting that value orientations partially mediate the relationship between occupational position and party support.

Third, the structural equation modeling confirms this mediating mechanism. Occupational differentiation influences party support indirectly through redistribution preferences, demonstrating a value-mediated cleavage structure within the upper strata.

Taken together, these findings provide strong evidence that class voting persists in Japan, but in a reconfigured form shaped by horizontal differentiation within the upper occupational strata. Rather than disappearing, class-based political divisions have shifted from traditional vertical conflicts between manual and non-manual workers to horizontal divisions among elite occupations. This finding also suggests that the apparent decline of class voting in previous research may reflect the limitations of vertical class measures rather than the disappearance of class-based political conflict itself.

This study advances Japanese political sociology by shifting the analytical focus from the erosion of traditional LDP support bases to the internal differentiation of the upper occupational strata. It highlights how structural changes in occupational composition generate new forms of political alignment that have remained largely overlooked in existing research.

More broadly, the findings contribute to the comparative study of class politics by demonstrating that value-mediated class cleavages can persist even within a dominant-party democracy. The Japanese case thus extends existing theories of class voting beyond the context of Western European multiparty systems.

Finally, the results point to the importance of gender in understanding contemporary class politics. Socio-cultural occupations, which exhibit stronger redistributive preferences, are disproportionately composed of women. This suggests that gendered occupational sorting may reinforce value-based political differentiation within the upper strata. Future research should more explicitly examine how gender intersects with occupational class to shape political attitudes and party support.

Despite these contributions, several limitations remain. This study relies on cross-sectional data from SSP 2015, and future research should examine whether similar patterns persist using more recent data. In addition, while the analysis focuses on horizontal differentiation within the upper strata, similar processes may also operate within lower occupational groups, particularly between manual and service-sector employment. Exploring these dynamics would further enhance our understanding of how class-based political divisions evolve in contemporary societies.

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Appendix

Table A1. Decomposition of Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects on LDP Support

Variable	Direct effect	Indirect effect (via redistribution attitudes)	Total effect
Occupational class (reference: Non-elite)			
Technical elites	0.060	−0.000	0.059
Managerial elites	0.062	0.016 **	0.078 *
Socio-cultural elites	−0.064 *	−0.020 ***	−0.084 **
Independent elites	−0.130	0.006	−0.124
Controls			
Female	−0.020	−0.013 ***	−0.033
Age	0.003 ***	−0.001 ***	0.002 *
Education years	−0.011 *	0.007 ***	−0.005
Log income	−0.007	0.009 ***	0.001
Mediator			
Redistribution attitudes	−0.070	—	−0.070

Notes: The table reports the decomposition of direct, indirect, and total effects on support for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) based on an auxiliary linear structural equation model. Indirect effects represent mediated effects through redistribution attitudes. The reference category for occupational class is the non-elite group. Robust standard errors were used in estimation. The main structural model was estimated using generalized structural equation modeling (gsem), while the auxiliary linear SEM is presented to illustrate the mediation mechanism and standardized effects.

Notes

1. This is the result of performing principal component analysis after inputting all five questions included in SSP 2015 Question 18, then excluding one item with a contribution below 0.6 and re-running the analysis.
2. Estimates for the independent category should be interpreted with caution because of the relatively small number of observations.

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