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The changing political significance of social class in Scotland

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Abstract

The meaning of social class in Scotland has been shifting because of two large economic changes, and because of the expansion of higher education. Numerically the more important is a new class of graduates who work in the service sector of the economy. Alongside that segment is a smaller but growing group who feel economically insecure – sometimes described by class theorists as the 'precariat'. These trends are seen in many economically developed societies, including in the rest of the UK. But the meaning of the changes is distinctive in Scotland because they interact with the political question of how Scotland is governed. Unlike in other nations, including England, liberal graduates are increasingly in favour of national independence. Also, unlike elsewhere, the precariat are increasingly not conservative while favouring the liberal project of independence. Class remains a useful general concept for understanding social change, but its meaning has to take account of each country's specific political circumstances.

Key words

Social class; higher education; precariat; Scottish independence; nationalism

Introduction

The rise of the political party Reform UK has made prominent some searching questions about the changing character of social class, even though that is not the way in which its supporters or opponents usually describe its appeal. One version of the questions is about what used to be called alienation: is Reform the political expression of people whose lives feel permanently on edge – insecure, lacking opportunities, excluded from society? The fluidity of political allegiance of this group lay behind Labour's victory at the UK general election in 2024, and of

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its subsequent rapid loss of popularity. The social basis of both these processes has been summarised by Professor Jane Green and her colleagues at Nuffield College, Oxford:

The Labour Party had lost 39% of its July 2024 voters to other parties by October 2024 and being 'undecided'. Feelings of economic insecurity are critical to understanding this, as they were to Conservative vote losses between 2019 and 2024.

(Nuffield Politics Research Centre, 2025)

These are the 'precariat', a term invented by the sociologist Guy Standing to describe what he called a new social class:

One defining characteristic of the precariat is distinctive relations of production: so-called 'flexible' labour contracts; temporary jobs; labour as casuals, part-timers, or intermittently for labour brokers or employment agencies.

(Standing, 2014)

That insecurity inclines the precariat to the form of identity politics of which, it is claimed, Reform UK is a prime instance – the cry of the outsider against a system that is felt to deny them a meaningful role. There is debate as to whether the precariat is a new class, or the description of new ways in which what used to be called the proletariat is now exploited (Frase, 2013). But the core idea remains one of class: the experience of being in a marginalised social class has taken on new forms because of new kinds of insecurity.

But there is a second question about parties like Reform which should make us think more carefully about what is happening to social class and politics here. This theory is consistent with the first, but distinct: is populism of the Reform kind a resentment against educated elites, expressed as nationalism because the elites have supposedly betrayed the nation for a rootless cosmopolitanism? Eatwell and Goodwin (2017, pp. 23-4), for example, have described education as 'one of major fault lines that runs beneath national populism across the West'. Runciman (2018, p. 164) summed up what the resentment is against: 'the educated mistake their [own] tribalism for superior wisdom'.

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Scotland is not insulated from any of this. There is insecurity (as we shall see), and there is now the rise of Reform. The most visible was in the Scottish Parliament by-election in Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse in June 2025, where Reform came from nothing to capture more than a quarter of the vote. There have been similar stories in numerous local-government by-elections in Scotland in the past year. Scotland's close connection to UK social change and political currents has been clear throughout the history of mass democracy (McCrone, 1992). Do the theories of Reform's rise adequately explain this recent Scottish experience too? As numerous journalists asked after the parliamentary by-election, has Scottish exceptionalism been shown to be a myth?

The political questions are themselves interesting and important. But they are also one way of understanding the changing experience of class. Class is – in Weber's terms – about economy, status and power. The economy creates forms of employment, and the risk of its absence. Status is about many things, but education is central. Power is about politics. To understand any one of these, the other two have to be considered. The relevance of politics goes further, however: politics in a democracy becomes the forum in which class interests are made visible. When one aspect of the political contest is the existence of the political state, as it is in Scotland, the aspect of class which is about power is also about the very definition of the society to which these classes belong.

A new class: service-sector graduates

I'll come back to the precariat and low education shortly. To understand these, it is useful first to reflect on another very large change in the class structure which is almost the mirror-image of marginalisation and powerlessness. In Scotland a new and powerful social class has emerged in the past three or four decades. It is partly a consequence of the massive expansion of higher education; more fundamentally it is the result of the economic changes to which that expansion was in many respects a response. Scotland has experienced the same gradual shift to a service economy staffed by well-educated personnel as many other countries, including the rest of the UK.

On the educational expansion, the changes are remarkable if they are set in a long-term historical context. For this, and throughout the article, we use the series of Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys, which has been mostly annual from 1999, though there was an interruption

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between 2020 and 2022 because of Covid. The sample size in each year was around 1,200 (For more detail, see Paterson, 2024). As recently as 1979, only 10% of Scottish adults were graduates of higher education (meaning HNDs and HNCs as well as degrees). When the Scottish parliament was first elected, in 1999, this had tripled to 33%. In 2019, it was over one half – 53%. The economic changes were almost as striking. By 1981, already a majority of people worked in services (61%), having risen from 45% in 1951. This grew to 81% in 2019. Industrial employment correspondingly declined. It was roughly equal to services in 1951 (41%), was still one third in 1981, and collapsed to 16% in 2019.

Even more revealing is to distinguish between public services and what might be called market services. Market services are trade, repair, communications, finance, property and technical support. These have expanded from 33% of employment in 1981 to 39% in 2019. Public services – public administration, education, health and social care – have grown much more, from 28% in 1981 to 42% in 2019. These forms of employment occupied a very large proportion of the new graduates. In the Social Attitudes Surveys of 2014-19, over one half of graduates worked in the public services, and a further third were in market services. Another way of putting the importance of these graduates to the economy in these same years is that, of all people in work, 43% were graduates, made up of 23% in the public services, 14% in the market services, and 6% in industry or agriculture and mining.

This transformation has been common throughout the UK, and much further afield. It has changed the character of society and of social leadership. The new graduates form a new class in the sense that they have new kinds of employment (in services), new employment relations (predominantly in public agencies), and a new basis in advanced knowledge and skills. They also have an ideology that is unlike previous generations of graduates, who tended to be conservative. The Social Attitudes Surveys include a scale of ideology that is intended to measure the distinction between liberal and conservative values. The scale is constructed by respondents' views on such matters as the rule of law, crime, censorship, and teaching children about authority and traditions. Liberal views would, for example, oppose censorship and be sceptical of traditional authority (Paterson, 2024, p. 282). Dividing the scale in two at its mid-point, we find that 61% of graduates were liberal in 1999-2002, rising to 71% in 2014-23.

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That too is common throughout the UK, and internationally. But what makes this class distinctive in Scotland is its constitutional commitments. After 1999, it came to be enthusiastic about the Scottish parliament. For example, on the question of whether the parliament was giving people more say in government, the percentage of graduates who assented rose from 50% in 1999–2002 to 63% in 2014–23. Among non-graduates, the level was lower (42% to 48%). Then large parts of the new graduate class gradually warmed to Scottish independence, reaching 48% by 2014-23. This interacted with ideology: 53% of liberal graduates were in favour of independence in 2014-23. It also interacted with age: 55% of graduates born after the mid-1970s favoured independence, contrasting with 35% of those born before the mid-1950s.

We can sum this up by saying that the movement in support of Scottish independence has been led in a sociological sense by the large new class of graduates who are employed in the expanding service sector of the economy. These graduates are young because they are mostly the product of the massive expansion of higher education since the 1980s. They are also liberal in their political ideology, which explains why the constitutional aim has gradually come to be associated with a variety of liberal political causes. All this shows the distinctively Scottish aspects of the emergence of this new class, even though, in economic terms, it is a change that is found in many other societies.

How does this relate to economic insecurity?

Graduate support for Scottish independence also then casts doubt on the explanation of national populism as being a rebellion against educated elites by people who have little education. Scottish nationalism is mostly not like that. In one respect, the survey evidence does confirm the tendency for non-graduates to be suspicious of current liberal ideology. Non-graduates are much less likely to have liberal views than graduates: 39% against 71% in 2014-23. But both groups have become more liberal since the turn of the century (when these proportions were 33% and 61%). Moreover, whereas non-graduates used to be more likely to support independence than graduates – as the theory of national populism would lead us to expect – the difference has reversed. When the Scottish parliament was set up in 1999, independence support was 29% among non-graduates and 22% among graduates. In 2023, it was 45% among non-graduates but 51% among graduates. The cross-over point was in 2016, just after the referendum that led to Brexit.

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Something similar has been true of the effects of economic insecurity. The Social Attitudes surveys do not measure the complexity of this in the depth that has been done by Green and her colleagues. Moreover, the most recent survey from which the data set is available (2023) is too early to have captured the very recent rise in support for Reform UK. But the survey series does contain a more-or-less consistent question about household finance. In 2023, the survey respondents were asked: 'Which of the following statements is the closest to your feelings about your household's income these days?', the options being on a five-point scale about the adequacy of that income: 'comfortable', 'really comfortable', 'neither comfortable nor struggling', 'struggling' or 'really struggling'. (The versions of this between 1999 and 2002 did not distinguish between the two 'comfortable' categories, and before 2010 the middle category was 'coping'.) Combining the two 'comfortable' and the two 'struggling' options gives in 2014-23 a split of 53% being comfortable, 31% neither, and 16% struggling. The proportion who are struggling has risen from 12% before the financial crisis of 2008 (being 12% in 2004-9). Economic insecurity was loosely associated with education, but these did not measure the same thing. In 2014-23, 14% of graduates felt insecure, and 49% of non-graduates felt comfortable.

Independence support has always been associated with economic difficulties, but the gradient has become much shallower. In 1999-2002, independence was almost twice as popular in the group experiencing difficulties as in the comfortable group: 39% of people compared to 23%. In 2014-23, the proportions were much larger, and the difference smaller – respectively 53% and 43%. Moreover, by that same period, independence support was the same among insecure graduates and insecure non-graduates. Although this is not the same conclusion as on education, insofar as independence remains somewhat more popular among the insecure than among the comfortable, these recent high levels of support for independence in both groups could hardly be said to be consistent with a view that Scottish nationalism is merely a protest by outsiders against an affluent elite.

The strong support among people in difficult economic circumstances might even be said to be surprising given that the economic uncertainty of independence was one reason which people gave for opposing independence in the 2014 referendum (Curtice, 2014). The explanation of this apparent paradox is in what seems to be a transformation in the expectations of independence by the economically insecure. By 2019, a majority of them (55%) thought that

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independence would improve the Scottish economy, up from 33% in 2013. It is probably also relevant that they have become more liberal over time. Throughout the period before 2014, the insecure were on average less liberal than others (for example, in 2011, 31% liberal compared to 38% among those who were economically comfortable). The difference persisted, but the absolute levels of liberal views rose in each of these groups: in 2023, it was 56% among the insecure and 68% among the economically comfortable. This growing liberalism of the economically insecure is a trend that is not consistent with the assumptions about the ideology of similar groups in other places. If the reason why the insecure vote for, say, Brexit or Reform UK is that they are ideologically conservative, then the political action of the insecure in Scotland is not likely to be predictable in that same way.

Conclusions

Overall, then, we can conclude that an important feature of Scottish society is the emergence of two new kinds of social class. The larger could be described as a class of liberal graduates who work predominantly in the vastly expanded service sector of the economy. This kind of class has been observed in many developed economies, and has often been thought of as being made up of what David Goodhart calls the 'anywheres' – people who have minimal national allegiance, who are enthusiastic about globalisation, and who welcome cultural diversity. Yet in Scotland this class has become increasingly attached to that supremely 'somewhere' project of national sovereignty.

On the other hand, there is a smaller class of economically insecure people. They, too, have been observed in other places. Elsewhere, they have been politically volatile, but also consistently sceptical about the liberalism of elites and of rampant globalisation. In Scotland, it is then not surprising that they have high levels of support for national independence. But what the character of this class elsewhere would not lead us to expect is its increasing liberalism in Scotland. Their attachment to independence links them to what is now a strongly liberal project, led by the new class of graduates. This is quite contrary to the British nationalism of Reform UK.

Between them, these two classes in 2023 made up 71% of all supporters of independence: 42% were graduates who did not feel economically insecure, 13% were graduates who felt insecure, 16% were non-graduates who felt insecure. Whether these new sources of support for

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independence would ever translate into a political movement that would be powerful enough to achieve that goal remains very unclear, especially because their social worlds are quite different. They are nothing like the coalition that produced the Brexit vote in England.

These new social and ideological formations pose challenging questions for all the main political parties. If Reform UK is indeed drawing on the support of the economically insecure, then it will be rather surprised to find that a majority of them oppose that party's firm unionism. The Labour party may seek the support in Scotland of those liberal graduates who have formed their bedrock in southern England. That party, too, will eventually have to address the strong support for independence in that group, and will have to find a way of reconciling it with the party's liberal unionism. Supporters of independence – whether in the SNP or elsewhere – rarely recognise two uncomfortable facts. On the one hand, an independent state would be, in many ways, the constitutional expression of the liberal preferences of elite graduates. On the other, by drawing also on the support of the economically insecure, the campaign for such a state is drawing on some of the same kind of support as currently is the basis of Reform UK. This is an opportunity for the nationalist movement, but to seize it they would have to think more carefully about what it means to lead a cross-class alliance.

Politics is not the only defining feature of social class. The nature of the graduate service class could in principle be described solely in terms of its employment, its social status through education, and its cultural preferences. The same could be done for the economically marginalised. To the extent that these classes exist in many economically developed societies, that way of discussing them in Scotland can point to important ways in which the country is not at all unique. Nevertheless, like everywhere else, it also is indeed unique. Despite the abeyance of the Scottish constitutional question at present, it is the sieve through which the Scottish politics of class is filtered. Any discussion of new social classes in Scotland which ignores that will miss the ways in which economy and status translate into arguments about power.

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