

Workers' Descriptive Representation in the United Socialist Party, 1938–1968

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Abstract

Workers are significantly underrepresented in party politics, a reality that both reflects and perpetuates economic inequality. However, workers' political representation and economic inequality vary across time and place. Using a unique dataset of membership registers, supplemented and verified by archival data from non-party sources (N=2,374) and secondary data on Iceland's working population, this study examines workers' descriptive representation in the United Socialist Party (USP) from 1938 to 1968. The USP presents an intriguing case for studying workers' descriptive representation for three reasons: 1) Iceland was arguably the world's most egalitarian modern democracy during the study period; 2) the USP actively recruited and substantively represented workers; but 3) it was neither a dominant political party, nor did USP membership facilitate members' advancement in a society characterized by intense political patronage. Overall, the results show that workers were relatively well descriptively represented in the USP compared to Iceland's working population during the study period. Workers were also over-represented among USP's founding members. However, the descriptive and substantive representation of workers in the USP declined after the party's founding. Furthermore, workers' under-



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representation relative to the over-represented middle class was consistent and increased alongside Iceland's middle-class growth and the decline of the working class. Additionally, workers were slightly under-represented on the USP's central committee, while the middle class was vastly over-represented. These results offer a more nuanced view of workers' political representation over time and across national contexts.

Keywords: Class position; descriptive representation; party membership; socialist party; working-class representation.

Introduction

Sociologists' long-standing interest in workers' political representation originally stems from the emergence of socialist movements and parties in Western societies during a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Przeworski 1980). Marx and Engels ([1848] 2013) famously argued that the growing industrial working class would eventually—against a backdrop of increasing class inequality and polarization—overthrow the capitalist system and establish a classless communist society, with state socialism (i.e., “a dictatorship of the proletariat”) serving as the transitional phase. “[S]ocialists and social democratic leaders later assumed, and their conservative opponents feared, that if workers won the franchise, they could lay the foundation for an electoral road to socialism” (Manza et al. 1995, 139). These assumptions rest on the premise that workers support and join socialist parties because they substantively represent working-class interests.

In the latter part of the 20th century, nearly four out of ten people lived under some form of authoritarian, one-party socialist or (nominally) communist regime, many of which emerged after revolutionary upheavals (Singer 2018). However, while modern socialism emerged in Europe, where certain versions gained prominence, Western socialists have pursued political change through the “democratic class struggle” (Anderson & Davidson 1943) rather than by overthrowing capitalism through revolution. The expansion of suffrage to workers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was significant in this respect, as it fuelled the emergence of socialist parties representing working-class interests in the labour-capital cleavage that long dominated national politics (Lipset & Rokkan 1967; Rokkan 1970; Emanuele 2023).

However, while socialist parties worldwide have historically acted in the name of the working class (or at least claimed to), they have been disproportionately founded and led by middle-class intellectuals (Gouldner 1979; Manza et al. 1995). This contradiction raises questions about the possible discrepancy between socialist parties' *substantive representation* (i.e., *acting for* workers) and *descriptive representation* (i.e., *the similarity between* party members and workers) (Pitkin 1967). While substantive representation is arguably the most important form of political representation, descriptive representation is important in and of itself for what it symbolizes for citizenship and inclusion and because it enhances under-represented groups' substantive representation (Phillips 2012; Pontusson 2015; Elsässer & Schäfer 2022). Workers, as a case in point, are everywhere under-rep-

resented in politics. Moreover, there is relative consensus in the literature that “[p]oliticians from different economic backgrounds tend to think differently in ways that mirror differences in the general public, and when they have some leeway in their choices in office, they seem to behave differently” (Carnes & Lupo 2023, 258). More specifically, studies show that people from working-class backgrounds are more responsive to workers’ demands and interests and are more likely to act on their behalf in the political arena (Carnes 2018).

While scholars have primarily studied the descriptive representation of legislative bodies (Carnes & Lupo 2023), the concept is also helpful to analyse party members’ representativeness. Furthermore, descriptive representation was “particularly an important part of party attraction in the past when considering the ideal type of traditional mass party, for example, socialist party membership was a tool for the working class to improve their quality of life” (Koivula et al. 2020, 808). However, studies of workers’ descriptive representation in socialist parties have mainly focused on state socialist systems like China, the Soviet Union, and other satellite states in the so-called “Eastern Bloc” during the Cold War period. Overall, this literature suggests, despite the parties’ aim to be workers’ parties and relatively strong working-class membership, that workers in state socialist societies were variously underrepresented among leaders and the rank-and-file as compared to the general population. Moreover, workers’ descriptive representation among party members declined as the 20th century progressed because an increasingly complex social structure and technological developments encouraged the recruitment of educated middle-class professionals (Parkin 1972; Gouldner 1979; Szélenyi 1987; Marks 2004). This decline in working-class membership vis-à-vis the increase in middle-class membership is referred to as “deproletarianization” (Hanley 2003).

Moreover, despite the global reach of the socialist movement, the descriptive representation of workers in socialist parties outside the Eastern Bloc remains understudied, particularly in the Nordic countries (Egge & Rybner 2015). This paper helps to address this gap in the literature by contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of workers’ descriptive representation in the United Socialist Party (USP) from 1938 to 1968, utilizing a unique dataset of registered members, which was supplemented and verified with archival data from non-party sources (N=2,374) as well as secondary data on Iceland’s working population (Statistics Iceland 1969; Einarsson 1987). The study thus addresses the following research question: *How was workers’ descriptive representation in the USP from 1938 to 1968?*

The membership registers of the USP and the Icelandic Communist Party (ICP) (1930–1938) are the first of Iceland’s political parties to be made available for academic research. Moreover, to our knowledge, no comparable dataset exists for any socialist or communist party in Western Europe (Ingimarsson 2024). Like many other studies examining the social composition of socialist parties (Marks 2004), the only other study of this kind in Iceland (on ICP) draws on unverified official statistics from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Egge & Rybner 2015). Our detailed, supplemented, and verified dataset expands upon studies drawing on less reliable internal party records or

official statistics.

Studies consistently show that workers are under-represented in politics, with this political inequality reflecting and perpetuating broader economic inequality trends (Elsässer & Schäfer 2022; Carnes & Lupu 2023). Given this, the USP offers a compelling case to study workers' descriptive representation. First, Iceland was arguably the world's most egalitarian modern democracy during the study period (Tomasson 1980; Oddsson 2016, 2022; Ólafsson & Kristjánsson 2017). Second, the USP actively recruited and substantively represented workers (Ingimarsson 2024). Third, despite achieving some electoral success and being part of Iceland's "fourparty" political establishment, the USP was neither a dominant political party nor an integral part of Iceland's stratification order, unlike in the Eastern Bloc, where socialist party membership entailed symbolic and material benefits and was all but necessary to get ahead in society (Parkin 1972; Otrachshenko 2023). All three factors promote working-class political representation (Carnes & Lupu 2023).

Before reporting results, we will 1) discuss class and political representation, particularly substantive representation, 2) trace the history of the USP, and 3) describe our data and methods.

1. Class and Political Representation

Class is often defined too broadly and used interchangeably with measures such as education and income (Crompton 2008; Lareau & Conley 2008). Although it is correlated with education and income, occupational position offers a more robust measure of social class in terms of structural position, life chances, preferences, and potential interests. Thus, in this paper, we use a person's occupation as our starting point when measuring class position. Specifically, we operationalize class using Einarson's (1987) "occupational aggregate" class model (Crompton 2008), which Einarson used to map the Icelandic class structure over the course of the 20th century, utilizing census and labour market data on occupations. This approach allows us to assess workers' descriptive representation in the USP by comparing the party's class composition based on verified membership registers to the Icelandic working population by drawing on Einarson's (1987) findings for the latter.

The occupational foundation of our class model (Einarsson 1987) is based on the premise that the "backbone of the class structure, and indeed of the entire reward system of modern Western society, is the occupational order" (Parkin 1972, 18). Specifically, in a capitalist society, the market primarily shapes a person's life chances, that is, their chances of obtaining valued resources and improving their quality of life (Weber [1922] 1978). An individual's life chances, in turn, are primarily defined by their position in the market, and occupation is a crucial indicator of market position. Class models based on "occupational aggregates" (Crompton 2008) are correlated with various factors such as attitudes, health, life expectancy, and political representation (Wright 2005; Goldthorpe 2010).

By relying on the class composition of the workforce for comparison (Einarsson

1987), we establish a commonly used empirical baseline that reflects the social reality of the Icelandic working class to evaluate workers' descriptive representation in the USP (Phillips 1995; Koivula et al. 2022; Carnes & Lupo 2023). While arguably a minimal requirement for workers' descriptive representation in a political party with normative commitments to working-class interests, we argue that an empirical baseline, in this case, is preferable over a normative benchmark (where workers are variously over-represented). First, an empirical baseline is more analytically clear, concrete, and objective, enabling us to quantify descriptive representation more precisely than when using a relatively abstract normative benchmark (Phillips 1995; 2012; Mansbridge 1999, 2015). Second, like Western socialist parties in general, the USP was less ideologically committed to recruiting workers than socialist parties in the Eastern Bloc, which nonetheless did not typically meet the empirical baseline of workers' descriptive representation (Szelényi 1987; Marks 2004; Egge & Rybner 2015). The USP was established, in part, to attract broader support and membership than the ICP and broadened its reach over time (Kommúnistaflokkur Íslands 1931a, 1931b; Sósíalistaflokkurinn 1938, 1964; Ingimarsson 2024).

One of the most consistent findings in the literature on political representation is that workers are significantly underrepresented in party politics. While “class itself has had an extraordinary presence” (Phillips 1995, 173) in politics—evidenced by the left-right divide that has shaped Western political systems since the early 20th century—workers continue to be underrepresented in the political process. This discrepancy highlights the various dimensions of political representation. To address this contradiction, we draw on the different but interconnected dimensions of political representation famously identified in Hannah Pitkin's (1967) comprehensive account: *formalistic*, *descriptive*, *symbolic*, and *substantive representation*. Although these concepts are primarily used to examine legislative bodies, they are also helpful for analysing the representativeness of party members (Koivula et al. 2020).

According to Pitkin (1967), the most significant form of political representation is *substantive representation* or “acting in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive them” (209). *Descriptive representation*—the extent to which representatives resemble their constituents—is less important, Pitkin argues. Other scholars dispute Pitkin's (1967) view and claim that descriptive representation shapes substantive representation in important ways and is particularly important for structurally disadvantaged groups such as women, ethnic and racial minorities, and workers if their interests are not being represented (Phillips 1995; Pontusson 2015; Elsässer & Schäfer 2022).

As a case in point, descriptive representation was particularly important for the ideal-typical traditional mass socialist party as a tool for the working class to improve their life chances (Koivula et al. 2020). Moreover, socialist parties' substantive and *symbolic representation*—representing their constituents' ideology—in the political arena is also what has historically set workers apart from other disadvantaged groups (Pitkin 1967). Specifically, socialist, labour, and other leftist political parties long defended working-class interests and defined themselves as workers' parties, whereas few political parties have

committed themselves to the interests of women and ethnic and racial minorities in the same way. However, while the group representation of women and ethnic and racial minorities has improved in recent decades, class working-class representation has declined alongside growing income inequality and the relative shrinking of the middle class, helping explain, in part, why policymakers are much more responsive to the preferences of the upper and middle classes and remain inattentive to working-class interests (Gilens 2012; Pontusson 2015; Evans & Tilley 2017; Elsässer & Schäfer 2022; Carnes & Lupu 2023).

In this paper, we do not examine the entire “chain of responsiveness” in politics (Powell 2004). Instead, we focus on the descriptive representation of workers in a socialist party under relatively egalitarian conditions, which should promote working-class political representation. First, economic equality promotes workers’ political representation (Evans 1999; Jacobs & Skocpol 2007; Manza & Brooks 2008; Carnes & Lupu 2023). Thus, we expect that working-class representation in the USP was enhanced by Iceland being, arguably, the world’s most egalitarian modern democracy for most of the study period, as evidenced by comparatively low levels of income inequality and high rates of social mobility (Oddsson 2016, 2022; Ólafsson & Kristjánsson 2017; Ólafsson 2022). Iceland also had remarkably high unionization rates during the study period, which has been shown to enhance working-class political representation (Ólafsson 2022; Carnes & Lupu 2023).

Iceland was still a capitalist “class society” in the Weberian sense—where people’s market position primarily determined their life chances—(Weber [1922] 1978) during the study period (Ólafsson 1982; Oddsson 2022). Iceland industrialized late, and a modern class structure did not begin to emerge until the end of the 19th century. Class formation and working-class consciousness grew in the first decades of the 20th century against the backdrop of more marked class divisions as evidenced, for example, by radical class action as well as the founding of a national confederation of unions and a political party representing the working class movement in 1916 (Magnússon 1990; Grjetarsson 1993; Oddsson 2022). Unionization rates also significantly increased over the 20th century, which cross-national studies suggest promotes workers’ descriptive representation (Carnes & Lupu 2023). Class conflict reached its peak in Icelandic society in the 1930s and early 1940s—the “golden age” of the working class movement—a period marked by the fiercest struggles between capital and labour and some of the working class movement’s most important gains ever, including a right to strike incorporated into law in 1938 (Olgeirsson 1983; Oddsson 2022). This period also saw the founding of the ICP in 1930 and the USP in 1938 (Olgeirsson 1980, 1983; Ólafsson 1989). Economic growth, increased employment, and welfare state expansion after WWII fuelled social mobility, middle-class growth, improved living standards, and greater economic equality (Ólafsson & Kristjánsson 2017).

Second, consistent with their political ideology and normative commitments to working-class interests, socialist parties have traditionally been more focused on recruiting workers than other kinds of political parties. This was particularly the case in the

Eastern Bloc, evidenced, for example, by the institutionalization of class quotas promoting the recruitment of workers. In contrast, Western socialist parties—subject to the democratic process—have needed to recruit from a broader base to succeed, moderating the ideological commitment to the recruitment of workers (Szelényi 1987; Marks 2004; Egge & Rybner 2015). Notwithstanding its relative ideological moderation, it is quite clear that the goals and policy directives of the USP (Ingimarsson 2024; Sósíalis-flokkurinn 1938, 1964) could have influenced its membership, potentially mitigating or even reversing the class effects that contribute to workers’ under-representation in politics (Pontusson 2015; Evans & Tilley 2017; Elsässer & Schäfer 2022).

Third, despite achieving some electoral success and being part of Iceland’s “fourparty” political establishment, the USP was neither a dominant party nor an integral part of Iceland’s stratification order (Ólafsson 2020; Ingimarsson 2024). Specifically, unlike communist and socialist party membership in East-Central Europe, joining the USP was not a means to get ahead in society (Parkin 1972; Szelényi 1987; Hanley 2003; Marks 2004; Otrachshenko 2023). In contrast, material benefits were an important incentive for members of the three other parties forming the “fourparty” in an era of strong patronage politics (Kristinsson 1996, 2021). In fact, being a member of the USP could easily hinder an individual’s social advancement. For example, Iceland’s most dominant political party from 1944 onward—the conservative and right-of-centre Independence Party—kept records of people’s political leanings, information that employers, for example, used when making hiring decisions (Jóhannesson 2010). In other words, USP membership neither granted individuals access to much political power nor increased their chances of upward social mobility. As such, people did not have a “social mobility incentive” for joining the USP, which may have further weakened the relationship between class and membership.

Lastly, since studies indicate that individuals and social groups with greater political, social, and economic resources are better represented in politics, we also expect that men were more likely to join the USP than women and that married and cohabiting individuals were more likely to join than those who were single or widowed (Brady et al. 1995; Lamprianou 2013; Janoski et al. 2020). It is also possible that the USP recruited more women to promote greater equality, potentially offsetting the predicted effects of gender (Marks 2004). The following section provides a more detailed historical background on the USP.

2. The United Socialist Party (1938–1968)

Of all the Nordic communist and socialist parties, the least is perhaps known about the Icelandic Communist Party (1930–1938) and the United Socialist Party (1938–1968). This is not surprising, as the history of the Icelandic socialist movement has largely been overlooked outside local academic circles (Whitehead 1979; Snævarr & Ingimundarson 1992; Hannibalsson 1999; Ólafsson 1999; Jóhannesson 2006; Kristjánsdóttir 2008; Whitehead 2010; Bergsson 2011; Gissurarson 2011; Ingimarsson 2018; Ólafsson 2020; Magnúsdóttir 2021; Ingimarsson 2024).

The USP was established in October 1938 when Héðinn Valdimarsson, former vice chairman of the Social Democratic Party, and his supporters joined forces with the Icelandic communist movement to create a new political party. Valdimarsson, the leader of Dagsbrún, Reykjavík's largest labour union, was elected party chairman. Although founded on Marxist principles, the USP was not a member of the Comintern. The party's aim was to unite the working class, organize workers into trade unions and political associations, and improve the rights and living standards of the people through collective action. The collaboration between communists and left-wing social democrats, however, proved difficult to maintain. When the communists refused to condemn the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the Soviet invasion of Finland, Valdimarsson left the party in December 1939. Consequently, Einar Olgeirsson, a prominent member of the former Communist Party, became the new party chairman, a position he held until 1968 (Ólafsson 2020).

However, the British occupation of Iceland in May 1940 prompted a change in the USP's policy, emphasizing nationalism at the expense of internationalism and labour struggles. Olgeirsson viewed the occupation as a turning point in Icelandic history. Icelanders, on the brink of liberation from Danish colonialism, now faced the threat of new colonial masters in the British and Americans. They would lose their independence, and the nation would also confront existential cultural and moral threats due to the military occupation (Olgeirsson 1980). The party's stance regarding Iceland's occupation changed temporarily following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, when the pre-war struggle against fascism was reignited through cooperation with the Western Powers. At the end of the war, and with the onset of the Cold War, this policy shifted again as the USP readopted its previous position of a national liberation struggle against U.S. military presence in Iceland. The opposition was depicted as a continuation of Iceland's independence struggle. This manifested itself in stiff opposition to Iceland's Western integration in the 1940s and 1950s: a U.S. request for long-term military bases in Iceland in the autumn of 1945; the Keflavík Agreement, which granted the United States military landing rights in 1946; Iceland's involvement in the Marshall Plan in 1948; Icelandic membership in NATO in 1949 and the conclusion of the U.S.-Iceland Defence Agreement, which extended U.S. military presence in Iceland, in 1951. The USP's nationalism was also directed against Iceland's potential Associate Membership in the European Economic Community in the early 1960s (Ingimarsson 2024).

Emphasizing nationalism at the expense of internationalism and labour struggle strengthened the USP's standing in Icelandic politics by widening its appeal and support. The party ran for the first time in parliamentary elections in July 1942, receiving 16.2% of the votes and having six members elected to Parliament. The USP celebrated a historic victory four months later, receiving 18.5% of the votes and having ten representatives elected to Parliament. The party had outgrown the Social Democratic Party and retained this status, receiving between 15 and 20% of the total vote during the Cold War (Ólafsson 2020). In the 1953 parliamentary elections, the USP collaborated with the Resistance Movement against the presence of the US military in Iceland but suffered an electoral defeat (Whitehead 1998; Ingimundarson 2011). In 1956, the party allied

with the People's Alliance, which included a group of left-wing Social Democrats led by Hannibal Valdimarsson, president of the Icelandic Confederation of Labour. Later that same year, the USP ran in Parliamentary elections under the banner of the People's Alliance, and it continued to do so until 1968 (Ingimarsson 2024).

In electoral terms, the USP was one of the most successful communist and left-socialist parties in Western Europe, alongside parties in Finland, France, and Italy, and significantly more successful than similar parties in the other Nordic countries (Ingimarsson 2024). However, the USP was never a dominant force in Icelandic politics. The party participated in forming the so-called New Enterprise Government from 1944 to 1947, alongside the Independence Party and the Social Democrats, and held two ministerial posts. The People's Alliance also participated in the leftist government from 1956 to 1958, together with the Progressive Party and the Social Democrats, and had two ministers (Olgeirsson 1980). Nevertheless, the USP's influence gradually waned as the Cold War progressed. The sympathy that the party had expressed with the Soviet Union sustained a severe blow in the spring of 1956 when Stalin's atrocities were disclosed and an even greater one in the fall of that same year when the Soviets crushed the Hungarian Revolt by military force. Ultimately, the remaining traces of sympathy were swept aside in the summer of 1968, when the Soviet Union extinguished the initial signs of "humanitarian socialism," associated with Alexander Dubcek, in Czechoslovakia. The USP's executive committee condemned this act, and the party distanced itself from the Soviet Communist Party and parties in the other Warsaw Pact states that had participated in the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Later that same year, the People's Alliance transitioned from an electoral alliance to a political party, and the USP was abolished (Ólafsson 2020; Ingimarsson 2024).

3. Data and Methods

This study of workers' descriptive representation in the USP is based on a dataset of all known USP members from 1938–1968 compiled by Ingimarsson (2024). The dataset consists primarily of a party membership register compiled in 1961–1962, which was discovered in the national archives in 2011. This register contains the names of 1,388 USP members (711 in Reykjavík, 677 outside the capital). However, the register was incomplete. For instance, it did not include members from large party divisions outside Reykjavík. By combing through meeting minutes, printed party publications, and interviewing individuals involved with the USP, a further 505 names were identified, mainly from areas outside Reykjavík. Later, a handwritten notebook on membership dues in the Reykjavík division in 1938 was discovered, making it possible to identify 415 individuals, of whom 358 had not appeared elsewhere in the data. This resulted in a final dataset of 2,374 registered members, which is accessible through the Icelandic research data service (Ingimarsson 2024, 2025).

The fact that only 57 out of 415 individuals paying membership dues to the USP's Reykjavík division were discovered in other data sources might indicate a significant turnover in party membership. Data from the USP's second-largest division (Akureyri),

where the entry year is known for all registered members, reveals a quite different pattern, with 58% of all known members joining in the party's first year. This suggests that the high turnover since the founding year is a distinctive feature of the Reykjavík division and a consequence of the 1939 split. Since 1939, the membership of the Reykjavík division remained relatively stable.

Sources show that registered USP members from 1938–1968 were at least 2,761. The total number of party members has been estimated to have been somewhat higher, around 3,000 individuals. Therefore, we can estimate that our dataset contains information on as many as 80% of all registered party members. Notably, the overwhelming majority of active party members during this period are in our dataset (Ingimarsson 2024).

The party registers lack information on party members' social position. To address this issue, a card index was created for each registered member from available sources in the National Archives of Iceland, such as census data and parish, resident, municipality, and church records. Additional information was also obtained by cross-referencing occupational registries and genealogical databases. Using this approach, it was possible to identify over 99% of known registered members and classify them by place of birth, county, party division, gender, age, marital status, family status, occupation, class position, and religious affiliation. This comprehensive dataset forms the basis of our analysis and helps address two issues that hamper studies of communist and socialist parties' class composition relying on unverified internal party records or official statistics from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. First, occupational categories used in unverified internal party records or official statistics are often ambiguous and incomparable across countries. Second, party records and official statistics can be manipulated to present a more favourable picture of party membership for ideological purposes by overestimating the proportion of workers (Szelényi 1987; Rønning 2015; Ingimarsson 2024).

We use occupational information (available for 95% of the data) to assign party members to class. The class model we utilize to classify USP's members derives from Einarsson (1987) and consists of five class categories: Employers, Petty bourgeoisie, Middle class, Working class, and Other. Specifically, information on party members' occupations was used to assign each individual in the dataset to the categories used in Einarsson's (1987) analysis of the Icelandic class structure. A total of 123 different occupations are in the data, and the authors assigned these to one of five class-specific categories based on the description provided by Einarsson (1987) for his categorization of the available census data. These categories include Employers, Petty bourgeoisie, Middle strata A and B, and Working class. In addition, two other categories for domestics and family workers are classified as Other. Table 1 illustrates how class categories were operationalized in this study and provides examples.

Table 1. Class location operationalization and examples

Class location	Operationalization	Examples
Employers	Owner or part-owner of business hiring employees.	Business owners
Petty bourgeoisie	Self-employed or owner or part-owner of business not hiring any employees from outside the family.	Farmers, watchmakers, and goldsmiths
Middle strata	a) Managers, supervisors, foremen, professionals, and technicians.	Teachers, writers, and politicians
	b) All other non-manual workers such as clerks, sales and service workers.	Clerks, journalists, and office workers
Workers	Industrial wage labourers, craftsmen, fishermen, sailors and all other manual workers both skilled and unskilled.	Manual workers, craftsmen, and sailors
Domestics	Servants in homes.	Domestic servants
Family workers	Unpaid family workers.	Housewives

Source: Einarsson (1987), authors added examples of occupations in the third column.

The sorting of occupations into class categories was conducted separately by three of the authors without knowing beforehand how the others would classify occupations. The level of agreement in the grouping was then estimated by calculating a Kappa coefficient between each pair of coders, which ranged from 0.79 to 0.82, respectively. The resulting estimate of Cohen’s kappa averaged across coder pairs is 0.68 (coder pair kappa estimates = 0.62 [coders 1 and 2], 0.61 [coders 2 and 3], and 0.80 [coders 1 and 3]). The kappa coefficient computed for each coder pair was then averaged to provide a single index of IRR (Light 1971). The resulting IRR of $k = 0.68$ indicates a substantial level of agreement (Landis & Koch 1977). The final decision on classifying occupations where coders disagreed was taken in a meeting where the fourth author acted as an adjudicator.

The data include information on occupation, class, year of birth, gender, religious affiliation, marital status, family status, and whether a member was part of the party’s central committee. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for members of the USP.

Table 2. Descriptive characteristics of members of the USP

	All	Reykja- vík	Akur- eyri	Vestm. eyjar	Norð- fjörður	Ísa- fjörður	Other
Year of birth							
Mean	1913	1911	1907	1911	1919	1909	1919
Median	1913	1911	1908	1913	1921	1911	1919
Gender							
% Men	77	77	66	83	77	72	82
% Women	23	23	34	17	23	28	18
Religious affiliation							
% The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland	73	60	88	80	99	83	92
% No religious affiliation	19	28	11	20	1	13	5
% Other	8	13	1	0	0	4	3
Marital status							
% Married or co-habiting	73	72	68	77	76	65	78
% Single	19	16	29	22	19	28	20
% Widowed	2	2	3	0	4	3	1
% No record	6	10	1	1	2	4	1
Family status							
% With children	54	53	45	63	63	46	59
% No children	46	47	55	37	37	54	41
Status within party							
% In central committee	5	8	1	1	1	4	2
% Not on the central committee	95	92	99	99	99	96	98
Number of members	2,374	1,294	284	102	86	81	532

It is challenging to draw any clear conclusions from USP party members' birth years without knowing when they joined the party. This information is only available for the local party divisions in Akureyri and Ísafjörður, which might not be representative of the party as a whole. For the Reykjavík division, however, it is possible to distinguish between members who joined the first year and those who joined later. This means it is possible to compare members who joined the USP when the party was founded to those who joined later for divisions that include 70% of the party members. This data reveals that founding members of the Reykjavík division were, on average, 34 years old; in Akureyri, they were 39 years old, and in Ísafjörður, they were 37 years old.

Regarding gender, only a fourth of the members of USP were women. The same pattern can be observed across the party divisions except for the division in Akureyri, where a third of the members were women. Comparing founding members with those

who joined later reveals that women were slightly better represented among founding members. Men almost exclusively made up the central committee.

The USP had a sizeable group that was recorded as having no religious affiliation, or 19%. Notably, nearly 95% of the population belonged to the National Church of Iceland during the study period (Pétursson 1990). The group without religious affiliation was particularly large in the Reykjavík division, or 28%. Moreover, this division also had a relatively sizeable group with other religious affiliations, and this group consisted mainly of people belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church, which relates to Iceland’s struggle for independence and opposition to Danish authority in Iceland rather than any theological motivations (Pétursson 1990). Lastly, in terms of marital status, married and co-habiting individuals were better represented in the USP than those who were single or widowed, which is consistent with the literature on political participation and party membership (Brady et al. 1995; Lamprianou 2013; Janoski et al. 2020).

4. Results

Table 3 shows USP members’ class positions based on occupational data from our dataset for the party as a whole and select party divisions. A total of 1,202 members are classified as working class, which accounts for roughly half of party members, or 53%. For comparison and to assess workers’ descriptive representation in the USP, Table 4 shows the class composition of the Icelandic working population from 1930–1960. Table 4 shows that the relative size of the working class remained stable from 1930 to 1950 at around 56% of the overall population. By 1960, the relative size of the working class had decreased to 53% (Einarsson 1987). This leaves the working class only slightly descriptively underrepresented in the USP compared with the Icelandic working population. As expected from a socialist party, employers and petty bourgeoisie were heavily under-represented, with only 22 members classified as employers and 77 as petty bourgeoisie. These two groups made up only around 4% of party members compared with 20% of the working population (Einarsson 1987).

Table 3. USP members’ class position by party division

	All	Reykja- vík	Akur- eyri	Vestm. eyjar	Norð- fjörður	Ísa- fjörður	Other
% Employers	1	1	0	2	1	0	2
% Petty bourgeoisie	3	1	2	4	0	0	11
% Middle strata A	15	15	11	23	19	15	15
% Middle strata B	14	18	5	8	11	14	9
% Workers	53	52	59	52	47	51	53
% Domestic and family workers	14	13	22	10	22	20	10
% Middle strata (A+B)	29	33	16	31	30	28	24
<i>Ratio workers : middle strata</i>	<i>1.8</i>	<i>1.6</i>	<i>3.6</i>	<i>1.7</i>	<i>1.5</i>	<i>1.8</i>	<i>2.2</i>
Number of members	2,264	1,248	264	96	79	74	503

However, although workers were relatively well descriptively represented in the USP compared to Iceland's working population, the working class was consistently under-represented in the party vis-à-vis the middle class. As in many other socialist parties worldwide, the middle class was over-represented in the USP and accounted for 29% of all registered members. In comparison, only 15% of the Icelandic working population belonged to the middle class in 1940, rising to 23% in 1960 (Einarsson 1987).

Table 4. The Icelandic class structure, 1930–1960

	1930	1940	1950	1960
% Employers	12	12	10	6
% Petty bourgeoisie	9	8	8	11
% Middle class	11	15	17	23
% Working class	56	56	56	53
% Other categories	12	8	10	6
<i>Ratio workers : middle class</i>	<i>4.9</i>	<i>3.6</i>	<i>3.3</i>	<i>2.3</i>
Number of individuals	47,644	52,521	63,595	68,140

Source: Einarsson (1987).

The relative balance between working-class and middle-class representation in the USP can be further assessed by examining the size ratio between the two classes. The working class/middle class ratio was 1.8 for the party as a whole, whereas the ratio for the working population was 3.6 in 1940 and gradually declined over time, to 2.3 in 1960. The Akureyri division was markedly different from the pattern observed for both the USP as a whole and other large divisions, with considerably fewer individuals in the middle-class category. Thus, Akureyri's working class/middle class ratio was considerably higher.

To get a sense of how the USP's class composition changed over time, it was possible to compare founding members of the Reykjavík, Akureyri, and Ísafjörður party divisions with those who joined the USP later. The data presented in Table 5 suggests that founding members of the USP were significantly more likely to be working class than those who joined later.

Table 5. USP members' class position by when they joined the party

	Reykjavík		Akureyri		Ísafjörður	
	Founders 1938	Joined 1939–68	Founders 1938	Joined 1939–68	Founders 1938	Joined 1939–68
% Employers	0	1	0	1	0	0
% Petty bourgeoisie	1	1	1	4	0	0
% Middle strata A	6	20	8	15	13	16
% Middle strata B	15	19	6	4	3	20
% Workers	61	48	64	52	63	43
% Domestic and family workers	17	11	21	23	20	20
% Middle strata (A+B)	21	39	14	20	17	36
<i>Ratio workers : middle strata</i>	<i>2.8</i>	<i>1.2</i>	<i>4.7</i>	<i>2.6</i>	<i>3.8</i>	<i>1.2</i>
Number of members	429	808	152	112	30	44

A further indication of the importance of class position in the USP can be seen by examining central committee members. Overall, only 124 individuals (5% of party members) are known to have been elected to the central committee during the period when the party was active. Of this group, 29 (or 24%) are classified as working class, compared with 53% of all party members. Almost half of the central committee members are classified as middle strata A compared to only 15% of all party members.

Lastly, we examined membership in the USP in terms of geographical distribution. Figure 1 shows the approximate location of USP party divisions superimposed on a road map of Iceland published in 1945. The map shows the 19 USP divisions with 11 or more registered members (a division needed to have at least five founding members to be formally accepted into the party). However, as many as 50 divisions existed, many with only a handful of members to give the party a symbolic presence in communities where it lacked popular support. The map shows that the USP had a relatively strong presence in the capital area, which includes not only Reykjavík but also the neighbouring towns of Kópavogur and Hafnarfjörður. The same went for Akureyri, which at the time was Iceland's second-largest town and a local centre for service and administration in northern Iceland. Otherwise, the party divisions were mainly concentrated in fishing towns around the island. One exception is the division in Rangárvallasýsla (an agricultural area in south Iceland) with 28 members, despite not having a significant town or a clear population centre.



Figure 1. Approximate location of USP party divisions and registered membership

Source: Map of Iceland with main roads (National Land Survey of Iceland, 1945).

To estimate the strength of USP membership across larger communities in Iceland, Table 6 displays the 13 towns with a registered population of 1,000 or more inhabitants for the year 1952 (chosen as the midpoint between 1938 and 1968). The table also shows the number of registered members for every 1,000 inhabitants as a crude estimate of how big the party division was relative to the size of the community.

Table 6. Towns with a population of 1,000 or more in 1952 and the number of USP members in the respective division

	Population in 1952	USP members	Members per 1000 inhabitants
Reykjavík	58,761	1,294	22.0
Akureyri	7,815	284	36.3
Hafnarfjörður	5,288	53	10.0
Vestmannaeyjar	3,884	102	26.3
Siglufjörður	2,921	52	17.8
Akranes	2,737	31	11.3
Ísafjörður	2,734	81	29.6
Keflavík	2,630	-	-
Kópavogur	2,117	82	38.7
Neskaupstaður	1,328	86	64.8
Húsavík	1,319	54	40.9
Selfoss	1,062	25	23.5
Sauðárkrókur	1,056	11	10.4

Source: Statistics Iceland (n.d.).

It should be noted that there was considerable migration from rural areas to towns in Iceland over the study period (Hálfðánarson 1987). Nevertheless, the size of a party division relative to the population size helps to pinpoint where the USP was particularly successful, such as Neskaupstaður in Norðfjörður (earning it the nickname “Little Moscow”). Furthermore, this can also help to identify places where the USP was less successful. Here, we can point to places like Patreksfjörður (located in the southern part of the Westfjords), which had around two-thirds of the population of Norðfjörður and similar characteristics in terms of being a relatively isolated fishing town with a limited rural hinterland. We can also point to Húsavík, with its 54 members, in comparison to Sauðárkrókur, with only 11 known members. Both towns had similar characteristics in terms of population and being local service centres in rural areas while also having a sizeable fishing industry. The fishing town of Keflavík in the southwest is also an interesting example with no known members. However, it is possible that individuals from Keflavík were members of the nearby division in Ytri-Njarðvík. Still, that division only had 15 known members, which indicates a small following in this area. This might result from both towns’ proximity to the U.S. military base in Keflavík, but the U.S. forces were a big employer in the area and were known to systematically exclude known socialists from any employment related to the military base.

5. Conclusions and Discussions

The findings of this study on workers' descriptive representation (Pitkin 1967) in the United Socialist Party (1938–1968) indicate that workers were relatively well descriptively represented in the USP compared to the working population over the study period. Moreover, workers were over-represented among the founding members. However, our results suggest that workers' descriptive representation in the USP declined over time. Furthermore, workers' under-representation vis-à-vis the over-represented middle class in the USP (cf. the working class/middle class ratio) was consistent and grew parallel to middle-class growth and working-class decline. Workers were also slightly under-represented on USP's central committee, whereas the middle class was vastly over-represented.

Our results help paint a more nuanced picture of workers' descriptive representation in politics over time and across different national contexts. First, workers' relatively strong descriptive representation in the USP compared to the working population suggests that workers' all but universal under-representation in politics (Carnes & Lupo 2023) may have been partly mitigated by 1) the USP's socialist ideology, policies, and commitment to representing workers; 2) Iceland's unusually egalitarian context during the study period; and 3) the fact that the USP was neither a dominant political party nor an integral part of Iceland's stratification order. However, our data do not allow us to support or reject this hypothesis.

Second, the USP was established in 1938 when Iceland's communist movement (former members of the ICP) joined forces with the far-left faction of the Social Democratic Party to form a new political party. Rooted in a broader membership base than the defunct ICP, the USP sought broader support than the ICP, which was reflected in USP's party platforms that, contrary to the ICP, emphasized nationalism over internationalism and labour struggle (Kommúnistaflokkur Íslands 1931a, 1931b; Sósíalista-flokkurinn 1938, 1964). A nationalist party platform garnered the USP broader support than the ICP had enjoyed earlier, which manifested in more electoral success and better middle-class descriptive representation (Ingimarsson 2024).

Third, the USP increasingly emphasized nationalism over internationalism and labour struggle over the study period (Sósíalistaflokkurinn 1938, 1964). This may be partially explained by the declining descriptive representation of workers in the USP and their increased under-representation in comparison to the over-represented middle class. In that sense, the decreasing substantive representation of workers within the USP over time (i.e., less emphasis on labour struggle) mirrored their declining descriptive representation among members (Ingimarsson 2024). Moreover, the decline in workers' descriptive representation and their increased under-representation relative to the over-represented middle class in the USP aligns with the deproletarianization thesis (Hanley 2003). Additionally, the decline in workers' substantive representation supports Kirchheimer's (1966) argument regarding the "catch-all party" striving for a broad following instead of relying on the support of a specific class. In any case, the USP's changing class composition suggests that the party "branched out" over time, increasingly

seeking out (or at least admitting) members from a growing middle class rather than a shrinking working class.

Fourth, regarding class composition, the USP was undeniably a party of the working class *and* the middle class, with members of these two classes making up 82% of the party membership. The growing over-representation of the middle class in the USP over time reflects that the single most notable change to the Icelandic class structure over the 20th century was the relative growth of the middle class and the corresponding shrinking of the working class (Ólafsson & Kristjánsson 2017). Consequently, it is probable that many middle-class members of USB came from working-class backgrounds as increased structural mobility in the post-war period, due to industrialization and middle-class growth, created a “mobility updraft” (Gilbert 2017), fuelling increased upward social mobility among workers (Björnsson et al. 1977; Ólafsson 1982). The decreasing working class/middle class ratio in the general working population from 1930 onwards suggests this. Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to delve into changes in USP’s class composition in greater detail, as our data do not include information on the duration of each person’s membership. Nonetheless, the data suggest that increased upward social mobility, coupled with a nationalist party platform and the fact that the socialist cause attracted certain segments of the growing middle class, enhanced middle-class party membership (Ingimarsson 2024).

It is a strong testament to the fact that “class is a pervasive social cause” (Wright 1997, 1) that the most radical left-wing political party in a country that was, arguably, the world’s most egalitarian modern democracy during the latter part of the 20th century was in some respects subject to similar class processes as political parties elsewhere (cf. the over-representation of middle-class members among the rank-and-file and particularly on USP’s central committee). Social inequality was also reflected in the low representation of women in a political party that explicitly advocated for gender equality (see Table 2). This reflects the fact that although Iceland has ranked at the top of the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index since 2009, Icelandic women were marginalized in all forms of political participation for most of the 20th century (Rafnsdóttir 1995; Styrráksdóttir 1999; Einarisdóttir 2010; World Economic Forum 2023).

As a case in point, more than three-fourths of the membership in the United Socialist Party were men, and merely one-fourth consisted of women. There was also a notable difference between men and women within the party, as the central committee was almost exclusively made up of men. These results documenting the underrepresentation of women in the USP are consistent with the literature on political participation and representation (Milbrath & Goel 1977; Beeghley 1986; Brady et al. 1995; Lamprianou 2013; Janoski et al. 2020; Carnes & Lupo 2023). There are also indications that the USP’s masculine and bellicose party culture appealed less to women. The party’s objective of fighting for gender equality could not counteract this. The party also expected its members to prioritize collective party interests at the expense of their individual interests. This meant that women were supposed to yield to the party line and accept the leadership role of their male counterparts. As a result, Katrín Thoroddsen was USP’s only

female parliamentarian from 1946 to 1949, even though female party members were better represented in municipal and local government (Ingimarsson 2024).

The membership records of the United Socialist Party (1938–1968) and the Icelandic Communist Party (1930–1938) are the first of Iceland's political parties to be made available for academic research. Consequently, research on political parties in Iceland has mainly focused on their political history and the interaction between state and society. Therefore, until now, limited attention has been given to party members, their social position, and their influence within political parties (Ingimarsson 2024).

The relative size of the Icelandic working class peaked during the early decades of the 20th century, and the “golden age” of the working class movement and height of the class struggle was during the 1930s (Olgeirsson 1980, 1983; Ólafsson 1989; Kristjánsson 2008). The 1930s also witnessed the establishment of the Icelandic Communist Party. Given this context, we argue that it is also essential to study workers' descriptive and substantive representation in the Icelandic Communist Party, which existed during a time of substantial economic inequality and class action in Iceland (Ólafsson & Kristjánsson 2017). This would provide valuable input to the study of Nordic Communist parties, shed new light on the worldwide communist movement, and facilitate cross-national comparison (Egge & Rybner 2015).

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