**Description:** Why are unions weaker in the U.S. than in Canada, despite the two countries’ socio-economic similarities? Many view this cross-border difference as a byproduct of long-standing differences in political cultures and institutions. But using detailed archival and statistical data, I find this divergence is relatively recent, resulting from different ruling party responses to working class upsurge in both countries during the Great Depression and World War II. In Canada, an initially more hostile state response ended up embedding “the class idea”—the idea of class as a salient, legitimate political category—more deeply in policies, policies, and practices than in the U.S., where class interests were reduced to “special interests.” I illustrate this through comparative studies of party-class relations, postwar Red scares, and divergence in labor policy between the two countries.

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