

CHAPTER 34

CLASS DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ATTITUDES IN THE UNITED STATES

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POLICY attitudes and preferences have long been thought to vary widely between citizens with different levels of income or wealth, and indeed to provide one key to understanding public opinion at both the individual and aggregate level. The “class” thesis in public opinion research has, however, proven to be one of the more vexing questions in the field. The basic idea is deceptively simple. Citizens will think differently about many social and political issues depending on where they sit in the stratification order. Poor people have a strong material interest in redistributive public policies. Rich people, by contrast, will resist such policies (and in particular the taxes they inevitably require). Because inequality is rooted in the relative differences between individuals and groups, such attitudinal gaps can be expected to persist even in the face of rising affluence, and should further strengthen in periods when inequality widens.

While seemingly straightforward, the class thesis has generated theoretical controversy and conflicting empirical evidence from the very start. Since the advent of modern public opinion surveys, debates over whether there are meaningful differences to be found along class lines, and if so on what specific issues, have been plentiful. A major source of confusion in these debates arises from the fact that analysts have employed varying ways of conceptualizing class, and these different conceptualizations produce different empirical results. We review and reconsider these debates and the analytical and empirical puzzles they have generated in the context of contemporary American public opinion. Our discussion is in three parts. We begin with a brief

description of some of the classical and contemporary controversies about class differences in public opinion. We then consider some definitional issues that have plagued work in this area. Next we offer some illustrative examples of variation in social and political attitudes across different specifications of class. A brief conclusion summarizes where things stand and where future research might go.

CLASSICAL POSITIONS AND CONTEMPORARY CONTROVERSIES

The Classical Debate: Theoretical Sources of Class Influence on Citizens' Attitudes

Class differences in social and political preferences were, for many decades, one of the central research questions in the field of public opinion research. The claim that individuals and groups with different levels of income and wealth should be expected to have different attitudes appears in many different places. Werner Sombart's *Why Is there No Socialism in the United States?* (1906) posed the question sharply in his famous essay on what would come to be known as the "American exceptionalism" thesis. For Sombart, the relative affluence of American workers meant that "all socialist utopias come to nothing on roast beef and apple pie" (for later examples of the "embourgeoisement thesis," see, for example, Kerr, Dunlop, Harbison, and Myers 1960). By contrast, Selig Perlman (1928) argued in his institutional account that class consciousness among American workers never took hold because of the absence of feudal legacies, the early extension of the franchise, and successive waves of immigration which undermined class-wide solidarity. Generations of scholarship on American exceptionalism have periodically reiterated these claims (see, for example, Hartz 1955; Bell 1960; Lipset and Marks 2000).

Although it suggests the absence of strong class divides, the American exceptionalism thesis stimulated rather than ended debate about class divisions in public opinion. Indeed, some of the earliest efforts at systematic research on public preferences, using voting behavior as a proxy for "public opinion," sought to explore the link between class location and political preferences and test the exceptionalism thesis. In the era before the advent of modern survey research, for example, early ecological analyses by W. F. Ogburn (Ogburn and Peterson 1916) and Stuart Rice (1928) used voting data as a proxy to analyze the underlying beliefs of different class segments (see also Ogburn and Coombs 1940 and Anderson and Davidson 1943 on class differences in politics in the New Deal era).

In the post-Second World War era, Seymour Martin Lipset probably did as much as anyone to focus attention on the role of class divisions in structuring political preferences (Lipset 1960; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; see also Alford 1963). In the essays gathered

together in his widely read 1960 book *Political Man*, for example, Lipset developed what he would later characterize—in the 1981 postscript to the reissue of the book—as an “apolitical Marxist” approach to explaining the social origins of democracy, fascism, communism, and the social bases of modern political parties. The values that sustain democratic societies were said to be more prevalent in societies with a large and stable bloc of middle class citizens, especially where education levels were relatively high. Authoritarian preferences, by contrast, could be traced to marginalized groups or classes, including workers (Lipset’s famous formulation of the thesis of “working class authoritarianism”), small business owners, and other economically vulnerable class segments.

Lipset’s early work implied both a rational foundation to class-based public opinion, in which class location normally gives rise to an orientation toward social and political issues, and an “irrational” attraction to left- or right-wing extremism. Anthony Downs’s (1957) landmark work on an economic model of political behavior pushed much further in developing a rational model of class-based preferences. For Downs, “groups” of voters are simply aggregates of self-interested actors (albeit with similar calculations of utility), and group-based voting or attitudes can be explained in terms of calculations of individuals within the group. Influential extensions of this approach can be seen in Meltzer and Richard’s (1981) model of median voter support for redistribution and Hibbs’s (1982, 1987) model of vote choice determined by working class preferences for low unemployment and middle class preferences for low inflation. Brustein (1998) even provided an answer to Lipset’s irrational account of fascism in his study of National Socialism’s appeal, finding evidence that early party members were drawn from class segments potentially benefiting economically from the Nazi platform.

The interest-based account of class preferences was long predominant, indeed the default model of class influence on public opinion. But it presumes high information on the part of citizens; they have to reliably connect their economic situation to other social and political attitudes. Not surprisingly, alternative and less demanding models of the links between class and attitudes developed in the post-war era as well. The most influential work came out of the Columbia School and its panel survey of voters in the 1940 and 1948 elections, which found voter preferences to be surprisingly stable (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). This led the authors to identify a simple “index of political predisposition,” rooted in socioeconomic status, and attribute both stability and class bias to the influence of social networks of friends, family members, and co-workers in guiding and reinforcing political preferences (even in the face of the noise of the campaign and low levels of information). After a flurry of interest, however, contextual models fell out of fashion; their relatively recent rediscovery as a source of class influence on political preferences remains very much a work in process (cf. Weakliem and Heath 1994; Kohler 2006; Zuckerman 2006).

The social psychological approach of the Michigan School of Angus Campbell and his colleagues provides yet another possible source of understanding how class membership may shape attitudes through partisanship (A. Campbell, Converse, Miller, and

Stokes 1960). The idea is that partisan and socioeconomic influences from individual families create enduring attitudes and behaviors in adulthood (cf. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Later extensions of the model argued that “group identity,” or a sense of “linked fate,” becomes the source of strength of class politics (cf. Conover 1988; Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1989; Dawson 2003 introduces the concept of “linked fate” in analyzing African Americans’ high levels of Democratic partisanship). Powerful evidence of the importance of childhood inheritance has also come from studies of socially mobile individuals who often retain preferences as close to their class origin as to their class destination (for example, De Graaf, Nieuwbeerta, and Heath 1995; Kohler 2006). The social mobility thesis remains one of the more powerful sources of evidence of the relevance of class as a background factor in shaping citizens’ attitudes.

In spite of these theoretical insights, however, it is fair to say that the classical tradition produced no consensus about why social attitudes should be linked to class, or, for that matter, to any coherent and consistent system of thought (Converse 1964; cf. Svallfors 2006, 7; Kohler 2006, 117). Where mechanisms rooted in class relations have been systematically tested, it has primarily been voting behavior—not attitudes—that is of primary interest (cf. Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1995; Gelman 2008). Yet it is hardly unreasonable to expect that social and political attitudes may invoke different class (and non-class) factors, or that class may have different consequences for attitude formation than for vote choice.

Recent Controversies

If class divisions in public opinion were for a long time a staple of debate and investigation in research in public opinion and political behavior, there has been somewhat less attention in recent decades. Indeed, something of a popular and scholarly backlash against the view that class remains a relevant factor shaping individual attitudes has emerged. For example, while Seymour Martin Lipset was once associated with a strong view of the enduring importance of class, toward the end of his long scholarly career he came to adopt the view that class divisions were of declining importance (see, for example, Clark and Lipset 1991). A flurry of works published in the 1990s asserted “the death of class politics” in a variety of manifestations, including class differences in public opinion (Inglehart 1990; Pakulski and Waters 1996; Kingston 2000, ch. 6).

One widely discussed recent set of controversies has arisen in relation to Thomas Frank’s best-selling book *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* (2004). Frank asserts that traditional patterns of class politics in the United States have declined, with white working class voters increasingly influenced by the conservative framing of electoral contests around social issues such as abortion, gun control, and family values, encouraging them to overlook (or misunderstand) their own economic interests (see also Roemer 1998). A more general variant of Frank’s “cultural turn” argument can be found in claims that the contemporary political landscape is defined more by

ideological polarization on cultural and social issues than on economic ones. Here, the role of education (one component of class in the broadest conceptualizations) appears to be the driving factor between those with liberal and conservative views on social and cultural matters (Van Der Waal, Achterberg, and Houtman 2007; see also Gelman 2008).

The class thesis has also been controversial outside the electoral context, where it is not uncommon to find relatively modest differences between higher class and lower class groups across a range of attitudes. Studies of attitudes toward rising inequality, for example, do not appear to have generated the expected class divisions in response and, moreover, show responses to be sensitive to income and education in different ways (Bartels 2008; McCall and Kenworthy 2009b; Page and Jacobs 2009). On related issues, comparative research shows Americans to be much less divided on questions of worker–management relations, the role of economic markets, and attitudes toward the welfare state than Europeans (Svallfors 2006; Wright 1997). Casting the net still wider, several recent studies of the responsiveness of politicians and policy to public opinion on a variety of issues conclude that even if policy is more reflective of the views of upper-income constituents (see Bartels 2008; Gilens 2005; and Jacobs and Page 2005), underlying differences in views among income groups are small (R. S. Erikson and Bhatti forthcoming; Ura and Ellis 2008). Changes in aggregate “policy mood” correlate well with both changes in policy outcomes and changes in opinion among lower-income groups (Enns and Kellstedt 2008; Page and Shapiro 1992; Soroka and Wlezien 2009).

Pronouncements about the declining significance of class and economic self-interest have not gone unanswered, however. While the responses have been forceful, they have also been reflective of what might be called an emerging middle ground in class analysis. In this view, the potential for wide variation in the political importance of class is acknowledged and the growing salience of non-economic issues, and the complexity this introduces, is appreciated. On the subject of cultural polarization, for instance, an extensive analysis by Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2006) affirmed the sense that many political and social commentators have that social issues are more prominent in politics than they once were. Yet it also revealed a rise in the salience of economic issues such that these issues continue to dominate partisanship and vote choice for all demographic groups, as they have in the past (cf. the cross-national evidence presented in Van Der Waal, Achterberg, and Houtman 2007).

Similarly, while scholars have challenged the thesis that class position no longer guides political behavior by showing in a variety of ways that income significantly shapes electoral outcomes (for example, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Stonecash and Brewer 2006; Bartels 2008), these scholars have also demonstrated that the income effect varies by time period and by region. In a state-level analysis, for example, Gelman (2008) finds widening income divides in vote choice throughout much of the country, especially in the South, but narrowing divides in affluent states, particularly on the two coasts. Likewise, Gilens’s (2009) analysis of policy preferences spanning perhaps the widest range of issues yet considered suggests that preference gaps by income and education vary across both policy domains and specific policy options

within such domains. Such gaps can be substantial (20–30 percentage points) not only for economic issues but for cultural and foreign policy issues as well (see also Jacobs and Page 2005).

As these findings naturally demand further explanation, the contextual and multidimensional nature of preference and attitude formation will no doubt continue to preoccupy scholars of public opinion for some time to come. Two avenues of research are particularly relevant in this respect. The first combines the insights of political psychology and political institutions to understand how asymmetries in information processing and political motivation are connected to economic inequalities and exploited or crafted by political elites and the media (for example, Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Hacker and Pierson 2005). Studies of both public opinion and elite discourse on single issues can be especially revealing of the conditions under which policy preferences do and do not conform to rational expectations, particularly when studied over time (Bartels 2005; A. L. Campbell 2009). Because public opinion data typically come in aggregate form, however, “average” public opinion is often confounded with that of the “middle class” and then opposed to the views of political and economic “elites.” While this seems reasonable, much further research is needed to discern the true extent of class differences in both information and opinion.

Second, research that more tightly controls for the informational context of opinion formation can have important explanatory value even if it is limited to narrow groups and contexts or to experimental settings. Scheve and Slaughter (2007), for instance, home in on the threat of job loss among low-skill workers in sectors exposed to import competition to show how this leads to their greater support for immigration and trade restrictions even relative to high-skill workers in the same sectors (whose jobs are less substitutable). Incorporating the influence of organizational contexts and selection bias in their frameworks, a number of scholars demonstrate that employment in the public sector corresponds with distinctive attitudes toward government spending, individual programs, and aid recipients, which in turn affect the political views of recipients themselves in a policy feedback chain of relations (Lipsky 1983; Mettler and Soss 2004; Kumlin 2007). More generally, Weeden and Grusky (2005) identify narrow occupations as the key source of class influence, with individuals more absorbed by their specific occupation than the bigger class groupings (“working class,” “middle class,” “managers,” etc.) that most class analysts of public opinion have employed.

DEFINITIONS AND EXTENSIONS

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Thus far we have ignored a frequent point of contention in classical and contemporary debates: whether analysts should conceptualize classes in terms of education, occupation, or income, and whether to break the distribution into smaller or larger members of classes. The multiplicity of definitions suggests that before any firm conclusions about trends in the class–attitude relationship are drawn, analysts should consider a

wider range of definitions of socioeconomic status than is typical in most studies. In the rest of this chapter, we first provide some brief commentary on the underlying logic of the major approaches using definitions other than income, such as those based on occupations, subjective social class identification, social mobility, and intersecting identities. We then provide, in the next section, an illustrative analysis of four major areas of public opinion across five major definitions of class.

For sociologists, the predominant approach to identifying individuals' class locations has long centered on occupation, for two main reasons. First, occupations are intended to capture the multidimensionality of work (Hauser and Warren 1997; Ganzeboom and Treiman 2003). In socioeconomic indices or scales, detailed occupations are scored according to an occupation's human capital requirements and monetary rewards, thus taking both education and earnings into account (with education typically weighted more than earnings). Similarly, several categorical typologies mix occupational and organizational characteristics to create a multidimensional class map (Wright 1997). Based on a combination of factors such as work content (routine or non-routine), working conditions (office or factory), and especially employment relations (owner or non-owner, supervisor or non-supervisor, secure or insecure) (Goldthorpe 2000), such typologies are common in the large literature on class voting, where they show divergences among groups with similar incomes and educations, such as managers and business owners (more Republican or right-wing) versus professionals (more Democratic or left-wing) (Manza and Brooks 1999).

Second, occupation-based measures are intended to capture the social and collective aspects of economic life. Individuals communicate with co-workers in their same line of work to a greater extent than with all but family members (cf. Weeden and Grusky 2005). Some research suggests that such co-worker networks are also more diverse than friend, family, and neighborhood networks, which in turn fosters the political goods of knowledge and tolerance (Mutz and Mondak 2006). Further, as compared to income, occupation may represent a more stable indicator of socioeconomic status and ideological views over the life course (Goldthorpe 2000; Hauser and Warren 1997). Occupational niches with concentrations of like-minded individuals are especially likely both to select certain kinds of people in, and to reinforce their underlying world views through, their occupational networks (Brint 1994). The influence of occupation-based associations and business and labor organizations in shaping social policy legislation is also richly documented (for example, Starr 1983).

If one of the virtues of occupations is that they combine education and earnings in a parsimonious way, this may tend to confuse truly "class" effects with educational effects (see, for example, Van Der Waal, Achterberg, and Houtman 2007). Particularly when assessing class differences in social attitudes, a long line of research suggests the importance of the independent role of education. For example, Lipset's working class authoritarian thesis drew from research on the timely subject of social and political tolerance, especially concerning the civil liberties of free speech and association (but also racial inclusion), which was found to be greater among those with higher education and occupational status and in positions of community leadership (Stouffer 1955).

Later analyses in the same vein would emphasize the importance of education over occupational status in fostering more liberal values and attitudes (Davis 1982).

As an alternative to occupation measures, some analysts have focused on “subjective” measures of class identity (i.e., the social class category respondents place themselves in). Although subjective measures are sometimes viewed with skepticism, several studies provide evidence of their reliability and usefulness (Jackman and Jackman 1983; Vanneman and Cannon 1987). For example, about a third of Americans will say they do *not* think of themselves as belonging to the working or even middle class when given the chance to abstain (as in a National Election Study screening question on class identity), yet when presented with a forced-choice question on class identity such as on the General Social Survey (i.e., lower, working, middle, or upper), nearly half identify as lower or working class, a share that has barely budged over several decades of growing real incomes (Hout 2008). This suggests a tendency to view economic status in relative terms, which in turn is useful in assessing trends over time in class-based attitudes and political behavior (Walsh, Jennings, and Stoker 2004).

The strength and consistency of the signal provided by subjective measures of class identity depend on a number of factors, however. The correlation of subjective class identity with education, income, and occupation is strongest at the extremes of the distribution while those in the middle exhibit greater heterogeneity in status (e.g., lower than average income and higher than average education) and therefore class identity (Jackman and Jackman 1983; Hout 2008). Political sophistication, interest, participation, and partisanship also have the potential to accentuate the degree to which subjective class distinctions affect vote choices (A. Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960; Lewis-Beck, Weisberg, Norpoth, and Jacoby 2008). Conversely, the strength and substance of class identity influence political efficacy and participation, with middle class identifiers more likely to feel efficacious and to engage in politics, net of objective indicators of class (Walsh, Jennings, and Stoker 2004).

Yet another step beyond measuring social class as one of the “big three” objective indicators (i.e., education, income, and occupation) is to more explicitly cast it as a function of future rather than current economic well-being. In Max Weber’s classic conception, class is distinct from other forms of social stratification because it is meant to capture an individual’s “life chances.” Thus, expectations of upward social mobility, however modest (Lane 1962), may help explain why those at the bottom or in the middle might not fully embrace redistribution despite their objective economic interests in doing so, especially as income inequality rises (Benabou and Ok 2001; Piketty 1995). But while broadly sympathetic to this approach, other scholars find that Americans’ tolerance of inequality and opposition to redistribution is heterogeneous *within* income groups. This suggests that values of fairness and reciprocity may be more important than narrow economic self-interest (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2006; Fong, Bowles, and Gintis 2004). This perspective converges with those in political science who emphasize the psychological importance of values such as deservingness and need, and not egalitarianism per se, in shaping support for social policy (Feldman and Steenbergen 2001; Hochschild 2001).

Finally, we note the potential significance in shaping public opinion of intersections of class with gender, race–ethnicity, region, and nation. On the one hand, this hardly needs stating. Particularly in studies of partisan identification and presidential voting, the centrality of race and the South to shifts in trends over time is incontrovertible. Cross-national comparative research also recognizes that class structures and ideologies are enduringly embedded in national political, economic, racial, and social institutions (Brooks and Manza 2007; Svallfors 2006; Alesina and Glaeser 2004). On the other hand, Hochschild (2009) argues that recent concerns about the adverse impact of income inequality on democratic representation have led to studies focused exclusively on class. Similarly, the important literature on the gender gap in voting and preferences for government spending generally speaks little of class differences among women (but see Brady, Sosnaud, and Frenk 2009; Edlund and Pande 2002). Not all intersections need be explored nor should they be expected to result in substantive differences, but the recent trend toward intersectional approaches has been productive and should be encouraged further.

ISSUE- AND INDICATOR-SPECIFIC PATTERNS

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Since it is rare for scholars to include a full gamut of indicators of class in their analyses of public opinion, with earlier scholars more partial to occupation and subjective class and later scholars more partial to income and education, we provide a simple illustrative analysis here using data from the General Social Survey. As shown in Figures 34.1–4, we examine the effects of five different indicators of socioeconomic status on four different indices of public opinion. The indicators of socioeconomic status are coded as categorical variables, each with between four and six categories, and entered as a set of dummy variables to capture potential non-linear effects. The indicators are family income (roughly in quintiles), education (less than high school, high school, some college, college, and postgraduate), the Erikson–Goldthorpe class schema (six categories based on occupation and self-employment; see R. Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992), subjective social class (lower, working, middle, and upper class), and optimism about future economic mobility, measured in levels of agreement to the statement that “people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living” (five categories from strong disagreement to strong agreement). Detailed information about the data and analysis are available in the appendix to this chapter.

Following from the discussion in previous sections, the outcomes were selected to cover both economic and non-economic issues and policies that do and do not require government spending. The four outcomes map onto the cells in a two-by-two table of attitudes involving government spending (yes/no) and economic issues (yes/no). To maximize coverage of topics and facilitate the presentation of results, we also selected outcomes that could be constructed from multiple items into a continuous index with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. We chart gross effects only in order to make simple, baseline comparisons of strength and direction across indicators and

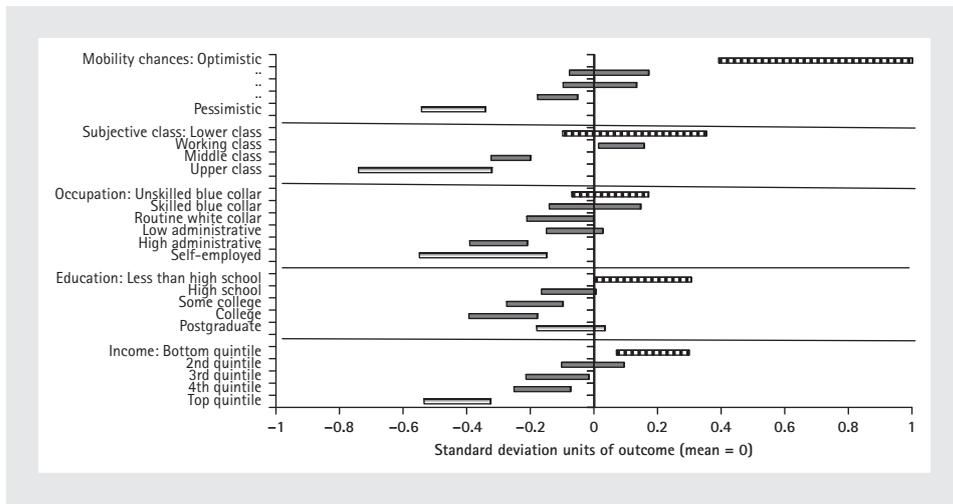


Figure 34.1 Socioeconomic effects (95% CI) on index of support for redistribution

Same sample for all models (N = 1,100) and separate models for each indicator; no controls added. Outcome is average of *helpoor*, *eqwlth*, and *goveqinc*. Vertical striped bars refer to lowest-class group and two-tone bars refer to highest-class group. See text and appendix to this chapter for further details.

Source: General Social Survey 1996, 2000, 2008.

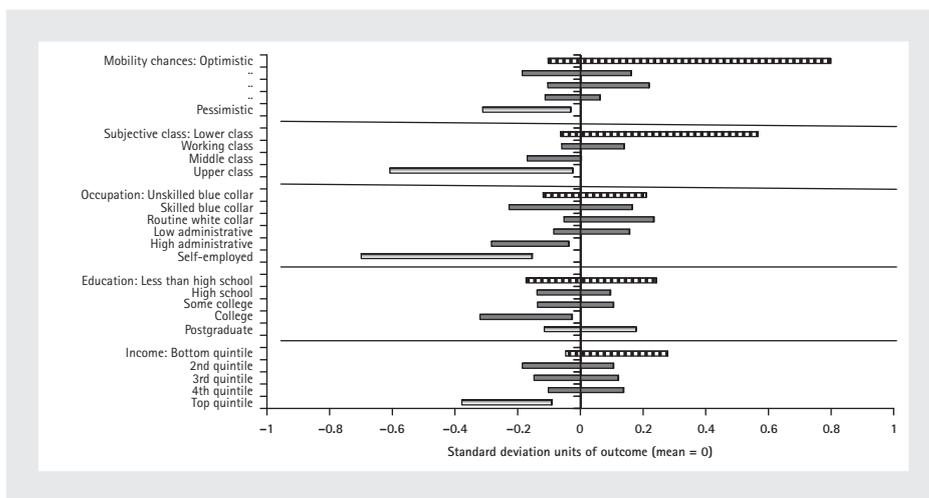


Figure 34.2 Socioeconomic effects (95% CI) on index of support for government spending

Same sample for all models (N = 1,100) and separate models for each indicator; no controls added. Outcome is index of ten questions about government spending (*nat** questions). Vertical striped bars refer to lowest-class group and two-tone bars refer to highest-class group. See text and appendix to this chapter for further details.

Source: General Social Survey 1996, 2000, 2008.

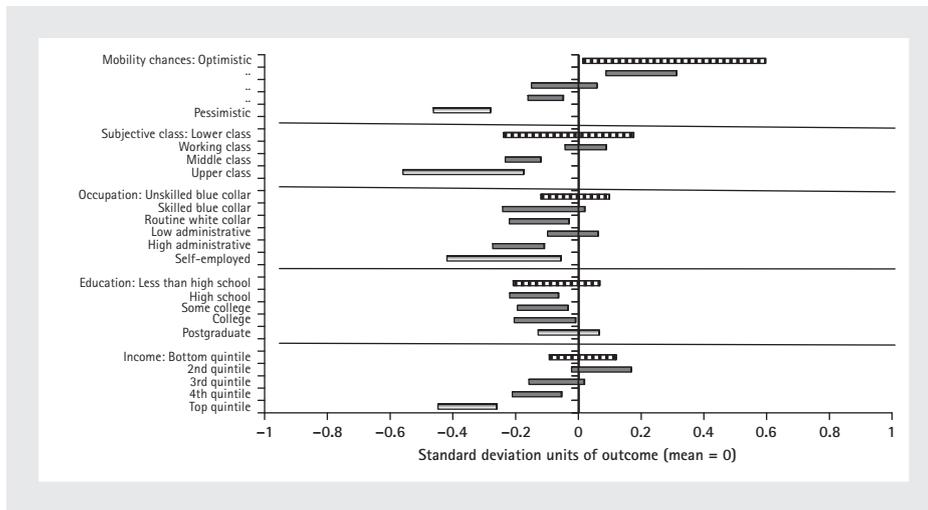


Figure 34.3 Socioeconomic effects (95% CI) on index of opposition to inequality

Same sample for all models (N = 1,100) and separate models for each indicator; no controls added. Outcome is average of *incgap*, *inequal3*, *inequal5*. Vertical striped bars refer to lowest-class group and two-tone bars refer to highest-class group. See text and appendix to this chapter for further details.

Source: General Social Survey 1996, 2000, 2008.

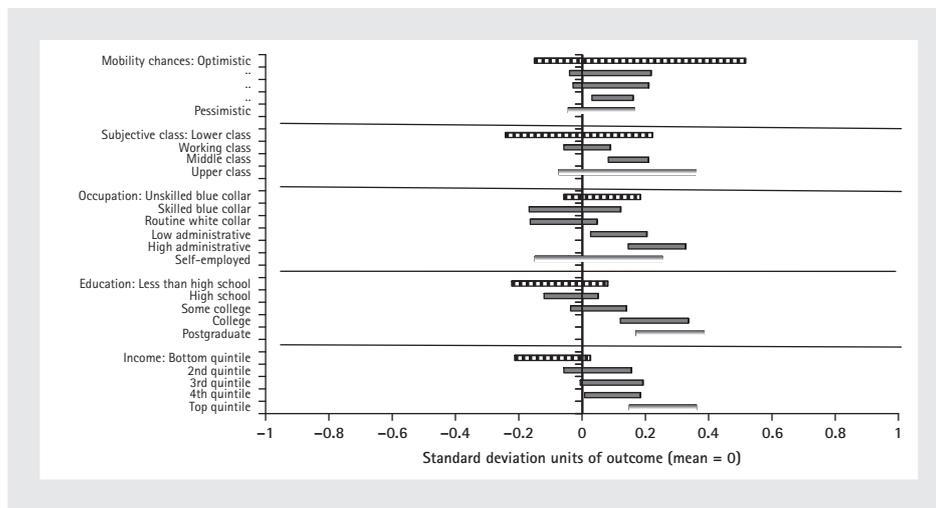


Figure 34.4 Socioeconomic effects (95% CI) on index of support for abortion

Same sample for all models (N = 1,100) and separate models for each indicator; no controls added. Outcome is average of seven questions about abortion (*ab** questions). Vertical striped bars refer to lowest-class group and two-tone bars refer to highest-class group. see text and appendix to this chapter for further details.

Sources: General Social Survey 1996, 2000, 2008.

outcomes (higher values are coded in the liberal direction). We also examine and discuss other outcomes—such as capital punishment, happiness, trust, ideological views, and partisan identification—as well as full models that are not presented in the figures.

The results are consistent with the “middle ground” view about the significance of class differences in public opinion that we suggested above. Class differences are more evident in support of a three-item index of redistribution in Figure 34.1 than in support of a ten-item index of support for government spending across economic and other domains in Figure 34.2. Individuals in the lowest class group (vertically striped bars) are significantly more supportive of government redistribution than those in the highest class group (the two-tone bars) for four out of the five indicators of class. Education is the exception but only partially so because of non-linear effects: postgraduates have more liberal views on redistribution than college graduates but college graduates have more conservative views than those with a high school education or less. Class differences in support of government spending more broadly are in the same direction but are much weaker, with significant differences for only two of the five indicators of class.

Much the same general pattern, albeit more muted, is found in public opinion on economic and social issues unrelated to government spending. Attitudes about income inequality (a three-item index) and abortion (a seven-item index) are shown in Figures 34.3 and 34.4, respectively. For two of the five indicators (family income and mobility optimism) individuals in the lowest class are significantly more likely to oppose income inequality than are those in the top class. For a third indicator, differences are significant between the second lowest and top groups (i.e., between the working and upper classes). The range of variation in support of abortion is much smaller across all indicators of class. Where class matters, the difference runs in the opposite direction, with higher education, income, and occupation groups significantly more likely to support the liberal position. We find analogous patterns for other outcomes. For example, indicators of class were much weaker in their effects on ideological views than on partisan identification, and a postgraduate education resulted in the most liberal ideology but not the most liberal partisanship. If ideological views are considered more representative of public opinion on a wide range of social and economic issues, relative to partisan identification, these results suggest, along with those in Figures 34.1–4, that the farther the outcome is from measuring preferences related to narrow economic issues or formal political practices, the weaker the class effect.¹

Taken as a whole, several other notable patterns emerge from Figures 34.1–4. First, income has the broadest impact across outcomes; it is the only indicator of class that resulted in significant differences between the bottom and top groups for all four outcomes. This may reflect the fact that the income measure does not confound education and material well-being. Second, differences in outcomes are weak among middle groups; this suggests that finer and more disaggregated measures will yield

¹ We examined opposition to capital punishment (a binary variable) and also found postgraduate education and lower administrative occupations to be associated with greater opposition, the liberal view. We found less of an effect for income.

greater variation and illuminate potentially important divergences between groups at the extremes. Third, non-linear effects are common, most especially with occupational groups (as expected, of course, since it is a non-ordinal variable) but also with education because of the tendency for postgraduates to be more conservative than college graduates on government programs. Fourth, and related, education is the least correlated with other indicators of class and ought to be entered separately to capture the multidimensionality of socioeconomic status. Fifth, the subjective indicator of optimism about upward mobility is of clear and substantial significance in models predicting preferences regarding redistribution and income inequality.² Sixth, as noted by other scholars, preferences among lower class groups are measured less precisely than preferences among higher class groups. And finally, the overall range of variation in outcomes as a result of differences in socioeconomic status is modest but not trivial in most cases (e.g., a third of a standard deviation) but in some instances is substantially large (e.g., two thirds to a full standard deviation).

CONCLUSION

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In this chapter, we have endeavored to present both an overview of classical and contemporary theoretical debates about class differences in social and political attitudes and an empirical investigation of class effects across multiple specifications. Two questions have dominated research on class and public opinion: (1) how large are class differences in public opinion? and (2) what are the trends? Are “classes dying,” as some have suggested, or does class remain a robust force in contemporary public opinion? Our dissection of the scholarly literature suggests that these continue to be vexed questions. Analysts have deployed multiple specifications of class in their work, producing results that either speak past one another or fail to capture the full extent of economic stratification. This could also be said of other related areas of research that we have not discussed. Most important, perhaps, is the subject of class asymmetries in the information and knowledge upon which public opinion is often formed. Such asymmetries stem from several potential sources, from differences in education and family background to class biases in political participation and media framing. But whatever their origin, a better understanding of their extent and nature could help explain some of the patterns we observe, such as the absence of strong class differences in public opinion where we might otherwise expect them.

The analyses we have presented in this chapter are meant to demonstrate the need to study these questions with multiple measures of class and across a range of social, economic, and political issues. They are primarily illustrative and not intended to

² To explore the broader influence of this indicator, we ran ordered probit models with trust and happiness as outcomes and found sizable positive effects of mobility optimism on both (again, also in models with controls).

resolve existing debates. Nevertheless, we are confident that the results we have presented are supportive of an argument emerging from recent research, albeit one in need of further exploration. This argument holds that socioeconomic differences matter in the formation of public opinion but their impact varies across issue area (Gilens 2009) and across indicators of socioeconomic status. Moreover, indicators other than those commonly included in public opinion research are of potentially large import. Finally, preferences formed in proximity to or directly within the formal political sphere—regarding economic policy, partisanship, turnout, and vote choice—are among the most susceptible to the influence of class background, perhaps justifying the classical literature’s emphasis on voting behavior instead of public opinion more broadly. Overall, then, the domains in which class seems to matter the most are domains of considerable consequence in democratic, capitalist societies.

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APPENDIX 34.1

DATA

All data are from the General Social Surveys (GSS) for 1996, 2000, and 2008.

Views about Redistribution

The three items for the index on views about redistribution are averaged for each respondent (McCall and Kenworthy 2009a). The items are: “Should the government do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans, or should each person take care of himself?” (*helppoor*, 5 categories); “Should the government reduce income differences between the rich and poor, perhaps by raising taxes of wealthy families or by giving income assistance to the poor, or should the government not concern itself with reducing differences?” (*eqwlth*, 7 categories); and “Do you agree or disagree that it is the responsibility of the government to reduce differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes?” (*goveqinc*, 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree). All items and the average are coded so that positive values indicate the liberal position.

Views about Government Spending

The ten-item index on government spending is taken from Ura and Ellis (2008) and is based on the national spending questions (*nat**): “We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. Are we spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount on” (1) “welfare,” (2) “improving and protecting the nation’s health,” (3) “improving the nation’s education system,” (4) “improving the condition of blacks,” (5) “improving and protecting the environment,” (6) “solving the problems of big

cities,” (7) “dealing with drug addiction,” (8) “halting the rising crime rate,” (9) “foreign aid,” and (10) “military/armaments/defense?” All items and the index are coded so that positive values indicate the liberal position.

Views about Income Inequality

The three items for the index of views about income inequality are taken from McCall and Kenworthy (2009a) and are averaged for each respondent: “Do you agree or disagree: Differences in income in America are too large?” (*incgap*, 5 categories); “Do you agree or disagree: Large differences in income are necessary for America’s prosperity?” (*inequal5*, 5 categories); and “Do you agree or disagree: Inequality continues to exist because it benefits the rich and powerful?” (*inequal3*, 5 categories). All items and the average are coded so that positive values indicate the liberal position.

Views about Abortion

The seven items for the index of abortion attitudes is an average for each respondent and is based on a battery of questions on abortion (*ab**): “Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion (yes or no) if” (1) “there is a strong chance of a serious defect in the baby,” (2) “she is married and does not want any more children,” (3) “the woman’s own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy,” (4) “the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children,” (5) “the woman became pregnant as a result of rape,” (6) “the woman is not married and does not want to marry the man,” or (7) “the woman wants it for any reason.” All items and the average are coded so that positive values indicate the liberal position.

The Sample Size and Controls in the Full Models

All class indicators are included in the full models, but they are measured as continuous or ordinal variables instead of as dummy variables. Controls include views about the role of hard work in getting ahead, ideological views, party identification, church attendance, dummies for Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic denominations, marital status, age, age squared, household size, and dummies each for being white and male. Inclusion of these variables reduces the sample size to 1,100 observations across three years, and this same sample is used for all analyses. These three years were selected because they are the most recent years containing each of the outcome measures.

Other Coding Issues

The GSS occupational categories were converted to the Erikson–Goldthorpe schema using Stata routines developed by John Hendrickx (*ssc isco* and *ssc isko*) and based on Ganzeboom and Treiman (2003).

The income quintiles are inexact due to changes across General Social Surveys in the measurement of family income categories.