

Middle Class Identity in the Modern World: How Politics and Economics Matter

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Il est bien reconnu que les gens ont tendance à s'identifier à la classe moyenne indépendamment de la position sociale qu'ils occupent. Ce sentiment d'appartenance à la classe moyenne n'est pas ressenti dans toutes les sociétés démocratiques occidentales. Cet article vise principalement à examiner l'influence des conditions économiques et politiques sur ce phénomène. En examinant le lien entre l'identité de classe sociale et le contexte national dans 15 sociétés modernes, deux questions principales sont explorées: 1) de quelle façon le revenu des particuliers détermine-t-il le rang social pour lequel ils s'identifient? et 2) comment le contexte politique et économique national influence-t-il cette relation? Tout d'abord, les résultats obtenus indiquent que le revenu contribue positivement à l'identification des classes sociales dans les 15 sociétés étudiées et que l'identification à la classe moyenne est à son plus faible lorsque l'inégalité de revenu est élevée. De plus, les résultats montrent que le développement économique a un impact positif sur l'identité de classe sociale. Finalement, le rôle déterminant de l'idéologie politique est également montré par l'effet persistant du régime communiste. En fait, il semble que les habitants d'anciens pays communistes sont plus susceptibles à s'identifier à la classe sociale inférieure, et ce même après avoir tenu compte du développement économique et de l'inégalité de revenu.

It is widely accepted that people tend to identify with the middle classes regardless of their social class position. Nevertheless, this "middle class identity bias" is not equally prominent in all western democracies. The goal of this article is to assess the role of political and economic conditions in shaping this phenomenon. By exploring the relationship between class identity and national context in 15 modern societies, I address two main questions: (1) how individual-level income affects

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where people place themselves in the class system, and (2) how national political and economic context affects this relationship. In doing so, I offer several important findings. First, although there is a positive relationship between income and class identification in all 15 societies, middle class identification is weakest when income inequality is high. Consistent with previous findings, the results suggest that economic development has a positive impact on class identity. The results also uncover a role for political ideology by suggesting a lingering affect of Communist rule. Even after controlling for economic development and income inequality, respondents in former Communist countries are more likely than others to identify as belonging to a low social class.

ALTHOUGH THE STUDY of class identity has a strong tradition in research on politics and inequality (Centers 1949; Davis and Robinson 1988; Hodge and Treiman 1968; Jackman and Jackman 1983; Kelley and Evans 1995; Vanneman and Pampel 1977; Wright 1997), it has received little attention in recent years. The recent work focuses on either individual countries (Davis and Robinson 1998; Goldman, Cornman, and Chang 2006; Hayes and Jones 1992; Oddsson 2010; Shirahase 2010; SurrIDGE 2007) or small groups of countries (e.g., Baxter 1994; Evans, Kelley, and Kolosi 1992; Johnston and Baer 1993; Wright 1997), making it difficult to uncover systematic cross-national differences in people's perceptions of their class position. In short, a rigorous analysis of data from many countries is necessary in order to systematically test the influence of national context on class identity. This article attempts to fill this gap.

Using World Values Survey data, the present paper explores the correlates of class identity in 15 modern societies. My purpose is to uncover the ways individual-level economic conditions, political ideology, and economic context interact in their effects on class identity. The ultimate goal is to demonstrate the conditions under which middle class identity bias—that is, identifying with the middle class regardless of objective class position—is most common.

MIDDLE CLASS IDENTITY BIAS

Research on class identification evolved from the work of Cantril (1943; 1944), Centers (1949), and others (Hodge and Trieman 1968; Ossowski 1963). Research typically finds that most people understand class labels and believe that social classes still exist (Argule 1994; Gilbert 2003; Jackman and Jackman 1983; Popitz et al. [1957] 1969; Reid 1998; Vanneman and Cannon 1987). Yet, it is also commonly found that people's self-reports of social class can be poor measures of actual class positions (Evans and Kelley 2004; Kelley and Evans 1995; Oddsson 2010; Rothman 2002). In fact, people often identify with the middle classes, regardless of their position in the social structure (Evans and Kelley 2004; Kelley and

Evans 1995). Dominant middle class identities have been reported to occur in both affluent Western countries (Kelley and Evans 1995; Oddsson 2010) and former Communist countries (Evans and Kelley 2004; Evans et al. 1992).

This bias is often explained by “reference group theory,” which suggests that many people cannot distinguish between classes, and for various reasons develop a dominant “middle class” consensus (Evans and Kelley 2004; Kelley and Evans 1995). This is alleged to occur because people consider themselves in relation to those around them. The homogeneity of references groups distorts people’s perception of the class structure. It has also been suggested that when people refer to the “middle class” they tend to consider similarities in consumption patterns rather than production relations, income, or wealth (Clement and Myles 1994). This process of *embourgeoisement* is a common explanation for declining class consciousness, which is influenced by postindustrial economic change (Goldthorpe and Lockwood, 1963).

Reference group theory gets us part of the way to understanding dominant middle class identification, but it fails to explain cross-national differences. Factors at the national-level may influence the ways that people think about class and where they perceive their fit in the class structure to be. For example, some argue that when people feel that they share common interests, typically associated with economic experiences, their class identities are strengthened (Weakliem 1993). This can occur as a result of the political climate within countries or the ways in which income and wealth are distributed (Wright 1985).

Several studies argue that there is very little difference in class identity and awareness across the modern world (Evans and Kelley 2004; Kelley and Evans 1995). These studies, however, are typically comprised of very small samples of countries, often employing only individual-level analyses. Other comparative work considers only differences between the United States and elsewhere. For example, Vanneman (1980) argues that class identity and awareness among American and British workers was strikingly similar. This is a novel finding, as class tends to be a more important politically in Britain than the United States. Focusing on differences between the United States and Sweden, Wright (1989) also argues that national differences in class identity are muted, though he notes that Swedish workers express greater displeasure for capitalism than their American counterparts.

Similarly, Kelley and Evans (1995) demonstrate that subjective perceptions of class are relatively similar in six Western democracies—the United States, Great Britain, Australia, Switzerland, Austria, and Germany. They argue that in all six countries “reference group” processes distort people’s perceptions of class by encouraging them to think that they belong to the middle. In other words, class identity and awareness is weak across many Western democracies, and individual-level economic

circumstances may be less important in predicting images of class identity in modern societies.

Although different in some ways, a connection can be made to a long tradition of political sociology concerned with working class mobilization and consciousness (Korpi 1983; Mann 1973; Scase 1977). Class identities are thought to be strongest among the “traditional” worker. However, the language and demands of the new working class has changed as societies have become increasingly affluent. As a result, class identities have weakened and class opposition has become less apparent (Mann 1973). This change may have also shifted working class identities toward the middle.

CLASS IDENTITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

A common argument holds that class identities become less relevant as societies become more prosperous. Goldthorpe et al. (1969) note that in the mid-twentieth century economic prosperity in Britain changed the consumption patterns of the working classes, which in turn influenced how working class people thought about class placement. In short, the richer a society, the more likely people are to identify with the middle classes. Along similar lines, but drawing more general conclusions, Bell (1974) and Inglehart (1987) discuss the role of economic development in reducing the correlates of class across affluent societies. For their part, Evans and Kelley (2004) report that economic prosperity strengthens peoples’ sense of upper and middle class identity, irrespective of economic position. This finding reinforces their earlier claim of a “middling” identification effect, specifically, that people across all societies tend toward the middle classes—the so-called “rising tide” argument of economic development. While their sample does not include many countries with diverse economies, they conclude that in rich societies people perceive themselves to be higher in the class structure.

CLASS IDENTITY AND INCOME INEQUALITY

Some research indicates that cross-national differences could be related to political differences across countries during times of economic growth (Robinson and Kelley 1979; Wright 1997). At the heart of this issue is the idea that vast economic growth can induce changes in how people perceive the class structure. Specifically, it is possible that prosperous economic conditions strengthen the class identities of the lower and working classes because expectations for consumption and mobility become heightened (Gurr 1970; Huntington 1968; Logan 1977; Olson 1963). This implies that differences in class identity between classes may become more polarized if the economic benefits of industrialization are not experienced by all—especially by the lower and working classes.

Recent research demonstrates that economic development has only *limited* influence on class identity when other national contextual effects are considered (Andersen and Curtis 2012). This is not to say that economic conditions do not matter; rather, it is *economic inequality* that most strongly shapes class identity. This finding is perhaps not surprising when one considers that the advantages of economic growth are seldom distributed equally across economic groups (Atkinson and Piketty 2007; Kenworthy 2010; Smeeding 2005). The general conclusion is that classes tend to be more polarized when income differences and economic stratification are more apparent (Andersen and Curtis 2012; Weakliem 1993).

CLASS IDENTITY AND POLITICAL REGIME

If economic conditions matter, then because the economic differences between former Communist societies and other modern democratic societies are so pronounced, we should also expect class identities to be much more polarized in former communist societies. The tremendous pace of both economic prosperity and inequality in former Communist societies could have implications for class identity. Perhaps more importantly, Communist regimes were fundamentally different in their political ideologies. This could have a residual influence on present attitudes toward class (Evans 1997).

Consistent with the ideological differences between former Communist societies and established democracies, evidence suggests that people living in Communist regimes are less likely to see themselves as belonging to a high social class (Evans et al. 1992). But over the past 20 years, there have been drastic social and economic changes in most formerly Communist countries. While most previously had relatively lower levels of inequality, keeping pace with the rapid economic development (Heyns 2005), inequality has risen to levels at least equal, if not greater than most established democracies (Bandelj and Mahutga 2010).

A mounting body of research suggests that dramatic economic changes are accompanied by changes in attitudes (Evans 1997; Evans and Mills 1999; Gerber and Hout 2004). For example, Kelley and Zagorski (2005) find that only one decade after the fall of Communism in Poland and Hungary, public opinion in these countries was more favorable of income inequality than in most Western democracies. Particularly relevant to the present study, Evans and Kelley (2004) argue that once other factors are taken into account, patterns of class identity in former Communist countries are very similar to those in established democracies, especially among the very young. These findings underscore the importance of considering the role of former Communist rule on its own and including it as a control when attempting to assess the effects of both economic development and income inequality.

Following the discussion above, I will explore the relationship between class identity and national context. I will begin with the assumption that greater income is associated with “higher” class identities, and that people across all societies will disproportionately identify with the middle classes. On the grounds that significant cross-national differences are expected, I will explore of how economic development, income inequality, and post-soviet rule affect the relationship between income and class identification. More specifically, I will evaluate the claim that people across all societies develop a dominant middle class consensus, showing how such patterns of identification waver under specific political and economic conditions. I test these ideas using individual-level data from the *World Values Survey* (Inglehart et al. 2006) and national-level data from several official sources. I now turn to a detailed discussion of the data and methods employed in this analysis.

DATA AND METHODS

Individual-Level Survey Data

The *World Values Survey* consists of a collection of nationally representative samples of adults (18 years and older). The analysis relies on data from all European and Anglo-Saxon countries for which data were available in the 2005 wave.¹ The analysis is limited to persons between the ages of 30 and 65 on the grounds that they are more established in the labor market, with more stable class positions. Once missing data are removed, the final sample consists of 10,672 individual respondents from 15 countries (sample size in parentheses): Australia (858), Canada (1,133), Finland (559), Germany (1,089), Italy (451), Moldova (612), Norway (621), Poland (530), Romania (972), Slovenia (589), Spain (645), Sweden (560), Switzerland (730), Ukraine (559), and the United States (764).

Dependent Variable: Class Identity

Class identity is measured by a single questionnaire item:

People sometimes describe themselves as belonging to the working class, the middle class, or the upper or lower class. Would you describe yourself as belonging to the (read out and code one answer): (1) “Upper class,” (2) “Upper middle class,” (3) “Lower middle class,” (4) “Working class,” (5) “Lower class?”

Responses are recoded into three categories: (1) “lower” classes (responses 4 and 5); (2) “middle” class (responses 3 and 2); and (3) “higher” classes

¹ Data from less developed countries are not employed because their political economies differ so drastically from those of modern democracies that it makes little sense to compare them in the same analysis.

(response 1).² The categories are collapsed for two reasons: first, the distinction between working class and lower class is not obvious, even for academics (Baxter 1994), and second, given my interest in middle class identification, combining both middle class categories allows the “middle class identity thesis” to be more directly evaluated. For all countries in this sample, the dependent variable was uniformly measured across individual national surveys.

Individual-Level Predictors

Consistent with previous research, the most important individual-level predictor is *household income*, and it is used as a proxy for objective social class.³ Although raw income is not included in the World Values Survey (WVS), a relative measure of household income does appear. Within each country, respondents’ incomes are coded into deciles. Also, following standard practice (Baxter 1994; Hayes and Jones 1992; Jackman and Jackman 1983; Yamaguchi and Wang 2002), the statistical models control for gender, age, religiosity, and education. Age, which is measured in years, enters the models as an orthogonal quadratic polynomial.⁴ Education is divided into four categories: no formal education (the reference category), postsecondary school, some postsecondary school (including community college diplomas), and university degree. Religiosity is divided into two categories: practice at least once a month, and practice less than once a month or never (the reference category).

NATIONAL-LEVEL DATA

Economic Development

Economic development is measured using *gross domestic product (GDP) per capita*. For most countries, GDP per capita was obtained from the *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD; 2010) and standardized to 2005 U.S. dollars for all countries. OECD data are not available Moldova, Ukraine, and Romania; therefore, their GDP per capita is obtained from *The World Bank* (2010). Although it is common practice to

² Several transformations of the dependent variable were used in earlier analyses—specifically, separating “lower” and “working” class, as well as combining “upper middle” and “upper” class. There were, however, no significant differences in the final results.

³ Income is only one of the many indicators of social class. As an alternative, one could employ an occupation-based measure to capture not only economic position but also structures of power (Wright 1997) and life chances not necessarily associated with income (Erickson and Goldthorpe 1993). Given the complexity of the occupation structure in modern societies (Weeden and Grusky 2005), however, I focus on the role of income as it arguably has the greatest impact on living standard.

⁴ The transformation allows the model to capture a nonlinear relationship between class identification and age.

utilize the log of GDP per capita, the unmodified effect of GDP consistently results in the best model fit.⁵

Income Inequality

Following common practice in public opinion research (Andersen and Fetner 2008; Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1995), income inequality is measured using the *Gini coefficient for household incomes* after transfers. The Gini coefficient has a theoretical range from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality). For all but three countries (Moldova, Slovenia, and Ukraine), Gini measures were obtained from the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) (2009). For the three countries for which LIS data are not available, Gini estimates are obtained from the *Standardized World Income Inequality Database* (Solt 2009).⁶

Former Communist Rule

Any country under Communist rule within the past two decades is specified “former Communist”; all other countries are considered “established Democracies.” Information on Communist rule was taken from the Central Intelligence Agency *Factbook* (2005).

Descriptive statistics for important variables in the analysis for each country are shown in Table 1.

STATISTICAL MODELS

Because the dependent variable has three categories, I employ a series of multinomial logit models to assess how it is related to income and national context.⁷ All models control for gender, age, education, and religiosity. Two sets of models are fitted in this analysis. These models allow me to explore the effect of individual-level income and how it varies across countries. The first starts with a separate model for each country. In the second, in order to test the contextual effects, a multinomial logit model is fitted to the pooled data from the 15 countries. As I will discuss in more detail below, Spain is identified as an outlier in this analysis. While

⁵ I also explored other specifications for the effect of GDP per capita, including a linear effect and a quadratic polynomial.

⁶ I also tested the impact of other specifications for the effect of the Gini coefficient (e.g., a quadratic polynomial and the square of the Gini coefficient) on model fit. In most cases, the linear specification adequately captured the relationship between the Gini coefficient and attitudes.

⁷ All analyses were run using both multinomial models and ordered logit models. I present the results from the multinomial models for three reasons: (1) the test for parallel lines assumption failed for the ordered logit models; (2) the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion for the final model indicated a much better fit to the data for the multinomial models; and (3) the fitted values for the multinomial and ordered logit models were radically different, especially not only for the middle class, a significant focus of this paper, but also for the higher class.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Each Country. Countries are Rank Ordered by GDP

Country	Individual-level data			National context data			
	Mean income (SD)	Proportion reporting lower class	Proportion reporting middle class	Proportion reporting higher class	GDP per capita (\$1,000 US)	Income inequality (net Gini)	Former Communist
Norway	5.82 (2.651)	.274	.393	.333	47,319	.256	No
United States	5.08 (1.872)	.376	.329	.296	42,494	.372	No
Switzerland	5.53 (1.795)	.125	.386	.489	35,478	.268	No
Canada	6.00 (2.848)	.380	.314	.306	35,033	.318	No
Australia	5.83 (2.835)	.355	.346	.298	33,963	.312	No
Sweden	6.59 (2.796)	.218	.370	.413	32,298	.237	No
Germany	4.59 (1.872)	.350	.406	.244	31,366	.278	No
Finland	4.78 (2.540)	.390	.349	.261	30,644	.252	No
Italy	4.34 (2.712)	.412	.317	.271	144	.338	No
Spain	4.71 (1.614)	.270	.687	.043	27,377	.351	No
Slovenia	4.93 (1.815)	.401	.384	.216	17,871	.240	Yes
Poland	4.04 (1.786)	.619	.278	.104	13,786	.320	Yes
Romania	.86 (2.781)	.560	.276	.165	4,572	.343	Yes
Ukraine	4.43 (1.829)	.451	.381	.168	1,829	.360	Yes
Moldova	4.97 (2.088)	.454	.250	.296	831	.380	Yes

the results with Spain included in the analysis do not substantively alter the study's conclusions, the Spanish data mute the models' effects. As Table 1 demonstrates, Spaniards disproportionately identify with the middle classes relative to all other nations. I therefore focus on the results from the models that exclude the Spanish data.

RESULTS

I start by exploring the relationship between income and the middle class identification bias. I expect a positive relationship between household income and class identity, as well as a bias toward middle-class identification. While I expect to find these two relationships in all countries, I also expect to find significant cross-national variation. Therefore, I explore the results from the individual-country models predicting class identity. Given that my concern is the impact of income, I focus only on this effect. Also, given that income has a nonlinear effect in all 15 countries, I display fitted probabilities for the income effect in Figure 1 rather than discuss the model coefficients alone. The fitted probabilities are calculated with all other variables in the regression equation set to typical values (Fox and Andersen 2006). Each of the dashed lines represents the fitted probabilities from one of the 15 countries. The wide solid lines depict the fitted probabilities from a single model fitted to the pooled data from all 15 countries (with fixed effects for country). In other words, the solid lines represent the average effect of income across the 15 countries. I have also identified Spain as a statistically significant outlier with a solid gray line—this was also confirmed later when more rigorous diagnostics were performed.

Figure 1 confirms that income is positively related to class identity. In all 15 countries, as income rises, people become less likely to identify with the lower classes and more likely to identify with the higher classes. There is a relatively similar pattern in most countries for middle class identification; as income increases, people become more likely to report middle class identity until about the median income level. There is substantial cross-national variation in the effect of income, however. This is obvious by the variance in the fitted lines shown in Figure 1, especially for top incomes and "higher class" identification (panel c). Figure 1 also highlights the extent to which Spain is an outlier. Very few Spaniards identify with a high social class, including those with very high incomes. Moreover, Spaniards are far more likely than respondents from any other country to display "middle class" identification. These observations are consistent with other research on public opinion and class identity in Spain (Barnes, Lopez-Pina, and McDonough 1984; see also McDonough, Barnes, and Lopez-Pina 1986).⁸

⁸ Tests for outlying countries also indicated that Norway stood apart from other countries in that the effect of income on "lower" class identity was much weaker, and that Romania stood apart in terms of

Figure 1

Fitted Probabilities for Class Identification by Income in 15 Democracies.⁹

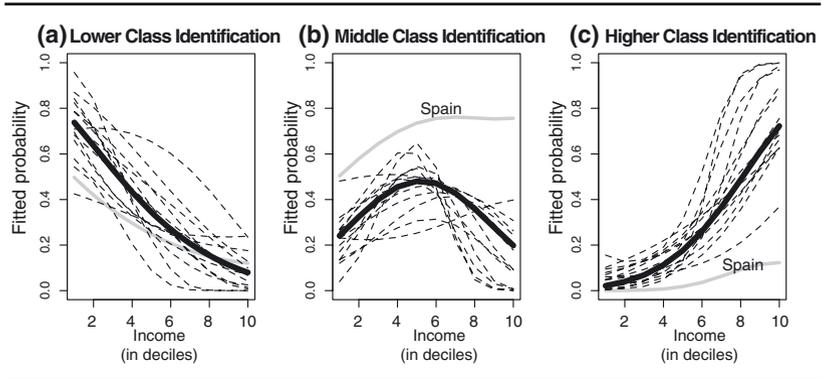


Table 1 suggests that patterns of class identification are much more complicated than previous research assumes. It is clear that middle class identities vary widely across countries. Among the 15 countries that this study considers, only two—Germany and Spain—have more than 40 percent of respondents identifying with the middle class. This hardly suggests a dominant middle class consensus. More importantly, this significant cross-national variation indicates the importance of exploring how national context influences class identification.

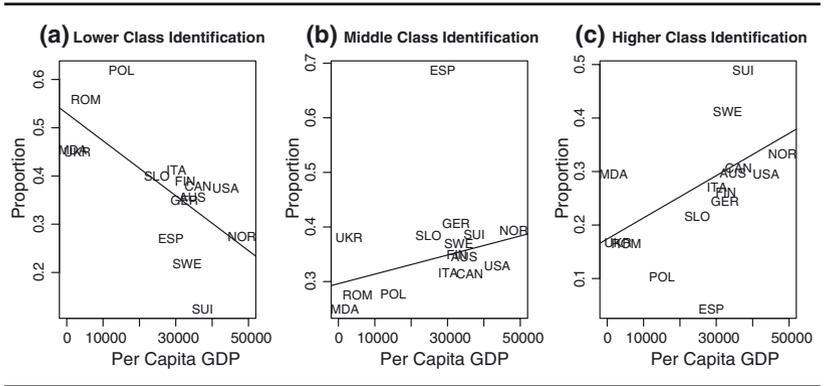
I now turn to the relationships between the national-level economic context and class identity. Figure 2 displays the cross-national relationship between economic development and the proportion of people indicating that they belong to each class category. This preliminary evidence indicates that as economic development rises, class identities tend to shift higher up the class hierarchy. If we look more closely at the figure, however, some doubt is cast on this observation. Concentrating only on countries in the bottom half of GDP per capita—all of which were formerly Communist—it is far less obvious that economic development and class identity are positively related. A similar conclusion is reached when looking only at the rich countries, none of which have experienced Communist rule.

the effects of income on “middle”-class identity. Excluding these countries from the analyses did not significantly alter the substantive conclusions from the final model, however, so they require no further attention.

⁹ The dashed lines represent the fitted values from separate multinomial logit models fitted to each of the 15 countries. The thick solid lines display the fitted probabilities for a multinomial logit model (with fixed country effects) fitted to the pooled data.

Figure 2

Economic Development and Average Class Identification in 15 Democracies.¹⁰



When all countries are considered together, Figure 3 indicates that the relationship between income inequality and public opinion is a near mirror image to the relationship between GDP per capita and class identity. As income inequality rises, average public opinion is more likely to fall in the lower classes and less likely to fall in the middle and higher classes.

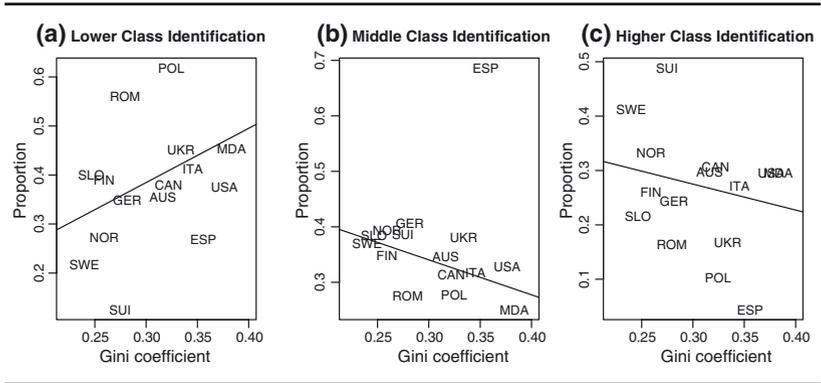
Spain has already been identified as unusual in terms of disproportionate middle class identification, and Figures 2 and 3 further highlight the country’s unique nature. It has a far greater proportion of middle class identifiers and a smaller proportion of higher class identifiers than any other country. Given Spain’s level of economic development and income inequality, these unusual proportions are especially noteworthy, as they do not adhere to the pattern shown in the rest of the data. I thus pay careful attention to the Spanish data from this point on.

Figures 2 and 3 provide preliminary evidence that economic context influences class identity, but they show the effects of the two main context variables without controlling for the other. As I will show later, when both factors are considered simultaneously, the findings change dramatically. While the patterns in these graphs fail to consider the relationships associated with class identity within countries, they confirm that economic conditions may help to clarify the puzzle of cross-national differences in class identification. To test this, I turn to the multinomial logit models fitted to the pooled data from all 15 countries.

^{10.} The regression line excludes data from Spain. Countries are denoted by the *International Organization for Standardization’s* three-letter country codes.

Figure 3

Income Inequality and Average Class Identification in 15 Democracies.¹¹



The estimates from the final model—which excludes data from Spain—are displayed in Table 2 (estimates for a model including the Spanish data are available upon request). Although the findings are substantively similar with Spain included in the analysis, I concentrate on the model excluding Spain because the contextual effects are more pronounced. All three contextual variables have a statistically significant effect on class identity, and the cross-level interaction between income and the Gini coefficient is statistically significant. Given the complex nature of multinomial logit models, especially for interactions and nonlinear relationships, it is nearly impossible to adequately interpret the findings from the coefficients alone. I therefore focus on fitted probabilities calculated from the model coefficients.

I start by evaluating the influence of economic development on class identification. Previous research implies that GDP has a generally positive influence on class identity; in other words, people in richer countries are more likely than those in poorer countries to place themselves higher in the class structure, regardless of their income. I find no support for this hypothesis. The main effect of GDP per capita does have a statistically significant (chi-square = 7.10, df = 2, $p = .029$) influence on class identity. The fitted values in Figure 4 demonstrate a positive relationship between economic development and both lower class identification (panel a) and middle class identification (panel b). In other words, with

¹¹ The regression line excludes data from Spain. Countries are denoted by the *International Organization for Standardization's* three-letter country codes.

Table 2

Final Multinomial Regression Model Predicting Class Identification¹²

	Lower class ID		Higher class ID	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Independent-level variables				
Intercept	.069***	2.564	-2.959	2.493
<i>Age</i>				
Age	-5.655	1.074	5.505***	2.896
Age ² (orthogonal)	-9.249	5.550	1.044***	5.379
Gender (men)	.240***	1.226	-.080	1.163
<i>Education</i>				
Less than primary	0	-	0	-
Primary	-.359	8.233	-.087***	3.495
Secondary	-.913	1.472	.249***	1.336
University degree	-2.082	2.080	.693***	8.111
Religiosity (at least once a month)	-.128	6.688	-.107	6.147
<i>Family income</i>				
Income	-.025	1.137	.212***	1.623
Contextual variables				
GDP per capita	-8.482***	8.569	3.446***	8.735
Gini coefficient	4.970***	7.547	.888***	7.291
Former communist rule	.266***	3.268	-.140	1.707
Income × Gini coefficient				
Income	-.711	3.336	0.469***	4.730
Number of individuals		10,027		
Number of countries		14		
AIC		18,036.1		

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Model excludes data for Spain.

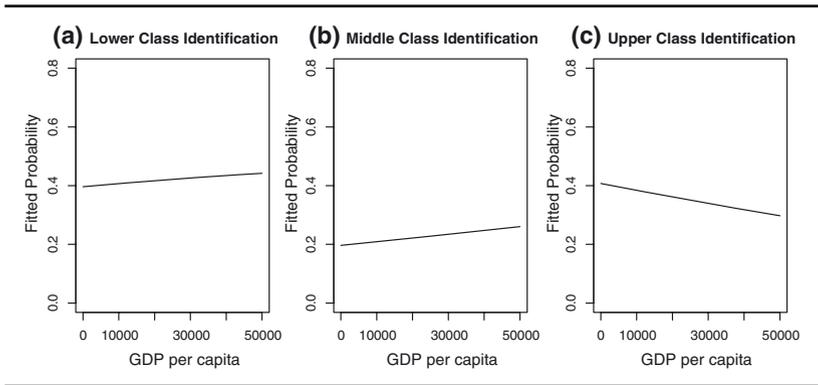
increased economic development, people identify more strongly with the lower and middle classes. The opposite is true for upper class identification. That is, in societies with more developed economies, people tend to hold weaker upper class identities. Figure 4 lends some support to earlier claims that economic development strengthens middle class identification through “reference group” and other related theories. This is only part of the story, however.

With respect to the role of income inequality, both the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) values and an analysis of deviance (chi-square = 11.03, $df = 2$, $p = .0004$) confirm that individual-level income and national-level income inequality significantly interact in their effects on class identity. As we shall see shortly, the interaction effects are also in the expected

¹² Middle-class identification is the reference category.

Figure 4

Fitted Probabilities Demonstrating the Effect of National-Level Economic Development in Their Effects on Class Identification.¹³



direction. Income inequality affects class identity on its own, and it also influences how individual-level income affects class identity. Simply put, we see that class polarization is highest in unequal societies. To demonstrate this effect, I present fitted probabilities in Figure 5.

Figure 5a illustrates the probability of lower class identification by income in equal and unequal societies. There is clearly a negative relationship between lower class identification and income, but the strength of this relationship differs according to the level of national income inequality. Compared to their counterparts in more equal societies, people with low income in less equal societies are much more likely to report that they belong to a lower class. The opposite pattern appears in Figure 5c. In this case, those with higher income are much more likely to report that they belong to a high class if they reside in a less equal society than a more equal society. In contrast, people with lower income in both societies are equally likely to report that they do not belong to a high social class, while people with higher income are equally likely to indicate that they do not belong to a low social class. Finally, Figure 5b demonstrates a curvilinear relationship between income and middle class identification in both equal and unequal societies, though regardless of income, people tend to be less likely to report middle class identity in unequal societies.

13. “Low GDP” represents a typical country with GDP per capita of \$5,000 US, and “High GDP” represents a typical country with GDP per capita of \$40,000 US. Fitted probabilities are calculated with all other variables (both individual-level and contextual level) set to their means (or proportion for categorical variables).

Figure 5

Fitted Probabilities Demonstrating the Interaction between Income and National-Level Income Inequality in Their Effects on Class Identification.¹⁴

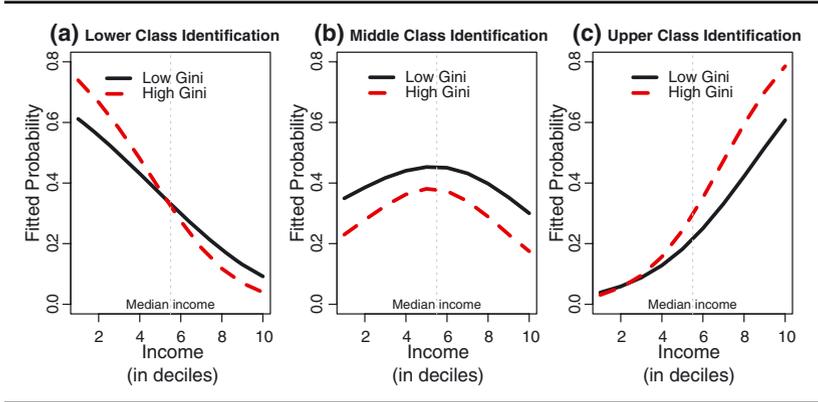


Table 3 provides fitted probabilities of class identification for post-Communist states and established democracies, allowing me to test for differences between the two. There are marked differences between the two types of societies, especially in terms of the probability of reporting lower class identification. Compared to people in established democracies, people in former Communist societies are much more likely to identify as lower class and less likely to identify as higher class. Although this fits well with other research indicating that inequality has sharply increased since the fall of Communism (Kelley and Zagorski 2005), this finding is derived from a model that controls for income inequality. I argue, therefore, that former Communist rule has had a profound and lingering influence on social attitudes, and this, in turn, affects class identity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study confirms some previous findings while also producing novel new ones. First, and not surprisingly, I show that class placement is highly influenced by household income. Contrary to common conjecture, however, I also show that there is little evidence to suggest a dominant “middle class” consensus. People hold very diverse perceptions of their place in the class structure across different nations.

¹⁴. “Low Gini” represents a typical country with a Gini coefficient of .23; “High Gini” represents a typical country with a Gini coefficient of .38. Fitted probabilities are calculated with all other variables (both individual-level and contextual level) set to their means (or proportions for categorical variables).

Table 3

Fitted Probabilities for Class Identities According to Democratic Tradition^a

	Social class identification		
	Lower classes	Middle classes	Higher classes
Democratic tradition			
(a) Established democracies	.324	.431	.245
(b) Former Communist societies	.397	.404	.200
<i>Difference (a – b)</i>	–.073	.027	.045

Note: ^aFitted probabilities are calculated with all other variables (both individual-level and contextual level) set to their means (or proportion for categorical variables).

Consistent with previous research, I also demonstrate that economic development shapes class identity. This pattern holds even when income inequality is considered. In short, as economic development increases, so too does lower and middle class identity. There is, however, a negative effect between GDP and upper-class identity, suggesting that as society becomes more prosperous, upper-class identities weaken. This finding contradicts previous research, which argues that richer societies hold stronger upper class identities compared to less affluent ones (see Evans and Kelley 2004). The analysis employed in this paper improves on previous work by evaluating countries with diverse economies, while also testing for the effect of income inequality.

Also in line with other recent work (Andersen and Curtis 2012), this paper highlights that national-level income inequality moderates the relationship between income and class identity, even when political conditions are also accounted for. More specifically, I show that class polarization is strongest in societies with higher levels of income inequality. This finding helps clarify the dominant viewpoint of a “middle class” consensus across all societies. My results show that in *more* equal societies, people at all income levels tend toward the middle. This relationship is curvilinear in all societies, suggesting that for the most part, low- and high-income earners identify less strongly with the middle classes. In other words, people across societies do *not* hold a dominant middle class consensus, one that is thought to emerge alongside economic prosperity. Instead, the story is about income inequality and its polarizing effect on class attitudes in less equal societies, not the role of economic development.

The results suggesting the lingering effect of Communist rule are also intriguing. Many argue that people in post-Communist countries have recently begun to display attitudes toward class identity that are more in line with people living in established democracies. The logic for this argument is straightforward: after the fall of communism, sweeping social and

economic changes resulted in rapid economic development and increased economic inequality. This has been accompanied by changes in public opinion relating to class values more generally (Evans 1997; Evans and Mills 1999; Gerber and Hout 2004). For example, convincing research shows that people now look more favorably upon income differences (Kelley and Zagorski 2005). In this study, I find that as former Communist societies have become more unequal, class identities have changed accordingly. But this is not the whole story. Former Communist rule and its ideology appear to have had a lasting effect on class identity that persists regardless of the level of economic development and income inequality. Simply put, more than a decade after the fall of Communism, people in formerly Communist societies tend to hold class identities that are consistent with more egalitarian views of society.

Other research has also shown a similar lingering effect of communist rule. Andersen (2012a) demonstrates that people are far less supportive of democracy in post-Communist nations, even after controlling for economic context. This finding also coincides with a vast amount of public opinion research demonstrating that people living in post-Communist countries tend to be less socially and politically liberal (Andersen and Fetner 2008; Inglehart and Baker 2000) compared to people living in established democracies.

These results suggest an important distinction between class identity and class awareness. If one believes that class awareness is indicated simply by a strong match between income and class identification, these results would suggest that people in more equal societies (e.g., Sweden) are simply less aware than people in less equal societies (e.g., the United States). I do not believe that this is the case. Such an interpretation seems to contradict a vast amount of research from the comparative welfare states literature, suggesting that working class mobilization has played an important role in the development of welfare states in social democratic countries (Esping-Andersen and van Kersbergen 1992; Myles and Quadagno 2002). Instead, I argue that the lower level of class polarization in more equal societies reflects greater feelings of social solidarity and social trust (cf., Uslander 2002; Uslander and Brown 2005) rather than a lack of class awareness. Arguably, people in equal societies are more likely than people from less equal societies to see all citizens as part of a common enterprise, regardless of their position in the class structure. In other words, rather than having less knowledge of class structure, people in more equal societies tend to hold less rigid “us” versus “them” ideologies and are thus less concerned with distinguishing their position within it.

This finding is consistent with research that emphasizes the social costs of income inequality for *all* members of a society. In countries where inequality is low, people of all classes report heightened social and emotional well-being (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Countries with the largest gap between the rich and the poor are confronted with many social

problems related to low levels of trust, life expectancy, education, and social mobility. It is not surprising, then, that class identities would become more polarized as a result. Social and economic differences—and their negative effects—are more obvious in these societies, because inequality and social difference becomes more noticeable.

Like most research, this project is not without limitations. It could be argued that survey-based measures are a poor indicators of class identity on the grounds that people do not have enough knowledge of the complexity of class structure to be able to make accurate assessments of their own position within it. Nonetheless, I concur with Hout (2008), who argues for the continued use of “subjective” social class measures on the grounds that survey evidence suggests that they are meaningful markers. Moreover, as Wright (1997:43–44) states, “the appropriate question . . . is not ‘do the categories we develop faithfully mirror the complexity of the world?’ but rather, ‘are these categories capable of advancing our knowledge of specific problems in class analysis?’” My results provide insight into the economic and political conditions that shape class identity and how it might affect society.

Of course, some countries will have fundamental differences within them. For example, many have argued that cross-cutting cleavages diminish the influence of class in predicting political attitudes and behaviors (Alford 1963, 1967; Lijphart 1979). Alford’s (1967) seminal work on class, party, and competing cleavage structures proclaimed Canada as a case of pure non-class voting. This is because, in Canada, regional and ethnic cleavages are strong, and reduce the significance of class position on voting behavior—particularly among the working classes (Andersen 2012b; Nakhaie and Arnold 1996). If cross-cutting cleavages diminish the importance of class on vote, there is good reason to believe that competing cleavage structures that vary by region might differentially influence class identification.

In fact, the notable differences in Spanish “middle” class identity might be dominated by particularly strong regional difference. For example, McDonough et al. (1986) argue that regional cleavages, unrelated to social class, distract citizens from issue associated with the economy and class conflict. While this study is not about class identification per se, the implication is that awareness is low in Spain and that people are more strongly influenced by competing cleavage structures.

More generally, other research suggests that community-level factors influences people’s attitudes and class behavior (Andersen and Milligan 2011). Though, beyond the scope of this paper, an interesting avenue for future research would be to analyze within country differences. For example, economic disparity varies greatly within the United States—while many regions are industrialized, others are not. This difference certainly holds the potential to dramatically shape within nation class attitudes.

Finally, I must consider the limitations of analyzing only 15 countries. Although I have addressed class identity in more countries than most research on the topic, including more would have allowed me to test for broader contextual effects. It would be of interest, for example, to assess how competing cleavages affect the relationship between income and class identity (see, e.g. Andersen and Heath 2003; Lijphart 1979; Lipset and Rokkan 1967). A long-standing argument holds that if society is relatively homogenous in terms of other social structural variables (e.g., region, religion, race, ethnicity, and language), class identities have little competition and are thus more salient. Meanwhile, if society is significantly divided along other social cleavages, class identities tend to be weaker (Hout 2008; Lijphart 1979). It is possible, then, that the relationship between income and class identity is weaker in societies with complex cleavage structures than in societies with no significant division other than class.

While it is possible that competing cleavages also matter, I have no reason to believe that accounting for these cleavages would render the inequality effect insignificant. For a competing cleavage to negate the inequality effect, it would need to be highly correlated with both inequality and class identity. It is not obvious that such a competing cleavage exists in most societies.

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