

# The Future of Class Analyses in American Politics

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## Abstract

Although the role of class has been extensively studied, this essay suggests several important matters that have been neglected and deserve more attention. The focus on occupational positions limits our understanding of the possible role of class. We need to devote more attention to household income and its impact on opportunity. We need to ask people about their aspirations and sense of fairness in American society and how that affects class voting. The presumption that class divisions have been reduced by racial and cultural issues has been embraced too quickly and needs more careful analyses. The use of nationally aggregated individual-level surveys is limiting because it neglects how the distribution of classes across legislative districts and their representation through that matters for the emergence of class issues. Finally, the focus on multivariate analyses may satisfy academic notions of rigor but it removes analyses from having relevance for politicians.

## INTRODUCTION

Does class matter in American politics? Does the lower class vote Democratic and the upper class Republican? Do existing divisions affect policy debates? We have considerable evidence of trends that suggest that class would seem to matter. Inequality in the distributions of income and wealth is steadily increasing (Congressional Budget Office, 2011; Keister, 2000, 2009; Kochhar, Fry, & Taylor, 2011), which in turn creates differential in opportunity (Bowles *et al.*, 2005; Lareau, 2011; Massey, 2008). Mobility from family class during a lifetime and from generation to generation appears to be stagnant or declining (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2012). It would seem that America would be experiencing class divisions in which party is supported.

## FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Despite this, studies of the role and relevance of class have produced no clear evidence about the extent of class political divisions. Some argue that

class is of declining relevance while others argue that it still matters. To many, the issue is whether class has been displaced by other issues. As might be expected, much of the disagreement revolves around measurement and method issues. Should class be measured by relative economic position and with what categories? What statistical technique should be used? The decisions made about these matters affect the results and the conclusion about the role of class. These matters have been analyzed and discussed with considerable care (Clark and Lipset, 2001; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007; Weakliem and Adams, 2011).

Although there have been many careful and rigorous studies, the argument of this essay is that analyses of class have been severely limited by how this topic was initially studied. The early studies of class began with a focus on Marxian concerns of how individuals related to the means of production. The resulting studies have been well done but the heritage of these individual-level analyses of how position affects political leanings has limited our understanding of the relevance of issues of class. Further, studies have been conducted in a way that has little relevance to politicians. The following is not a critique of the issues that have been discussed in existing studies but an argument that the focus of current academic debates about the role of class is far too limited. We need to rethink how the role of class is studied.

## KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

### WHAT ABOUT INDIVIDUALS IS RELEVANT?

The study of class has been enormously influenced by Marx's focus on the individual's relationship to the means of production. His argument was that this relationship defines one's place in society and one's perspective about politics. This focus on economic position has been the basis for numerous careful and thoughtful efforts to create measures of occupational position. This has also prompted many exchanges about how many categories should be created and what to do with students, spouses, and retirees.

Although this focus has produced some valuable analyses, the focus on Marx's argument about the position of individuals has also limited our thinking about how to define class. Two matters in particular need much more attention. First, the focus on individuals and their positions leads us away from thinking about what is surely more important for individuals: household income and wealth and the opportunity that they provide. The concern about how to classify the "positions" of students, spouses, and retirees stems from focusing on individual job titles. This focus on individual positions misses some important matters. It is income that limits or creates opportunity and grants access to amenities and it is household income that ultimately

matters. Individual occupational categories can be poor indicators of individual income. Position categories may also be bad indicators of the household situation, whether that be a married couple, individuals living together, or an extended family. The Marxian focus on occupational position may have made sense when there were factories, factory owners, and employees, but titles are harder to make sense of now and may be much less relevant. We all know someone who was laid off of a job and now defines himself as a consultant, but actually makes a limited amount of money. It is income or wealth that significantly affects opportunity in life and we need to focus on the resources individuals have access to if we are to understand the class situation of people in American society. This also means thinking in terms of household income. Most individuals still live in a household situation and may even be involved in an extended family. The resources available to them are generally broader than their income and we need to consider the total income and wealth available to people to define their class situation.

Second, even if we devote more attention to overall resources, we are still missing something very important about how people see their situation. The presumption appears to be that positions (or income, when used) define opinions. This assumption has inclined researchers to not ask individuals about their aspirations, assessments of their capabilities, and frustrations with the ability to achieve their goals in American society. What we do not know is whether people in various economic situations expect more or are satisfied. Do they aspire to more or find their situation satisfactory? Do they think they are capable of more or think they are doing well given the talents they have? If they aspire to more, do they see American society and its policies as systematically limiting them or are limits seen as a result of random luck in life? Essentially, do they accept their situation or are they frustrated. Do they think that public policies could be adopted to change opportunity or do they see government efforts as ineffective (Bageant, 2008; Greenberg, 1996; Page and Jacobs, 2009)? The focus on position or income as a definer of class mentality leads us to neglect the views of individuals. To understand how class is seen by individuals and the role of class, we need to devote more resources to asking people with different occupations or incomes how they view their situation.

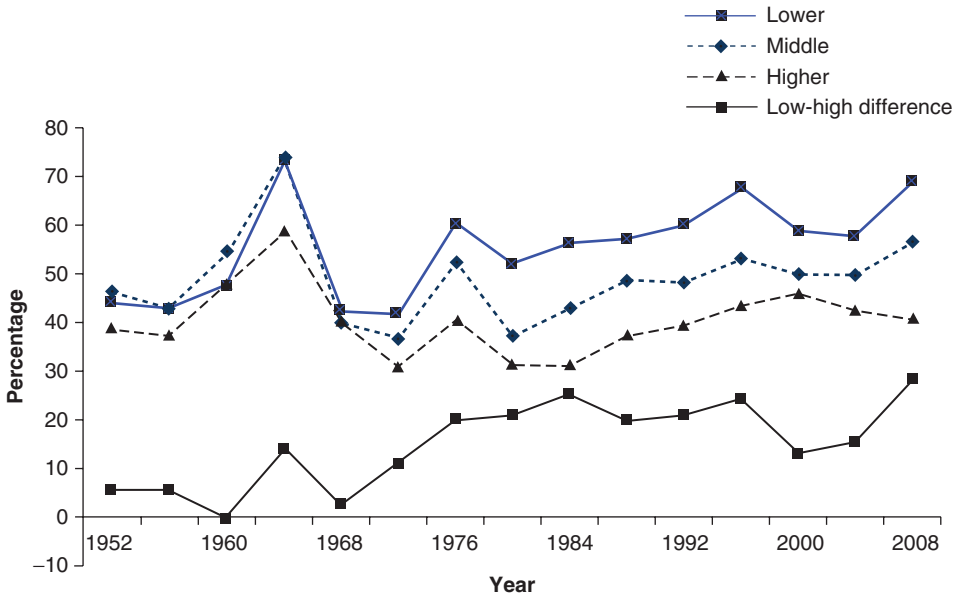
#### THE PRESUMPTION OF THE PULL OF OTHER ISSUES

The analysis of class appears to have been significantly affected by an unstated presumption that if the working class were rational they would be liberal on economic issues. Their failure to be heavily liberal has prompted concern with why they are failing to fulfill these expectations. There has also been a thread of clear disappointment with the working class. Ever since

Seymour Martin Lipset published an article expressing his sense that the working class was authoritarian and not as liberal as he hoped, there been a vague sense that the working class may simply have the wrong values to fulfill the expectations of many (Lipset, 1959). The expectation was that the working class should be devoted to programs expanding opportunity and benefits, and heavily Democratic. Class divisions were expected to be greater than they were.

The thinly veiled sense was that the working class was too concerned with other values and that assigning class a central role in politics was a mistake. The developing conclusion was that the working class was distracted by noneconomic values. The working class has less education and was seen as authoritarian, racist, heavily religious, and attached to traditional cultural norms and behaviors (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Hunter, 1991; Lipset, 1981). The Democratic Party, concerned with fairness and seeking to expand its electoral base, was becoming an advocate for blacks in the 1960s (Carmines & Stimson, 1989). In sharp contrast, the white working class was strongly committed to norms of personal responsibility. They saw themselves as adhering to norms of diligence and were opposed to welfare, particularly for blacks who they saw as exploiting America's guilt over slavery and racial discrimination (Carter, 1995; Edsall & Edsall, 1991). They were also intolerant of homosexuality and abortion. This conclusion that class did not matter as much as might be expected was supported by the arguments that western societies were entering a postmodern era in which economic pressures were diminishing and quality of life issues were becoming more prominent (Inglehart, 1971, 1977, 1990, 1997). The combination of authoritarianism and racism among working class whites and postmodernism was making class divisions less and less relevant (Clark, 1994; Clark & Lipset, 1991).

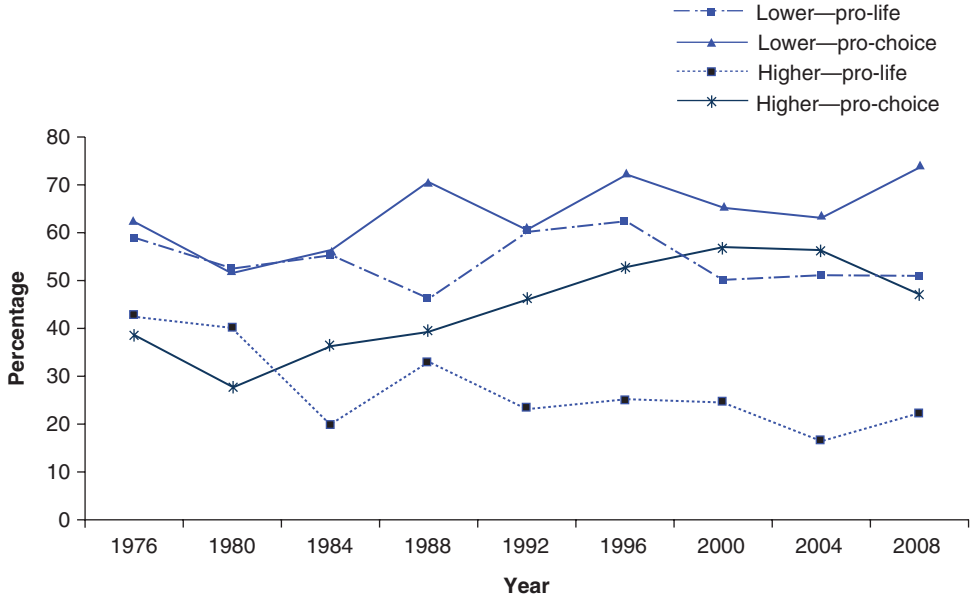
The loss of the white working class became a central concern of those involved in politics (Galston & Kamarck, 1989; Greenberg, 1985, 1996). It is difficult to read popular works such as Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas* and not sense the idea that the working class is being unfortunately distracted by issues not central to their lives. Perhaps most importantly, they have presumably been duped by Republicans with social issues (welfare exploitation, race, abortion, and homosexuality issues). To some, class divisions had even become inverted, with the working class voting Republican and the more educated voting Democratic (Ladd, 1976–1977, 1978, 1984; Ladd and Hadley, 1975; Lawrence, 1991, 1997). It became conventional wisdom that the working class is voting Republican (Harwood, 2012; Stevenson, 2011). It is now common to encounter assertions such as “The Republican Party is the party of the white working class. They overwhelmingly favor Republicans” (Brooks, 2011, A21).



**Figure 1** Democratic presidential voting by income groups, 1952–2008.

The difficulty is that it appears the disappointment with the white working class has been more influential than the evidence for these conclusions. Two data trends illustrate just how dubious the abovementioned conclusions might be. First, if income is used to group individuals, the evidence indicates a steadily growing division in partisan voting between those in the top and bottom third of the income distribution. Figure 1 presents these results, using National Election Studies (NES) from 1952–2008. All respondents are grouped into thirds of the income distribution, and the percentage voting for Democratic presidential candidates within each group is presented. The bottom line presents the difference between the bottom and top thirds. Several matters are important. First, the difference between the two has increased over time. Second, those in the bottom third are now voting more Democratic than in the 1950s and 1960s. Third, since the early 1980s, those in the top third are voting somewhat more Democratic. Despite this, a greater difference between the top and bottom third has emerged because those in the bottom third are now more Democratic. The basic premise that the working class is less Democratic is not supported by these data. There are of course issues of how we define and measure the working class, as noted earlier. These data, however, surely suggest the need for caution in declaring that class divisions are less relevant.

The aforementioned fact raises the issue of whether the working class is so caught up in cultural issues that they now vote less Democratic. The evidence



**Figure 2** Abortion views, class, and Democratic presidential voting, 1976–2008.

that racial resentment is reducing class voting among whites does not hold up on review (Brewer & Stonecash, 2001; Shafer & Johnston, 2006). Another issue that is often seen as exerting a powerful impact on the working class is abortion. Presumably those who are less affluent but conservative on a social issue such as abortion are moving to the Republican Party, resulting in less class voting. Figure 2 uses NES data and provides an effort to sort out this issue. Assume that we can measure class by relative income position (again, there is disagreement about this). We can classify people by relative income position, so we can place voters in the bottom or top third of the income distribution. We can also classify voters by whether they define themselves as pro-choice or pro-life. This allows us to track the voting behavior of those who are in the lower third and who are pro-choice or pro-life, and those in the top third who are pro-choice or pro-life.

In the 1970s, before cultural issues emerged, those in the lower third, regardless of abortion opinions, voted more Democratic and those in the top third of the income distribution voted less Democratic by about 20% points. Over time, as the abortion issue increased in saliency, opinions about this issue have come to play a greater role in affecting votes. Among those in the lower third, those pro-choice moved more Democratic and those pro-life moved less Democratic. A cultural issue mattered, but its effect among those less affluent and pro-life has been to reduce their Democratic voting by only about 5% points. As indicated in Figure 1, however, overall those in

the bottom third are now voting *more* Democratic now than they did before 1980.

Equally interesting is what has happened among the more affluent. Opinions about abortion have had a significant effect within this group. Those pro-life have moved away from the Democratic Party while those pro-choice have moved strongly Democratic. The more affluent generally have more education and are more inclined to be pro-choice. The net effect is that since 1980 the more affluent have moved more Democratic. In short, the relationship is just the opposite of the argument that the less affluent are moving Republican. It is the more affluent who are moving more Democratic (Liscio, Stonecash, & Brewer, 2010). This, of course, will not settle the matter, as some will not accept the definition of class used here. However, there are grounds for doubting the assertions that other issues are displacing class issues and moving the working class more Republican.

The interesting matter is that disappointment in the behaviors of the white working class has been so dominant that there has not been careful empirical analysis of their behavior. Assertion dominates over analysis (Pakulski & Waters, 1996). There has also been little examination of the more affluent, apparently under the presumption that they all vote Republican because they are better educated and equipped to not be distracted from economic issues. We are at a point where analyses simply need to be redone if we are to understand the relevance of class in American politics.

#### HOW ISSUES EMERGE

Finally, the focus on aggregated national samples takes us very far away from how issues of class emerge in American politics. The standard assessment of the relevance of class for politics is how much variation there is across occupations or incomes in partisan identification or voting. The focus is on the mass public and differences within the public, which has little relevance for how issues become or do not become a part of national political discussions and policy debates. What matters are the distribution of people across districts and how that creates electoral bases for legislators who in turn may advocate class-related positions. It also ignores the Bartels–Hacker–Pearson–Gilens argument that groups and their mobilization of support across districts and within Congress have a major impact on policies with class implications.

While there are arguments about the extent of class divisions within nationally aggregated samples of voters, class issues matter in public policy debates. Efforts to enact legislation in Congress often have a distinct class focus—what strata will pay what taxes and who will benefit from specific programs. The issue is how does this focus emerge if voters are not that

divided in their partisan voting by class. We have much to learn about this, but it appears that it emerges in two ways. One involves the interaction between partisan voting by income level and the variation in electoral bases across legislative districts. The other involves the growing role of ideology and the mobilization of ideology within the political process.

The search for the relevance of class generally involves examining differences in partisan voting among individuals. This neglects the fact that the expression of concerns about class also emerge in the policy preferences of representatives in congress, depending on the electoral base they represent. National surveys treat voters as one aggregated unit, without regard to their distribution across states and House districts. To take House districts as an example, there are enormous variations in the economic composition of House districts. On the basis of 2000 census data, the median family income in House districts during the 2000s ranged from \$20,924 to \$91,571. The 2010 census results are likely to reflect similar differences. The populations being represented by members differ enormously. These differences are likely to make members vary in their concern for class issues.

Second, House Members are not elected by the entire constituency in a district. Democrats are more likely within each district to draw votes from lower income constituents and Republicans are likely to draw votes from higher income constituents. Table 1 provides an illustration of this. Assume that based on national surveys that 60% of those in the bottom third of the income distribution vote Democratic, 50% of those in the middle do so, and 40% of those in the top third do so. Those percentages are in the second column. Then to the right of that are four House districts, with varying population compositions. In district 1, the population is 80% lower income and 20% middle. If each group votes follows the national pattern and there are 100 votes in the district, then the Democrat receives 48 votes from lower income voters and 10 from middle. The Democrat wins with 58 of 100 votes. This Democrat has an electoral base that is heavily lower income. In contrast is district 4, which is 20% middle and 80% higher. Assuming the national voting pattern prevails, the winner is a Republican with a heavily higher income base. The result is that many Democrats are likely to be forceful in their representation of lower class concerns and more likely to vote for corresponding legislation. Republicans are more likely to oppose such legislation. These differences are a direct reflection of the distributions of populations across districts. While the national individual level survey results may not show major differences in partisanship by income, the distribution of populations across states and House districts and the differences in electoral bases of party members create significant differences in representation concerns. These differences are surely a source of much of the class content of debates in Congress. If we



**Table 1**  
 District Composition, National Voting, and Party Electoral Bases

Income	% D	District 1		District 2		District 3		District 4	
		Pop	D Votes	Pop	D Votes	Pop	R Votes	Pop	R Votes
Lower	60	80	48	60	36	10	4	0	0
Middle	50	20	10	30	15	30	15	20	10
Higher	40		0	10	4	60	36	80	48
Winner			D: 58		D: 55		R: 55		R: 58

are seeking to understand the role of class in American politics, we need to understand how these district differences affect policy debates.

Class issues also emerge from the mobilization efforts of those seeking to expand and limit programs. Liberal advocacy groups are continually expressing concern about the growing inequality in the distribution of income and opportunity. As programs have grown and more of the federal income tax comes from the affluent, conservatives have mobilized to seek to reduce taxes, programs, and regulations (Bartels, 2008; Hacker & Pierson, 2010; Smith, 2012). They are seeking to change the focus of debates from the needs of the less affluent to their lack of discipline and character and exploitation of federal programs (Eberstadt, 2012; Murray, 1994, 2012; Sykes, 2011). Any analysis of class has to incorporate these battles between groups and the lobbying efforts within state and national legislatures. Many voters may be completely unaware of these battles, but class issues are discussed and policy changes are made that have great relevance for classes. While much of the analysis of class has focused on individual level differences, class issues are being contested at other levels and those other levels need to be incorporated when considering the relevance of class in American politics.

#### METHODS AND POLITICIANS

Finally, there is a fundamental issue of how academic work connects to the politicians engaged in these policy debates. Most academic research is conducted and presented to other academics. Modes of analysis develop and become accepted among academics as appropriate. In the case of class analysis, there is a question of whether the modes of analysis that dominate most studies have any relevance for politicians who are trying to understand whether class matters. Do class divisions exist within their constituency? Are issues of economic fairness and differences in opportunity relevant to their constituents and should they speak of such matters, depending on

the makeup of their electoral base? Do academic analyses in this area help politicians understand what divisions and issues exist in politics?

In addressing these questions, I comment largely based on having spent 25 years conducting polls and doing analyses of electoral patterns for politicians. Most academic work is of limited relevance for two reasons. The reliance on nationally aggregated samples is of very limited relevance for politicians. Even presidential candidates must run in states so a national analysis might be of interest, but not necessarily relevant. What matters for a politician at any level is the composition of a political unit—state, legislative, or local government—and how groups within the district vote. It is the combination of the two that might lead a politician to either stress issues of class or downplay them.

Even if relevant political units were focused on, there is the issue of whether most academic analyses would convey much of meaning to politicians. Most academic work has been influenced by the general move to multivariate analysis. The question asked is whether class, however measured, matters after controlling for an array of presumably relevant individual traits. The issue is whether this approach consigns academic analyses to being irrelevant to politicians. A politician wants to know how groups see him or her and how they vote. Telling a politician that the coefficient for a class variable, after controlling for education, race, and sex, is statistically significant will leave them mystified as to what that statement means. They do not understand those statements and do not think that way about voters. They want to know what percentage of their district is less or more affluent, whether people who make less or more money vote for them, and by how much. They also want to know how neighborhoods and communities vote. They know their district and ask for analyses about party identification and voting by community. The analyses that dominate in academic publications have little relevance for politicians trying to understand what issues are motivating voters. Although academics tend to think of the independent effects of a variable, politicians do not think that way. As long as academic studies continue to focus on multivariate statistical analyses, the results will have little relevance to politicians seeking to understand their electoral base.

#### SUMMARY

The study of class divisions in America has a long and rich history. Although many valuable studies have been produced, the argument of this essay is that we need to expand our sense of how class can matter and how we need to study it. The prior studies tell us a great deal about nationally aggregated patterns of behavior, but we need to add to them to gain a full sense of how class matters.

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