

Dimensions of class identification? On the roots and effects of class identity

Rune Stubager¹  | Gitte Sommer Harrits²

¹Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

²VIA University College, Aarhus, Denmark

Correspondence

Rune Stubager, Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark.
Email: stubager@ps.au.dk

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Abstract

Throughout the 20th century, objective class position was a strong predictor of both class identity, political preferences and party choice, but since the 1980s, the relationship between objective and subjective dimensions of class has supposedly vanished—according to some as the result of a fundamental blurring of class relations. However, others suggest that this result may be partly due to the use of outdated class schemes. Although still basically focused on inequality of life chances, class relations today are complex and include more than labor market position, such as different forms of cultural resources (e.g., education). As a result, class identity may also have become more complex, and possibly dependent upon the salience of different resources and types of group relations—both in itself and in its relationship with political preferences. Very few contributions, though, test such claims. Using two independent Danish surveys, this paper investigates to what extent class identification is multidimensional and how any such dimensionality is related to, on the one hand, different dimensions of objective class relations and, on the other hand, different dimensions of political conflict. The analyses show that despite changes at the overall, societal level, class identity remains a primarily unidimensional concept both in its structural origins and its relationship with politics.

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KEYWORDS

class and politics, class identity, Denmark, party choice, political attitudes, social structure

1 | INTRODUCTION

The importance of class relations and class identity for politics as well as for everyday life is a contested issue. Throughout the 20th century, class relations and class identity figured prominently in many sociological explanations. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, scholars suggested that class relations were becoming more blurred, and that education, cognitive mobilization and individualization has made class and class identity less relevant for people's perception of themselves, each other and political conflicts (Beck, 2007; Giddens, 1991; Pakulski & Waters, 1996).

This position has been contested all along (see, e.g., Atkinson, 2007; Goldthorpe & Marshall, 1992) and more recently, analyses of class relations seem to be making a comeback with scholars in different areas demonstrating how class is still relevant for analyses of, for example, political behavior, lifestyles, income, education and health (e.g., Bukodi et al., 2016; Crowley & Manza, 2018; Elo, 2009; Friedman & Savage, 2017; Harrits et al., 2010; Savage, 2015). Included in most of these analyses, however, is often a claim that echoes parts of the 'death of class'-critique, viz. that class relations in advanced capitalist societies have become more complex or fragmented (Beck, 2007, p. 586; Clark & Lipset, 1991, p. 408; Pakulski, 1993).¹ This means that class relations can no longer be seen as solely based on the relations of production or market positions, but must also include other types of resources, such as authority and education (see also Bourdieu, 1984; Goldthorpe, 1996; Grusky & Sørensen, 1998; Wright, 1997).

While a growing body of literature thus underlines the continuing relevance of (a more complex set of) class relations, fewer studies focus on class identity (Heath et al., 2009). This is curious, as traditional class analyses typically pointed to class identity, class interest, and class consciousness as key mechanisms mediating the effects of class relations on behavior (Giddens, 1973; Lukács, 1967; Marx, 1978; Wright, 1997) just as an alleged demise of class identification plays a key role to some protagonists of the 'death of class'-perspective (Beck, 2007; Pakulski, 1993; see also Heath et al., 2009). Further, the studies that do exist focus mostly on aggregate measures of identity, on demonstrating that class identity indeed still exists, and on how it varies across countries (e.g., Andersen & Curtis, 2012; Haddon, 2015).² This means that we know less about how class identity is related to the complex class structure of advanced capitalist societies and whether it is as fragmented as claimed by those who argue for the demise of class.

However, if we want to understand how class identity may still impact politics (and everyday life) and what any such impact reflects, it is important to understand how people see themselves as related to the now more complexly structured class relations and to trace the relationship of such potentially more complex understandings of class with political attitudes and behavior. The issue is even more pressing in light of repeated findings of a multi-dimensional space of political contestation comprising at least an economic and a cultural dimension differentially related to class (e.g., Crowley & Manza, 2018; Evans & Langsæther, 2021). It seems likely, that is, that the different relationships found between class (identity) and the political dimensions reflect the existence of different dimensions of class identity with each their pattern of relationship with politics—but we don't know.

While this may seem partly a scholarly matter, in fact it goes to the heart of class as a political factor. Thus, delineating the extent to which individuals' class identities have fragmented provides important insight into how they understand their own position in society and into the limitations and opportunities facing actors attempting to mobilize classes to achieve political goals. Whereas on the one hand fragmented identities may be difficult to use as basis for mobilization, insight into such potentially different dimensions is, on the other hand, exactly what, for example, political parties need in order to be able to "strike the right chords" when appealing to classes.

To approach these questions, we study different measures of class identity, priming several dimensions of an individual's objective class position (i.e., we instruct participants to think about different aspects of their social situation—occupation, income and wealth, or education—when choosing a class identity). We study how these primed class

identities relate to each other, as well as to different elements of objective class positions, including both occupation, income, education and class origin. Finally, we study how class identity is related to politics by investigating the relationship between the different measures of class identity and dimensions of political attitudes and party choice. We do so using data from two Danish surveys. Denmark represents an advanced capitalist economy, where especially education has had a growing importance for economy and politics with an increasing proportion of the population achieving higher education and education playing an increasing political role. On the one hand, following theories of the declining importance and fragmentation of class, this makes Denmark a least likely case for the existence of a strong class identity with influence on political attitudes and behavior. On the other hand, following theories of class relations in advanced societies, Denmark is a most likely case for the development of a more complex understanding of one's class identity with more varying influence on attitudes and behavior. In that way, Denmark constitutes an interesting setting in which to explore the role of class identification.

Overall and despite some, minor signs of multidimensionality our results show that class identity can be seen as one, overarching concept with a common structural root and a stronger relationship with economic attitudes and voting based on such consideration than on cultural attitudes and voting based hereon. Despite debates about the increasing complexity of class relations, thus, class identity appears a fairly coherent construct in people's minds and one that is related to politics in the way envisioned by classic theories in the field as well as earlier scholarship. To arrive at this conclusion, we first review the debate about multiple dimensions of class at both the structural and political levels and use this as the basis of formulating our research questions. These are subsequently explored using our survey data before the conclusion gathers the implications and discusses the potential for generalizing the results.

2 | STUDYING CLASS IDENTITY

Subjective dimensions of class have always figured prominently in class analyses. In the Marxist tradition, the mobilization of class consciousness, often understood as both class interest and class identity, is seen as a key mechanism for class mobilization and political action (Giddens, 1973; Lukács, 1967; Marx, 1978; Wright, 1997). Somewhat similar, the Weberian tradition typically considers class interests, that is, individuals' understanding of their own market position, life-chances and the possible costs and benefits related to different courses of actions, a key mechanism mediating between objective class and different behavioral outcomes (Goldthorpe, 1996). In more recent approaches to class analysis, such as the Bourdieusian tradition, there has been an increasing focus on subjective dimensions of class, understood as class habitus, class identity and class lifestyle, including also an increased focus on how subjective dimensions of class intersect with the construction and mobilization of group identity, symbolic class struggles and the distribution of class resources (Bourdieu, 1984, 1985). Also, within the Durkheimian tradition of micro-classes, subjective dimensions of class, and especially class identity, is seen as a constitutive dimension of class relations constructed and reproduced through mechanisms of social closure (Grusky & Sørensen, 1998; Grusky & Weeden, 2001).

Within this broad theoretical landscape, numerous differences exist with regard to both the understanding and conceptualization of subjective dimensions of class, the theoretical understanding of how objective and subjective class are related and whether emphasis is on what class identity is or on its roots. Three main (but partly overlapping) distinctions capture many of the discussions. First, some scholars focus primarily on what constitutes subjective dimensions of class seen as individual and cognitive constructs. Thus, for example, Wright (1997: 383, italics in original) defines class consciousness as "those elements of a person's subjectivity which are *discursively accessible to the individual's own awareness*", whereas others also focus on collective aspects. This is seen most clearly in Lukács' (1967) somewhat metaphysical understanding of collective class consciousness, but also in Thompsons (1963) classic focus on the mobilization of class culture, as well as in the Bourdieusian focus on lifestyles, classifications and symbolic class struggles (Bourdieu, 1984).

Second, some traditions see class identity primarily as class interests, that is, the individual's understanding of how important parts of her (material) opportunities and autonomy are related to her class position, and thus shared

with others in similar positions (e.g., Giddens, 1973; Wright, 1997). Others, however, focus mainly on class identity as awareness of class relations and an emotional attachment to one particular position (or group) within these relations (Pérez-Ahumada, 2014).

Third, some traditions focusing on the roots of class identity suggest to see objective and subjective dimensions of class as structurally related, in the sense that subjective dimensions of class are continuously structured by existing class relations, and more precisely, that an individual's class consciousness is structured by her current position within class relations (Pérez-Ahumada, 2014; Wright, 1997). Other traditions, however, see class as not only structural but also as a historical process, where class emerges as a result of class practice and mobilization (Bourdieu, 1985; Thompson, 1963). At the collective level of cultural repertoires this means that class is constructed in the cultural and discursive struggles, but also that cultural understandings of class can have a lagged existence beyond changing structural relations (see also Evans et al., 2022). At the individual level, this means that class consciousness, identity or habitus may be structured more by early class experiences than by current class position.

While these issues continue to spike intense scholarly discussions, in recent years, several scholars seem to suggest that it is useful to see all the different elements mentioned above as important aspects of one phenomenon, which merits different and complementary strategies for empirical analysis. For example, Pérez-Ahumada (2014) suggest to see class identity and class interest as different dimensions of class consciousness, whereas Robinson and Stubager (2018) suggest to study both class identity as well as people's perceptions of class relations, including class associations (what class is), class boundaries and class conflict. However, not many scholars have begun theorizing or studying how current class relations may shape subjective dimensions of class in more complex ways than has been hitherto realized.

One recent British study shows how mobility may lead to increased complexity, identity ambiguity and conflict as well as emotional injuries at the individual level (Friedman, 2016). Also, in a recent Danish study, Harrits and Pedersen (2018) found that class categories displayed some degree of complexity. Thus, even though economic and occupational aspects dominated people's conceptions of class, education and lifestyle were often weaved into these conceptions, presenting what is described as a gradational, multidimensional and synthetic understandings of class. Further, although this study does not focus on class identity, the authors suggest that their results could suggest "the possible mobilization of multiple, nuanced and intersecting class identities" (Harrits & Pedersen, 2018, p. 85).

A potentially more radical perspective is the idea of class "dis-identification" according to which "the term class is used to talk about others more than about self" (Savage et al., 2010, p. 66). Class is, thus, "not an identity that is internalized" (Savage et al., 2001, p. 883). Paradoxically, however, it is exactly this tendency to avoid class self-identification that testifies to the power of class: class distinctions are so powerful that they threaten "people's fragile sense of self-dignity and self-respect" (Savage et al., 2001, p. 878). Although the tendency toward dis-identification shows up in qualitative work, quantitative analyses show a continued rather high (albeit slightly declining) level of class identification also using unprompted measures (Heath et al., 2009; see also Evans et al., 2022 and below). The extent of dis-identification may, in other words, depend somewhat on the analytical approach.

3 | CLASS IDENTITY AND POLITICS

Analyses of the relationship between, on the one hand, class and class identity and, on the other hand, political attitudes and behavior have also identified an increasing degree of diversification and complexity. The traditional relationship between class and politics was well captured in Lipset's (1981, 230) telling depiction of elections as "The expression of the Democratic Class Struggle" in which the working class preferred left-wing solutions while those in the middle and higher classes preferred more rightist solutions on economic issues and voted accordingly based on the parties' policy offerings (see also Evans & Langsæther, 2021). Despite claims about the "death of class", the first part of this pattern can still be observed across Western countries where those in the working class (variously defined) continue to hold the most leftist positions on economic matters (for recent reviews, see Lindh & McCall, 2020; Crowley & Manza, 2018).

The relationship between class and party choice has, however, become more complex. As noted by, for example, Evans and Langsæther (2021; see also Crowley & Manza, 2018), this reflects a realignment driven by the advent of a new, salient dimension of political conflict over so-called cultural issues encompassing topics like immigration, environmental protection and minority rights. Attitudes to such issues run counter to the traditional, economic, pattern in that the working class tends to be on the right in the cultural conflict while the middle and upper classes tend toward the left (Crowley & Manza, 2018; Evans & Langsæther, 2021; Lindh & McCall, 2020). The coexistence of the economic and cultural dimensions and their different relationships with class means that the relationship between class and vote has become more contingent than before. In many contexts, voters as well as parties now face a choice about which dimension to prioritize just as parties have more options for strategically altering their positions in order to attract voters.

Part of the reason for this more complex class-politics relationship is exactly the complexity of class itself as discussed above. Thus, research has repeatedly shown how the relationship between class and cultural issues is driven by educational differences between classes more than the economic differences traditionally highlighted as the core of class conflicts (e.g., Crowley & Manza, 2018; Stubager, 2008). Complexity at the political level, hence, reflects complexity at the structural level.

The central question from the perspective pursued here, however, is whether and how people's sense of class identity is related to these complexities. As noted, this question has been subject to considerably less research at the structural level and the absence of studies is equally pronounced with respect to the political level. Among the few studies addressing the issue is Sosnaud et al. (2013; see also the comparative extension by D'Hooghe et al., 2018) who have investigated the overlap between objective class positions and class identification with an eye to both economic and cultural conflicts without, however, finding clear patterns. In their study of the US, Sweden, Germany and the UK, however, Crowley and Manza (2018; see also Hout, 2008) find a clearer picture in which class identity is mostly linked with attitudes in the economic domain with working class identifiers leaning more left than those identifying with the middle class. The relationship between class identity and cultural issues is clearly weaker and reversed with the working class placed farthest to the right. In an analysis of British data, however, Evans et al. (2022) find a stronger link between class identity and cultural issues (on which the working class tends to the right) than between identity and economic issues (where no effect seems discernible) whereas the authors find the opposite relationship in Denmark where class identity is only linked to economic issues and not to cultural ones.

One reason for these somewhat contradictory results could be the existence of a multi-dimensional conception of class identity. Thus, the differences in the relationship between class identity and political attitudes and behavior found by extant studies could result from the existence of sub-dimensions of class identity that are activated differently across different contexts. By placing the potential multidimensionality of class identity at the center of the analysis, we aim to contribute to sorting out these inconsistencies thereby potentially also contributing toward delineating some of the current limitations and opportunities of class-based politics as noted above.

4 | RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Extending these recent contributions, we focus on class identity defined as people's identification with a class (Pérez-Ahumada, 2014, p. 61). Specifically, we study if class identity has become more complex and how this might influence the relationship between class identity and political attitudes and behavior. Based on the theoretical discussion above as well as results from recent empirical investigations (e.g., Crowley & Manza, 2018; Hout, 2008; Romero-Vidal, 2021; Sheppard & Biddle, 2017; Sosnaud et al., 2013; Stubager et al., 2018) highlighting these as the most important components of class and determinants of class identity, we zoom in on three separate factors that may or may not provide a basis for different dimensions of class identity: education, income and wealth, and occupation (i.e., the job that one holds). At the political level, we follow the literature in focusing on both economic and cultural issues in addition to vote choice.

We investigate four specific research questions. First, we explore whether individuals meaningfully identify with different dimensions of class by asking about class identification priming the different dimensions of class relations. Second, we explore how these different dimensions of class identity are related to each other, as well as to a standard, unprimed measure of class identification. Third, we explore how different dimensions of objective class relations structure the different measures of class identity, including both traditional occupational measures of class, economic and non-economic resources, as well as a measure of class origin. Finally, we investigate the relationship between the different dimensions of class identity and political attitudes in both the economic and cultural realms as well as party choice. Overall, hence, our goal is to illuminate to what extent class identification is multidimensional and how any such dimensionality is related to, on the one hand, different dimensions of objective class relations and, on the other hand, different dimensions of political conflict.

5 | CASE-SELECTION, DATA AND METHODS

We situate our study in Denmark. Like other North-West European countries, Denmark experienced strong working class mobilization in the last decades of the 19th Century spearheaded by the three-pronged labor movement including the Social Democratic party. From the 1920s onwards, the Social Democrats occupied a central political position alternating in government power with right wing parties. Class has, in other words, played a fundamental role to central parts of Danish social and political history. Over the course of the 20th Century, the Social Democrats succeeded in introducing a comprehensive welfare state that has characterized and fundamentally transformed Danish society. In this sense, Danish politics clearly fell under Mair's (Mair et al., 1999) heading of "class politics" meaning that class related issues were the basis for party mobilization. So successful has been the welfare state that Denmark in the 21st Century is characterized by a high degree of equality and income mobility (for more on these elements, see Stubager et al., 2021). Because of this leveling of social disparities and despite the early class roots, thus, Denmark can today be considered a least likely case for citizens displaying a strong class identity at least seen from an economic perspective (Evans et al., 2022). This is reflected in Faber et al.'s (2012) finding that class references only appear indirectly in their study of social boundary drawing (thus also reflecting aspects of the class dis-identification perspective).³

At the same time, increasing levels of education, and a somewhat lower educational mobility (Landersø & Heckman, 2017) suggests that Denmark can be seen as a most likely case for the existence of a complex set of class relations, and thus as a relevant case for exploring the impact of such relations on class identity and the identity-politics link. Supporting this further are recent studies suggesting that lifestyles and political behavior in Denmark can be understood as a result of a complex set of class relations (Harrits, 2013; Harrits et al., 2010).

We use data from two surveys of representative samples of adult Danish citizens. The main results presented below are based on a postal survey of 1227 respondents conducted in the spring of 2015. For reasons discussed below and as a replication exercise, this data is supplemented with an online survey of 2065 respondents conducted in the summer of 2021 the results from which are presented in the appendix that also describes the details of both surveys.

Our main variable is a measure of class identification, which we operationalize following the literature and the procedure adopted in the International Social Survey Program with the question "Sometimes there is talk of different social groups or social classes. If you were to place yourself in such a social class which of these would it then be?", followed by these choices: Lower class, working class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, upper class and don't know.⁴ To explore the possibility of a more complex class identification, we further asked the same question (with the same response categories), now priming the respondents to think primarily about their (1) education, (2) job, and (3) income and wealth: "Some people think differently about their class, depending on what part of their life they emphasize. If you think only about your [education/job/income and wealth] what class would you say you belong to?"⁵

In order to be able to investigate the interrelations between the different sub-dimensions of class identity as measured by the primed versions of the identity measure, we posed all four (i.e., the unprimed and the three primed) versions of the question to all respondents in the postal survey. However, this procedure entails the risk that respondents may let their responses to one version influence those to one or more of the other either in an attempt to appear consistent or to accommodate a perceived wish by the researchers to differentiate responses. To counter this risk, we conducted a (survey) experiment in the online survey where randomly selected quarters of respondents were each presented with only one of the four versions. Additionally, this survey afforded the opportunity to replicate all analyses based on the postal survey. The vast majority of results were highly similar across the two survey formats and designs, thereby greatly enhancing our confidence in their veracity. We discuss the minor deviations that arise as we go along.

A tabulation of responses to the identity measures revealed that the upper and lower class categories received very few answers. This parallels what other studies (e.g., Andersen & Curtis, 2012) have found and led us to merge the two extreme responses into the nearest categories, resulting in a four category-measure (lower and working class, lower middle class, middle class, and upper and upper middle class).

To explore the structuring of class identification by different dimensions of objective class relations, we include, first, an adapted measure of occupation following the EGP-schema, including six categories (higher professionals, lower professionals, routine non-manual labor, self-employed, skilled manual labor, unskilled manual labor). Second, we include a measure of education including five categories (no education beyond school, vocational education, short further education, bachelor degree, post-graduate degree), as well as, third, a measure of household income. Finally, we include a measure of occupation of the father (with the same categories as for respondents' occupation), and substituting occupation of the father by occupation of the mother in those situations where the respondent grew up only with their mother or where no information on father's occupation exist.

On the political side, we constructed two attitudinal measures in addition to party choice (see the appendix for all details). First, we combined three Likert-items asking about respondents' attitudes toward the desirability of economic equality and higher taxation into an economic attitudes scale. Similarly, we combined three Likert-items about immigration, criminal justice and environmental protection into a cultural attitudes scale. The vibrant Danish multiparty system (even growing from 10 to 12 parties eligible to run for parliament over the period between the two surveys) means that it is not possible to arrive at stable estimates of the relationship between the variables of interest and each and every party simply because some parties garner very little support. To achieve stable results also in the samples of around 500 respondents in each of the four experimental conditions on the online survey, we group parties in five categories (see the appendix): left socialists, Social Democrats, social liberals,⁶ immigration skeptic right and mainstream right.

Analytically, we mostly rely on regression analyses. When investigating the structural roots of class identity, we estimate multinomial logistic models with the identity measures as the dependent and education, occupation, income, and parental occupation as the independent variables. For the political variables, we substitute each of the three measures (i.e., attitudes and party choice) as the dependent and include class identity among the independents letting the character of the dependent variable dictate the functional form of the regression (OLS for the two scales and multinomial logistic for party choice). In all models, we also control for gender (male or female) and generation (born before 1945, born 1945–1959, born 1960–1974, born 1975–1989 or born after 1990). Don't knows and respondents with missing information are excluded from the analysis. See the appendix for descriptive statistics for all variables (Table A1) and details on the estimation.

Due to the large number of models and coefficients estimated, we rely on graphical presentations of the effects of the variables of interests (with the underlying coefficients presented in the appendix). This takes the form of presenting differences in the predicted probability of selecting a given identity category (or party) between those placed at either end of a given independent variable—for example, for education, between those with no education beyond school and those with a post-graduate degree. Given the ordinal nature of the independent variables, this provides a convenient way of displaying their maximum effects on the dependent variables. For the OLS models, we

simply present the estimated difference between the two extreme categories on a given independent variable. We describe the exact procedure for each variable below.

6 | DIMENSIONS OF CLASS IDENTITY?

Our first two research questions focus on whether people can meaningfully identify with the different dimensions of class and the extent of interrelation between the dimensions. The answer to the first question is positive. Thus, all four questions on class identification seem to tap meaningful dimensions for respondents, in the sense that all questions have low non-response and don't know rates—ranging from (combined) two to six per cent in the postal survey and from four to nine per cent in the online survey. Interestingly, the job-primed measure stands out from the others in both surveys by generating a higher level of don't know responses (a difference of about three percentage points in both surveys). As depicted in Figure 1, further, the distributions on the four measures resemble each other to a considerable extent. It should be noted, however, that compared to the unprimed version, the share of middle class identifiers is smaller on the three primed versions while the share of lower and working class identifiers is larger. The primed versions, in other words, result in slightly more differentiated responses. As can be seen in Figure A1 in the appendix we find a very similar pattern of responses in the online survey which provides a first indication that the methodological worries raised about the postal survey should not be overstated. Overall, these descriptive results provide rather weak support for the idea that class identity has meaningful sub-dimensions indicating instead a considerable degree of similarity in responses.

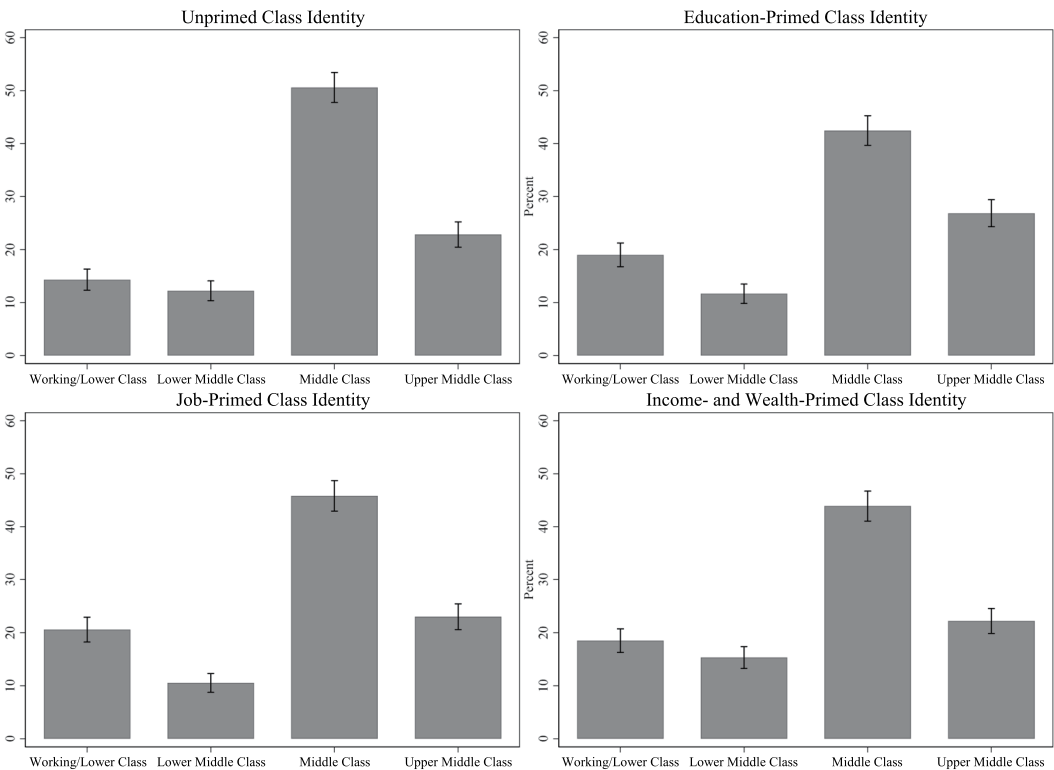


FIGURE 1 Unprimed and primed class identity, per cent. N: 1,150-1,199. The bars represent the percentage (with 95% confidence intervals) of responses to each of the four versions of the class identity measure with don't know responses excluded. See the text for question wording

TABLE 1 Correlations of unprimed and primed measures of class identity, gamma

	Education-primed	Job-primed	Income- and wealth-primed
Unprimed	0.74	0.86	0.85
Education-primed		0.81	0.66
Job-primed			0.81

Note: $N = 1130-1175$. Cell entries are Goodman and Kruskal's gamma, using the four-category version of the class identification measures. All entries are statistically significant from 0. Analyses using the full version of these measures show very similar results.

To explore our second research question, Table 1 presents simple (gamma) correlations between the four class identification measures in the postal survey. As can be seen in Table 1, all measures are strongly correlated, thus reinforcing the impression of overall similarity.⁷ Nevertheless, education-primed class identity seems somewhat less strongly correlated with both unprimed class identity and income- and wealth-primed class identity. Thus, although education-primed identity by no means can be characterized as independent of the other types of class identity, it does seem to follow a partly separate logic. In contrast, unprimed, job-primed and income- and wealth-primed class identity seem to be more closely related to each other than to education-primed identity. These results do indicate the existence of some element of dimensionality in class identification, but within a common, overall frame.

7 | THE SOCIAL STRUCTURING OF (DIMENSIONS OF) CLASS IDENTITY

Our third research question pertains to the structural origins of class identity, in particular whether and how different structural dimensions may play a different role for the different dimensions of class identity. As noted, we investigate the matter using multinomial logistic models having the four identity measures as the dependent variables. The models are set up in four steps according to the order in which the independent variables are expected to exert their influence. In the first step, we enter parental occupation (as well as gender and generation); in the second step, education is added, while steps three and four add occupation and household income, respectively. The influence of each variable is evaluated at the step at which it enters the model to avoid post-treatment bias. Due to their large number, the estimated coefficients are presented in the appendix (Table A3–A6) while Figure 2 below illustrates the main relationships. Before discussing these, it is worth noting that Wald-tests show that all variables (except household income for the education-primed measure) are significant (at the $p < .001$ -level) in all models. This indicates a clear structural basis to class identity no matter how we measured it.

The results from the online survey deviate somewhat on this point in that parental occupation is insignificant in all models, while occupation fails to reach significance for the unprimed and education-primed measures. In contrast, income is significant for all four measures. However, since the vast majority of the underlying coefficients point in the same direction in the two surveys (see tables in the appendix) we see these deviations as primarily reflecting the smaller number of respondents in the online survey. Thus, at this overall level we find a considerable degree of similarity across the four measures.

Figure 2 shows the effect of the four structural variables on the predicted probabilities of identifying with each of the four class categories for each measure of class identity. We depict the differences in the predicted probabilities of identifying with each category between, for education, those with no education and those with post-graduate education; for parental as well as respondents' own occupation, between those (whose parents were) occupied as unskilled manual workers and those occupied as higher professionals, and for income between those earning the equivalent of the 25th percentile and those earning the equivalent of the 90th percentile. The figures are constructed such that positive values indicate a higher probability of selection among the "higher" structural group and vice versa for negative values. What we show in the figure, in other words, is a sort of maximal effect of the objective variables on choosing each category of the identity variable.⁸

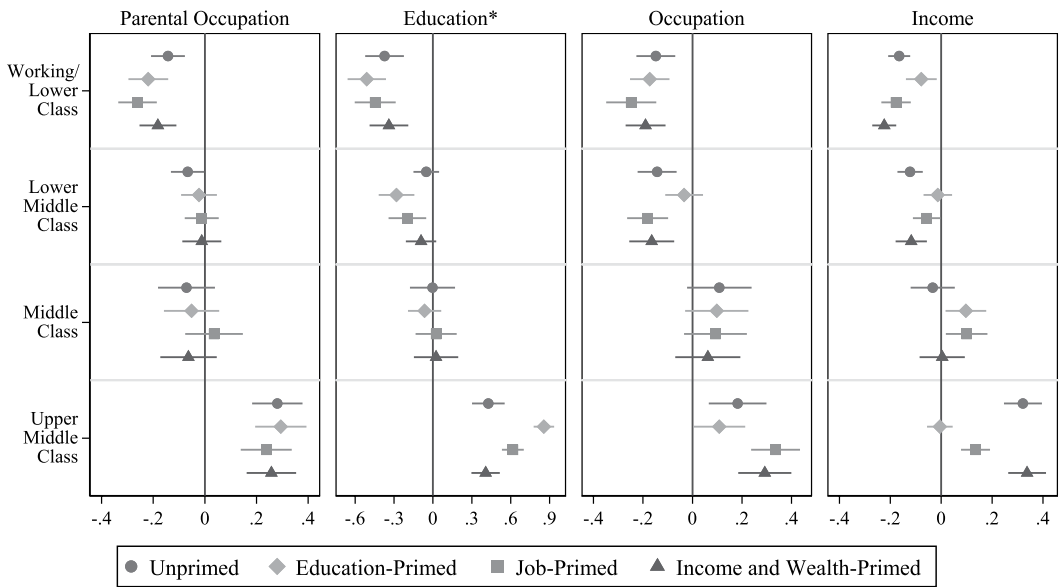


FIGURE 2 Objective and subjective class, differences in predicted probabilities. *: Note the different scale in the education sub-plot. The markers represent the difference (with 95% confidence intervals) in the predicted probability of selecting a given identity category between, for education, those with no education beyond school and those with a university degree, for occupation, between those with an unskilled manual occupation and those occupied as higher professionals, and for income, between those earning the equivalent of the 25th percentile and those earning the equivalent of the 90th percentile. Positive values indicate that the category is more popular among the 'higher' group. See the text for the underlying models

As is clear from Figure 2, the pattern of effects is quite similar across the four versions of the identity question (depicted with each their marker in the plots)—although with some deviations. Overall, the pattern is that the differences between the “low” and “high” categories on each of the four structural variables is negative for the working/lower class and the lower middle class (although only weakly for parental occupation), absent or positive for the middle class and positive for the upper middle class. In other words, those occupying “higher” structural positions have a lower tendency to identify with the working or lower middle class and a higher tendency to identify with the upper middle class compared to those occupying ‘lower’ structural positions. This is not very surprising, but it shows that class identity is interpreted by our respondents in the way sociologists would normally do. In this sense, class identity still seems to have its traditional reference points for people—and that consistently so across all four identity measures.

Figure 2 also shows how the priming exercise entailed in the sequence of identity questions seems to have worked to a certain extent in that our respondents pay more attention to the primed variable when responding to each of the primed identity questions. This is clear from the fact that the effects tend to be higher (in an absolute sense) for the variable that is primed. That is, we see a stronger effect of education for the education-primed measure (the diamond markers) than for the other versions—and similarly (but weaker) for occupation and income.⁹ As shown in Figure A2, the online survey reproduces the overall pattern of effects, although the differences between the four versions seem more muted with only the effect of education for the education-primed measure standing out as particularly strong. Thus, even though the differences in the strength of relationships between the various structural dimensions and our different measures of class identity might be seen as an indication of sub-dimensions of class identity, the differences are too weak to challenge the main pattern of similarity across the four measures.

Overall, therefore, the analysis of our third research question confirms the tendencies already identified in terms of a high degree of overall consistency across the four different measures of class identity combined with a

clearly weaker element of differentiation between an economic sub-dimension (reflected in responses to the job- and income- and wealth-primed—as well as the standard—measures) and an educational sub-dimension (reflected in responses to the education-primed measure). The differentiation between the sub-dimensions is somewhat stronger in the postal survey compared to the online survey, however. All in all, hence, class identity appears to be a rather coherent concept including with respect to its relationship with structural indicators of class while a multi-dimensional structure seems best described as potentially emerging.

8 | (DIMENSIONS OF) CLASS IDENTITY AND POLITICS

Turning to our fourth research question we shift to the political level to investigate whether any emerging dimensionality in class identity is visible in the effect of class identity on political attitudes and party choice. In the first set of analyses, we investigate the relationship (net of the structural variables also included in the previous analyses) between the four measures of class identity and attitudes in the economic and cultural realms, respectively. We follow the same presentational strategy as above in focusing on the differences between the extreme categories, only here we compare those identified with the working/lower class with those identifying with the upper middle class. For the attitudinal analyses, we rely on OLS models and since we treat the identity measure as ordinal, we present the effects by means of the coefficient for the dummy variable showing the contrast between a working/lower class identity (the reference category) and an upper middle class identity (see Tables A7 and A8 in the appendix for the full models).¹⁰ These coefficients are presented in Figure 3 for both economic and cultural attitudes.

Before delving into the figure, it is worth noting that *F*-tests of the combined significance of the block of dummy variables representing the identity measures in each analysis are significant (at $p < .001$) in all four economic attitudes models and insignificant (i.e., $p > .05$) in all four cultural attitudes models. These overall results are perfectly matched by the coefficients presented in Figure 3: on all four measures of class identity, it is so that those identifying with the

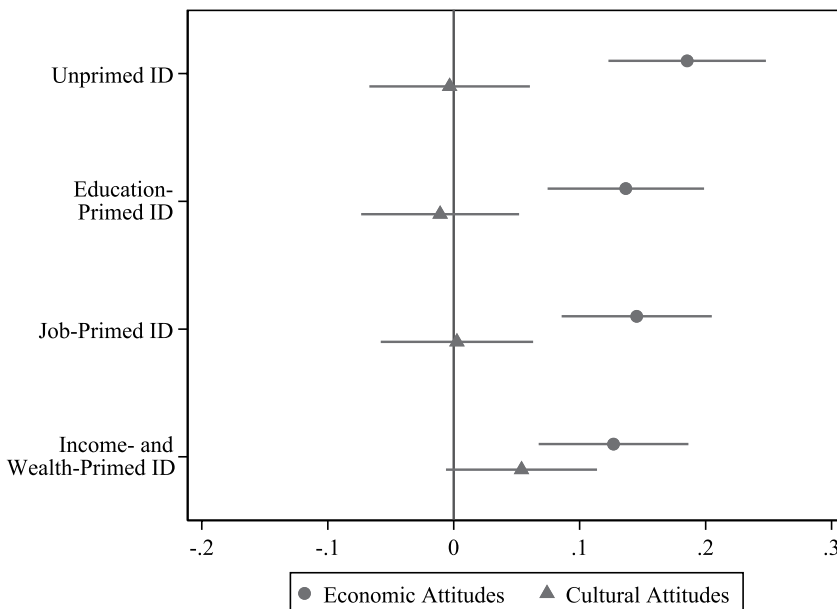


FIGURE 3 Class identity and economic and cultural attitudes, regression coefficients. The graph shows the regression coefficients (with 95% confidence intervals) for dummy variables indicating the difference between those identified with the lower/working class and those identified with the upper middle class on the four identity measures. See the text for the underlying models

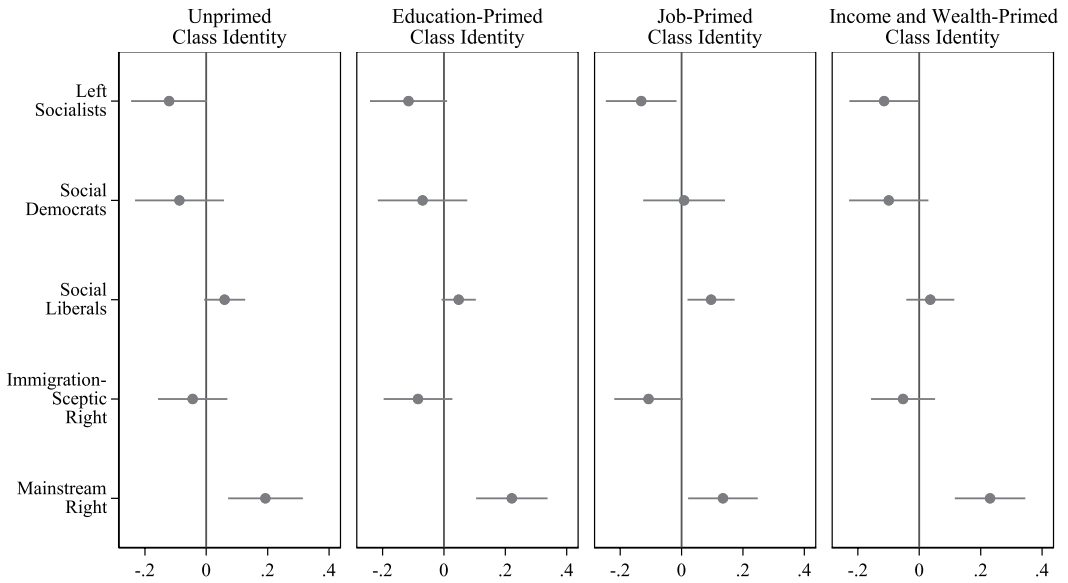


FIGURE 4 Class Identity and Party Choice, Differences in Predicted Probabilities. The markers show the difference (with 95% confidence intervals) in the predicted probability of selecting each party (group) between those identifying with the lower/working class and the upper middle class, respectively. See the text for modeling

upper middle class are placed further to the right on economic issues than those identifying with the lower or working class. And given that the dependent variable is scaled from 0 to 1, the estimated coefficients ranging between 0.1 and 0.2 are of non-trivial size (also recalling that they are controlled for the structural factors). The picture is very different for cultural attitudes where all coefficients in the figure are not only rather small, but also insignificant (just like the overall *F*-tests). Put differently, the analyses show that class identity, consistently across our four identity measures, is related to economic attitudes while it, equally consistently, shows no relationship with cultural attitudes. Class identity, in other words, remains tied to traditional, economic class issues.

These results are largely reproduced in the online survey (see Figure A3) with only one difference worth mentioning: the education-primed measure fails to show a relationship with economic attitudes (overall as well as for the lower/working class vs. upper middle class contrast).¹¹ Curiously, given the absence of differentiation at the structural level in the online survey, this result points at the same pattern of two sub-dimensions of class identity (an economic and an educational) that we found at the structural level in the postal survey. Given estimation samples of between 300 and 400 respondents in the online survey, the results should be interpreted with caution, but we will return to them in the concluding discussion.

Finally, we turn to investigating the extent of multidimensionality in the relationship between class identity and party choice. As in the attitudinal analyses, we focus on the contrast between those identifying with the lower/working class and the upper middle class, respectively, but since the dependent variable is categorical, we illustrate the relationships by means of the difference in the predicted probability of voting for each party between the two identity groups. The results for party choice appear in Figure 4 (with the underlying coefficients available in Table A9). Wald tests of the overall significance of the identity variable are significant for all measures except the unprimed one.

As is the case in the foregoing analyses, the dominant pattern is one of similarity across the four versions of the identity measure. Indeed, for this dependent variable the similarity is even more pronounced in that we see the same configuration of differences in party support—or lack thereof—for all four measures. Thus, support for the mainstream right is significantly higher among upper middle class identifiers compared to lower/working class identifiers across the board just as we see the reverse pattern for left socialist parties (although the difference just fails to reach significance for the un- and education-primed measures). For the three other parties, the differences are clearly

smaller and only reach significance in one case. This pattern is generally replicated in the online survey (see Figure A4) and out of the 20 differences estimated in each survey there is only one case in which a difference is significant in one survey without also being so in the other (when counting the two deviations for the left socialist parties in the postal survey as insignificant).

In substantive terms this pattern of results conforms to the one found at the attitudinal level in that the mainstream right parties are placed the farthest to the right on economic matters while the left socialist parties are placed the farthest to the left (the remaining parties are placed in between the two extremes). What we can observe, in other words, is that the relationship between people's class identification and their party choice aligns with the classic pattern of a left-leaning working class and a right-leaning upper middle class. We see no indication of an education-based sub-dimension potentially based on cultural issues. The overall picture emanating from the analyses of the political level, thus, is one in which class identity is much more strongly related to economic compared to cultural considerations, including with respect to party choice, and that fairly consistently across our four different measures of class identity. In this way, the pattern of results suggests the continuing existence of "class politics" (Mair et al., 1999) in Denmark, a point we expand below.

9 | CONCLUSION

Despite increasing focus on new and more complex class relations in advanced capitalist societies, studies of the subjective dimensions of class, including class identity, have not yet been as comprehensive as studies of, for example, lifestyles and social mobility. Addressing this void, we have explored if and how class identity can be seen as multidimensional or fragmented. In two Danish surveys, we have used both a traditional, unprimed measure and new measures of class identification priming people's job, education or income and wealth as basis for their class identity. Overall, the analysis finds that although the respondents in both of our surveys are able to relate to the unprimed as well as primed measures of class identity, the general pattern is one of similarity across the four measures that are, furthermore, highly correlated. This applies both at the structural level where we find mostly similar patterns in the relationship between respondents' social positions and their class identification as well as at the political level where the different measures of class identity tend to be related to attitudes and party choice in the same way. We do find some indications that educational class identity may constitute a sub-dimension of class identity, whereas job- and income- and wealth-based class identity seem to tap into an economic sub-dimension, which is also more highly correlated with the unprimed measure. However, since these deviations from the overall pattern are of a rather modest size and, furthermore, fail to materialize consistently in the two surveys, we are hesitant to accord them too much weight.

Therefore, our conclusion is that class identity can, by and large, be seen as one, overarching concept with common structural roots and a much stronger relationship with economic attitudes and voting based on such consideration than with cultural attitudes and voting based hereon. Despite debates about the increasing complexity, even fragmentation, of class relations, class identity appears a fairly coherent construct in people's minds. And a construct that is related to politics in the way envisioned by classic theories in the field as well as earlier scholarship. In other words, those identifying with the working class are (still) to be found to the left of those identifying with the middle and upper middle class on issues related to the economic dimension and at the polls.

To observers of Danish politics, this relationship between class identity and party choice may come as a small surprise. Thus, although their positions have varied somewhat over time, it is still the case that Danish left-wing parties, the left socialists and the Social Democrats, direct their policy appeals to the working class (as well as other disadvantaged groups; see, e.g., Stubager et al., 2021). In this sense, therefore, Danish politics still displays features of what Mair terms "class politics" (Mair et al., 1999). Furthermore, the results imply that parties seeking to strengthen class based mobilization can do so by appealing to fairly coherent class identities. Class appeals do not seem conditioned by the saliency of different structural dimensions.

Since Denmark, as mentioned, may constitute a most-likely case for the development of a multidimensional class identity due to the growing importance of education, our results would seem to suggest that we should see a similar degree of uni-dimensionality in class identity in other countries where education plays less of a role. The analyses of Evans et al. (2022), however, indicate that the generalizability of our results may be conditioned by the class culture prevalent in a given country. In Britain, thus, where class has strong cultural connotations, they find class identity linked with cultural rather than economic attitudes. This result, in turn, suggests that class identity in such contexts may be either multi-dimensional or dominated by the educational sub-dimension. Whereas it is upon future analyses to delve into that question, we can note that the relationship between class identity and political variables found in our analyses is fairly prevalent across Western countries (see D'Hooghe et al., 2018) thereby providing an indication that our results may generalize to a wider range of countries.

In drawing such conclusions we should note two additional caveats. First, the structural changes discussed above do not take place over night, even less so in terms of their effects on individuals' social identities. It might be, that is, that our analyses show the early phase of an emerging, multi-dimensional pattern that will become stronger as time passes. Second, it is clear that the use of other indicators of class identity could have produced different results. As noted, we have followed the lead of much extant literature as well as the International Social Survey Program in our choice of class identity question, but others are available that might uncover other response patterns including the extent of class dis-identification. Likewise, the various sub-dimensions of class identity could have been primed in other, perhaps stronger, ways. Indeed, a broader approach could have placed class identity in relation to other identities like race/ethnicity or gender opening for a more comprehensive understanding of people's social identity. Future analyses will have to explore these matters further.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors are aware of no conflicts of interest pertaining to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Data collection for the research has been registered with the Danish Data Protection Agency (2015) and The University of Aarhus (2021) in accordance with the rules applying at the time of data collection.

ORCID

Rune Stubager  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5473-6799>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Hodge and Treiman raised a similar point already in 1968.
- ² See, however, Heath et al., 2009; Sheppard & Biddle, 2017 and Romero-Vidal, 2021 for exceptions.
- ³ However, it should also be noted, that recent studies (Harrits & Pedersen, 2018; Robison & Stubager, 2018; Stubager et al., 2018) indicate that contemporary Danes do see class differences and appear comfortable with using class labels

when describing society and categorizing others. Likewise, Harrits and Stubager (2020, p. 247) show a stable absolute level of class identification over the 1971–2019 period.

- ⁴ As highlighted by the dis-identification perspective (e.g., Savage et al., 2010), this measure may risk over-estimating the share of class-identifiers by not directly presenting respondents with the option of not identifying with a class. While this is true, the implications should not be overstated. Thus, Evans et al. (2022, 1183) show how using a two-step procedure where respondents are first asked if they identify with a class, returns a positive response from more than 60% of their Danish respondents. This indicates the existence of a solid base of class identifiers. Further, although an imprecise measure is of course sub-optimal, we should expect it to introduce random noise in the estimates below thereby rendering them conservative. Finally, since our focus is not on levels of class identification but on its consistency and relationship with other variables, the issue is less pressing in this context.
- ⁵ Due to lack of relevant indicators, unfortunately we cannot investigate the influence of wealth at the structural level. Further, the inclusion of both income and wealth in the item introduces some degree of imprecision that may depress its relationship with the structural variables (see below).
- ⁶ Due to insufficient respondents, we could not include the social liberals in the models estimated on the online survey.
- ⁷ These high correlations are somewhat in contrast to the structural level where the gamma-correlation between occupation (excluding the self-employed) and education reaches 0.64 while the correlations of these two dimensions and household income both fall below 0.35. The dimensions are more loosely coupled structurally than in terms of identity, that is (see also Hodge & Treiman, 1968).
- ⁸ Due to the small number of respondents located in more extreme positions on the income variable and the transitory status of many respondents at low levels of income (e.g., students), we do not use the absolute extremes on this variable. Incidentally, due to an indeterminacy in the data (see also Section 3 in the appendix) that prevented the estimation of confidence intervals, the figures for the effect of occupation and income on job-primed class identity are based on a model ($n = 916$) where the parental occupation variable is substituted by a subjective measure of economic class experience: 'How would you describe the economic situation of your family when you were growing up', with five response categories. Figures based on parental occupation are highly similar.
- ⁹ As noted for income, the weaker effect may be due to the inclusion of wealth in the priming for the income- and wealth-primed identity measure.
- ¹⁰ We find similar results if we disaggregate the extreme identity categories and focus on the contrasts between the working class and the upper middle or upper class, respectively.
- ¹¹ The lower/working class versus upper middle class contrast just misses significance at $p = .054$ for the job-primed measure, a result at least partly attributable to the small sample size of the online survey.

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