

Social class

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British Social Attitudes 40



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Unequal Britain: the reawakening of class divisions

It is often suggested that social class does not matter much nowadays. This chapter assesses the validity of this claim by, first, analysing long-term trends in middle and working-class identity and in awareness of class inequality, and, second, by identifying who thinks of themselves as middle or working class and the political attitudes that are associated with class identity and awareness.

The myth of a classless Britain

There is no consistent evidence that people have become less likely to identify as middle or working class, while, despite the growth in white-collar jobs, more people identify as working than middle class. At the same time people are more aware of class inequalities in Britain.

- In 1987, 46% identified without prompting as middle or working class. In 2015, 42% still did so.
- When asked if they were one or the other, in 2021, 52% said they were working class while 43% indicated they were middle class.
- Over three-quarters (77%) now say that social class affects someone's opportunities 'a great deal' or 'quite lot', up from seven in ten (70%) in 1983.



Class identity not just about occupation

While those in blue-collar jobs are more likely than those in white-collar occupations to say they are working class, people's class identity is also strongly influenced by education and income.

- As many as 62% of those in working-class jobs identify as working class, compared with 38% of those in managerial and professional occupations.
- Only 28% of those who have been to university think of themselves as working-class, compared with 60% of those with a GCSE or less.
- 32% of those whose household income is in the highest income quartile feel working class, compared with 52% of those in the lowest quartile.

Class identity and awareness affect attitudes differently

Those who identify as working class are less likely than those who regard themselves as middle class to uphold liberal values or express pro-immigrant views. But those who are aware of class inequalities are more left-wing in their attitudes.

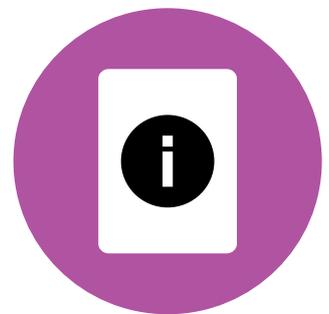
- Only 54% of working-class identifiers have a libertarian outlook, compared with 75% of middle-class identifiers.
- While 77% of middle-class identifiers express pro-immigrant sentiment, only 48% of working-class identifiers do so.
- Among those who think it is 'very difficult' to move from one class to another, 77% express left-wing views. Just 38% who say it is 'not very difficult' to change class hold such views.

Introduction

British society has changed a lot over the last forty years. One marked change has been the spread of higher education and a concomitant increase in the proportion of people engaged in middle-class occupations. This has led many commentators to assert that class inequalities have declined, and that class is not as important a determinant of life chances as it once was. Meanwhile, in contrast to the position in the 1980s, much of today's discourse about inequality focuses on one or more of the protected characteristics under the Equalities Act, such as gender and sexual orientation, rather than social class.

This chapter examines whether class identities have really weakened and whether people think that class does not matter anymore.

The traditional view is that class inequalities are no longer a salient feature of life, either socially or politically. According to this view, changes that have occurred within society, such as rising living standards, the spread of affluence, and increased social mobility have undermined the salience of class identities and made voters more individualistic. People therefore no longer think in class terms because divisions between classes have blurred (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Clark and Lipset, 2001). And as the social relevance of class has withered, so too has its political expression. Social classes are no longer politically divided, because the social conflict that underpinned these divisions have been successfully resolved (van der Eijk et al., 1992: 423).



If this traditional view was ever true, it seems much less likely to be so today. Rising inequality, stagnating wages, and spiralling inflation make a narrative of social progress much harder to sustain than during the economic ‘good times’ before the 2008 financial crisis. And rather than blurring social divides, the spread of education has created new fault lines between what has been dubbed the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of globalisation (Kriesi et al., 2006).

Moreover, social identity rests on comparisons between one’s own group and others (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In the aftermath of the financial crisis – and indeed the pandemic – rather than being ‘all in this together’, as former Chancellor George Osborne famously declared about austerity, people may have a heightened sense that the consequences of such crises have fallen unevenly and unequally across society. Or as a poem published at the height of the pandemic put it, ‘we are in the same storm, but not in the same boat’ (Barr, 2020). These events may have made people more aware of class divisions in society, rather than less.

The extent to which social classes are politically divided is also open to question. Although the class basis of support for Labour has waned over time (Evans and Tilly, 2017), identity divides based on class have found political expression in other quarters. Across Europe the emergence of radical right parties has led to a realignment among the working class, with increased polarisation around cultural issues – specifically to do with immigration (Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). In the UK these divisions became sharply evident in the vote for Brexit (Ford and Goodwin, 2017), followed by the fall of the ‘red wall’ in the 2019 general election, when working class voters backed the Conservatives in unprecedented numbers (Cutts et al., 2020). These shifting alignments in turn pose a dilemma for social democratic parties like Labour. Across Europe, the share of the vote won by mainstream parties on the left has declined. And in order to win back working-class voters, left wing parties are tempted to adopt more anti-immigrant stances, which, in turn, risks alienating other sections of their support base who do not share such an outlook.

Utilising data that has been collected by the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey over the last forty years, this chapter examines how both class identity and class awareness have evolved over time and analyses how the political values of social classes may have changed. The first section examines class identity and class awareness and addresses two main questions. Has class identity really waned? And do the public believe that Britain has become a class-less society? The second section looks at the sources of class identity. Who thinks of themselves as working class? And how has this changed over time? Whereas much contemporary discourse equates ‘the working class’ with old white men, does this correspond with the groups of people who actually identify as working class? Lastly, the third section examines the political implications of class identity and class awareness. To what extent have class identity and awareness become politically less important? And how do they relate to contemporary political debates about immigration on the one hand and inequality on the other?

Class identity and awareness

To begin with we consider how patterns of class identity have changed over time. Since 2001, the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey has asked people on a number of occasions whether they identify with a particular class. In so doing it has asked questions that were previously asked as part of the British Election Study (BES) (see Heath et al 2013), thereby giving us readings over a forty-year period. Both surveys have asked the following question:



Do you ever think of yourself as belonging to any particular social class?

Yes, middle class

Yes, working class

Yes, other (please write in)

No

If respondents did not spontaneously put themselves as either “middle” or “working class”, they were prompted to do so with this follow-up question:

Most people say they belong either to the middle class or the working class.

If you had to make a choice, would you call yourself middle class or working class.

However, this follow-up prompt was not asked in 2022. Moreover, the way in which the initial question has been asked since the pandemic is also not identical to previous years. Since 2020, BSA has been carried out online rather than administered face to face by an interviewer. This means that, in contrast to previous surveys, respondents can see the different response options available to them, which may encourage them to declare a class identity. These two differences in the way that class identity has been ascertained mean we should treat the more recent results with a certain amount of caution and should not read too much into changes over time.

Table 1 shows both the unprompted and prompted (where available) responses to these questions since the 1980s. From the top panel we can see that for much of the period from the 1980s to the 2010s, the unprompted proportion of people identifying as working class stayed relatively constant at around 30%, while the proportion of people identifying as middle class was somewhat lower at around 20%. With the switch from face to face to online surveys during the pandemic, there is a sharp increase in people declaring a class identity and a corresponding decrease in the percentage of people who say they do not belong to a particular social class. In 2015, 55% of the population did not express a class identity, whereas in the 2021 and 2022 online surveys this fell to under 30% (as it also did in the 2019 BES, which was also partly carried out online). This suggests that the way in which the survey was delivered may have influenced responses to the question – and, in particular, the visibility of the response options may have provided a subtle prompt to declare a class identity.

Interestingly, this appears to have had a stronger impact on reported levels of working-class identity than middle-class identity. In 2022 nearly half the population (46%) identified as working class – compared to just over a quarter (29%) who identified as middle class. This represents an increase of 23 percentage points in the level of working-class identity since the last face to face survey in 2015, compared with an increase of just nine percentage points in the level of middle-class identity. Even if we take these increases with a pinch of salt, there is certainly very little to suggest that class identities have waned over time – and for most of the period covered by the surveys the level of class identification has hovered at an average of around 50%.

The lower panel of Table 1 shows the prompted responses to class identity since the 1980s. The prompt serves to encourage people to think of themselves in class terms, even if they may not choose to do so spontaneously. It therefore does not tell us much about whether the prevalence of class identities have waned over time or not – but it does shed light on whether, when pushed to express a preference, people are increasingly likely to think of themselves as middle class or not. These data are less affected by differences in how the questions were asked since, to a certain extent, the explicit prompt to declare a class identity in the follow up question compensates for the subtle prompt provided by the visibility, when administered online, of the response options in the unprompted question. Nonetheless, some caution is probably needed when analysing changes over time.

Bearing this in mind, it is striking just how stable the balance between working-class identification and middle-class identification has been over the last 40 years. In 1983, when people were ‘prompted’ to declare a class identity, 58% chose working class. In the intervening forty years, this figure has hardly changed. In 2015, 57% identified as working class, and in 2021, 52% did so. Despite the decline of traditionally working-class occupations, there does not appear to be a corresponding decline in the percentage of people who identify as working class. And far from being all middle class now, a majority of people still think of themselves as working class when pressed to express a preference.

Table 1 Class identification, 1983–2022

	1983*	1987*	1992*	1997*	2001	2003	2005	2006	2012
Unprompted	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Middle class	20	16	16	20	19	19	20	19	22
Working class	32	30	28	31	21	26	25	32	28
None	43	50	53	48	58	53	53	47	47
Prompted	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Middle class	34	33	34	37	37	37	36	36	35
Working class	58	61	59	61	59	59	57	59	59
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>3955</i>	<i>3826</i>	<i>3534</i>	<i>2906</i>	<i>2761</i>	<i>975</i>	<i>2102</i>	<i>3240</i>	<i>1076</i>
	2015	2019*	2021	2022					
Unprompted	%	%	%	%					
Middle class	20	28	31	29					
Working class	23	43	38	46					
None	55	25	28	22					
Prompted	%	%	%	%					
Middle class	38	37	43	-					
Working class	57	58	52	-					
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1105</i>	<i>3946</i>	<i>3138</i>	<i>2175</i>					

*Source: British Election Study

Next, we consider the prevalence of class divisions in society from a slightly different perspective. Whereas class identity provides a personal perspective on the salience of class in people's own lives, class awareness entails a wider perspective on the prominence of class divisions in society at large. Someone who is class aware is of the view that class position has important consequences, that there are barriers between classes, and that social class has an impact on peoples' life chances and opportunities (Vanneman and Cannon, 1987, Evans and Mellon, 2016). If people truly believe that Britain has become a classless society as Tony Blair once hoped, we might expect levels of class awareness to have declined over time. By contrast, in the context of rising inequality people may be more likely to perceive class barriers in society than previously.

We can begin to address this issue, by examining how people responded when they were asked the following question:

To what extent do you think a person's social class affects his or her opportunities in Britain today?

***A great deal,
Quite a lot,
Not very much,
Or, not at all?***

This question has been asked in exactly the same way since 1983 and so provides a stable indicator of how public attitudes towards class inequality have changed over time. It is therefore not affected by changes in survey mode in the way we have seen the questions on class identity have been. Table 2 shows that in the last forty years the level of awareness of class inequality of opportunity has never been higher than it is now. In the last ten years, the proportion of people who say that social class affects someone opportunities 'a great deal' has increased from 22% to 28%, and the proportion of people who say 'not very much' has declined from 28% to 19%. Overall, the vast majority (77%) say that class affects opportunities in Britain 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot'. This figure is, if anything, even higher than it was in the 1980s, when 70% (in 1983) and 66% (in 1985) felt that way. This clearly shows, that as far as the public are concerned, divisions between classes have not blurred – and indeed have become sharper.

Table 2 Class and opportunity, 1983–2022

	1983	1985	1987	1989	1991	1996	1997	2012	2022
Extent to which social class affects opportunities	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
A great deal	25	29	28	27	27	26	27	22	28
Quite a lot	45	37	39	42	47	43	49	44	49
Not very much	25	27	27	25	21	23	17	28	19
Not at all	3	4	5	4	3	4	3	3	2
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1719	1769	2766	2930	1473	2399	1355	1076	2175

To further explore public attitudes towards class inequalities, we next consider beliefs about social mobility by examining how people responded when asked:

How difficult would you say it is for people to move from one class to another? Is it...

***Very difficult,
Fairly difficult,
Or, not very difficult?***

Table 3 shows that nowadays people are more likely than previously to perceive class barriers to occupational mobility. The proportion of people saying it is very difficult to move from one class to another has increased sharply from 17% in 2005 to 32% in 2022. By contrast, the proportion of people who say that it is ‘not very difficult’ to move from one class to another has declined from one in three (33%) to just one in nine (11%).

Table 3 Class mobility, 2005–2022

	2005	2015	2021	2022
Difficulty for a person to move class...	%	%	%	%
Very difficult	17	21	28	32
Fairly difficult	42	50	49	52
Not very difficult	33	25	18	11
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2102	1105	3138	2175

Meanwhile, Table 4 shows that those who identify as working class (40%) are much more likely than those who identify as middle class (27%) to say movement between classes is ‘very difficult’ – a difference of 13 percentage points. This gap is higher than in 2015, when 25% of those who identified as working class said ‘very difficult’ compared with 17% of those who identified as middle class – a difference of just eight percentage points. There is also a strong age divide: 42% of people aged 18-34 say it is very difficult to move classes, compared with just 22% of people aged 55 and over. There is thus a strong sense that Britain is not as equal as it once was. And this sense is not untethered from reality. As the noted sociologist John Goldthorpe (2016: 96) recently observed, ‘younger generations of men and women now face less favourable mobility prospects than did their parents or grandparents’.

Table 4 Class mobility, by class identity, 2022

	Middle class	Working class	All
Difficulty for a person to move class...	%	%	%
Very difficult	27	40	32
Fairly difficult	58	52	52
Not very difficult	12	6	11
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>771</i>	<i>844</i>	<i>2175</i>

So far, we have examined respondents’ own perceptions of class awareness in terms of equality of opportunity and social mobility. For the most part, perceptions of class inequality have increased over time, particularly with respect to mobility. This indicates that class divisions are viewed as a salient feature of people’s lives. But how widespread do people consider this view to be? Perhaps because class now receives less attention as a political issue, people do not think that others consider class to be important anymore, even if they themselves do. To investigate this further we examine responses to the following question, which has been asked since 1983.

To what extent do you think people are aware of social class differences in Britain today?

***Very aware,
Quite aware,
Not very aware,
Or not at all aware?***

This question asks about perceptions of other people’s awareness of class rather than the respondent’s own perceptions. It can therefore be treated as an indicator of how salient people consider the issue to be among society at large. Table 5 shows that in our latest survey just 25% of respondents say that people are ‘very aware’ of class differences. This figure is, if anything, slightly lower than in previous years. In particular, the salience of class as a public issue appears to have declined somewhat in the last 10 years. This is somewhat at odds with the other data presented so far, which tends to point towards an increase in the salience of class divisions. Why then do people think others lack awareness of these issues?

Table 5 Extent others are aware of class differences, 1983–2022

	1983	1997	2012	2022
Extent people are aware of social class differences in Britain today...	%	%	%	%
Very aware	29	30	32	25
Quite aware	43	48	45	49
Not very aware	20	18	18	24
Not at all aware	3	2	2	1
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1719</i>	<i>1355</i>	<i>1076</i>	<i>2175</i>

One possible answer is that, although there is a growing sense that class inequalities have risen, people do not necessarily feel that this issue is widely acknowledged by the public at large. Table 6 shows that people who identify as working class are somewhat less likely than people who identify as middle class to say that people are aware of social class differences in Britain today, even though they themselves are more likely to say that class differences are important. There is thus a bit of a mismatch between what people themselves consider an important issue and what they think other people consider to be important, perhaps reflecting a sense that class inequalities do not receive sufficient attention in today’s media and political debates (see Evans and Tilley, 2017).

Table 6 Extent others are aware of class differences, by class identity, 2022

	Middle class	Working class	All
Extent people are aware of social class differences in Britain today...	%	%	%
Very aware	30	25	25
Quite aware	53	50	49
Not very aware	17	23	24
Not at all aware	0	1	1
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>771</i>	<i>844</i>	<i>2175</i>

Taken together, these findings paint a different picture of class in modern Britain from what is often depicted and challenge the idea that Britain has become a classless society. People are still more likely to identify as working class than middle class. At the same time, class awareness has also increased. That is, people are more likely than previously to say that class affects opportunities in Britain ‘a great deal’ and that it is ‘very difficult’ for people to move classes. The view that class inequalities have increased and social mobility has stalled is particularly pronounced among people who identify as working class. A quarter of a century on from the famous proclamation by the former Labour Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, that ‘we’re all middle class now’, people – particularly those who identify as working class – are much more likely to perceive class barriers to social mobility than they were in the New Labour era. In the following sections, we examine the political implications of this increase in class awareness. But before doing so we first examine the sources of class identity.

The sources of class identity and class awareness

On the face of it, the persistence of working-class identity in Britain presents something of a puzzle. Despite the decline of traditionally working-class occupations, there does not appear to be a corresponding fall in the percentage of people who identify as working class. This suggests that class identity may not simply be a function of present occupation, as is commonly assumed – and may be influenced by other factors, such as education or income, which are central to many current debates about inequality and disadvantage. To dig into this, we next examine which groups of people are most likely to identify as working class.



First, we examine how far class identity varies according to the type of jobs that people do. For this purpose, we identify three occupational classes using the established (NS-SEC) class schema that has been developed by the Office for National Statistics.¹ These are, first, employers, managers, professionals and higher supervisors (who may be regarded as the middle class), second, intermediate, small employers, and own account workers (intermediate class), and, finally, lower supervisory and lower technical workers, together with routine and semi-routine workers (working class). Table 7 shows that in our latest survey people engaged in working-class occupations (62%) are much more likely than those in a middle-class job (38%) to identify as working class. Nonetheless, a non-trivial number of people who may be thought of as occupying middle class jobs self-identify as working class. Indeed, nearly half (46%) of all people who identify as working class are employed in middle class jobs.

¹ For more details, see: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/otherclassifications/thenationalstatisticssocioeconomicclassificationnssecbasedonsoc2010>

Table 7 also shows that there are big differences in class identity by education. Whereas 60% of people who left school with the equivalent of a GCSE or less identify as working class, just 28% of people who went to university do so – a gap of 32 percentage points. We therefore observe somewhat bigger differences in class identity according to someone’s education (32 point gap) than we do their present occupation (24 point gap). Indeed, most people (76%) who identify as working class have not been to university. People in the lowest quartile of household incomes (52%) are also more likely than people in the highest quartile (32%) to identify as working class.

There are also differences by other social characteristics. Although there is a tendency for debates about the working class to be framed in terms of old, white men (Ford and Goodwin 2010, 2017) – the reality in terms of who identifies as working class is somewhat different. People from ethnic minority groups are more likely than people from white backgrounds to identify as working class, as are the young as compared with the old, while women are just as likely as men to identify as working class. Class identity also varies by religious identity. People who are Church of England or have no religion are less likely to identify as working class than Catholics or people from other religions. Lastly, class identity also varies by region. People in the North (56%) are much more likely than people in the South West (35%) to identify as working class.

These findings indicate that the sources of working-class identity are diverse. Although occupation is an important element of subjective class identity, so also are other factors that affect someone’s life chances, most notably education and income. Thus, rather than representing a monolithic bloc, people who identify as working class come from a variety of different backgrounds that cut across different axes of disadvantage.

To understand the key underlying predictors of class identity better – and identify systematically the relative importance of these various social characteristics – we use regression analysis. This allows us to measure the independent association between a given characteristic and class identity, controlling for the other characteristics considered. For example, older people are less likely to have been to university than younger people, so does education still matter for class identity when we control for age?

Overall, the key factors associated with whether someone identifies as working class rather than middle class are to do with education, occupation, and income (for details see Table A.1 in the appendix to this chapter). Interestingly, education has a stronger impact on class identity than occupation. That is, someone's class identity is shaped more by whether they went to university or not than by whether they do a white-collar or a blue-collar job. There are also strong regional differences. Regardless of their occupation, income or education, people in the North and Scotland are much more likely than people in London, the South East, and the South West to identify as working class. Indeed, the difference between someone in the North and someone in the South West in the likelihood that they identify as working class is broadly equivalent to the difference between someone in a professional vs a routine occupation. This suggests that class identity may be shaped by social factors to do with where someone lives as well as purely individual attributes to do with what someone does.

Table 7 Class identity by different social characteristics, 2022

		Middle class identity	Working class identity	No class identity	<i>Unweighted base</i>
Occupation					
Managerial and professional	%	39	38	20	1323
Intermediate and self-employed	%	23	52	22	368
Lower supervisory, semi-routine and routine	%	14	62	22	379
Education					
Degree and above	%	49	28	20	1023
A-levels or equivalent	%	24	54	19	312
GCSE or below	%	12	60	25	497
Household Income					
Lower quartile	%	17	52	28	291
Middle	%	25	51	21	992
Upper quartile	%	47	32	18	541
Sex					
Female	%	27	46	24	1212
Male	%	32	45	20	960
Ethnicity					
White	%	31	45	21	1914
Ethnic minority background	%	21	49	25	220
Age					
18-34	%	31	49	17	485
35-54	%	26	49	21	714
55+	%	31	40	26	968

Table 7 Class identity by different social characteristics, 2022 (continued)

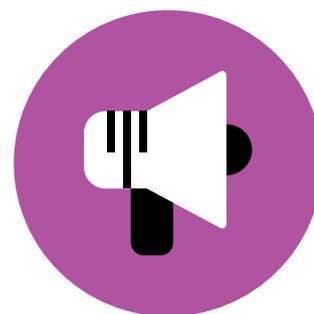
		Middle class identity	Working class identity	No class identity	<i>Unweighted base</i>
Religion					
Church of England	%	32	39	27	298
Catholic	%	20	63	13	163
Other religion	%	21	52	20	139
No religion	%	35	42	20	1069
Region					
North, Yorkshire & Humber	%	20	56	21	519
The Midlands and East	%	29	46	22	601
London and South East	%	35	40	21	538
South West	%	41	35	23	225
Wales	%	39	44	16	107
Scotland	%	19	48	27	185
All	%	29	46	22	2175

Class identity and political values

If social classes are heterogenous in character, does that mean that they do not have distinctive political preferences? And does class identity make any difference to people's political values, over and above the demographic factors associated with these identities?

In Table 8 we examine how political attitudes vary by class identity. We focus on three main groups of issues. The first group of issues comprise our 'left/right' scale (see the Technical Details for this report). This scale includes questions about inequality and redistribution, such as whether 'Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well-off', and whether 'Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers'. Left/right issues are often regarded as the bedrock of class politics. The logic of this claim dates back to Lipset et al.'s (1954) assertion that the working class tend to favour redistribution and so vote for parties of the left, whereas the middle class try to resist these claims and so vote for parties of the right.

The second group of issues comprise BSA's liberal/authoritarian scale, which captures attitudes towards such issues as the death penalty, homosexuality and morality (again, see this report's Technical Details for full details). We also examine attitudes to immigration, which has been a very salient feature of political debate in recent years.



Following Evans and Mellon (2016), we dichotomise the various scales. A right-wing response is coded as an average score of greater than 2.5 on the left/right scale (whose values range from one, meaning very left-wing, to five, very right-wing), while an authoritarian response is one greater than 3.6 on the five item libertarian/authoritarian scale (where the values range from one, very libertarian, to five, very authoritarian). Similarly, on immigration, respondents are coded as pro-immigrant if they give a score of between six and ten in response to the question, ‘On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is extremely bad and 10 is extremely good, would you say it is generally bad or good for Britain’s economy that migrants come to Britain from other countries?’, whereas those who choose a response between zero and five are coded as anti-immigrant.

Table 8 shows that the percentage of people who hold left-wing views has increased from 44% in 2005, when Labour last won a general election, to 61% in 2022. The pendulum of public opinion has swung to the left during the long period of Conservative-led government since 2010. This phenomenon is not uncommon – the public mood often moves in response to what the government of the day delivers (see, for example, Bartle et al., 2011).

People who identify as working class are more left-wing than people who identify as middle class. This was the case in both 2005 and 2022, though the gap has narrowed somewhat and middle-class identifiers have moved to the left in greater numbers than working-class identifiers; the gap has fallen from 21 points in 2005 to just nine points in 2022. This suggests that the attitudes of those with different class identities may have become less distinctive over time, at least on issues to do with tax and redistribution.

However, a slightly different picture emerges with respect to liberal/authoritarian values and attitudes towards immigration. Once again, there have been some pronounced shifts in public opinion at the aggregate level. Whereas 37% of the public held liberal views in 2005, this has increased to 63% in our latest survey – an increase of 26 percentage points. However, although both working-class and middle-class identifiers have moved in a more liberal direction, the rate of change has been somewhat greater among middle-class identifiers even though they were already the more liberal group. As a result, the class gap on liberal values has increased from 14 percentage points in 2005 to 21 points in 2022. Meanwhile, a similar story is evident with respect to attitudes towards immigration.

People on average are much more likely now than they were in 2015, just before Brexit, to hold pro-immigration views, but the difference in opinion between the working class and middle class has increased somewhat from 17 percentage points in 2015 to 29 percentage points in 2022.

Thus, whereas working-class and middle-class identifiers were previously somewhat more polarised on left/right issues than they were on liberal/authoritarian ones, now they are somewhat further apart on attitudes towards immigration and on libertarian/authoritarian values than they are on left/right issues. For example, in the 2022 survey 52% of those who identify as working class hold anti-immigrant views, whereas just 23% of those who identify as middle class do so, a difference of 29 percentage points. At the same time, whereas 65% of those who identify as working class hold left-wing views, 56% of those who identify as middle class do so, a difference of just nine percentage points.

Table 8 Libertarian-authoritarian and left-right values and attitudes towards immigration, by class identity (unprompted), 2005-2022

		Libertarian	Authoritarian	Left	Right	Anti-immigrant	Pro-immigrant
2005							
Middle class	%	45	54	30	68	-	-
Working class	%	31	67	51	47	-	-
All	%	37	62	44	55	-	-
2015							
Middle class	%	53	47	46	53	46	54
Working class	%	42	57	52	44	62	37
All	%	47	51	49	49	58	42
2022							
Middle class	%	75	25	56	44	23	77
Working class	%	54	46	65	35	52	48
All	%	63	37	61	39	40	59

The question on immigration was not asked in 2005

The bases for Table 8 can be found at Table A.2 in the appendix to this chapter

Of course, part of the reason for these differences may be to do with the factors that are associated with class identity, rather than identity itself. That is, maybe people on low incomes are more likely to hold left-wing views, or people with degrees are more likely to hold pro-immigration attitudes, and that it is these factors that matter rather than people's class identity. To investigate this, we once again turn to multivariate regression (see Table A.3 in the appendix to this chapter). Even when we control for additional demographic factors, the impact of class identity on political values is significant. Regardless of what occupation people do, people who identify as working class are more left-wing; more authoritarian, and more anti-immigration than those who identify as middle class. Indeed, on liberal/authoritarian values and immigration attitudes, class identity matters rather more than occupation or income (though rather less than education). This indicates that class identity is politically relevant, particularly on 'cultural' issues which have come to dominate so much of the post-Brexit political debate.

However, a slightly different picture emerges if we examine political values by class awareness. Table 9 shows that the people who are most likely to identify class barriers to social mobility and to say that it is 'very difficult' for people to move between classes are relatively left-wing, but are not distinctively anti-immigrant or authoritarian. For example, in the 2022 survey people who said it was very difficult for people to move between classes (77%) are much more left-wing than those who said it was not very difficult (38%). By contrast, the difference in anti-immigrant attitudes is negligible (42% vs 45%).

This suggests that people who are concerned about class inequalities in Britain may be more receptive to economic policy proposals that seek to limit the influence of big business and of the rich and powerful than they will be to policies that seek to blame immigrants for squeezing the labour market and making economic conditions more difficult for British workers.

Indeed, people have become much more polarised on this issue over time. In 2005 during the New Labour government, people who thought it was 'very difficult' to move classes were split evenly between those who favoured left-wing policies and those who favoured right-wing ones (49% vs 51% respectively). However, now they lean clearly to the left (77% vs 23% respectively). Moreover, the difference in the level of support for left-wing views between those who say it is very difficult to move between classes and those who believe it is not very difficult has increased from just 11 points in 2005 to 39 points now.

Table 9 Libertarian-authoritarian and left-right values and attitudes towards immigration, by class awareness, 2005-2022

Difficulty for a person to move class...		Libertarian	Authoritarian	Left	Right	Anti-immigrant	Pro-immigrant
2005							
Very difficult	%	35	65	49	51	-	-
Fairly difficult	%	38	60	43	55	-	-
Not very difficult	%	40	58	38	60	-	-
All	%	37	62	44	55	-	-
2015							
Very difficult	%	48	51	59	39	59	41
Fairly difficult	%	48	51	43	55	56	43
Not very difficult	%	44	56	35	63	58	41
All	%	47	51	49	49	58	42
2022							
Very difficult	%	56	43	77	23	42	58
Fairly difficult	%	67	33	53	47	40	60
Not very difficult	%	55	45	38	62	45	53
All	%	63	37	61	39	40	59

The question on immigration was not asked in 2005

The bases for Table 9 can be found at Table A.4 in the appendix to this chapter

Table 10 pursues this analysis further by examining the relationship between political values and both class awareness and class identity together. People who identify as working class are more likely to hold left-wing values when they think it is very difficult for people to move between classes than when they do not (79% vs 44% – a difference of 35 percentage points). Interestingly, class awareness also appears to dampen anti-immigration sentiment among working-class identifiers. People who identify as working class are less likely to hold anti-immigration views when they think it is very difficult for people to move between classes than when they do not (48% versus 58% – a difference of 10 percentage points).

These patterns are also in evidence among those who identify as middle class, indicating that class awareness, and not just simply class identity, helps to shape political values. When people are aware of inequalities in society, they are more likely to lean towards policies that explicitly seek to address those inequalities.

Table 10 Libertarian-authoritarian and left-right values and attitudes towards immigration, by class identity and class awareness, 2022

Difficulty for a person to move class...		Libertarian	Authoritarian	Left	Right	Anti-immigrant	Pro-immigrant
Working class ID							
Very difficult	%	52	48	79	21	48	52
Fairly difficult	%	57	43	57	43	53	47
Not very difficult	%	46	54	44	56	58	42
All	%	54	46	65	35	52	48
Middle class ID							
Very difficult	%	70	30	70	30	23	77
Fairly difficult	%	79	21	53	47	22	78
Not very difficult	%	66	34	36	64	27	73
All	%	75	25	56	44	23	77

The bases for Table 10 can be found at Table A.5 in the appendix to this chapter

Both class identity and class awareness are associated with political values, albeit in slightly different ways. Whereas class identity is most strongly associated with anti-immigration attitudes and liberal/authoritarian values, and only to a lesser extent with left/right attitudes, class awareness is associated primarily with left/right attitudes (see also the regression analysis at Table A.6 in the appendix to this chapter). This suggests, that even if people who identify as working class are relatively anti-immigrant, they do not blame immigration for worsening class conditions, while people who think class inequality is a problem are more likely to favour left-wing economic solutions than anti-immigrant ones. Consequently, as levels of class awareness have increased over time, so has the appetite for left-wing policies that are designed to address social inequalities.

Conclusion

Social class looms large in people's lives. People think of themselves in class terms – and, if anything, are more likely to identify with a social class than previously. However, rather than identifying as middle class – the evidence suggests that people are still much more likely to think of themselves as working class, even though the percentage of people employed in working-class jobs is relatively small.



On the face of it, the relatively large number of people employed in traditional middle-class jobs who identify as working class poses something of a puzzle. But class identity is not shaped purely by occupation, or, indeed, purely by economic factors. On the one hand, people in professional occupations who have not been to university, or who are not on high incomes, are much more likely than those who have to identify as working class. And on the other hand, people who live in northern areas with a strong working class-culture are much more likely to identify as working class than people in similar jobs and salaries who live in the South East, indicating the relative impact of cultural versus economic influences on class identification (see also Evans, Stubager and Langseather, 2022).

People not only identify in class terms, but also perceive obstacles to those from different class backgrounds being able to move from one class to another. And on this score the evidence is much clearer – people think Britain has become a more unequal place over time. This is particularly the case for people who identify as working class (and also for younger people).

The political implications of this are two-fold. Across Europe the emergence of radical right parties has led to a realignment among the working class, with increased polarisation around cultural issues – especially on immigration (Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). As a result, the share of the vote won by mainstream parties on the left has declined. And in order to win back working-class voters, left-wing parties are tempted to adopt more anti-immigrant stances, which, in turn, risks alienating other voters. However, even if these types of policies may be popular with people who identify as working class (though perhaps less than previously) they will do little to appease those who are concerned about worsening class conditions. Therefore, in order to make the case for left-wing policies, parties on the left first need to raise class awareness and make the case that there are problems in society which such policies are aimed to address.

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Appendix

Table A.1 Logistic regression model for whether identify as working class or middle class, 2022

	Working class ID
<hr/>	
Occupation (Professional)	
<hr/>	
Intermediate occupation	0.12 (0.17)
<hr/>	
Routine	0.91*** (0.19)
<hr/>	
Education (Degree)	
<hr/>	
A-Level or equivalent	1.42*** (0.15)
<hr/>	
GCSE or below	1.94*** (0.20)
<hr/>	
Household income (Upper quartile)	
<hr/>	
Lower quartile	1.23*** (0.24)
<hr/>	
Middle	0.85*** (0.15)
<hr/>	
Women	-0.29** (0.12)
<hr/>	
BAME	0.67*** (0.21)
<hr/>	

Table A.1 Logistic regression model for whether identify as working class or middle class, 2022 (continued)

	Working class ID
Age (55 +)	
18 to 34 years old	0.74*** (0.16)
34 to 55 years old	0.74*** (0.15)
Region (London and Southeast)	
North, Yorkshire & Humber	0.61*** (0.18)
The Midlands and East	0.00 (0.17)
Southwest	-0.35 (0.23)
Wales	0.46 (0.29)
Scotland	0.51** (0.25)
Constant	-2.03*** (0.20)
Observations	1,461

Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A.2 Unweighted bases for Table 8: Libertarian-authoritarian and left-right values and attitudes towards immigration, by class identity (unprompted), 2005-2022

	Libertarian/Authoritarian	Left/Right	Anti-immigrant/ Pro-immigrant
2005			
Middle class	318	318	-
Working class	441	441	-
All	3559	3559	-
2015			
Middle class	185	185	206
Working class	221	221	262
All	3670	3670	2167
2022			
Middle class	771	771	398
Working class	844	844	432
All	6699	6699	2258

Table A.3 Logistic regression model for political attitudes, 2022

	(1) Right vs Left	(2) Authoritarian vs Libertarian	(3) Pro vs. anti-immigrant
Class ID (Middle class)			
Working class ID	-0.26** (0.12)	0.38*** (0.13)	-0.74*** (0.19)
No class ID	-0.24 (0.46)	-0.78 (0.58)	-1.18* (0.70)
Occupation (Professional)			
Intermediate	-0.11 (0.14)	0.12 (0.14)	-0.44** (0.20)
Semi-routine and routine	-0.37** (0.15)	0.33** (0.15)	-0.44** (0.22)
Education (Degree)			
A-level	0.14 (0.12)	0.98*** (0.13)	-0.94*** (0.18)
GCSE or below	0.24 (0.15)	1.45*** (0.16)	-1.51*** (0.22)
Household Income (Upper quartile)			
Low income	-0.75*** (0.19)	0.13 (0.19)	-0.46* (0.27)
Middle income	-0.50*** (0.12)	0.01 (0.13)	-0.04 (0.19)
Refused	-0.13 (0.16)	-0.07 (0.18)	-0.48* (0.26)
Female	0.06 (0.10)	-0.09 (0.11)	-0.24 (0.16)
Bame	-0.04 (0.17)	0.54*** (0.18)	0.74*** (0.28)
Age (55+)			
18-34 years old	-0.64*** (0.13)	-0.38*** (0.15)	0.12 (0.21)
35-54 years old	-0.66*** (0.12)	0.13 (0.12)	0.03 (0.18)

Table A.3 Logistic regression model for political attitudes, 2022 (continued)

	(1) Right vs Left	(2) Authoritarian vs Libertarian	(3) Pro vs. anti-immigrant
Region (London and Southeast)			
North, Yorkshire & Humber	0.09 (0.14)	-0.19 (0.16)	-0.50** (0.22)
The Midlands and East	0.23* (0.13)	-0.01 (0.15)	-0.34 (0.21)
Southwest	0.07 (0.18)	-0.05 (0.20)	-0.18 (0.28)
Wales	-0.18 (0.24)	-0.08 (0.25)	-0.11 (0.40)
Scotland	-0.21 (0.20)	-0.36 (0.22)	0.60* (0.32)
Constant	0.30** (0.15)	-1.56*** (0.17)	2.17*** (0.26)
Observations	1,910	1,913	969

Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A.4 Unweighted bases for Table 9: Libertarian-authoritarian and left-right values and attitudes towards immigration, by class awareness, 2005-2022

	Libertarian/Authoritarian	Left/Right	Anti-immigrant/ Pro-immigrant
2005			
Very difficult	297	297	-
Fairly difficult	719	719	-
Not very difficult	595	595	-
All	3559	3559	-
2015			
Very difficult	183	183	216
Fairly difficult	485	485	555
Not very difficult	250	250	288
All	3670	3670	2167
2022			
Very difficult	647	647	334
Fairly difficult	1161	1161	598
Not very difficult	253	253	130
All	6699	6699	2258

Table A.5 Unweighted bases for Table 10: Libertarian-authoritarian and left-right values and attitudes towards immigration, by class identity and class awareness, 2022

	Libertarian/Authoritarian	Left/Right	Anti-immigrant/ Pro-immigrant
Working class ID			
Very difficult	332	332	162
Fairly difficult	433	433	225
Not very difficult	58	58	32
All	844	844	432
Middle class ID			
Very difficult	198	198	104
Fairly difficult	454	454	234
Not very difficult	99	99	53
All	771	771	398

Table A.6 Logistic regression model for political attitudes with class awareness, 2022

	(1) Right vs Left	(2) Authoritarian vs Libertarian	(3) Pro vs. anti-immigrant
Class awareness (Not at all difficult)			
Very difficult	-1.75*** (0.18)	-0.47** (0.18)	0.73*** (0.28)
Fairly difficult	-0.84*** (0.16)	-0.61*** (0.16)	0.56** (0.25)
Class ID (Middle class)			
Working class ID	-0.15 (0.13)	0.43*** (0.14)	-0.81*** (0.20)
No class ID	-0.23 (0.47)	-0.83 (0.58)	-1.12 (0.69)
Occupation (Professional)			
Intermediate	-0.15 (0.14)	0.10 (0.14)	-0.42** (0.21)
Semi-routine and routine	-0.39** (0.16)	0.30** (0.15)	-0.41* (0.22)
Education (Degree)			
A-level	0.17 (0.13)	0.98*** (0.13)	-0.96*** (0.19)
GCSE or below	0.27* (0.16)	1.45*** (0.16)	-1.50*** (0.22)
Household Income (Upper quartile)			
Low income	-0.75*** (0.19)	0.12 (0.19)	-0.48* (0.28)
Middle income	-0.48*** (0.12)	-0.00 (0.13)	-0.04 (0.19)
Refused	-0.17 (0.17)	-0.12 (0.18)	-0.42 (0.27)
Female	0.08 (0.10)	-0.09 (0.11)	-0.26* (0.16)
Bame	-0.02 (0.17)	0.53*** (0.18)	0.75*** (0.28)

Table A.6 Logistic regression model for political attitudes with class awareness, 2022 (continued)

	(1) Right vs Left	(2) Authoritarian vs Libertarian	(3) Pro vs. anti-immigrant
Age (55+)			
18-34 years old	-0.40*** (0.14)	-0.35** (0.15)	0.03 (0.21)
35-54 years old	-0.52*** (0.12)	0.16 (0.13)	-0.03 (0.19)
Region (London and Southeast)			
North, Yorkshire & Humber	0.17 (0.15)	-0.18 (0.16)	-0.52** (0.22)
The Midlands and East	0.32** (0.14)	0.01 (0.15)	-0.39* (0.22)
Southwest	0.08 (0.18)	-0.03 (0.20)	-0.20 (0.28)
Wales	-0.03 (0.24)	-0.05 (0.26)	-0.16 (0.40)
Scotland	-0.12 (0.20)	-0.32 (0.22)	0.52 (0.33)
Constant	1.09*** (0.20)	-1.10*** (0.21)	1.73*** (0.31)
Observations	1,910	1,913	969

Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

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