

Consider Your Origins: Parental Social Class and Preferences for Redistribution in the United States from 1977 to 2018*

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Abstract

Capitalizing on the newly available and consistent coding of detailed occupations for the General Social Surveys (GSS), this article examines the link between class origins and public support for redistribution in the United States from 1977 through 2018. The findings reveal significant net associations between class origins and preferences for redistribution. Individuals with farming-class or working-class origins are more supportive of government action to reduce inequality than individuals with salariat-class origins. These class-origin differences are associated with individuals' current socioeconomic characteristics but are not fully accounted for by these factors. In addition, individuals in more privileged class positions have increased their support for redistribution over time. Attitudes toward federal income taxes are also analyzed as an additional measure of redistribution preferences. Overall, the findings suggest a continuing role of class origin in determining support for redistribution.

Keywords: Class origins; Parental class; EGP class; Redistribution.

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Introduction

In the United States, income and wealth inequality have surged since the late 1970s, and the concentration of economic resources at the top is now at a level that was last seen in the depression of the 1930s (Piketty and Saez 2003, 2014). Against this backdrop, controversies over the causes of the increase in inequality, as well as effective remedies for its consequences, have emerged in public and political discourse in the US (McCall 2013).

In modern market democracies, governments can reduce economic inequality through the redistribution of economic resources. Governments, by the virtue of their rights to tax and spend unevenly, control the capacity to divide and redistribute the “economic pie” more equally. In the face of this tremendous growth of inequality, one would expect many US residents to increasingly favor redistributive government policies, especially those who support left-leaning political parties.¹

Given that policy proposals for redistribution require broad public support, identifying the determinants of such support is an active area of research. Accordingly, an extensive literature exists in the disciplines of economics (e.g., Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Alesina and La Ferrara 2005; Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso 2018; Benabou and Ok 2001; Piketty 1995), sociology (e.g., Kenworthy and McCall 2007; McCall 2013; McCall and Kenworthy 2009; Owens and Pedulla 2013), and political science (e.g., Lupu and Pontusson 2011; Margalit 2013; Plotnick and Winters 1985). Within sociology, the most prominent link investigated is between social class — broadly defined as individuals’ structural positions within markets (Sørensen 1991: 72) — and preferences for redistribution (e.g., Brooks and Svallfors 2010; Fernández and Jaime-Castillo 2017; Inniss and Sittig 1996; Jaime-Castillo and Marqués-Perales 2019; Lindh, Andersson, and Volker 2021; Linos and West 2003; McCall and Manza 2011; Svallfors 2006). These studies, in general, find that support for redistribution differs by social class, given that redistribution tends to be more strongly supported by lower classes.

This article makes two main contributions. First, the current literature has largely overlooked the potential role of *parental class* in shaping individuals’ preferences for redistribution. In the US, Wilson, Roscigno, Sauer, and Petersen (2022) is the only extant study that considers class origins using occupational measures to assess the impact of intergenerational mobility — discrepancies between class origins and current classes — on redistribution support (for similar cross-national evidence, see Jaime-Castillo and Marqués-Perales 2019). The study provides important evidence that class origins can shape Americans’ redistribution preferences. Yet, it mainly focus on the effects of mobility among mobile individuals.² Thus, the present study contributes

¹For evidence of this support, see Pittau, Farcomeni, and Zelli (2016).

²Specifically, Wilson et al. (2022) use the 2008–2010 General Social Surveys and the diagonal reference model (DRM) of Sobel (1981, 1985) to examine the effects of intergenerational mobility on redistribution support. Based on the DRM, the main contribution of Wilson et al. is to discern the relative importance (i.e., weight) of class origins and current classes in determining redistribution support among mobile individuals whose current classes vary from their class origins. The present study differs in that it focuses explicitly on the independent or marginal associations of class

to the literature by providing evidence on how class origins are directly linked to redistribution preferences among Americans. In doing so, it also offers potentially important descriptive evidence on the mechanisms of the class-origin differences in redistribution preferences. Second, contrary to the overall trends, sub-group over-time change in redistribution support in the US has not been well documented. In particular, we know little about how redistribution support may have diverged by class positions in the US in recent decades when economic inequality and insecurity grew substantially among Americans. This article also addresses this limitation.

To this end, I use the 1977-2018 General Social Surveys (GSS) and capitalize on a newly released consistent coding of occupations over the entire survey period. With this newly available measure, I construct a stable measure of social class, employing the class schema proposed by Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarrero (i.e., EGP class schema; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero 1979). Accordingly, I overcome a limitation common to almost all survey-data-based research utilizing an occupation-based measure of social class over an extended period, specifically, the sensitivity of the class measure to periodic changes in occupational classification systems (Mitnik and Cumberworth 2018; Morgan 2017). Using this class measure, I analyze how class origins, both directly and indirectly through individuals' current characteristics, may shape attitudes toward two types of redistribution: 1) increasing the government's role in reducing inequality and 2) federal income taxation. Furthermore, I assess how class origins and current classes are associated with redistribution support has varied over the last four decades.

Social Class and Redistribution Preferences

While its continued relevance is not undisputed (e.g., Clark and Lipset 1991; Pakulski and Waters 1996; cf. Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1993), social class has undoubtedly been central to sociological analysis of social and political outcomes. Its significance rests on the recognition that, in modern societies, life chances are structured primarily around class positions, and therefore, discrepancies in individual outcomes are best explained by social class (see Wright 2005).³

This tradition of class analysis has aligned the class positions of individuals on the basis of occupations. The following arguments have commonly justified this convention (McCall and Manza 2011). First, compared to competing indicators such as income or education, occupations

origins with redistribution support among all individuals, using standard regression techniques and the EGP class schema. Furthermore, the analysis of over-time trends and attitudes toward income tax and the descriptive evidence on the mechanisms of the class-origin differences in redistribution preferences are also unique to this study.

³There is extensive literature on social class in sociology. For a comprehensive overview of the various approaches to class analysis, see Wright (2005), Lareau and Conley (2008), and Breen and Rottman (1995). For a more focused review of why occupations have been central to sociological conceptualizations of social class, see Connelly, Gayle, and Lambert (2016) and McCall and Manza (2011). For an overview of the EGP class schema and its relation to sociological analyses of social stratification and mobility, see Breen (2001), Erikson and Goldthorpe (2002), and Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992).

better approximate the diverse dimensions of economic conditions. Beyond financial rewards, occupations reflect the shared market situations by encapsulating the broad scope of work characteristics, including work routines, working conditions, contract types, and employment relations (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Goldthorpe 2000).

Second, occupations preserve the organizational and relational aspects of economic life. For example, social interactions within workplaces are more readily captured when occupations are perceived to be the basis of class positions rather than income or education. These aspects may be especially important for redistribution attitudes given that many individuals learn politics through workplace discussions (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014; Mutz and Mondak 2006). Furthermore, on a macro level, occupations better represent the idea that class interests are often interrelated – that is, defined in relation to each other – allowing for more explicit theorizing of the potential competition between social classes (Wright 1997). Third, occupations are more stable and thus better approximate long-term life chances than income (Hauser and Warren 1997).

Although the noted mechanisms will not be scrutinized in the empirical sections of the present study, as Manza and Brooks (2008) outline, the sociological scholarship identifies three main ways that social classes can shape political attitudes, such as redistribution preferences. First, incumbents of each class share common material interests; they are similar in their market and work situations and thus are parallel in the risks and options faced within the market. These common conditions can translate into interests among class members in pursuing shared economic goals (Brooks and Svallfors 2010; Langsæther and Evans 2020).

This mechanism is closely related to self-interest or rational-choice perspectives on redistribution preferences, articulated in the more general and interdisciplinary literature. In this general view, individuals are primarily assumed to be maximizers of material self-interest, weighing the expected gains and losses from a set of proposed policies and deciding to endorse the one yielding the most significant net expected gain (Meltzer and Richard 1981). These behavioral assumptions suggest that working classes will be more supportive of redistribution than those of higher classes (e.g., managers and higher professionals) because they are the likeliest beneficiaries of such policies.

Second, social class effects on redistribution attitudes could be generated by social networks. Social ties often shape the type of political information gathered and values adopted. At a higher level, these ties are structured by social class because social spaces (e.g., workplaces and neighborhoods) in which such connections get generated are typically organized around social class (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Thus, these network influences can cause and reinforce class differences in political attitudes. Lindh et al. (2021) provides evidence that class segregation in social networks is substantial, and these segregations in networks then account for a sizable portion of the class differences in preferences for redistribution.

Third, subjective awareness of class can be critical for the materialization of class-based action, and objective class conditions may constrain individuals only to the extent to which subjective identities are developed (Hout 2008; Jackman and Jackman 1983). This mechanism is fre-

quently invoked to explain the weak link between class positions and political behaviors in the US. Some researchers argue that the salience of competing identities, particularly race, and the cross-pressures they entail, undermines the formation of staunch class identities (see Vanneman and Cannon 1987). As a result, Americans' political preferences tend to be weakly related to their class position compared to other Western nations (Lindh and McCall 2020). For example, extensive literature identifies class interests as secondary to racial attitudes in determining Americans' support for social welfare policies (see Sears, Sidanius, Sidanius, Bobo, et al. 2000).

However generated, the overarching evidence from the empirical literature is that support for redistribution is inversely related to social class positions: individuals occupying higher class positions (e.g., managers and professionals) are less supportive of redistribution than those in the lower classes (e.g., lower service or manual workers). These regularities are observed regardless of whether a study uses income or education as proxies for social class (e.g., Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Alesina and La Ferrara 2005; Bullock 2021; Pittau et al. 2016) or whether explicit measures of occupational social classes are employed (e.g., Brooks and Svallfors 2010; Fernández and Jaime-Castillo 2017; Langsæther and Evans 2020; Lindh et al. 2021; Linos and West 2003). For example, Lindh and McCall (2020) show that in all the 18 developed countries considered, including the US, individuals in the working classes express stronger support for redistribution than those in professional or managerial positions.

The Relevance of Class Origins

How might class origins matter for redistribution preferences? While systematic assessments of this question have been limited, various conjectures are possible. Most straightforwardly, class origins may impact redistribution attitudes simply because they influence individuals' current social class. One of the most robust findings in the study of inequality is that class positions persist through generations; children of upper-class parents are likely to be themselves in privileged positions, while individuals from working-class origins disproportionately remain in working classes (see Hout and DiPrete 2006). Accordingly, any effect of current class positions on redistribution attitudes may also be a mechanism through which class origins indirectly influence policy preferences.

In addition to the indirect effects realized through the current class, direct class origin effects are also conceivable. Notably, class origins may confer direct economic advantages that the current occupational classes do not readily capture. For example, the amount of intergenerational transmission of capital and wealth in the form of inheritances and gifts differ significantly by class origins (Albertini and Radl 2012; Morgan and Scott 2007; Spilerman and Wolff 2012). To the extent that the anticipated gains from intergenerational transfers are reflected in individuals' current preferences, we would expect support for redistribution to be inversely associated with the class positions of parents, even among individuals currently occupying similar class positions.

The impact of class origins can also be postulated based on normative approaches to redistribution preferences. These approaches assert that policy preferences are not necessarily outcome-oriented but anchored within values, ideologies, and identities committed to by individuals. These claims are supported by findings showing that beliefs in meritocracy, egalitarianism, and social trust are strongly linked to support for redistribution (Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Daniele and Geys 2015; Kam and Nam 2008; Lefgren, Sims, and Stoddard 2016; Svallfors 2013).

According to this line of thinking, class origins could, for example, shape redistribution attitudes by circumscribing the early environment in which political socialization occurs (Niemi and Sobieszek 1977). The literature generally perceives the most critical socialization to occur in early life stages, particularly in adolescence and early adulthood (Bartels and Jackman 2014; Smets 2021), and parents to play a pivotal role in these stages (Jennings and Niemi 2015). Given that socialization contexts are likely contingent on parents' class positions, we would expect distinct political values, identities, and ideas to be instilled that endure through the life course, leading to class-origin differences in redistribution attitudes. Nevertheless, the predicted direction of these influences likely depends on which normative content is considered consequential for redistribution preferences.

To date, the most robust empirical evidence for class origin influences on redistribution preferences comes from studies on the effects of intergenerational mobility. After decades of research, the general conclusion from this stream of research is that socially mobile individuals' political orientations tend to be in between the dominant positions of their class origin and class of destination (De Graaf, Nieuwbeerta, and Heath 1995; Knoke 1973; Nieuwbeerta, De Graaf, and Ultee 2000; Turner 1992; Weakliem 1992). For instance, De Graaf et al. (1995) finds that conditional on current social class, individuals originating from lower classes are more likely to support the Democratic Party than those from the upper classes in the US. Moreover, among young individuals in four Western countries (Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, and the US), the overall class effects (i.e., the sum of the current class and class origin effects) on party preferences can be attributed equally to the effects of class origins and class destinations, although the relative importance of class destinations grows as individuals age.

Consistent with these findings, Jaime-Castillo and Marqués-Perales (2019) document that class origins and current classes are both significant dimensions of attitudes toward government action to reduce inequality in Europe. The authors find that class origins account for a fifth to two-thirds of the overall class effects on redistribution attitudes depending on the country considered. Similar findings are documented in Wilson et al. (2022) based on a sample of US adults. Langsæther and Evans (2020) also provide evidence that, when the effects of current classes are fixed, individuals originating from the higher service class (class I of the EGP class schema) are less demanding of redistribution than those from working-class origins in European societies.

By and large, the theoretical accounts and the empirical evidence suggest class origin is a significant predictor of redistribution attitudes, and these class origin effects are not expected to be fully captured by individuals' current class positions. Moreover, the existing evidence also sug-

gests support for redistribution is inversely related to class-origin positions, regardless of whether individuals' current classes are conditioned on or not. However, the subjective identity perspectives summarized in the previous section would predict the effects of class origins to be largely "explained away" by individuals' subjective class identities.

Trends in Attitudes toward Redistribution in the United States

With rising levels of inequality and the growing salience of inequality as a political issue in the US, one may expect that demand for redistribution has increased since the 1970s. This kind of expectation is consistent with what the canonical self-interest model of policy preferences would suggest. For example, the Median Voter Theorem predicts that widening gaps in income pull more people below the mean income. Overall support for redistributive policies then increases as a consequence of growing inequality (Meltzer and Richard 1981).

However, some researchers have found that overall support for redistribution in the US has been unchanged and, if anything, declined slightly on some dimensions during the last several decades (see Ashok, Kuziemko, and Washington 2016). This puzzling pattern has inspired a literature to ascertain why the American public has not responded to rising inequality by demanding more equal distribution. Some common explanations from the literature suggest that: 1) the foundational belief in equality of opportunity and the merits of hard work make Americans tolerant of inequality in outcomes (Norton and Ariely 2011); 2) Americans' excessively optimistic view of future mobility suppresses support for redistribution (Alesina et al. 2018; Benabou and Ok 2001); 3) racism divides the American public and prohibits a collective support for redistribution (Lee and Roemer 2006); 4) the American public is simply incapable of relating concerns for inequality to coherent policy demands (Bartels 2005).⁴ All of these explanations have been supported by at least some empirical evidence.

However, the existing literature has been inattentive to the possibility of subgroup heterogeneity in over-time trends. Such inattention is unfortunate because focusing exclusively on the stable overall trend may mask substantial subgroup heterogeneity that may have important implications for explaining the puzzling aggregate trend. Only recently have researchers begun to document subgroup trends in preferences for redistribution in the US. For example, Pittau et al. (2016) finds that while individuals with low levels of education (i.e., individuals with less than 12 years of education) have reduced support for redistribution, individuals with high levels of education (i.e., individuals with more than 16 years of education) have become more supportive toward redistribution between 1978 to 2010. They also find that individuals over 65 and African-Americans have become less favorable toward redistribution than in the past while also documenting a growing polarization in support for redistribution among Democrats and Republicans.

⁴See McCall and Kenworthy (2009) for an overview of the literature.

Ashok et al. (2016) document similar trends — support for redistribution among older individuals and African-Americans have taken a substantial downturn over time — while also documenting that such trends are consistent across different dimensions of redistribution and various surveys.

The two foregoing findings — 1) support for redistribution evolved differently for various subgroups and 2) the link between class position and preference for redistribution has been an active area of research in sociology — taken together, underscore an interesting sociological question on whether trends in support for redistribution diverged for individuals with different class-origin (and also current-class) backgrounds in the US. However, to my knowledge, no study thus far has examined the class-specific trends in support for redistribution that spans recent periods using an explicit measure of social class in the US. Therefore, it remains an open question if and how individuals with distinct class backgrounds vary in their support for redistribution in the wake of rising inequality.

Research Questions

Against this backdrop, I address three primary research questions:

1. Do class origins, as measured by parents' occupations, shape attitudes toward redistribution in the US?
2. If so, what factors account for the associations between class origins and redistribution attitudes?
3. In the face of rising inequality since the 1970s, how have the net associations between class origins and attitudes toward redistribution varied over time?

Although straightforward, these questions require a careful selection of a sample and consideration of modeling strategies. In the next section, I provide a summary of these analytical decisions.

Data and Study Sample

I draw data from the 1977 through 2018 GSS, which, when combined, yields a total of 57,224 sampled respondents. I first restrict the sample to respondents who were in the labor force and aged between 30 and 64 at the time of the survey.⁵ Because of this restriction, 29,639 respondents are dropped. Then, I exclude 2,554 additional respondents who have no information on any of the two outcome variables. Among such respondents, 90.2 percent (i.e., 2,303 out of 2,554) are

⁵Therefore, the study sample includes respondents who were either 1) working full-time or part-time or 2) with a job, but temporarily out of work or 3) unemployed, laid off, and looking for work, at the time of the survey.

excluded because they are not asked to answer any of the relevant questions by the multiple-ballot design of the GSS. After such restrictions have been applied, the total analytical sample consists of 25,031 respondents.

For two reasons, different subsets of the overall analytical sample will be utilized for each outcome. First, the survey years differ in which each outcome variable is measured. Second, due to the split-ballot survey design, some respondents are subject to only one of the two outcome variables. The effective n is 16,635 for attitude toward the government's role in reducing inequality and 16,632 for tax attitudes.⁶ Descriptive sample statistics are provided in the Online Supplement (see Table S3).

Measurement of Preferences for Redistribution and Social Class

As outcome measures, I consider two variables (labeled EQLWTH and TAX in the GSS). Since 1978, the GSS has asked respondents the following question:

“Some people think that the government in Washington ought to reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or by giving income assistance to the poor. Others think that the government should not concern itself with reducing this income difference between the rich and the poor. What score between 1 and 7 comes closest to the way you feel?”

The showcard has a scale with a score with 1 for “government should do something to reduce income differences between rich and poor,” and a score of 7 for “government should not concern itself with income differences.” For analysis, these scores are reverse-coded. Respondents can a “don't know” answer to this question. I code such cases, a total of 223 respondents, as missing.

To gather information on attitudes toward the federal income tax, the GSS asks:

“Do you consider the amount of federal income tax which you have to pay as too high, about right, or too low?”

Respondents choose a response:⁷

1) “Too high” 2) “About right” 3) “Too low”

In the analysis, I transform responses for this question into a binary variable, separating those stating that the income tax is “too high” and all else.⁸

⁶As explained later, respondents either in the armed forces or raised by a parent in the armed forces are further dropped from this n in the analysis reported in Figure 3 to Figure 5.

⁷In a few years of the GSS, respondents had an additional option of “*R pays none*.” The ten respondents who responded “*R pays none*” are coded as missing.

⁸Only 1.1 percent (i.e., 183 respondents) of the respondents indicated that the federal income tax is “too low.”

The two variables contain information on respondents' attitudes toward 1) the government's role in reducing inequality and 2) the federal income tax imposed on the respondent. I contend that these two measures are complementary, given that each captures distinct dimensions of preferences for redistribution.

The first variable, the more preferred measure, captures abstract preferences for the general idea of redistribution. It is considered a standard measure within the literature, and its validity has been widely demonstrated (e.g., Alesina and Giuliano 2011; Alesina and La Ferrara 2005; Ashok et al. 2016; Owens and Pedulla 2013; Pittau et al. 2016). Nevertheless, this measure may be weakly informative about preferences for specific types of redistribution schemes. Support for redistribution can diverge depending on whether a government targets them through differential spending or taxation (Jaime-Castillo and Sáez-Lozano 2016). Therefore, I also consider attitudes toward the federal income tax. This measure is less standard, but it captures views about a concrete form of redistribution. Moreover, it may allow the costs associated with redistribution to be more salient in the respondents' minds and thus reflect a more realistic intent to endorse redistribution, especially among the upper classes (Kenworthy and McCall 2007). Nevertheless, this outcome needs to be more cautiously interpreted because it could merely be capturing attitudes such as general satisfaction with personal economic situations or how the government currently spends its tax revenues.⁹ The two measures' distinctiveness and complementary nature will become more apparent when the results are presented in the following sections.

To construct a measure of class origin and current class, I use variables on respondents' and their parents' occupations (labeled OCC10, PAOCC10, and MAOCC10). Since the July 2016 data release, the GSS has re-coded all past respondents' verbatim responses on all occupation questions to the same consistent and detailed 2010 US Census Occupational Classification. Therefore, occupation codes throughout all survey years are fully comparable (for examples using the new GSS occupation codes, see Franko and Witko 2022; Morgan and Lee 2017). With this newly available measure, I closely follow the coding procedures documented in Morgan (2017). Morgan provides a complete mapping of this 539-category occupation variable in the GSS to the most elaborate 12-category version of the EGP class scheme.¹⁰

Every survey year, the GSS asks for information on respondent's current job:

“What kind of work {do you/did you} normally do? That is, what {is/was} your job called?”

The question wording differs slightly based on the labor market status of the respondent. Respondents with a current job are asked for their current job title. Those currently without a job

⁹For some examples of studies using attitudes toward tax to capture redistribution preferences, see AuClaire (1984); Hout (2008); Jackman and Jackman (1983); Jaime-Castillo and Sáez-Lozano (2016); Kuziemko, Norton, Saez, and Stantcheva (2015); Manza and Brooks (2021); McCall and Kenworthy (2009).

¹⁰For empirical evidence on the EGP class measure's construct and criterion validity, see Evans (1992) and Evans and Mills (1998).

but who had one in the past (for longer than a year) are asked for their last job title. Most of the respondents in the study sample provided information on a current job, except for the few who were unemployed, laid off, or looking for work at the time of the survey. I use this information to construct a measure of the current class of the respondent.

For information on class of origin, I use the following question, which was asked in all survey years and ballots that included question(s) on any of the two outcome variables in this study:

“What kind of work did your {father/mother} normally do while you were growing up? That is, what was {his/her} job called?”

Respondents, again, provided a verbatim response to both questions. I use this information to create a measure of class origin.

To differentiate class IVab, the non-professional self-employed workers, from classes IIIa, IIIb, V, VI, and VIIa in the two measures of class, I use information on the following questions. Every survey year, following the question on respondent’ own occupation, the GSS has asked:

{Are/Were} you self employed or {do/did} you work for someone else?

and following the question on parents’ occupation, GSS has also asked:¹¹

Was {he/she} self-employed or did {he/she} work for someone else?

To reduce to a single measure of class origin, I employ a dominance rule. Respondents are initially assigned class origin by the father’s class. Then, I replace it with the mother’s class if the mother is in either class I or II, and the father does not belong to either of these classes.¹² Also, using a variable in the GSS that contains information on family structure at age 16 (labeled FAMILY16), I assign the mother’s class, regardless of her class position, to those who were raised in a single-mother family at age 16.

Table 1 presents descriptions of the EGP class scheme as outlined by Morgan (2017). Given a moderate sample size, I coarsen some classes from the 11-category version into broader categories to increase the power to draw inferences in the analyses and to present the findings more concisely. I combine classes I and II as the “salaried class”; I combine classes IIIa, IVab, and V as the “intermediate class”; classes IVc and VIIb as the “farming class”; classes IIIb, VI, and VIIa as the “working class.” For descriptive purposes in Figure 1, I will use a slightly more detailed categorization of the working class, separating the working class into service-based (class IIIb) and manual-labor based (classes VI and VIIa) working classes.

¹¹For these questions, respondents could also answer “don’t know” or could refuse to respond. Among the study sample, 128 respondents (i.e., 0.5 percent) either chose “don’t know” or refused to respond about their own self-employment status and 265 respondents (i.e., 1.1 percent) for their father’s status. Given that the majority, 85.4 percent, of the respondents in the study sample are working for someone else and 73.7 percent had a father who was working for someone else, I code “don’t know” and no response as working for someone else hence these respondents are not classified as class IVab.

¹²I also apply this replacement if the father’s class is missing.

Table 1: Construction of the EGP Class Schema

Collapsed	Full	Description
Salariat Class:		
	I	Higher-grade professionals, administrators, managers, and officials
	II	Lower-grade professionals, administrators, managers, and officials
Intermediate Class:		
	IIIa	Routine non-manual and service employees, higher-grade
	IVab	Non-professional self-employed workers
	V	Higher-grade technicians and repairers, public safety workers, performers, and supervisors of manual workers
Farming Class:		
	IVc	Owners and managers of agricultural establishments
	VIIb	Agricultural workers and their first-line supervisors, and other workers in primary production
Service Working Class:		
	IIIb	Routine nonmanual and service employees, lower grade
Manual Working Class:		
	VI	Skilled manual workers, lower-grade technicians, installers, and repairers
	VIIa	Semiskilled and unskilled manual workers, not in agriculture
Other:		
	Military	All members of the armed forces

Using this measure, among the total study sample, 314 respondents (i.e., 1.3 percent of the study sample) are missing information on their own class. Also, 2,430 respondents (i.e., 9.7 percent of the study sample) are missing data on parents' classes, with 98 missing for both. Among respondents non-missing on current class and parents' class, 25.1 percent were missing information on at least a variable used as an adjustment variable in the analyses. I impute class origins, current class, and the variables used as adjustment variables in the analyses. A description of the procedures for imputation and details of the use of sampling weights is included in the Online Supplement.

Table 2: Summary of the Adjustment Sets and Model Specifications

Covariate Set	Variables
1. Period	Survey Year (along with interaction effects with class origins)
2. Background	Age, Gender, Race, Parents' Places of Birth, Region of Residence at Age 16, Type of Residence at 16, Religion at 16
3. Current SES	Current Class (along with interaction effects with survey year + interaction effects with class origins), Family Income, and Years of Education
4. Parental Education	Father's Years of Education, Mother's Years of Education
5. Class ID	Subjective Class Identification

Model	Adjustment Variables
1	Period
2	Period + Background
3	Period + Background + Current SES
4	Period + Background + Current SES + Parental Education
5	Period + Background + Current SES + Parental Education + Class ID

Model Specification

To estimate the net associations between class origins and preferences for redistribution, as well as their heterogeneity over time, I fit generalized linear models of the following baseline form:

$$\begin{aligned}
 & E(y_{it} \mid \mathbf{x}_{it}, o_{it}, t_{it}; \boldsymbol{\theta}, \boldsymbol{\beta}) \\
 & = g^{-1}(\theta_o + \sum_o \theta_1^o I\{o_{it} = o\} + \sum_t \theta_2^t I\{t_{it} = t\} + \sum_{(o,t)} \theta_3^{(o,t)} (I\{o_{it} = o\} * I\{t_{it} = t\}) + \mathbf{x}'_{it}\boldsymbol{\beta})
 \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where y_{it} denotes an outcome of individual i interviewed in year t , $g(\cdot)$ is the link function set to the canonical forms (i.e., the identity function for EQWLTH and the logistic function for TAX), $I\{\cdot\}$ is the indicator function, o_{it} and t_{it} respectively denote class origins and survey periods. $\boldsymbol{\beta}$ is a parameter vector, and \mathbf{x}_{it} is a vector of covariates.¹³

For each outcome, I estimate a total of five models with varying sets of adjustment variables (i.e., sets of variables included in \mathbf{x}_{it}). In each model, I augment the adjustment variables incrementally to examine the proportion of the class-origin effects accounted for by the characteristics of individuals. The adjustment sets and specifications of each model are summarized in Table 2 (see Tables S2 and S3 in the Online Supplement for details on how these variables are

¹³Throughout the article, I do not use the term “effect” to imply causal effects based on the notions of counterfactuals, as frequently defined in the causal inference literature (see Morgan and Winship 2015).

treated).¹⁴ I will summarize the results throughout the analyses using predicted values or probabilities analogous to Equation (1) but calculated based on the appropriate marginal distributions.

Results

Trends in the Class Distributions and Attitudes toward Redistribution

To first demonstrate the validity of the measures, I provide a depiction of how the current-class and class-origin distributions, as well as support for redistribution, have evolved over time. Figure 1 plots the distribution of respondents' current class (left panel) and class origins (right panel). Each point in the figure represents a share of each current class or class origin for each survey year. The vertical lines associated with each point are 95-percent confidence intervals.¹⁵

The left panel of Figure 1 shows that the salariat class (classes I and II) increased from 20.8 percent in 1977 to 31.6 percent in 2018, while the working class in manual-labor jobs (classes VI and VIIa) decreased from 33.9 percent to 23.3 percent over the same period. The proportion in the intermediate class (classes IIIa, IVab, and V) remained stable, varying only from 33.0 percent to 32.7 percent during the four decades, unlike the working class in service-based jobs (class IIIb), which increased from 7.7 percent to 11.3 percent. The relative size of the farming class (classes IVc and VIIb) and the military remained small throughout the entire period.

The right panel presents the distribution of class origins which changed more substantially. Compared to the trends in current classes, the salariat class increased more dramatically, increasing from 6.7 percent in 1977 to 28.0 percent in 2018. There is also a sharp decline of the working class in manual-labor jobs, declining from 40.6 percent to 27.1 percent. The farming-class origin also declined substantially, as the proportion of respondents with farming origins dropped from 23.7 percent in 1977 to only 5.2 percent in 2018. The proportion in the service-based working class increased modestly, although the absolute magnitude is still small compared to the proportion in the current-class distribution.

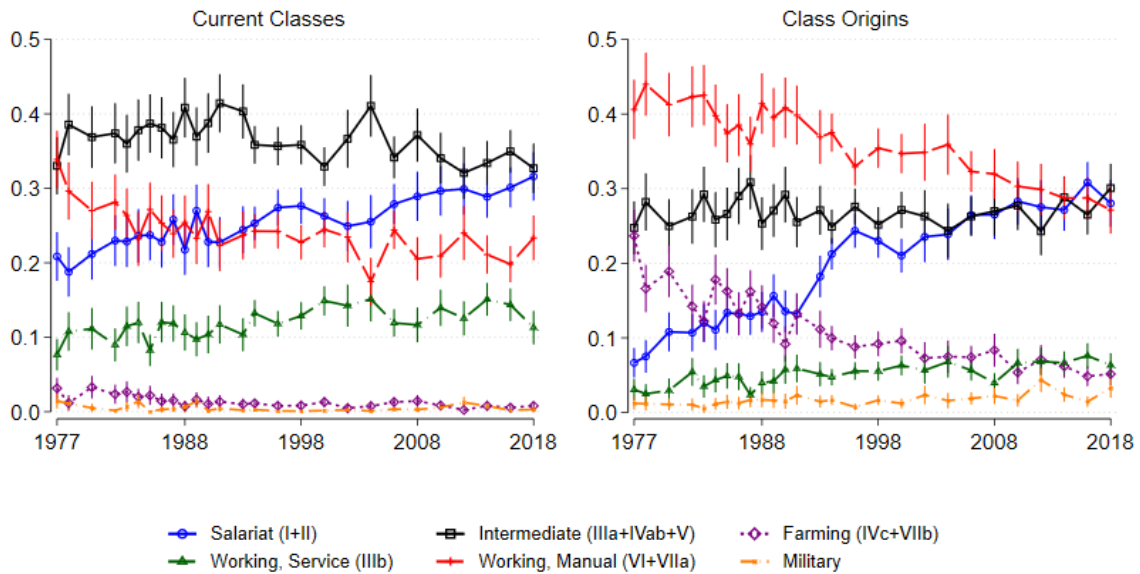
Overall, the observed structural trends in the distribution of current class and class of origin correspond well with the transition from “industrialization” (Bell 1973) to “automation and job polarization,” articulated in the economic and sociological literature (see Autor 2015; Autor, Katz, and Kearney 2006 for examples in economics and see Dwyer 2013; Wright and Dwyer 2003 for sociological examples).

Trends in Americans' attitudes toward redistribution are displayed in Figure 2. Panel (a) presents the trends in attitudes toward the government's role in reducing economic differences,

¹⁴For analysis on EQLWTH, an indicator variable for the y-version question is included as a covariate. See the Online Supplement for more details on the y-version question.

¹⁵The estimates in the figure are based on a sample with imputed values for missing information on current class or class of origin. Inclusion of the imputed cases makes only minor differences to the estimates, as discussed in more detail in the Online Supplement.

Figure 1: Distributions of Current Class and Class of Origin from 1977 to 2018



Note: The vertical bars indicate the 95-percent confidence intervals. Sampling weights applied (N = 25,031).

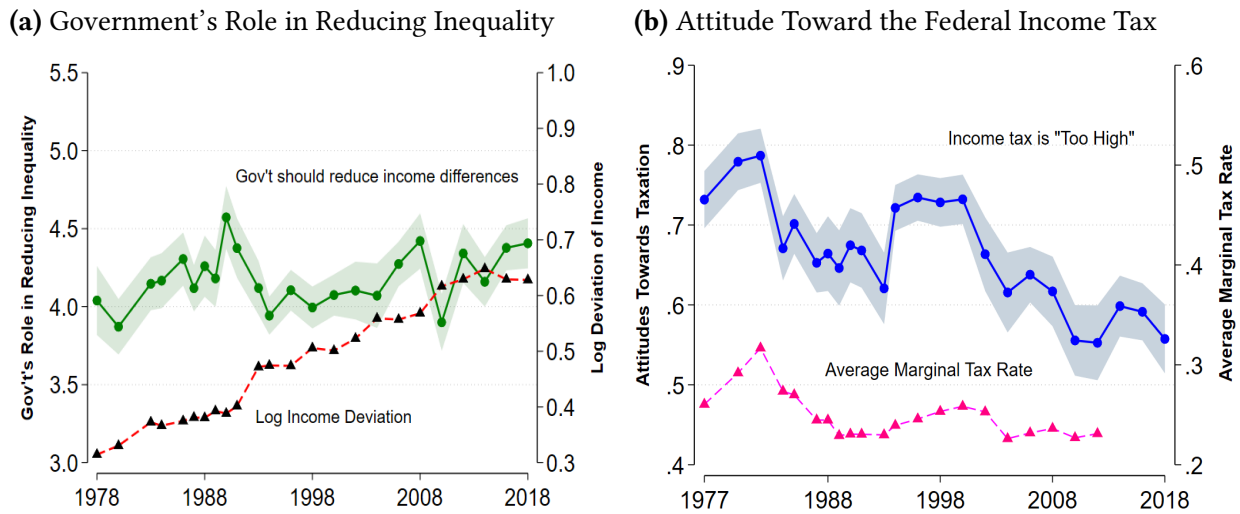
and panel (b) plots the trends in the proportion of respondents indicating that the federal income tax imposed on them is “too high.” Also, in the right panel, estimates of the average marginal tax rate for the prior year of each survey, obtained from Mertens and Montiel Olea (2018), are displayed up to the year 2012.

Support for increasing the government’s role in reducing inequality has remained relatively stable over the last four decades, consistent with what prior studies have found (e.g., Ashok et al. 2016; Pittau et al. 2016). The average level of support, which could take on a value between 1 to 7, fluctuates from 3.87 to 4.41. Given that the average support level over the entire time series is 4.18, attitudes toward government action to reduce inequality varied only within a narrow bound of a 7.4 percent decrease and a 5.5 increase from the grand-mean level during the four decades. This stability stands in stark contrast to the levels of income inequality, as the mean log deviation of income among American households, which more than doubled from 0.31 to 0.63 from 1978 to 2018, as is evident in Figure 2(a).¹⁶

Contrary to stability in perceptions toward the government’s role in reducing income inequality, Figure 2(b) suggests that attitudes toward the federal income tax have undergone substantial changes during a similar period. In 1977, 73.2 percent responded that the federal income tax they pay is too high. The share of such respondents declines throughout the 1980s until 1993. After this period, the proportion rises again until 2000, when the share of respondents who think that the income tax is too high reaches a local peak at 73.2 percent. Then, the percentage continued to decline to a more moderate level of 55.7 percent in 2018.

¹⁶Specifically, this statistic corresponds to the income-equivalence-adjusted income dispersion obtained from the US Census Bureau (source: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-income-inequality.html>).

Figure 2: Trends in Attitudes toward the Government’s Role in Reducing Economic Inequality and the Federal Income Tax



Note: The shaded areas indicate the 95-percent confidence intervals. Sampling weights applied (N=16,635 for EQWLTH and N=16,632 for TAX). Log-income deviation is obtained from the Census Bureau and the average marginal tax rate is obtained from Mertens and Montiel Olea (2018).

Since the turn of the century, why did Americans gradually become less resistant to taxation? This shift may signal a genuine change in feelings toward the income tax rate, possibly induced by the recognition that redistribution is of growing importance in the face of increasing inequality.¹⁷ Nevertheless, for such an explanation to hold, one must carefully consider the following facts: 1) the question considered asks respondents about feelings on the income tax that they paid, as opposed to feelings about the federal income tax rate in general; 2) the federal income tax rate has also changed during the period considered in this study, as is shown in the same panel. Comparing the trend in individuals’ attitudes with the trend lines of the marginal income tax rate estimates, it is apparent that periodic changes in responses toward income tax mirror that of the effective tax rate to a considerable extent. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether the responses are anything other than a response to changes in tax rates without further evidence.

The Explanatory Power of Class Origins

Before presenting the main results, I first demonstrate that class of origin is a meaningful predictor of redistribution attitudes. To this end, in Table 3, the raw mean class-origin differences in the two redistribution attitudes are presented (see Table S3 in the Online Supplement for more detailed class-origin comparisons). In Table 4, I offer tests of the model fit of 10 separate models for each of the two measures of redistribution attitudes. I assessed the predictive power of class origins using the following metrics of model fit: R-squared; adjusted R-squared; Akaike information criterion

¹⁷As a reviewer suggested, one other possibility is that respondents may have become less resistant because they may perceive the need for more additional governmental spending on less-redistributive areas such as scientific research, the military, environmental protection, or policing.

Table 3: Redistribution Attitudes by Class Origins

	Class Origins				
	All	Salariat	Intermediate	Farming	Working
<i>Attitudes toward the Govt's Role in Reducing Inequality</i>	4.2 (2.0)	3.8 (2.0)	4.0 (2.0)	4.4 (2.0)	4.4 (2.0)
<i>n</i> (unweighted)	16,246	3,480	4,464	1,583	6,719
<i>Attitudes toward Income Tax</i>					
“Too high”	0.67	0.61	0.67	0.67	0.70
“Too low” + “About right”	0.33	0.39	0.33	0.33	0.30
<i>n</i> (unweighted)	16,244	3,428	4,405	1,680	6,731

Note: Standard deviations presented in parentheses. Sampling weights applied.

(AIC); and Bayesian information criterion (BIC).¹⁸ For easier comparisons, in Table 4, each model's AIC and BIC values are contrasted with the baseline model (Model a)), which specifies a factor representation of each survey year. For the R-squared statistics, their raw values are reported.

In all analyses hereafter, 555 respondents either in the armed forces themselves or raised by a parent in the armed forces were dropped because the sizes of these groups were too small to obtain meaningful interpretation.¹⁹ In addition, for the respondent's current class only, I combine the farming class with the working class because the farming class is too small.

First, Table 3 presents substantial class-origin differences in redistribution attitudes. The salariat origin's average location on the seven-point scale for more government action to reduce inequality is 3.8. The intermediate origin is at 4.0, while the farming and working origins are at 4.4, implying that the general support for redistribution is inversely related to an individual's class of origin. However, perhaps surprisingly, individuals with salariat-class origins are also less likely to express that their income tax is “too high” than other class origins, at 61 percent rather than 67-70 percent.

The first panel of Table 4 compares the models on attitudes toward the government's role in reducing inequality. Consistent with the over-time trend in Figure 2(a), the baseline model (Model a)) yields little predictive power, as indicated by the near-zero R-squared values. In Model b), I augment the baseline model with a set of indicator variables for class origins. The inclusion of class origins meaningfully improves the model; the adjusted R-squared value increases by at least a factor of three, and it reduces AIC and BIC values, indicating a better fit.

In Model c), I add parental education to the baseline model to compare the relative power of parental education to class origins. For this analysis only, parental education was operational-

¹⁸R-squared values are not reported for the binary variable TAX because logistic regression does not have an equivalent to the R-squared in OLS. Various analogs of R-squared proposed for logistic regression (i.e., “pseudo-R-squared”) do not yield the same interpretation.

¹⁹Specifically, 389 and 388 such respondents are dropped for the analysis of EQLWTH and TAX variable, respectively.

Table 4: Relative Model Fit of Ten Models of Redistribution Attitudes

Model	Model d.f.	Model Statistics			
		R^2	$Adjusted-R^2$	AIC	BIC
A. Attitudes toward the Government's Role in Reducing Inequality (n = 16,246)					
a) Period	24	0.007	0.006	68309	68493
b) Period and Class Origins	27	0.022	0.020	-233	-210
c) Period and Parental Education	25	0.023	0.022	-264	-256
d) Period, Parental Education, and Class Origins	28	0.028	0.026	-329	-299
e) Period and Current Class	26	0.034	0.032	-433	-418
f) Period, Current Class, and Class Origins	29	0.040	0.039	-537	-498
g) Period, Current Class, and Parental Education	27	0.040	0.039	-545	-522
h) Period, Current Class, Education, and Income	28	0.060	0.058	-878	-847
i) Period, Current Class, Education, Income, and Class Origins	31	0.063	0.061	-916	-862
j) Period, Current Class, Education, Income, and Parental Education	29	0.062	0.060	-907	-869
B. Attitudes toward Income Tax (n = 16,244)					
a) Period	24	-	-	20467	20652
b) Period and Class Origins	27	-	-	-54	-31
c) Period and Parental Education	25	-	-	-25	-18
d) Period, Parental Education, and Class Origins	28	-	-	-58	-27
e) Period and Current Class	26	-	-	-16	-1
f) Period, Current Class, and Class Origins	29	-	-	-60	-22
g) Period, Current Class, and Parental Education	27	-	-	-34	-11
h) Period, Current Class, Education, and Income	28	-	-	-71	-40
i) Period, Current Class, Education, Income, and Class Origins	31	-	-	-114	-60
j) Period, Current Class, Education, Income, and Parental Education	29	-	-	-80	-42

Note: Sampling weights applied. Period, current class, and class origins are parameterized as factors, whereas parental education, respondents' own education, and family income are considered as (quasi-)continuous variables (n=16,246). The AIC and BIC values are contrasted with the values of the baseline model (Model a)), except for the baseline model itself.

ized analogous to class origins as the highest years of education among the parents to facilitate a more direct comparison. When I compare models b) and c), I observe that the R-squared values and information criteria values all favor Model c) over Model b), indicating that parental education's predictive power is slightly stronger than class origin.

However, comparing models c) and d) also reveals that class origin is not a dimension simply reducible to parental education. The model that jointly specifies parental education and class origins (Model d)) is uniformly favored by the metrics over the model that parametrizes

only the periods and parental education, or Model c). This result suggests that class origins explain variation in the outcome, which parental education cannot fully capture. Similarly, pairwise comparisons of models e) and f) and models h) and i) reveal that class of the origin is not reducible to those of the current classes or the combined effects of individuals' current classes, income, and years of education.

The second panel presents similar results for attitudes toward the federal income tax. For this measure, the explanatory power of class origins is more pronounced. When I compare models a) through c), I find that both class origins and parental education are significant predictors, as indicated by the reductions in the AIC and BIC values in both models from the baseline model. However, I also find that class origin has greater explanatory power than parental education when comparing models b) and c).

Similarly, when I contrast Model b) with Model e), I conclude that class origins explain more variations in tax attitudes than individuals' current classes. Finally, contrasting Model h) with Model i) reveals that gains for specifying class origin as a predictor of tax attitudes are substantial, even after accounting for the combined effects of individuals' current classes, income, and education.

Altogether, the results in Tables 3 and 4 provide primary evidence that class origins are meaningful predictors of redistribution attitudes that deserve greater scrutiny. Class origins' predictive power can be stronger than parental education, depending on the measure, and is certainly not reducible to the primary indicators of current class positions.

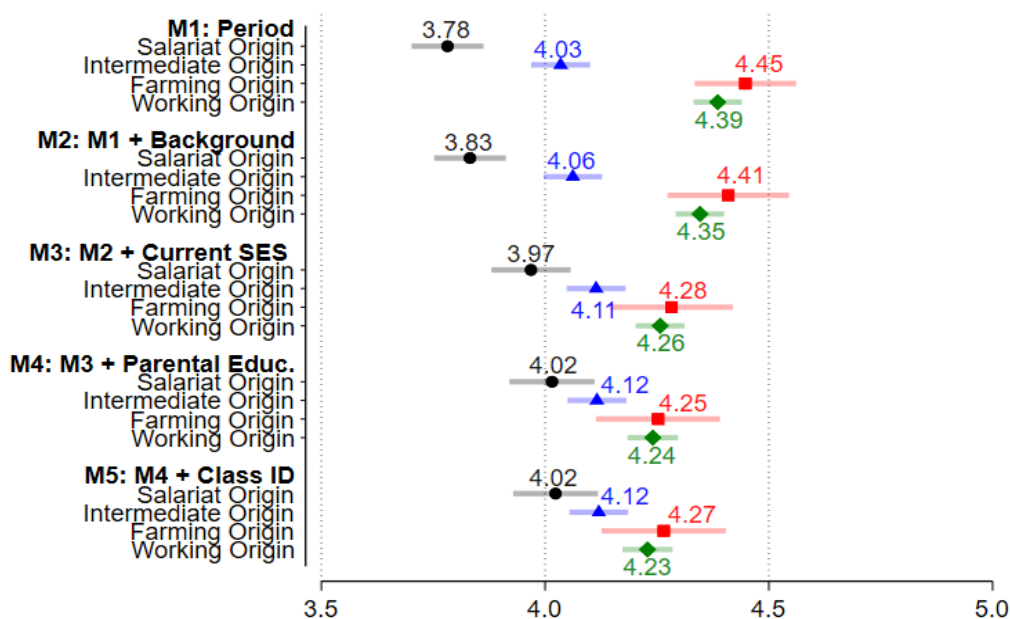
Do Attitudes toward Redistribution Differ by Class Origins?

Class origin distinctions in demand for redistribution are presented in Figure 3. Panel (a) summarizes attitudes toward government action to reduce inequality, and panel (b) summarizes attitudes toward the federal income tax. All estimates included in the figure are summaries of regression models based on Equation (1). The figure presents the marginal predicted values or probabilities for class origins. The horizontal lines represent the 95-percent confidence intervals of each estimate.

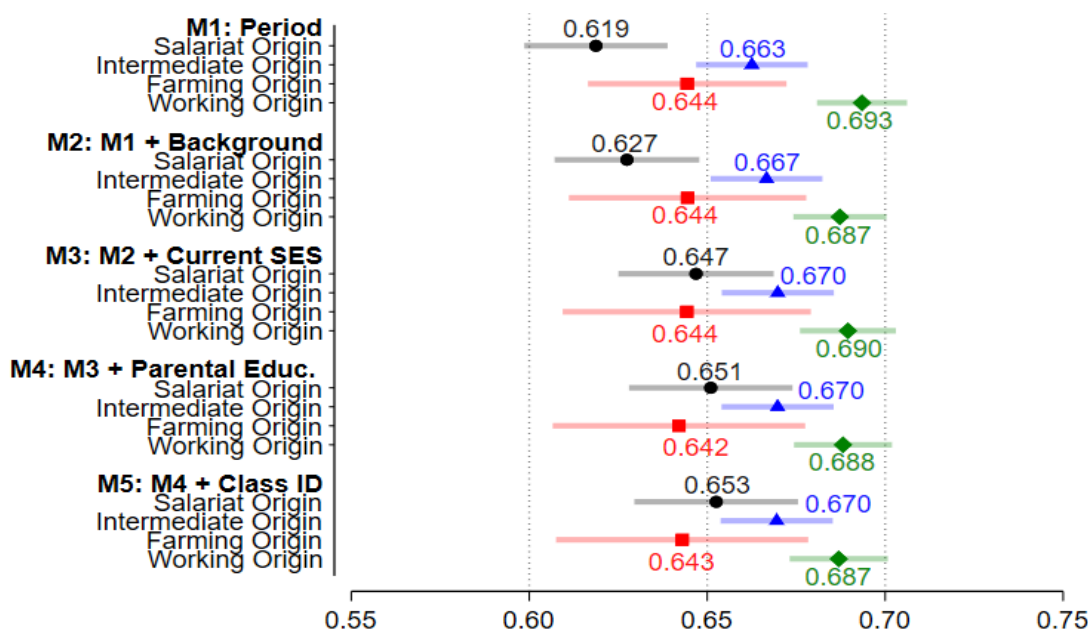
Systematic variation by class of origin is present for both outcome measures. First, consider Figure 3(a). In Model M1, no adjustment variables other than the survey years are specified. In this model, the predicted level of support among those of salariat origin is 3.78 on a 7-point scale. The intermediate origin expresses greater support for redistributive action by 0.25 points than the salariat origin, given that this group's predicted level of support is 4.03. Farming and working origins' demands for redistribution are more pronounced, estimated to be 4.45 and 4.39, respectively. The gap between the salariat origin and working and farming origins is similar to the raw-mean difference on this variable between staunch independents — independents not leaning toward any party — and those self-identifying as a "strong Democrat" in the same sample,

Figure 3: Attitudes toward Redistribution by Class Origins

(a) “Government should reduce income and wealth differences”



(b) “The Federal income tax I pay is “too high””



Note: M1 adjusts for survey years, M2 augments M1 adding adjustments for respondents’ background variables (age, gender, place of birth, place and type of residence at age 16, and religion at age 16), M3 further adjusts for current SES (current social class, family income, education), M4 additionally makes adjustments for parental education, and M5 adds subjective class identification to the adjustment set (See Table 2 for more details). The horizontal bars indicate the 95-percent confidence intervals. Sampling weights applied (N=16,246 for EQWLTH; N=16,244 for TAX).

estimated to be 0.64.²⁰²¹

²⁰These estimates are derived using the variable labeled PARTYID in the GSS.

²¹For comparison, from a similar model that adjusts only for survey year but specifies current classes instead of class origins, the predicted levels of support by *current classes* is estimated to be 3.77, 4.06, and 4.57 for salariat, intermediate, and farming/working classes, respectively.

Model M2 introduces the background variables summarized in Table 2. The inclusion of the additional background variables yields a minor impact on all class origins, suggesting that the class-origin deviations in redistribution support are mostly unrelated to the differences in the background characteristics. However, Model M3 introduces the indicators of individuals' current social status, I observe a substantial reduction in the class-origin differences. For example, the salariat origin's predicted level of support increases to 3.97 from 3.83, while farming and working origins' support level decreases to 4.28 and 4.26, respectively. The gap between the salariat and working origins thus reduces from 0.52 in Model M2 to 0.29 in Model M3. These findings imply that large proportions of the class-origin gaps in support for more government action for redistribution are associated with class-origin differences in individuals' *current* socioeconomic characteristics. However, at the same time, the same result also implies that redistribution attitudes can differ by class origins, even among individuals of similar income, current class, and education levels, given that significant class-origin gaps remain even after accounting for such factors. Including parental years of education as an additional predictor in Model M4 yields a modest impact on the class-origin gaps in redistribution support, as does adjusting for subjective class identity in the final model (Model M5).

In Figure 3(b), attitudes toward the federal income tax are presented. The first baseline model predicts that 61.9 percent of individuals with salariat origins express that their income tax is "too high." Among individuals with intermediate origins, 66.3 percent express similar views, implying that they are 4.4 percentage points likelier than individuals with salariat origins to express dissatisfaction with the income tax they pay. The working-class origin is 7.5 percentage points ($\approx 0.693 - 0.619$) likelier than the salariat origin to indicate that the tax rate is too high. I find that 64.4 percent of individuals of farming-class origin express that their income tax is too high. In general, while the class-origin distinctions are not immense, these initial patterns are somewhat surprising considering that those with non-salariat origins were also more demanding of government action to reduce inequality.²²

As with panel (a), I incrementally enriched the set of adjustment variables to examine whether these attitude inconsistencies reflect the imbalance in the various individual characteristics by class origin. The class origin variations observed in the baseline model stand almost unchanged after introducing the background variables in Model M2. Including income as part of the current class-related variables in Model 3 has more of an effect. Most notably, the salariat origin's predicted level changes from 62.7 percent in Model M2 to 64.7 percent in Model M3, rendering them statistically indistinguishable from the other origins at conventional levels ($p = 0.09$ for salariat vs. intermediate origins and $p = 0.91$ for salariat vs. farming origins), except for the working-class origin. Including parental education in Model M4 yields little impact on the remaining class-origin gaps. Even in the most extensive model, Model M5, which supplements subjective

²²An analogous model that specifies current classes in place of class origins estimates that the predicted values are 63.7, 67.8, and 67.1 percent for current salariat-, intermediate-, and farming- or working-class individuals.

class identification, individuals with working-class origins are still 3.5 percentage points ($\approx 0.687 - 0.653$) more likely to indicate that they pay too much income tax than individuals of salariat origins.

Synthesizing the findings in this section, an interesting result is that attitudes toward redistribution are not necessarily consistent in ways that most would initially anticipate. Consider the individuals with a working-class origin. Compared with their counterparts originating from the salariat class, these individuals express greater support for government action to reduce economic inequality. Nevertheless, they are, at the same time, more likely to indicate that the income tax they pay is too much. A possible reconciliation of these positions is that they feel that redistribution can be achieved by lowering their taxes, but not those of the salariat. I return to the interpretation of these findings in the concluding section.

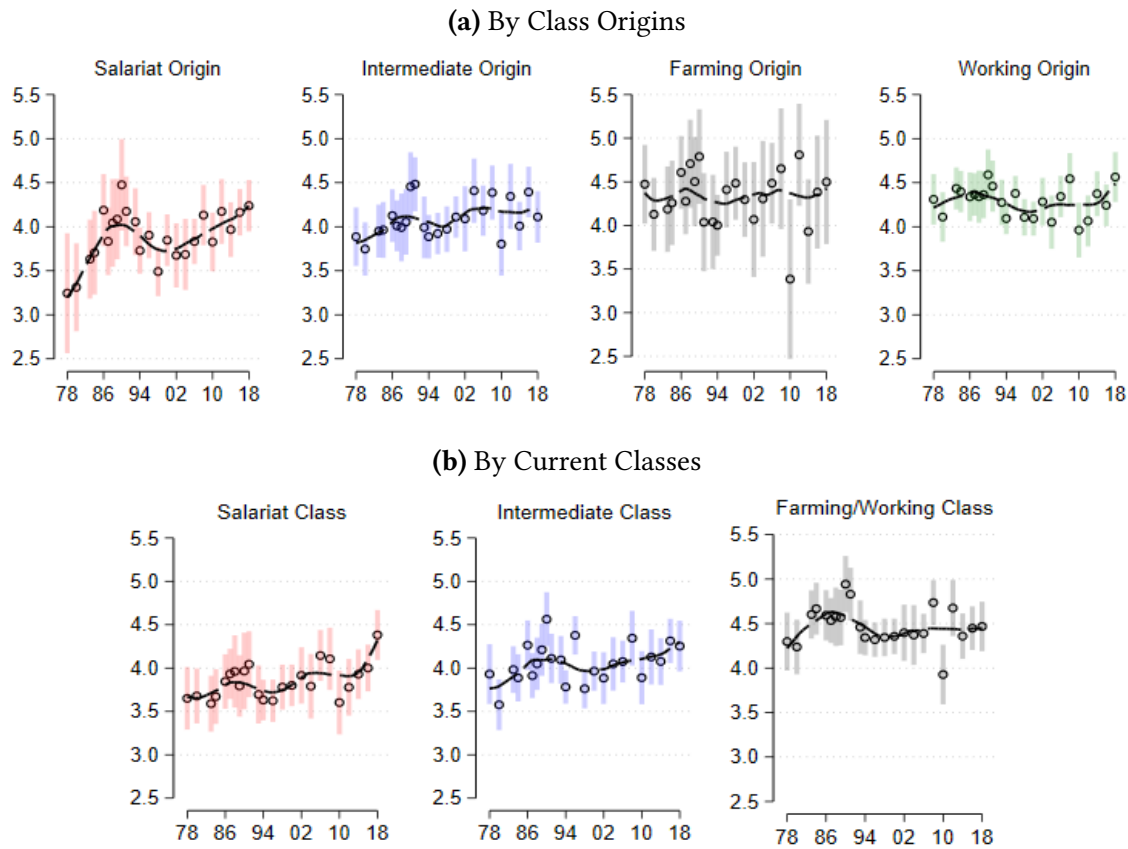
Have the Link Between Class Origins and Redistribution Attitudes Varied Over Time?

Now, I examine the third research question of whether the associations between class origins and attitudes toward redistribution have varied over time. Figure 4 presents time trends as predicted for attitudes toward the government's role in reducing inequality, and Figure 5 shows trends for attitudes on the federal income tax. As complementary evidence, alongside the trends by class origins, I also present the over-time trends by the current classes (see panels (b)). For both figures, the labels on the horizontal axis represent the survey years. I obtain these predictions from regression models that specify the main survey-year effects, year-specific class-origin and current-class effects, and time-constant interaction effects between class origins and current classes while adjusting for the "background" variables described in Table 2. The vertical bars indicate a 95-percent confidence interval associated with each point estimate. The black dashed lines represent the best-fit-non-parametric-smoothing line of the predictions, inversely weighted by the year-specific variance.²³

Interpretation of the observed patterns will to some extent, depend on how tolerant one wishes to be with the magnitude of the sampling variation in the estimates. However, even with such a caveat, some notable patterns are evident. First, in Figure 4(a), individuals with salariat origins have become more supportive of greater government action to reduce inequality. Specifically, from the initial low levels of the 1970s, the salariat origin's support steadily increases, reaching a local peak in the early 1990s. After declines in support during the 1990s, the salariat origin has increased support from 2000 to 2018. In 2018, the predicted level of support was 4.24, which is its highest level since 1990. For the other class origins, the over-time trends have been less dramatic, although, for the farming origin, the estimates may carry too much uncertainty to discern a clear long-term trend.

²³More specifically, each line is a kernel-weighted local polynomial smoothing line with a bandwidth of 3.

Figure 4: Class-Origin and Current-Class Differences in Attitudes toward Government Action to Reduce Inequality Over Time



Note: The vertical bars on each sub-graphs indicate the 95-percent confidence intervals. The black dashed-lines represent the best-fit-non-parametric-smoothing line of the predictions which are inversely weighed by year-specific variance. Sampling weights applied (N=16,246).

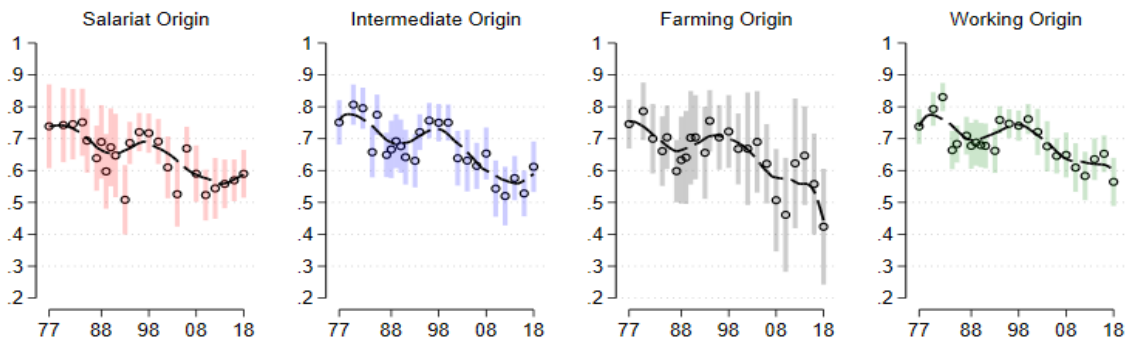
Similar conclusions can be drawn when from the marginal predictions for the current classes in Figure 4(b). For the current salariat class, I observe a generally rising trend throughout the entire period. In particular, for these individuals, support for the government’s action to reduce inequality rose monotonically during the last decade, after a notable drop in 2010, likely driven by the aftermath of the Great Recession. The current salariat class’s support level was 4.38 in 2018, its highest level over the entire observational interval. A pattern of rising support is also evident for the current intermediate class, although the strength of change is more modest. Over-time trends have mostly been stable for the current farming and working classes.

Contrary to the trends in attitudes toward government action to reduce inequality, attitudes toward the federal income tax have evolved similarly for all current classes and class origins, as shown in Figure 5. The over-time trends are strikingly similar for all groups. These common trends align with the fluctuations in the actual tax rate depicted in Figure 2(b), suggesting that attitudes toward taxes are mainly unresponsive to factors other than the changes in the tax rate itself.

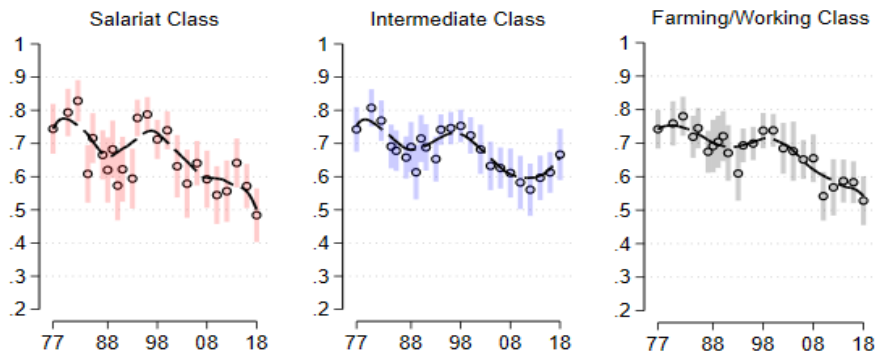
In sum, these findings point to some class-specific trends in preferences for redistribu-

Figure 5: Class-Origin and Current-Class Differences in Attitudes toward the Federal Income Tax Over Time

(a) By Class Origins



(b) By Current Classes



Note: The vertical bars on each sub-graphs indicate the 95-percent confidence intervals. The black dashed-lines represent the best-fit-non-parametric-smoothing line of the predictions which are inversely weighed by year-specific variance. Sampling weights applied (N=16,244).

tion. The most notable over-time trend is that, in general, individuals occupying more advantageous class positions—the current salariat class and individuals with salariat-class origins—have increased support for more government action to reduce inequality over time. However, these over-time trends are evident only in abstract attitudes and not for the respondents’ own tax rates. All current-class and class-origin groups have experienced a similar trajectory in attitudes toward their own tax rates. Although all have become less resistant to the taxation on income over time, the shared trajectory closely mirrors the trends in actual federal tax rates, suggesting that the changes in actual tax rates may have been the main drivers of these over-time changes. These findings are in line with the recent evidence from experimental research that shows abstract attitudes toward redistribution are more malleable than attitudes toward tax and transfer policies (Kuziemko et al. 2015).

Conclusions and Discussion

In this article, I examined the role of individuals' class origins on their preferences for economic redistribution in the US. I also investigated how the effects of class origin and current class on redistribution support have changed over the past four decades, during which economic inequality has grown. The main results can be summarized as four conclusions.

First, abstract support for redistribution has remained stable over time, but specific attitudes toward taxation have changed in parallel to actual changes in federal tax rates. Second, class origin displays a strong association with these attitudes. Namely, individuals with farming and working-class origins were more favorable toward increasing the government's role in reducing inequality. While measures of current socioeconomic status were the strongest correlate with these class-origin differences, such differences were not fully accounted for by these factors. Third, abstract preferences for redistribution do not always align with attitudes toward taxation. For example, individuals with working-class origins were more likely to feel that their federal income tax was too high than were individuals with salariat-class origins. Nevertheless, these same respondents (i.e., individuals with working-class origins) simultaneously expressed greater demand to increase the government's role in reducing inequality. These inconsistencies were not fully explainable by differences in current class positions or in subjective class identities by class origins. Fourth, trends in support for government action to reduce inequality were not all uniform among the class-origin and current-class groups. Notably, the current salariat class and individuals with salariat-class origins increased their support for government action to redistribute, especially over the last decade.

The increase in redistribution support in recent years among only the most advantaged class groups — the current salariat class and individuals from salariat origins — is inconsistent with standard economic models or “self-interest” accounts of redistribution support. Namely, given the substantial rise in economic inequality in the US, such models would predict increases in demand for redistribution to have been stronger among individuals with farming- and working-class backgrounds (Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote 2001).

What may have driven this unpredicted trend? One possibility is shifts in party alignment. Specifically, in the US, the support of upper/middle-class and college-educated citizens for the Democratic Party has increased, while working-class voters have increasingly tended to vote Republican (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, and Piketty 2022; Morgan and Lee 2017). To the extent that Americans formulate redistributive views through a partisan lens, one may interpret these trends as reflecting the alignment of individuals' preferences with the endorsed positions of the supported parties, especially among the salariat-class groups. The resistance to change of working- and farming-class groups' redistributive attitudes over time may also provide clues to why more forceful public demands for redistribution have not accompanied the growth in inequality.

The apparent inconsistency in redistribution attitudes among, for example, individuals

from working-class origins who demand greater government action for redistribution while also being more resistant to taxation can be interpreted in two ways. First, one can view this as representing a genuine inconsistency and ambivalence in Americans' ideas about redistribution. In this case, the findings demonstrate the relevance of considering specific redistribution schemes when modeling public opinion on redistribution. Second, it may point to the weakness of attitudes toward one's own income tax as a measure of redistribution preference. This measure certainly has the potential to tap into more specialized preferences for redistribution relative to the broader measure. Nevertheless, its content runs the risk of conflating other attitudes that may be tangential to redistribution. In general, this potential caveat should be considered when assessing these findings. But, as I have noted above, it is also possible that it is a surprisingly nuanced position: "reduce all taxes, but reduce my tax the most."

Overall, the primary implication of this study is that redistribution preferences can be traced, at least partially, to parental social class. This primary finding suggests that researchers should more actively consider class origins in assessing redistribution support, which could guide various new orientations for theory and research. For example, driven by the shifts in the occupational structure, Americans increasingly have parents who occupy advantageous class positions, as depicted in Figure 1. Together with the demonstrated evidence that redistribution attitudes are inversely associated with class origins, these distributional changes in class origins may provide a partial explanation for why public opinion on redistribution in the US has been so slow to change. Furthermore, as recent studies have begun to do (Jaime-Castillo and Marqués-Perales 2019; Wilson et al. 2022), class origins could be more actively considered in the context of intergenerational mobility, which would require evaluating how class origins interact with current classes to shape individuals' opinions about redistribution.

In closing, I emphasize that the present study neither thoroughly scrutinizes nor offers a causal analysis of the mechanisms of class-origin effects. As reviewed, extant scholarship hints at diverse mechanisms, and empirically verifying these could be a promising line of future research. Such evidence could shed light on the broader debate about whether political and policy preferences derive primarily from normative commitments shaped by early socialization environments or from the self-interest motives of individuals.

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