

Working class conservatism: a system justification perspective

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Working class conservatism is a perennial issue in social science, but researchers have struggled to provide an adequate characterization. In social psychology, the question has too often been framed in ‘either/or’ terms of whether the disadvantaged are more or less likely to support the status quo than the advantaged. This is a crude rendering of the issue obscuring the fact that even if *most* working class voters are not conservative, millions are — and conservatives could not win elections without their support. System justification theory highlights epistemic, existential, and relational needs to reduce uncertainty, threat, and social discord that are shared by everyone — and that promote conservative attitudes. I summarize qualitative and quantitative evidence of system justification among the disadvantaged and consider prospects for more constructive political activity.

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The meanest eating or drinking establishment, owned by a man who is himself poor, is very likely to have a sign on its wall asking this cruel question: ‘if you’re so smart, why ain’t you rich?’

There will also be an American flag no larger than a child’s hand — glued to a lollipop stick and flying from the cash register.

(Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five*)

Working class conservatism: a perennial issue

Nearly fifty years ago, Stacey and Green [1] observed that ‘The Conservative Party [in Britain] receives approximately half its electoral support from the manual working class’ and that ‘between 30 and 35 per cent of the voters in this class usually support the Conservatives’ (p. 10). Their

point was not that the working class was *more* conservative than the middle and upper classes; it was that — in an apparent violation of self-interest motivation — a substantial plurality of working class citizens adopted conservative attitudes because of ‘exposure to the dominant value system of capitalism’ (p. 13). Parkin [2], too, argued not only that conservative parties would be incapable of winning elections without the support of significant segments of the working class voters but also that conservatives have a built-in political advantage because they are ‘the political guardians’ of ‘the dominant institutional orders and central values of the society’ (p. 282).

In 2017, 43% of working class voters in the U.K. favored the Conservative Party, and only 26% favored Labor [3]. In the U.S., observers often marvel at the extent to which the working class embraces conservative politicians — such as George W. Bush [4] and Donald Trump [5] — given how much their economic policies favor the wealthy. At the same time, there are detractors seeking to ‘bust’ the ‘myth’ of working class conservatism, who point out that only ‘35 percent [of Trump’s voters] had household incomes under \$50,000 per year’ [6]. It is true that Trump’s supporters were slightly wealthier — but less educated^a — than Hillary Clinton’s, but the fact remains that 22 million people earning less than \$50,000/year voted for the billionaire in 2016.

The topic of working class conservatism has engrossed generations of social scientists, presumably because it violates standard assumptions about the role of self-interest in political attitudes [8–13]. In psychology, Jost and Banaji [14] proposed system justification theory to account for deviations from individual and group-based self-interest in terms of the principles of motivated social cognition (see also [15]). The guiding notion is that most people are motivated (at least to some extent) to defend and justify aspects of the social systems — such as capitalism — on which their livelihoods depend. This, in turn, helps to explain why members of disadvantaged groups often hold the same (or similar) system-justifying beliefs as members of advantaged groups [16].

A system justification perspective

According to system justification theory, people are motivated to believe that the institutions, authorities, and arrangements on which they depend are good, fair,

^a Accounts of social class vary in the extent to which they emphasize income, education, or occupation, with some research suggesting that a lack of education played a crucial role in Trump’s election [7].

desirable, and legitimate (see also [17]). The fact that people are *motivated* to justify the social system does not mean that they will do so invariably; some systems, including certain political regimes, are so obviously corrupt that citizens are unable to maintain faith in their legitimacy. This may lead them to look elsewhere (such as religious or family systems) to fulfill their system justification needs.

In any case, believing that the status quo is legitimate and desirable serves epistemic motives to reduce uncertainty, existential motives to reduce threat, and relational motives to connect with mainstream society [18]. Hennes *et al.* [19] found that people who were low in need for cognition but high in death anxiety and the need to share reality with like-minded others were more politically conservative, more system-justifying, more supportive of the Tea Party movement, and less supportive of the Occupy Wall Street movement. These results were conceptually replicated in Argentina, where respondents who scored higher on the need for cognitive closure, death anxiety, and the need to share reality were more system-justifying, more right-wing, more supportive of the center-right government in power, and more dismissive of the center-left opposition party [16*].

Members of the working class are especially likely to confront aversive levels of uncertainty, insecurity, and social exclusion and to develop a strong ‘desire for long-term stability and security’ that is consonant with conservative values of ‘thrift’ and self-reliance [1], as well as ‘law and order.’ Thus, for psychological — as well as institutional — reasons, ‘parties of the Right and Centre have a built-in advantage over the parties of the Left’ in a capitalist society ([2], p. 281). This advantage is by no means confined to the working class, but it is extended to it.

In attempting to provide a psychological explanation for why the working class would support the status quo, the social theorist Jon Elster [20] drew on cognitive dissonance theory:

The interest of the upper class is better served by the lower classes spontaneously inventing an ideology justifying their inferior status. This ideology, while stemming from the interest of the lower classes in the sense of leading to dissonance reduction, is contrary to their interest because of a tendency to overshoot . . . (p. 142)

This formulation was consistent with the outcomes of Robert Lane’s [8] interviews with blue-collar workers, which suggested that ‘Lower status people generally find it less punishing to think of themselves as correctly placed by a just society than to think of themselves as exploited, or victimized by an unjust society’ (p. 227). It also fit with famous demonstrations of cognitive dissonance theory,

such as fraternity pledges who suffered the most during ‘hazing’ rites becoming the most enthusiastic supporters of the Greek system [21]. As Elster noted, ideology results from a complex interaction between social (or institutional) and psychological processes, and the two levels of analysis are compatible: ‘both the external situation and the internal processing must come into play’ (p. 137).

Jost *et al.* [22] explored the hypothesis — which was a hybrid derivative of dissonance and system justification perspectives — that people who were most disadvantaged by the status quo would have the strongest need to justify existing social systems, authorities, and outcomes. They obtained some evidence from public opinion surveys suggesting that low income European Americans, African Americans, and Latinos were more likely than others to trust the government, support restrictions on criticizing it, and believe that society is meritocratic and that economic inequality is legitimate and necessary. These findings were broadly consistent with the notion derived from dissonance theory that those who suffer most intensely from a given state of affairs would be especially motivated to justify it. Nevertheless, Jost and colleagues pointed out that “economic and other theories of material and symbolic self-interest may be said to account for the ‘baseline’ with regard to social and political attitudes and behaviors” (p. 14). They added:

To be clear, we are not arguing that members of disadvantaged groups are always (or even ordinarily) the most likely ones to provide ideological support for the system. In fact, to the extent that system justification conflicts with motives for self-enhancement, self-interest, and ingroup favoritism among members of disadvantaged groups . . . it should often be tempered by these other motives (p. 17).

Despite these caveats, some researchers have confused the strong, dissonance-based hypothesis with system justification theory itself [23–25].

Brandt [23], in particular, renamed it the ‘status-legitimacy hypothesis’ and extended it to other domains — such as gender and education^b — that were not part of the original research program. His analyses revealed few consistent differences in terms of group status with respect to trust in government and other institutions and concluded that the phenomenon ‘may be a random event without need of a theoretical explanation’ (p. 2). In

^b Although income and education often exert opposite effects on ideological variables, Brandt [23] offered the same hypothesis for these two indicators of social class. In general, income is positively associated with conservative, right-wing orientation, whereas education is negatively associated with it [26]. When it comes to gender, women are more likely than men to endorse traditionalism as an aspect of conservatism, but they are less likely to endorse anti-egalitarian aspects of conservatism [27].

sum, Brandt found scant evidence of *enhanced* system justification among the disadvantaged — but he also found little or no consistent evidence of group-based self-interest. Thus, far from obviating the need to understand phenomena such as working class conservatism, these null results force us to confront, once again, a perennial question: why are members of the working class *just* as likely — or, in some cases, *almost* as likely — as the middle and upper classes to defend and justify aspects of the societal status quo?

Recent evidence of system justification among the disadvantaged

In the last few years, there has been a flurry of innovative studies that enrich our understanding of working class conservatism and related social psychological phenomena. These studies call into question Brandt's [23] claim that support for the status quo among the disadvantaged is 'a random event without need of a theoretical explanation.' There is new qualitative evidence in the rich tradition of Lane's [8] interviews, as well as quantitative evidence from surveys, experiments, and field studies conducted around the world.

Durrheim *et al.* [28] interviewed low income, Black female domestic workers in post-Apartheid White South African homes and observed that far from seeing themselves as exploited or underpaid, they saw themselves as fortunate to be part of a mutually beneficial relationship with their employers. The researchers noted that the workers were quick to acknowledge "each act of employer 'generosity'" and that these stimulated a "corresponding impulse to 'return the favour' by displaying gratitude, appreciation, hard work and acceptance of existing relations of power and privilege."

Godfrey and Wolf [29] analyzed interview scripts with low-income Latina and African-American mothers living in the Northeastern U.S., and discovered that nearly all of them held system-justifying beliefs that poverty was attributable to 'character deficiencies of the poor.' One insisted:

[T]hey are poor for a reason, not poor for no reason. If you're poor is because you don't want to do nothing with your life, and don't want to provide money for yourself . . . You're poor because you want to be poor . . . [I]t's your fault that you're drinking and a drug addict . . .

Douglas [30] interviewed low-income African Americans in Kansas City and obtained comparable results. One woman exclaimed: 'Welfare, welfare . . . they need to stop that! Point blank, period! They need to stop giving these girls welfare.'

Wiederkehr *et al.* [31] fielded a study of high school students in France and found that children of low

socio-economic status commonly believed that academic success was determined by purely meritocratic factors; this belief was also associated with system justification at the societal level.

Godfrey *et al.* [32**] followed a sample of low-income adolescents in the Southwestern U.S. and discovered that 'youth with greater system-justifying beliefs in sixth grade had better outcomes in sixth grade but worsening trajectories' by eighth grade in terms of self-esteem, classroom behavior, and risky behavior outside of the classroom (p. 11). This is consistent with the notion that — for those who are disadvantaged by the status quo — system justification may have short-term palliative benefits as well as longer-term costs in terms of self-worth, group image, and collective action [33–36,37**].

Sengupta *et al.* [38*] observed that low-status ethnic minorities in New Zealand (Maori, Asians, and Pacific Islanders) were not strong supporters of the political system, but they did perceive ethnic relations in society as extremely fair — despite the persistence of significant ethnic disparities in income, education, employment, and health. The authors note that Maori possess a highly politicized group identity, and yet they 'legitimized ethnic-group relations at least as much as the group that benefits from the ethnic-group hierarchy' (p. 12).

A nationally representative survey of citizens in Lebanon — an Arab country with rampant social and economic inequality and a deeply entrenched hierarchical political system based on religious sects — revealed that although poorer people scored lower than other respondents on general system justification, they scored *higher* on economic system justification [16*]. People who scored higher on both types of system justification defended the legitimacy of the sectarian political system more strenuously, and those who scored higher on economic system justification were more religious and were more supportive of the neoliberal, pro-capitalist 'March 14' alliance — as opposed to the socialist-leaning 'March 8' alliance.

A series of experiments by van der Toorn and colleagues [39*] showed that reminding people of situations in which they felt powerless and dependent on others increased their justification of racial, gender, and class-based disparities — as well as their legitimation of governmental authorities. These findings are compatible not only with system justification theory but also the compensatory control model, which suggests that people who are deprived of a sense of personal control tend to seek out structure and meaning in external systems, such as work organizations, as well as political and religious ideologies [40].

Richter and König [41] surveyed over 500 German employees about organizational downsizing and observed that most regarded layoffs not only as inevitable but

effective and justifiable, and some regarded them as ‘liberating’ for those who are fired. Consistent with the notion that such beliefs reflect motivated social cognition, employees who felt that downsizing was more likely perceived it as more effective and justifiable.

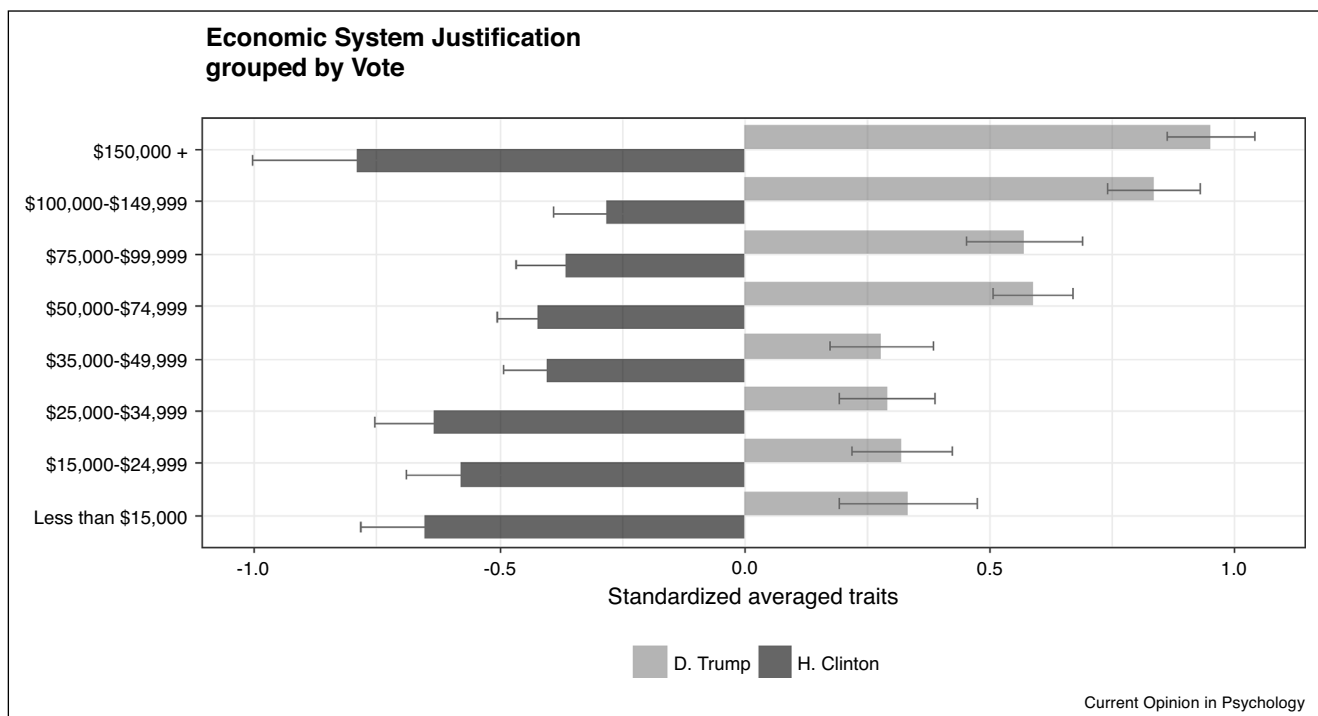
Although most sociological theories would suggest that increasing inequality in society would, over time, stimulate public demand for the redistribution of economic resources, the opposite has in fact occurred [10,13]. Rising inequality in the U.S. has, if anything, fostered conservative thinking, possibly because citizens justify shifts in the economic status quo. There is also growing evidence that people — especially conservatives — systematically underestimate the degree of economic inequality in capitalist society [42], and they overestimate the degree of social mobility [43] — especially *upward* mobility [44]. All of these processes are likely to contribute ideological support to the societal status quo [45*].

A longitudinal study by Milojev *et al.* [46] suggested that the working class in New Zealand became more conservative in the aftermath of the worldwide financial crisis that began in 2007–2008, whereas the ideological

orientations of the middle and upper classes were unchanged. The authors interpreted these results as consistent with the strong, dissonance-based hypothesis and noted that ‘a conservative belief system may provide people with the stability needed to satisfy their needs for order and structure’ and that such needs should be especially salient for poor people; therefore, ‘the poor should be more likely than the wealthy to increase their levels of conservatism during times of economic uncertainty and upheaval’ (p. 9).

A long tradition of research on ‘working class authoritarianism’ suggests that education and (to a lesser extent) income are negatively associated with prejudice, social intolerance, and the rejection of democratic norms [9]. These effects, in turn, are mediated by right-wing orientation [26] and the endorsement of conservative, system-justifying attitudes [47], and they are amplified by threatening societal circumstances [48]. In the context of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, Azevedo *et al.* [49*] conducted a nationally representative survey and found that — at all levels of income — supporters of Donald Trump justified the economic system much more strongly than supporters of Hillary Clinton (see Figure 1). That is,

Figure 1



Economic system justification among supporters of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton as a function of income. *Note:* This figure is based on the results of a nationally representative survey of 1500 U.S. citizens conducted shortly before the 2016 Presidential election (see Azevedo *et al.* [49]). Economic system justification scores were standardized, so that the sample mean was zero. Results reveal that supporters of Donald Trump scored higher than supporters of Hillary Clinton (and higher than average, overall) on economic system justification at every income level, including very low levels of income.

working class voters who favored Clinton questioned the legitimacy of economic inequality under capitalism, whereas working class voters who favored Trump did not.

Conclusion

System justification theory sheds light on the phenomenon of working class conservatism and helps to explain why the disadvantaged sometimes hold the same system-justifying beliefs as members of advantaged groups. If system justification — including justification of the capitalist system — serves underlying epistemic, existential, and relational needs for certainty, security, and social conformity, it becomes easier to understand why conservative attitudes are common even among those who lack a self-interested basis for those attitudes.

Because everyone, including members of the working class, possesses these fundamental epistemic, existential, and relational needs, there are psychological — as well as institutional — advantages associated with conservative politics. As Parkin [2] pointed out many years ago, embracing a progressive, system-challenging worldview is a form of ‘political deviance.’ Consequently, its sustenance depends upon the availability of social support from an alternative community that is critical and ‘class conscious,’ that is, knowledgeable about the true and myriad causes of social and economic deprivation and that avoids the ‘cluelessness’ and ‘callousness’ that presently characterizes much of the public discourse about social class [50]. Only then is there a chance for a more constructive form of political activity — one that is humane, thoughtful, and inspiring in its commitment to progress, equality, and freedom from exploitation . . . for all.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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