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The Economic Implications of Working-Class Authoritarianism: A Comparative Perspective

Steve Fisher

ABSTRACT

Seymour Martin Lipset first proposed his theory of working-class authoritarianism in his 1959 paper “Democracy and Working-Class Authoritarianism.” His thesis held that individuals of lower social and educational classes were more prone to sympathize with authoritarian and illiberal regimes, be they to the political left or right. This paper will discuss and then explore Lipset’s theory in a modern context. In doing so, it will argue that working-class authoritarianism still exists in liberal democracies today. To do so, case studies of several states and their elections will be analyzed and compared. These examples will show that while the phenomenon can still be seen today, the manner in which it appears has changed following the fall of communism. This paper will conclude its discussion of Lipset’s theory by arguing that the authoritarian tendencies of the classes Lipset indicated now lean exclusively to the political right. Furthermore, the economic implications of this theory in a modern context will be illuminated. Finally, the argument will be made that working-class authoritarianism has the effect of preventing individuals affected by it from voting for the liberal political policies that could aid them in their economic struggle.



Since the beginnings of democracy, citizens’ voting habits have been a great deal of interest to political scientists around the world. In 1959, Seymour Martin Lipset made his contribution with an article titled “Democracy and Working-Class Authoritarianism.” In this paper he argues that individuals of lower social strata are more likely to support authoritarian regimes than their counterparts of middle or upper socioeconomic class. Furthermore, Lipset correlated this to both past fascist regimes and also to communism in the (then) present and the future. As mentioned, the majority of his arguments referenced (either directly or otherwise) historical instances of fascist governments shortly after their demise. Furthermore, he made note of since-fallen communist systems as the opposite extreme. With neither of these types of

illiberal regimes surviving in the sense Lipset knew them to be at the time of his writing, the validity of his thesis is worthy of re-examination in a modern context.

Lipset's use of data almost exclusively from a time in history directly succeeding the fall of authoritarian regimes to the political right and the rise of them to the left raises the possibility that given the mitigation of instantiated political extremes to both the left and right, working-class authoritarianism has been dealt a crippling blow. In addition to the above theory, this paper evaluates the economic implications of working-class authoritarianism in order to see what effects the concept has on the ability of people to vote toward economic policies that are favorable to them and their low economic standing. Examining both Lipset's work and modern-day case studies, it is apparent that working-class authoritarianism is, in fact, still a relevant phenomenon in liberal democracies throughout the world and that it is directly derogatory to the economic well-being of the lower-class individuals affected by it.

In discussing the core tenants of working-class authoritarianism, Lipset claims, "A variety of evidence from many countries suggests that low status and low education predispose individuals to favor extremist, intolerant, and transvaluational forms of political and religious behavior" (Lipset 482). Taking this assertion a step further, Lipset asserts that these past trends can be used to "anticipate wide-spread support by lower-class individuals and groups for extremist movements" (483). Prior to discussing the present-day applications of Lipset's argument, it is necessary to first discuss and analyze the argument itself.

Lipset bolsters his thesis with statistics from several world democracies. In particular, he cites a study completed in post-World War II Germany in which 3,000 German men were asked what their preferred governmental system would be. These men were then given the choice between a single-party system, a multiparty system, and a system absent of political parties (Lipset 485). This test was designed to determine the relative strength of authoritarian and illiberal opinions within a particular occupational group. An answer of "one party" would indicate a preference for an authoritarian style of governance, given the monopoly of national politics this party would attain. On the opposite side, an answer of "several parties" would imply a preference towards liberal government. These results would then be compared by occupational group, revealing relative feelings of authoritarianism or liberalism.

The results, as reproduced in Figure 1, revealed that men who worked as unskilled and semi-skilled workers were significantly more likely to support the idea of a single-party

governmental structure than their counterparts who identified as artisans or civil servants, among others. Lipset further explains that in addition to this 1953 study, “comparable results were obtained in 1958 when a similar question was asked of national or regional samples in Austria, Japan, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and France” (485).

A second study cited by Lipset was conducted on almost 5,000 Americans in 1955. The study asked participants a series of questions regarding the rights of free speech for different groups including communists, critics of religion, and several others.¹ Based upon their responses to these prompts, the participants were grouped into three categories of relative “tolerance.” These categories were considered to be “more tolerant,” “less tolerant,” and a middle ground referred to in the study as “in-between” (Lipset 486). These results were then arranged by the occupation of the test subject. Lipset examined the concluding statistics of the study and found that farmers and manual laborers had a 20 percent and 30 percent chance of being members of the “more tolerant” group, respectively. This data was compared to the 66 percent of subjects labeled as being professional or semi-professional workers who tested as being “more tolerant” (Lipset 1959, 486). The results of this study are reproduced in this paper as Table 2.

Lipset also indicates that other factors can explain the increased levels of authoritarianism found in lower-class individuals throughout the world. These include religion, personal upbringing, and education. Of education, Lipset argues that an increase in levels of education has a direct correlation to an increase in liberal attitudes. As evidence for this, Lipset cites a study finding that in both the United States and Germany the likelihood of an individual to support a system with multiple parties increased as the individual’s education increased (Lipset 489).

In making this argument, Lipset states something that few today would refute, claiming that a lack of “... formal education, itself closely correlated with social and economic status is also highly correlated with undemocratic attitudes” (Lipset 489).² Lipset is positing the notion that education and income levels combine to form a sort of infinite regress in society. To expand on this, further consider the following: If one is educated then they are more likely to lead a life

¹ These groups were chosen because they would be seen as heretical to the “average” American’s predispositions at the time.

² Lipset is using the term “undemocratic” in the way that I use the terms “illiberal” and/or “authoritarian,” that is, to mean a system which lacks civil rights and personal freedom, not necessarily a system which fails to hold elections. I submit that the two are not mutually exclusive, a “liberal” system with personal freedoms and civil rights may exist absent of democratic elections and, conversely, a system can hold elections and thus be democratic without the aforementioned traits of a “liberal” system. For more discussion of the distinction see Chapter 2 of Fareed Zakaria’s *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*.

on a higher economic level than an equivalent individual with no education. This will all but certainly lead to an increased opportunity for the former's children to be educated, thus continuing this cycle of education. If the opposite approach is taken, however, and an individual with no education and thus, a lower economic class is assumed, it is easy to see the difficulty in financing an education for either themselves or their children, perpetuating a lineage of the uneducated lower class. In this way it is difficult in all but the most exceptional cases, to make a firm distinction between economic class and education level. This is certainly part of the reason for Lipset's conclusion that "both inferior education and low occupational position are highly intercorrelated, both are part of the complex making up low-status, and are associated with a lack of tolerance" (Lipset 490).

The first modern case study to be evaluated for congruence with working-class authoritarianism is that of the United Kingdom. The British system of liberal democracy is parliamentary in nature, a factor that leads to a system in which third parties have the potential to gain representation within Parliament. As a result of this feature the government can be more volatile than in more strict two-party systems like that of the United States.³ With that being said, the majority of British politics do remain dominated by a center-right and center-left party.

In the United Kingdom general elections data from 2005, one sees at first glance little indication of working-class authoritarianism. Indeed none of the three top vote-getting parties, the Labour Party, the Conservative Party, and the Liberal Democrats, can be characterized as authoritarian or radical in any regard. They are, in fact, best described as center-left, center-right, and centrist respectively, with all demonstrating strong commitments to liberalism. Furthermore, statistics support the notion that the economic lower class is voting for the left-leaning party. This aligns directly with what one would expect to be in the economic interests of that group. In the 2005 election, the Labour Party earned 48 percent of the vote from the lowest class studied, and 40 percent from the second lowest. This can be compared to the center-right Conservative Party's percentages of 25 percent and 33 percent, respectively, or the politically moderate Liberal Democrats with 18 percent and 19 percent (Tetteh 31).

This data strongly indicates that working-class authoritarianism does not have a strong hold on the voting in the United Kingdom. Accordingly it can be concluded that, on a national

³ A more detailed comparison of the impact of presidential and parliamentary democracy will be given later in this paper.

level, it does not affect the economic concerns of the lower classes, which still vote in large numbers for the center-left Labour Party. However, simply because working-class authoritarianism in the UK is not perceivable on this level does not mean it is completely extinct. On a smaller scale evidence does suggest that authoritarian opinions still maintain a hold on the British lower classes.

To find proof of this one has to only look as far as the radical right British National Party (BNP). Recently this party garnered over 500,000 votes, making it the most popular extreme right-wing party in British electoral history with interest in the party “growing sharply” (Ford). While these votes were not enough to win a seat in Parliament, they were enough to show an alarming demographic trend. As Robert Ford explains, “The BNP does best among older, white working class men with few educational qualifications living in the North of England” (Ford). Statistics further support the notion that a label of “working class” is the best indicator of support for the BNP, with a 70 percent chance of a BNP voter fitting this description (Ford). This is a group that generally favors the center-left Labour Party.⁴ What is perhaps more telling is that it is a perfect match to the portrait painted by Lipset’s thesis. He had posited that individuals of poor economic and educational standing would be more tempted to support an authoritarian party or governmental system than a more wealthy or educated individual, all other factors being equal. This fact, combined with the meteoric rise of the BNP, indicates that though small in size, working-class authoritarianism seems to be on the rise in the UK.

One factor from Lipset’s thesis that is not present is a sizeable contingent from the authoritarian left as well as right. Lipset does not specifically argue that working-class authoritarianism will favor either fascism or other illiberalism on the right or communism on the left, only that it will be an illiberal regime. This is not so in the study of Britain, where lower-class individuals who have shown themselves as sympathetic towards authoritarianism seem to gravitate to one end of the political spectrum. While the radical right BNP was able to win 1.9 percent of total votes in the 2010 election, the Communist Party of Britain (certainly a left-wing authoritarian group) was only able to take 0.38 percent of the vote in the general election (“Communist Party of Britain...”). Further damaging to the notion that working-class

⁴ Ford’s label of “working class” is very much akin to the DE and C2 labels used by Tetteh. Tetteh’s terms come from the social scale used by the National Readership Survey (NRS) to indicate unskilled individuals (D) and those at the very edges of economic sustenance (E) and skilled manual labors (C2), respectively. Both authors are referring to members of the lowest income-earning economic group.

authoritarianism could easily cleave to either the political left or right are the membership numbers of both parties. While the BNP reports a membership of 10,256 in 2010, the Communist Party of Britain can only claim 931, or less than 10 percent of the BNP's membership ("Communist Party of Britain..."; "British National Party..."). Clearly the authoritarian working class of Britain is gravitating toward the political right rather than the left.

The second state to be examined is Australia. Australia, like the United Kingdom, features a liberal, parliamentary system of democracy. As one would then perhaps expect, voting trends and behavior in Australia seem to mirror those of the UK in every way discussed above. Like the UK, there is a strong majority of lower-class individuals voting for the center-left party, while their upper-class counterparts tend to vote center-right. Simon Jackman, who has analyzed Australian election results from 1987–2001, indicates that in the case of Australia, this center-left party favored by the poor is known as the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and has won the majority vote of the self-defined "working-class" during this period. As for the center-right Liberal Party of Australia (LP), the same study shows that it has been favored by the economically wealthy across the same period of time (Jackman 16).

One of the findings of this Australian case study is in regards to illiberal parties. As with the mainstream liberal ALP and LP, these illiberal parties also follow trends established by the UK case study. Election results from 2010 indicate that while working-class authoritarianism does not have a crippling hold on Australian politics, it does exist. One of the foremost authoritarian parties in Australia is known as One Nation. This party, based out of the Australian state of Queensland, is characterized by its radical right-wing political stances. Damon Alexander's work "Modelling the Socioeconomic and Demographic Characteristics of One Nation's Vote" examines the voting base of the party. This study concludes that earners in excess of \$1500 are "decidedly less likely to support One Nation than those earning less than \$699..." (Alexander 9). Lipset's thesis is once again confirmed by these results; the majority of support for an illiberal political party in a democracy is coming from lower-income classes.

While Alexander's work illuminates the voting trends for One Nation, on the political far right, it does not discuss One Nation in comparison to far-left authoritarian parties. Results from the most recent Australian Federal elections (held in 2010) indicate that Australian working-class authoritarianism also leans disproportionately towards the radical right. One Nation, the illiberal right-wing example party discussed above, gathered 27,184 popular votes for 0.2 percent overall.

This is significantly greater than the figures reported for the illiberal left-wing Communist Alliance, which received 656 votes. So small was the voter support for the Communist Alliance that they received a statistical zero percent of the popular vote in this election (“Party Totals”). Interestingly, as in the case of the BNP, One Nation enjoys much of its support from one geographic region, in this case the state in which it is headquartered in, Queensland (Alexander 2).

The final country to provide a case study is the United States. Also a liberal democracy, the United States differs from the previous case studies in the means by which its democratic actions are carried out. The United States relies upon a presidential electoral system rather than a parliamentary system. This has resulted in the emergence of two strong parties with little to no practical chance of a viable third party emerging and earning seats in Congress in the foreseeable future, as they frequently do in the Parliaments of the UK and Australia. In the United States, the two main political parties are the center-left Democratic Party and the center-right Republican Party.

Despite the aforementioned difference, statistics indicate a high degree of similarity between the US and the previous countries discussed. *New York Times* exit poll data confirms that the majority of individuals with family income equal to or below \$49,999 have voted Democrat since as far back as 1992 (the first year in which this data was compiled). In contrast, those who make \$100,000 or over per family have statistically voted Republican, with the exception of the 2008 election in which results were split 49 percent to each party (“National Exit Polls Table”). This data confirms that, as in the previous case studies, members of lower social strata tend to vote to the left while wealthier members of society vote for right leaning parties.

What is, however, different about the United States is the lack of a “dominant” right-wing authoritarian party. Whereas in the UK and Australia a lower-class individual sympathizing with authoritarianism can find and vote for right-wing illiberal parties like the BNP and One Nation, the political structure of the United States is arranged in such a way that no true, viable, third-party exists, let alone one characterized by right-wing illiberalism.⁵ Two of the most illiberal right-wing parties in US politics, the United States Nazi Party and the American Fascist

⁵ The term “viable” is used in this context to indicate a third-party with a realistic capability of winning a seat in Congress as many third parties in Parliamentary governments like the UK and Australia can. This idea is expanded upon later in this paper.

Movement, do not publicize membership statistics. Furthermore, neither party indicates its intention to sponsor their own candidate to run for national office (though the American Fascist Movement has seemingly endorsed Ron Paul for President), a stark contrast to the national ambitions of the BNP and One Nation (“American Fascist Movement...”). As far as the illiberal left in the United States, it appears to be just as irrelevant as elsewhere in the world. The Communist Party USA, like the US Nazi Party and American Fascist Movement, has not entered its own candidate in any recent elections, preferring instead to endorse President Barack Obama in both 2008 and 2012 (Webb).

Despite the lack of instantiated working-class authoritarianism with an independently functioning illiberal right-wing party, lower-class individuals can still be seen voting against trends for right-wing parties in the United States. Similar to the UK and Australia, this also occurs in certain geographic locations; in this case, the region in question is the US South. Exit polls from the 2004 Presidential election indicate that the Republican Party was favored in the South by a margin of 58 percent to 42 percent, the largest discrepancy between parties of any US region (“US President/National/Exit Poll 2004”). This trend continued in 2008 when the South was the only region to vote Republican with a greater frequency than Democrat (“Election Center 2008: Exit Polls”). This pattern can be traced back as far as 1980, with the Southern vote either favoring Republican or being split with Democrats in every election (“National Exit Polls Table”). Perhaps coincidentally, the American South is also statistically the poorest region of the United States, a title that recent data indicates it is putting distance on other regions for (Velasco). This evidence of geopolitical cleavages, in which the lower class from one particular region votes in a manner apart from the same class elsewhere, is indicative of a working-class authoritarian sentiment within United States politics.

When taking the totality of the case studies together, it becomes clear that working-class authoritarianism is in fact, still relevant in modern-day democracies. Though these authoritarian sympathies seem to have shifted along the political spectrum since the time Lipset introduced the theory, it nonetheless holds true: certain groups of people of a relatively low socioeconomic class are indeed more prone to sympathize with authoritarian regimes. Another finding that is perhaps more surprising is that working-class authoritarianism seems to have a greater practical effect in parliamentary democracies. This is due to the higher propensity for third parties to earn seats in parliament in either the United Kingdom or Australia than for one to win a seat in Congress in

the United States. This results in a scenario in which a system at face value may seem to be more representative and “democratic,” is actually much more prone to allowing power to authoritarian parties, thus creating an overall more illiberal regime. In the case of the United States, the incredibly rigid two-party structure that exists forces would-be radical right or left voters closer to the political center, robbing authoritarian parties of potential votes. This notion explains the lack of a viable radical right third-party in the United States, as was apparent in the UK and Australia, despite the presence of the seemingly prerequisite geographically concentrated lower class present in all three of the countries.

Given the modern prevalence of working-class authoritarianism, it is valuable to discuss its economic implications upon those affected by it. The relationship between the liberalism or illiberalism of a regime and the economic ramifications of that distinction were of particular interest to political scientist Barrington Moore. In his 1966 book *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Moore explores the relationship between economics and liberalism in governments around the world. One of Moore’s conclusions holds that liberal democracies are largely the result of lower class individuals gaining more wealth and eventually becoming part of an expanding middle class. This newly created middle class will then go about pressing for political rights. This process leads, according to Moore, inevitably to an increase in liberalism, culminating in the establishment of a liberal democracy (Moore 1966). In making this claim, Moore discovered a positive correlation between liberalism and economic growth, resulting in quality-of-life gains for the lower and middle classes.

On the opposite end of the political spectrum, Moore argues that illiberal and authoritarian regimes stifle the economic growth of the lower classes, seemingly with a goal of preventing them from creating a middle class. To Moore, a right-leaning authoritarian regime results from changes from the economic top, as opposed to the middle, as would happen in a liberal political shift (Moore 1966). This upper class then imposes authoritarian measures to solidify its control over the country in question. Unsurprisingly, this is done at the expense of the classes below it. In this manner Moore makes another positive correlation, this time between illiberal, authoritarian regimes and lower social, economic, and political status for those of the lower class. This results in an overall lower standard of living for members of this lower class.

With Moore demonstrating that favorable economic circumstances (more specifically, the creation of a large middle class) implies an increase in political liberalism, what does this mean for the economic implications of modern working-class authoritarianism? Simple *modus ponens* indicates that if beneficial economic circumstances to the lower and middle classes of society imply an increase in liberalism, then an illiberal system would lead to harmful economic circumstances. This asserts that working-class authoritarianism, by leading people to favor authoritarian regimes, is also leading them to support a system that is damaging to their own economic best interests.

The theory of working-class authoritarianism presented in this work is very much a product of its time. Lipset's work was written shortly after the conclusion of World War II, in which three of the belligerent fascist states (Germany, Japan, and Italy) were vanquished and during an era when common opinion presented communism as the foremost threat to liberalism throughout the world. This thesis can best be summarized in Lipset's own words: "Both evidence and theory suggest, however, that the lower strata are relatively more authoritarian, that (again, other things being equal) they will be more attracted towards an extremist movement than toward a moderate and democratic one, and that, once recruited, they will not be alienated by its lack of democracy, while more educated or sophisticated supporters will tend to drop away" (Lipset 484). While Lipset's theory was, at the time, focused on discussing the communist appeal to democratic lower classes it is still relevant today, despite the fall of communism. Through the course of the over half-century since Lipset's theory was published, the lower socioeconomic classes he indicated have undergone a shift from sympathizing with the illiberal left to the illiberal right.

The trend explained and discussed by this theory bears a poor omen for the economic status of those affected by it. Time has shown that authoritarian regimes, be they politically left or right, seldom benefit the lower classes. In this there is the tragic irony of working-class authoritarianism: many of those who would benefit most from the liberal economic policies of centrist political policies are among those who challenge them most vehemently. Should this trend continue to progress and expand, as data suggests it has and will, those of the lower socioeconomic classes in liberal democracies around the world, particularly those based upon a parliamentary structure, risk doing drastic damage to their economic self-interest.

Table 1

Responses of Different German Occupational Groups to Preferred Party System in Percentages (Males Only), 1953					
Occupational Group	Several Parties	One Party	No Party	No Opinion	Number
Civil Servants	88	6	3	3	111
Upper White-Collar	77	13	2	8	58
Free Professionals	69	13	8	10	38
Skilled Workers	65	22	5	8	277
Artisans	64	16	9	11	124
Lower White-Collar	62	19	7	12	221
Businessmen (Small)	60	15	12	13	156
Farmers	56	22	6	16	241
Semi-Skilled Workers	49	28	7	16	301
Unskilled Workers	40	27	11	22	172

Source: Lipset, Seymour Martin. "Democracy and Working-Class Authoritarianism." *American Sociological Review*. 24. no. 4 (1959): 482–501.

Table 2

Proportion of Male Respondents Who Are "More Tolerant" With Respect to Civil Liberties Issues		
Occupational Group	Percentage	Number
Professional and Semi-Professional	66	159
Proprietors, Managers, and Officials	51	223
Clerical and Sales	49	200
Manual Workers	30	685
Farmers or Farm Workers	20	202

Source: Lipset, Seymour Martin. "Democracy and Working-Class Authoritarianism." *American Sociological Review*. 24. no. 4 (1959): 482–501.

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