

The 2008 Great Recession Lowered Americans' Class Identity

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Abstract

Americans readily identify with class labels, such as *working class* and *middle class*. In turn, these identities affect their social affiliations, cultural values, and physical health. Despite theoretical predictions that class identity can change, little work has empirically examined the long-term malleability of class identity. Here we ask, can class identity change in the long term? And if so, when? We tested this question by examining whether the 2008 Great Recession changed how Americans viewed their social and economic standing in society—that is, their class identity. In three of four data sets (total $N = 164,296$), we found that the 2008 Great Recession shifted Americans toward identifying as a lower class. We discuss the implications of these results for theories of the formation of class identity and for the political and social development of the United States following 2008.

Keywords

subjective socioeconomic status, socioeconomic conditions, personality development, identity formation

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Class identity refers to the social and economic position in society of which people consider themselves a member (e.g., working or middle class; Jackman & Jackman, 1973). It is both a source of meaning and understanding for one's experiences and a director of social and cultural affiliation. Consequently, it affects a wide array of personal and interpersonal outcomes. For instance, people who identify as a higher class have better physical health (Adler et al., 2000; Cundiff & Matthews, 2017) and psychological well-being (Tan et al., 2020). People who identify as a higher class tend to vote more conservatively, both for politicians (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015) and for policies (e.g., against economic redistribution; Jackson & Payne, 2021). In social interactions people who identify as a higher class, or are perceived as such, are stereotyped positively; observers see them as more open-minded, more conscientious, more extraverted, more agreeable, and more emotionally stable (Hughes et al., 2023). And in terms of worldviews, identifying as a higher class brings rose-tinted glasses. Compared with those who identified as a lower class,

Americans who identified as higher class more strongly identified with this class but were less aware of classism in society, perceived less conflict between classes, viewed classes as permeable, and reported less discrimination because of their social class (Keefer et al., 2015).

Considering the psychological power of class identity, an important pair of questions to ask is, can class identity change in the long term, and if so, when? Little research has examined long-term change in class identity. Here, we present an initial study of how class identity changes across individuals' lives, investigating how the 2008 Great Recession changed Americans' class identity. We note that this project emerged as an extension of a larger project on age-, period-, and cohort-based change in class identity in the United States (reported in the Supplemental Material available online).

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Can Class Identity Change in the Long Term? And if so, When?

The impression that emerges from the history of research on class identity is one of stability. For instance, Americans are most likely to identify as working class and middle class, and this has been true as far back as 1943 (Cantril, 1943). Moreover, differences in class identity between people are relatively stable over short to moderate periods of time, with $r_s \approx .60$ from 2 weeks up to 7 months (Giatti et al., 2012; Operario et al., 2004; Thompson et al., 2014).¹ Despite this stability, momentary changes in class identity can be induced using experimental manipulations, whether through telling people to imagine that they have less money than they actually do (Antonoplis & Chen, 2021; Lee et al., 2018) or by asking people to compare themselves to people who have more or less than they do (Ten Brinke & Keltner, 2022; see Tan & Tai, 2025, for a meta-analysis). It is important to note that theory about class-identity formation makes predictions about when individuals should change their class identity in the long run.

Theory about the formation of class identity has moved toward a consensus model in the last few decades. Two core processes involved in the formation of class identity are what can be called *absolute* and *relative* processes (Galvan et al., 2022). In the absolute process, people consider the actual level or amount of resources they have and add these resources into a single level (Adler et al., 2000; Andersson, 2015, 2018; Jackman & Jackman, 1973; Singh-Manoux et al., 2003). This process implies that people should shift their class identity up or down in the long run as they stably acquire more or fewer socioeconomic resources throughout their lives (e.g., graduating college vs. finishing one's schooling after high school). In the relative process, people use the single aggregated level of their resources and compare it to their perception of the aggregated levels of the people with whom they interact in a psychologically relevant community (e.g., their neighborhood, their friends, their country; Kraus et al., 2013; Tan et al., 2020). This process implies that people should shift their class identity up or down in the long run as they acquire stable reference points of people with fewer or more socioeconomic resources than they have (e.g., a sibling or close friend with a lower vs. higher wage). Work on these two core processes has focused almost exclusively on people's current levels of resources, assuming that people's past and anticipated future levels of resources are irrelevant to how people form a class identity. There is increasing recognition, however, that people's past and anticipated future levels of resources play a role in class identity formation (Destin et al., 2017; Laurin et al., 2024).

How might each of these processes guide class identity formation in response to the Great Recession? Absolute theories predict that class identity changes whenever people experience changes in their socioeconomic conditions. Graduating from high school or college should increase class identity, as should raises in wages. During the Great Recession, many Americans lost large amounts of their income (Danziger, 2013) and wealth (Pfeffer et al., 2013), especially home equity, and many Americans lost their jobs (Hoynes et al., 2012). In addition, some cities reported large increases in rates of homelessness (Sard, 2009). These changes were long-lasting, until at least 2011 or 2013 (Pfeffer et al., 2013), despite the formal end to the Great Recession in 2009 as determined by gross domestic product (GDP) performance (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2024). Thus, absolute theories predict that the 2008 Great Recession would have, on average, lowered Americans' class identity.

Relative theories predict that class identity changes whenever people experience or perceive changes in their rank-order position in their socioeconomic conditions. Thus, sources as diverse as changes in reference points (e.g., making friends with rich peers at school) and changes in rank-order position (e.g., not getting a promotion and raise at work that one's peers got) should change class identity. Similarly, more recent theories that emphasize comparisons to one's past and future socioeconomic conditions allow for diverse sources of changes in class identity, as long as those changes alter one's understanding of one's past and future socioeconomic conditions (e.g., learning that home ownership is an unlikely personal outcome). A raft of cultural changes occurred during the Great Recession that may have altered how Americans viewed their position in society. Media outlets reported with great fear and consternation on the effects of the Great Recession (e.g., Associated Press, 2009; Evans, 2009; Herbert, 2010), which may have made readers feel threatened about their own position or future prospects (Hill et al., 2012). The rise of Occupy Wall Street brought new language for identifying one's position in society: the 1% versus the 99%. This language emphasized to most Americans that they were economically lower than another group of Americans. Finally, the federal government's decision to bail out the banks instead of citizens constituted a form of institutional betrayal that left many Americans feeling bitter about their own economic prospects and their own importance to the economy (Lipton & Nixon, 2009; Matsu, 2011; Schoenfeld, 2008; Smith & Freyd, 2014). Thus, relative theories predict that the 2008 Great Recession would have, on average, lowered Americans' class identity.

The Present Research

In the present research, we examined how Americans' class identity changed as a result of the 2008 Great Recession. We did not preregister any aspects of this study, and we made the prediction described above after seeing the historical trends reported in the Supplemental Material but before conducting the analyses reported here. We report in the study how we determined our sample sizes as well as all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures. Analytic code is available on the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/7qjc8/?view_only=d47b1953aa6e4537bd21ab7649dc2b5d.

Research Transparency Statement

General disclosures

Conflicts of interest: All authors declare no conflicts of interest. **Funding:** This research was supported by grants from the National Institute on Aging (No. R01-AG018436, No. R01-AG067622, and No. R01-AG064006) and the Claude D. Pepper Older Americans Independence Center (OAIC) at Northwestern University (No. P30AG059988). **Artificial intelligence:** No artificial intelligence technologies were used in this research or in the creation of this article. **Ethics:** This research was considered exempt by Northwestern University's institutional review board. **Computational reproducibility:** The computational reproducibility of the results in the main article (but not the Supplemental Material) has been independently confirmed by the journal's STAR team. Instructions for reproduction of all analyses in the manuscript and the Supplemental Material are available at <https://osf.io/7qjc8/files/3u6rf>. **Open Science Framework:** To ensure long-term preservation, we registered all OSF files at <https://osf.io/87sfh/>.

Study disclosures

Preregistration: No aspects of this study were preregistered. **Materials:** All materials associated with the data sets we used are publicly available, and links to access them are available in the manuscript or online at <https://osf.io/7qjc8/files/pq3gt>. **Data:** All data sets are publicly available, and links to access them are available in the manuscript or online at <https://osf.io/7qjc8/files/pq3gt>. We cannot share the primary data, because we do not own them. **Analysis scripts:** All analytic code we wrote to clean and analyze the data is available online at <https://osf.io/7qjc8/files>. Some functions we used need to be downloaded from third

parties, and instructions for that process are included on the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/7qjc8/files/3u6rf>.

Method

Participants

We identified four data sets that had the requisite data structure for our study. All four data sets were publicly available. These were the American National Election Studies, the General Social Survey, the World Values Survey, and the Health and Retirement Study. We briefly describe each of these data sets below, and Table 1 reports sample characteristics for gender, race, highest educational degree attained, and current labor-force status.

American National Election Studies. The American National Election Studies is a set of national surveys of political opinions and behaviors, begun by the Survey Research Center and Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan (American National Election Studies, 2021; <https://electionstudies.org/>). Beginning in 1948 and continuing through the present day, this data set has routinely obtained nationally representative samples of American adults. Class identity was measured from 1956 to 2016. Across all yearly samples, there were 59,944 participants, and yearly sample sizes were generally large (median = 1,714, min = 662, max = 5,914). The first column of Table 1 shows that participants in this data set were broadly representative of the United States in terms of gender, race, education, and labor-force status.

General Social Survey. The General Social Survey is a national survey of social and political attitudes and behaviors, begun by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago (Davern et al., 2024; <https://gss.norc.org/>). Beginning in 1972 and continuing through the present day, this data set has routinely obtained nationally representative samples of American adults. Class identity was measured from 1972 to 2022. Across all yearly samples, there were 72,390 participants, and yearly sample sizes were generally large (median = 1,716, min = 1,372, max = 4,510). The second column of Table 1 shows that participants in this data set were broadly representative of the United States in terms of gender, race, education, and labor-force status.

World Values Survey. The World Values Survey is an international survey of social, political, economic, religious, and cultural attitudes and values, started at the University of Michigan (Inglehart et al., 2020; <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>). Beginning in 1981 and continuing through the present day, this data set has

Table 1. Demographics Across All Waves

	ANES	GSS	WVS	HRS
Sample size	59,944	72,390	8,819	23,143
Gender				
Women	55%	55.8%	50%	51%
Men	45%	44.2%	50%	49%
Race				
Asian	1%	—	0.5%	—
Black	12%	14%	11%	15%
Latino	7%	—	12%	11%
Multiracial	—	—	2%	—
Native American	1%	—	—	—
Other	1%	6%	3%	1%
White	79%	80%	72%	73%
Education				
No degree	26%	20%	24%	20%
High school	53%	50%	50%	55%
Associate's	—	6%	—	—
Bachelor's	14%	16%	26%	13%
Graduate	7%	8%	—	12%
Labor-force status				
Employed	60%	61%	62%	29%
Unemployed	6%	4%	7%	2%
Retired	16%	15%	18%	61%
Disabled	4%	—	—	2%
Not in labor force (other reason)	15%	20%	14%	5%

Note: ANES = American National Election Studies; GSS = General Social Survey; WVS = World Values Survey; HRS = Health and Retirement Study. Dashes indicate that a response option was not administered in a data set.

obtained nationally representative samples of American adults roughly every 5 years. Class identity was measured from 1995 to 2017. Across all yearly samples, there were 8,819 participants, and yearly sample sizes were generally large (median = 1,542, min = 1,200, max = 2,596). The third column of Table 1 shows that participants in this data set were broadly representative of the United States in terms of gender, race, education, and labor-force status.

Health and Retirement Study. Started in 1992, the Health and Retirement Study is a longitudinal, cohort sequential study originally focused on the experiences of American adults aged 50 and older and later expanded to adults of all ages (University of Michigan, 2024; <https://hrs.isr.umich.edu/about>). Birth years ranged from 1900 to 1996. The sample is large ($N = 23,143$) and nationally representative. The fourth column of Table 1 shows that participants in this data set were broadly representative of the United States in terms of gender, race, education, and labor-force status, with an important caveat for labor-force status: Participants in the Health and Retirement Study were much more likely to be retired than the

participants in the other data sets used here (61% vs. 14%–17% in the other samples). This difference in labor-force status is expected, given the data set's focus on retirement-age individuals. Retired participants may have been sheltered from the Great Recession's effects on income and employment, compared with participants in the labor force, but retired individuals, including those in the Health and Retirement Study, could still have been exposed to the recession's effects on wealth and housing.

Measures

The American National Election Studies, the General Social Survey, and the World Values Survey asked participants to pick a class label with which they identified most strongly. In the American National Election Studies, the available labels were *lower*, *average working*, *working*, *upper working*, *average middle*, *middle*, *upper middle*, and *upper*. In the General Social Survey, the available labels were *lower*, *working*, *middle*, and *upper*. In the World Values Survey, the available labels were *lower*, *working*, *lower middle*, *upper middle*, and *upper*.

Each data set converted these labels into integers differently. In the American National Election Studies, the labels ranged from 0 (*lower*) to 7 (*upper*). In the General Social Survey, the labels ranged from 1 (*lower*) to 4 (*upper*). In the World Values Survey, the labels ranged from 1 (*lower*) to 5 (*upper*).

The Health and Retirement Study administered the MacArthur Ladder for socioeconomic status at the country level to subsets of participants beginning in 2004 and continuing through the most recent wave (2020). This measure asks participants to think of the people who are the best off and worst off in society in terms of money, education, and jobs and then rate their own standing in society, relative to the best-off and worst-off individuals, on a scale from 1 to 10. In past work, the MacArthur Ladder has been found to correlate very highly with the measure of class identity used in the other data sets studied here (i.e., $r = .63$ in Andersson, 2022, and $rs > .70$ in Antonoplis & Chen, 2021).

In all data sets, we used the original integers provided by each data set. This means that only the direction of the regression coefficients is comparable across data sets.

Analytic approach

We used interrupted time-series modeling to answer our research questions. We included terms for a pre-event linear trend, a level change, and post-event linear change. This model allowed us to identify whether Americans' class identity changed before the Great Recession (pre-event linear trend), in response to the Great Recession (level change), and whether class identity increased or decreased following any initial change (post-event linear change). We used weights provided by each data set that adjusted for a variety of demographic factors (e.g., gender, race, age, geographic location) and for a variety of factors related to study participation (e.g., Internet and phone access, in-person vs. online interview) in all samples except the Health and Retirement Study. The weights available in the Health and Retirement Study removed 74% of observations from the sample, which we deemed too costly a trade-off.

The four studies we used had two kinds of designs, requiring different, albeit broadly similar, modeling strategies. The American National Election Studies, the General Social Survey, and the World Values Survey used repeated cross-sectional designs. Each year, these studies recruited a new sample of participants that was distinct from participants sampled in prior years of the study. This design allowed us to examine how class identity changed across groups of distinct Americans

surveyed before and after the recession. The Health and Retirement Study used a cohort-sequential design. Each year, it followed up with participants recruited in prior years, and it recruited a new cohort of participants who were followed up with in subsequent years. This design allowed us to examine how class identity changed within the lives of one group of Americans. We detail differences in modeling strategy for each design below.

Repeated cross-sectional designs. We used interrupted time-series modeling in which all participants interviewed in a given assessment year received the same values on the three model terms (Biglan et al., 2000; Cheung et al., 2020; Lopez Bernal et al., 2017). For example, all participants interviewed in 2004 had a value of -4 for the pre-event linear trend, a value of 0 for the level change, and a value of 0 for the post-event linear change. Because the 2008 Great Recession officially started in December 2007, we used January 2008 as our measure of the recession's start. We modeled the pre-event linear trend as years until 2008, which increased from a negative value to negative one in 2007. We modeled level change as all years prior to 2008 ($= 0$) versus 2008 and all subsequent years ($= 1$). We modeled post-event linear change as time since 2008, which started at 1 in 2009 and increased by 1 per year until however many years had passed since 2008. The intercept in this model is, thus, the predicted class identity in 2008 if the pre-2008 trend had continued through 2008. For each data set, we predicted yearly class identity from pre-event linear trend, level change, and post-event linear change. We used standard linear regression models.

Cohort sequential designs. Because of the clustered nature of longitudinal data, we used a hierarchical interrupted time-series model nested within participants. For each participant, we modeled the pre-event linear trend as years until 2008, which increased from a negative value to -1 in 2007 and was 0 in 2008 and all subsequent years. We modeled level change as all years prior to 2008 ($= 0$) versus 2008 and all subsequent years ($= 1$). We modeled the post-event linear change as time since 2008, which started at 1 in 2009 and increased until however many years had passed since 2008. The intercept in this model is, thus, the predicted class identity in 2008 if the pre-2008 trend had continued through 2008. We predicted yearly class identity from pre-event linear trend, level change, and post-event linear change. We fitted a random intercept and a random slope for level change; we were unable to fit random slopes for pre-event linear trend or post-event linear change because of convergence issues.

Identification strategy

Finally, interrupted time-series models have five threats to their validity (Biglan et al., 2000; Hausman & Rapson, 2018; Lopez Bernal et al., 2017). The first two threats pertain to whether the obtained results can be interpreted causally. The last three threats pertain to the accuracy of the estimated coefficients and standard errors. We describe here why the first two threats do not apply to the current study, and we describe in the Supplemental Material why the last three threats do not apply.

The first threat is the possibility that co-occurring events other than the focal event caused the observed pattern in the outcome. In the case of the present study, this threat does not seem to apply. If we limit the pool of possible events to those of sufficient magnitude to induce a population-level effect in the United States, there are only a handful of events that co-occurred with the Great Recession. For example, the 2008 election of Barack Obama to the presidency was of a similar magnitude to the Great Recession, but it occurred almost a year after the Recession had started and carried a note of hope that America was entering a post-racial era. Similarly, a number of important events occurred during the United States' war in the Middle East, several years before the Great Recession (e.g., the trial and execution of Saddam Hussein in 2006) and several years after the Great Recession (e.g., WikiLeaks' revelations about Guantánamo Bay in 2011, the assassination of Osama bin Laden in 2011), but none co-occurred with the Great Recession and it is not obvious why these events would have affected class identity.

The second threat is the possibility that people change their behavior in anticipation of the event or self-select out of experiencing the event (see Dunning, 2012, for additional details on this threat). In the case of the present study, this threat does not seem to apply for three reasons. First, the participants in the data sets we used were last interviewed before the Great Recession in 2004 and 2006; 2006, 2005, 2004, and the preceding years of the early 2000s were periods of economic growth (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2024). Drops in home prices did not take off until the

very end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008 (U.S. Federal Housing Finance Agency, 2024), and the real GDP did not decline until 2008 (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2024). It seems unlikely that participants interviewed 2 to 4 years prior to 2008, during years of real GDP and housing-market growth, would have expected or known that they would experience a recession in 2008. Second, as far as we can tell, there are only two ways to avoid a population-level historical event such as a recession: (1) move to a country that is not experiencing the event or (2) die. It seems reasonable to assume that most people prefer to live than to die. It also seems reasonable to assume that most people prefer to not fully uproot their lives and move to a different country. Thus, it is possible that people in the United States had some incentives to avoid the 2008 recession, but these incentives were likely not very strong. Third, attrition in response to the Great Recession seems more likely to attenuate than to magnify the effect studied here. It seems plausible that experiencing stronger negative effects of the recession would reduce motivation to participate in surveys. If true, this compositional change in surveys post-2008 should lead to an underrepresentation of the people most likely to identify as members of lower classes. This underrepresentation should raise the sample-average level of class identity, attenuating any sample-average declines in class identity observed post-2008. Given the above arguments, we consider the 2008 Great Recession to satisfy the requirements for causal identification in the U.S. context and for the outcome that we study in the present manuscript.

Results

Did the Great Recession change class identity for Americans surveyed before and after 2008?

Table 2 gives the regression coefficients and standard errors for each parameter from the interrupted time-series model in the American National Election Studies, the General Social Survey, and the World Values Survey.

Table 2. Coefficients (Standard Errors) From Interrupted Time Series Models of National Class Identity

	ANES	GSS	WVS
Intercept	3.03 (0.02)***	2.48 (0.006)***	2.85 (0.03)***
Pre-event linear trend	0.008 (0.0008)***	0.0002 (0.0003)	−0.01 (0.003)***
Level change	−0.13 (0.04)**	−0.08 (0.01)***	−0.02 (0.04)
Post-event linear change	0.02 (0.006)**	0.001 (0.001)	0.01 (0.005)*

Note: ANES = American National Election Studies; GSS = General Social Survey; WVS = World Values Survey.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Beginning with the American National Election Studies, class identity increased in the decades before 2008, as indicated by the statistically significant positive coefficient for the pre-event linear trend. Critically, class identity dropped in 2008, as indicated by the statistically significant negative coefficient for the level change. Finally, class identity recovered to pre-2008 levels relatively quickly in the 8 available years following 2008, as indicated by the statistically significant positive coefficient for post-event linear change.

In the General Social Survey, class identity did not reliably change in the decades before 2008; showed a statistically significant drop in 2008; and then again showed no reliable change in the 14 years following 2008.

In the World Values Survey, class identity significantly decreased in the decades before 2008; it then showed a statistically nonsignificant decrease in 2008; and then significantly increased over the 9 available years following 2008.

Figure 1 shows class identity for each year over time and the predicted regression lines for each data set. The red line before 2008 indicates the pre-event linear trend. The vertical red line at 2008 indicates the level change in 2008. The red line after 2008 indicates the post-event linear change. Finally, the dashed blue line indicates the counterfactual line, reflecting what would have resulted if the pre-2008 linear trend had continued post-2008.

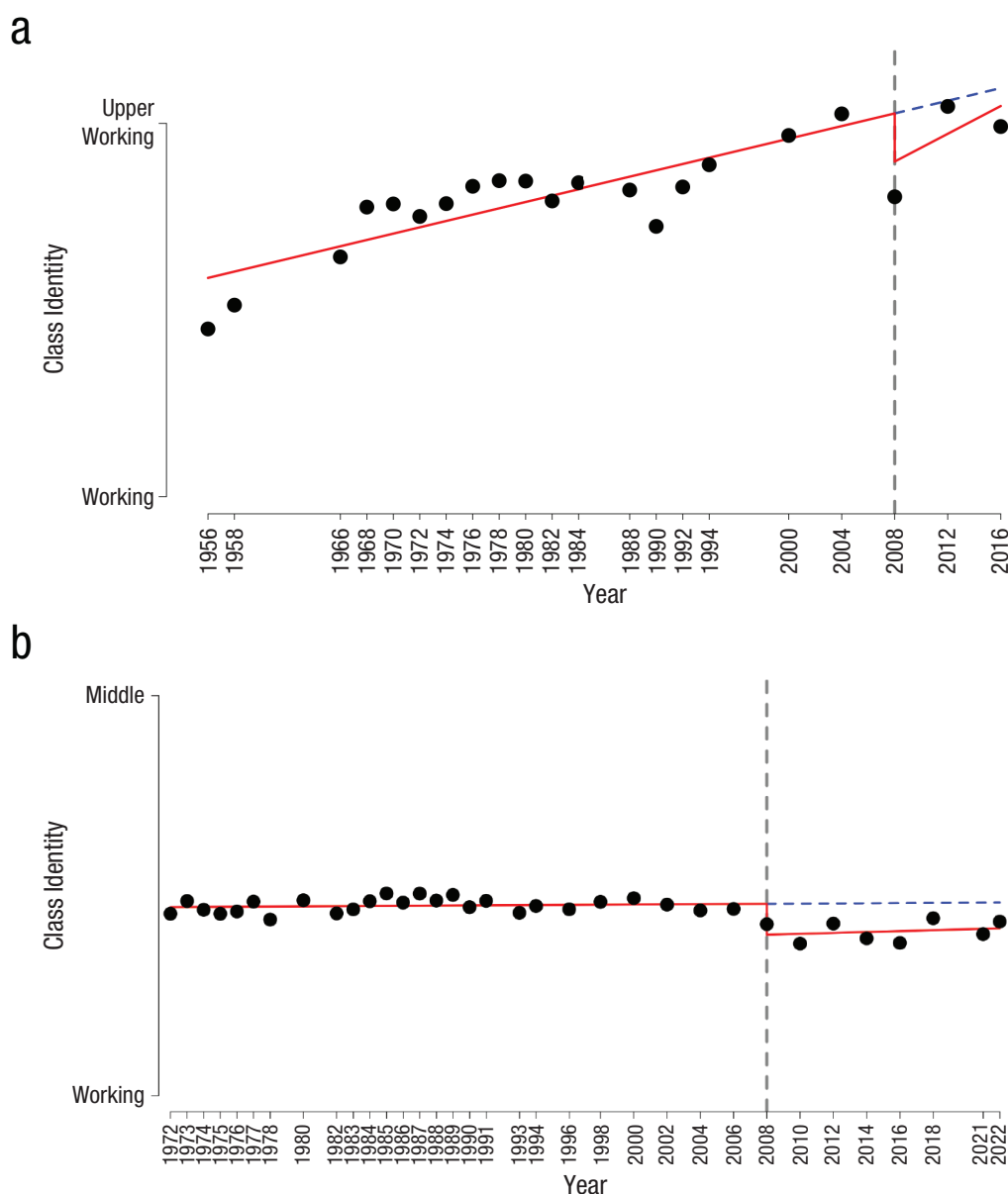


Fig. 1. (continued on next page)

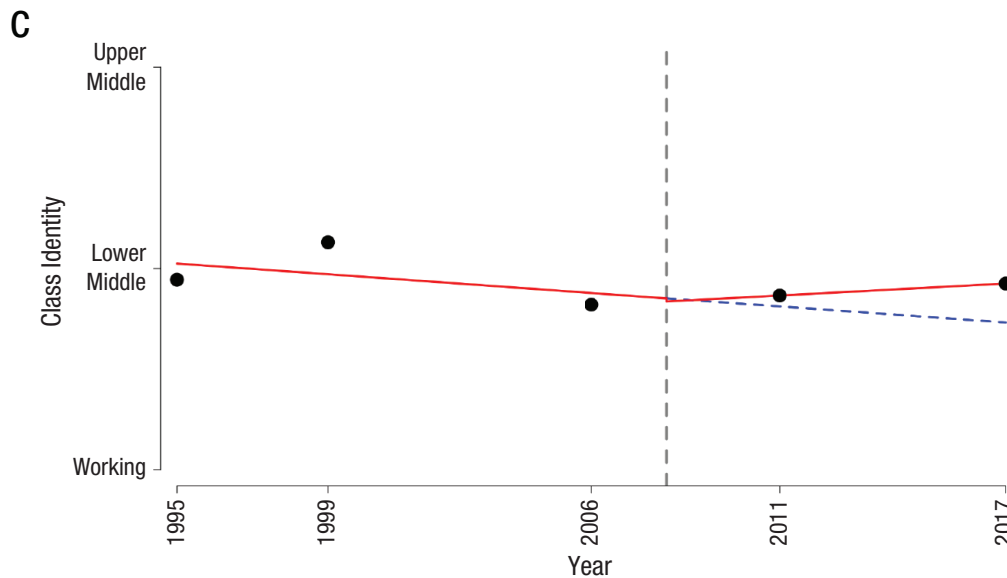


Fig. 1. Interrupted time-series models of the Great Recession and aggregate American class identity. In (a) results of the American National Election Studies are shown; in (b) results from the General Social Survey are shown; and in (c) results of the World Values Survey are shown. Y-axes are truncated to more clearly demonstrate the historical change. Dots are the average level of class identity (weighted) in each year.

Did the Great Recession change class identity within the lives of individual Americans?

Replicating results from the repeated cross-sectional designs, in the Health and Retirement Study, individual Americans experienced a linear increase in class identity in the years preceding 2008 ($B_{\text{pre}} = 0.16$, $SE = 0.02$, $df = 20,167$, $t = 10.56$, $p < .001$), a level drop in 2008 ($B_{\text{level}} = -0.53$, $SE = 0.04$, $df = 21,036$, $t = -12.23$, $p < .001$) compared with their expected level in 2008 had the Great Recession not occurred ($B_{\text{intercept}} = 6.77$, $SE = 0.04$, $df = 20,239$, $t = 159.66$, $p < .001$), and a linear increase in the years following 2008 ($B_{\text{post}} = 0.02$, $SE = 0.002$, $df = 31,598$, $t = 11.04$, $p < .001$). Between-person differences in the average level of class identity accounted for over half of the variance (intraclass correlation coefficient, or ICC = 0.58). Figure 2 below shows the predicted slopes across participants, as well as the counterfactual line for if the pre-2008 trend had continued through and past 2008. The lines before 2008 indicate the pre-event linear trend; the vertical lines at 2008 indicate the level change in 2008; and the solid lines after 2008 indicate the post-event linear change. The dashed blue line indicates the counterfactual line for if the pre-2008 linear trend had continued post-2008.

Discussion

The 2008 Great Recession lowered Americans' class identity, on average. We found evidence for this claim

in three of the four data sets we examined. Two of these data sets (American National Election Studies, General Social Survey) provided evidence for this claim across samples of participants, meaning that a new sample of Americans in 2008 claimed a lower class identity than previous samples of Americans would have been expected to claim in 2008 had the Great Recession not occurred. One of these data sets (Health and Retirement Study) provided evidence for this claim within-subjects, meaning that the same participants claimed a lower class identity than they were expected to claim on the basis of their previous identifications. In addition, we found this result using two common measures of class identity, the MacArthur Ladder and class labels (e.g., working class, middle class).

These results demonstrate that class identity can change in the long term and that dominant theories of class identity formation can predict when this change happens. Although theories of class identity formation imply that class identity could change in the long term, we were aware of no research studying long-term change, and research looking at class identity over longer intervals suggested that there was some stability to class identity. For example, longitudinal studies lasting from 2 weeks up to 7 months found retest correlations around .60 for the single-item measures of class identity that we used (Giatti et al., 2012; Operario et al., 2004; Thompson et al., 2014). Similarly, Americans have been most likely to identify as working or middle class for much of the last century (Cantril, 1943). Experimental work had shown that people can be induced to change

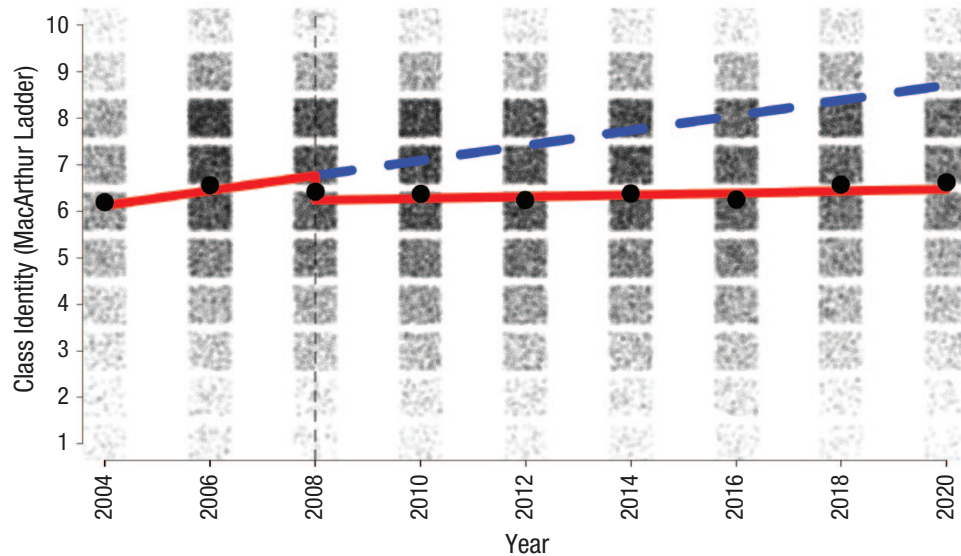


Fig. 2. Interrupted time-series model of the Great Recession and individual American class identity. Small dots represent individual data points (unmodeled), arranged in a light gray grid. Large dots represent yearly averages (unmodeled) and are visually prominent, appearing on the red lines.

their class identity for brief durations (Antonoplis & Chen, 2021; Lee et al., 2018; Tan & Tai, 2025; Ten Brinke & Keltner, 2022), so we thought it was important to investigate whether class identity can change over longer periods of time.

On the basis of the absolute theory of class identity, we argue that the material changes induced by the Great Recession should have caused Americans to identify as a relatively lower class. Many Americans lost income (Danziger, 2013), wealth, homes (Pfeffer et al., 2013), and jobs (Hoynes et al., 2012). These changes were long-lasting, until at least 2011 or 2013 (Pfeffer et al., 2013). Based on the relative theory of class identity, we argue that the cultural changes induced by the Great Recession should have caused Americans to identify as a lower class. Media outlets reported with great fear and a sense of threat on the Great Recession (e.g., Associated Press, 2009); social movements like Occupy Wall Street introduced language that emphasized to most Americans that they were economically lower than another group of Americans (i.e., the 1% vs. the 99%); and the federal government bailed out the banks that caused the recession, instead of bailing out individual Americans harmed by it, potentially creating a feeling of institutional betrayal (e.g., Schoenfeld, 2008; Smith & Freyd, 2014).

These results show that absolute and relative theories of class-identity formation can predict when class identity changes in the long term. Recent research has struggled to find support for the social comparison process that is at the heart of the relative theory of class identity

formation. For example, in an examination of the response processes to the MacArthur Ladder, which instructs people to compare themselves to other people, Tan et al. (2020) found that only 40.2% of participants (total $N = 3,590$) reported comparing themselves with other people. In addition, Tan et al. (2020) meta-analytically tested four moderators of the link between class identity and well-being that they considered tests of the theory that social comparison underlies class identity formation. Only one of these tests yielded a statistically significant result in line with the relative theory of class identity formation. The present results help strengthen the evidentiary base for the relative theory of class-identity formation by showing that the theory can be used to accurately theorize when class identity should change in the long term.

Future research might build on the present results in a variety of ways. To continue testing the validity of absolute and relative theories of class identity formation, researchers might examine how individual differences in changes in class identity following the Great Recession were associated with individual differences in changes in socioeconomic conditions during the Great Recession and with exposure to media stories about the Great Recession (cf. Ravary et al., 2023).

To continue understanding the psychological implications of the Great Recession, future research might expand to other important constructs. Past work has shown that the Great Recession worsened Americans' mental health (e.g., more depression; Hiilamo et al.,

2021; Margerison-Zilko et al., 2016). What other psychological attributes might it have affected, such as attitudes, personality traits, or social and political preferences? Given that theories of class identity portray many important psychological constructs as consequences of class identity, it will be important to examine whether individual changes in class identity are associated with individual changes in these other constructs (e.g., political views, psychological well-being). In addition, the Great Recession was global, so does the effect identified here replicate in other countries (e.g., Curtis, 2013; Kim et al., 2018)?

Overall, the 2008 Great Recession caused Americans, on average, to identify as a lower class. The reasons for these individual changes are likely diverse, and the consequences of this change remain unknown. We look forward to future work that will uncover the mechanisms underlying the change we identified and elucidate its consequences for social life.

Transparency

Action Editor: Yoel Inbar

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Author Contributions

Stephen Antonoplis: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Software; Supervision; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

Juan Eduardo Garcia-Cardenas: Project administration; Writing – review & editing.

Eileen K. Graham: Funding acquisition; Supervision; Writing – review & editing.

Daniel K. Mroczek: Funding acquisition; Supervision; Writing – review & editing.

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The authors declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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Artificial Intelligence

No artificial-intelligence technologies were used in this research or in the creation of this article.

Ethics

This research was considered exempt by Northwestern University's institutional review board.

Open Practices

Open practices for this article are described in the Research Transparency Statement section, which appears at the end of the Introduction section in the main text.

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Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information can be found at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/09567976251400338>

Note

1. These are for two single-item measures correlated with each other and with no correction for unreliability.

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