



The Association Between Lifelong Social Class Traversal and Belief in the American Dream



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Introduction

- An aspect of the American Dream is the sentiment that America is a meritocracy, where working hard means advancing up the social ladder (Wright & Boese, 2015).
- Factors related to people's meritocratic views include being in a racial minority or holding conservative/liberal political views (Reynolds & Xian, 2014; Ellis, 2017).
- Recent decline in personal or neighborhood finances was also correlated with less adherence to meritocratic views (Ellis, 2017).
- A possible factor could be social class traversal, which describes moving up or down the social ladder throughout life; for example, a person who grew up working class and is now higher class.
- Correlation between lifelong social class traversal and belief in American meritocracy has yet to be examined.

Research Questions

- Is upwards class traversal throughout life associated with a higher likelihood of holding meritocratic views?
- Does the association between lifelong class traversal and meritocratic views differ for individuals of different political alignments?

Methods

Sample

- Respondents (n=4032) were drawn from the 2021 General Social Survey (GSS), a national survey that assessing the social views of a sample of the American population.

Measures

- Meritocratic views were assessed based on these questions: Should the government reduce income differences? Is luck or hard work more important to getting ahead? Is it morally just that rich people can buy better healthcare? That they can buy better education for their children? Each individual's mean score was taken, and scores above the midpoint of this scale were coded as having meritocratic views.
- Class traversal was measured via participants' self-described current family income compared with American families in general (scored from far below average to far above average), compared to the same question for when they were sixteen years old. From this, we measure the change from their youth to current day. This is scored from -4 to 4. For example, a zero indicates no class change, a 2 is moving up two "levels" of self-reported economic status since youth, and a -4 is moving from a far above average economic status to far below average.
- Participants reported their political party; Democrats and leaning Democrats were coded liberal, and Republicans and leaning Republicans were coded as conservative.

Results

Univariate

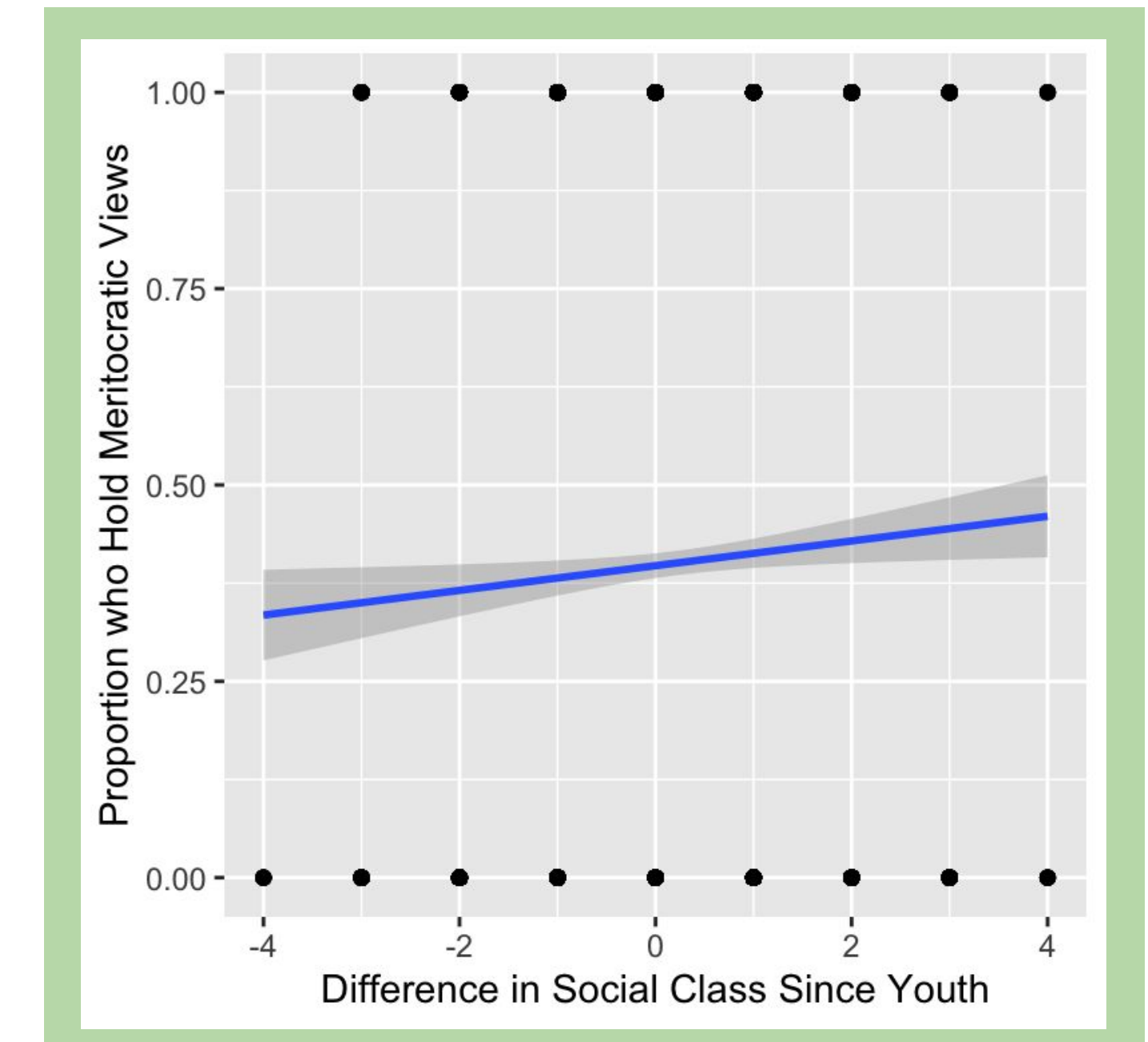
- 39.2% of people reported no class change, and 41.3% moved one level up or down (1 or -1).
- Only 0.4% of people have moved 4 levels up or down (4 or -4).
- Skewed positive; more people report moving upwards throughout life. (Figure 1)



Bivariate

- ANOVA analysis showed that **upwards class traversal was significantly associated with the likelihood of holding meritocratic views** ($F(5.5,3802)=36.66, p=0.019$) (Figure 2).
- A logistic regression showed that for every level of economic status an individual has moved up by, their odds of holding meritocratic views increases by a factor of 1.07.

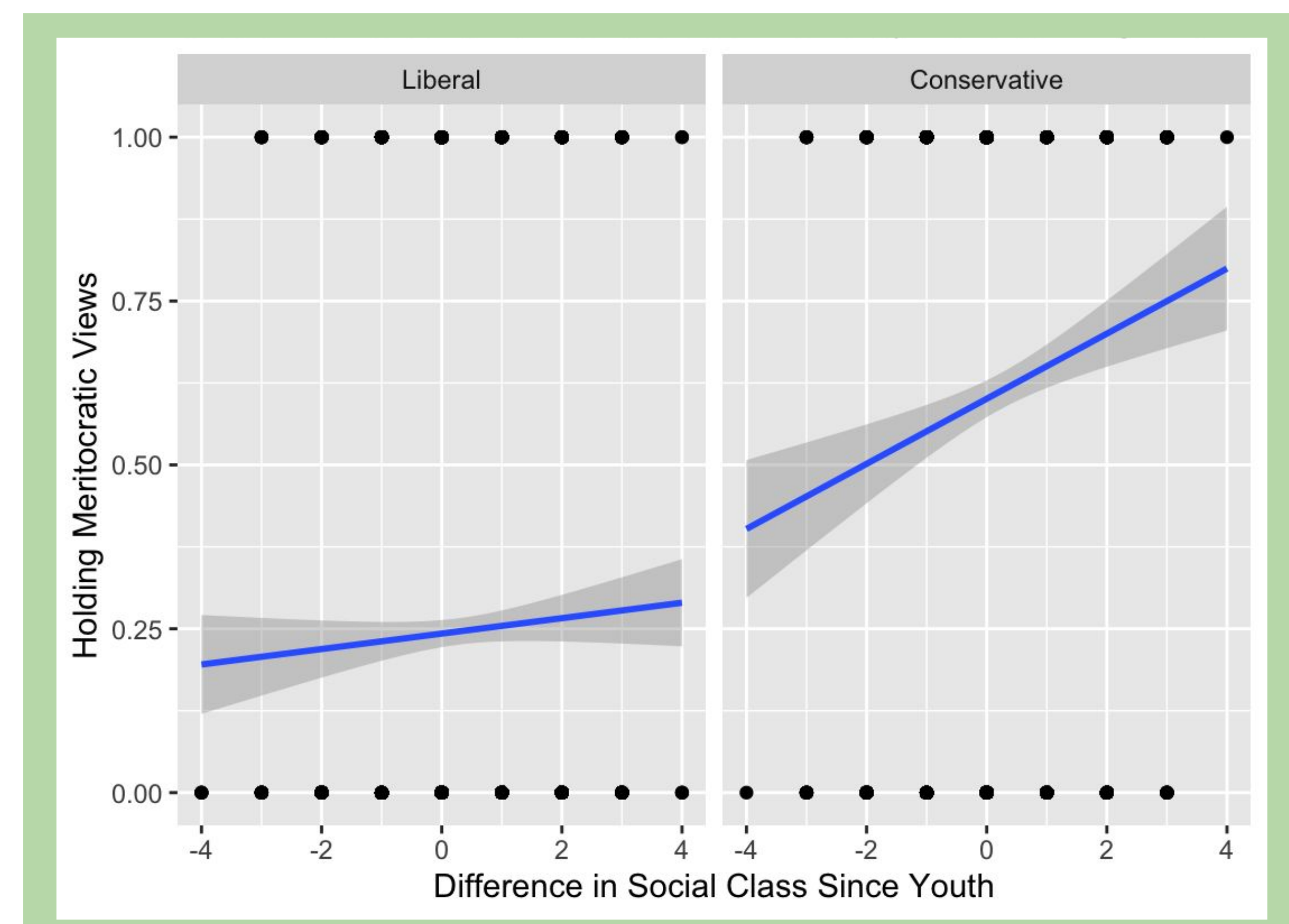
Figure 2. Class Traversal and Meritocratic Views



Multivariate

- Multiple logistic regression analysis reveals that that **upwards class traversal is still significantly associated with** holding meritocratic views after controlling for political alignment ($B=-0.21, p<0.0001$) (Figure 3).
- Additionally, **political alignment moderates** their relationship, where liberals are 0.86 times as likely as conservatives to hold meritocratic views ($B=-0.15, p=0.035$).
- Graphing this data also shows that conservatives as a whole are more likely to have meritocratic views. But, for conservatives, class traversal has a greater correlation with meritocratic views than it does for liberals.

Figure 2. Class Traversal and Meritocratic Views, Split by Political Alignment



Discussion

- Upward lifelong class traversal, or moving upward in social class, is correlated with a higher likelihood of belief in meritocratic views.
- This is moderated by political alignment, where conservatives have a greater likelihood of being meritocratic and a greater relationship between class traversal and meritocratic views. It could be hypothesized that this demonstrates the impact of political messaging in spite of one's lived experience.
- Notably, lifelong class traversal was based on self-assessment of economic status, and is likely to be biased. However, this still shows the personal narrative that may guide a person's beliefs around American society.
- Further research is needed to explore how class traversal impacts other aspects of adherence to the American Dream, and how political messaging interacts with meritocratic views in comparison to the lived experience of class traversal.