

Why middle class activism surprises economists



A middle class in modern societies often causes political ferment and spearheads mass movements against the status quo. The political turmoils that swept Brazil, Bulgaria and Turkey in 2013 provide recent examples. The demonstrations in Turkey grew from a protest against plans for a construction project; an increase in public transport prices triggered the protests in Brazil; and the government corruption and cronyism set off the protests in Bulgaria.

The torch of middle classes revolution was passed to Hong Kong in 2014, where the Umbrella Revolution paralysed the financial centre and upset Beijing profoundly. Actually, such examples abound in history. The "third wave" of democratisation that occurred between the 1970s and the early 1990s were led mostly by the middle class, while the rich, peasants, and even the industrial workers remained relatively inactive or indifferent, as documented by Huntington. The 1987 demonstrations against Chun Doo-hwan in South Korea were a good case in point.

The phenomenon of middle class revolution or activism would surprise economists more than political scientists and historians. As argued by Francis Fukuyama, it is typically the newly prosperous and educated middle classes that exert pressure on governments by participating in collective actions, such as demonstrations, protests, or even revolutions and demand for reform and a higher quality of governance, such as better public services and less corruption. The other side of the same coin is that the poor are usually passive politically.

Social commentator Hoffer observed in the 1950's that the poor "are not hospitable to change. [. . .] There is thus a conservatism of the destitute as profound as the conservatism of the privileged, and the former is as much a factor in the perpetuation of a social order as the latter."

A stereotyped economist would be puzzled. Why are the poor less active than the middle class? If anything, they should be more dissatisfied with the current regime than the middle class are, and their opportunity costs of taking action are lower. Is middle class activism simply a urban myth, because the cries from the poor are less often heard?

To investigate, we analyse political participation data from the third, fourth, and fifth waves of the World Values Survey, which cover 78 countries from 1994 to 2007 and find that the lower (and, not surprisingly, the upper) classes are indeed significantly less likely to participate in demonstrations against governments than those in the middle social strata.

An instinctive idea to explain this would be that education matters. After all, the middle class is not only economically better off, but also more educated than the poor. Educated individuals tend to be more politically involved and more likely to demand political changes. End of story!

On the one hand, our analysis of the data suggests that this hypothesis can indeed explain some observed differences between the middle classes and the poor; on the other hand, it is far from the complete story: once we tease out the effects of education empirically, the choice of political participation of individuals still largely relies on their economic status.

To rationalise this empirical regularity, we put forth a new hypothesis of political aspiration, in which the economic circumstances or experiences of individuals in society may shape their attitudes toward the prospect of social movements. Downtrodden individuals who do not do well despite the ups and downs of political cycles, are pessimistic and reluctant: they perceive the current regime as bad, rationally infer that the system is likely to be dysfunctional or at least not in their favour, and therefore believe mass movements for political changes are futile.

In other words, the politically disadvantaged (mostly the poor) are inclined to hold politically cynical views about how their country is governed, and remain skeptical about what would be brought to them by political movements. In contrast, the middle class, which is better off in society, is more sanguine about the quality of governance in general and expect many fellow citizens to share the same view. Optimism of this sort underpins their active role in political activities including protests and demonstrations.

We empirically test three key mechanisms of our theory. First, we show that the poorer the respondents, the more likely they are to be politically pessimistic. This result is robust to various definitions of pessimism. Second, the data reveal that people who hold more pessimistic views about real changes in politics are less likely to participate in mass political action. More than 20 per cent of respondents in the least pessimistic group claim that they have participated in demonstrations against governments, while only less than 10 per cent of the most pessimistic group report so. Third, their evidence indicates that poor individuals do not have sufficient knowledge about their actual status in society and tend to believe that they are closer to the median than they actually are. As a result, the poor wrongly believe that many more people would be as pessimistic as they are, which further prevents them from taking actions.

The moral of our story is that the political passivity of the poor and the activism of the middle class are not necessarily a behavioural or psychological trait, but a result of their experiences and economic circumstances. The manifestation of those political attitudes in political movements leads to the contrast of the two classes. The middle class aspire and fight for a better society, because they expect that such a goal is achievable through coordinated effort and that they can benefit from it. The lower classes, struggling at the bottom of society, would potentially have even more to gain but choose to stand by, because they are indifferent about the likely impending changes.

One implication of this research is that the key to spur the underclass into political actions is to change their pessimistic beliefs about how the world operates. That is actually one essential point made by Lenin in his influential political pamphlet of 1902, *What is to be done?*, in which he argues that, to motivate the working class to take part in political action, their political consciousness “would have to be brought to them from without.”

In light of this research, one element of Mr. Trump’s campaign strategy in 2016 starts to make even more sense: cleverly leveraging his identity as a political outsider to convince the working class with many false hopes, which gave rise to a wave political optimism among the economically disadvantaged and helped him ascend the throne.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the author’s paper [Aspiring for Change: A Theory of Middle Class Activism](#), co-authored with Wing Suen, *The Economic Journal*, August 2017.
- The post gives the views of the authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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