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# Who Is in the Middle: Social Class, Core Values, and Identities in India

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*This article examines how middle-class identity is experienced and employed by traditional and neo-middle-class identifiers in India. The economically and socially heterogeneous middle-class identifiers vote similarly, but we know very little about what they want out of politics. We focus on the subjective experiences of middle-class identifiers, we theorize the expressive function of middle-class identities, and we examine the socially and personally focused core values of traditional middle-class identifiers and neo-middle aspirers. We introduce the “Class as Social Identity” scale and analyze qualitative interviews with strong middle-class identifiers (Study 1) and the 2006, 2012, and 2014 World Values Survey India segments (Study 2). The interviews show that upper middle class and lower middle class identifiers express similar socially focused values but different personally focused values. The WVS analyses show convergence of upper-middle-class and lower-middle-class identifiers on conservation and self-transcendence in line with dominant political narratives and divergence on materialism, hedonism, and stimulation in line with their rising differences in income and every-day life pressures. We discuss the significance of these findings for the understanding of the political function of middle-class identities in India in the context of heightened Hindu nationalism and recent socioeconomic challenges aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.*

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**KEY WORDS:** middle class, core values, political psychology, Hindu nationalism, Identity, India

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## The Layers of Middle-Class identity in India

Traditionally the middle class occupies the center of the socioeconomic hierarchy between the upper and the lower classes. In India, the center is currently undergoing a significant transformation. In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced the rhetorical label “*neo-middle*” inviting lower class aspirers to join the ranks of traditional middle-class identifiers. Capitalizing on the significant demographic expansion of the lower class, Modi’s *neo-middle* blurred social-class boundaries based on fixed socioeconomic criteria.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) invited through its campaigns the middle and lower class to join its vision of marketized Hindu nationalism, presenting

<sup>1</sup>Between 2001 and 2011, the lower class made up 77% of the Indian population. It increased by 273 million, as people exited poverty. The traditional middle class made up only 3% of the population and increased by 17 million (Kochchar, 2015).

their aspirations as closely aligned, while distinguishing them from the poor (Chacko, 2019). This is a notable change from pre-2009 BJP manifestos which clubbed the lower class with the poor and referred separately to a “salaried” or “entrepreneurial class” as *the middle class*. In the wake of anxieties generated from economic uncertainty and rapid social change, Hindu nationalism has been offered as the provider of ontological security (Kinnvall, 2002, p. 90), a stable sense of self for a middle class, recognized as members of a majoritarian community, defended against religious Others. This strategy has brought significant electoral gains for the BJP, which received the overwhelming support of middle-class voters in recent elections (Gupta, 2019; Heath, 2015; Jaffrelot, 2013, 2019).

These political developments, coupled with the demographic expansion of *neo-middle* aspirers and the recognition of their critical market base (Jodhka & Prakash, 2016), alert scholars to the rising political salience of middle-class identifiers. Extant studies have noted the significance of the middle class alongside other identity markers such as caste, ethnicity, and religion, but they suffer an important shortcoming: they identify “who is in the middle” using classification indices based on objective material and social markers of income, occupation, type of house, and assets (Manstead, 2018). The social-class index in the Lokniti-CSDS National Election Survey (NES, 2014, 2019) is one such measure used extensively in electoral research.<sup>2</sup> But the political reality on the ground is complicated. When Modi recognizes the “middle classes” as the electoral base of the BJP, he evades the socioeconomic divide between traditional middle-class identifiers and middle-class aspirers who covet the *neo-middle* label but under Lokniti would be classed as lower class (Jaffrelot, 2019).

What is missing is the systematic study of the psychological content of middle-class identities in India. What does it mean to be middle class for the *neo-middle* aspirers and for their traditional middle-class counterparts? And how do middle-class identifiers employ their middle-class identity when they engage with politics? Addressing these questions is the focus of this article. These are important questions because the political consequences of the ongoing transformation of middle-class identities in India are significant. Recently, Jaffrelot and Chatterji (2019) attributed distinct electoral motivations to the traditional middle-class and *neo-middle* identifiers. The traditional middle class support the BJP as an “elite revenge” to repeal positive discrimination and pro-poor schemes, while aspirant *neo-middle* voters are drawn to BJP’s populist schemes for low-cost urban housing, financial inclusion (*Jandhan*), medical insurance (*Ayushman Bharat*), and education loans. The promises of upward mobility and aspiration in BJP’s Hindu-nationalist rhetoric of development and national pride can prove problematic in the long run if they fail to address the inequalities and challenges of the *neo-middle* identifiers (Fernandes, 2019).

Considering these points, our contribution is twofold. Relying on the subjective *self-identification* employed by individuals to indicate their middle-class status, we examine the psychological content of middle-class identities for the traditional middle-class and *neo-middle* identifiers. Furthermore, we seek to understand the function of middle-class identities as they become increasingly politicized. If these identities are politically salient and enduring, strong middle-class identifiers will display stable political preferences overtime, vote consistently, be less susceptible to short-term economic and political fluctuations, and be more liable to elite narratives and campaigns.

Our study engages with the psychological experience of social class as an individual and subjective identity but recognizes that the concept of social class is multidimensional and extensively researched. For economists and political scientists, “middle class” has traditionally referred to an

<sup>2</sup>The Lokniti-CSDS NES (2014, 2019) social-class index identifies middle-class individuals alongside the rich, the lower class, and the poor. The *middle class* earns between \$53 and \$107 per day in rural areas, \$93–\$173 in a town or city, and \$120–\$227 per day in a metro and are owner-cultivators, class 2 administrative officers, and medium businessmen. The *lower class* earn \$13–\$53 per day in rural areas, \$33–\$93 in a town or city, and \$53–\$120 per day in a metro and are tenant cultivators, tradesmen, and service workers like carpenters, electricians, waiters, launderers, mechanics, and drivers. The *poor* earn <\$13 in rural areas, <\$33 in small towns and cities and <\$53 per day in metros, and the rich earn >\$106 in rural areas, >\$173 in towns and cities, and >\$227 per day in metros.

assigned classification based on an individual's objective demographic and socioeconomic position. This approach is indeed prevalent across electoral behavior studies in India (Heath, 2015; Jaffrelot, 2019). Sociological approaches see middle class as an acquired performative experience embedded in a social setting, shaped through intersubjective relations with the other classes.<sup>3</sup> A handful of studies, which we consider below, provide valuable insights on how middle-class experiences are shaped in the context of interactions, political narratives, and socioeconomic relations. Understanding the sociopolitical context allows us to appreciate the complexities of the subjective psychological experiences related to the identity of individuals who perceive themselves to be middle class.

Given the richness of social class as a concept, we do not wish to resolve these debates. Instead, we seek to add nuance focusing on the psychological aspects of middle-class identities. The widely used social-class indices provide objective categorizations, but in reality the aspirations, desires, and aims of middle-class identifiers are complex and cannot be captured by their income and assets. They are inspired by political narratives of Hindu nationalism and carry subjective (and intersubjective) meanings and interpretations, linked with how they "feel about themselves as persons of a certain social class standing, experienced through sentiments of benevolence, respect, compassion, pride and envy, contempt and shame" (Sayer, 2005, p. 3). These class identities in turn generate expectations (Baas, 2020), impose constraints (Baviskar & Ray, 2012), stimulate power and emotional reactions (Fernandes, 2006), and allow these individuals to make sense of each other and their political world (Jodhka & Prakash, 2016). Our focus on the psychological underpinnings of middle-class identities makes a contribution to the puzzle of "who is in the middle" in India. Our investigation of the function of middle-class identities as political identities sheds light onto their significant role in Indian politics.

Understanding middle class as an identity in India has an added layer of complexity as it intersects with the traditional caste system. Caste is a traditional *ascriptive identity* based on rituals of purity linked to the reservation system, while social class is an *acquired identity* based on achievement in social and professional contexts (Crompton, 2008).<sup>4</sup> Research shows that caste and class identities intersect, as individuals from low castes are motivated to identify as middle class to escape their caste identities (Naudet & George, 2018). We borrow insights from research that examines the political function of social identities (Huddy, 2013) and suggest that while caste identities hold an instrumental function by allowing individuals to claim benefits and resources (Oskarsson & Sareen, 2019), middle-class identities hold an expressive function by allowing individuals to voice their subjective sense of belonging to this class group. This hypothesis is original and motivates our examination of the values and systems of meaning of this identity held by traditional middle-class identifiers and *neo-middle* aspirers.

In the empirical section of our article, we employ two studies (Study 1, qualitative interviews; Study 2, survey data from World Value Surveys WVS5 and WVS6 waves), to examine the psychological experiences of traditional middle-class identifiers and *neo-middle* aspirers. In Study 1, we introduce a novel measure of middle-class identity strength which allows us to screen participants

<sup>3</sup>Sociological conceptions of class see it as a product of socioeconomic dynamics. Class divisions are affected by economic relations and expressed as *social and symbolic interactions* in everyday life. For Bourdieu (1973), social class is an acquired performative experience embedded in a social setting (the field) like work, classroom, or market, where individuals operate and class is performed. When individuals enter a field, they carry habitus—a set of acquired patterns of thought, behavior and preference based on their understanding of their position in society and how they think they are expected to behave. This approach sees individuals as products of the same *conditionings* which include various combinations of capital: economic (material resources, property, income); cultural (cultural knowledge, credentials), social (connections, networks) or symbolic (respect and reputation), which together empower (or constrain) in a social setting. For further discussion on sociological conceptualizations of class see Crompton (1999) and Lucal (1994).

<sup>4</sup>Middle-class identity-making in India has a distinct political history, emerging through the colonial modern state, then folded into nationalist narratives on a united modern India and finally heightened through neoliberal transformation to a consumer-based aspirational society. For debates on how the middle class sits with caste and class-based identities in Indian politics, see Jodhka (2015); on BJP's approach to caste identities, see Hasan (2018); on neoliberalism, see Fernandes (2006); and on colonial state, see Joshi (2010).

focusing on strong middle-class identifiers that label themselves as traditional middle-class and *neo-middle* aspirers. Our analyses identify and compare their values, aspirations, concerns, and needs, providing a rich psychological account of “who is in the middle.” In Study 2, we map the ideological positioning, political preferences, political engagement, and commitment to democracy of traditional middle-class identifiers and *neo-middle* aspirers using WVS data over three time points, thereby enriching the findings of recent studies that focus on the electoral preferences of middle-class voters.

### Assessing “Who Is in the Middle”: Categorization Indices vs. Self-Identification

The BJP investment on the *neo-middle* label has generated electoral dividends and, alongside other social dynamics, created significant change in terms of who identifies as middle class in India. Of those who describe themselves as middle class in public opinion surveys, 42% are categorized as *middle class* or *rich* by the Lokniti index, and 45% are categorized as *lower class* (Kapur & Vaishnav, 2014). This statistic demonstrates the significant gap between indices using objective criteria and citizens’ self-identification as middle class.

Empirical models using objective social-class indices assume that individuals assigned to a particular class rank think and feel similarly about politics. As we saw earlier, indexing is not equivalent to self-identification, and individuals assigned to a specific class rank might self-identify with a different one. Self-identification measures of the middle class offer a closer approximation of likeness and similarity. Studies of social identity theory show that individuals identifying with one group hold the same theory of human nature and cause and effect considerations as they perceive themselves to be similar to one another<sup>5</sup> (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). This perception of sameness develops and strengthens overtime. In politics, when individuals identify with the same group, they *eventually* share similarities in ideological orientation, the kinds of rulers that are desired, and the principles that matter for democracy. They also *eventually* share the major values in life, hold similar evaluations of government and political institutions, embrace similar social programmes, identify similar group interests, and share ethical and moral positions and belief systems. This *gradual* psychological alignment that results in political ingroup identification happens because individuals see themselves through their experiences and social interactions. The bond with the group has psychological implications: as individuals experience a sense of attachment, a feeling of belonging towards the group they identify with, over time this experience shapes their individual identity and sense of self (Hamill, Lodge, & Blake, 1985; Lane, 1962, 1973; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

While subjective self-identification is a closer indicator of ingroup similarity than objective categorization indices, it is not by itself a reliable indicator of *sameness* among individuals that use a group label. When groups are heterogeneous, as is the case with middle-class identifiers in India, the group label “middle class” can conceal significant differences. It is possible to find differentiations of how people think and feel within heterogeneous groups, which can be hidden under the superordinate category label of belonging to a specific group. For example, people in western contexts who self-identify as “conservative,” “liberal,” or “libertarian” do not have consistently conservative or liberal preferences (Ellis & Stimson, 2012; Feldman, 2013; Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012; Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). If this is also the case for middle-class self-identifiers in India, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to anticipate their political preferences and choices based on their middle-class status. To provide an answer to the question “who is in the middle,” we examine what lies beneath this social-class identification, focusing particularly on the psychological experiences of those that identify strongly with it.

<sup>5</sup>Social identity theory also notes that members of a group see themselves as different to those who are not members of the group. The expectation of the outgroup’s distinctiveness is beyond the scope of our examination of middle-class identity in India, but it is an interesting avenue for further exploration.

## Social Representations of the Middle Class in India

Social identity accounts explain how being a member of a group determines an individual's identity and sense of sameness with the group. Sociologists also find that individuals socialized in the same class ranks would have common interests and think and behave in a similar manner (Crompton, 1999). The middle-class "way of life" in India holds specific identifiers like English-language ability, use of consumer goods, and also practicing moderation, control, and self-discipline. The middle-class *field*, to adopt a sociological term, contains social (families, networks), symbolic (public discourses), cultural (speaking English), and economic capital (occupation, ownership).

Everyday consumption practices such as displaying a mobile phone (Dickey, 2013) or owning a car brand (Nielsen & Wilhite, 2015), the clothes one wears (Nakassis, 2016) typically reflect one's middle-class economic position. The middle class in India are distinguished from the poorer others by claims of cultural and moral superiority, values and norms related to meritocracy (Jodhka & Newman, 2007), urban beautification and cleanliness (Ghertner, 2012), religious morality (Srivastava, 2009), and moderate consumption (Fernandes, 2006). These discourses and practices of distinction suggest the consolidation of middle-class identity across key values seen as middle-class markers.<sup>6</sup>

By inviting the lower class to become *neo-middle*, Modi calls on them to adopt the middle-class way of life: to identify with "market citizenship" values like being entrepreneurial, consumption-oriented, and self-reliant, while following conservative Hindu norms<sup>7</sup> (Chacko, 2019, p. 317). Values of hard work, meritocracy, and honesty, traditionally associated with the middle class through their description as "national builders," "national laborers," and "honest taxpayers" have been attributed to the *neo-middle* (Vikas Yatra, 2019).<sup>8</sup> But Modi's *neo-middle* is hard to align with the traditional middle class because low-class aspirers of the *neo-middle* are products of different social conditioning.

It is possible that overtime, as more people self-identify as middle class, their social connections, economic resources, cultural experiences, and symbolic status are gradually blended together (Baas & Cayla, 2020; Dickey, 2016). It is also reasonable to expect that this blending comes with significant rewards but also stressors, as the needs and desires of the traditional middle-class identifiers and the *neo-middle* aspirers are subjected to distinct socioeconomic pressures. For example, the upward social mobility of *neo-middle* identifiers has been enhanced through the expansion of high-end service-sector jobs (coffee shops, gyms, malls), but their attempts to accumulate cultural (speaking English) and social capital (dressing in branded clothes) is embedded in social hierarchies and is fraught with anxieties (Dickey, 2016) and struggles to gain recognition of their worth (Baas & Cayla, 2020). We hypothesize that these tensions will be evident in the way middle-class identifiers describe their experiences and political preferences.

## The Expressive Function of Middle-Class Identities

The political narrative of "who is middle class" has over time become less about *what individuals could ask for* in terms of their relative income and occupation and more about *gaining recognition of their status* because of how they lead their life in relation to others. Fernandes (2006) explains that gaining recognition as middle class operates through a "politics of classification": behavioral

<sup>6</sup>The relational experience of class is a central aspect through which middle-class identity is constituted. For more, see Savage (2003).

<sup>7</sup>The BJP is an elitist party, with a predominantly middle-class support base. It reaches out to poor voters through its affiliate grassroots organizations, which provide social services like education and health care in remote and underdeveloped areas (Thachil, 2014). These welfare organizations recruit the poor through moral projects such as antidrinking and antireligious conversion to elevate their Hindu status and protect them from religious Others (Froerer, 2006).

<sup>8</sup>Vikas Yatra is a module on Narendra Modi's personal website, which captures developments over his tenure as Prime Minister of India. We have summarized extracts from articles posted in the section: "Mobility for middle class."

indicators once associated with caste differences are now adopted as class markers (Dickey, 2016, p. 5). Modi's *neo-middle* label has facilitated this further by inviting affluent ethnic and caste-based factions to join the middle-class ranks (Jaffrelot, 2019) by appealing to lower castes' desire to gain mutual recognition of their social status. Socially, upper castes "own their upper-caste status and middle-class identity" as high-caste norms (aka as *sanskritization*) are symbols of "middle-class modernity" (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2014), and caste practices around marriage, lifestyle, and vocation are molded to portray a positive middle-class group image. Meanwhile, middle-class identifiers from low castes attempt to gain positive recognition by dropping their surnames that give away their inferior caste status in their neighborhood communities and workplace groups<sup>9</sup> (Guru, 2018).

Two important points follow. First, this suggests that caste and class identities coexist and hold distinct functions. Remaining rigid and traditional, caste identities are used in politics to serve interests shared with others and make claims relating to socioeconomic positioning, such as income, education, or occupation. In contrast, middle-class identities offer individuals the opportunity to achieve a positive identity which, when used politically, could give voice to identity-specific considerations. As Sheth (1999) notes, blending their caste and class identities, individuals get access to specific opportunities and benefits through their caste, while gaining status recognition and relating to others with whom they share similar values through their class. While the instrumental function of caste identities in India has been well documented, the expressive function of middle-class identities has not attracted much attention. Its significant implications for electoral politics, political engagement, orientations towards democracy, and society at large invites opportunities for more research. For example, when parties or leaders promote and endorse particular social-class standing and values, voters may form their electoral preferences based on symbolic considerations instead of economic or pragmatic ones.<sup>10</sup>

The second important point that follows if middle-class identities are expressive is that they will point to specific roles and core values, systems of thought, and meanings. Engaging with the desires, frustrations, and aspirations of middle-class identifiers from the traditional and *neo-middle* requires a psychological approach that focuses on their deeper needs. For this, we turn to an examination of their core values, the relatively stable beliefs that serve as guiding principles in individuals' lives (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 2012).

### The Value Foundations of Middle-Class Identities

Core values are reliable indicators of deep psychological needs of order, certainty, and security and constitute the foundation of our preferences. They indicate our desire for power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security; they can be prioritized and exist in systems (Bilsky, Janik, & Schwartz, 2011; Schwartz, 1994). Core values present as stable over time but are flexible enough to account for slow changes because they are responsive to significant sociopolitical developments (Ashton et al., 2005; Duckitt, 2001; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; McCann, 1997; Vecchione, Caprara, Dentale, & Schwartz, 2013).

Measures of core values have been used extensively in Western democracies' electoral behavior models, and they are reliable predictors of political preferences, attitudes, and ideological

<sup>9</sup>The IHDS (2005) surveyed 41,554 households. Measuring class according to assets owned, it estimated that UMC are 1.7% of total Indian population and of them, 3.1% are upper castes, Other Backward Castes (1%), Muslims (1.5%), Scheduled Castes (0.5%) and Scheduled Tribes (0.6%). LMC were estimated at 17.1%, of which are upper castes (28.2%), Other Backward Castes (16.6%), Muslims (11.5%), Scheduled Castes (8.6%), and Scheduled Tribes (5.8%).

<sup>10</sup>For studies on social class and also race, sex, age and party identification functioning as expressive politicized identities, see Devine (1992), Huddy (2001, 2013), Gurin et al. (1980), Walsh et al. (2004).

identifications (Feldman, 2013; Miller & Shanks, 1996; Peffley & Hurwitz, 1985; Schwartz, 1992).<sup>11</sup> The socially focused core values of *self-transcendence* and *conservation* are reliable indicators of citizens' opinions on political issues and policies, while personally focused core values of *self-enhancement* and *openness to change* play a limited role in determining political preferences (Goren, Schoen, Reifler, Scotto, & Chittick, 2016).

As middle-class identification rests increasingly on social class relations and is promoted by the homogenizing narrative of Hindu nationalism, we expect socially focused values like self-transcendence and tradition to be unifying principles of middle-class identity, expressed similarly by the traditional and *neo-middle* identifiers. The significance of personally focused values, however, should not be overseen. Analyses of World Value Survey (WVS) data in developing countries by Amoranto, Chun, and Deolalikar (2010) show that self-perceptions of class status are linked to personally focused values of upward mobility, rather than socially focused values such as social welfare and gender equality. In India, those joining the middle-class ranks as *neo-middle* identifiers are under pressure to keep up appearances and find maintaining this identity to be a challenging and stressful process (Dickey, 2016). We therefore expect lower agreement of traditional middle-class identifiers and *neo-middle* aspirers on the personally focused values of self-enhancement and openness.

### Methodology

To test our hypotheses regarding how traditional middle-class identifiers and *neo-middle* aspirers experience their middle-class identity in India, we adopt an empirical approach that gives careful consideration to psychological dynamics while being sensitive to the complex political environment. Our multimethod framework consists of two studies (interviews and nationally representative surveys) which identify similarities and differences between traditional middle-class identifiers and *neo-middle* aspirers and examine the core values and preferences they express through their middle-class identity.

Study 1 involves 37 semistructured interviews conducted between December 2016 and March 2017 in India.<sup>12</sup> This study contains a novel measure of social-class identity strength to prescreen participants. The "Class as Social Identity" scale taps how personal one's social-class identity is felt to be and is a variant of the "Partisan Identity as Social Identity" scale<sup>13</sup> adapted from Huddy (2013). The accounts of strong middle-class identifiers of their everyday practices and their social world enabled us to gain in-depth insights of their experiences, thoughts, and opinions (Silverman, 2016), thus building a complex and nuanced picture (Denzin, 2010; O'Reilly, 2012) of class-based identity patterns among traditional middle and neo-middle identifiers. Study 2 uses survey data from the nationally representative samples of the India segments of the World Values Survey (WVS) waves 5

<sup>11</sup>Core values are related to political values, which reflect normative beliefs about political matters and predict preferences for civil liberties, egalitarianism, ethnocentrism, and government size (Feldman, 2013; McCann, 1997; Peffley and Hurwitz, 1985; Schwartz et al., 2010).

<sup>12</sup>Interviews were conducted in four locations: Bangalore (22 participants), Kolkata (5 participants) Asansol (6 participants), and Mumbai (4 participants). Of the 37 participants, 18 were female and 16 were male. Their age ranged from 19 to 67 (mean 37) years.

<sup>13</sup>Our scale 'Class as Social Identity' contains six items (ranging from 0-10): "When I speak about my social class I usually say 'we' instead of 'they'"; "I am interested in what other people think about this social class"; "When people criticize this social class, it feels like a personal insult"; "When I meet someone from this social class, I feel connected to this person"; "When I speak about this social class, I refer to them as 'my social class'"; "When people praise this social class, it makes me feel good." The wording of these items is adapted from the "Partisan Identity as Social Identity" scale used by Huddy (2013) which has strong internal reliability.

and 6 collected in 2006, 2012, and 2014.<sup>14</sup> While the WVS lacks a measure of social-class-identity strength, it allows overtime comparisons of core values, ideological leanings, and political preferences of individuals who identify as upper middle class and lower middle.

### *Selection of Participants and Operationalization of Social Class*

In both studies, we relied on a subjective indicator of social class. Specifically, we used the WVS 5-category self-identification measure<sup>15</sup> (upper class, upper middle class, lower middle class, working class, lower class). The subjective category *upper middle class* (UMC) corresponds to traditional middle-class identifiers, and the subjective *lower middle class* (LMC) corresponds to the *neo-middle* aspirers. This operationalization of middle class as self-identification allows us to study individuals who self-identify as middle class but would fall under the “low class” categorization under objective class indexes (like the Lokniti-CSDS class index).

Study 1 participants were identified using the snowball method<sup>16</sup> and prescreened for being strong UMC or LMC identifiers using (1) the WVS 5-point class self-identification measure and (b) the multi-item “Class as Social Identity” scale. There were 17 UMC and 20 LMC identifiers who scored 7 or above on the “Class as Social Identity” scale, and they proceeded with the semistructured interviews. The recorded material amounts to 37 hours. For Study 2, we screened the WVS5 and WVS6 waves, selecting all UMC and LMC self-identifiers across the three time points (2006, 2012, 2014). In total, this was 1,359 UMC identifiers (302 in 2006, 614 in 2012, 443 in 2014) and 2,799 LMC identifiers (681 in 2006, 1,587 in 2012, 531 in 2014).

### *Empirical Models and Variable Operationalization*

Both studies measure core values using the WVS adapted Schwartz Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) which involves 10 short verbal portraits of people who value *creativity*, *materialism* (being rich and having expensive possessions), *achievement* (being successful), *conformity* (respecting rules), *tradition*, *security* (living in a safe environment), *hedonism* (enjoying life and having a good time), *benevolence* (caring for others), *stimulation* (being adventurous and taking risks), and *universalism* (caring for the environment). Participants identified how similar these portraits were to them, ranging from “very much like me” to “not at all like me” on a 0–10-point scale (Schwartz, 2012). These value items allow us to examine *socially focused values* of conservation (security, conformity, tradition) and self-transcendence (benevolence, universalism) and *personally focused values* of self-enhancement (materialism, achievement, hedonism) and openness (creativity, stimulation).

In Study 1, to systematically analyze the interview material, we coded three key variables: the self-identification of participant as UMC or LMC; their score on each core value on the PVQ scale (from the questionnaire at the start of the interview); and the core values mentioned in their interview open-ended responses. First, we coded all open-ended responses (unit of analysis is each statement per participant) for the presence of any of the 10 PVQ value items and sorted them thematically by value. Second, within each value category we selected the responses of participants (P) with high

<sup>14</sup>The 2006 WVS5 was collected between December 12, 2006 and January 31, 2007 ( $N = 2001$ ). WVS6 was collected in two time points: 2012 (dates unreported, sample 4078), and 2014 (October 24, 2014 to April 17, 2015, sample 1581). The WVS studies used face-to-face interviews in 18 out of the 28 states of India (97% of the population). Samples were drawn using four-stage stratified random sampling. The questionnaires were translated and adapted from English. For more details, see <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp>.

<sup>15</sup>In the 2006 WVS5, the social-class breakdown was 4.4% upper class, 15.1% upper middle class, 34% lower middle class, 17.2% working class, and 26.5% lower class. In 2012, it was 3.1% upper class, 15.1% upper middle class, 38.9% lower middle class, 26.1% working class, and 13.8% lower class. In 2014, it was 13.8% upper class, 27.4% upper middle class, 33.6% lower middle class, 18.3% working class, and 5.8% lower class.

<sup>16</sup>We interviewed five participants who then referred their contacts in line with the snowball method (Parker et al., 2019).



numerical scores on this specific value (from the questionnaire at the start of the interview). Third, we grouped all excerpts thematically by socially and personally focused values and sorted by class self-identification looking for similarities and differences between UMC and LMC. We present the original quotes that point to specific core values, noting in parentheses the participants' UMC/LMC self-identification and their numerical score on a relevant core value.

In Study 2, WVS measures of income and education were used as controls in our statistical models that compare the value orientations of UMC and LMC (PVQ value measures). *Income* was measured on a scale from 1 to 10 without specific income brackets or amounts, representing total household-income decile, accounting for all wages, salaries, pensions, and other incomes. *Education* was measured from 1 (*no formal education*) to 9 (*university-level education*). Measures of political orientations and issue preferences allowed us to compare the UMC and LMC on *ideology* (self-positioning on a 1-left to 10-right scale), the importance of maintaining order in the nation, having a say in government decisions, fighting rising prices, protecting freedom of speech, the importance of economic growth, strong defence, having more say about how things are done in jobs and communities, and making cities and countryside more beautiful; *social and political engagement* like interest in politics, participation (active or inactive); *preferences for ways of governing* like having a strong leader that does not bother with parliament and elections, experts rather than government making decisions, the army rule the country or a democratic political system; and *orientations towards democracy*, like how democratically the country is governed and the importance of living in a democratically governed country.

## Analysis and Results

### *Study 1: Unpacking the Expressive Function of Middle-Class Identity*

In Study 1, we examined how strong UMC and LMC identifiers internalized their middle-class identity. We expected that similarities and differences linked to their middle-class identity would be more pronounced among strong identifiers and therefore easier to detect in our interview sample. Our first question was why they themselves identified as middle class. The most frequent answers pointed to the typical markers of occupation, family status, neighborhoods, ability to fit into “cosmopolitan behaviors” like speaking English, and family activities. Strong UMC identifiers mentioned family heritage (upper caste, elite professions) and their position in the upper rungs of the middle class. Strong LMC identifiers mentioned their humble backgrounds and moving up the class ladder with hard work and aspiration. Their responses were consistent with the divergent socioeconomic experiences of the two groups indicated in the literature.

We also asked these strong middle-class identifiers whether they personally expected any specific gains from Modi's policies towards the middle class. We grouped answers by self-identification (UMC vs LMC) to explore further our hypothesis of the expressive versus instrumental function of middle-class identity. When referring explicitly to the BJP's middle-class rhetoric, strong UMC identifiers mentioned core values of *conservation* and *self-enhancement*. They also felt their achievements should be recognized and rewarded with bolder moves against corruption and cleaner cities. While they were ambiguous on which specific government programs or entitlements they could access, they spoke about how specific policies (citizenship, anticorruption) represented values they identified with, such as *security*, *conservation*, and *achievement*. They saw their middle-class status as an opportunity to express a specific way of life, and uphold specific values. For example, P21 (UMC) a human resource adviser said, “when Modi speaks for the middle class he makes the hard-working taxpayers feel that the government cares for them. So far, we worked hard and lived in the outskirts of the city, while slums are in the city centre. We didn't feel like we belonged to the general society, only to our own families. Finally, in Modi we have a person who is bringing us to the centre

of public decisions.” Common among UMC identifiers was also the sentiment that the recognition of “the middle” would strengthen the Indian nation. P2 (UMC) said: “the middle is always neglected, but without them the system would collapse. We are the average people, who follow rules, pay taxes, and keep traditions and morals and recognising us means recognising the ideal citizen.”

To the same question on whether they personally expected any gains from Modi’s policies towards the middle class, strong LMC identifiers focused on *achievement* and *security*. They described themselves as hardworking and mentioned they needed more support for their individual security and growth. They were not asking for entitlements based on their relative income or specific needs, but rather on the basis that as middle class they embodied values of ideal citizens (hard working, law abiding, traditional). P33 (LMC) a driver, said: “Modi respects people like me because we work hard and contribute to society. We also need a strong leader like him to protect us from traitors in our own country who are abusing our kindness and bringing harm to us. When he speaks for the middle class, I feel positive about my future.”

Taken together, the responses of UMC and LMC contained references to values and what being middle class means to them, but they also varied in content. To understand how they employed specific values when describing their everyday experiences as middle class, we turn to the excerpts referring to socially and personally focused values among those with high-value scores.

#### *Socially Focused Values: Conservation and Self-Transcendence as Points of Overlap*

UMC and LMC identifiers mentioned *conservation* and *self-transcendence* values frequently. While *conservation* (security, conformity, tradition) was linked to what being middle class meant to the individual (subjective meaning), *self-transcendence* (benevolence and universalism) was mentioned in the context of how they relate to other classes and their standing in Indian society (inter-subjective meaning).

P6 (UMC, Tradition 9), who was an insurance adviser, stated that she was middle class “not only by virtue of money but also because of her values.” When we probed further on what values characterize her class, she, like other UMC identifiers, mentioned *tradition*: “Being middle class means that we are more obliged to follow rules of decency, tradition and the law than the rich or the poor.” Similarly, P8 (LMC, Tradition 10) mentioned that tradition was very important to him. “I don’t have much wealth, but religion and culture are my most valuable possessions. I gain respect from others when I follow my traditions.”

Participants also mentioned that to keep a positive standing in society they could not depend on others, and therefore keeping their families financially and socially *secure* was important to them. P36 (UMC, Security 10), working as a psychotherapist, said “we have to carefully plan and spend our money so that we can face difficult times without depending on others and losing our self-respect in society.” P37 (LMC, Security 10), who was a school drop-out and a shopkeeper, spoke of how security of women in his family was important for social honor “In our society where rowdies are everywhere, I have to protect my daughter’s honour so that she can get married to a good family.” Real and imagined insecurities from the social world were internalized as personal concerns for financial and social security and linked to maintaining honor and social standing.

Middle-class identifiers also mentioned conformity and their sense of obligation to follow social norms. P14 (UMC, Conformity 6), who is a graduate and homemaker, said, “being middle class means we carefully spend money to keep our social standing: like education, a decent house, marrying our daughters to respectable families.” P23 (LMC, Conformity 6), working as a tailor, said “I live on a monthly salary so I have to ensure that I live by a rule book. Get to work on time, dress properly, be disciplined. Middle class follows the rules.”

Self-transcendence values (universalism and benevolence) alluded to the intersubjective aspect of middle-class identification. Universalism was linked to respect for nature, peace, and social justice, and participants mentioned it in the context of how they lived in their homes and neighborhoods and defined their relations with the wider community. P6 (UMC, Universalism 10) said: “We middle classes contribute to the economy and pay taxes but in return we should have a clean, green and safe space to live in.” P8 (LMC, Universalism 10) said, “I don’t live in a big house or a rich neighbourhood. But as a middle class family, every day in the morning we pray to the sun, pour water on tulsi (holy basil) and clean our entrance and apply rangoli. This our way of showing how we want to live—with respect for nature and humanity.” *Benevolence* involved mentions of relations with people from subordinate classes. In India, having a servant is a sign of middle-class status, and class relations are shaped at home. P5 (UMC, Benevolence 8), who is an academic, said, “I try to do my bit by helping my maid. She is a single mother of two children. I have been teaching them in the evenings for the last two years.” P8 (LMC, Benevolence: 10), who is a practising Christian, cannot afford a domestic helper, but she, too, spoke of compassion for the lower ranks: “When I go to church, I ask my employers to give me their old clothes so I can help those who are less fortunate than me.”

#### *Personally Focused Values: Achievement, Materialism, Hedonism, Stimulation, Creativity*

Responses linked to high scores on personally focused values along the dimensions of *self-enhancement* (achievement, materialism, hedonism) and *openness* (stimulation, creativity), showed significantly more variation between the strong UMC and LMC identifiers, although a common point of reference was *achievement*. For P35 (UMC, Achievement 7), a businessman, “education is the key to our success and prosperity. That is why we are obsessed about investing in our children’s education and making them doctors, engineers and accountants.” P26 (LMC, Achievement 9), who was a school drop-out working as a domestic help, noted the priority for the education of her children but was more concerned noting that “I want to make sure that my sons go to college and become officers. I don’t think this will happen as they want to drop out of school and earn money quickly.”

The mean score on the significance of materialism across the 37 participants was low (2.6 on a 0–10 scale), but the interviews contained frequent references to consumption choices as an indication of middle-class lifestyle. Strong UMC identifiers spoke of how what they could afford was comparable to global standards. For P21 (UMC, Materialism 4), an owner of a health food start-up, lifestyle was an important indicator of middle-class modernity, but she chose to consume with moderation due to her upper caste upbringing. “Today being middle class means owning a foreign car, going on one holiday abroad, eating in an Italian restaurant. Our lifestyles are not different from millennials in New York and London. However, as I have a Brahmin upbringing I am inclined to be simple and not show off.” For P26 (LMC, Materialism 2), who worked as a domestic helper, it was important to spend on certain rituals to maintain middle-class status, but these expenses were difficult to keep up. “It is important for us to perform marriages, birthdays, festivals. My wife and I manage to do these by carefully managing our money.” Touching on hedonism, P16 (UMC, Hedonism 9), a software engineer earning INR 1,000,000 (\$1,536) monthly, saw his ability to avoid daily chores as his signifier of upper middle class standing. He continued, “See, I could have settled in the US with my qualification. But with our combined salaries my wife and I can afford 5 servants, holidays abroad and have good savings.” Disinclined to pursue pleasure with income, strong LMC identifiers stressed frugality rather than hedonism. P23 (LMC, Hedonism 4), working as a cook earning \$200 per month: “It is important to have money but I do not think I need to buy expensive clothes and eat in restaurants.” Similarly, P33 (LMC, Hedonism 6), who worked as a driver earning around INR 18000 (\$276) monthly, said that he does not make enough money to lead a “hi-fi life.”

Strong UMC and LMC identifiers differed in their accounts of creativity and stimulation, personal values which indicate openness. On the whole, UMC participants were more likely to value creativity than LMC participants. P35 (UMC, Creativity 10) spoke highly of India's start-up culture "India was known previously as a cheap manufacturing hub. But today we are known for innovation. We have done ingenious things with very little." P25 (LMC, Creativity 5) explained the low inclination for creativity, saying "If you have one slice of bread to share between four people you will eat it first. Only after that can you think of turning it into something else."

On *Stimulation*, most LMC respondents scored high at the questionnaire at the start of the interview, while UMC respondents scored lower. Because our sample is small and not representative, we should not put much emphasis on their mean scores, but we noticed that taking risks and seeking adventure had very different meanings for LMC and UMC identifiers. The LMC respondents felt that to hold on to their social ranks, or even to move up, they had to constantly deal with externally imposed challenges and were compelled to take risks. For the UMC identifiers, taking risks was a choice to either accelerate upward social mobility or to remain content with what they had. Characteristically, P37 (LMC, Stimulation 8), working as a domestic, explained "In times of crisis we have to take risks for everything -our jobs, our children, our health, like I am doing now. We take these risks because we have to, not because we choose to. I pray for a more stable life." P35 (UMC, Stimulation 8) said, "I am always seeking new challenges by changing jobs so that I can grow in my career quickly."

Taken together, the findings of Study 1 show that (1) UMC and LMC participants expressed their middle-class identification through socially and personally focused values; (2) there were significant overlaps in their socially focused values and differentiation in their personally focused values; and (3) these differences were linked to their distinct socioeconomic experiences that shaped their needs and orientations. Conscious of the small-sample limitations of this study that prevent meaningful statistical analysis of these trends, we tested for patterns in the value preferences of UMC and LMC identifiers in Study 2, using the three waves of the WVS.

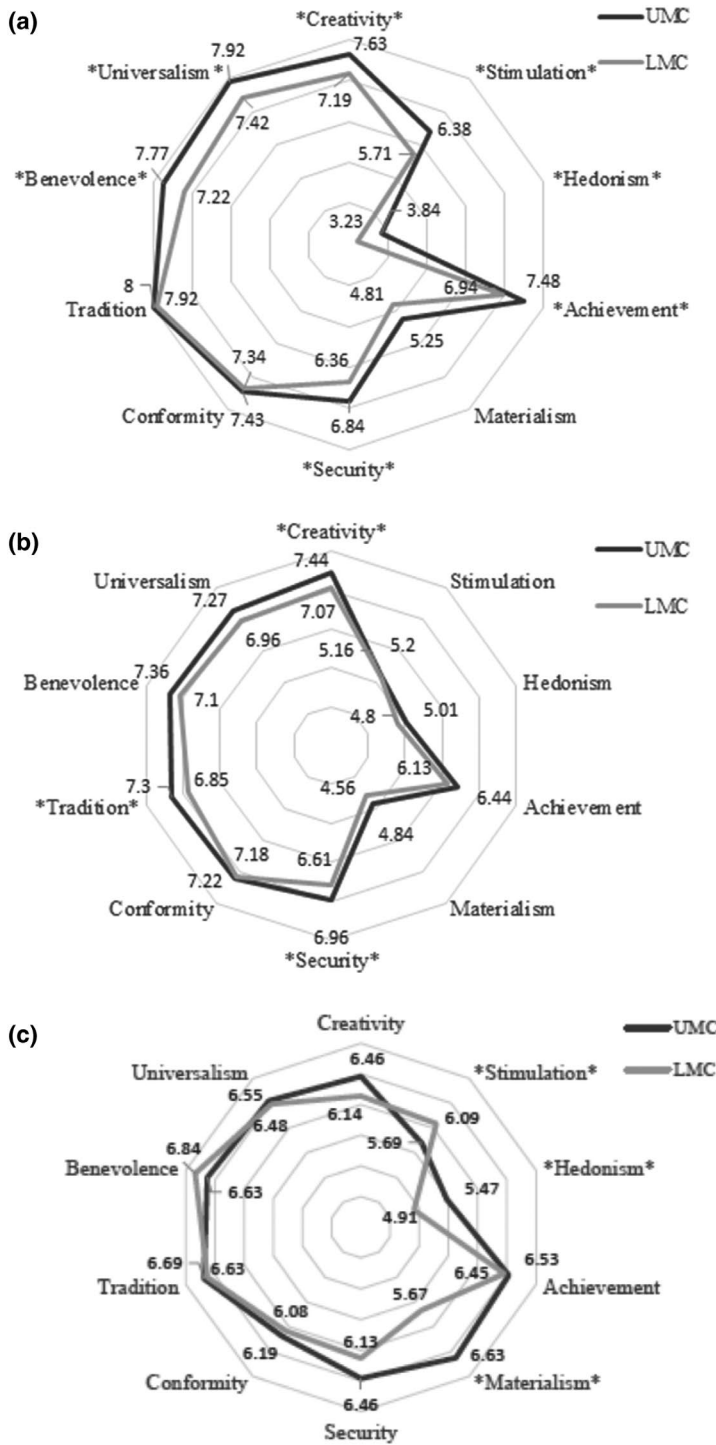
### *Study 2: Socioeconomic Differences, Core Values, and Political Preferences of UMC and LMC Identifiers in the WVS5 and WVS6*

We analyzed the 2006, 2012, and 2014 WVS waves in order to compare the core values of UMC and LMC identifiers, testing for over-time changes. We also compared their socioeconomic experiences and examined patterns in their issue preferences and priorities, extending research that has recently identified apparent similarities in their electoral preferences (Heath, 2015).

#### *Core Values of UMC and LMC Identifiers: Socially Compatible but Personally Divergent*

We computed the mean scores on each value for UMC and LMC identifiers using ANOVA and present the results for each of the socially focused (conservation and self-transcendence) and personally focused (self-enhancement and stimulation) core values for 2006, 2012, and 2014 in Figure 1a,b, and c, respectively.<sup>17</sup> While in 2006 there was significant differentiation across the socially and personally focused values of the UMC and the LMC, by 2014 a key pattern emerged: The socially focused (SF) values converged overtime, and the personally focused (PF) values diverged.

<sup>17</sup>The structure of value preferences in WVS5 and WVS6 in India is not consistent with the typical four-cluster structure. Correlations between values that typically fit together under "openness to change" (creativity and stimulation) "self-enhancement" (hedonism, achievement, materialism), "conservation" (security, conformity, tradition), and self-transcendence (benevolence, universalism) are weak and do not justify a four-factor solution. Instead, factor analysis identified a two-factor solution for 2006 and a three-factor solution for 2012 and 2014. Detailed results are available by the authors upon request. Based on this, we analyzed each value score separately rather than as in preset clusters.



**Figure 1.** (a) Core values WVS 2006. India segment, 2006, WVS5. (b) Core values WVS 2012. India segment, 2012 WVS6. (c) Core values WVS 2014. India segment, 2014, WVS6. Numerical values are means on a 0–10 range. Statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) between UMC and LMC are identified with \* in the value labels.

Figure 1a shows that in 2006 LMC identifiers scored significantly lower than UMC identifiers on most PF values (creativity, stimulation, hedonism, achievement) and SF values (security, benevolence, and universalism). Their scores were statistically indistinguishable (mean around 5 points) only on materialism (PF), conformity, and tradition (SF, 7.5 points and above). In 2012, (Figure 1b) hedonism (PF) increased, and the scores of the two groups on conformity (SF) converged, while LMC self-identifiers scored lower than UMC self-identifiers on tradition and security (SF) and creativity (PF). By 2014 (Figure 1c), the scores of LMC and UMC identifiers were statistically indistinguishable across all socially focused values (security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, universalism) but statistically different on personally focused self-enhancement values: UMC identifiers scored significantly higher on materialism and hedonism, values which were on the rise for both groups, and LMC identifiers took the lead on stimulation.

The overtime convergence of LMC and UMC identifiers on socially focused values and their significant differentiation on personally focused values by 2014 suggests two important points: (1) middle-class identity serves an expressive function consistent with the interview findings, and (2) its content varies for the LMC and UMC. The lead of UMC self-identifiers on materialism and hedonism and the lead of LMC identifiers on stimulation show that *different personal values* matter for the two middle-class sections. For this reason, in the analyses that follow we examine these value items separately rather than merged together as one scale of personally focused values.

### *The Socioeconomic Gap of UMC and LMC Identifiers*

Extant research suggests that the socioeconomic experiences of UMC and LMC identifiers are different (Kapur & Vaishnav, 2014), and comparing their average income and education in 2006, 2012, and 2014, we saw these cleavages widening over time. LMC identifiers scored significantly lower on income than UMC identifiers (4.12<sub>LMC</sub> and 5.18<sub>UMC</sub> in 2006, 4.85<sub>LMC</sub> and 6.7<sub>UMC</sub> in 2012, 4.22<sub>LMC</sub> and 4.91<sub>UMC</sub> in 2014,  $p < .05$ ) and were significantly less educated (5.2<sub>LMC</sub> and 6.48<sub>UMC</sub> in 2006; 4.62<sub>LMC</sub> and 5.7<sub>UMC</sub> in 2012; 4.01<sub>LMC</sub> and 4.64<sub>LMC</sub> in 2014,  $p < .05$ ).

To test for overtime changes in the relationship between class self-identification with socioeconomic indicators, we correlated class with income and education. Class identification corresponded closely to income with significant ( $p < .05$ ) correlations in 2006 ( $r = .40$ ) and 2012 ( $r = .47$ ) and became nonsignificant by 2014 ( $r = .01$ ). Turning to education, its significant correlation with class in 2006 and 2012 ( $r = .48$  and  $r = .38$ ,  $p < .05$ ) dropped to .16 in 2014. This suggests that while over time the education and income gaps widened, their relationship with middle-class identification declined.

### *Identifying the Tipping Points Between UMC and LMC Identification*

To examine whether any key markers separate UMC from LMC identifiers, we ran a series of LOGIT analyses across the three time points, with the dependent variable being a binary variable that marks the change from UMC to LMC. The hypothesized tipping points were socioeconomic indicators, core values, ideology, and demographics, which were entered in the model as predictors that could distinguish one level of the dependent variable (0 for UMC) from the other (1 for LMC). Significant positive coefficients of the independent variables indicate an increase in the probability of change from UMC to LMC for a unit increase of the independent variable, and negative coefficients indicate a decrease in the probability of change from UMC to LMC for a unit increase of the independent variable. Statistically insignificant effects mean that UMC and LMC identifiers are indistinguishable along these criteria.

Table 1 shows that in 2006, income, education, and age were significant predictors of change from UMC to LMC. Lower income ( $-.435$ ), lower education ( $-.211$ ), and younger age ( $-.021$ ) set the LMC identifiers apart from UMC identifiers. Socially focused values predicted the differentiation

**Table 1.** Tipping Points from UMC to LMC (Logit Analysis)

		2006	2012	2014
PF: Openness to change	Creativity	.018 (.048)	.014 (.024)	-.009 (.025)
	Stimulation	-.055 (.042)	.030 (.019)	.050* (.026)
PF: Self enhancement	Hedonism	.016 (.038)	-.019 (.019)	-.076*** (.024)
	Achievement	-.016 (.053)	-.009 (.022)	-.026 (.027)
	Materialism	-.065 (.042)	-.011 (.020)	-.094*** (.024)
SF: Conservation	Security	.027 (.041)	-.026 (.022)	-.018 (.025)
	Conformity	.099* (.046)	.013 (.024)	-.006 (.026)
	Tradition	.033 (.049)	-.057* (.023)	-.017 (.025)
SF: Self transcendence	Benevolence	-.085 <sup>+</sup> (.048)	.016 (.024)	.013 (.025)
	Universalism	-.112 <sup>+</sup> (.059)	-.025 (.024)	-.018 (.025)
Instrumental considerations & political orientations	Income	-.435*** (.065)	-.360*** (.035)	-.097** (.033)
	Education	-.211*** (.050)	-.121*** (.025)	-.083** (.030)
	Age	-.021** (.008)	-.003 (.005)	-.005 (.005)
	Ideology	-.062 (.041)	-.015 (.027)	-.065* (.031)
	Interest in politics	-.029 (.038)	-.003 (.019)	.066** (.024)
	Constant	6.363 (.910)	4.256 (.405)	2.350 (.484)
	N	480	1529	935

Note: India Segment 2006, 2012 and 2014 World Values Survey. *PF* denotes *Personally Focused values* and *SF* denotes *Socially Focused values*. The dependent variable is the probability of moving from upper middle class (UMC) to lower middle class (LMC). Numerical values are Logit regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses.

Openness to change refers to Creativity and Innovation; Self enhancement refers to Hedonism, Achievement and Materialism; Conservation refers to Security, Conformity and Tradition; Self transcendence refers to Benevolence and Universalism.

<sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

between UMC and LMC. Desire for conservation and conformity (.099) and a decline in self-transcendence (–.085 for benevolence and –.112 for universalism) set LMC apart from their UMC counterparts, while personally focused values were not significant predictors.

In 2012, income and education remained significant but with weaker effects (–.360 income, –.121 education) indicating that over time the distinct socioeconomic positioning of UMC and LMC identifiers became less salient. Personally focused values were insignificant, and among socially focused values, only tradition (–.057) was a significant tipping point. These findings suggest that in 2012 the personally and socially focused core values of LMC and UMC identifiers could be consolidated under the “middle class” label without any significant differentiations apart from tradition, with UMC identifiers scoring higher than LMC identifiers.

By 2014, income (–.097) and education (–.083) effects declined further. Tradition was no longer significant, but personally focused self-enhancement values of hedonism (–.076) and materialism (–.094), as well as the openness value of stimulation (.50), were the new tipping points from UMC to LMC. Ideology and political interest were also significant with UMC identifiers standing further to the right than LMC identifiers (–.065) and LMC identifiers showing higher political interest (.066).

These core value patterns are consistent with our interview findings. UMC and LMC identifiers have over time settled on a common core of socially focused values, but struggled to hold similar personally focused values as their socioeconomic experiences drifted further apart. LMC identifiers were more stimulated, less materialistic, and less hedonistic. Moreover, drawing from our interview findings, their orientations towards new experiences and stimulation was different from those of their UMC counterparts. Their acknowledgement of new experiences was more frequent but also more externally imposed, as a result of their struggles and challenges of everyday life.

The heightened political interest of the LMC is also an important finding. Extant research suggests they have been voting similarly to their UMC counterparts, as the BJP invited LMC identifiers to join UMC identifiers under the *neo middle* label in casting a vote in support of Modi’s government.

**Table 2.** Political Preferences for UMC and LMC

	2006		2012		2014	
	UMC	LMC	UMC	LMC	UMC	LMC
Importance of democracy	7.60 <sup>a</sup> (2.89)	7.21 <sup>b</sup> (2.76)	8.14 <sup>a</sup> (1.88)	7.75 <sup>b</sup> (2.04)	6.64 <sup>a</sup> (2.71)	6.45 <sup>a</sup> (2.59)
Democracy score India	7.03 <sup>a</sup> (3.28)	6.41 <sup>b</sup> (3.21)	6.71 <sup>a</sup> (2.23)	6.56 <sup>a</sup> (2.11)	5.11 <sup>a</sup> (2.33)	5.22 <sup>a</sup> (2.26)
Rule by democracy	8.50 <sup>a</sup> (2.30)	7.97 <sup>b</sup> (2.31)	7.78 <sup>a</sup> (2.93)	8.42 <sup>b</sup> (2.38)	6.28 <sup>a</sup> (3.44)	7.21 <sup>b</sup> (3.15)
Rule by army	3.65 <sup>a</sup> (3.49)	4.03 <sup>a</sup> (3.25)	5.01 <sup>a</sup> (3.52)	4.51 <sup>b</sup> (3.49)	6.03 <sup>a</sup> (3.48)	7.27 <sup>b</sup> (2.76)
Rule by experts	6.20 <sup>a</sup> (3.08)	6.17 <sup>a</sup> (2.88)	6.95 <sup>a</sup> (3.08)	6.59 <sup>b</sup> (3.21)	7.21 <sup>a</sup> (2.75)	7.00 <sup>a</sup> (2.90)
Rule by strong leader	5.72 <sup>a</sup> (3.37)	6.10 <sup>a</sup> (3.16)	6.78 <sup>a</sup> (3.71)	6.08 <sup>b</sup> (3.87)	6.64 <sup>a</sup> (3.31)	6.68 <sup>a</sup> (3.35)
Ideology	4.78 <sup>a</sup> (2.93)	4.37 <sup>a</sup> (2.99)	5.90 <sup>a</sup> (2.51)	5.63 <sup>b</sup> (2.16)	5.20 <sup>a</sup> (2.66)	4.83 <sup>b</sup> (2.24)
Interest in politics	4.87 <sup>a</sup> (3.50)	4.65 <sup>a</sup> (3.19)	4.25 <sup>a</sup> (3.45)	3.90 <sup>b</sup> (3.24)	5.12 <sup>a</sup> (3.26)	5.63 <sup>b</sup> (2.70)
Member party	4.47 <sup>a</sup> (3.70)	4.62 <sup>a</sup> (3.61)	2.42 <sup>a</sup> (3.75)	1.59 <sup>b</sup> (3.11)	3.42 <sup>a</sup> (3.71)	3.16 <sup>a</sup> (3.63)
Member environment organizations	3.72 <sup>a</sup> (3.40)	4.16 <sup>b</sup> (3.44)	1.78 <sup>a</sup> (3.34)	1.02 <sup>b</sup> (2.54)	3.30 <sup>a</sup> (3.69)	2.68 <sup>b</sup> (3.53)
Member labour unions	3.79 <sup>a</sup> (3.47)	4.24 <sup>a</sup> (3.44)	1.77 <sup>a</sup> (3.36)	1.16 <sup>b</sup> (2.74)	2.83 <sup>a</sup> (3.60)	2.41 <sup>a</sup> (3.47)

*Note:* India Segment, 2006, 2012, and 2014 WVS. Numerical values are means (comparisons with ANOVAs), standard deviations in parentheses. Variables range from 0 to 10 where 10 indicates strong support. Different superscripts indicate statistically significant means between UMC and LMC per year ( $p < .05$ ).

As the LMC identifiers get more interested in politics, it remains to be seen whether their political preferences will align further with those of UMC identifiers.

Next, we compared the mean scores of UMC and LMC identifiers across the three time points on a wide range of political preferences: the importance of politics, the country's economic growth, and social and economic preferences such as support for competition and private ownership of business. The mean comparisons (ANOVA) in Table 2 did not indicate statistically significant differences.<sup>18</sup> In addition, mean scores on the importance of living in a democratic country and the ratings for democracy in India were significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) in 2004, but converged by 2014.

Where UMC and LMC identifiers diverged is their approaches to governance. In 2006, their *preferred type of governance* was democracy. This declined over time, and by 2014 LMC identifiers preferred the army, while UMC identifiers favored the rule of experts and strong leaders. In addition, ideological differences became more pronounced. While ideology scores were similar in 2006, by 2014 both groups moved to the right but UMC identifiers significantly more so (5.20<sub>UMC</sub>, 4.83<sub>LMC</sub>;  $p < .05$ ).

As we saw in Table 1, their levels of political interest also diverged. Mean comparisons indicate that from their similar 2004 scores, LMC identifiers surged forward by 2014 (5.63<sub>LMC</sub>, 5.11<sub>UMC</sub>;  $p < .05$ ), but this increased interest did not translate to action. Over time, their active participation declined more than UMC identifiers, and they were less inclined to be formally involved with labor unions, political parties, and environmental groups. If LMC identifiers are a new force in Indian politics, their potential is currently dormant, but if awakened, it could serve as a windbreaker for BJP's pull to the right.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This article makes a number of contributions. The first involves the expressive function of middle-class identity. The lay experience of middle-class identifiers in our interviews was expressed through core values pointing to "who they thought they were" and "what they thought they stood for

<sup>18</sup>Results available on request by the authors.



in society.” Our findings are compatible with Bourdieu’s (1973) argument that alongside the habitual and instrumental function of social class lies its value-based and expressive dimension. Individuals who self-identified as middle class held socially and personally focused values, expressed in the objects, resources, and relations they pursued. Their socially oriented values appeared to be harmonized through political discourses and cultural contexts which determine what it means to be middle class, while personally focused values appeared to be determined by their individual attitudes and circumstances. We extend social stratification approaches to class that rely on objective indices by bringing attention to the expressive function of the middle class as a political identity that can influence political outcomes.

Our second contribution involves the use of the multi-item “Class as Social Identity” scale (adapted from Huddy, 2013) that taps on the degree of internalization of one’s middle-class identity. In Study 1, we employed this scale to screen and interview the strong middle-class identifiers, who internalize strongly their middle-class identity and express more readily and firmly the values they associate with being middle class. Such a measure would be particularly valuable in nationally representative surveys like the WVS as it would allow scholars to test statistically whether strong traditional and neo-middle-class identifiers align more closely on socially oriented values than their more modest counterparts. Strong identity attachments drive political engagement and are associated with action-oriented emotions, intense issue preferences, and strong reactions to collective threats (Huddy, 2013). Measuring gradations in social-class identity strength would also allow scholars to test how it relates to other politicized identities, issue preferences, emotional reactions, mobilization, and political engagement.

Our finding that UMC and LMC identifiers positioned themselves similarly in terms of socially oriented values, but drifted further apart on personally focused values as their income and education gap widened, has significance for the understanding of the function of middle-class identities in India. The alignment of *neo-middle* aspirers and traditional middle-class identifiers on socially focused values (conservation and tradition) fits well with the Hindu nationalist rhetoric on the significance of Hindu society as a common identity that harmonizes internal differences. It also hints at the intersubjective experiences of middle-class identity. A useful extension is to examine how the traditional and neo-middle identifiers see each other and how those who identify as working, or lower, class relate to the Hindu-right mission of “being middle class.” The gradual over-time move of middle-class identifiers to the right is consistent with the tide of Hindu nationalism promoting a rising middle class. Modi’s *neo-middle* campaign appears to have resonated particularly well with LMC identifiers who aspire to higher status, security, and respect for authority. Their preferences for strong army rule are consistent with populist ideologies of majoritarian dominance.

Another important finding is the divergence of LMC and UMC identifiers on personal values like stimulation, hedonism, and materialism. Notably, while owning assets and keeping up social status is an important determinant of middle-class identity, LMC identifiers felt that taking risks was not a choice but a compulsion and were less inclined to pursue hedonistic pleasures than their UMC counterparts. This suggests that daily struggles and anxieties shape the behaviors and expectations of the LMC. We want to put these findings in context. The *neo-middle* aspirers, who have just moved out of poverty, have modest means and pocketbooks. As they adopt middle-class lifestyles, they remain preoccupied with daily struggles that are different from those of the successful, upwardly mobile, and indulgent upper middle class (Beinhocker, Farrell and Zainulbhai, 2007). Recently, the *neo-middle* aspirers have been particularly vulnerable to massive job losses, decline in income, and breakdown of social support during the COVID-19 pandemic, falling into the ranks of the “new poor” (Das, 2020). But unlike the poor, they are not eligible for government relief. This serious adversity exposes the widening gap between the *neo-middle* aspirers struggling for survival and the traditional middle-class identifiers who retain resources.

While expressive political identities are thought to be resilient through short-term economic fluctuations, the struggles of the neo-middle aspirers are not trivial and might last a long time. This raises questions about the potential shift of the function of middle-class identity from expressive to instrumental as the financial burdens of the global COVID-19 pandemic rise. Although caste performs an instrumental function in Indian politics, Hindu nationalist framings of the middle class are intended to overcome caste-based claims for affirmative action. It would be interesting to examine if the *neo-middle* label takes on the instrumental contours of caste, as it fits better within the Hindu nationalist rhetoric of a homogenous majoritarian ethnic community.

Our evidence suggests that the middle-class label might not carry the consolidating power Modi desires, and urges us to take middle-class identities seriously in Indian politics. Tensions in the electoral base of BJP have not gone unnoticed. Its election manifestos in 2014 and 2019 dedicated an entire section to the *neo-middle*, and shortly after the defeat of the opposition Congress party in the 2019 general election, party leader Rahul Gandhi promised to focus more on the uplift of the lower class. It remains to be seen how Hindu nationalist party politics will perform through the significant economic and social challenges ahead. What is more certain is that these developments challenge Modi's populist experiment of inviting the *neo-middle* aspirers to join the "elite revenge" and rally around an ethnically superior Hindu majoritarian nation.

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