

# The Economic Other

INEQUALITY IN THE AMERICAN  
POLITICAL IMAGINATION

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## CHAPTER 1

# The Politics of Social Comparison

Life for both sexes—and I looked at them, shouldering their way along the pavement—is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle. And how can we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so invaluable, most quickly? By thinking that other people are inferior to oneself. By feeling that one has some innate superiority—it may be wealth, or rank, a straight nose, or the portrait of a grandfather by Romney—for there is no end to the pathetic devices of the human imagination—over other people.

VIRGINIA WOOLF, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929

And there is deep down within all of us an instinct. It's a kind of drum major instinct—a desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade, a desire to be first. And it is something that runs the whole gamut of life.

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., *The Drum Major Instinct*, 1968

The human imagination is an engine of comparison. We get our bearings in a complex, changing world by comparing ourselves to other people. These comparisons shape the way we see the social order and ourselves; they govern our desires and our discontents. They are often automatic, driven by context and impulse, so much so that they can happen just beneath our awareness. But often, if we think back, we can recognize them. What social comparisons have you made today, or even in the past hour? Have you compared yourself to coworkers, neighbors, people in the media or on the street, even just for a moment? Did the comparisons bring you up or down? Did you aspire—covet—pity—condescend? Do you think these kinds of everyday comparisons matter at all for the way you see politics? In this book, we ask similar questions, but from a much broader perspective. What kind of social comparisons are encouraged by an increasingly unequal America, and what are the consequences for our shared political and economic future?

Social comparisons take many forms, but our focus will be on *cross-class* comparison. Here, at the outset of the book, take a moment to try out this experience for yourself. Imagine another person who is at the very top of our

socioeconomic hierarchy—someone rich, prestigious, elite. Whom do you think of? How are you different from this person? How do you feel about yourself, the other person, or the social system in general when you make this comparison? Now imagine someone at the other end of the hierarchy. Who comes to mind when you think of the poor? How are you different from this second imagined other? What reactions do you notice in yourself?

In the real world, context and psychology combine to direct attention up or down and govern the images that come to mind. How often, under what conditions, and with what political results do these cross-class comparisons occur? On one hand, there is reason to believe that downward comparison dominates. Nearly a century ago, Virginia Woolf explained that imagining lower-status others is an efficient way to feel confident and secure. Contemporary social scientists have repeatedly confirmed her observation; downward comparison can elevate a person's sense of their own status, even when markers of status like money or achievements do not change. In an era marked by rapidly growing economic insecurity, perhaps people are especially drawn to this kind of thinking, driven by what Martin Luther King Jr. called the drum major instinct: the human desire to engage in downward comparison to elevate the self.

What might the consequences be for politics? Both Woolf and King emphasized that comparison with others structures not only individual perception and self-concept, but power relations. King argued that the drum major instinct lies at the roots of racial resentment, because people often satisfy their drive to compare downward by focusing on members of marginalized racial groups.<sup>1</sup> Woolf made a similar argument about gender. She viewed the drum major instinct as foundational to patriarchy, arguing that men are able to elevate themselves by drawing upon, “that deep seated desire, not so much that *she* shall be inferior as that *he* shall be superior.” In fact, Woolf called downward social comparison “one of the chief sources of [a man's] power.”<sup>2</sup>

Unlike downward comparison, upward comparisons can foster anxiety, weaken confidence, and lower perception of status. Olympic medalists provide a tidy illustration of these dynamics. Bronze medalists often appear happier on the Olympic podium than silver medalists. Psychologists interested in this puzzling phenomenon have studied it carefully; in one clever study, researchers looked only at the faces of medalists, blinded as to which medal the athlete won. Indeed, they consistently rated bronze medalists' faces as happier than silver medalists'. The reason turns out to be a difference in the direction of social comparison. Bronze medalists tend to compare downward, contrasting themselves with those who did not win a medal at all, feeling thrilled just

to have made the podium. Silver medalists tend to compare upward, focusing on the athlete who won gold, experiencing the sense of loss.<sup>3</sup> As Woolf, King, and a massive body of contemporary research demonstrate, it feels good to be a drum major, to think of the band behind and feel out in front. It empowers, elevates, and changes expectations. This line of thinking tells us that it is much less pleasant to think of a long parade stretching for miles ahead (or to look up at the glint of the gold medal).

And yet, whether we are looking back at history or into the mirror of present popular culture, we do find upward comparison. America has a longstanding appetite for news from the top. From Benjamin Franklin and Andrew Carnegie to *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* and television's *Shark Tank*,<sup>4</sup> homilies on the gospel of wealth ring from the public pulpit. Our elected leaders increasingly hail from the upper classes.<sup>5</sup> And modern celebrity culture relentlessly draws attention to gold medalists of today's society.<sup>6</sup>

In particular, when it comes to American political rhetoric, there is certainly no shortage of upward comparison. Candidates and leaders seem almost unaware of how bad upward comparisons can feel. Progressive Democrats like Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders consistently direct Americans' attention to disparities between the rich and the rest, telling Americans to "look around. Oil companies guzzle down the billions in profits. Billionaires pay a lower tax rate than their secretaries, and Wall Street CEOs, the same ones that direct our economy and destroyed millions of jobs still strut around Congress, no shame, demanding favors, and acting like we should thank them" (Elizabeth Warren, September 2012). Economic disparities were the core problem put forth by the Sanders presidential campaign in 2016. Crowds cheered on as the candidate preached about the economic divide: "If you can believe it, between 2013 and 2015 the 14 wealthiest individuals in the country saw their net worth increase by over \$157 billion" (Bernie Sanders, June 2015). Moderate Democrats, like Hillary Clinton, chimed in too: "We do need to make sure our economy works for everyone, not just those at the top. The changes that have roiled our economy over the past few decades are not just numbers on a page that economists study. They are real forces that families are dealing with up close and personal every day" (Hillary Clinton, July 2016).

Upward comparisons persisted into the 2020 presidential campaign season. Elizabeth Warren, now a presidential hopeful, told attendees at a televised town hall meeting: "I'm tired of a Washington that works for the rich and the powerful. I want a Washington that works for the rest of America" (Elizabeth Warren, April 2019). Sanders, again a frontrunner, held the line too, going so far as to argue that "billionaires should not exist" (Bernie Sanders, September

2019). Warren and Sanders were joined by others in the Democratic field, like Julián Castro, who directed attention to the contrast between his supporters and the rich on Twitter: “I’m not a billionaire, and neither are any of my donors” (Julián Castro, August 2019).

And it’s not always just the Left drawing Americans’ attention up; similar rhetoric began to echo from the other side of the political aisle in 2015. After years of accusing Democrats of class warfare, Republicans began to talk about income inequality. Jeb Bush’s 2016 presidential campaign and his Political Action Committee were titled “Right to Rise.” The PAC’s mission statement asserted, “While the last eight years have been pretty good ones for top earners, they’ve been a lost decade for the rest of America.” Marco Rubio called for the Republican Party to “become the champion of the working class,” focusing on the connection between inequality and political influence: “If you can afford to hire an army of lawyers, lobbyists, and others to help you navigate and sometimes influence the law, you’ll benefit. And so that’s why you see big banks, big companies, keep winning. And everybody else is stuck and being left behind” (Marco Rubio, April 2015). Even self-proclaimed billionaire Donald Trump—who would go on to win in 2016—joined in: “The middle class is getting clobbered in this country. . . . You know the middle class built this country, not the hedge fund guys, but I know people in hedge funds that pay almost nothing and it’s ridiculous” (Donald Trump, August 2016).<sup>7</sup>

Are these politicians shouting into a void? Examples of how much people dislike the silver medalist vantage point abound, and yet here we have candidates trying to garner votes repeatedly asking Americans to look upward. Furthermore, quite a bit of public opinion scholarship suggests that Americans are generally unresponsive to economic inequality, ignorant of its magnitude or perhaps viewing it as acceptable as long as everyone has a chance to compete for gold. Why, then, is there so much attention to inequality and in particular upward comparison, in campaigns and speeches?

In the chapters that follow, we provide an answer by explaining the central role of social comparison. Americans are quite sensitive to inequality when they think about it in terms of social contrast. Powerful currents compete to propel Americans’ attention up or down—toward the rich or the poor—pulling politics along in the wake. In particular, though the experience of upward comparison may not always be pleasant, it can change how people view government action. In each of the references to inequality we just quoted from speeches and campaign messages, the speaker talks about interpersonal, social differences between people: between billionaires and secretaries, finan-

ciers and families, scions who hire teams of lawyers and workers who fight for scraps. In the minds of Americans, socioeconomic disparities are indeed “not just numbers on a page that economists study,” and when these gaps are framed instead as social contrasts, Americans of all political affiliations and walks of life rev up their engines of comparison and respond.

**WHAT CAN SOCIAL COMPARISON TELL US  
ABOUT THE POLITICS OF INEQUALITY?**

Woolf’s patriarch, King’s drum major, and the sad silver medalists are only a few among many illustrations of the power and prevalence of social comparison. Examples from psychology to literature suggest that such comparisons happen across many contexts but are particularly important when people are faced with social structures that are complex or unfamiliar. In these contexts, humans act like creatures equipped with a social sonar—forming images of the environment and their own location in it by bouncing their self-concepts against the others in their purview. And yet, social comparison across class lines has received little attention in many prominent attempts to understand Americans’ responses to one of the most complex and rapid shifts to the social order in a generation—the dramatic rise in economic inequality since the middle of the last century.

We are left with many unanswered questions about the national reaction to growing inequality. When and under what conditions do Americans consider the economically mighty and the weak? What do they think about when they compare themselves to others across the class divide? How do those contrasts make them feel about themselves? And what, if anything, do they want government to do about it all? These questions puzzle social scientists and political observers alike, making American attitudes about inequality one of the great unsolved mysteries in the social sciences.

In particular, public opinion in the United States has not responded to rising income inequality the way many experts predicted it would. The long-standing expectation has been that as inequality increases, and more people fall farther from the top earners, the public will demand more redistributive action from government: people will recognize their slipping status; concern about inequality will boom; support for a government response will grow. But the reality runs contrary to this expectation. Americans have trouble identifying their own positions in the changing economic hierarchy, and appetite for economic redistribution has remained relatively stable for decades.



The connections between Americans' opinions and socioeconomic status—which social scientists often capture by looking at individuals' incomes and resources—remain weak and hard to predict.

Explanations for the inconsistency tend to ignore social relations and comparison, instead characterizing individual Americans as either ignorant: lacking the factual knowledge to respond rationally to growing inequality, or tolerant: accepting of inequality because of fierce individualism, ideology, or deeply held beliefs about mobility and the American Dream. Both of these approaches assume that something about individual Americans renders them immune to the status changes that come from rising inequality: perhaps they do not know, or perhaps they do not care about the yawning gaps that characterize the American socioeconomic landscape. These answers dominate the discourse and are important pieces of the puzzle, but they are, at some level, still unsatisfying. Though Americans have a hard time describing the details of the income distribution in quantitative terms, most have the basic facts right, and most are aware that inequality is large and growing fast. And large numbers of Americans express concern about these facts.<sup>8</sup>

In this book, we take a new social approach. Instead of focusing on what Americans know about inequality, what they believe, or the resources they possess individually, we look at how Americans' systems of social sonar are functioning. We investigate the opportunities people have (or lack) to confront others who are economically different, how people select preferred targets for comparison to boost a sense of self in the midst of anxiety-producing change, and how people respond when they think about the differences between themselves and this economic other. Because we are interested in understanding the response to economic inequality, we focus on cross-class comparisons, but we point out that social comparative thinking can never be scrubbed of race or gender the way statistical information about broad economic trends can be.

Barack Obama, in his Farewell Address, echoed King's argument that satisfying the drum major instinct with racial difference draws attention away from economic inequality. He evoked upward and downward comparisons, warning that the divide between the rich and the rest would only grow if poverty continued to be racialized: "If every economic issue is framed as a struggle between a hard-working white middle class and an undeserving minority, then workers of all shades are going to be left fighting for scraps while the wealthy withdraw further into their private enclaves" (Barack Obama, January 2017). As Obama argued, class is welded to other social categories in the American imagination.

And so, we also examine the ways in which the intersection of class, race, and gender influences both which comparisons Americans make and how they react to them. Our goal is to move beyond the dominant individual-focused resource, information, and ideology-based models of inequality and public opinion, drawing attention instead to how patterns in social relations shape the American response to inequality.

#### THE COMPARISONS WE MAKE AND HOW THEY MATTER

While there has been little attention to the specific question of how cross-class comparison affects political attitudes, there is considerable evidence from across the social sciences showing that attitudes and emotions, broadly constructed, are quite sensitive to cross-class social comparison. Take, for example, a natural experiment provided by airplane passenger classes: air rage is more common among economy passengers in flights that have a first-class cabin, and also more prevalent on front-boarding flights, where economy passengers have to pass by already seated first-class passengers, in contrast to middle-boarding flights, where economy passengers are not directly confronted with an upward social comparison. Air rage is also more prevalent among *first-class* passengers when economy-class passengers pass through first class on their way to their seats, a finding that is consistent with other social psychological experiments showing that downward comparisons with the disadvantaged cause higher-status individuals to respond with feelings of entitlement and contempt for the less fortunate.<sup>9</sup> In many of these studies, upward comparison evokes resentment, and downward comparison often makes people scornful and stingy, rather than magnanimous or empathetic.

Does something similar happen to political reactions? This is where we begin. In part I of the book, we make the case for focusing on cross-class social comparison if the goal is to understand the political response to inequality, and then we listen to Americans' own descriptions of the people and concerns that come to mind when they think of the rich and the poor: who do they see boarding this plane? First, we present a theoretical model of attitude formation centered on the social perception of inequality in chapter 2, further explaining the importance of social comparison and our expectations. This theory calls for an analytical shift away from absolute resources and statistical reasoning, and toward social comparative thinking and relative status. In chapter 3, we discuss the methodological challenges created by such a shift and explain how we address them through a combination of large-scale experiments, qualitative research, and analysis of survey data. The book's first

two empirical chapters then leverage these data to examine Americans' perceptions of the disadvantaged other (chapter 4) and the advantaged other (chapter 5).

In part II, we ask how cross-class comparisons govern Americans' perceptions of their own status (chapter 6) and their political attitudes about redistributive spending (chapter 7). We find that while many Americans misperceive their place in the income distribution, social comparison with people who are economically different can make them more accurate, even when no factual information about the income distribution is provided. And though there is a deep disconnect between rising inequality and Americans' preferences for redistribution, when Americans think about the differences between themselves and a person at the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy, their support for several social programs grows.

The results in the second part of the book, in a sense, make the puzzle with which we began even more puzzling: if American opinion *is* sensitive to falling status perceptions, why no groundswell of support for social spending? Resolving this puzzle requires looking beyond *how* Americans react to cross-class comparison and asking *how much* and *with whom* they compare. What we find is that America is increasingly a middle boarding flight, with people of different classes making their way through life with fewer and fewer experiences of comparison with the economic other. While political elites do try to draw attention to social contrast in their stump speeches and campaign messages, directing voters' social gaze both up and down as we saw in the snippets of campaign rhetoric we quoted earlier, that sort of political communication makes up only a sliver of Americans' social experience. The rest of the American socioeconomic landscape is increasingly structured to prevent Americans from thinking in terms of social contrast, especially when it comes to the differences between themselves and the rich.<sup>10</sup>

Part III presents three major countervailing forces that insulate American politics from the effects of interpersonal cross-class comparisons. First, growing geographic income segregation and media portrayals of wealth combine to restrict opportunities people have to experience contrast with the economic other, especially with the most advantaged Americans. But when Americans do have opportunities to contrast themselves with an advantaged other in their communities, they are more accurate about their relative position in the socioeconomic hierarchy and more supportive of redistribution (chapter 8). Second, rising economic anxiety further inhibits Americans from thinking about the differences between themselves and the socioeconomic elite. Given the choice, people prefer not to think about the economic other at all, but when

they experience economic anxiety, many turn to downward comparisons to protect their sense of self in uncertain times (chapter 9). Third, while upward comparison alters opinion about government action, it also suppresses political efficacy—inducing many Americans to want more from their government, but at the same time to feel less confident about their own capacity to make those demands (chapter 10).

Race and gender undergird all three of these forces: structuring opportunity for social cross-class contact, increasing anxieties, shaping stereotypes of the rich and poor, and providing a means for many people to avoid thinking in terms of uncomfortable class disadvantages, just as Woolf and King described. Cross-class social comparison also interacts with race and gender to affect some people's political attitudes more than others'. In all of these ways, attention to social comparison reveals the impossibility of solving mysteries about class and American politics without investigating race and gender.

Throughout the book, we will point out many ways in which race and gender determine the nature and impact of cross-class social comparison. In doing so, we aim to complicate what we think has become an oversimplified dichotomy between class politics and what is sometimes referred to as identity politics. We focus on gender and race because of their deep political importance, persistent intersection with economic status, and centrality in stereotypes about class groups. However, we recognize that other social identities and cleavages might matter in similar ways, structuring people's experiences of and responses to cross-class social comparison. So, while race and gender are often built into the design of our studies and featured prominently in the interpretation of our results, we also discuss other social cleavages, including partisanship and political ideology. We also note here that we use the term "race" throughout the book for simplicity's sake, but perhaps a more accurate term for the construct we are examining would be ethno-racial identity. In particular, Latino ethnicity is often racialized in American political rhetoric and attitudes, especially in immigration debates, and we will examine its importance along with other racial identities.<sup>11</sup>

Attention to social comparison—its prevalence, our responses to it, and in some cases our resistance to it—uncovers an important way in which inequality is reinforcing. In chapter 11, we ask whether the reinforcing patterns identified throughout the book can be interrupted. Can comparison-resistant Americans be encouraged to consider the economic other? Are there conditions under which people look down at the poor and experience generosity and empathy? Are there conditions under which people look up at the rich and still feel mobilized? In considering each of these questions, we set forth an

agenda for the study of the social perception of inequality, and suggest strategies that could be applied by political and community actors grounded in a fuller understanding of social comparison as an important power resource.

#### POLITICS AND THE HUMAN IMAGINATION

Scores of thinkers throughout history have reminded us that our feelings, attitudes, and actions are driven by what Virginia Woolf called “devices of the human imagination—over other people.” We reference several of these philosophers, writers, artists, and scientists throughout the book. In the Western canon, the basic concepts go back to ancient philosophers. Aristotle was deeply interested in relative perception: “[People] disagree about what happiness is . . . indeed the same person keeps changing his mind, since in sickness he thinks it is health, in poverty wealth. And when they are conscious of their own ignorance, they admire anyone who speaks of something grand and beyond them.”<sup>12</sup> How exactly we construct these others in our minds has great consequence for the ways in which we relate to each other and see ourselves. Politics does not lie beyond this realm of the social imagination. Political feelings, attitudes, and actions are driven by the human imagination’s constant process of social comparison. The central premise of this book is that understanding the politics of inequality in America requires investigating cross-class social comparison and the perception of status. It is not just where we stand on the podium that matters. The world around us might make us look up; the drives within us might make us look down. The politics of a silver medal society are quite different from bronze, and it is worth investigating which one we live in now.