

Kenyon College

Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange

CSAD Democracy Scholars Program

Summer Student Research Scholarship

Summer 2017

Tracing the Emergence of the Middle Class in American Political Discourse

Catalina D. Odio

Kenyon College, odiocd@kenyon.edu

H. Abbie Erler

Kenyon College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.kenyon.edu/csadscholarsprogram>



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Odio, Catalina D. and Erler, H. Abbie, "Tracing the Emergence of the Middle Class in American Political Discourse" (2017). *CSAD Democracy Scholars Program*. Paper 1.

<https://digital.kenyon.edu/csadscholarsprogram/1>

This Poster is brought to you for free and open access by the Summer Student Research Scholarship at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in CSAD Democracy Scholars Program by an authorized administrator of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact noltj@kenyon.edu.



Tracing the Emergence of the Middle Class in American Political Discourse

Catalina Odio '18 and H. Abbie Erlar

Kenyon College Center for the Study of American Democracy 2017

Background

Over the past twenty-odd years, acute worry about the state of the middle class has pervaded public discourse, politics, and policy in the United States. This dynamic is evident in the rise of academic research investigating this group, in the lip service every politician pays to it, and in the proliferation of popular books with titles like "The Murder of the Middle Class." In political science, the deliberate problematizing of issues is a crucial precursor to setting policy agendas and taking action. Consequently, the spread of narratives lamenting the state of the middle class may have significant implications for public policy. To harness the potential predictive and explanatory power of this phenomenon, we sought to construct a comprehensive picture of the "middle class" in political discourse. Thus, our research presents the treatment of this concept by the office of the president, the news media, and pundits who address the general public.

Data and Methods

- We first analyzed a selection of political science books in order to identify common narratives about the middle class.
- We then used the American Presidency Project database to identify every presidential communication (including speeches, radio addresses, and press releases) from the Eisenhower to the Clinton administrations that used either the term "middle class" or other relevant class language.
- Finally, to assess the rise of the "middle class" in the news media, we tracked the term's use in periodicals. Using the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature, we identified over 400 relevant articles from 1950 to 2000.

"Pop poli-sci" narratives

Our sampling of 9 "pop poli-sci" books yielded three general narratives:

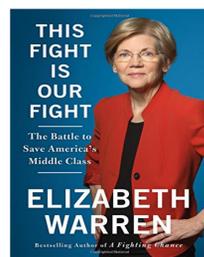
• Hijacked

The middle class, which includes most Americans who are neither very rich nor very poor, has seen the returns on its labor diminish because a tiny elite exercises outsized control over policy, tilting it to benefit the rich at the expense of the rest. They have accomplished this by undermining labor unions, inappropriately influencing politicians' votes on issues such as corporate governance, and leading the country into the financial meltdown of 2009. As a result, middle class Americans now work doubly as hard and still face a declining standard of living.



• Broken Promise

This narrative also sees a middle class in decline, but it attributes blame much more broadly. According to this story, the postwar middle class enjoyed an improved lifestyle and high returns



on its labor because the private and public sectors deliberately worked together

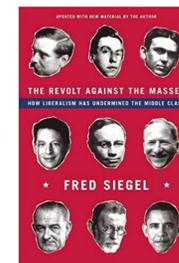
to make it so. The government invested in education, successful corporations gave back to the domestic economy, and the country maintained a robust safety net. Since Reagan, however, American society has been abandoning its commitment to shared prosperity and to the middle class, which now works harder for less (reaching poverty, in some cases) as a result.

Results

"Pop poli-sci" narratives (cont.)

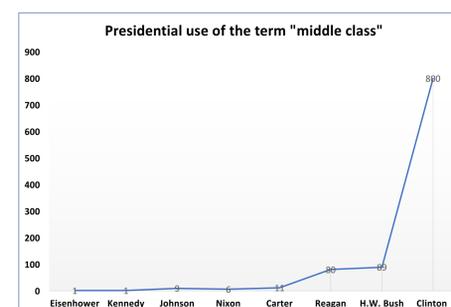
• Culture War

In this final narrative, the middle class is defined as a politically moderate, small-business-owning, often white group. This story contends that liberal elites have formed a "top-bottom" coalition with the poor in order to secure special benefits for the latter and dominion over an enlarged government for the former. Said coalition, through taxation that harms small businesses, regulations that favor criminals over middle class neighborhoods and families, and imposed social policies (such as providing welfare for immigrants), has sabotaged the American middle class, which is disappearing as more of its members face downward mobility.



Presidential Discourse

Our analysis of presidential discourse revealed that executive use of the term "middle class" emerged only gradually, beginning in earnest with Reagan. Before it became commonplace, other names were used to identify a large group of Americans whom the president constructed positively and invoked to promote policies. Notably, similar characteristics were used to construct these groups, including "hardworking," "breadwinners," and home- and car-owners. This demonstrates that today's "middle class" is not exactly unique, but neither has it been the timeless bedrock of society it is often said to be. Rather, the term is rooted in a presidential tradition of winning over the public by identifying—or constructing—a popularly perceived group of Americans with which to align.



Periodical Literature

Our survey of periodical literature revealed an increase in the salience of the middle class from the 1950s to 2000. Notably, however, the middle class enjoyed attention in the news media much earlier than it did in presidential discourse—as early as 1951. Our review also revealed certain recurring themes surrounding the middle class. These include, in the 1950s, an emphasis on the rapid expansion of the middle class, as well as the need many people felt to distinguish between the "middle" and "working" classes. The 1970s saw the rise of the "squeezed" middle class narrative, which continued into the 1980s. By 1990, however, dissenting voices had begun to question whether this group was a victim or merely a distraction from the truly needy.

Conclusion

Our research suggests that there are currently three popular narratives regarding the state of the middle class, all of which depict it in decline. We have also demonstrated that, though ubiquitous today, the middle class as a politically relevant group emerged only gradually, from the 1950s onward. Our next step is the coding of the periodical literature, in which we will classify each piece according to the empirical and subjective characteristics each deems to be "middle class."

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Kenyon College Center for the Study of American Democracy (CSAD) for their generous support of this project.