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Charles Murray's *Coming Apart* and the measurement of social and political divisions

Abstract: This article examines some claims made in a recent popular book of political sociology, with the intent not being to debunk any claims but rather to connect some important social and policy positions to statistical data on income, social class, and political attitudes. The thesis of Charles Murray's book is that America's upper and lower classes have become increasingly separate, with elites living more disciplined, orderly lives (characterized by marriage, work, and stable families) while being largely unaware of the lifestyles of the majority of Americans. I argue that some of Murray's conclusions are sensitive to particular choices of whom to label as elite or upper-class. From my analysis of survey data, I see the big culture war occurring within the upper class, whereas Murray focuses on differences in attitudes and lifestyles comparing rich to poor. *Coming Apart* is a lively contribution to current debates and complements more statistical analyses of political and social polarization.

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1 A controversial study of social class in America

Charles Murray is an influential non-academic social scientist and writer, most famous for his books *Losing Ground* (1984) about the negative consequence of welfare programs and *The Bell Curve* (1994) about IQ and society. His most recent book received wide media attention, with *New York Times* columnist David Brooks writing, "I'll be shocked if there's another book this year as important as Charles Murray's *Coming Apart*."

The thesis of Murray's book is that America's upper and lower classes have become increasingly separate, with elites living more disciplined, orderly lives (characterized by marriage, work, and stable families) while being largely unaware of the lifestyles of the majority of Americans. One notable feature of the book is a quiz in which Murray challenges his well-educated readers with 25 questions about American popular culture. He argues that liberal elites should

“preach what they practice” and be less accepting of the pathologies of lower-middle-class American life, as a starting point toward reuniting the country around traditional values of work and family.

As a conservative intellectual, Murray gets his share of criticisms from liberals, with one vulnerability of *Coming Apart* being that Murray emphasizes the difficulties that low-skill workers face in the current economy, even while arguing in a companion article that the new upper class should “drop its condescending ‘nonjudgmentalism.’ Married, educated people who work hard and conscientiously raise their kids shouldn’t hesitate to voice their disapproval of those who defy these norms.” I think everyone would agree with Murray that social mixing of the classes would be expected to increase economic mobility, but it is not clear to me how much an emphasis on the norm of hard work is going to help a low-skilled worker find a good job during a recession. This is not to say that particular policies such as a stimulus program are the solution, either: I understand Murray’s long-stated view that governmental assistance to low-income Americans is counterproductive.

Here, however, I want to talk not about economics but about political science, more specifically about the measurement issues involved in Murray’s definition of “the new upper class.” Murray has a lot of discussion of upper-class liberals, from the characters in the 1980s television show *Thirtysomething* to college graduates living in modern-day east coast metropolitan areas. I think his discussion would be improved by also considering upper-class conservatives, given that, in our research on public opinion and voting, my collaborators and I have seen the big culture war occurring *within* the upper class, as illustrated in Figure 1.

2 Murray on the top 5%

Political journalist David Frum quoted Murray as writing that the top 5% “tends to be liberal—right? There’s no getting around it. Every way of answering this question produces a yes.” In response, Frum and I both pointed out that, no, Americans in the top 5% of income are less likely to be liberal and more likely to vote Republican, compared to the average American.

Those numbers are correct, but it was unfair to present them as a contradiction of Murray, who when talking in his book about the top 5% is not talking about income. Murray defines “the broad elite” as “most successful 5 percent of the people working in the professions and managerial positions,” including top military officers, government officials, business executives, professionals, and the media, a set of occupations that include, in Murray’s words, “23 percent of all

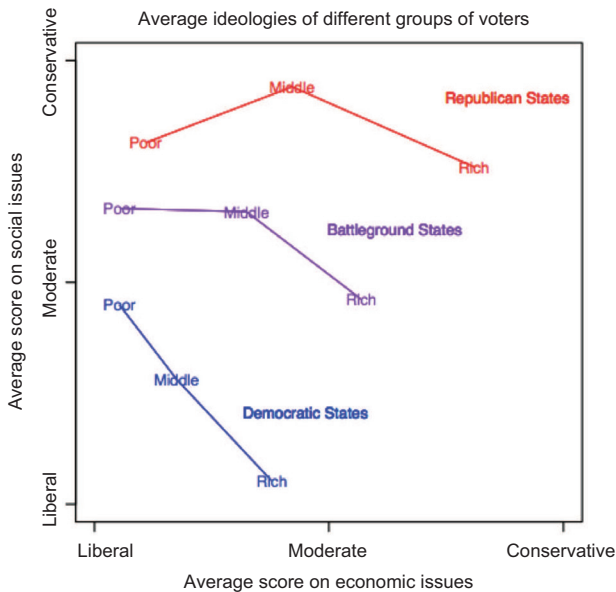


Figure 1: Average attitude scores on social and economic issues among high, middle, and low-income Americans, looking separately at solid Republican (red), battleground (purple), and solid Democratic (blue) states. Rich people tend to be more conservative on economic issues (especially in Republican states) and more liberal on social issues (especially in Democratic states). From Gelman et al. (2009), which also presents similar graphs with voters further categorized by frequency of religious attendance.

employed persons ages 25 or older.” He’s talking about the top 5% (in “success,” as broadly defined, which is related to but not quite the same as income) in these professions.

After his offhand remark about the upper class being liberal (more on that below), Murray takes pains to emphasize that this popular impression is exaggerated, writing, “the essence of the culture of the new upper class is remarkably consistent across the political spectrum.” The concept of upper-class people being liberal is not central to Murray’s argument; if anything, his point is the opposite, to de-emphasize the liberal tilt of “famous academics, journalists, Hollywooders, etc.” and rather make the point that, that whatever the political attitudes are of the new upper class, their attitudes and actions isolate them from mainstream America.

Getting back to Murray’s upper 5%: as he defines them, I would guess they are more conservative than the average American on economic issues and more liberal than the average American on social issues. But I cannot really be sure, as it is not easy to break down poll data using Murray’s definitions.

Rather than defining the American upper class as including some job categories but not others, I would prefer to include all the high-income groups and say that the American upper class is highly divided—that is, polarized. Murray does address much of this in his comparison of different sorts of SuperZips (zip codes with high values of average income and education), so maybe it is just a matter of emphasis: from my analysis of survey data (as in the Figure 1 above), I see the big culture war occurring within the upper class, whereas Murray focuses on differences in attitudes and lifestyles comparing rich to poor.

As I noted earlier, upper-income liberals, while a minority of upper-income Americans, are still an influential group and worth studying. But alongside them is an even larger group of upper-income conservatives.

I think Murray and I are basically in agreement about the facts here. If you take narrow enough slices and focus on the media, academia, and civilian government, you can find groups of elites with liberal attitudes on economic and social issues. But I am also interested in all those elites with conservative attitudes. Statistically, they outnumber the liberal elites. The conservative elites tend to live in different places than the liberal elites and they tend to have influence in different ways (consider, for example, decisions about where to build new highways, convention centers, etc., or pick your own examples), and those differences interest me.

I think that any focus on upper-class liberals would gain more context by contrasting them with the more numerous upper-class conservatives, but Murray's real point has little to do with political attitudes, and if you remove his comments about the purported liberalism of elites, nothing is really taken away from his main arguments.

3 “The New American Divide”

Murray describes his book as “about an evolution in American society” in the past half-century, “leading to the formation of classes that are different in kind and in their degree of separation from anything that the nation has ever known,” with a new upper class that now lives a life that is qualitatively different from the experiences of most Americans.

I see this argument having the following logical implications, in the context of Murray's conservative political attitudes (i.e. that he favors low taxes and low public spending).

As I read it, Murray's argument plus his political opinions imply the following story: Rich liberals lead personally admirable and economically productive

lives, but they are tied to a false ideology of socialism and social permissiveness. This left-wing ideology may have its appeal, but in the long term, or even the medium term, it does no favors for most poor and middle-income Americans, as it leads to economic stagnation (the natural result of money spent through the government's political process rather than through the decisions of individuals and private businesses) and social disaster (all the problems that arise with families when individuals attempt to live their lives without restraint).

Murray writes about culturally and politically influential elites because they have the ability to influence American attitudes, both thorough their economic power and through their representation in the news and entertainment media. Murray writes about politically liberal rich elites because he disagrees with their politics. From Murray's point of view, there's no point in writing about rich conservatives (for example, the funders of the campaigns of Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum) because they are already doing what he wants, advocating for lower taxes, lower government spending, and more restrictions on the behavior of lower-income Americans.

The above is not a quote; it is just my attempt to draw out the implications of Murray's thesis that the upper class should "preach what it practices" and recommend to ordinary Americans the attitude of long-term responsibility.

Just to be clear, let me emphasize that Murray's book does not distinguish between a "good" elite that is conservative and a "bad" elite that is liberal. He considers the new upper class as problematic as a class. My point above is that, given his political views, it makes sense for Murray to be more concerned about the attitudes of the liberal elite, a concern Murray can have without implying any moral criticism on his part.

Again, Murray never writes anything like the bit I have above about economic stagnation; this is just my interpretation of the implications of his concerns in the context of his economic beliefs.

And let me also make clear that Murray does not consider the politics of the new upper class in making his case that the social divide is problematic. Even if the American upper class were 100% conservative, Murray could still be concerned about their disconnect with the masses. But I think the contrast between liberal and conservative views is relevant given Murray's own attitudes.

One way to see this is to consider Murray's quiz, "How thick is your bubble," where he challenges his upper-class readers to assess their points in common to the ordinary Americans. One of Murray's questions is, "Have you ever participated in a parade not involving global warming, a war protest, or gay rights?" The bit about gay rights is cute, but it also serves to separate out the liberals in the audience. After all, lots of non-elites go to gay rights parades. What if Murray had asked, "Have you ever participated in a parade

not involving the pro-life or Tea Party movements?” This might not be the best example; my point is that there are lots of ways to separate the elites from the non-elites. Elites are more likely to know a business executive, more likely to buy a new SUV, more likely to fly business class, more likely to attend professional sporting events (those tickets are expensive), less likely to rent rather than their homes, less likely to ride public transportation, and so on. Murray’s quiz is interesting but he chooses to separate elites from non-elites in a particular way that makes me think he is sensitive to the attitudes of politically liberal elites in particular.

4 Categorizing Americans into social classes

In a blog entry two years earlier, Murray posted the graph reproduced in Figure 2 along with the following description:

The General Social Survey, a mother lode of information for social scientists that has been collected annually or biannually since 1972, has asked people in every survey to say whether they are extremely conservative, conservative, slightly conservative, moderate, slightly liberal, liberal, or extremely liberal. A really simple question.

The graph represents the percentage of people who answered “extremely liberal” or “liberal” minus the percentage of people who answered “extremely conservative” or “conservative” in any given survey.... [T]hink of the classes this way:

Traditional Upper: Someone at the 95th percentile of income, with a graduate degree, who is a business executive, physician, engineer, etc.

Intellectual Upper: Also at the 95th percentile of income and with a graduate degree, but a lawyer, academic, scientist (hard or soft) outside academia, writer, in the news media, or a creator of entertainment programming (film and television).

Traditional Middle: Same occupations as the Traditional Uppers, but with just a bachelor’s degree and at the 75th percentile of income.

Technical Middle: Someone working in the many technical specialties that have proliferated in health, information technology, and industrial technology, with an associate’s degree and at the 50th percentile of income.

Working: Someone working in a skilled blue-collar job, with just a high school diploma and at the 25th percentile of income.

Lower: Someone working at a low-skill job who did not finish high school, at the 5th percentile of income.

The graph is based exclusively on non-Latino whites (because that is who the book is about).

The divergence of the intellectual upper class in Murray's graph is dramatic, but partly because he is excluding many people who do not fall into any of the above groups, for example the vast majority of the people with graduate degrees who are *not* in the top 5% of income. (According to the Census Bureau, the median income of the 16 million Americans, 25 years or older, with full-time employment and a Master's-level education in 2011 was \$61,000, while the 95th percentile of individual income exceeds \$100,000.) Consider, for example, teachers, nurses, and social workers.

Beyond the problem with excluding ethnic minorities (whose fraction in the population, and in the electorate, has been growing), Murray's chart also excludes lots of white people. For example, where are "intellectual non-uppers"—that is, people in intellectual jobs such as teachers, writers, scientists, etc., who are below the 95th percentile of income? Graduate students—even white grad students—are really really liberal, I think, and even at Columbia and Harvard, they are nowhere close to the 95th percentile of income. And there are a few million teachers out there, not to mention many

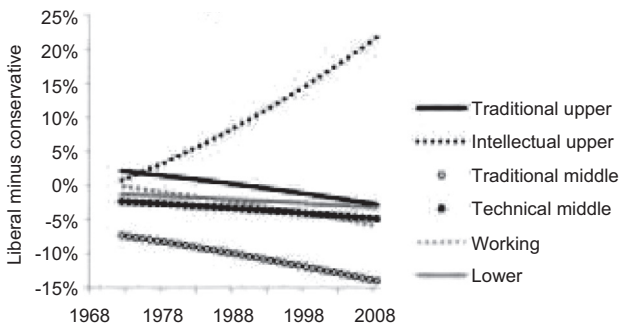


Figure 2: Graph from Charles Murray showing smoothed trends in average political ideology for different groups characterized by income and occupation category. One difficulty in interpreting this graph is that many categories of workers are not included in these groups.

professors making less than the 95th percentile, etc. Also, where do nurses with college or graduate degrees fit into the picture? Or college-educated journalists? I am not saying that Murray is wrong in the data he presents; I just worry that including only a subset of categories can give a distorted view of the trends.

As we know, Republicans tend to be richer than Democrats, but liberals and conservatives, on average, have pretty much the same income profiles as the general population. It looks odd that a single high-income group stands alone in Murray's plot, but I think this comes from his exclusion of groups such as middle-income intellectuals and professionals.

Murray writes, "every white socioeconomic class in America has become more conservative in the last four decades." But, again, what about the various groups he's excluded from the graph? Again, I am not saying he is wrong, it is just that, as a statistician, I just would like the full story, the set of all groups that add up to 100%.

I sent Murray some of the above comments and he explained his data-analytic choices as follows:

The graph was based on fitted values for logit regressions, with separate regressions run for each occupational class (I have five of them—essentially traditional professions; intellectual professions...; technical/mid-level white collar; skilled blue-collar/low-level white collar; and unskilled jobs).

Take self-identification as liberal as an example. For each occupational group, a logit was run with the dependent variable being a binary variable scored 1 if the person answered "extremely liberal" or "liberal," 0 otherwise. The independent variables were family income centile within survey year (continuous) age (continuous), and a vector of dummy variables for education (graduate degree, ba, aa, hs, and less than high school, using aa [two-year Associate's degree, often included in the "some college" category in surveys] as the reference group). The graph was produced by plugging in the values specified in my description. The points in the graph were the annual fitted values for liberal minus the fitted values for conservative. So no one was excluded. The graph simply gives illustrative combinations of income, age and occupation (the fitted value for age was based on 40 for all the graphs). Why separate regressions instead of entering dummies for occupation? Because the slopes are so different for different occupational groups and educational groups, and I prefer running separate regressions to loading the equation with interaction terms.

Given the above description, I think the graph would be improved by considering more categories. As it is, it excludes most people with graduate degrees, which is a problem in a study of an upper class which is categorized partly by education.

5 Difficulties of the recommendation to “preach what you practice”

Murray does not consider the case of Joe Paterno, but in many ways the Penn State football coach fits his story well. Paterno was said to live an exemplary personal and professional life, combining traditional morality with football success—but, by his actions, he showed little concern about the morality of his players and coaches. At a professional level, Paterno rose higher and higher, and in his personal life he was a responsible adult. But he had an increasing disconnect with the real world, to the extent that horrible crimes were occurring nearby (in the physical and social senses) but he was completely insulated from the consequences for many years. Paterno’s story is symbolic of upper-income America: you can live an ordinary life in an ordinary house and still feel like a regular guy but still live in a bubble.

As a small-town icon, Joe Paterno does not fit Murray’s template of urban and suburban elites, and his personal story represents an extreme example, but I think his case is relevant to explain the difficulty of the “preach what you practice” guideline. My claim is that “preaching,” to make a difference, requires actions as well as words. While Paterno did not espouse a nonjudgmental stance on rape, assault, etc., in his alleged actions he expressed a hands-off policy. (For our purposes here, what is relevant are not the specifics of what Paterno knew and did, but rather the institutional failure of Penn State, as personified by Paterno, in failing to stop the crimes that were happening on campus.) I see no reason to think that the Penn State administration believed that the crimes committed by the assistant coach and the football players were morally acceptable; they just did not seem to think it was their role to do much about it. I do not place myself above Paterno in any moral sense—I certainly do not monitor the after-hours activities of my own students and employees—I just see it as an example of the social distance that Murray writes about, that an authority figure such as Paterno can feel it is acceptable to be so isolated in this way.

Murray’s argument is a step forward in sophistication compared to some other discussions of the culture war. Old-style conservatives such as Michael Barone have characterized upper-class liberals as being frivolous “trustfunders” who do “not to have to work very hard” and “have done nothing to earn their money,” slackers who “revel in looking down on” the common people.

In contrast, Murray tones down the Snidely Whiplash rhetoric and describes upper-class liberals as people who are living admirable lives but who are giving irresponsible advice because of their deluded social theories. His recommendation

is, “When it comes to marriage and the work ethic, the new upper class must start preaching what it practices.”

The Paterno example illustrates the difficulty of this recommendation. What the Penn State administration had to do was not simply preach against rape and violence, but to act to stop it. The university’s leaders were indeed acting like Murray’s new upper class and simply looking away, allowing crimes to happen under his umbrella of protection. Unfortunately, this sort of behavior would seem to be characteristic of the old upper class as well, so I am not sure how new this all is.

My point is that preaching values in a real way is not so easy; it requires hard work and direct involvement, not just talk. I do not think Murray would disagree with me here. He writes that conscientious people should “voice their disapproval of those who defy these norms,” but it takes more than voicing disapproval. The kind of disapproval that makes a difference takes work and is risky. Joe Paterno could have reported the crimes of his coach and his students to the police, but at a possible cost to his reputation. Or, to choose a more homely example, just try telling an acquaintance that he or she is not conscientiously raising his or her kids. That would not be a costless conversation to you. Again, it might be a good idea, but it is hard to think about Murray’s suggestions without considering their challenges.

6 Upper-class liberals and upper-class conservatives

Setting aside the difficulties of implementing his recommendations, I see two limitations of Murray’s thesis. The first is a matter of selection. Let us divide Americans into upper and lower income categories. (Murray just talks about whites, but I think the arguments apply to the general population; my guess is that after the reception of his *Bell Curve* book, Murray just thought it would be safest to leave race out of his discussions entirely.) Murray is comparing rich liberals to poor everybodys, but he just as well could be looking at rich conservatives. By focusing on the cultural contradictions of liberalism, Murray piques the attention of the liberal elite while lulling the conservative elite into a false sense of security. But I think he is telling only part of the story, as I emphasize in graphs such as Figure 1.

My second problem with Murray’s argument is that it has a bit of a self-contradictory nature. As David Frum has noted, Murray criticizes upper-class Americans for (a) shunning lower-income cigarette smokers, but also for (b) not

shaming lower-income people for poor life choices. But smoking is a poor life choice, no?

Elsewhere Murray states that upper-class Americans are more likely to go to church, and it seems that he would like these upper-class people to encourage churchgoing among the mass of Americans. But in another place he says that the elites themselves should try going to church, just like the common people do. So which is it: is churchgoing an admirable habit, along the lines of marriage and hard work, that the elites should encourage others to do, or is churchgoing a bit of homespun Americana, like watching football on TV and eating at Applebee's, that the top 5% should reconnect with?

The point of these examples is not that Murray is wrong, either in his prescriptions or in his recommendations—much here depends on one's economic views about taxation and government spending—but rather that his argument keeps going in two opposite directions at once. From one side he argues that the upper class has good habits that they should transmit to ordinary Americans; on the other side he says that the upper class should become more like the rest of the country. But I cannot see how you can have it both ways. This connects to my earlier point that much could be gained by considering the diversity of attitudes among the upper class.

7 Summary

This whole discussion was started because Murray was writing something about social class and David Frum and I fired back with statistics about income. But Murray is not writing about income; in fact, he explicitly states.

The new-upper-class culture is not the product of great wealth. It is enabled by affluence—people with common tastes and preferences need enough money to be able to congregate—but it is not driven by affluence. It is driven by the distinctive tastes and preferences that emerge when large numbers of cognitively talented people are enabled to live together in their own communities. You can whack the top income centile back to where it was in the 1980s, and it will have no effect whatsoever on the new-upper-class culture that had already emerged by that time.

I do not know how true that is, but to be fair to Murray, he is writing about cultural attitudes, not income. Based on my own interests, I would take this the next step and consider the divisions between liberals and conservatives *within* America's elites. My suggestions along those lines don't contradict Murray's observations but rather represent additional things to think about. The connection with

statistics and social research more generally is that much can be gained by clarity in measurement. Murray's work is characteristic of interesting social science in that it goes back and forth between statistics, anecdotes, and social theories. One of the roles of careful measurement and analysis is to strengthen such connections.

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