

The conditioning power of class: Collective action and attitudes toward inequality in neoliberal Chile (2016–2023)

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Abstract

In an age of deepening inequality, most sociological research has examined how perceptions of injustice motivate collective action. This article reverses that perspective to explore how participation in collective action shapes attitudes toward income inequality—and how this process is shaped by class. Using nationally representative panel data from Chile (2016–2023), we analyze perceptions of fair pay gaps between top managers and unskilled workers. We show that individuals in subordinated class positions—for example, nonmanagerial workers—support significantly smaller pay gaps than those in privileged class locations. Moreover, while participation in protests is associated with more egalitarian attitudes overall, this effect persists over time only among nonmanagerial workers. Building on Marxist class analysis, we conceptualize this pattern as the conditioning power of class: class is not merely a structural location but a formative force that molds how collective action politicizes people. A causal mediation analysis indicates that, among nonmanagerial workers, protest participation nurtures egalitarian orientations partly by strengthening left-leaning political identities. By revealing how class shapes the transformative potential of collective action, this article contributes to research on inequality, class formation, and contentious politics in neoliberal economies.

Keywords

social class, collective action, political attitudes, neoliberalism, liberal-market economies, sociology

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Introduction

We are living in an era in which working-class organizations such as labor unions are weak, while business actors have become increasingly powerful (Baccaro and Howell, 2017; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2018). As a result, class inequality has risen dramatically over the past few decades, even in industrialized countries where income disparities were once mitigated through the expansion of the welfare state (Lupu and Pontusson, 2023). Against this backdrop, empirical research shows that although working-class individuals tend to perceive lower levels of inequality, they are significantly more likely to support redistributive policies (Fernández and Jaime-Castillo, 2018; Kiatpongsan and Norton, 2014; Knell and Stix, 2020; Lindh and McCall, 2020). Yet these redistributive preferences are often weakly translated into political outcomes, particularly in highly unequal societies (Lupu and Pontusson, 2023).

Building on this literature, this article examines how attitudes toward class inequality—measured as perceptions of the fairness of pay gaps between higher-managerial and unskilled working-class occupations—are shaped by social class and participation in collective action. Specifically, we ask three questions. First, how does social class shape attitudes toward fair pay gaps? Second, how does participation in collective action influence these attitudes? Third, does the association between collective action participation and attitudes to fair pay gaps vary across social classes? Our analysis bridges and contributes to the literature on inequality perceptions, social class, and collective action by focusing on a less-explored aspect of the class-inequality nexus. Rather than examining how perceptions of inequality or injustice lead to collective action, or how social class affects individuals' likelihood of protest participation—as much of the empirical literature has done (see, e.g., Brady et al., 1995; Kelly, 1998; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015)—we reverse the lens to explore how collective action influences attitudes toward pay gaps, and how such effect varies across classes.

Drawing on panel data from a nationally representative survey conducted in Chile between 2016 and 2023, we show that participation in collective actions, such as marches and demonstrations, is associated with more egalitarian attitudes toward pay gaps between top-level managers and unskilled workers—that is, with a reduction in the size of the gap that people consider “fair.” We argue that this occurs because collective action participation can “resocialize” and politicize individuals by exposing them to ideologies that challenge the status quo (Fillieule and Neveu, 2019; Tarrow, 2011).

In addition, using a Marxist-inspired class schema (Wright, 1997), we also find that individuals in subordinated class positions (e.g., nonmanagerial workers and the informal self-employed) prefer lower pay gaps than those in privileged positions, such as expert managers. More importantly, we find that social class conditions the longitudinal association between collective action and attitudes toward fair pay gaps: only among nonmanagerial workers does protest participation foster more egalitarian views over time. We call this *the conditioning power of class*—the idea that class is not merely a structural location but a formative force that shapes how individuals make sense of collective experience. In this view, protest does not resocialize and politicize uniformly; rather, its transformative potential is molded by class-based positions within relations of production and power. We interpret this conditioning power of class through the lens of the “two logics” of collective action hypothesis (Offe and Wessenthal, 1980), suggesting that collective action fosters dialogical relationships that deepen critiques of class inequality among workers but not among members of privileged classes. We also speculate that this effect is absent among other subordinated classes, such as the informal self-employed, probably due to their lack of unionization and limited participation in sustained collective action.

Building on this finding, we pose an additional research question: through which mechanisms does collective action participation shape workers' attitudes toward fair pay gaps? Focusing on a

subsample of nonmanagerial workers, we conduct a causal mediation analysis and find that left-wing political identity mediates approximately 6% of the association between collective action participation and attitudes toward fair pay gaps. This indicates that protest participation partly strengthens workers' egalitarian attitudes by reinforcing left-leaning identities, while also suggesting that other unobserved mechanisms play a substantial role.

This article explores the interplay between class, collective action, and attitudes toward fair pay gaps by focusing on the case of Chile. Like other liberal-market economies, Chile is marked by weak unions, low levels of taxation and social spending, high levels of inequality, and a welfare regime centered on means-tested assistance and the commodification of social services (Barozet et al., 2021; OECD, 2025; Pérez-Ahumada, 2023b). Between 2011 and 2019, Chile experienced recurrent waves of anti-neoliberal mass mobilization, culminating in the 2019 "Social Outburst"—the country's most intense protest cycle in nearly four decades (Joignant et al., 2024; Somma et al., 2021). The persistent levels of economic inequality and the recent wave of intense social mobilization make Chile a compelling case for studying attitudes toward inequality in market-oriented societies. Drawing on panel data that capture public attitudes before and after the 2019 social outburst, this article ultimately reflects on how the Chilean case can inform broader debates on class, collective action, and attitudes toward economic inequality.

Class and attitudes to pay differentials

Studies on attitudes toward pay differentials assess perceived inequality by asking respondents how much they think people in high-income (e.g., higher-managerial) occupations and low-income (e.g., unskilled working-class) occupations earn or should earn (Castillo, 2012; Easterbrook, 2021; García-Sánchez et al., 2019; Osberg and Smeeding, 2006). These studies show that working-class individuals and individuals with lower educational attainment tend to perceive *smaller* pay differentials than those in privileged class positions, partly because they underestimate high earners' wages and overestimate their own (Easterbrook, 2021; Kiatpongsan and Norton, 2014; Knell and Stix, 2020; Osberg and Smeeding, 2006). Marxist scholars attribute these misperceptions to a "dominant ideology" that obscures exploitation and legitimizes inequality (Therborn, 1980), while social psychologists argue that misperceptions occur because people justify inequality to fulfill psychological needs for meaning and order ("system justification" theory) (Castillo, 2012; García-Sánchez et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2015). These justifications are reinforced by beliefs in meritocracy and equal opportunity, which suggest that rewards reflect personal effort and that everyone competes on a "level playing field" (García-Sánchez et al., 2019; Kluegel and Smith, 1986).

However, despite misperceptions or ideological domination, people in subordinated classes have *more* egalitarian attitudes towards pay gaps than those in privileged classes. In other words, they believe that the "fair" pay gap between high-income and low-income occupations should be *smaller* (Kiatpongsan and Norton, 2014; Knell and Stix, 2020). From a class-based perspective, this occurs because class shapes material interests by defining access to income, rights and power at work, job security, and exposure to risk (Chibber, 2022; Fernández and Jaime-Castillo, 2018; Langsæther and Evans, 2020; Lindh and McCall, 2020). Marxist scholars further argue that class positions reflect relations of domination and exploitation, where employers appropriate workers' surplus (Chibber, 2022; Wright, 2015). Therefore, exploited classes are less tolerant of inequality, more likely to perceive conflict between workers and managers, and more likely to support redistribution (Haddon and Wu, 2022; Lindh and McCall, 2020; Pérez-Ahumada, 2023a; Wright, 1997).

Beyond income differences, class entails qualitative disparities associated to people's location in the relations of production (Wright, 2015). For instance, in affluent countries, the

self-employed—despite similar incomes to workers—often express more conservative attitudes due to greater work autonomy and individualism (Langsæther and Evans, 2020). In Latin America, however, many self-employed workers are informally employed and economically vulnerable (Elbert and Pérez, 2018; OIT, 2022). Therefore, our first and most basic hypothesis is that:

H1: Those located in subordinated class positions (e.g., nonmanagerial workers or the informal self-employed) consider that the fair pay gap between high-income (e.g., higher managerial) and low-income (e.g., unskilled working-class) occupations should be *smaller* than what is considered fair by individuals in privileged class positions such as expert managers.

Class inequality and collective action

Perceptions of injustice, shaped by experiences of inequality, are key a basic precondition for action (Kelly, 1998; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). Therefore, one might assume that, due to their exploited class position and greater discontent with inequality, working-class individuals would be more inclined to mobilize. Yet, evidence suggests that viewing inequality as unfair prompts collective action mainly among the upper classes, while it can discourage action among the lower classes (Vezzoli et al., 2023). This paradox can be explained by several dynamics common in neoliberal, market-oriented economies like Chile.

First, as shown in Figure 1, people in such economies (e.g., Chile, the U.S., and Australia) perceive higher inequality but are also more likely to accept it (Castillo, 2012; García-Sánchez et al.,

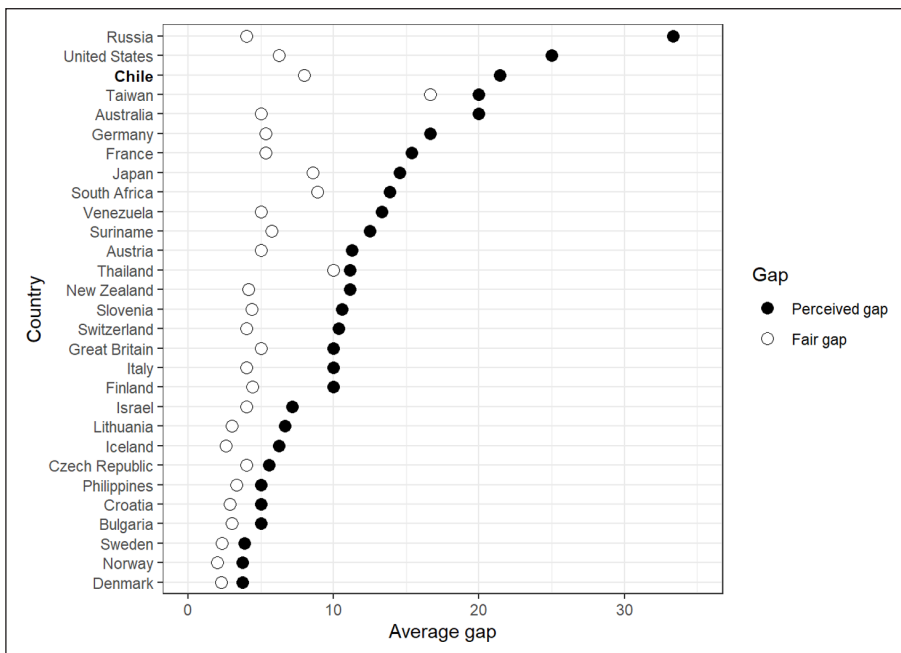


Figure 1. Perceived and fair pay gaps (Chairman of a large corporation vs unskilled worker, 2019).

Note. Gaps were calculated using responses to the 2019 International Social Programme (ISSP) question: “How much do you think people in these jobs earn/should earn?” (a) a chairman of a large national corporation, and (b) an unskilled worker. Perceived and “fair” earnings for each occupation were weighted using country-level weights, and the gaps were computed as the ratio of the chairman’s earnings to the worker’s earnings.

2019; Kiatpongsan and Norton, 2014). Second, in these contexts, class disparities are larger, labor unions are weaker, and governments less responsive to workers' demand for redistribution (Edlund and Lindh, 2015; Kelley and Evans, 2021; Lupu and Pontusson, 2023; Pérez-Ahumada, 2023b). As a result, disillusionment and diminished political efficacy are more common among working-class individuals than their privileged counterparts (Haddon and Wu, 2022; Vezzoli et al., 2023). Third, neoliberal shifts in traditional labor parties have severed ties with unions and weakened the historic link between class and leftist voting, especially in market-driven societies like Chile (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2018; Pérez-Ahumada, 2023b). Finally, working-class individuals consistently show lower political participation. According to the "resource model" of participation, this is due to the upper and middle classes having more political resources—education, income, civic skills—which translate into greater political efficacy and action (Brady et al., 1995; Vezzoli et al., 2023).

Can collective action shape class attitudes?

The literature reviewed above primarily explores how class position shapes political interests and collective action. Although less numerous, some studies reverse this causal direction, examining how participation in collective action can promote egalitarian outcomes at both macro and individual levels (Fillieule and Neveu, 2019; McAdam, 1989; Polletta and Jasper, 2001).

At the macro level, social movements can drive democratization by pressuring elites to adopt redistributive policies and expand political inclusion (Tilly, 2003). At the individual level, participation in protests can raise awareness of inequality by reshaping identities, attitudes, and behaviors—even without tangible incentives or when social movements do not achieve their stated goals (Fillieule and Neveu, 2019; Polletta and Jasper, 2001; Tarrow, 2011).

Social movement scholars demonstrate that protest involvement politicizes individuals through processes of "resocialization" (McAdam, 1989) in which they are exposed to new ideologies that enable them to question dominant norms (Fillieule and Neveu, 2019; Tarrow, 2011). These processes also connect participants to networks that alter life trajectories—for example, by influencing family choices or increasing future political engagement (Fendrich and Lovoy, 1988; Wilhelm, 1998). Social movements also reshape collective identities and provide resources (e.g., political skills or risk tolerance) that empower participants and enable further action (Tarrow, 2011).

Marxist scholars similarly highlight the transformative effects of collective action, especially through strikes. Hyman (1989) sees strikes as critical for mobilizing resistance against employers, while Wright (1997) argues that strikes can reinforce anti-capitalist class consciousness. Strikes also build solidarity, encourage union membership, and raise political awareness among workers (Fantasia, 1988; Kelly, 1998; Pérez-Ahumada and Godoy-Márquez, 2025).

In sum, this evidence suggests that participation in collective action politicizes people, and strengthen leftist and collectivist orientations, which correlate with lower meritocratic beliefs and stronger support for redistribution (Hadler, 2005; Willis et al., 2015). Therefore, our second hypothesis is:

H2: Those who participate more frequently in collective actions consider that the fair pay gap between higher managerial and unskilled working-class occupations should be smaller, relative to those who participate less frequently or do not participate in collective actions

Class differences in the effect of collective action participation

Despite their different emphases, neither social movement nor Marxist scholars have examined whether the effects of collective action on individuals vary across social classes. A notable exception is Offe and Wiesenenthal's (1980) study of the "two logics of collective action," which underscores fundamental differences between worker and employer organizing.

Offe and Wiesenenthal argue that, unlike labor unions, capitalist associations do not rely on dialogical relations—that is, interactive processes through which class interests are formed—because their collective action is rooted in the aggregation of individual, private interests rather than in class-based struggle. As a result, capitalist organizing follows an "instrumental-monological" logic, sustained by the provision of selective incentives to employer associations' members. In contrast, labor unions must engage in sustained collective action and develop ideologies that cultivate a "willingness to act" among workers (Offe and Wiesenenthal, 1980: 83–85; see also Kelly, 1998).

Offe and Wiesenenthal's argument has been criticized from various perspectives. For instance, scholars such as Streeck (1998) and Bowman (1998) argue that business associations also face collective action challenges in coordinating capitalists' individual interests. Still, the "two logics" perspective suggests that collective action is central to forming class consciousness among workers, but less so for the capitalist class.

As explained below, our survey does not include capitalists in the strict sense (e.g., large employers or owners of capital). Instead, we focus on Chile's "privileged class" of expert managers—high-level decision-makers whose authority stems from specialized knowledge (Wright, 1997). With this in mind, and extending Offe and Wiesenenthal's argument, our third and final hypothesis is that:

H3: The association between collective action participation and attitudes toward pay inequality is negative and statistically significant among workers, but not among expert managers. Workers who participate more frequently in collective actions favor smaller pay gaps than non-participating workers, whereas expert managers' views of fair pay gaps do not vary with their participation in collective actions (see Figure 2).

The Chilean context

Like other liberal-market regimes, Chile features a welfare state marked by means-tested assistance and high commodification of social services such as education, healthcare, and pensions (Barozet et al., 2021). Consequently, it has low public spending and high inequality: with a market-income Gini of 0.49 (disposable-income Gini=0.45) and a P90/P10 ratio near 9.5, Chile is among the most unequal OECD countries (OECD, 2025).

Chile's market institutions resemble those of countries like the U.S. and U.K., shaped by "deregulatory liberalization"—that is, the displacement of earlier systems for coordinating markets (Thelen, 2014). In Chile, this shift occurred under Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship (1973–1990), which restructured sectors like labor, education, healthcare, and pensions to prioritize capital accumulation and employer power. Unlike other Latin American nations that "turned to the left" in the early 2000s, Chile maintained its free-market foundations throughout the 1990s and 2000s. For instance, since the return to democracy in 1990, labor unions have remained weak due to the continuation of the dictatorship's pro-business labor code (Pérez-Ahumada, 2023b). Meanwhile, center-left *Concertación* governments preserved the elite consensus and actively demobilized social movements "from above" (Araujo et al., 2023; Joignant et al., 2024).

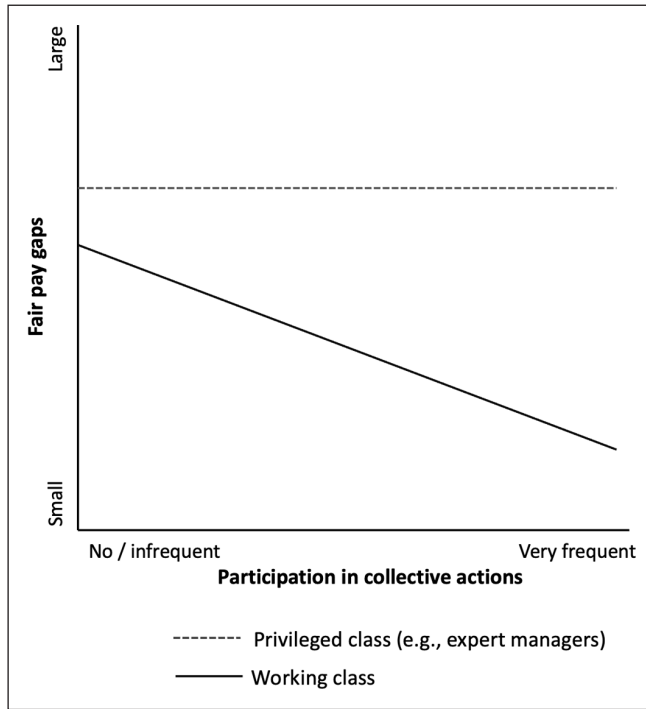


Figure 2. Hypothesized interaction effects between class location and collective action participation on attitudes toward the fairness of pay gaps.

This demobilized landscape shifted after 2011, when Chile saw a resurgence of protests across labor, student, and feminist movements demanding deep institutional change (Joignant et al., 2024; Pérez et al., 2017). These mobilizations not only repoliticized the debate on inequality and increased citizens’ willingness to participate in protests, but also eroded trust in parliament and political parties, deepening the divide between social movements and traditional politics (Araujo et al., 2023; Somma et al., 2021).

Furthermore, from October 2019 to March 2020, Chile experienced its largest protests since the dictatorship—the 2019 “Social Outburst.” Millions demanded better living conditions, an end to privatized services, and a new constitution. According to the Observatory of Social Conflict (Observatorio de Conflictos COES, 2020), protest events rose from around 1000 in 2010 to 5000 in 2019. Panel data used in this article (see below) show that nearly 20% of Chileans protested in 2019—nearly triple the share in 2018 (see Figure 3). This unprecedented mobilization generated major political consequences. The scale of the protests—particularly the general strike of November 12—forced right-wing President Sebastián Piñera to agree to the creation of a Constitutional Convention (OHL, 2020; Osorio and Velásquez, 2022). In December 2021, Chileans further expressed support for progressive change by electing Gabriel Boric, leader of the left-wing coalition *Apruebo Dignidad*, as president. Boric took office in March 2022, pledging an ambitious agenda of redistributive reforms.

However, by 2022 protest momentum had waned due to COVID-19 restrictions, and the Constitutional Convention—composed largely of independent left-leaning representatives with limited partisan experience—failed to produce a constitutional draft that resonated with the

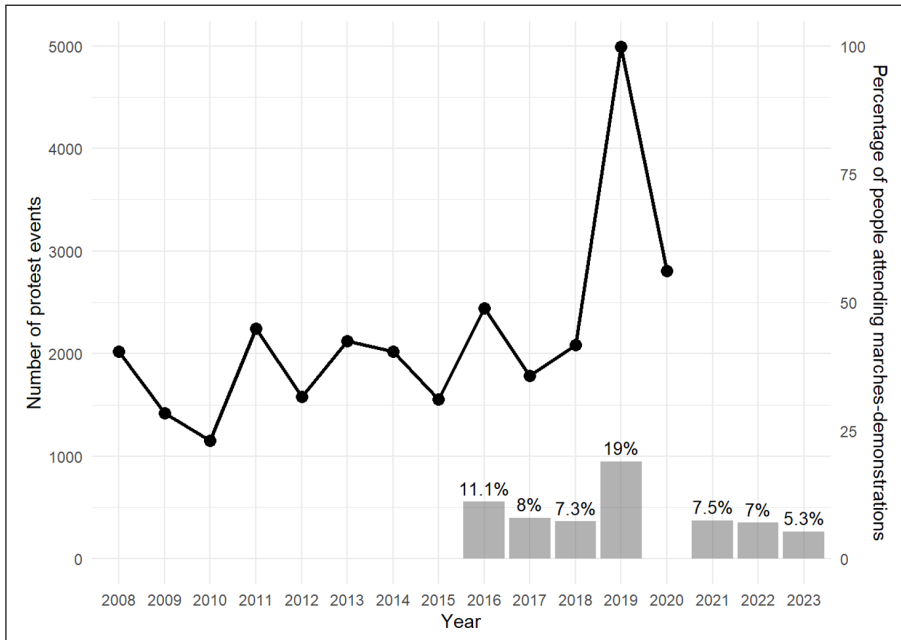


Figure 3. Protest events and participation in marches and demonstrations in Chile.

egalitarian aspirations of Chileans. As a result, the proposed constitution was rejected in a plebiscite held in September 2022.

This outcome marked a significant defeat for social movements, left-wing parties, and the Boric administration itself. Since then, and throughout the remainder of its term, the Boric government was unable to regain the momentum it enjoyed upon taking office. Given its minority position in Congress, it largely abandoned the anti-neoliberal agenda that had brought it to power, including proposals to dismantle the privatized pension system or substantially increase taxes on large corporations. These developments, together with the election of the neoliberal, far-right politician José Antonio Kast as president in December 2025, underscore the enduring strength of the neoliberal project in Chile. Despite this, the 2019 Social Outburst remains the most significant episode of mass mobilization in the country since at least the mid-1980s, and its long-term political implications have yet to fully unfold (Araujo et al., 2023; Joignant et al., 2024).

Data and methods

We use data from the Longitudinal Social Survey of Chile (ELSOC), a panel study conducted annually from 2016 to 2023. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, fieldwork for the 2020 wave was suspended, resulting in a total of seven waves. The survey follows a probabilistic, stratified, clustered, multistage sampling design and includes both major urban centers (e.g., Santiago, Valparaíso, and Concepción) and smaller cities. It targets a nationally representative sample of men and women aged 18–75 who are habitual residents of private dwellings. The first wave (2016) surveyed 2927 participants, covering approximately 77% of the national population and 93% of the urban population, with a response rate of 62.4%. To mitigate panel attrition and maintain representativeness, a refreshment sample of 1519 respondents was added in wave 3 (2018).

Given the aims of this study, we restricted our analysis to respondents who were employed and thus could be assigned to a social class position. Thus, for this article, we use an unbalanced panel of 2268 individuals, totaling 9143 person-wave observations across the seven waves.

Dependent variable

Fair pay gap. The “fair” pay gap was calculated using the following question from the ELSOC survey questionnaire: “How much money do you think a person should earn per month. . .?” (a) a top-level manager of a large corporation, and (b) an unskilled worker. Based on the responses, we divided the income considered fair for a manager by the income considered fair for an unskilled worker and applied a logarithmic transformation to adjust for the skewed distribution of income values (as a few respondents tend to report very high values). Thus, the variable was calculated as follows:

$$\text{Fair Pay Gap} = \log \left(\frac{\text{Fair income for top-level manager}}{\text{Fair income for unskilled worker}} \right)$$

Higher values on this variable indicate a greater acceptance of income disparities, that is, a stronger justification of economic inequality.

Independent variables

The main independent variables of this study are two:

Social class: This variable was measured using a modified version of Wright’s (1997) Marxist class schema. Wright distinguishes class positions based on three criteria denoting the social position occupied by individuals within relations of exploitation: (1) the private ownership of means of production; (2) the level of skills; and (3) the possession of “organizational assets” (authority) within the production process.

To operationalize the first criterion, we used a ELSOC question that measured the respondents’ employment status (i.e., whether they work as employers, independent workers, or salaried workers). Then, to operationalize the second criterion, we used the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08) 2 digit-groups and education levels—particularly, to distinguish “experts” from skilled/unskilled workers. Thus, experts were those employed in occupations belonging to ISCO groups from 10 to 26 who had also completed some post-secondary education. The remaining occupational groups (groups 30 to 96 in the ISCO-08 code) were classified as “non-experts,” that is, skilled or unskilled workers. Finally, to operationalize the authority dimension, we used a question measuring the respondents’ supervisory capacity (1 = they supervise others as part of their job, 0 = they do not). Though the ELSOC dataset does not offer distinctions between the three authority levels proposed by Wright (1997: 74–90), it at least allowed us to distinguish between those who worked in a supervisory capacity and those who did not, which was fundamental to create a Marxist-inspired class scheme.

Based on these variables, we created a six-category class scheme: (1) *Petite bourgeoisie* (small employers or solo self-employed with professional degrees), (2) *Informal self-employed* (i.e., unskilled independent workers that, due to their lack of professional degrees, are much more likely

to be employed in the informal sector) (Elbert and Pérez, 2018), (3) *Expert managers*, that is, upper-level employees that work in an expert class position and perform supervisory roles; (4) *Experts*, that is, people employed in expert occupations without supervisory roles; (5) *Supervisors*, that is, skilled or unskilled workers who have supervisory capacity, and (6) *Workers*, that is, non-managerial workers employed in skilled or unskilled occupations.

While grounded in Wright's (1997) Marxist class framework, our operationalization necessarily rests on the assumption that employment status, occupational skill, and supervisory authority provide empirically observable *proxies* for ownership and control within production. Thus, our measurement captures relative positions within capitalist labor markets, but not *direct* ownership of the means of production.

In this article, social class was treated as a time-invariant measure. Preliminary analyses showed that there was little within-individual variation on this variable in our data. Across the panel, only a few percent of individuals changed their class position in a theoretically relevant way—for example, less than 8% of them moved from an unprivileged (working-class or informal self-employed) class location to a privileged (e.g., expert or expert-manager) class location. To include respondents from the refreshment sample in the analysis, social class was fixed at wave 3 (the wave in which the refreshment sample was introduced).

Collective action participation: This variable was measured through a 1 (never) to 5 (very often) scale, which indicated whether the respondent attended a march or demonstration during the last 12 months.

Controls

Our statistical analyses included the following sociodemographic controls: age (in years), sex (1=female, 0=male), and sector of employment (1=private, 0=public). We did not include educational level as a control variable in the models because education was used as a key criterion to differentiate between expert managers and skilled/unskilled workers in our class scheme.

In addition, to more accurately estimate the effect of collective action on the fairness of pay gaps, our models controlled for two other variables. The first variable was *level of political involvement*, measured through an additive 0–12 interval scale resulting from three survey questions: (1) How interested would you say you are in politics? (0=not interested at all to 3=very interested), (2) How often do you . . . Talk about politics with family or friends? and (3) How often do you . . . Actively seek out political information through media such as television, radio, newspapers, or the internet? (in these two latter cases, responses ranged from 0=Never to 3=Very often). The average Pearson's correlation between the items was 0.55; Cronbach's Alpha=0.79. Higher values in the scale denote higher levels of political involvement.

The second variable was *perceived pay gap*, measured as the log-transformed ratio between the perceived monthly salaries of a corporation top-level manager and an unskilled worker. This ratio was calculated using the survey question: "How much money do you think a top-level manager of a large corporation/an unskilled worker earns per month. . .?" Higher values indicate a greater perceived disparity in earnings. We included this variable because fair pay gaps are strongly shaped by the amount of inequality individuals perceive (Castillo, 2012; Kiatpongsan and Norton, 2014).

Finally, our models included year dummies to control for unobserved, time-specific shocks or trends that may affect all individuals in the sample equally but are not directly measured.

Except for sex, all these controls were treated as time-varying.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the variables included in this research.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics ($N=9143$).

Variables	Mean	SD	Range	Percentage
Fair pay gap	1.95	1.11	−3.47 to 8.29	
<i>Social class</i>				
1. Expert managers				5.6
2. Petit bourgeoisie				6.3
3. Informal self-employed				15.3
4. Experts				5.9
5. Supervisors				15.1
6. Workers				51.8
Collective action participation	1.35	0.83	1 to 5	
Female (1 = yes)				51.8
Age	45.57	12.58	18 to 82	
Sector of employment (1 = private)				85.1
Political involvement	4.69	3.09	0 to 12	
Perceived gap	3.45	1.16	−0.92 to 9.57	
<i>Political identity</i>				
1. Left				23.3
2. Center				28.3
3. Right				17.6
4. Not identified				30.9
Social change orientation	3.95	0.79	1 to 5	
Meritocratic orientation	3.39	1.87	0 to 8	
<i>Wave</i>				
1. 2016				11.1
2. 2017				10.1
3. 2018				22.6
4. 2019				19.8
5. 2021				13.3
6. 2022				11.2
7. 2023				12.0

Strategy of analysis

Our analytical strategy involved several steps, which are summarized in Figure 4.

To account for the panel structure of the data, we estimate both fixed effects (FE) and random effects (RE) models. As is well known, FE models control for all time-invariant individual characteristics by focusing exclusively on within-unit variation over time (Schleifer and Chaves, 2017; Wooldridge, 2013). We use FE models to estimate the effect of collective action participation on attitudes toward pay gaps. This modeling approach aligns with our goal of examining how changes in individuals' participation in collective action influence their attitudes *over time*. Moreover, by excluding between-person variation, FE models can strengthen the causal interpretation of the results, as changes in the dependent variable are not confounded by unobserved, time-invariant differences between individuals (Schleifer and Chaves, 2017: 135).

Despite this advantage, FE models do not permit the estimation of effects for time-invariant variables. This is a limitation in our case, as one of our key independent variables—social class—is treated as time-invariant. To address this issue, we also estimate RE models. These models

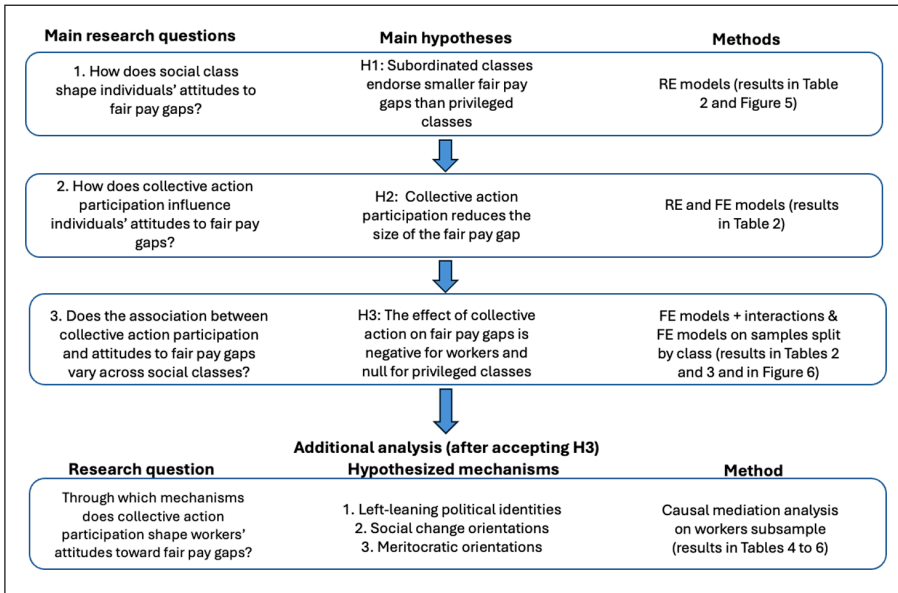


Figure 4. Analytical strategy diagram.

incorporate both within- and between-individual variation under the assumption that unobserved variables are uncorrelated with the error term (Wooldridge, 2013). While this assumption increases the risk of omitted variable bias and model misspecification, RE models allow us to examine the between-person effect of social class—specifically, whether individuals in different class positions differ on average in their attitudes toward pay gaps.

Finally, to assess whether the effect of collective action varies by social class, we estimate FE models separately for each class, as well as FE models with interaction terms between class and collective action. The use of interaction terms in FE models has been debated due to the potential for estimation bias when both the moderator and the independent variable are time-varying (Giesselmann and Schmidt-Catran, 2022). However, such bias is less likely when the moderator is time-invariant (Giesselmann and Schmidt-Catran, 2022), as is the case with social class in our analysis.

To account for within-person correlation and potential heteroskedasticity, we computed cluster-robust standard errors at the individual level. All models were estimated using Stata (*xtreg* command). For robustness, we also estimated the models in R using the *plm* package and obtained nearly identical results. Data and codes are available in the supplementary materials, hosted at the OSF repository.¹

Mediation analysis

To understand the processes through which collective action participation shapes workers' preferences for smaller pay gaps, we used the *mediation* package in R to perform a causal mediation analysis (Tingley et al., 2014). Focusing on a subsample of the respondents classified as “working class” ($N=4733$), we examined three theoretically relevant mediators:

- 1) *Political identity*: measured as a four-category variable: 1. Left (scores 0 to 3 in the original 0 to 10 scale), 2. Center (scores 4–6), 3. Right (scores 7 to 10), 4. Not identified (NA/DK in the original variable).

- 2) *Social change orientation*: measured through a 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) interval scale resulting from the statement “Social change is possible.”
- 3) *Meritocratic orientation*: measured using a summative scale ranging from 0 to 8 (higher values=stronger meritocratic orientations). The scale was constructed from two survey items: (a) People are rewarded for their effort, and (b) People are rewarded for their intelligence (0=completely disagree to 4=completely agree). Pearson’s correlation between the two items is 0.68.

Some of these measures are not without limitations. For instance, political identity—operationalized through self-placement on a left-right scale—is an indirect indicator of the ideological processes through which collective action may shape workers’ attitudes. Nevertheless, in the absence of more fine-grained measures, it remains a widely used proxy for distributive political orientations.

This limitation aside, our goal was to assess the mediating role of these three potential mechanisms. More specifically, our goal was to analyze whether collective action reduces the size of the gap workers consider “fair” by strengthening their left-leaning identities and their social change orientations or by reducing their meritocratic orientations.

Following traditional mediation analysis, we performed this analysis in three steps. First, we analyzed the relationship between participation in marches/demonstrations and the three theoretically relevant mediators. In a second step, we analyzed whether the relationship between participation in marches/demonstrations changed after including the theoretically relevant mediators. Finally, we estimated the average direct effects (ADE) and the average causal mediation effects (ACME) of collective action—that is, its direct and indirect or mediating effects—on fair pay gaps, as well as the percentage of mediation, and confidence intervals to see whether the direct and indirect effects were statistically significant. Due to the requirements of the *mediation* package, in this third stage we could only account for the longitudinal nature of our data by using multilevel modeling techniques (Finch et al., 2019: Ch. 5). Additionally, due to convergence issues, we had to recode our political identity variable as dummy (1 = left, 0 = otherwise) to fit multilevel lineal probability models. To calculate confidence intervals, we used the quasi-Bayesian approach with 5000 simulations (Tingley et al., 2014).

As a final methodological reflection, we acknowledge that our quantitative design cannot capture the interactional and experiential processes through which class perceptions are formed and politicized (Fantasia, 1988). Nevertheless, consistent with prior quantitative research on class consciousness and class perceptions (Haddon and Wu, 2022; Pérez-Ahumada, 2014, 2023a; Wright, 1997), we believe that our approach is well suited to identifying systematic associations between class location, collective action, and attitudes toward inequality at the population level. Ethnographic and qualitative methodologies are better suited to analyzing micro-level processes of identity formation and politicization, whereas survey data allow us to map broader patterns of class conflict across national contexts.

Results

Table 2 presents three models predicting attitudes toward the fairness of pay gaps in Chile. Model 1 shows the results of a RE model that suggests that there is a statistically significant relationship between class and fair pay gap: compared to people in an expert-managerial class location, workers and the informal self-employed prefer a smaller pay gap. To illustrate this relationship, Figure 5 shows the average marginal effect of class location on fair pay gap. This figure shows, for instance, that an informal self-employed and a nonmanagerial worker believe that a fair pay gap should be

Table 2. Random- and fixed-effects models predicting attitudes toward the fairness of pay gaps in Chile.

Variables	M1: RE model	M2: FE model	M3: FE model
Participation in marches/demonstrations	-0.054*** (0.014)	-0.025 (0.015)	
<i>Social class (ref: expert managers)</i>			
Petit bourgeoisie	-0.123 (0.089)		
Experts	-0.012 (0.084)		
Supervisors	-0.149* (0.074)		
Workers	-0.304*** (0.068)		
Informal self-employed	-0.374*** (0.075)		
<i>Participation in marches/demonstrations # Social class</i>			
Participation # Expert managers			0.054 (0.046)
Participation # Petit bourgeoisie			0.108 (0.075)
Participation # Experts			-0.048 (0.036)
Participation # Supervisors			-0.003 (0.038)
Participation # Workers			-0.061** (0.021)
Participation # Informal self-employed			0.020 (0.045)
Time-variant controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time-invariant control	Yes	No	No
Constant	0.735*** (0.103)	-0.365 (0.618)	-0.361 (0.610)
R ² (within)	0.23	0.23	0.23
R ² (between)	0.37		
Individuals	2268	2268	2268
Observations	9143	9143	9143

Note. Time-invariant control refers to the respondents' sex. Time-variant controls are age, sector of employment, level of political involvement, and perceived pay gap. The models also included year dummies.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

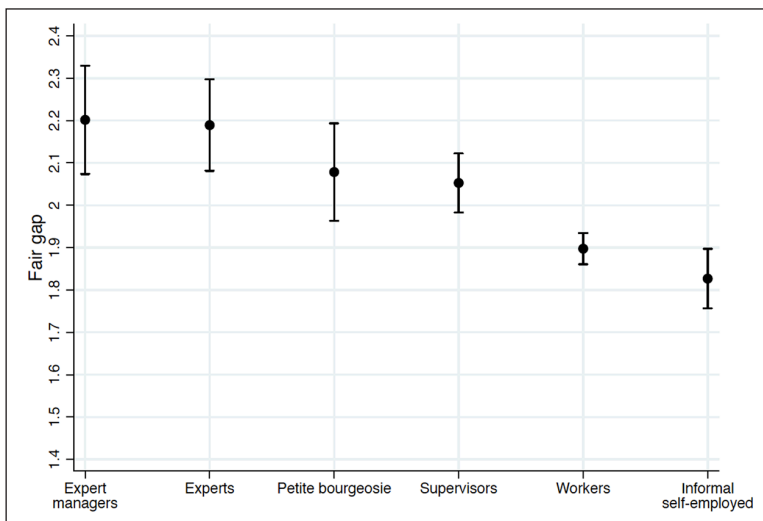


Figure 5. Average marginal effect of class location on attitudes to the fairness of pay gaps.

on average log (1.8) and log (1.9), equivalent to US\$ 1890 and US\$ 3660, respectively. On the other hand, an expert-manager considers that on average a fair gap should be log (2.2), equivalent to US\$ 5600. This difference is statistically significant (p -value < 0.001) and in the hypothesized direction, which indicates that H1 should be accepted.

Model 1 also indicates that there is negative relationship between participation in marches and fair pay gap. This implies that those who demonstrate more frequently, tend to have more egalitarian attitudes to pay differentials (i.e., prefer a smaller pay gap). To test whether this relationship holds longitudinally, model 2 presents the results from a FE model. The coefficient for collective action participation is negative but statistically insignificant, suggesting that an increase over time in collective action participation does not produce significant changes in people's attitudes to pay gaps (i.e., a reduction of the size of gap considered "fair"). This implies that H2 should only be partially accepted.

Despite this, model 3 indicates that the longitudinal association between collective and attitudes to pay gaps varies by social class. More specifically, the interaction term coefficients indicate that this association is negative and statistically significant for workers only. This suggests that collective action participation reduces the size of the gap considered fair by workers, but not by the people located in privileged classes such as the expert managers. This is consistent with H3. This conclusion is further supported by the results from Table 3, which shows the coefficients from FE models estimated separately for each class. Table 3 suggests that collective action participation has a statistically significant and negative effect for the working-class people, but not for the people belonging to other classes. For nonmanagerial experts, the effect is also negative but statistically insignificant, likely due to the smaller sample size. Among the remaining classes, the effect is positive but not statistically significant.

This class difference in the effect of collective action is illustrated in Figure 6, which shows the average marginal effect of collective action participation on fair pay gap for each class category. Figure 6 shows that, in the case of the working class, a higher frequency in collective action participation leads over time to a reduction in the size of the gap considered fair. This effect contrasts with the positive and insignificant effect found among classes such as the supervisors, the petite bourgeoisie, the expert managers, and even the informal self-employed. All in all, these results are consistent with H3.

Analysis of mechanisms

To understand the processes through which collective action participation can shape workers' attitudes to the fairness of pay gaps, we analyzed a subsample of working-class respondents and examined three possible intervening mediating pathways (mechanisms): political identity, social change orientation, and meritocratic orientation. To do so, we first estimated several FE models to test whether collective action participation produce changes in each of the three hypothesized mediating pathways. In Table 4, we observe that political identity is the only mechanism that is significantly shaped by collective action participation: collective action significantly reinforces workers' left-wing identities, relative to right-wing identities (p -value < 0.01). By contrast, collective action participation does not produce statistically significant changes in workers' meritocratic orientations (i.e., does not reduce them), nor in their social change orientations.

This result implies that collective action can reduce the size of the gap that workers consider fair in part because it reinforces their left-leaning identities. This conclusion is consistent with the results from Table 5. This table we present two FE models: the first model ("baseline model") shows the same coefficient for collective action participation presented in Table 3 ("Workers" model), while the second model ("political identity" model) shows how this coefficient changes

Table 3. Fixed-effects models predicting attitudes toward the fairness of pay gaps in Chile by social class.

Variables	Expert managers	Petite bourgeoisie	Experts	Supervisors	Workers	Informal self-employed
Participation in marches/demonstrations	0.084 (0.049)	0.115 (0.078)	-0.035 (0.042)	0.008 (0.040)	-0.063** (0.022)	0.001 (0.047)
Time-variant controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	2.389 (1.844)	-0.088 (0.679)	-1.554* (0.622)	-4.440* (2.087)	0.440 (0.790)	-0.486 (0.851)
R ² (within)	0.28	0.27	0.22	0.25	0.23	0.26
Individuals	117	138	127	323	1187	376
Observations	512	572	542	1385	4733	1399

Note. Time-variant controls are age, sector of employment, level of political involvement, and perceived pay gap. The models also included year dummies.
 * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

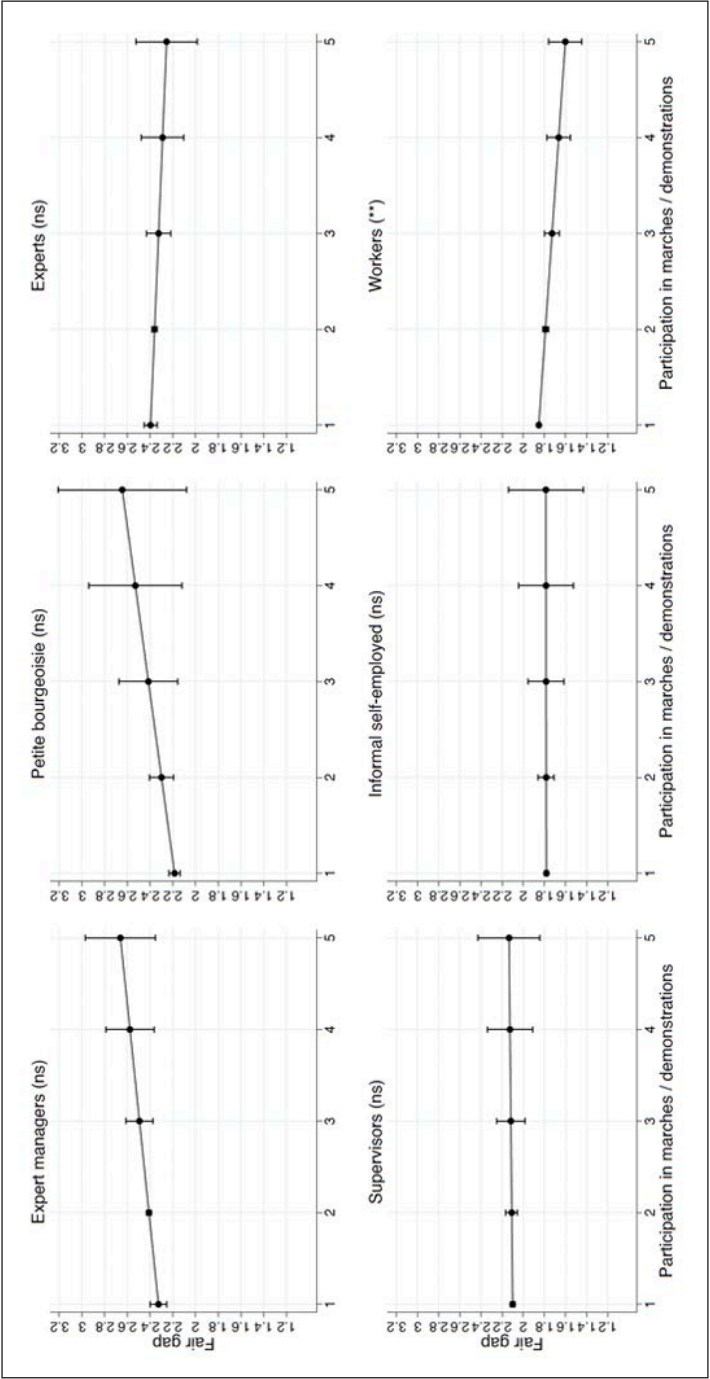


Figure 6. Average marginal effect of collective action on attitudes to the fairness of pay gaps, by social class.
Note. ns = non-significant ($p > 0.05$).
* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. Fixed-effect models estimating the effect collective action on hypothesized mediating pathways (workers subsample).

Variables	Political identity (base outcome = right) ^a			Social change orientation	Meritocratic orientation
	Left	Center	Not identified		
Participation in marches/demonstrations	0.413** (0.131)	0.110 (0.123)	0.075 (0.128)	0.032 (0.019)	0.000 (0.041)
Time-variant controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant				4.076*** (0.403)	4.406*** (0.071)
Log likelihood	-1728.124				
R ² (within)				0.04	0.02
Individuals	849			1187	1187
Observations	3779			4733	4733

Note. Time-variant controls are age, sector of employment, level of political involvement, and perceived pay gap. The models also included year dummies.

^aFixed-effects multinomial logit models (coefficients expressed as log relative risk ratios). The sample size is lower than in the other models because 338 individuals (954 observations) were omitted due to no variation in the outcome variable over time.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 5. Fixed-effects effects models estimating attitudes to the fairness of pay gaps (workers subsample).

Variables	M1. Baseline model	M2. Political identity
Participation in marches/demonstrations	-0.063** (0.022)	-0.058** (0.022)
Political identities (ref.: Left)		
Center		0.119** (0.045)
Right		0.151** (0.056)
Not identified		0.092* (0.047)
Time-variant controls	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.440 (0.790)	0.299 (0.782)
R ² (within)	0.23	0.23
Individuals	1187	1187
Observations	4733	4733

Note. Time-variant controls are age, sector of employment, level of political involvement, and perceived pay gap. The models also included year dummies.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

when the political identities variable is introduced into the model. Two findings should be noted from model 2. First, as expected, having a left-leaning identity is associated with a decrease in the size of the pay gap considered fair by workers, relative to having other political identities (especially a right-wing identity). Second, in model 2 the size of the coefficient for collective action is slightly reduced, compared to the coefficient from model 1. This finding is consistent with our explanation as it suggests that the effect of collective action participation on fair gap is partially mediated by political identities (MacKinnon et al., 2000).

To test this explanation further, we used the *mediation* package in R to perform a causal mediation analysis (Tingley et al., 2014). We found that the estimated average causal mediation effect (ACME) of having a left-wing identity was statistically significant (p -value < 0.05) (see Table 6). This suggests that political identities partially mediate the relationship between collective action

Table 6. Mediation effect estimates (workers subsample).

Variables	Estimate	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
ACME	−0.005*	−0.01	0.00
ADE	−0.078***	−0.11	−0.04
Total effect	−0.083***	−0.12	−0.05
Prop. mediated	0.06*	0.01	0.14
N	4733		
Simulations	5000		

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

participation and fair pay gap. In other words, participation in marches and demonstrations increases workers' left-wing identification, thereby reinforcing their egalitarian attitudes to pay gaps. That said, our results also indicate that the mediating effect of political identities should not be overstated: left-wing identity accounts for only 6% of the relationship between participation in marches/demonstrations and fair gap. This means that other mediators could be playing a larger role in explaining why collective action reinforces workers' egalitarian attitudes to pay gaps.

Robustness checks

To assess the robustness of our findings, we estimated alternative models in which social class was treated as a time-varying variable, and models that included additional controls potentially relevant to the relationship between collective action and attitudes toward pay gaps—specifically, union membership and economic sector (see, e.g., Hadziabdic and Baccaro, 2020; Turner et al., 2020). Neither modeling class as time-varying nor adding these controls substantially altered the results: the direction, magnitude, and statistical significance of the main effects remained consistent with those reported in the primary analysis.

In addition, focusing on the subsample of nonmanagerial workers for whom a significant and negative effect had been identified, we estimated FE models in which protest participation was lagged by 1 year ($t-1$). The lagged coefficient was statistically insignificant, suggesting that while contemporaneous protest participation is associated with more egalitarian views among workers, this association is primarily short-lived or immediate rather than durable over time.

Discussion

Understanding the subjective effects of class is crucial to explaining how individuals perceive inequality. Using longitudinal data from Chile—a market-oriented society marked by deep class divisions—we show that attitudes toward pay gaps are class-based. Individuals in subordinated, exploited positions such as non-managerial workers favor smaller pay gaps than those in privileged ones, reflecting the antagonistic interests that underpin Marxist conceptions of class as a relation of exploitation (Wright, 2015). Using a class scheme tailored to the Chilean context, we also found that informal self-employed workers hold attitudes toward pay gaps very similar to those of salaried workers. This challenges findings from affluent countries that associate self-employment with conservative views (Langsæther and Evans, 2020). In contexts of economic informality and self-exploitation, independent workers may align more closely with the working class in distributive struggles (Agarwala, 2016). While the informal self-employed remain largely unorganized (Bensusán, 2019; OIT, 2022), their precarious conditions and laboring activity suggest potential for solidarity with salaried workers.

Previous research has shown that although people in subordinate classes prefer more equality, they are less likely to engage in collective actions to defend those preferences (Haddon and Wu, 2022; Vezzoli et al., 2023). This paradox has been attributed to the misperception of inequality, a lack of mobilization resources, and the presence of inequality-legitimizing beliefs such as meritocracy (Brady et al., 1995; Castillo, 2012; García-Sánchez et al., 2019).

Against this background, we asked whether participation in collective action fosters more egalitarian attitudes toward pay gaps—and whether such effects vary by class. The social movement and Marxist-inspired literatures demonstrate that collective action increases people's egalitarian attitudes (Fantasia, 1988; Hyman, 1989; Kelly, 1998). Our RE model largely supported this idea. It showed a robust negative association between participation in marches/demonstrations and the fair pay gap, suggesting that even sporadic and non-institutionalized forms of protest can reinforce egalitarian attitudes.

That said, our FE models presented in Tables 2 and 3 indicated that this relationship is class-specific: over time, the egalitarian effect of protest holds only for nonmanagerial workers. Among expert managers, by contrast, the effect is positive (though insignificant), suggesting that participation may even reinforce inegalitarian attitudes among elites. We interpret this as evidence of the conditioning power of class—the idea that class does not simply locate individuals within the social structure but actively shapes how they make sense of collective experience. The theoretical implication is that protest may probably become a site of ideological struggle, where the meanings and consequences of participation are refracted through the prism of class position and its embedded power relations.

One possible explanation for this draws on Offe and Wiesensthal's (1980) "two logics" argument: collective action may deepen critical views of inequality among workers but not among capitalist/managerial classes. This interpretation, however, should be treated with caution. First, our sample does not include capitalists in a strict sense, but rather a privileged class of expert managers embedded within corporate hierarchies. Second, the form of protest we examine—marches and demonstrations—is far less institutionalized than the union- and employer association-based forms of collective action theorized by the "two logics" framework. Another plausible, though tentative, explanation for our finding is that participation may reinforce inegalitarian attitudes among expert managers because, unlike workers, they mobilize to defend the status quo. However, this seems unlikely in Chile's recent history, where right-wing street mobilization has remained marginal, even after the political backlash following the failed Constitutional Convention of 2022.

The class-specific nature of this effect is further underscored by the different trajectories of nonmanagerial and informal self-employed workers. Despite their similarly egalitarian views, informal self-employed workers did not experience significant attitudinal shifts over time. A possible, tentative explanation is that this reflects their organizational marginality: while salaried workers continue to be mobilized through unions—especially during peak protest moments like the 2019 social uprising, the informal self-employed remain largely outside these networks (Bensusán, 2019; Pérez-Ahumada and Carrasco, 2025). For example, ELSOC data show that between 2018 and 2019, salaried workers increased their average participation score in demonstrations by 35%, compared to just 14% among the informal self-employed. Moreover, in 2019 the difference in participation scores between these two classes was statistically significant (t -test p -value < 0.000), suggesting that the mobilization gap between salaried workers and the informal self-employed may have even widened compared to other years.

Why does protest participation lead to more egalitarian views among workers? Both Marxist and social movement theories argue that collective action fosters critical orientations by strengthening class awareness and left-wing identities (Hyman, 1989; McAdam, 1989; Polletta and Jasper, 2001; Tarrow, 2011; Wright, 1997). Drawing on these ideas, we tested three potential mechanisms:

political identity, orientation toward social change, and meritocratic beliefs. Among these, only political identity emerged as a significant mediator. Specifically, participation in collective action reinforced workers' identification with the left, which in turn was associated with support for smaller pay gaps. Although this mediation effect was modest—accounting for only 6% of the total relationship—it underscores the continued relevance of left-right political identities in structuring attitudes toward inequality. This is notable given Chile's weak party-union linkages and the widespread disillusionment with political institutions (Araujo et al., 2023; Joignant et al., 2024).

In sum, this study provides new evidence that class shapes attitudes toward inequality not only structurally but also dynamically, through political engagement. Protest participation can reinforce egalitarian views, but this effect is contingent on class location and mediated—albeit partially—by political identities. Future research should explore additional mediating pathways to better understand how collective action influences distributive attitudes in unequal democracies.

Conclusion

This article examined how social class and collective action participation shape attitudes toward income inequality in Chile, a highly unequal and market-oriented society. Our findings show that individuals in subordinated class positions—such as nonmanagerial workers and the informal self-employed—consistently support smaller income gaps than those in privileged classes, reflecting a Marxist understanding of class as rooted in structural exploitation and antagonistic interests.

More importantly, we find that collective action participation fosters egalitarian attitudes, but only among nonmanagerial workers. Among privileged classes, by contrast, protest participation has no such effect and may even reinforce inequalitarian views. We interpret this as evidence of the conditioning power of class: protest does not politicize uniformly but through the lens of class position, which can shape how individuals experience and internalize collective action within relations of production and power. Moreover, the mediating role of left-wing political identity highlights the continuing importance of ideology in sustaining egalitarian consciousness, even where unions are weak and protest occurs outside institutional channels. At the same time, the modest magnitude of this mediating effect suggests that other, unexamined mechanisms also play a substantial role.

As noted in the methods section, these conclusions should be interpreted with the understanding that social class is operationalized through employment status, occupational skill, and workplace authority rather than direct ownership of capital. While this approach captures structured positions within capitalist labor markets, it calls for caution when extending claims about class power and political action beyond these empirically observable dimensions.

All in all, our findings underscore that, even in liberal market economies with fragmented class organizations and minimal welfare provision, class conflict over inequality persists. They also suggest that political participation remains a key mechanism for activating egalitarian consciousness among the working class. That said, our robustness checks indicated that the egalitarian effect of protest participation is likely short-term rather than durable. This temporal fragility can help explain, at least in part, the resilience of neoliberalism in Chile. Despite intense mobilizations in 2019 and the election of a left-wing president in 2021—who was ultimately unable to implement substantive anti-neoliberal reforms—Chile elected the far-right politician José A. Kast as president in December 2025, signaling a renewed consolidation of neoliberalism. Taken together, these dynamics suggest that while collective action can momentarily activate egalitarian attitudes among workers, sustaining such shifts requires continued grassroots organizing by left-wing parties and working-class organizations such as labor unions. Moreover, recent political defeats underscore the importance for left-wing parties to take this challenge seriously by promoting forms of organizing that extend beyond episodic mass mobilization and electoral cycles.

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Data availability statement

Data and codes are available at the OSF repository: <https://osf.io/cpjny/overview>

Note

1. See <https://osf.io/cpjny/overview/>.

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