

Supplement to:

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL to

An unreliable ladder: Top-Bottom Self-Placement, subjective social status, and political preferences

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Link to Stata code and interview transcripts

[This link](https://osf.io/q4sjr/) (<https://osf.io/q4sjr/>) is to an Open Science Framework page containing:

- Code (a Stata .do file) for reproduction of the quantitative results;
- Anonymised transcripts from the cognitive interviews.

Data availability (by section)

For specific data versions used, see the .do file linked to above.

Item nonresponse: level (Table 1)

- ISSP (all countries and years): publicly available from [gesis.org](https://www.gesis.org/).
- BESIP wave 21: publicly available from [britishelectionstudy.com](https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/).

- BESIP wave 23: as of April 2025, Topbot (statusTopBottom) and related status items (not used here) are not part of the public release of BESIP wave 23 data. For verification of results based on wave 23, please contact Professor Geoff Evans (geoffrey.evans@nuffield.ox.ac.uk) of the British Election Study Scientific Leadership Team, who kindly allowed me access to the data. A future release of the data is expected to include this item.
- SOECBIAS-COVREF: available upon request from the GESIS repository at <https://doi.org/10.7802/2772>.

Item nonresponse: pattern (Figure 1, Tables S1 and S2)

- BESIP wave 21: publicly available (see above).

Reliability (Table 2)

- BESIP waves 21 & 23: not both publicly available (see above).
- GSS Panels: publicly available from gss.norc.org.
- SOECBIAS-COVREF: available upon request (see above).

Validity: quantitative assessment (Table 3)

- ESS 2012: publicly available from europeansocialsurvey.org.
- SOECBIAS-COVREF: available upon request (see above).

Standard deviations of Topbot and specific subjective income rank measures (Table S4)

- (Where the source is given as a specific Figure from a paper, I read the percentage distribution across deciles from the Figure using <https://automeris.io/WebPlotDigitizer> and calculate the implied SD.)
- Grigorieff (2018) / TESS-Experiments (2017): available from the OSF repository at <https://osf.io/9yzts/>.
- Konstanz Inequality Barometer 2020: available from the GESIS repository at <https://doi.org/10.7802/2740>.
- SOECBIAS-COVREF: available upon request (see above).
- ISSP (all countries and years): publicly available from gesis.org.

Table S1: Linear regression of *Don't know* Topbot response on demographic variables (= Figure 1)

	b	SE
Female	0.07 ***	0.01
Male (ref.)		
White British	-0.01	0.02
Any other ethnicity (ref.)		
18-29	0.19 ***	0.02
30-39	0.24 ***	0.02
40-49	0.14 ***	0.02
50-59	0.11 ***	0.02
60-69	0.06 ***	0.02
70- (ref.)		
Higher salariat (ref.)		
Lower salariat	0.01	0.02
Intermediate	0.04	0.02
Small employer / own account	0.01	0.03
Lower supervisory / technical	0.05	0.03
Semi-routine / routine	0.06 **	0.02
NS-SEC missing	0.07 ***	0.02
< GCSE	0.07 ***	0.02
GCSE	0.03 *	0.01
A-level	0.01	0.01
Degree (ref.)		
Education missing	0.13 ***	0.02
Constant	0.05 *	0.02

Data: British Election Study Internet Panel wave 21 (May 2021). N=6,886.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table S2: Descriptive statistics for Figure 1 & Table S1 sample

	N	%	% DK
Female	3873	56.2	29.0
Male	3013	43.8	20.1
White British	6066	88.1	24.5
Any other ethnicity	820	11.9	29.6
18-29	793	11.5	34.6
30-39	910	13.2	38.4
40-49	1249	18.1	28.1
50-59	1129	16.4	24.9
60-69	1517	22.0	19.5
70-	1288	18.7	14.0
Higher salariat	940	13.7	19.0
Lower salariat	1725	25.1	21.2
Intermediate	1229	17.9	26.5
Small employer / own account	355	5.2	21.7
Lower supervisory / technical	342	5.0	24.6
Semi-routine / routine	860	12.5	29.4
NS-SEC missing	1435	20.8	31.1
< GCSE	633	9.2	28.0
GCSE	1295	18.8	24.9
A-level	1342	19.5	25.0
Degree	3164	46.0	23.2
Education missing	452	6.6	36.1

Data: British Election Study Internet Panel wave 21 (May 2021). N=6,886. DK: responded *Don't know* to Topbot.

Table S3: Examples of themes presented in Figure 3

Theme	Example(s)
Income, standard of living	(1) I would say in terms of, um, primarily income, living standard (2) I'm not particularly well off
Occupation, job quality, job stability	(1) I have quite a good job (2) for me the higher up is, you know, you're comfortably employed
Wealth, housing tenure	(1) Home ownership, that sort of thing (2) people who—who are rich. Um, the well-to-do people
Education, qualifications, skills	(1) I would consider myself an educated middle class (2) what I also take into consideration is like my education
Class	(1) I'm somewhere in the middle – working class. Straightforward. (2) Um... I'm assuming it's class based, which—uh, yeah. I mean, I—I put myself at middle class.
Relationships	(1) but also like [...] I don't know, relationships with others (2) for me I guess um--I guess that would depends on more... community engagement. More sort of—uh—uh--connection with others around me
Family background	(1) Uh well I--I grew up in very much a working class family (2) It would just be on... education, I think, and background.
Undefined, e.g. 'average', 'normal', 'in general'	(1) I'm doing alright with my life (2) I feel like I'm an average person (3) um, I feel kind of a 3 <i>in life</i>
Respect, status, standing, how viewed by others	(1) as soon as they hear that you're--you know you live in a--a certain area where there's only working class people, they seem to snub you (2) how that sort of positions yourself in the sort of um, um, social standing in society (3) I feel very much that where I'm placing myself is--is based on how <i>society</i> views people and where other people would--would put me. (4) I feel at the bottom of a social structure.
Intelligence	(1) I'm not outstandingly academic, but I'm not stupid (2) in terms of... um, general, sort of, intellectual ability, and things of that kind, um, I'd probably be in the upper quartile, so I guess I'd put myself somewhere between 3 and 2.
Happiness	(1) Generally happy in life (2) [at the top are] also people who are quite, um, content with where they are and quite happy with their lives
Problems, difficulties	(1) relatively... ver—very minimal issues in my life (2) [I'd be higher] if I had like, absolutely no worries about anything
Neighbourhood	(1) we live in a great area (2) We're not in a very, um... upmarket--we don't live in a very upmarket area. It's just an average place, mixed.
Health	(1) Apart from—I've got a broken hand. But apart from that, my health is ah—is otherwise—is otherwise pretty good. (2) Well, my health isn't very good so... I wouldn't put myself [at the top].

Ethnicity, race	(1) you know I'm middle-aged, I'm white, I'm male (2) OK um, because I'm people of colour [...] So I guess that would put me somewhere not at the top
Age, cohort	(1) I'm part of the golden generation (2) Just kind of pretty much average. Middle-aged.
Socio-economic, socio-economic status	(1) well, this is probably just an overall metric of socio-economic status (2) my <i>presumption</i> would be to do with sort of socio-economical sort of side of things
Sex, gender	(1) It can be because of my gender (2) Oh and I'm a woman as well of course
Quality of leisure	(1) But, um, I don't think I'm a typical bus driver if you like, because I have quite a wide range of interests, and interest in politics and reading (2) Um... basically, it's a limitation on the <i>leisure time</i> , for myself that I would like to... gain time.
Personal qualities	(1) you know--sometimes you do recognize qualities in yourself and I think in the past I've put myself down, and perhaps I shouldn't (2) So like, people would see your race, people would see--and then, you know, maybe you have some kinds of personality traits.
Advantage, privilege	(1) So I'm assuming 'below' means... um, someone who is not privileged, right? (2) I'm gonna go for 4 because I think I'm slightly more... I think I'm at a slightly more advantageous position
Social capital, connections, resources	(1) I just feel it's difficult to make it in society, uh, if you don't have some sort of social or educational capital (2) And then the second thing that comes to mind is sort of just overall maybe <i>social capital</i> .
Purpose	(1) What I mean is that... life [changed ...] and it's given me... a <i>purpose</i> , if that makes sense. (2) I guess money-wise, uh, yes, I might be on the top for number 2 or 3, but it doesn't give me the life's <i>pleasure</i> and <i>meaning</i> , really.
Sporting ability	(1) like... top half, probably third-ish. Um. Yeah, just based on my past experience in, you know sports, um (2) Whether it's top intelligence, uh... top sporting ability, um... top whatever. [...] So, you know, tempted to go for the middle, but <i>nah</i> , I'm better than that, so let's say 3.
Social mobility	(1) maybe part of why I put myself where I put myself is because I feel that I have moved up from—from where I was previously [...] it does feel like a—a significant improvement on where I was as a child. (2) Whereas I started off--I was--I would say my life was at uh... I would say was at 6, maybe 7 at the time, and now I've moved up.
Power, influence, leadership	(1) I assume you're talking about leadership, political leadership or whatever. (2) Oh and I'm a woman as well of course, which gives me less power.
Opportunity	(1) Um... You know, I've--I've got opportunities I've got--I've got (2) I didn't have the opportunity to go to university.

Morals, character, 'right and wrong'	(1) I feel like I'd differentiate between top and bottom also, by the way people... go about their lives and treat people, as well, so people who are... are perhaps greedy, or... (2) I see myself [...] at the top [...] in terms of [...] my life choices [...] I choose my--I guess--life activities on the basis of what's—uh—right, what's wrong
Life satisfaction	(1) in terms of life satisfaction I'm feeling OK at the moment. (2) [at the top are] like people whose--whether their life is balanced where they want it to be
Success	Okay. Um... I'd probably interpret it as... Um... Like... Like how successful and happy I am
Religion	It can be because of my... ethnicity, my religion
Prospects	Or you've got future prospects if you will
Performance	you know I, I--I work in IT. But if I made a load of different mistakes, I'd probably feel like I'm, I'm not as good
Language(s) spoken	Umm, I speak another language.
History of drug abuse	and um, I was a drug use--a drug user, drug misuser.
Whether having a good day	Other days, if I've had a really good day or lots of positive things have happened, you--you'd probably put yourself further up.
Criminal history	Um, you know, I've been to prison
Experienced abuse	But you know I <i>was</i> subject to some abuse, you know, growing up in care and...

Table S4: Standard deviations of Topbot and specific subjective income rank measures

Country-year	Subjective income rank: source	Subjective income rank: question	Subjective income decile: SD	Topbot: source	Topbot: SD	((Subj. income dec. SD) - Topbot SD)/Topbot SD)*100
ES 2012	Fernández-Albertos and Kuo (2018) Figure 1; original online survey	Of all households residing in Spain, what percentage do you think has a higher income level than yours? And a lower income level than yours? <i>Please try to be as precise as possible in your estimate. To be as accurate as possible, you cannot enter any numbers that end in zero (0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, or 100). Please think carefully about your answer.</i> [Two boxes, one each for the percentage higher and the percentage lower; also their sum]	1.80	ISSP ES 2012	1.30	38
DE 2015	Engelhardt and Wäger (2018) Figure 1; original online survey	[As reported in main text] What do you think, how many households in Germany have an equal or lower standard of living than yours? [As reported in online appendix] Please make a guess - based on your equalised monthly household income of [show calculated equalised disposable income] Euro - how high the share of households in Germany with a lower equalised monthly household income than yours is: [Possible responses: 10/20/30/40/50/60/70/80/90/100 percent]	1.99	ISSP DE 2015	1.58	26
US 2016	Grigorieff (2018); original online survey (FESS-Experiments, 2017)	[In preamble to previous question: <i>Note: A household consists of all the people who occupy a housing unit, such as a house or a flat. Income is comprised of earnings, unemployment compensation, social security, veterans' payments, survivor benefits, disability benefits, pension or retirement income, interest and dividends, alimony and child support, financial assistance from outside of the household and other income.</i>] According to the 2015 Current Population Survey, what percentage of US households earned less than your household ? Please select the appropriate percentage using the slider. If you correctly guess the percentage (within three percentage points), you will receive a bonus of 10 cents. [0-100 slider]	2.52	ISSP US 2016	1.76	43
CH 2017	Weissanner and Armington (2022) Figure 1; original online survey (German-speaking CH only)	What do you think is the share of households in Switzerland having a higher income than your own household? <i>Click on the scale and move the slider on the scale</i> [0-100 slider and box showing corresponding percentage]	2.06	ISSP CH 2017	1.70	21

DE 2017	Fehr et al. (2022) Figure A.3a; original CAPI module within SOEP Innovation Sample (baseline)	You indicated before that your gross household income in 2016 [2017] was EUR [XX] and your household had [Y] members. This means that the per-capita gross income in your household in 2016 [2017] was EUR [XXX]. We will now ask a few more questions about this per-capita gross household income.	1.95	ISSP DE 2017	1.51	29
DE 2018	Fehr et al. (2022) Figure A.3c; original CAPI module within SOEP Innovation Sample (follow-up; control group only)	We are interested in your assessment of how your per capita gross household income relates to the income of other people. Please give the most accurate and truthful assessment. You can earn money for the accuracy of your assessment. For each of the following two questions you will receive 20 Euros at the end of the survey if you are correct with your assessment. If you are not correct with your assessment, you will not receive any money. What is the proportion of people in Germany who had a lower per-capita gross household income in 2016 [2017] than you? Please enter your answer in percent. 0 percent means that you are the poorest person in Germany. 100 percent means that you are the richest person in Germany. With the values in between, you can scale your assessment.	2.08	ISSP DE 2018	1.59	31
DE 2020	Konstanz Inequality Barometer 2020 (Bellani et al., 2024; Busemeyer et al., 2024); online survey	Imagine a ladder ranking where people in Germany are. On the lowest level there are the 10% of people with the lowest income, on the highest level there are the 10% of people with the highest income. On which level would you see yourself at the moment? [Boxes from '1. level - 10% of people with the lowest income' to '10. level - % [sic] of people with the highest income']	1.96	ISSP DE 2020	1.82	8
DE 2020	SOECBIAS-COVREF (Beblo et al., 2024; Sattler-Bublitz et al., 2024); online survey	[In preamble to previous question: <u>Net</u> means after deduction of taxes and social contributions. <u>Total</u> means all types of income, i.e. income from employment, retirement, pensions, social benefits, capital assets, maintenance and other income of all persons in your household.]	2.13	SOECBIAS-COVREF	1.95	9
IT 2020			1.90	(adapted version in which respondents place markers for themselves, themselves five years ago, neighbours, and friends)	2.40	-21
PL 2020			2.11		2.16	-2
SE 2020			2.32		1.92	21
DE 2022		How many percent of the population in [country] (18 years or older) do you think had a total yearly net household income that was <u>lower</u> than yours was in 2019 [2021]? [Box to write in percentage; also 'Don't know' option which filters through to 'We know that this is not an easy question. If you are unsure, please make a guess' and repeats question]	2.12		2.20	-4

CAPI: Computer-Assisted Personal Interview. SOEP: (German) Socio-Economic Panel. ISSP: International Social Survey Programme.

Search for subjective income rank data for Table S4

Beginning with Weisstanner and Armingeon (2022), I searched the text for references to earlier studies which collected data on subjective income rank – then searched the text of those studies, etc. I also searched Google Scholar for studies citing Weisstanner and Armingeon (2022) and screened those for relevance and searched their text for further relevant references, as appropriate.

I include any (accessible) data containing a measure of subjective income rank for a country-year for which ISSP data are also available, so that the SD can be compared to that of Topbot for the same population – except in the unique case of SOECBIAS-COVREF where (a slightly modified version of) Topbot is included in the same survey. Inclusion is also conditional on the sample being (close to) nationally representative.

Some excluded studies/datasets which initially seemed promising:

- Cruces et al. (2013) (original survey, Argentina). Not nationally representative: the sample distribution of objective national income decile (Figure 2) is far from uniform.
- Karadja et al. (2017) (original survey matched with register data, Sweden). Distribution or SD of subjective income rank not reported. Survey data not publicly available.
- Grigorieff and Roth (2016) is mentioned by Karadja et al. (2017: 202). This version is unavailable but appears to have been published in final form as Grigorieff (2018), which I do include.
- Perez-Truglia (2020) (Norwegian Monitor Survey 1985-2013). Includes a perceived rank measure but it asks about ‘economic situation’ and has only five categories such as ‘much worse than average’.
- The Life in Transition Survey (LiTS) series mentioned by Gimpelson and Treisman (2018: 38ff.) asks about the ‘poorest’ and ‘richest’ in one’s country rather than about income specifically: ‘Please imagine a ten-step ladder where on the bottom, the first step, stand the poorest 10% of people in our country, and on the highest step, the tenth, stand the richest 10%. On which step of the ten is your household today?’
- Coda Moscarola & Figari (2025) use the SHARE dataset, which samples adults aged 50 and above.
- Ardanaz et al. (2022) (original survey, eight Latin American countries, 2022). None of the countries under study were in the 2022 ISSP, meaning no Topbot data is available for comparison.
- Bublitz (2022) (original survey, six countries, 2015). Data not publicly available.
- Hvidberg et al. (2023) (original survey, Denmark). Restricted to respondents aged 45-50; only 29% of sample in bottom half of (objective) income distribution (Table 1).
- Konstanz Inequality Barometer 2022, as used in Busemeyer et al. (2024). Data not publicly available.

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