Status, Symbols, and Politics: A Theory of Symbolic Status Politics

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Studies of politics are increasingly attempting to account for status. However, status remains undertheorized in much of that research. This article sketches a theory of status in politics, distinguishing status from prejudice, identity, cultural difference, and concrete threats to interests. It shows how status accounts for some of the apparent effects of these variables or for patterns they cannot explain. I focus on the symbolic facets of status, connecting theories of symbolic politics with theories of status.

Keywords: status, symbols, politics, identity, cultural difference

What is status, and how does it function in politics? These questions have gained urgency with the rise of populism, ethno-nationalism, and authoritarianism across the globe. Increasingly, political scientists are attempting to explore the role of status in the challenges facing democracies.[1] Recognition that economic explanations do not suffice is beginning to take hold (Gidron and Hall 2017; Mutz 2018).

Further, the rise of ethno-nationalism is only one of many examples where economic models fall short. People who experience disadvantage do not always or often perceive the disadvantage and take instrumental steps to address it (Fiske 2011). Additionally, advantaged as well as disadvantaged groups are often willing to give up material resources in favor of status. Concrete self-interest—income, jobs, assets, property—rarely explains political attitudes (Sears and Funk 1991). Because standard theories in politics tend to be materialist and utilitarian, they expect social inequality to prompt revolt. However, the field is littered with disconfirmations of this prediction (McClendon 2018). For example, even as income inequality has risen, low-income citizens have not demanded more redistribution from the government (Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005; Kelly and Enns 2010; McCall 2013; Franko, Tolbert, and Witko 2013; Newman, Johnston, and Lown 2015). Class inequality is only one of many dimensions of inequality for which materialist theories offer incomplete explanations.

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1. The neglect of status has not figured prominently in critiques of the self-interest model.

Contrary to materialist theories, resources are not always a goal; sometimes they are a way to achieve status (Ridgeway 2013). In many cases of deep political conflict, people want the authoritative recognition of higher status. Important political events, issues, movements, and laws often arise because groups seek to change or maintain their status relative to others. Political systems allocate not only valued material resources but also collective social value.

The main alternative to materialist theories of politics are theories of culture and identity. These explanations, however, also do not suffice (Gidron and Hall 2017). A central idea of research on cultural and identity conflict in politics is *difference*. This focus on difference per se obscures the role of status, however. Difference is a necessary but not sufficient condition for identity politics. It is when difference becomes inferiority—when identities are assigned a rank—that identity and culture become politically potent.

To understand many of the central puzzles in the politics of inequality, it is necessary to understand what status is. Although the concept is well established outside political science, it has received only spotty attention in studies of politics. Instead, political scientists tend to focus on power, resources, class, culture, moral values, identity, prejudice, and norms. Status is often assumed to be indistinguishable from these or to have the same effect. That assumption is a misconception.

Status politics rests on symbolic meaning (Edelman 1985; Gusfield 1986). Politics confers social rank through symbolic signals of norms of social value. Symbols are the currency of status, much as material resources are the currency of power and of class. Laws, official rules, and the exercise of political office do not only confer power; they can also symbolize status. Governmental actions can implicitly allocate "badges of ranked order" (Petersen 2002, 262). The law, the ceremonial exercise of political office, and other distinctive features of government put the full authority of the most coercive institution in society behind the allocation of collective social value to a group. Government can signal whose traditions, moral standards, and language are worthy of wide esteem and whom society should cast out. It designates which groups deserve access to resources and privileged practices and which groups may be neglected, exploited, and stigmatized. Government also symbolizes status in its very composition (Chandra 2004; Chauchard 2014). When members of a social group hold political power, the trappings of political office signal that it merits authority (Mansbridge 1999). Efforts to change the status hierarchy often aspire to change the symbolic signals of government. They leverage politics to change the allocation of status and not only the distribution of economic resources and power. Moreover, they often do so with symbols that communicate their status injury. In addition, some ostensibly apolitical features of society, including the visibility of a language, or discourse about demographic change, can become politically potent symbols.

The concept of status provides not only an alternative to materialist concepts but also a particular way to interpret variables central in the study of political psychology and political behavior: stereotypes, prejudice, identity, and the effects of the balance of in-group and out-group numbers. These are often assumed to originate from one of three fundamental causes: a deep suspicion of the stranger, hardwired mental biases and heuristics, or competition over concrete resources. However, conflicts between social identities are not only rooted in an aversion to difference, cognitive limitations, or conflict over interests. They are also responses to—and expressions of—status. Furthermore, they are not always causes of conflict. They are also causes of the absence of conflict. They may eliminate conflict when they are written into durable hierarchies of collective social value.

How does political authority affect social status? What are the links between social status, politics, and social inequality? Why and how do people contest status in the political system, and how does political mobilization change the political allocation of status? How does social status affect politics? How is status distinct from prejudice, identity, social norms, culture, economic class, and resources such as money, land, and numerical strength? These are unwieldy questions. They cannot be an-

swered here. I take only a partial step, aiming toward a theory of status in politics, with attention to social inequalities.[2] These literatures suggest that status is important and distinct from other core concepts.

A THEORY OF SYMBOLIC STATUS POLITICS

My point of departure is the concept of *symbolic politics* (Edelman 1985; Sears 1993). Political "condensation" symbols are signals of a distant, complex referent that evoke "pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations, [or] promises of future greatness" (Edelman 1985, 5). Theories of symbolic politics are supported by decades of behavioral and cognitive psychology research on System 1 processes (Eagly and Chaiken 1993; Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Strack and Deutsch 2004; Sears 2001).

This framework offers a sharp contrast between symbolic and concrete (Citrin and Green 1990; Kinder and Sears 1981; Sears and Funk 1991; Sears et al. 1980). In political science, influential theories often assume that people take political action to seek resources (jobs, income, economic opportunity). By contrast, symbolic politics theory argues that people are more often concerned with implementing their in-group's values. By the same token, elites do not use communication merely to signal policy positions or to claim credit and deflect blame for the conditions that voters live in, as standard theories of politics posit. They also use messages to evoke anger, disgust, and fear, or enthusiasm and hope in response to long-held associations.

Symbols

Symbolic politics theory has developed a coherent alternative to materialist theories, but it has not focused on status. I use it as a building block for a theory of *symbolic status politics*. Symbols implicate social status in evoking status-based emotions (such as "glories and humiliations"). Symbols connect status, emotions, and objects or acts that represent social value. Political symbols signal what kinds of people and whose codes of behavior are worthy in the eyes of society as a whole. They reflect and maintain notions of who is esteemed and who is stigmatized by the political community, often, the nation. They represent the official, authoritative expectation about the appropriate status of in-groups and out-groups. Using the implied force of ultimate coercive authority, they powerfully communicate and reinforce status beliefs, such as who is competent, prosocial, or otherwise valued, and who deserves privilege.

Contests over laws, or the official actions of government-run institutions such as schools or police departments, are not only conflicts over material costs and benefits, whether money, assets, security, freedom, or personal safety. They are also struggles over the social rank that these institutions confer. If these institutions designate a group's norm as the societal norm, teaching its traditions as representative of society's traditions, they signal a high status for the group. If these institutions punish, surveil, and control a group, or shame the group for its social position, they attach stigma that lowers the group's status in society. A conflict over what government does may be more about status than about power, resources, or actually regulating behavior—when it signals the social standing of a group or its ways of life.

Government actions matter partly because they create widespread knowledge of what others know (Chwe 2013). People correctly infer from these official signals what society views as the relative group position. These symbols or experiences let "everyone know which group is 'on top'," who is moving up and who is moving down (Petersen 2002, 43).

It is well known that governmental symbols create national unity or enhance the authority of a government, but little is known about the use of political symbols to confer status. Joseph Gusfield (1986, 170–71) labels the former "gestures of cohesion" and the latter "gestures of differentiation." Symbols of the former convey consensual affirmation of unity. For example, when an American president dies, all the living past presidents attend the funeral, signaling a consensus of respect for the presidency. By contrast, symbols of differentiation use the author-

2. I synthesize studies in political science and related fields, primarily on the United States, my area of expertise.

ity of government to signal esteem or stigma for a particular group. As Gusfield (1986, 172) notes, using symbolic signals, "governments take sides in social conflicts and place the power and prestige of the public, operating through the political institution, on one side or the other. . . . they indicate the kinds of persons, the tastes, the moralities, and the general lifestyles toward which government is sympathetic or censorious. . . . it is through this mechanism of symbolic character that a government affects the status order."

Social movements and interest groups often aim to elicit these symbolic signals as a means of creating norms that affect the group's status. The more authoritative the entity, the more effective its normative signal may be. The same logic applies to left-wing movements, which seek to flatten the hierarchy, and to right-wing movements, which seek to preserve or enhance it.

Defining Status

Status is a collectively defined rank of social value (for similar definitions, see Goffman 1951, 294; Gusfield 1986, 14; Ridgeway 2013). Status can be personal; it can accrue to an individual independent of their social identity. Status can also be social, a collectively defined rank of social value based on social identity. As Cecilia Ridgeway (2013) notes, social status draws on cultural "beliefs about group differences regarding who is 'better' (esteemed and competent)." Status beliefs act "through micro-level social relations," cumulatively channeling "higher status groups toward positions of resources and power . . . through these processes, status writes group differences such as gender, race, and class-based lifestyle into organizational structures of resources and power, creating durable inequality" (Ridgeway 2013; on status as a cultural scheme, see also Ridgeway and Markus 2022, this issue).[3]

This definition has three elements. When it comes to social status, membership is the first element. Status accrues to a social identity through traits, behaviors, or objects deemed particular to it. Identity can be more or less porous or hard and more or less salient. Rank distinctions may become more pronounced with hard group boundaries. In turn, if rank is extreme and entrenched, it may reify the social boundary (Lamont 1992). In other words, rank and prejudice can be mutually reinforcing.

The second element is social value. Status rests on collectively defined social value, that is, widely shared ideas about which people deserve more respect, esteem, prestige, honor, admiration, dignity, and worth (Gusfield 1986, 15; Ridgeway 2013).[4] These terms are not interchangeable, but they all provide some form of social value, a concept distinct from identity and cultural difference. Note that social value is collectively defined, derived from widely shared beliefs and moral sentiments. Status is not derived from the opinion of one or of a few. It depends on norms. Status is allocated based on widespread conventions that socially construct a group's traits, practices, or ways of life, and assign them overall social worth. This means that status is not absolute nor objective. It depends on intersubjective ideas about which social identity is more esteemed than others. That is why even low-status groups may internalize their status (Ridgeway and Correll 2006). Status rests on the social value assigned by a collective. This is a key distinguishing element of status.

The final component is rank. Status is a hierarchy of esteem. Some people are ranked

3. This definition also draws on sociological literature on a "sense of group position" (Blumer 1958; Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Masuoka and Junn 2013). The sense of group position begins with bounded identities separated by psychological and social distance. Second, it consists of beliefs in out-group inferiority and in-group superiority on dimensions valued by the higher ranked group. These beliefs result in a rank of esteem. The third element is the belief that the higher ranked group deserves exclusive or advantageous privileges and goods. This belief directly links prejudice to inequalities in resources. Consequently, attempts to flatten the status hierarchy elicit resentment. Put differently, the sense of group position is a form of group consciousness for higher-ranked groups, and a "legitimating ideology" (Miller et al. 1981; Sidanius and Pratto 1999). The theory I develop draws on these elements but does not bundle them into an ideology.

4. Dignity belongs within the concept of status and outside the concept of identity.

above and others below. To be sure, esteem in itself does not require rank. It does not exist only in a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority. Just because a person or a group has more esteem does not mean others must have less. However, status ranks esteem and allocates more of it to some than to others.

Rank Relative to Whom?

Esteem serves as a powerful individual motive, and individuals engage in social comparison with others in an automatic way, without necessarily being aware of it (Fiske 2011, 84–86).[5] However, spontaneous comparisons of rank occur primarily with in-group peers and not so readily with outgroups (Fiske 2011, 90; McClendon 2018). Upward comparisons to those just above ourselves and within reach are motivated by the aspiration to increase one's esteem (Fiske 2011, chapter 5). As individuals compare themselves with in-group members who have higher status than themselves, they may strive to conform to in-group norms (McClendon 2014). The group then becomes more uniform internally and better able to act collectively (Fiske 2011, 119, 121). Downward comparisons mitigate demands for status change: people whose incomes exceed that of coethnic urban residents are less supportive of economic redistribution even though their ethnic group would benefit from it (McClendon 2018). Maintaining high status within the in-group weighs more than absolute economic interests (McClendon 2018).

When people do compare themselves with an out-group, they develop more stereotyped judgments and psychological distance from it (Fiske 2011, 121). When high-status members of a low-ranked group compare themselves with a high rank out-group rather than down within rank, they express more political discontent. For example, middle-class Blacks were at the forefront of the urban rebellions of the mid-1960s (Kerner Commission 1968). Contrary to resource explanations or theories of anomie, and consistent with a status explanation, many Blacks in the rebellions had relatively high education and a history of employment. They were relatively high status within their racial group. Resources are not an adequate explanation for this pattern. Resources would not facilitate rebellion, nor accrue to those who rebel. Instead, Blacks with relatively more resources rebelled because their higher status within their racial group could not translate into commensurate status outside the group in a White-dominated society. This pattern generalizes beyond the 1960s. Across time, more-educated Blacks express more status discontent than less-educated Blacks (Hochschild 1995).[6]

Self-Esteem

Esteem is a central element of status. However, the link between status and self-esteem is far from direct (Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse 2003). One type of esteem rests on the approval of the individual as an individual; another type rests on the approval of one's in-group and thus of the person as a group member; and a third type is unresponsive to social evaluations (Fiske 2011, 120). Groups evaluated as incompetent and weak but friendly and supportive draw low respect as a social category but high personal esteem (Fiske 2011).[7]

The distinction can help explain how low status is perpetuated. If society assigns a social group to obedience, service, and sacrifice, then meeting those expectations can be a form of personal achievement and competence. This personal esteem does not elevate the social rank of that category. However, interpersonal interaction that signals high esteem for low-status people as individuals can alleviate the low value of their category. This inequality-enhancing result is an underappreciated function of politeness, kindness, and social warmth.

5. Many social contexts heighten mental attention to status, and set in motion an entire psychological system of emotional expression, behavioral scripts, and conceptions of the self (Fiske 2011; Markus and Stephens 2017).

6. Similarly, in Katherine Cramer's interviews of rural Wisconsin residents, many of those expressing rural political consciousness were local civic and business elites (Cramer 2016).

7. This finding forms an important element of the stereotype content model. Erving Goffman (1951) similarly offered a distinction between personal "esteem" and status "prestige."

Moreover, status discontent may follow when social interactions systematically fail to convey personal approval. For example, in Susan Pharr's study of a civil service agency in Kyoto, women collectively coordinated to stop serving tea to male colleagues when the personal regard they received from the men plummeted (Pharr 1990). These "tea rebellion" participants expressed a willingness to serve tea to men who acknowledged their act with "warmth and appreciation" (176). What they would not countenance was the incivility they received while performing an act emblematic of a low-status identity. Similarly, Japanese low-caste students protested against their teachers when teachers regularly engaged in "deliberately condescending" behavior toward individual students (177). Status groups may mobilize when their members experience a drop in personal esteem despite their performance of status-role expectations. Finding itself bereft of personal respect, the group may come to see the status hierarchy as injurious and unjust.

Protest that dramatizes the effect of low group status on low personal esteem may be especially effective in challenging the legitimacy of a low status. Some of the most salient events of the American civil rights movement did so. Movement actors showcased the status injury to Black Americans by highlighting its personal indignity. The searing images of the movement include crowds insulting people engaged in common everyday behaviors such as eating lunch or going to school while segregationist crowds poured ketchup and mustard over their heads (in the Woolworth sit-ins) or pelted them with tomatoes (in the iconic Norman Rockwell painting of Ruby Bridges). These were vivid symbols of segregation's affront to individuals.

Social movement organizations often strive to communicate the personal indignity of their low status, and they use vivid images, slogans, dramatic incidents, and other symbols to do so. The symbols allow movements to link the personal injury to the status harm their group suffers at the hands of an unjust system. Political movements use symbols of personal injury because doing so allows them to implicate their group status as a cause of unjustified denial of personal esteem. From there, they can show that group status is systemic, and point to the need for political change.

Dignity versus Prestige

An asymmetry in the effect of status is common. For example, in studies of relative income, people are more motivated to avoid being lower than average than they are to be higher than average (Card et al. 2012). Some aspects of status may be more motivating because they implicate low status: disrespect, dishonor, and worthlessness. Because those are attached to shame and disgust, they may have more potent psychological power (Fiske 2011). When status becomes low enough, it implicates the fear of being cast out from the community. Avoiding low status means avoiding stigma and maintaining belonging, a basic need (Fiske 2011, 116). Thus, dignity and worth are central concepts in normative critiques of inequality (Fraser, Honneth, and Golb 2003). They are also central in philosophical defenses of universal rights and liberties, including the right to self-govern (Waldron 2012). Nancy Fraser specifically argues that basic respect is universally deserved, even as prestige can be unequal without being unjust as long as the opportunity for prestige is equal (Fraser, Honneth, and Golb 2003). Government must communicate symbolic recognition to groups denied dignity, because that is how society can most authoritatively signal the end of a norm of shame and disgust directed at the group.

WHAT STATUS IS NOT

It is important to distinguish status from competing constructs including class, identity, culture, moral values, and threat. I elaborate on these below.

Status Differs from Class

Status is perhaps most often confounded with class. It is thus important at the outset to distinguish between them. Class refers to a group's objective location in relation to a market. It is a set of people defined by control over concrete resources, including goods and services. In Max Weber's theory, a number of different markets constitute class (Weber 1978). In Marx's theory, a class is defined by its relation to the means of production (owners versus workers),

and there are two major classes, the capitalist class and the working class (DiMaggio 2012). In either framework, class is objective, not subjective. It does not depend on identity and sense of belonging to a common group. Nor does it depend on perceptions of a group's value, beliefs about the characteristics of a group, or cultural traditions and lifestyle norms. In addition, class is not inherently relative; a worker is a worker because they do not own capital, not because they have less capital. Thus status differs from class in two ways. First, it is defined subjectively, by perception of social value. Second, it is defined as a rank.[8]

Relative—Versus Absolute—Economic Resources as a Form of Status

An unequal allocation of concrete resources can represent status in and of itself. As minimal group experiments have shown in settings around the world, group conflict is often the product of relative comparisons more than absolute deprivation (Fiske 2011; Huddy 2003; Tajfel 1981). In fact, people are willing to pay to ensure that their social category has more than its competitor (Brewer 1979; Messick and Mackie 1989; Tajfel 1981). As Michael Hout (2016, 219) puts it, "people respond to their relative position in society rather than their absolute level of living." Relative income matters for job satisfaction, happiness, health, longevity, and reward-area activation in the brain, even accounting for absolute income (Brown et al. 2008; Card et al. 2012; Veblen 1899).

Moreover, relative income may matter most when it denotes rank (Frank 1985). Individuals are specifically sensitive to their position in an ordinal hierarchy (Brown et al. 2008). People tend to heuristically attend to how many have lower and how many higher incomes than oneself. Ordinal rank affects pay and job satisfaction independently of cardinal metrics such as distance from the mean, how far away the top and bottom are, or the weight of income above or below one's own (Brown et al. 2008; Kuziemko et al. 2014). Being the second-lowest versus fifth-lowest in an income distribution matters even when the money is the same (Brown et al. 2008).

Relative economic rank in turn affects political attitudes. Ilyana Kuziemko and her colleagues (2014) convincingly demonstrate that occupying the second-lowest income rank independently reduces support for redistribution both in dyadic games and regarding government redistribution. People are particularly averse to falling from a low to a lower place. This tendency goes a long way to explaining resistance to redistribution by those who would benefit in absolute terms but lose their relative rank above the bottom.

Relative income is not the only source of status; relative spending is as well, and its symbolic meaning gives it a particular potency (Kraus, Rheinschmidt, and Piff 2012, 154). Consumption symbolizes rank in a clearer way than relative income, because it is much more visible to others. *Conspicuous consumption* is a familiar term: people convert money to objects whose major purpose is to signal status (Veblen 1899, 75). This includes major financial purchases—and clothes, accessories, leisure activities, and personal appearance (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Social media signals these status symbols, and these signals motivate people to maintain a high status by keeping up with their social media friends (Thal 2020). Similarly, social milieus populated by many affluent people foster resistance to increasing taxes on the wealthy (Mendelberg, McCabe, and Thal 2017). Status signals nudge individuals to adopt more meritocratic explanations of success—and more economically conservative political views (Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009; Thal 2020).

The Culture Explanation

How does status differ from culture and identity? Theories of politics often explain political phenomena as the product of ethnic, religious, or linguistic difference. The difference may be objective, rooted in actual traditions and practices, or perceived, rooted in stereotypes and

8. Of course, class also involves ideas and cultural processes. Objective class may or not be subjectively recognized, and views of class matter in and of themselves. Class perceptions, beliefs, and reasoning are heavily shaped by systems of knowledge, and cultural schema are themselves ideological products of economic structures that produce them. The literature on these ideas is extensive (see, for example, Gramsci 1971).

prejudice. In some studies, the authors argue that difference matters in itself, whether it is linguistic, religious, or ethnic. As Paul Sniderman and his colleagues put it (2000, 128), "it is the attribution of difference, and not the form of it, that principally sets immigrants apart." The more noticeable the difference, the more likely the conflict (Sniderman et al. 2000). Similarly, Donghyun Choi, Mathias Poertner, and Nicholas Sambanis (2019) attribute anti-Muslim discrimination in Europe to the perception of difference, and hypothesize that when Muslims exhibit behavioral commitment to shared civic norms (by picking up litter), this common identity will overcome discrimination. This focus on difference and the lack of shared identity is common in social psychology and political psychology.

However, I argue that it is not the perception of difference that creates conflict. Instead, the perception of ranked difference politicizes identity. Research that focuses on difference per se obscures what may be the most potent aspect of culture and identity. To clarify, I do not argue that status can be entirely separated from culture but instead that many studies in political science treat status and culture as two unrelated concepts. Instead, it is more useful to analyze cultural or identity conflict through the lens of status.

For example, consider Choi and colleagues' excellent study of European discrimination against Muslims (2019). The study tests the impact of immigrants' Muslim identity and their compliance with a local norm against littering on the level of social exclusion they experience. In one field experiment, a confederate in distress wears either a cross or a hijab. The investigators then assess how often they receive help from passersby. The investigators find that the hijab-wearer gets less help than the (identical) cross-wearer. In a second field experiment, a distressed confederate either wears or does not wear a hijab and either complies with a local antilittering norm or does not. The authors find that the hijab-wearer receives more help when complying, though compliers receive still more help absent the hijab. The conclusion is that shared identity, signaled through common civic norms, alleviates exclusion, though anti-Muslim discrimination is difficult to overcome even then. Thus the study's main concept is identity as difference: immigrants face exclusion when they are perceived as different. However, according to a theory of status, identity as difference does not suffice to explain the findings. Native-born non-Muslim Europeans find the hijab threatening not because it is different but because it represents a set of cultural practices that appear to them both alien and inferior to their own. Muslim identity and practice are regarded as having low esteem, and their presence as degrading the esteem of their own identity and practice. Further, the response behavior—social exclusion—is a form of status. The exclusion positions the excluded at a rank below those doing the excluding. The behaviors that symbolically signal disrespect help native Europeans reconstruct a hierarchy of dignity. Failing to offer help functions as a way to reduce the other's social value. It takes away their dignity and thereby reinforces one's own superior position.

As another example, consider the literature on ethnic fractionalization. The centerpiece of this literature is the robust finding that the more ethnically fractured the population, the less likely is the country to provide public goods that serve the needs of the country's population. Demographic diversity correlates with inefficient or suboptimal governance, social capital, and violence (Easterly and Levine 1997; Habyarimana et al. 2009). A number of explanations have been offered for this finding. First, diverging economic interests may prevent agreement on what government should provide and to whom it should provide it. Majority ethnic groups may not want to share resources with minorities (Abrajano and Hajnal 2017). Alternatively, when group boundaries are hard and come with different traditions, groups may have difficulty cooperating and pooling their resources for the common good.

However, the underprovision of social welfare benefits may not be directly caused by cultural differences. In fact, measures of cultural difference between these groups do not predict it once other factors are accounted for (Baldwin and Huber 2010). What does predict it? Unequally distributed economic resources among ethnic, linguistic, or religious groups (Baldwin and Huber 2010). Such findings open the pos-

sibility that status may explain what is commonly attributed to culture and identity.

An example of how status explains what appears to be the work of difference comes from research on AIDS (Cohen 1999; Lieberman 2009). In Cathy Cohen's (1999) study, many Black communities did not rally racial solidarity to combat AIDS, which they disproportionately suffered, because they wished to avoid being further stigmatized by association with gay people and heroin users. Evan Lieberman (2009) offers a similar theory to explain why countries suffering substantial illness and death from AIDS nevertheless failed to prevent and treat AIDS. Ethnic fractionalization predicts the underprovision of government resources to fight HIV, not because it indexes cultural or ethnic conflict, but because in ethnically divided societies, ethnic groups seek to avoid being associated with a stigmatized illness. In sum, then, the motivation to distance from the stigma of gay identity overrides racial or national solidarity as well as concrete interests in health and survival. The explanation for scarce public goods, weak public health, and cultural exclusion does not lie in the absence of common cultural ground or even in ethnic conflict. The concepts of culture and identity are often used in ways that set status aside. The result is an incomplete understanding of the nature and causes of inequality, conflict, and discrimination. From a status perspective, what matters about culture is how it ranks people (Duckitt 2006; Masuoka and Junn 2013).

Status Versus Moral Issues

The AIDS case also demonstrates why status is necessary to understand the impact of moral issues in politics. Consider the movement to prevent legalized gay marriage. A prominent reason given was to preserve the practice of marriage. However, as a right-wing social movement, it may also have sought to maintain the higher status of heterosexuals. Marriage is a socially valued institution. If stigmatized groups are allowed to practice it, it will erode their stigma and flatten the esteem hierarchy of sexual orientation. Restricting marriage to heterosexuals ensures that heterosexuals retain exclusive access to an esteemed practice. The Defense of Marriage Act House committee report on H.R. 3396 put it this way: "Civil laws that permit only heterosexual marriage reflect and *honor* a collective moral judgment about human sexuality. This judgment entails both moral disapproval of non-normative sexuality, and a moral conviction that heterosexuality better comports with traditional (especially Judeo-Christian) morality."[9] Similarly, in the landmark *Obergefell* case, the amicus curiae brief of the Family Resource Council stated, "[marriage] is a privileged legal and social institution."[10] In other words, marriage confers esteem. Restricting this esteemed activity to one's in-group preserves its prestige and continues to confer that prestige only to the in-group. If one has to share a prestigious practice with a stigmatized group, that group's esteem rises, and the hierarchy flattens.

Without this lens of status, claims that gay marriage harms heterosexual marriage are difficult to understand. In fact, these claims on their face would suggest that marriage be made available to as many people as possible and that those who are not married be "converted" to marriage as nonbelievers are encouraged (sometimes forced) to adopt a "true" religion. If society were to extend marriage widely, marriage would gain force as a descriptive and prescriptive norm: everyone should and does get married. Thus marriage as a societal norm—one followed by as many as possible—is in conflict with marriage as a status-delimited norm—that is, a norm followed only by a high-status group as a mark of its privilege.

Maintaining relative rank, and attaching stigma or prestige, are functional, as the case of marriage illustrates. They are not simply overbroad expressions of fear of the other, or inaccurate perceptions of a group. Symbols that address intergroup relations are not trivial simply because they are symbolic; they can affect group status. Fights over those symbols are not merely expressive; nor are they a distraction from real, serious interests. Xenophobia,

9. Defense of Marriage Act of 1996, Pub. L. 104-199, struck down, *United States v. Windsor*, 570 U.S. 744 (2013).

10. *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015).

prejudice, and stereotypes are often viewed as illogical, biased, and expressive, lacking in instrumentality. Once linked to status, they take on a logic of their own.

Many issues that seem to be about moral conflict may have a status dimension. They include gambling, pornography, prostitution, and alcohol and drugs. The symbolic politics of status are clear in the "moral" issue of prohibition (Gusfield 1986). In the United States, this was among the hardest fought and most salient political conflicts in the first decades of the twentieth century. Prohibition represented an attempt by rural, native-born, Protestant, White Americans to validate their cultural dominance in the face of rising status threats from their opposite. Their livelihoods were not at risk, but their ability to be the arbiters of national norms was. They turned to symbolic validation by the state, in the form of laws prohibiting drinking. As Gusfield writes, "the public acceptance of a set of ideal norms confers prestige and respect on them. It stamps them as those which are set forth as most worthy of obedience in the society. Correspondingly, acceptance of such ideal norms confers respect and prestige on those groups whose behavior is closest to them. It stamps such groups as those most worthy of emulation" (1986, 66).

Repeal in turn symbolized a status reversal for these groups. As one temperance movement member said, "we were once an accepted group. The leading people would be members. . . . today they'd be ashamed to belong. . . . today it's kind of lower-bourgeois" (Gusfield 1986, 138). The political loss represented and reinforced the status loss of pro-abstinence social groups. Their way of life lost its hold on societal consensus and became stigmatized. As the group's distinctive behavior—abstinence—grew in stigma, the social group that still practiced it increasingly lost its status (Gusfield 1986, 129–34). A group can lose status when law demotes its norms from the national consensus. (I return to status reversal later.)

Abortion is another case in point. Interviews in one study revealed that homemakers opposed the legalization of abortion partly because it implicitly undermined the social esteem of their role (Luker 1984). With legal abortion, government signaled a higher value for women's autonomy than for their domestic roles. The legality of abortion symbolized a status drop for women with domestic roles. Moral outrage over abortion was genuine and grounded in religious precepts. It was also, however, a reaction to status reversal. Political conflict over laws that regulate behavior may be waged in the language of morality when the moral code attaches to social rank of economic as well as cultural groups. From the perspective of concrete resources and power, abortion would seem to serve the interests of women. It gives them autonomy and freedom they can translate into more education, better occupations, and higher earnings. It gives them market power. However, it lowers the status of groups for whom having children confers higher status.

When a group's moral sensibility and ways of life are symbolically recognized by government recognition, the group garners esteem. This holds even if its ways of life are not widely practiced. In the standard theory of value conflict, each side wishes to impose its values on the other and make them as widespread as possible. It is a missionary account of moral conflict. From a symbolic status perspective, however, the goal is not to spread a tradition but to gain official recognition for it. In fact, from a status perspective, the ideal may be to exclude the low-status outgroup from access to practices that confer prestige. That approach may be especially likely when the identity boundary is hard and the low-status group is defined as inherently stigmatized. This account better explains some seemingly puzzling examples, such as the fight over gay marriage.

To be sure, morality can serve as its own core motive apart from status. A group wants its norms to be society's norms because it believes they are good and right, not only because that is a way to get high status for the group. Still, a group's determination to see its morality enshrined in law may have much to do with its motivation to raise or defend its status.

Numbers as Symbols of Status: What Does "Threat" Threaten?

Numbers are an important variable in studies of politics. They are often assumed to matter because they are a source of power or an indi-

cator of concrete interests (Chandra 2004; Posner 2004). However, numbers can also represent status, and the effect of group numbers may be due to status. To be sure, groups with a large number of members can use their greater number to generate political power. However, the significance of numbers may lie as much in their symbolic signal about which group can shape the rank of social value as in their ability to directly deliver absolute levels of concrete power.

Consider the racial threat thesis. Research consistently finds that places with a higher percentage of Blacks are also the places where Whites perceive threat to White political power and access to jobs or resources and where they seek to prevent these losses (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2018; Key 1949, 1; Kinder and Mendelberg 1995). The effect of numbers is typically interpreted as arising from threats to concrete resources. This is in line with realistic group conflict theory (Bobo 1988).

However, numbers could instead matter because of status (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014). If numbers mattered because they supply power, their increase would matter linearly, or at a tipping point that triggers political power, such as the majority threshold. But in fact it is the sharp rise in outgroup numbers from a small baseline, and not absolute numbers or tipping points, that predicts perceptions of cultural threat, hate crimes toward various outgroups, and anti-immigration views (Newman 2013; Green, Strolovitch, and Wong 1998). Hate crime patterns are a form of symbolic "neighborhood defense" (Green, Strolovitch, and Wong 1998). These acts do not directly protect economic resources—property values—but represent a hardened boundary against the inclusion of low-status groups (Green, Strolovitch, and Wong 1998). Once the neighborhood has diversified, the status loss has already occurred and rising numbers would not further threaten symbolic status. Similarly, if rising numbers threatened material resources or actual safety, or prompted generalized prejudice, then high percentages of immigrants would have similar effects regardless of baseline or trend. But the number of immigrants in itself does not strongly predict negative attitudes toward immigrants (Hopkins 2010; Citrin et al. 1997; Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Kinder and Kam 2010, 147–49).

Furthermore, if numbers mattered only through threat to concrete resources, or even through generalized prejudice, they would affect perceptions of that specific threat. Yet rising numbers of immigrants in previously homogenous areas affect only perceptions of cultural threat, not of job competition or crime; cultural threat is in turn associated with restrictive immigration preferences (Newman 2013). Findings from Maureen Craig and Jennifer Richeson (2014b, 2014a) likewise support a status interpretation for numbers. When they showed White Americans information about rising numbers of non-Whites in the United States, they observed increased implicit and explicit racial bias, weaker support for overtly or indirectly racially egalitarian policies, more conservative political ideology and party choices, and perceived racial status threat—the belief that as racial minorities' status rises, White Americans' influence in society will decrease (Craig and Richeson 2014b, 2014a). When they reassured respondents that White Americans will continue to have higher incomes and wealth than other racial groups, the demographic change no longer mattered to their political preferences or perception of racial status threat.

The main cause of opposition to immigration is not competition over concrete resources. Immigrant exclusion is not a defense against actual threats to an individual's concrete quality of life—jobs, money, or physical safety from crime. Instead, these attitudes are grounded in symbolic threats to the superior status of native citizens—their relative resources and the esteem conferred on their in-group values, traits, and traditions (Citrin et al. 1997; Schildkraut 2007; Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990).

Much of the research on numbers, threat, or immigration neglects the concept of status. In many studies, minoritized groups are perceived as a threat to the nation's way of life and identity because they are viewed as culturally alien. Yet the findings, on the whole, are consistent with the effects of status, as Natalie Masuaka and Jane Junn (2013) argue. Resistance to equal-

ity is rooted not only in concern about economic interests, cultural difference, or dislike and stereotypes of an outgroup but also in a desire to protect the in-group's status. A changing balance of numbers can directly or indirectly signal a change in norms of collective value, and imply eroding political power to prevent such change. Rising or declining numbers can come to represent the rise or decline of a group's status. As the in-group loses numerical advantage, it loses its ability to influence how society will allocate ranked esteem.

APPLICATIONS OF THE THEORY

In the following sections, I elaborate on how the theory can be applied. I consider political office as a status signal and ethnic violence.

Political Office as a Status Signal

An important example of how government confers symbolic status comes from Simon Chauchard's (2014) study of caste and status change in India. This case illustrates the symbolic meaning of holding political office. It shows how officeholding can increase social status by signaling basic respect for the group.

Scheduled castes (SCs), also known as Dalits, are an identity group defined by ancestry. Although India banned anti-Dalit discrimination in its founding constitution, Dalits in the 1990s continued to experience significant segregation, stigma, and exclusion. To address this situation, in 1993, India implemented a constitutional amendment mandating SC quotas for elected offices in village councils, a powerful and prevalent unit of government in India.[11] Chauchard studied the most powerful of these positions: the head of the village council. The council head not only wields significant power. They also hold a symbolically important role in presiding over village assemblies, or *gram sabhas* (Chauchard 2014, 406). As Chauchard puts it, "villagers may observe a member of the SCs seating ceremoniously on a dais, providing his or her opinion or signing off on the council's decisions. As the sarpanch and their entourage walk through village streets to assess various public works, villagers see members of the SCs on streets on which they otherwise dared not venture" (Chauchard 2014, 407).

The quotas did not redistribute resources to SC members (Dunning and Nilekani 2013). The "reserved" villages were no more likely to select SC individuals to receive government program benefits. They did not build more infrastructure or public services that especially serve SC members. Officials continued to depend on dominant caste members for election, because even though a SC is guaranteed to occupy the office by law, which individual SC will do so is decided by election, with non-SC voters playing a crucial role (Chauchard 2014; Dunning and Nilekani 2013). Moreover, SCs were still stereotyped as lacking in hard work and intelligence.

However, despite gaining little power or concrete resources, and winning few hearts and minds, SCs did benefit from a distinct change in status. The higher-caste members in reserved villages were more likely to believe that fellow caste members socially accept SC members and would socially punish hostile behaviors against them (Chauchard 2014, 405). They believed that others in their group would treat SCs with respect, and would socially include them. They expressed an intention to avoid enforcing "untouchability" sanctions, such as ejecting SCs from integrated seating or threatening violence toward SCs entering a temple. Thus seating stigmatized identity members in a high-status political office creates basic dignity. It does not do so by changing attitudes about the group's traits and behaviors, but instead by changing the perception of social norms that regulate social value. This change in norms of respect is an important form of politically driven status change. This case illustrates how political symbols can change status independently of negative stereotypes (which lingered) and resources (also largely unchanged).

Similar findings in other parts of the world reinforce the notion that collective signals can alter norms while leaving negative stereotypes unchanged, and it is the change in norms that alters behavior (Tankard and Paluck 2016). For example, the landmark American civil rights legislation of the mid-twentieth century sig-

11. Chauchard (2014) compares villages with and without a quota but with very similar numbers of SC villagers.

naled a new "norm of equality" in public discourse (Mendelberg 2001). Although racial stereotypes and interest-based conflicts continued, political discourse changed dramatically to accommodate new norms of equal social status.

Ethnic Violence

Having considered the matter of status reversal tangentially, I now focus on it directly, because the effects of status reversal showcase some of the most powerful consequences of status. As mentioned, social movement successes, whether gay marriage or abortion, often trigger an intense backlash because they represent status reversal. This phenomenon is widespread. During Ukraine's democracy movement in 2013, the sudden dismantling of hundreds of Soviet monuments evoked an electoral backlash: "failure to protect the Soviet memorials . . . served as a public signal of the diminishing influence of the Soviet legacy parties, which motivated higher turnout among their sympathizers" (Rozenas and Vlasenko 2022, 2). As Arturas Rozenas and Anastasiia Vlasenko argue, status loss may be more motivating than status gain, at least when it happens to groups with relatively high status. And status reversal comes from many sources, not only social movements, and has far reaching, troubling consequences, including large-scale violence.

Mass violence has many explanations (Horowitz 2000; Staub 1989). Nevertheless, the concept of status can help explain some empirical puzzles about violence. Violence is actually rare, even during times and events we associate with prevalent violence. Violence fails to materialize for most potential places, perpetrators, and victims (Kopstein and Wittenberg 2018). For example, even in twentieth-century Eastern Europe, the site of repeated mass killings and genocides, ethnic majorities massacred only some hated minorities but not others, and only in specific places and times (Petersen 2002). They did not do so uniformly, even when and where they had the ability.

For example, in 1941, between the Soviet and Nazi occupation, during a wave of pogroms, Poles did not massacre Jews because of economic competition, or because Jews had allied with the hated Soviets, or simply from anti-Jewish hatred. As Jeffrey Kopstein and Jason-Wittenberg show (2018), local anti-Jewish pogroms did not occur where economic inequality or competition with Jews was toughest, or where Jews had most cooperated with the Soviets, or where the anti-Semitic party vote was highest. Instead, pogroms were prevalent where Jews and their allies had successfully mobilized for political equality with non-Jews. Pogroms were backlash to political status reversal.

Put differently, status is an underestimated yet parsimonious explanation (Petersen 2002). Status often features in explanations for ethnic violence. However, it has been unclear whether low-, high-, or equal-status groups are more targeted; whether status predicts violence or is simply confounded with other factors; and why violence varies dramatically across time and place.

According to Roger Petersen (2002), a consistent and powerful predictor of ethnic violence in this time and region is status *reversal*. Specifically, an ethnic group aggressed against an ethnic outgroup where and when their rank was reversed (52). The most egregious violence was triggered by clear and dramatic status change. These reversals may come about through war, military occupation, and the build-up or disintegration of state institutions.[12] This process is mediated by what Petersen calls resentment and what Richard Smith and Charles Hoogland (2020) call envy: the belief that one's in-group is unjustly subordinated to an outgroup, occupying a lower position than it deserves in society—and in politics (Petersen 2002, 40; Smith and Hoogland 2020, 62). According to this theory, resentment occurs when groups are initially arrayed in a hierarchy with marked group boundaries. It becomes activated by status reversal.

Resentment is reinforced by symbolic representations of status change. These include visible roles for the elevated group in government bureaucracies frequently encountered in

12. These conflicts may turn violent when the state is not strong enough to monopolize the use of force. Aggressive groups do not always have the capacity to execute the aggression effectively.

ordinary life, such as the police, army, or other administrative structures that exercise control over a population (Kopstein and Wittenberg 2018). As the historian Jan Gross puts it, Poles who massacred Jews described how "offensive it was to see a Jew in a position of authority" (quoted in Petersen 2002, 264). As one observer remarked, "Offices and institutions that never saw a Jew on their premises abound now with Jewish personnel of all kinds" (quoted in Kopstein and Wittenberg 2018, 4). Those encounters are not only indicators of concrete power and resources; they make salient the symbolic cues of group rank. Other symbols include ethnically marked street names, and the official language, a "daily marker of subordination and humiliation" (Petersen 2002, 258). People infer status from salient public displays of authority and group representation.

Resentment is tied to status, and this distinguishes it from competing explanations. Petersen distinguishes resentment from three alternatives: realistic fear, historical hatred, and irrational rage (Petersen 2002). Fear is an accurate perception of concrete threat from an outgroup. Fear is a realistic assessment that the outgroup poses an existential threat to the ingroup. Politically mobilized Jews posed an actual threat to Polish political power (Kopstein and Wittenberg 2018). Hatred, by contrast, is prejudice—a constant underlying hostility based on perceived negative traits. For example, explanations of anti-Jewish massacres often point to anti-Semitic attitudes originating in medieval Catholic teachings such as the blood libel, attitudes said to drive the marginalization and harassment of Jews over millennia. Finally, the concept of rage derives from a frustration-aggression model. Being maltreated creates emotional pressure that erupts at available scapegoats.

A clear example of status reversal, resentment, and its violent consequences comes from Lithuania. During the Nazi occupation of Lithuania, two hundred thousand of the 240,000 Jews of Lithuania were murdered, nearly 85 percent, with Lithuanian complicity. Yet earlier in the century, Lithuanians had not engaged in mass violence against Jews, even as they did so against other ethnic groups. When the Soviets invaded in 1940, they placed Jews in visible positions in the bureaucracy charged with intrusively centralizing Lithuanian agriculture. Jews gained symbolic status in other ways as well, for example, with Hebrew street signs in Jewish areas. In a very short period, the occupied Lithuanians lost their dominant status in their society, becoming subordinated to both the occupying Russians and the formerly subordinated Jews. As one Lithuanian put it, "Lithuanians, who had lived peacefully for centuries together with the Jews, in the course of a single year literally came to hate them" (Petersen 2002, 109). When the Soviets left in 1941, removing constraints against Lithuanian violence, and before the Germans took control, Lithuanians brutally attacked Jews, and continued the assault after the Nazis took over.

Why were ethnic Russians not attacked after the Nazi occupation? An instrumental logic would predict that they would be the targets, given that they had staffed much of the occupying Soviet regime. However, a resentment explanation predicts otherwise. Because Russians had been at the top of the status hierarchy, being ruled by them was not considered a moral wrong to be righted (Petersen 2002, 111). Jews were targeted because they had been a stigmatized low-ranked group suddenly lifted above Lithuanians.

Further evidence for a status reversal explanation is the symbolic nature of outgroup aggression. Rather than targeting the secular Jews who had occupied the positions of control over Lithuanians, violence targeted the symbolic representation of Jews as a group: religious Jews dressed in orthodox garb (Petersen 2002, 111). In addition, many attacks entailed symbolic humiliation. As Kopstein and Wittenberg (2018) note, symbolic humiliations were rife in the 1941 Polish pogroms of Jews, where Jews were forced to both tear down Soviet statues and engage in mock Jewish rituals such as praying over these statues. Finally, some of the most notable massacres occurred in the same place where Jews had symbolically asserted their rising status, for example, in Kaunas, where street signs had appeared in Hebrew (Petersen 2002, 100, 103, 116).

Even in 1941, Jews were not attacked in all areas of Lithuania. In Vilnius, Jews were a large and visible group. However, they had not been

elevated to higher-status positions. Instead, when the opportunity for violence arose, in Vilnius Lithuanians attacked Poles. Poles had elevated their status over Lithuanians when they had taken over the area in the immediately preceding period. When Lithuanians had the opportunity for mass violence, they took it to correct the status reversal they had experienced in that region at the hands of Poles.

The pattern does not fit the fear explanation, which would have targeted secular Jews and, even more so, Russians, the group directly inflicting oppression during the Soviet regime. Nor does the pattern fit the rage or hatred explanation, which would predict that Jews would be targeted at every opportunity, not only in 1941, and in all areas of Lithuania, such as Vilnius. Status reversal and its symbolic processes play an important role in explaining the pattern. The few Jews who did hold power over Lithuanians symbolically represented a reversal of group status as a whole. When group boundaries are sharply delineated, salient instances of government recognition come to be viewed as symbolic of a group's positions in the status hierarchy. Violence can be an attempt to decisively undo a status reversal.

CONCLUSION

The potency of status in politics is becoming increasingly clear, but what it is and how it differs from other concepts has been opaque in many studies of politics. This article offers a step toward a theory of status in politics.

Groups mobilizing in politics are not simply attempting to obtain concrete resources, or even power. They are often attempting to obtain status. Government not only holds a monopoly on coercive force; it is also an official authority for the allocation of status. Government recognizes group status with powerful symbolic forms. Citizens respond to symbols of status and political movements and organizations use symbolic representations of status to pursue their goals.

Status differs from class, interests, and other concepts linked with materialist assumptions. Concepts anchored to materialist theories, such as the threat of numbers, or the significance of group representation in political offices, can instead be interpreted through the lens of status. Status also differs from cultural and identity difference. It is not well captured by measures of prejudice, xenophobia, or subjective identity. These are necessary for a politics of status, but not sufficient. Status becomes political when identity and culture are ranked, when difference becomes a source of indignity or prestige.

Politics is a stage for symbols of group status and an arena for fights to control those symbols. Groups may seek to remove positive symbols enjoyed by those above or below them. They may especially seek to avoid negative symbols, that is, symbols of low status. Groups struggle over official symbols of group status because, in a pluralistic society, government is uniquely positioned to declare and enforce the norms of the entire community. As Gusfield (1986, 168, 171) puts it, "government is the only agency which claims to act for the entire society . . . the political agent representative of the society symbolizes the societal attitude, the public norm, toward some person, object, or social group." Symbols of regard or disregard are among the most powerful ways to signal which groups society values and devalues.

Status has been undertheorized for any number of reasons, but two stand out. First, status is subjective. It is difficult to differentiate it from other related concepts. This article is an attempt to move toward this differentiation. Second, status is about inequality. Inequality is obvious in societies with hard group boundaries and ossified disadvantage. It is less obvious in other societies. There, it becomes easy to focus too much either on materialist concepts (economic resources) or subjective concepts that do not build in rank, such as identity, culture, norms, or values. Scholars often use these concepts without considering how they involve status. I argued here that these phenomena often become politically potent precisely when they do involve status.

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