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What Factors Affect Adherence to COVID-19 Misinformation?

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Recommended Citation

Barrett, Althea, "What Factors Affect Adherence to COVID-19 Misinformation?" (2022). *Research Days Posters 2022*. 124.

https://orb.binghamton.edu/research_days_posters_2022/124

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COVID-19 Theories: What Factors Affect One's Openness to Believing them to be True?

Althea Barrett

With help from: Sonja M. Kim

INTRODUCTION

The US is no stranger to the idea of a conspiracy theory. However, in recent years, COVID-19 has become a staple of modern life - and with it, of course, has surged the rise of conspiracy theories surrounding both the virus and the pandemic as a whole. Many researchers blame this on a combination of overinformation and political polarization, both of which are issues magnified by social media in the modern day (¹Zunino, ²Kubin). Many previous research studies, statements from political figures and even historical events further establish a link between COVID-19 theories and political orientation. As Grunawalt puts it, neither misinformation nor conspiracy theories nor the anti-mask movement is apolitical when it comes to the Pandemic (³Grunawalt). However, most research into this topic has focused on *politics*.

What other factors may lead someone to be open to the theories surrounding the pandemic? Is political orientation really the most decisive factor, or is there another division that claims that spot in its stead?

METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research questions above, I have conducted a survey with the expressed purpose of converting general openness to theories surrounding COVID-19 into a numerical score. The survey in question functions by asking a series of questions asking how closely the participants aligns with a variety of ideas. Higher alignment with individual theories results in a higher score for each individual question on a scale from 0 to 4, continuing for thirty questions. Thus the highest possible score is 120, and the lowest is 0. The survey also collects information about 3 different factors that may influence the participants' answers: childhood environment, socioeconomic status, and political orientation.

RESULTS

There is a positive correlation between openness to COVID-19 theories and right-wing political alignment - although the results for socioeconomic status is largely consistent across the board otherwise (excluding "Very Rich" which had exactly one sample, anyway). However, out of these three factors, it was not political orientation but **childhood environment** that had the most drastic and most consistent impact on one's likelihood to believe in theories surrounding COVID-19.

DISCUSSION

While the link between political orientation and COVID-19 theories has been well-studied by previous researchers, this research study makes it clear that it is not the only - or even the strongest - factor involved in such. Socioeconomic status may not be a decisive factor, but childhood environment shows a much stronger and much more consistent correlation with openness to believing in theories surrounding COVID-19 than either of the other two factors studied in this survey.

However, there is one great limitation here: sample size. Only 63 valid samples were collected in preparation for this analysis, which is a far cry from the near 3.4 hundred million US citizens. Furthermore, several people may have been dishonest: there is no way to ensure that all participants respond truthfully. As such, this survey on its own cannot be taken as absolute proof of anything.

CONCLUSION

Assuming that the results of this survey are applicable to the general US population, political orientation is not the most decisive factor concerning one's openness to theories about COVID-19. However, only three factors are on display side-by-side. What other factors may have an effect on one's openness to these theories? Also, many factors influence one another. It's well-known that political orientation is linked to factors such as environment and socioeconomic status. With this in mind, which one is more likely to act as an influence? Furthermore, while conspiracy theories can evolve into misinformation, is it fair to say that they're inherently bad? Should all of them should be ignored because they are mere theories and not fact? When does a conspiracy theory evolve into dangerous misinformation, and who decides that? Finally, what steps should be taken to curb the spread of misinformation in this country?

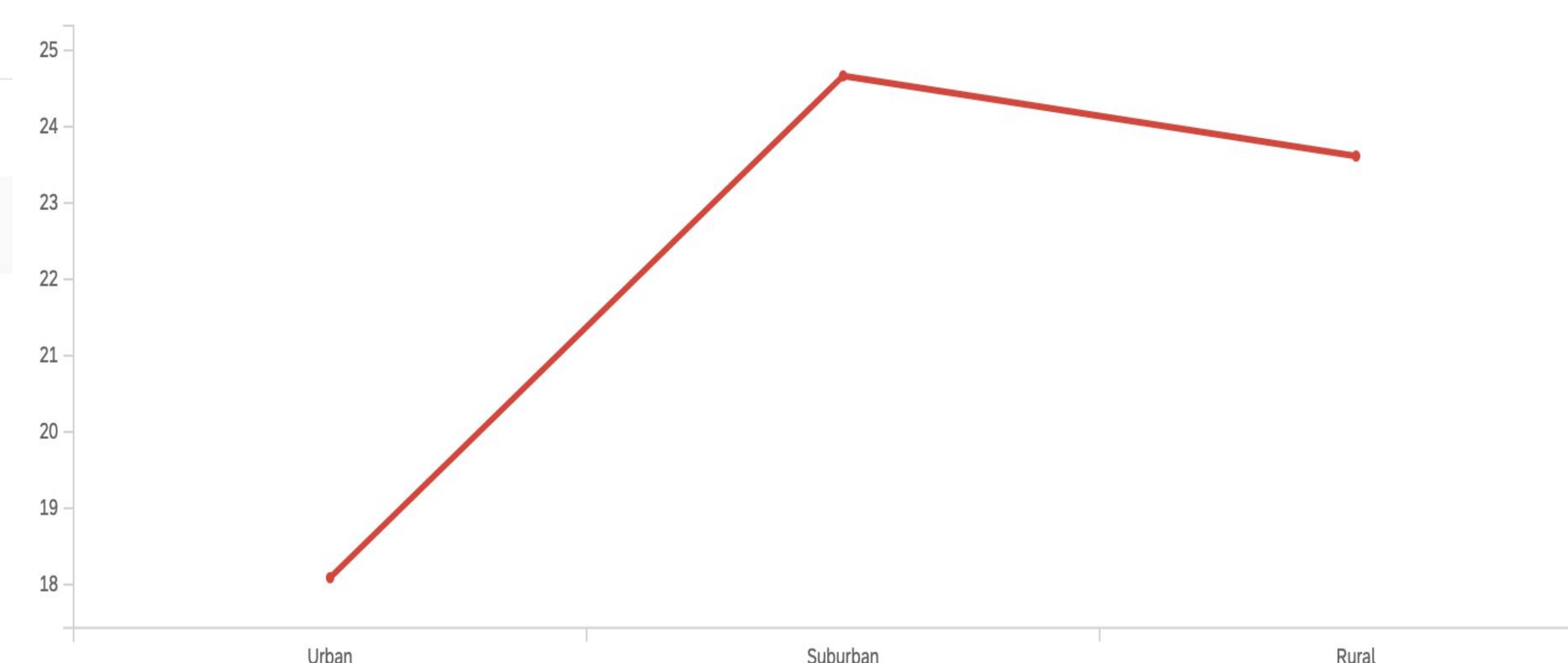
¹Zunino, E. (2021). Digital Media and COVID-19: overinformation, polarization and misinformation. *Universitas-Revista De Ciencias Sociales Y Humanas*, (34), 133-153.

²Kubin, E., & von Sikorski, C. (2021). The role of (social) media in political polarization: a systematic review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 45(3), 188-206.

³Grunawalt, J. (2021). The Villain Unmasked: COVID-19 and the Necropolitics of the Anti-Mask Movement. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 41(3), N. PAG. <https://doi.org/proxy.library.miami.edu/10.18061/dsq.v41i3.8343>

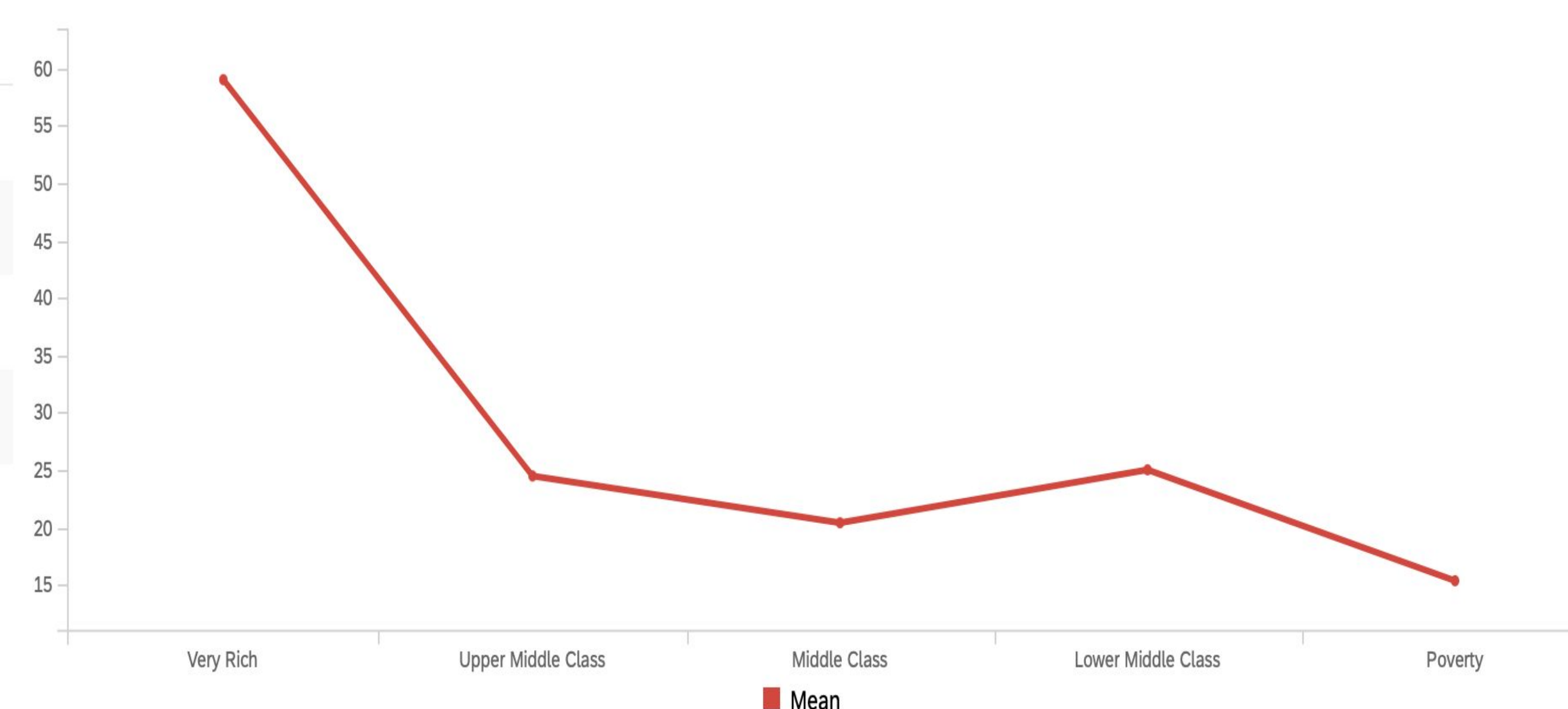
Childhood Environment

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Urban	6.00	31.00	18.08	6.55	42.91	12
2	Suburban	8.00	60.00	24.65	14.73	217.10	46
3	Rural	16.00	28.00	23.60	4.45	19.84	5



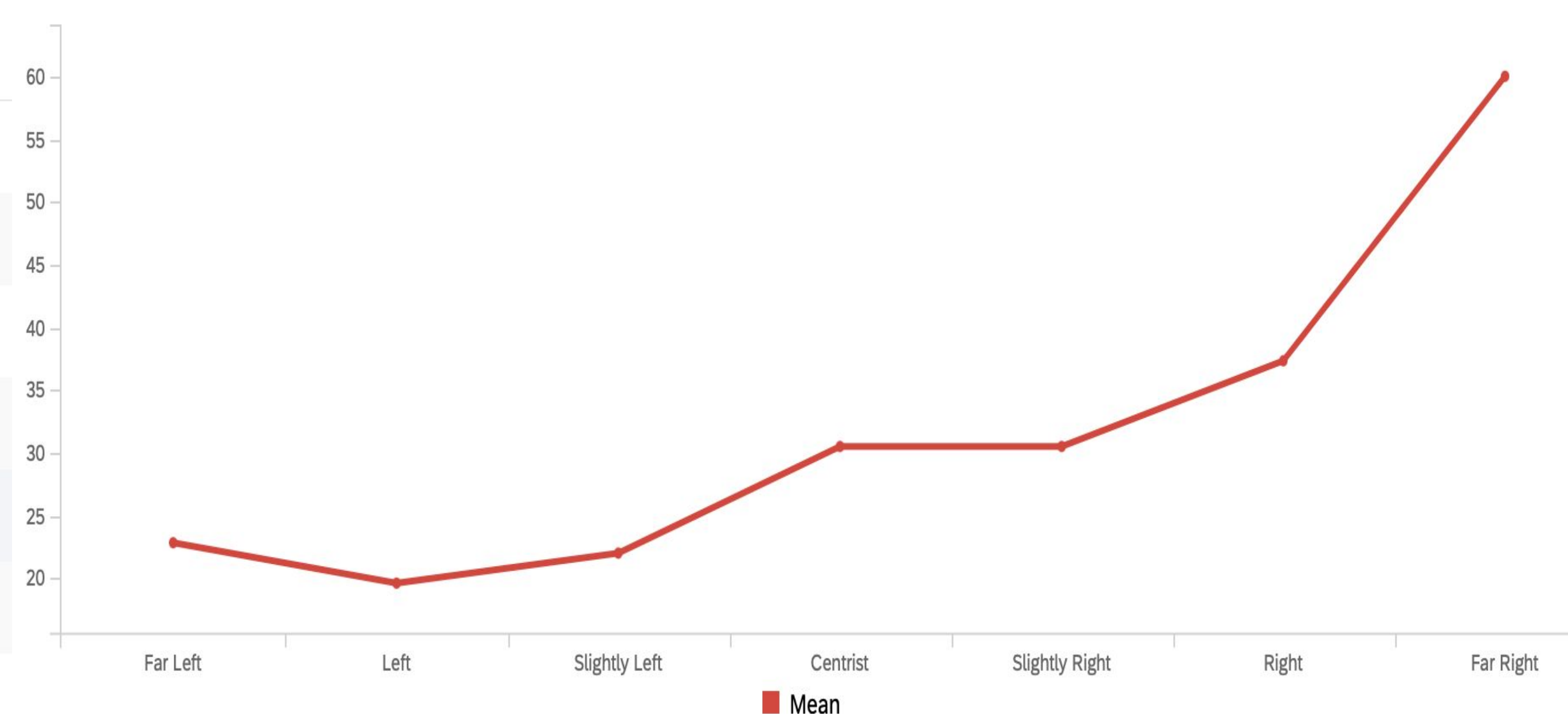
Socioeconomic Status

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Very Rich	59.00	59.00	59.00	0.00	0.00	1
2	Upper Middle Class	8.00	60.00	24.46	13.85	191.79	26
3	Middle Class	8.00	59.00	20.38	11.44	130.90	21
4	Lower Middle Class	11.00	51.00	25.00	10.80	116.67	12
5	Poverty	6.00	24.00	15.33	7.36	54.22	3



Political Orientation

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Far Left	11.00	59.00	22.83	14.06	197.81	12
2	Left	6.00	59.00	19.61	11.01	121.27	33
3	Slightly Left	8.00	31.00	22.00	7.44	55.33	6
4	Centrist	24.00	42.00	30.50	6.98	48.75	4
5	Slightly Right	18.00	41.00	30.50	8.56	73.25	4
6	Right	13.00	57.00	37.33	18.26	333.56	3
7	Far Right	60.00	60.00	60.00	0.00	0.00	1



Take the Survey Yourself!

