

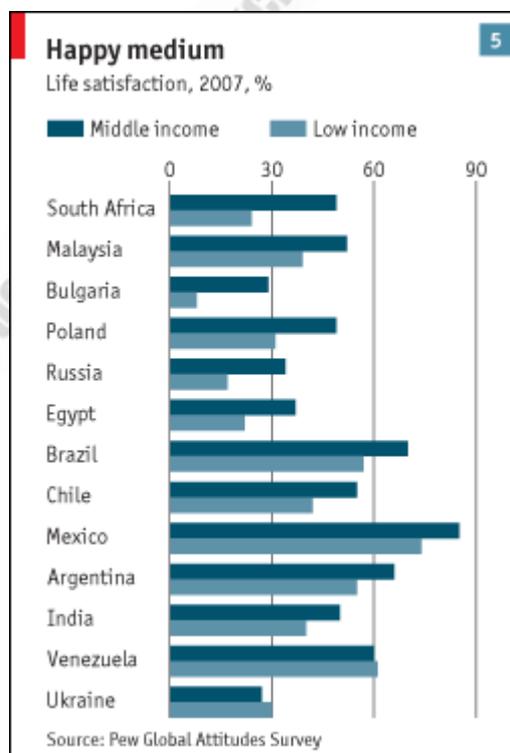
What do you think?

A special poll on middle-class attitudes.

Economic studies of the middle classes are plentiful, but opinion-poll research—especially involving international comparisons—is thin on the ground. So The Economist asked the Pew Research Center to trawl through its Global Attitudes database for this special report.

Pew looked at 13 middle-income countries in which the middle class is large or growing and classified their responses to questions about religion, democracy, life satisfaction, homosexuality and the environment by income. The threshold it used for “middle-classness” was a self-reported income of \$4,286 a year in 2007 PPP dollars, consistent with the range of \$4,000-17,000 a year used by the World Bank. Pew then compared these answers with the rest of the sample. Its middle-class group included the rich (defined as those with over \$17,000 a year), but their numbers were not statistically significant. The survey therefore compares the attitudes of the global middle class with those of the poor in the same countries. Andrew Kohut, the Pew Research Center’s president, describes it as “the most comprehensive analysis of the ways in which the middle class in emerging markets differs in its attitudes to life and society”.

The differences can be large. In half of all responses there was a gap of five to 15 percentage points between the answers given by the middle class and by the poor. For example, 52% of middle-class Venezuelans but only 42% of poor ones say homosexuality should be accepted as a way of life. The middle-class differences run mostly in the same direction. The middle class is more likely to see competitive elections as important (by an average of 8 points); somewhat more concerned about global warming; and less religious than the poor (for full results, see pewglobal.org/middleclass).



The biggest differences are in so-called “life satisfaction”. Asked to rate their personal position on a ten-point scale of satisfaction, middle-class respondents are far more likely to put themselves near the top than are poor ones. The finding is consistent with polls showing that countries tend to become happier as they get richer. But the differences in current satisfaction

are bigger than might have been expected (see chart 5). The middle class is also far more likely than the poor to expect a better life in future. These findings qualify the common view that economic growth unleashes myriad discontents.

The Pew survey also provides evidence to support two other arguments put forward in this special report. One is that the middle class varies a good deal from place to place. The gap in attitudes between the global middle class and the poor seems greater in most of eastern Europe and Spanish-speaking Latin America than in, say, Egypt, India and Brazil. The second is that the middle class supports democracy, which the poll bears out. Given widespread scepticism about this, it is perhaps the most striking finding of all.

Middle-income people are more likely than the poor to say they want competitive elections with at least two parties; more likely to demand fair treatment under the law; and more disposed to back freedom of speech and the press. However, their attitudes about politics do not differ quite as much from those of the poor as they do on religion, homosexuality or happiness. It is also true that these indicators are blunt instruments for describing often subtle attitudes.

Still, the findings are consistent across all questions and across all countries (even in Russia, where backing for democracy is low, half the middle class supports fair elections, compared with barely a third of the poor). The poll, concludes Mr Kohut, shows that "when they make it into the middle class, people in emerging markets want the kind of governance associated with rich nations."

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