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Economic Inequality and Public Support for Organized Labor

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Abstract

When exploring the political response of citizens to economic inequality, scholarship primarily focuses on support for left parties and demand for redistribution. This article expands upon this literature by exploring whether inequality generates public support for a known inequality-attenuating force in society—labor unions. In contrast to prior work, which largely focuses on national levels of inequality, we focus on the effect of citizens' firsthand exposure to inequality in their local context. We theorize that residing in a context with visible income inequality should generate support for expanding the power of unions and should do so by augmenting the perceived exigency of unions in advocating for the working class. Using observational analysis of national survey data, reinforced with matching, placebo tests, and a survey experiment, we find strong support for our theoretical expectations.

Keywords

labor unions, income inequality, public opinion

In an era of rising economic inequality in the United States, a question of importance is what kind of backlash—if any—might we expect among the mass public? Scholarship has long theorized that inequality will trigger demand for redistribution (Meltzer and Richard 1981), and that political democracy enables the public to translate this demand into policy output (Lipset 1960). Recent research, however, casts doubt on this form of backlash, as scholarship finds only a weak link between perceptions of inequality and policy mood liberalism (Hayes 2014), and that dissatisfaction with inequality is not associated with increased support for spending on the poor or progressive taxation (McCall 2013). Furthermore, analysis of data over time finds that periods of increased inequality in the United States are accompanied by *decreases* in mass support for redistribution (N. J. Kelly and Enns 2010; cf. Johnston and Newman 2016). Moreover, even if the public were to demand redistribution in the face of inequality, scholarship suggests that lower income citizens wield less political influence relative to affluent citizens (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Winters and Page 2009). Although findings for an explicitly *pro-rich* bias are somewhat mixed (Bashir 2015; Gilens and Page 2014, 2016), the presence of an *anti-poor* bias in political representation—particularly in areas with high inequality, a low presence of organized labor, and representation by a Republican legislator (Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien 2017; Ellis 2013; Rigby and Wright 2011, 2013)—casts doubt on the extent to which even hypothetical support for redistribution in response to inequality could, in fact, lead to the enactment of redistributive policies.

With the failure of economic inequality to translate into heightened public support for redistribution in the United States, where else might scholarship look for possible evidence of a public backlash against inequality? The impetus for the search for such a backlash is provided by the empirical fact that the majority of Americans are concerned about income inequality, believe it is bad for the country, and agree that a slim minority of super-rich individuals and corporations have an inordinate degree of power in American society (Bartels 2008; Eichler 2011; McCall and Kenworthy 2009). These facts depict a terrain of mass opinion with strong latent potential for some form of convulsion against rising inequality. Given the limited responsiveness of political institutions to low-income Americans (Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien 2017; Rigby and Wright 2011, 2013), one might question whether evidence of a backlash may be manifest by citizens turning their support to *nongovernmental* actors who offer to redress inequality. One such actor in the economic and political arena is organized labor.

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Labor unions are a known inequality-attenuating force in society, as they have a rich history of opposition to industrial managers, "trickle-down" economic policies, and rising income inequality (e.g., Hacker and Pierson 2011). Indeed, prior research demonstrates that a strong presence of organized labor is associated with lower levels of wage inequality (Card 2001; Western and Rosenfeld 2011; cf. Rosenfeld 2014) and higher levels of redistributive government spending (Iversen and Soskice 2006), political participation among lower- and middle-class citizens (Leighley and Nagler 2007), and support for left political parties (Andersen, Tilley, and Heath 2005). A long history of research in the United States reveals that labor unions can be a pivotal force in providing campaign information and mobilizing voters to support pro-labor candidates in national elections (Asher et al. 2001; Francia 2006; Greenstone 1977), in facilitating economically self-interested voting behavior (Glasgow 2005), and in promoting the election of working-class individuals to state legislatures (Carnes 2016). Furthermore, evidence has accumulated demonstrating that the rise in inequality over the past thirty years in the United States is at least partially due to the decline in the size and strength of unions over the same period (Acemoglu, Aghion, and Violante 2001; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012; Volscho and Kelly 2012).

Despite the importance of unions to the politics of inequality, the current political science literature on inequality has failed to incorporate unions into its search for a public response to inequality. This inattention to unions is underscored by a more general gap in our understanding of the sources of public support for unions. Indeed, while considerable effort has been invested in describing trends in aggregate opinion toward unions (Desilver 2014; Lipset and Schneider 1987; Panagopoulos and Francia 2008; Rosenfeld 2014), much less effort has been invested in analyzing the *sources* of individual support for unions. Moreover, there is no known scholarship to date that analyzes the effect of individual exposure to income inequality on support for unions. This gap in our understanding of the drivers of support for unions is critical, as research demonstrates that public opinion can play a pivotal role in the success of union organizing and protest efforts (Clawson and Clawson 1999; Martinez and Fiorito 2009; Schmidt 1993).

In this article, we theoretically and empirically explore the relationship of income inequality to public support for labor unions. In contrast to previous work, which primarily focuses on cross-national or temporal variation in aggregate inequality, we focus on citizens' firsthand exposure to inequality via their local residential context. Using the 2007 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), we demonstrate that, compared with citizens residing in economically equal contexts, those residing in unequal contexts are significantly more supportive of expanding the power and influence of labor unions. We demonstrate the robustness of this main result to concerns over residential self-selection and endogeneity using subsample analyses, matching, placebo tests, and a survey experiment. With respect to underlying mechanisms, we complement our main finding with data from the Pew Research Center and demonstrate that residence in areas with high inequality is strongly associated with (1) perceptions of inequality in America, (2) believing unions are necessary to protect working-class citizens, and (3) siding with unions in disputes with business. These findings suggest that exposure to inequality may lead to support for expanding the power of unions because it makes salient that unions work to help the "have-nots" vis-à-vis the "haves."

The Sources of Mass Opinion toward Organized Labor

Compared with the amount of work addressing the dynamics of opinion toward many actors in the political arena (e.g., President, Congress, Political Parties, etc.), considerably less research exists on the sources of public attitudes toward labor unions. The majority of existing research focuses on explaining the factors shaping either the propensity of nonunion workers to join a union or those motivating outstanding members to participate in union activities (Freeman and Rogers 2006; C. Kelly and Kelly 1994; Klandermans 1986). One prominent feature of this literature is its analytical focus upon the individual-level predictors of union participation, such as orientations toward work (e.g., job dissatisfaction, organizational commitment, etc.), sociodemographics (e.g., income, ethnicity, occupation level), attitudes toward unions (e.g., perceived instrumentality, ideological congruence, etc.), and working-class consciousness (Bamberger, Kluger, and Suchard 1999; Klandermans 1986; Martinez and Fiorito 2009; Schulman, Zingraff, and Reif 1985). Most recently, scholarship has begun to explore the effect of workers' personality traits, such as social dominance orientation, on union participation (Green and Auer 2013).

While scholars have long argued for the importance of the social environment *outside* of the workplace in shaping workers' union participation (Bulmer 1975; Goldthorpe 1968), the research exploring environmental factors is relatively sparse and tends to be dominated by analyses of workers' social networks (Gordon et al. 1980; Van De Vall 1963). Only a handful of studies have linked union participation, or public opinion toward unions more generally, to environmental factors beyond the social network. Within this small body of work, existing studies explore the effect of economic conditions, such as inflation and unemployment, on union strike activity (Shalev

1983) and membership growth and decline (Bain and Price 1980). In addition, scholarship in this area finds that public approval of labor unions is systematically linked to changes in national unemployment rates (Jarley and Kuruvilla 1994; Lipset and Schneider 1983) and consumer prices (Edwards and Bain 1988), with the main finding being that union approval suffers during downturns in the national economy. These studies, however, nearly exclusively rely on aggregate analyses and employ outdated time-series methodology[1]; thus, open for question is both the robustness of these linkages and the extent to which they inform our understanding of the effect of economic conditions on *individual-level* opinion.

Of the individual-level studies that exist, scholarship finds that negative retrospective evaluations of one's personal financial situation, as well as experienced unemployment, enhance support for unions among nonunion workers (Krahn and Lowe 1984b). In addition, research in the Canadian context found that economic conditions in one's city of residence strongly influenced support for unions (Krahn and Lowe 1984a; Lowe and Krahn 1989), suggesting that future research analyzes the effect of citizens' community economic context on their views toward organized labor. One important direction yet to be pursued is to explore whether the level of economic inequality in citizens' surrounding community influences their orientations toward unions. Moving the literature in such a direction is important given the burgeoning scientific literature on inequality (Chin and Culotta 2014) and the established importance of unions to the political economy of income inequality. One thesis emerging from the literature on inequality is that the United States has moved into a "new gilded age" (Bartels 2008), characterized by the drastic expansion of economic inequality and concomitant growth in political inequality (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Hayes 2013). With the new gilded age thesis in mind, the stage is set for an exploration of the linkage between inequality and mass support for organized labor.

Local Exposure to Inequality and Support for Labor Unions

Prior research has established a tentative link between community economic context and public attitudes toward labor unions (Lowe and Krahn 1989). However, to establish a more focused foundation for predictions about the effect of local inequality on support for unions, we turn to extant theory concerning inequality and government redistribution, prior opinion research on labor unions, and key findings in the scholarly literature on inequality. Starting with the redistribution literature, a dominant theory is the Meltzer–Richard (MR) model (Meltzer and Richard 1981), which predicts that increases in market-based income inequality will be met with heightened public demand for redistribution. According to this model, the heightened demand is due to growing inequality rendering a larger proportion of the population below the mean income level, which increases the number of citizens that stand to benefit from redistribution.

While the MR model has been subject to considerable debate and tests of the model have rendered mixed findings (e.g., Fong 2001; Johnston and Newman 2016; N. J. Kelly and Enns 2010; Kenworthy and McCall 2008), it is possible that exposure to inequality could generate support for *nongovernmental actors* in the economic sphere—such as labor unions—that serve to reduce inequality primarily by means of "market conditioning" as compared with government redistribution (see N. J. Kelly 2005). By engaging in collecting bargaining with employers, unions are able to produce different economic outcomes (e.g., enhanced worker income and benefits) than those which would be produced by market forces in the absence of union activity. In addition, as a nongovernmental entity advocating for workers, the potential linkage between inequality and support for unions may be less encumbered by the myriad factors that potentially hinder the formation of a linkage between inequality and support for government redistribution, such as racial considerations (Gilens 1999), beliefs about the causes of poverty (Kluegel and Smith 1986), and the deservingness of government program beneficiaries (Aarøe and Petersen 2014). Thus, despite having a seemingly tenuous effect on support for government redistribution, exposure to economic inequality may exert a substantial positive effect on support for unions.

The plausibility of this expectation is provided by key findings from the opinion research on labor unions. According to decades of polling data, labor unions in the eyes of Americans are "necessary but unpopular" (Lipset and Schneider 1983; Panagopoulos and Francia 2008); that is, despite Americans' reservations about "big labor" and union leaders, most view unions as necessary to protect the interests of working-class Americans from the depredations of the market system. For example, Lipset and Schneider (1983, 199) find that the majority of Americans believe unions are necessary to protect workers from the "arbitrary misuse of power by employers" and to ensure that "big corporations would pay fair wages and give decent benefits to people who work for them." Such widely held perceptions have stood firm over time, as a recent poll conducted in 2012 found that 63 percent of Americans agree that "labor unions are necessary to protect the working person."[2] The existence and persistence of this public perception have strong objective bases, as research demonstrates that stronger unions are associated with lower levels of wage inequality (Card 2001; Western and Rosenfeld 2011) and wealth concentration among the super-rich (Volscho and Kelly 2012).

Thus, paralleling the MR model logic that exposure to inequality should enhance mass support for inequality-reducing government activity, it is plausible that it also garners support for labor unions, as they function as inequality-attenuating institutions in the economic sphere and are widely perceived as a necessary advocate for economically vulnerable citizens.

While the prospective abuses by the economic system observed to underscore mass support for unions center upon worker exploitation, a case can be made that one of the abuses of market systems is economic inequality itself. Surveys of public opinion firmly document that Americans perceive increasing inequality as a "bad thing" for society (Bartels 2008; Drake 2013). While Americans' negative appraisal of inequality is likely rooted in widespread support for egalitarian values (e.g., Bartels 2008), it may also be due to the visible material consequences of inequality and the psychological effects of encountering inequality. In an analysis of inequality in US cities, Berube (2014) argues that "a city where the rich are very rich, and the poor very poor, is likely to face many difficulties," including maintaining mixed-income schooling, raising revenue for services, and a bifurcation of housing wherein there effectively come to exist "rich neighborhoods" and "poor neighborhoods," with little in between. Building on this, existing research has linked inequality to problems in physical and mental health (Roux et al. 2001; Wilkinson 1997), and demonstrates that inequality is subjectively upsetting, as exposure to the homeless has been found to generate sadness, as well as frustration and anger when cast in light of the affluence in America (Lee, Farrell, and Link 2004). Such reactions hold among higher status individuals, who tend to experience guilt in response to poverty and inequality (Chen and Tyler 2001; Harth, Kessler, and Leach 2008). Adding to this, recent work finds that residing in a local context with high-income inequality erodes confidence in the fairness of the economic system (Newman, Johnston, and Lown 2015), and that contact with people experiencing economic distress heightens perceptions that the wealthy have undue power in society (Newman 2014). Such perceptions are not unfounded, as there is mounting evidence that economic inequality leads to inequality in political representation (Gilens 2012; Hayes 2013).

Thus, of the putative detriments generated by market economies, a case can be made that inequality itself is arguably one clear harm: citizens dislike inequality in principle, find exposure to inequality upsetting, and evince attitudinal reactions to inequality that reflect comprehension of the broader consequences of inequality, such as the erosion of economic mobility and deepening of political inequality. As such, given that public support for labor unions is linked to their actual—and widely perceived—function of curtailing the abuses of market systems, it stands to reason that this relationship could extend beyond concern over worker exploitation to encompass inequality. Previous research documents that perceiving the economic system as unfair, and the rich as having too much power and influence, leads to increased support for "corrective measures" such as government income redistribution (Fong 2001; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Newman 2014). As exposure to inequality and the poor triggers mass perceptions that the system is unfair and "rigged" in favor of the rich, such exposure might lead to support for measures that level the playing field and bolster the status of lower- and working-class citizens, such as having more powerful labor unions. This leads to the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Compared with citizens residing in relatively economically equal contexts, those residing in contexts with a high degree of income inequality should—on average—be more supportive of expanding the power of labor unions.

Data and Method

To test this hypothesis, we draw upon the 2007 CCES's Common Content (Ansolabehere 2007).[3] The 2007 CCES is an Internet-based survey containing a large sample of adult US citizens (n = 10,000). In addition to the benefits afforded by its sample size, this survey contains an item tapping attitudes toward labor unions, a host of relevant control variables, and provides data for respondents' zip code of residence, thus enabling the survey data to be matched with contextual data from the US Census Bureau.

The causal factor of interest in this analysis is exposure to economic inequality. Our hypothesis focuses on local inequality because prior research finds that, in contrast to national economic conditions where citizens suffer from "innumeracy" (Lawrence and Sides 2014), citizens are largely aware of subnational local economic conditions (Newman, Velez, et al. 2015), including levels of income inequality (Franko 2014; Minkoff and Lyons 2016; Newman, Johnston, and Lown 2015; Xu and Garand 2010; cf. Solt et al. 2017). To measure local income inequality, we rely upon three separate measures, each constructed at the zip code level from household income data obtained from the US Census Bureau.[4] First, we measure the amount of *bimodal inequality* (Johnston and Newman 2016) in a respondents' zip code with the multiplicative term created by the interaction of the percentage of households earning below \$25,000 per year (labeled *Below 25K*) and the percentage of households earning above \$100,000 per year (labeled *Above 100K*).[5] The multiplicative term—*25K* × *100K*—captures the effects of each respective constituent term at the maximum value of the other or, in other words, residential areas where there are higher percentages of both poor and relatively well-off households. This measure was introduced by Johnston and Newman (2016), who argue that it better captures the *visibility of inequality* than skew-based measures, such as the Gini coefficient or 80/20 ratio.

To be sure, one limitation of skew-based measures is that, while they do capture the degree of income concentration, they do not necessarily capture whether the wealthy exist in a numerous or conspicuous manner among the relatively poor. Higher Gini coefficients, for example, indicate movement toward a community in which a single household possesses all of the income in the community. While Gini values in practice never achieve their mathematical maximum, having but a few super-rich individuals within a community imparts minimal opportunities for frequent and pervasive contact between the rich and the poor. Indeed, while the typical citizen in a high-Gini community might be aware of the handful of super-rich families in their area, their chances of contact with members of such families might be extremely low, as wealthy individuals tend to segregate their residences from everybody else (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001) and do so even more in communities with higher income inequality (Watson 2009). As such, the majority of the daily economic landscape surrounding the typical member of a high-Gini community might lack conspicuous and recurrent manifestations of affluence, and thus present few observable contrasts of poverty with wealth that persist on a daily basis. This, in turn, may render the mathematical reality of income concentration less salient to the typical resident. It is for these reasons that we use *bimodal inequality* as our principal measure of inequality, as it better captures the *joint visibility* of the wealthy and the poor, and thus the presence of conspicuous contrasts between wealth and poverty in daily life.

In the analyses that follow, we contrast the *25K* × *100K* measure of bimodal inequality to two standard measures of income skew—the *Gini coefficient* and the *80/20 ratio*.[6] In addition, we demonstrate in Online Appendix D that core results hold when using alternative cutoffs to operationalize bimodal inequality, such as *Below 30/40/45K* and *Above 125/150/200K*. Furthermore, as this bimodal measure of inequality is novel, we provide important descriptive information on the measure in Online Appendix A.

For our dependent variable, we rely upon an item in the CCES asking the following question: "How much influence would you like labor unions in the United States to have?" The response options for this question ranged from (1) "More influence than they have today," (2) "The same amount of influence as they have today," and (3) "Less influence than they have today." From this item, a dichotomous item was constructed, coded "1" for respondents wanting an expansion of labor union (30.8%) influence and "0" for those wanting labor union influence to be kept the same or decreased.[7] Our analysis controls for zip-code-level median household income, unemployment, racial composition, and population density, as the inclusion of these controls ensures that estimated effects of inequality are not tapping into contextual variation in absolute levels of income, unemployment, or urbanicity. Due to the tendency of higher inequality areas to have certain characteristics related to partisanship (i.e., the % black, urbanicity, etc.), our analysis controls for the percentage of voters in respondents' county who voted for George Bush in the 2004 Presidential Election.[8] We also control for the strength of unions (percentage of workers unionized) in a respondents' state of residence,[9] which may exert an effect on views toward unions. Last, given the unique history of antiunionism in the American south (Minchin 2006), we include a dummy for residence in a southern state.[10] At the individual level, our analysis includes standard demographic and political controls. For ease of interpretation, all contextual- and individual-level variables were recoded to range from 0 to 1. For more information about question wording and variable measurement, see Online Appendix B. Given the hierarchical nature of the data, where individual respondents are embedded within zips, and the dichotomous nature of our dependent variable, we estimated random intercept logistic regression models. These models allow us to control for unobserved heterogeneity at the zip code level.[11]

Results

Table 1 presents the results from our test of our hypothesis. The different results columns correspond to the different measures of inequality. Focusing first on our measure of bimodal inequality, we find strong support for our hypothesis that support for labor unions will increase in environments characterized by a polarized, bimodal distribution of income. The constituent term for *Below 25K* indicates that among individuals residing in zips with no households earning above 100K, an increase in the proportion of very poor households is associated with a significant decrease in support for expanding the power of unions. While statistically significant, this effect is entirely negligible (Rainey 2014); the change in predicted support for expanding the influence of unions associated with a 5th to 95th percentile increase in *Below 25K* (when *Above 100K* is set to its 5th percentile value) is a mere .03. Turning to the constituent term for *Above 100K*, among respondents in zips with no households earning below 25K per year, we find an insignificant effect for an increase in the percentage of wealthy households.

Turning to the interaction term, however, we find that the effect of an increasing percentage of wealthy (poor)

Table 1. Local Income Inequality and Support for Increasing the Power of Labor Unions.

	Bimodal inequality	Gini coefficient	80/20 ratio
Local inequality			
Below 25K	−0.963* (0.420)		
Above 100K	−0.568 (0.744)		
Below 25K × Above 100K	6.02** (2.07)		
Gini coefficient		0.352 (0.412)	
80/20 ratio			0.811* (0.321)
Contextual controls			
Median income	−0.649 (1.19)	−0.503 (0.320)	−0.005 (0.382)
Unemployment rate	0.579 (0.518)	0.156 (0.496)	0.215 (0.497)
% black	−0.038 (0.208)	−0.125 (0.206)	−0.088 (0.207)
% Republican vote	−0.169 (0.204)	−0.247 (0.203)	−0.185 (0.203)
Population density	0.348 (0.445)	0.462 (0.443)	0.320 (0.443)
% unionized workers	−0.370* (0.147)	−0.353* (0.147)	−0.365* (0.147)
Individual controls			
Education	0.258** (0.098)	0.266** (0.098)	0.253** (0.098)
Income	−0.534*** (0.123)	−0.506*** (0.123)	−0.508*** (0.123)
Age	0.016*** (0.002)	0.016*** (0.002)	0.016 (0.002)
Male	0.249*** (0.055)	0.246*** (0.055)	0.246*** (0.055)
Black	−0.047 (0.112)	−0.042 (0.112)	−0.039 (0.112)
Hispanic	−0.291* (0.121)	−0.291* (0.121)	−0.287* (0.121)
Asian	−0.468 (0.270)	−0.467 (0.270)	−0.471 (0.270)
Other	0.168 (0.116)	0.176 (0.116)	0.176 (0.116)
Employed part-time	−0.012 (0.095)	−0.013 (0.094)	−0.015 (0.095)
Unemployed	0.310* (0.144)	0.321* (0.143)	0.320* (0.143)
Current union member	1.27*** (0.090)	1.27*** (0.090)	1.27*** (0.090)
Past union member	0.532*** (0.060)	0.531*** (0.060)	0.532*** (0.060)
Party ID	−2.34*** (0.105)	−2.32*** (0.105)	−2.32*** (0.105)
Ideology	−2.08*** (0.129)	−2.09*** (0.129)	−2.09*** (0.129)
Religiosity	−0.155* (0.075)	−0.161* (0.075)	−0.160* (0.075)
South	−0.106 (0.089)	−0.112 (0.089)	−0.117 (0.089)
Constant	0.648 (0.312)	0.442 (0.325)	−0.020 (0.345)
Likelihood ratio test	0.000	0.000	0.000
No. of individuals	9,647	9,647	9,647
No. of zip codes	6,326	6,326	6,326

Source. 2007 Cooperative Congressional Election Study's Common Content.
Standard errors appear in parentheses. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from random intercept logistic regression models estimated using *xtlogit* in the software package Stata®.
$*p < .05$. $**p < .01$. $***p < .001$ (reported significance levels are based upon two-tailed hypothesis tests).

households is associated with increasing support for the expansion of labor union power as the percentage of lower (upper) income households increases.[12] These effects are illustrated in Figure 1, Panels A and B, with listed case example zip codes.[13] The figures are intended to provide a coarse visual representation of low and high bimodal inequality contexts, with the x-axis broken into three household income categories (households earning below \$25,000, households earning between \$25,000 and \$100,000, and households earning above \$100,000) and the y-axis depicting the percentage of households falling into each of the three household income groupings on the x-axis. Panel A depicts zips with low bimodal inequality, defined as those below the 5th percentile of *Below 25K* and *Above 100K*, which entails zips with no households falling in these extreme categories. Panel B depicts zips with high bimodal inequality, defined as those where *Below 25K* and *Above 100K* are each above their 80th percentile values, which encompasses zips with 35 percent or more households *Below 25K* and 40 percent or more households *Above 100K*. In such cases, at least 75 percent of the population is situated opposite from one another on the local economic totem pole. As can be seen, moving from the type of neighborhood depicted in Panel A to that depicted in Panel B is associated with a .12, or nearly 50 percent, increase in the probability of supporting an

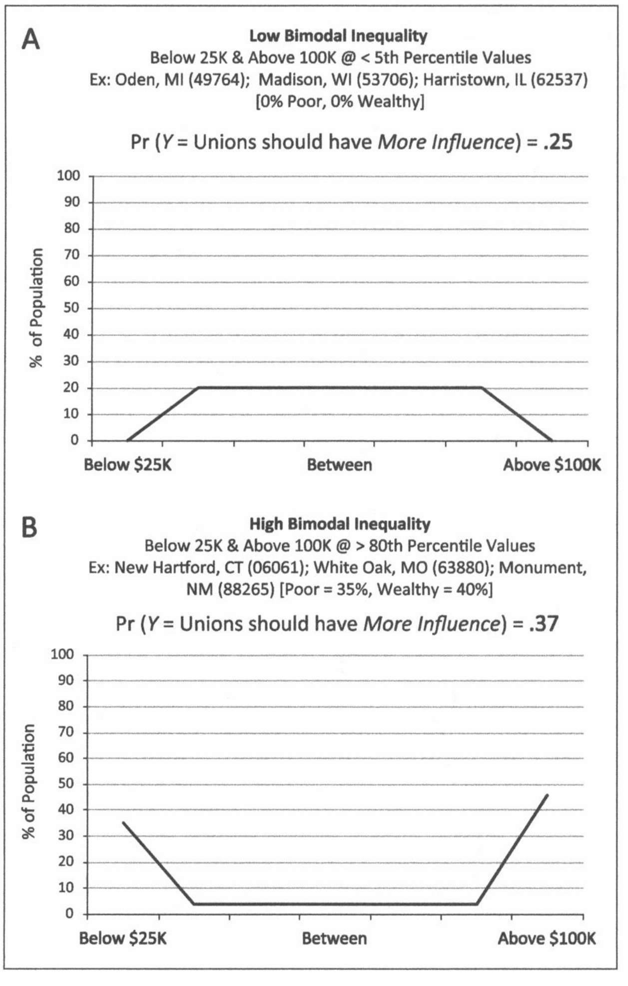

Figure 1. Predicted probability of union support at varying levels of bimodal inequality (2007 CCES data).
CCES = Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

increase in union power. These findings provide strong support for our first hypothesis. It is important to note that these effects emerge after controlling for a variety of factors (e.g., political context and median income). Turning to the effects of the two other measures of inequality, we find that only one of the two skew-based measures (the *80/20 ratio*) exerted a significant effect. And, the magnitude of this effect is substantially smaller than that observed for the bimodal measure, as moving from the 5th to 95th percentile value of the *80/20 ratio* is associated with a .06, or roughly 30 percent, increase in the probability of labor union support.

These results provide unprecedented evidence that exposure to inequality, particularly when it involves residence in a neighborhood with pronounced populations of haves and have-nots, is associated with a statistically significant and substantively meaningful increase in support for the power of organized labor. As such, these results make an important contribution to the growing literature on inequality, as well as to the study of labor politics, by revealing evidence of a backlash against economic inequality among the American public. When turning our gaze from support for government redistribution to support for nongovernmental actors within the economic realm, evidence is uncovered that Americans respond to inequality with heightened support for labor unions—who are widely perceived by the American people to act as an advocate and protector of the working class.

Robustness Checks

The results presented in Table 1 hold when using different income cutoffs to operationalize bimodal inequality (see Table D4 in Online Appendix D) and when converting the 25K × 100K interaction into a dichotomous "treatment" variable (see Table D5 in Online Appendix D). In addition, variation in the costs of living within and between towns and cities throughout the United States may alter the meaning of earning below 25K or above 100K in terms of standards of living. To account for such variation, we reestimated the bimodal inequality model presented in Table 1 on subsamples of the data that excluded relatively low, or relatively high, cost-of-living zips, and find that our results fundamentally hold (see Table D6 in Online Appendix D). Finally, to address the possibility that residential self-selection may be driving our findings (Oliver and Wong 2003), we feature in Online Appendix D a series of additional analyses using particular subsamples, coarsened exact matching (CEM; Iacus, King, and Porro 2012), and placebo policy outcomes. In each case, the results of these various analyses provide robust support for H1.

Survey Experiment

To provide an additional test of whether exposure to inequality can cause increased support for labor unions, we conducted a survey experiment ($n = 300$) on Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk that manipulated awareness of economic inequality. Respondents were told they were participating in a study about "current events" where they would be asked to read an excerpt from a randomly selected news story, followed by some brief questions. Respondents assigned to the control condition read a (fabricated) article discussing the increasing prevalence of carpooling, mass transit, and bicycle riding in cities throughout the United States. Respondents in the treatment condition read a (fabricated) article discussing the prevalence of income inequality in cities throughout the country. The article referenced "visibly unequal neighborhoods," where "20 percent of the residents earn incomes below $25,000 per year while another 20 percent

Table 2. Effect of Experimental Treatment on Support for Increasing the Power of Labor Unions.

	No controls	Controls
Inequality treatment	0.529* (0.264)	0.661* (0.301)
Controls		
Education		0.360 (0.922)
Income		−0.201 (0.554)
Age		0.010 (0.016)
Male		−0.031 (0.305)
Black		1.38* (0.605)
Hispanic		0.230 (0.527)
Asian		0.385 (0.550)
Unemployed		−0.123 (0.582)
Union membership		1.33*** (0.395)
Party ID		−2.74*** (0.704)
Religious attendance		−0.822 (0.550)
South		0.728* (0.342)
Constant	−0.953 (0.194)	−0.932 (0.731)
n	262	261
Effect size		
ΔPr (*Y* = more influence) due to Δ in *inequality treatment*	.120	.136

Source. June 2015 MTurk "Inequality and Organized Labor" Survey Experiment.
Standard errors appear in parentheses. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from logistic regression models estimated using *logit* in the software package Stata®.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$ (reported significance levels are based upon two-tailed hypothesis tests).

earn annual incomes above $100,000," with the intent being to augment awareness of inequality. For full transcripts and information about the sample, see Online Appendix E.

While many treatments associated with citizens' residential context are difficult to instantiate within a survey experiment, our analytical focus on context stems from its theorized ability to alter the visibility of inequality. Thus, we believe our design useful in that it seeks to manipulate quantities (e.g., awareness of inequality) we theorize to vary as contexts exhibit more or less inequality. Respondents completed a pretreatment questionnaire measuring demographic and political variables and a posttreatment questionnaire containing the "union influence" item from the CCES. Table 2 presents the effect of our treatment on respondents' support for expanding the power of unions. As can be seen, in models excluding and including demographic covariates, our treatment significantly increased support for expanding union power. Moreover, the effect sizes presented in the bottom of Table 2 reveal substantively meaningful effects on par with those exerted by contextual inequality in the CCES data.

Testing Key Links in the Causal Chain

The preceding sections presented strong evidence that citizens exposed to inequality are more supportive of expanding the power of labor unions. Presumably, these observed effects are underscored by several intervening processes. First, for high objective inequality to affect attitudes at all, citizens must actually *perceive* there to be high inequality. Once this inequality is perceived by members of the community, a crucial connection citizens would have to make is between inequality and the function of unions. Specifically, exposure to high inequality should lead to heightened support for unions because *unions are perceived to advocate for lower and working-class citizens*. In sum, for local inequality to exert a positive influence upon attitudes toward unions, it seems necessary that citizens (1) actually perceive there to be high inequality and (2) believe that unions operate in the interests of the working class and not the wealthy.

To test our presumptions regarding citizens' ability to perceive local economic inequality, we draw upon Pew surveys conducted in 2006, 2007, 2009, and 2010[14] that asked respondents the following question: "Some people think of American society as divided into two groups, the 'haves' and the 'have-nots,' while others think it's incorrect to think of America that way. Do you, yourself, think of America as divided into haves and have-nots, or don't you think of America that way?"[15] We constructed a dichotomous variable coded "1" for those viewing American society as "divided" and "0" otherwise. Table 3 presents the regression of this item on our three separate measures of local inequality. While the *Gini coefficient* and *80/20 ratio* both fail to exert a significant effect on perceptions of inequality, bimodal inequality registered an effect that is statistically significant, as indicated by the interaction term. Moving from zips where only 5 percent of households earn *Below 25K* and only 5 percent earn *Above 100K* (i.e., low bimodal inequality) to zips where 35 percent of households earn *Below 25K* and 35 percent earn *Above 100K* (i.e., high bimodal inequality), we observe a .05 increase in the probability of perceiving society as "divided" into haves and have-nots.[16] One reason for the small effect size of bimodal inequality is that each constituent term exerts a negative effect, which makes sense in that it indicates that residing in an area containing mostly poor (or mostly wealthy) households (i.e., low-income diversity) is associated with lower perceived inequality.

Having provided evidence that local inequality is indeed perceived by citizens, and that bimodal inequality is the only form that significantly registers with citizens, we turn now to the linkage between exposure to inequality and intervening beliefs about unions. The presumption we

Table 3. The Effect of Different Measures of Inequality on Perceived Economic Inequality—American Society Is Divided into "Haves" and "Have-Nots."

	Bimodal inequality	Gini coefficient	80/20 ratio
Local inequality			
Below 25K	−0.441 (0.539)		
Above 100K	−1.24 (0.859)		
Below 25K × Above 100K	5.50† (2.84)		
Gini coefficient		0.124 (0.374)	
80/20 ratio			0.413 (0.402)
Contextual controls			
Median income	1.12 (1.38)	−0.273 (0.384)	−0.038 (0.454)
Unemployment rate	0.254 (0.365)	0.120 (0.347)	0.150 (0.349)
% black	0.397† (0.225)	0.352 (0.223)	0.365 (0.224)
% Republican vote	−0.170 (0.228)	−0.185 (0.225)	−0.162 (0.226)
Population density	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Individual controls			
Education	−0.060 (0.125)	−0.065 (0.125)	−0.067 (0.124)
Income	−0.521*** (0.126)	−0.510*** (0.126)	−0.513*** (0.126)
Age	0.002 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)
Male	−0.075 (0.059)	−0.075 (0.059)	−0.074 (0.059)
Black	0.655*** (0.118)	0.649*** (0.118)	0.650*** (0.118)
Hispanic	0.219† (0.123)	0.215† (0.123)	0.215† (0.123)
Asian	0.282 (0.210)	0.279 (0.210)	0.278 (0.210)
Party ID	−0.939*** (0.099)	−0.935*** (0.099)	−0.938*** (0.099)
Ideology	−0.722*** (0.141)	−0.721*** (0.141)	−0.717*** (0.141)
Religious attendance	−0.090 (0.097)	−0.096 (0.097)	−0.094 (0.097)
South	−0.073 (0.069)	−0.085 (0.069)	−0.085 (0.069)
Survey controls			
2007	0.266*** (0.081)	0.264*** (0.081)	0.264*** (0.081)
2009	−0.459*** (0.085)	−0.458*** (0.084)	−0.458*** (0.084)
2010	−0.108 (0.080)	−0.108 (0.080)	−0.109 (0.080)
Constant	0.675 (0.322)	0.747 (0.327)	0.495 (0.395)
Likelihood ratio test	0.000	0.000	0.000
No. of individuals	5,651	5,651	5,651
No. of zip codes	4,610	4,610	4,610
Effect size			
ΔPr (Y = divided) due to Δ in *inequality measure*	.05	.01	.03

Source. Merged 2006 News Interest, 2007 Pew Media Update Survey, 2009 Values, and 2010 Political and Future Pew Surveys.
Standard errors appear in parentheses. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from random intercept logistic regression models estimated using *xtlogit* in the software package Stata®. Effect sizes are the change in the probability of perceiving society as divided into "haves" and "have-nots" due to 5th to 95th percentile changes in *Gini coefficient* and the *80/20 ratio*, and due to a change from 5% *Below 25K*/5% *Above 100K* to 35% *Below 25K*/35% *Above 100K*.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$ (reported significance levels are based upon two-tailed hypothesis tests).

seek to test is that citizens will view the protective function of unions as more exigent in unequal environments. Indeed, our theoretical account for the findings in Table 1 hinges upon the assertion that inequality augments the perceived importance of unions as an inequality-attenuating force acting on behalf of poor and working-class citizens.

To test these theoretical presumptions, we merged together three Pew surveys, conducted between 2007 and 2012,[17] soliciting respondents' level of agreement with the following statement: "Labor unions are necessary to protect the working person." From this item, we constructed a dichotomous variable coded "1" for respondents reporting agreement with this statement (63.9%) and "0" for those reporting uncertainty or disagreement. In addition, we draw upon a Pew survey conducted in 2011[18] that asked respondents: "When you hear of a disagreement between labor unions and businesses, is your

Table 4. The Effect of Local Income Inequality on Theorized Intervening Factors.

	2007–2012 Pew surveys	2011 Pew survey
	Unions necessary to protect workers	Side with unions over business
Local inequality		
Below 25K	0.066 (0.796)	0.723 (1.22)
Above 100K	−1.75 (1.38)	−0.727 (2.58)
Below 25K × Above 100K	8.50† (4.41)	12.24* (6.46)
Contextual controls		
Median income	2.03 (1.99)	3.75 (4.33)
Unemployment rate	0.209 (1.12)	3.52 (2.70)
% black	−0.179 (0.353)	0.299 (0.629)
% Republican vote	−1.02** (0.341)	0.891 (0.604)
Population density	2.45 (1.60)	0.208 (1.33)
% unionized workers	0.558* (0.245)	0.199 (0.476)
Individual controls		
Education	−0.328 (0.200)	0.116 (0.349)
Income	−0.705*** (0.179)	−0.949* (0.379)
Age	−0.006* (0.003)	−0.023*** (0.007)
Male	−0.273** (0.086)	−0.220 (0.167)
Black	0.631*** (0.197)	0.426 (0.313)
Hispanic	0.837*** (0.180)	−0.114 (0.282)
Asian	0.008 (0.301)	−1.29 (0.707)
Employed part-time	0.539*** (0.141)	0.541* (0.268)
Unemployed	0.459*** (0.107)	0.282 (0.206)
Union household	1.47*** (0.172)	1.70*** (0.384)
Party ID	−1.57*** (0.175)	−1.31*** (0.319)
Ideology	−1.08*** (0.221)	−2.01*** (0.517)
Religious attendance	0.465*** (0.146)	—
South	0.275* (0.135)	0.007 (0.259)
Survey controls		
2009	−0.320** (0.110)	
2012	−0.199 (0.109)	
Constant	2.16 (0.499)	−0.215 (0.964)
Likelihood ratio test	0.16	1.43
No. of individuals	3,290	1,216
No. of zip codes	2,897	1,158

Source. 2007–2012 Merged Pew Survey Data; 2011 Pew Political Survey.
Standard errors appear in parentheses. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from random intercept logistic regression models estimated using *xtlogit* in the software package Stata®.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$ (reported significance levels are based upon two-tailed hypothesis tests).

first reaction to side with unions *or* to side with business?" From this item, we constructed a dichotomous variable coded "1" for respondents' reporting siding with labor unions (36.1%) and "0" for those siding with business. Table 4 presents the results from analyses assessing the effect of local inequality on the perceived importance of unions in protecting workers and on siding with unions in labor disputes. In both instances, as the degree of bimodal inequality increases in a respondent's area of residence, so too does their probability of perceiving labor unions as necessary to protect workers and siding with unions against business. As with its effects in the previous sections, the effects of bimodal inequality here are substantively meaningful. Moving from zips with low to high bimodal inequality (i.e., 5th–90th percentile values of *Below 25K* and *Above 100K*) is associated with a .14 increase in the probability of perceiving unions as necessary to protect working Americans and a .54 increase in the probability of siding with unions over business in labor disputes.

Taken together, these results corroborate key links in the theorized causal chain underlying the findings in Table 1.[19] We theorize that the relationship between exposure to inequality and support for more powerful unions derives, at least in part, from citizens perceiving unions as an advocate for the working class, and thus as a means of redressing inequality. We provide evidence for this by demonstrating that exposure to inequality enhances the perceived necessity of unions as advocates for working-class citizens, as well as powerfully increasing the likelihood of taking the side of labor in disputes with business. These results suggest that support for unions in unequal contexts stems from a heightened sense of living in an unequal society and a concomitant impulse to counteract inequality via support for workers vis-à-vis business.

Local Voting on State Ballot Initiatives

To assess whether these results extend to actual political behavior, we analyzed election results for five recent state ballot initiatives pertaining to labor unions. Consistent with the results presented above, we find that greater bimodal inequality is predictive of a higher share of pro-union votes across counties. Due to spatial constraints, this analysis can be found in Online Appendix F.

Conclusion

Economic inequality has become a central political issue of our time. President Obama, nearing the end of his presidency, stated, "I will measure myself at the end of my Presidency in large part by whether I began the process of . . . reversing the trend toward economic bifurcation in this society" (Remnick 2014). The relevance of increasing inequality for political attitudes, policy making, and legislative behavior has attracted renewed scholarly interest in the subject in more recent years (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Hacker and Pierson 2011). This article makes important contributions to the mounting literature on the politics of inequality. First, this work represents the only known research that addresses whether mass support for unions rises in response to income inequality. While scholars have privileged specific forms of *government* activity (e.g., redistribution) as of increasing appeal to Americans living in the "new gilded age" (Bartels 2008), they have neglected the historic role of unions as a *non-governmental* actor known to reduce inequality. Second, scholars have tended to not conceptualize inequality in quite the same manner as President Obama and many others—that is, the "economic bifurcation of society." Our analyses focus on *bimodal inequality*, a measure designed to capture instances wherein many "haves" and "have-nots" live beside one another in a bifurcated economic environment. We find that, in contrast to skew-based measures of inequality, greater bimodal inequality shapes perceptions of inequality in America and increases support for labor unions.

Certainly, there exist many additional phenomena that likely affect public support for organized labor, as well as membership in labor unions, beyond that of local inequality. Over the past several decades, trends in deindustrialization, outsourcing, declining unionization rates (and, thus, decreasing personal contact with union workers), negative media coverage of unions, and various other factors have no doubt affected public support for unions (Rosenfeld 2014; Schmidt 1993). Thus, while our cross-sectional analyses suggest that greater bimodal inequality in one's local context increases support for unions *all else being equal*, it is not entirely surprising that, since the 1950s, the United States as a whole has witnessed a slight decline in support for unions despite a steep rise in inequality (Hacker and Pierson 2011; Saad 2015). Again, while our findings would suggest that rising inequality (both nationally and at the local level) may have exerted upward pressure on public support for unions, it seems likely that these co-occurring phenomena may have exerted countervailing effects. Future analyses would do well to investigate this possibility, particularly by analyzing overtime trends in public support for unions.

In addition, our findings raise an important potential implication—that is, if a labor union were to successfully *reduce* inequality in a particular area, would such efforts ultimately *reduce* local support for the labor union? In fact, this concern manifests itself in contemporary political dialogue wherein unions are described as being "victims of their own success" and are criticized as having "outlived their usefulness" (e.g., see National Public Radio 2012). Because such a question is *temporal*, rather than cross-sectional, in nature, our analyses cannot speak to it directly. Moreover, we would ideally also need a measure of the extent to which citizens in a given area perceive *unions* as being responsible for decreasing inequality vis-à-vis factors unrelated to unions (e.g., economic growth, social welfare spending, etc.). Thus, while our data are ill-suited for addressing the possibility that successful union efforts to reduce inequality could ultimately reduce public support for unions, we believe this remains a vitally important question for understanding the nature of public support for labor unions as well as what the future may hold for labor unions in the United States.

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Notes

1. For example, Jarley and Kuruvilla (1994) appear to analyze their data in level form, and thus fail to account for the nonstationarity of each series. This runs a serious risk of generating spurious regression results (e.g., Granger and Newbold 1974). In a similar vein, Edwards and Bain (1988) do not account for the possibility that their series may be fractionally integrated, again raising the possibility that their parameter estimates are biased and inconsistent (e.g., Lebo, Walker, and Clarke 2000).
2. Based on the April 2012 Values Survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.
3. The 2007 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) is an Internet survey conducted by the firm YouGov. The response rate (American Association for Public Opinion Research [AAPOR] Response Rate 3 [RR3]) was 37.1 percent. For more information, see https://cces.gov.harvard.edu.
4. Our analysis relies upon zip-code-level data from the 2007 to 2011 American Community Survey (ACS) five-year file. We use zip code because there is strong reason to expect that respondents' zip code should serve as an appropriate context for our treatment of interest (i.e., economic conditions) to be delivered. Prior research demonstrates that citizens' perceptions of local economic conditions are strongly predicted by objective economic conditions measured at the zip code level (Newman, Johnston, and Lown 2015) and that citizens' perceptions of many characteristics solicited about their "local community" are more strongly predicted by zip-code-level measures than by county-level or user-defined geographies (Velez and Wong 2017). In short, there is strong reason to expect zip code to serve as an effective measure of citizens' local residential context, and one where objective levels of economic inequality will be perceived by residents.
5. These "cut-offs" were selected because $25K or less corresponds to the lowest quartile of the income distribution in the United States, and thus captures households that could be characterized as lower income or poor.
6. Based on the 2007–2011 ACS zip-code-level estimates of Gini. The *80/20 ratio*, given that the ACS measures income in an ordinal fashion, was created by calculating the median income *category* separately for the top 20 percent and the bottom 20 percent of households within a zip, and then subtracted the latter from the former. Higher values of this measure indicate a larger gap between the average high- and low-income households within a zip, and thus greater inequality.
7. Our results entirely hold when analyzing this variable as an ordinal item (see Table D1 in Online Appendix D). We dichotomize this item for ease of model estimation and interpretation.
8. These data were obtained from David Leip's Atlas of Presidential Elections. Presidential voting is a common measure of local political context (see Campbell, Wong, and Citrin 2006). We use county-level data because zip-code-level data are not available.
9. These data were obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) at https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/union2_01252007.pdf. We rely upon a state-level measure because this is the lowest level of geographic aggregation for which there are reliable estimates. The BLS does not provide estimates of union membership at the county or zip code level. We assess the robustness of our main results in Table 1 using two alternative measures of union strength: (1) county-level union membership estimated from Current Population Survey data using multilevel regression with poststratification (MRP), and (2) using the percentage of workers employed in the public sector as a proxy measure, as union membership has been growing in the public sector relative to the private sector. The core results for bimodal inequality presented in Table 1 hold when using these alternative measures of union strength (see Table D2 in Online Appendix D).
10. One alternative to controlling for residence in the South is to control for residence in a "Right-to-Work" (RTW) state, as the passage of such laws may indicate a distinct anti-union culture within a state. When we reanalyze the results in Table 1, substituting a dummy variable for residence in an RTW for residence in the South, we find that our results entirely hold and that our RTW dummy fails to exert a significant effect (see Table D3 in Online Appendix D).
11. We should note that the results presented in Table 1 hold when estimating a simple logistic regression model.
12. In addition to uncovering a statistically significant interaction term, we find that the marginal effect of *Below 25* is significant when *Above 100* is at its maximum values. We present a marginal effects plot of this effect in Figure B1 in Online Appendix B. Here, it can be seen that the marginal effect of *Below 25* turns positive and significant when *Above 100* takes on values of 32 percent more greater. We present these effects for values of *Above 100* ranging from 0 to 50, because these constrain the plot to within-sample estimates.
13. The five-digit number in parentheses following each listed example in Figure 1 is the zip code for each example.
14. The 2006 News Interest Survey (N = 1,507; AAPOR RR3 = 26.5%), 2007 Media Update Survey (N = 1,503; AAPOR RR3 = 16.7%), 2009 Values Survey (N = 3,000; AAPOR RR3 = 19.5% landline, 17% cell phones), and 2010 Political and Future Survey (N = 1,546; AAPOR RR3 = 18.1% landline, 19.4% cell phones) were conducted via Random Digit Dialing (RDD) by Princeton Survey Research Associates International for the Pew Research Center. For this analysis, we merged these four surveys together into a single dataset and included fixed effects for each survey.
15. In the 2009 Values Survey, this question only appeared on one of the two questionnaire formats (Form B) that were randomly assigned to survey respondents. Thus, this analysis is only able to use the N = 1,500 respondents randomly given Form B.
16. These predicted probabilities are based on within-sample value ranges of *Below 25K* and *Above 100K*, as well as within-sample value ranges of their joint distribution, in both our merged Pew data and the 2007–2011 ACS data.

17. For this analysis, we rely upon the 2007 Values Update Survey (N = 1,025, Form 2 only), the 2009 Values Survey (N = 1,492, Form 1 only), and the 2012 Values Survey (N = 1,498, Form 2 only). These surveys were conducted by Princeton Survey Research International and used RDD. The 2007 Values Update Survey was conducted between December 12, 2006, and January 10, 2007, and achieved a (AAPOR RR3) response rate of 23 percent. The details of the 2009 Values Survey are outlined in Note 9. The 2012 Values Survey was conducted between April 4 and 15, and achieved overall (AAPOR RR3) response rates of 11 (landline) and 7 (cell phones) percent. For more information about these surveys, see http://www.people-press.org/category/datasets/.
18. Pew 2011 Political Survey, N = 1,500, conducted via RDD (landline and cell phones) between February 2 and 7, achieving overall response rates (AAPOR RR3) of 14 (landline) and 7 (cell phones) percent. For more information, see http://www.people-press.org/category/datasets/2011/.
19. One limitation of this analysis is that it does not perform actual mediation analysis. While ideal, doing such an analysis is limited by the unavailability of our mediating and dependent variables in existing survey data. This limitation noted, we believe that the analyses offered in this section provide extremely strong suggestive evidence of the mechanisms presumed by our hypotheses.

Supplemental Material

Replication data for this article are available with the manuscript on the *Political Research Quarterly* (*PRQ*) website.

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