Public Opinion and Reactions to Increasing Income Inequality[1]

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In 2008, the Great Recession temporarily interrupted a decades-long rise in income inequality in the United States. The recession catalyzed the Occupy movement, which in turn pushed the phrase “the one percent” into the popular lexicon (typically referring to the top one percent of income earners, and occasionally wealth owners). However, despite this apparent surge in public interest in economic inequality, income inequality continued to grow after the recession, as “the one percent” of income earners disproportionately captured the gains from income growth. In total, over the past five decades, this group has nearly doubled their share of national income; income inequality in the United States now rivals that of the famously unequal 1920s.

This chapter asks how the public has (or has not) reacted to these economic trends. In a time of increasing income differences, with income accumulating at the very top of the income distribution, what has been the American public’s reaction? Has public pressure to address economic inequality through public policy intensified – and if not, why not? In this chapter I will review the recent literature on these questions. In doing so, I will draw on empirical evidence from within as well as beyond the United States, placing American public opinion toward income differences in comparative perspective.

As the chapter will make clear, there is a significant and relatively recent literature to draw on; the economic changes of recent decades have led to a burst of activity from social scientists looking to understand the consequences of income inequality. This fortunate circumstance, however, necessitates placing some boundary conditions on the type of studies and research questions covered here. For the bulk of the chapter, I focus narrowly on the role that factual information about income differences plays in affecting attitudes toward inequality. At the end of the chapter, I will zoom out and place the take-away points from this particular literature in a broader context of research on how social and political institutions (including the media, labor unions, and public policy) affect the public’s reactions to facts about inequality.

A traditional way to pose the key question motivating this chapter is “why don’t the poor soak the rich” (Shapiro 2002). A more formal way to describe this puzzle is through rational choice: in a society with unequal incomes skewed toward the top, the median income earner’s economic self-interest should cause them to demand income redistribution (Meltzer and Richard 1981). The chapter will start by observing that contrary to this prediction, increasing economic inequality is not consistently or strongly linked to support for redistribution. In other words, economic inequality can increase significantly without a corresponding growth in public support for “soaking the rich”. I will then explore potential explanations for this phenomenon.

First, I will ask whether a lack of public awareness regarding increasing inequality is to blame. On the one hand, evidence clearly indicates that citizens commonly underestimate both wealth and income inequality. On the other hand, however, the existence of underestimation does not prove that a fully informed public would react any differently. Even if the public is unaware of the extent of inequality, the question remains of how they *would* react if they were aware.

This question is addressed in numerous recent experiments that inform people about inequality or expose them to income differences in various ways. Summarizing recent studies in this vein, I show that the impact of such information on attitudes is inconsistent and includes numerous null findings. The mixed results suggest that if information effects exist, they are likely to be contingent; that is, accurate information about inequality affects people’s attitudes toward inequality only under specific circumstances. I tentatively suggest three conditions that may condition public responses to information about inequality: a) whether information about one’s own position in the income distribution is included, b) whether economic mobility is implicated, and c) whether inequality is seen as changeable.

With this summary of recent findings in hand, I turn to broader questions. First, I ask which variables *other* than accurate information impact support for redistribution. While the effects from information experiments are inconsistent and likely conditional, other research has demonstrated that cues about the deservingness of the beneficiaries of redistribution powerfully and consistently affect attitudes toward redistribution. In light of these effects it seems likely that ideas surrounding the fairness of inequality and the deservingness of social groups (both at the winning and losing ends of inequality) are more important for support for redistribution than (in)accurate information about the extent of income inequality. In other words, knowing correct *facts* about inequality does not easily change people's *attitudes* toward inequality (with potential exceptions for the conditional effects mentioned above). Social perceptions regarding the fairness of inequality-producing mechanisms, as well as stereotypes regarding the deservingness of social groups, are powerfully shaped by sociopolitical institutions like political parties, the media, unions, and others. This insight, then, points us toward scholarship, both classic and recent, on the roles these institutions play in shaping normative interpretations of inequality.

Finally, I ask whether the United States is exceptional when it comes to public attitudes toward redistribution. Without disputing that there are some ways in which Americans' beliefs stand out in a comparative perspective (e.g. a higher than average belief in the role of hard work as opposed to luck determining one's lot in life), I argue that the dynamics through which we should understand support for redistribution are the same in the US as they are in other industrialized countries. Americans, like others, evaluate inequality through a prism of deservingness, in which group stereotypes regarding deservingness feature heavily. And, like others, Americans are prone to underestimating inequality in their country (though it is unclear how consequential such underestimation is). Finally, Americans are more supportive of redistribution and more disapproving of inequality than the American exceptionalism narrative can make them seem. I conclude by arguing that to understand American exceptionalism in inequality-producing public policy, we need to look beyond public opinion, and turn toward issues of representation and policy-making processes.

Before moving to the main content of this chapter, an important caveat is in order. This chapter focuses primarily on public reactions to increasing top-end incomes. This focus, combined with the short format of a book chapter, necessitates giving only brief descriptions of some broader contextual variables. In particular, questions of race and gender inequality undeniably structure conversations around the acceptability of income inequality, in the United States as well as elsewhere. While I cover these key variables relatively briefly in the main body of the chapter, this is not to imply they are unimportant. Toward the end of the chapter, I briefly discuss the importance of variables such as whether specific socio-economic groups are perceived as deserving their lot in life. However, for a more detailed discussion of these factors, see the chapters by Andra Gillespie and Alice Kessler-Harris in this volume. Additionally, and also in this volume, questions of geographic segregation (including income-based segregation) are addressed by Douglas Massey and Jacob Rugh, while Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson discuss unequal political responsiveness. The current chapter, in other words, is intended to be read within the broader context of this edited volume.

Material Self-Interest and Reactions to Income Inequality

The material self-interest assumption is probably the most common theoretical foundation for studies of public reactions to income inequality. From this perspective, individuals who earn below-mean incomes should support redistribution, because they can expect to benefit from it (Meltzer and Richard, 1981). This basic expectation can be extended to argue that *increasing* inequality should lead to *increasing* demands for redistribution – this because the distance between median and mean incomes increases as incomes become more concentrated at the top of the income distribution (Kelly and Enns 2010).

This stylized material self-interest expectation has a mixed track-record empirically. On the one hand, it is generally true that people with lower socio-economic status support redistribution and taxation more than well-off people do (Amable 2009, Andersen and Curtis 2015). But on the other hand, evidence generally does not support the hypothesis that high income inequality is associated with more intense public demand for redistribution.[2] In comparative perspective,

[2] In the bulk of this chapter, I follow a common convention in the literature, which is to think of public support for redistribution as agreement with relatively generic statements such as “the government

for example, the public in more unequal countries does *not* tend to be more concerned about inequality than the public in more equal countries (Kenworthy and McCall 2008, Breznau and Hommerich 2019, though see Finseraas 2009, Andersen and Curtis 2015). In the United States, McCall (2013) shows that dissatisfaction with inequality has remained relatively steady (at consistently high levels) from the late 1980s onwards, even though inequality has risen sharply during this time period. These findings are replicated, with additional sub-group analysis, in Ashok et al. (2015). Kelly and Enns (2010), Luttig (2013), and Wright (2017) all argue that increasing inequality in the United States may even have led to more conservative public opinion on issues of redistribution. Moving from national to local-level inequality in the United States, Johnston and Newman (2016) find no relationship between local income inequality and preferences for redistribution. Finally, McCall (2013) and Franko (2016) each find that increasing inequality may lead to more progressive opinions on some, though not all, aspects of redistributive public policy. In sum, the expected relationship between increasing inequality and increasing demand for redistribution is only found inconsistently in empirical analyses of this type.

Turning from cross-sectional survey data to evidence from field and/or experimental studies, results are also mixed. Sands (2017), in a field experiment, finds that seeing a poor person in a wealthy neighborhood (which serves as a reminder of inequality) leads to *lower* support for a 'millionaire's tax'. In a similar vein, Roth and Wohlfart (2016) use observational data and find that people who experienced more inequality growing up become less supportive of redistribution as adults. McCall et al. (2017), in a survey experiment, find that reading information about increasing income inequality *increases* support for redistribution, while experiments by Kuziemko et al. (2015) and Trump (2018) find that information about inequality does not change support for redistribution.

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should do more to reduce income differences between the rich and the poor". Support for redistribution can also be measured through public support for specific policies that have various redistributive impacts; I return to the distinctions that these policies bring into the conversation later in this chapter.

In sum, research findings are mixed on the question of whether high or increasing inequality leads to high or increasing support for redistribution. This conclusion applies both in comparative perspective and in the United States in particular. The conflicting evidence suggests that *if* inequality has an impact on public opinion toward redistribution, it is likely to be conditional on other factors; such conditionality may explain otherwise conflicting findings. Having said this, it is important to point out that these findings do not mean that the public in general is *not concerned* with income inequality. On the contrary: the public in the United States generally agrees that inequality is “too high” (Page and Jacobs 2009, McCall 2013) and expresses sympathy with the poor (Piston 2018). It is *the extent* to which the public disapproves of inequality that is not consistently related either to levels or to changes in inequality.

Why is demand for redistribution not responsive to increasing inequality? Below, I first ask whether the public is simply too uninformed about growing inequality, followed by an examination of whether providing accurate information about inequality might affect public support for redistribution.

How Accurate Are Perceptions of Inequality?

One plausible explanation for the lack of a relationship between inequality and support for redistribution is that the public is simply not aware of the extent of income inequality. The population in the United States tends to have relatively low levels of political information in general (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997); they also do not perform very well when asked to give numeric estimates of politically relevant quantities (Kuklinksi et al. 2000). It would therefore not be surprising if citizens also struggled to accurately estimate income inequality. Indeed, the public in the United States as well as in other countries systematically underestimates income inequality (Osberg and Smeeding 2006, Kiatpongsan and Norton 2014) as well as wealth inequality (Norton and Ariely 2010). Since it is difficult (albeit not impossible, in the presence of elite cues) to react to phenomena that one is not aware of, this could explain why increasing inequality has not led to increasing public support for redistribution.

This argument becomes even more appealing if we consider that, if inequality *levels* are difficult for an average citizen to observe, then *changes* in inequality may be even harder to see. Studies show that substantial and relatively quick changes in inequality, such as those that occurred in post-Communist countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union, are perceived by their citizens (Gijsberts 2002, Kolczynska and Merry 2016). Smaller changes, however, such as the gradual growth in top-end inequality in the United States over a longer period of time, are probably not accurately perceived by the population (Gimpelson and Treisman 2017).[3]

Before describing these results in more detail, is worth pausing here to emphasize the importance of operationalization choices. In studies that seek to measure public knowledge, operationalization is key – and this may be even more true in studies of economic inequality than in other studies of citizen knowledge. Developing survey items about inequality requires special care, because income inequality is a particularly abstract concept, and it can be numerically summarized in many different ways. This makes intuitive survey questions about inequality a challenge to construct. The choice of survey questions also matters because it may not only affect the conclusions of one's study; it can also influence the design of follow-up studies in which participants are informed about real levels of inequality. For these reasons, in what follows I will consider operationalization choices in somewhat more detail than is usual in overview essays of this type.

Good survey items about inequality should allow us to separate normative assessments of inequality from factual knowledge. This separation is crucial to the research agenda at hand, which seeks to understand how (a lack of) factual knowledge may affect normative attitudes. Because survey questions about knowledge need to stop short of encouraging normative assessments, we need to rule out using some common survey items, such as those that ask whether inequality is 'too low', 'just right', or 'too high'.

[3] Note, however, that within the United States, changes in state- and local-level inequality may be more visible than national levels of inequality (Xu and Garand 2010, Franko and Witko 2017).

Additionally, the choice of survey question can significantly influence the results of a study. For example, in the case of wealth inequality, Norton and Ariely (2010) ask U.S. respondents to estimate the *share of wealth* that belongs to different income quintiles. They find significant and widespread underestimation of inequality, as well as widely shared popular support for very low levels of inequality. Eriksson and Simpson (2012), however, demonstrate that asking a similar question, but focusing on *the average wealth* of people in different quintiles yields different results. Perhaps most significantly, they find that this alternative phrasing shows the public endorsing higher wealth inequality than in the Norton and Ariely (2010) study.

Similar concerns apply when measuring perceptions of income differences. Using a similar approach as Norton and Ariely (2010), adapted to income rather than wealth, Boudreau and MacKenzie (2018a) find that Californians underestimate state-level income inequality. However, using a set of visualizations (society depicted as pyramids/ladders), Niehues (2014) shows that *over*estimation of inequality is common, and that the extent of overestimation varies by country. A third way to measure perceived income differences is asking respondents to estimate how much money people in different vocations make in a year (e.g. factory worker, CEO of large national company). This approach finds significant underestimation of income inequality both cross-nationally (Kiatpongsan and Norton 2014) and in the United States (Osberg and Smeeding 2006). In an operationalization where respondents fill in their own histogram of household incomes in the United States, Page and Goldstein (2016) find that respondents underestimate income inequality and overestimate median incomes. Finally, Minkoff and Lyons (2017) find that simply asking whether inequality is 'small' or 'large' in one's local neighborhood is related to the actual income diversity in the local area. Their results indicate at least a somewhat accurate perception of inequality on the local level, though this approach does not allow a quantification of potential over/under-estimation.

While the results vary somewhat from study to study, the overall picture that emerges is that inequality, especially at the national level, is difficult for most citizens to perceive and that underestimation of income differences is very common, in the United States as well as cross-nationally.

While underestimation of inequality may be widespread, the studies cited above do not demonstrate that *if the public were more informed*, they would be more supportive of redistribution. To find out whether a more informed public would react to inequality differently, we need to look at studies that directly explore the link between factual knowledge of inequality and support for redistribution.

How Would Opinions about Inequality Change if People Were Better Informed?

Public ignorance of inequality could explain why increasing inequality has not been met with increasing support for redistribution. For this to be the case, however, a well-informed citizen would need to react to inequality by demanding more redistribution, if it was in their economic self-interest to do so. In recent years, a literature that tests this link between information and attitudes has emerged. The results from this literature are quite mixed; as a whole, the results 1) suggest that information alone probably does not suffice to change concern about inequality or support for redistribution, and 2) highlight the moderating role of fairness perceptions and, by extension, of social and political institutions, in shaping reactions to income inequality.

First, looking at cross-sectional evidence, the most informative available studies regarding the impact of *knowledge* of increasing inequality come from Eastern Europe in the period immediately following the fall of the Soviet Union. As mentioned above, surveys suggest that in countries where inequality sharply increased after the fall of Communist regimes, the population started perceiving larger income differences (these perceptions were measured with the “occupational earnings” questions described above). However, these perceptions did not go hand in hand with changes in normative reactions, such as beliefs that inequality was too high, or that more redistribution was needed (Gijsberts 2002, Kolczynska and Merry 2016). Instead, citizens started reporting higher occupational income differences as desirable, indicating that the population had come to see larger income differences as legitimate (Kelley and Zagorski 2004; for similar evidence from Chile see Castillo 2012). Of course, observational studies like these suffer from a range of weaknesses, perhaps most prominently that the new, democratic and capitalist regimes were seen as more legitimate than the previous Communist regimes. Increased regime legitimacy probably helped legitimate the growing income differences that accompanied the transitions, which leaves us with the question of how the public reacts to increasing inequality within democratic systems.

To establish whether inequality *per se*, net of confounding factors such as regime change, can cause increased support for redistribution, we need to turn to experimental research. Two recent studies, carried out in the United States and Sweden, use information treatments that mirror the occupational earnings questions used in the studies from Eastern Europe. In these experiments, respondents are told how much different occupational categories, including CEO's of large national companies, make per year. These studies show that informing people about the true extent of occupational income inequality does not change normative assessments of whether inequality is "too high", nor does this information impact support for redistribution (Trump 2018, Pedersen and Mutz 2018). Further, and consistent with the correlational evidence discussed above, respondents who are exposed to such information start recommending higher income differences as ideal. These patterns probably occur in part because of anchoring processes (Pedersen and Mutz 2018), and partly because of motivated reasoning processes such as system justification, whereby people are motivated to interpret their social environment as fair (Trump 2018, Garcia-Sanchez et al. 2018).

Additional experiments have used different operationalizations than the occupational earnings questions. For example, Kuziemko et al. (2015) show their respondents a range of information that focuses primarily on growing inequality but also discusses taxation and economic growth. Despite the substantial information treatment, this study finds only a small effect of information on concerns about inequality, and no impact on support for redistribution. On the other hand, Boudreau and MacKenzie (2018b) inform Californians about the extent of inequality in their state (through pie charts displaying the share of income going to different income quintiles), and find that this information increases support for raising the marginal income tax rate among some subgroups of respondents.

Departing from numeric information about inequality, McCall et al. (2017) use a vignette that discusses rising inequality; they find that this treatment causes respondents to perceive less meritocracy in the United States, and to increase their support for redistribution. Conversely, in a field experiment in which people in a wealthy neighborhood are unobtrusively exposed to a poor individual (thus highlighting inequality), Sands (2017) finds that experiencing inequality makes people *less* supportive of redistributive public policy.

These mixed results jointly suggest that reactions to information about inequality are probably conditional, depending on variables such as the context in which information is received, respondent characteristics, and how information is presented. For example, based on the studies cited above, support for redistribution is not affected by information about the high incomes of CEO's. On the other hand, when information about inequality is presented in a way that raises concerns about the existence of equal opportunity in society, support for redistribution increases. The key question becomes: under *what conditions* do citizens link information about income inequality to support for redistribution?

When Does Income Inequality Lead to Demand for Redistribution?

Without yet broadening our remit to the broader world of socio-economic institutions, social stereotypes, and other such variables, this section will retain a narrow focus on the consequences of giving citizens accurate information about inequality, exploring its potentially conditional impact on opinion toward redistribution. Focusing on this narrower question and recent experimental evidence, three moderators emerge as potentially relevant. First, the respondents' ability to connect information about inequality to their economic self-interest may be important. Making this connection is not as straight-forward for many citizens as simply reading income statistics; therefore, the way in which information is presented can be consequential. A second potentially relevant variable is how strongly citizens believe in meritocracy and upward mobility. And finally, the effect of information may depend on the citizens' perceptions of whether inequality is changeable (as opposed to an inevitable fact of life).

Awareness of One's Own Economic Position

For information about income inequality to change people's support for redistribution according to their economic self-interest, respondents need to connect inequality information to the consequences that increased redistribution would have on their own income. This may be a challenge for many citizens, not least because it is common for people to not be aware of their specific position in the income distribution (Boudreau and MacKenzie 2018a). Giving people information about the economy and inequality in a format that helps them connect the dots between inequality, redistribution, and their own economic outcomes, may therefore have a different effect than decontextualized information about inequality.[4]

Consistent with this line of reasoning, recent research suggests that learning one's specific position in the income distribution can affect attitudes toward redistribution. For example, Cruces et al. (2013) show that Argentinian respondents who overestimated their own position in the income distribution started supporting more redistribution after they were informed of their true ranking. Similarly, Karadja et al. (2017) show that Swedes who initially underestimated their own position became less supportive of redistribution after receiving correct information; this effect was driven by individuals who also held right-wing political beliefs. In a study carried out in California, Boudreau and MacKenzie (2018a) find that information about one's own position in the income distribution, as well as information about growing income inequality, strengthens the relationship between personal economic

[4] For similar arguments, see Bullock (2011) and Boudreau and MacKenzie (2014); both articles argue that citizens connect their values and interests to policy positions - when the circumstances are right.

circumstances and support for redistributive policies. Engelhardt and Wagener (2016) find that while information about one's own position does not change Germans' attitudes toward redistribution, additional information about whether one is a net contributor to or beneficiary of redistribution does affect support for redistribution in expected directions. Finally, however, Hoy and Mager (2019) carry out a standardized information experiment in ten countries, finding mixed results, and no impact of information on support for redistribution in the United States among a few other countries.

While information about one's position in the income distribution does not directly provide information about the *extent* of inequality, these results are nonetheless relevant to understanding the relationship between income inequality and economic attitudes. Jointly, the studies provide evidence that when individuals have the requisite information, they *can sometimes* connect their own position in society to their policy preferences. This evidence is also consistent with the broader observation that a person's socioeconomic position predicts their support for redistribution (Amable 2009). In conclusion, information about one's relative position may be a key piece of information for people to have, whenever they reason about inequality and redistribution. In fact, this information may be more important than information about the absolute distance between the top and the bottom of the income distribution.

Meritocracy and Upward Mobility

All else being equal, citizens tend to interpret the possibility of upward mobility as a sign of meritocracy, which in turn legitimizes the existence of inequalities of outcome (Shariff et al. 2016). The related hypothesis that the prospect of upward mobility reduces support for redistribution (Benabou and Ok, 2001) is well known and empirical evidence supports it (Engelhardt and Wagener 2014, Day and Fiske 2017). Recent research, building on this insight, has asked whether the reverse relationship also exists: whether income inequality itself affects perceptions of meritocracy and equal opportunity. Unfortunately, studies so far disagree on the direction of this relationship, alternately suggesting either that inequality leads to *increased* perceptions of meritocracy (in turn justifying inequality) or that inequality leads to *reduced* perceptions of meritocracy (in turn delegitimizing inequality).

In a cross-sectional analysis, Mijs (2019) finds that citizens of relatively unequal countries are more likely to explain success in meritocratic terms. Similarly, local inequality in the United States is associated with an increased willingness to believe that people can get ahead if they are willing to work hard (Solt et al. 2016). Theoretically, such a relationship may occur because of motivated reasoning: people are motivated to believe that it is possible to improve one's lot in life, even in unequal circumstances (Kraus and Tan 2015).

However, experimental evidence suggests that the opposite relationship may hold: that information about high inequality may lead to doubts about how widespread equal opportunity is. McCall et al. (2017) find that a vignette about economic inequality decreases belief in meritocracy. Similarly, Davidai (2018) finds that information about unequal wealth distribution (between quintiles) reduces perceptions of upward mobility. Becker (2019) finds that information about income inequality between groups increases respondents' belief that the differences were due to circumstances (as opposed to individual effort). The experimental evidence thus contradicts the correlations found in observational data; reconciling these findings is an important task for future research.

Belief that Inequality Can Be Changed

Some recent evidence suggests that perceiving inequality as *changeable* may affect how people react to it. Johnson and Fujita (2012) show that perceptions of changeability affect how we engage with information about the status quo in general. The inequality-related implication of this finding is that perceiving inequality as inevitable may suppress support for redistribution. Consistent with this prediction, Pellicer et al. (2019) show that perceiving inequality as inevitable affects whether information about inequality leads South African respondents to support more redistribution. Only when inequality appears changeable does demand for redistribution increase in response to information about inequality.

Inevitability perceptions may also explain at least one set of conflicting findings in the literature. As mentioned above, McCall et al. (2017) find that exposing survey respondents to information about increasing income inequality increases beliefs that wealth and family background matter for getting ahead. In other words, inequality decreases belief that success is determined meritocratically. However, in analyses of cross-sectional, international surveys that use the same survey questions as used by McCall et al. (2017), Mijs (2019) finds that income inequality is positively related to belief in meritocracy. It may be possible to reconcile these conflicting findings by observing that McCall et al.'s informational treatment included an implied message of changeability: the focus of the information treatment was on how inequality has changed over time, which necessarily implies that inequality *can* change. As per the Pellicer et al. (2019) argument, this perception of changeability may trigger demands that the government address inequality. Further research could shed useful light on how these findings complement each other.

Broader Context: Fairness and Deservingness Considerations

Each of the variables discussed in the previous section – awareness of one's own position, perceptions of upward mobility, and perceptions of whether inequality can be changed – plays out in a broader context of culture and politics. Attitudes toward government policy are not only shaped by economic self-interest; they are also powerfully affected by perceptions of who deserves government help, and to what extent inequality can be considered fair (Hochschild 1981, Starmans et al. 2017). In this section, I will place the frequently conditional or contradictory effects of information that I have summarized above into a broader context, in which considerations of (frequently group-based) fairness and deservingness play a major role. Addressing this broader context requires first pointing out that generic support for redistribution (frequently measured as agreement with statements such as "the government should do more to reduce income differences between the rich and the poor") can differ from attitudes toward particular policies that benefit specific social groups. So far, I have discussed support for redistribution as a uni-dimensional attitude, whose primary referent is the respondent's own expected loss or gain from redistribution. However, attitudes toward redistribution are also informed by what we think of *other* beneficiaries of government policy (Petersen 2012), and these additional considerations mean that attitudes toward redistribution can vary depending on whom we know or imagine the beneficiaries to be. For example, Cavaille and Trump (2015) show that attitudes regarding redistribution *to the poor* are not necessarily correlated with support for redistribution *from the rich* (see also Kluegel and Smith 1987 and Attewell 2019). Stereotypes regarding the poor and the rich influence attitudes toward policies that help these groups, and it is clear that these stereotypes matter *in addition to* economically self-interested attitudes.

The importance of stereotypes about social groups for attitudes toward public policy is made clear in a broad literature that emphasizes the concept of the "deserving poor" (Katz 1989). When the poor are seen as undeserving of government help, support for redistribution is lower. This dynamic can be particularly acute in racially or ethnically heterogeneous societies, where minority groups are frequently stereotyped as both poor and undeserving (Gilens 1999, Alesina and Glaeser 2004). In a related argument, Scheve and Stasavage (2016) emphasize the centrality of deservingness attitudes for redistributive tax policy, arguing that top marginal income tax rates have historically only been raised during or immediately after wars that involve mass mobilization. In other words, taxes on the rich are significantly increased only in situations where the sacrifices of the poor for the common good are abundantly clear (thus speaking to their deservingness), and there is societal agreement that the rich need to 'pay their share'.

So far, the experimental literature on reactions to information about inequality has not directly engaged with the question of how perceptions of group-based deservingness interact with increasing income inequality to shape support for redistribution. However, we know from experiments that explicitly include cues regarding the deservingness of welfare recipients that such cues can affect opinion so strongly as to remove partisan differences in support for redistribution (Petersen 2012, Petersen et al. 2012). The strength of findings in the literature on deservingness perceptions, contrasts strongly with the weak and mixed findings in the literature on well-informed, economically self-interested reactions to inequality. Taking these sets of findings together, it seems probable that when it comes to changing public support for redistribution, opinions about the recipients of government help are more important than the public's knowledge about growing inequality. If this is true, then we should not expect increasing income inequality to affect public support for redistribution – unless growing inequality affects perceptions of how deserving either the rich or the poor are.

The proposition that public notions regarding fairness and deservingness are a key driver of support for redistribution highlights the importance of socio-political institutions that shape such notions. While information about high CEO salaries, on its own, may be inconsequential for attitudes toward redistribution, the rich activities of labor unions do affect such attitudes (Ahlquist and Levi 2013, Rueda and Pontusson 2000). While simply informing people of the income distribution through the media may not be effective, the media also describes the universe of available policy options (Guardino 2019) and illustrates who the beneficiaries of such policies would be (Gilens 1999). Policies that reduce inequality create their own constituencies and feedback effects, affecting public opinion about inequality (Mettler 2005, Campbell 2003, Michener 2018, Pierson 1993, Skocpol 1992). In other words, the finding that information is not enough, on its own, to change support for redistribution directs our attention toward the broader societal institutions that structure public interpretations of what constitutes fairness.

Is the United States Exceptional?

The United States is more unequal than most other industrialized countries; having experienced sustained growth in income inequality since the 1970s, it now has the highest levels of inequality since the famously unequal 1920s (Saez 2017). During this same period, however, American public opinion regarding inequality did not substantially change: from the late 1980s to the 2010s, agreement with statements like "inequality is too high" remained steady, with a majority of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing (McCall 2013). This pattern of increasing inequality, contrasted against stable (but generally disapproving) public opinion, raises the question of whether the United States is exceptional in that its population is particularly unlikely to object to growing income differences.

Arguments in favor of American exceptionalism point out that Americans overestimate upward mobility (Davidai and Gilovich 2015, Kraus and Tan 2015) and perceive more upward mobility than citizens of other wealthy industrialized countries (Alesina and Glaeser 2004). As described above, such beliefs make inequality more acceptable to the public (Engelhardt and Wagener 2014, Shariff et al. 2016). Another strand of the exceptionalism argument points out that the United States is a particularly racially and ethnically heterogeneous country, and that such heterogeneity is associated with lower support for redistribution (Alesina and Glaeser 2004). In fact, Alesina and Glaeser (2004) further argue that Americans' relatively strong belief in meritocracy is in fact endogenous to the United States' relatively high racial and ethnic heterogeneity. Complementing this line of reasoning, Gilens (1999) shows that United States' minority groups – especially, but not only, African Americans – are stereotyped as undeserving in American culture, and that this reduces popular support for redistributive policies that are perceived to disproportionately benefit the minorities in question.

Whether these variables make the United States exceptional is a matter of perspective. There are no strong reasons to believe that the underlying mechanisms that explain popular support for redistribution – ethnic heterogeneity and perceptions of meritocracy – work differently in the United States than they do anywhere else. While the United States scores unusually high on these explanatory variables, all this means is that even if redistributive politics in the United States *looks* somewhat different to other countries, it nonetheless follows a similar logic (Alesina and Giuliano 2011).

Additionally, when it comes to the other relevant variables I have discussed in this chapter, the United States does not stand out as unusual. Overall, Americans are not significantly worse than citizens of other nations at estimating levels of income inequality (Osberg and Smeeding 2006), though they may be somewhat more likely to underestimate incomes at the very top (Kiatpongsan and Norton 2014). Both Osberg and Smeeding (2006) and Kiatpongsan and Norton (2014) further find that Americans report ideal levels of income inequality, and in particular preferences for 'leveling down' top incomes, that are comparable to the preferences expressed by citizens in other countries. Finally, while support for redistribution in the United States is lower than in other countries, it is more widely shared than the narrative of American exceptionalism might make it seem. Concern about the poor, belief that inequality is too high, and even direct support for government redistribution are shared by most Americans (Kluegel and Smith 1986, Page and Jacobs 2009, McCall 2013, Piston 2018).

If the United States is an outlier primarily due to racial/ethnic heterogeneity and (the resulting) higher rates of belief in meritocracy, and if it is subject to the same logics of redistributive politics that we observe in other countries, then what does this tell us about American public opinion in an age of increasing inequality? First, that while Americans – like other nationalities – underestimate the true extent of income inequality, informing them about it is unlikely to change how they feel about redistribution, except under particular circumstances. Second, that perceptions of the possibility of upward mobility are important here, as they are everywhere, and may be affected by income inequality. In a country long known for unusually strong belief that hard work gets you ahead, the hypothesis that income inequality may undermine perceptions of meritocracy is a particularly intriguing one. As mentioned above, however, at the moment evidence on this hypothesis is contradictory, which makes this an issue worthy of further study.

Finally, Americans have consistently been concerned about high inequality in recent decades (even though this concern has not intensified as inequality has increased). This points to a question outside the realm of public opinion studies: why has the political system not been responsive to this stable and broadly shared concern among its citizens? Even though the public does not react thermostatically to increasing income inequality, there is arguably sufficient concern about inequality among the American public to justify interventions that would at least reduce the rate of growth of inequality. The lack of such public policies in the United States raises questions about the political system in general, and differential responsiveness in particular. In other words, it would be too simple to attribute the lack of policy responses to growing inequality in the United States solely to lackluster demand for them among the public.

Conclusion

Even though income inequality in the United States has increased substantially since the 1970s, reaching historically high levels by the late 2010s, the public's concern about inequality and their support for redistribution plateaued during the same time period. Why did the increase in income inequality, driven by the top 1% of income earners capturing the lion's share of income growth over several decades, not lead to a stronger public backlash?

This chapter started by asking whether a lack of public awareness about the true extent of income differences is to blame, especially in the broader context of low levels of knowledge about political facts among most citizens. While it is true that Americans generally underestimate the prevalence of income inequality (and perceive themselves to be more middle class than they actually are), the evidence suggests that a lack of information is not the whole story. Informing citizens about inequality does not consistently change their normative attitudes toward inequality and redistribution, and economically self-interested reactions only seem to occur in particular circumstances.

When citizens can draw clear connections between their own economic position and proposed redistributive policies, they can and do react in accordance with their self-interest and/or their political values. However, the information that enables them to do this needs to be rich, for example letting people know where they fall in the income distribution. More abstract representations of inequality either result in no changes in public support for redistribution, or have indirect effects, such as by affecting perceptions of meritocracy.

These subtle and contingent findings contrast with the strong evidence that social stereotypes about the rich and the poor are powerful predictors of support for redistribution. People evaluate economic differences based on their perceptions of whether the rich and the poor seem to deserve their lot in life. These perceptions of fairness, in turn, are affected by racial and ethnic heterogeneity, with minority groups frequently stereotyped as undeserving. These findings redirect our attention to the sociopolitical institutions (such as labor unions, the media, and public policy) that shape public notions regarding the deservingness of socioeconomic groups and the fairness of inequality-producing mechanisms.

The United States does not have a unique political dynamic when it comes to public support for redistribution, despite standing apart in comparative context on some key variables, notably when it comes to believing that poverty is due to personal characteristics rather than bad luck. Even though the United States is an outlier when it comes to perceptions of the deservingness of the poor, it does not follow that the underlying political logics of economic inequality and redistribution are different here. If increasing inequality, for example, slowly changes public perceptions regarding the deservingness of the rich, then we may ultimately see increased support for redistribution in the Unites States, too. But even if this does not happen, it does not follow that public policies allowing disproportionate growth in top-end incomes in the United States have been fully sanctioned by the population. Disapproval of inequality has not risen in tandem with inequality, but it has been high and stable, with most Americans continuously concerned that inequality in the United States is too high. To give a full account of the political dynamics of inequality-ameliorating public policy in the United States, we need to look beyond public opinion, considering how the political system more broadly shapes public opinion and then translates it into public policy.

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