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# Inequality in the Social Mind: Social Comparison and Support for Redistribution

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Income inequality is fundamentally relational in nature, but research on the American public's response to it tends to examine individuals in isolation, concluding that support for redistribution is unresponsive to inequality. We focus instead on perceptions of relative socioeconomic position, which we manipulate experimentally through imagined social interactions with high- or low-status others. We find that subjects who make social comparisons between themselves and someone who is socioeconomically advantaged perceive their own status as lower, assess their own socioeconomic status more accurately, and become more supportive of social welfare spending, even though we provide no factual information about the income distribution to subjects in the experiment. Our findings demonstrate that Americans respond with support for redistribution when conditions facilitate upward social comparison. We argue for a shift in scholarly attention to the structural factors that keep rising upper-tail inequality socially invisible.

There is a puzzling disconnect between rising income inequality and public opinion in the United States. Why (despite the substantial increases in income inequality) haven't Americans demanded more economic redistribution? Public opinion data suggest that US policy makers have not faced much electoral pressure to redistribute income downward (Ashok, Kuziemko, and Washington 2015; Kelly and Enns 2010; Kenworthy and McCall 2008). Explanations for this inconsistency often characterize Americans as ignorant (lacking the factual knowledge to respond rationally to growing inequality; e.g., Osberg and Smeeding 2006) or tolerant (accepting of economic inequality because of ideology or deeply held beliefs about mobility; e.g., Feldman and Zaller 1992; Lipset 1997). Both of these approaches separate the individual from social context and focus on absolute, rather than relative, characteristics.

The canonical political economic model gives more attention to the changes to relative socioeconomic position that happen when inequality grows, predicting that governments will face greater pressure to redistribute income as market inequality increases and the median voter falls farther from the

top of the income distribution (Meltzer and Richard 1981; Romer 1975). But the line of inquiry flowing from this model emphasizes objective status, typically operationalized with income, ignoring individuals' subjective perception of status and social experience. None of these approaches has been able to offer a satisfactory explanation for the absence of a robust American response to growing inequality. We argue that resolving the puzzle requires a step that scholars have not taken, focusing inquiry on perception of relative status and its basis in social experience.

Our social perception approach is grounded in two simple ideas. First, status and inequality are by definition relational; second, individuals make sense of relational phenomena by comparing themselves to others. Therefore, we begin from the premise that to understand how Americans respond to inequality, we must investigate the particular social comparisons they make, and how these comparisons shape their sense of the socioeconomic hierarchy, their place in it, and their views about what, if anything, they want government to do to change it. The social perception approach draws attention to a new possibility: given the variation in the accessibility of referent groups,

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individuals with the exact same objective position, knowledge of economic facts, and ideology may be exposed to, or pay attention to, different social contrasts and as a result may draw very different conclusions about their relative standing and what they would like government to do to address income differences.

If this is the case, it is possible that opinion is insulated from inequality because Americans are not experiencing the cross-class social comparisons that help people perceive relational phenomena like status and inequality accurately and make inequality meaningful and salient as people form opinions. In particular, based on decades of social psychological research about social comparison to attitude formation (e.g., Tajfel 1981; Turner 1985) and comparative political economy literature about the specific characteristics of the income distribution that drive support for the welfare state (Lupu and Pontusson 2011), we expect social comparison with the wealthy, what we call “upward comparison,” to induce a perception of social distance and increase demand for social spending. These are exactly the sort of cross-class comparisons that are most limited in the United States today. Increasing class segregation, especially the social isolation of the wealthy (Reardon and Bischoff 2011; Watson 2009), along with an ego-protecting psychological tendency to avoid comparison with others who are better off (Wheeler and Miyake 1992; Wood 1989), could be preventing individuals from thinking about the social comparisons that could link inequality to support for redistribution.

The first step in investigating those expectations is testing whether Americans’ opinions about social spending change when they are induced to think in terms of particular cross-class social comparisons, holding constant individual attributes and attitudes. To accomplish this, we conducted a large-scale study of Americans’ opinions about inequality and social welfare policy in which we implemented a novel survey experiment. We manipulated individuals’ perceptions of the socioeconomic hierarchy and their place in it, not by providing information to subjects but by asking them to imagine social interactions with prototypical members of the upper or lower classes. By varying the social position of the imagined conversation partner, we induced subjects to perceive greater social distance from the other person and perceive their own socioeconomic status as higher or lower. We exploit the resulting variation to examine how perceptions of status and social distance affect attitudes about the welfare state. Critically, randomization allows us to hold individual resources, factual knowledge, ideology, and values constant, isolating the causal effects of status perceptions on opinion.

We show that subjects who make social comparisons between themselves and another person who is very well off are indeed induced to feel greater social distance from the socio-

economic elite. They respond with a more accurate perception of their own socioeconomic status and greater support for social spending, even though we provide no factual information to subjects in the experiment. By showing that political preferences are responsive to status when it is framed in social comparative terms, our results indicate that American unresponsiveness to growing inequality may be due to social forces that insulate Americans from upward social comparison, rather than individual characteristics that render Americans’ opinions immune to status. We redirect future inquiry to examine the structural and psychological conditions that guide perceptions of economic inequality as a social phenomenon.

### INEQUALITY IS RELATIONAL

Americans are not demanding more redistribution in the face of growing income disparities, but the United States is not the only country where we see this so-called Robin Hood paradox (Alesina and Glaeser 2004). When comparative scholars look across nations and focus on the relative distance between the middle class and the wealthy, rather than overall inequality, they find an intuitive result: countries redistribute more income downward when the distance between the middle and top of the income distribution is larger than the distance between the bottom and the middle of the income distribution (Kristov, Lindert, and McClelland 1992; Lupu and Pontusson 2011). Drawing on individual-level survey data from more than a dozen industrialized democracies, Lupu and Pontusson further show that middle-income voters are more supportive of redistribution when their objective income places them closer to the poor than to the rich.

These intriguing findings suggest a specific process of individual opinion formation—that it is not simply inequality but perception of relative status that causes opinion change about redistribution; in fact, the authors hint at this possibility. But we know little about whether the individual psychological process implied by this cross-national observational study actually occurs.<sup>1</sup> No study to date tests the microfoundations of these macro patterns by examining whether individuals actually feel more socially distant from the wealthy or closer to the poor when the income distribution is heavily skewed to the right, or whether such a perception of distance changes opinion.

There is suggestive evidence from experiments with small convenience samples that sense of subjective status relative to others has a stronger relationship with redistributive attitudes

1. These patterns may also reflect unmeasured differences across nations. For example, more recent research by Alt and Iversen suggests that redistributive preferences are “less affected by social or economic distance between groups once labor market segmentation is taken into account” (2017, 34).

than absolute markers of status like education and income (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al. 2015), and that redistributive attitudes can be sensitive to changes in these perceptions. For example, in one recent experiment conducted in Argentina, researchers measured perceptions of relative income position and then randomly assigned some subjects to see their actual ranking (Cruces, Perez-Truglia, and Tetaz 2013). Posttreatment, subjects were asked about their support for redistribution. Respondents who were informed that they were relatively poorer than they had thought became more supportive of redistribution, and the size of the treatment effect was substantial, about half the difference in support between the top and bottom quintiles of individuals in the control group.<sup>2</sup> Another study, this time in Sweden, came to similar conclusions (Karadja, Mollerstrom, and Seim 2016). Researchers found that although nearly three out of four respondents missed their relative income position by a decile or more in an initial query, correcting misperceptions about relative economic status changed their preferences for redistribution. However, in this case, conservative respondents who learned that they were relatively richer than they thought became less supportive of redistribution. Taken together, these studies suggest that individually tailored information about relative economic status can have an effect on redistributive attitudes. But outside of an experimental environment, individuals almost never confront customized information about their own relative income.

### HUMANS ARE SOCIAL THINKERS

This brings us to our second basic proposition: people regularly make sense of relational phenomena through a process of social comparison, understanding the world and their place within it by making comparisons with other people (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Tajfel 1981). Social comparison helps individuals accurately assess their abilities, characteristics, and preferences (Festinger 1954) and to process information more efficiently (Fiske and Taylor 1991; Mussweiler and Epstude 2009). It also satisfies deep psychological needs for positive self-image and group identity (Tajfel 1982; Turner 1978). People routinely, often unconsciously, categorize people by constructing symbolic boundaries that define views about deservedness and desirability (Lamont and Molnár 2002). These comparison-based social identities, in turn, provide “the fundamental basis of people’s social orientations toward others” (Turner and Onorato 1999, 37). In all of these ways, social comparisons help people make sense of their place in society (Brewer 1991) and shape subjective perceptions of well-being (Adler et al.

2000; Luttmer 2004). Social comparisons have been shown to affect a wide range of behaviors, from consumption habits (Frank 2013) and self-improvement efforts (Bandura 1986) to social protest (Gurr 1970; Runciman 1966). In short, the human mind is an engine of social comparison.

Therefore, we theorize that perceptions of and reactions to inequality arise not just from absolute status, broad trends in inequality, or even objective relative status but in large part from which comparisons we make and how often we think in social contrast-based terms. This social comparative thinking is influenced by residential patterns, workplace interactions, and racial context. Geographic segregation, for example, can obstruct the social perception of inequality. American communities are increasingly segregated by income (Owens 2016; Reardon and Bischoff 2011; Watson 2009), resulting in the social isolation of income groups from one another and decreasing the opportunity for cross-class social comparison.

Importantly, the visibility of income difference has declined during the same period in which inequality has grown. Schools (Owens, Reardon, and Jencks 2016), civic organizations (Skocpol 2004), and workplaces (Autor 2011) all provide limited opportunities for cross-class contact. Families and social networks are also heavily stratified; Americans today are more likely to marry someone with the same socioeconomic background (Mare 2016). Robert Putnam reviews the literature on geographic and social segregation and calls the current state of affairs “a kind of incipient class apartheid” (2015, 39). And today it is the rich—not the poor—who are the most socially isolated from other Americans (Reardon and Bischoff 2011), meaning that for most Americans, upward cross-class comparisons are contextually restricted. Although recent research points to how the spatial isolation of affluence reduces the empathy of the rich (e.g., leading the wealthy elite to develop inaccurate, overly positive perceptions of social problems; Thal 2017), we know little about how this class segregation and geographic inequality affects the opinions of less affluent Americans.

Furthermore, factors beyond contextual availability structure the comparisons that people make. In particular, individuals tend to avoid thinking about upward comparisons when they feel threatened, anxious, or insecure. The tendency to avoid upward comparison may be directly related to rising inequality. While upward comparisons are uncomfortable, downward comparisons can make people feel better about themselves (see, e.g., Taylor, Wood, and Lichtman 1983). So individuals who perceive their status as falling (e.g., due to rising inequality) and feel anxious may be more likely to make ego-boosting downward social comparisons, focusing on those who are worse off as a way to counter inequality’s threat to self-esteem (Fiske 2011). A social approach to public opinion leads us to expect that the absence of available upward comparisons

2. Information had no effect on respondents with “unbiased” perceptions of their relative income rank or on those with subjective perceptions that were lower than their objective ranking in the income distribution.

and high levels of insecurity in the American public may be suppressing upward comparison, inflating status perception, and suppressing support for government action. To investigate this possibility, the first step is to test the basic psychological mechanism and ask whether Americans' perceptions of relative status and opinions about redistribution are indeed sensitive to different cross-class comparisons.

### ASSESSING THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL COMPARISON

The investigation of the role social comparison plays in the American response to inequality is notably missing from the scholarly literature. A primary reason for this absence is the difficulty of teasing apart social comparison from individual characteristics that affect public opinion, especially those characteristics which also influence where people live and with whom they come into contact in their daily lives. We present an experiment designed to induce experiences of social comparison, holding these other factors constant through randomization.

We expect that inducing people to think about the social contrasts between themselves and others of different socioeconomic status will first generate a feeling of distance. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**H1:** Subjects who contrast themselves with the most advantaged in society will perceive greater social distance from the wealthy and consequently rank their socioeconomic status as relatively lower, while subjects who contrast themselves with the most disadvantaged in society will perceive greater social distance from the poor and consequently rank their socioeconomic status as relatively higher.

The generated perception of class contrast could then influence opinion in two primary ways: by altering perceptions of what a person stands to gain or lose under a more liberal policy regime (the mechanism proposed by the canonical Romer-Meltzer-Richard model) or by enhancing feelings of solidarity and identification with the rich or the poor. Through each of these mechanisms, perceived contrast with the wealthy would move opinion in the liberal direction: individuals induced to perceive shared interests or greater solidarity with the poor (and divergent interests and separation from the wealthy) should desire increased government redistributive action. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**H2:** Subjects induced to perceive greater social distance from the wealthy and thus relatively lower social status will express greater support for social welfare spending, relative to those who compare themselves to the poor.

### EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

We identify the effect of perceptions of social distance on opinion formation by tapping into individuals' rich sociological imaginations. Given previous research on the importance of social comparative thinking, we argue that inducing subjects to imagine prototypical members of different social classes should induce changes in perception, even though we provide no new information. Our survey experimental method is based on that insight and takes advantage of an intervention, first developed by social psychologists and described in greater detail below, that uses social comparisons to manipulate subjective perceptions of socioeconomic status (see, e.g., Kraus, Cote, and Keltner 2010; Piff et al. 2010, 2012).

Our experiment was conducted as part of the Time-Sharing Experiments for the Social Science (TESS) project. This is an online panel study in which surveys are administered over the internet by GfK, a survey research firm. Unlike the convenience samples increasingly used in survey experiments (e.g., Amazon Mechanical Turk), this panel is representative of US adults. Panel members are recruited through a probability-based sampling frame that uses random-digit dial and address-based sampling methods. GfK recruits both English and Spanish speakers, and sampled noninternet households are provided access to the internet and hardware so that they can participate as online panel members. A total of 985 panel members participated in our study, 908 of whom completed the entire survey.

We first blocked subjects by gender to increase the precision of the estimates (Gerber and Green 2012).<sup>3</sup> We then randomly assigned subjects with equal probability to one of three conditions: (1) *downward comparison*, (2) *upward comparison*, and (3) *control*. Subjects assigned to conditions 1 and 2 were first shown an image of a ladder and instructed to think of the ladder "as representing where people stand in the United States." This prompt is based on the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status, a visual scale designed to capture a sense of social status that can be applied across populations (see Adler and Stewart [2007] for an overview and review). Subjects assigned to either of these two conditions were then presented with a vignette in which they were randomly assigned to think about either very high or very low status individuals, which makes them experience their own social standing as relatively low or high: "Think of the people in the United States who are the (worst/best) off: those who have the (least/most) money,

3. In addition to this advantage, we were concerned that the social imagination-based treatment might affect women and men differently. We report block-design adjusted standard errors (see Gerber and Green 2012, 71–77), but note that adjusting the standard errors for the blocked design makes little difference, because we have roughly equal numbers of male and female participants with similar reactions to the treatment (see the appendix, available online).



(least/most) education, and the (least/most) respected jobs. In particular, we'd like you to think about how you are different from these people in terms of your own income, educational history, and job status."<sup>4</sup>

To strengthen the manipulation, subjects assigned to the vignettes were asked to imagine a social interaction with one of the people they thought about and to write a few sentences describing the interaction and then rank themselves relative to these people at the very bottom or top. Subjects assigned to control answered the posttreatment questions only; they did not see the ladder, read the vignette, or place themselves on the ladder. The full experimental protocol is available in the supplemental materials. Although we are primarily interested in the contrast between the upward comparison and downward comparison conditions, we include the control condition for the purpose of benchmarking the baseline attitudes in our sample and to compare our estimated treatment effects to other important divisions in public opinion.

Following the experimental manipulation, we first asked respondents a standard question often used to measure attitudes about economic redistribution: whether they agree that "it is the responsibility of government to reduce income differences between rich and poor." We measured strength of agreement on a four-point scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

We then asked respondents about their support for specific social policies. Although public opinion surveys routinely gauge support for redistribution by asking the generic question about whether individuals think government should do more to close the income gap, this item captures social policy preferences imperfectly. Americans are ideologically conservative but programmatically liberal (see, e.g., Ellis and Stimson 2012; Page and Jacobs 2009), so it is possible that this abstract measure may mask opinion change about specific government action. Additionally, the generic item about government responsibility to reduce income differences may tap broad orientations toward the size of government or trust in political institutions, rather than support for particular policy responses to income inequality. Finally, this measure may conjure up notions of welfare spending (i.e., benefits to clearly defined sets of disadvantaged people), for which there is generally lower, more ideologically divided support than other programs that provide a broader base of social support and insurance, such as education and Social Security (see, e.g., McCall 2013). Thus,

4. Following the sizable literature on the MacArthur scale, our manipulation references economic and social markers of status. This omnibus treatment allows the scale to work across cultural contexts in which people may construct socioeconomic status with different emphasis on income, education, and occupation.

the generic survey item may obscure significant heterogeneity in attitudes toward social policy.

For these reasons, we include several policy-specific items that measure support for different types of social spending. These questions are adapted from the American National Election Study and cover three policy types: means-tested programs (food stamps); contributory programs based on labor market participation (Social Security, unemployment insurance); and opportunity-enhancing programs (federal aid for college tuition; see, e.g., Kenworthy and McCall 2008). Respondents reported their level of support on a scale that ranged from 0 to 100.<sup>5</sup> We then combined these items into a single scale of support for pragmatic social welfare spending using factor analysis.<sup>6</sup> We standardized both dependent variables (*reduce income differences* and *social welfare spending scale*) within our analytic sample ( $M = 0$ ,  $SD = 1$ ) to allow for more direct comparability of treatment effects and to ease interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

5. Although support for social welfare spending is often measured with Likert-type scales in the American National Election Studies (ANES) and other phone and in-person surveys, online panels more easily accommodate continuous, visual scales. We elected to use continuous scales to avoid the loss of information that can occur when responses are forced into a limited number of categories, and to increase our ability to detect small changes in support. Question order was randomized for these items. We note that in this study we also pilot tested a modification to the ANES policy items in which a brief description of an average program recipient was presented with the question. The format of the spending questions was randomly assigned and independent from status treatment assignment. Although the question version including the descriptions produced somewhat higher support for spending across conditions than the traditional question version, there was no interaction with the social comparison treatment, and all results remain the same when controlling for the question format.

6. Full results of the factor analysis are provided in the appendix. All four items loaded well onto a single factor ( $\alpha_{\text{full sample}} = .80$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{control}} = .79$ ).

7. Our analytic sample includes the 908 respondents who completed our online survey. Results remain the same if we drop missing data for each outcome separately (see the appendix). In addition to the generic question and spending items on which we focus the analysis, we included a different wording of the generic item: government should do more to ensure equal opportunity. We included this second version of the generic government action item to check for robustness across different common framings of government action. The second item is framed positively (increase equity rather than reduce difference), and includes an opportunity frame. Other research has found that these differences are often important to Americans' expressed opinions about redistributive policy (McCall 2013). Our main finding is robust across both versions of the generic question, though there were some suggestive gender differences across the two item wordings. To save space, we report the results for only one version of the generic question in the text of this article. Readers can see the appendix for the robustness check with the second, opportunity framed, generic item.

## RESULTS

Before turning to our main results, we emphasize that our social comparison task worked as expected; we were able to successfully manipulate perceptions of social distance and status. Following the vignette, we asked respondents in the downward comparison and upward comparison conditions to place themselves on a 10-point scale of socioeconomic status (similar to the image of the ladder that accompanies the vignette). Because the self-placements were part of our status manipulations, those assigned to control did not place themselves on this scale.

### Self-placement

As hypothesized (hypothesis 1), those assigned to think about the least advantaged (downward comparison) placed themselves higher than those assigned to think about the most advantaged (upward comparison). The magnitude of the differences between the two conditions is approximately one-third of a standard deviation ( $M_{\text{downward}} = 5.70$ ,  $M_{\text{upward}} = 5.14$ ,  $SE_{\text{difference}} = 0.14$ ,  $p < .01$ , two-tailed). To place this effect in context, we compare it to the gap in self-placement between higher-income and lower-income subjects. Respondents reported their household income in an earlier wave of the TESS panel used to conduct our experimental study, and thus our manipulation cannot bias measures of household income. To facilitate cross-subject comparisons, we adjust household income by household size and for differences in cost-of-living.<sup>8</sup> We define higher-income subjects as those with an adjusted household income above the national median and lower income subjects as those below the median. The mean difference in self-placement between these two income groups is about 1.4 rungs of the ladder; the mean difference between the downward comparison and upward comparison conditions is 0.56 rungs, more than one-third of the difference between higher and lower income subjects.<sup>9</sup>

The effect on self-placement is more than just a manipulation check. That we are able to alter subjects' perceived socioeconomic status through such a simple imaginary interpersonal task demonstrates the significance of social comparison to perceptions of status and inequality. It also shows that these perceptions are relatively flexible. And subjects more accurately assessed their own status when they compared themselves to people with whom they have the least in

common.<sup>10</sup> Notably, we reduced these inaccuracies without providing any additional information about the distribution of income in the United States.

We did not ask subjects in our control condition to place themselves on our 10-rung ladder, so as not to prime them to think about cross-class comparisons prior to answering the political attitude questions. However, to examine how people's subjective perception of status might respond to upward or downward comparisons in contrast to those who were not directed in a specific direction, we conducted a separate study with a nonrepresentative sample of Americans. We replicated our social comparison manipulation and included a third treatment condition that showed subjects our ladder on which to place themselves but did not ask them to engage in any form of social comparison. Subjects assigned to make an upward comparison placed themselves lower than subjects in both the downward comparison and ladder only conditions. Similarly, those assigned to make a downward comparison placed themselves higher than those assigned to the ladder only condition (full results provided in the appendix). This result underscores the robustness of our initial finding and shows that both upward and downward comparison affect perceptions of status.

### Opinion about redistributive spending

We turn now to our question of interest: whether these social comparisons affect how Americans want to address inequality. We begin with the opinion on whether the government should do more to reduce income differences between rich and poor. As shown in figure 1A, we find no evidence that Americans respond to upward social comparison as we expected they would; the differences across conditions are statistically indistinguishable from zero. If we stopped here, we might conclude that there is little connection between the way that Americans see their own economic standing and what they want from government. We induced change in the former and none in the latter, at least when we ask about generic government responsibility.

However, as we suspected, based on the work of others who have written about attitudes on the question of generic government responsibility and pragmatic social welfare policy preferences (e.g., Ellis and Stimson 2012; McCall 2013; Page and Jacobs 2009), the null finding for this item masks important opinion change. Turning to the social welfare spending scale capturing opinion about specific social policies, we find strong support for hypothesis 2: subjects were more supportive of social welfare spending on specific programs when they

8. Details of our scaling approach and measures of household income are available in the supplemental materials.

9. Prior to conducting this experiment with a nationally representative sample, we conducted a pilot study of the intervention with a representative sample of a Midwestern state. The results of the pilot study were similar to our main results (see the appendix).

10. Accuracy was assessed using adjusted household income from a prior wave of the panel. Details of this analysis are available in the supplemental materials.

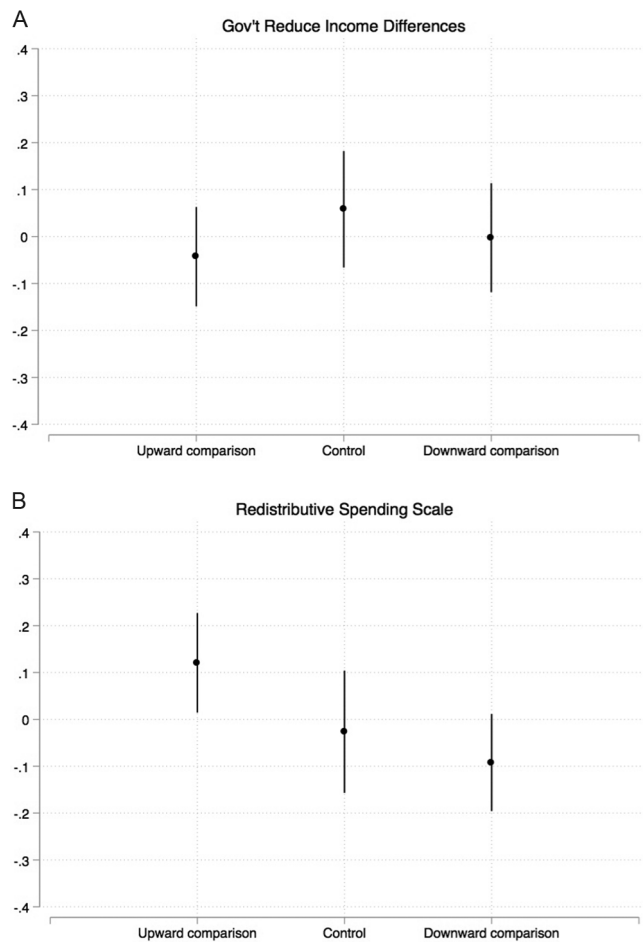


Figure 1. Social comparison and support for redistribution. The dots represent group means, and the vertical lines represent the 84% confidence interval. The more common 95% confidence intervals of two means drawn from different distributions overlap more than 5% of the time and produces a type I error rate at approximately the 0.006 level and not the often incorrectly presumed 0.05 level. If one wishes to infer the two-tailed level of statistical significance at the 0.05 alpha level from the overlap of confidence intervals, it is more appropriate to specify 84% confidence intervals (Goldstein and Healy 1995; cf. Arceneaux 2017).

perceived greater social distance between themselves and the wealthy.

As shown in figure 1B, inducing perceptions of greater social distance from the wealthy (upward comparison) increased support for social spending compared to the other two conditions. The difference between the upward comparison and downward comparison conditions is just over one-fifth of a standard deviation ( $\Delta = 0.22$ ,  $p = .005$ , two-tailed). The difference between the upward comparison and control conditions is nearly one-sixth of a standard deviation ( $\Delta = 0.15$ ,  $p = .08$ , two-tailed). Here we use our control group to put these effect sizes into context. The difference in support for social spending between Republicans and Democrats in the control group is just over three-quarters of a standard deviation ( $\Delta = 0.83$ ). The treatment effect on support for social spend-

ing between the upward comparison and control conditions is equivalent to approximately one-fifth of this partisan gap. Likewise, the income divide between higher-income and lower-income subjects in our control group is nearly one-third of a standard deviation ( $\Delta = 0.32$ ).<sup>11</sup> The estimated treatment effect between the upward comparison and control conditions is nearly half this difference.

These results suggest that questions about government responsibility that are generic in scope, such as whether the government should do more to close the gap between rich and poor, can mask real desire for redistribution and real effects of structural inequality and status. Inducing individuals to experience changes in relative status does little to move opinions on whether government should reduce income differences in the abstract. In contrast, we find sizable treatment effects when subjects are presented with concrete policy choices; subjects induced to perceive greater social distance from the wealthy prefer higher levels of social spending. This distinction lends support to the theory that Americans are “pragmatic egalitarians” who tend to look to government for help with practical problems, particularly when their confidence in the American dream has been undermined (Page and Jacobs 2009).

Although we have no a priori expectations about whether opinions about particular programs drive these results, figure 2 presents treatment effects for each of the four policy items used to construct our measure of support for social spending. On average, subjects in the control group gave the strongest support to Social Security ( $M = 65.2$ ,  $SD = 23.2$ ), followed by college aid ( $M = 58.0$ ,  $SD = 24.9$ ), unemployment insurance ( $M = 55.8$ ,  $SD = 23.6$ ), and food stamps ( $M = 54.1$ ,  $SD = 27.5$ ). We standardize each item ( $M = 0$ ,  $SD = 1$ ) to ease interpretation of treatment effects across policy items. For federal aid for college tuition, food stamps, and unemployment insurance, the differences between conditions are statistically significant and substantively meaningful.<sup>12</sup> The one exception is Social Security where we find no statistically significant differences in preferred spending across conditions. Because Social Security is the most popular of the programs considered here—receiving

11. We define lower-income (higher-income) subjects as before, as those with adjusted household incomes that place them below (above) the national median household income.

12. For example, the difference in support for spending on food stamps between self-identified Republicans and Democrats in the control group is large, at just over three-quarters of a standard deviation ( $\Delta = 0.76$ ). The difference between the upward comparison and control conditions ( $\Delta = 0.15$ ,  $p = .08$ , two-tailed) is about one-fifth this partisan gap. The difference between the upward comparison and downward comparison conditions is nearly a quarter of this partisan gap ( $\Delta = 0.18$ ,  $p = .02$ , two-tailed).



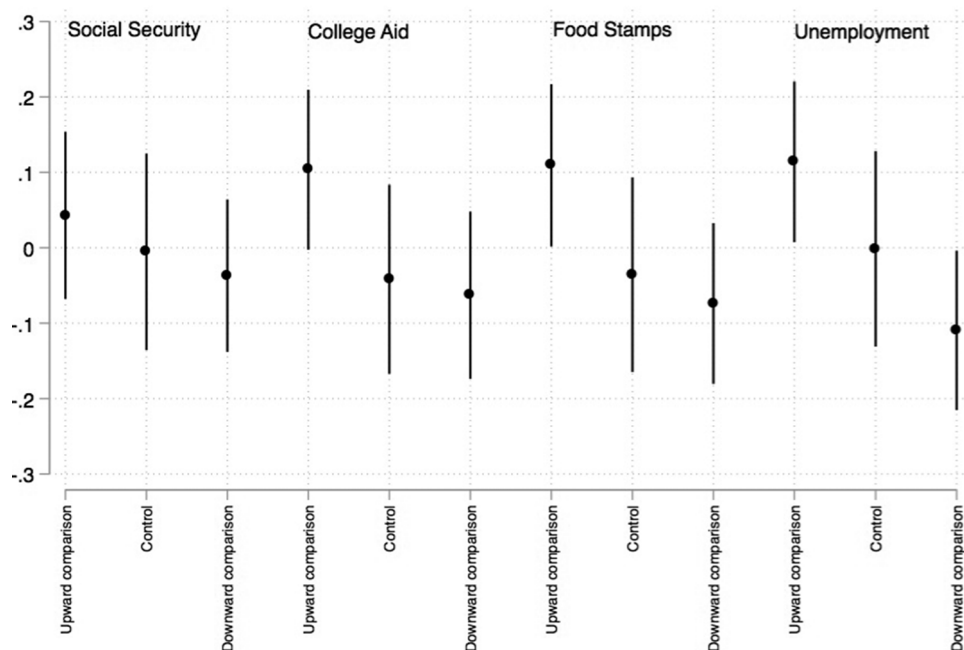


Figure 2. Social comparison and support for social welfare spending by program. The dots represent group means, and the vertical lines represent the 84% confidence interval. Support is a standardized scale (mean = 0, SD = 1) that ranges from least supportive to most supportive.

the highest levels of support across socioeconomic and partisan groups—this null result could reflect a ceiling effect.

In contrast to clear change induced by comparisons with the rich, we find no evidence that social comparison with the poor reduces support for social spending; the downward comparison and control conditions are not statistically distinguishable from one another. This result is also broadly consistent with cross-national patterns, which show no increase in support for the welfare state when the middle class is closer to the poor. However, there are three additional possible explanations for the null finding about downward comparison.

First, and most simply, it is entirely possible that the null finding is the artifact of a study without the power to detect very small differences between the control and downward comparison conditions. However, the psychological literature on social comparison suggests a second possibility, that subjects in the control condition—Americans who are not experimentally induced to focus upward or downward—are thinking in similar terms to those in the downward comparison condition. People often try to avoid upward comparison for the purposes of ego protection (Wills 1981). This tendency to compare downward may be enhanced by our opinion items, and a battery of questions about social welfare programs, which draw attention to lower-status beneficiaries like the poor, the unemployed, and the young may exacerbate this tendency.<sup>13</sup> Still a

13. We know that the manipulations effectively prompted subjects in the two treatment conditions to look up and down, but we are unable to prevent

third possibility exists; it could be that different subjects responded differently to this treatment. Downward social comparison boosted perceptions of status, but if some of our subjects felt empathy for the least advantaged (Piston 2018, but see Sands 2017), and therefore responded to downward social comparison with an increased desire for social spending, and others were pulled in the opposite direction by negative stereotypes of the poor and a self-interest driven desire to avoid redistribution, that heterogeneity could produce a null overall effect.<sup>14</sup>

We investigate the third possibility raised above by testing for heterogeneous treatment effects, focusing on the prominent partisan and social divides in the American electorate. It is

subjects in the control condition from thinking in social comparative terms unprompted. If subjects in the control condition were more likely to think about the poor even without an intervention, then their responses might look more like those of the subjects in the downward comparison condition. The challenge of creating a pure control condition where no cross-class comparisons come to mind for subjects is another reason why we focus our analysis on the difference between the two treatment conditions.

14. It is also possible that rather than different groups of subjects responding in different ways to treatment, individual subjects may be pulled in two directions by downward comparison, and rendered ambivalent. Inequality-adverse subjects in the downward comparison condition may want to minimize the lower-tail inequality to which their attention is drawn (see Fehr and Schmidt 1999), while at the same time wanting to maximize their own interests because they are made to feel higher. Pressured in these competing ways, they may experience little net opinion change. We thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this possibility to our attention.

fairly straightforward to compare self-identified Republicans to self-identified Democrats, but defining social cleavages is not as simple. We adopt an intersectional analytic strategy, differentiating subjects by how their race, class, and gender position them within structures of inequality (see, e.g., Bruch and Soss 2018). This strategy focuses attention on the intersecting patterns of social stratification that may govern responsiveness to cross-class comparison (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Hancock 2007).<sup>15</sup> We compare the responses to treatment among white men with or without a college degree, white women with or without a college degree, and racial and ethnic minorities with or without a college degree.<sup>16</sup>

First, we note that we found no heterogeneity along political cleavages. Whether we compare Republicans to Democrats, or conservatives to liberals, all responded equally to the treatments. Turning to social cleavages, in our upward comparison condition, we find a striking similarity across groups. Estimated treatment effects are all in the hypothesized direction for each of our sub-groups, with the exception of nonwhite subjects without a college degree who appear unmoved by the experiment.<sup>17</sup> We do find some evidence that suggests that the null effect for our downward comparison treatment may be driven in part by heterogeneous treatment effects; white, college-educated women and men both experience opinion change in response to downward comparison, but they move in opposite directions, with women supporting more social spending when prompted to contrast themselves with someone at the bottom

15. An alternative approach would be to treat social categories as mutually exclusive, parsing the sample by different markers of status, such as education, income, race, and gender one at a time, an approach that would obscure substantial differences in social, economic, and opinion differences between individuals, e.g., by lumping together white men and women of color without college degrees in an analysis cut by education only.

16. We use education to capture politically significant class differences given the growing divide between low-skill/low-wage, service and routine production jobs and a high-skill/high-wage information sector, which has resulted in substantial differences in economic wellbeing between college and noncollege graduates (see, e.g., Autor 2014; Reardon 2013). Unfortunately, our smaller sample of nonwhite subjects limits our ability to further differentiate these subjects by gender, race, or ethnicity. We focus on the class divide, given increasing economic inequality within minority groups, and outstanding questions about whether such disparities threaten racial solidarity and perceptions of linked fate (see, e.g., Hochschild and Weaver 2015). Full results from the heterogeneity results are available in the supplemental materials.

17. It is possible that these subjects, who expressed the highest level of support for social spending in the control condition, already perceive a great chasm between themselves and the socioeconomic elite; alternatively, it could be that with a small sample of people of color without college degrees, we lack the power to detect a small effect. Future study with larger samples of socioeconomically marginalized subjects could investigate these possibilities further.

of the ladder and men supporting less.<sup>18</sup> We caution readers that with the exception of gender, the tests for heterogeneous treatment effects discussed in this paragraph are unplanned comparisons, conducted without a priori expectations, and should be read as exploratory, suggesting directions for future inquiry on how the effects of social comparison may be refracted through individuals' social position and status.

In sum, we find that, as expected, when people are induced to reflect on the yawning gap between themselves and those at the top, they want government to do more. When we hold individual characteristics like ideology and statistical ignorance constant through randomization, it becomes clear that perceptions of socioeconomic difference have an important effect on how Americans view redistribution. Crucially, no new information about the income distribution needs to be provided to increase this awareness. When people are induced to make social comparisons with the wealthy, they experience an increased feeling of social distance, which they express by rating their own socioeconomic status lower relative to the most advantaged. Attitudes change accordingly; subjects become more supportive of increased spending on programs designed to help people lift themselves up, whether it is providing individuals some security when they involuntarily lose their jobs or financial assistance to get a college degree. But they also become more supportive of aid to the poor, a policy domain that previous research suggests is generally disconnected from concerns about inequality (see, e.g., McCall and Kenworthy 2009).

In this study, we observe a nationally representative sample of American adults induced to perceive greater contrast with the wealthy through social comparison, responding with more support for social programs. In contrast to some aggregate, observational evidence suggesting the opposite, we demonstrate that Americans respond with greater support for redistribution when conditions facilitate perceptions of greater social distance from the elite.

## CONCLUSION

Understanding the public response to economic inequality requires serious attention to the way people think about social, relational phenomena. Decades of social psychological research show that the core of that process is social comparison—thinking about ourselves in relation to other

18. In addition to these tests, we also considered whether subjects' self-placements following treatment differed by social position. For all groups, the upward comparison treatment induced the greatest change in status perceptions among subjects without a college degree. On our generic measure of whether government should reduce income differences between rich and poor, we find that the upward comparison increased support for government action among college-educated, white women, but decreased support among white men without a college degree. Full results are available in the appendix.

people, but those comparisons have been largely absent from studies of American opinion about redistribution. In contrast, we argue that the interpersonal, social opportunities Americans have (or lack) to compare themselves to others are an essential missing link in theories of status perception and opinion formation. Here we have tested the basic psychological process at the foundation of the social perception approach, finding evidence that people use social comparison to gauge the distance between themselves and the extremes of the income distribution, and that the sense of social distance they develop changes what they want from government.

We see three primary avenues for future research on the social perception of inequality. First, our results suggest that when it comes to inequality and public opinion, the exceptionality may lie in the American context, rather than the American individual. If the current unequal income distribution was altering the social experiences of Americans, then we would expect opinion change to follow. Indeed, even after brief, imagined cross-class comparison experiences, our subjects became more supportive of social spending. The contextual factors that structure social comparison opportunities warrant increased scholarly attention. For several reasons, it appears that the kind of upward comparison that increases support has become less common in the United States as inequality has increased. As economic inequality has grown over the last half century, so has economic segregation. These two trends should no longer be studied in isolation from one another. Instead, we might think about them as countervailing forces. Of particular significance is the fact that the socioeconomic elite are invisible to most Americans, geographically concentrated in cities, neighborhoods, and even gated communities. The growing spatial isolation of wealth has made it less likely that ordinary Americans encounter the affluent other. Instead, they are increasingly surrounded by those who are on a similar rung as themselves.<sup>19</sup>

But this does not mean we should expect support for redistribution to spring invariably from contact between the classes. Individuals' frames of reference can vary dramatically, depending on psychological and structural factors. Psychologists caution that an individual's "place in the local environment does not straightforwardly predict comparison choices

or interpretation" (Smith et al. 2012, 206). Importantly, most individuals prefer to engage in more comfortable comparisons with others of a similar social station, and avoid upward comparison (Wheeler and Miyake 1992; Wood 1989). People who feel threatened, anxious, or uncertain are particularly likely to avoid upward comparison, focusing instead on the downward comparisons that boost perceptions of status (Fiske 2011) or downplaying the importance of economic status, focusing instead on "moral criteria of success that are available to all" (Lamont 2000, 100; see also Cramer 2016). These insights lead us to theorize that there is an additional countervailing force limiting upward comparison. Even beyond class segregation, the insecurity produced by growing inequality could itself prevent Americans from thinking about the very upward comparisons that induce support for redistributive government action.

Racial and gender difference can also exacerbate feelings of social contrast, while similarity can make social distances feel smaller. Lupu and Pontusson attribute the American exceptionalism in their study of redistributive spending to the "high concentrations of racial-ethnic minorities in the bottom of the income distribution" (2011, 329), an idea that is consistent with several comparative studies that link racial and ethnic diversity to lower levels of redistributive spending (see, e.g., Alesina and Glaeser 2004) and find that attitudes about redistribution toward the poor grow more conservative as inequality and racial diversity increase in a nation (Cavallé and Trump 2015). Public policy in the United States is highly racialized and gendered; media and elite discourse define and reinforce public images of program recipients that easily activate racial and gender resentments (Gilens 1999; Hancock 2004; Winter 2008). It is possible that if white middle- and working-class Americans construct the socioeconomic elite as white, or men construct the elite as male, they may be less likely to think in terms of contrast when comparing upward, as we induce them to do in our experiment, dampening the effects of any upward comparisons they do make.

All of these factors—class segregation, perceptions of risk and economic anxiety, race, and gender—govern whether people look up, look down, or avoid comparisons altogether. In a sense, they determine whether Americans' real world experiences look like those in our upward comparison, downward comparison, and control conditions. Along these lines, more work is needed to test expectations about how the effects of social comparison may differ based on individuals' positioning within the socioeconomic hierarchy. Our examination of heterogeneity within our sample suggests possible starting points for this line of inquiry. We emphasize here that social identities are multidimensional and that markers of status, including race, ethnicity, and gender, are neither additive,

19. This visibility also varies substantially across the country. Rural communities, for example, tend to be more egalitarian than urban ones, making cross-class social comparisons less likely. Although it is beyond the scope of our research, it is possible that these differences in the social visibility and proximity of the wealthy elite explain why social protests over income inequality, like the Occupy movement, erupt in Manhattan, and why rural Americans focus more on inequalities between places rather than between classes (see, e.g., Cramer 2016).

nor mutually exclusive (see, e.g., Hancock 2007; McCall and Orloff 2017). Moving forward, the study of inequality and public opinion will benefit from greater attention to these broader social conditions that foster or inhibit cross-class social comparisons, and how these comparisons are shaped by social identities, lived experiences of inequality, and socioeconomic circumstances.

The second avenue we see for research on the social perception of inequality is mediated cross-class contact. While Americans may lack contact with the socioeconomic elite on the street, they do experience it on the page and the screen. Modern celebrity culture, reality television programming, and popular fictional characters offer opportunity for a form of upward comparison. Whether or not such opportunities function like the interpersonal comparisons we have studied is an open question, but we are skeptical that media images of wealth help Americans make sense of income disparities in ways that increase feelings of distance; instead mediated contact with the wealthy is often carefully crafted to make people feel a closeness or personal connection to rich celebrities—to make the experience pleasurable and keep fans coming back for more (e.g., Lueck 2015). Similarly, although the rich can be the subject of news coverage, media outlets have a great deal of flexibility with how the elite are framed. For example, framing them as overpaid government bureaucrats or city dwelling “takers” may produce images of the rich that are consistent with reduced support for redistribution, leading to the type of thinking observed in, for example, rural Wisconsin (Cramer 2016). The point is that mediated contact can be intentionally crafted to meet many goals, potentially producing different effects from the sort of interpersonal comparisons at the core of our study. Such flexible mediated cross-class contact experiences may be particularly important given the shrinking opportunity for interpersonal contact in our segregated society.

Third and finally, future studies could dig more deeply into the mechanisms connecting the cross-class comparison to opinion. We raised two possibilities earlier. First, the mechanism may be simple self-interest. People who compare upward and see themselves as relatively lower on the ladder may think they stand to gain more (or lose less), resulting in more support for redistribution (Meltzer and Richard 1981; Romer 1975). Alternatively, cross-class social comparison may affect opinion through group identification—increasing solidarity, warmth, and perhaps empathy with the class to which the subject is made to feel closer, even in the absence of an altered view of self-interest. Finally, we note that a third possible mechanism exists. By priming people to think of the rich or the poor in social terms, we may be bringing different values and considerations to the top of their minds, making upper- or lower-tail inequality more or less salient or activating racial and class

biases, and altering opinion in the process. Based on existing literature across disciplines, we think it is likely that each of these mechanisms plays a role. Our experiment was not designed to parse these pathways, but that is a logical next step for studies of the social perception of inequality to take.

In sum, taking seriously the fact that humans are social thinkers points to a different way forward for the study of inequality and political attitudes. Instead of focusing on factual ignorance, individual, absolute resources, and objective markers of status, scholars should turn to the structural factors that generate interpersonal perceptions of status. Americans know the basic fact that income gaps are large and growing (McCall 2013), but for many people, rising inequality remains socially invisible. Rather than ask what’s the matter with Americans, we ought to look carefully at how American society obstructs the upward comparisons that make inequality real in the social mind.

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