



Why Aren't Americans Angrier About Rising



BY JEFF MANZA
AND CLEM BROOKS

Four decades of rising income and wealth inequality, combined with stagnating or even declining real wages for a majority of the American workforce, would appear to have changed the political landscape.

Politicians on both sides of the aisle, including most of the presidential candidates seeking office in 2016, express at least some measure of concern about stagnating incomes and rising inequality (albeit with varying degrees of sincerity and wildly diverging policy prescriptions). After 20 years of social science research documenting inequality trends and Occupy Wall Street's mobilization, inequality appears to have become an essential part of the national political discourse. The writer and critic Thomas Frank has appropriately (if snarkily) referred to the growing deluge of writing and talking about inequality as a "tsunami of sad," noting that so many books have appeared in recent years that authors are having trouble finding distinctive titles.¹

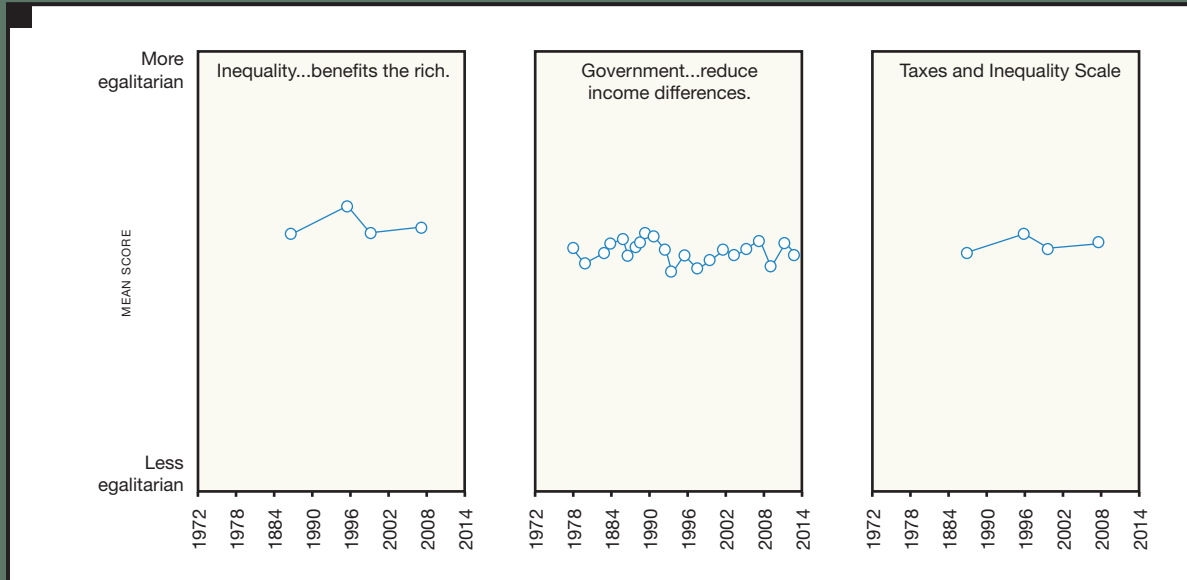
It is important, however, to distinguish this political and academic response from the sentiments of the public. How, then, has the *mass public* responded to these critical trends in the distribution of income and wealth? A long tradition of research in political economy suggests that trends of this very sort will inevitably spur increased demands for redistribution. Questions about public preferences are thus important for both theory and policy, as it would be startling—and contrary to much of the existing research—to discover that rising inequality on the scale that has been observed in the United States over the past four decades has not had consequences for preferences regarding government policies and demands for redistribution. We might even think of the increase in inequality as an experiment in how public opinion is, or is not, impacted by such a profound historical shock.

The results from this experiment are, it turns out, not so clear when it comes to expressed public sentiment. Although there are some countervailing forces, such as the 2016 presidential campaign of self-described democratic socialist Bernie Sanders and a handful of successful state initiatives to slightly raise taxes on very high earners, we have not seen much evidence that redistributive sentiments have moved in an extensive and consistently egalitarian direction in recent years. This surprising result is the topic of our article.

Inequality?



FIGURE 1. Opinion Trends on Taxes and Inequality



Source: General Social Survey.

The Surprising Quiescence of Public Opinion

Before explaining this result, it's important to first document it, which we can do using data from the General Social Survey (GSS), a longstanding and widely analyzed ongoing survey of Americans' social and political attitudes. In Figure 1, we present mean responses to two repeated GSS items and a scale of the four most commonly fielded of these items. Higher scores indicate greater support for egalitarian policies or sentiments. We can directly compare levels and trends because the data are plotted across the full range of each item (and across the highest versus lowest score for the scale). Taken as a whole, these data suggest an important portrait in which there is, overall, only a very modest shift toward support for egalitarian policy measures. Looking across all available GSS inequality items (we identify 11 such items in all),² the average shift is a humble +.06 standard units. This doesn't look like the energized and concerned public that much political economy scholarship leads us to expect.

Explaining Nonresponsiveness

What factors might explain this puzzling pattern of tepid public responsiveness to the massive and ongoing increase in inequality? Could data of the sort we have presented be indicative of an unwillingness on the part of the public to substantially rethink what government could do to rein in inequality?

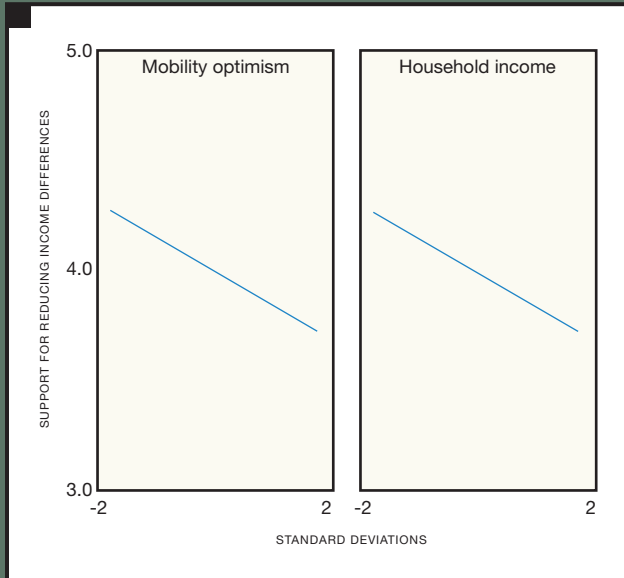
There is no shortage of hypotheses about the sources of this result. The best-known hypotheses include, for example, the claims that elite leadership on the question of inequality and how to respond to it is lacking; that the United States famously lacks a social democratic or labor party that might assume the oppositional mantle; that, until recently, inequality had received at best mixed attention from a Democratic Party that relies

on immense donations from wealthy Americans and corporate political action committees; that unions are declining in strength and no longer have the power to lead an oppositional movement; and that other egalitarian social movements (e.g., the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement) have, for a variety of reasons, been too weak to constitute much pressure for reducing inequality.

The foregoing hypotheses are all about the weakness of left-leaning organizations. The second stream of hypotheses focus instead on the rising power of anti-egalitarian political elites and media on the right of the political spectrum. Since the 1970s, there has been a steady rightward shift inside the Republican Party at the elite level, punctuated by the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980, the ascendancy of Newt Gingrich and his "Contract with America" in 1994, and a growing reliance on tax-cutting and deregulation as policy solutions.³ There is also a social movement foundation for these developments, exemplified by the rise of the Tea Party in 2009 and, more generally, an increasingly aggressive and confident conservative movement with an "echo chamber" located in talk radio, Fox News, and *The Wall Street Journal* that effectively messages anti-government sentiments to a large audience of conservatives.⁴

A third line of possible explanation is that, even if Americans favor redistribution in principle, they don't want it to be done by the federal government. This view, which has deep roots in post-war public-opinion research, suggests that low trust or declining confidence in government may help explain why Americans have failed to embrace egalitarian policy attitudes.⁵ Even if they support the principle of redistribution, many Americans do not favor enhanced government intervention to achieve it. In a 2009 book, Lawrence Jacobs and Benjamin Page characterized the

FIGURE 2. Predicted Attitudes Toward Reducing Income Differences



Source: Authors' analysis of General Social Survey.

predominant view on inequality among the public as “conservative egalitarians,” favoring equality in principle, but opposing policy interventions that might actually impact the distribution of income and wealth.⁶

A fourth possible explanation is that information deficits limit public responses. By this account, limited knowledge about trends in income and wealth, or about the potential for redistribution through government policies, distorts policy preferences and reduces possibilities for “rational” responses to social and economic trends. In the formulation of Larry Bartels, poorly informed Americans resemble the bumbling cartoon character Homer Simpson; they support, for instance, regressive tax cuts because they fail to grasp such fundamental facts as how less than 1 percent of estates are typically subject to inheritance taxes in the first place.⁷ This proposition has been tested—and for the most part rejected—in an important recent study by Ilyana Kuziemko and her colleagues.⁸

We address here a fifth—and we think especially important—hypothesis about the sources of public quiescence. Our analysis of opinion trends explores a scenario with roots in the classics of mid-century social science: that a disposition among many Americans to embrace optimistic views about the mobility structure of U.S. society often curbs the formation of redistributive policy preferences. What we term “mobility optimism” has its roots in longstanding ideas of the American Dream. To the extent that this optimism about social mobility still holds, this may confound support for taxes and redistributive policies. For example, mobility optimists may simultaneously express hostility to the “rich” or the “1 percent” and harbor doubts about the “fairness” of the economy. But they may also retain a belief in the promise of their own (or their children’s) economic pros-

pects that insulates them from reacting to historical trends with more vigorous support for policy reform efforts.

While our investigation (and that of other scholars as well) is ongoing, we present here some simple results that suggest the relevance of mobility optimism in shaping responses to rising inequality. We again use data from the repeated General Social Surveys. We focus on responses to one of the most frequently fielded inequality items, which asks whether “the government in Washington ought to reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families.” We predict responses to this item using a new measure of mobility optimism, alongside a host of controls for such relevant factors as respondents’ partisanship, economic evaluations, unemployment status, age, union membership, class identification, and household income. Our measure of mobility optimism combines responses to a pair of GSS items. The first item asks respondents to respond to the prompt: “The way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living.” The second item asks respondents to evaluate their “own standard of living now” in comparison to their parents. Higher scores on the resultant scale indicate greater optimism.

Figure 2 displays predicted attitudes toward reducing income differences as a function of mobility optimism and household income. To facilitate comparisons, we vary these two independent variables across a ± 2 standard unit range when predicting attitudes. In the first chart of Figure 2, the effects of mobility optimism are notable and non-trivial. This can be seen by making a comparison with the predictions for household income. Because income is well-known to be a fundamental determinant of attitudes toward inequality, it is impressive to find that mobility optimism matters just as much.

Concluding Thoughts

In 2005, an American Political Science Task Force on Inequality asserted in a collectively authored volume that “studying changes in political behavior and public opinion over time is essential to evaluate the impact of rising economic inequality.”⁹ Such a recommendation should also apply to those cases where attitudes and political behaviors have changed *less* than expected. Analyzing repeated General Social Surveys through 2014, we find precisely this kind of puzzle: In spite of rising inequality, the mass public has failed to shift (in the aggregate) in expected directions. We believe this is an important, yet under-acknowledged, challenge for scholars seeking to understand the politics of rising inequality in the United States.

The persisting strength of mobility optimism and other sources of public reluctance to embrace redistribution suggests one reason that Democratic Party politicians appear to have failed to get public traction beyond their base by using anti-inequality themes and sound bites. There is an irony in the growing scholarly and journalistic literature focusing on the failures of the U.S. economy to produce results matching the ideals of the American Dream.¹⁰ These commentaries stress how the emerging economic order is at odds with the premises of

widespread opportunity and mobility, yet they appear to simultaneously miss the power of mobility optimism as a symbolic filter on how Americans reason about inequality and redistribution. Of course, it is possible that the degree or relevance of mobility optimism will *ultimately* erode in the face of New Gilded Age realities. But through 2014 at least, beliefs about mobility and opportunity are of robust relevance to policy attitudes, however much they may fail to square with actual opportunities for mobility. It is time for scholars and political commentators alike to take seriously mobility optimism as an important part of how the public reasons about issues of inequality and redistribution.

Presidential campaigns can sometimes become vehicles for prompting a new national dialogue over important questions. At the time of this article's writing, Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders had just won a decisive victory in the New Hampshire

primary with a message advocating egalitarian and redistributive themes, and has pushed his primary opponent, Hillary Clinton, to articulate a more aggressively redistributive agenda. However, even in the event that Sanders were to win the nomination, he would be vying with the Republican nominee under the scrutiny of an electorate that, we suspect, would not have yet fully updated its policy attitudes. The broader hope of progressives and, indeed, the governing theory of the Sanders campaign¹¹—that rising citizen demands for redistribution can reshape the policy environment—appears, at best, to be very slow in coming and to be countered by a very powerful set of forces including an enduring mobility trope. ☆

Jeff Manza is Professor of Sociology at New York University. Clem Brooks is Rudy Professor of Sociology at Indiana University.

Notes

1. Frank, Thomas. 2013. "Storybook Plutocracy." Public Books. Available at <http://www.publicbooks.org/nonfiction/storybook-plutocracy>. Frank himself has now contributed to the tsunami with his 2016 book, *Listen Liberal: Or Whatever Happened to the Party of the People?* New York: Metropolitan Books.
2. For a more detailed and extended analysis, see Manza, Jeff, and Clem Brooks. n.d. "Prisoners of the American Dream? Public Responses to Rising Inequality," unpublished ms., Department of Sociology, New York University.
3. See, for example, McCarty, Nolan, Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal. 2006. *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
4. Jamieson, Kathleen H., and Joseph Cappella. 2010. *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. New York: Oxford University Press.
5. Hetherington, Marc. 2006. *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
6. Page, Benjamin, and Lawrence Jacobs. 2009. *Class War? What Americans Really Think About Economic Inequality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
7. Bartels, Larry. 2008. *Unequal Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
8. See Kuziemko, Ilyana, Michael I. Norton, Emmanuel Saez, and Stefanie Stancheva. 2015. "How Elastic Are Preferences for Redistribution? Evidence from Randomized Survey Experiments." *American Economic Review*, 105, 1478–1508. The authors present results from a series of online survey experiments using Amazon's Mechanical Turk, where respondents are treated with "customized information" about rising income inequality and tax rates in the contemporary United States. They find that the provision of information increases the salience that respondents attach to inequality, but their larger result concerns the formation of policy attitudes. Here, they find that information has small (and in many cases nil) impact on respondents' willingness to support specific redistribution measures (with the sole exception of the estate tax, where telling respondents that only 0.2% of all American households are now subject to the tax significantly increases support for expanding it). Among the policies with respect to which Kuziemko et al. (2015, pp. 1490–1491) report small-to-no treatment effects are respondents' preferred tax rate on the richest 1 percent of Americans and on millionaires, government provision of food stamps, minimum wage laws, and the Earned Income Tax Credit.
9. Skocpol, Theda, and Lawrence Jacobs. 2005. *Inequality and American Democracy*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press, p. 215.
10. See, for example, Bartlett, Donald, and James Steele. 2012. *The Betrayal of the American Dream*. New York: Public Affairs Books; Hedrick Smith. 2012. *Who Stole the American Dream?* New York: Random House; Packer, George. 2014. *The Unwinding: An Inner History of America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; and Putnam, Robert. 2015. *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. New York: Simon and Shuster.
11. See Ornstein, Norm. 2016. "Why Bernie Sanders Can't Govern." *The Atlantic*, February 5, 2016. Available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/why-bernie-sanders-cant-win-and-cant-govern/460182/>.