

Economic inequality and blame attribution to the political system

Pre-Registration Plan for a survey experiment and a new survey question

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Economic inequality is on the rise and has gained momentum in the political debate. However, despite heavy political rhetoric, i.e. Obama calling inequality “the defining challenge of our time”, little political action has been taken to counter the trend and the general public displays little appetite for more redistribution. This is insofar puzzling as the political economy models would predict otherwise.

Within the larger project, I propose to focus on the perception of inequality and to analyse the effects of these perceptions on political preferences and behaviour. I argue that the link between inequality perceptions and political action is more complex than previously thought and establish the causal chain in detail. The (more or less correct) perception of inequality is followed by a judgment phase where citizens decide whether to see inequality as justified and fair or not. Only after making an attribution, i.e. linking inequality and political actors comes the implication phase where political action is at stake.

An important step to expect political implications of inequality perceptions is that people attribute the (unsatisfactory) state of economic inequality to the political realm, i.e. rate it as product of political decision making. This aspect has been widely discussed with regard to economic and performance voting where the attribution of responsibility is treated as important precondition for electoral punishment effects (e.g. Tilley and Hobolt 2011, Malhotra and Kuo 2008, Giger 2011). While there is a large psychological literature on attribution (e.g., Gilbert and Malone 1995, Schlenker et al. 1994), few studies consider political outcomes and the attribution of responsibility to political actors. Recently, more work studies the question how individuals link political events to political actors and how they do so (e.g. Malhorta and Kuo 2008, Rudolph 2006, Nawara 2015, Tilley and Hobolt 2011, Hobolt and Tilley 2014, León 2011). While this literature generally confirms that the attribution of responsibility is far from automatic and that individual differences exist, the question whether citizens attribute governments the full responsibility for the state of economic inequality or whether they rather see it as the consequences of a globalized economy is still uncharted territory. The general hypothesis of this project is that attributing responsibility for economic inequality to governments is a vital mediator between perceptions of inequality and subsequent political behavior. Only if citizens see the government as “in charge”, they will use their vote to demand more redistribution. So, it is crucial to know more about this attribution step if we want to understand the (missing) political reaction to rising inequality.

H1: The less responsibility for economic inequality voters assign to the government, the less they are willing to support redistribution

H2: The less responsibility for economic inequality voters assign to the government, the less they are willing to vote for parties supporting redistribution

Importantly, we expect individual's political sophistication as well as the context in form of clarity of responsibility to moderate the strength of the link between government attribution and vote. As shown in earlier work (De Vries and Giger 2013), the sophistication effect can go both sides: We can imagine that more sophisticated individuals see more clearly that the governments room to maneuver is limited and thus assign less responsibility to the government, but we can also imagine that more sophisticated individuals see more clearly that economic responsibility is something that the government would have the means to influence via policy making. Thus, our hypothesis reads the following:

H3: Political sophistication moderates the extent to which people assign responsibility for economic inequality to the political realm.

The context is also considered important for this relation. It has been shown widely that situations where the responsibility for political action is clear, make it easier to use their vote as weapon for policy change, so we expect a similar mechanism here as well:

H4: The context in form of the clarity of responsibility conditions the extent to which people assign responsibility for economic inequality to the political realm.

In the project, we analyze how much responsibility for economic inequality citizens attribute to the government with a twofold research design. In a first step, we want to gain observational evidence on the question by asking specifically about the attribution of responsibility in a cross-national survey. The online survey, conducted in collaboration with Jonas Pontusson, will be conducted in 13 European countries and the US with national samples of N=2000 in spring 2019 and will not only ask about the perception and evaluation of inequality but also specifically about whether they see it as a political problem. The following questions taps into this. It is adapted from a question fielded in the European Election Study 2009 (see e.g. Hobolt and Tilley 2013):

*People often hold **different actors responsible for economic inequality**. Please indicate your views using any number on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "no responsibility" and 10 means "full responsibility"*

- A. How responsible is the **national government** for the current state of economic inequality in your country?*
- B. How responsible is the **European Union** for the current state of economic inequality in your country? (not for US)*
- C. How responsible are **private and multinational companies** for the current state of economic inequality in your country?*

In a second step, we aim to gain experimental evidence on the effect of government responsibility attribution on political behavior. The idea is to use a subsample of the online survey for a survey experiment. Taking inspirations in the work of Tilley and Hobolt (2014), our treatment consists of different statements about who is responsible for economic inequality, followed by a standard question about respondents' demand for redistribution in their respective country.

*Treatment 1: Experts say that changes in income differences in country X are largely driven by **actions taken by the X' government**.*

*Treatment 2: Experts say that changes in income differences in country X are largely driven **by global economic changes***

Control no introduction to question

(last question in the module on redistribution) F2.1 Position on redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor.

0. Fully opposed to the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor

...

10. Fully in favour of the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor

In the remainder of the survey, we ask about electoral participation, party vote choice and other forms of political participation. In addition, several questions about attitudes towards redistribution will be asked as well.