WHAT DRIVES THE PUBLIC MOOD OF INCOME INEQUALITY

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Income inequality in the United States has been growing since the 1970s. However, this economic phenomenon has not been widely discussed in public discourse until recently. Scholars suggest that income inequality has major consequences for representation and redistribution policy, however, no scholar has examined what are the driving factors behind how American public opinion is formed on income inequality. This study examines how economic factors, political factors, and media influence may potentially help form American public opinion on income inequality. With survey questions from 1971-2012, we create a public mood measure to determine how liberal or conservative the public feels towards income inequality.

The results show that the American public takes almost no cue from actual economic conditions when forming their mood towards income inequality. The party of the president is the only significant factor in what causes the public to feel more liberal or conservative towards income inequality. Cues from the president and the media have no effect on public opinion either. Even when accounting for the liberal or conservative tone of presidential rhetoric in a year, we find that the party of the president is still the only determining factor.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Introduction

In September 2011, thousands of people gathered in Zuccotti Park in New York City. This protest group had no specific demands from government and claimed to only want to restore the influence of the 99% over the 1% in politics and economics (Schwartz 2011). This protest was the base of the Occupy Wall Street movement and thousands remained in the park camping and discussing the Occupy movement. Eventually the movement moved across the United States and even abroad. The Occupy movement grew out of public concern for income inequality in the United States, as Washington bailed out failing international banks, common Americans became concerned about what interests the government was protecting, those of the ordinary man or those of the richest Americans.

Income inequality is not a new economic phenomenon in the United States. The Gilded Age in America in the late 19th and early 20th century allowed business men like John Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie to amass a tremendous amount of wealth, while most Americans lived in relatively impoverished conditions. Rockefeller earned a total of $340 billion dollars in his lifetime, while the average American family made less than $1200 dollars a year in 1890. Through policy changes, such as income tax, and the effect of two world wars, income inequality in the United States decreased, and was at its lowest in the 1940s and 1950s in the post war boom. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, income inequality began increasing and has continued to ever since (Piketty and Saez 2003, Shaw and Gaffey 2012). Even with increasing income inequality in the 20th centruy, the American public, researchers, and political elites have largely been uninterested, in learning about, discussing, or solving income inequality. In 2004, the American Political Science Association put together a task force to investigate how disparities in income may affect the democratic process in America. This task force sparked a greater interest, among academics, in what effect income inequality may have on not only the economic conditions of the country, but also how the political system operates. In his 2014 State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama talked directly about the stark differences in income between the richest and poorest Americans, bringing discussion about income inequality to the forefront in American news and media.

Many academic studies on income inequality focus primarily on how income inequality affects the political system through voter turnout, representation, and how redistribution occurs (Bartels 2008, Kelly 2009, Ura and Ellis 2008). previous literature suggests implicitly that there is a kind of feedback loop to how opinions are formed towards a political phenomenon. If the public starts with a specific opinion towards a public policy, we would expect elected politicians to adjust their policy preferences and opinions to the preference of the public. Politicians are "single minded re-election seekers" (Mayhew 1974), so from this, we would expect politicians to move with public opinion in a specific policy area to increase their chance of re-election. Once this policy choice is enacted, we can expect from previous research, that the public mood will then respond, thermostatically, to the policy by moving away from where their previous stance on the issue was (Stimson 1999). This feedback loop moves from public opinion to representation to policy to policy outcome which then should affect an update in public opinion in congruence to the policy change that occurred. Previous research on income inequality has addressed representation, policy, and policy outcomes for redistribution, but not how the public's opinions on income inequality are formed.

How is public mood of income inequality first formed? When thinking of income inequality in this feedback loop, of public opinion and representation, is there a way to determine what will move the public's mood? Economic factors should matter, after all income inequality is at its core an economic problem. Income inequality, however, is an abstract and sophisticated phenomenon. On sophisticated political and economic matters, most Americans use knowledge shortcuts from political elites and the media to form an opinion about a policy or issue (Zaller 1992, Kellstedt 2003). Thus we would expect public opinion to move along with the policy sentiment of elites and the increased attention to the topic. Previous research finds contradictions to the idea that the president and media are first movers in the opinion formation of the American public (Canes-Wrone 2006 and Edwards 2009). The president, the highest political elite, moves after mood waiting to gage public sentiment before choosing his stance. Also, the media must choose carefully because stories may not gain traction (and therefore profit) without general interest from the public.

In this study, an explanation for what drives the public's opinion towards income inequality will be sought. What starts the feedback loop for the issue of income inequality? No scholars who have studied income inequality, have determined where public concern for income inequality originates or even if it is dynamic over time. Determining the source of public mood towards income inequality, may help us understand not only this specific issue, but how the American public is informed about abstract and complex economic phenomenon. This study will also bring to light when the American public sees income inequality as a problem for the nation and what drives their concern.

1.2 How is Public Opinion Formed?

The study of the formation of public opinion towards politics is a long standing field of research in American political science. In his seminal work, Philip Converse, found that the opinions of individuals were largely inconsistent and highly volatile over time (1964). The idea of Americans as a largely uninformed electorate remained the dominant theory in political science for most of the 20^{th} century. In his 1992 book, John Zaller found that people are not inconsistent, but have competing considerations when comes to any given policy issue. These different considerations are simply different ways that an individual has heard an issue discussed in the media or among peers. For instance when thinking of unemployment, a person may consider a friend who has recently been laid off, someone who they have seen on the news receiving unemployment benefits, and a homeless man who begs outside of their office building. Anyone of these considerations can be exploited by the media, and the most recent "exploitation" will dictate how a respondent will express their opinions towards the issue of unemployment. Zaller found that the media and elite rhetoric played a large part in the considerations that were brought to mind when an individual was prompted with a question about a certain policy area.

When examining what could determine the public mood towards income inequality, we can look at three major influencers from what we know from previous research: political elites, the media, and economic conditions. Economic conditions should have a direct affect on how Americans feel about income inequality which is an economic issue. Macro economic studies like Durr (1993) show that when people are pessimistic about the economic future they are likely to be less favorable towards big government. When economic times look good, however, people are more willing to help support big government. So as inequality rises, Americans may try to hold on to their earnings instead of favoring big government, which leads to more taxes. However, Hayes (2013) finds that those who are doing well financially are less opposed to government spending. These contradictory findings could be due to an issue of level of analysis considering Hayes looks at micro level data, but the contradiction is important to note. Diana Mutz in her 1992 study asks if Americans vote with their pocketbook or sociothropically in presidential elections. Mutz finds that "at the national level, personal and social level concerns remain virtually independent." The way that that the American public thinks about national economic issues is simply not influenced by any personal economic experience.

Some of the literature, including Zaller, suggest that for abstract economic issues, Americans use shortcuts from the media and political elites to learn about complex economic phenomenon. Americans do not take time to learn about an issue for themselves, so they take cues from partisan elites or pundits as to what opinions they should form. Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) find that the public forms opinions on the economy through what the media tells them about the economy, not actual economic conditions or their own economic situation. If the American public is getting cues about how to feel about policy issues from elites and media, then it is pertinent to examine the existing literature on how rhetoric and the media can drive or change public opinion.

1.3 Can Presidential Rhetoric on Income Inequality Move Opinion?

1.3.1 Presidential Agenda Setting

The president is elected with expectations that he will implement the policies he advocated for in his platform during his campaign. These issues have been strategically predetermined by the president or president to be (and his staff) as feasible to be achieved once he assumes office. Determining the agenda sets the stage for what rhetoric the president will give to the public in his national addresses. Light (1998) suggests that there are three incentives behind what issues the president will choose to be on his agenda: electoral benefits, historical benefits, and programmatic benefits. The president will choose policies that the public will reward him for during elections, policies that give him historical significance, and policies that are attractive to the president's personal or political beliefs. Kingdon (1984), like Light, agrees that "no other single actor in the political system has quite the capability of the president to set agendas in given policy areas for all who deal with those policies" (25).

Kingdon suggests however that the president is cued by national mood on what he should include on his agenda. Cohen (1997) contends that a problem must become a social or public problem and the problem must be considered within the legitimate scope of government in order to reach the president's agenda. Cohen also agrees with the majority of the literature that the "president plays a critical role in shaping the systematic agenda by affecting problem identification and issue polarization in the mass public" (32).

1.3.2 Can the President Move Opinion?

Once the president has determined what will be on his policy agenda, he must convey his policy preferences to the public, Congress, and the bureaucracy. A large segment of the literature believes that the president is effective in moving public opinion, and thus Congress, by speeches and other rhetoric that the president engages in throughout his time in office. However, most of the theories and hypotheses supported by these scholars are found wanting in the data. Even though scholars expect presidential rhetoric to matter, they find little empirical support that it does much to sway public opinion and policy.

The president, as the highest political elite, is likely capable of moving public opinion and addressing his policy goals. However, Page and Shapiro (1984) question the effect that presidential rhetoric has on the opinion of the American public. In their analysis they find that the president doesn't move public opinion, but not because of a lack of trying, the president still addresses the public regularly, however, the public is either not listening or not responding (652). Page and Shapiro find that ultimately when a president is popular they are able to affect public opinion, but when they are unpopular they have no effect on public opinion.

Cohen (1995) finds that public takes no notice of the actual substance of what the president says, but just mere mentions of a policy increase the attentiveness of the public to the issue. He finds that these slight leadership effects on opinion decay by policy year's end. The results in the existing literature seem to suggest that the president can move opinion, but not in any significantt way. The rest of the literature then focuses on the way the president can strategically use opinion and what presidents are more effective at addressing policy through their rhetoric.

1.3.3 Strategic Presidential Rhetoric

If the president does not affect public opinion toward policy directly with rhetoric, then why and how do they use rhetoric? Canes-Wrone (2006) and Edwards (2009) both suggest that the president uses public opinion as the main indicator on what he should address in his rhetoric. Instead of leading opinion, these authors suggest that the president moves with the current public mood and exploits policies that are already favorable in the public. If the president cannot move opinion, then he will champion policies that are already popular in the public. Edwards suggests that the president exploits existing opinion through framing and priming. He postulates in his book that the maximum influence a president can have (post-Reagan) is to identify a policy question that already has a lot of public support and just draw more attention to it. Canes-Wrone suggests that presidents go public for policies that are already popular and then this leads to extra pressure on the legislature to pay attention to the policy.

Edwards and Wood (1999) claim that the president is limited in his legislative agenda power, and thus must work hard to win over Congress. In this study, the authors also suggest that the media is an important agenda setter for the public, who then influence elites. The authors look at the relationship of agenda influence among the media, the president, and the Congress. They find that Congress and the media do not respond to the president on foreign affairs. They find that the president does have some influence on domestic issues but in the study this was specific to certain presidents and had the most effect during campaign seasons. Interestingly, the authors find that the media can have a strong driving force in influencing the president's agenda. This piece brings the media into consideration when thinking about the president's strategy for his rhetoric. In her 2001 article, Canes-Wroneincludes prior media salience as a control when examining the effect of presidential rhetoric on the public, yet the media still plays a significant effect in the modern era on how politics are discussed and reach the mass public.

Even if presidents are strategic on when they go public, do their messages reach the public? Young and Perkins (2005) study the effect that State of the Union Address rhetoric has on public opinion towards the issue the president addresses. They question if "the end of the Golden Age of presidential rhetoric has undercut the impact of presidential rhetoric on public opinion" (1191). They find that the president could move public opinion during the "Golden Age", but in the cable age, presidential emphasis on policies do not have an effect on public opinion. Especially for economic policy, they find that the public forms their own ideas about the economy based on their own personal experience with current economic conditions.

Peake and Esbaugh-Soha (2008) note that the change in the nature of modern media is likely to limit the president's ability to affect media attention to his policy priorities. With these changes, is the president still able to increase attention to his policy goals? The authors find that the president can only increase media attention to economic policy a third of the time. Prior media attention to an issue diminishes the president's agenda setting effect. If a issue has media attention and has a lot of public opinion surrounding it, then the president's role as a leader for policy on a issue is very small. Peake and Esbaugh-Soha also find that the president is strategic in what he chooses to address publicly. When the president addresses an issue that has high public concern then the media is more likely to cover that speech. Although the president may not be able to move opinion on a popular issue, he can increase attention to him which can be electorally beneficial.

1.4 Can the Media Move Opinion on Income Inequality?

It is well known that the media influences what issues Americans think about and how they think about these issues. Early studies done on media effects for politics, examined how the media could effect votes for presidential elections and presidential approval. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) conducted an early experimental study that examined the effects that the media could have on what candidate a voter would choose to vote for. They found that through framing, priming, and agenda setting, that the media can change the publics intentions without changing their underlying belief system.

Similar to the study of the effect of presidential rhetoric, we have to ask if the American public is listening to the messages they receive from the news media. Erbring and Goldenburg (1980) find that there is a difference between "unsensitized audiences" and "sensitized audiences" for what learning or priming comes from media coverage. They find that those who are more sensitized to an issue, such as unemployed individual watching a story on unemployment, are more likely to absorb information given to them in the news. Whereas unsensitized audiences do not take in new information that is given to them in general news stories. The authors conclude that, “People have different notions of what is important to them, and they tune in and out accordingly.”

Bartels (1993) suggests that opinions are already too well defined in presidential elections for the media to have any real change in opinion. However, when it comes to more abstract policy issues, the media can be the primary way that people learn about difficult topics and those topics or people that have little actual experience with. Kellstedt (2003) finds that the media is a primary way that most Americans form racial attitudes. When Americans think of a policy issue at the national level they rely especially on the news media for their attitude formation on race. When it comes to abstract or difficult policy areas, the public largely relies on the news media to simplify and streamline the information that the receive about different policies. Learning about economic phenomena at the national level is often too costly and complex for the average American, so they rely on the media for that information.

1.5 What is Known About Income Inequality?

Many studies have shown that income inequality in the United States has been increasing since the end of World War II (Piketty and Saez 2003, Shaw and Gaffey 2012). However the nature of what inequality means for American society and politics has taken very different forms within the literature. Many scholars are in agreement that inequality plays a direct role in representation. Larry Bartels (2008) suggests that inequality creates an incentive for elected officials to pay attention to only the wealthiest income groups, those with influence who donate to campaigns and are active in the political arena. It has even been shown that the political preferences of the rich align the most closely with actual policy implementations (Gilens 2009).

Hacker and Pierson (2010) show through the political history of party change in the last half of the twentieth century, elected officials have generally begun to move away from the politics of the middle and working class. They postulate that the decline in unions have given the middle and working class few political organizations to work through. Instead, the Republicans have been able to pay attention to big business while pulling in moral conservative votes from middle and lower class Americans. Republicans vastly out raised the Democrats in campaign money from the 1980s on. This has caused the Democrats to try and play fund-raising catch up causing them to abandon their original electoral focus on their poor and minority voting bloc, and instead to court affluent liberal policy making such as environmental policy in order to receive campaign donations and please affluent party members. This fundamental change in attention to certain groups for electoral reasons, has left the middle and lower class largely out of politics.

Lower income groups have little political voice and are often marginalized by political actors and ignored in the policy making process. This means that policies that could benefit the poor are not implemented leaving the poor powerless and in a vicious cycle where their policy preferences will continue to be ignored (Bartels 2008). Scholars worry that this leads to a fault in American democracy where a specific group of American citizens are not represented by their elected politicians.

A subset of scholars (Ura and Ellis 2008, Soroka and Wlezien 2008) take an opposing view of income inequality and claim that the policy preferences between the top income brackets and the low-income brackets have virtually no difference in their policy preferences. These scholars contend that income inequality in the United States does not threaten the representation of all Americans. If most Americans share similar policy preferences then it is likely that these policies will be enacted. However, this claim is contentious in the literature with rebuttals claiming that there are vast policy differences between income groups across different policy areas (Gilens 2009).

What do we currently known about how Americans form opinions about income inequality? Much of survey research shows us that Americans oppose big government, but support spending in almost every policy area. Burak (2013) posits that this is due to the values of economic individualism and the American dream in the United States. Americans believe that hard work should be rewarded and inequality is a natural process of capitalism. Burak (2013) finds that most Americans regardless of what they earn oppose compensation caps for the richest Americans. Even those respondents who believe that the highest incomes are too high are uncomfortable with the idea of capping pay. This helps to give insight to the peculiar finding that most Americans are rather accepting of economic and income inequality in the United States regardless of their own income bracket.

Hochschild (1981) did a series of interviews with Americans in different income brackets about income inequality within American society. She finds that those being interviewed believed in the capitalist economic model and that even the low income participants are accepting of people who make high incomes and agree that the wealthy deserve what they worked for. The low-income respondents also did not believe in equal compensation across occupations claiming it would ruin competition, and claiming that those who worked harder deserved to earn more. Wealthier subjects in the study, claimed that they made more than enough to live and held feelings that the poor in society should be helped, but not receive handouts. These interviews lead Hochschild to the conclude that Americans hold different and competing ideas and values about inequality in society.

Americans overall, regardless of how much they make, are not overly supportive of redistributive policies. In fact, Kelly and Enns (2010) find that as inequality rises, both the rich and poor want less government and are more conservative in their political views. This is contradictory and has lead many scholars to wonder if the poor are able to link redistributive policies with their own financial needs.

Soroka and Wlezien (2008) and Kelly and Enns (2010) both find that the poor are knowledgeable about inequality and redistributive policy, but are still opposed to government spending when inequality rises.

While this finding is not logical on its face, the literature does provide several reasons for why this may be the case. First, both Bartels (2008) and Kelly (2009) find that inequality increases under Republican presidents. Republican presidents and political leaders have an incentive to pit public opinion against redistributive policies to keep their base ignited (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). This may lead to an overall disapproval of redistributive policies in times when inequality is in fact at its greatest. Findings like this give credit to the legitimacy of this study. If the political rhetoric is successful at causing income inequality to not be perceived when it is in fact growing, then insight into perceptions and not just actual income inequality is needed to understand when and why the public demands redistributive policy.

Many scholars worry that rising income inequality may lead to poor Americans being underrepresented, as politics will be focused on the preferences of the rich (Gilens 2005, Bartels 2008, Kelly 2009). Another faction of the literature suggests that policy preferences across income groups are not very different. This suggests that representation is not flawed because policymakers are responding to the electorate as a whole (Ura and Ellis 2008, Soroka and Wlezien 2008). Little work has been done on perceptions of inequality, but we do know that Americans respond to bad economic expectations and high perceptions of inequality thermostatically by becoming more conservative in their political views and favoring less government (Durr 1993, Kelly and Enns 2010).

2. THEORY AND METHODS

2.1 Theory

How is public opinion towards income inequality first formed? When thinking of income inequality in the loop of public opinion and representation, is there a way to determine what will move the public's mood? The public's mood towards income inequality, after all, has important implications for how much government redistribution citizens want and thus expect from their elected representatives. This should lead voters to make different electoral decisions which will be reflected in redistributive policy. Scholars have already studied extensively how voters react in times of income inequality (Kelly and Enns 2010, Soroka and Wlezien 2008). scholars have also studied how income inequality changes representation (Bartels 2008). The literature also makes it clear that Americans are tolerant of income inequality due to deep rooted American values (Hochschild 1981, Burak 2013). Regardless of what values allow Americans to be more tolerant towards income inequality, public opinion about income inequality is dynamic and these opinions are driven by certain factors that affect how the public "considers" income inequality.

Economic factors should matter, after all, income inequality is at its core an economic problem. Income inequality, however, is an abstract and sophisticated phenomenon. To learn about and form opinions on sophisticated political and economic matters, most Americans use shortcuts from political elites and the media to form their opinion about a policy or issue. We may find then that actual economic conditions have a slight effect on the public mood towards income inequality. While Americans may have more of a grasp on tangible economic conditions such as inflation (price of milk goes up) and unemployment (personal experiences), income inequality is an abstract phenomenon. Most Americans live in a neighborhood and work with people who have similar incomes to themselves. And we know that even if a person's next door neighbor buys a porsche, individual level phenomena do not translate into people's attitudes at the macro level (Mutz 1992).

To look at what drives macro level opinion towards an economic phenomenon, we need to examine macro economic factors. General economic conditions should prompt Americans to either want more or less from government in terms of redistribution. When economic conditions look pessimistic, we should expect Americans to see income inequality as a wrong to be corrected and to want more from government to fix inequality. This idea is contested in the literature (Soroka and Wlezien 2008, Kelly and Enns 2010), however, when looking at general macro-level trends, we should expect negative economic conditions to cause the American public to demand more action from government. A complex issue like income inequality is not something that should cause Americans to be more conservative when they are asked about it as a problem alone. Income inequality will involve government redistribution to correct, it cannot be done simply by the natural processes in the economic system.

It is more likely that Americans take cues about income inequality from the media and political elites when they form opinions towards income inequality. Presidential rhetoric has increased significantly since the beginning of the modern television era. The president also obtains the highest political office which should mean that his rhetoric reaches most Americans and is highly salient for the public, whether they approve of the president or not (Cohen 1995). However, existing literature suggests that the president does not really move opinion and rather strategically addresses existing opinion and rides a public opinion "wave" when addressing the nation (Page and Shapiro 1984, Edwards 2009, Canes-Wrone 2006). Regardless of this, it can be expected that when a president addresses an issue to a national audience that it will raise salience among the public. If a president addresses a topic in major national address, it will receive media attention and this too will increase the salience of the topic in the American public.

Stories about income inequality in the media should cause the most significant increase in concern for income inequality among the public. Americans may not grasp the state of current economic conditions and many Americans can choose to tune out of presidential rhetoric, however, most Americans cannot avoid highly salient media news stories. They permeate through the news and into personal discussions where most Americans learn about a topic, especially an issue that is unfamiliar or complex (Kellstedt 2003). The media is the most accessible source of information for Americans and an increase in media attention about income inequality should increase concern. The media is also likely to frame income inequality as the rich getting richer at the expense of the middle and lower classes. This should prime most Americans to think of income inequality as a concern that needs to be rectified.

Public opinion on income inequality is often placed in a loop of representation and redistribution in the literature. When Americans are concerned about income inequality, they then want policies to correct for inequality which means that their elected officials should enact policy changes that lessen or address income inequality if they want to stay in office. What we do not have a clear idea of is where opinion on income inequality comes from. Using data on economic and political conditions, presidential rhetoric, and media attention to income inequality, this study will attempt to determine what drives Americans to have concern, or not, about income inequality.

2.2 Why Use the Public Mood Towards Income Inequality?

This study will look at public mood towards income inequality over time. Looking at a snapshot of opinion on income inequality does not give a complete picture of what may drive these opinions, but simply what may have caused concern at one point in time. An overtime analysis allows different social climates, politics, and economic conditions to affect opinion, and gives more insight into what really drives opinion towards income inequality. Studying public opinion about income inequality over time using existing survey data is difficult. Unfortunately, a single survey group, newspaper, or other source have not collected consistent data using the same question from year to year. In her book, McCall (2005) is limited to three time point from the General Social Survey in her analysis because they are the only consistent questions that exist. While having consistent questions is ideal for this type of analysis, it severely limits what we can learn about large over time variance in public opinion towards income inequality.

In order to accomplish this study without having consistent measures of the public opinion towards income inequality, a public mood measure of income inequality is used for the dependent variable. James Stimson created a public mood measure in his 1991 book, *Public Opinion in America*, to attempt to capture a general trend in public opinion across different social and economic policy areas. Stimson found that by indexing these different areas together, a common conservative/liberal tide in American public opinion existed, he dubbed this the public mood of the nation. The American public, and thus their mood, either moves liberally or conservatively depending on different political and economic factors. Like other thermostatic measures used in political science, once the public becomes liberal or conservative, mood will slowly ebb in the opposite direction. For instance, Stimson finds that instead of Ronald Reagan revolutionizing a conservative mood in the country, he rode into the White House on a conservative wave which was backlash from the more liberal Carter era.

Taking this same idea, we measure opinion towards income inequality as a public mood. Even though consistent opinion questions do not exist, we can take various questions on income inequality and code them as liberal or conservative to get a general idea on how liberal or conservative the public is feeling towards income inequality in a given year. This was coded by looking at questions like "Do you agree with the following: The rich get rich, while the poor get poorer?" If the respondent responds with "agree" or "strongly agree" then they would be considered to have responded "liberally." Any response given that implies that income inequality is a problem or that the government should solve it would be a liberal response. Whereas disagreeing that it is a problem or that government involvement is needed would be measured as a conservative response.

The percentage break down of how people respond, liberal versus conservative, is then put into a equation using the algorithm created by Stimson (1991). The questions are coded for the liberal response and the conservative response. Then they are put into the equation liberal response + 100 - conservative response, which means that in the final series 200 is the most liberal point on the scale while 0 is the most conservative point. This variable is measured by several questions per year that are then combined together to get a single annual measure of the public mood towards income inequality. This measure accurately captures when the public feels that income inequality is an issue and when is not. This can give us closure to our loop of opinion, representation, and redistribution even if it is not a perfect measure.

A full list of the questions used, their wording and number of times they appear in the mood measure has been included in the appendix. The questions used in the mood measure do not gauge the American public's knowledge of rising income inequality. These questions are focused on gauging if Americans see rising income inequality as a problem in society. Some of the questions also ask the respondent what they believe should be the government's role in addressing income inequality. These questions can be problematic because they address the role of government which is different than what we want to capture in our mood measure. However, since we are measuring liberal and conservative responses to these questions, we should still be able to capture the public's general mood towards income inequality from these questions.

2.3 Data

2.3.1 Independent Variables

Gini Coefficient. The Gini coefficient is a measure of inequality and is recorded by the United Sates federal government in the Federal Reserve Economic Database (FRED). It is a ratio where 1 would signify that one person owns all the wealth in a country, and 0 that everyone has a completely equal share of wealth in a given country. It is calculated by looking at the total income distribution within a country. In 1971 the U.S. had a Gini coefficient of 0.397 in 2012 it was 0.477. The Gini coefficient serves as a proxy measure for redistribution that occurs. The Gini does vary over the time period in the analysis which should give us insight into if actual increases or decreases in income inequality affect opinion towards inequality.

Unemployment and Inflation Rates. To measure inflation, the annual inflation rate was taken from the United States economic database FRED. Likewise, the annual unemployment rate was taken from the FRED database.

Partisan Control of the White House. This variable is a measure of which party maintained control of the White House in any given year. The variable was coded 1 when a Democratic president was in office and 0 when a Republican president was in office. The time series in this study covered eight presidents and five changes in partisan control. The series begins during Nixon's first term and ends at the beginning of Obama's second term.

Presidential Rhetoric. This variable was collected by manually coding the content of major presidential addresses in every year of the dependent variable. The speeches coded were found in the Miller Center's Presidential Speech Archive from the University of Virginia. The coded speeches were addresses or debates given by the president prior to or during his presidency to the American public. Presidents like Reagan and Obama came on the political scene early and spoke at the Republic National Convention or Democratic National Convention, respectively, prior to becoming president. Even though these men were not in office, they were political elites that can affect public opinion. Debates were also included because they gain significant media attention and often are a place where presidents or presidents to be must market or defend their policy platforms. Speeches given to foreign government bodies (including the U.N.) and at commemorative events over seas are not included in the analyses because they are not highly relevant to the American people and rarely address domestic policy.

Overall, 166 presidential speeches from Nixon to Obama were coded. A dictionary was created from the list given in McCall 2005 (93), the terms used are in the appendix. These 16 terms capture the most relevant speech to the concerns of income inequality. Only one president in the data set, Clinton, used the actual term income inequality in a national address. Text that was determined to address income inequality was that that highlighted the difference between income groups asthem being unequal. For instance, to simply address the problems of the poor, does not explicitly compare the status of the poor, compared to, or at the expense of the middle or upper class. This variable is measured as the number of speeches with a mention of income inequality in a given year.

Media Mentions. This variable was collected manually through the Lexis Nexis database. The same dictionary that was used in collecting presidential rhetoric data was not used in finding media mentions. Searching for terms like "tax" in Lexis Nexis over 41 years would yield thousands upon thousands of results. Instead, the terms "income inequality" and "income gap" were searched for. These articles were then manually coded as mentioning income inequality within the United States. Similar to the presidential speech data, the number of mentions of income inequality in the media in a year are summed together. The data is collected from the New York Times and Newsweek, from 1971-2012. The number of media mentions towards income inequality in both these news outlets were surprisingly low. The years 2012 and 2007 had the highest number of mentions with 11 news stories between the two sources. Using only two sources is a limited measure, but both of these sources are long standing news outlets with high readership. If they together cover a large number of stories on income inequality, it should serve as an effective proxy for media coverage on income inequality at large.

3. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Do Economic Factors Drive Public Mood Towards Income Inequality?

Before conducting any analysis, it is important to look at how the public mood towards income inequality changes over time. Figure 3.1 shows us that the public mood towards income inequality has been growing more conservative since the Clinton years and drops off completely during Obama's presidency. The recession in the 2000s may be responsible for the dip during Obama's tenure, but the economy was booming under Clinton, and as previously mentioned Clinton is the only president to address income inequality explicitly, and in a liberal tone. This move could simply be a thermostatic response to liberal policy, which Stimson (1999) finds with his public mood measures. As can be seen, liberal public mood towards income inequality is highest in the Reagan and Bush years in the 1980s and early 1990s, and even rises again during the Bush years in the early 2000s.

Table 3.1 shows the effect of macro economic conditions on the American public's mood towards income inequality. Income inequality is an economic phenomenon, and we should expect that as Americans experience worsening or bettering general economic conditions, mood towards income inequality would also change. For most Americans during the time period examined in this study, income inequality is an abstract and not highly salient economic condition. More familiar economic conditions such as unemployment and inflation should help cue Americans to how they feel the economy is doing overall, which would give insight into how they should feel about income inequality.

Overall we find very little evidence that current economic conditions have

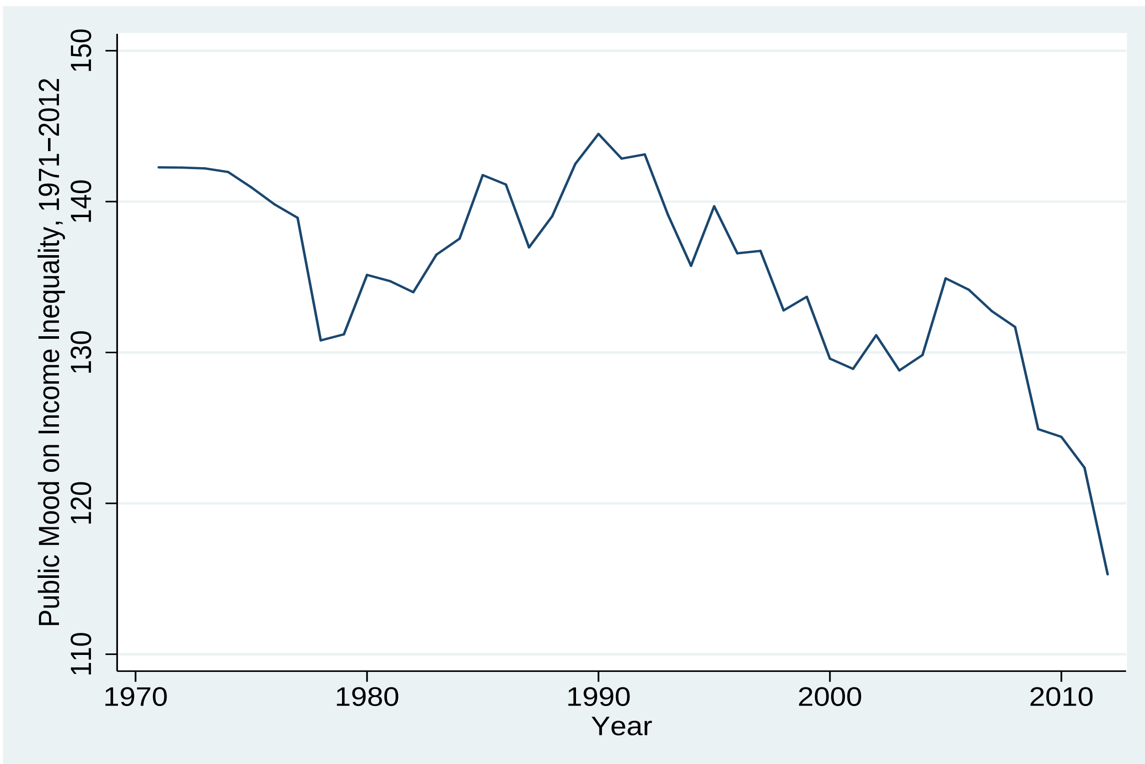

Figure 3.1: Public Mood on Income Inequality, 1971-2012

Table 3.1: Do Economic Factors Drive Public Mood Towards Income Inequality?

Public Mood of Income Inequality$_{t-1}$	0.813
	(0.131)
Gini Coefficient	-58.919
	(38.477)
Unemployment	-0.531
	(0.348)
Inflation	-0.109
	(0.271)
Constant	54.377
	(34.403)
N	41
R^2	0.80

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses.
Two-tailed hypothesis test; *** = p $<$ 0.01; ** = p $<$ 0.05; * = p $<$ 0.10.
Dependent Variable is Public Mood Towards Income Inequality.
The dependent variable contains a unit root which was confirmed by a Dickey-Fuller test.
This analysis and those that follow will contain a lagged dependent variable to correct for this.

any effect on the public mood towards income inequality. In fact a rise in the Gini coefficient causes a decrease, or more conservatism, although insignificant, in public mood towards income inequality. Kelly and Enns (2010) find that as actual income inequality rises, "the public responds with increased conservative sentiment." Unemployment and inflation trend in the opposite direction than expected although insignificant. This results could suggest that the findings of Soroka and Wlezien (2008) and Kelly and Enns (2010) are correct and that as income inequality and the economy worsen, the public becomes more conservative about government policy.

The results in Table 3.1, while null, show us that the American public clearly gets their attitude formation on income inequality from sources other than the current state of the economy. Figure 2 shows us that as income inequality has steadily risen since 1971, the public mood towards income inequality has actually become

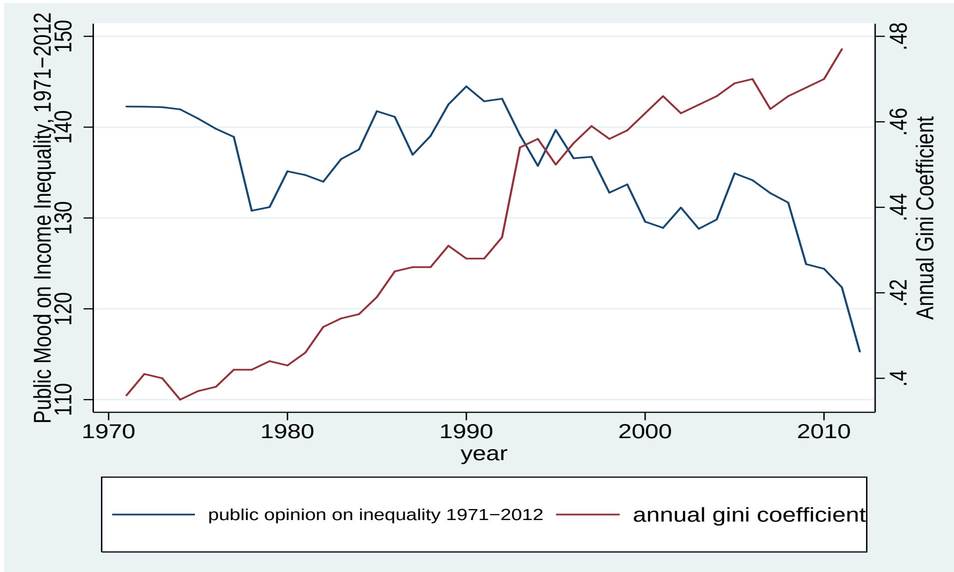

Figure 3.2: Public Mood on Income Inequality and Annual Gini Coefficient, 1971-2012

more conservative. The results from Table 3.1 and what Figure 3.2 shows suggests that another factor besides economics is driving when Americans are concerned or not about income inequality. The next logical place to look for answers is where Americans find their knowledge shortcuts, through rhetoric by political elites and the media.

3.1.2 Do Elite and Media Cues Drive Public Mood Towards Income Inequality?

Table 3.2 shows us the effects that political and media cues have on the public's mood towards income inequality. Depending on a president's party, we would expect not only their rhetoric but their policy focus on redistribution to differ. Bartels (2008) and Kelly (2009) find that rising income inequality often coincides with when Republican presidents are in office, but the model shows us that with a Democrat in office, the American public actually becomes more conservative toward income inequality. James Stimson's work on public mood shows that a thermostatic effect is possible which could cause the public to move in a conservative policy direction even with liberal leadership.

Presidential rhetoric has almost no effect on the public's mood towards income inequality. From the raw speech data itself, we know that president's rarely speak of income inequality and only once in the time span of this study, did a president actually use the words income inequality in a national address. This confirms what much of the previous research on presidential rhetoric shows which is that presidential speeches rarely cause the American public to have increased salience to an issue or change their opinion.

Media mentions have a significant and conservative effect on public mood towards income inequality. All of the media mentions coded for this study framed income inequality as a problem in the United States, or a liberal response. Here again we see a possible thermostatic effect from income inequality cues by elites and the media as these liberal mentions make Americans less concerned about income inequality.

While the results in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2 contradict some theoretical expectations, these are very simple models that allow us to get a glimpse at what could possibly be driving the public's mood towards income inequality. Economic factors had no effect on the public mood towards income inequality. A democratic president in the White House and media mentions of income inequality make the public more conservative or less concerned about income inequality. Kelly and Enns (2010) suggest (based off Gilens 2000) that the media tends to highlight individualism which creates a "negative link between rising inequality and public opinion liberalism." This may be a factor in the thermostatic effect we see from presidential rhetoric and media mentions that largely address income inequality as an issue. In Table 3.3, the model is expanded to cover some phenomenon that may work together to shape public mood towards income inequality.

Table 3.2: Do Elite and Media Cues Drive Public Mood Towards Income Inequality?

Public Mood of Income Inequality$_{t-1}$	0.871
	(0.091)
Democrat President	-2.155**
	(0.967)
Presidential Rhetoric	-0.021
	(0.633)
Media Mentions	-0.311*
	(0.177)
Constant	18.406
	(12.454)
N	41
R^2	0.83

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses.
Two-tailed hypothesis test; *** = p < 0.01; ** = p < 0.05; * = p < 0.10.
Dependent Variable is Public Mood Towards Income Inequality.

3.1.3 Does Presidential Rhetoric Matter? The President's Effect on the Public Mood of Income Inequality

We know that the party of the president matters significantly for how the American public views income inequality. However, we would not imagine that Republicans and Democrats speak about income inequality the same way. This model includes two variables that measure if the president speaks about income inequality in a liberal or conservative manner. If we break down presidential mentions of income inequality as conservative or liberal, can we see why the president's party has an effect on the public mood towards income inequality? In Table 3.3, we explore a more full model to explain what drives the public mood towards income inequality. The Gini coefficient is added to the model to capture real life income inequality in the United States. Also added to the model is an interaction between the president's party and presidential rhetoric.

Table 3.3: Does Presidential Rhetoric Matter for The Mood of Income Inequality?

Public Mood of Income Inequality$_{t-1}$	0.781
	(0.103)
Gini Coefficient	-13.163
	(24.648)
Democrat President	-2.233**
	(1.00)
Presidential Rhetoric	-0.274
	(0.809)
Conservative Mentions	1.100
	(1.525)
Liberal Mentions	1.01
	(1.238)
Media Mentions	-0.167
	(0.235)
Constant	35.867
	(20.653)
N	40
R^2	0.81

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses.

Two-tailed hypothesis test; *** = p < 0.01; ** = p < 0.05; * = p < 0.10.

Dependent Variable is Public Mood Towards Income Inequality.

As Table 3.3 shows, parsing out if presidential mentions are conservative or liberal does not give us anymore insight into why presidential party effects the public mood towards income inequality. The president's party retains a significant effect and remains the strongest theoretical indication of how public mood towards income inequality is formed.

3.2 Conclusion

The analysis presented in this thesis tells us a lot about what forms the public's opinion towards income inequality. The analyses gave a lot of insignificant effects, but this helps to show what does not drive the public mood towards income inequality which can serve as a guideline for future research. We know that for Americans actual economic conditions do not determine the public mood towards income inequality. The American public often relies on cues from media and elites when forming opinions on complicated economic matters such as income inequality. We did find that presidential party and media mentions do have a significant conservative effect on the public mood towards income inequality. It seems that as income inequality is addressed more frequently by opinion leaders, the public moves into see income inequality as less of an issue for American society. In the full model with both economic, political, and media factors, media mentions are no longer significant, but presidential party remains the most significant factor in determining the public mood towards income inequality.

In the full model we also found that president party remains significant, but what the president is saying about income inequality, liberal or conservative, does not effect the public mood towards income inequality. Further research should take a closer examination of redistributive policies and their effect on income inequality. Maybe liberal presidents address income inequality in policy therefore alleviating inequality and making the public less concerned. Looking at actual redistributive policies and their outcomes could give great insight into what drives the public's mood towards income inequality. A deeper media analysis could also give more insight into what kind of cues Americans are getting from mainstream media about income inequality. Public opinion towards income inequality has significant effects on what types of redistributive policies American citizens demand from their government. As income inequality continues to grow, it is imperative that we understand when and why Americans are concerned about income inequality.

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APPENDIX A

A.1 Presidential Rhetoric Dictionary

income

gap

inequality

rich

poor

middle class

wage

equal

minimum wage

tax

wealth

pay

american dream

class

social class

APPENDIX B

B.1 Questions in Mood Measure

Resurgent Republican Survey - 3 Points in DV

Which of the following statements comes closer to your view? Government policies should promote fairness by narrowing the gap between rich and poor, making the rich pay their fair share, and reducing income inequality. Government policies should promote opportunity by fostering job growth, encouraging entrepreneurs, and allowing hardworking people to keep more of what they earn.

Democracy Corps Poll - 2 Points in DV, Fielded 8/23/12 - 11/6/12

Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements about the economy. For each pair, please tell me whether the first statement or the second statement comes closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right....First statement: I'm more concerned about growing inequality, because we are turning into a country with only very rich and very poor. Second statement: I'm more concerned that we will go overboard, punish the rich for being successful and keep businesses from investing and strengthening the economy....(If First/Second statement, ask:) (Is that much or somewhat closer?)

General Social Survey - 5 Points in DV, Fielded 2/1/87 - 4/17/08

Do you agree or disagree... inequality continues to exist because it benefits the rich and powerful

General Social Survey - 3 Points in DV, Fielded 2/1/87-2/1/00 Do you agree or disagree...inequality continues to exist because ordinary people don't join together to get rid of it? ...Strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree

<u>LA Times/Bloomberg</u> - 2 Points in DV, Fielded 12/8/06 - 3/3/07

As you may know, Congress is considering various measures to reduce the growing gap between the rich and the poor in this country. Do you think this income gap has become a very serious problem for the nation, a somewhat serious problem, or not too much of a problem, or not a problem at all?

<u>ABC News/Washington Post Poll</u> - 2 Points in DV, Fielded 1/1/78-2/1/81

I'm going to read a few statements. For each, can you please tell me if you tend to agree or disagree with it?... The government should work to substantially reduce the income gap between rich and poor.

<u>Gallup</u> - 2 Points in DV, Fielded 4/23/98 - 11/28/11

Do you think that the fact that some people in the United States are rich and other are poor-[ROTATED: represents a problem that needs to be fixed (or) is an acceptable part of our economic system?]

<u>American National Election Study</u> - 3 Points in DV, Fielded 9/18/02 - 11/5/08

Do you think the difference in incomes between rich and poor people in the United States today is LARGER, SMALLER, or ABOUT THE SAME as it was 20 years ago?

<u>American National Election Study</u> - 2 Points in DV, Fielded 9/18/02 - 11/3/04

Do you think the difference in incomes between rich people and poor people in the United States today is LARGER, SMALLER, or ABOUT THE SAME as it was 20 years ago? Do you think this is A GOOD THING, A BAD THING, or haven't you thought about it?

<u>General Social Survey</u> - 21 Points in DV, Fielded 2/1/78 - 3/15/10

Some people think that the government in Washington ought to reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or by giving income assistance to the poor. Others think that the government should not concern itself with reducing this income difference between the rich and the poor. Here is a card with a scale from 1 to 7. Think of a score of 1 as meaning that the government ought to reduce the income differences between rich and poor, and a score of 7 meaning that the government should not concern itself with reducing income differences. What score between 1 and 7 comes closest to the way you feel?

General Social Survey - 6 Points in DV, Fielded 2/1/85 - 3/10/06

On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to...reduce income differences between the rich and poor?...Definitely should be, probably should be, probably should not be, definitely should not be

Pew/Times Mirror - 18 Points in DV, Fielded 4/27/87 - 1/24/08

(Now I am going to read you a series of statements on some different topics. For each statement, please tell me if you completely agree with it, mostly agree with it, mostly disagree with it or completely disagree with it.)...Today it's really true that the rich just get richer while the poor get poorer.

PRRI - 2 Points in DV, Fielded 10/10/11 - 11/7/12

(Now, as I read some statements on a few different topics, please tell me if you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree or completely disagree with each one.)...The government should do more to reduce the gap between the rich and poor.

Harris - 12 Points in DV, Fielded 12/2/99 - 7/13/10

Now I want to read you some things people have told us they have felt from time to time. Do you tend to feel or not feel...the rich get richer and the poor get poorer?

APPENDIX C

C.1 Correlations for Tables

Table C.1: Pairwise Correlation of Table 1

	Public Mood	Mood$_{t-1}$	Gini	Unemployment	Inflation
Public Mood	1.00				
Mood$_{t-1}$	0.882	1.00			
Gini Coefficient	-0.618	-0.571	1.00		
Unemployment	-0.200	-0.160	-0.244	1.00	
Inflation	0.268	0.204	-0.707	0.078	1.00

Notes: Correlations found using pwcorr in Stata.

Table C.2: Pairwise Correlation of Table 2

	Public Mood	Mood_{t-1}	Democrat Pres	Pres Rhetoric	Media
Public Mood	1.00				
Mood_{t-1}	0.882	1.00			
Dem President	-0.451	-0.282	1.00		
Pres Rhetoric t	0.1870	0.238	-0.061	1.00	
Media	-0.577	-0.469	0.403	-0.090	1.00

Notes: Correlations found using pwcorr in Stata.

Table C.3: Pairwise Correlation of Table 3

	Mood	Mood_{t-1}	Gini	Democrat Pres	Rhetoric	Cons Rhett	Lib Rhet	Media
Public Mood	1.00							
Mood_{t-1}	0.882	1.00						
Gini	-0.618	-0.571	1.00					
Democrat Pres	-0.4511	-0.282	0.268	1.00				
Pres Rhetoric	0.187	0.238	-0.328	-0.061	1.00			
Conservative Rhetoric	0.319	0.292	-0.292	-0.288	0.302	1.00		
Liberal Rhetoric	-0.034	0.037	-0.143	0.277	0.509	-0.104	1.00	
Media	-0.577	-0.469	0.618	0.403	-0.090	-0.171	0.263	1.00

Notes: Correlations found using pwcorr in Stata.