



Income inequality and voting for radical right-wing parties



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ABSTRACT

Using a multilevel analysis method, this article tests different hypotheses for how income inequality affects voter support for radical right-wing parties (RRPs) in Western Europe. Specifically, the article shows how this 'income inequality effect' encourages poor people to vote for RRP, while it concurrently discourages rich people from doing so. This finding supports the social identity hypothesis, which states that social identity (a micro-level factor) intermediates income inequality effect (a macro-level factor) on voter support for RRP. The article's results suggest, further, that income inequality has different effects between the main supporters of RRP with dissimilar occupations (e.g., manual workers and the petty bourgeoisie) because they belong to different income groups; and that country-level factors may have different effects on people regarding their support for RRP.

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1. Introduction

Previous scholarship on radical right-wing parties (RRPs) in Western Europe finds that changes in socioeconomic conditions significantly influence voter support for these parties.¹ The modernization loser thesis argues that RRP gain votes from people who are marginalized because of changes in socioeconomic circumstances such as globalization and deindustrialization (Betz, 1994). Similarly, the crisis thesis also suggests that socioeconomic distress and consequent political resentment primarily motivates voter support for RRP, but this theory focuses more on short-term, abrupt changes (such as increases in unemployment and a sudden massive influx of foreigners) (Zimmermann, 2003).

Another critical socioeconomic phenomenon to affect Western European countries in recent decades is increasing income inequality. The average Gini coefficient of market (pre-tax, pre-transfer) income inequality in Western European countries increased by over 20 percent between 1980 and 2010 (the Standardized World Income Inequality Database, SWIID). Income redistribution has had only a modest effect on this rising income inequality, however. The average Gini coefficient of net (post-tax, post-transfer) income inequality increased by approximately 15 percent over the same period.

Recent research has found that rising income inequality has had

significant political effects. It reduces political and electoral participation, particularly of poor people (Solt, 2010), and consequently intensifies representational biases toward rich people (Gilens, 2005). Income inequality has an effect on political parties as well: Pontusson and Rueda (2010) find that left-wing parties move to the left as income inequality rises. In addition, rising income inequality affects individuals' political and social attitudes as well. Some studies find it increases nationalism and intensifies intolerance toward cultural outgroups (Andersen and Fetner, 2008; Shayo, 2009), while others emphasize that it decreases one's level of social trust (Uslaner and Brown, 2005).

Despite the important political implications of rising income inequality, only two studies have examined how this phenomenon affects voter support for RRP. Coffé et al. (2007) argue that rising income inequality reduces support for RRP as voters, particularly those in the lower socioeconomic class, shift their support to left-wing parties – parties seen as best representing the interests of the economically distressed. In contrast, Jesuit et al. (2009) argue that income inequality encourages the rise of RRP by increasing the psychological distance between people in a society, undermining social trust and social capital, and increasing the prevalence of authoritarian ideologies.

In contrast to these studies, this analysis suggests that an individual's socioeconomic status shapes income equality's effect on party choice. Because extant research has produced conflicting findings regarding how particular socioeconomic conditions affect voter support for RRP (e.g., Jackman and Volpert, 1996; Knigge, 1998; Swank and Betz, 2003; Veugelers and Magnan, 2005), recent studies have emphasized that the "translation of macro-level processes to micro-level behavior remains either vague" or

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¹ The term 'extreme (extreme right-wing parties)' connotes anti-system while the term 'radical (radical right-wing parties)' connotes extremism (Mudde, 2007). Since the focus in this article is on parties with a far-right position on nationalism-related issues, radical right-wing – rather than extreme right-wing – appears to be the more appropriate label.

contingent on other factors (Mudde, 2007, 203). Thus, because socioeconomic conditions may have different effects on party support among different socioeconomic groups, individual-level theories of socioeconomic conditions are required to explain such dissimilar impacts (Knigge, 1998).

Income inequality affects people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly the rich and poor, in different ways. Therefore, this article examines whether income inequality has dissimilar effects on the support for RRPp between different income groups, and proposes a novel hypothesis. Drawing on social identity theory, I argue that income inequality affects the rich and poor differently. The way in which income inequality produces dissimilar effects on RRP support among different types of individuals has yet to be explored in the literature.

First, I outline two hypotheses drawn from the previous literature and present a novel hypothesis derived from social identity theory. Then, I test these hypotheses using survey data, as well as country/year-level and country-level data, with a multilevel analysis model. The evidence indicates that while income inequality increases support among the poor for RRPp in Western Europe, it decreases support among rich people for these parties. In contrast to previous studies, this article's results indicate that income inequality's effect on overall support for RRPp ultimately depends on the composition of the party's pre-existing constituency. It also implies that a macro-level phenomenon (e.g., rising income inequality) may alter not only the overall level of party support but the compositional structure of party support as well.

2. Previous hypotheses on income inequality and voting for RRPp

2.1. Class voting hypothesis

Coffé et al. (2007) utilize the class voting hypothesis to argue that income inequality reduces support for RRPp. When people, particularly those in the lower socioeconomic class, are going through difficult economic times, they are more likely to support a party (usually a left-wing party for people in the lower socioeconomic class) that is perceived as representing and protecting their narrow economic interests (Nannestad and Paldam, 1994). Then, the poor's support for RRPp will be reduced because they switch their vote to left-wing parties.

Although rising income inequality does not necessarily indicate deteriorating economic conditions for the poor when the overall national income level also rises, it does imply declining conditions for the people when the overall national income level is fixed. Moreover, a person's subjective perspective on her economic well-being is determined by both her absolute and relative income level (Graham and Felton, 2006). Scholars also claim that rising income inequality intensifies class politics behavior, particularly of people in lower socioeconomic classes: rising income inequality enlarges the income distance between poor people and mean income, leads to a "mobilization of leftward sentiments" among the people (Rydgren, 2003, 61), and drives them to support pro-redistribution, left-wing parties (Pontusson

and Rueda, 2010).² Consequently, their support for RRPp is lowered.³

While they do not address how the income inequality effect pertains to the rich, Coffé et al. (2007) assume that the income inequality effect among the poor dictates the income inequality effect on the overall party support and propose that income inequality reduces the overall support for RRPp.

Class voting hypothesis: Income inequality reduces the support for RRPp, particularly among the poor.

2.2. Social capital hypothesis

Jesuit et al. (2009) argue that income inequality raises the electoral support for RRPp based on the social capital thesis. Social capital is a feature of "social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam, 1993, 167).

Social trust, or trust of other people, constitutes an important element of social capital and requires a sense of group identity (Knack, 2002). This group identity is significantly influenced by the perceived distance between group members (Shayo, 2009). Therefore, by amplifying the disparity between people, income inequality, as well as other factors such as ethnic diversity, weaken social trust and consequently social capital (Uslaner, 2002; Knack, 2002; Uslaner and Brown, 2005).

The weakening of social trust and social capital reduces tolerance for outgroups (e.g., homosexuals), and thus rising income inequality enhances people's authoritarian tendencies, which reject the notion of equality and liberty for minorities and members of 'outgroups' (Andersen and Fetner, 2008). Thus, rising income inequality is expected to increase RRP support through the increasing prevalence of authoritarian ideologies – defining features of RRPp (Mudde, 2007).

Most of the literature on social capital does not discuss whether income inequality impacts the rich and poor differently. However, Fukuyama's (1995) 'trust radius' suggests that income inequality effects on social capital fall equally on the rich and poor because increasing income inequality reduces the scope of their 'moral community' and broadens the psychological and emotional gap between them. Both rich and poor people exclude each other from their moral community because they "have little reason to believe that they share common values, and thus might well be wary of each others' motives" (Uslaner, 2002, 181). Consequently, the social trust levels of the two groups will be lowered by rising income inequality, and thus support for RRPp will grow.⁴

Social capital hypothesis: Income inequality increases support for RRPp among both the poor and the rich.

² Not all the RRPp are anti-redistribution. For example, when we compare political parties' positions on income redistribution from the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys in 2006, we find that some RRPp are more pro-redistribution than right-wing mainstream parties in the same country (e.g., the Freedom Party of Austria and the Danish People's Party). However, in general, the average position of RRPp on income redistribution is significantly less pro-redistribution than that of socialist parties and statistically indistinguishable from that of mainstream right-wing parties (at the 0.05 level). Thus, we can assume that RRPp are 'right-wing' parties in regard to economic egalitarianism.

³ It should be noted that the standard political economy framework that connects the lower socioeconomic class with left-wing parties has been challenged. On the one hand, the preferences of the poor toward income redistribution have been found to depend on the 'skew' of the wage distribution (Lupu and Pontusson, 2011), labor market status (Rueda, 2007), and sociocultural orientations (Shayo, 2009). On the other hand, policy positions of left-wing parties have been found to be constrained by globalization (Huber and Stephens, 2001) and no longer tightly linked to the preferences of rank-and-file party members (Kitschelt, 1994, 2001).

⁴ However, there can be a disconnection between the income inequality effect on social trust and the social trust effect on RRP support. While income inequality is found to reduce 'generalized' social trust, or trust in others in general (Uslaner, 2002), the support for RRPp is related more specifically to 'particularized trust', or trust only in specific groups.

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