



# Process over outcome: How perceptions of procedural fairness influence conservative support for redistributive taxes



Matthew R. Miles\*

Brigham Young University, Idaho, Department of History, Geography and Political Science, 525 S. Center Street, Rexburg, ID 83460-2160, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Though majorities of Americans express support for redistributive tax policies as a cure for income inequality in the United States, this general support tends to dissipate when the public evaluates their support for specific proposals. The dominant explanations emphasize elite behavior and the disconnect between American values and political representation. An alternative view is that this counter-intuitive finding is entirely consistent with individual values. Some people place higher priority on policy processes than policy outcomes. This paper demonstrates that conservatives think about redistributive tax policy differently than liberals. Conservative support (opposition) for redistributive taxes is based on evaluations of the fairness of processes of government that lead to economic inequality. When conservatives believe that these processes are not fair, they are very supportive of wealth redistribution as a cure for economic inequality, whereas liberal support for wealth redistribution is more outcome-dependent.

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## 1. Introduction

The American political system seems to represent the interests of the affluent better than the poor (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Gilens, 2012; Gilens & Page, 2014). Indeed, despite having a Democratic President who consistently decries the income inequality gap in America, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen (Hacker & Pierson, 2011). The worldwide growth in income inequality has spurred considerable academic exploration of the causes and consequences of the gap between rich and poor in America (Bartels, 2005, 2007, 2008; Baum, 2004; Gilens, 2012; Gilens & Page, 2014; Gottschalk & Danziger, 2005; Light, 1999; Mathews, 2014; Newman, 2014; Page &

Shapiro, 1992; Whitford & Yates, 2009; Wlezien & Soroka, 2011).

Among the more perplexing findings to emerge from this research is the counter intuitive Republican support for tax policies that exacerbate income inequality. For instance, when George W. Bush proposed an income tax cut in 2001, many poor Republicans supported the policy (Bartels, 2005, 2007; Lupia, Levine, Menning, & Sin, 2007). Again, in 2004 George W. Bush's proposal to eliminate the inheritance tax—a proposal that would only benefit people with estates worth nearly \$1 million—poor Republicans are supportive. Bartels (2008) argues that this support was motivated by ignorance, or by partisanship. Those that are ignorant of the political system supported these tax proposals because they did not understand the probable outcomes of the policy (p. 186). However, politically informed partisans also seemed to disregard these probabilities and supported the proposal advocated by their

\* Tel.: +1 208 496 4238; fax: +1 208 496 5238.

E-mail addresses: [milema@byui.edu](mailto:milema@byui.edu), [milesma@byui.edu](mailto:milesma@byui.edu)

party leaders (p. 210). In this view, poor conservatives oppose redistributive policies either because they are uninformed about the policy implications (Franko, Tolbert, & Witko, 2013), or because they are misrepresented by their party (Frank, 2004; Page & Jacobs, 2009).

However, this is too simplistic a view of political party competition in the United States. Though political party coalitions are stable, they are subject to substantial fluctuation (Ansolabehere, Behr, & Iyengar, 1993; Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Miller & Krosnick, 1997). Though social conservatives have consistently supported the Republican Party for the last several decades, past support is no guarantee of future support. Political parties that take voting blocs for granted are subject to Election Day upsets (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Leege, 2002; Zaller & Chiu, 1996). This suggests that political parties are not in a position to consistently misrepresent the views and values of their constituents.

It is more likely that conservative opposition for redistributive taxes is consistent with individual values. One of the most consistent findings to emerge from social psychology is that when people think institutions function fairly, they are supportive of those institutions. People are more likely to obey the law when they think that the system of government treats people fairly (Tyler, 1987; Tyler & Blader, 2000; Tyler, Casper, & Fisher, 1989; Tyler & Huo, 2002), they report higher levels of trust in institutions that function fairly (Doherty & Wolak, 2012; Gibson, 1989, 2004, 2009; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002), they are even supportive of less desirable outcomes that result from fair processes. Perceptions of process fairness also influence policy support. Many voters supported Reagan's trickle down economic policies because they thought that Reagan's proposals were more fair than Mondale's alternative (Rasinski & Tyler, 1988).

Thus for some, policy support is not the result of a self-interested, rational, cost/benefit calculus wherein people support policies most likely to generate the greatest individual gains and oppose those with the greatest potential for loss. Some people seem to value political processes more than policy outcomes. Some may be acutely aware of the widening gap between rich and poor in America and be agnostic about policy solutions because they think that inequality might be the result of fair government processes. These may be willing to tolerate unequal outcomes that result from fair processes.

The remainder of the article engages this debate. The dominant view assumes that when people support inequality that is incongruent with self-interest they are misinformed or misrepresented. This is because the dominant view does not adequately account for policy support for outcomes incongruent with individual self-interest. However, policy support derived from perceptions of process fairness is not outcome dependent. People are expressing support for processes, not outcomes. If so, conservative opposition for redistributive taxes is rational, and when the Republican Party advocates such policies, they represent the policy preferences of these conservatives.

Using both a nationally representative survey and a nationally representative survey experiment, this article

experimentally manipulates individual perceptions of system fairness to explore the causal relationship between perceptions of system fairness and support for redistributive tax policies. This article makes two contributions to the literature. First, it demonstrates that perceptions of process fairness in a system of government influence support for redistributive taxes. All things being equal, people who think that the government process is fair are *less* supportive of wealth redistribution. Second, when it comes to wealth redistribution, perceptions of system fairness influence conservatives differently than liberals. Early arguments about how the conflict of egalitarian values with American political culture make liberals ambivalent about redistributive tax policies (Feldman & Zaller, 1992) no longer seem to apply. On the contrary, the increased media coverage of the gap between rich and poor in America, coupled with a narrative that challenges the meritocratic properties of the US system (McCall, 2013) challenges conservative beliefs in the American dream and conservative values. This moves conservatives to attend more to the fairness of government processes in America. When conservatives think that the process is not fair, they are supportive of redistributive taxes. Thus, liberals are supportive of redistributive taxes regardless of the cause of income inequality (Mitchell, Tetlock, Newman, & Lerner, 2003), while conservative support is conditioned by perceptions of government process fairness.

## 2. Literature review

Why do conservative Americans oppose redistributive taxes that would benefit the poor? This empirical puzzle is the foundation of significant political inquiry (Bartels, 2005, 2007, 2008; Gilens, 2012; Hacker & Pierson, 2005; Lupia et al., 2007). One view, articulated by Bartels (2008) holds that Republicans support tax policies that lead to greater inequality because they are either uninformed or blinded by partisan misperception. Many politically uninformed Americans support tax policies that elevate income inequality because they do not understand the implications of such policies. According to Bartels, "popular support for the 2001 tax cut seems to have been grounded in the political ignorance of ordinary citizens" (p. 186). A similar pattern emerges when Bartels evaluates support for repealing the estate tax. He finds that only among the best-informed citizens does concern about inequality lead people to be *less* supportive of the repeal (p. 212).

However, a very different pattern explains policy support among politically informed *partisans*. Those that are politically informed and affiliate with a political party tend to support the policy that their party advocates. For instance, politically informed Republicans supported repealing the estate tax, while politically informed Democrats did not (p. 210). Thus, political knowledge was associated with supporting the partisan, rather than the self-interested policy proposal. This pattern of findings led Bartels to conclude that people are either too uninformed to allow their values to influence support for tax policies or they are blinded by partisan misperceptions (Bartels, 2008).

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