



Economic inequality and ideological roll-call votes: Income stratification, minority threat and support for conservative legislation[☆]

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Abstract

This study assesses whether the growth in economic inequality since the late 1960s produced enhanced support for conservative policies in the U.S. House of Representatives. Tests of the effects of inequality and tests of hypotheses derived from minority threat theory are conducted using a pooled time-series, fixed-effects design. The political influence of the most menacing street crime the public blames on underclass minorities is captured as well. Analyses based on 1,488 state-years show that income inequality, minority presence, and the murder rates reduce liberal roll-call votes. Interactions that assess period contrasts in the strength of relationships show that increases in inequality led to greater congressional support for conservative measures particularly in the later years of the post civil rights era. Such tests also support racial threat theory because they show that a strong negative relationship between African American presence and liberal roll-call votes persisted throughout this period. Such results corroborate claims (Bartels, 2008; Krugman, 2006) that the expansion in economic inequality since the late 1960s helped increase support for conservative legislation.

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1. Introduction

What is the relationship between the sharp increase in economic inequality and the recent expansion in the political strength of conservatives in the United States? This dramatic shift has been almost completely ignored by political scientists (see Block & Piven, 2010 for this

claim and Bartels, 2008 for an important exception). Other scholars, however, assert that the recent surge in inequality has helped create a second conservative “gilded age” in U.S. politics about a hundred years after the first such age (Block & Piven, 2010; Bartels, 2008; Krugman, 2006). After a long shift toward greater equality, this trend reversed in the late 1960s (see Fig. 1). Many analysts have claimed that this departure has created a set of affluent citizens who have successfully preserved their increased economic advantages by political means. If this reversal in the trajectory of economic stratification helped extremely prosperous citizens extend their political influence in order to maintain or increase their recent

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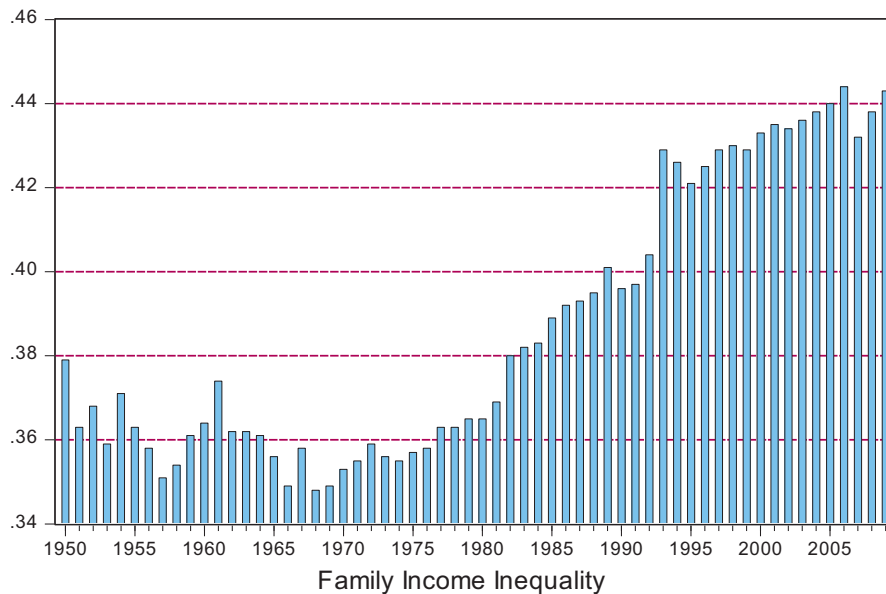


Fig. 1. Yearly national changes in family income inequality (measured by Gini), 1950–2009.

gains, expansions in economic inequality should have a close positive relationship with increases in conservative roll-call votes in the U.S. House of Representatives. The analyses in this paper focus on this test of the political effects of economic inequality.

Such assertions about the determinants of a new “gilded age” are persuasive, but many of the scholars who make these claims fail to give sufficient attention to equally plausible accounts. For example, the historically intense U.S. antagonisms about race suggest that such divisions may have a greater influence on U.S. politics than economic inequality. Larger minority populations produce harsh outcomes in the criminal justice system (Behrens, Uggen, & Manza, 2003; Jacobs & Carmichael, 2002; Liska, Lawrence, & Benson, 1981) partly because racially threatened whites disproportionately vote for conservative politicians who endorse such severe measures. Research shows that candidates who are less sympathetic to minorities receive greater white support in communities with more minority residents (Heer, 1959; Giles & Buckner, 1993; Giles & Hertz, 1994). Increases in underclass minority populations along with a growth in the most menacing street crimes that whites blame on minorities (Chambliss, 1994; Chiricos, Welch, & Gertz, 2004) elicit diminished support for liberal candidates and their policies (Edsall & Edsall, 1991; Jacobs & Tope, 2007; Mendelberg, 2001).

Findings show that effective legislation designed to improve the lot of the least prosperous is less likely if minorities are seen as the primary beneficiaries (author

cite; Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; Putnam, 2007; Quadagno, 1994; Zylan & Soule, 2000). Additional evidence for a close association between underclass minority presence and reduced inclinations to support liberal policies can be found in both sociology and in other disciplines. Such findings support claims that a growth in the presence of underclass minorities will undermine majority white political support for liberal policies and increase conservative strength in both national and state legislatures.

In light of the intense recent political emphasis on street crime, it is equally likely that expansions in the most threatening violent crime will have similar effects. Although surveys have documented diminished white enmity toward minorities (Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997), many citizens continue to view violent crime as almost entirely the responsibility of poor minorities who, they mistakenly believe, mostly victimize whites (Chiricos et al., 2004). Such beliefs persist even though few crimes are interracial (O’Brien, 1987). After the crime rates are held constant, for example, fear of crime is positively related to the size of minority populations (Liska, Lawrence, & Sanchirico, 1982; Quillian & Pager, 2002). Such findings suggest that reduced votes for liberal legislation in the House of Representatives can be expected after increases in the most threatening street crimes (Jacobs & Tope, 2007) probably because whites erroneously see themselves as the primary victims of such crimes. Whites react politically to increases in these such crimes by supporting conservative candidates who campaign using racial code words such as

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