Does the prospect of upward mobility undermine support for redistribution?

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A B S T R A C T

Despite substantial economic inequality in the United States, many Americans who would benefit from redistributive economic policies vote against them. This opposition could be justified by an exaggerated belief in the prospects of upward mobility. That is, people may oppose higher taxes on the largest incomes and estates because they overestimate the degree to which they would be subject to them. This research employs an experimental approach to studying Americans' beliefs about their own prosperity and correlates these beliefs with support for redistribution. The results are not consistent with the theory that overconfidence about future prosperity impairs Americans' support for redistribution. Instead, people report ideological stances tolerant of economic inequality and opposing redistribution, largely independent of their private economic interests.

1. Introduction

As economic inequality continues to increase (Saez & Zucman, 2020), many who would benefit from redistributive economic policies vote against them, especially in the United States. The POUM hypothesis contends that this opposition arises from overconfidence about the prospect of upward mobility (Benabou & Ok, 2001). A widespread resistance to higher taxes on the wealthy might arise from people overestimating the degree to which they would be subject to these higher taxes. That is, they might oppose redistribution because they are overconfident about their future prosperity.

Many people do indeed hold overly optimistic views about their economic prospects. A 2018 survey found that more than 50% of people born between 1981 and 1996 expected that they would be millionaires at some point in their lives (Adamczyk, 2019). In reality, just over 8% of Americans qualify as millionaires (Global Wealth Report, 2021). A different survey found that 66% of millennials expect to become wealthy one day (Hoffower, 2019). These expectations might lead people to erroneously believe that they would be among the net "losers" harmed by redistribution, rather than its "winners." Widespread overconfidence of future prosperity might also contribute to a tolerance of more unequal societies (Cohn et al., 2023). But do these expectations actually undermine support for economic redistribution?

The present research project investigates Americans' beliefs about

their own prosperity and those beliefs' correlations with their support for economic redistribution. Our project asks whether Americans overestimate their current incomes; overplace themselves in the national income distribution; and overestimate their likely future mobility. Our key hypothesis, however, examines support for redistributive economic policies, testing the degree to which confidence about future prosperity might predict support for redistribution and whether an experimental correction of overconfidence might reduce this support.

1.1. Are people overconfident?

Prior research offers conflicting evidence on the question of whether people are overconfident about their economic standing and future prosperity. While some studies have found that people overplace themselves in the income distribution (Jackson and Payne, 2020), others find underplacement (Berlingieri et al., 2023; Karadja et al., 2017). Similarly, while some studies have found that people overestimate economic mobility (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015), others have found that people underestimate it (Chambers, Swan, & Heesacker, 2015). What accounts for these inconsistencies?

One factor that may affect whether individuals overplace or underplace themselves in the income distribution is the group to whom they compare themselves (Jackson and Payne, 2020). This comparison group is often the community in which people live (Jensen, 2010). If

neighborhoods are segregated according to income and people infer their placement in the national income distribution by comparing themselves with their neighbors, then too many people will believe they are near average (Dawtry et al., 2015). The influence of the local comparison group therefore contributes to a distribution of subjective placement in the income distribution that is too close to a bell curve, in which most people place themselves near the middle of the distribution. Cruces et al. (2013) call this the "middle-class" effect: estimates of income are regressive. In other words, those low in the distribution overplace themselves relative to others while those high in the distribution underplace themselves (Hvidberg et al., 2023).

Our study tests these regressive biases and seeks to answer the question of whether Americans are overconfident about their current prosperity by first asking respondents to estimate their current income and percentile rank in the national income distribution and subsequently comparing their answers with the truth by asking them to consult their tax returns and report total income from IRS form 1040, line 9. They are asked to verify this number by taking a photo of the number and submitting that image.[2]

In addition to their current standing relative to other Americans, individuals may also be overconfident about their future prosperity, or their likely upwards economic mobility. This might be part and parcel of what has been called the American Dream − an enduring belief in the idea that any individual can attain economic prosperity through hard work and thrift. Indeed, Americans' faith in economic mobility persists, despite evidence questioning it (Chetty et al., 2014a). Most studies find that Americans overestimate the likelihood that those on the bottom rungs of the socioeconomic ladder are able to climb it (Alesina et al., 2018; Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015) and overplace the United States relative to other countries with regard to economic mobility (Davidai & Gilovich, 2018; Chetty et al., 2014b). Overall, 60% of Americans believe that people can "make it" if they're willing to put in the effort (Fitz, 2015).

Why is this important? Research shows that those who overestimate mobility also tend to underestimate inequality (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005; Alesina et al., 2018), and that experimentally increasing respondents' perceptions of economic mobility led to greater acceptance of economic inequality (Shariff et al., 2016). This relationship between belief in mobility and tolerance of inequality could offer one possible explanation for the disconnect between rising inequality and low support for redistribution: if Americans believe that anyone can succeed, they might be more tolerant of inequality, and in turn, show less support for redistributive policies. Our study will measure perceptions of general social mobility and belief in the American Dream to investigate their association with support for redistribution.

Furthermore, if Americans overestimate their *own* future mobility, this may also undermine their support for redistributive policy. If poor Americans are sufficiently optimistic about their ability to move up the economic distribution, then this prospect of upward mobility could make them overestimate the chances that redistributive policies would be costly to them in the future, and therefore rationalize their opposition to redistributive taxation (Benabou & Ok, 2001). Our study asks survey respondents to estimate their own economic mobility by predicting what their income and percentile rank will be at various time points in the future. The second wave of our survey includes an experimental treatment that corrects half of participants' forecasts of their own prosperity. We ask whether these beliefs affect support for redistribution. We also compare the influence of other consequential factors, such as partisan political affiliation and moral attitudes toward redistribution.

1.2. Reasons for redistribution

Besides overconfidence, several other factors may affect support for redistribution. Both those who support and those who oppose redistribution can make arguments based on differing notions of fairness. Progressives can argue that large differences in familial wealth represents prima facie evidence of inequality, especially for children born into differing levels of privilege. In this view, redistribution is a necessary corrective to a market that fails to provide equal opportunity to all. On the other hand, conservatives can argue that wealth disparities result from the effective operation of market economies and that government interference requires the forcible appropriation of individual property–and an accompanying deadweight loss (Harberger, 1964).

Of course, these different perspectives on fairness may be determined in part by where people land in the income distribution. As a rule, the wealthy are less supportive of redistributive taxation (Kluegel and Smith, 2017). Doherty et al. (2006) examined how changes in wealth affect attitudes toward taxation and redistribution, and found that lottery winners became more hostile toward estate taxes. They found weaker evidence that lottery winners might become more hostile toward other forms of redistribution. Andersen et al. (2023) fail to find that increased wealth reduces support for redistribution. Page and Goldstein (2016) even fail to find a correlation between support for redistribution and beliefs about one's own prospects for social mobility.

As inequality grows, so does the number of people who stand to benefit from redistribution. In reality, however, political forces regularly move in the opposite direction (Kelly & Enns, 2010). Economic inequality is correlated with populist political conservatism that opposes redistributive policies (Luttig, 2013). Moreover, those who believe that the prospect of future wealth drives effort and innovation could oppose redistribution because they believe that social inequality produces motivational incentives (Piketty, 1995).

Failure to find a correlation between confidence in future prosperity and support for redistribution would undermine what Benabou and Ok (2001) called the POUM hypothesis: that the prospect of upward mobility undermined support for redistribution (see also Laméris et al., 2020). It would instead highlight other potential causes, such as political affiliation, income, or education.

2. Wave I

2.1. Methods

2.1.1. Sampling

Our preanalysis plan called for a representative sample of 500 American adults, recruited from Prolific in October of 2022. The project's preregistration, materials, data, analysis code, and explanatory codebook are all available online: https://osf.io/urshp/. We powered our study to give us an 80% chance to detect a correlation of 0.2 at a significance threshold of 0.005. After applying our pre-registered exclusion criteria, our final sample size was 490. Out of these respondents, 134 reported their true income from their tax return, so some analyses rely on this reduced sample. The characteristics of our sample are reported in Table 1. The survey took, on average, 16.9 min ($SD = 11$ min). All respondents received a fixed $4 payment, equivalent to $14.20 per hour. We concluded data collection prior to testing our hypotheses.

2.1.2. Measures

We asked respondents to estimate their income from the previous year and their corresponding percentile rank in the national income distribution. We also asked respondents to predict their income and percentile rank 1, 2, 10, 20, and 30 years into the future (in "today's dollars" to account for inflation).

We included three measures of support for redistribution:

Ideal distribution of income. We asked respondents to choose their ideal distribution of income from a bar graph of seven different

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[2] Instructions cautioned subjects, "Make sure that your photo only includes total income, and not any other identifiable information such as your social security number or taxpayer ID.".

Table 1

Means, medians, and frequencies for the present sample compared with the adult population of the United States for demographic variables (US Census Bureau, 2022; Understanding America Survey, 2022). Income data is nominal to the year the respective study was conducted. (Standard deviations in parentheses.).

	Wave I		Wave II		
	Full sample (*N* = 490)	Those who verified 2021 income (*N* = 134)	Full sample (*N* = 266)	Those who verified 2023 income (*N* = 97)	US population
Annual income, median	$36,550	$45,322	$49,594	$52,552	$47,960^
Age, median	46	51	49	55	38.8~
Gender (percent female)	51.2 %	47 %	50 %	55.7 %	50.5 %[+]
White or European-American	74.3 %	77.6 %	78.9 %	76.3 %	75.3 %[+]
Black or African-American	11.8 %	12.7 %	9.4 %	12.4 %	13.7 %[+]
Asian or Asian-American	5.9 %	5.2 %	6.4 %	7.2 %	6.4 %[+]
Hispanic or Latino	5.7 %	4.5 %	3.8 %	3.1 %	19.5 %[+]
Other race	3.9 %	1.5 %	3.4 %	2.1 %	4.7 %[+]
Educational attainment: 1–8 yrs, primary school	0.8 %	0.0 %	0.4 %	0.0 %	5.3 %[†]
Educ.: 9–12 yrs, secondary school	32.0 %	26.9 %	25.9 %	19.6 %	39.9 %[†]
Educ.: Associate's degree	12.0 %	10.4 %	14.7 %	10.3 %	13.6 %[†]
Educ.: College bachelor's degree	37.8 %	41.8 %	37.2 %	42.3 %	24.3 %[†]
Educ.: Graduate or professional degree	17.3 %	20.9 %	21.8 %	27.8 %	16.9 %[†]
Religiosity (1 to 7)	2.9 (2.2)	2.4 (2.0)	2.8 (2.2)	2.7 (2.1)	4.1 (2.0)[†]
Social conservatism (1 to 7)	3.0 (1.7)	2.8 (1.6)	3.0 (1.7)	2.9 (1.7)	4.0 (1.7)[†]
Economic conservatism (1 to 7)	3.3 (1.8)	3.2 (1.7)	3.4 (1.8)	3.4 (1.8)	4.0 (1.7)[†]
Party affiliation (1=*Strong Democrat* to 7=*Strong Republican*)	3.1 (1.7)	2.9 (1.7)	3.2 (1.7)	3.1 (1.8)	3.5 (1.7)[†]

^ U.S. Census Bureau Income in the United States: 2022. https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2023/demo/income-poverty/p60-279.html.

[+] U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/INC110222.

~ U.S. Census 2021 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.

[†] Understanding America Survey (2022).

distributions, from most to least equal, where the center bar roughly represents the true distribution in the United States. The data came from the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic (ASEC) Supplement from 2020 (US Census Bureau, 2020).

Subjective support for redistribution. We adapted a measure from Fehr, Mollerstrom, and Perez-Truglia (US Census Bureau, 2022) to ask respondents how much redistribution of income they wanted among citizens.

Redistributive taxation preferences. We asked respondents how much more a family earning $200,000 per year should pay in taxes than a family earning $50,000 to approximate preferences for progressive taxation.

In addition, we included measures of general preferences for taxation, perceptions of personally benefiting or being harmed by redistribution, concerns that redistribution would reduce incentives to work, belief in economic mobility and endorsement of the American Dream, and demographic information. Two attention check questions were included to ensure data quality.

Finally, respondents were asked to look up their IRS income tax return from the previous year and report their actual total income (form 1040, line 9).

All measures appear verbatim in Appendix A.

2.2. Results

2.2.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 describes our sample and the subsample of those who verified their income, compared to the US population. The samples roughly match the demographics of the US population.

2.2.2. Focal analyses

We preregistered a plan to conduct a principal component analysis on our three measures of support for redistribution:

1. ideal distribution of income (*Ideal_dist*): asked respondents to indicate their ideal distribution of income in the U.S. from 1 (perfectly income equality) to 7 (the top 20% enjoy 75% of the income)
2. subjective support for redistribution (*Preference*): simply asked respondents how much redistribution they would want from 1 (No redistribution) to 10 (Complete redistribution)
3. redistributive taxation preference (*Family*): asked respondents how they would want to distribute taxes between a rich family (with $200K income) and a poor family (with $50K income), from 1 (both families pay the same) to 10 (the rich family pays 10 times more)

Correlations between these three average a modest 0.28 and none correlated with the first principal component above 0.7, suggesting that they do not represent a unitary construct. That is, our survey respondents did not possess well-articulated, coherent attitudes toward redistribution. Because our three measures of attitudes toward redistribution are so poorly correlated with one another, it does not make sense to combine them into a single index. They are measuring different things. Consequently, consistent with our preregistered analysis plan, we report individual regressions for each of the three support for redistribution variables using the full slate of predictors. Table 2 shows those results, listing unstandardized regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses.

Of our three key dependent measures, the one best explained in our regression analyses is subjective support toward redistribution (*Preference*). The regression's R^2 value indicates nearly half the variance in this measure is accounted for by the regressors in Table 2. Economic conservatism and concerns that redistribution can undermine incentives to work account for a substantial proportion of the variation in reported support for redistribution. Notably, beliefs about future prosperity and beliefs about social mobility do not figure in this set. In short, ideology is a stronger driver of attitudes than is economic self-interest.

These regression results are consistent with the zero-order correlations presented in Fig. 1.

Table 2

Preregistered OLS regression analyses reveal weak relationships between beliefs about future prosperity and three measures of support for redistribution (each in its own column), for the full sample, n = 490 (columns 1–3) and for the subset of those who verified their income, n = 134 (columns 4–6). (Table shows standardized (beta) coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses.) *p < 0.05; **p < 0.005.

	Ideal_dist	Preference	Family	Ideal_dist	Preference	Family
(Intercept)	**5.46 (0.59)****	**7.54 (0.87)****	**4.57 (0.82)****	3.73 (2.27)	8.48 (3.03)*	6.37 (2.87)*
Overestimation of income	–	–	–	0.03 (0.10)	0.07 (0.13)	0.12 (0.13)
Overestimation of percentile rank	–	–	–	−0.01 (0.01)*	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)*
Income last year	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.03 (0.06)	0.03 (0.05)	−0.15 (0.26)	0.10 (0.34)	0.71 (0.33)*
Percentile rank last year	−0.01 (0.01)*	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.02)
Income next year	0.04 (0.04)	0.03 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)	−0.01 (0.11)	0.16 (0.15)	0.24 (0.14)
Rank next year	0.01 (0.01)	−0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	−0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)
Income in 2 years	−0.01 (0.05)	−0.02 (0.08)	−0.06 (0.07)	0.30 (0.29)	−0.48 (0.39)	**−1.14 (0.37)****
Rank in 2 years	−0.00 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)*	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.02)
Income in 10 years	−0.02 (0.05)	0.02 (0.07)	0.01 (0.06)	−0.01 (0.12)	0.07 (0.16)	−0.22 (0.15)
Rank in 10 years	0.00 (0.01)	−0.02 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	−0.00 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Income in 20 years	−0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	−0.04 (0.10)	0.02 (0.13)	0.17 (0.12)
Rank in 20 years	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Income in 30 years	0.02 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.03 (0.05)	0.03 (0.06)	0.08 (0.06)
Rank in 30 years	−0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)
General preference for taxation	**0.16 (0.05)****	0.10 (0.07)	0.05 (0.06)	0.11 (0.10)	0.26 (0.13)*	0.32 (0.12)*
Redistribution reduces incentives to work	−0.07 (0.03)*	**−0.27 (0.05)****	−0.11 (0.04)*	−0.01 (0.07)	−0.19 (0.09)*	−0.06 (0.08)
Belief in economic mobility	−0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Belief in American dream	**−0.08 (0.03)****	−0.11 (0.04)*	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.16 (0.07)*	−0.08 (0.09)	0.18 (0.09)*
Economic conservatism	−0.02 (0.07)	**−0.42 (0.10)****	−0.14 (0.09)	−0.11 (0.14)	0.08 (0.19)	0.43 (0.18)*
Control variables included?[+]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Adjusted R-squared	**0.188****	**0.474****	**0.110****	0.162*	**0.445****	**0.198****
	n = 490	n = 490	n = 490	n = 134	n = 134	n = 134

[+] Control variables include age, zipcode median income, gender, race, years of education, party affiliation, social conservatism, and religiosity, all of which failed to provide significant results at p < 0.005. Full results presented in supplement.
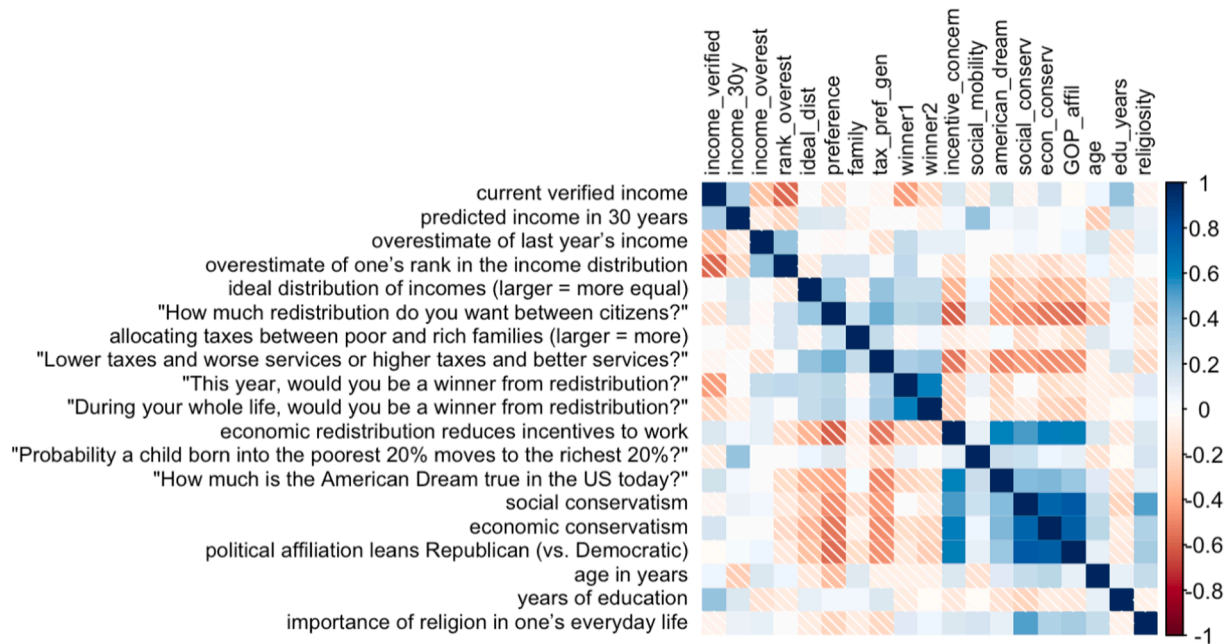

Fig. 1. Predicted future income is weakly associated with attitudes toward redistribution in a correlation matrix showing associations between measures (N = 134), with variable names along the top and descriptions on the left. Darker blue squares indicate stronger positive correlations; darker red cross hatched squares indicate stronger negative correlations; white squares indicate faint or zero-order correlations. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

2.2.3. Additional analyses

Correlations amongst variables. Fig. 1 represents the correlations between each of our variables for the subsample of Wave I respondents who verified their income (*n* = 134). Neither overestimates of last year's income (*income_overest*) nor overplacement of one's rank in the income distribution (*rank_overest*) predict support for redistribution. Notably, neither does predicted income in 30 years (*income_30y*).

However, social conservatism, economic conservatism, Republican party affiliation, belief in the American dream, and concerns about incentive to work were all negatively correlated with subjective preference for redistribution (*preference*). *Preference* was also negatively correlated with current income, both when taking it to be the income estimates of the full sample (*r* = -0.17) and the verified incomes of the subsample (*r* = -0.15).

Upward mobility and support for redistribution. When asked about social mobility in general, our respondents estimated a 15% chance (*SD* = 16%) that a child born into a family in the bottom 20% of the income distribution would someday make it into the top 20%. This overestimates actual mobility. Chetty and colleagues (2014a, p. 1594) estimate this probability from 4% to 12%, depending on time period and geographic area.

When we asked respondents to predict their own incomes and percentile ranks at various time points in the future, their responses do indicate some optimism that they themselves would rise in the income distribution ten years into the future. Fig. 2 below shows respondents' estimated percentile ranks at each of the time points measured: in the present day, 1 year into the future, 2 years into the future, 10 years into the future, 20 years into the future, and 30 years into the future.

Fig. 1 shows that respondents' predicted income in 30 years has little association with their present-day support for redistribution. If, instead, we replace income with expected *change* in income, we find that the correlation actually becomes *positive* for both the change they expect in their incomes (*r* = 0.15) and the expected increase in rank in the income distribution (*r* = 0.16). Fig. 3 illustrates the weakly positive correlation between estimated increase in income and support for redistribution. In other words, support for redistribution actually grows with the prospect of upward mobility, but this effect is quite weak.

The middle-class effect. In measuring participants' perceptions of their positions in the income distribution, we found support for the middle class effect (Cruces et al., 2013; Hvidberg et al., 2023): people tend to think they are closer to average than they are. Rich people think they are poorer than they are and poor people think they are richer than they are, relative to everyone else. We performed paired *t*-tests comparing estimated with verified percentile rank for (a) those with above-median incomes and (b) those with below-median incomes. We found differences of –22.4 and 6.9 respectively; the people in the top half of incomes estimated themselves to be on average 22.4 percentiles lower than they actually were, *t*(66) = -9.97, *p* < 0.001, while those in the bottom half of incomes estimated themselves to be on average 6.9

percentiles higher than they actually were, *t*(67) = 3.15, *p* = 0.002. Fig. 4 shows rank estimates for our sample compared against perfect accuracy, where points above the accuracy line indicate overestimation and points below the line indicate underestimation.

3. Wave II

3.1. Methods

3.1.1. Sampling

In July of 2024, we invited Wave I respondents to take part in the second wave of the study (preregistered here). Wave II involved an experimental treatment that aimed to correct participants' misplaced confidence and observe the effect on their support for redistribution. Of the original 490 participants, 291 completed the follow-up survey (retention rate of 59%). After applying our pre-registered exclusion criteria and merging the dataset with Wave I data, our final sample size for Wave II was 262: 126 in the experimental condition and 136 in the control condition.

The median survey duration was 13.5 min (*SD* = 1032 min). All respondents received a fixed $5 payment, equivalent to $22.22 per hour. We concluded data collection prior to testing our hypotheses.

3.1.2. Measures

Respondents once again estimated their income from the previous year (2023) and the year before that (2022). They were not asked to make predictions for their future income and rank again.

All other measures were repeated from Wave I of the study, and one new measure was added to capture perceived effectiveness of government intervention. This measure was intended to account for respondents who may prefer more equality but are leery of governmental redistribution.

We preregistered a few minor revisions in the stimuli to improve clarity, and all measures appear verbatim in Appendix B.
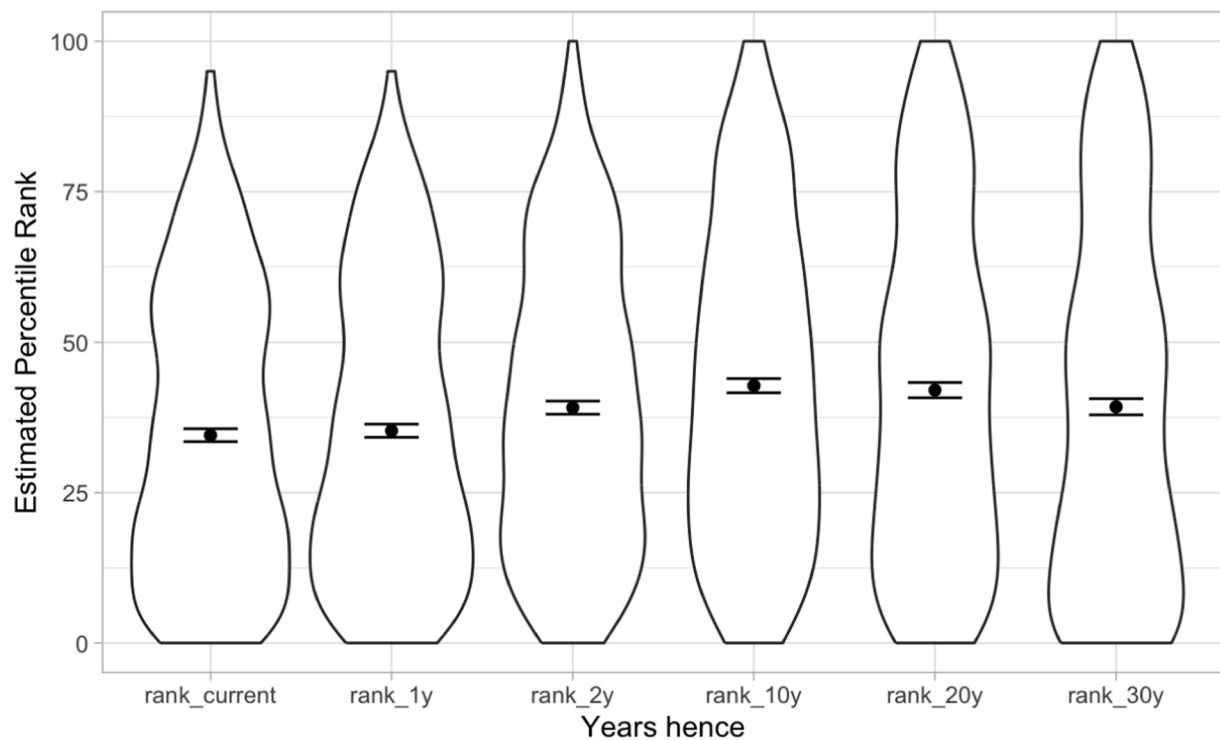

Fig. 2. Respondents underplace their incomes, as shown in this violin plot of respondents' estimates of their rankings in the income distribution at six points in time (n = 490). The width of each white blob indicates the density of responses at each level. Black dots indicate means, with error bars indicating one standard error above and below the sample mean.
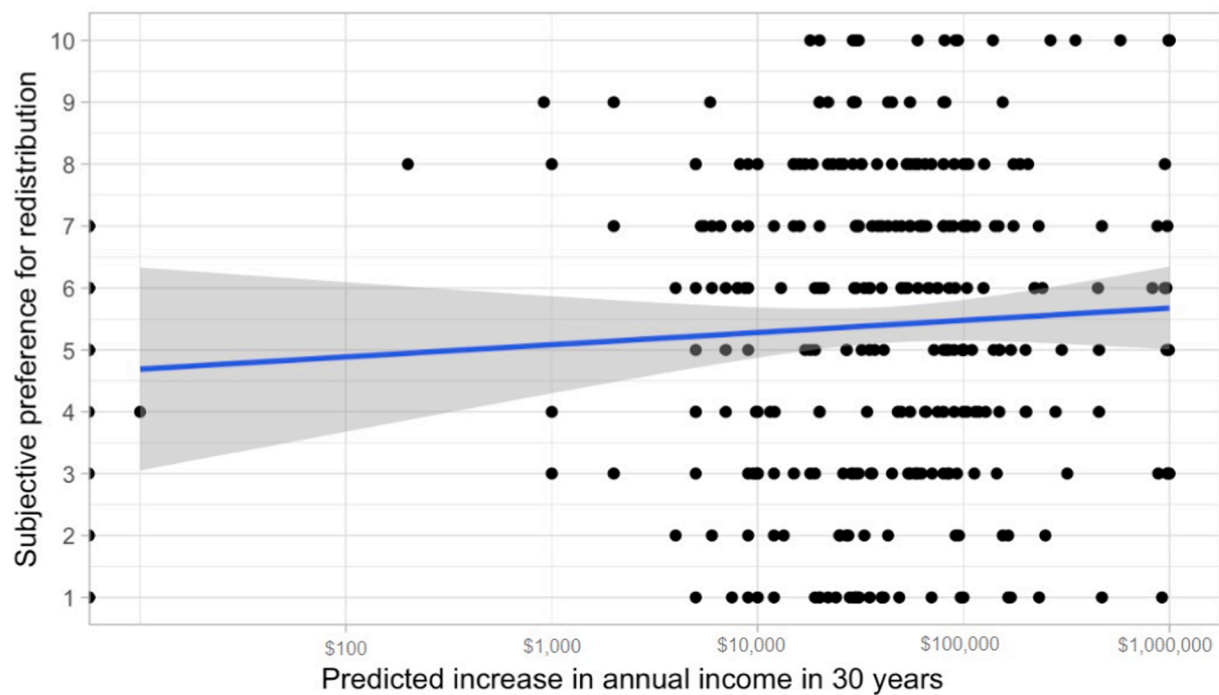
Fig. 3. No evidence of the POUM hypothesis in a scatterplot of predicted increase in income 30 years hence (log scale) and subjective support for redistribution in response to the question, "How much redistribution do you want among citizens?" on a scale from 1: No redistribution, to 10: Complete redistribution, for the full sample (n = 490).
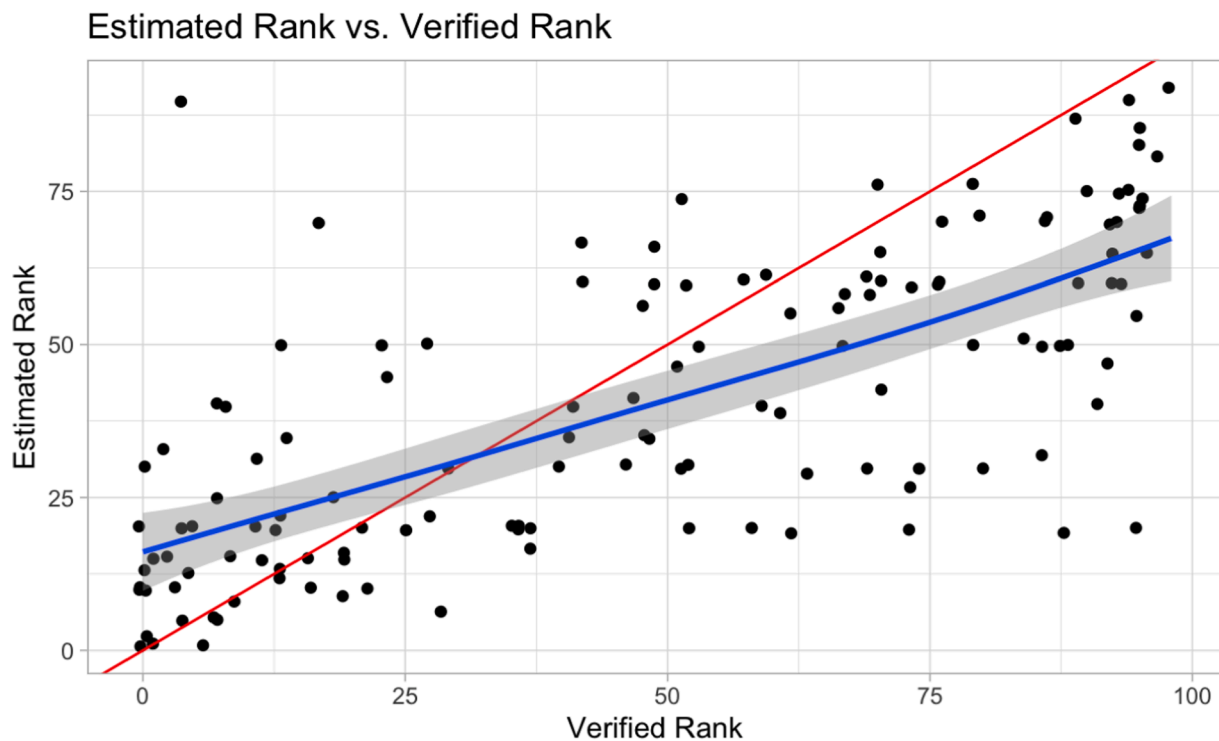

Fig. 4. Scatterplot of estimated vs. verified percentile rank shows the "middle class" effect. Data from those who verified their income (n = 135). The red identity line represents perfect accuracy. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

3.1.3. Experimental manipulation

We stratified participants from Wave I into matched income pairs and randomly assigned one from each pair to either the experimental condition or a control condition, in an attempt to balance the two conditions with respect to income. The experimental treatment reminded each subject of the income and percentile rank they had predicted they would have in 2023 when they completed the first wave of the study, two years before. They were then asked to look up their true income from 2023 and informed in real time of their true percentile rank in 2023. After presenting these numbers to participants, the survey asked

them to report the difference between their predicted and actual income and percentile rank (see Appendix B, questions 7–10). This computation highlighted any overprediction of their future income. Requiring them to accurately report the difference serves as a check of the manipulation's effectiveness.

Those in the control condition were not reminded of their past predictions and did not have their erroneous beliefs corrected. They reported income from 2023 at the end of the survey.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Focal analyses

We preregistered a plan to test the effect of the experimental treatment on subjective support for redistribution (1 to 10 scale) by regressing subjective support for redistribution (*Preference*) on:

1. The experimental treatment (1 = treatment condition, 0 = control condition)
2. Treatment correction, computed as 2023 percentile rank predicted in 2022 minus 2023 actual percentile rank
3. Their interaction

We also planned to repeat this test on our two other measures of support for redistribution by regressing ideal distribution of income (*Ideal_dist*) and redistributive taxation preference (*Family*) on the above covariates.

Low R^2 values indicate that the regressors explain little of the variance in the three measures. In particular, our treatment correction did not appear to have an effect on these three measures, suggesting that the degree of overestimation of percentile rank in the income distribution from two years ago does not affect support for redistribution.

3.2.2. Additional analyses

What other factors explain support for redistribution? As another secondary analysis, we regressed subjective support for redistribution on all our measured correlates in two ways: once with the experimental treatment as an indicator variable (Model 1: 1 = treatment, 0 = control), and a second time with the interaction between the treatment and treatment correction (Model 2). Table 3 presents the results of the respective methods.

When including the experimental treatment as a predictor, perceived effectiveness of government intervention, concerns that redistribution can undermine incentives to work, and belief in the American dream explain a significant portion of the variation in subjective support for redistribution, while many of the other regressors contribute a smaller amount. When we add the interaction between receiving the experimental treatment and the degree of treatment correction as a predictor,

the only measure that remains significant is the concern that redistribution reduces incentives to work.

The effect of changing income. Among participants who verified their income, there was no effect of the difference between their 2023 and 2021 incomes. This suggests that changes in annual income from two years ago do not impact support for redistribution.

4. General discussion

We designed this project to examine the degree to which the prospect of upward mobility undermined current support for redistributive economic policy. Our results provide little reason to believe that it does. The bivariate correlation between support for redistribution and predicted income in 30 years is a measly 0.01. Overestimation of income, predicted increase in income, and overplacement of income provide little explanatory power. By contrast, the correlation between support for redistribution and economic conservatism is −0.60. The evidence strongly suggests that support for or opposition to redistributive economic policy is driven by ideology more than self-interest. Yes, ideology may be driven in part by self-interest; economic conservatism increases with income (correlation of 0.15), but this effect is relatively weak. There are plenty of poor conservatives and rich progressives, both in our sample and in the broader population.

Are people making a mistake when they vote against redistributive policies from which they would benefit personally? Maybe not. After all, the causal chain from one individual's vote to changes in national economic policies is exceedingly weak. By contrast, if adherence to a shared political ideology enhances one's membership in a community of like-minded neighbors, that membership can pay immediate dividends. Thus it might be justifiable for poor Americans who live in politically conservative communities to oppose redistribution if their neighbors do. Moreover, it is easy to cast this "irrationality" as morally admirable. Rich progressives are willing to sacrifice their own self-interest for the greater good of a society whose less fortunate deserve more support. Poor conservatives support policies that allow the wealthy to retain the privileges they have earned and resist the temptation for governments to interfere in markets. Indeed, if redistributive taxation introduces distortions such as disincentives to generate income, redistribution could be costly in aggregate even if it has some beneficiaries.

The associations between conservatism, party affiliation, work incentives, distrust in the government's effectiveness, and support for redistribution in our data provide support to these potential explanations: that people may prefer to vote with their ideological and party commitments, that they may be skeptical about the role of governmental policies and electoral politics to effectively make changes that reduce inequality and impact their lives, and that they might indeed be considering distal disadvantages of redistribution such as demotivation

Table 3

Concerns about incentives to work appear to undermine support for redistribution in this OLS regression predicting subjective support for redistribution using the full Wave II sample, n = 262. (Standard errors in parentheses.) Single asterisks indicate statistical significance at p < 0.05. **Bolding and double asterisks**** indicate statistical significance at p < 0.005. Columns show standardized regression coefficients.

	Preference model 1	Preference model 2
(Intercept)	0.00 (0.04)	−0.09 (0.07)
General preference for taxation	0.11 (0.05)*	0.24 (0.09)*
Government intervention reduces economic inequality	**0.18 (0.05)****	0.11 (0.09)
I will be a winner from redistribution this year	−0.09 (0.06)	−0.24 (0.10)*
I will be a winner from redistribution in my lifetime	0.15 (0.06)*	0.19 (0.10)
Redistribution reduces incentives to work	**−0.45 (0.06)****	**−0.39 (0.10)****
Belief in economic mobility	0.10 (0.05)*	0.14 (0.10)
Belief in American dream	**−0.23 (0.06)****	−0.21 (0.09)*
Experimental treatment indicator	−0.05 (0.04)	−0.11 (0.07)
Treatment correction		0.02 (0.08)
Experimental treatment * Treatment correction	–	−0.10 (0.08)
Adjusted R-squared	0.55	0.54
Sample size	*n* = 262	*n* = 262

to engage in economy productivity (Cohn et al., 2023).

Despite many sensible reasons to expect a negative relationship between the prospect of upward mobility and support for redistribution, therefore, we fail to find evidence for it. Is it possible that confounding variables are shrouding what is, in fact, a negative relationship between them? Suppressor variables that are positively related to both and could interfere with our ability to detect a negative relationship. Consider education—which could both enhance prospects of upward mobility and enhance support for redistribution. In fact, in our data, support for redistribution goes down with years of schooling (correlation of −0.06), even after controlling for income. While there may be other suppressor variables, we do not regard this as a compelling explanation for our failure to find a relationship between the prospect of upward mobility and support for redistribution. Our skepticism arises not only from our own results but from studies of exogenous shocks to wealth (such as winning a lottery) that fail to find changes in support for redistribution (Andersen et al., 2023; see also Page & Goldstein, 2016).

Might our study have lacked the power to detect such a relationship between the prospect of upward mobility and opposition to redistribution? That is possible, but it implies the effect is small. How small? One estimate comes from Alesina et al. (2018), who attempted to manipulate their subjects' beliefs about intergenerational economic mobility and measure support for redistribution. Their treatment did affect reported beliefs regarding economic mobility, but the effect on support for redistribution was so small (Cohen's d of 0.04) that it failed to attain statistical significance, even in their sample of 8585. Our key analysis suggests that a one standard-deviation increase in predicted income is associated with only a 0.03 SD decrease in preference for government redistribution.

For the prospect of upward mobility to undermine support for redistribution among poor Americans and overshadow the complex ideological factors, they would have to overestimate their future prosperity on a massive scale. Our results provide little evidence for such overestimation. Subjects' median estimate of the probability that a child born into the bottom income quintile could make it into the top quintile is 9 % (mean = 15 %), a modest overestimate (Chetty et al., 1994). But when asked whether the "American dream" is alive in the United States today, the median response was closer to "Not at all" (median = 4, mean = 4.6 on the 10-point scale) than it was to "Absolutely" suggesting that overconfident optimism about rising up in the ranks is not prominent in the beliefs of our respondents.

Another notable feature of our results is the weak correlation between our different measures of support for redistribution. Our three primary measures of support for redistribution are correlated positively with each other, but these weak correlations undercut the claim that our respondents held coherent, consistent beliefs about how (or whether) the government should act to redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor. Fully 77% of respondents endorsed a distribution of incomes more equal than the status quo, but when asked how much they wanted the government to intervene in the distribution of income, they were substantially less enthusiastic. Furthermore, even those who indicated wanting the government to intervene did not consistently prefer progressive taxation policies. How people think about this complicated issue depends on the context and the policy.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2025.105418.

Data availability

Data and code: https://osf.io/urshp/.

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