

Economic Inequality, Intergenerational Mobility, and Belief in Meritocracy in the United States

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University of Iowa

Inequality Mini-Conference
SPSA 2016

A Looming Question

- ▶ What's the Relationship Between Economic Inequality and Democracy?
- ▶ Inequality: Self-Correcting or Self-Reinforcing?
 - ▶ Meltzer-Richard or Benabou?
 - ▶ Unequal Representation?
 - ▶ Participation: Energized or Demobilized?

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- ▶ Belief in Meritocracy
- ▶ Activated Conflict Theory
 - ▶ High inequality activates class consciousness
 - ▶ Poor less likely to believe in meritocracy
 - ▶ Rich *more* likely to believe in meritocracy

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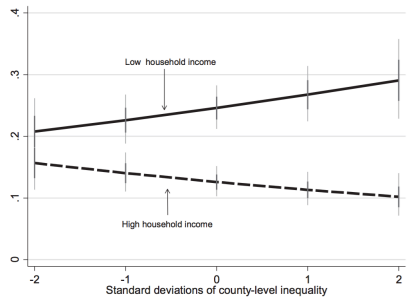
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FIGURE 2 The Polarizing Effect of Local Inequality on Belief in Meritocracy across Income Levels for White Americans, 2005–09



Data

Individual-Level Data

- ▶ Religious Landscape Survey
- ▶ > 35,000 respondents
- ▶ 'Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard'
- ▶ plus income and controls

Contextual Data

- ▶ Commuting Zones
- ▶ Equality of Opportunity Project
- ▶ Income Inequality
- ▶ Relative Mobility

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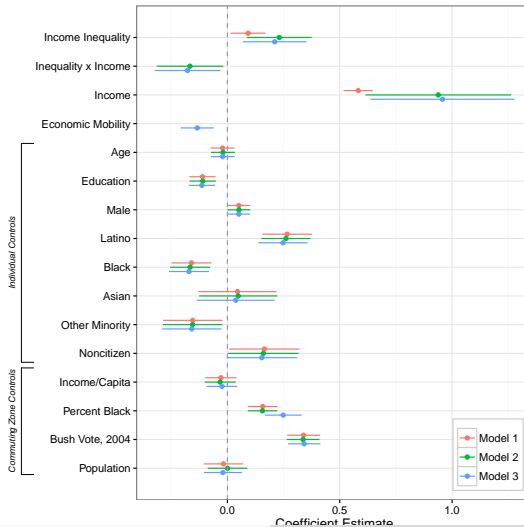
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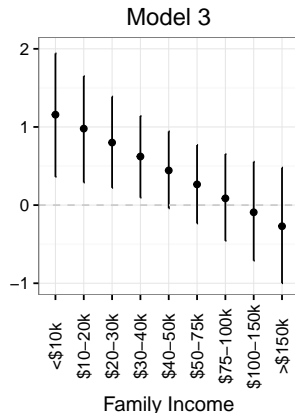
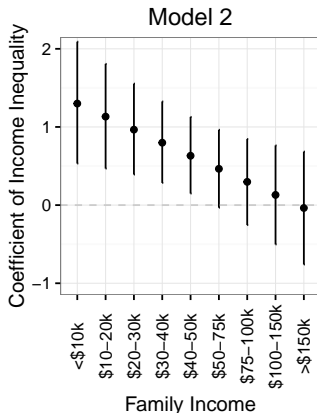
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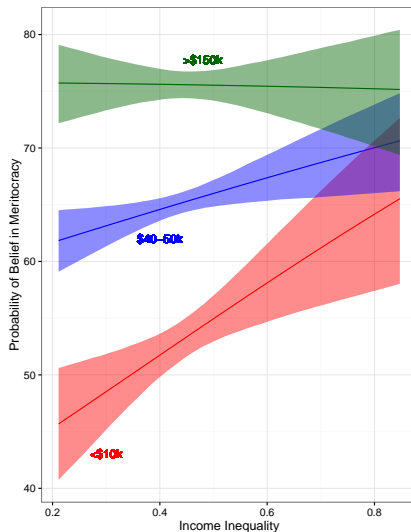
Predicting Belief in Meritocracy



Estimated Coefficients of Income Inequality by Income



Belief in Meritocracy by Income



Moving Forward

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- ▶ *IF* results hold up:
 - ▶ NO reason to think mere exposure breeds opposition
 - ▶ In fact, support for the opposite
 - ▶ Inequality is not self-correcting

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