

Economic Inequality and Belief in Meritocracy in the United States

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 <https://github.com/fsolt/meritocracy>

Meritocracy

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- Core aspect of “American Dream” and U.S. ideology
- And so an important system justification

Inequality and Meritocracy: Two Theories

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Conflict Theory

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Relative Power Theory

- Higher inequality increases power of rich to win overt conflicts, to control agenda, and to shape attitudes

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Relative Power Theory

- Higher inequality increases power of rich to win overt conflicts, to control agenda, and to shape attitudes
- Poorer people more susceptible to internalizing beliefs of rich, including by embracing meritocracy

False Consciousness or Class Awareness? Local Income Inequality, Personal Economic Position, and Belief in American Meritocracy

Benjamin J. Newman University of Connecticut
Christopher D. Johnston Duke University
Patrick L. Lown Stony Brook University

Existing research analyzes the effects of cross-national and temporal variation in income inequality on public opinion; however, research has failed to explore the impact of variation in inequality across citizens' local residential context. This article analyzes the impact of local inequality on citizens' belief in a core facet of the American ethos—meritocracy. We advance conditional effects hypotheses that collectively argue that the effect of residing in a high-inequality context will be moderated by individual income. Utilizing national survey data, we demonstrate that residing in more unequal counties heightens rejection of meritocracy among low-income residents and bolsters adherence among high-income residents. In relatively equal counties, we find no significant differences between high- and low-income citizens. We conclude by discussing the implications of class-based polarization found in response to local inequality with respect to current debates over the consequences of income inequality for American democracy.

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Interaction Terms

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Reject Meritocracy}_{ij} = & X\gamma + \gamma_{10}\text{Income}_{ij} + \gamma_{01}\text{Inequality}_j \\ & + \gamma_{11}\text{Inequality}_j \times \text{Income}_{ij} \\ & + r_{1j}\text{Income}_{ij} + u_{ij} \end{aligned}$$

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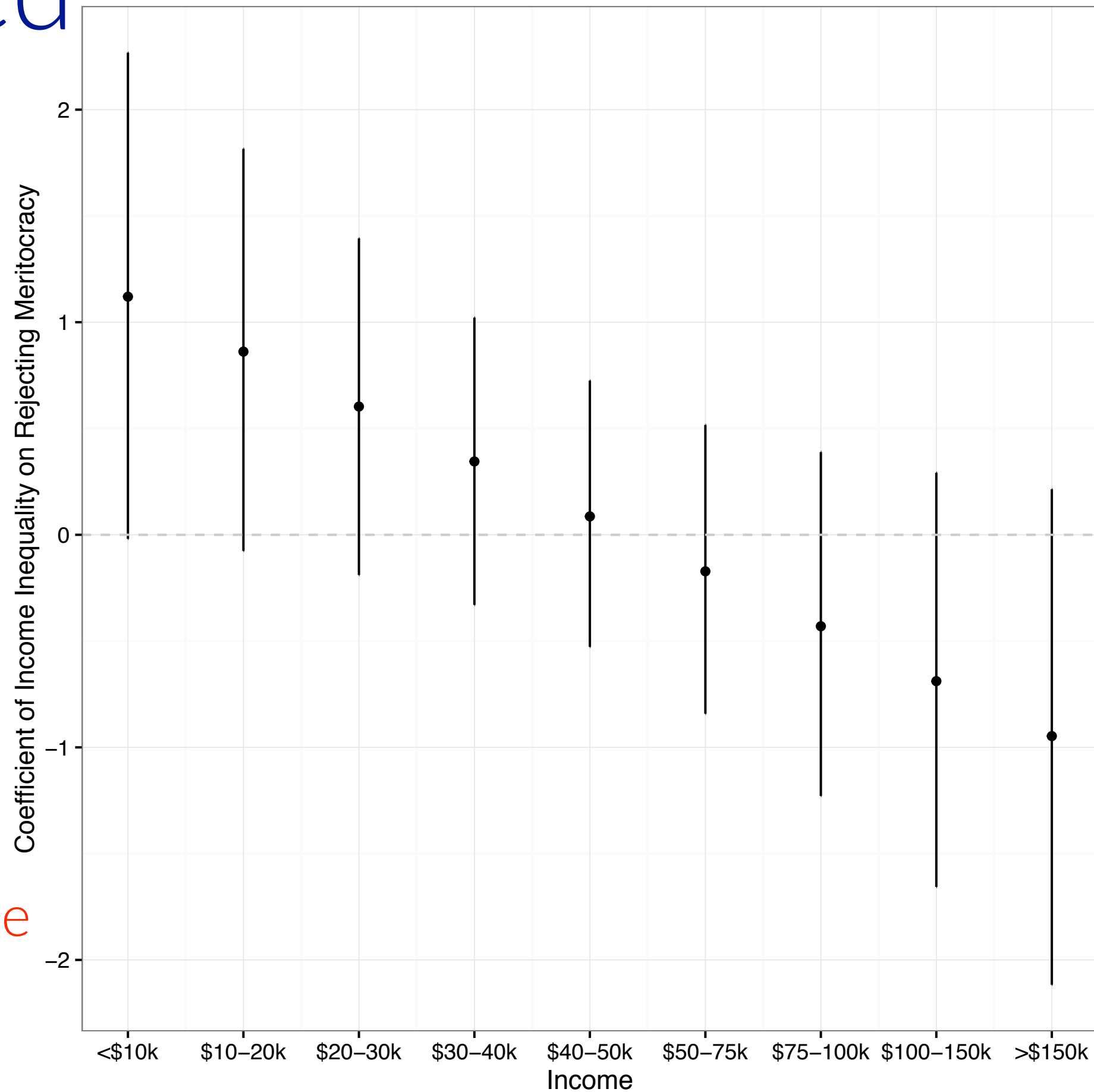
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Another Problem

Incomparable
Data

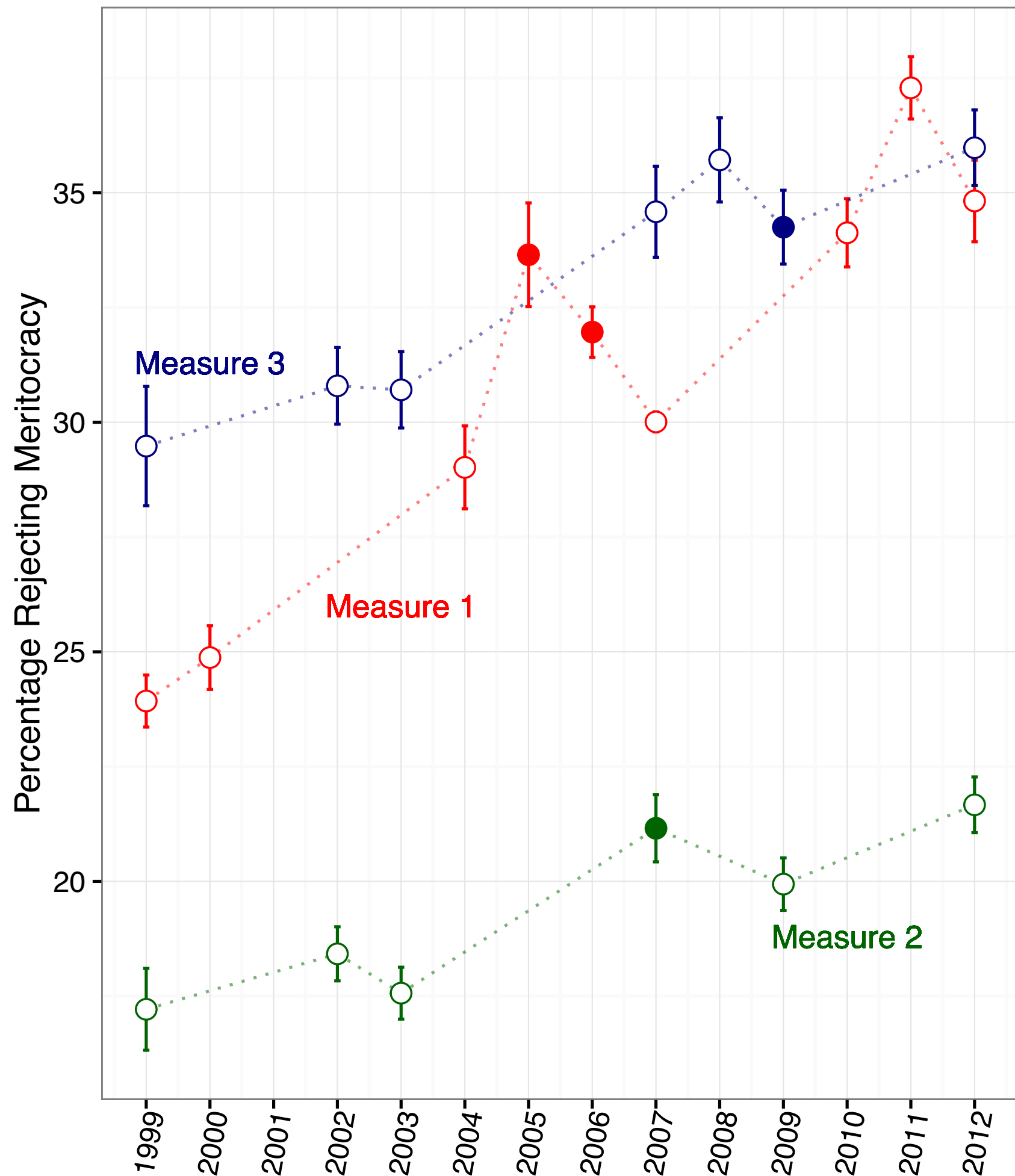
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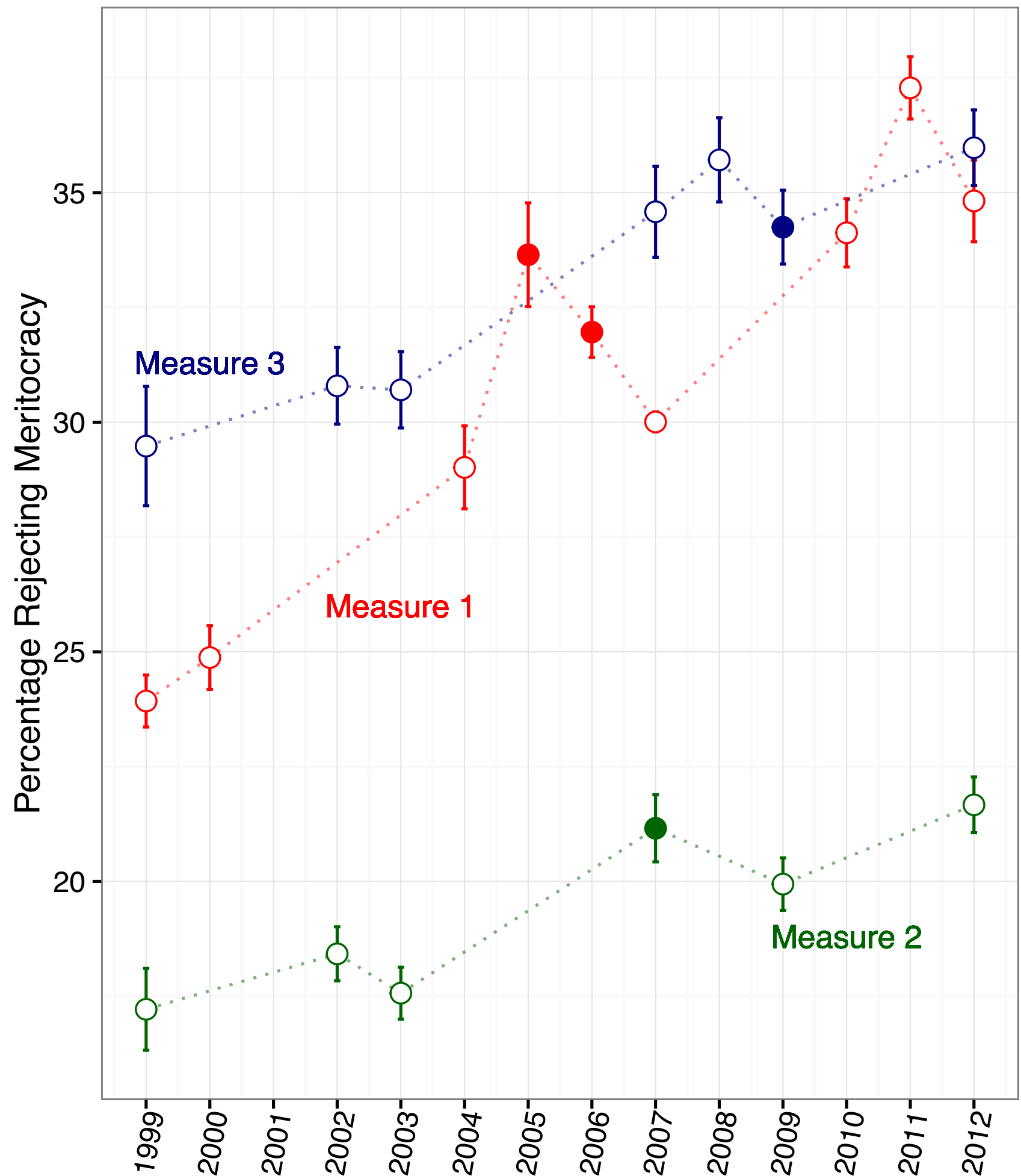


Another Problem

Incomparable Data

Three different measures of the DV in a single analysis

Apparently to get enough respondents in a variety of different local contexts



An Independent Replication

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- Pew Religious Life Survey, 2007

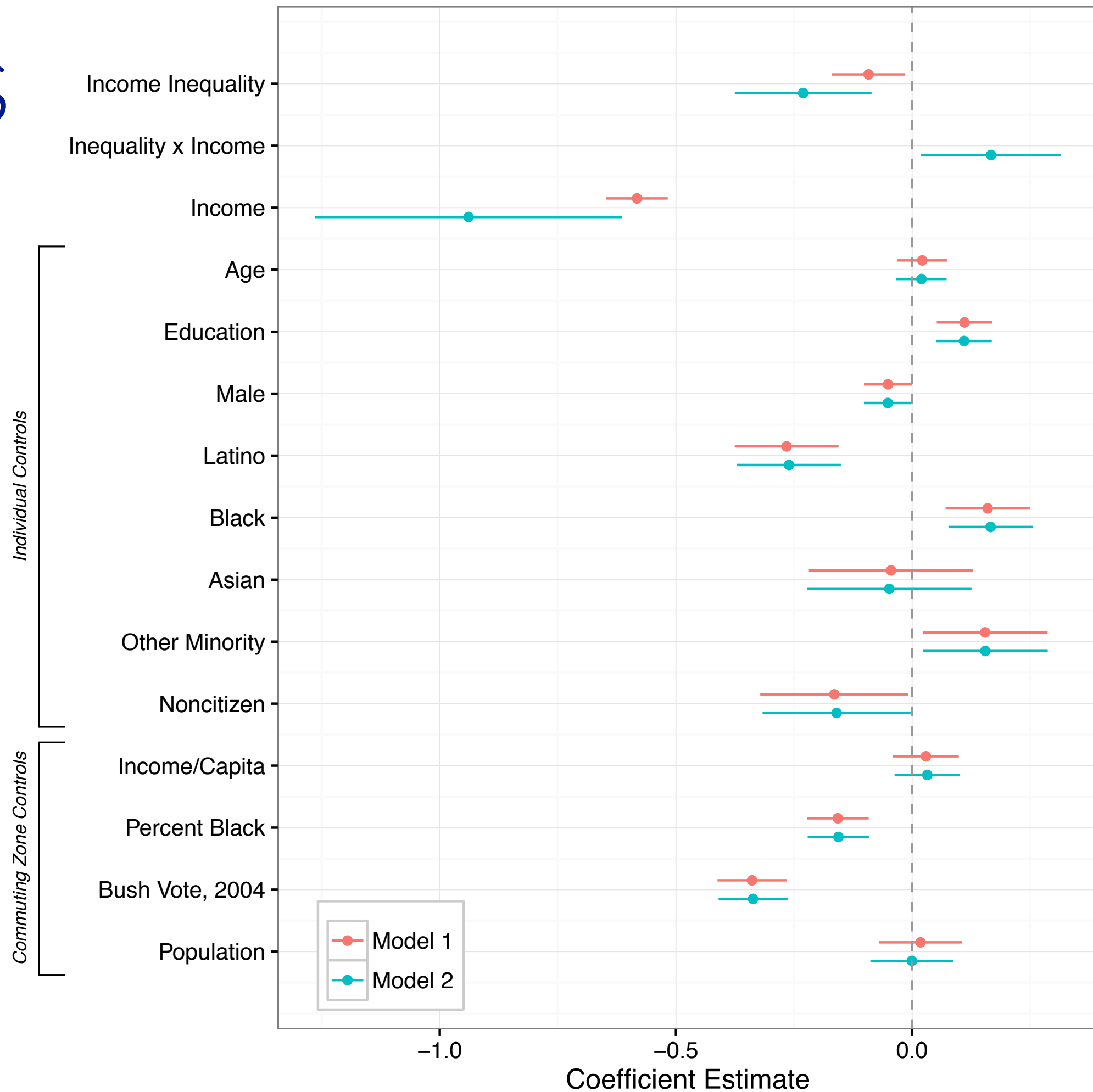
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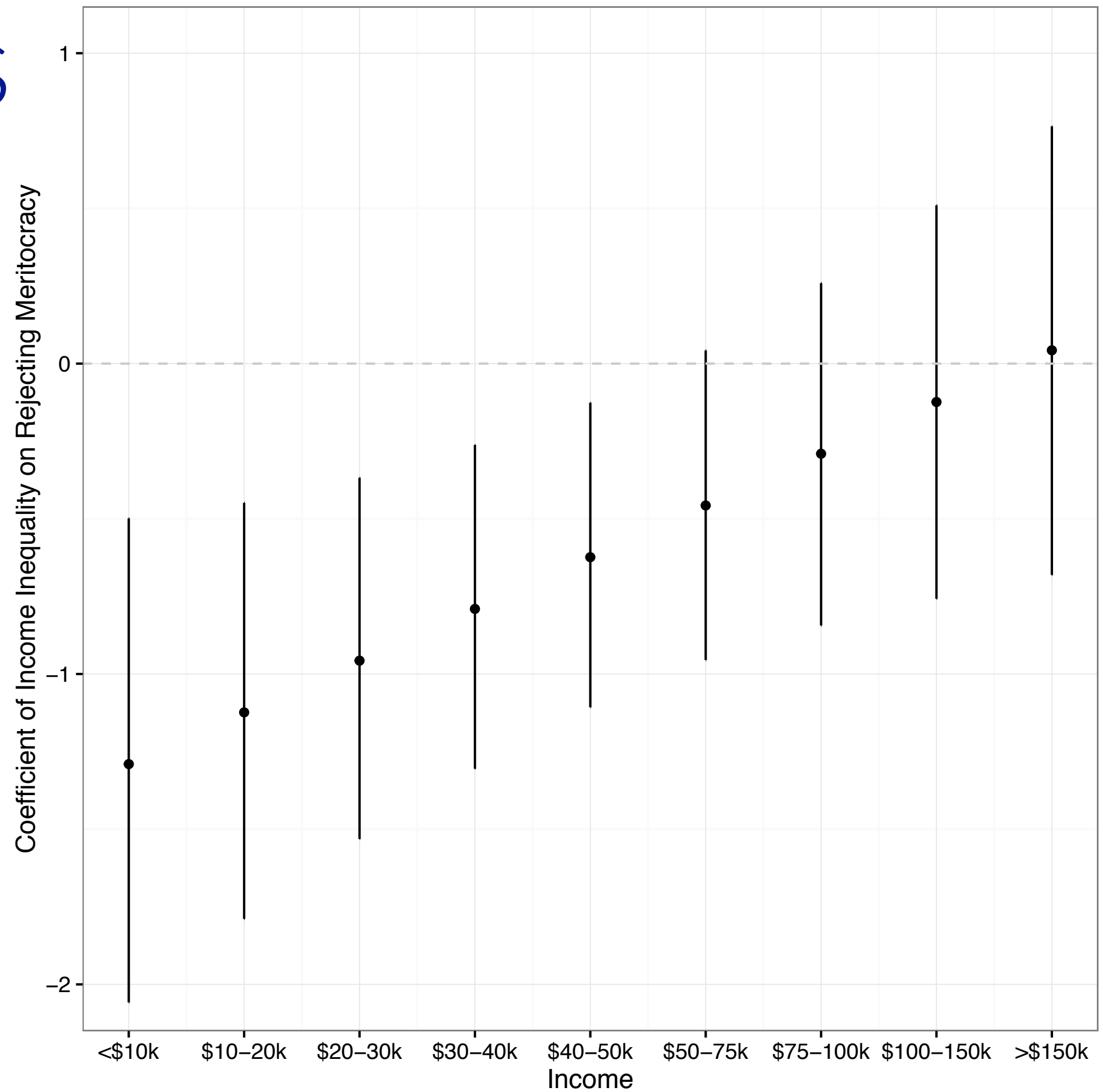
An Independent Replication

- Pew Religious Life Survey, 2007
- Better unit of local context: CZ
- Better model specification:
exclude controls for IntVs

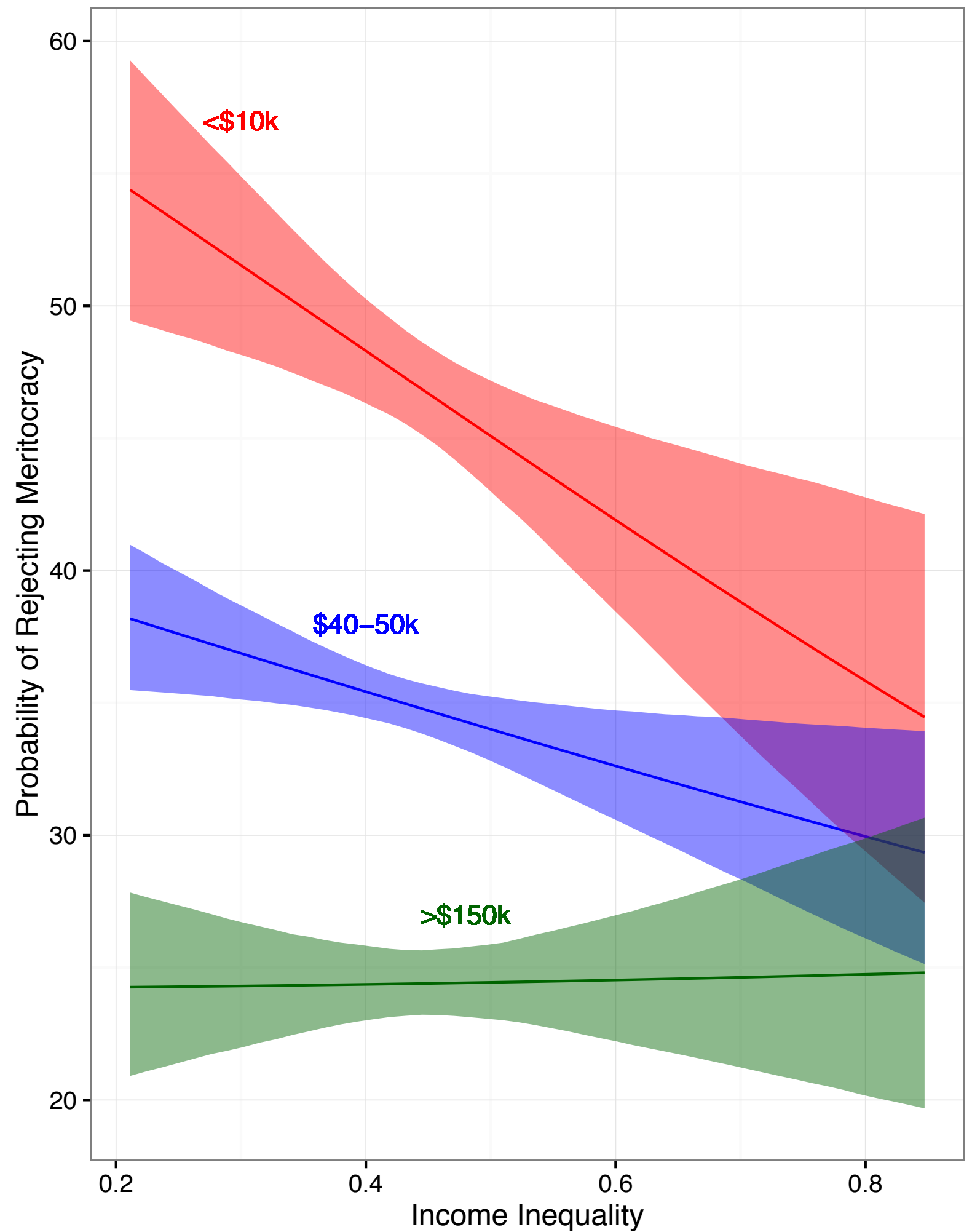
Results



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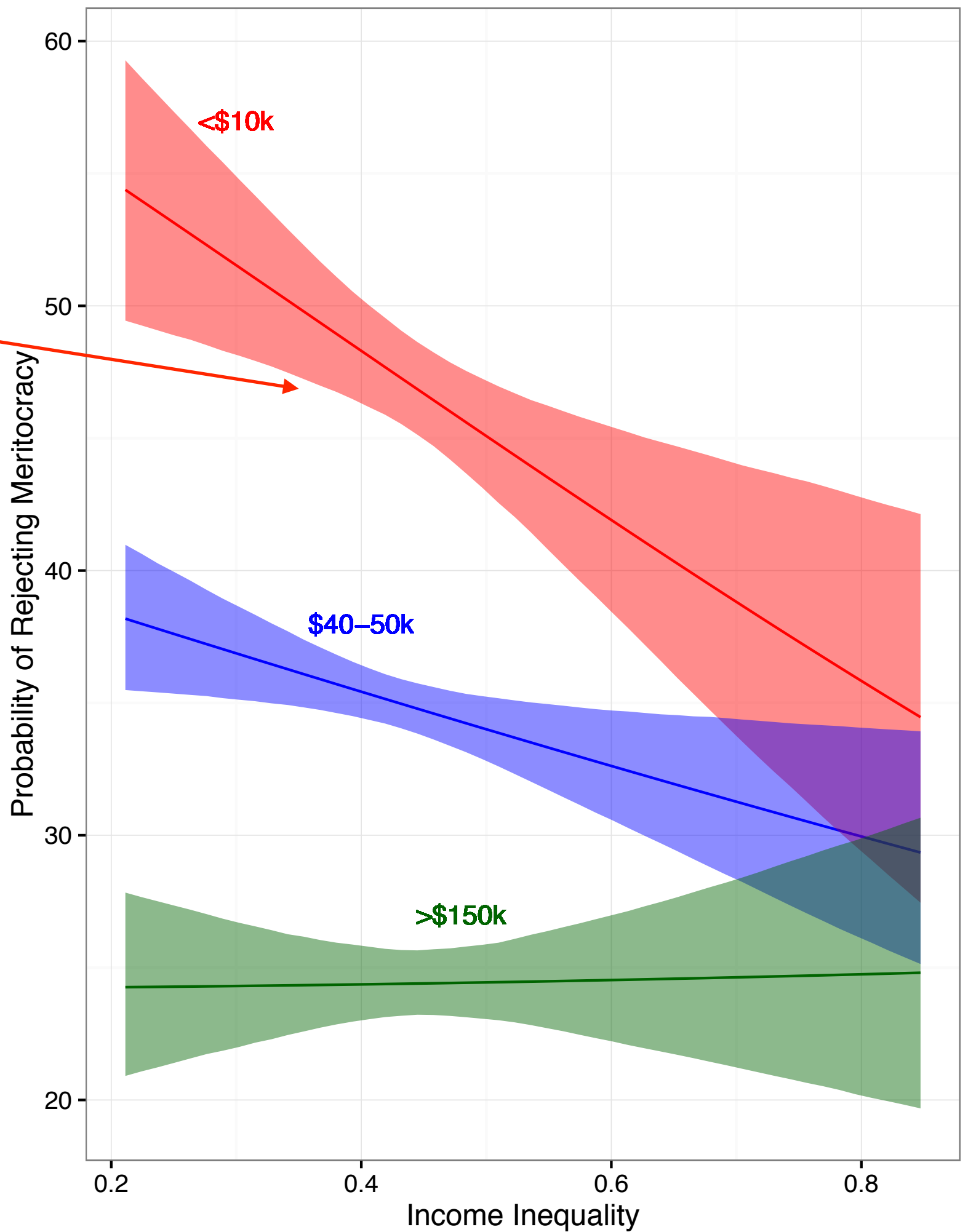


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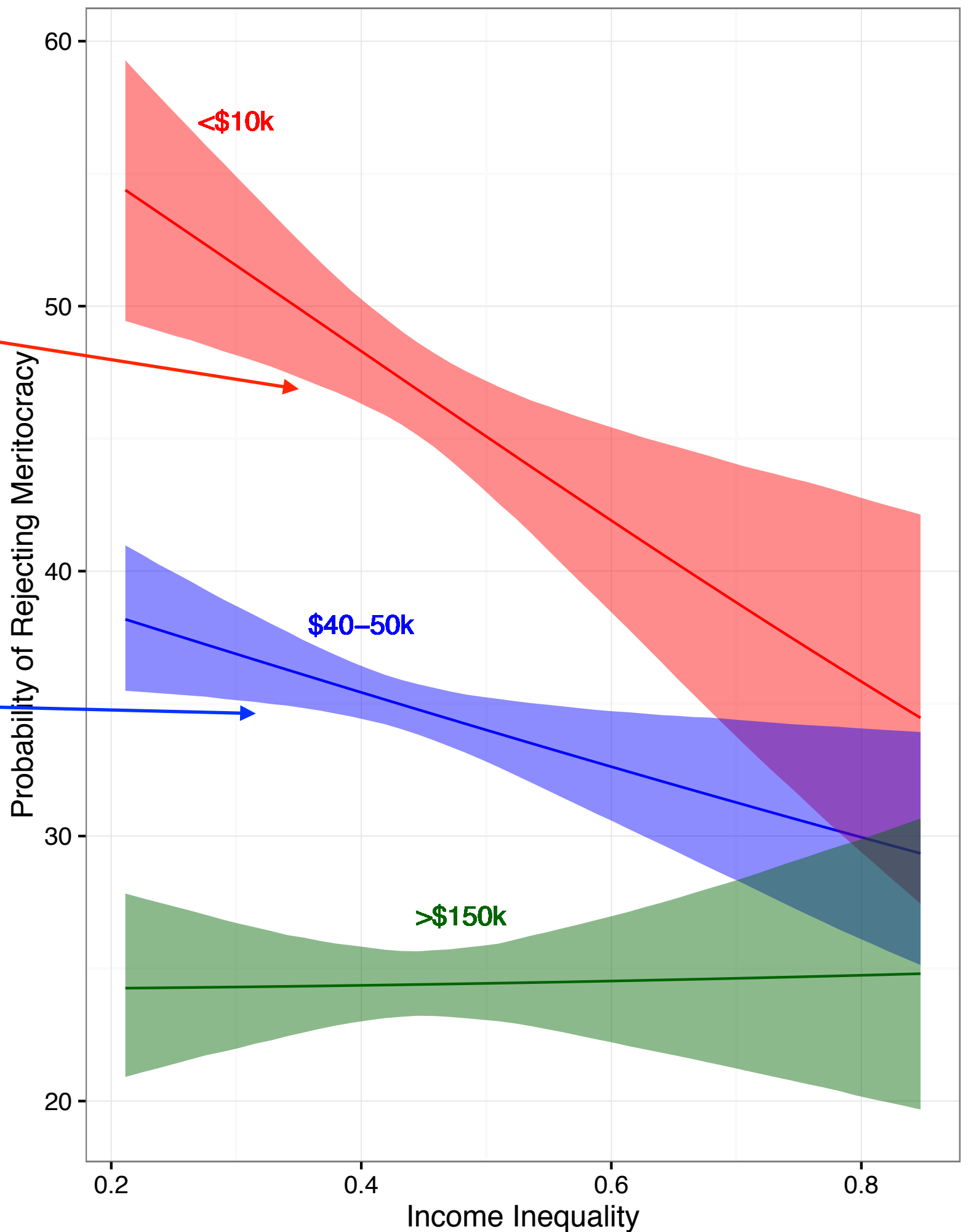
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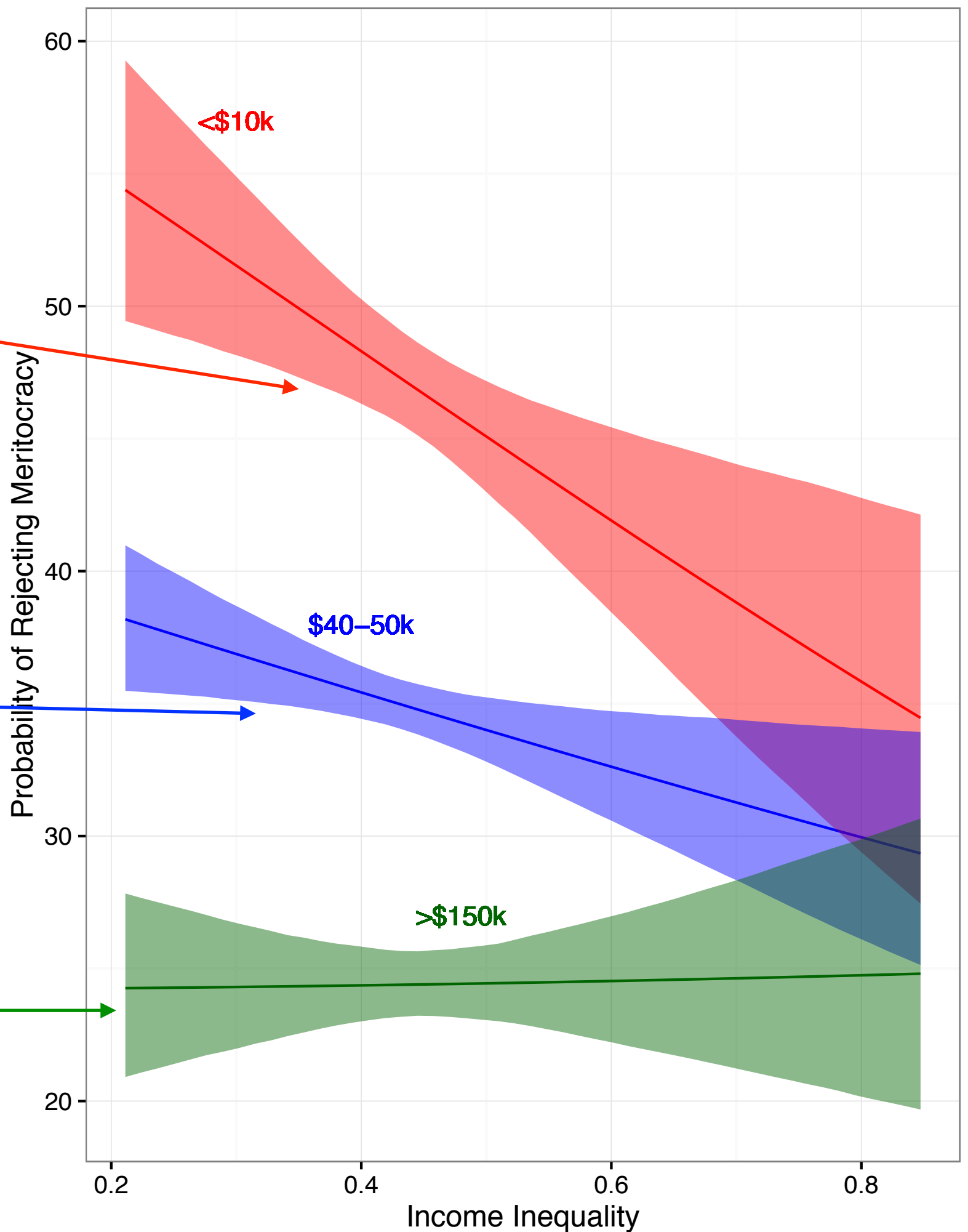


Results

-20 ± 9
points

-9 ± 9
points

0 ± 6
points



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- No support for conflict theory, even in NJL results
- Replication with better data yields opposite result
- Poorer people are *less* likely to reject meritocracy where inequality is higher, consistent with relative power theory



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