

# Economic Inequality and Belief in Meritocracy in the United States

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

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- And so an important system justification

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## Relative Power Theory

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- 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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NJL:

1.  $\gamma_{01}$  is positive and statistically significant

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... so **conflict theory** is supported



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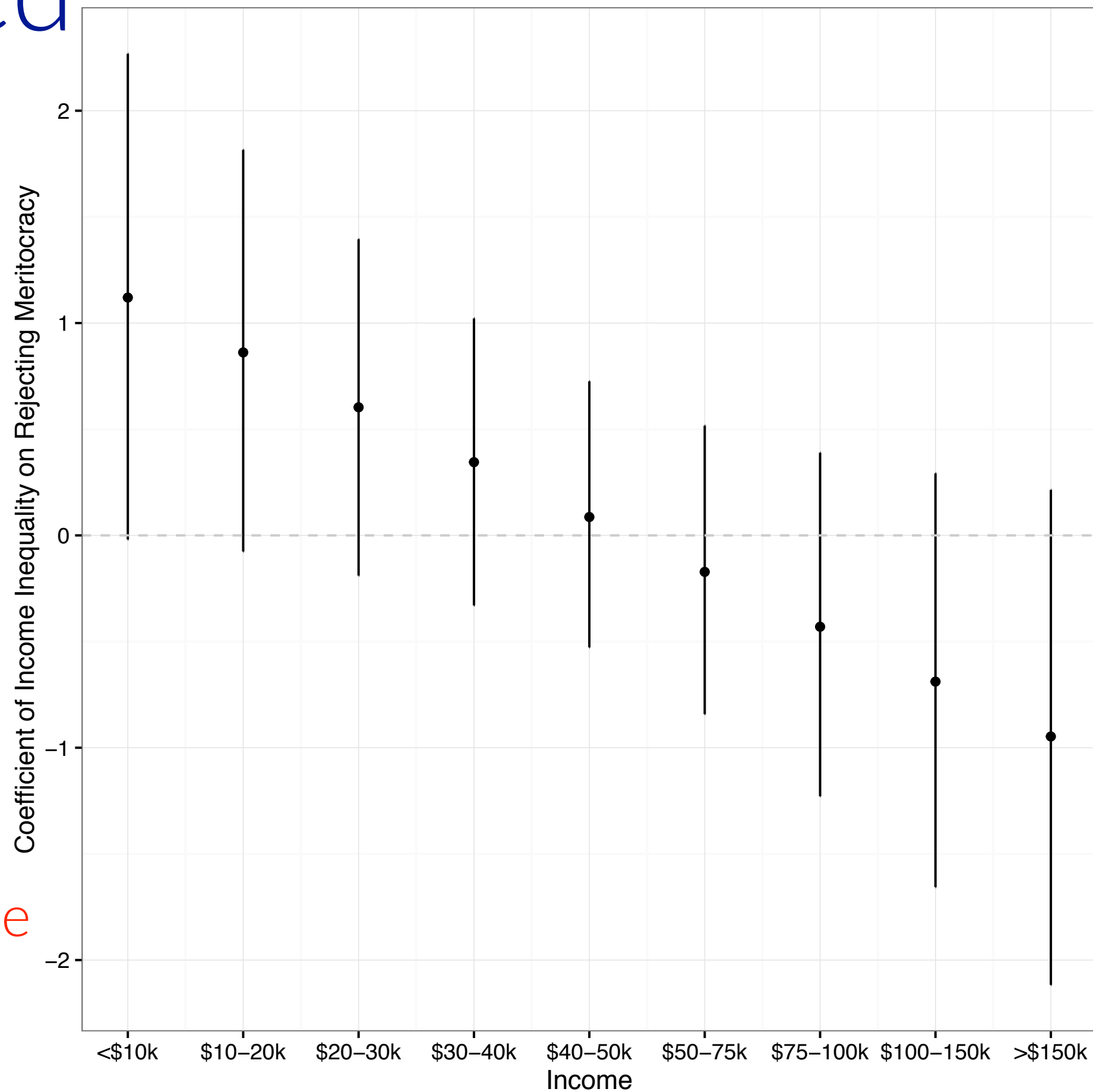
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# Another Problem

Incomparable  
Data

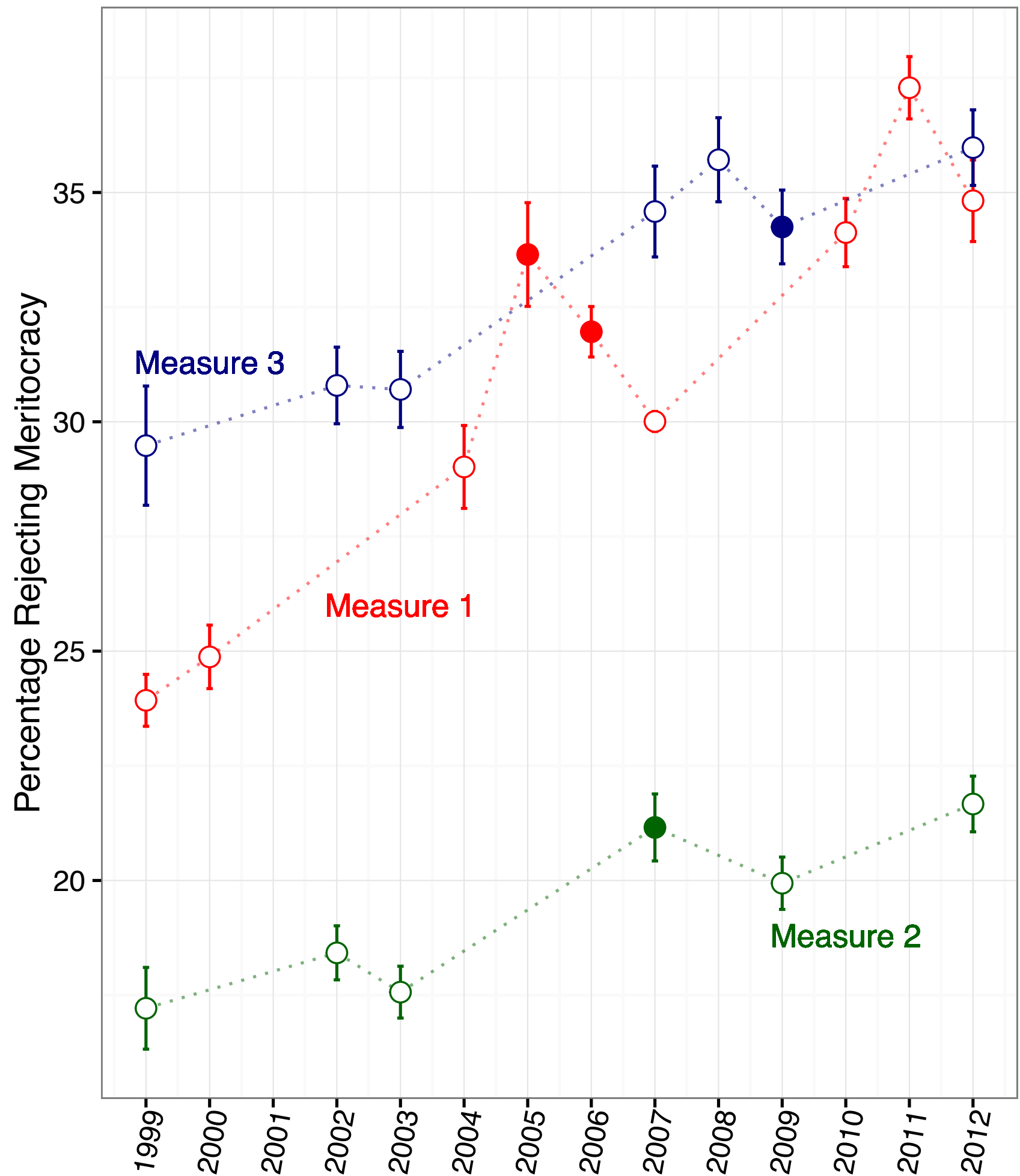
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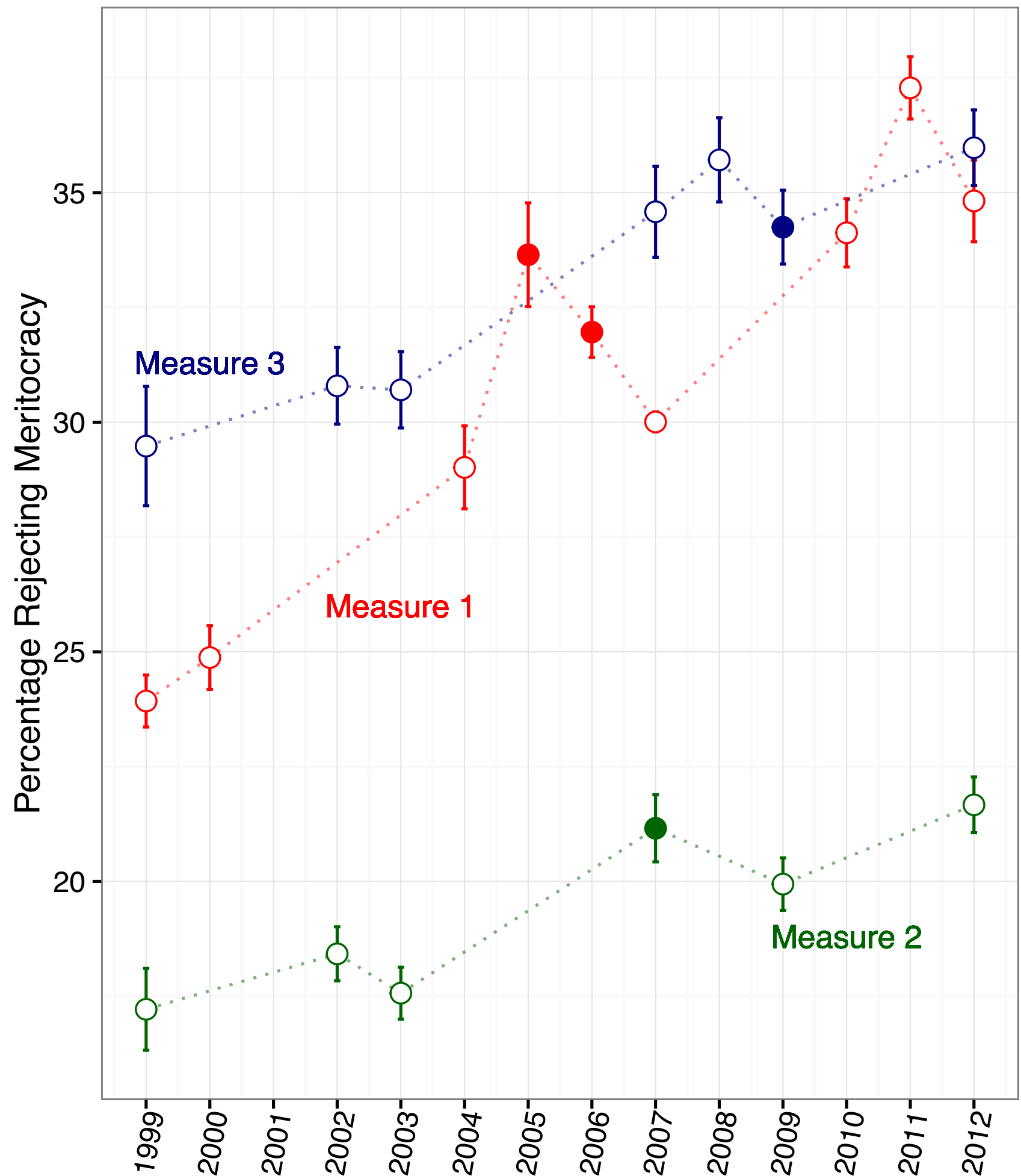


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## Incomparable Data

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

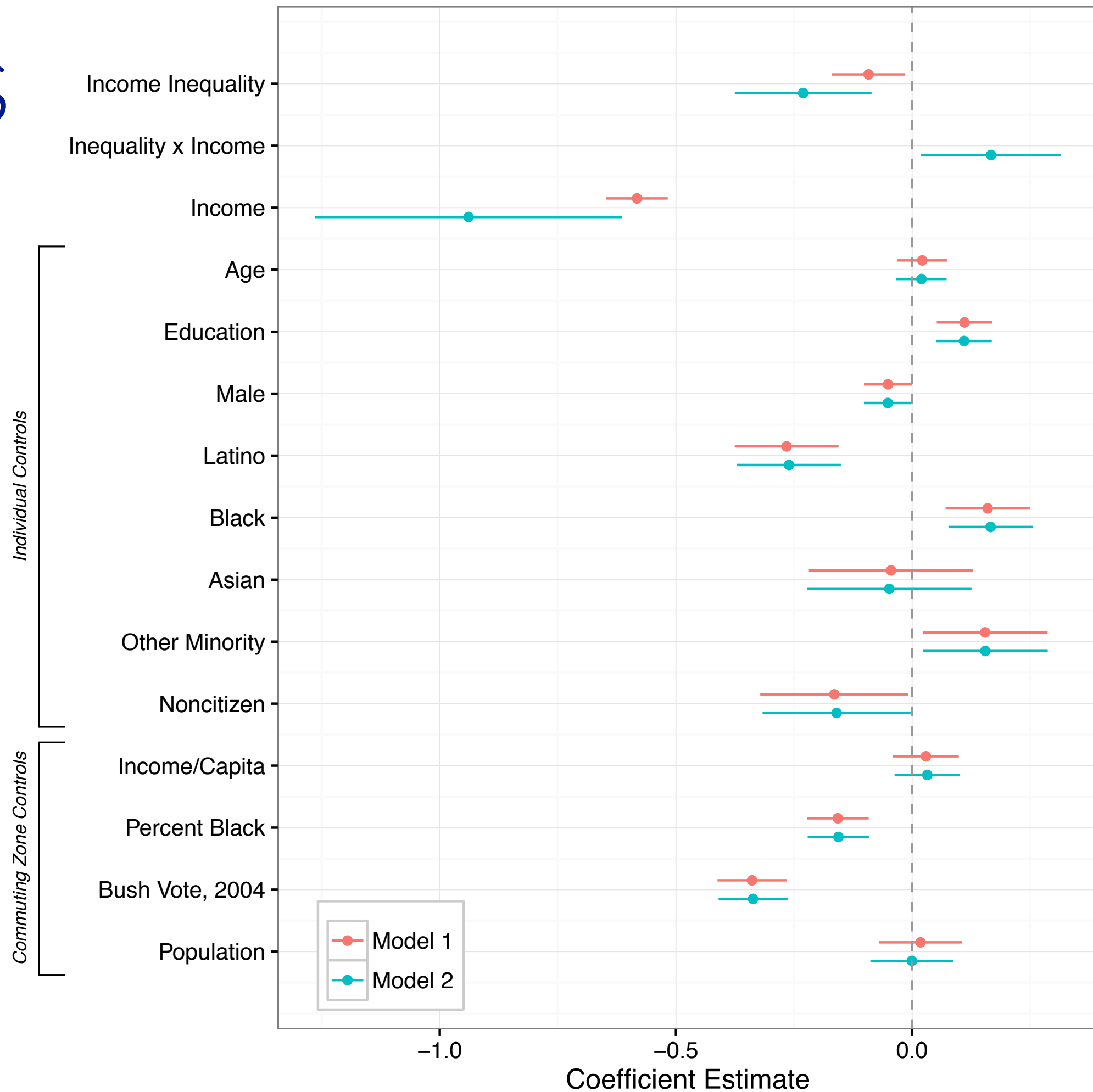
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- Pew Religious Life Survey, 2007
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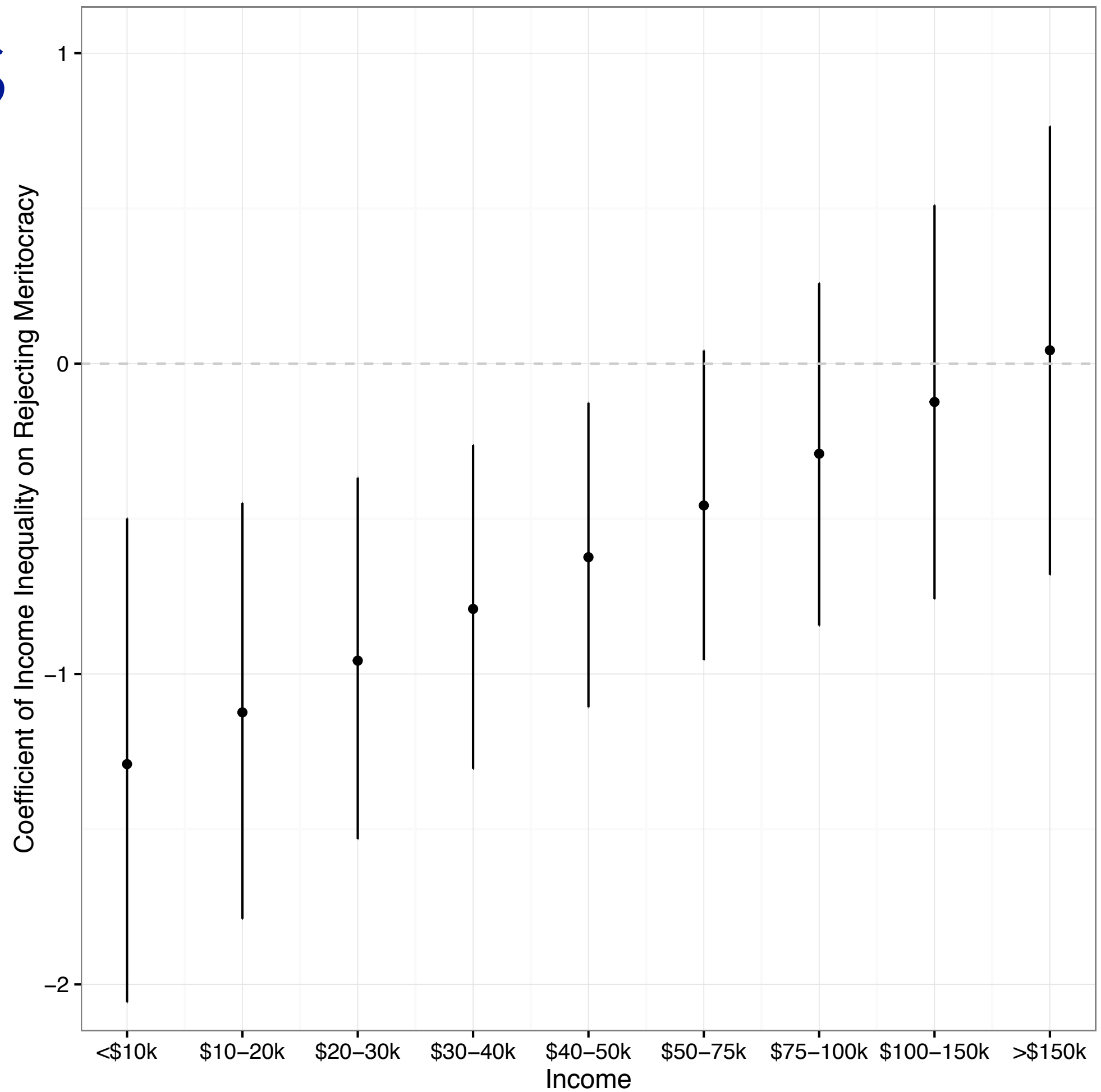
# An Independent Replication

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

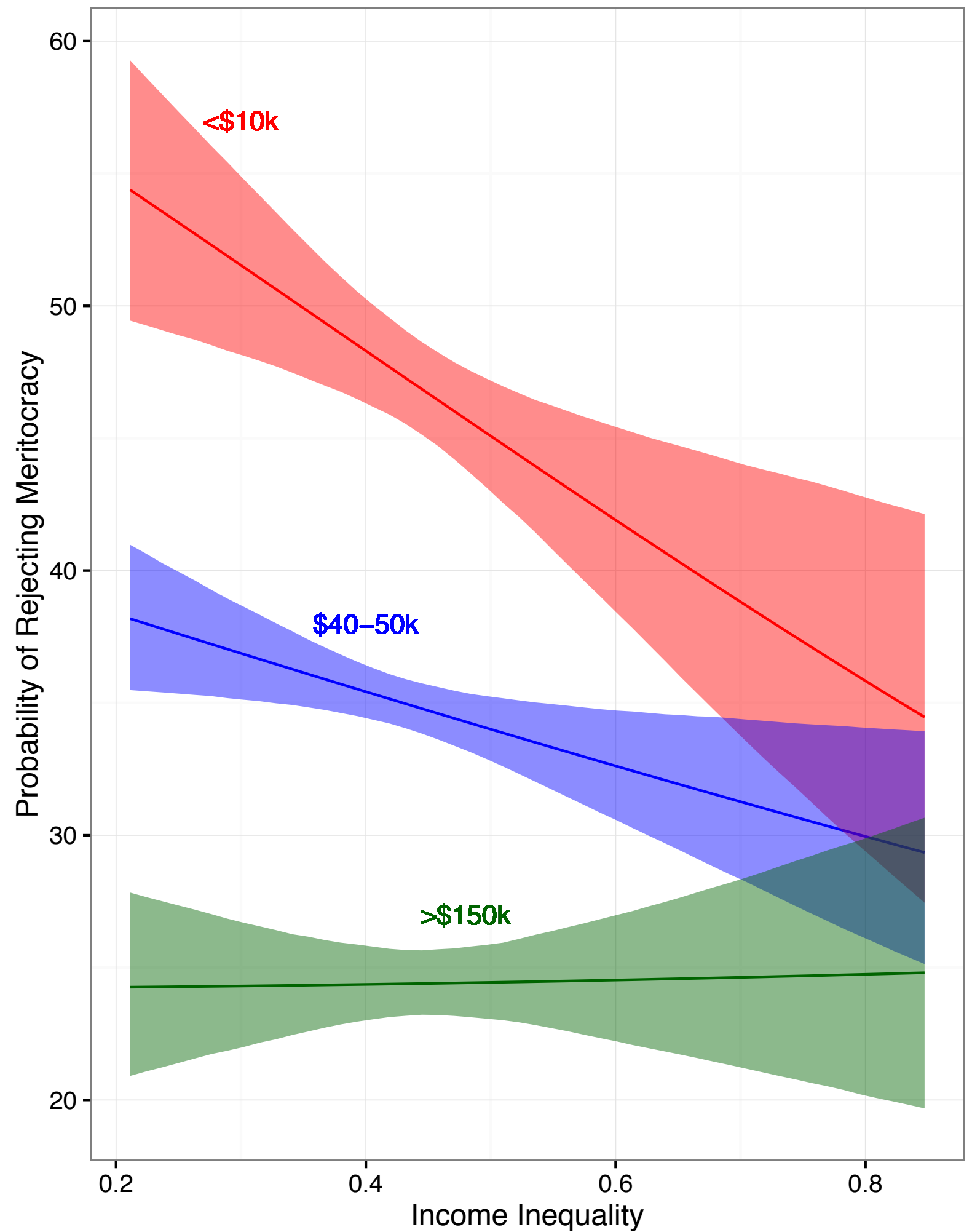
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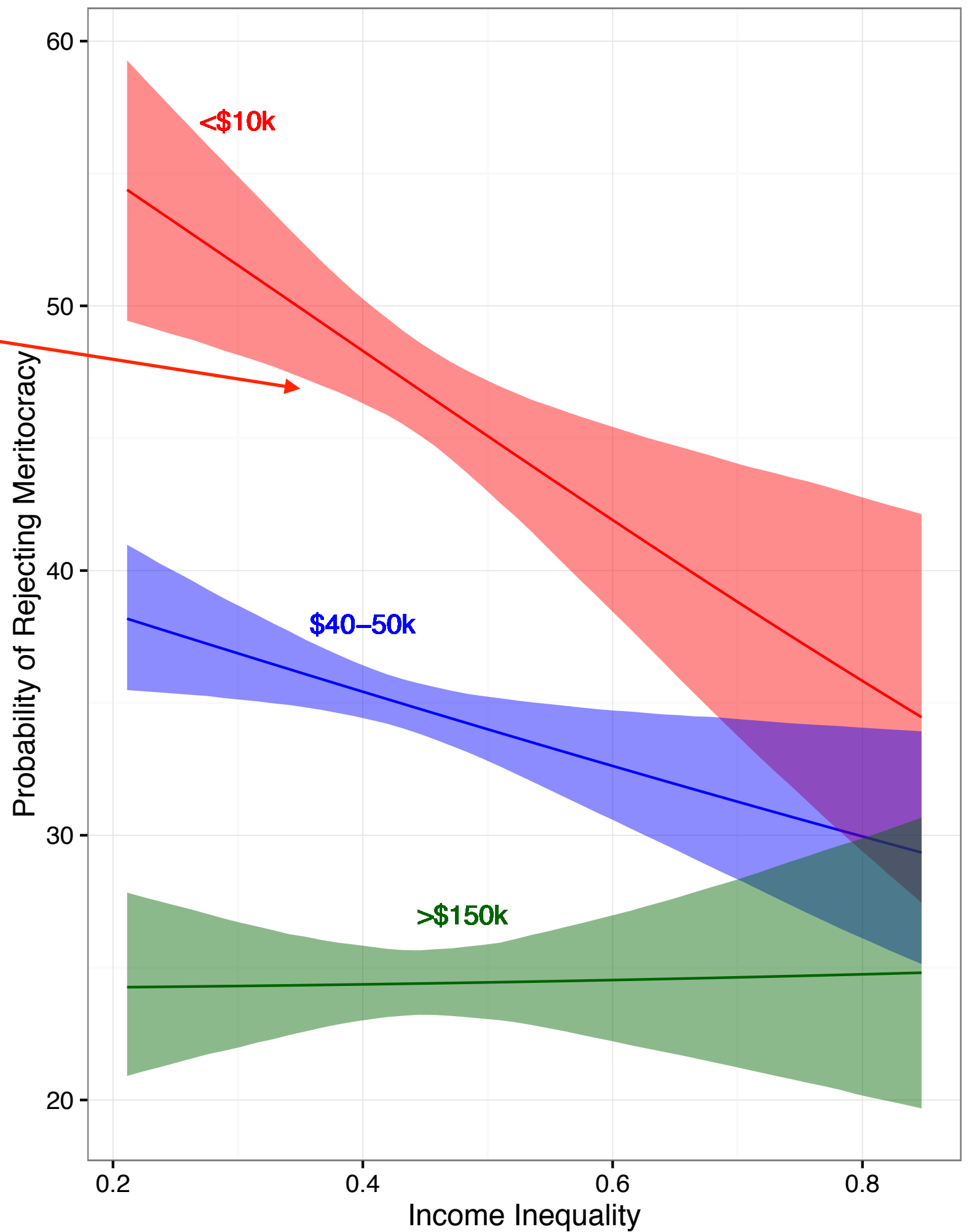
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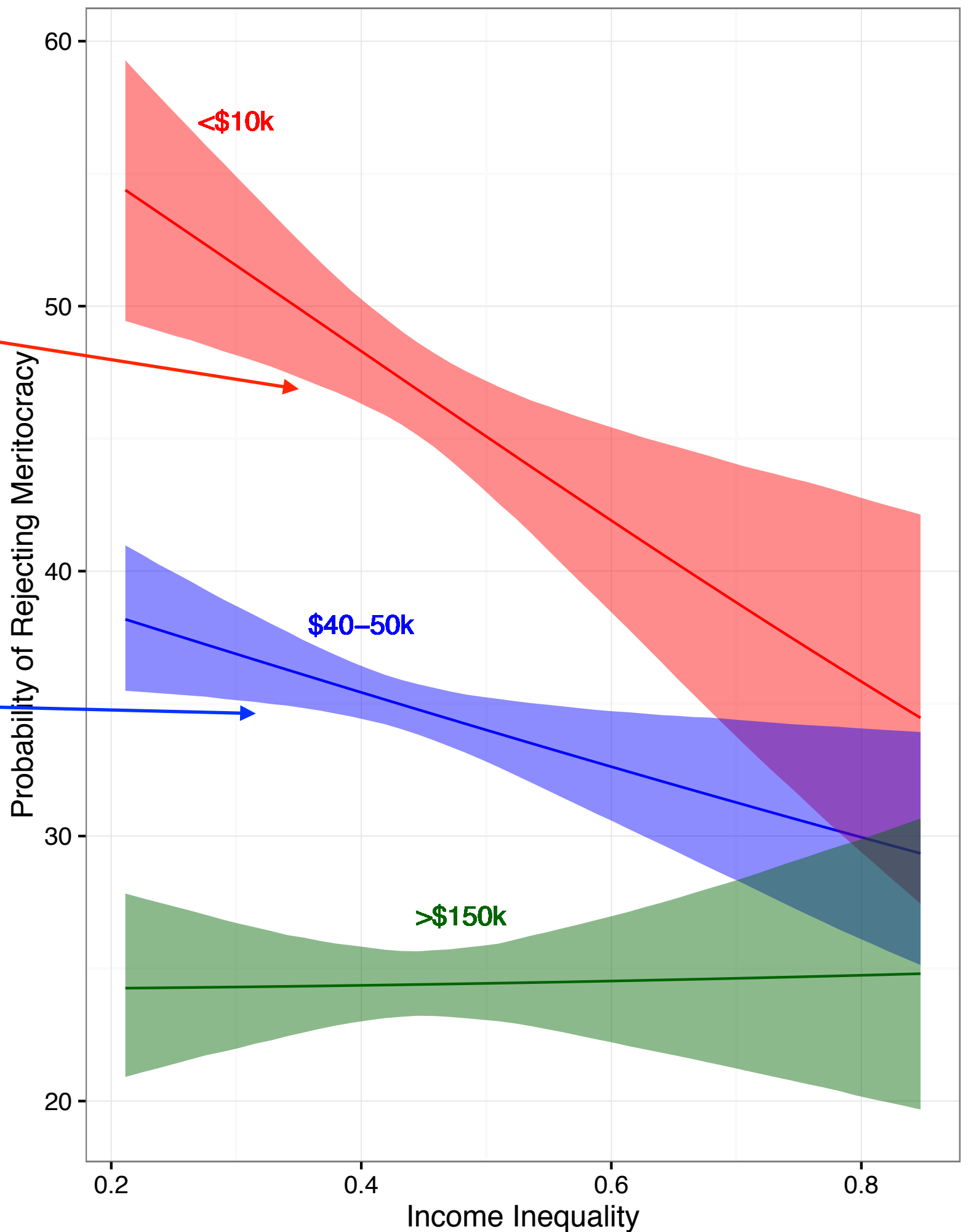
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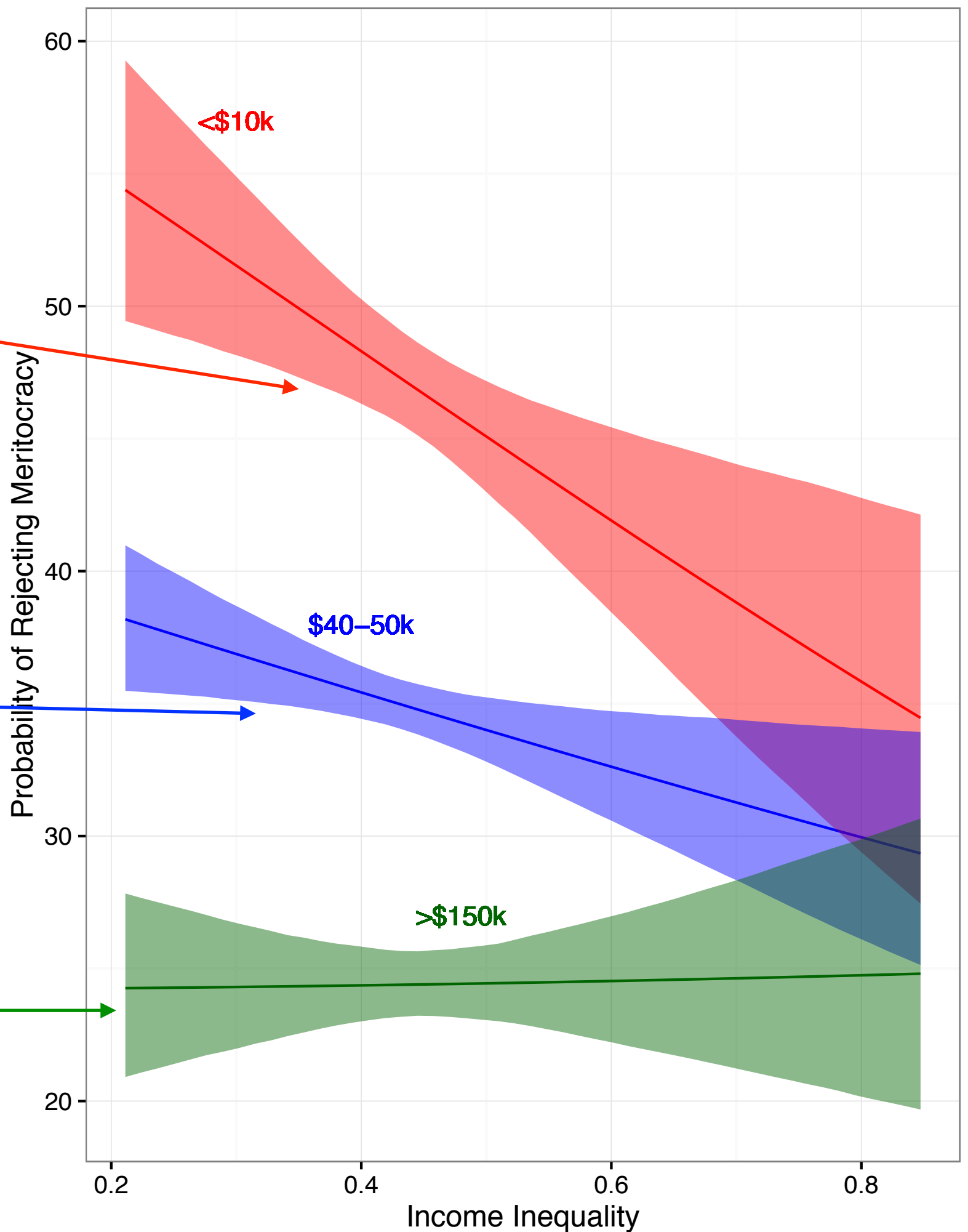


# Results

$-20 \pm 9$   
points

$-9 \pm 9$   
points

$0 \pm 6$   
points



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- 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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