

Decline of the Sociological Imagination? Social Change and Perceptions of Economic Polarization in the United States, 1966-2013*

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To be aware of the idea of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing linkages among a great variety of milieux. To be able to do that is to possess the sociological imagination. (Mills, 1959)

Mills’ 1959 “sociological imagination” is widely recognized as a call for structural thinking: a charge for observers to link outcomes and “biographies” with social causes and currents. Through such an imagination, Mills famously argued, “. . . the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate. . . by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances.” (Mills, 1959: 4).

Even as professional sociologists have largely relegated Mills’ term to the status of a pedagogical slogan, we suggest that the concept highlights important empirical questions about the social structuring of social imaginaries in an era of rising inequality. Income and wealth distributions have become less equal in the U.S. and most other advanced countries since the 1970s, a trend driven primarily by increasing concentration at the top. Social scientists have cast the growth of distributional inequality in the U.S. as a profound transformation, one which carries far-reaching implications for political and economic behaviors (e.g. Moss, Thaker, and Rudnick, 2013; Schneider, Hastings, and LaBriola, 2018; MacLean and Grusky, 2016). In the words of Mike Savage (2019) economic polarization has become “fundamental to the impasse of American society.”

Yet social scientists’ efforts to reckon with the effects of inequality have been complicated by a growing awareness of the degree to which Americans themselves misperceive levels of inequality (Osberg and Smeeding, 2006; Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018; Hauser and Norton, 2017; Norton and Ariely, 2011). Although the majority of Americans do avow concern about inequality and view it in a negative light (McCall, 2013), they also consistently underestimate its severity across a wide array of different measurement techniques (e.g. Osberg and Smeeding, 2006; Bartels, 2016), and they underestimate it to a greater degree than actors in other countries (Osberg and Bechert, 2016).

Americans’ misperceptions of inequality are even more remarkable when placed in historical perspective (Kenworthy and McCall, 2007). Figure 1 below demonstrates the striking

aggregate pattern whereby changes in distributional inequality over time have been inversely correlated with changes in *perceptions* of economic polarization, as measured by whether respondents agree that “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” since the 1960s. As the political scientist Bartels (2016) points out, by this measure a greater portion of the population perceived inequality to be widening during the late 1970s (when it was still low and flat) than during the mid-2000s (by which point it had been growing for decades). A similar post-1992 decline also appears in the other survey-based measures of perceived pay inequality (Kenworthy and McCall, 2007: p. 58-59). Even as the growth of inequality emerged as an increasingly prominent object of social science knowledge during the 1990s and 2000s (Morris and Western, 1999; Piketty and Saez, 2003; Hirschman, 2016), its status as a perceived social fact within the population had become more tenuous. The downward trend continued up until the 2008 Great Recession, after which there was a partial reversal.

This paradoxical pattern raises the key empirical puzzle addressed in this paper. Namely, why did the share of Americans who perceived that “the rich get richer” diminish during the 1990s and 2000s, even as actual levels of inequality continued to grow? Did this decline reflect a broad-based secular fragmentation of the post-war social imaginary (Beck, Lash, and Wynne, 1992; Putnam, 2000; Rodgers, 2012) due to neo-liberalism and/or the disappearance of class and poverty coverage in the news media? Or was it socially differentiated as a function of Americans’ varying exposure to poverty and wealth in local residential environments? Or as a function of shifts in the population distribution, or the changing role of mediating institutional positions amid the decline of labor unions and rising partisan polarization?

We develop these alternative explanations by locating them within two distinct yet potentially complimentary perspectives on macro-distributional perceptions, each of which highlights different mechanisms of change in aggregate beliefs. One perspective treats inequality perceptions as an informational problem and focuses on individuals’ differential exposure to inequality at the local level as a function of between-locality differences in inequality and segregation. This perspective suggests that segregated life-worlds obscured the growing gulf

between the rich and poor by limiting interactions with dissimilar others. In contrast, perspectives from cultural sociology suggest inequality perceptions are as much expressions of situated social cognition (Mijs, 2018; Zerubavel, 2015; Lamont, 2019) as they are mimetic reflections of social-structural exposure. We highlight three sets of socio-institutional positions which, we argue, shape actors’ perceptual frames and may help explain shifting patterns of inequality perception across our study period: birth cohort membership, union membership, and political party affiliation. Shared generational experiences shape birth cohorts’ cultural frames and expectations for income inequality and thereby their members’ ability to perceive shifts that deviate from earlier experiences. Unions historically played a role in mobilizing members’ attention to distributional processes. Finally, since the mid-century, the democratic party has advocated for more egalitarian distributional policies than its republican counterpart (Bartels, 2016), which may differentially direct democrats’ attention to distributional outcomes.

To assess these arguments we collated and harmonized a large set of little-used historical survey datasets covering the period from 1966-2013. Since 1966, the Harris Poll and Pew Surveys have regularly queried respondents on whether they agree that “today it is true that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer.” These surveys have yielded information from over 100,000 respondents across sixty-nine waves. They offer the only historical window over the long duree into Americans’ changing perceptions of economic polarization (McCall, 2013). We also validate the analysis using other perceptual measures available over a more limited time frame from the GSS/ISSP.¹ Although our analysis focuses primarily on explaining the decline of perceived income polarization from 1992-2008, we also draw on the limited post-2008 data to assess how the Great Recession may have transformed the dynamics of macro-distributional perceptions.

We find broad support for the social cognition perspective and little support for the in-

¹The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) has semi-regularly queried respondents about how much they think individuals in different occupations earn. Researchers have used this question to construct a “subjective gini,” based on perceived earnings variance across occupations.

formational perspectives. Union members, democrats, and members of the “baby boomer” cohort are consistently more likely to report perceiving inequality than non-union members, independents/republicans, and Gen-Xers. We found no significant association between local contextual inequality and inequality perceptions on average. The historic trend reversal during the early 1990s was attributable primarily to the shifting effects of partisan political identification. Republicans, who had previously followed similar over time patterns as democrats, increasingly disavowed the idea that the economic gulf between rich and poor was growing. We estimate that if the difference between republicans and democrats in inequality perceptions had remained at its 1992 size, the aggregate downturn would have been halved.

Our analysis makes several broader contributions. First, by analyzing how individual-level correlates of inequality perceptions changed as U.S. society has become more economically stratified, institutionally fragmented, and spatially segregated, we bring a more historical perspective to the growing social-science literature on (mis)perceptions of inequality (Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018; McCall, 2005, 2013; Norton and Ariely, 2011; Osberg and Smeeding, 2006; Chambers, Swan, and Heesacker, 2014; Kteily, Sheehy-Skeffington, and Ho, 2017; Xu and Garand, 2010; Cruces, Perez-Truglia, and Tetaz, 2013; Eriksson and Simpson, 2012; Franko, 2017). This research focuses primarily on cross-sectional variations in perception during the contemporary period as a function of political ideology, social-psychological dispositions, and local contexts. By considering how the determinants of inequality perceptions have varied historically alongside the growth in inequality since the early 1980s (Morris and Western, 1999), we recast distributional beliefs in terms of the coevolution of social structure and social imaginaries (Fischer, 2010).

Second, the analysis uses the case of perceived income polarization to help ground debates about individuation (Beck, 2002; Rodgers, 2012) and cultural logics of “neoliberalism” (Amable, 2011; Centeno and Cohen, 2012) in a set of concrete empirical indicators. We are not the first to suggest that dominant social imaginaries in the U.S. have become less isomorphic with sociological views of social structure over the past forty years. But ours is one of the

only studies we know of to analyze this empirically over time. Contrary to theories which suggest a broad-based individuation of social perception (Putnam, 2000; Rodgers, 2012), our results instead suggest that the decline of a sociological imagination during the 1990s and 2000s, at least as measured by perceived income polarization, is driven by the asymmetric polarization of partisan political beliefs. Beginning in the early 1990s – well before the takeoff of cable news viewership during the early 2000s – republicans began to evince an increasingly divergent conception of macro-distributional reality. This divergence persisted through both democratic and republican administrations, and through the post-2008 recession, but has slightly attenuated alongside the rise of conservative economic populism with the Tea Party Movement.

1 Inequality Perceptions and Economic Polarization

The study of inequality perceptions is tied to a larger set concerns about Americans’ understandings of the social stratification system (Jackman and Jackman, 1983; Kluegel and Smith, 2017; Lamont, 1992, 2019). This body of research has been concerned especially with Americans tolerance and justification of the high levels of economic inequality that prevail in the United States (Benabou, 2000; Kelly and Enns, 2010; Bartels, 2016), as well as the relationship between inequality and support for redistributive policies. Historically, the dominant perspective on these questions is the so-called “liberal consensus”: that Americans tolerate income inequality out of a belief that there is high equality of opportunity in America (McCall, 2013: 30). This issue has received renewed attention in light of the historic growth of income and wealth inequality since the late 1970s. Some recent research suggests that income inequality and belief in equality of opportunity are causally related insofar as rising inequality prompts actors to embrace adaptive rationalizations which cast inequality as natural or warranted (Jost, Banaji, and Nosek, 2004), such as a stronger belief in meritocracy (Mijs, 2019; Trump, 2018). In contrast to the idea that rising inequality

produces its own self-reinforcing hegemony, others point to survey evidence that Americans are concerned about income inequality, and that their concern is increasing. In her review of historical survey data, McCall reports that a consistent majority believe income differences in the U.S. are too large, and that the share increased after 1987 (McCall, 2013: 103). Larry Bartels, drawing on the 2002 American National Election Survey, found that the majority of Americans view increasing inequality is a negative light (Bartels, 2005).

Until recently there was far less research on the prior question of the extent to which Americans even perceive economic inequality. Debates about Americans’ tolerance and preferences regarding inequality have often presumed that actors’ opinions are grounded in some clear sense of how much inequality exists. A growing literature finds that this is not the case. Actors within the United States consistently underestimate the magnitude of distributional disparities (Hauser and Norton, 2017). Researchers in this field have employed a variety of survey instruments to demonstrate the remarkable divergence of American perceptions of inequality from actual economic reality (Norton and Ariely, 2011; Eriksson and Simpson, 2012; Niehues, 2014; Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018). The underestimation of inequality holds across a variety of different measures and methodological designs. Although Americans may be less sanguine about inequality than traditionally assumed by the liberal consensus hypothesis (McCall, 2013), their perception of the underlying phenomenon is downwardly biased.

Even more striking (and less studied) is the historical evolution in (mis)perception. Figure 1 tracks the percent of Americans who agree with the statement the “rich get richer and the poor get poorer” from the Harris Poll and Pew Surveys alongside trends in the top 10% wealth share (left panel) and income share (right panel). This survey item represents the longest-running and most widely cited indicator of perceived distributional inequality (McCall, 2013; Bartels, 2016), and is the main focus of our analysis here. Although the question suffers from some shortcomings such as its double-barreled structure (McCall, 2005), a recent focus group validation study finds that it performs significantly better as a measure of perceived

distributional inequality compared to questions which invoke the abstract term “inequality” directly, as the latter tends to elicit more confusion and varied respondent interpretations (Kim, Pedersen, and Mutz, 2016).

Insert Figure 1 here

The trends in figure 1 demonstrate a remarkable inverse relationship between beliefs about the gap between rich and poor and actual distributional trends at the national level. The percent of Americans perceiving that inequality was increasing shot up from the late 1960s to the mid the 1980s when levels of income inequality were still fairly stable and wealth inequality was decreasing. Moreover, this increasing perception of inequality occurred in the wake of historic reductions in the poverty rate from 1964-1980 (Wimer, Fox, Garfinkel, Kaushal, and Waldfogel, 2013). Conversely, the percent of Americans believing that inequality was increasing began to diminish after the early 1990s, even as distributional inequality continued growing. The inverse relationship is even more stark if one compares perceptions and *wealth* inequality, which declined from 1966-1986 and did not begin to take off until the late 1980s. By this measure, public perception of inequality appears as a historically dynamic phenomenon: Americans during the late 1960s and 1970s were more likely to over-estimate the degree to which society was becoming more disparate, whereas three decades later fewer and fewer saw the growth of disparities which in fact had become more acute.²

Prior interpretations of this series have emphasized continuity insofar as a large absolute majority of respondents continued to believe that “the rich get richer while poor get poorer,” throughout this period (McCall, 2013), but the dynamic trends present a puzzle insofar as there was a clear reversal. Of particular explanatory interest for us is why inequality perceptions declined after the early 1990s (by approximately eight to ten percentage points

²Recognition of this perceptual gap is not new. Reflecting on one of the earliest Harris inequality polls in 1968, the sociologist Amitai Etzioni (1968) bemoaned the disjunct between majority perception of a growing gap between rich and poor, and the actuality that the U.S. had experienced dramatic declines in poverty over the preceding decade (pg. 5).

through the mid-2000s). This decline appears independently in both the Harris and Pew data series, as well as in an alternative measure of inequality perceptions from the ISSP (shown in Figure 9 in Appendix A; see also Kenworthy and McCall (2007)), which make us confident that it is real rather than a survey artifact.³ A second question is what drove the post-2008 reversal, whereby the aggregate trend line in inequality perceptions began to increase, although the single year of data makes any potential conclusions preliminary.

2 Explaining Inequality Perceptions: The Social Structuring of Exposure

We develop two theories to explain cross-sectional trends in inequality perceptions, and why they may have changed over time in the aggregate. We term these theories the “differential exposure” and “social cognition” theses. We discuss these perspectives below and then extend them to develop specific hypotheses that account for these historical trends in perception.

The “differential exposure” perspective on inequality perceptions emphasizes that exposure to inequality is socially structured. Nobody experiences national distributions on a day to day level. Instead, their experiences of socio-economic disparities are a function of the particular contexts they inhabit (Franko, 2017; Newman, Shah, and Lauterbach, 2018). This perspective assumes that people infer from their local economic realities to form beliefs about national distributions.

There are two characteristics of local environments that are likely to be salient for inequality perceptions: local inequality and local segregation. Local inequality shapes misperceptions of national phenomena because individuals may infer from locally observed levels of inequality and project this to the national level. Xu and Garand (2010) find a positive

³Although we refer throughout to “inequality perception” as a shorthand, our main survey item of interest does not reference the abstract concept of “inequality” directly. Rather it asks whether the gap between rich and poor is growing wider.

relationship between state-level income inequality and respondents' inequality perceptions. They also find that this relationship is attenuated by income. Newman, Velez, Hartman, and Bankert (2015) similarly find interactions between individuals' SES and perceptions of local inequality. They demonstrate that high income residents living in more unequal counties tend to believe in the power of meritocracy, while low income residents in the same county tend to reject said beliefs. These findings suggest that actors tend to extrapolate from their varied sub-national inequality experiences when answering survey questions about inequality. In other words, actors' perceptions of inequality are shaped by local distributional realities, just not the realities at the national level. Empirically, this perspective implies that we should observe a positive association between localized inequality and respondents' likelihood of believing that the rich get richer.

- Hypothesis 1A: Individuals who live in regions with higher income inequality and/or more rapid growth of income inequality will be more likely to perceive that the “rich get richer.”

Although differences in the level and growth of inequality across locales might help explain between-person variation in inequality perception, geographic variation cannot explain the aggregate decline in inequality perception after the early 1990s, for the simple reason that inequality continued to grow. Almost all states across the United States experienced increases in income and wealth inequality during this period.⁴

The degree to which individuals are in a position to see economic polarization is also a function of social class segregation in actors' day-to-day life-worlds (Edmiston, 2018). One reason that rising inequality might not translate into increased perception of inequality is that social class segregation operates as a countervailing perceptual factor, rendering inequality less visible. This is sometimes referred to as a “gated community” hypothesis.

⁴Within-state inequality increased for every state from 1990 to 2007 except Alaska and Hawaii. The median percent change in Gini coefficient from 1990 to 2007 was nine percent. Thus changes in local-level inequality cannot account for the aggregate decline in perceptions of inequality over the 1990s and 2000s.

Social class segregation might structure inequality perceptions at multiple geographic scales. At the macro-level, the U.S. has seen a pronounced divergence in household incomes across geographic areas, as measured by commuting zones Manduca (2019).⁵ The growth of between-place segregation was driven primarily by increased sorting of high (top 10%) income households into a relatively small number of coastal enclaves. One consequence is that fewer people live in locales where locally observable income distributions approximate the national distribution. In other words, greater between-city sorting effectively reduces within-city economic diversity, and thereby residents’ local exposure to the full extent of inequality. For the median respondent, increasing gaps between rich and poor might be less evident because the wealthy no longer merely live in a different neighborhood, but increasingly in a different city.

Perceptions of inequality might also be skewed by segregation across neighborhoods within cities. Since the 1980s, those at the bottom and especially at the top of the income distribution are increasingly concentrated amongst one another within metropolitan areas (Fry and Taylor, 2012). Although recent studies question whether average summary index levels of within-city neighborhood segregation have grown since the 1980s (Logan, Foster, Ke, and Li, 2018), those cities with more rapid growth of income inequality do tend to have higher levels of residential income segregation (Reardon and Bischoff, 2014). This implies that actors in the areas with the starkest inequality are also disproportionately shielded from exposure to inequality.

To the extent that social perceptions are formed largely by actors’ day to day experiences, greater segregation (both between and within cities) will tend to diminish perceptions of inequality by limiting regular encounters with dissimilar others (Edmiston, 2018; Minkoff and Lyons, 2019). Cruces et al. (2013) find that in areas with high economic segregation, poorer residents overestimate their rank in the national income distribution, while richer residents tend to underestimate their rank. Individuals’ local “reference group” can thus

⁵Commuting zone geography is similar to metropolitan statistical areas, but they also cover rural regions.

serve to bias their perceptions of national-level phenomena. Mendelberg, McCabe, and Thal (2017) likewise finds that local economic segregation can shape individuals' perceptions and beliefs about distributional outcomes. As Dorling (2015) puts it: "the implications of this rising segregation have been a growth in ignorance across the board: ignorance of poverty for the rich, ignorance by the poor of the true value of riches held by the few, and more and more people seeing themselves as average, while fewer are near to average." (364)

We focus particularly on residential income segregation for reasons of data availability, but it is important to note that life-worlds have also simultaneously become more segregated along other dimensions in an era of rising inequality. For instance, increasing marital homogamy contributes to increased aggregate inequality between families (Schwartz, 2013) at the same time that it also reduces actors' exposure to inequality through extended spousal family networks (Charles, Hurst, and Killewald, 2013). Similarly, the fissuring of workplaces (Weil, 2014) has heightened aggregate inequality at the same time that it has made the composition of work establishments increasingly homogeneous with respect to employees' education (Hellerstein, Neumark, and McInerney, 2008). In all of these cases, the more pronounced sorting which has accompanied rising inequality has also paradoxically made growing inequality less present in actors' day-to-day lives.

Thus, even as the socio-economic distribution has widened, Americans reside near an increasingly narrow portion of the distribution. These statements lead to the following two hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 2A: Individuals who live in regions with higher income segregation will be less likely to perceive that the "rich get richer."
- Hypothesis 2B: Overall increases in income segregation help account for diminished percent of Americans who believe the "rich get richer" since the early 1990s.

3 Theorizing Inequality Perception as Social Cognition: The Social Structuring of Perceptual Frames

The differential exposure hypotheses detailed above suggest that the visibility of inequality in the local environment shapes perceptions of this phenomenon. A sociological account of inequality perceptions must also attend to how perception is shaped by differential cognition: Individuals may perceive the same environmental cues differently and these differences can be socially patterned (Hochschild, 2001). The frames through which actors apprehend the social world are shaped by both cultural toolkits and habitus on the one hand, and day-to-day experiences on the other. Below we develop a second set of hypotheses that emphasize how, conditional on common exposure, variations in the cultural frames which individuals bring to social situations will shape their perceptions of inequality.

Drawing on insights from phenomenology (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1967) and cognitive sociology (Zerubavel, 2015), we suggest two different mechanisms of social cognition. First, the sociology of perception focuses on the social foundations of attention. What is visible is a function of not only what is perceptually available, but also the extent to which the viewer attends to a given object. Attention is the habitual “filter” by which individuals come to differentiate relevance from irrelevance, figure from background. Social groups can form different attentional communities, adopting norms and scripts concerning what is worthy of noticing. Doctors pay attention to different aspects of a sick person’s body than lay individuals because of their professional training (Zerubavel, 2015: 66-67). Economists emphasize specific economic indicators over others because of dominant theories which suggest that some facts are more attention-worthy (Fligstein, Stuart Brundage, and Schultz, 2017). Attentional communities can vary along any number of dimensions, including class background, institutional location, or occupational identity.

Second, perspectives from cultural sociology suggest that individuals may perceive the reality that is line with their identities and social groupings. These perspectives empha-

size that differences in perception may be driven by not only differences in attention, but also divergences in how social actors make sense of material phenomenon. For example, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus highlights how the frames through which actors perceive the social world are systematically linked to actors’ social backgrounds (Lizardo, 2004). This emphasis on framing in cognition is broadly consonant with work in social psychology on motivated cognition, which argues that actors are motivated to seek out environmental cues that confirm their beliefs about the world. A handful of inequality perception researchers have drawn on these insights already, designing social psychological experiments to test the relationship between perception and belief (Hochschild, 2001; Kteily et al., 2017). In terms of inequality perceptions, we may acquire beliefs about the causes of difference in institutional experiences. Individuals who attend economically homogeneous schools, for example, may be more likely to adopt individualist beliefs about the nature of human difference (i.e. that differences in social outcomes are due to differences in individual ability or effort). Heterogeneous environments may make visible more structural causes and thus lead to the adoption of structural beliefs about the cause of inequality (Mijs, 2018).

We don’t distinguish between these two mechanisms in our empirical results as both perspectives predict that social groupings will have a marked impact on perception above and beyond any difference in social reality. In the next section we highlight three relevant sets of social categories which may shape perceptions of inequality: labor unions, cohorts, and political parties. We develop hypotheses for each of these social categories and link them to our potential explanations for the historical shifts in the aggregate trend of inequality perceptions.

3.1 Unions

The impact which labor unions once had on economic life in the post-war U.S. only became fully apparent in the wake of their decline (Rosenfeld, 2014). Beyond their role in structuring workplace conditions, employment contracts, and labor market inequality, labor organiza-

tions also socialize and mobilize their members politically. Although individual unions have varied in their precise political orientation, tactics, and grassroots engagement, they have generally sought to build class solidarity by directing attention toward distributional outcomes (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013). For instance, in recent decades unions have undertaken CEO “pay-shaming” campaigns, which aim to publicize out-sized high executive compensation relative to workers’. Unions are thus one of the few institutional mouthpieces in American society which propound a socio-political logic that is isomorphic with sociological conflict theories.

As organizations, unions have well-documented effects on the attitudes and behaviors of their members. Persons in union households tend to be more left-leaning, politically informed, and supportive of redistributive policies compared to demographically similar non-union members (Rosenfeld, 2014: ch. 7). In a strong test, Ahlquist, Clayton, and Levi (2014) show how ILU members’ embeddedness in the labor movement led them to adopt trade policy preferences at odds with their own economic interests. Until the 1990s, unions’ ideological power also resulted in substantial cultural spillover effects within social networks and local communities. Western and Rosenfeld argue that high union density inculcated a moral economy of pay fairness norms, which compressed wage distributions in non-union segments of local labor markets (Western and Rosenfeld, 2011). As unions have declined, this moral economy effect has weakened.

We suspect that unions’ efforts to reinforce a worldview which foregrounds inequality as a problem would make union households more prone to see a growing gap between rich and poor in society. However, declining rates of participation in unions means that an ever-smaller share of Americans were exposed to this treatment (either directly or through a household member). Deunionization disembedded a large class of Americans from institutions which had previously served to mobilize attention toward distributional processes (Feigenbaum, Hertel-Fernandez, and Williamson, 2018). Even if labor organizations continue to publicize growing pay inequality, far fewer Americans are apt to pay attention. As Faux (2014)

predicts, the decline of unions carries cultural implications: “the consequences of the demise of labor unions will go far beyond paychecks and policies. Unions have not always lived up to their ideals, but they embody the values of solidarity, fairness and mutual self-help....which are being elbowed aside in a culture that idolizes the egocentric.”

This leads to our third set of hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 3B: Members of union households will be more likely to perceive that the “rich get richer.”
- Hypothesis 3B: The decline in unionization rates helps account for diminished percent of Americans who believe the “rich get richer” since the early 1990s.

3.2 “Neo-liberal” Generation and Cohort Effects

Another relevant set of factors derive from demographic approaches to the study of cultural and attitudinal change (e.g. Hout and Fischer, 2002; Mannheim, 1952; Pampel and Hunter, 2012; Vaisey and Lizardo, 2016). Cohort succession mechanisms of change highlight the fact that individual beliefs’ are often “baked in” at an early age and remain relatively stable within persons over time (Vaisey and Lizardo, 2016). Aggregate change tends to be driven by cohort differences (VanHeuvelen and Copas, 2018).

To what extent can we attribute the over-time shifts in perception of economic polarization to cohort replacement in the population, as distinct from contemporaneous period processes? Mannheim (1952) proposes that historical conditions cause cohorts to develop distinctive socio-political outlooks. Although *zeitgeists* are difficult to measure contemporaneously, they become encoded in the distinctive behavioral patterns of generational groups. Drawing on Bourdieu, Eyerman and Turner (1998) extend Mannheim’s formulation to include cohort-specific cultural dispositions and perceptual frames, what they call “generational habitus.” Such habitae are forged through cohort-specific experiences, especially during the formative years of transition to adulthood (Elder, 1998).

Generational imprinting can have long-lasting effects on actors' attitudes about economy, society, and government. For instance, Malmendier and Nagel (2011) find that the 1930s Great Depression permanently shaped a generation's orientation toward markets, disposing them to support banking regulations and view stocks and debt suspiciously. Using several datasets on an array of historical and geographic contexts, Giuliano and Spilimbergo (2013) find that growing up during a recession produces long-lasting and consistent cohort effects on attitudes about the economy, namely greater support for economic redistribution and a more pronounced sense that economic success depends on luck. Political scientists have similarly shown that the political-cultural background in which young adults are socialized shapes their norms and preferences (Grasso, Farrall, Gray, Hay, and Jennings, 2017; VanHeuvelen and Copas, 2018; Center, 2011). In the U.S. the baby boom generation that came of age in the 1960s and early 1970s has tended to be unusually left-leaning throughout the life-course, while the subsequent generation that came of age during the late 1970s and 1980s (Gen-X) has tended to be unusually right-leaning. Across the Atlantic, Grasso et al. (2017) document that UK cohorts which came of age in the wake of Thatcher's election have since become increasingly "Thatcherite" in their attitudes toward economic redistribution.

Building on these lines of research, we suspect that tendencies to perceive inequality are partly shaped by generational experiences, and that the inverse historical relationship between inequality and perceptions of inequality is partly driven by cohort succession in the population. The cresting of inequality perceptions during the 1980s partly reflects the peak population representation of the children of the New Deal and the Great Society (those born roughly from 1915-1930, and from 1945-1960). Despite their cultural differences, both of these generations were socialized into liberal bureaucratic societies, where universalist social policies, cold war civic nationalism, and relatively egalitarian institutional norms promoted a popular, quasi-sociological imaginary (Rodgers, 2012), and both political parties portrayed inequities as pressing, tractable public concerns. The very same political and institutional conditions which produced bold governmental and social movement efforts to redress inequal-

ities also endowed the generations which came of age during these periods with an elevated disposition to see inequality throughout their lives.

Conversely, we suspect that increasing representation of Reagan-era “neo-liberal” or “Gen-X” cohorts in the adult population partly accounts for declining perceptions of inequality during the 1990s and 2000s. Although they entered adulthood and the labor market in a period which was becoming ever-more unequal, the institutional conditions of their upbringing also tended to produce a generational habitus which was more individualist (Eyerman and Turner, 1998; Rodgers, 2012). Thus, the generation which most fully felt the effects of deepening structural fissures in the global economy was paradoxically least disposed to “see” widening inequality.

It is worth noting that cohort differences in perceptions could be confounded by cohort differences in party identification. As we discuss below, democrats tend to be more likely to perceive inequality than republicans (Bartels, 2016), and members of Generation X have long been more republican than adjacent cohorts at comparable ages. A strong version of the generational habitus hypothesis which we test below would suggest that, even conditional on individual party affiliation, members of Gen-X will be less likely to perceive inequality.

This leads to the following two hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 4A: Even though they came of age in a period of high and increasing inequality, post-Reagan era cohorts less likely to perceive that the “rich get richer” compared to earlier cohorts.
- Hypothesis 4B: Generational succession helps account for diminished percent of Americans who believe the “rich get richer” since the early 1990s.

3.3 Party Membership

We also examine political party membership as a key component of social cognition. As early as the classic *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960),

political scientists have recognized the potential for party identification to shape individuals' cognition and perception. Campbell and colleagues cast partisanship as a filter, a "perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation. The stronger the party bond, the more exaggerated the process of selection and perceptual distortion will be." (133) This research tradition recognizes partisan identification as a type of social identity (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2004), obdurate over time and constitutive of individuals' "hearts and minds," rather than the result of rational choice processes of utility maximization. Researchers have located individuals' perceptions of reality in political organizations and partisan identities (e.g. Hochschild, 2001; Jerit and Barabas, 2012; Bartels, 2002).

The more recent literature on (mis)perceptions of inequality has documented partisan differences in the cross-section (Chambers et al., 2014; Bartels, 2016). Democrats are consistently more likely to perceive increasing inequality than republicans. This is not surprising. Like labor unions, the democratic party platform has tended to emphasize egalitarian redistributive policies, which may direct democrats to be more attentive to inequality.

There are reasons to suspect that the relationship between party identification and inequality perception has evolved over time. The demographics of partisanship - who identifies as a democrat versus a republican - and the very meaning of partisan categories have changed substantially over the second half of the twentieth century. The realignment of the democratic party in favor of the civil rights movement resulted in massive declines in democratic partisanship in the south over the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, particularly amongst non-college educated whites (Bartels, 2006). Furthermore, the number of Americans who identify as independents began growing steadily in the years following the Watergate scandal.⁶ Given our hypothesis about the role of party organizations in shaping the views of their partisans, we suspect that the diminished share of identified democrats may help account for the post-1990 downturn in inequality perceptions.

⁶See Figure 12 in Appendix A for the distribution of party identification by year in our dataset and in the American National Election Survey.

Changes in rates of party identification have also been accompanied by shifts in the attitudinal implications of party identification as the parties became more polarized. From the 1970s onward, political elites – especially on the right – diverged on a number of key policy issues (Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz, 2006). These elite fractures in turn drove mass opinion polarization across numerous social, economic, and political issues (Evans, 2003; Campbell, 2016; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson, 1996; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Hout and Fischer, 2014). Attitudinal polarization was abetted by the transition from network television to cable news in the 1980s and 1990s, which afforded Americans the opportunity to choose a news source in line with their partisan preferences (Prior, 2007), and exposed them to increasingly divergent depictions of socio-economic reality (Ansolabehere, Meredith, and Snowberg, 2011). Given these trends, we suspect that cognition of inequality also became increasingly disparate over time, such that republicans became less and less prone to perceive inequality.

This leads to three hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 5A: Respondents who identify as republican will be less likely at all time periods to perceive that the “rich get richer,” even when controlling for other relevant demographic and contextual variables.
- Hypothesis 5B: Shifting numbers of identified republicans vs. democrats helps account for diminished percent of Americans who believe the “rich get richer” after the early 1990s.
- Hypothesis 5C: The increasing salience of party membership on inequality perceptions helps account for diminished percent of Americans who believe the “rich get richer” after the early 1990s.

It is worth noting an alternative factor that might account for patterns of partisan perception over time. One line of work suggests that partisan perceptions reflect response bias rather than divergent epistemic constructions of social reality (Prior, Sood, and Khanna,

2015). Partisans may respond to perceptual questions that have normative valence (such as whether the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer) in a manner that supports their ideological commitments or evaluations of the current administration. Prior and collaborators (2015) find that partisan biases in responses to factual questions are especially common when said questions are framed in a political manner, and are reduced when respondents are motivated to answer accurately. As we elaborate below, however, partisan-approval and response biases are unlikely explanations for the post-1990 downturn in aggregate inequality perceptions or partisan differences therein.

3.4 Interaction Effects

As final note, our “differential exposure” and “social cognition” hypotheses aren’t necessarily mutually exclusive. The sociology of perception, for example, predicts that differences in reported perception may be driven by differences in attention to the same underlying reality. This suggests that local reality may only shape the perceptions of those who are predisposed to see it. This leads to our final set of hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 6: The association between our “differential exposure” variables and inequality perceptions will vary by our three social cognition variables.

4 Methodology

To test our hypotheses we draw on the only survey instrument of inequality perceptions available over the long-term in American public opinion research: “Do you feel that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer?” This question has been included in fifty-eight Harris Poll surveys from 1966 to 2013, as well as fourteen Pew Surveys from 1987 to 2012. We constructed a harmonized dataset from these seventy-two survey waves, acquired from the Harris Poll Archive at the University of North Carolina’s Odum Institute and from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. Together, these surveys include

over 100,000 individual respondents’ perceptions of inequality, and offer a unique historical window into Americans’ changing perceptions of distributional inequality (McCall, 2013). We applied casewise deletion, which yields an analytical N of 77,539 respondents in the full data set (1966-2013), and 9,129 respondents in the geo-located (MSA-level) dataset (1987-2012 only).⁷

Comparing inequality beliefs across the seventy-two different survey waves requires harmonization. The precise wording of our main item of interest, whether the respondent feels that “the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer,” varied slightly across survey waves, as did the structure of available responses (in some years responses were confined to a binomial response, while in other years a Likert type scale was used). We collapsed our measure into a “yes” (“I agree”) and “no” (“I don’t agree”) binary, excluding from analysis individuals who responded “not sure” or those who refused to answer.

As with most survey research, one concern is measurement validity owing to respondent interpretation. Our difficulties are compounded by the fact that we are confined to a single outcome measure. The “rich get richer while the poor get poorer” question might be capturing a more general set of negative socio-economic sentiments or social alienation, as opposed to distributional perceptions specifically. We mitigate this concern and “isolate” the perceptual component by controlling for respondents’ egocentric economic satisfaction and macroeconomic (sociotropic) optimism.⁸ We also checked whether our findings were sensitive to our survey instrument in two ways. First, we checked whether the main results were robust across differences in the precise wording of the “rich get richer” question (see Appendix A, Table 2). Second, we tested whether the cross-sectional relationships we observed could be replicated using an entirely different perceptual measure that does not prime “rich” and “poor.” This alternative measure, constructed from ISSP data, captures

⁷For more details how we constructed these samples as well as data missingness investigations, please see Appendix A.5.

⁸Egocentric economic satisfaction refers to an individual’s evaluation of their personal economic life. Macroeconomic optimism refers to an individual’s evaluation of the economy as a whole. Following Harris, we collapse these questions into a composite measure which we term “alienation.” We only included this measure in the full data analysis, not in the MSA subset. (Harris, 2008)

respondents’ implicit perceptions of pay variance across several occupational categories (see Figure 9 in Appendix A).

Our key covariates include birth cohort, union membership, party membership, and residential location. Other covariates include age, race, and income. In the original survey, both income and age were coded as a series of open and closed categorical ranges, which were not compatible across survey waves. We harmonized age and income into numeric measures by using random draws from a uniform distribution within the range of each bounded category. For the open (top-end) ranges, we constructed an empirical pareto distribution from the observed data. We deflated income values using the Consumer Price Index.

Our union membership data indicates whether the respondent or another member of the household is a member of a union. Not all survey waves included this question, but we do have data on union membership through 2012.⁹ As a result, we only included union membership as a covariate in models that were specifically examining the relationship between union membership and inequality perceptions. Our measure for party membership classifies respondents as republican, democratic, or “independent/other.” Some survey waves offered respondents the chance to identify a specific third-party. We collapsed these into the “independent/other” category. We weighted all descriptive plots with post-stratification survey weights we constructed based on age, gender, and level of education using the Current Population Survey.

To test hypotheses 1 and 2 we measured local economic context and segregation at the metropolitan level. It was not possible, however, to examine these factors across the full historical period because respondents’ geographic locators were not available in the Harris Poll data. Thus we analyze the contextual effects using a subset of the PEW data from 1987-2012 for which we were able to link respondents to localities. These two decades cover our core period of interest during which inequality perceptions peaked and then declined.

For Pew surveys in 1987 and 1988 we measured context using respondents’ three-digit

⁹The 2012 data only is not directly comparable with other years, as the 2012 survey which included union data only asked about the respondent, not other family members.

home telephone area code. We acquired a geo-spatial dataset of the North American Number Plan circa 1990 and adjusted it to account for a small number of reported area code splits from 1987-1990. We then allocated census tracts to area codes using 1990 census geography. For the surveys after 1988 (1990-2012) we could link respondents directly to MSAs and calculate our measures at the standard metropolitan level.

We experimented with multiple measures of economic context and segregation within MSAs. We included in analyses the standard gini index of household income inequality, the gini index of wealth inequality, the top 10%’s share of income, mean relative deprivation, and the poverty rate. We measured within-MSA segregation using Reardon’s rank-order information theory index (Bischoff and Reardon 2014). This is an entropy index of segregation, which captures the ratio of within census tract income variations to rank-order income variation in the broader metropolitan area. This measure has the advantage of being invariant to differences in the level of income inequality across macro-areas, which allows us to distinguish income segregation and income inequality empirically. We measure between-MSA income segregation as the extent of local exposure to extremes of national distribution. Including such a range of measures for local economic context and segregation allowed us to test whether other facets of distributional reality might have a more salient relationship with actors’ perceptions of whether the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. We standardized all these variables by year in order to compare observations across the 1990 shift from using area code to MSA as the geographic level of analysis. Finally, in order to include a larger number of respondents in our analysis of local variation, we also ran models with state-level measures of inequality, which were available for a larger fraction of the Pew data.

To test the cross-sectional hypotheses (1A, 2A, 3A, 4A, 5A, and 6), we ran linear probability regression models with year fixed-effects.¹⁰ For each respective hypothesis, if we found evidence for a cross-sectional association, we proceeded onto the second set of hypotheses to examine how much changes in either the levels or the effects of the covariates could account

¹⁰We also ran logistic regression models to ensure our results were insensitive to model parameterization. These results are included in Appendix A, Table 1.

for the post-1990 downturn in aggregate inequality perceptions (hypotheses 2B, 3B, 4B, 5B, and 5C). We first examined year-variable interaction effects to see if the relationship between inequality perceptions and our key variables changed over time. Second, we simulated counterfactual scenarios to estimate the aggregate trend in inequality perceptions if each of our covariates were held constant at the levels and effects observed in 1992, the last year before the sharp decline in perceptions began.

5 Results

Our analysis proceeds in two stages. We begin by testing the cross-sectional hypotheses 1A, 2A, 3A, 4A, 5A, and 6A. Hypotheses 1-2 and 6 are assessed using the geo-located Pew surveys from 1987-2012, while hypotheses 3-5 are tested on the full combined Harris/Pew data from 1966-2013. We finish our results by assessing the over-time hypotheses 2B, 3B, 4B, 5B, and 5C. In the text below we present our results in a series of figures. All model output that generated these figures is included in appendices referenced in the text.

5.1 Environmental Exposure: Local-Level Inequality and Segregation

Hypothesis 1 proposes that sub-national variations in levels of inequality correlates with inequality perceptions, such that residing in regions where inequality is greater will render actors more prone to believe that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. Hypothesis 2 predicted that the growth of residential income segregation has served to insulate actors' day-to-day experience from growing distributional disparities, such that actors who reside in more economically segregated metropolitan contexts will be less likely to perceive that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer, *ceteris paribus*. Figure 2 shows coefficient estimates for a variety of state and MSA-level measures of inequality and segregation on inequality perceptions over the 1987-2012 period. The adjusted models control for cohort,

education, income, alienation (state only), party, and race. The model output associated with this figure is included in Tables 4, 5, and 6 in Appendix B.

Insert Figure 2 here

At the state level, individuals in states that have seen an increase in Gini over the preceding five years (i.e. “state Gini trend”) are slightly more likely to report perceiving inequality. The Gini trend variable does not rise to statistical significance in the unadjusted model, but once controls are included the coefficient does become marginally significant. In scaled terms, individuals living in states that had a standard deviation increase in their state’s Gini coefficient in the five years prior to the survey have a 1.3 % greater probability of reporting perceiving inequality. In the other state models we do not see any evidence that actors in more economically unequal states are more prone to perceiving inequality.

This lack of association between local-level inequality and inequality perceptions also holds at the MSA level. While the Gini coefficient is significantly positive in the unadjusted model, these estimates attenuate to zero in the covariate-adjusted model, suggesting that the apparent metropolitan-level contextual effect is actually driven by compositional characteristics of residents.¹¹ The same pattern holds for the poverty rate and relative mean deprivation measures. The wealth Ginis are non-significant and estimated at zero in both models.

We find a similar pattern for inequality perceptions and local-level segregation. For our within-MSA segregation measure, in neither the unadjusted nor the adjusted model do we see any substantively or statistically significant results. For our between-MSA segregation measure, “MSA Income Exposure,” the coefficient is significant in the unadjusted model, but its estimate drops to zero once relevant individual controls are included.

Taken as a whole, our analysis of the relationship between local context and actors’

¹¹We do not include any analysis of Gini or other trends at the MSA-level because of the post-1990 shift from using area codes to MSAs as the geographic unit of analysis. We deal with the lack of comparability for the time invariant measures through standardization, but no such easy method was available for time variant measures.

inequality perceptions suggests a null association between actors’ likelihood of perceiving increasing inequality and local economic context. For local-level inequality, the only measure associated with increased perceptions of inequality is the five-year Gini trend measured at the state level. The estimated effects, furthermore, are substantively small. At the MSA level, which is a better proxy for individuals’ environmental exposure, we found no evidence. This null finding runs counter to hypothesis 1A. It also runs counter to past research using other data sources (Franko, 2017; Xu and Garand, 2010). We also find no evidence that living in a more economically segregated area leads to a reduced likelihood of perceiving inequality (hypothesis 2A). The apparent lack of any direct mimetic relationship casts doubt on the utility of perspectives which focus on variations in contextual exposure, rather than variations in perceptual dispositions.

5.2 Social Cognition: Union, Generation, and Party Membership

Our second set of results examines hypotheses 3A, 4A, and 5A regarding perceptual divergences by cohort, union, and party identification. We assessed hypotheses 3A, 4A, and 5A on the full combined Harris-Pew database spanning 1966-2013. We also examined interaction effects between our social cognition variables and differential exposure variables on the smaller PEW subset (hypothesis 6). These interaction models allow us to examine whether the null effects described in the previous section are because local inequality and segregation shape the perceptions only among a subset of those who are more predisposed to see it. We first discuss our main effect models and then bring in the interaction effect results.

5.2.1 Perceptual Framing Main Effects

Figure 3 below shows the predicted probabilities across our focal individual-level covariates. This figure was estimated from a model which includes year-fixed effects and individual controls (see Table 9 in Appendix C). The cohort subfigure also includes unadjusted and age-adjusted models to disentangle cohort from age effects.

Insert Figure 3 here

These figures show broad support for Hypotheses 3A, 4A, and 5A. *Ceteris paribus*, union members are 4% more likely than non-union members to report perceiving inequality. Members of the baby boomer generation are more likely in all models to report perceiving inequality than Gen-Xers. They are also more likely to report perceiving inequality than older cohorts, although the difference is only statistically significant for the 1925- 1934 cohort in the unadjusted and age-adjusted models. That the predicted difference between the baby boomer and Gen-X cohorts holds across all three models demonstrates that the cohort-perception association for these two cohorts is not an age effect. We note that these findings are insensitive to alternative definitions of generational cohorts (see Table 3 in Appendix A). Republicans, finally, are 17.5% less likely than democrats to report perceiving inequality. Independents are also less likely to report perceiving inequality than democrats, although the effect is substantively smaller.

5.2.2 Informational-Perceptual Interaction Effects

The sociology of perception predicts that individuals from different groups will perceive the same reality differently. Our earlier null findings regarding the role of local economic context in explaining cross-sectional perceptual variation may be due to a heterogeneous relationship between local environmental information and inequality perceptions. Republicans and democrats, union members and non-union members, boomers and gen-Xers may make different inferences from the same local environment because their cognitive frames may prompt them to attend to the same local realities differently.

To account for this possibility, we examined the interaction between MSA-level segregation and gini measures, and our three social cognition variables. In terms of local inequality, none of the interaction coefficients were significant substantively or statistically. This same pattern held for the segregation interaction effects, which were still largely insignificant. The only exception to this pattern was the democrat-segregation coefficient. An increase of one

standard deviation of local segregation is associated with a 1.7% increase in the gap between republicans and democrats (from 22.5% to 24.2%). This coefficient was only statistically significant at the 10% level, however. These results are included in Tables 10 - 15 in Appendix D.

Figure 4 shows the estimated difference for our perceptual comparisons (republicans versus democrats, union vs. non-union members, boomers versus gen-Xers) by whether the comparison occurs between individuals living in a high inequality/segregation area versus low inequality/segregation area. We defined high inequality and segregation as residing in a metropolitan area one standard deviation above the sample mean on those measures, low inequality as residing in a county one standard deviation below the sample mean.

Insert Figure 4 here

In this figure, the key comparison is between the pairs of “high inequality/segregation” and “low inequality/segregation” first difference estimators:

$$\mathbb{E}((\text{Perception}_i = \text{Yes} | \text{Party}_i = \text{Democrat}) - (\text{Perception}_i = \text{Yes} | \text{Party}_i = \text{Republican}))$$

$$\mathbb{E}((\text{Perception}_i = \text{Yes} | \text{Union}_i = \text{Yes}) - (\text{Perception}_i = \text{Yes} | \text{Union}_i = \text{No}))$$

$$\mathbb{E}((\text{Perception}_i = \text{Yes} | \text{Cohort}_i = \text{Boomer}) - (\text{Perception}_i = \text{Yes} | \text{Cohort}_i = \text{Gen-X}))$$

In all cases the pairs of bars overlap each other, providing a visual display of the null interaction results. The gap between republicans and democrats, union and non-union members, boomers and gen-Xers persists regardless of local economic reality. High inequality doesn’t make democrats more sensitive and high segregation doesn’t make republicans less sensitive. These interaction results replicate our earlier null findings regarding the relationship between local-level economic context and inequality perceptions and provide even further evidence for the primacy of social cognition instead.

5.3 Explaining the Post-1990 Downturn

The cross-sectional results discussed thus far highlight the potential role of cohort shifts, de-unionization, and party realignment in driving the post-1990 decline of inequality perceptions depicted in Figure 1. As we found little evidence for the role of geographic differences in inequality and segregation driving cross sectional divergences in inequality perceptions, we do not expect that changes in the levels or effects of these factors could plausibly account for the post-1990 downturn.

For each of our social cognition hypotheses, we explore whether changes in the “levels” or “effects” of the variables can account for the post-1990 downturn. The levels hypotheses account for shifts in the distribution of individuals within each of our social categories over the 1990s. We explore the following counterfactual scenario: If we kept the proportions of Americans who were in each of the variable categories fixed at their 1992 levels, would we reverse the observed aggregate decline in perceptions of inequality? By contrast, the effects hypotheses account for changes in perception by social category membership over the 1990s. We explore the following counterfactual scenario: If we kept the relationships between category membership and inequality perceptions constant at their 1992 levels, would we reverse the aggregate decline in perceptions of inequality?¹²

We begin by examining the levels counterfactual scenario. Figure 8 shows the observed and counterfactual scenario for the cohort, party, and union variables, respectively. Each pane includes a non-parametric estimate for the mean percent of respondents by year who report perceiving that inequality is increasing under two different weighting scenarios. The “observed” lines show the percent of individuals who believe inequality is increasing, weighted by yearly population estimates for cohort, party, and union membership, which we constructed from post-stratification weights. The “counterfactual” lines show the percent of individuals per year who believe inequality is increasing, weighted by the population estimates for

¹²We choose 1992 as the kink point for the counterfactual scenarios by calculating piecewise regressions with different kink points from 1988 to 1993. The piecewise regression with 1992 as the kink point returned the lowest mean squared error.

cohort, union and party membership from 1992.

Insert Figure 5 here

Figure 5 demonstrates that changes in the levels of cohort, party, and union explain little to none of the post-1990 aggregate downturn. These findings run counter to hypotheses 3B, 4B, and 5B.

We began investigating the effects counterfactual scenario by first estimating the time-varying effects of our social cognition variables on inequality perceptions. Figure 6, constructed from the models reported in Tables 18, 17, and 16 in Appendix E, shows estimated values of the percent believing that the “rich get richer” for each of the social cognition categories. We restrict our cohort-year analysis to individuals born in the “Greatest,” “Silent,” “Boomer,” and “Gen-X” generations, using our alternative collapsed measure of cohorts to increase degrees of freedom. We also limit the analysis for the cohort analysis to surveys from 1990 and after in order to ensure that all included cohorts could be adequately represented in the surveys.

Insert Figure 6 here

The top panel shows that the conditional perceptual difference between “Boomers” and “Gen-Xers” remains relatively constant over the post-1990 period. Meanwhile, union members remain more likely to perceive inequality than non-union members across all years, and the gap between these two groups widens slightly after 1990. The growing gap is driven by declining inequality perceptions among non-union members, though there is also a slight absolute decline among union members. For both figures, however, the confidence bars for the two estimates overlap for a majority of the years.

The party estimates, depicted in the second pane, tell a much more striking story. They reveal a significantly changing relationship between party membership and the probability of perceiving that the “rich get richer.” This figure shows a striking aggregate pattern whereby

the post-1990 downturn has been concentrated mostly among republicans. Democrats and independents had slight reductions in their perceptions of inequality after 1990, but their trend line are largely flat. The downward trend for republicans continued through 2000, after which it flattened out and then, post-2008, began an upward climb. This suggests that the post-2008 reversal has been driven by identified republicans closing the gap in inequality perceptions with their independent and democratic peers. There is also some evidence of a post-2008 increase in inequality perceptions among democrats, although the confidence bars for the yearly democratic estimates overlap. Our confidence in the post-2008 “republican reversal” is tempered by the fact that only the 2013 estimate is significantly higher than previous years. Only future surveys can confirm whether this finding of a post-2008 re-convergence between republicans, independents, and democrats is a statistical blip or a meaningful trend.

Together, the results in Figure 9 suggest that changes in the effects of union membership and cohort are minimal and hence cannot account for a substantial portion of the post-1990 downturn in aggregate inequality perceptions. In contrast, the changing association between party identification and perception is substantively significant.

In order to quantify the impact of changing party effects on the aggregate trend, for each observation in our data we calculated their probability of perceiving that inequality is increasing with observed party coefficients and the party coefficients from 1992. All other coefficients were held at their observed values. We then used these predictions to estimate the aggregate trend line under the observed and counterfactual scenario. We also did this counterfactual comparison for cohort and union effects.

Figure 7 shows the percent of the population that perceives the rich get richer predicted with the observed coefficients (the “observed effects”) and under the counterfactual scenario (“1992 effects”).

Insert Figure 7 here

As anticipated with the cohort-year and union-year interaction effects, there is no observable difference between the observed effects and counterfactual effects for the cohort and union variables. This figure does show, however, that if the gap between republicans and democrats in inequality perceptions had remained at its 1992 size, the average percent of the population perceiving inequality to be increasing would have remained consistently higher, an average of 7 percentage points. Given that the post-1990 downturn was in total an aggregate reduction of ten percentage points, these results suggest that the changing effect of party membership can account for the bulk of the historical decline in inequality perceptions. If the relationships between party membership and inequality perception had remained at their 1992 levels, by 2003 the average percent of Americans perceiving inequality to be increasing would have risen back to its pre-downturn levels.¹³

Our findings in this section emphasize party polarization as the key component of the post-1990 aggregate downturn in inequality perceptions. While union and cohort membership are important in understanding inequality perceptions cross-sectionally, they cannot account for the historical shifts at the center of this paper. We likewise find evidence for the post-2008 reversal being a partisan re-convergence, largely driven by identified republicans reversing their earlier divergence from independents and democrats. Our findings suggest that political polarization in the United States is not only a matter of differences in opinion but also divergences in macro-social cognition.

5.4 Media Alternatives

One potential alternative hypothesis for the post-1992 downturn is the role of media coverage about inequality. In her work on American’s beliefs about inequality, McCall finds that increases in media coverage from 1992 to 1996 (and later declines in coverage in the second half of the 1990s) help explain time trends in normative attitudes toward inequality, especially whether individuals believe inequality “benefits the rich,” whether it is “too large” and

¹³These findings are sensitive to which year is set as “fixed.” For an alternative year specification and further justification for using 1992 as the kinkpoint in our analyses, please see Figure 11 in Appendix A.

whether it is “necessary for prosperity.” (McCall, 2013: 131-136). Trends observable in our data, however, suggest that media coverage cannot account for the post-1990 downturn in perceptions of whether the rich get richer. The main issue is timing. McCall’s analysis shows that media coverage of inequality increased from 1992 to 1996, right when the perceptual downturn is first visible in our data.

As McCall’s analysis is focused on newspaper articles, we expanded her investigation into television news broadcasts using the Vanderbilt archive. We searched for all available news broadcasts in the archive from 1990 to 2000 including at least one of the the terms “income inequality”, “wage differentials”, equality, and meritocracy.¹⁴ This figure shows the results of this search.

Insert Figure 8 here

There were very few broadcast segments centrally focused on inequality during this period (a yearly maximum of 10), suggesting that income inequality was not a key topic on these channels over the 1990s. Furthermore, as with McCall’s data, the coverage of inequality increased over the 1990s. This shows that even the scant coverage visible in these data did not reflect a downturn in media attention which could account for a mimetic decline in aggregate inequality perceptions. The rise of Fox News is similarly insufficient to account for the partisan divergence part of our story, as Fox only appeared on the scene in 1996. These findings, however, do not prove that media coverage and especially the rise of cable news played no role. As we note in the introduction, media polarization was likely a key mechanism behind the broader radicalization of republicans’ world view in the 1990s. We do not find evidence, however, that media coverage of inequality specifically can explain the

¹⁴McCall herself used these terms as starting search terms and then expanded the search words to include further relevant terms during her research process. For a full list of the terms McCall used, as well as her coding and validation process, see (McCall, 2013: p. 90-94). We used a more limited search set than McCall because we did not watch the television clips to validate that they were on inequality-related themes, so we had to use a set of keywords with very high precision. The search function searches news abstracts and titles, so the broadcast would have to be centrally focused on one of these themes to be returned in the search. The archive is limited to nightly broadcasts from ABC, CBS, and NBC, as well as one hour per day from CNN since 1995.

attitudinal patterns we observed. Republicans and democrats diverged not on the basis of differential information, but upon a broader shift in republicans’ macro-social imaginaries.

6 Discussion

C. Wright Mills famously outlined the promise of the “sociological imagination” to orientate the individual to their place in broader social structures. Mills was right to understand the sociological imagination as a distinct orientation, but Mills did not fully consider how that orientation, like any other set of cultural frames, is itself the product of structural conditions beyond the individual. Scholars such as the historian Daniel Rodgers (2012) have argued that Americans’ social imaginations became increasingly individualized from the 1970s onward. As social worlds and frames fragmented, dominant ways of seeing and sense-making gravitated away from the popularized sociological imagination of the post-war period. Americans became less prone to view themselves or their environments in terms of social structures and institutions.

In this article we consider one manifestation of the purported decline of the sociological imagination by analyzing Americans’ perceptions of rising polarization between rich and poor. Our analysis both extends and challenges Rodgers’ portrayal of a secular decline in sociological imaginaries. We have demonstrated that the aggregate percentage of Americans who perceived inequality to be increasing, whether measured by agreement with the notion that the “rich get richer and the poor get poorer” or with the alternative ISSP “subjective Gini,” diminished over the 1990s even as inequality as a distributional reality was continuing to grow wider. However, we do not find that there has been an overarching secular decline in the percent of Americans who see widening inequality.

The most significant finding of our paper is the growing partisan divergence of inequality perceptions over the 1990s and 2000s. Until the early 1990s, republicans tended to track democrats in their relative propensities to “see” the rich getting richer and the poor get-

ting poorer. Although they tended to disagree on the most appropriate policy responses, democrats and republicans tended to express broadly consonant perceptions of macro-social reality, at least with respect to inequality. This changed markedly around the time of the Gingrich takeover in congress (Hout and Fischer, 2002), at which point republicans became less and less attentive to growing income polarization. The aggregate pattern of attitudinal change with which we began this article masked an increasing polarization in inequality perceptions by party identification. We also find evidence for a post-2008 reversal amongst republicans, whereby republicans partially closed the partisan gap in perceptions, contributing to an aggregate reversal in inequality perceptions amongst Americans. This reversal tracks the rise of economic populism in the republican party with the advent of the tea party. (Skocpol and Williamson, 2016; Hochschild, 2016) While previous research has documented partisan differences in perceptions of inequality (Bartels, 2016), the present findings highlight the historical contingency of these differences.

Our findings further highlight the strikingly asymmetric character of perceptual change during this period, mirroring others’ findings of asymmetric partisan polarization in the United States (Hacker and Pierson, 2010). The proportion of democrats who perceived the “rich to be getting richer, the poor getting poorer” remained largely flat over the 1990s and 2000s. By contrast, republicans in the aggregate inched ever further from their partisan rivals. Even before the explosive growth of Fox News Channel viewership during the early 2000s, republicans were espousing a conception of macro-distributional reality increasingly in conflict with underlying real trends.

Because our data are repeated cross-sections, they do not allow us to distinguish to what extent this change was due to a shift in the beliefs of existing republicans, or whether it was due to more efficient cognitive sorting of the population into partisan identities as a function of their perceptual dispositions (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). Either way, however, partisan-based polarization over the 1990s and 2000s explains a significant portion of the post-1990s aggregate downturn in inequality perceptions. Moreover, this trend per-

sisted across periods of both democratic and republican presidential administrations and congresses, suggesting that republicans’ attitudinal shift was not simply an evaluative statement on the incumbent party (Prior et al., 2015).

As noted in the introduction, Prior et al. (2015) offer an additional alternative hypothesis regarding partisan biases in factual perceptions. Prior and colleagues argue that partisan differences in inequality perceptions are driven by question-order effects. When asked a factual question after affirming a partisan identification, respondents face consistency pressures to answer the factual question in line with their expressed partisan identity. This theory suggests that if respondents were asked whether they believed the “rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer” after a partisan identification question, we would expect a greater partisan bias. For this generation of partisan bias to explain our historical results, there would need to be an increasing placement of the main inequality question after the partisan identification question over our study time period. Our data, however, show an opposite pattern. Figure 10 in Appendix A demonstrates that the inequality perception question was placed after the partisan identification question in surveys primarily before 1980, when the partisan divergence was much less pronounced than it became after 1990. These findings suggest that partisan identification consistency pressures cannot explain the post-1990 partisan divergence.

Another alternative interpretation is that republicans’ growing disavowal that “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” is driven less by changes in their perceptions of society than by changes in the perceived normative implications of acknowledging or broaching the issue of inequality in the first place. For instance, the 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney argued that mere discussion of “inequality” was a partisan code word for redistribution, a “bitter politics of envy, [...] and class warfare.” By this account, efforts by democratic politicians to seize on inequality as a salient political issue after the 2008 financial crisis prompted republicans to resist granting the factual premises of their opponents’ policy agendas, as occurred in the case of partisan beliefs about climate change.

Although our account is broadly consistent with the idea that identity and beliefs drive social perceptions, we are doubtful that explicit politicization of widening inequality among elites can account for our findings in any direct manner. First is the timing. Unlike 2012, inequality per se was not a prominent issue for democratic party elites during the early 1990s. In fact, republicans’ perceptual declines occurred at the same time that Bill Clinton and the “New Democrats” were attempting to depoliticize distribution by turning the democratic party away from explicit appeals to traditional class politics. By the time that the former senator John Edwards launched a presidential campaign focused explicitly on stratification between rich and poor in 2004, republicans had already disavowed the idea of a growing gap. Second, we find a similar (though less pronounced) partisan split in the ISSP/GSS data on perceived occupational pay disparities during the same time period (see Figure 9 in Appendix A). This convergent pattern suggests that that the main results above are not solely an artifact of the potential normative connotations of the “rich get richer” question. Third, our findings regarding the post-2008 republican reversal are the opposite of what would be expected by this elite cleavage theory. Republicans began to become more like democrats and close the partisan gap in inequality perceptions precisely when party elites became more diverged on matters of inequality and distribution.

Beyond partisanship, our findings also challenge existing cross-sectional research on inequality perceptions. We found very little evidence that variations in local inequality levels shape the perceptions of individuals who live in those environments on average. This is at odds with approaches which focus on the social structuring of exposure to inequality. By contrast, we find stronger evidence for the patterning of perception by social category and institutional affiliations. Union members, members of the baby boom cohort, and democrats were more likely to perceive rising inequality throughout our study period. These results point to the important role that institutions and generational experience play in shaping social cognition (Zerubavel, 2015).

The present findings carry several broad implications. Most obviously, the polarization

of partisan perceptions about whether inequality is growing affects the possibilities for ameliorative policies. Reckoning with increased inequality represents a major policy challenge of the 21st century. As with other major policy challenges such as climate change, the covid 19 epidemic, and police violence against Black Americans, the construction of divergent realities in siloed “echo chambers” (Bail, Argyle, Brown, Bumpus, Chen, Hunzaker, Lee, Mann, Merhout, and Volfovsky, 2018) precludes a common factual basis on which to ground policy debates (Hochschild, 2001).

Second, the post-2008 reversal in aggregate inequality perceptions highlights the need for further research on how the landscape of inequality perceptions changed in the wake of the Great Recession. Although our current data is limited, the fact that the events of this period appear to have reversed decades of declining inequality perception among republicans raises questions about the longer-term consequences of the Great Recession and new forms of right economic populism.

Third and finally, our results highlight the need for further research on the evolution of macro-social imaginaries more generally Fischer (2010). Just as sociologists have studied the social construction and enactment of homo economicus, the circumstances under which actors “think” or “perceive” social structures ought to be a topic of sociological study in its own right. For example, how should we understand inequality perceptions in the 1960s which were overly sensitive to increases in inequality? Potential research into this topic should not be limited to questions about inequality. For instance, to what extent do other sociological frames, such as those which stress networks of interconnection or structural domination, fare over time? And to what extent might such imaginaries shape actors’ dispositions toward issues such as climate change, vaccination campaigns, and freedom of expression? Sociologists should treat social imaginaries as important objects of empirical analysis.

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Figures



Figure 1: Realities and perceptions of inequality over time. The top 10% share refers to the top decile of the distribution's share of the overall distribution. Wealth data from Saez and Zucman (2016), income data from Frank (2009). The loess smoothing curve was calculated from the full dataset (not the survey averages plotted here).

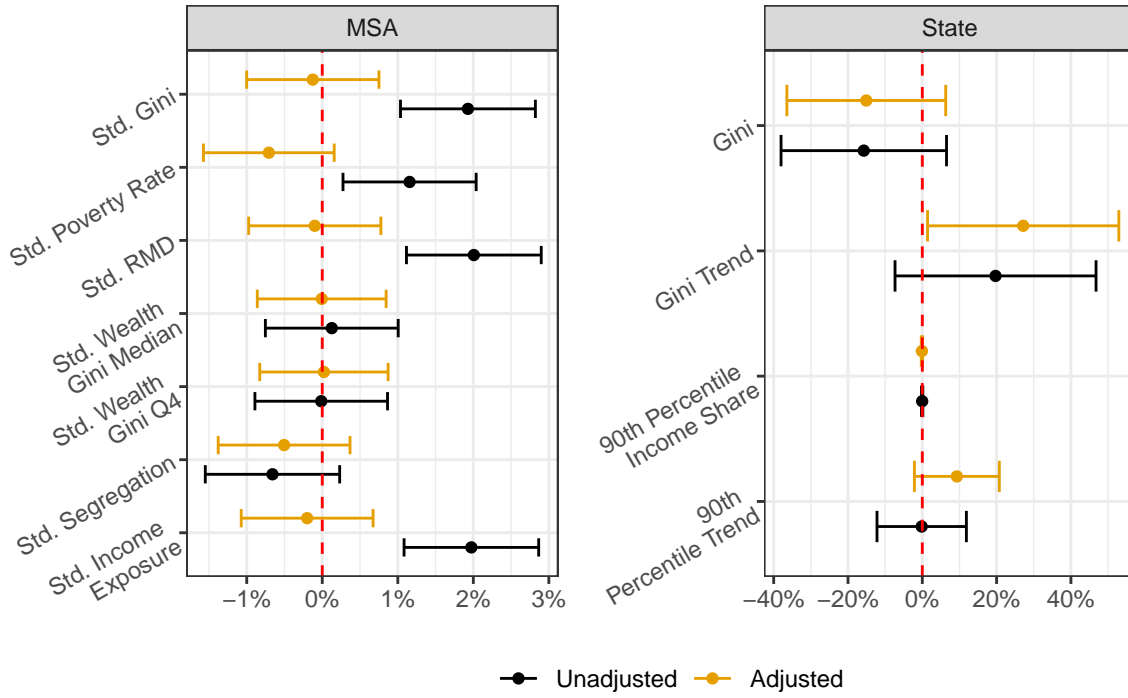


Figure 2: Coefficient plot of state and MSA-level economic context variables on “the rich get richer while the poor get poorer,” based on data from the geographic sub samples. For model output which generated this plot, see Appendix B, Tables 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. For details on how the geographic sub-samples were constructed, see Appendix A.5.

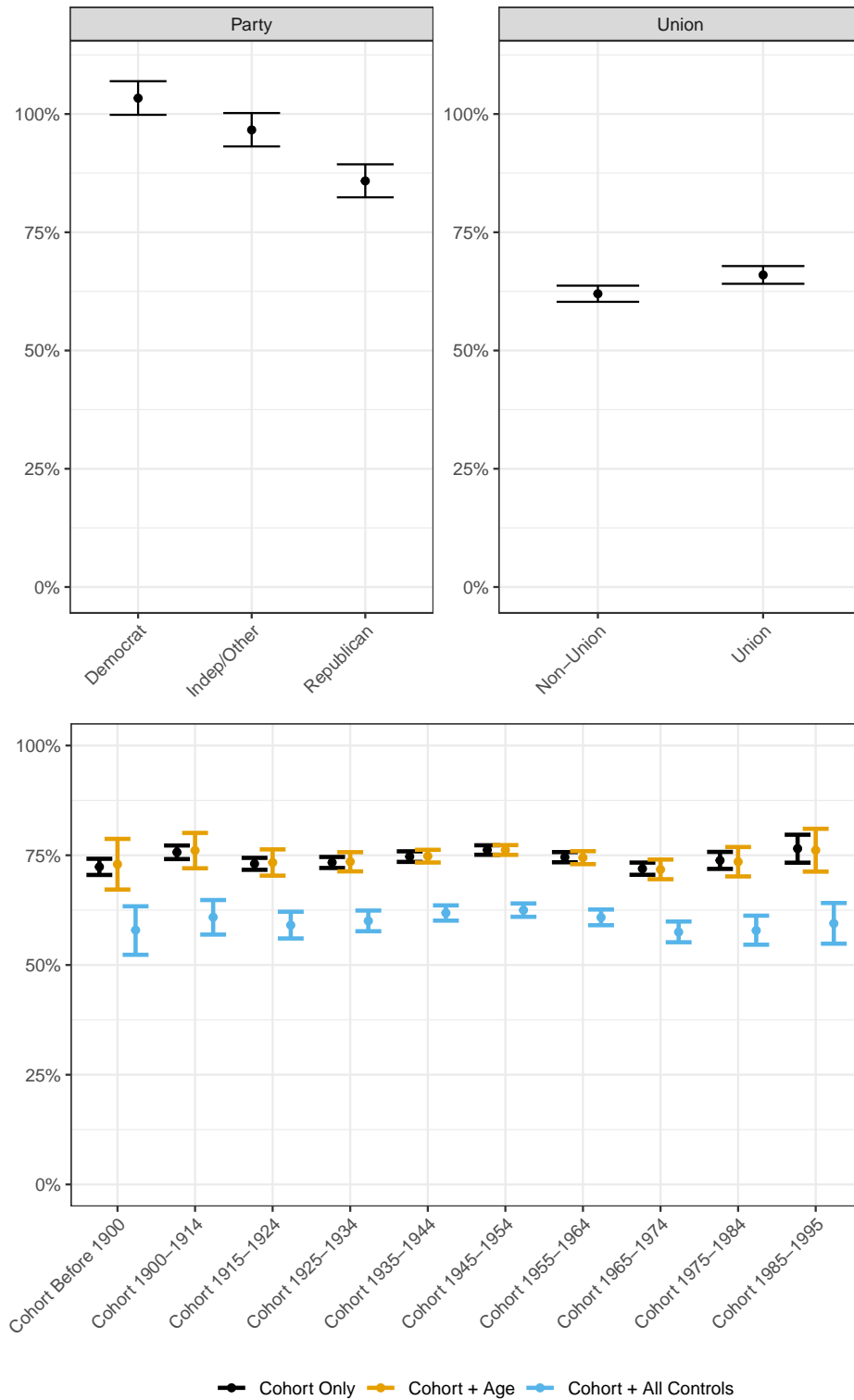


Figure 3: Estimated value of perceiving “the rich get richer while the poor get poorer,” by social cognition variable levels, based on data from the full 1966-2009 sample. For the model output associated with this plot, please see Appendix C, Table 9.

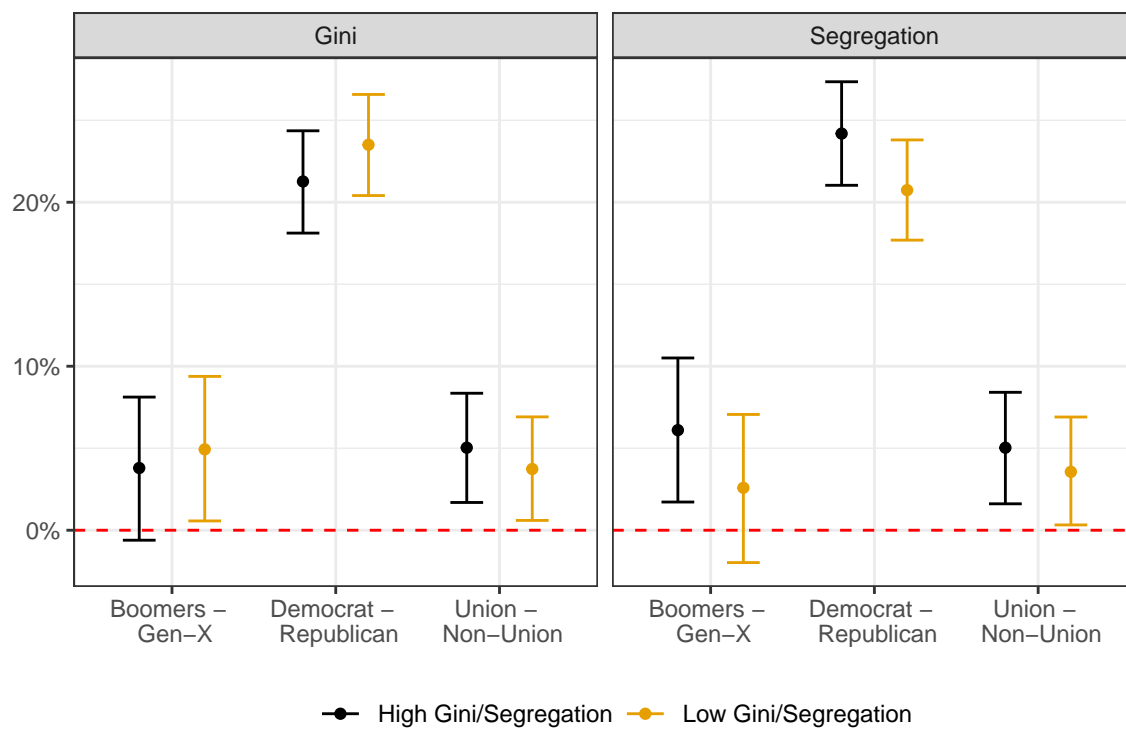


Figure 4: Estimated value of first differences of perceptual variables by whether respondents reside in counties with high versus low inequality/segregation, 1987-2012. For model output associated with this plot, please see Appendix D, Tables 10 - 15.

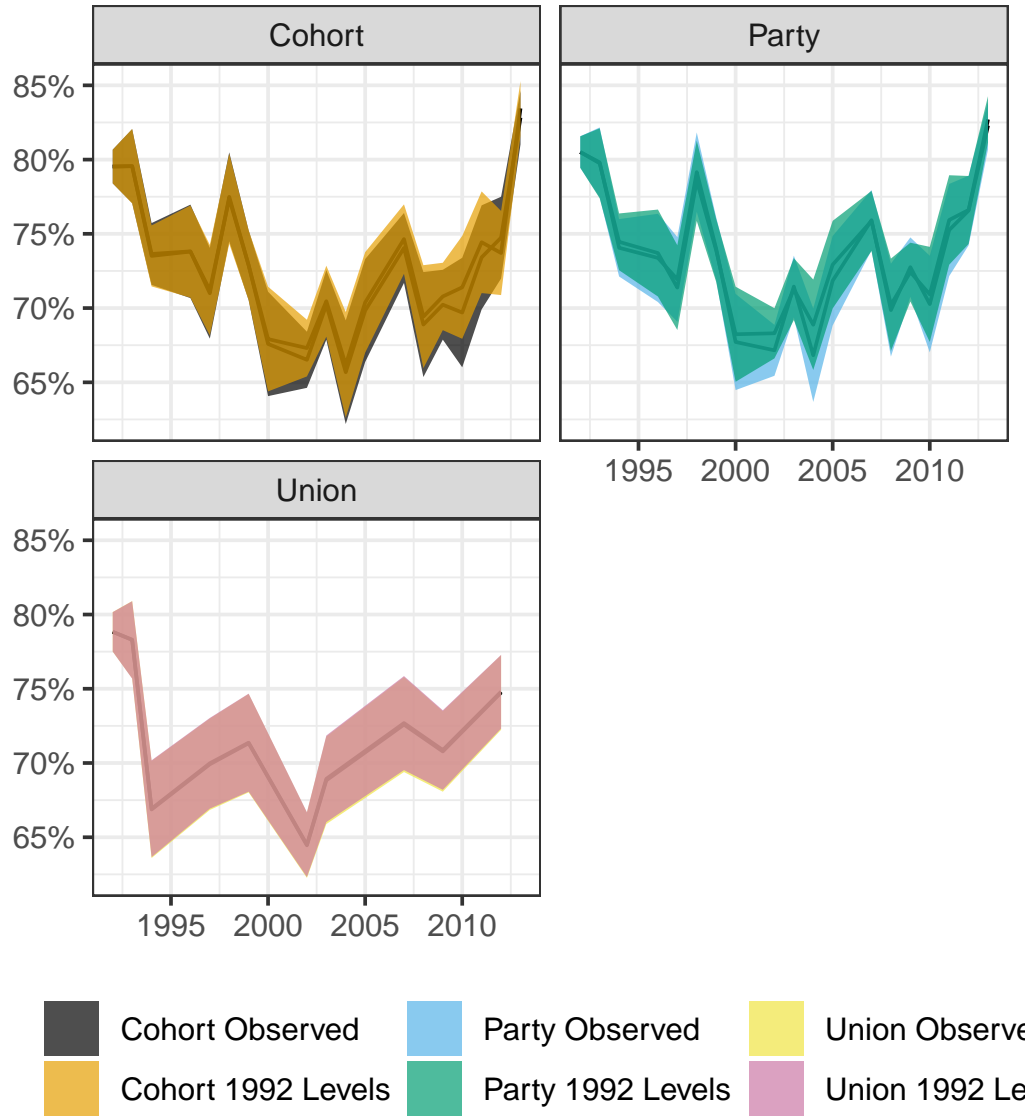


Figure 5: Aggregate Trend Line Counterfactual Estimates with 1992 Levels. This figure displays the non-parametric estimates for the aggregate percent of individuals who believe the “rich get richer and the poor get poorer” under the counterfactual and observed “levels” weighting scenarios. Weights are post-stratification weights constructed based upon Current Population Survey estimates. Standard errors were estimated for the weighted estimates with the survey package in R (Lumley, 2019). As these simulations are non-parametric, we don’t make any assumption regarding the changing effect of union, cohort, or party membership.

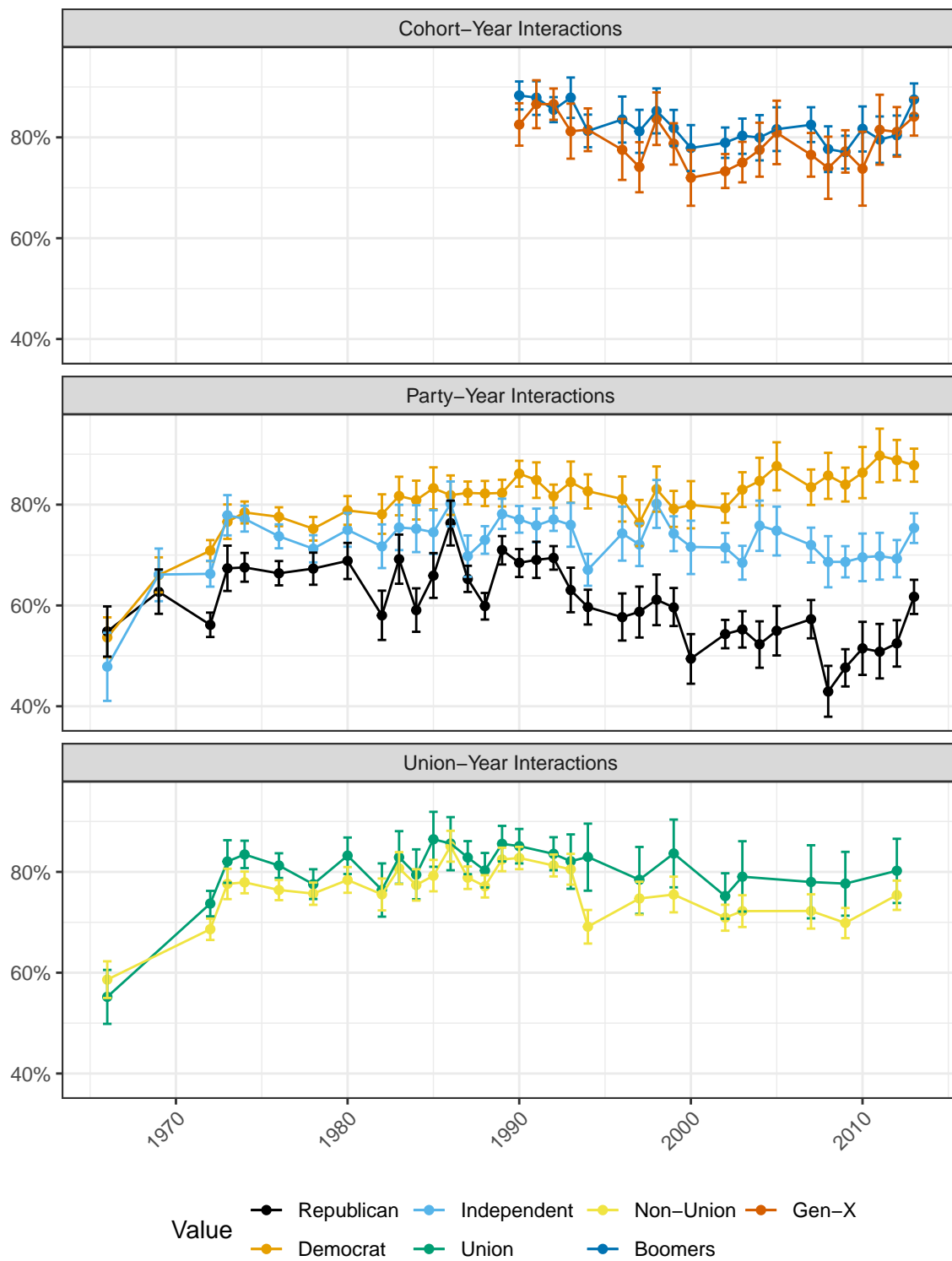


Figure 6: Estimated value of probability of perceiving “the rich get richer while the poor get poorer” by covariate with covariate-year interaction effects, 1966-2013. Standard errors for these estimated values were constructed using a parametric bootstrap.

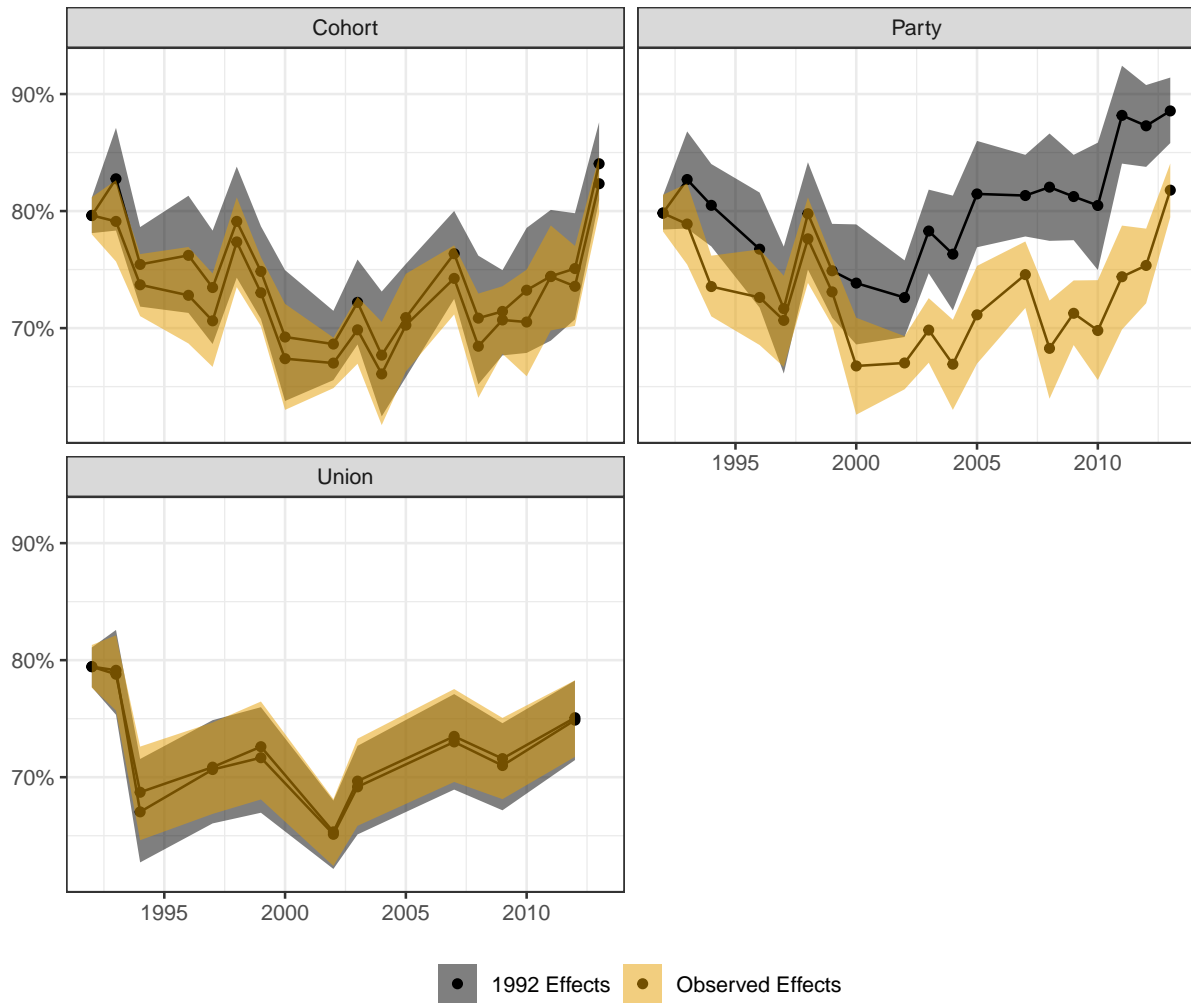


Figure 7: Aggregate Trend Line Counterfactual Estimates with 1992 Effects. This figure displays the parametric estimates for the aggregate percent of individuals who believe the “rich get richer and the poor get poorer” under the counterfactual and observed “effects” scenarios. Confidence intervals were calculated with a non-parametric bootstrap.

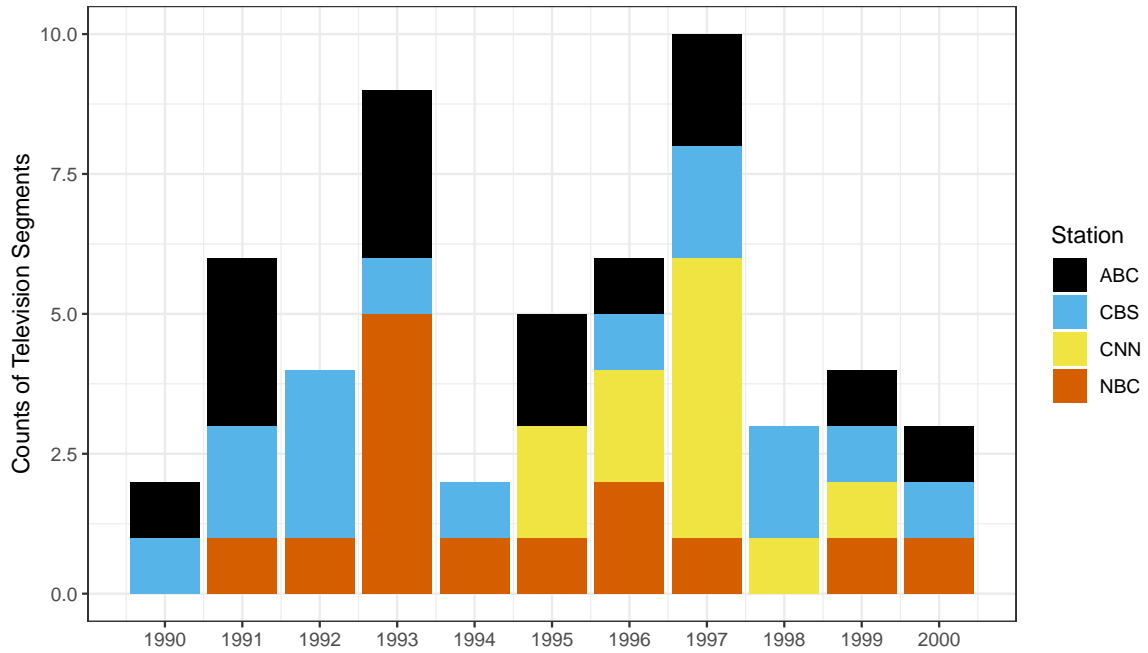


Figure 8: Television Coverage of Inequality, 1990-2000. This figure displays the count of television segments centrally focused on topics of inequality. These estimates are drawn from the Vanderbilt Television News Archive 200 (2000).

Appendix A Sensitivity Checks and Additional Analyses

A.1 ISSP Analysis

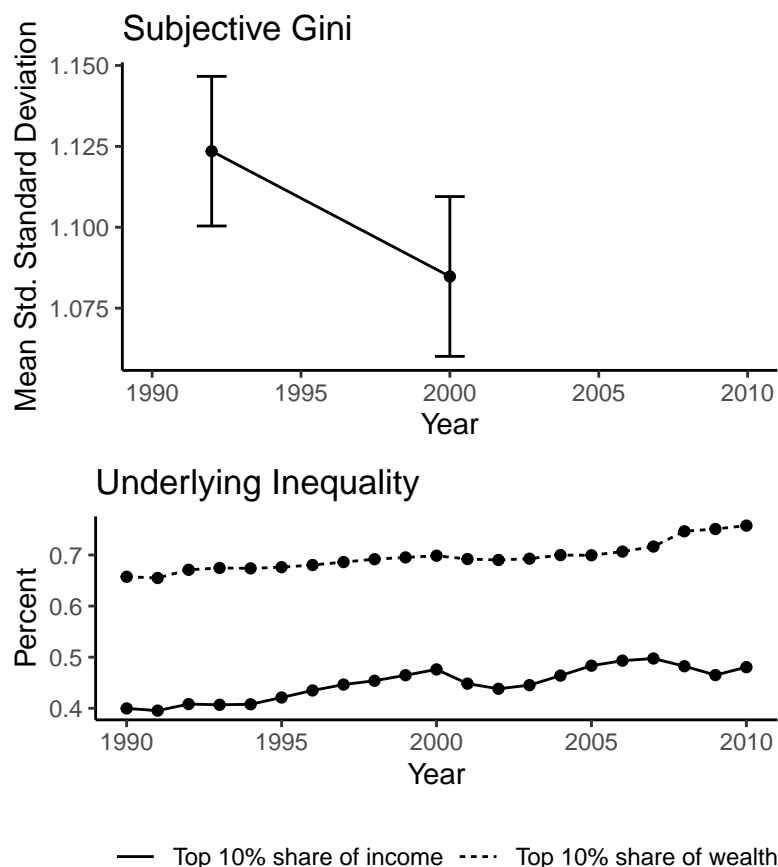


Figure 9: ISSP Alternative Inequality Perception Variable Specification

This figure shows the aggregate downturn using an alternative measure of inequality perceptions: the “subjective gini” from the 1992 and 2000 GSS/ISSP. Following Kenworthy and McCall (2007); Gimpelson and Treisman (2018); Kuhn (2011); Osberg and Bechert (2016), we recover implicit estimates of perceived occupational pay inequality using the 1992 and 2000 GSS/ISSP modules and compare them against actual changes in occupational pay inequality. Respondents are asked to estimate the compensation levels for a series of oc-

cupations. There are four groups included consistently across the two years: an unskilled worker; a skilled worker in a factory; a doctor; and the executive or chairman of large public company. For each individual we calculate the standard deviation between each of their pay assessments and then de-mean them to develop a standardized measure of pay variation across the sub-groups. One limitation of this approach is that we do not know what respondents believe about each occupation's relative population share, which obviously affects the inequality calculation. This approach also rests on the simplifying assumption that society is composed of only four individuals. We apply a pareto factor adjustment of 1.5 to inflate top-coded values (above \$1,000,000)

In the aggregate, subjective perceptions of occupational pay variation declined slightly from 1992-2000 (p is less than .05 in a one-sample t -test), from an average 1.12 in 1992 to 1.08 in 2000 (sample $sd=0.36$). The figure above, while showing the decline, has overlapping confidence bars because the estimates were calculating with the separate samples for 1992 and 2000. These findings are consistent with the pattern reported by Kenworthy and McCall 2008, though they use a slightly different ratio measure.

Moreover, as in the Harris/Pew data, we find that the downward trend was driven by republicans, and independents to a lesser extent. The result is a partisan reversal: In 1992, republicans on average actually perceived greater occupational pay variation than democrats. By 2000, this is reversed, and democrats perceive slightly more pay inequality. The fact that we see a similar pattern of party divergence from this very different set of questions about occupational pay perceptions suggests that the observed party effect in the "rich get richer" analysis is not reducible to some other non-inequality connotation of the question.

A.2 Question Placement

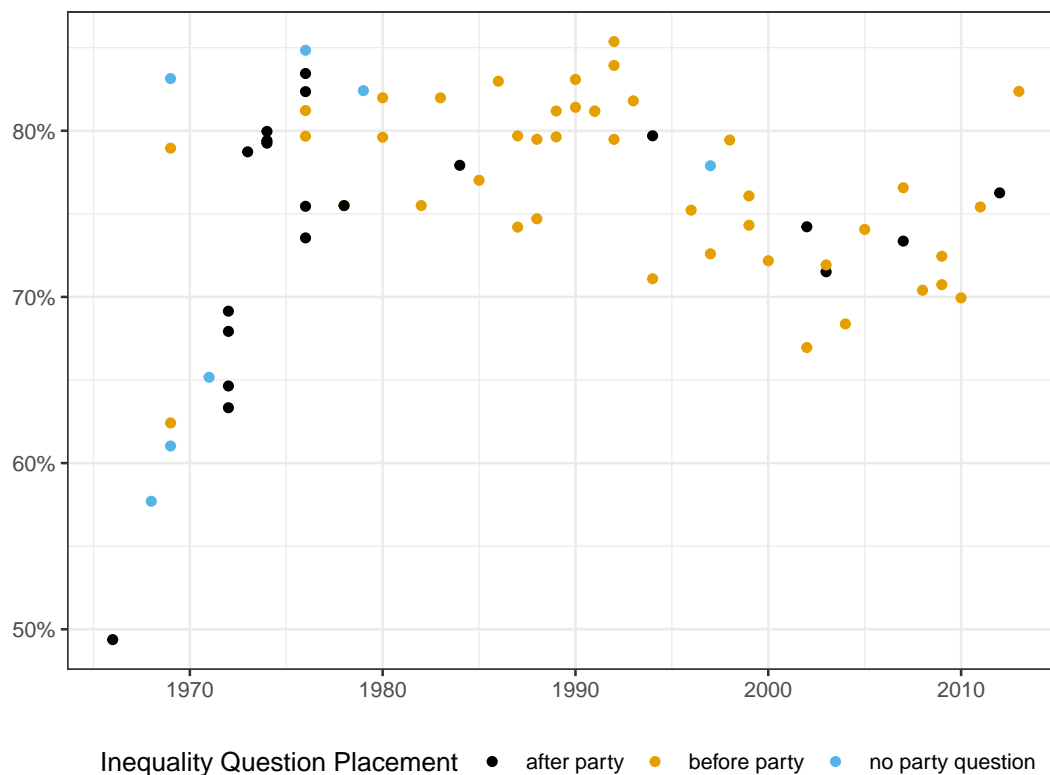


Figure 10: Share who agree that the “rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer” by survey, year, and the placement of that question in the survey (whether before or after the party identification question).

This figure breaks out the weighted percent of respondents who agreed that the “rich are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer” by whether the survey they responded to placed this main question of interest before or after the party identification question. We ran this analysis in response to the claim of Prior et al. (2015), who argue that individuals respond in a partisan-biased fashion to factual questions because they face consistency pressures. One word of caution is that many of the surveys included many more questions with partisan *implications* than solely the partisan identification question. Our results thus cannot disprove a more general question order effect. They are, instead, a much narrower treatment of the question order effects of the partisan identification question.

A.3 Alternative Counterfactual Specification

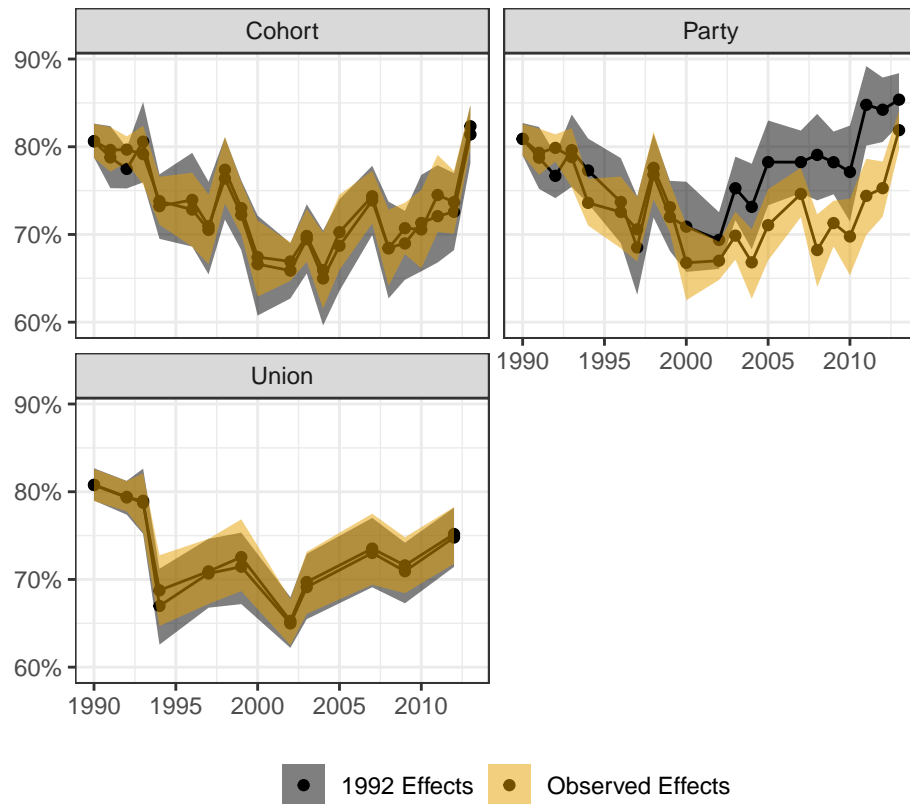


Figure 11: Counterfactual estimates with 1990 party effects

This figure demonstrates how the counterfactual effects estimates are sensitive to which year is “fixed.” The confidence bands for the aggregate estimate using the 1990 and observed party effects largely overlap pre-2000. In this case, the figure overlaps because in the year 1990 the partisan gap in inequality perceptions was smaller than in the following survey year (1992, the year that was set as fixed in the simulation included in the main text of the paper). By 2002, however, the 1990 and 1992 counterfactual scenarios have broadly similar trend lines. We ultimately had confidence in using 1992 as the counterfactual effect in our analysis because 1992 was the year before the aggregate decline began (determined visually and with the piecewise regression cutoff analysis).

A.4 Trends in Party ID

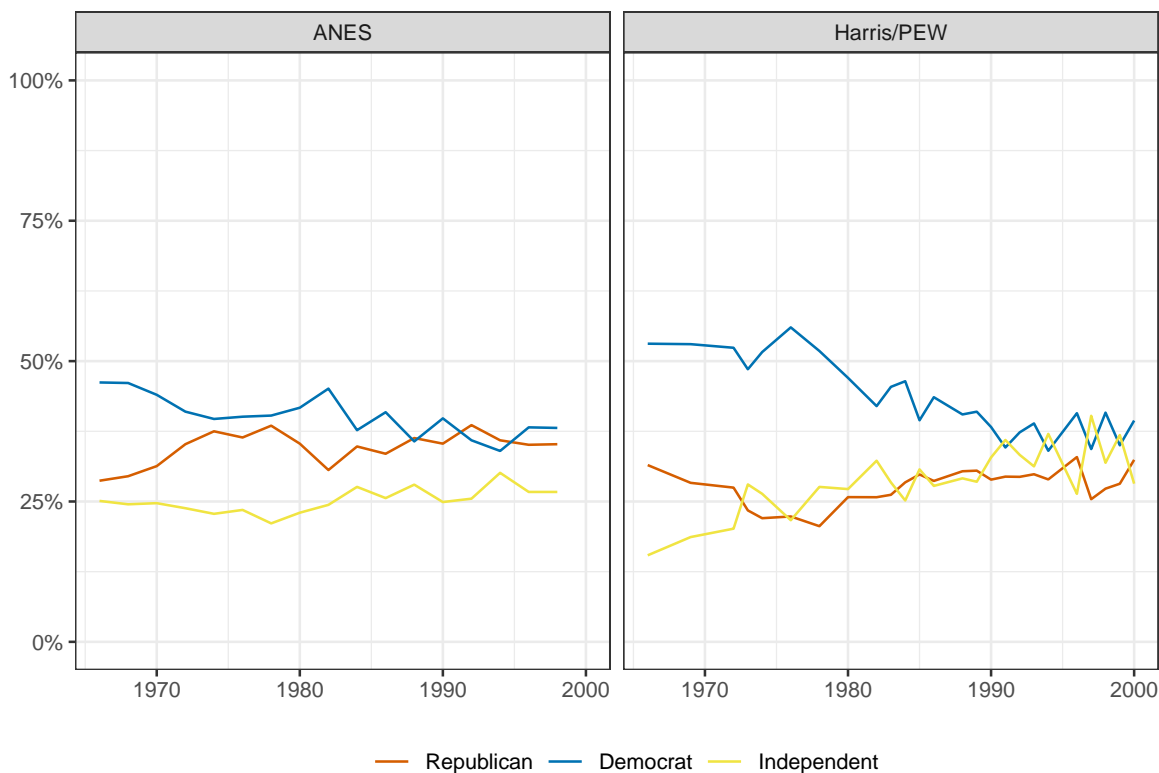


Figure 12: ANES Trends in Party Identification

This figure compares the weighted estimates of party identification by year in our combined Harris/PEW sample versus the American National Election Survey. The weights for the Harris/PEW sample are post-stratification weights constructed from the Current Population Survey. The ANES estimates were constructed from a table of weighted estimates presented in (Green et al., 2004: 15). The Harris/PEW survey has more democrats and less republicans than the ANES survey. This is likely due to sampling differences. This furthermore suggests that our estimate of the historical downturn in inequality perceptions shown in Figure 1 is likely an underestimate of the magnitude of the downturn, given the polarization of inequality perceptions over the 1990s along party lines. We also have more independents in our sample than in the ANES. This is likely because we grouped individuals who called themselves “independents” with those who chose “other” and “no preference” in order to harmonize

respondents across all years. There was also one year, 1987, in which we could not include independents in our descriptive statistics, as the survey instrument for that year collapsed the choice of “independent” with that of “not sure.”

A.5 Survey Missingness

One of the key challenges in this project came from harmonizing 72 different surveys across 47 years. The 58 Harris Polls, although sharing some commonalities in format and questions (in particular the “alienation index,” whose inclusion of questions regarding inequality perceptions we exploit for this research), were nonetheless designed for different research questions and purposes in mind. This created significant problems for us in both harmonizing the variables across all survey years as well as determining which key variables of interest to include.

The plot below shows the patterns of missingness for the key variables of interest across the 72 surveys.

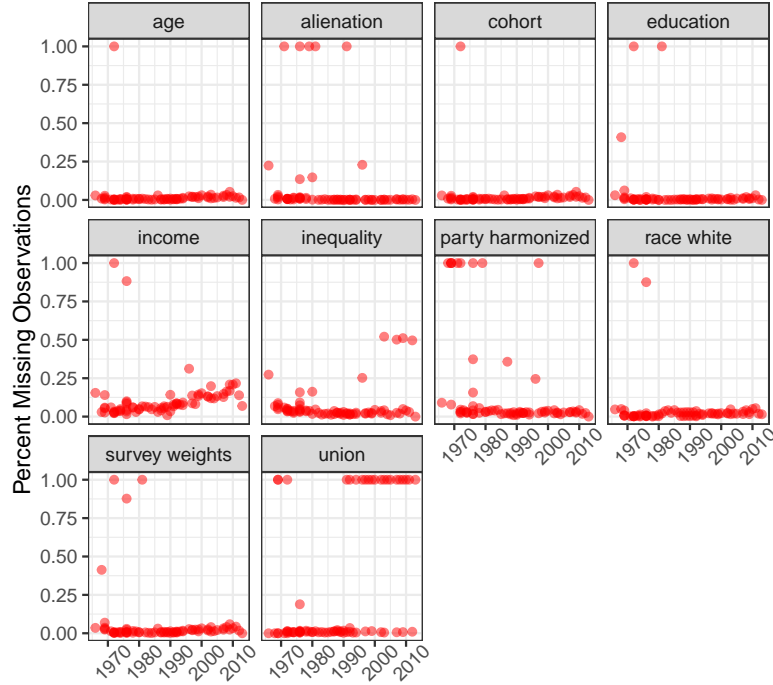


Figure 13: Missingness by survey, variable and year. This plot shows the percent of total observations in the sample missing each of the main variables of interest, broken out by year and survey.

Three key patterns which this figure shows is that a majority of surveys from later years (post-1990) stopped including questions regarding union membership. Furthermore, our main survey instrument (the inequality question) was only asked for half of the respondents in a number of surveys post-2000. Finally, some earlier surveys (pre-1975) did not include the party membership question.

Based on these patterns, we made a number of decisions. First, we decided to use case-wise deletion rather than imputation in dealing with missing data. This is because missingness varied between the surveys, creating technical challenges in developing a general imputation strategy across all datasets and years. Furthermore, in the plot above we do not observe a pattern in our main survey item of interest that would indicate increasing aversion to the question (such a scenario would suggest that the post-1990 decline was driven by sample selection). Our inferences should be understood as to the population of individuals who would respond to these questions when asked. This is a limitation of our study, but

can be understood as a necessary cost when dealing with messy, historical data. Second, we elected to eliminate the union variable as a main covariate in all models except for the ones that investigate union membership specifically. This means that the models investigating union membership and the models not investigating union membership are estimated on two different samples.

Using case-wise deletion, the total number of observations in our dataset dropped from 118,518 to 77,539. The total number of unique surveys used in our merged dataset dropped from 72 to 60. For the data used in state-level analyses, our data was limited to Pew surveys which included information on respondents' home state (none of the Harris included this information). For respondents from these eleven surveys, the number of observations dropped from 27,050 to 18,917 with case-wise deletion.

The process of creating the MSA datasets was significantly more complicated. As noted in the text above, for we were able to link to their MSA a subset of respondents which reported their zipcode from nine Pew surveys. For respondents from the 1987 and 1988 surveys we had to use the telephone area codes linked to their zipcodes, while for respondents from later years we were able to directly link zipcodes to MSAs. Because of this shift in geographic unit of analysis, we standardized by year each of our MSA-level measures.

The plot below shows the patterns of missingness for the MSA dataset. Using case-wise deletion based on these variables, the 24,710 respondents from ten Pew surveys was reduced to 9,129.

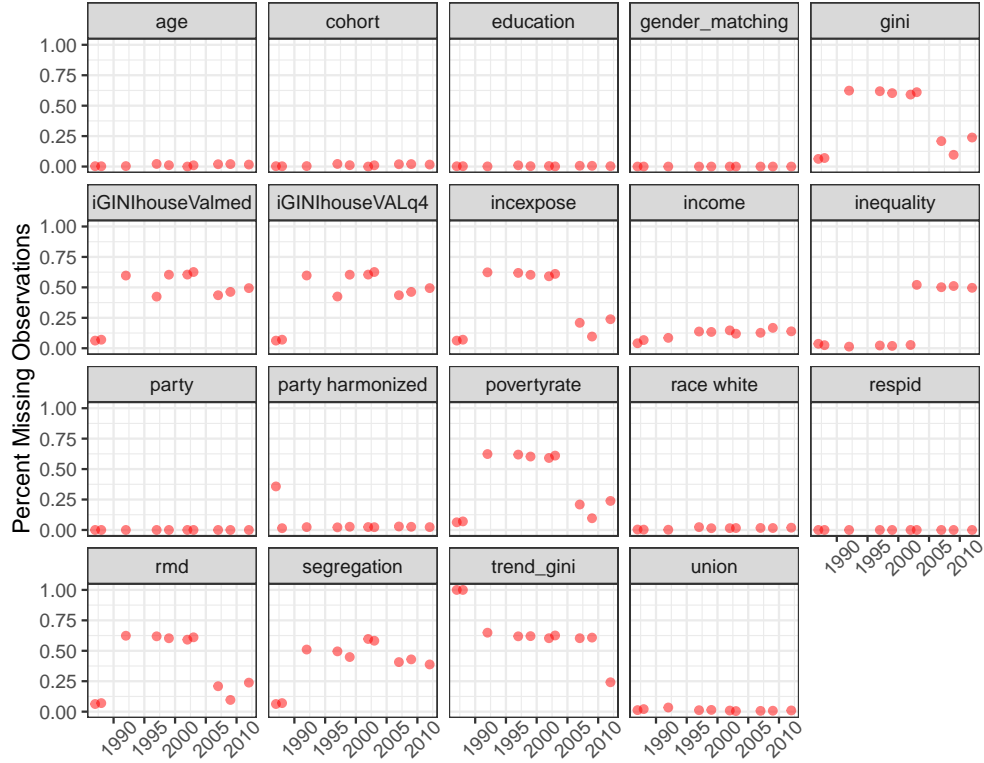


Figure 14: Missingness by survey for MSA-eligible surveys. This plot shows the percent of observations missing each of the main variables of interest in the sample of observations that could potentially be linked to MSA data.

This figure shows that we were only able to link a little less than half of respondents to their MSA from the nine MSA-eligible PEW surveys. This was due to either non-response on the residential zip code survey item, linking error which we were not able to resolve, or because the respondent was not in a MSA. A significant minority of respondents were not in MSAs, particularly before 2007 when the definition was more restrictive. Finally, some of the measures such as housing price inequality were created from data with some sparse or missing cells due to public reporting suppression in the American Community Survey. This primarily affects some of the smaller CBSAs in the later years.

Table 1: Full Data Estimated with Logit

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>						
	Inequality Perceptions Binary						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Indep/Other		0.465*** (0.026)		0.704*** (0.021)		0.556*** (0.023)	0.556*** (0.023)
Democrat		0.874*** (0.026)		1.206*** (0.021)		1.032*** (0.023)	1.032*** (0.023)
Union HH	0.427*** (0.024)	0.253*** (0.027)					
Age					-0.001 (0.003)		-0.001 (0.003)
Cohort Before 1900		-0.384*** (0.054)	-0.204*** (0.045)		-0.173 (0.160)	-0.387*** (0.051)	-0.303* (0.175)
Cohort 1900-1914		-0.169*** (0.046)	-0.032 (0.039)		-0.010 (0.110)	-0.168*** (0.043)	-0.112 (0.120)
Cohort 1915-1924		-0.271*** (0.039)	-0.173*** (0.032)		-0.157* (0.082)	-0.259*** (0.036)	-0.218** (0.089)
Cohort 1925-1934		-0.162*** (0.037)	-0.157*** (0.030)		-0.146** (0.059)	-0.182*** (0.033)	-0.154** (0.064)
Cohort 1935-1944		-0.064* (0.035)	-0.085*** (0.028)		-0.080** (0.037)	-0.058* (0.031)	-0.045 (0.041)
Cohort 1955-1964		-0.121*** (0.037)	-0.093*** (0.029)		-0.098*** (0.037)	-0.089*** (0.031)	-0.102** (0.041)
Cohort 1965-1974		-0.358*** (0.046)	-0.232*** (0.034)		-0.241*** (0.059)	-0.282*** (0.037)	-0.308*** (0.064)
Cohort 1975-1984		-0.155* (0.080)	-0.131*** (0.051)		-0.146 (0.089)	-0.252*** (0.055)	-0.292*** (0.097)
Cohort 1985-1995		0.130 (0.154)	0.019 (0.089)		-0.001 (0.132)	-0.123 (0.097)	-0.176 (0.143)
HS Grad		-0.390*** (0.034)				-0.330*** (0.029)	-0.330*** (0.029)
Some College		0.150*** (0.030)				0.214*** (0.025)	0.215*** (0.025)
College Grad		0.046* (0.025)				0.101*** (0.021)	0.101*** (0.021)
Postgraduate		0.009 (0.021)				0.020 (0.018)	0.020 (0.018)
Income		-0.00002*** (0.00000)				-0.00002*** (0.00000)	-0.00002*** (0.00000)
White		-0.132*** (0.032)				-0.124*** (0.028)	-0.124*** (0.028)
Alienation.1		1.549*** (0.027)				1.523*** (0.023)	1.523*** (0.023)
Alienation.2		-0.071*** (0.024)				-0.039* (0.021)	-0.039* (0.021)
Alienation.3		0.094*** (0.021)				0.103*** (0.018)	0.103*** (0.018)
Observations	58,735	58,735	77,539	77,539	77,539	77,539	77,539
Log Likelihood	-32,358.000	-28,125.000	-43,074.000	-41,349.000	-43,074.000	-37,313.000	-37,313.000
Akaike Inf. Crit.	64,770.000	56,344.000	86,241.000	82,775.000	86,243.000	74,740.000	74,742.000

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

All models include year fixed effects. Employing a logit rather than a linear probability model does not change the observed magnitude or significance of the coefficients.

Table 2: Inequality Variable Sensitivity Check

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Inequality Perceptions Binary	
	(1)	(2)
Variable_PEW	-0.001 (0.005)	0.015** (0.007)
Indep/Other		0.090*** (0.004)
Democrat		0.148*** (0.004)
Union		0.040*** (0.004)
Cohort Before 1900		-0.061*** (0.009)
Cohort 1900-1914		-0.028*** (0.007)
Cohort 1915-1924		-0.045*** (0.006)
Cohort 1925-1934		-0.028*** (0.006)
Cohort 1935-1944		-0.011* (0.005)
Cohort 1955-1964		-0.018*** (0.006)
Cohort 1965-1974		-0.056*** (0.007)
Cohort 1975-1984		-0.020 (0.013)
Cohort 1985-1995		0.023 (0.023)
HS Grad		-0.058*** (0.006)
Some College		0.021*** (0.005)
College Grad		0.013*** (0.004)
Postgraduate		0.003 (0.003)
Income		-0.00000*** (0.00000)
White		-0.013*** (0.005)
Alienation_1		0.244*** (0.004)
Alienation_2		-0.061*** (0.003)
Alienation_3		0.016*** (0.003)
Constant	0.480*** (0.015)	0.519*** (0.015)
Observations	77,539	58,735
R ²	0.018	0.161
Adjusted R ²	0.018	0.161
Residual Std. Error	0.430 (df = 77500)	0.397 (df = 58687)
F Statistic	37.530*** (df = 38; 77500)	240.300*** (df = 47; 58687)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

All models include year fixed effects. The "inequality perception variable" is a nominal variable. The reference group is the Harris style coding of the inequality perception outcome variable. While the inequality perception variable is positive and significant, demonstrating that respondents to the PEW survey were more likely to report perceiving inequality (suggesting question wording effects), comparing these results with the model from table 9 demonstrates that the inclusion of this variable did not change the significance or magnitude of the other coefficients.

Table 3: Cohort Variable Sensitivity Check

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Inequality Perceptions Binary		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Cohort Before Greatest	-0.011** (0.006)	0.008 (0.014)	-0.003 (0.013)
Cohort Greatest	-0.024*** (0.005)	-0.012 (0.010)	-0.015* (0.009)
Cohort Silent	-0.014*** (0.004)	-0.007 (0.006)	-0.002 (0.006)
Cohort Gen-X	-0.033*** (0.005)	-0.040*** (0.007)	-0.048*** (0.006)
Cohort Millenials	0.008 (0.012)	-0.004 (0.014)	-0.034*** (0.013)
Age		-0.0004 (0.0003)	-0.001** (0.0002)
Indep/Other			0.109*** (0.004)
Democrat			0.176*** (0.004)
HS Grad			-0.046*** (0.005)
Some College			0.031*** (0.004)
College Grad			0.022*** (0.003)
Postgraduate			0.005* (0.003)
Income			-0.00000*** (0.00000)
White			-0.013*** (0.004)
Alienation.1			0.241*** (0.003)
Alienation.2			-0.055*** (0.003)
Alienation.3			0.017*** (0.003)
Constant	0.495*** (0.015)	0.500*** (0.016)	0.512*** (0.015)
Observations	77,539	77,539	77,539
R ²	0.019	0.019	0.161
Adjusted R ²	0.018	0.018	0.160
Residual Std. Error	0.430 (df = 77497)	0.430 (df = 77496)	0.398 (df = 77485)
F Statistic	36.120*** (df = 41; 77497)	35.320*** (df = 42; 77496)	279.900*** (df = 53; 77485)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

These models include an alternative specification of the cohort variable to test whether our cohort results are sensitive to variable specification. Rather than by decade, individuals are grouped substantively by birth year into the following cohort groupings: "before greatest" (birth year less than 1915), "greatest" (1915-1924), "silent" (1925-1944), "boomers" (1945-1964), "gen-X" (1965-1980), and "millenials" (birth year greater than 1980). Three models were run: an unadjusted model (which only includes year fixed effects and cohort), an age model (including age as a variable to disentangle age from cohort effects), and a full adjusted model including all relevant covariates. All models include year fixed effects. The reference group for the cohort variable is "boomers," for the party variable it is "republicans", and for education it is "less than high school." These results demonstrate that the key finding from the main cohort specification, that members of the generation following the "boomers" are less likely to perceive inequality at all points in the life course, holds whether cohort is specified by decade or substantively. In this model "Gen-Xers" are 4.8 % less likely to report perceiving inequality than boomers.

Appendix B Geographic Variable Tables

Table 4: State Gini Models

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Inequality Perceptions Binary			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Gini	-0.158 (0.114)	-0.151 (0.109)		
Gini Change			0.197 (0.138)	0.272** (0.131)
Democrat		0.187*** (0.008)		0.187*** (0.008)
Indep/Other		0.117*** (0.008)		0.117*** (0.008)
Cohort Before 1900		-0.013 (0.071)		-0.012 (0.071)
Cohort 1900-1914		0.019 (0.017)		0.019 (0.017)
Cohort 1915-1924		-0.006 (0.013)		-0.007 (0.013)
Cohort 1925-1934		-0.010 (0.011)		-0.010 (0.011)
Cohort 1935-1944		-0.012 (0.011)		-0.012 (0.011)
Cohort 1955-1964		-0.019** (0.009)		-0.019** (0.009)
Cohort 1965-1974		-0.053*** (0.010)		-0.053*** (0.010)
Cohort 1975-1984		-0.036** (0.016)		-0.036** (0.016)
Cohort 1985-1995		0.018 (0.033)		0.017 (0.033)
HS Grad		-0.063*** (0.008)		-0.064*** (0.008)
Some College		-0.004 (0.006)		-0.004 (0.006)
College Grad		-0.005 (0.006)		-0.005 (0.006)
Income		-0.00000*** (0.00000)		-0.00000*** (0.00000)
White		-0.026*** (0.008)		-0.024*** (0.008)
Alienation_1		0.168*** (0.007)		0.168*** (0.007)
Alienation_2		-0.016** (0.006)		-0.016** (0.006)
Alienation_3		0.012** (0.005)		0.012** (0.005)
Constant	0.872*** (0.061)	0.821*** (0.060)	0.774*** (0.013)	0.718*** (0.017)
Observations	18,982	18,982	18,982	18,982
R ²	0.013	0.114	0.013	0.114
Adjusted R ²	0.013	0.112	0.013	0.112
Residual Std. Error	0.427 (df = 18970)	0.405 (df = 18951)	0.427 (df = 18970)	0.404 (df = 18951)
F Statistic	22.944*** (df = 11; 18970)	81.017*** (df = 30; 18951)	22.955*** (df = 11; 18970)	81.106*** (df = 30; 18951)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

This table depicts four models which include measures of local income inequality, measured at the state level. The measures are “Gini” (state level Gini coefficient) and “Gini Change” (state level change in Gini coefficient from the coefficient measured five years previously). All models are linear probability models and include year fixed effects. The reference groups for the ordinal variables education and alienation are, respectively, “less than high school” and 0 (indicating the respondent did not reply yes to any of the alienation questions). The reference groups for the nominal variables party membership and cohort are, respectively, “republican” and “1945-1954.”

Table 5: State 10-Percent Share Models

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Inequality Perceptions Binary			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Top 10% Share	-0.0003 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)		
Top 10% Share Change			-0.002 (0.061)	0.093 (0.058)
Democrat		0.187*** (0.008)		0.187*** (0.008)
Indep/Other		0.117*** (0.008)		0.117*** (0.008)
Cohort Before 1900		-0.014 (0.071)		-0.012 (0.071)
Cohort 1900-1914		0.019 (0.017)		0.019 (0.017)
Cohort 1915-1924		-0.007 (0.013)		-0.007 (0.013)
Cohort 1925-1934		-0.010 (0.011)		-0.010 (0.011)
Cohort 1935-1944		-0.012 (0.011)		-0.012 (0.011)
Cohort 1955-1964		-0.019** (0.009)		-0.019** (0.009)
Cohort 1965-1974		-0.053*** (0.010)		-0.053*** (0.010)
Cohort 1975-1984		-0.036** (0.016)		-0.036** (0.016)
Cohort 1985-1995		0.018 (0.033)		0.018 (0.033)
HS Grad		-0.064*** (0.008)		-0.064*** (0.008)
Some College		-0.004 (0.006)		-0.004 (0.006)
College Grad		-0.005 (0.006)		-0.005 (0.006)
Income		-0.00000*** (0.00000)		-0.00000*** (0.00000)
White		-0.026*** (0.008)		-0.025*** (0.008)
Alienation_1		0.168*** (0.007)		0.168*** (0.007)
Alienation_2		-0.016** (0.006)		-0.016** (0.006)
Alienation_3		0.012** (0.005)		0.012** (0.005)
Constant	0.801*** (0.035)	0.779*** (0.036)	0.788*** (0.009)	0.736*** (0.014)
Observations	18,982	18,982	18,982	18,982
R ²	0.013	0.114	0.013	0.114
Adjusted R ²	0.012	0.112	0.012	0.112
Residual Std. Error	0.427 (df = 18970)	0.405 (df = 18951)	0.427 (df = 18970)	0.405 (df = 18951)
F Statistic	22.779*** (df = 11; 18970)	81.001*** (df = 30; 18951)	22.767*** (df = 11; 18970)	81.041*** (df = 30; 18951)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

This table depicts four models which include measures of local income inequality, measured at the state level. The measures are “Top 10% Share” (share of the income distribution held by the top 10th percentile, measured at the state level) and “Top 10% Share Change” (state level change in the “Top 10% Share” over the previous five years). All models are linear probability models and include year fixed effects. The reference groups for the ordinal variables education and alienation are, respectively, “less than high school” and 0 (indicating the respondent did not reply yes to any of the alienation questions). The reference groups for the nominal variables party membership and cohort are, respectively, “republican” and “1945-1954.”

Table 6: MSA Gini and Segregation Models

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Inequality Perceptions Binary					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Std. Gini	0.019*** (0.005)	-0.001 (0.004)				
Std. Segregation			-0.007 (0.005)	-0.005 (0.004)		
Std. Income Dist. Exposure					0.020*** (0.005)	-0.002 (0.004)
Democrat		0.224*** (0.011)		0.224*** (0.011)		0.224*** (0.011)
Indep/Other		0.143*** (0.012)		0.143*** (0.012)		0.143*** (0.012)
HS Grad		-0.102*** (0.030)		-0.101*** (0.030)		-0.102*** (0.030)
Some College		0.016 (0.025)		0.015 (0.025)		0.016 (0.025)
College Grad		0.025 (0.016)		0.025 (0.016)		0.025 (0.016)
Postgraduate		0.009 (0.010)		0.009 (0.010)		0.009 (0.010)
Income		-0.00000*** (0.00000)		-0.00000*** (0.00000)		-0.00000*** (0.00000)
White		-0.034*** (0.011)		-0.036*** (0.011)		-0.034*** (0.011)
Cohort Before 1900		-0.023 (0.084)		-0.023 (0.084)		-0.023 (0.084)
Cohort 1900-1914		0.011 (0.023)		0.011 (0.023)		0.010 (0.023)
Cohort 1915-1924		-0.021 (0.018)		-0.020 (0.018)		-0.021 (0.018)
Cohort 1925-1934		-0.010 (0.016)		-0.010 (0.016)		-0.010 (0.016)
Cohort 1935-1944		-0.023 (0.015)		-0.023 (0.015)		-0.023 (0.015)
Cohort 1955-1964		-0.004 (0.013)		-0.004 (0.013)		-0.004 (0.013)
Cohort 1965-1974		-0.044*** (0.016)		-0.044*** (0.016)		-0.044*** (0.016)
Cohort 1975-1984		-0.026 (0.024)		-0.026 (0.024)		-0.026 (0.024)
Cohort 1985-1995		0.017 (0.035)		0.017 (0.035)		0.017 (0.035)
Constant	0.784*** (0.009)	0.702*** (0.020)	0.785*** (0.009)	0.703*** (0.020)	0.784*** (0.009)	0.702*** (0.020)
Observations	9,129	9,129	9,129	9,129	9,129	9,129
R ²	0.012	0.098	0.010	0.098	0.012	0.098
Adjusted R ²	0.011	0.096	0.009	0.096	0.011	0.096
Residual Std. Error	0.427 (df = 9118)	0.408 (df = 9101)	0.427 (df = 9118)	0.408 (df = 9101)	0.427 (df = 9118)	0.408 (df = 9101)
F Statistic	10.746*** (df = 10; 9118)	36.776*** (df = 27; 9101)	9.148*** (df = 10; 9118)	36.826*** (df = 27; 9101)	10.840*** (df = 10; 9118)	36.781*** (df = 27; 9101)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

This table depicts six models which include measures of local income inequality and segregation, measured at the MSA level. The measures are "Std. Gini" (MSA-level standardized by year Gini coefficient), "Std. Segregation" (within-MSA measure of income segregation, also standardized by year), and "Std. Income Distribution Exposure" (between-MSA standardized measure of income distribution, which estimates the MSA-level exposure to the extremes of the national income distribution). All models are linear probability models and include year fixed effects. The reference group for party membership is "republican," for cohort it is "1945-1954." The education variable is an ordinal variable with base reference group "Less than High School."

Table 7: MSA Wealth Models

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Inequality Perceptions Binary			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Std. Wealth Gini Median	0.001 (0.004)	-0.0001 (0.004)		
Std. Wealth Gini Upper Quartile			-0.0001 (0.004)	0.0002 (0.004)
Democrat		0.224*** (0.011)		0.224*** (0.011)
Indep/Other		0.143*** (0.012)		0.143*** (0.012)
HS Grad		-0.102*** (0.030)		-0.102*** (0.030)
Some College		0.016 (0.025)		0.016 (0.025)
College Grad		0.025 (0.016)		0.025 (0.016)
Postgraduate		0.009 (0.010)		0.009 (0.010)
Income		-0.00000*** (0.00000)		-0.00000*** (0.00000)
White		-0.033*** (0.011)		-0.033*** (0.011)
Cohort Before 1900		-0.023 (0.084)		-0.023 (0.084)
Cohort 1900-1914		0.011 (0.023)		0.011 (0.023)
Cohort 1915-1924		-0.021 (0.018)		-0.021 (0.018)
Cohort 1925-1934		-0.010 (0.016)		-0.010 (0.016)
Cohort 1935-1944		-0.023 (0.015)		-0.023 (0.015)
Cohort 1955-1964		-0.004 (0.013)		-0.004 (0.013)
Cohort 1965-1974		-0.044*** (0.016)		-0.044*** (0.016)
Cohort 1975-1984		-0.026 (0.024)		-0.026 (0.024)
Cohort 1985-1995		0.017 (0.035)		0.017 (0.035)
Constant	0.785*** (0.009)	0.702*** (0.020)	0.785*** (0.009)	0.702*** (0.020)
Observations	9,129	9,129	9,129	9,129
R ²	0.010	0.098	0.010	0.098
Adjusted R ²	0.009	0.096	0.009	0.096
Residual Std. Error	0.427 (df = 9118)	0.408 (df = 9101)	0.427 (df = 9118)	0.408 (df = 9101)
F Statistic	8.943*** (df = 10; 9118)	36.773*** (df = 27; 9101)	8.936*** (df = 10; 9118)	36.773*** (df = 27; 9101)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

This table depicts four models which include measures of local wealth inequality, measured at the MSA level. The two wealth inequality measures are “Std. Wealth Gini Median” and “Std. Wealth Gini Upper Quartile.” The first refers to the standardized by year Gini of the median value of owner-occupied housing across tracts within respondent MSA, while the latter is the standardized by year Gini of the upper quartile of owner-occupied housing values across tracts within respondent MSA. All models are linear probability models and include year fixed effects. The reference group for party membership is “republican,” for cohort it is “1945-1954.” The education variable is an ordinal variable with base reference group “Less than High School.”

Table 8: Additional MSA-Level Economic Context Measures

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Inequality Perceptions Binary			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Std. Poverty Rate	0.012** (0.004)	−0.007 (0.004)		
Std. RMD			0.020*** (0.005)	−0.001 (0.004)
Democrat		0.224*** (0.011)		0.224*** (0.011)
Indep/Other		0.142*** (0.012)		0.143*** (0.012)
HS Grad		−0.103*** (0.030)		−0.102*** (0.030)
Some College		0.016 (0.025)		0.016 (0.025)
College Grad		0.025 (0.016)		0.025 (0.016)
Postgraduate		0.010 (0.010)		0.009 (0.010)
Income		−0.00000*** (0.00000)		−0.00000*** (0.00000)
White		−0.036*** (0.011)		−0.034*** (0.011)
Cohort Before 1900		−0.022 (0.084)		−0.023 (0.084)
Cohort 1900-1914		0.010 (0.023)		0.010 (0.023)
Cohort 1915-1924		−0.021 (0.018)		−0.021 (0.018)
Cohort 1925-1934		−0.010 (0.016)		−0.010 (0.016)
Cohort 1935-1944		−0.023 (0.015)		−0.023 (0.015)
Cohort 1955-1964		−0.004 (0.013)		−0.004 (0.013)
Cohort 1965-1974		−0.043*** (0.016)		−0.044*** (0.016)
Cohort 1975-1984		−0.025 (0.023)		−0.026 (0.024)
Cohort 1985-1995		0.016 (0.035)		0.017 (0.035)
Constant	0.785*** (0.009)	0.705*** (0.020)	0.784*** (0.009)	0.702*** (0.020)
Observations	9,129	9,129	9,129	9,129
R ²	0.010	0.099	0.012	0.098
Adjusted R ²	0.009	0.096	0.011	0.096
Residual Std. Error	0.427 (df = 9118)	0.408 (df = 9101)	0.427 (df = 9118)	0.408 (df = 9101)
F Statistic	9.603*** (df = 10; 9118)	36.878*** (df = 27; 9101)	10.899*** (df = 10; 9118)	36.775*** (df = 27; 9101)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The key variables in this table are “standardized relative mean deprivation” and “standardized poverty rate.” These are the alternative measures for local economic context measured at the MSA-level, discussed in the methodological overview. As these results show, while each of the local-level geographic variables are significant when included as the sole regressor, once additional controls are added they all become statistically insignificant. This suggests that the significance of the geographic variables in the base model is due to cross-regional demographic differences. All models include year fixed effects. All adjusted models additionally control for education, income, and race.

Appendix C Full Data Models

Table 9: Full Data Basic Models

Dependent variable:							
Inequality Perceptions Binary							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Democrat				0.227*** (0.004)	0.175*** (0.004)	0.175*** (0.004)	0.148*** (0.004)
Indep/Other				0.147*** (0.004)	0.108*** (0.004)	0.108*** (0.004)	0.090*** (0.004)
Union HH	0.074*** (0.004)						0.040*** (0.004)
Cohort Before 1900		-0.038*** (0.009)	-0.033 (0.030)		-0.062*** (0.008)	-0.046* (0.028)	-0.061*** (0.009)
Cohort 1900-1914		-0.005 (0.007)	-0.001 (0.021)		-0.027*** (0.007)	-0.017 (0.019)	-0.027*** (0.007)
Cohort 1915-1924		-0.031*** (0.006)	-0.029* (0.015)		-0.042*** (0.006)	-0.035** (0.014)	-0.044*** (0.006)
Cohort 1925-1934		-0.028*** (0.006)	-0.027** (0.011)		-0.030*** (0.005)	-0.025** (0.010)	-0.027*** (0.006)
Cohort 1935-1944		-0.015*** (0.005)	-0.014** (0.007)		-0.009* (0.005)	-0.007 (0.006)	-0.010* (0.005)
Cohort 1955-1964		-0.017*** (0.005)	-0.017** (0.007)		-0.014*** (0.005)	-0.017*** (0.006)	-0.018*** (0.006)
Cohort 1965-1974		-0.043*** (0.006)	-0.044*** (0.011)		-0.045*** (0.006)	-0.050*** (0.010)	-0.056*** (0.007)
Cohort 1975-1984		-0.024** (0.010)	-0.026 (0.017)		-0.038*** (0.009)	-0.046*** (0.016)	-0.020 (0.013)
Cohort 1985-1995		0.003 (0.016)	-0.0001 (0.024)		-0.020 (0.015)	-0.030 (0.022)	0.023 (0.023)
Age			-0.0001 (0.0005)			-0.0003 (0.0004)	
White					-0.013*** (0.004)	-0.013*** (0.004)	-0.014*** (0.005)
Alienation_1					0.241*** (0.003)	0.241*** (0.003)	0.243*** (0.004)
Alienation_2					-0.055*** (0.003)	-0.055*** (0.003)	-0.062*** (0.003)
Alienation_3					0.017*** (0.003)	0.017*** (0.003)	0.016*** (0.003)
HS Grad					-0.047*** (0.005)	-0.047*** (0.005)	-0.059*** (0.006)
Some College					0.031*** (0.004)	0.031*** (0.004)	0.020*** (0.005)
College Grad					0.021*** (0.003)	0.021*** (0.003)	0.012*** (0.004)
Postgraduate					0.005* (0.003)	0.005* (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)
Income					-0.00000*** (0.00000)	-0.00000*** (0.00000)	-0.00000*** (0.00000)
Constant	0.459*** (0.015)	0.503*** (0.015)	0.504*** (0.017)	0.338*** (0.015)	0.512*** (0.015)	0.516*** (0.017)	0.519*** (0.015)
Observations	58,735	77,539	77,539	77,539	77,539	77,539	58,735
R ²	0.024	0.019	0.019	0.064	0.161	0.161	0.161
Adjusted R ²	0.023	0.019	0.018	0.063	0.160	0.160	0.161
Residual Std. Error	0.428 (df = 58708)	0.430 (df = 77493)	0.430 (df = 77492)	0.420 (df = 77500)	0.398 (df = 77482)	0.398 (df = 77481)	0.397 (df = 58688)
F Statistic	54.406*** (df = 26; 58708)	33.481*** (df = 45; 77493)	32.754*** (df = 46; 77492)	138.972*** (df = 38; 77500)	265.561*** (df = 56; 77482)	260.906*** (df = 57; 77481)	245.391*** (df = 46; 58688)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

All models are linear probability models and include year fixed effects. The reference groups for the ordinal variables education and alienation are, respectively, "less than high school" and 0 (indicating the respondent did not reply yes to any of the alienation questions). The reference groups for the nominal variables party membership and cohort are, respectively, "republican" and "1945-1954." The sample used for models 1 and 7 is different than the sample used for all other models (n = 58,735 vs. n = 77,539). This is because the union variable was only included in models 1 and 7. For more details on the justification for and construction of these samples, please see the Missingness Appendix.

Appendix D Geographic Interaction Effects

Table 10: Union-Gini Intx Effects, MSA Data

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Inequality Perceptions Binary	
	Unadjusted	Adjusted
Union	0.068*** (0.012)	0.044*** (0.011)
Std. Gini	0.020*** (0.005)	−0.001 (0.005)
Union:Std. Gini	0.003 (0.011)	0.007 (0.011)
Observations	9,017	9,017
R ²	0.016	0.099
Adjusted R ²	0.014	0.097
Residual Std. Error	0.426 (df = 9004)	0.408 (df = 8987)
F Statistic	11.863*** (df = 12; 9004)	34.212*** (df = 29; 8987)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

All models are linear probability models and include year fixed effects. The adjusted model controls for party membership, cohort, education, income, and race.

Table 11: Party-Gini Intx Effects, MSA Data

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Inequality Perceptions	Binary
	Unadjusted	Adjusted
Democrat	0.258*** (0.010)	0.224*** (0.011)
Indep/Other	0.165*** (0.012)	0.142*** (0.012)
Std. Gini	0.014* (0.008)	0.005 (0.008)
Democrat : Std. Gini	−0.006 (0.010)	−0.011 (0.010)
Indep/Other : Std. Gini	−0.004 (0.012)	−0.005 (0.011)
Observations	9,129	9,129
R ²	0.076	0.098
Adjusted R ²	0.074	0.096
Residual Std. Error	0.413 (df = 9114)	0.408 (df = 9099)
F Statistic	53.344*** (df = 14; 9114)	34.281*** (df = 29; 9099)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

All models are linear probability models and include year fixed effects. The adjusted model controls for cohort, education, income, and race. The reference group for party membership is “republican.”

Table 12: Cohort-Gini Intx Effects, MSA Data

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Inequality Perceptions Binary	
	Unadjusted	Adjusted
Cohort Before 1900	0.003 (0.098)	0.020 (0.094)
Cohort 1900-1914	0.058** (0.023)	0.007 (0.023)
Cohort 1915-1924	0.016 (0.018)	-0.021 (0.018)
Cohort 1925-1934	0.013 (0.017)	-0.009 (0.016)
Cohort 1935-1944	-0.018 (0.016)	-0.023 (0.015)
Cohort 1955-1964	-0.002 (0.014)	-0.004 (0.013)
Cohort 1965-1974	-0.033** (0.016)	-0.044*** (0.016)
Cohort 1975-1984	0.004 (0.025)	-0.023 (0.024)
Cohort 1985-1995	0.082** (0.036)	0.017 (0.035)
Std. Gini	0.014 (0.010)	-0.006 (0.010)
Cohort Before 1900 : Std. Gini	-0.102 (0.130)	-0.122 (0.125)
Cohort 1900-1914 : Std. Gini	0.029 (0.024)	0.026 (0.023)
Cohort 1915-1924 : Std. Gini	0.015 (0.018)	0.007 (0.017)
Cohort 1925-1934 : Std. Gini	0.001 (0.017)	-0.005 (0.016)
Cohort 1935-1944 : Std. Gini	0.030* (0.016)	0.022 (0.016)
Cohort 1955-1964 : Std. Gini	0.005 (0.014)	0.004 (0.014)
Cohort 1965-1974 : Std. Gini	-0.002 (0.016)	0.006 (0.015)
Cohort 1975-1984 : Std. Gini	-0.037 (0.025)	-0.014 (0.024)
Cohort 1985-1995 : Std. Gini	-0.015 (0.036)	0.005 (0.035)
Observations	9,129	9,129
R ²	0.016	0.099
Adjusted R ²	0.013	0.095
Residual Std. Error	0.426 (df = 9100)	0.408 (df = 9092)
F Statistic	5.180*** (df = 28; 9100)	27.731*** (df = 36; 9092)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

All models are linear probability models and include year fixed effects. The adjusted model controls for party, education, income, and race. The reference group for cohort is "1945-1954."

Table 13: Union-Segregation Intx Effects, MSA Data

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Inequality Perceptions Binary	
	Unadjusted	Adjusted
Union	0.065*** (0.012)	0.043*** (0.011)
Std. Segregation	-0.010** (0.005)	-0.007 (0.005)
Union : Std. Segregation.std	0.020* (0.012)	0.008 (0.011)
Observations	9,017	9,017
R ²	0.014	0.100
Adjusted R ²	0.012	0.097
Residual Std. Error	0.427 (df = 9004)	0.408 (df = 8987)
F Statistic	10.496*** (df = 12; 9004)	34.266*** (df = 29; 8987)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

All models are linear probability models and include year fixed effects. The adjusted model controls for cohort, party, education, income, and race.

Table 14: Party-Segregation Intx Effects, MSA Data

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Inequality Perceptions Binary	
	Unadjusted	Adjusted
Democrat	0.260*** (0.010)	0.225*** (0.011)
Indep/Other	0.167*** (0.012)	0.143*** (0.012)
Std. Segregation	−0.020** (0.008)	−0.013* (0.008)
Democrat : Std. Segregation	0.022** (0.010)	0.017* (0.010)
Indep/Other : Std. Segregation	0.003 (0.012)	0.002 (0.011)
Observations	9,129	9,129
R ²	0.076	0.099
Adjusted R ²	0.075	0.096
Residual Std. Error	0.413 (df = 9114)	0.408 (df = 9099)
F Statistic	53.650*** (df = 14; 9114)	34.411*** (df = 29; 9099)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

All models are linear probability models and include year fixed effects. The adjusted model controls for cohort, education, income, and race. The reference group for party membership is “republican.”

Table 15: Cohort-Segregation Intx Effects, MSA Data

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Inequality Perceptions Binary	
	Unadjusted	Adjusted
Cohort Before 1900	−0.027 (0.088)	−0.022 (0.084)
Cohort 1900-1914	0.063*** (0.023)	0.009 (0.023)
Cohort 1915-1924	0.018 (0.018)	−0.020 (0.018)
Cohort 1925-1934	0.014 (0.017)	−0.010 (0.016)
Cohort 1935-1944	−0.018 (0.016)	−0.023 (0.015)
Cohort 1955-1964	−0.001 (0.014)	−0.003 (0.013)
Cohort 1965-1974	−0.032* (0.016)	−0.043*** (0.016)
Cohort 1975-1984	0.001 (0.024)	−0.026 (0.024)
Cohort 1985-1995	0.081** (0.036)	0.017 (0.035)
Std. Segregation	0.008 (0.010)	0.009 (0.010)
Cohort Before 1900 : Std. Segregation	0.029 (0.092)	0.008 (0.088)
Cohort 1900-1914 : Std. Segregation	−0.020 (0.023)	−0.028 (0.022)
Cohort 1915-1924 : Std. Segregation	−0.017 (0.018)	−0.010 (0.017)
Cohort 1925-1934 : Std. Segregation	−0.028* (0.016)	−0.019 (0.016)
Cohort 1935-1944 : Std. Segregation	−0.010 (0.016)	−0.018 (0.015)
Cohort 1955-1964 : Std. Segregation	−0.023 (0.014)	−0.021 (0.014)
Cohort 1965-1974 : Std. Segregation	−0.014 (0.017)	−0.018 (0.016)
Cohort 1975-1984 : Std. Segregation	0.002 (0.024)	−0.003 (0.023)
Cohort 1985-1995 : Std. Segregation	−0.006 (0.034)	0.0002 (0.033)
Observations	9,129	9,129
R ²	0.013	0.099
Adjusted R ²	0.010	0.095
Residual Std. Error	0.427 (df = 9100)	0.408 (df = 9092)
F Statistic	4.394*** (df = 28; 9100)	27.718*** (df = 36; 9092)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

All models are linear probability models and include year fixed effects. The adjusted model controls for cohort, education, income, and race. The reference group for cohort is “1945-1954.”

Appendix E Year-Variable Interaction Effects

Table 16: Union-Year Intx Effects, Full Data

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Inequality Perceptions Binary
Union HH	−0.034 (0.030)
Union:1972	0.085*** (0.032)
Union:1973	0.079** (0.038)
Union:1974	0.090*** (0.033)
Union:1976	0.083*** (0.032)
Union:1978	0.053 (0.033)
Union:1980	0.083** (0.036)
Union:1982	0.043 (0.042)
Union:1983	0.056 (0.042)
Union:1984	0.054 (0.041)
Union:1985	0.107** (0.042)
Union:1986	0.040 (0.042)
Union:1987	0.074** (0.034)
Union:1988	0.065* (0.034)
Union:1989	0.066* (0.035)
Union:1990	0.058* (0.035)
Union:1992	0.057* (0.034)
Union:1993	0.050 (0.042)
Union:1994	0.173*** (0.047)
Union:1997	0.071 (0.046)
Union:1999	0.115** (0.047)
Union:2002	0.077** (0.038)
Union:2003	0.103** (0.047)
Union:2007	0.092* (0.049)
Union:2009	0.113** (0.045)
Union:2012	0.082* (0.045)
Observations	58,735
R ²	0.162
Adjusted R ²	0.161
Residual Std. Error	0.397 (df = 58663)
F Statistic	159.400*** (df = 71; 58663)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The model is a linear probability models and includes year fixed effects as well additional controls for party, cohort, education, income, race, alienation.

Table 17: Party-Year Intx Effects, Full Data

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Inequality Perceptions Binary	
	Democrat	Indep/Other
Main Effects	-0.012 (0.031)	-0.070* (0.042)
Party:1969	0.045 (0.040)	0.105** (0.053)
Party:1972	0.159*** (0.033)	0.171*** (0.044)
Party:1973	0.104** (0.041)	0.175*** (0.051)
Party:1974	0.121*** (0.034)	0.167*** (0.045)
Party:1976	0.124*** (0.033)	0.144*** (0.044)
Party:1978	0.090*** (0.035)	0.110** (0.046)
Party:1980	0.111*** (0.037)	0.132*** (0.048)
Party:1982	0.212*** (0.043)	0.207*** (0.052)
Party:1983	0.137*** (0.043)	0.133** (0.053)
Party:1984	0.229*** (0.042)	0.231*** (0.052)
Party:1985	0.185*** (0.042)	0.157*** (0.051)
Party:1986	0.067 (0.042)	0.109** (0.052)
Party:1987	0.182*** (0.034)	0.116** (0.048)
Party:1988	0.235*** (0.034)	0.201*** (0.045)
Party:1989	0.125*** (0.035)	0.141*** (0.046)
Party:1990	0.188*** (0.035)	0.156*** (0.045)
Party:1991	0.170*** (0.039)	0.139*** (0.048)
Party:1992	0.134*** (0.034)	0.147*** (0.044)
Party:1993	0.226*** (0.042)	0.200*** (0.052)
Party:1994	0.242*** (0.038)	0.144*** (0.047)
Party:1996	0.246*** (0.044)	0.237*** (0.055)
Party:1997	0.188*** (0.045)	0.204*** (0.053)
Party:1998	0.232*** (0.045)	0.260*** (0.054)
Party:1999	0.207*** (0.039)	0.217*** (0.048)
Party:2000	0.317*** (0.045)	0.292*** (0.055)
Party:2002	0.262*** (0.036)	0.242*** (0.045)
Party:2003	0.289*** (0.039)	0.202*** (0.048)
Party:2004	0.335*** (0.045)	0.305*** (0.053)
Party:2005	0.338*** (0.045)	0.269*** (0.053)
Party:2007	0.273*** (0.039)	0.217*** (0.048)
Party:2008	0.440*** (0.046)	0.328*** (0.055)
Party:2009	0.375*** (0.039)	0.280*** (0.048)
Party:2010	0.360*** (0.047)	0.251*** (0.055)
Party:2011	0.401*** (0.048)	0.200*** (0.055)
Party:2012	0.375*** (0.042)	0.238*** (0.050)
Party:2013	0.273*** (0.038)	0.207*** (0.047)
Observations	77,539	
R ²	0.168	
Adjusted R ²	0.167	
Residual Std. Error	0.396 (df = 77410)	
F Statistic	122.200*** (df = 128, 77410)	

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The model is a linear probability models and includes year fixed effects as well as additional controls for party, cohort, education, income, white, alienation.

Table 18: Cohort-Year Intx Effects, Post-1990 Data

	Greatest	Silent	Gen-X
Main Effect	−0.035 (0.021)	−0.022 (0.017)	−0.058*** (0.021)
Cohort:1991	0.007 (0.043)	0.0001 (0.029)	0.045 (0.033)
Cohort:1992	0.003 (0.030)	0.030 (0.022)	0.069*** (0.026)
Cohort:1993	−0.012 (0.046)	−0.047 (0.036)	−0.009 (0.038)
Cohort:1994	−0.009 (0.040)	−0.032 (0.028)	0.060* (0.032)
Cohort:1996	−0.082 (0.056)	−0.014 (0.038)	−0.002 (0.042)
Cohort:1997	0.013 (0.059)	0.001 (0.039)	−0.013 (0.037)
Cohort:1998	−0.039 (0.067)	−0.004 (0.040)	0.042 (0.038)
Cohort:1999	0.087* (0.049)	−0.019 (0.031)	0.026 (0.032)
Cohort:2000	−0.020 (0.077)	0.041 (0.041)	−0.002 (0.040)
Cohort:2002	0.057 (0.045)	0.035 (0.026)	0.001 (0.028)
Cohort:2003	−0.033 (0.059)	0.022 (0.031)	0.004 (0.031)
Cohort:2004	0.037 (0.085)	−0.004 (0.041)	0.033 (0.040)
Cohort:2005	0.074 (0.087)	0.005 (0.039)	0.050 (0.042)
Cohort:2007	0.069 (0.060)	0.008 (0.031)	−0.002 (0.033)
Cohort:2008	−0.059 (0.084)	−0.013 (0.039)	0.020 (0.042)
Cohort:2009	0.076 (0.066)	0.005 (0.029)	0.059* (0.032)
Cohort:2010	−0.010 (0.111)	−0.013 (0.039)	−0.022 (0.047)
Cohort:2011	0.226** (0.115)	0.013 (0.039)	0.076* (0.046)
Cohort:2012	−0.040 (0.119)	−0.029 (0.036)	0.064* (0.036)
Cohort:2013	0.138 (0.144)	0.007 (0.030)	0.024 (0.030)
Observations	32,502		
R ²	0.153		
Adjusted R ²	0.150		
Residual Std. Error	0.400 (df = 32407)		
F Statistic	62.170*** (df = 94; 32407)		

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

This is a table of the year-cohort interaction coefficients. The data used to compute these coefficients was subsetting to year 1990 and after and excluded respondents born before 1915 or after 1980. The date and respondents were restricted to ensure that all year-cohort categories included sufficient respondents. The cohort-year interactions on the full data set included many NA values and suffered from collinearity. This model uses an alternative measure of cohort than birth decades (used in all other models). In this alternative measure, cohorts were collapsed into six categories: “before greatest,” “greatest,” “silent,” “boomers,” “gen-X,” and “millennials.” We collapsed cohorts in order to increase the degrees of freedom in the model and reduce collinearity. Model also includes year fixed effects, party, education, income, race, and alienation.