doi:xx.xxxx/xxxxx

Economic Self-Interest and Support for Redistribution: New Evidence Using Election Results Data

JIEUN LEE *University of California, Riverside*
E. GRANT BALDWIN *University of California, Los Angeles*
G. AGUSTIN MARKARIAN *Loyola University Chicago*
BENJAMIN J. NEWMAN *University of California, Riverside*

A formidable corpus of scholarship explores the role of economic self-interest in shaping public support for redistribution. One striking feature of this literature is its near exclusive reliance on reported preferences in surveys, with little-to-no research analyzing revealed preferences in the form of actual voting on redistribution. Leveraging 7 redistributive ballot initiatives across 6 American states and a total of N=66,820 observations of revealed support for redistribution, we find consistent evidence that the economic standing of precinct voters is systematically related to their support for redistribution. Critically, we find that the exercise of self-interest is non-linear across the income distribution; while lower to upper-middle income precincts are each significantly more supportive of redistribution than upper income precincts, maximum support is observed among precincts with higher densities of middle income households. Finally, we observe the largest class differential in support for redistribution in more heavily Republican precincts.

Word Count: 5747

Jieun Lee is a PhD candidate at University of California, Riverside, Department of Political Science (jlee1433@ucr.edu).

E. Grant Baldwin is a PhD student at University of California, Los Angeles, Department of Political Science (baldwinegrant@g.ucla.edu).

G. Agustin Markarian is an Assistant Professor at Loyola University Chicago, Department of Political Science (gmarkarian@luc.edu).

Benjamin J. Newman is a Professor at University of California, Riverside, School of Public Policy and Department of Political Science. Corresponding Author (bnewman@ucr.edu).

This is a manuscript submitted for review.

INTRODUCTION

In an era of unabated growth in economic inequality in the United States spanning roughly 50 years (Solt 2020), a large and growing body of scholarship strives to understand the politics of redistribution in America and to grasp the factors that augment or erode Americans' support for redistributive policies (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Edlund 1999; Alesina and La Ferrara 2005; Kelly and Enns 2010; McCall 2013; Piston 2018; Condon and Wichowsky 2020; Peyton 2020; Culpepper et al. 2025). One consistent finding in this literature concerns the exercise of economic self-interest and the tendency of lower income individuals to favor government redistribution more than those with higher incomes (Alesina and La Ferrara 2005; Culpepper et al. 2025; Edlund 1999; Doherty et al. 2006; Fong 2001; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Piston 2018; Newman et al. 2022). This finding aligns with long-standing theory contending that voters are capable of engaging in rational calculations of their material interests and arriving at policy preferences that maximize such interests (Chong 2023).

Surprisingly, our accumulating scientific knowledge about public support for redistribution—both in the United States and abroad—is largely based on the preferences people report during their brief time taking surveys in person, over the telephone, or online (i.e., "reported preferences"). In other words, what we think we know about mass preferences on redistribution is based near-exclusively on the responses given by people in the fleeting and artificial context of survey response. The vast majority of published studies measure support for redistribution in the abstract by relying on the response of survey-takers to statements such as, "The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels" (Finseraas 2009; Rueda and Stegmueller 2016; Schmidt-Catran 2016), and "Do you think it should be the government's responsibility to reduce income differences between the rich and poor?" (Alt and Iversen 2017). While a few studies go beyond measuring abstract support by soliciting preferences over concrete state-level redistributive policy proposals (Franko et al. 2013; Newman and Teten 2021; Tolbert et al. 2019), these studies nevertheless rely on reported preferences and do not retrieve election results data to analyze actual voting on these proposals. Studies using experimental economic games measure subjects' redistribution of artificial monetary units (e.g., points or tokens), or relatively small sums of actual money, with other players in small group settings (Lekfuangfu et al. 2023; Wiese et al. 2025). While behavioral in nature, it is unclear if or how these game-bound behaviors conceptually or empirically relate to behavioral support for government redistribution. An innovative field experiment by Sands (2017) observed whether subjects signed a petition to place a redistributive measure on the state ballot in an upcoming election. While arguably the most externally valid behavioral measure of support for redistribution in the literature, this outcome captures support for putting redistribution to a vote rather than a "Yes" vote on the proposed policy.

In the end, the literature's heavy reliance on reported preferences begs the question of whether key patterns of opinion formation on redistribution, such as the established role of economic self-interest, would manifest when analyzing real-world choices (i.e., "revealed preferences"). It is well-known that the preferences people report in surveys to researchers may deviate from their actual preferences (Beshears et al. 2008) or subsequent behavior (Couture and Dooley 1981; Wardman 1988), which is why economists studying consumer behavior generally prefer to use choices observed in the marketplace to test theory and build knowledge. The distinction between reported preferences and actual behavior was made salient in the foundational study by LaPiere (1934), who found that the reported preference of hotel and restaurant proprietors to refuse service to Chinese persons was almost never fulfilled when confronted with an actual Chinese patron. This study highlighted that the attitudes people report may not predict their behavior, leading to an extensive literature focused on understanding attitude-behavior discrepancies (Bechler et al. 2021). Reported preferences typically suffer from "hypothetical bias" (Murphy et al. 2005), where survey-takers overstate their preferences over a particular set of choices in hypothetical settings where endorsed actions, outcomes, or policies are non-binding in the real world. The tendency for people to overstate their preferences is theorized to partially derive from their desire to have a positive self-image, maintain their "moral credentials," and demonstrate social responsibility (De Corte et al. 2021; Monin and Miller 2001). Put succinctly, endorsing redistribution in the abstract in a survey may not translate into costlier forms of behavioral support for concrete redistributive policies. Moreover, observed economic self-interest effects may be confined to reported abstract policy support and not manifest when analyzing actual voting on redistribution.

These possibilities are bolstered by several findings in the literature. First, Margalit and Raviv (2024) find that, when asked to describe the government actions Americans think of when responding to the commonly-asked "government should reduce income differences between rich and poor" survey question, only small percentages selected taxing the rich to spend on the poor. Instead, these authors found that roughly 40% of respondents endorsed abstract reduction of income differences without any concrete policy actions in mind.[1] Second, Americans' tend to endorse equality and social welfare provision in the abstract while resisting concrete government policies that promote these ends (Gilens 2009; McClosky and Zaller 1984). This disconnect between abstract and concrete support has been attributed to ambivalence deriving from holding countervailing humanitarian and individualistic values (Feldman and Zaller 1992), as well as belief in agency-based and structural explanations for wealth and poverty (Bartels 2016; Kluegel and Smith 1986), which have opposing relationships to support for redistribution (Alesina and La Ferrara 2005; Fong 2001; Kluegel and Smith 1986; McCall 2013). Race and prejudice are also relevant factors, as considerations of race may be less operative in abstract endorsement of government "reducing income differences" than with support for concrete redistributive programs benefiting stigmatized minorities (Gilens 2009) and visible populations of non-White "have-nots" (Newman et al. 2022). Finally, reported preferences for redistribution may not translate to revealed behavioral support due to the potential complexity of real-world policy proposals and voters' lack of complete information or understanding leading to decision errors (Beshears et al. 2008) or the enactment of "unenlightened" self-interest (Bartels 2016).[2] These possibilities are accompanied by evidence that Americans misperceive the factors that shape their own support for redistribution. Kane and Newman (2023) document that Americans believe that the amount and sources of income of the wealthy are important determinants of their desire to impose heavier taxes on the rich when, in fact, they play a modest or insignificant role. Adding to this, is research demonstrating that statistically significant relationships between experimental treatments and outcome variables observed

[1]Margalit and Raviv (2024) conduct a follow-up survey experiment demonstrating that altering the outcome question to include explicit reference to taxing the rich and spending on the poor elevated endorsement of redistribution, and did so the most among low-income respondents.

[2]Research focusing on relatively simple and straightforward state-level redistributive ballot propositions uncovers evidence of self-interest in the form of elevated policy support among lower income state residents (Franko et al. 2013; Newman and Teten 2021). While these studies illustrate the role of policy simplicity and clarity in facilitating self-interest, such conclusions about "when self-interest matters" are nonetheless based on reported preferences and not corroborated with election results data from the analyzed ballot propositions.

in survey research do not manifest in real world settings (Barabas and Jerit 2010; Biggers 2021).

Taken together, this work highlights the uncertain external validity of findings relying on reported preferences and the potentially precarious nature of knowledge built on reported preferences. Put simply, Americans may seem economically self-interested on government redistribution when taking brief pauses out of their day to respond to a survey, but may not follow through to actually vote their reported preference on redistribution when given the chance. And, if given the chance to vote directly on redistribution, myriad factors may stymie the exercise of economic self-interest. At present, we are unable to locate a single published study analyzing revealed preferences (e.g., vote choices) over a real-world redistributive policy. As such, a substantial contribution to the literature can be made by analyzing voting directly on redistribution, and assessing whether citizens' presumed exercise of economic self-interest emerges when the outcome is voters' revealed preferences rather than survey takers' reported preferences.

DATA AND METHODS

Voting on redistributive ballot measures in American states with direct democracy offers a revealed-preference behavioral measure of support for redistribution and a valuable opportunity to test for economic self-interest using externally valid data. We identified redistributive policy initiatives placed on a state ballot between 2000 to 2024. We included any initiative proposing to increase taxes on high income earners to generate revenue for social spending. Several of the cases we identified could not be included in our analysis due to the absence of publicly-available state-wide precinct-level election results. Precinct is the smallest unit of geographic aggregation for election results, and many states did not start compiling and making such data publicly available until the 2010s. In addition to state-wide precinct-level election results, our analysis required state-wide precinct boundary shapefiles in order to merge election results data with demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau. This resulted in our identification of seven redistributive ballot measures across six U.S. states. See Table A1 for more information about case selection and inclusion criteria.

Our analysis included the following ballot initiatives voted on by state citizens between 2012 to 2024: California Proposition 30 (2012) and Proposition 55 (2016), Colorado Amendment 73 (2018), Arizona Proposition 208 (2020), Illinois Graduated Income Tax (or 'Fair Tax') Amendment (2020), Massachusetts Question 1 (2022), and Washington Initiative 2109 (2024). Five of these measures involved straightforward proposals to increase taxes on high earners to fund social spending, one involved a constitutional amendment to do away with flat taxes to allow for a graduated income tax, and one involved a change to capital gains taxation. While these measures varied in scope and detail (see Appendix A), they all directly addressed redistribution through progressive tax reforms or related fiscal measures. Election results data and precinct shapefiles were retrieved from various sources (see Appendix C), including state election offices, the MIT Election Lab, the Redistricting Data Hub, and IPUMS-NHGIS (Manson et al. 2024). Where necessary, precinct shapefiles were projected into a common coordinate reference system (EPSG:26915) and validated for topological consistency. The precinct-level data we compiled across these seven ballot measures provided a total of N=66,820 observations of revealed support for redistribution among precinct voters. For each ballot measure, we computed the percentage of votes cast in favor of redistribution, which was the "Yes" vote for all initiatives except Initiative 2109 in Washington. For this initiative, a "No" vote indicated opposition to repealing the state capital gains tax and thus a vote in support of redistribution from the rich to spend on social services. The proportion of votes cast in favor of redistribution in each election precinct served as the dependent variable in our analysis.

To conduct our analysis, we needed information about the demographic characteristics of our election precincts. As such, we gathered demographic data from IPUMS-NHGIS (Manson et al. 2024), using both Decennial Census block-level data (2010 or 2020) and American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year block-group-level data for the closest pre-election period for each ballot measure (e.g., 2008–2012 ACS for 2012 elections, 2012–2016 ACS for 2016 elections).[3] Because Census block and block-group boundaries do not perfectly align with election precinct boundaries, we employed areal interpolation using the `areal` R package to estimate block and block group level variables into 2010 or 2020 precinct boundaries. Areal interpolation allows us to merge Census (source) and precinct (target) data, weighing source data based on the degree of spatial overlap with target shapefiles under

[3]We used a combination of block and block-group data because some covariates were only available at the block-group level (e.g., annual household income), while others were available at the block-level (e.g., population male, population under 18, population non-White). See Appendix C for information about variable measurement.

the assumption that individuals are evenly distributed across source features (Prener and Revord 2019).

Our main independent variables capture precinct-level income composition and we used three different measures of the economic standing of precinct voters. First, *Proportion Below Median Income*, is the estimated share of precinct households with annual incomes below the state median in the year of the election containing each redistributive measure; this variable offers an easily interpretable estimate of the size of the precinct population theoretically most likely to support redistribution (i.e., lower income residents). Second, *Median Income*, measured in thousands of USD, allows for a test of the relationship between the average income of precinct voters and their support for redistribution. Third, to explore potential non-linearity and the voting behavior of distinct income groups, we calculated the proportion of precinct households falling into each quintile (labeled *Q1*-*Q5*) of the state income distribution in the year of the election containing each redistributive ballot measure. For example, *Q1* captures the proportion of households in a precinct whose incomes fall in the first quintile of the state-year income distribution; for Proposition 208 in Arizona in 2020, the first income quintile included households with annual incomes ranging from \$0 to \$26,747 (cutoff point: \$25,000) and, across precincts in Arizona, the proportion of households in this *Q1* range varies from as low as 4% to as high as 100%. When using these quintile proportion measures, we use two different excluded reference categories: the middle quintile (*Q3*) or the highest quintile (*Q5*). Using *Q3* as the omitted reference group allows us to assess the voting behavior of lower and upper income precinct voters relative to middle income precinct voters. Alternatively, using *Q5* as the omitted reference group allows us to assess the voting behavior of lower through upper-middle income precinct voters relative to high-income precinct voters.

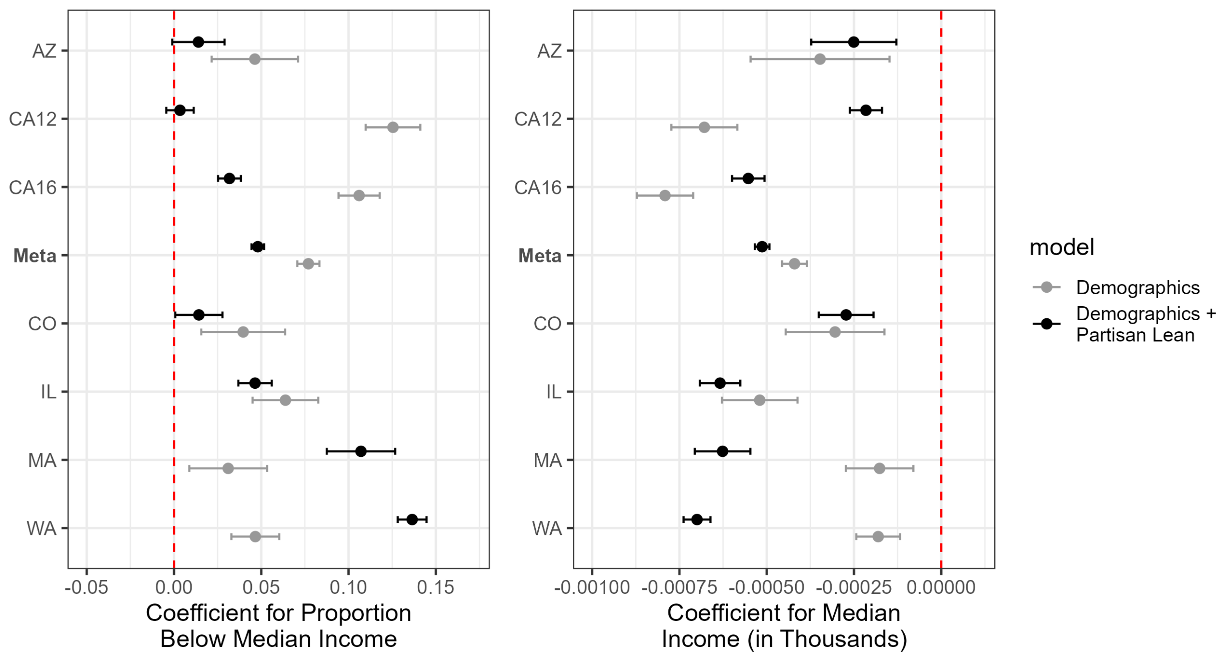
For each state, we estimated ordinary least squares (OLS) models predicting precinct support for redistribution as a function of one of the above referenced income composition measures and a consistent set of controls. All models included controls for proportion male, proportion under 18 years of age, proportion aged 65 years or older, proportion non-White, proportion homeowners, proportion with a bachelor's degree or higher, proportion unemployed, and population density. While the partisan leanings of precinct voters may be posttreatment to their economic positions, such leanings are known to be correlated with the income of voters (Peterson 2016) and thus represent a potential confounder. We measured precinct partisan lean using precinct Democratic presidential vote share in the election prior to the ballot measure under consideration. On one hand, controlling for partisan leanings helps alleviate the concern that estimates for our income measures (e.g., *Proportion Below Median Income*) suffer from confounding with political orientations; on the other hand, it risks biasing the estimated coefficients for our income measures downwards if economic self-interest partially operates through partisan attachment and vote choice. We therefore present our primary results from models including and excluding precinct partisan lean. To prevent low-population precincts from exerting disproportionate influence, we weight our OLS models by each precinct's estimated voting-age population. This approach shifts the analysis from one in which all precincts contribute equally (unweighted) to one in which all voters contribute equally, approximating an individual-level relationship aggregated through precincts.

For our initial presentation of findings, we present results from four distinct OLS models for each of our seven ballot measures: models using *Proportion Below Median Income* as the focal income composition measure that include or exclude partisan lean in our set of covariates, and models using *Median Income* as the focal income composition measure that include or exclude partisan lean in our set of covariates. To summarize findings across our seven cases, we estimated meta-analytic coefficients using the `meta` package (Schwarzer 2023). To explore potential non-linearity and the voting behavior of distinct income groups, we estimated a final set of models using our proportion in each income quintile as the focal predictors, with the proportion in *Q3* or *Q5* as the excluded comparison category. We then summarize these by-quintile findings across our seven cases with meta-analytic estimates.

FINDINGS

Figure 1 displays the estimated coefficients for *Proportion Below Median Income* (left panel) and *Median Income* (right panel) for each case, alongside the meta-analytic estimates, for models excluding and including partisan lean (see Appendix D for full results). Beginning with the left panel and models excluding partisan lean (gray coefficients), across all cases, precincts with larger shares of households earning incomes below the state-year median exhibit significantly higher revealed support for redistribution. Thus, when excluding a control that is arguably posttreatment from the set of covariates,

FIGURE 1. Precinct Income Composition and Support for Redistribution



Note: All models use heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors and are weighted by voting-age population. Points denote coefficients and capped horizontal bars denote 95% confidence intervals. “Meta” refers to fixed-effects meta-analytic estimates pooling across the seven cases.

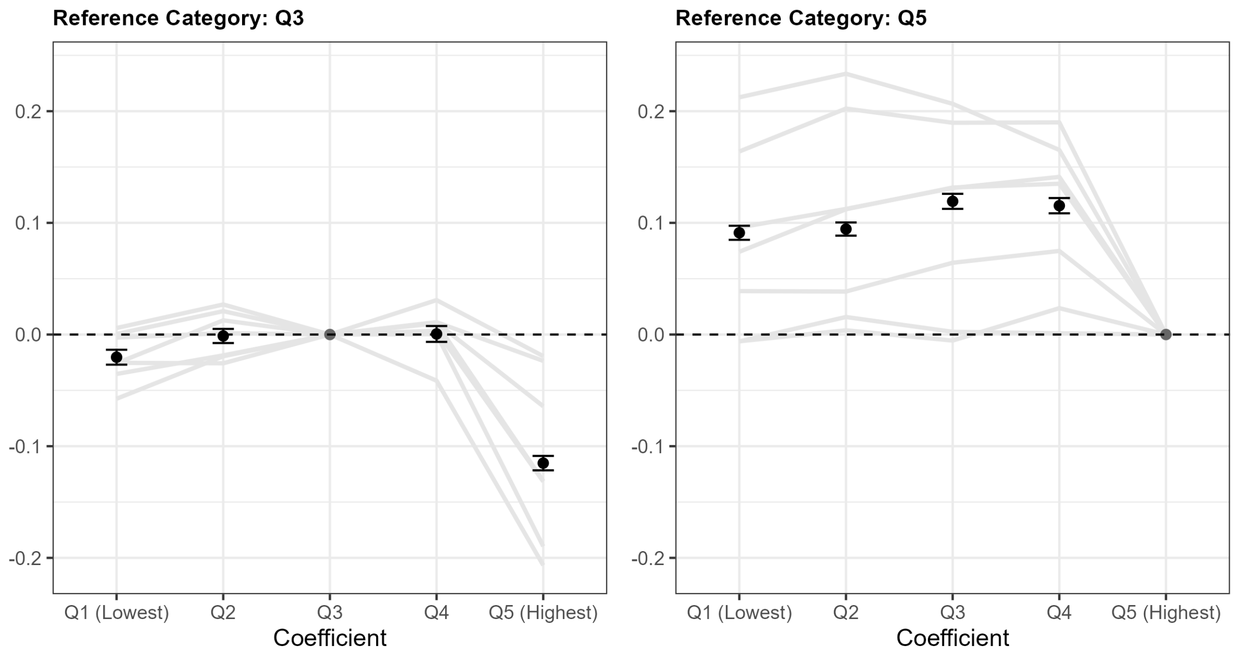
the findings are uniform with respect to sign and statistical significance. The size of the coefficients are notably larger for the CA ballot measures, and the pooled meta-analytic estimate (β = 0.08, 95%CI [0.07, 0.08]) indicates that a one–percentage-point increase in the share of below-median-income households is associated with a 0.08 percentage-point increase in votes cast for redistribution. Turning to our models including precinct partisan lean (black coefficients), we observe statistically significant coefficients for *Proportion Below Median Income* for most cases except CA Proposition 30 in 2012 and Arizona Proposition 208. In five of the cases, the coefficients are larger in models excluding partisan lean, however, the opposite is true in two of our cases. The reduction in coefficient sizes caused by controlling for partisan lean was expected given that inclusion of posttreatment variables can bias estimated treatment effects to zero. The pooled meta-analytic estimate (β = 0.05, 95% CI [0.04, 0.05]) indicates that a one–percentage-point increase in the share of below-median-income households is associated with a 0.05 percentage-point increase in votes cast for redistribution.

The right panel of Figure 1 presents the results from models using *Median Income* to capture the economic standing of precinct voters. In line with the findings in the left panel, the results in the right panel indicate that higher median income is consistently associated with lower support for redistribution, with uniformly negative and statistically significant coefficients from models excluding and including partisan lean. The pooled meta-analytic estimates indicate similar average coefficients for *Median Income* across models excluding and including partisan lean. In substantive terms, using the meta-analytic estimate from a model including partisan lean ($\beta = -0.0005$, 95%CI [-0.00053, -0.00049]), a $1,000 increase in a precinct's median income is associated with a 0.05 percentage point decrease in revealed support for redistribution; alternately, a one standard deviation ($42,950) increase in precinct median income is associated with a 2.15 percentage point decrease in support for redistribution. As further robustness checks, we demonstrate that the results in Figure 1 are not due to "suppression effects" (Lenz and Sahn 2021) and hold when estimating bivariate models (Appendix D1), hold when using beta regression instead of OLS (Figure A1), hold when excluding weights for precinct voting age population (Appendix E1), and hold when stacking the data instead of estimating meta-analytic coefficients (Appendix E3).

Figure 2 examines potential non-linearities and the voting behavior of distinct income groups. The gray lines depict the results when analyzing the seven ballot measures separately, and the plotted black coefficients present meta-analytic estimates. To simplify presentation, all results in this figure are from models including partisan lean (see Appendix D2 to view results excluding partisan lean). As a reminder, each *Q1-Q5* variable measures the estimated proportion of precinct households falling within the respective quintile. The left panel presents results from regression models where precinct support for redistribution is regressed on *Q1*, *Q2*, *Q4*, and *Q5* plus controls (including Democratic vote share in previous election), and the right panel does the same but includes *Q3* and omits *Q5*. Coefficients can be interpreted as the expected change in precinct percentage pro-redistribution votes associated with an increase in the proportion of precinct households falling into the respective income quintile relative to an increase in the proportion in the excluded quintile.

Starting with the left panel, where *Q3* serves as the excluded reference category, the most visible finding is the pronounced reduction in pro-redistribution votes associated with the increased presence of high-income (*Q5*) earners in a precinct. An increase in the percentage of *Q5* households is

FIGURE 2. Precinct Income Group Density and Support for Redistribution



Note: All models use heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors and are weighted by voting-age population. Gray lines trace state-specific estimates; black points and capped vertical bars are fixed-effects meta-analytic estimates pooling across the seven cases.

associated with a roughly 11.5 percentage point drop in proportion of pro-redistribution votes in the meta-analysis ($\beta = -0.115$, 95%CI [-0.12,-0.11]). The left panel also shows that increases in the presence of lower (*Q1*) income households (relative to precincts with more middle income (*Q3*) households) are associated with a small (2 percentage point) decrease in the proportion of votes in favor of redistribution ($\beta = -0.02$, 95%CI [-0.03,-0.01]). Turning to the right panel, where the highest quintile (*Q5*) is the excluded reference category, we see that the coefficients are similar across *Q1* (β =0.091, 95%CI [0.08,0.1]) and *Q2* (β = 0.094, 95%CI [0.09,0.1]) and slightly higher for *Q3* (β = 0.12, 95%CI [0.1,0.13]) and *Q4* (β = 0.1, 95%CI [0.11,0.12]). Taken together, the graphs in Figure 2 reveal that support for redistribution was the lowest in high-income precincts and highest in middle and upper-middle income precincts. While there were slight differences in the changes in pro-redistribution votes associated with increasing densities of *Q1*-*Q4* households, these differences were modest compared to the pronounced drop in redistribution support associated with the increasing prevalence of *Q5* households.

Given the aggregate nature of our data, we complement the results in Figure 2 with an analysis of support for redistribution in income-homogeneous low- and high-income precincts and an ecological inference model (Appendix E). Results from both ancillary analyses suggest significantly higher support for redistribution among low-income voters vis-à-vis high-income voters. Additionally, we conducted ancillary analyses (see Appendix F2) using changes in precinct turnout in the election including the redistribution ballot measure and the preceding election to explore if changes in turnout—and thus class-based mobilization—underscored differences in support for redistribution. We found that increasing densities of *Q4* and *Q5* households were associated with increasing turnout in the election containing the redistributive measure (relative to the prior election), suggesting potential mobilization to vote for redistribution among upper-middle income precincts and mobilization to vote against redistribution in upper income precincts.

The results in Figure 1 and Figure 2 provide suggestive evidence of a general exercise of economic self-interest consistent with standing wisdom based on past research relying near exclusively on individual-level survey data and reported preferences. In other words, consistent with prior survey findings, our results imply that higher income voters are less supportive of redistribution than voters located lower down on the economic ladder. This said, when conducting more nuanced analyses (i.e., Figure 2), we see that suggested economic self-interest effects may be non-monotonic, as the increasing prevalence of low-income households has a somewhat smaller association to support for redistribution than the increasing prevalence of middle-income or upper-middle income households. While this pattern is intriguing, it is important to avoid drawing too large of conclusions from these findings and to focus on the main take-home point: the economic standing of precinct voters is systematically related to their revealed support for redistribution, with support the lowest among precincts densely populated with households subject to proposed tax increases.

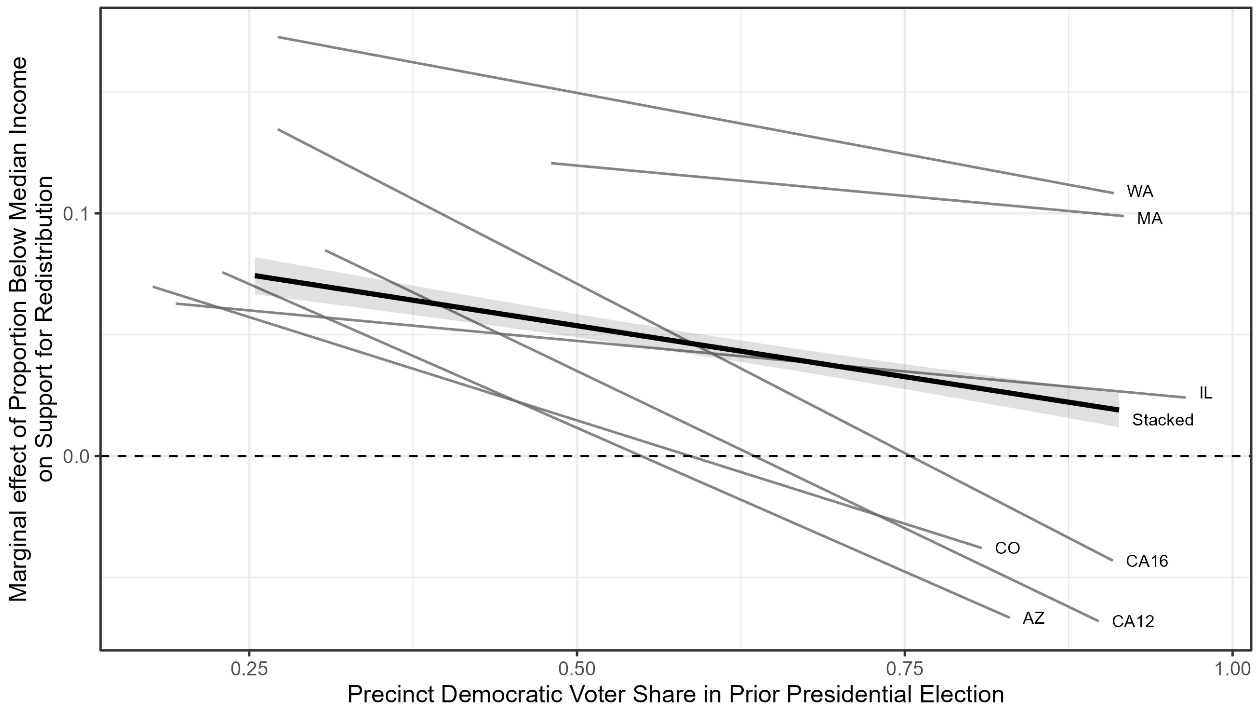
Heterogeneity by Partisan Leanings

Prior research suggests that the exercise of economic self-interest may vary based on partisanship and political context. For example, Gelman (2024) only observed significant and sizable differences in voting patterns between low and high income Americans in poor and more politically conservative states, noting that the wealthy in more affluent and politically liberal states were seemingly not exercising their economic self-interest the way their wealthy counter-parts were in poor and more conservative states. One potential explanation for this is the increasing importance of non-economic considerations in shaping the policy preferences of affluent Americans. For example, Gilens and Thal (2018) find that, among affluent Americans, altruistic concern for the well-being of others leads to greater identification with the Democratic Party and heightened support for liberal economic policies. This is complemented by research demonstrating more pronounced income-based differences in preferences over taxing high-income earners among Republican vis-à-vis Democratic identifiers (Vilbig 2025). Reinforcing these findings, repeated surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center soliciting Americans' support for raising taxes on wealthy households finds opposing patterns across respondent income by partisanship: among Democrats, higher income respondents were more supportive of progressive taxation than lower income respondents; however, among Republicans, the opposite was observed—with lower income respondents more supportive than higher income respondents (Fingerhut 2017; Cerda 2025).

In this section, we examine whether precinct partisan leanings moderate the relationship between precinct income composition and support for redistribution. We regressed support for redistribution on the interaction between precinct *Proportion Below Median Income* and *Democratic Presidential Vote Share* in the prior election. We estimate these models separately for each ballot measure and in a "stacked" specification that pooled all seven ballot measures while including ballot measure fixed effects.[4] All models included demographic controls. Figure 3 displays the marginal effect of *Proportion Below Median Income* across values of precinct partisan lean. The results indicate a consistent negative moderation effect: as precincts become more Democratic-leaning, the effect of *Proportion Below Median Income* on support for redistribution diminishes and, in some cases, reverses (see Table A30). In cases such as Proposition 208 in Arizona or Proposition 30 in California, the pattern is especially stark. In the most Democratic-voting precincts, an increase in the prevalence of low- and lower-middle-income households is associated with reduced support for redistribution, implying that higher income Democratic precincts were more supportive of redistribution than lower income Democratic precincts. In less Democratic-voting precincts (i.e., more Republican precincts),

[4]Meta analysis would not allow for the estimation of marginal effects we present in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3. Marginal Effects of Proportion Below Median Income by Precinct Partisan Lean on Support for Redistribution



Note: All models use heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors and are weighted by voting-age population. The black line presents the marginal effects for the "stacked" OLS model, which includes all states and 95% confidence intervals indicated by the gray ribbon. Gray lines trace state-specific estimates.

the opposite pattern obtains. Importantly, the pattern of results reported in Figure 3 hold when using the check on interaction models recommended by Hainmueller et al. (2019) (Appendix F). These findings strongly align with prior research documenting more visible economic self-interest effects among voters on the political right, with affluent voters on the political left seemingly acting against their own material self-interests in pursuit of other motives (e.g., altruism).

CONCLUSION

This research note provides the first, and most comprehensive, analysis to date of Americans' revealed preferences on government redistribution. A massive corpus of research on the politics of redistribution relies near-exclusively on reported preferences in surveys, with little-to-no research analyzing instances where Americans' were given the opportunity to cast a vote on redistribution directly. The exercise of economic self-interest is a standing wisdom in the redistributive politics literature, and this study is the first to corroborate decades of survey-based finding using reported preferences with an analysis of revealed preference election results data using all redistributive ballot measures in the 21st century from states with publicly-available statewide precinct-level election results. We uncover clear and consistent evidence of the exercise of self-interest in the form of greater support for redistribution in precincts dominated by non-affluent households and significantly lower relative support in precincts dominated by high-income households subject to increased taxation.

One interesting finding to emerge from our analysis was the non-monotonic nature of the pattern of support associated with the increasing presence of households moving up the income quintile ladder. Our findings did not suggest higher support among low-income relative to middle- or upper-middle income precincts. Instead, we found only slight differences in support for redistribution associated with increased densities of low-, middle-, and upper-middle-income households. The most obvious explanation for this is that most of the redistributive measures analyzed in our study involved defined income-thresholds for elevated taxation that were above the incomes of households in the first four income quintiles. Adding to this, the social spending programs outlined in these ballot proposals were not targeted for programs specifically benefiting the poor, but instead were public education, healthcare, and other public goods benefiting households across a wider stretch of the state income distribution. In the end, any assumed linear relationship between household income and support for redistribution may be a relic of reported preferences on questions soliciting abstract support for redistribution. When shifting from abstract survey questions to concrete policy proposals typically involving clear income-thresholds for triggered tax increases, it stands to reason that support would be comparably elevated among non-affluent households and that the main cliff in support would be observed among households at the income-threshold for tax increases.

REFERENCES

Alesina, Alberto and Eliana La Ferrara. 2005. “Preferences for redistribution in the land of opportunities”. *Journal of Public Economics* 89 (5-6): 897–931.

Alt, James and Torben Iversen. 2017. “Inequality, labor market segmentation, and preferences for redistribution”. *American Journal of Political Science* 61 (1): 21–36.

Barabas, Jason and Jennifer Jerit. 2010. “Are survey experiments externally valid?”. *American Political Science Review* 104 (2): 226–242.

Bartels, Larry M. 2016. *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Second ed.). Princeton University Press.

Bechler, Christopher J, Zakary L Tormala, and Derek D Rucker. 2021. “The attitude–behavior relationship revisited”. *Psychological Science* 32 (8): 1285–1297.

Beshears, John, James J Choi, David Laibson, and Brigitte C Madrian. 2008. “How are preferences revealed?”. *Journal of Public Economics* 92 (8-9): 1787–1794.

Biggers, Daniel R. 2021. “Can the backlash against voter id laws activate minority voters? experimental evidence examining voter mobilization through psychological reactance”. *Political Behavior* 43 (3): 1161–1179.

Cerda, Andy. 2025, March. “Most americans continue to favor raising taxes on corporations, higher-income households”. `https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/03/19/most-americans-continue-to-favor-raising-taxes-on-corporations-higher-income-households/`. Accessed: 2025-10-08.

Chong, Dennis. 2023. “Rational choice as an empirical and normative model of political behavior”. *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*: 109.

Condon, Meghan and Amber Wichowsky. 2020. “Inequality in the social mind: Social comparison and support for redistribution”. *The Journal of Politics* 82 (1): 149–161.

Couture, Michael R and Thomas Dooley. 1981. “Analyzing traveler attitudes to resolve intended and actual use of a new transit service”. *Transportation Research Record* (794).

Culpepper, Pepper D, Ryan Shandler, Jae-Hee Jung, and Taeku Lee. 2025. "'the economy is rigged': inequality narratives, fairness, and support for redistribution in six countries". *Comparative Political Studies* 58 (4): 714–745.

De Corte, Kaat, John Cairns, and Richard Grieve. 2021. "Stated versus revealed preferences: An approach to reduce bias". *Health Economics* 30 (5): 1095–1123.

Doherty, Daniel, Alan S Gerber, and Donald P Green. 2006. "Personal income and attitudes toward redistribution: A study of lottery winners". *Political Psychology* 27 (3): 441–458.

Edlund, Jonas. 1999. "Trust in government and welfare regimes: Attitudes to redistribution and financial cheating in the usa and norway". *European Journal of Political Research* 35 (3): 341–370.

Feldman, Stanley and John Zaller. 1992. "The political culture of ambivalence: Ideological responses to the welfare state". *American Journal of Political Science*: 268–307.

Fingerhut, Hannah. 2017, September. "More americans favor raising than lowering tax rates on corporations, high household incomes". `https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/09/27/more-americans-favor-raising-than-lowering-tax-rates-on-corporations-high-household-incomes/`. Accessed: October 8, 2025.

Finseraas, Henning. 2009. "Income inequality and demand for redistribution: A multilevel analysis of european public opinion". *Scandinavian Political Studies* 32 (1): 94–119.

Fong, Christina. 2001. "Social preferences, self-interest, and the demand for redistribution". *Journal of Public Economics* 82 (2): 225–246.

Franko, William, Caroline J Tolbert, and Christopher Witko. 2013. "Inequality, self-interest, and public support for "robin hood" tax policies". *Political Research Quarterly* 66 (4): 923–937.

Gelman, Andrew. 2024. *Red state, blue state, rich state, poor state: Why Americans vote the way they do*. Princeton University Press.

Gilens, Martin. 2009. *Why Americans hate welfare: Race, media, and the politics of antipoverty policy*. University of Chicago Press.

Gilens, Martin and Adam Thal. 2018. "Doing well and doing good? how concern for others shapes policy preferences and partisanship among affluent americans". *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82 (2): 209–230.

Hainmueller, Jens, Jonathan Mummolo, and Yiqing Xu. 2019. "How much should we trust estimates from multiplicative interaction models? simple tools to improve empirical practice". *Political Analysis* 27 (2): 163–192.

Kane, John V and Benjamin J Newman. 2023. "What they have but also who they are: Avarice, elitism, and public support for taxing the rich". *Public Opinion Quarterly* 87 (2): 402–414.

Kelly, Nathan J and Peter K Enns. 2010. "Inequality and the dynamics of public opinion: The self-reinforcing link between economic inequality and mass preferences". *American Journal of Political Science* 54 (4): 855–870.

Kluegel, James R and Eliot R Smith. 1986. *Beliefs about inequality: Americans' views of what is and what ought to be*. Routledge.

LaPiere, Richard T. 1934. "Attitudes vs. actions". *Social forces* 13 (2): 230–237.

Lekfuangfu, Warn N, Nattavudh Powdthavee, and Yohanes E Riyanto. 2023. "Luck or rights? an experiment on preferences for redistribution following inheritance of opportunity". *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics* 106 : 102078.

Lenz, Gabriel S and Alexander Sahn. 2021. "Achieving statistical significance with control variables and without transparency". *Political Analysis* 29 (3): 356–369.

Manson, Steven, Jonathan Schroeder, David Van Riper, Katherine Knowles, Tracy Kugler, Finn Roberts, and Steven Ruggles. 2024. "Ipums national historical geographic information system: Version 19.0". [dataset] Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS.

Margalit, Yotam and Shir Raviv. 2024. "Does support for redistribution mean what we think it means?". *Political Science Research and Methods* 12 (4): 870–878.

McCall, Leslie. 2013. *The undeserving rich: American beliefs about inequality, opportunity, and redistribution*. Cambridge University Press.

McClosky, Herbert and John Zaller. 1984. *The American ethos: Public attitudes toward capitalism and democracy*. Harvard University Press.

Monin, Benoit and Dale T Miller. 2001. "Moral credentials and the expression of prejudice". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81 (1): 33.

Murphy, James J, P Geoffrey Allen, Thomas H Stevens, and Darryl Weatherhead. 2005. "A meta-analysis of hypothetical bias in stated preference valuation". *Environmental and Resource Economics* 30 (3): 313–325.

Newman, Benjamin J, Tyler T Reny, and Bea-Sim Ooi. 2022. "The color of disparity: racialized income inequality and support for liberal economic policies". *The Journal of Politics* 84 (3): 1818–1822.

Newman, Benjamin J and Paul Teten. 2021. "Inequality federalism and economic self-interest in subnational progressive tax politics". *Political Research Quarterly* 74 (1): 243–252.

Peterson, Erik. 2016. "The rich are different: The effect of wealth on partisanship". *Political Behavior* 38 (1): 33–54.

Peyton, Kyle. 2020. "Does trust in government increase support for redistribution? evidence from randomized survey experiments". *American Political Science Review* 114 (2): 596–602.

Piston, Spencer. 2018. *Class attitudes in America: Sympathy for the poor, resentment of the rich, and political implications*. Cambridge University Press.

Prener, Christopher G and Charles K Revord. 2019. "areal: An r package for areal weighted interpolation". *Journal of Open Source Software* 4 (37): 1221.

Rueda, David and Daniel Stegmueller. 2016. "The externalities of inequality: Fear of crime and preferences for redistribution in western europe". *American Journal of Political Science* 60 (2): 472–489.

Sands, Melissa L. 2017. "Exposure to inequality affects support for redistribution". *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114 (4): 663–668.

Schmidt-Catran, Alexander W. 2016. "Economic inequality and public demand for redistribution: Combining cross-sectional and longitudinal evidence". *Socio-Economic Review* 14 (1): 119–140.

Schwarzer, Guido. 2023. *meta: General Package for Meta-Analysis*. R package version 7.0-0.

Solt, Frederick. 2020. "Measuring income inequality across countries and over time: The standardized world income inequality database". *Social Science Quarterly* 101 (3): 1183–1199.

Tolbert, Caroline J, Christopher Witko, and Cary Wolbers. 2019. "Public support for higher taxes on the wealthy: California's proposition 30". *Politics and Governance* 7 (2): 351–365.

Vilbig, Karyn. 2025. "Why do high-income democrats support redistribution? the roles of partisanship, racial attitudes and fiscal populism". *The British Journal of Sociology*.

Wardman, Mark. 1988. "A comparison of revealed preference and stated preference models of travel behaviour". *Journal of Transport Economics and Policy*: 71–91.

Wiese, Juliane V, Nattavudh Powdthavee, Jonathan XW Yeo, and Yohanes E Riyanto. 2025. "Unveiling the effects of hidden luck and merit on redistribution in groups". *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics*: 102392.