

Labor Unions and Support for Redistribution in an Era of Inequality*

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Objectives. The United States has become increasingly unequal over the past several decades. Despite this, public opinion toward redistribution has remained largely unchanged. This is puzzling, given Americans' professed concern regarding, and knowledge of, rising inequality. I argue that the decline of labor unions, an organization that promotes anti-inequality attitudes among its members, can help us to understand this. *Method.* I use panel data from the 50 U.S. states from 1978 to 2012 and ordinary least squares regression to examine how state-level unionization levels condition the relationship between income inequality and support for redistributive spending. *Results.* I find that in contexts where labor unions are stronger, higher levels of income inequality prompt greater support for welfare spending. *Conclusion.* These findings illustrate an additional mechanism through which labor unions can check income inequality and help us to understand why the American public has not turned in favor of redistribution during an era of rising economic inequality.

The United States has become increasingly unequal. Over the past four decades, a vast amount of wealth has concentrated at the top of the income distribution. Indeed, U.S. inequality has reached levels not seen since before the Great Depression (Saez and Zucman, 2016). High levels of inequality enhance the political influence of the affluent, while depressing that of the poor (Bartels, 2016; Gilens, 2012; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, 2012), something that is troubling for democratic governance and political equality (Hacker and Pierson, 2010; Page and Gilens, 2017).

The decline of organized labor is often viewed by scholars as a driver of rising inequality (Ahlquist, 2017; Bartels, 2016; Bucci, 2018; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, 2012; Volscho and Kelly, 2012). Typically, labor unions are thought to reduce income inequality through two mechanisms. The first is by boosting their workers' wages through collective bargaining (Freeman and Medoff, 1984; Rosenfeld, 2014), which produces a more equal distribution of wealth between workers and management. The second is through electoral mobilization, by bringing a higher share of low- and middle-income voters into the electorate (Leighley and Nagler, 2007), and increasing the political influence of the less affluent (Flavin, 2016).

These are not the only mechanisms, however, through which labor unions can influence economic inequality. I argue that there is another mechanism through which unions can influence inequality. Specifically, I argue that unions promote anti-inequality attitudes among their members. Where organized labor is stronger, there are more individuals who hold anti-inequality attitudes and, thus, by extension, the mass public is more responsive to rising inequality, that is, people turn in favor of redistribution when inequality rises. To my

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knowledge, no study to date had investigated the conditioning effect of unionization on the relationship between inequality and public opinion about government welfare spending.

I draw upon recent work that illustrates labor unions' capacity to shape their members' political attitudes and clarify their economic self-interest (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013; Iversen and Soskice, 2015; Kim and Margalit, 2017; Mosimann and Pontusson, 2017). Using survey data from the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES), 2004 National Annenberg Election Study (NAES), and aggregate panel data across the 50 U.S. states from 1978 through 2012, I show that union members are more aware of, and more concerned about, rising income inequality. Furthermore, in states with higher levels of union membership, the mass public *responds* to rising inequality by demanding more redistribution.

These findings contribute to our understanding of the political consequences of declining union membership, highlighting one such consequence—decreased support for economic redistribution. They can also shed light on a theoretically puzzling relationship between income inequality and support for redistribution, specifically that there has been little change in public demand for redistribution, even among the less affluent, despite decades of rising inequality (Kelly and Enns, 2010; Shaw and Gaffey, 2012). This is particularly puzzling, given that Americans favor lower levels of inequality (Page and Jacobs, 2009; McCall, 2013), and are well aware that it has risen over the past several decades (Kelly and Enns, 2010).

I argue that it is not simply political ignorance, apathy regarding inequality, nor acceptance of an unequal status quo (Bartels, 2016; Hayes, 2014; Trump, 2018) that has prevented U.S. public opinion from turning in favor of economic redistribution over the past several decades. The decline of labor unions, an organization that promotes pro-redistributive attitudes, and conditions public responsiveness to income inequality, has also played an important role. The decline of unions has political implications, not only depressing voter turnout among the less affluent (Leighley and Nagler, 2007), but also weakening a source of pro-redistributive attitudes. This can in turn reduce public pressure on government to address the issue of high, and rising, income inequality.

Inequality and Public Opinion Toward Redistribution

Models of democracy and inequality (Meltzer and Richard, 1981) assume that when inequality rises, the public will respond by demanding greater redistribution because the median voter can be better off economically by supporting government redistribution. In this sense, democracy should be “self-correcting” in terms of addressing income inequality, with higher inequality leading to greater demand for redistribution. This has not been observed in many democracies (Benabou, 2000), including the United States (Kelly and Enns, 2010; Luttig, 2013; Wright, 2018), which stands out as one of the most unequal OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries.¹

Polls consistently show that Americans are opposed to high levels of inequality (Page and Jacobs, 2009; McCall, 2013), and that people are well aware that inequality is higher today than in decades past (Kelly and Enns, 2010).² Despite this, there has been little observed responsiveness to rising inequality, that is, public opinion shifting in a pro-redistributive direction, and we lack a satisfactory answer as to why this is the case.

¹Among the 35 OECD countries, the United States ranks as the third most unequal, after post-tax redistribution, with a Gini coefficient of 0.39. Only Turkey, Chile, and Mexico ranked higher (<https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm>).

²See (<http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Political-Report-May-2015.pdf>).

Not all works find that people are unresponsive to income inequality, with several studies finding that higher levels of local inequality depress belief in American meritocracy (Newman, Johnston, and Lown, 2015), and boost support for organized labor (Newman and Kane, 2017), and political candidates who support inequality-reducing policies (Newman and Hayes, 2017). Experimental evidence also shows that information regarding the extent of inequality can prompt support for redistribution (Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2018; McCall et al., 2017). Overall, however, findings are mixed (Franko, 2016), and in the aggregate, we have observed little movement in support for redistribution during an era of rising income inequality. I argue that the decline of labor unions can help us to understand why a mass public that cares about inequality and is aware of its rise has not responded in the expected direction—by demanding greater government redistribution.

How Labor Unions Influence Opposition to Inequality

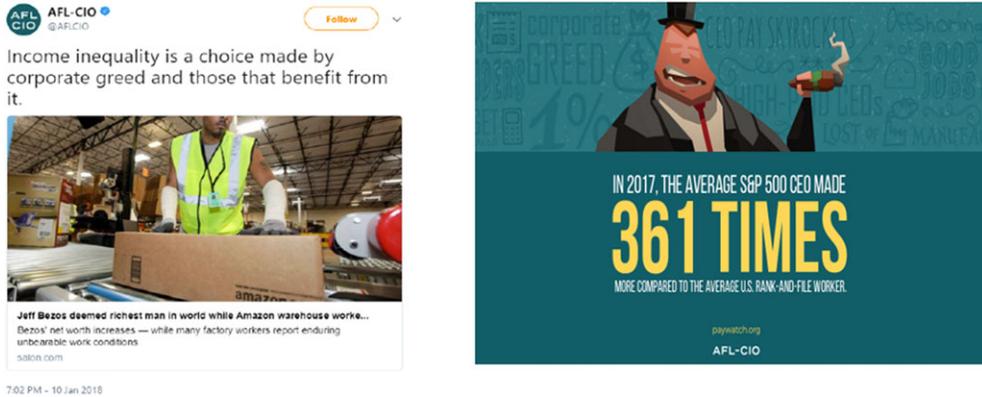
There are theoretical reasons to expect a link between union membership and attitudes toward inequality. The primary objective of labor unions is to bargain on behalf of workers, primarily seeking to increase wages, and promote a more egalitarian distribution of earnings in the workplace by “compressing pay,” that is, increasing the wages of rank-and-file employees and limiting the compensation of management (Freeman and Medoff, 1984). Indeed, unionized workers have higher wages and more generous benefits than do their nonunionized counterparts (Rosenfeld, 2014; Western and Rosenfeld, 2011), and working poverty is lower in U.S. counties with high levels of unionization (Brady, Baker, and Finnigan, 2013). Labor unions have been linked to more liberal public policy and lower inequality (Becher, Stegmüller, and Käppner, 2018; Bucci, 2018; Franko, Kelly, and Witko, 2016; Kelly and Witko, 2012; Radcliff and Saiz, 1998), as well as greater demand for redistribution and liberal public policy (Franko, 2016), at the U.S.-state level, and greater political equality in representation (Ellis, 2013; Flavin, 2016). In a recent review, Ahlquist (2017) notes that higher levels of unionization have been linked to lower levels of income inequality, both in the United States and cross-nationally.

Politically, labor unions have long favored a higher minimum wage, universal health-care, more generous pensions, and a strong social safety net. Unions have also protested against high levels of executive compensation, particularly at the expense of rank-and-file employees (Lichtenstein, 2013; Western and Rosenfeld, 2011). Furthermore, unions disproportionately support the pro-redistributive (compared to the Republicans) Democratic Party (Anzia and Moe, 2016; Dark, 1999; Jansa and Hoyman, 2018), endorsing candidates and mobilizing their members for political action on behalf of union-backed candidates and ballot initiatives (Asher et al., 2001; Flavin and Radcliff, 2011; Flavin and Hartney, 2015; Francia and Bigelow, 2010; Francia and Orr, 2014; Kerrissey and Schofer, 2013; Radcliff and Davis, 2000; Zullo, 2004). The egalitarian norms that labor unions promote, along with general support for left-leaning politicians and liberal policies, should not be lost upon their members. Indeed, a recent literature has examined the ability of labor unions to influence their members’ political attitudes, arguing that unions disseminate information and communicate with members, and through their political activity and collective bargaining tactics, promote norms of egalitarianism and altruism (Ahlquist, 2017; Ahlquist and Levi, 2013).

In short, I argue that labor unions promote economically egalitarian attitudes among their members and increase opposition to economic inequality. When organized labor is

FIGURE 1

Union Communications to Members on the Issue of Income Inequality



stronger, that is, in a particular state, that means there are more individuals in the mass public who are union members, and are thus being exposed to an “anti-inequality” environment.

Illustrating the Mechanisms

I argue that labor unions shape their members’ attitudes on the issue of income inequality, shifting them in a more egalitarian direction, through two mechanisms: direct information provision and facilitation of workplace discussion. Though I cannot directly test these mechanisms, that is, observe specific union communications to their members on the issue of inequality, and then assess how union members internalized this information, nor directly observe union-based discussion about economic inequality, I attempt to bring a variety of indirect evidence to bear, showing that, first, labor unions do emphasize the issue of inequality and, second, that unions—by facilitating workplace discussion—can shape their members’ attitudes on this issue. To make this argument, I draw on recent work that has demonstrated the capacity of labor unions to shape their members’ political attitudes on economic issues (Ahlquist, Clayton, and Levi, 2014; Kim and Margalit, 2017; Mosimann and Pontusson, 2017).

Labor unions provide their members with information about political issues, via newsletters, emails, and social media. See, for example, Figure 1, which shows a recent tweet and report on pay differentials from the AFL-CIO, the largest union organization in the United States, emphasizing the norm of wage equality and economic fairness, informing members about the issue of income inequality, and clearly emphasizing organized labor’s position. The AFL-CIO not only sends out communications to its members, but also publishes a yearly report on pay differentials, entitled the “Executive PayWatch Database.” These data are prominently featured on the AFL-CIO’s website, and list the highest-paid CEOs in the United States and show the ratio between the CEO and the median employee for hundreds of companies, from Walmart—where the CEO makes over \$9,000 an hour compared to \$9.00 an hour—to McDonald’s, Johnson & Johnson, and Capital One.³ This information is highlighted by union leadership such as AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, and

³See (<https://pr-paywatch-aflcio.pantheonsite.io/paywatch/company-pay-ratios>).

TABLE 1

Union Membership and Workplace Discussion of Politics

	0 Days	1–2 Days	3–4 Days	5–7 Days
Union members	31.2% (1,969)	24.9% (1,542)	19.5% (1,210)	23.9% (1,483)
Nonunion members	38.1% (18,183)	26.4% (12,585)	17.4% (8,278)	18.0% (8,600)

NOTE: The sample is restricted to people who are currently employed. The number of observations is in parentheses. A bivariate regression of the number of days discussing politics in the past week (0–7) on union membership (1,0) was statistically significant ($t = 13.03$, $p = 0.000$).

SOURCE: 2004 NAES.

receives attention and coverage from the mass media and from prominent politicians.⁴ For example, in a 2017 speech, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said that “income inequality was tearing apart the United States and the entire world” and “the mission of the labor movement is to fight back against the forces responsible for widening the income gap.”⁵

In addition, union organizations such as these send members information on salient legislation, via an online legislative scorecard.⁶ This provides information on how legislators voted and illustrates the union’s stances on key issues such as the 2018 Fiscal Year Budget Resolution. The AFL-CIO opposed this bill, arguing that “it cuts programs like Medicare, Medicaid and other income security programs that provide critical support to our nation’s most vulnerable population by \$4.1 trillion over the next decade to pay for trillions of dollars in tax giveaways for millionaires and major corporations.”

These are certainly not the only ways through which unions can provide information to their members, but they are illustrative of one such way—via online activity.

Another is through workplace discussion. Data from the 2004 NAES, presented in Table 1, show that union members are significantly more likely to discuss politics at work, a finding consistent with Kerrissey and Schofer (2013), who show that union members are significantly more politically active and engaged than their nonunion counterparts. Although I cannot directly observe workplace discussion about inequality, it seems plausible that at least some political discussion centers around the issue of economic inequality, particularly given that union leadership frequently emphasizes issues relating to wage equality and leveling of the economic playing field.

Information dissemination such as this, as well as workplace discussion of political issues, has the potential to influence members’ political attitudes. Indeed, past research has found that union members pay attention to the policy stances taken by their union and form their attitudes based in part on the position of their union, following not only top-down cues from the union, but also being influenced by workplace discussion and union-based socialization.

Ahlquist, Clayton, and Levi (2014) illustrate this in a study of dockworkers on the U.S. West Coast in the International Longshore Warehouse Union (ILWU). They found that members of the union were more willing to take a protectionist stance on trade policy, following the ILWU’s position, even though this stance cut against their material

⁴See (<https://aflcio.org/press/releases/ceo-pay-increases-347-times-average-workers>); (<http://money.cnn.com/2018/05/22/news/economy/ceo-pay-afl-cio/index.html>); (<http://www.aei.org/publication/hillary-and-bernie-both-complain-about-excessive-ceo-pay-but-the-average-ceo-makes-less-than-hillarys-speaking-fee/>).

⁵See (<https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/as-afl-cio-convention-opens-trumka-emphasizes-need-to-battle-income-inequality/>).

⁶See (<https://aflcio.org/scorecard/votes>).

TABLE 2
Union Membership and Knowledge of Rising Inequality

	Much Larger	Somewhat Larger	About the Same	Somewhat Smaller	Much Smaller
Union members	67.1% (378)	17.9% (101)	11.5% (65)	1.6% (9)	1.8% (10)
Nonunion members	56.3% (2,948)	22.1% (1,159)	15.7% (824)	3.9% (202)	1.9% (102)

NOTE: Question asks about the difference in incomes between rich and poor people in the United States today compared to 20 years ago. The number of observations is in parentheses. A bivariate regression of knowledge of rising inequality (1–5) on union membership (1,0) was statistically significant ($t = 4.62$, $p = 0.000$).

SOURCE: 2012 ANES.

self-interest. Ahlquist, Clayton, and Levi also found that ILWU members who had more exposure to union communications and who engaged in more frequent workplace discussion were more likely to have an opinion on trade policy, and were more likely to have an opinion that is consistent with the union position. Specifically, ILWU members were more likely to support restrictions on imports and less likely to express confidence in NAFTA. Ahlquist, Clayton, and Levi attribute these findings to ILWU communications via the union newspaper, workplace discussion, and a “socialization” mechanism that shapes workers’ political attitudes.

Kim and Margalit (2017) similarly found that union positions on trade policy influenced members’ attitudes, showing that workers (across a variety of industries) were more aware of their union’s position on trade policy—particularly when union communications were more frequent. Workers were also more likely to hold a trade policy position in line with their union compared to nonunionized workers in the same industry. Kim and Margalit also showed that a sharp shift in the United Auto Worker’s (UAW) union in 2010, from supporting to opposing the U.S.–Korea Free Trade Deal, led to a substantively large and significant shift in UAW members’ attitudes on this policy, a shift consistent with changes in the UAW’s position. There was no similar shift among nonunionized workers in the auto industry. Kim and Margalit attribute this to the ability of union communications, workplace discussion, and socialization to influence people’s political attitudes.

Clearly, labor unions have the ability to shape their members’ attitudes on trade policy. Mosimann and Pontusson (2017) use European Social Survey data from 2002 to 2014 to show that this extends to redistributive attitudes as well. They argue that this results from unions’ promotion of egalitarian norms and facilitation of workplace discussion that allows for information to spread (Iversen and Soskice, 2015; Putnam, 2000), as well as a sense of altruism and “linked fate” with other workers (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013) that unions promote. This, Mosimann and Pontusson show, makes all workers, but particularly those in unions with a larger share of low-income employees, an environment where compression of wage differentials is more likely to be pursued, and thus norms of egalitarianism more likely to be emphasized, more favorably inclined toward reducing income inequality.

In short, both top-down union information dissemination and workplace discussion of politics, which can help inform and socialize union members, should shape attitudes toward economic inequality. If this was not the case, then we should not observe any differences between union and nonunion members’ attitudes on the issue of economic inequality. Table 2 shows that union members are significantly more likely than their nonunion counterparts to be aware of rising income inequality, with 67 percent of union members stating that the differences between rich and poor have gotten much larger in the past

TABLE 3

Union Membership and Attitudes Toward Rising Inequality

	Bad Thing	Neither Good nor Bad	Good Thing
Union members	62.5% (331)	28.9% (153)	8.7% (46)
Nonunion members	51.5% (2,553)	38.2% (1,893)	10.3% (512)

NOTE: In 1967, households in the top 20 percent earned an average of 11 times as much as households in the bottom 20 percent. Today, the top earn an average of 15 times as much. Is it good, bad, or neither good nor bad that the DIFFERENCE between the top and the bottom incomes has changed this way? The number of observations is in parentheses. A bivariate regression of attitudes toward rising inequality (1–3) on union membership (1,0) was statistically significant ($t = 4.13$, $p = 0.000$).

SOURCE: 2012 ANES.

TABLE 4

Union Membership and Inequality Attitudes by Right-to-Work Status

	(1) Knowledge of Inequality	(2) Aversion to Inequality		
Union member	0.225*** (0.064)	0.197*** (0.064)	0.181*** (0.067)	0.162** (0.067)
Right-to-work state	-0.123*** (0.032)	-0.112*** (0.032)	-0.183*** (0.033)	-0.178*** (0.033)
Union member × RTW	0.075 (0.129)	0.103 (0.129)	0.081 (0.129)	0.101 (0.130)
Republican	- -	-0.490*** (0.031)	- -	-0.312*** (0.031)
Constant cut1	-2.104*** (0.042)	-2.304*** (0.046)	-1.336*** (0.028)	-1.453*** (0.033)
Constant cut2	-1.627*** (0.031)	-1.833*** (0.037)	-0.121*** (0.023)	-0.229*** (0.026)
Constant cut3	-0.841*** (0.024)	-1.033*** (0.028)	- -	- -
Constant cut4	-0.214*** (0.022)	-0.386*** (0.025)	- -	- -
Observations	5,798	5,782	5,488	5,469

NOTE: Dependent variables (DVs) range from 1 to 5 (column 1) and from 1 to 3 (column 2); Ordered probit coefficients; robust standard errors are in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$; two-tailed.

SOURCE: 2012 ANES.

20 years compared to 56 percent of nonunion members. Table 3 provides further evidence to suggest that income inequality looms larger in the minds of union members, showing that union members are significantly more likely than their nonunion counterparts to state that the rise of inequality in the United States over the past four decades is a bad thing, with 63 percent of union members volunteering this opinion compared to 52 percent of nonunion members.

Addressing Self-Selection into Labor Unions. Table 4 shows that this relationship between union membership and attitudes toward inequality holds when taking partisanship (Bartels, 2016) into account, and that there are also no significant differences in right-to-work (RTW) and non-RTW states. The RTW analyses are meant to help rule out the possibility that self-selection is driving the relationship between union membership and

TABLE 5
Descriptive Statistics, U.S. State Panel, 1978–2012

Obs.	Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
1,750	Pro-welfare spending (%)	20.326	4.843	10.000	39.700
1,750	Top 1 percent income share	14.091	4.553	4.600	36.100
1,750	Union membership (%)	14.850	7.089	2.300	38.300
1,450	Private-sector union membership (%)	9.275	4.930	1.100	26.100
1,450	Public-sector union membership (%)	33.452	17.135	5.200	73.100
1,712	Partisanship (Democrat (%)–Republican (%))	6.663	16.209	–80.052	58.938
1,712	Ideology (liberal (%)–conservative (%))	–14.781	12.572	–64.624	53.813
1,750	Nonwhite population (%)	20.357	14.232	0.500	76.800
1,750	Per capita income (thousands of dollars)	36.576	7.664	20.951	68.957
1,750	Unemployment rate	6.021	2.103	2.300	17.800
1,750	Economic policy liberalism (higher = liberal)	0.009	1.032	–2.100	3.131

attitudes toward inequality. In RTW states, people cannot be forced to join a labor union as a condition of employment. As such, workers in RTW states can “free ride” and receive union benefits even if they do not belong to the union. Workers in RTW states have fewer incentives to join the union, and if they do belong are more likely to have joined as a result of political predispositions, rather than economic incentives.⁷ If self-selection was driving results, that is, political predispositions are driving the decision to join a union and shaping attitudes toward inequality, we would expect that union membership would not have an influence on attitudes toward inequality in non-RTW states, where people should be less likely to join based on political predispositions. Results in Table 4 show that there are no differences between union members in RTW and non-RTW states, suggesting that unionization in and of itself is associated with greater knowledge of, and aversion toward, income inequality.

Overall, labor unions promote a more egalitarian distribution of income, and support political candidates and policies that favor a strong social safety net, mobilizing their members for political action in support of these policies. This is reflected in the observed differences between union and nonunion members’ attitudes toward income inequality. As such, in contexts where organized labor is stronger, we should observe that the public is more averse to high inequality, and thus more likely to *respond* to rising inequality by supporting government policies to reduce it. More specifically, in contexts where union membership is higher, public opinion should *respond* to rising inequality by demanding increased redistribution.

Hypothesis: Unionization levels condition the relationship between income inequality and public support for redistribution.

Data and Methods

To test this hypothesis, I employ an ordinary least squares regression model and panel data from the 50 American states from 1978 to 2012. The three primary variables of interest are over time measures of income inequality, union membership levels, and public

⁷See Kim and Margalit (2017) for an extended discussion of this logic and an additional applied example.

support for welfare spending. Table 5 shows descriptive statistics for each of these three variables as well as for several controls. I explain each of these in greater detail below.

Dependent Variable

I use a state-level measure of support for government spending on welfare. These data are obtained from Kim and Urpelainen (2017). Welfare spending is a prominent form of redistributive spending, comprises a large proportion of state budgets, and has long been an outcome of interest in the state politics literature (Barrilleaux, Holbrook, and Langer, 2002; Brown, 1995; Key, 1949). Kim and Urpelainen (2017) used multilevel regression and poststratification (MRP) and data from the General Social Survey to construct over time measures of state-level support for several different types of government spending.⁸ This measure is valuable because of longitudinal availability, encompassing a time period in which unions were strong and inequality was low, as well as the contemporary era of weak unions and high inequality.⁹ The dependent variable is operationalized as the percentage of a state's population in a given year that says we are currently spending "too little" on welfare. I use this measure from 1978 through 2012, spanning much of the era of rising U.S. income inequality.

Independent Variables

The two main independent variables are a measure of the percentage of the nonagricultural workforce that belongs to a labor union and a measure of income inequality. Data on state-level union membership are obtained from Hirsch, MacPherson, and Vroman (2001), who used Current Population Survey (CPS) data to calculate annual measures of state union membership.¹⁰ I use this variable from 1977 through 2011 (temporally preceding the dependent variable by one year).

Data on state-level income inequality are obtained from Mark Frank.¹¹ I measure inequality as the wealth share of the top 1 percent in each state. I do this because the nature of U.S. income inequality over the past several decades has been a collection of wealth at the top of the income distribution (Bartels, 2016; Volscho and Kelly, 2012). The top 1 percent reflects popular discourse, that is, "the 99 percent versus the 1 percent," and follows the trend of a collection of wealth at the very top of the income distribution, rather than a collection at the 20th percentile and above, for example.¹² This measure of inequality is based on IRS tax returns, rather than survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau. As such, it does not "top code" high incomes (above \$250,000, for example) and thus provides

⁸See Warshaw and Rodden (2012) for a broader discussion of MRP's validity as a technique for developing state-level estimates of public opinion.

⁹In contrast, data from Pacheco (2014), which uses a similar methodology to measure state-level public opinion on welfare spending, only ranges from 1978 to 2000.

¹⁰This variable includes both public- and private- sector union membership. I also separately run analyses for private- and public-sector unions, using available data from 1983 to 2011 (preceding the DV by one year). Results show that both private- and public-sector unionization levels condition the inequality-redistribution relationship in the American states. See the supplementary appendix for these models.

¹¹See (http://www.shsu.edu/eco_mwf/inequality.html).

¹²In contrast, the Gini coefficient (even if it is based on IRS tax return data), a measure of how equally income is distributed in a society (ranging from perfect equality, where all households hold the same amount of income, to perfect inequality, where one household owns all income), is not adequately sensitive to changes at the top of the income distribution (Franko, 2016:963, note 4).

a more accurate measure of the true extent of income inequality. This measure is available from 1917 through 2015, I use it here from 1977 through 2011, preceding the dependent variable by one year.

I also take into account several factors that past research has linked to redistributive preferences (Franko, 2016; Franko, Kelly, and Witko, 2016; Kam and Nam, 2008). I control for state partisanship and ideology (Erikson, Wright, and McIver, 1993), expecting that more liberal and Democratic mass publics will desire greater levels of welfare spending.¹³ I also control for the state unemployment rate, per capita income, the percentage of the population that is nonwhite, and previous government policy liberalism, accounting for the thermostatic nature of public opinion (Pacheco, 2013; Wlezien, 1995).¹⁴ I also include year fixed effects, which account for factors such as the party of the president, and any national-level factors that may influence union membership and income inequality. I include state fixed effects, which restrict variation of welfare support to *within* states, rather than both within and across states. These state dummy variables also account for time-invariant factors such as state political culture or region, that is, whether a state is a part of the South or not.

Unions and Public Opinion Toward Income Inequality

Table 6 and Figure 2 illustrate the relationship between income inequality, union strength, and support for welfare spending in the American states. Results show that unions powerfully condition the inequality–redistribution relationship. From 1978 to 2012, overall (private and public combined) state union membership ranges from 2.3 percent (South Carolina in 2006) to 38.3 (West Virginia in 1982). At this lowest level of union membership, results show that an increase in state inequality (measured by the income share of the top 1 percent) would actually *decrease* support for welfare spending, with a one point increase in the top 1 percent wealth share depressing support for spending more on welfare by 0.16. Results from the marginal effects plot (Figure 2) show that higher inequality does not significantly increase support for welfare spending until state union membership exceeds 13 percent—which is above the 2017 national average of 10.7 percent. At the highest level of observed union membership (38 percent), a one point increase in the top 1 percent wealth share leads to a 0.67 increase in support for welfare spending, a substantively significant effect size, given that the dependent variable (the percentage of people in a particular state-year that say we are currently spending “too little” on welfare) ranges from 10.0 to 39.7 percent.¹⁵

¹³Partisanship and ideology are measured as the percentage of the state’s population that self-identifies as Democrats minus the percentage that identifies as Republican, and the percentage of the state’s population that self-identifies as ideologically liberal minus the percentage that identifies as conservative, respectively.

¹⁴Data on the state unemployment rate, nonwhite population, partisanship, and ideology were obtained from the Correlates of State Policy Data Set (Jordan and Grossmann, 2017); see (<http://ippsr.msu.edu/public-policy/correlates-state-policy>). Data on state partisanship and ideology are missing for Alaska and Hawaii from 1977 to 1996. This is why there are not 1,750 observations (50 states × 35 years). Data on per capita income were obtained from (<https://www.bea.gov/regional/>) and adjusted for inflation using the CPI inflation calculator; see (https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm). Data on state economic policy liberalism were obtained from Caughey and Warshaw (2017); see (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/K3QWZW>).

¹⁵In the supplementary appendix, I used alternative measures of inequality. I used data from Mark Frank’s website; a Gini coefficient that is based on IRS tax returns. This is a pretax measure of income inequality in the states. I also used a posttransfer (after federal and state benefits are included) measure of inequality that is based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau. These were originally collected by Franko, Kelly, and Witko

TABLE 6

Union Membership, Inequality, and Support for Welfare Spending (1978–2012)

Top 1 percent income share	−0.205*** (0.073)
Union membership (%)	−0.283*** (0.077)
Top 1 percent × Union membership (%)	0.023*** (0.006)
Partisanship (Democrat–Republican)	0.018*** (0.005)
Ideology (liberal–conservative)	−0.005 (0.006)
Nonwhite population (%)	0.060** (0.025)
Per capita income (in thousands)	0.091* (0.051)
Unemployment rate	0.004 (0.069)
Economic policy liberalism	−0.087 (0.344)
Constant	17.542*** (2.044)
Year fixed effects?	Yes
State fixed effects?	Yes
Observations	1,712
R^2	0.771

NOTE: DV is the percentage saying we are spending “too little” on welfare. All independent variables measured at $t - 1$; ordinary least squares coefficients. Robust standard errors are clustered by state in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$; two-tailed.

Exploring Heterogeneity in the Relationship

Public Versus Private Sector. It is possible that issues of inequality are discussed/emphasized more in private-sector unions, given that workers tend to be less educated, and thus the higher share of lower wage/hourly workers might be focused more on issues of wage inequality than are more highly educated public-sector workers, for example, teachers.¹⁶ To assess this possibility, I separately ran analyses for private- (membership ranges from 1.1 to 26.1 percent) and public-sector (membership ranges from 5.2 to 73.1 percent) state-level union membership (including the same controls as in Table 5). These data are available from 1984 onward. Results, presented in Table 7, show that both types of unionization positively condition support for redistribution.¹⁷ See the supplementary appendix for the full regression models. The coefficient for private-sector unions is

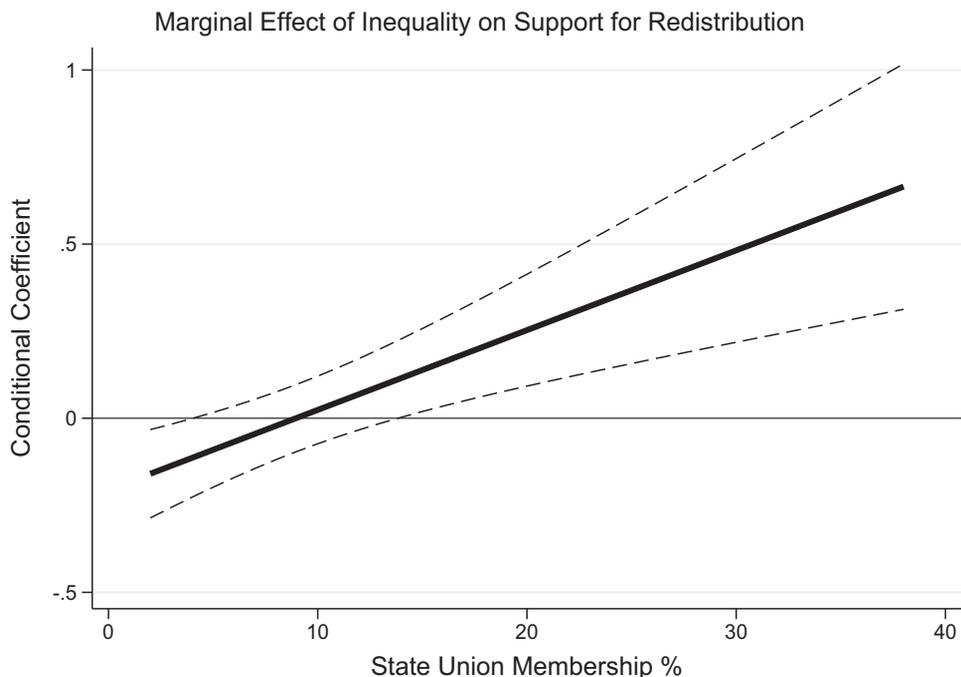
(2016), ranging from 1976 to 2006. They were extended up through 2014 by Bucci (2018). I use them here through 2011. Regardless of which measure is used, the top 1 percent (based on IRS data), pretransfer Gini (based on IRS data), or a posttransfer Gini (based on Census data), I find that state-level unionization rates significantly condition the relationship between inequality and public support for welfare.

¹⁶See <https://gspp.berkeley.edu/research/featured/public-sector-employees-are-highly-educated-underpaid>).

¹⁷This is not to say that certain unions would differentially influence their members’ attitudes, that is, teachers’ unions on education spending or a steelworkers’ union on free trade. However, on the broad issue of economic inequality, results here suggest that belonging to a union (vs. not belonging) shapes redistributive attitudes.

FIGURE 2

Labor Union Strength, Inequality, and Support for Welfare Spending (1978–2012)



NOTE: Based on the ordinary least squares model in Table 6. Dashed lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

larger than for public-sector ones, suggesting that private-sector unions (which are larger in terms of raw numbers of people) make a larger difference (in terms of promoting mass responsiveness to inequality) than do those in the public sector, although public-sector unions matter as well. Given that private-sector unions have declined far more than their public-sector counterparts, this is a particularly important finding.

South Versus Non-South. I also examine potential differences between the South and the non-South (using the Census Bureau's divisions). The South has a larger minority population, and many southern whites are hostile toward economic redistribution. Indeed, the racial history of this region could certainly shape residents' attitudes toward issues of inequality and economic redistribution (Key, 1949; Soss, Fording, and Schram, 2008). The main analysis in Table 6 includes state fixed effects, which account for any effect that state political history, that is, being a part of the regional South, may exert on mass support for welfare spending.

In Table 8, I split the data into southern and nonsouthern states, separately examining how unionization conditions the relationship between inequality and support for welfare spending. In both South and non-South, I find that unionization significantly conditions mass responsiveness to inequality. I find that the relationship is actually stronger in the South than in the non-South (as indicated by the coefficient on the interaction term). This suggests that higher unionization would make *more* of a difference in the generally less union-friendly and less economically liberal South.

TABLE 7

Unionization by Sector, Inequality, and Support for Welfare Spending (1984–2012)

	(1) Private Sector	(2) Public Sector
Top 1 percent income share	−0.156* (0.087)	−0.201** (0.083)
Private-sector union (%)	−0.413*** (0.143)	−
Top 1 percent × Private-sector union (%)	0.035*** (0.010)	−
Public-sector union (%)	−	−0.140*** (0.039)
Top 1 percent × Public-sector union (%)	−	0.008*** (0.002)
Constant	24.217*** (2.333)	28.075*** (2.791)
Controls?	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects?	Yes	Yes
State fixed effects?	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,424	1,424
R^2	0.735	0.737

NOTE: DV is the percentage saying we are spending “too little” on welfare. All independent variables are measured at $t - 1$. Robust standard errors are clustered by state in parentheses.
 *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$; two-tailed.

TABLE 8

Unionization, Inequality, and Support for Welfare Spending by Region (1978–2012)

	(1) South	(2) Non-South
Top 1 percent income share	−0.685*** (0.176)	−0.064 (0.093)
Union membership (%)	−0.675*** (0.181)	−0.110** (0.050)
Top 1 percent × Union membership (%)	0.063*** (0.015)	0.009** (0.004)
Constant	19.484*** (3.274)	11.756*** (1.487)
Controls?	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects?	Yes	Yes
State fixed effects?	No	No
Observations	560	1,152
R^2	0.698	0.767

NOTE: DV is the percentage saying we are spending “too little” on welfare. All independent variables are measured at $t - 1$. Robust standard errors clustered by state in parentheses.
 *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$; two-tailed.

Union Decline and Prospects for Redistribution in an Era of Inequality

Overall, the totality of evidence suggests that labor unions, via a socialization and information provision mechanism, play an important role in determining the extent to

which the mass public turns in favor of redistribution when inequality rises, that is, whether public opinion is *responsive* to inequality. These are substantively meaningful results that have important political implications, as shifts in public opinion can, over time, influence government policy outcomes (Caughy and Warshaw, 2017; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 2002; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010), shaping the distribution of economic and political power in society.

U.S. labor union membership peaked in 1953, with one in three workers belonging to a union (Goldfield and Bromsen, 2013). Since that time, unions have declined dramatically. Today, barely one in ten workers belong to a union. Furthermore, RTW legislation is on the rise, with several states, including Michigan and Wisconsin, former bastions of organized labor, passing legislation that curtails the ability of unions to organize workers. Recent Supreme Court rulings that prevent public-sector unions from collecting fees from nonunion members will likely further undermine organized labor.¹⁸ Elite and media depiction of labor unions as corrupt, greedy, and undeserving of their benefits, particularly those in the public sector, can also undermine mass support for organized labor (Kane and Newman, 2017), something that will further increase economic inequality.

Decreased union strength can depress the political voice of lower-income groups (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, 2012) that differ from the upper class in terms of many policy preferences, particularly those dealing with redistribution (Gilens, 2009; Leighley and Nagler, 2013). This further skews policy outcomes in favor of the wealthy (Bartels, 2016; Gilens, 2012), something that runs counter to the principle of political equality (Dahl, 2006; Lijphart, 1997) that underlies democratic governance. Decreased turnout is not the only manner through which declining union membership can influence inequality. The results here suggest that diminished unions will drive down support for redistribution as a result of fewer people being exposed to an environment that promotes pro-redistributive attitudes, and make it less likely that the mass public will respond to rising inequality by demanding greater government redistribution. If the mass public is not putting political pressure on government, be it through higher turnout, or through shifts in public opinion, then politicians will have little incentive to pursue redistributive policies.

One limitation of this study is that only welfare spending was examined. Indeed, this has a pejorative connotation (Gilens, 1999), and it is possible that unions would more strongly promote responsiveness to other types of redistributive spending such as education (see, e.g., Franko, 2016). Furthermore, support for policies such as higher taxes on the rich or a higher minimum wage were not examined. This would be useful to examine going forward. There are several other potential paths for future work as well. I think it is worthwhile to examine how the strength of organized labor shapes public opinion in the American states. For example, it would be interesting to compare mass politics in states with a strong union history versus those that have typically been hostile to unions, perhaps following the model of Andrew Gelman and his colleagues in their study of the politics in rich and poor states (Gelman et al., 2009). Future work would also do well to examine whether rising inequality is driven more by public-sector or private-sector unions, given that the latter have declined far more than the former. Finally, future research would do well to examine if income inequality equally depresses the political participation of union and nonunion members, or if unions acts as a bulwark against the demobilizing effects of high economic inequality. It is also crucial to examine whether high inequality spurs unions to lobby government to reduce inequality, and whether state governments actually respond with policy changes.

¹⁸See (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/27/us/politics/supreme-court-unions-organized-labor.html>).

Overall, these findings illustrate how unions shape public opinion toward rising inequality. Although the American mass public appears to be aware of and concerned about rising inequality, public opinion has not meaningfully shifted in favor of redistribution, even in an era of high, and rising, inequality. The decline of organized labor can offer an explanation for this. The continued decline of U.S. union membership will help to ensure that “the heavenly chorus sings with an upper class accent” (Schattschneider, 1960:35), likely resulting in a continuation of the status quo of economic and political inequality.

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