Who Votes for Inequality?

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In an age of soaring economic inequality, what good is our Congress? Should we expect lawmakers to push back against the economic and social changes that are driving wealth into fewer and fewer hands? Or do legislators have incentives to let the broadly shared prosperity America enjoyed a half century ago become the stuff of history books?

Over the last four decades, economic inequality in the United States has grown to levels not seen since the start of the last century (for useful reviews, see Bartels 2008, ch. 1; Jacobs and Skocpol 2005; Kelly 2009, ch. 1). From the 1940s to the 1970s, the incomes of the rich and the poor grew by roughly the same amount. From the 1970s on, however, the vast majority of Americans have endured tepid income growth, while the richest have enjoyed astronomical economic fortunes. Figure 1 plots Piketty and Saez's (2003) well-known data on the percentage of income earned by the richest 1 percent of Americans. The mid-20th-century decades of shared prosperity are over. Today, we live in what Bartels (2008) has aptly termed the New Gilded Age.

[Figure 1 about here]

There are good reasons to be concerned about how unequal America has become: economic inequality usually spells trouble. Although we might disagree about how much

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inequality is “right” in some moral or normative sense, scholars who study inequality have consistently found that more unequal places are worse off on a host of objective measures of well-being. Cross-nationally, countries that are more unequal tend to have higher rates of obesity, mental illness, homicide, teen pregnancy, incarceration, drug use, and social fragmentation (for another useful review, see Wilkinson and Pickett 2011). Of course, it is difficult to know which way the causal arrow runs—economic inequality might cause other social problems, or widespread social problems might make societies more economically unequal (or both). Either way, *at best* inequality is a symptom of a larger illness; at worst, it is the disease itself. Our New Gilded Age is a serious red flag, a warning sign that our social fabric is fraying in ways that could have far-reaching consequences for the well-being of American society.

How has our legislative branch responded to accelerating inequality? For the most part, it hasn’t done much to step on the brakes. To the contrary, in many instances, Congress has actually punched the gas pedal. It has enacted policies that relaxed regulations on corporations and banks. It has taxed types of income unique to the rich—in particular, money from investments and derivatives—at lower rates than income earned the way most Americans earn it. And it has done even more by inaction: Congress has allowed the real value of the minimum wage to plunge to record lows (by not increasing it) and tolerated the emergence of a quasi-legal “wealth defense industry” that furnishes the super-wealthy with exotic tax dodges (by not policing it; Winters 2011, ch. 5). As economic outcomes have become more and more unequal in the last few decades, Congress could have embarked on an ambitious reform program to keep inequality at bay. Instead, lawmakers often made life easier for wealthy Americans.

Why didn't Congress do more? Why did our legislative branch allow inequality to reach record levels? Why didn't lawmakers prevent the New Gilded Age?

To date, scholars of Congress have had surprisingly little to say about these important questions. In general, political scientists have been less interested in studying economic inequality than scholars in other fields.[2] Within our discipline, moreover, the scholars who have most energetically investigated inequality have seldom been experts on Congress itself.

It is high time for Congress specialists to play more of a role in the conversation. They have a lot to contribute: scholars and activists have highlighted a wide range of factors that might discourage our legislative branch from fighting inequality. Lobbyists have grown more numerous on Capitol Hill. Money has grown more important in congressional elections. Unions have declined. Political participation has become more unequal.

To date, however, there haven't been many efforts to document the connections between forces like these and the decisions members of Congress make about economic inequality. Some studies have focused on the inputs into the legislative process (e.g., differences in voter turnout between the rich and the poor) and simply assumed that congressional action follows suit. Others have skipped Congress altogether, focusing instead on the larger relationships between inputs

[2] For instance, from 1999 to 2011, the *American Journal of Political Science*, *The Journal of Politics*, and the *American Political Science Review* published just nine articles that mentioned economic inequality in their titles or abstracts (Andersen and Fetner 2008; Garand 2010; Golden and Londregan 2006; Kelly 2005; Kelly and Enns 2010; Lupu and Pontusson 2011; Solt 2008; 2011; and Wallerstein 1999). During the same period, more than five times as many articles on inequality ran in the *American Economic Review*, *Econometrica*, the *Journal of Political Economy*, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, and *The Review of Economic Studies*.

(e.g., decling rates of unionization) and economic outcomes—while leaving out the legislative missing link in between.

The few studies that have focused on how Congress handles policies related to inequality have been somewhat piecemeal. We know that legislators' class backgrounds are associated with how they voted on the Bush Tax Cuts (Carnes 2013, ch. 5) and that the preferences of pivotal actors relative to the status quo affect the outcomes of lawmaking on the minimum wage (Clinton 2012). But are these kinds of factors important when lawmakers confront the larger set of issues related to inequality? In Congress, is there a broader *politics of inequality*?

The legislative branch should be front and center in research on the role of government in economic inequality. To that end, this essay examines several potential *obstacles* to congressional action on inequality, several factors that might discourage members of Congress from supporting policies that would reduce the growing rich-poor gap. Scholars and political observers often argue that Congress drags its feet on inequality because citizens don't understand the problem, because unions are weak, because businesses have sophisticated lobbyists, and so on. Activists and reformers often devote their lives to changing these aspects of our political process in the hopes of making our legislative branch more receptive to pro-equality policies.

Do these factors really affect how legislators think or vote or advocate on economic issues? Do they help explain why lawmakers haven't done more to reduce economic inequality? Who exactly votes for inequality in Congress?

Six Reasons a Member of Congress Might Not Care about Inequality

There are a number of factors that might discourage lawmakers from getting serious about economic inequality. As I see it, six stand out as especially important (although my list is by no means exhaustive). Why hasn't Congress done more to fight inequality? There are several potential obstacles:

1. Many Americans don't realize how unequal the United States is, or they don't care.
2. The rich are more likely to participate in public affairs.
3. The rich are better able to advance their goals with organizations and lobbyists.
4. Lawmakers depend on wealthy campaign donors to finance their elections.
5. The parties are polarized, and Republicans oppose policies that would reduce inequality.
6. Most lawmakers are from the top economic strata themselves.

Each of these aspects of American political life has been carefully studied by scholars of US politics. However, most of these factors have never been directly linked to how Congress responds to economic inequality.

1. Many Americans don't realize how unequal the United States is, or they don't care.

For example, to date, only a handful of scholars have given any serious thought to how legislators' choices might be influenced by the public's confusion about economic inequality. However, most Americans are confused about inequality—and the potential effects on congressional decision making seem clear enough.

In general, most Americans don't pay much attention to political issues most of the time (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), and many are misinformed about how economic policies affect them (Bartels 2008, ch. 6). Many Americans overestimate their odds of becoming rich some day (DiPrete 2007), which dampens their support for policies that reduce inequality (Benabou and Ok 2001). Racial stereotypes and prejudices can also confound how voters think about inequality and anti-poverty policy (Gilens 1999). As a result, many Americans simply don't care about economic inequality.

Many don’t realize how unequal the United States has become. In a recent survey, Norton and Ariely (2011) asked a representative sample of citizens to estimate the percentage of wealth that different quintiles of Americans possessed. Although the richest 20 percent of Americans have close to 85 percent of our country’s wealth, the average citizen thinks that the top fifth only has around 58 percent of the money. Simply put, most Americans don’t realize how wide the gulf between the rich and the poor has grown.

How then can they demand that members of Congress take action? Norton and Ariely (2011, 12) make exactly this point, noting that their findings help explain why “more Americans, especially those with low income, [are] not advocating for greater redistribution of wealth.” If most Americans don’t know much about economic inequality, don’t care much about it, or can’t see the connection between inequality and economic policy, should it come as a surprise that members of Congress don’t do more to curb inequality?

Although there isn’t much research on the link between public opinion about inequality and how members of Congress think or behave, scholars of Congress have known for decades that members make choices with an eye to how their decisions might affect them at election time (Arnold 1990; Mayhew 1973). If a legislator’s constituents don’t know much about inequality or don’t care much about how Congress deals with it, the legislator won’t have much incentive to take the problem seriously, either. Why don’t members of Congress do more to fight inequality? One obvious possibility is that their constituents simply don’t care.[3]

2. *The rich are more likely to participate in public affairs.*

[3] This observation is consistent with Kelly’s (2009) finding that macro-level shifts in the public mood engender changes in public policy related to inequality—that as the public becomes more liberal or conservative on economic issues, economic policy becomes more or less redistributive.

Another possibility is that their *voters* don't care. Scholars who study political participation have consistently found that people who are better off are more likely to participate in politics, that is, more likely to vote, attend a political rally, keep up with the news about public affairs, and so on (Miller and Shanks 1996; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Summarizing decades of data on numerous forms of political participation, Schlozman et al. (2005, 69) conclude that "those with high levels of income, occupational status and, especially, education are much more likely to be politically articulate." And in turn, they argue, these inequalities in participation have "unambiguous implications for what policymakers hear." As a headline on a *Slate Magazine* blog bluntly put it, "90 percent Of Life Is Just Showing Up, And The 99% Don't" (Yglesias 2011).

The fact that the rich participate more could tilt what lawmakers hear about economic inequality or how hard they work to address the problem. If the people who show up on election day are the ones who *benefit* from rising inequality, why would expect members of Congress to do anything about it?

Although this explanation seems intuitive, to date, scholars haven't had much luck demonstrating that inequalities in routine forms of political participation have any bearing on what members of Congress do in office. Cross-nationally, countries where voters turn out in larger numbers (and where, presumably, the poor are more likely to vote) tend to adopt more progressive redistributive policies (Lupu and Pontusson 2011; Mahler 2008). In the U.S., however, scholars have never demonstrated a link between unequal participation and legislative action. To the contrary, the scholars who have tried have come up empty-handed. In his analysis of voting in the Senate, for instance, Bartels (2008, ch. 9) finds that inequalities in political engagement are *not* responsible for the fact that Senators are more responsive to their rich constituents. Likewise, Gilens (2012) finds that differences in education levels (a strong proxy for routine political engagement) have little bearing on whose voices actually influence public policy. Scholars and activists often claim that the poor would have more of a voice if they showed up at the polls more often or paid more attention to politics, but there simply isn't much evidence that unequal participation has much of an effect on Congress.

3. *The rich are better able to advance their goals with organizations and lobbyists.*

The bigger obstacle seems to be inequalities in who participates in larger organizational efforts, that is, inequalities in serious forms of collective action like social movements and interest groups (Skocpol 2003). Since the 1970s, interest groups representing corporations and businesses have become increasingly sophisticated and well funded (see, for instance, Hacker and Pierson 2010). At the same time, organizations representing working people have lost ground at a steady clip. In the 1950s, roughly one in three workers in the United States belonged to labor unions. Today, less than 15% of Americans are in unions (Clawson and Clawson 1999; Western and Rosenfeld 2011). Although the landscape of interest group politics in the United States still includes many groups that represent the interests of middle- and working-class Americans, the well-to-do dominate the world of organized political voice. "[T]he heavenly chorus," as Schattschneier ([1960] 1975, 35) noted a half century ago, still "sings with a strong upper-class accent" (see also Grossman 2012; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012).

And that accent seems to affect what lawmakers do. Of course, interest groups can't simply "buy" legislators' votes (despite what many citizens and advocates think). However, lobbyists and interest groups can mobilize their allies in Congress to take action on a particular bill (Hall and Wayman 1990), can make it easier for members to support certain policies by "subsidizing" the legislative work involved (Hall and Deardorff 2006), and can threaten to alert the constituents who share their views if members get out of line. If interest groups represent the wealthy more often than they represent the poor, their pull in Washington may help to explain why Congress hasn't done more to fight inequality.

4. Lawmakers depend on wealthy campaign donors to finance their elections.

Likewise, the fact that lawmakers usually need to raise huge sums to finance their re-election campaigns may be part of the story, too. All told, the 2012 election was the most expensive in history: federal candidates and their outside supporters spent more than $6 billion on campaigns. In the House, the average incumbent raised $1.2 million; in the Senate, incumbents raised roughly $11 million each (Center for Responsive Politics 2013).

Especially since *Citizens United*, activists and journalists have increasingly sounded warnings about how campaign finance practices affect members of Congress. Most members spend several hours each day in cubicles at party headquarters calling wealthy donors to request money. They attend countless fundraisers, sometimes for themselves, sometimes for their allies.

Many observers have questioned how members who are forced to raised heaps of money from wealthy donors can make unbiased decisions about the government's role in economic affairs (Lessig 2011). Some have directly implicated campaign finance in rising inequality: As Massey (2007, 185) bluntly put it, "How have policies that so obviously benefit the few been implemented and ratified in an electoral system ostensibly controlled by the many? An obvious answer is that money talks and politicians listen."

The evidence linking fundraising and legislative decision making is thin, but again, the logic of the argument seems sound. If lawmakers depend on the wealthy—the class of people who have benefitted from rising inequality—to fund their campaigns, they may pick up the wealthy's attitudes, or they may under-estimate how concerned their larger constituency is about inequality (e.g., Broockman and Skovron 2013). Or they may simply worry that fighting inequality might alienate enough big donors to cost them the next election.

5. The parties are polarized, and Republicans oppose policies that would reduce inequality.

Many observers have looked to our party system to explain congressional inaction on economic inequality. In the 1970s—at around the same time that economic inequality began to creep upward—the two major parties began to diverge sharply in Congress. Over the next four decades, the ideological distance between the two parties expanded rapidly, both parties became more internally homogenous, and the dividing lines between the two parties centered more and more on economic issues (e.g., McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 1997).

Polarization makes it harder to pass any policy in Congress, especially in the presence of super-majoritarian voting rules in the Senate and other potential choke points that effectively require bills to have large coalitions in order to succeed. Moreover, members of Congress have polarized on economic policies, exactly the kinds of policies lawmakers would need to pass to respond forcefully to rising inequality. Republicans—who tend to oppose measures that would reduce economic inequality—seem to be especially committed: a small but growing body of research has found evidence of *asymmetric polarization*, that is, evidence that congressional Republicans have pulled to the right faster than congressional Democrats have pulled to the left (Hacker and Pierson 2006).

These changes appear to have big consequences. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) have carefully illustrated how polarization in Congress makes it difficult to pass laws that address economic inequality. They aren't alone in pointing to the importance of parties. As Bartels (2008, ch. 6) illustrates, economic inequality tends to grow under Republican presidents and shrink under Democrats. Why did Congress allow inequality to grow so much? One of the most well-supported hypotheses is simply that Congress is polarized and that GOP lawmakers are opposed to many policies that would reduce inequality.

6. Most lawmakers are from the top economic strata themselves.

Last, lawmakers might not care much about the growing gap between the rich and the poor because lawmakers themselves tend to be privileged. Members of Congress have always been considerably better off than their constituents. Today, millionaires make up a majority of all three branches of the federal government—including a majority of the House and a super-majority in the Senate (Carnes 2013, ch. 1). Because lawmakers are on the winning end of economic inequality themselves, they may not have many personal incentives to tackle the problem in a serious way.

Scholars have long recognized that members of Congress base their choices in office on their own views and opinions, at least some of the time (Burden 2007; Jewell 1982; Kingdon 1981, ch. 10). As a result, the kinds of differences that pollsters see in public opinion—between men and women, whites and blacks, and so on—often play out in a similar fashion in our legislatures. Women tend to have more progressive views on reproductive rights issues; so do women in Congress. Blacks tend to favor more generous social spending; so do black lawmakers (e.g., Berkman and O'Connor 1993; Canon 1999; Griffin and Newman 2008; Swers 2002; Thomas 1991; Whitby 1997.)

The same seems to be true for class. Legislators from white-collar professions—especially those from profit-oriented jobs in the private sector—tend to vote more conservatively on economic issues, especially compared to lawmakers who spent time in blue-collar jobs (Carnes 2012a; 2013; see also Carnes and Lupu 2013). States with more of these white-collar lawmakers have higher rates of economic inequality (Carnes 2013, ch. 5). Wealthier legislators are less likely to vote to repeal the estate tax (Griffin and Anewalt-Remsburg 2013). Legislators who are heavily invested in the stock market are more likely to vote to protect it (Grose 2013).

In short, there are good reasons to suspect that legislators sometimes vote with their own economic- or class-based interests in mind. And in our white-collar Congress, that poses yet another potential obstacle to serious efforts to reduce economic inequality.

There are many factors that might help explain why Congress hasn't done more to fight economic inequality. Most haven't been extensively tested, however, at least with data on how members of Congress make decisions on a broad range of issues related to inequality.

Testing these explanations is hardly an esoteric intellectual exercise. Many activists premise their work on exactly the hypotheses outlined above. Some attempt to educate citizens about how bad inequality has gotten with white papers (Mishel et al 2012) and viral videos (Klein 2013). Others focus on closing the gap in routine forms of political participation. Still others focus on combating biases in the organized pressure system, getting the money out of politics, or reducing polarization in Congress. A handful of us are even exploring ways to elect more working-class Americans to public office.

In short, a lot of people have a lot riding on the question of what might discourage Congress from taking economic inequality seriously. Many believe that they know the root of the problem, and many consequently invest their time and resources in reform efforts premised on the idea that some factor or set of factors is what *really* prevents members of Congress from taking economic inequality seriously. But few reformers have a strong empirical basis for their beliefs. Few can say for certain whether members of Congress who *don't* suffer from the problem the reformer is focused on actually take inequality more seriously.

Who Supports Inequality?

If we want to know why members of Congress support or oppose policies that reduce inequality, the first step is to measure how often they do so. Collecting these data is harder than it might seem, however. Members make lots of decisions that affect economic policy—they cast votes, they sponsor bills, they serve on committees, they do work behind the scenes. Along the way, however, no one keeps track of how their choices affect economic inequality. In principle, most of the substantive legislation Congress considers probably has some effect on the distribution of wealth or income in the United States, even if only indirectly or in some small way. For the vast majority of proposals, however, no one really knows how they affect inequality—no one can really sum up how the bills a member of Congress supports and opposes collectively affect the distribution of income or wealth in this country.

We can, however, study how legislators respond to policies that are likely to significantly and directly affect economic inequality. In the last few decades, advocacy organizations have started paying closer attention to how members of Congress vote and what they do behind the scenes. Many have developed scorecards to determine who their friends and enemies are in the legislative branch. Groups that care about economic inequality are no exception. Since the 1970s, the AFL-CIO has ranked legislators based on how they vote on bills the organization deems important to the well-being of lower-income and working-class Americans.

To determine where members of Congress stood on measures that significantly affect inequality, I analyzed how members scored on a new legislative report card computed by the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) that focuses exclusively on high-stakes legislation related to economic inequality. In October 2012, the 50-year-old think tank released a legislative scorecard that ranked House members on how they reacted to 24 bills and amendments during the 2011-2012 legislative session that "stand out as having tremendous impact (or potential impact) on economic inequality in America" (Anderson et al 2012, 11). Most of the actions focused on major tax reforms (e.g., a bill to repeal the estate tax, a bill to enact the so-called Buffett Rule, a measure to extend the Bush Tax Cuts, and so on), budget proposals (e.g., the Ryan Budget), jobs and wages bills (e.g., increasing the minimum wage), anti-poverty policy, and other measures with clear implications for economic inequality. The organization also included a few items related to education, housing, and health policy. (For a complete list, see Anderson et al 2012.) The IPS was not alone in flagging these proposals—a casual review of other progressive organizations' websites found that other groups mentioned at least half of the items on the IPS scorecard as important to the future of economic inequality. In short, the IPS created a useful measure of how lawmakers responded to proposals that were widely believed to have serious implications for the gap between the rich and the poor.

In many respects, the IPS Inequality Report Card is an ideal resource for studying how members of Congress handle policies related to inequality. First, it was created during a congressional term when people in and around government were paying close attention to inequality. In 2011 and 2012, the *New York Times* ran Warren Buffet's "Stop Coddling the Super-Rich" op-ed, the Occupy Wall Street protests began, and the president gave a State of the Union Address that focused centrally on economic inequality. During the 112th Congress, policy makers, activists, and citizens were more likely to be thinking about the gap between the rich and the poor—more than usual, lawmakers were basing their choices on their views about economic inequality.

The IPS Inequality Report Card's other major advantage is that it included not just how legislators voted, but also whether they cosponsored several important bills that never reached a floor vote. Especially in the Republican-controlled House, many bills with the potential to significantly reduce economic inequality never stood a chance of making it to a vote. Instead, many lawmakers signaled their support by cosponsoring stalled legislation. The bill to enact the so-called Buffet Rule, for instance, was never put to a vote in the House—but was cosponsored by 72 representatives. By including data like these, the IPS Inequality Report Card avoided some of the problems associated with simply studying roll call voting, which can miss important actions behind the scenes.

Of course, there are obvious drawbacks to studying the IPS data: They don't account for issues that were never even proposed in Congress (a weightier form of agenda control than keeping a bill from a floor vote), they only cover a narrow timeframe (they don't tell us anything about how legislators voted on some of the most important legislation related to inequality, like the New Deal and Great Society programs, the 1986 Tax Reform Act, or the 2001 Bush tax cuts), and they only allow us to see differences in how members behave on the margin—if there are forces that discourage *every* member of Congress from taking inequality seriously (like the filibuster or first-past-the post elections), we won't be able to see them with data like these.

Even so, the IPS Inequality Report Card gives us a straightforward way to test a variety of hypotheses about the factors that discourage members of Congress from tackling economic inequality. They give us a valuable window into how today's Congress makes decisions on policies that could make our country more or less unequal.

To make it easier to understand the scores, I rescaled and reverse-coded the IPS Report Card so that the values ranged from 0 to 100, with a score of 0 being equivalent to the best grade the IPS gave, an "A+", and a score of 100 being equivalent to an "F" on the IPS Inequality Report Card. I then simply examined whether the lawmakers who scored higher on this rescaled measure—who were *more likely* to support policies that would *increase* inequality—were also the lawmakers who had the qualities that scholars and activists think discourage action on inequality. Who supports inequality in Congress? Lawmakers whose constituents don't care much about the problem? Those who represent districts where the rich participate in public affairs at higher rates? Those who are more tightly connected to business lobbyists and less tightly connected to working-class interest groups? Those who raise a lot of campaign money? Those who are farther to the right ideologically? Those who are well-off themselves?

To determine how much each representative's constituents cared about inequality, I used a few somewhat blunt measures. Computing public opinion in congressional districts is still challenging: most nationally representative surveys don't include enough cases to calculate average opinion in such small geographic areas. As such, I relied on the only recent survey that was large enough to generate reliable district-level estimates of public opinion, the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Ansolabehere 2012). Using the 2010 wave of the survey, I computed the average ideology of each legislator's constituents (using the standard five-point scale), their average partisanship (using the standard seven-point scale), their median household income, and their average response to a question that asked them what percentage of their state's budget deficit should be covered by spending cuts (versus increased taxes).[4] None of these were

[4] The question asked, "If your state were to have a budget deficit this year it would have to raise taxes on income or sales or cut spending, such as on education, health care, welfare, and road construction. What would you prefer more, raising taxes or cutting spending? Choose a point along the scale from 100% tax increases (and no spending cuts) to 100% spending cuts (and no

exact measures of how much constituents cared about inequality, but they were good proxies: my findings were the same when I replicated my analysis using a question from the 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Study that asked constituents whether they believed the federal government should do more to fight economic inequality. Asking citizens where they stand ideologically or what they think about taxing and spending seems to be a good way to tap into their views about economic inequality.

To test the idea that members of Congress are less concerned about inequality because wealthier Americans participate more in politics, I used the CCES to compute the median family incomes of voters in each district and the median incomes of highly engaged citizens, who I defined as those who had done two or more of four items related to political participation in the last year: “attending local political meetings (such as school board or city council),” “put[ting] up a political sign (such as a lawn sign or bumper sticker),” “work[ing] for a candidate or campaign,” or “donat[ing] money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization.” If the rich participate more, do lawmakers pay less attention to inequality?

And what if the wealthy are better organized collectively? To determine which legislators had more to gain (or fear) from organizations representing the rich and the poor, I used the CCES to compute the percentage of constituents in each district who lived in union households, and I used data from OpenSecrets (2013) to measure the amount of money each legislator received from labor groups and, separately, from businesses groups.

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tax increases). The point in the middle means that the budget should be balanced with equal amounts of spending cuts and tax increases. If you are not sure, or don't know, please check the box below.”

Likewise, as a simple measure of which legislators raised more money, I collected data from OpenSecrets on the total amount of money each legislator raised during the 2011-2012 congressional term. To measure legislators' parties and ideologies, I used Poole and Rosenthal's (2013) well-known DW-NOMINATE data. And to measure lawmakers' own economic and social class backgrounds, I used data on legislators' net worths from OpenSecrets and data from my Congressional Leadership and Social Status (CLASS) dataset on the occupations legislators had before they served in Congress (Carnes 2012b).[5]

The Politics of Inequality in Congress

Why doesn't Congress take rising inequality more seriously? Is it because citizens don't care? Because political activists are wealthy? Because the rich are well-organized and the poor aren't? Because the GOP has moved so far to the right? Because legislators are so rich?

Strikingly, the answer to nearly all of these questions is "yes." In Congress, the political deck is powerfully stacked in favor of economic inequality.

Lawmakers whose constituents cared less about inequality were less likely to fight inequality in the House. Figure 2 plots legislators' rescaled IPS Inequality Report Card scores

[5] Roughly 120 of the representatives who held office in the 112th Congress were not included in the CLASS dataset, which covers the 106th through 110th Congresses. For those legislators, I collected occupational data from the online Congressional Biographical Directory and equally weighted each type of job each legislator had before holding office. This quick and dirty approach doesn't seem to have affected my findings: I reached the same basic conclusions when I excluded these 120 legislators and focused only on the lawmakers in the CLASS dataset, for whom I have detailed, multiple-source-verified, time-weighted occupational data.

against measures of how much their constituents preferred cutting government services vs. raising taxes ("Constituent Preferences," top left panel), their constituents' average ideologies (top right), their constituents' average party identifications (bottom left), and their constituents' median family incomes (bottom right). In each panel, I have added separate best-fit lines for Democrats (printed blue and dashed) and Republicans (printed red and solid).

[Figure 2 about here]

Two patterns immediately stand out in Figure 2. First, the two parties were separated by an enormous gulf: the average Republican in the House scored about 60 points higher on this measure of support for inequality than the average Democrat. Second, within both parties, legislators who represented constituents who cared less about inequality, who were more conservative, or who were more likely to be strong Republicans were more likely to support policies that would increase inequality. This pattern was especially pronounced among Democrats—consistent with the idea that Republicans have moved farther to the right and tend to vote cohesively, the Republican representatives in this sample tended to support inequality regardless of where their constituents stood on the issue. Why hasn't Congress done more to fight inequality? Part of the explanation is that the GOP almost always opposes policies that would reduce inequality—and congressional Democrats join in when their constituents don't care about the issue.

Data on organized groups and money in politics tell a similar story. Figure 3 plots representatives' inequality scores against the percentages of their constituents who live in union households, the relative amount of money they receive from organized labor and business (specifically, the ratio of the two, a simple comparison that accounts for the fact that some legislators raise more money overall[6]), and the total amount of money each legislator raised from any source during the 2011-2012 campaign cycle. On most measures, Republicans are at the ceiling: regardless of who lobbies them or how much they receive, more than 90% of the time, the typical Republican representative supported legislation that would increase inequality. Among Democrats, however, organized influence seems to matter. Congressional Democrats are more likely to support inequality when they represent less heavily unionized districts. Those who receive half as much money from labor as they do from business (that is, a ratio of 0.5 on the horizontal axis in the top right panel of Figure 3) are more likely to vote for inequality than those who receive twice as much from labor groups as businesses (a ratio of 2.0). And Democrats who raise more money overall are more likely to support policies that increase inequality.[7]

[Figure 3 about here]

Like Figure 2, the data summarized in Figure 3 underscore the challenge pro-equality reformers face in Washington. In Congress, one party is staunchly opposed to policies that would reduce inequality, and the other party's support varies with the relative strength of grassroots pro-worker organizations—which are declining—the balance of organized lobbying—which is heavily tilted in favor of businesses and the wealthy—and the importance of high-dollar

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[6] The results are essentially the same when I separately analyze the percentage of a legislator's total campaign receipts that come from labor groups and the percentage that come from business groups.

[7] Of course, we have to be careful when interpreting results like these; the causal arrow could run both ways. The relationship between interest groups and legislators is probably more like a feedback loop: interest groups give to their allies in the legislature, who in turn remain allies—and remain in office.

campaign donors—who are more influential than ever as the costs of congressional campaigns spiral upward.

In addition to the electoral, interest group, and partisan politics that might discourage lawmakers from taking economic inequality seriously, lawmakers also appear to have personal incentives that discourage them from taking action. Figure 4 plots representatives' rescaled IPS Inequality Report Card scores against data on how they earned a living before Congress (the percentage of their career spent in profit-oriented white-collar jobs, like running a business) and how much of a living they earned in the process (their net worth). Again, among Democrats, those who spent more of their careers running businesses and (to a lesser extent) those who made more money doing so were more likely to support legislation that would make inequality worse. Fighting inequality in Congress is truly an uphill battle: only one party will even consider laws that reduce inequality, and among those lawmakers, there are many factors—both external and personal—that might discourage them from taking a stand against the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots.

[Figure 4 about here]

If there is good news in these data for people who care about reducing economic inequality, it is that inequalities in routine forms of political participation seem not to be a culprit. Figure 5 plots rescaled IPS scores against the median family incomes of the voters and highly-engaged citizens in each legislator's district. There is essentially no relationship. Although scholars often worry that unequal participation spells unequal political voice, lawmakers tend to vote for inequality at roughly the same rates regardless of whether lower-income citizens make up a large or small share of voters or engaged citizens. There are many factors that might discourage members of Congress from taking economic inequality seriously. The social class gap in routine political participation doesn't seem to be one of them.

[Figure 5 about here]

Of course, many of the factors that are associated with support for inequality are correlated with one another: Republicans tend to represent more conservative districts, receive more money from business lobbyists, and spend more of their pre-congressional careers in profit-oriented professions. Are any of the factors that seem to discourage lawmakers from dealing with inequality simply proxies for other important factors? Can we rule out any of these factors as duplicates of the others?

As a simple test, Table 1 reports the results of three regression models that relate legislators' inequality scores to the variables in Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5. In the first model, I have included the entire sample and simply added an indicator variable for Republican members. In the second and third models, I have limited my attention to Democrats and Republicans, respectively.

[Table 1 about here]

Nothing washes out. Each of the individual factors that seem to be associated with congressional action on inequality in Figures 2 through 5 still seems to matter when we control for all of the factors at once. Of course, big regression models like this one are risky (Achen 2005). However, in a fairly hard test—with a relatively small sample and a large number of explanatory variables—most of the patterns summarized in the figures above are still evident (and at least marginally significant) in these models. Of course, the party a lawmakers comes from is by far the best predictor of her inequality score: the estimated gap between Republicans and Democrats in the first model in Table 1 was more than half of the possible range of the variable. However, there seems to be more to the politics of inequality in Congress than just the GOP. Lawmakers who worked in profit-oriented white-collar jobs tend to be less concerned about inequality, especially compared to those who worked in blue-collar jobs (a gap I omit here but explore in more detail elsewhere; see Carnes 2012a; 2013). Likewise, lawmakers who represented more conservative districts and who received more money from businesses and other campaign donors were more likely to support policies that would increase inequality. Of course, just as in Figures 2 through 5, these associations were generally confined to Democrats. Across the board, Republicans tended to score high on the inequality support measure.

The opponents of economic inequality face a bleak outlook in the 21st-century Congress. Figure 6 summarizes the challenge. The figure plots the relationship between representatives' inequality scores and their first-dimension DW-NOMINATE scores, a composite measure of legislator ideology based on every vote a lawmaker casts. On the major legislation affecting economic inequality in the 112th Congress, Republicans of all ideological stripes voted in lockstep against policies that would reduce inequality. Democrats were divided: those farther to the ideological left tended to vote to reduce inequality, those farther to the right tended to vote to increase it.

[Figure 6 about here]

Those who oppose fighting economic inequality have a whole party in Congress. Those who want to reduce inequality have only part of one, when the political and personal circumstances are right.

What Would It Take to Make Congress Care about Inequality?

If we were to design a political institution that would prevent income and wealth from becoming extremely unequal, it probably wouldn't look much like the modern Congress. It wouldn't have ideologically polarized parties; it certainly wouldn't have one party that uniformly opposed efforts to reduce inequality. Its members wouldn't worry so much about constituents who are often confused about the links between public policy and inequality. It wouldn't be surrounded by an organized pressure system dominated by the wealthy. And it wouldn't be packed full of wealthy people itself.

For the most part, the scholars who have sounded alarms about Congress's ability to respond to rising inequality have been right to do so. The forces that discourage our legislative branch from taking inequality seriously are considerable, and many of them are getting worse. Legislators whose constituents don't care as much about inequality (and many don't) and who are well-off themselves (and many are) are less likely to take action. Lawmakers are less likely to oppose inequality when they have close ties to business lobbyists (which are becoming increasingly sophisticated), when they have weak ties to grassroots organizations that represent the working class (which have been dying off for decades), and when they have to raise vast sums to fund their re-election campaigns (which they have to do more and more often).

This isn't to say that legislators who "support inequality" want America to be more unequal. They may, but more likely, they probably simply prioritize other goals (like winning re-election) or think other problems are more important than economic inequality (like avoiding the "moral hazards" that safety net programs can create or reducing the restrictions on how businesses operate). Lawmakers have to make tradeoffs between competing values. Some simply may not value economic equality as much as they value other things. However, lawmakers probably never think to themselves, “I support economic inequality.”

Still, many of them do. As inequality has crept upward over the last few decades, federal lawmakers have often stood by. Sometimes, the policies they have enacted have nudged inequality even higher.

Of course, Congress isn’t entirely to blame. Soaring economic inequality is largely a result of changing economic circumstances: deindustrialization, globalization, the information revolution, and so on (Frank and Cook 1995; Freeland 2012). And Congress probably would have done more to address these forces if the political circumstances had been different. If more constituents demanded action on inequality, Congress would probably do more to reduce inequality. If more middle- and working-class Americans were engaged in collective action on behalf of their economic interests, Congress would probably do more to reduce inequality. If legislators didn’t have to raise huge sums of money to hedge against the possibility of a Super PAC attack—hardly a congressional creation—Congress would probably do more to reduce inequality. Most of the factors that discourage Congress from taking steps to reduce economic inequality don’t originate within Congress itself.

In that sense, there is a silver lining for those who care about reducing economic inequality. Our legislative branch itself isn’t the problem—it’s the *inputs* into the legislative process that make it difficult for Congress to deal with inequality.

Most of the problems reformers are trying to tackle are right on the money. Americans need to understand economic inequality better. They need to organize more effectively to press their demands on their representatives. Big donors need to play a smaller role in elections. Middle- and working-class Americans need to play more of a role in government. Even groups that are working to encourage routine forms of political participation probably aren't off base: if voting or putting up yard signs are steps towards participating in larger grassroots movements, encouraging less affluent Americans to do those things is a step in the right direction.

However, there almost certainly isn't a silver bullet—no single reform will transform Congress into an institution that works to keep inequality under control. Even if Congress were less polarized, if Americans still don't care much about inequality, Congress probably won't do much about it. Even if a social movement coalesces around the problem of economic inequality, Republicans in our polarized Congress probably still won't support proposals to reduce inequality. Even if we get all of the money out of Washington, if most members of Congress are millionaires, the Millionaire's Tax probably doesn't stand much of a chance. No single reform will work by itself: when there are so many factors that discourage members of Congress from addressing economic inequality, solving any one or two of them probably won't completely solve the problem. If we want Congress to get serious about inequality, we need to reduce party polarization, revive middle- and working-class civic organizations, control business lobbying, reign in big money in congressional elections, *and* transform our white-collar government into one that looks more like the country it represents. Reformers are working hard on each of these problems. If they want Congress to keep inequality in check, they'll probably have to work together.

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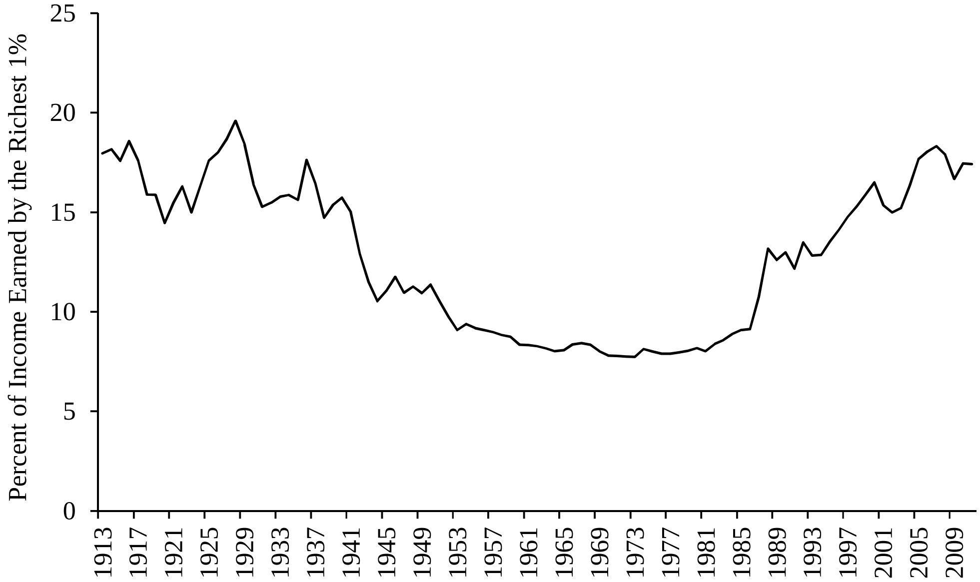
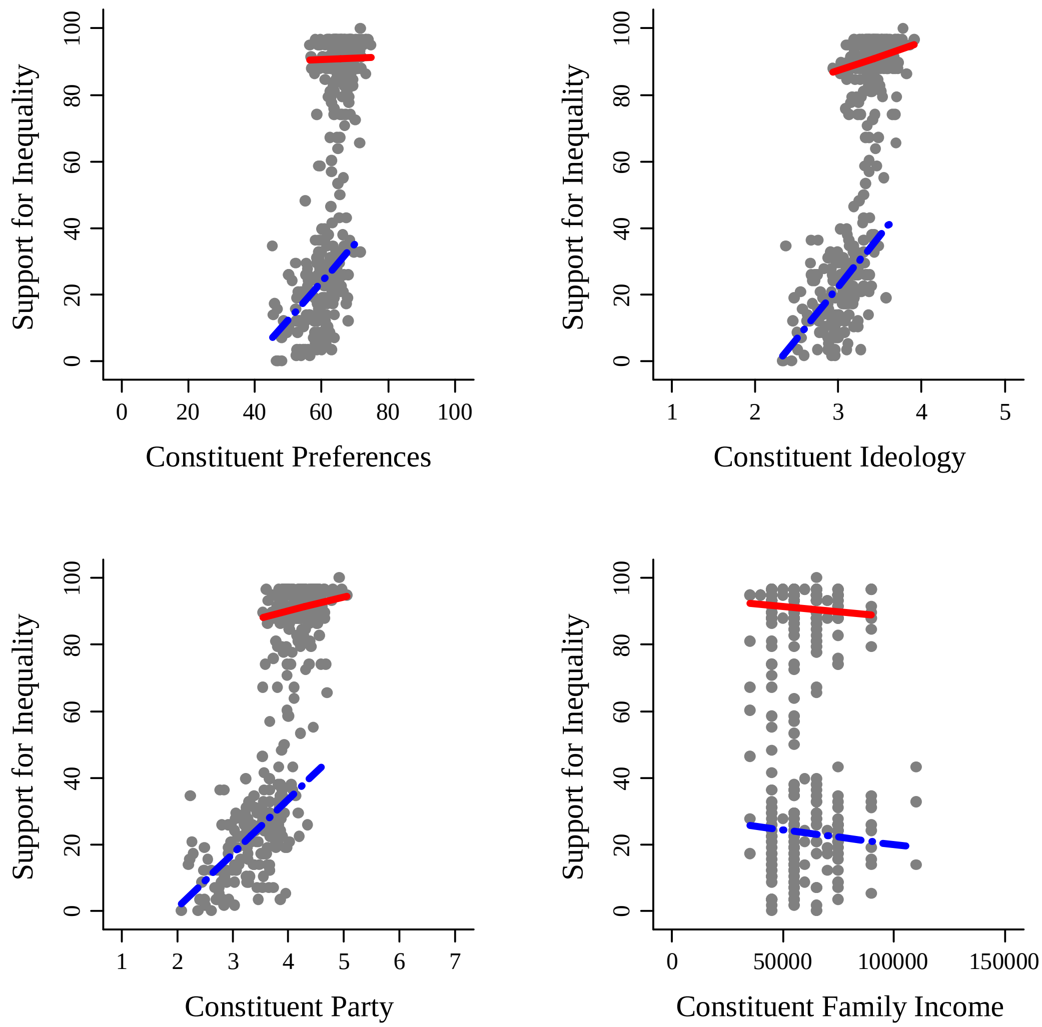
Figure 1: Income Inequality in the United States



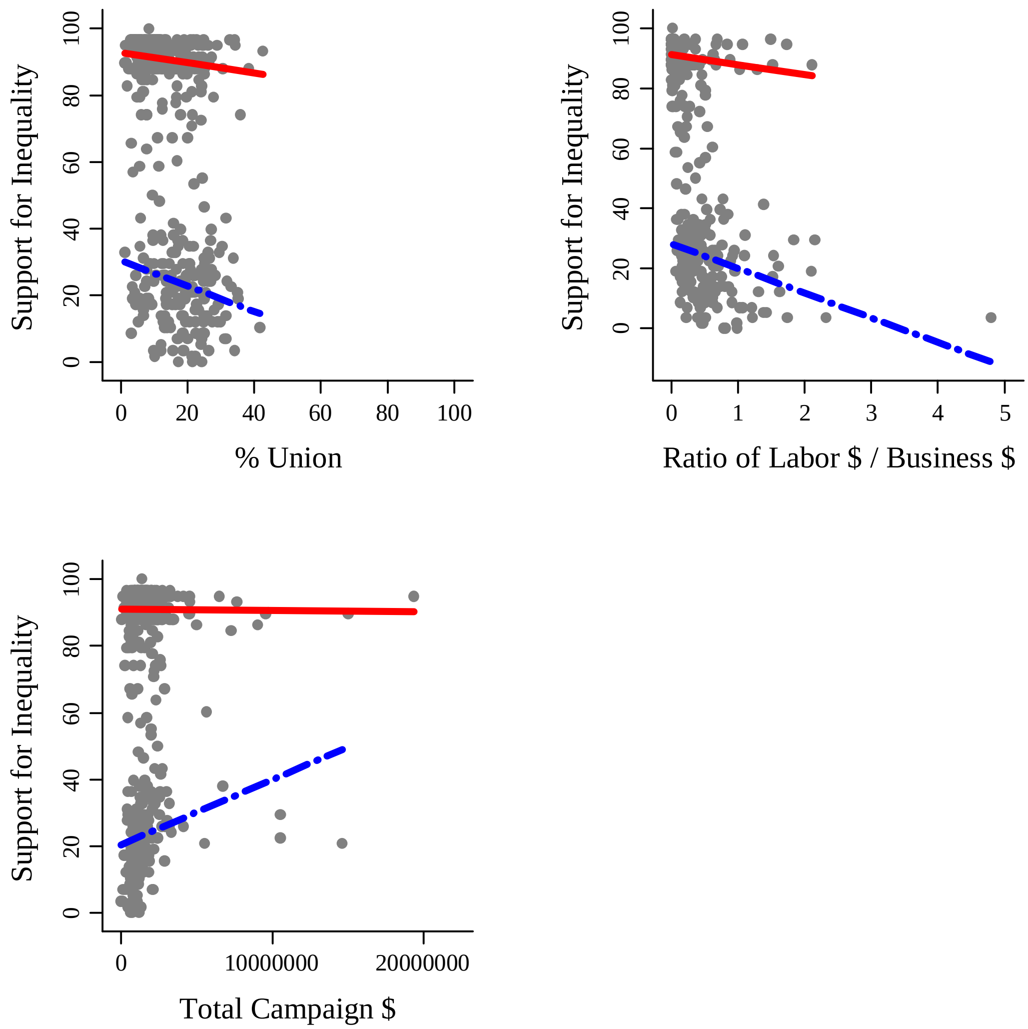
Source: Piketty and Saez (2003); data for 1999-2011 available online from elsa.berkeley.edu/~saez/ (accessed May 20, 2013).

Figure 2: Support for Inequality and Public Opinion



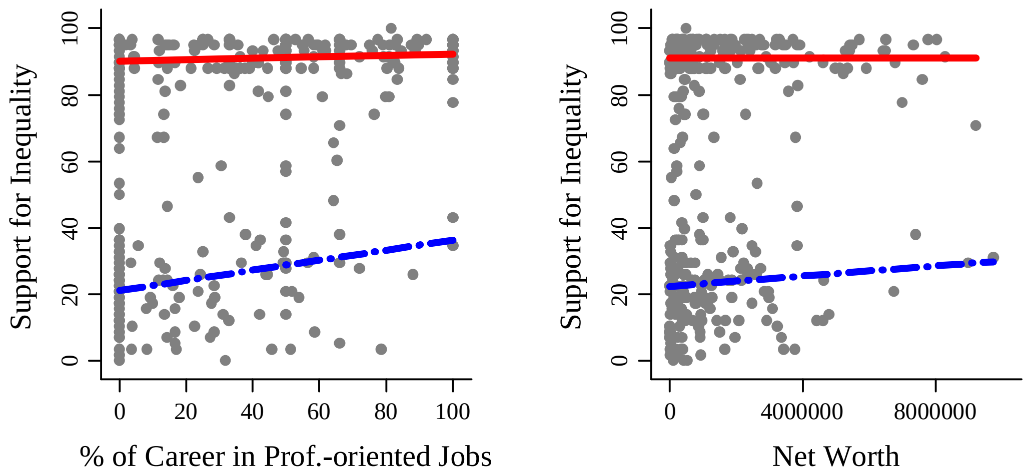
Note: This figure plots legislators' Inequality Report Card scores (rescaled to range from 0 to 100, with higher values signifying greater support for policies that would increase economic inequality) against the variables in question. The figure also includes separate linear best fit lines for Democrats (blue, dashed) and Republicans (red, solid).

Figure 3: Support for Inequality and Organized Influence



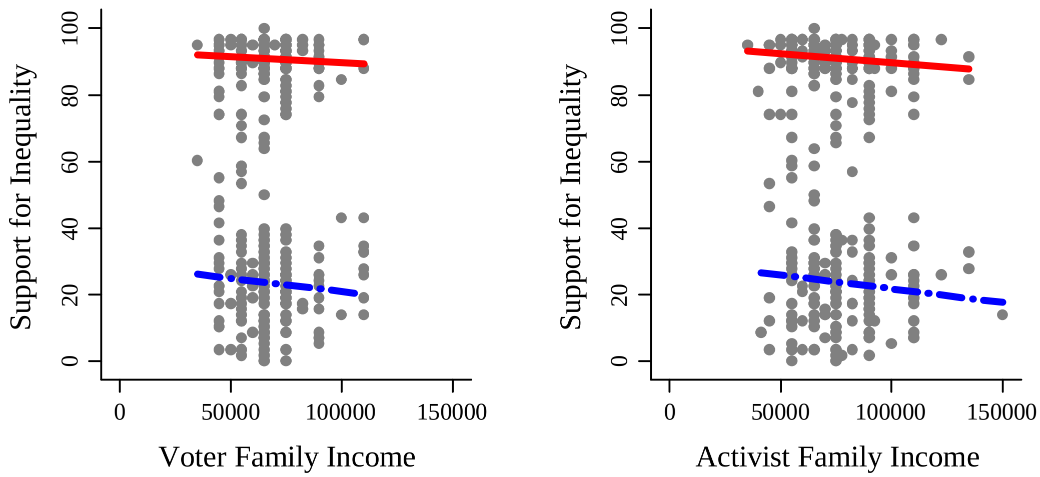
Note: This figure plots legislators' Inequality Report Card scores (rescaled to range from 0 to 100, with higher values signifying greater support for policies that would increase economic inequality) against the variables in question. The figure also includes separate linear best fit lines for Democrats (blue, dashed) and Republicans (red, solid).

Figure 4: Support for Inequality and Who Governs



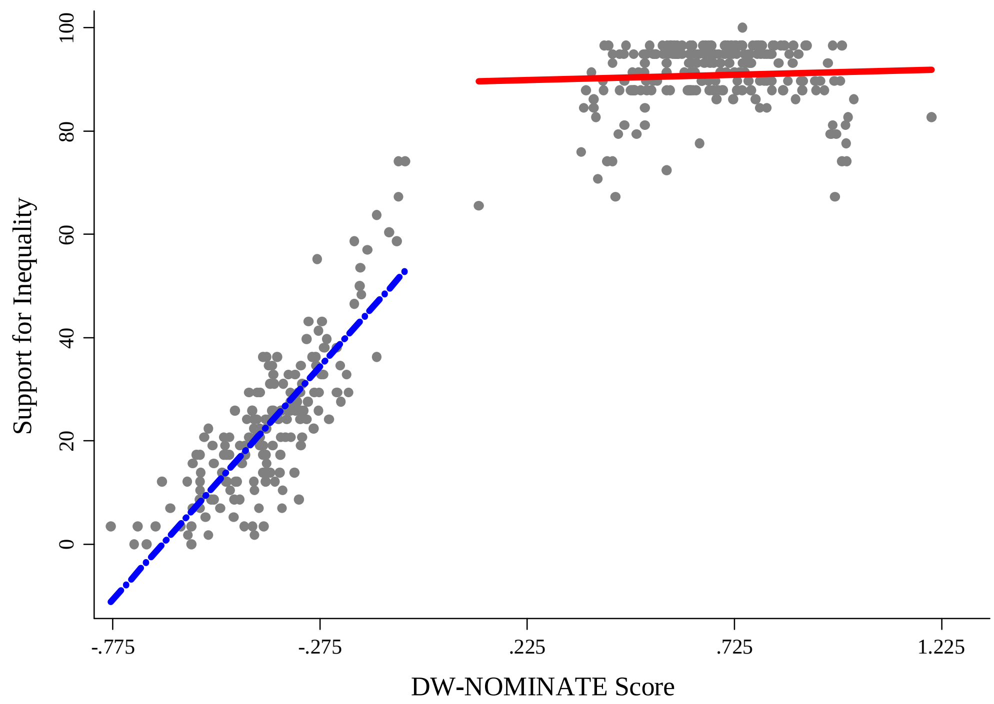
Note: This figure plots legislators' Inequality Report Card scores (rescaled to range from 0 to 100, with higher values signifying greater support for policies that would increase economic inequality) against the variables in question. The figure also includes separate linear best fit lines for Democrats (blue, dashed) and Republicans (red, solid).

Figure 5: Support for Inequality and Political Participation



Note: This figure plots legislators' Inequality Report Card scores (rescaled to range from 0 to 100, with higher values signifying greater support for policies that would increase economic inequality) against the variables in question. The figure also includes separate linear best fit lines for Democrats (blue, dashed) and Republicans (red, solid).

Figure 6: The Role of Ideology



Note: This figure plots legislators' Inequality Report Card scores (rescaled to range from 0 to 100, with higher values signifying greater support for policies that would increase economic inequality) against the variable in question. The figure also includes separate linear best fit lines for Democrats (blue, dashed) and Republicans (red, solid).

Table 1: Who Votes for Inequality?

	Full Sample	Democrats	Republicans
Preferences (0 to 100)	-0.145	-0.459	-0.121
	(0.15)	(0.30)	(0.15)
Ideology (1 to 5)	9.835*	14.888*	4.902
	(4.23)	(7.06)	(4.20)
Party (1 to 7)	8.410**	11.042**	0.990
	(2.33)	(3.44)	(2.27)
Family Income (in $10k)	-1.037	-1.648	-0.916
	(0.72)	(1.23)	(0.69)
Voter Family Income (in $10k)	0.743	0.627	1.204*
	(0.68)	(1.19)	(0.57)
Activist Family Income (in $10k)	-0.133	0.051	-0.563+
	(0.34)	(0.63)	(0.32)
Percent Union (0 to 100)	-0.031	-0.096	-0.077
	(0.06)	(0.10)	(0.07)
Ratio of Labor $ / Business $	-4.437**	-5.142**	-2.356
	(1.47)	(1.89)	(1.59)
Total Campaign Receipts (in $1M)	0.949**	2.278	0.187
	(0.24)	(1.39)	(0.14)
Pct. of Career in Profit-oriented Professions	0.030*	0.067+	0.017
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.01)
Net Worth (in $1M)	0.003	0.019	0.000
	(0.01)	(0.05)	(0.00)
Republican (indicator)	54.677**	—	—
	(1.98)		
Intercept	-22.954**	-26.347*	80.068**
	(8.76)	(11.91)	(10.41)
N	396	169	227
R^2	0.9396	0.4635	0.1106

+ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, two-tailed.