Nuffield's Working Papers Series in Politics



Mobilization and Persuasion in the Two Americas: How Perceptions of Growing Income Inequality Influence Partisan Electoral Behavior

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(Published 5 Nov. 2012)

Abstract:

Since the early 2000s there has been a political debate about the growing gap between rich and poor in the United States. However, we know little about how perceptions of growing income inequality influence electoral choice. In light of the partisan polarization literature this paper modifies issue and economic voting models to distinguish between swing-voter persuasion, partisan persuasion and partisan (de-) mobilization effects. The partisan (de-) mobilization hypotheses predict that perceptions of growing income inequality diminish turnout among Republicans by making them doubt their default option, while energizing Democrats to go out and vote. Using choice models on 2002, 2004 and 2008 ANES data, this paper finds demobilization effects among Republicans and mobilization effects among Democrats to be more pronounced than partisan or swing-voter persuasion effects in two out of three elections during the Bush Presidency.

Keywords: Income inequality, Mobilization, Persuasion, Perceptions, Electoral Behavior, Turnout, Party Identification

Biographical note:

Florian is a D.Phil Candidate in Political Sociology at the University of Oxford. He graduated from University College London and holds an MSc in Sociology from the University of Oxford. His research focuses on how core voters and swing-voters mobilize and demobilize in response to issues and partisan cues. He is interested in testing theories of political behavior using methods of causal inference. Florian is currently conducting two field experiments together with Dr Eline de Rooij (Simon Fraser University) in the context of the 2012 Police and Crime Commissioner Elections in the United Kingdom.

Introduction

There is little doubt that both income inequality and party polarisation have increased in the United States. While income inequality has been on the rise since the 1980s (Atkinson 2003; Piketty, Saez 2003; Bartels 2008; Krugman 2009), partisan polarization is a recent phenomenon, which has gained prominence during the Bush and the Obama Presidencies (Abramowitz, Saunders 2008; Abramowitz 2010; Baldassari, Gelman 2008; Bafumi and Shapiro 2009). As a consequence, many commentators and politicians have essentially concluded that there are two Americas: A rich and a poor America, and a red and a blue America. This paper addresses the question of how perceptions of growing income inequality influence partisans' electoral choices in such circumstances. By doing so, it modifies economic and issue voting models to account for partisan mobilization effects.

The first generation of economic and issue voting models assumed the existence of homogenous persuasion effects among voters (Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981; Clarke 1986; Clarke et al. 2004). Individuals will vote for the candidate whose position on an issue is closest to their own or who performed well on the economy. More recent work (Hillygus and Shields 2008) has relaxed this homogeneity assumption, building on earlier work that has dealt with "internal conflict in political decision making" (Lazarsfeld et al. 1949, Campbell et al. 1960). Hillygus and Shields (2008: 26, 27) focus specifically on how "cross-pressures between policy preferences and party identification" "influence a voter's decision to support one candidate over another". They therefore focus on partisan persuasion, while explicitly ignoring mobilization effects. The same holds for the retrospective economic voting literature, which has yet to take mobilization effects seriously. However, there is earlier, mostly theoretical, work on cross-pressured partisans (Hirschman 1970; Firoina 1976), which suggests that there could be important influences on turnout, which have previously been ignored.

A focus on persuasion at the expense of mobilization seems particularly at odds with the partisan polarisation literature, which suggests that elections are won by mobilizing core voters (while demobilizing the opponent's base) and not predominantly by persuading swing voters. There has been a series of experimental work focusing on the importance of voter mobilization efforts (for reviews see Green and Gerber 2008, de Rooij et al. 2009), but this work has focused more on mobilization techniques and testing theories of social pressure than on the potential of economic issues and perceptions to mobilize or demobilize voters (Levine and Lopez 2005). What I argue in this paper at the example of perceptions of growing income inequality is that political or economic perceptions can energize supporters of the party that is perceived to have an advantage on an issue while at the same time raising doubts in the minds of those voters who support the other party.

By focusing on partisan mobilization alongside persuasion, this paper hopes to fill this gap in the literature and contribute to the further development of those second-generation issue and retrospective economic voting models that take the influence of partisanship seriously. Its specific contribution consists of adding the partisan mobilization and demobilization dimensions of issues such as income inequality to existing persuasion models. The partisan mobilization model developed in this paper builds on ideas about the conditioning role of partisanship dating back to Hirschman (1970) and Fiorina (1976). Hirschman (1970: 88) has theorized that loyalty to a political party will "act as a break" on switching parties. This assumption can change the voting function for partisans. According to Fiorina (1976), individuals who disagree with their party on an issue will feel cross-pressured and are therefore less likely to vote. In contrast, partisans who agree with their party on the issues will be more likely to turn out.

While public awareness of the growing income gap has increased over the last decade and the inequality issue has played a prominent role in political campaigns, there is little knowledge about how perceptions of growing income inequality influence electoral choices. The existing literature either looks at the formation of inequality perceptions and attitudes (Bartels 2008, McCall and Kenworthy 2009, Xu and Garand 2010), or at the relationship between aggregate levels of income inequality, turnout and vote shares across Western democracies (Beramendi and Anderson 2008; Galbraith and Hale 2008; Solt 2008, 2010). But the crucial link between inequality perceptions and political behavior remains unexplored. This is despite the fact that much of the economic voting literature claims that economic perceptions influence electoral behaviour (Fiorina 1981; Lewis-Beck 2006; Duch and Stevenson 2008). There is also a growing public interest in the question of whether the income inequality issue is likely to benefit Democrats in 2012 Presidential Election and future election cycles.

This study will proceed as follows. First, I outline how individuals learn about growing income inequality and address potential concerns with endogeneity between economic perceptions and partisanship. I will then review relevant models of economic and issue voting, before introducing modifications in light of partisanship. Finally, using choice models, I model persuasion and mobilization as an interaction between partisanship and inequality perceptions. These partisan persuasion and mobilization models are tested using panel data from the 2000-2002-2004 ANES panel study and cross-sectional data from the 2008 ANES time series study. While there is evidence for partisan and swing-voter persuasion effects in the 2004 Presidential election, I find partisan mobilization and demobilization effects to be more important in the 2002 Congressional and the 2008 Presidential elections.

Theoretical perspectives on issue persuasion and mobilization

Inequality in the mind: From economic fact to perception

To examine how inequality perceptions influence individual political choices, the issue and economic voting literature offers a good starting point. Models usually include the assumptions that individuals perceive an issue and that they care enough about it to let it influence their voting decision. However, critics such as Dahl (1971: 95) have pointed to the long and difficult "path from objective inequality to demands for greater equality" as a prequisite for conscious political action. This path can be intercepted because people do not perceive inequality, because they fail to make demands for greater equality or because they fail to act on these demands. The first requirement for political action is therefore perception of the increasing income gap.

Of course individuals can learn about economic developments through the media (Zaller 1992; Clarke et al. 2004; McCall 2005; McCall and Kenworthy 2009) or through other channels such as protests (Lohmann 1995). Context matters: In the 1970s, when Dahl (1971) wrote, income inequality was still declining and it was yet to emerge as a political issue in American politics. While data on news coverage show that at the turn of the century the media paid little attention to the growing income gap, media coverage picked up in 2002 and accentuated over the last decade (McCall and Kenworthy 2009). It seems highly likely that reports have further intensified in the wake of the financial crisis (Noah 2012). We can therefore expect individuals to have learned about the issue throughout the 2000s.

Table 1 lists the%age of Americans who state that there has been a large increase in income inequality in 2002, 2004 and 2008. These are all years in which the question was asked as part of the ANES time series study. Table 1 shows that around half of the electorate perceived a large growth of income inequality over the last 20

years. In line with the growing media coverage the issue received, awareness has grown by around 11%age points between 2002 and 2008. While in 2002, 45% state that the gap between the rich and the poor has increased a lot, it is 49% in 2004 and 56% in 2008.

Table 1 about here

Public opinion research has not only pointed to the problem of perceiving economic facts, it has also demonstrated that a message is rarely transmitted in neutral terms (Zaller 1992; Lenz 2006; Bartels 2008). Objective information often gets mixed up with partisan cues and this is particularly true in a media age in which individuals self-select into the cable network they watch and the websites they access (Iyengar and Hahn 2009). Zaller (1992) suggests that partisanship conditions the extent to which individuals, once they receive new information about an issue, are likely to accept this information. It has been shown that this "perceptual screen" (Campbell et al. 1960) also applies to perceptions in regard to the economy (Duch et al. 2000; Bartels 2002, 2008). Therefore, perceptions will not necessarily reflect objective economic conditions. In fact, Bartels (2008) and Xu and Garand (2010) have shown that partisan identification conditions the formation of perceptions of income inequality.

Some authors have even argued that economic perceptions are so vastly distorted by partisanship that they lose their predictive power (Evans and Andersen 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010). This view has been criticised on both substantial and methodological grounds (Lewis-Beck 2006). In the case of perceptions of growing income inequality, this concern seems overstated. The growth of income inequality is not as politically contentious as growing unemployment. Government and opposition readily fight about the meaning of the latest monthly unemployment numbers, with the

incumbent party claiming that things get better and the opposition predicting doom. There is no such monthly controversy in the case of income inequality. While the income inequality issue has certainly been used for political advantage, political messaging has largely been one-sided because Republicans have preferred not to talk about the increasing gap between rich and poor. When George W. Bush first uttered the word in public in early 2007, he famously acknowledged that "income inequality is real: it's been rising for more than twenty-five years" (quoted in Noah 2012: 1).

Figure 1 displays the%age of Democrats, Independents and Republicans who perceive a large growth of income inequality in 2002, 2004 and 2008 compared to those who perceive a large growth of unemployment in 2004 and 2008. The question on unemployment perceptions is not available in the 2002 study. Question wordings are identical in 2002, 2004 and 2008.

Figure 1 about here

The numbers in Table 1 and in Figure 2 not only show that "the filter, or perceptual screen, is by no means absolute" (Marsh and Tilley 2010), but that a majority of Republican identifiers perceives the growing income gap. While in 2002 more than a third of Republicans perceive income inequality to be much larger, this proportion grows to 43% in 2008. If "somewhat larger" is included, between two thirds and three forth of Republicans perceive the growing income gap. While, as shown in Table 1, there is an increase in the relatively modest correlation between inequality perceptions and partisanship between 2002 and 2004, a decrease can be registered between 2004 and 2008.

Moreover, the comparison between partisan bias in inequality and unemployment perceptions in Figure 1 shows that unemployment perceptions are more

heavily biased than income inequality perceptions in both years. While a majority of Republicans and Democrats agree that unemployment got worse in 2008, partisans even disagree about the direction of change in 2004. This is in line with Evans and Pickup's (2010) expectation that in times of economic expansion, some economic perceptions tend to be endogenous. In contrast, a clear majority of Republicans, Independents and Democrats agreed in all survey years that the gap between the rich and the poor has become "somewhat larger" or "much larger".

These results confirm an observation by Hillygus and Shields (2008: 26) who conclude that both the party identification and the issue-voting literatures sometimes "tend to overlook the extent to which partisans might disagree with their political party without leading to change in either their partisanship or their policy attitude".

Furthermore, I follow Marsh and Tilley (2010) who face problems of potential reverse causation by exploiting the advantages of panel data: Where available, I use a measure of partisanship in 2000, while the other independent variables are measured contemporaneously in 2002 or 2004. The measure of partisanship is therefore at least one step removed. Towards the end of the Clinton years and before the Bush tax cuts, income inequality was not an important political issue in the United States. As Madrick (quoted in McCall 2005: 2) wrote, "America is now more unequal than at any time since the 1920s, and it has happened with hardly any discussion". This is reflected in the fact, that there is no question about the issue in 2000. Using the 2000 measure therefore takes care of some of the potential endogeneity. The inclusion of a lagged measure is reflective of a conservative approach towards the endogeneity question (Marsh and Tilley 2010: 128). Luckily, the one time point where there is no panel data available falls within the period covering the 2008 financial and economic crisis. As Evans and Pickup (2010) write, economic perceptions are likely to exert exogenous influences during times of economic crisis. The figures in Table 1 show indeed that the correlation

between partisanship and inequality perceptions is lower in 2008 than in 2004. In order to account for any remaining partisan bias, I include interaction terms between partisanship and inequality perceptions, comparing Democrats with Democrats and Republicans with Republicans.

Economic voting and issue-persuasion models

Economic or valence voting is often assumed to work as a sanctioning mechanism based on the economic performance of the incumbent. If the economy does well, citizens will re-elect the government; if it does badly, they attribute responsibility and withdraw their support from the incumbent (Fiorina 1981; Lewis-Beck, Stegmaier 2000; Anderson 2007). This model assumes that voters agree on ends. They all desire less unemployment instead of more unemployment. But do citizens univocally disapprove of income inequality just as they disapprove of growing unemployment? People might believe that an increasing gap between rich and the poor is good for the economy.

When respondents in the 2002 and 2004 ANES panel who answered that inequality had increased were asked in a follow-up whether this was good or bad, only 14% in the 2002 wave and 11% in the 2004 wave stated that they found the growth of income inequality desirable. 86 and 89% respectively, in contrast, said that it was a bad thing. These results are similar across income quintiles. While the%age that approved of growing income inequality was indeed higher amongst Republicans (20%), a clear majority was against in both waves. There are only few Republican politicians who openly state that increasing inequality is good for the country. Therefore, I would not expect richer people or Republicans to reward any party or candidate for the growth of income inequality. These assumptions are not incompatible with economic voting theory as conceived by Downs (1957: 37) who wrote that "it is possible for a citizen to

receive utility from events that are only remotely connected to his own material income" and further that "there can be no simple identification of "acting for one's own greatest benefit" with selfishness in the narrow sense". As experimental research based on dictator games shows, the assumption that most citizens behave egoistically is questionable (see Eckel, Grossman 1996; Camerer 2003).

Nevertheless, while Republicans and Democrats seem equally concerned about the unemployment rate, they do not care equally about growing income inequality. Opinion polls show persistent differences in how much importance the two groups attribute to the growing gap between rich and poor. According to a recent Harris Interactive Poll (2012), 74% of Democrats and 56% of Independents see income inequality as a major problem, while only 38% of Republicans share this evaluation.

The reward-punishment model therefore seems to provide an incomplete choice rationale in this specific case. It is more likely that income inequality is a case of issue ownership (Petrocik 1980; Petrocik et al. 2003): While Democratic candidates such as John Kerry and Barack Obama have talked at length about the income inequality issue, Republican nominees have failed to address it.

The issue-proximity model might therefore be a better fit. It assumes that "voters do not simply reward or punish a governing party for prevailing macroeconomic conditions or trends therein, but rather offer or withdraw support according to the perceived priorities of alternative governing parties " (Clarke et al. 1986). The issue-priority model therefore requires "that parties articulate issue priorities and/or espouse ideologies that enable voters to infer such priorities" (ibid). In the case of the income inequality issue it seems clear that Democratic candidates have articulated such priorities and espoused an ideology that makes it possible to infer their priorities. We should hence expect that the individuals who perceive a growth of income inequality choose a Democratic candidate over a Republican candidate.

Partisanship, persuasion and mobilization

Both the reward-punishment model and the issue-proximity model assume that perceptions and attitudes influence everyone similarly. These models therefore assume homogenous issue-persuasion, or "conversion" (Bartels 1998) effects. However, the assumption that everyone is equally likely to be persuaded by economic perceptions and issue attitudes has been questioned. The two most important models that have been discussed in the literature are the swing-voter persuasion model and the partisan persuasion model. Originally, it was assumed that elections are won by convincing the part of voters that is undecided or independent (Bartels 1998; Cox 2009). If this model holds, we should detect persuasion effects among Independents.

In contrast, as of late a series of authors has concentrated on partisan persuasion (Hillygus and Shields 2008; Lavine et al. 2012). They argue that the number of 'real' Independents is very small. Moreover, if partisans are cross-pressured or ambiguous they should be likely to dessert their party and vote for the opposition candidate. If this model holds, we should detect partisan persuasion effects.

But while Hillygus and Shields (2008) take both partisanship and political issues seriously, they maintain along with the classic economic and issue voting literature that economic perceptions influence electoral behavior through persuasion effects. But in a political context in which parties have become increasingly polarised (Abramowitz, Saunders 2008; Abramowitz 2010; Baldassari, Gelman 2008; Bafumi and Shapiro 2009), we would expect partisan mobilization to play an important role. Partisan mobilization is not incompatible with swing voter or partisan persuasion. As Bartels (1998: 50) writes, candidates "target their appeals to two distinct groups of prospective voters: likely voters without strong preexisting loyalties, who are most susceptible to conversion, and potential voters with strong preexisting loyalties who can be mobilized to turn out (or demobilized to stay at home)." The potential of mobilization is also

mentioned in the issue voting literature (Clarke et al. 2004: 24), but it remains an afterthought.

There is one important, but often overlooked, strand of the literature that has examined partisan persuasion and mobilization from a more theoretical standpoint. Hirschman's (1970) theory of *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* suggests how issue disagreement with a political party can lead to both vote switching ('exit') and abstention ('boycott'). He assumes the existence of partisanship, which is normally understood to "act as a break on the decision to exit" (Hirschman 1970: 88). Hirschman (ibid) writes that in some cases partisans will not exit immediately, but that they will feel unease about the party that they have supported in the past. This feeling of uneasiness has often been referred to as cognitive dissonance (Festinger and Carlsmith 1959). Before choosing the emotionally costly option of exit, partisans are either expected to voice their discontent or to boycott their party, which means withdrawing their support without switching sides. By choosing not to choose, abstention is a means of reducing cognitive dissonance. Fiorina (1976) has argued along similar lines. He expects turnout amongst consistent partisans (those, who agree with their party on important issues) to be higher, while turnout amongst inconsistent or cross-pressured partisans should be lower. Earlier research on psychological cross-pressures and the latest research on party identification dynamics have lent support to the partisan (de-) mobilization model. Research on the dynamics of party identification has shown that only a small number of partisans switch their party identification to the main opposition party (Zuckerman et al. 2007; Neundorf, et al. 2011). Furthermore, citizens who hold politically inconsistent group identities and attitudes have been found to be more likely to be undecided and to postpone their voting decision (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Campbell et al. 1960).

There is also aggregate evidence for (de-) mobilization effects. Studies that have examined the relationship between aggregate income inequality and turnout between

countries suggest that higher income inequality can depress turnout (Beramendi and Anderson 2008; Solt 2008, 2010). Moreover, it has been shown that in some election years income inequality between American states is correlated with both diminished turnout and higher vote shares for Democrats (Galbraith and Hale 2008).

Identifying persuasion and mobilization effects

Swing-voter or partisan persuasion assumes that income inequality perceptions influence Independents or Republicans by persuading them to change support from one candidate to another. In contrast, partisan mobilization assumes that perceptions of growing income inequality have a conditional influence on electoral behavior by diminishing turnout among Republicans and incentivizing turnout among Democrats. We can discriminate between swing-voter persuasion effects, partisan persuasion effects and partisan (de-) mobilization effects by looking at the predicted probabilities of voting for a Republican candidate, voting for a Democratic candidate and abstention. If swing-voter or partisan persuasion holds, Independents or Republicans who perceive growing income inequality should be less likely to vote for the Republican candidate and more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate. This leads to the following two hypotheses:

1. *Swing-voter persuasion hypothesis:* Independents who perceive a larger growth of income inequality will be less likely to vote for the Republican candidate and more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate.

2. *Partisan (core-voter) persuasion hypothesis: Republicans* who perceive a larger growth of income inequality will be less likely to vote for the Republican candidate and more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate.

If instead, there is core-voter or partisan (de-) mobilization, Republicans who perceive growing income inequality should be less likely to vote for Republican candidates and more likely to abstain, while Democrats should be less likely to abstain and more likely to vote for Democratic candidates.

3. *Partisan (core-voter) demobilization hypothesis*: Republicans who perceive a larger growth of income inequality will be less likely to vote for the Republican candidate and more likely to abstain.

4. *Partisan (core-voter) mobilization hypothesis*: Democrats who perceive a larger growth of income inequality will be less likely to abstain and more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate.

Data and modelling strategy

The data analyzed here are from the 2000-2002-2004 ANES Panel study and the 2008 American National Election Time Series Study (ANES). Both the ANES panel study and the 2008 ANES time series study uses recalled turnout and vote choice.

The main explanatory variable, perceptions of income inequality is measured on a 5-point scale from large decrease to large increase of income inequality. The question "Do you think the difference in incomes between rich people and poor people in the United States today is larger, smaller or about the same as it was 20 years ago?" asks for the respondents' perceptions without prompting a normative evaluation of income inequality as a desirable or undesirable state. It also offers a follow up question allowing respondents to specify the degree of perceived change (somewhat smaller/larger – much smaller/larger). Furthermore, the question clearly appeals to long-term change over the last twenty years, which refers to the period over which economic inequality objectively

increased in the United States. The question has thus high face validity. Other questions that tap into income inequality perceptions, for instance those included in the General Social Survey, include normative references ("Do you agree or disagree: differences in income in America are too large"). While I think that the ANES question measures inequality perceptions and not economic attitudes, I am aware that this distinction is crucial. I therefore control for potential confounding with liberal-conservative economic attitudes by including a 4-points economic attitude scale that captures attitudes towards the free market and governmental involvement in the economy.

The conditioning variable, party identification is measured on the usual 7-points scale, which runs from strong Republican (0), over Independent (2) to strong Democrat (6). In order to detect heterogenous effects, I collapse this 7-point scale into the three commonly used categories Republican, Independent and Democrat and include these three party identification dummies into the model. In line with the literature, partisan leaners are counted as partisans (Keith et al. 1992; Hillygus and Shields 2008).

Following Marsh and Tilley (2010) who face important problems of endogeneity, I exploit the panel structure of my data to address reverse causation and simultaneity concerns by including a lagged, fixed measure of partisanship. Including partisanship measured at the start of the panel in 2000 helps to address endogeneity concerns since the measure should be less strongly related to income inequality perceptions measured in 2002 and 2004 than contemporaneous measures. The 2000 measure will thus be at least one step removed from inequality perception.[1]

The voting equation also includes a number of control variables that might confound the relationship between inequality perceptions and electoral choice. In order to measure the effect of an explanatory variable with as little bias as possible, it is

[1] Since there is no available 2008 ANES panel that includes a comparable question on inequality perceptions, I use the 2008 cross-section. I therefore have to rely on the contemporaneous measure of party identification.

necessary to control for variables that can affect both inequality perceptions and vote choice. This means I need to control for observables that come causally before economic perceptions (Miller and Shanks 1996; Morgan and Winship 2007; Angrist and Pischke 2009). These include demographics, socio-economic and organizational variables. I specifically include common measures of education, household income, age, gender, marriage status, place of residence, ethnicity, union membership, church attendance and whether contact was made by a political party (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba et al. 1995).

According to the partisan persuasion and mobilization models presented earlier, electoral behavior is defined as a function of Republican, Independent or Democratic self-identification, income inequality perceptions and the interaction between partisanship and inequality perception. The choice set includes abstention, voting for a Republican candidate and voting for a Democratic candidate. Appropriate statistical methods for such a choice function can be multinomial logit and multinomial probit regression. There is a debate in the literature, whether it is preferable to use the multinomial logit or the more complex alternative specific multinomial probit estimator (Long and Freese 2001; Dow and Endersby 2004; Kropko 2010). The main difference between the two models comes down to the question to what extent the violation of the independence of irrelevant alternatives assumption (IAA) biases regression results and if this violation is more important than the potential shortcomings of the asmprobit model, e.g. the stability of its estimates. Dow and Endersby (2004) and Kropko (2010) argue that it is preferable to use multinomial logit even if the IAA assumption is violated. Other authors reach different conclusions. I therefore display the results from both statistical models.

In both models abstention is specified as reference or baseline category. The resulting logit and probit coefficients for the Republican vote and the Democratic vote are therefore calculated in comparison to the abstention category.

Results

Table 2 displays logit estimates of the conditional effects of income inequality perceptions on the choice between abstention, voting for a Republican candidate and voting for a Democratic candidate in the 2002, 2004 and 2008 US federal elections. In the 2002 and 2008 elections the interaction terms between the income inequality perception scale and the party identification dummies behave as predicted: There is a statistically significant, positive interaction effect between the Democrat dummy and the inequality perception scale. In 2004, the interaction effect for the comparison between the abstention and Democratic vote categories does not reach statistical significance. However, when voting for a Republican candidate is chosen as the baseline, there is a statistically significant, negative interaction effect between the Democratic party identification dummy and perceptions of growing income inequality. Control variables behave in line with the literature (see Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba et al. 1995).

Table 2 about here

Likelihood ratio tests between a base model without interaction effects and the full model displayed in Table 2 show that including the interaction effects between party identification dummies and the income inequality perception scale improve the model fit significantly in all three years (Prob > chi2 2002: 0.008, 2004: 0.056, 2008: 0.047).

Table 3 about here

Table 3 displays the results of the alternative specific multinomial probit model with a structural covariance parameterization that imposes more normalization on the model than the unstructured variant. As in the multinomial logit model, there are three alternatives: abstention, voting for a Republican and voting for a Democrat. Abstention was chosen as the base alternative, while voting for a Democrat was chosen as the scale alternative. The same control variables are entered into both the mlogit and the alternative specific mprobit models. Comparing the size of the probit coefficients and the related standard errors in Table 3 with the size of the logit coefficients and standard errors in Table 2 shows that the two statistical models shield broadly similar results for the 2002 and the 2008 elections. The mlogit and asmprobit estimators at times return different coefficient estimates for the 2004 election, but these differences do not change the interpretation of the results. Again, interaction effects between the Democratic party identification dummy and the income inequality perception scale are statistically significant in the 2002 and 2008 elections, while they do not reach statistical significance in the 2004 Presidential election.

Because the coefficients are estimated in logits and probits and are hence not amenable to direct interpretation, the results from the multinomial logit model are used to compute the marginal change in predicted probability for abstention, the Republican vote and the Democratic vote.

Figure 2 about here

Figure 3 about here

Figure 4 about here

Swing-voter and partisan (core-voter) persuasion effects

Figures 3 displays substantially large persuasion effects among Independents and Republican identifiers in the 2004 Presidential Election. While the marginal effects on the Democratic vote are statistically significant at the 0.05 level for Republican identifiers, effects for Independents are substantially large but only reach statistical significance at the 0.10 level. This is mainly due to large confidence intervals. As Figure 2 shows, persuasion effects in the 2002 Congressional election are both substantially and statistically insignificant, while persuasion effects in the 2008 Presidential elections are only significant for Democratic identifiers (Figure 4). In 2002 and 2008, Republicans and Independents who score higher on the income inequality scale are no more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate than Republicans and Independents who score lower. Moreover, in the 2008 election persuasion effects on Democratic identifiers are relatively small compared to 2004: Those who identify as Democrats and move up one point on the income inequality perception scale are only about 1.4%age points less likely to vote for John McCain.

In contrast, Republicans who score higher on the income inequality scale are significantly less likely to support George W. Bush and more likely to support John Kerry in the 2004 Presidential election. Marginal effects for Democrats are not significantly different from zero. In absolute terms, Republicans who move up one point on the inequality perception scale are 13%age points less likely to vote for George W. Bush and 12%age points more likely to vote for John Kerry. Thus, the persuasion effect among Republicans is large and amounts to around 12%age points.

The particularly strong persuasion effects on Republican identifiers in the 2004 Presidential election might be due to candidate cues transmitted through Democratic

Vice Presidential nominee John Edward's strong embrace of the Two America's campaign theme and the attention the income inequality issue enjoyed during the Democratic National Convention that year. Having lost control of both the House and the Senate in the 2002 midterm election, Democrats went into opposition and attacked the second round of the Bush tax cuts as benefitting the wealthy at the expense of the middle class. Moreover, Republicans who perceived a growth of income inequality had already abstained in the 2002 midterm election. While partisanship therefore acts as a "break on exit" (Hirschman 1970: 88), it does not prevent exit in all circumstances. If candidates emphasize an issue over and over again, Hillygus and Shields' (2008) expectation of strong partisan persuasion effects are verified.

Partisan (core-voter) mobilization effects

The marginal changes in predicted probabilities, which are displayed in Figures 2, 3 and 4 show that in 2002 and 2008, partisan mobilization effects are more important than swing-voter or partisan persuasion effects. In these two elections, Republicans who perceive a larger gap between rich and poor are less likely to vote for the Republican candidate and more likely to abstain. These marginal effects on the Republican vote and on abstention are significantly different from zero at the 95% level. At the same time the propensity of Republican identifiers who perceive a higher growth of income inequality to vote for the Democratic candidate is not statistically different from zero. There is thus evidence that perceiving a higher growth of income inequality demobilizes the Republican vote.

In contrast, there are mobilization effects for Democratic identifiers: Democrats who score higher on the inequality scale have a statistically significant, lower propensity to abstain and a statistically significant higher propensity to vote for a Democratic candidate. However, their propensity to vote for the Republican candidate

remains unchanged. These results provide evidence for the existence of mobilization effects among Democrats who perceive greater income inequality.

Since the marginal effects for Republicans and Democrats on abstention point in opposite directions and are both significantly different from zero, there are clearly significant differences between the two groups. The 95% confidence intervals do not overlap. This proofs that perceiving greater income inequality has different effects on Republican and Democratic identifiers. The marginal effects also show that in 2002 and 2008 Democrats are significantly more likely than Republicans to vote for a Democratic candidate if they perceive a growth of income inequality.

For a Republican, the marginal effects on abstention are substantially large in both years: In 2002 an average Republican who moves up one point on the 5-points income inequality scale is around 9%age points less likely to vote for Republican candidates and 13%age points more likely to abstain. In 2008, Republicans are 7%age points more likely to abstain. While the demobilization effect on the Republican vote amounts to 9%age points in 2002 and 5%age points in 2007, the partisan demobilization effect on the Democratic vote is statistically insignificant and amounts to 4%age points in 2002 and 1%age point in 2008. Moreover, both in 2002 and 2008 Democratic identifiers who score 1 point higher on the 5-points income inequality scale, become 5%age points more likely to turn out and to vote for Barack Obama.

In absolute terms, a Republican who perceives a large decrease of income inequality in has a predicted probability of abstention of 11% in the 2008 election, while this rises to 33% for a Republican who perceives a large increase of income inequality. This should be compared with a predicted probability of abstention of 32% for a Democrat who perceives a large decline of income inequality and a probability of 15% for a Democrat who perceives a large increase.

Therefore, I find support for the partisan mobilization hypothesis among Democrats and for the partisan demobilization hypothesis among Republicans in the 2002 midterm election and the 2008 Presidential Election. At the same time, the partisan persuasion hypothesis and the swing-voter persuasion hypothesis are verified in the context of the 2004 Presidential Election.

Discussion and Conclusion

The issue of growing income inequality has gained political importance over the last decade and is likely to play an important role in the 2012 US Presidential Election. This paper informs readers about the potential impact of perceptions of growing income inequality on electoral behavior and contributes to the development of economic and issue-voting models that account for the importance of partisan mobilization alongside swing-voter and partisan persuasion. This study has produced two important results: First, it shows that partisans make different electoral choices in response to perceiving similar growth of income inequality. Second, testing partisan persuasion and partisan mobilization models, I conclude that in two out of three elections held during the 2000s, perceptions of growing income inequality had a larger and more significant effect on partisan mobilization than on persuasion. While perceiving growing income inequality makes Republicans more likely to vote for John Kerry in the 2004 Presidential election, no such conversion or persuasion effects can be observed in the 2002 Congressional and the 2008 Presidential elections.

This paper also addresses a number of methodological challenges. First, it had to assess whether the economic fact that income inequality has been on the rise over the last decades has reached the American mind. It shows that there has been an increasing awareness of growing income inequality between 2002 and 2008, which is the time frame of this study. While, in line with Zaller's (1992) resistance axiom, Republicans

are still less likely to report an increase of income inequality than Independents and Democrats, there are many Republicans who perceive the growing gap and their numbers are growing. This quasi consensus amongst the public is reflective of the less contentious nature of elite level discourse about the issue. Instead of being a valence or a position issue, income inequality is an exemplary case of Democratic issue ownership: while Democrats talk about the issue, Republicans are largely silent. It is therefore unlikely that the pathway from objective condition to action as pictured by Dahl (1971) will already fail at the stage of perception.

As we have seen, the growing awareness of the facts about income inequality has resulted in political responses of Republican and Democratic identifiers alike. But their choices are not always quite as straightforward as issue persuasion models assume: The results of this study suggest that longstanding party attachments play a role in how individuals choose in response to economic perceptions. The robustness of the regression results to the inclusion of lagged measures of party identification gives me confidence that perceptions of growing income inequality have an independent, but conditional influence on electoral behavior.

Accounting for the conditioning effects of partisanship in issue voting models means including interaction effects between party identification and economic perceptions on the right-hand side of the equation and abstention as one potential choice option on the left-hand side. Excluding one potential choice citizens can make in an election means that we might sometimes miss important elements of the story and that we will falsely conclude that issues such as income inequality do not influence electoral behavior. While I am not first to emphasize this problem, usually issue-voting and retrospective economic voting models ignore the decision to abstain. This is despite the obvious advantages of looking at both partisan mobilization and partisan/swing-voter persuasion effects: In those cases, where mobilization effects are predominant,

including party choice on the left hand side of the equation enables us to test hypotheses in more detail. If we just used turnout as the dependent variable, we could not actually test if a negative effects on Republican turnout arises due to Republicans withdrawing their support from the Republican or the Democratic candidate. Going back to Downs (1957), the economic voting literature has understood turnout as a decision connected to candidate choice. It is time to recall this tradition and apply it to a new, partisan age.

In conclusion, the increasing role of the income inequality issue is likely to give an electoral edge to Democratic candidates. This result fit the previously established aggregate relationship between higher income inequality and Democratic electoral success in American states (Galbraith and Hale 2008). Since we see no evidence of a reversing trend in income inequality, the issue has the potential to influence electoral behavior for some time to come.

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago (IL), March 31 – April 3 2012, and at the Annual General Conference of the European Political Science Association, Berlin, June 21-23 2012. I thank Steve Fisher, Geoffrey Evans, Elias Dinas, James Tilley, Ray Duch, Catherine de Vries, Frederick Solt, Anja Neundorf, Daniel Stegmüller, Dingeman Wiertz, Toni Rodon and Eliza Galos for useful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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Tables

Table 1 Partisanship and perceptions of income inequality by year

	2002			2004			2008		
	Much*	somewhat	no+	much	somewhat	no	much	somewhat	no
Republican	34	37	28	36	37	27	43	30	28
Independent	48	28	24	52	32	16	52	24	24
Democrat	52	29	19	59	27	14	62	20	17
Total	45	31	24	49	32	14	56	23	21
Corr^	0.14			0.21			0.14		
Sig	0.00000			0.00000			0.00000		

* Income inequality much larger
\+ No increase of income inequality
^ Correlation between 5-points inequality scale and 7-points party id scale

Table 2 Perceptions of growing income inequality and partisan choices: mlogit results

	2002		2004		2008	
	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem
Inequality perceptions	-0.597**	-0.574**	0.461	0.575	-0.353*	-0.286
	(0.186)	(0.216)	(0.322)	(0.416)	(0.158)	(0.195)
Republican			Reference category			
Independent	-2.741+	-2.580	1.105	1.643	-2.180*	-0.289
	(1.436)	(1.732)	(2.472)	(2.990)	(1.009)	(1.063)
Democrat	-3.156**	-1.911+	-3.527*	2.748	-3.045***	-0.157
	(0.961)	(0.978)	(1.656)	(1.854)	(0.863)	(0.802)
Rep x inequality per			Reference category			
Indep x inequality per	0.593	0.639	-0.399	-0.323	0.035	0.166
	(0.395)	(0.451)	(0.667)	(0.780)	(0.271)	(0.270)
Dem x inequality per	0.672**	0.923***	0.638	-0.258	0.177	0.574**
	(0.255)	(0.261)	(0.434)	(0.486)	(0.218)	(0.214)
N	695		632		1621	

+p<0.10 *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

Table 3 Perceptions of growing income inequality and partisan choices: asmprobit results

	2002		2004		2008	
	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem
Inequality perceptions	-0.341**	-0.339*	-0.357	0.353*	-0.202+	-0.189+
	(0.131)	(0.144)	(0.474)	(0.161)	(0.107)	(0.114)
Republican			Reference category			
Independent	-1.619	-1.352	1.740	-1.868	-1.378*	-0.959
	(1.022)	(1.237)	(2.820)	(2.196)	(0.668)	(0.826)
Democrat	-1.807*	-0.844	-3.100	1.344	-1.808**	-1.155
	(0.743)	(0.720)	(3.235)	(0.884)	(0.530)	(0.824)
Rep x inequality per			Reference category			
Indep x inequality per	0.338	0.365	-0.443	0.635	0.058	0.076
	(0.266)	(0.325)	(0.566)	(0.547)	(0.168)	(0.177)
Dem x inequality per	0.365*	0.623**	0.122	0.244	0.330*	0.387**
	(0.162)	(0.183)	(0.340)	(0.162)	(0.150)	(0.133)
N	695		632		1621	

+p<0.10 *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

Figures

Figure 1 Change in partisan bias of perceptions of growing income inequality and unemployment

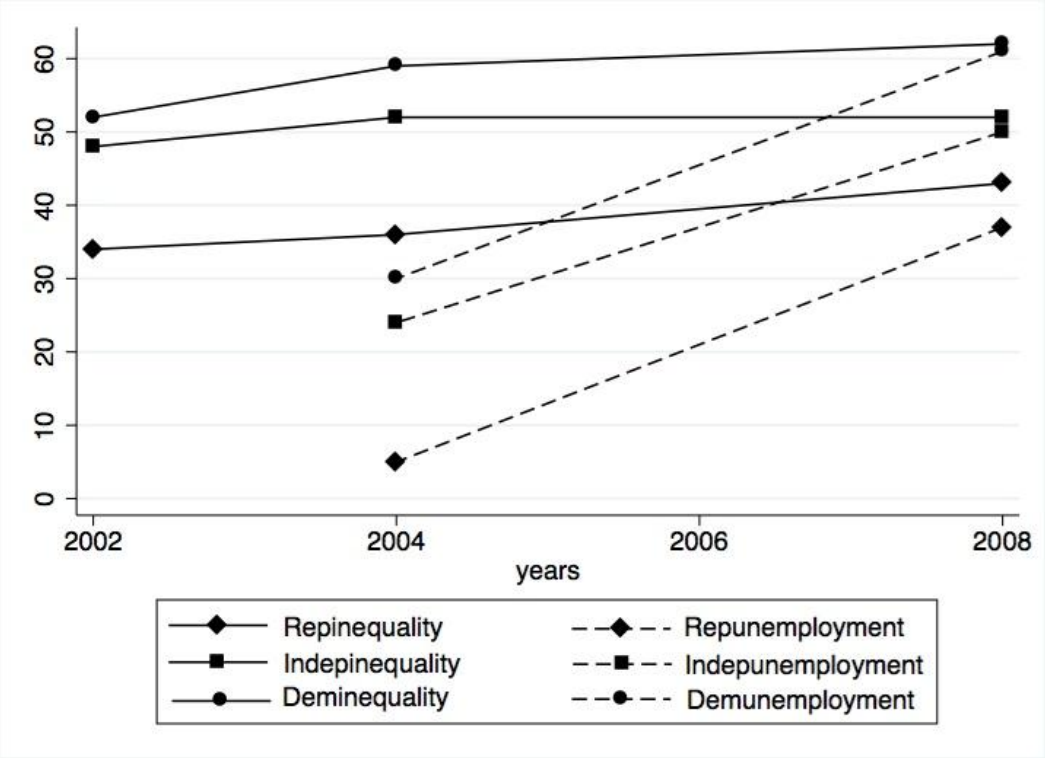


Figure 2 Marginal effects of 1-point increase of inequality perception on partisan electoral behavior 2002

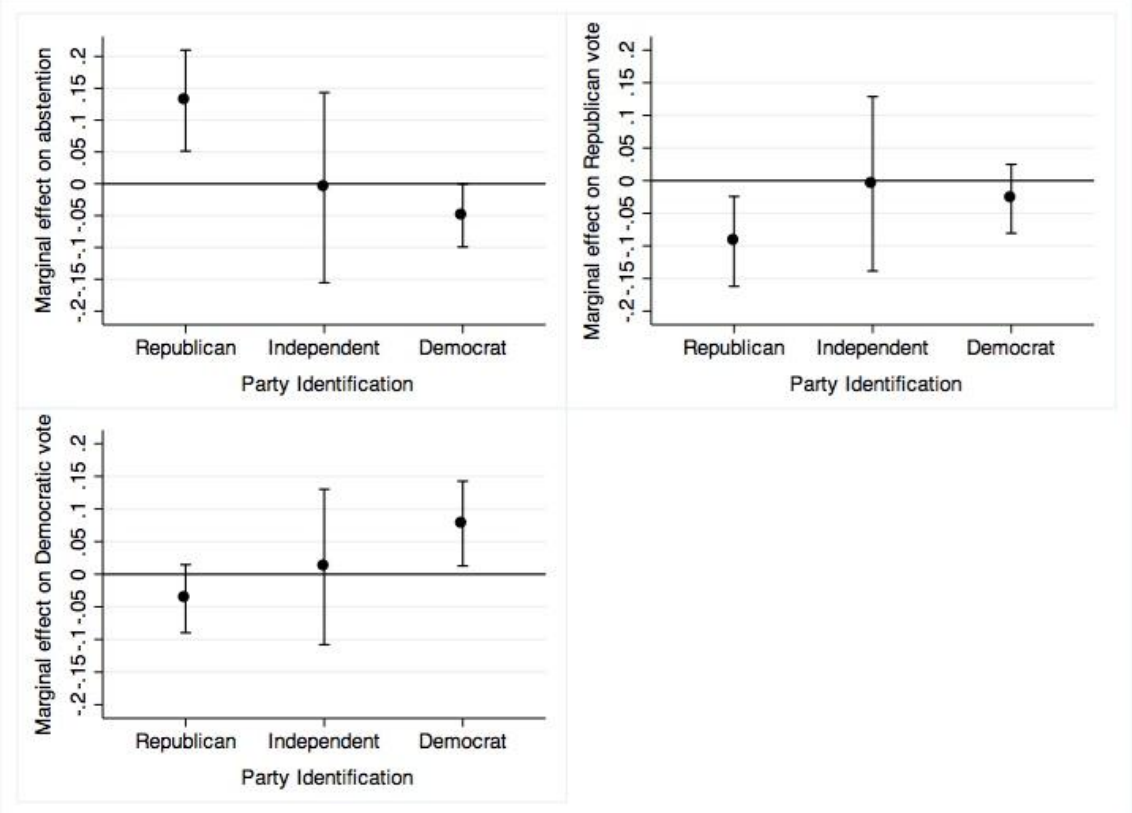


Figure 3 Marginal effects of 1-point increase of inequality perception on partisan electoral behavior 2004

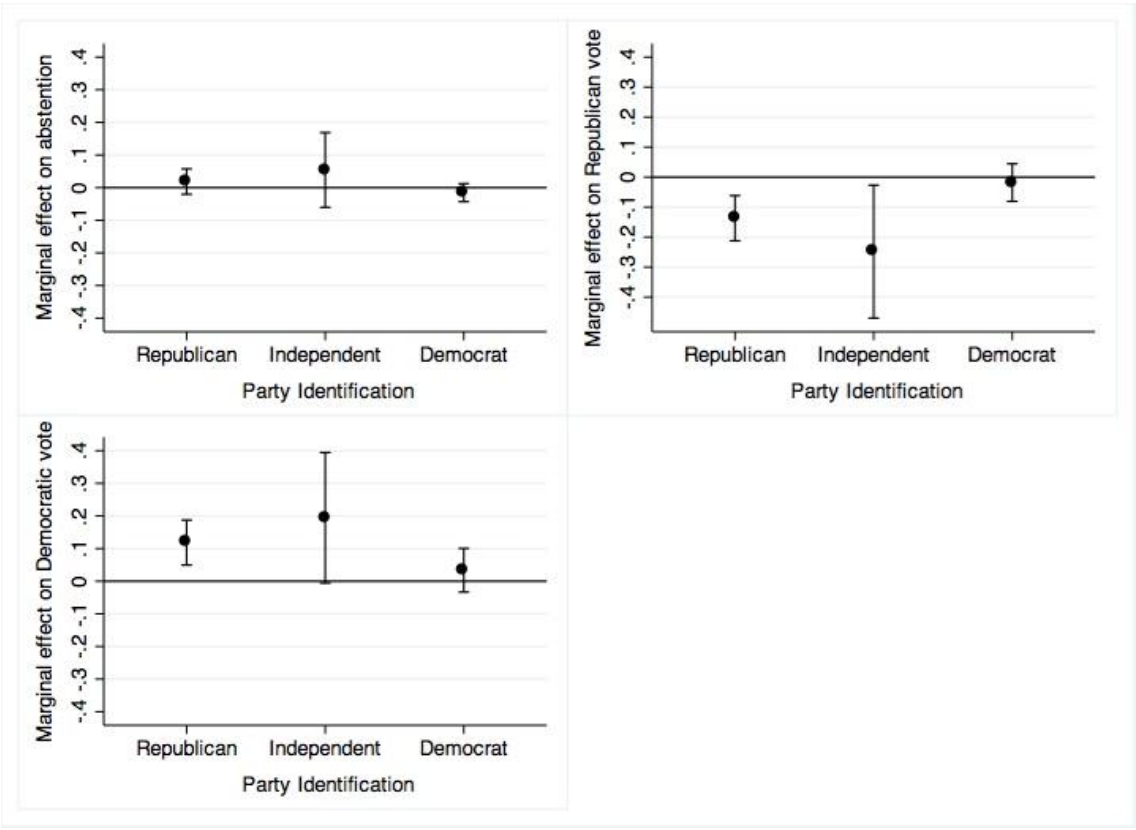
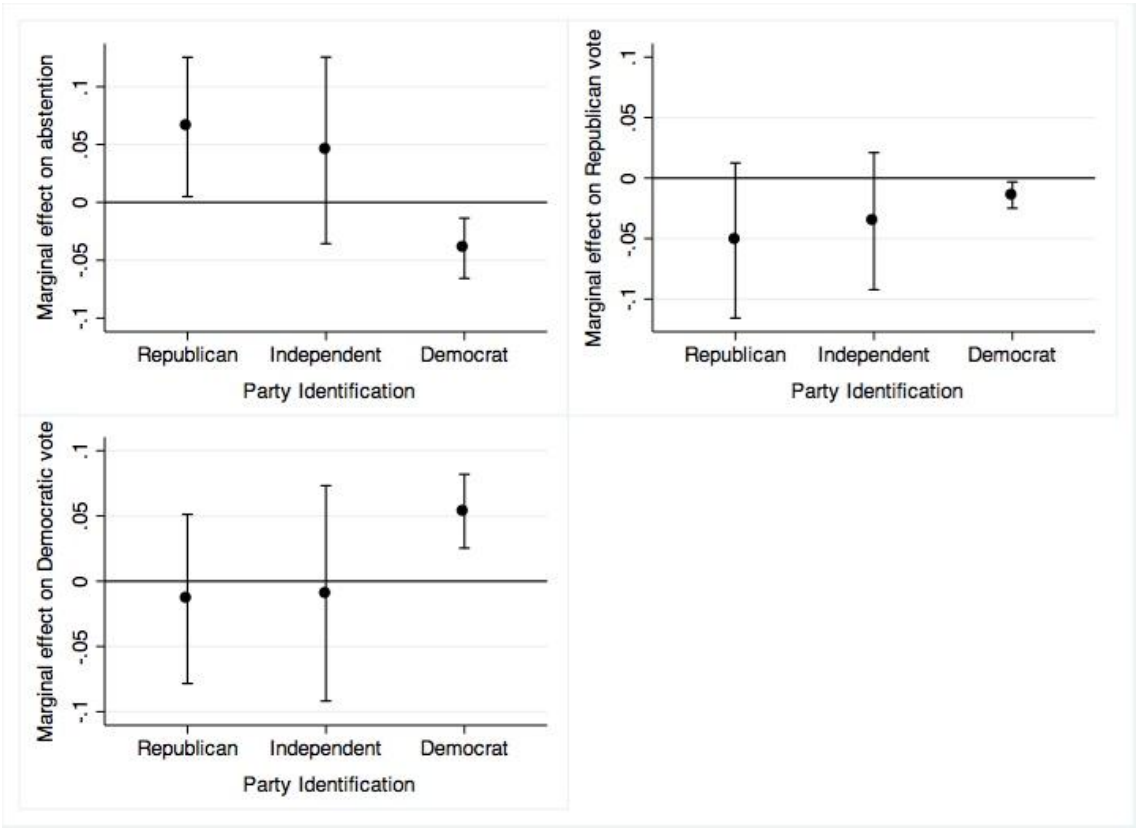


Figure 4 Marginal effects of 1-point increase of inequality perception on partisan electoral behavior 2008



Appendix

Variables	2000-2004 ANES Panel **Original variable names 2002**	2000-2004 ANES Panel **Original variable names 2004**	2008 ANES Time Series **Original variable names 2008**	**Recoding**
Income inequality perceptions	M023061	M045118x	V085080x	0-4 scale (much lower - much larger)
Party identification	M000523	M000523	V083098x	1 Rep (4-6), 2 Indep (3), 3 Dem (0-2)
Income	M023149	M045180x	V083248x	All available categories, continuous low to high
Education	M023131	M023131	V083217	All available categories, continuous low to high
Economic left-right	M001420-M001422	M001420-M00142	V085105-V085107	0-3 scale (added up)
Male	M023153	M023153	V083311	Binary (male/female)
Ethnicity	M023150	M023150	V081103a	Binary/3 dummies (Hispanic if available)
Age	M023126X	M045193	V081104	Quintile dummies
Married	M023127A	M045176	V083216x	Binary (married yes/all others no)
Urban	M021204	M041213	V082025	Binary (urban yes/all others no)/3 dummies if info available
Church attendance	M023084	M045174	V085130	Binary (yes/no)
Union membership	M023133A	M023133A	V083246	Binary (yes/no)
Party contact	M025005 + M025006	M045059 + M045059a	V085025 + V085025a	4 dummies (no contact, both, Rep, Dem)