

Are the Rich and the Poor Equally Committed to Liberal Democracy? Socioeconomic Status, Inequality, and the Political Status Quo*

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Abstract

In this study, we investigate how socioeconomic status is related to people's commitment to liberal democracy. Based on sociological and psychological theories of social conflict and dominance, we argue that those who enjoy a more privileged position in the social hierarchy tend to develop stronger preferences for the existing social and political order. Conversely, people in underprivileged positions tend to be less supportive of that order. Hence, we expect the relationship between socioeconomic status and commitment to liberal democracy to be context-specific: positive in liberal democracies but negative in autocracies. Furthermore, we argue that income inequality amplifies these dynamics, widening the gap between low and high status individuals. We test our hypotheses using the 5th wave of the World Value Surveys.

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Introduction

Despite widespread lip service paid to “democracy” by political elites and masses all over the world, careful investigation of existing social survey data by many researchers has shown that support for liberal democracy is much shallower than previously thought. Many of those who express support for “democracy” in social-scientific surveys also exhibit a less than enthusiastic commitment to basic liberal democratic principles, displaying instead an understanding of the very concept of “democracy” that does not necessarily prioritize individual or civil rights, free elections, or political equality. Why do some people understand democracy in liberal democratic ways while others do not?

Prevalent explanations have focused on learning processes, the role of values, or the redistributive consequences of democratic regimes. Some have argued that a deep allegiance to liberal democratic rules results from socialization under contexts where those rules are consistently abided by and withstand the test of time. Others have argued that espousing a “liberal” notion of democracy is something that stems from the acquisition of particular cultural values of freedom and emancipation. Others still have suggested that, given the redistributive potential of free elections and political equality, it is one’s position in the socio-economic hierarchy that should determine whether one endorses such rules and principles.

In this study, we suggest a different line of argument, drawn from a theoretical tradition to which both social psychologists and sociologists have contributed extensively: one’s commitment to “liberal democracy” can be conceived in terms of support for — or rejection of — a particular political and institutional status quo. Individuals placed higher up in the socio-economic hierarchy tend to display a stronger status quo bias, i.e., to be more supportive of the existing social and political order than

individuals placed in a lower position in that hierarchy. We argue that this also plays out in the relationship between socioeconomic position and one's view of what democracy should be: the rich are more likely to espouse a conception of democracy that is consistent with the political status quo than the poor. Furthermore, we suggest that economic inequality should widen this gap between rich and poor.

When applied to our research question, two simple predictions result. The first is that the relationship between income and the extent to which people support a democracy understood in liberal/procedural terms should be contingent: *positive* where liberal democracy represents the political status quo, but *negative* where it does not. The second is that the strength of these relationships, in each respective direction, should increase as income inequality also increases. We use data from the World Values Survey (WVS),¹ covering close to 60 countries around the world, to test these hypotheses. We find that even taking into account learning- and values-based explanations, one's socioeconomic position remains a direct driver of one's conception of democracy: the higher the position, the closer that conception is to the political and institutional status quo, independently of whether that status quo is liberal democratic or autocratic. Our findings have implications for the debate on the crisis of liberal democracy and the illiberal backlash that we have been witnessing in many Western countries as of late. Our results warrant the conclusion that, in established liberal democracies, income inequality reduces commitment to a liberal notion of democracy, but does so particularly among the poor.

When (and for whom) is “democracy” liberal?

All over the world, and for some time now, most people state that they prefer to live under a democratic regime.² And yet, we also know that this façade has many

cracks. More than a decade of research using cross-national survey data shows that overt support for democracy coexists with acceptance of non-democratic forms of government and a tepid endorsement of principles such as freedom of expression or opposition to censorship, freedom of organization, political equality, or limits to executive authority.³ As Dalton and Shin note, “in the eyes of global citizenries, democracy is yet to become the final achievement of history.”⁴ This is especially noticeable when we try to gauge what the widely accepted but rather abstract concept of “democracy” actually means to people. “Populist” or “instrumental” notions—focusing on prosperity, social equality, or law and order — are, at least in some regions of the world, almost as prevalent as liberal or procedural notions, like those that include freedom of speech, protection of individual rights, and political liberty.⁵ In sum, although it is possible that democracy as a highly abstract ideal for organizing the polity has become broadly accepted across most societies — and even that has been recently disputed⁶ — it’s much less clear that there is agreement on what people mean by it. What explains why some of those who say that they prefer democracy actually understand it mostly in liberal/procedural terms, while others do not? Three main approaches have been advanced in the literature. We present them next before advancing our own argument.

Learning

The “learning” approach suggests that conceiving of “democracy” in liberal democratic terms is something that results, quite simply, from being continuously exposed to the functioning of a stable liberal democracy. Evidence for this argument goes back to at least Muller and Seligson,⁷ who argued that “the experience of stable democracy produces high levels of civic culture” because of “the institutional

opportunities for peaceful collective action afforded by democratic regimes.”⁸ Rohrschneider⁹ explicitly advanced an “institutional learning” theory, suggesting that exposure to particular institutional configurations largely shapes people's attitudes in this regard. As Norris¹⁰ puts it, “citizens living in cultures with experience of democratic governance over many years, or even decades and centuries, are therefore expected to display more informed attitudes and familiarity with how democracy works than the public growing up under autocracy.”

There is some empirical evidence for this. Looking at the determinants of support for liberal democratic principles in Latin America, Booth and Seligson¹¹ find that “of all of the system-level values we modeled, once again only a nation’s prior history of democracy contributed to greater support for democratic regime principles.” Using World Values Survey data collected between 2005 and 2007 for more than 40 countries, Norris¹² similarly finds that individuals living in countries with a long experience with democracy tend to hold what she calls a more “enlightened awareness of democracy”, i.e., a more liberal/procedural (rather than instrumental or authoritarian) notion of what is “essential” for a country to be democratic.

Values

A different line of argument stresses the importance of *values* in shaping notions of democracy. Welzel,¹³ also using WVS data, examined the extent to which people see “free elections,” “equal rights,” “civil liberties,” and “referenda votes” as essential for a country to be democratic, while simultaneously rejecting illiberal notions (religious authority, military intervention, bread and butter, and law and order). He found that “democratic traditions” (a measure of a society’s historically accumulated experience with democracy (from Gerring et al.¹⁴) are unrelated to the notions of democracy people

uphold. Furthermore, while "cognitive" variables (formal education and informational connectedness, for example) do play some role in fostering liberal views and a desire for liberal democracy, their impact is trumped by another variable: "emancipative values," a set of orientations emphasizing freedom of choice and autonomy.

Where do these values come from? According to Welzel,¹⁵ "modernization has transformed impoverished, illiterate, and secluded subjects into equipped, skilled, and connected actors with both the capability and the motivation to pursue shared values, including freedoms." As "action resources" — material, intellectual, and connective — become available to people, releasing them from existential pressures and survival concerns, the utility and value of freedom increases accordingly. This, in turn, results in aspirations that can be best realized by liberal democratic institutions because, according to Welzel,¹⁶ "freedoms that empower people" are the defining features of such institutions. In other words, from this point of view, "orientations toward democracy should be seen more as an *evaluative* matter than a *cognitive* matter: people's responses to democracy questions indicate less what people know about democracy than what they *wish* democracy to be."¹⁷

Democracy as redistribution

Political economists who study regime change have also made relevant, albeit indirect, contributions to the literature on democratic attitudes. The two most influential works in this regard are Boix¹⁸ and Acemoglu and Robinson.¹⁹ Their shared idea is that rich elites are, in general, less likely to endorse fully democratic regimes than the poorer masses. This occurs because the extension of the franchise to the latter entails a redistribution of political power that, in turn, entails a redistribution of income and wealth. As Acemoglu and Robinson²⁰ put it, "[n]ondemocracy is generally a regime

for the elite and the privileged; comparatively, democracy is a regime more beneficial to the majority of the populace.” The implication is that we should find a gap in the extent to which the poor and the rich endorse democratic regimes. According to Boix,²¹ “[t]he least well-off individuals support a democracy, since it gives them a chance to establish redistributive mechanisms to their advantage. By contrast, well-off citizens, who would have to bear a net loss of income under a democracy, support a constitutional structure in which only they can vote.”

Furthermore, the size of this gap between the poor and the rich in terms of democratic support should increase with economic inequality. Under low inequality, the redistributive effort that results from democracy places a small burden upon the wealthy. In contrast, “excessive differences among the rich and the poor push the former to restrict the franchise to avoid the redistributive consequences of a fully democratic system.”²² As Acemoglu and Robinson²³ put it, “aversion to democracy should be generally higher for the elites in a society where the difference in incomes between the elites and the citizens is greater.” This is also the case as regimes become democratic: there, “greater inequality is likely to destabilize democracy because ... the burden of democracy on the elites is increasing in the income gap between them and the citizens.”²⁴

However, empirical evidence testing the implications of these arguments for the analysis of democratic attitudes appears to contradict them. Letsa and Wilfart²⁵ find that, in autocracies, socioeconomic status is unrelated with generic support for democracy. Furthermore, while lower status individuals tend to understand democracy on the basis of its economic promises, it is among people with a higher socioeconomic status that we are more likely to find a greater commitment to a liberal/procedural notion of democracy (elections, free speech, or legislative oversight). Similarly, Norris²⁶

finds a positive rather than a negative relationship between income and a liberal notion of democracy. Ansell and Samuels²⁷ find that people with higher levels of income are more likely to see democracy as a “good way to govern the country,” which they take to indicate that richer people are more likely to prefer democracy and its institutional constraints as barriers against the state’s predatory potential. Finally, although there is a dearth of scholarly attention to how inequality plays out in the relationship between socioeconomic status and attitudes toward democracy, existing studies yield findings that contradict the primary expectations of the political economy approach. While, in general, income inequality is found to have an adverse direct effect on pro-democratic attitudes, the relationship between socioeconomic status and such attitudes becomes *weaker* (rather than stronger) under conditions of high inequality.²⁸

Socioeconomic status, inequality, and the political status quo

We propose and test the implications of a different theoretical approach to explain individual attitudes vis-à-vis liberal democracy. The basic building block of our theory is the simple notion that people who enjoy a more privileged position in the socioeconomic hierarchy tend to develop a stronger affinity for the social and political order that sustains their position. Conversely, people in underprivileged positions are more likely to reject the status quo.

There is a long tradition in the social sciences, particularly in social psychology, linking individuals’ socioeconomic status to their views on the existing political order. Several theories in social psychology — such as realistic conflict,²⁹ social identity,³⁰ and social dominance theory³¹ — share the underlying assumption that different groups in society are in conflict over material and symbolic resources, “with the result that institutional arrangements and legitimizing ideologies favoring one group are often not

beneficial to those within other groups.”³² Social dominance theory, in particular, tends to view societies as being structured in group-based social hierarchies, with dominant groups possessing a disproportionate share of “positive social value” (power, status, and wealth) and promoting institutions, policies, and ideologies that help preserve that situation.³³ Despite differences among these theoretical approaches, their common expectation is that “members of high-status groups are the ones who justify the social order, in order to secure their privileges and to perpetuate the status quo.”³⁴ “Low-status groups,” in turn, “are more likely than high-status groups to reject the status quo.”³⁵³⁶

If individuals in a higher position in the socio-economic hierarchy tend to be more supportive of the status quo, what should we expect to find regarding their commitment to liberal democracy? Our first main expectation is that, when explaining the extent to which people endorse the principles of liberal democracy, the effect of socioeconomic status *should be contingent upon what happens to be the political status quo*. In liberal democratic regimes, we expect the poor to be less committed to “liberal democracy” than the rich. However, that gap should be reversed under autocracy: there, we expect the rich to be *less* committed to a liberal notion of democracy that might imply a change in the political status quo. More specifically, we propose the following first hypothesis:

H1: There is an interaction effect between the political and institutional status quo — the extent to which a country is a liberal democracy — and socioeconomic status, such that the relationship between socioeconomic status and the commitment to liberal democracy is negative in non-liberal democratic regimes and positive under liberal democracies.

Thus, in line with the political economy approach and in contrast with the “learning” or “values” approaches, we propose that attention should be given to how differences in socioeconomic status drive attitudes towards liberal democracy: we allow for social groups to have “opposing interests over political outcomes, and these translate into opposing interests over the form of political institutions.”³⁷ However, we depart from the political economy perspective as well, in that we do not see liberal democracy primarily as a set of institutions promoting income redistribution and, thus, as something that the poor masses will always support and the wealthy elites resist independently of the existing institutional arrangements. Instead, we see the established political status quo as something that will be systematically less espoused by members of less privileged social groups, independently of whether that status quo is liberal democratic or not.

In a previous study, we explore this general hypothesis, using European Social Survey (ESS) data, and find a significant cross-level interaction effect between age of democracy and socioeconomic status in explaining the extent to which Europeans hold a “liberal” notion of democracy.³⁸ However, our analysis was severely limited by the range of contextual variation in the countries included in the ESS, given that the overwhelming majority of them were established liberal democracies. The use of WVS data allows for a much more appropriate test with more and more meaningful variation on the political status quo.

Furthermore, we go beyond our previous work by proposing a second hypothesis, this time about the role of income inequality. Individuals with a lower socio-economic status, besides being less likely to lend legitimacy to status quo institutions and authorities, also tend to see income inequality as more illegitimate than high status individuals.³⁹ Robinson and Bell’s classic “underdog principle” applies: people “who

objectively benefit from the stratification system in comparison with others are more likely to judge its inequalities to be just. Conversely, people who are objectively less well off are more likely to judge equality to be fair.”⁴⁰ To the extent that the legitimization of political institutions is affected by the extent to which the societal outcomes are perceived to be congruent with people’s values, beliefs, and goals,⁴¹ high inequality should reinforce the skepticism of individuals with a lower socioeconomic status vis-à-vis the political and institutional status quo. Similarly, inequality should reinforce the skepticism of those with high socioeconomic status vis-à-vis *changing* the political and institutional status quo that benefits them. For our purposes, this suggests that, in liberal democracies, high inequality should increase the gap between the rich and the poor in the commitment to a liberal conception of “democracy,” with the poor being less committed to liberal democracy than the rich. Conversely, in autocracies, this gap should increase as well with inequality, but this time because the rich are less committed to liberal democracy than the poor. In other words, high inequality would make the rich even more likely to reject institutions and practices that imply a change of the autocratic status quo. Low inequality should mitigate these gaps, as it makes the political system appear to be more consistent with outcomes that fit with the values, attitudes, and interests of the poor and decrease the perceived negative consequences of change for the rich. Translating this into our specific research problem, we obtain:

H2: The positive relationship between socioeconomic status and commitment to liberal democracy (under liberal democracy) and the negative relationship between socioeconomic status and commitment to liberal democracy (under autocracies) should become stronger as income inequality increases, and weaker as inequality decreases.

Data and variables

The dependent variable

In this study, we investigate the relationship between socio-economic status and support for liberal democracy, as well as the extent to which such a relationship is context-contingent. The World Values Survey data is particularly appropriate for those purposes. First, theories based on “institutional learning” and “values” have already been tested using data from WVS data, particularly its 5th wave, conducted between 2005 and 2008 in fifty-eight countries from across the world.⁴² Thus, we introduce and test a new theoretical approach using the same data that previous studies have used to advance and test other theories, making sure that our results are not just a function of having gathered new and different data from new sources. Second, WVS allows substantial contextual variation on the political status quo: it includes “liberal democracies” such as Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland but also countries such as China, Viet Nam or Ethiopia, where liberal democracy has not taken hold.

Finally, the WVS includes survey items that can be used to construct a statistically valid cross-national measure of the extent to which people share a liberal notion of democracy, that allows for meaningful comparisons across diverse national contexts. One faces a number of challenges when trying to tap popular attitudes towards democracy more broadly. Some studies rely exclusively on survey items asking whether democracy is a “good way of governing the country,” whether respondents prefer to “live in a democracy,” or how “democratic” the country should be in the future. This is problematic because explicit mentions of democracy in survey items tend to elicit lip service without necessarily capturing commitment to democratic principles.⁴³ As Kiewiet de Jonge⁴⁴ argues, such measures are the source of many contradictory empirical findings, and relying exclusively on them for cross-national studies of attitudes

towards democracy is not advisable.⁴⁵ A related problem emerges in cross-national studies examining the determinants of variables based on “social” or “economic,”⁴⁶ “populist” or “social,”⁴⁷ “instrumental” or “authoritarian”⁴⁸ conceptions of democracy: careful analysis suggests that, with the exception of survey questions about *liberal* or *procedural* notions of democracy, it is not clear that other survey items about notions of democracy show the appropriate dimensionality and allow cross-national comparability.⁴⁹

In this study, we are primarily interested in investigating the extent to which individuals are committed to a liberal democratic notion of what democracy is. As such, we construct our dependent variable in two steps. First, we isolate those respondents who overtly support “democracy.” In WVS wave 5, one question asked in all surveys gauges this overt support:

“I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?

V151. Having a democratic political system.”

Overall, 85% of all respondents in all surveys in WVS wave 5 respond that “having a democratic political system” is a “very” or “fairly good” way of governing their country, corresponding to 91% of all valid answers to the question (excluding refusals and non-answers). Country sample values range from 98% (Egypt) to 61% (China), and from 98% (Egypt) to 77% (South Korea) among all valid answers. In other words, the overwhelming majority of respondents express overt support for democracy as a way of governing their country.

Then, we dig deeper into this overt support for democracy in order to understand the extent to which those who profess an overt support for democracy are indeed

committed to liberal democratic practices and institutions. Ariely,⁵⁰ employing multiple group confirmatory factor analysis, shows that the following four questions included in the 5th wave of WVS tap into one underlying concept of liberal democracy that is appropriate for cross-cultural analysis.⁵¹

Many things may be desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. Use this scale where 1 means “not at all an essential characteristic of democracy” and 10 means it definitely is “an essential characteristic of democracy”:

V154. People choose their leaders in free elections.

V157. Civil rights protect people’s liberty against oppression.

V160. People can change the laws in referendums

V161. Women have the same rights as men.

By using these variables, we are able to distinguish between those individuals who declare a preference for “democracy” *and* hold a liberal/procedural notion of it from those that do the former but not the latter. Thus, our main variable, *Commitment to liberal democracy*, takes the average score for variables V154, V157, V160 and V161.⁵² Individuals that score high on this measure deem basic liberal principles to be more essential for democracy than individuals with lower scores.⁵³

Operationalizing *Commitment to liberal democracy* with the survey items above raises two concerns. First, although Ariely⁵⁴ shows that the direct democracy question (V160) is empirically part of a single dimension with the remaining survey items, one might argue that "People can change the law in referendums" captures a notion of democracy that is not necessarily “liberal,” but rather an emphasis on direct democracy that can, in fact, become illiberal in nature. Therefore, we constructed another version of the dependent variable without the direct democracy item (average scores only for V154, V157, and V161). The results are virtually identical with this modified dependent

variable, so the remainder of the article shows the results with the original dependent variable, which has been shown to be appropriate for cross-national empirical investigation.

Second, some scholars have argued that peoples' notions of democracy often contain authoritarian and liberal elements simultaneously. To account for this, Welzel⁵⁵ has suggested a *qualified* measure of liberal notions of democracy, where non-liberal views are subtracted from liberal ones for each respondent.⁵⁶ For robustness checks, we also use this this qualified measure to test our hypotheses.

Independent variables of interest

The key independent variables of interest are one's position in the socioeconomic hierarchy, the extent to which a country is liberal democratic, and income inequality. Socioeconomic status has been measured in various ways. Some studies employ indicators of personal wealth such as the number of items possessed by the respondent (e.g. a television, an automobile, telephone, and others) to measure one's position in the social ladder.⁵⁷ Other studies use levels of education as an indicator of social standing. However, such cross-national measures of *absolute* levels of material or cognitive resources enjoyed by individuals are not ideal for our purposes, because our theory poses a relationship between a commitment to liberal democracy and *relative* measures of individual resources. This is a crucial point, because one's standing in a social hierarchy needs to be conceived in *relative* terms compared to those in one's social environment, and thus our theory cannot be tested with absolute measures of material resources or educational achievements.

A better measure of relative socioeconomic status, which has been widely used in studies of democratic support, is the reported (perceived) household income deciles.⁵⁸

V253. On this card is a scale of incomes on which 1 indicates the “lowest income decile” and 10 the “highest income decile” in your country. We would like to know in what group your household is. Please, specify the appropriate number, counting all wages, salaries, pensions and other incomes that come in.

While this measure relies on one’s perceived position in the income hierarchy rather than on an objective measure of relative income, it is nonetheless a suitable indicator for our purposes, since it is perceptions about one’s standing in the social hierarchy that should determine support for the status quo.

To measure the extent to which each country’s institutions are liberal democratic, we rely primarily on the *Liberal Democracy Index* developed by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) team. This measure is an aggregated index of other V-Dem indices tapping into freedom of association, clean elections, freedom of expression, equality before the law, protection of individual liberties, and judicial and legislative constraints on the executive.⁵⁹ In our sample, the index ranges from .06 (China in 2007) to .90 (Switzerland in 2004). We find this index to be particularly appropriate because of its conceptual sophistication and the breadth of the indices employed. However, for robustness checks we also employ the *Freedom House Aggregate Scores*, which rate countries in terms of the effective protection of political rights and civil liberties (see Appendix, table A3). Finally, to test hypothesis 2, we employ the Gini coefficient data compiled by Milanovic⁶⁰ in All the Ginis dataset. This dataset uses nine different sources to compile a single standardize Gini measure for each country-year. In our sample of cases, Gini values range from 24.2 (Japan in 2005) to 67.4 (South Africa in 2006).⁶¹

Controls

To account for the institutional learning argument — that individuals living in countries with longer experience with democracy will be more likely to espouse a liberal conception of democracy — we employ the commonly used variable *Age of democracy*, measuring the number of years a country has had an uninterrupted spell of democratic rule. We constructed this variable using Polity IV scores, which range from -10 (hereditary monarchy) to +10 (consolidated democracy). To identify democracies, we use Polity IV’s recommended cutoff of +6 to +10. We then calculate the total number of years a country has been continuously democratic up until the year of the WVS survey.

To test the emancipative values argument developed by Welzel,⁶² we rely on his Emancipative Values Index,⁶³ which captures emphasis on personal freedoms in various areas of life. Earlier work has also shown that religiosity is linked to authoritarian ideas and lower support for democratic ones in authoritarian countries,⁶⁴ so we account for *Religiosity*, which measures the importance individuals put on religion, from not at all important (1) to very important (4). Higher political engagement and interest in politics have been found to be associated with more support for direct democracy⁶⁵ and with more demanding notions of liberal democracy.⁶⁶ Thus, we control for *Political interest*, ranging from not at all interested (1) to very interested (4). The role of interpersonal trust for the sustenance of democracy has been emphasized by many scholars and assumes a central place in Inglehart’s⁶⁷ post-materialism theory. Likewise, existing research has also shown that higher trust in political institutions is associated with less demanding notions of liberal democracy.⁶⁸ Thus, we control for *Interpersonal trust* and *Political trust*.⁶⁹ To control for the effect of economic development on support for liberal democracy in each country, we use the IMF’s data on GDP per capita with purchasing

power parity (*GDP per capita PPP*). Remaining controls include individual levels of educational attainment (*Education*), ranging from no formal education (1) to university-level education, with degree (9). *Female* is coded 1 for women and 0 otherwise. *Age* measures the age of respondents in number of years. We also include a squared term for *Age* to test for curvilinear effects.⁷⁰ To control for the effect of being currently unemployed, we use the variable *Unemployed*, which is coded 1 for all those respondents who indicated that they are not engaged in paid work due to unemployment and 0 otherwise.

Method

We employ regression analysis using multilevel mixed models with two levels (individual and national) and random intercepts to explore cross-level interactions. To aid the substantive interpretation of the regression results, we standardize all the independent variables. Specifically, we subtract the mean from all non-dichotomous variables and divide them by two standard deviations. The dichotomous variables are only centered by subtracting their means. This approach renders the size of the coefficients of both non-dichotomous and dichotomous variables directly comparable.⁷¹ The coefficients are interpreted as the average change in the dependent variable as each independent variable goes from a low to a high value.

Results

Socioeconomic status, the status quo regime, and commitment to liberal democracy

Our first hypothesis posits that, in liberal democracies, relative income levels should be positively related with supporting democracy understood in liberal/procedural

terms, but that the opposite should happen in autocratic regimes. Figure 1 presents the correlates of *Commitment to liberal democracy* by means of a coefficient plot with the standardized coefficients and their respective 95 percent Confidence Intervals. When the confidence intervals cross the zero vertical line, that means the coefficient is not significantly different from zero at the conventional .05 level. The appendix contains all the regression results in a tabular form.

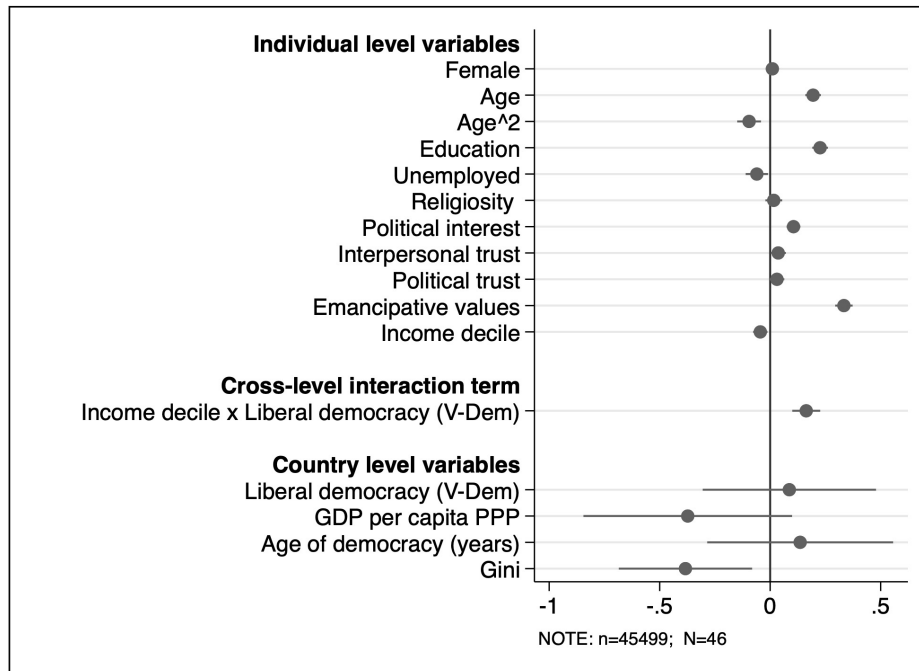


Figure 1. Commitment to liberal democracy—standardized coefficients from multilevel linear regression results with two-way interaction

Since we expect an interaction effect between *Income* and the *V-Dem Liberal Democracy index* in determining *Commitment to liberal democracy*, we present the average marginal effects with 95 per cent Confidence Intervals that result from moving from low to high income over various values of V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index (Figure 2a), as well as predictive margins for low and high income in autocracies and liberal democracies (Figure 2b).⁷² The region of the graph in which the regression line

crosses the zero line indicates that the differences between high and low-income deciles are statistically insignificant. In the background of Figure 2(a), we plot the density distribution of the V-Dem index to get a better sense of how the country-level observations are distributed.

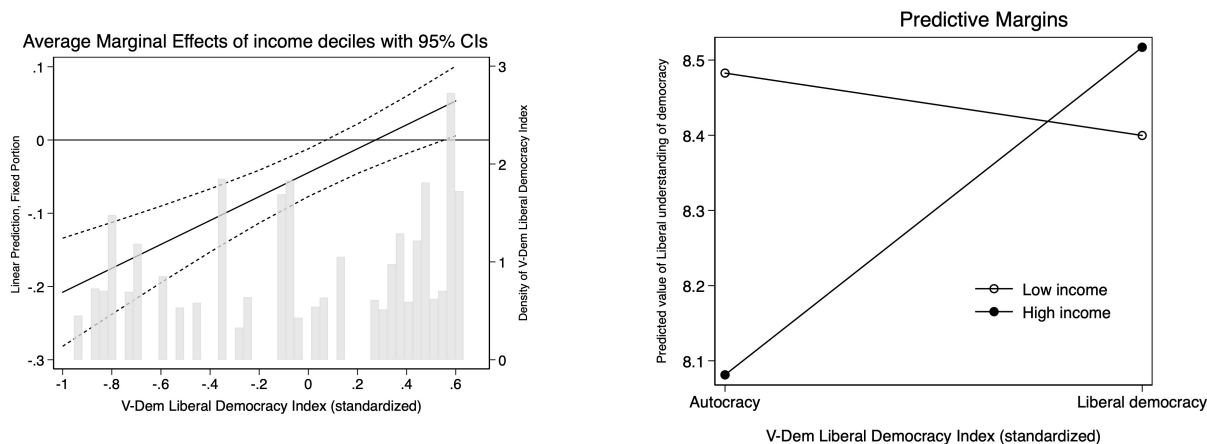


Figure 2. Commitment to liberal democracy (two-way interaction). (a) Marginal effects of moving from low to high income deciles over various values of V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index; (b) Predictive margins for lowest and highest deciles in autocracies and liberal democracies (min. and max. of V-Dem).

The results support Hypothesis 1. Specifically, in countries with low values on the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index—i.e., without electoral democracy, equality before the law, protection of individual liberties, or legislative and judicial constraints on the executive — higher income is *negatively* associated with the endorsement of a liberal conception of democracy (Figure 2a). In contrast, in the most established liberal democracies, the rich are more likely than the poor to espouse a liberal conception of democracy. The same idea is illustrated differently in Figure 2b. The expected values for *Commitment to liberal democracy* among individuals with high and low income show the opposite slopes as the context changes from autocracy to established liberal

democracy: as the context becomes more liberal democratic, the rich conceive of democracy increasingly more in liberal democratic terms, while the poor do less so. The gap between the two groups is reversed as we move from low to high values of the *V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index*. We should note that the (negative) gap between the rich and the poor is larger in autocratic regimes—almost a quarter of standard deviation of the DV—than the (positive) gap is in liberal democratic regimes. However, it is clear that the effect of socioeconomic status on commitment to liberal democracy depends on the political status quo, which supports H1.

Turning again to the coefficient plot (Figure 1), we can see that *Gini* has the highest standardized effect of all the variables in the model and its coefficient is negative and statistically significant. As we move from countries with low to high income inequality, respondents who state an overt preference for democracy are less likely to show a commitment to a liberal notion of democracy, holding the effect of all other variables constant. At this point, and given that a majority of the countries in our sample are on the upper half of the *Liberal democracy index*, these results are consistent both with studies that suggest that inequality breeds authoritarian attitudes⁷³ and with studies that argue that inequality decreases the endorsement of liberal democratic views (at least within democratic regimes).⁷⁴ We examine this aspect in greater detail later. The coefficient for *Emancipative values* is also substantively important and highly statistically significant, replicating earlier results.⁷⁵ From the country level variables, neither *Age of democracy* nor *GDP per capita PPP* reach conventional levels of statistical significance, suggesting that neither economic development nor experience with democratic rule are associated with supporting democracy understood in liberal terms.

Regarding the remaining individual-level variables, age exhibits a curvilinear effect, suggesting that the youngest and the oldest are *more* likely to hold liberal democratic views than those in the middle age cohorts. *Education*, *Political interest*, *Interpersonal trust* and *Political trust* are all positively and statistically significantly related with a liberal view of democracy, while being unemployed is negatively related to it.⁷⁶ Sex and religiosity do not seem to have much of a relationship with the dependent variable.

To further probe our main results, we conducted several additional robustness checks with different measures for the dependent and independent variables. First, we use the already mentioned “qualified” measure for the dependent variable *Commitment with liberal democracy*, based on Welzel’s⁷⁷ work. Second, instead of the *V-Dem Liberal democracy index*, we employed an alternative measure for the country-level measure of democracy, the *Freedom House Aggregate Scores*.⁷⁸ The results are presented in the Appendix, Table A1. Our main results are robust to all these additional tests and model specifications.

In general, therefore, regardless of which variables we use to gauge the extent to which citizens espouse a liberal conception of democracy or to measure the regime status quo, a main conclusion follows: the relationship between socioeconomic status and endorsing democracy understood in liberal/procedural terms is contingent upon the regime status quo. That relationship is negative in regimes that are not liberal democracies, but positive in regimes that adhere more closely to liberal democratic institutions and practices. In other words, our first hypothesis finds considerable empirical confirmation.

The role of inequality

Hypothesis 2 concerns the role that income inequality should play in amplifying the strength of the relationship between socioeconomic status and commitment to liberal democracy in a way that is consistent with the status quo regime. We expect high levels of income inequality to widen the gap between the rich and the poor. Conversely, we expect this gap to diminish under conditions of low income inequality.

We test this hypothesis by employing a three-way interaction between income measured at the individual level, and the *Gini index* and the *V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index* measured at the country level. Figure 3 presents the coefficient plot (the tabular results can be found in the appendix, Table A2, Model 1). Since the complex interaction effects are of primary interest and since the effects of the non-interacted variables remain unchanged, we focus our discussion on interpreting the interactions graphically.

Figure 3. Commitment to liberal democracy—standardized coefficients from multilevel linear regression results with three-way interaction.

Figure 4. Commitment to liberal democracy (three-way interaction): Marginal effects of a moving from low to high income deciles in autocracies and liberal democracies (min. and max. of V-Dem) over various values of Gini.

Figure 4 shows the marginal effects of going from a low to a high level of income, separately for autocracies and liberal democracies, and over the entire range of the *Gini index*. First, as we have seen before, the marginal effect of moving from a low to a high level of income under liberal democratic regimes consists of an increase in the extent to which individuals espouse a liberal conception of democracy; under autocratic regimes, the effect becomes, instead, negative. Although we knew that before, we can now see that this is true across almost the entire range of values of income inequality.

Second, however, we can now see that income inequality moderates the size of the gaps between high- and low-income individuals. For low levels of income inequality, the gaps are statistically insignificant, as can be seen by the confidence intervals of both marginal effects lines crossing the zero horizontal line. In more equal societies, and

regardless of whether the regime is an autocracy or a liberal democracy, the rich and the poor show a similar level of commitment to liberal democracy. However, as income inequality increases, so do the gaps between the poor and the rich in how much importance they attach to liberal democratic principles. The gaps increase in opposite directions depending on the political status quo regime. When autocracy is the political status quo, income inequality makes the rich less likely to support “democracy” in liberal/procedural terms than the poor. When the status quo regime is liberal democracy, income inequality again increases the gap between the two groups but now it is the poor who are less likely than the rich to express commitment to liberal democracy. Therefore, H2 is clearly supported by the data.

Figure 5. Commitment to liberal democracy (three-way interaction): Predictive margins for lowest and highest income deciles and for lowest and highest Gini values in (a) autocracies (min. V-Dem) and (b) liberal democracies (max. V-Dem).

Figure 5 plots the predictive margins with separate lines for the poor (bottom decile) and the rich (top decile) in autocracies (Figure 5a) and liberal democracies (Figure 5b), as income inequality increases from minimum to maximum. Again, we can see that, at low levels of inequality, rich and poor are equally committed to liberal

democracy. Furthermore, regardless of the regime, increasing income inequality decreases the commitment to liberal democracy among both rich and poor. However, under autocratic regimes, inequality undermines such commitment particularly among the rich. The change is drastic as can be seen by the steep negative slope for high income individuals in Figure 5(a). Substantively speaking, those in the top decile in highly unequal autocratic countries have, on average, more than a standard deviation lower score in *Commitment to liberal democracy*—or almost two points on a scale from 0-10— than do those in the top decile in low inequality autocracies. In contrast, under liberal democracies, it is among the *poor* that we see a sharper decline in the commitment to liberal democracy as inequality increases. This decrease is not as steep as for the rich under autocracies, but still steep enough to create a sizeable gap in liberal democratic support in favor of the rich under highly inegalitarian liberal democracies. Specifically, the predicted value for the *Commitment to liberal democracy* for the poor in highly unequal liberal democracies is about a third of a standard deviation or half a point lower than the predicted value for the poor in highly equal liberal democracies.

Overall, the results from the three-way interaction analysis paint a striking picture. The gap between the rich and the poor in terms of their commitment to liberal democracy is the largest in societies marked by high income inequality and virtually non-existent in societies where income is more evenly distributed. Quite interestingly, these gaps are comparable in size in highly unequal autocracies and liberal democracies. The most important finding, however, is the complete switch in how socioeconomic status contributes to these gaps as we move from autocracies to liberal democracies. In line with H1, the rich are more likely to be committed to liberal democracy than the poor if liberal democracy *is* the status quo, while the poor are more likely do so than the

rich if the status quo *is not* liberal democracy. Income inequality only strengthens this dynamic (H2). This strongly supports our general argument that the relationship between socioeconomic status and commitment to liberal democracy is fundamentally structured by the nature of the institutional and political status quo and by the level of income inequality.

As robustness checks, we performed additional analyses with Welzel’s “qualified” measure of liberal understanding of democracy as the dependent variable and with the Freedom House measure of democracy (see Appendix, table A2 for regression results). The results are remarkably consistent with the ones we present here. With the exception of only one model (model 2) in which the dependent variable is Welzel’s “qualified” measure and liberal democracy is measured using the V-Dem, the substantive results support Hypothesis 2.

Conclusion

Existing approaches to the study of what lies behind the façade of overt democratic support, in terms of actual espousal of liberal/procedural conceptions of democracy, have emphasized factors such as learning, values, and the redistributive consequences of democratic regimes. In this study, we suggest a different explanation. Based on established theoretical and empirical contributions in sociology and social psychology, we propose that the extent to which those who overtly support democracy actually have “liberal democracy” in mind — which we operationalize as the endorsement of a conception of democracy that prioritizes rights and freedoms — represents, depending on the political context, an affinity for (or a distance from) a particular political regime status quo. And as it occurs more generally in many other domains, such affinity for the status quo is largely driven by one’s position in a

particular socioeconomic hierarchy: the higher that position, the more that status quo is seen as legitimate.

The observable consequence of this line of argument is that socioeconomic status is not uniformly related to a commitment to a liberal conception of democracy across all countries and contexts. People who are more highly placed in the socioeconomic hierarchy espouse liberal democracy more than others when liberal democracy represents the status quo, but less so than others under autocratic regimes. Furthermore, income inequality plays an important role. Like others before us, we find that inequality is inimical of liberal democratic attitudes just about everywhere and for everyone regardless on their socioeconomic status.⁷⁹ However, we show that inequality plays an additional role: it amplifies the attitudinal gaps between rich and poor. As income inequality is more compatible with the values and interests of the rich than those of the poor, it especially weakens the attachment of the rich to liberal conceptions of democracy under illiberal regimes and it especially decreases the attachment of the poor to liberal democracy under liberal democracies.

In our findings, we see little evidence that institutional learning drives attitudes towards liberal democracy. We do find qualified support for one particular prediction derived from the political economy approach: under autocratic regimes, individuals with higher levels of income are less likely to support liberal democracy than the poor, and particularly so when economic inequality is higher. However, we also find that, under liberal democratic regimes, the political economy approach is not helpful: the rich, not the poor, are the ones who are more likely to adhere to liberal democracy there, a gap that is also widened by income inequality.

In contrast, we observe consistent support for the “emancipative values” argument. However, we find this story to be incomplete. What seems to be missing, in a

word, is *conflict*. Political economists have brought that dimension explicitly to the study of regime change, and have found that conflict is structured around the redistributive impact of fully democratic regimes and is magnified by economic inequality. However, their focus on regime change has led these scholars to focus mostly on how the preferences of actors present themselves under autocratic regimes, and to assume that such preferences should be transported more or less intact to liberal democratic regimes. However, that does not seem to be the case. In a sense, that is not surprising: as political economists themselves have discovered, the effects of liberal democracy on inequality and redistribution cannot be taken for granted.⁸⁰ Thus, the conflict between the most and the least well-off in a society does not seem to be about a particular regime “type”, but about a political and social order that allows some to be more well-off than others, a conflict that can be mitigated under conditions of low income inequality, but that is magnified when that status quo allows for highly unequal outcomes.

Finally, our findings imply that, in established democracies, income inequality dampens support for liberal democracy, but especially so among the least well-off. This is an important finding in light of ongoing debates about the role of economic factors in fueling support for extremist, radical, and populist leaders and parties. Several studies have shown a negative relationship between socioeconomic status or economic well-being and the propensity to vote for radical right-wing parties,⁸¹ radical left-wing parties,⁸² or both.⁸³ Others have shown that inequality is a relevant contextual moderator in this regard, increasing the gap between the poor and the rich in the propensity to vote for the radical right-wing.⁸⁴ Our findings suggest that, although the critique of socioeconomic inequality may play very different roles in the discourse of left vs. right-wing radical parties,⁸⁵ high and rising inequality may play an important role in fueling

demand among the least well-off for parties that criticize the failures and shortcomings of liberal democracy.

NOTES

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² Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “The True Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 135 (March 2003): 70.

³ See among many John A. Booth and Mitchell A. Seligson, *The Legitimacy Puzzle in Latin America: Political Support and Democracy in Eight Nations* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Ryan E. Carlin and Matthew M. Singer, “Support for Polyarchy in the Americas,” *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 11 (November 2011): 1500–1526; Russell J. Dalton and Doh Chull Shin, “Reassessing the Civic Culture Model,” in *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizens*, ed. Russell J. Dalton and Christian Welzel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 91–115; Ronald Inglehart, “How Solid Is Mass Support for Democracy—And How Can We Measure It?,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 36, no. 01 (2003): 51–57; Robert Mattes and Michael Bratton, “Learning about Democracy in Africa: Awareness, Performance, and Experience,” *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2007): 192–217; Andreas Schedler and Rodolfo Sarsfield, “Democrats with Adjectives: Linking Direct and Indirect Measures of Democratic Support,” *European Journal of Political Research* 46, no. 5 (August 2007): 637–59; Doh Chull Shin, “Democratization: Perspectives from Global Citizenries,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, ed. Russell J. Dalton and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 259–82.

⁴ Dalton and Shin, p. 108.

⁵ See Damarys Canache, “Citizens’ Conceptualizations of Democracy: Structural Complexity, Substantive Content, and Political Significance,” *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 9 (September 1, 2012): 1132–58; Russell J. Dalton, Doh Chull Shin, and Willy Jou, “Popular Conceptions of the Meaning of Democracy: Democratic Understanding in Unlikely Places,” *Center for the Study of Democracy*, May 18, 2007, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/2j74b860>; Sabrina de Regt, “Arabs Want Democracy, but What Kind?,” *Advances in Applied Sociology* 3 (2013): 37; Mattes and Bratton; Christian Welzel, “The Asian Values Thesis Revisited: Evidence from the World Values Surveys,” *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 12, no. 01 (2011): 25; Christian Welzel, *Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 318–21.

⁶ Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (2016): 5–17.

⁷ Edward N. Muller and Mitchell A. Seligson, “Civic Culture and Democracy: The Question of Causal Relationships,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 03 (September 1994): 637.

⁸ Muller and Seligson, 647.

⁹ Robert Rohrschneider, “Report from the Laboratory: The Influence of Institutions on Political Elites’ Democratic Values in Germany,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 04 (December 1994): 927–41.

¹⁰ Pippa Norris, *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 144.

¹¹ Booth and Seligson, p. 123.

¹² Norris, 2011.

¹³ Welzel, p. 325–28.

¹⁴ John Gerring et al., “Democracy and Economic Growth: A Historical Perspective,” *World Politics* 57, no. 03 (April 2005): 323–64.

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- ¹⁶ Welzel, 2011, p. 11.
- ¹⁷ Welzel, 2013, p. 328.
- ¹⁸ Carles Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- ¹⁹ Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- ²⁰ Acemoglu and Robinson, 18.
- ²¹ Boix, p. 171.
- ²² Ibid., p. 58.
- ²³ Acemoglu and Robinson, p.36.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 37.
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- ³⁵ Mark J. Brandt, “Do the Disadvantaged Legitimize the Social System? A Large-Scale Test of the Status-legitimacy Hypothesis.,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 104, no. 5 (2013): 765.
- ³⁶ To be sure, proponents of “system justification theory” have shown how, in several situations, members of underprivileged groups tend themselves to exhibit a status quo bias. However, even those proponents concede the predominant finding: “members of advantaged groups (who benefit from the status quo” are the most likely to justify and legitimize it” (John T. Jost and Brenda Major, “Emerging Perspectives on the Psychology of Legitimacy,” in *The Psychology of Legitimacy: Emerging Perspectives on Ideology, Justice, and Intergroup Relations*, ed. John T. Jost and Brenda Major (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 20.)
- ³⁷ Acemoglu and Robinson, p. xii.
- ³⁸ Besir Ceka and Pedro C. Magalhães, “How People Understand Democracy: A Social Dominance Approach,” in *How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy*, ed. Monica Ferrin and Hanspeter Kriesi (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 90–110.

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- ⁴² Norris, 2011; Welzel, 2013.
- ⁴³ Inglehart, 2003.
- ⁴⁴ Chad P. Kiewiet de Jonge, “Should Researchers Abandon Questions about ‘Democracy’? Evidence from Latin America,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (2016): 694–716.
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- ⁴⁷ Welzel, 2011.
- ⁴⁸ Norris, 2011.
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- ⁵⁰ Ariely.
- ⁵¹ Ghana is the only country where the different components of this measure of liberal democracy do not hang together, so this country is dropped from our analysis of support for liberal democracy.
- ⁵² See Appendix, Table A3 for more details on the construction of all the variables employed in this study and their summary statistics.
- ⁵³ Unfortunately, not all of these questions are asked in all the fifty-eight countries in WVS’s wave 5. In fact, the questions used to construct the *Liberal understanding of democracy* variable have all missing values for Colombia, Guatemala, Italy, Hong Kong, and New Zealand. However, this still leaves us with a large number of different country surveys.
- ⁵⁴ Ariely.
- ⁵⁵ see Welzel, 2011, p. 100, online appendix.
- ⁵⁶ Specifically, Welzel, 2011 calculates this qualified measure by averaging the variables tapping liberal attitudes (V154, V157, V160 and V161) and the inverse of the following variables: V153: Religious authorities interpret the laws; V156: The army takes over when government is incompetent; V158: The economy is prospering; V159: Criminals are severely punished.
- ⁵⁷ Booth and Seligson; Kiewiet de Jonge.
- ⁵⁸ Ansell and Samuels; Krieckhaus et al.; Norris, 2011.
- ⁵⁹ For a complete list of indices included in the *Liberal Democracy Index* see Coppedge et al. “Measuring High Level Democratic Principles Using the V-Dem Data,” *International Political Science Review* 37, no. 5 (November 2016): 580–93. Data available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/data/data-version-7-1/>.

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- ⁶⁰ Branko Milanovic, “All the Ginis Dataset,” October 2016, https://www.gc.cuny.edu/CUNY_GC/media/CUNY-Graduate-Center/PDF/Centers/LIS/Milanovic/Description-of-the-dataset_16.pdf.
- ⁶¹ We tried to match each country and year of survey with the Gini measure but that was not always possible. In such cases, we used the most recent Gini figures available before a WVS country survey was conducted (e.g. we used 2004 Gini data for Canada’s 2005 survey).
- ⁶² Welzel, 2011; Welzel, 2013.
- ⁶³ For more information on the construction of this index, please see https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Christian_Welzel2/publication/269942632_Description_of_Welzel_Data_for_QoG_and_WVS_1_t_6_Key_Aggregates/links/549a6aba0cf2fedbc30cb5ff/Description-of-Welzel-Data-for-QoG-and-WVS-1-t-6-Key-Aggregates.pdf.
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- ⁶⁶ See Ceka and Magalhães.
- ⁶⁷ Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- ⁶⁸ Ceka and Magalhães.
- ⁶⁹ See Table A3 in the Appendix for more details on the construction of these two variables.
- ⁷⁰ See Ceka and Magalhães.
- ⁷¹ Andrew Gelman, “Scaling Regression Inputs by Dividing by Two Standard Deviations,” *Statistics in Medicine* 27, no. 15 (July 10, 2008): 2865–73. For an implementation in Stata, see Daniel Bischof, “Standardization Ado for Stata” (2015), available at <https://danbischof.com/2015/08/06/standardization-ado-for-stata/>.
- ⁷² For the predictive margins, we use the minimum and maximum values of the standardized interacted variables. For example, for income deciles, “low income” refers to the first decile while “high income” refers to the tenth decile of income distribution.
- ⁷³ Frederick Solt, “The Social Origins of Authoritarianism,” *Political Research Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (2012): 710.
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- ⁷⁵ Welzel, 2011.
- ⁷⁶ *Political trust* is only statistically significant at the 0.1 level.
- ⁷⁷ Welzel, 2011.
- ⁷⁸ Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-aggregate-and-subcategory-scores>.
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⁸³ Matthijs Rooduijn and Brian Burgoon, “The Paradox of Well-being: Do Unfavorable Socioeconomic and Sociocultural Contexts Deepen or Dampen Radical Left and Right Voting Among the Less Well-Off?,” *Comparative Political Studies* 51, n° 13 (2018): 1720-1753.

⁸⁴ Kyung Joon Han, “Income inequality and voting for radical right-wing parties,” *Electoral Studies* 42 (2016): 54-64;

⁸⁵ Matt Golder, “Far Right Parties in Europe,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 19 (2016): 479.