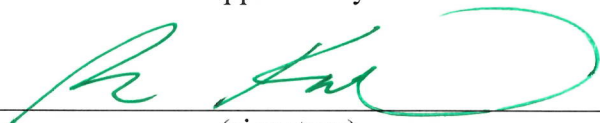


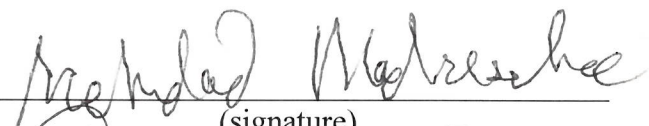
Effects of income, inequality, and political efficacy on the decision to vote

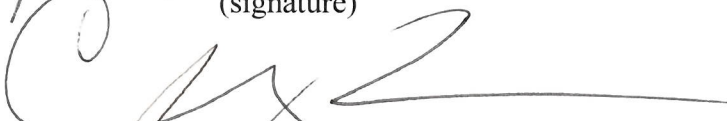
Presented to the faculty of Lycoming College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Departmental Honors in Political Science

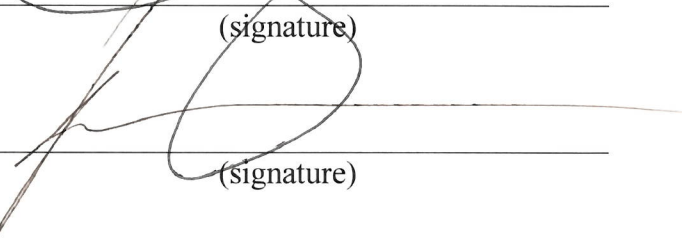
by
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April 25, 2023

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Introduction

Low-income voters in the United States face barriers to accessing the polls which their more affluent neighbors can avoid. Those with more money have more access to resources and education to help them make informed voting decisions, and fewer roadblocks to the act of voting itself. Richer voters have a greater influence on our politics, as they are better equipped to make sizeable donations to the candidates, parties, and interest groups which best represent their interests. Income and inequality cause Americans to vote at different rates.

States with greater income bias in voter turnout also have higher levels of income inequality. The government, elected by an income biased majority, will pass laws that benefit the people who put them in power and leave less representation for the people who face these barriers to voting based on their income (Avery). If more people with lower incomes were mobilized to vote, the effects of this income bias would decrease, resulting in a more representative government to advocate for the needs of those with lower incomes. This might take the shape of increased welfare benefits, for example, which would help alleviate some of the existing barriers which prevent those with low incomes from voting. This could potentially motivate them to become more politically active, as they realize the government can be responsive to them and their willingness to participate increases.

In efforts to motivate a more representative pool of voters, local agencies mobilize transportation to take unhoused and low-income voters to polling locations. Lobbyists call for Election Day to be made a national holiday so that workers will have the time off necessary to vote. What if, however, some of these barriers which affect low-income voter turnout are not physical ones? Perhaps low morale can be to blame for the disenfranchisement of low-income voters as the income gap in the United States has changed over time. This research seeks to

determine whether low morale¹ from having observed as “the rich get richer” discourages low-income Americans from voting.

In this study, morale is measured as political efficacy. Political efficacy is sometimes split into internal (IPE) and external political efficacy (EPE). Internal political efficacy is “one’s belief in his or her ability to understand and effectively participate in politics”, while external political efficacy is “one’s belief that political leaders and government institutions are responsive to the demands of its citizens” (Norris 2015, 792). This study looks at political efficacy as a whole. Low-income voters might recognize that their influence is limited when compared to that of the wealthiest Americans who can afford to make significant donations to campaigns and interest groups, effectively giving them a greater influence on policy, and then decide not to vote or participate in other political activity.

This study observes the effects of income, inequality, and perceived inequality on an individual’s political efficacy and, eventually, their decision whether to vote. Inequality is a measure of the distribution of income. Tests involving political efficacy are also included to see how the independent variables combined with varying levels of political efficacy affect the individual’s decision on whether to vote. If efficacy plays a role in low-income voters’ decision to vote, policymaking to enfranchise marginalized voters may not be the most effective solution. Instead, awareness campaigns to address the mental roadblocks which manifest as low efficacy should be put in place.

In this study, two methods of analysis are used to observe trends across two different populations. The first is a quantitative study using American National Election Survey data over several decades to capture sentiment of individuals across the nation. The second is a qualitative

¹ Measured in this study as political efficacy

study conducted by interviewing low-income residents in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, a city of the third class in this swing state which is represented by a Democratic mayor and majority Republican city council. Both methods yield similar results—as political efficacy of low-income voters increases, so does political behavior.

Literature Review

Preparation for this study showed little research to connect income, inequality, or perceived inequality with political efficacy or the decision to vote. Theories and hypotheses are therefore based on the existing research which pieces together interactions between one of the proposed independent variables² and one of the proposed dependent variables³.

Whether to Vote

The decision people make of whether to vote in an upcoming election is a culmination of different considerations. Such factors may be internal, like an individual's ideology or their upbringing, and others may be external factors, like the state of politics or one particularly motivating election; some of these considerations involve politics while others which do not. Something unrelated to politics such as involvement in the church, language proficiency, or disability status influences one's partisanship and political participation including voter turnout (Brockway 2018; De La Garza & Yang 2015; Schur & Adya 2012). Factors such as previous military service or current union membership also influence one's likelihood of voting (Leal &

² Income, inequality, perceived inequality, or efficacy

³ Efficacy or political participation (including voting)

Teigen 2018; Kerrissey & Schofer 2013). Accessibility to voting is important in determining whether an individual casts a ballot, but so is motivation.

Income

Matsubayashi and Sakaiya (2020) notes that those with lower incomes are less likely to vote than those with higher incomes. Individuals experiencing poverty face barriers to voting as the act of voting “costs” them more: time that needs to be spent making money, costly⁴ transportation, and the added stress of the logistics of voting. These challenges and more disincentivize low-income individuals, regardless of how motivated they might be to vote otherwise. People with higher incomes can decide to vote with less stress because they have access to a “richer information environment and more intense campaign activities” as they are surrounded by more affluent peers (Wichowsky 2012, 456). If someone without the same access wanted to become as educated a voter, they would have to take more time to find all the same accurate information. As the increased opportunity costs deter those in poverty from voting, this group is also offered fewer incentives for political engagement as the government is listening more closely to those with more money (Galbraith & Hale 2008). This idea can influence voters based on income, because those with low incomes do not have as much money or time to engage with elected officials. It can also influence voters based on perception of inequality, as those with low incomes and high perceptions of inequality perceive the government to have the best interests of the rich in mind instead of their own.

Wichowsky (2012) treats income as a sign of the amount of political power which people predict someone has. She argues that as the income inequality gap widens, the potential policy

⁴ In terms of time and money

implications of low-income voices being quieted are amplified. She calculates the “electoral strength” of groups of given income levels in different areas, and she concludes that education and campaigning in low-income areas can help to bridge the gap. Also, she adds that the income bias in states decreases as the Democratic Party establishes mobilization efforts in those areas.

Inequality

Galbraith and Hale (2008) use the Gini Coefficient to observe how income distribution plays a role in voter turnout. They describe how income inequality can influence voter turnout as well as vote choice. Other explanatory variables include income, urbanization, and diversity, and the dependent variable is voter turnout among eligible voters. They conclude that the existence of inequalities, more so than the wealth gap, is indicative of voter turnout and vote choice.

Macdonald (2021) notes that existing research doesn’t address *if* and *when* inequality demobilizes voters. His study finds that the inequality to voter turnout relationships is based on election salience; in midterm years, the relationship is negative and statistically significant while in presidential election years, the relationship is not significant because people who would otherwise not be motivated to vote are mobilized. He mentions that further research could observe who is discouraged from voting because of high income inequality, as I aim to assess among low-income populations.

One existing study looks at the relationship between knowledge of inequality and voter turnout, like this study which will look at the individual’s perception of the change in inequality. Matsubayashi and Sakaiya (2020) note that high income inequality discourages low-income citizens from voting because this group realizes that “they can never win against the rich, rendering their participation meaningless” (2). They seek to answer this question on the cross-

national scale and find that income-biased voter turnout exists across the globe. They also seek to understand if these trends are related to the mobilization or demobilization of high-income voters, low-income voters, neither, or both. They observe trends in both income inequality and income bias in voter turnout and conclude that the income bias in voting would be even greater without efforts to mobilize low-income voters. Rather than mobilization versus demobilization as a means of influencing income-biased voter turnout, this study uses political efficacy to observe trends in voter turnout among low-income populations. Instead of physical barriers preventing low-income individuals from casting ballots, political efficacy scores can be compared with political behavior scores to show if the individual's perception of government responsiveness relates to their decision to vote.

Some studies have shown that inequality influences voter turnout (Wichowsky 2012; Galbraith and Hale 2008; Matsubayashi and Sakaiya 2020). Specifically, Matsubayashi and Sakaiya conclude that these non-voters in an income biased electorate find their participation 'meaningless' (2). Presumably, had they measured political efficacy in this study, the non-voters would have shown little efficacy as they were so demobilized by the income gap that they did not vote if the government would not respond to their needs.

Efficacy

Existing studies have made connections between political knowledge, efficacy, and one's likelihood of voting. As an individual's level of political education increases, so too does their political empowerment (Beaumont 2011). Efficacy affects an individual's level of initiative (Pollock 1983). Specifically, one half of the decline in presidential election turnout in the middle of the 20th century can be attributed to a decrease in political efficacy (Pollock 1983). Gil de

Zúñiga et al. (2017) find that government efficacy, which they describe as an individual's perception of how competent the government is, is positively correlated with political participation. This study will observe how political activity and efficacy influence an individual's decision to vote while considering household income, economic inequality, and perceived inequality.

Question

How do income, inequality, and perceived inequality effect political efficacy and influence low-income individuals' decision to vote?

With theory informed by existing literature about motivations and barriers to voting, this study seeks to understand the impact of political efficacy on people with low incomes' decision to vote. Effects of income and inequality are tested to inform this discussion, as previous findings have looked at the implications of these factors on political behavior. The gap in the literature I seek to answer is whether a greater wealth gap demoralizes the lowest income voters and leads them to vote even less. I look for evidence to determine whether the existence and individuals' perceptions of economic inequality lowers morale and has an additional depressing effect on voter turnout among the low-income population.

Theory

As existing research has described people with lower incomes vote less because they experience higher costs of voting. When more inequality exists, low-income individuals are less likely to vote because the government is responding to the needs of those with higher incomes. People who perceive more inequality are less likely to vote because they have watched the rich

get richer and gain a greater influence⁵ on politics. As the income gap in the United States becomes larger, low-income individuals will vote less. Knowledge of the increasing income gap causes those with the lowest incomes to notice that they have less political power than those with the most money.

H1_a: As inequality in the United States increases, the likelihood a low-income individual will vote decreases.

H1_b: As perceived inequality in the United States increases, the likelihood a low-income individual will vote decreases.

This study looks at income, inequality, and perceived inequality as predictors of an individual's level of political efficacy. People with low incomes have low political efficacy because they have limited access to comprehensive and accurate information. When more inequality exists, low-income individuals will have less political efficacy because the government is not meeting their needs. Low-income voters who perceive more inequality will have less political efficacy because they recognize that they have limited influence as compared to the higher income, more politically advantaged. If a low-income individual perceives this economic inequality as political inequality, they might experience lower levels of political efficacy and therefore feel less inclined to vote.

H2_a: As inequality in the United States increases, political efficacy among low-income voters decreases.

H2_b: As perceived inequality in the United States increases, political efficacy among low-income voters decreases.

⁵ Based on the assumption that politics = power

A low-income individual with less political efficacy will be less likely to participate in politics and vote because political efficacy is positively influenced with an individual's level of initiative (Pollock 1983) and political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2017).

H3: As political efficacy decreases, the likelihood a low-income individual will vote decreases.

Quantitative Methods

The bulk of the data used in the quantitative study comes from the American National Election Studies (ANES) Cumulative Data File. It is a series of surveys of the American public conducted every two years beginning in 1948. After 2004, the survey has only been given during presidential election years. These survey data include a series of questions relating to political knowledge, feeling thermometers, external efficacy, and demographic information. Many of the questions I chose to use for this study were not asked in the early years of the survey, so this study will use the 29 surveys taken in the years 1956-2020. The unit of analysis is the individual survey respondent of 64,524 observations.

Variables

Dependent variables

The dependent variable for tables 1 and 3 is individual voter turnout. This is measured in a question which asked whether the respondent voted in the most recent general election, where '1' means that the individual did not vote and '2' means that the individual did vote.

The dependent variable for table 2 is efficacy. Specifically, the question used asks the respondent whether they feel they have a say in what the government does. This question is

coded in such a way that “2” means the individual feels they have a say and “1” means the individual does not feel they have a say in what the government does.

Independent variables

Tables 1 and 2 in this study include three independent variables, the first of which is income. The question asks what the respondent’s household income will be in that year, and the responses are not recorded as dollar amounts in the publication but are instead coded into percentiles: ‘1’ means 0-16th percentile; ‘2’ means 17th-33rd percentile; ‘3’ means 34th-67th percentile; ‘4’ means 68th-95th percentile, and ‘5’ means 96th-100th percentile. Including income as an independent variable makes this study comparable with the existing literature, which shows that those with lower incomes vote less as they experience increased costs of voting. A higher income should mean that an individual is more likely to vote, based on Matsubayashi and Sakaiya’s findings.

Another independent variable in these tables is inequality. To observe this measure, I rely on the Gini Coefficients. This number is a widely used measure to show the size of income distribution in a place at a given time. Its calculation relies on the Lorenz Curve, which is the graphical representation of income distribution. It exists on a coordinate plane on which percentage of the population exists on the X axis and the proportion of income is on the Y axis. The formula is $A/(A+B)$, where A= the area between the Lorenz Curve and the line of perfect equality (slope=1) and B=the area between the Lorenz Curve and x=100% of the population. A Gini Coefficient can be any number between 0 and 1, where 1 is the most unequal society and 0 is the most equal society. The survey did not provide the state of residence for each respondent, but it did narrow their location down to one of four census regions.⁶ Using Mark Frank’s state-

⁶ ANES Census Regions: Northeast (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont), North Central (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin), South (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware,

level Gini Coefficient publication, I calculated the average Gini Coefficient for each census region for each survey year. Originally published in the *Journal of Business Strategies* in 2014, Frank regularly expands upon this publication as data is made available. Based on Wichowsky and Matsubayashi and Sakaiya's research, a higher level of economic inequality should mean an individual is less likely to vote.

I also include in these tables a third independent variable, a survey question which reveals everyone's perception of the change in inequality. This question is not to gauge whether inequality exists, or whether the gap is large or small, but instead the change over time. Using this question to measure perceived inequality is grounded in the assumption that, if an individual believes that the difference in incomes is much larger than it was in the recent past, that they believe the difference in incomes is large, and if they believe that the difference in incomes is much smaller than it was in the recent past, then they believe that it is small. The survey question asks, "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?". Responses to this question are coded as follows: '5' the difference is "much larger"; '4' the difference is "somewhat larger"; '3' the difference is "about the same"; '2' the difference is "somewhat smaller"; and '1' the difference is "much smaller." This is included to make the connection between inequality and the individual's decision whether to vote. We cannot assume what anyone's considerations were in deciding whether to vote but assessing their awareness of how inequality has changed is a better measure than using raw inequality data and assuming causality.

Washington, D.C., Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia), and West (Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawai'i, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming).

Galbraith and Hale's study shows that an increase in perceived inequality should mean that an individual is less likely to vote.

Table 3 includes several questions about political efficacy as independent variables. Along with the question asking whether the respondent believes they have a say in what the government does, four other questions relating to efficacy are included. One question asked respondents "how much attention do you feel the government pays to what the people think when it decides what to do?" and the possible responses are '1' for "not much," '2' for "some" or for an answer that they do not know, cannot say, refuse to answer, or other nonresponses, or '3' for "a good deal." The other two questions relating to political efficacy are coded the same way: '1' for "disagree", '2' for "neither agree nor disagree" and "don't know; depends; not sure; can't say; refused to say" and '3' for "agree". Survey respondents were also asked whether they agree with the statement "Public officials care what people like me think." They are asked whether they agree with the statement "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on." As efficacy increases, so too should an individual's likelihood of voting (Gil De Zúñiga), because the individual has more trust that the government is going to effectively respond to the information they are communicating with their vote.

Control variables

The demographic items I control for in this study include age, gender, race, and education to see if my findings hold up across individuals with these different traits. The item which deals with age controls for the several decades worth of survey data by asking for the year respondents were born: '1' was born 1991 or later, '2' was born 1975-1990, '3' was born 1959-1974, '4' was born 1943-1958, '5' was born 1927-1942, '6' was born 1911-1926, '7' was born 1895-1910, and '8'

was born before 1895. I predict those who are older will vote more. In terms of efficacy, both positive and negative relationships might be observed for different respondents based on the political climates they have grown up in.

For the “Woman” variable, ‘1’ means the individual is a woman and ‘0’ means that they are not. “Not man or woman” did not become a valid response in the 2016 survey and was not statistically significant in any model. Race was recorded by the interviewer’s observation from the start of the survey in 1948 until 1970. Since then, interviewers have asked for ethnic group or ethnicity, and began prompting for Hispanic identity in 1988. For the “Black” variable, ‘1’ means the individual is Black non-Hispanic and ‘0’ means that they are not. I predict that these two marginalized groups will experience lower levels of voting and efficacy despite income level and when economic and perceived inequality are higher.

Respondents were asked their highest level of education completed, which were coded as follows: ‘1’ “grade school or less (0-8 grades)”, ‘2’ “high school”, ‘3’ “some college”, or ‘4’ “college or advanced degree”. The measure of urbanism is loosely categorized into ‘1’ “rural, small towns, outlying adjacent areas”, ‘2’ “suburban areas”, and ‘3’ “central cities”, though the specific bounds of these categories were redefined many different years. Those with higher levels of education should experience more efficacy if Beaumont is correct and should vote more.

Quantitative Methods

I run descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations on each variable from the ANES survey, as well as the region-level Gini coefficients and original political behavior index. I run a series of binary logistic regressions to see how each of the three independent variables interacted with an

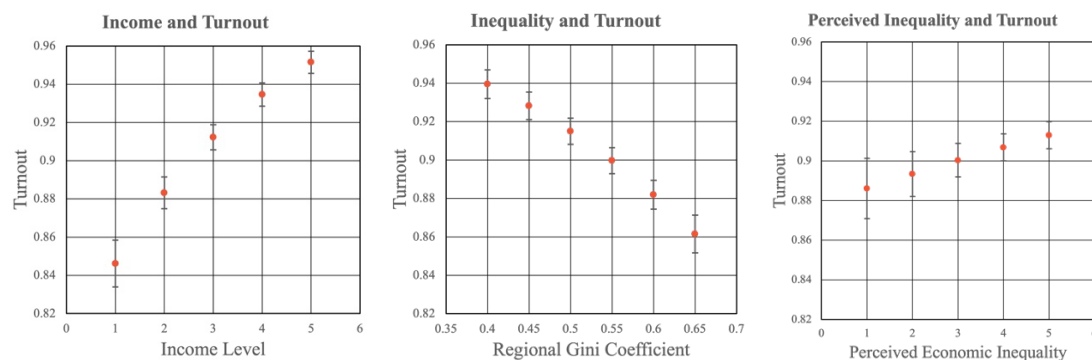
individual's likelihood of voting and with their political efficacy. Different models include different questions related to efficacy and demographics as controls.

Quantitative Results

H1 is tested and supported in Table 1. As the level of inequality in the United States increases, the likelihood of voting decreases. This holds true across all income levels, as shown in Model 1, and in low-income populations specifically, as depicted in models 2 and 3. Because this trend exists when all income levels are considered, different theories can be explored: those with lower incomes want to vote to combat economic inequality and those with higher incomes want to vote to protect their money.

The opposite effect is observed when looking at perceived inequality, however. Across all income levels and within low-income populations specifically, people who perceive more inequality also vote more. This could be because they are aware of inequality and want to combat it by voting. Table 1 also supports existing literature by depicting that, as income increases, so does an individual's likelihood of voting. Relationships between these independent variables and the decision to vote are represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1



The control variables in Table 1 show that womanhood, age, and education are positively associated with voting in all income groups and that Blackness is negatively associated with voting across the same groups.

Table 1
Dependent variable: turnout

| Independent Variable | Model 1 <i>All incomes</i> | Model 2 <i>≤ 33rd percentile</i> | Model 3 <i>≤ 16th percentile</i> |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Income | .318*** (.019) | .230*** (.060) | -- |
| Inequality | -3.656*** (.306) | -3.061*** (.434) | -3.043*** (.563) |
| Perceived Inequality | .075*** (.020) | .057* (.028) | .071* (.036) |
| Woman | .217*** (.042) | .223*** (.060) | .126 |
| Black | -.428*** (.047) | -.336*** (.068) | -.262** (.091) |
| Education | .610*** (.026) | .598*** (.038) | .666*** (.050) |
| Age | .473*** (.019) | .455*** (.025) | .404*** (.033) |
| N | 18294 | 6363 | 3416 |
| -2 log likelihood | 15058.788 ^a | 6800.467 ^a | 3846.789 ^a |
| Cox & Snell R Square | 0.121 | .112 | .109 |
| Constant | -.766*** (.209) | -.869** (.300) | .689 (.377) |

Significance levels: *** = $p < .001$ ** = $p < .01$ * = $p < .05$

H2 is tested and supported in Table 2; as inequality increases, the level of political efficacy individuals perceives decreases. This is the reality for all incomes and low-income populations. When economic inequality is higher, individuals feel like they have less of a say in what the government does. This could be related to income bias, where people with more money are voting more than people with less money, electing politicians which best reflect the needs and goals of someone with more money. Those with low incomes when inequality is high may be therefore subject to a government which is not representative of their needs or responsive to what they have to say.

This table also shows, surprisingly, that as income increases, political efficacy decreases. This could also be because income is also higher when people are older (having witnessed more elections) and more educated (knowing more about politics), so these individuals are more convinced that the government does not respond to their needs. It is worth noting that the question used to measure political efficacy in this question is one of internal political efficacy. Perhaps if income groups, age groups, or education levels were isolated, different results would emerge. Though most of the control variables in Table 2 did not yield statistically significant results, it does show that education is negatively associated with political efficacy within each of the three models. Another surprising finding from Table 2 is that perceived inequality is also positively associated with political efficacy; the more an individual perceives that the difference in incomes has changed over time, the more they believe they have a say in what the government does.

Figure 2

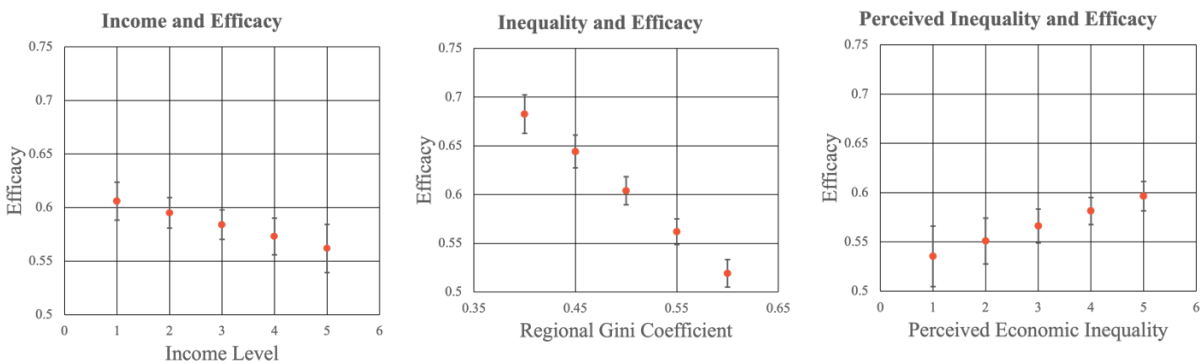


Table 2
Dependent variable: political efficacy

| Independent Variable | Model 1 <i>All incomes</i> | Model 2 <i>≤ 33rd percentile</i> | Model 3 <i>≤ 16th percentile</i> |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Income | -.045** (.015) | -.136* (.057) | -- |
| Inequality | -3.448*** (.235) | -2.941*** (.399) | -2.665*** (.541) |
| Percieved Inequality | .062*** (.017) | .099*** (.028) | .082* (.036) |
| Woman | .011 | .009 | .086 |
| Black | -.067 | -.133 | -.123 |
| Education | -.256*** (.021) | -.210*** (.035) | -.173*** (.046) |
| Age | .006 | .034 | .036 |
| N | 14913 | 5151 | 2785 |
| -2 log likelihood | 20218.799 ^a | 6958.897 ^a | 3747.836 ^a |
| Cox & Snell R Square | .026 | .020 | .016 |
| Constant | 2.653*** (.168) | 2.121*** (.285) | 1.749*** (.369) |

Significance levels: *** = $p < .001$ ** = $p < .01$ * = $p < .05$

Table 3 tests and supports H3; as political efficacy decreases, so does the likelihood a low-income individual will vote. This pattern exists at all income levels, as well. Because a lower level of efficacy means less belief in the integrity of the government to listen to the voters, it follows that individuals experiencing this discouragement with the government would be less likely to vote.

Table 3
Dependent variable: turnout

| Independent Variable | Model 1 <i>All incomes</i> | Model 2 <i>≤ 33rd percentile</i> | Model 3 <i>≤ 16th percentile</i> |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| I don't have a say | -.166*** (.030) | -.113* (.048) | -.136* (.069) |
| Gov't doesn't care | -.051 | -.072 | -.086 |
| Gov't is too complicated | -.144*** (.033) | -.071 | -.127 |
| My vote doesn't matter | -.856*** (.043) | -.724*** (.062) | -.602*** (.081) |
| Gov't pays attention | .075 | .062 | -.017 |
| Income | .242*** (.025) | .285*** (.086) | -- |
| Woman | -.082 | -.039 | -.170 |
| Black | -.232 | .066 | -.150 |
| Education | .495*** (.036) | .420*** (.061) | .305*** (.088) |
| Age | .386*** (.024) | .311*** (.034) | .272*** (.048) |
| N | 8196 | 2726 | 1328 |
| -2 log likelihood | 8666.393 ^a | 3334.048 ^a | 1686.183 ^a |
| Cox & Snell R Square | .170 | .130 | .105 |
| Constant | -1.181*** (.249) | -1.264** (.400) | -.122 (.528) |

Significance levels: *** = $p < .001$ ** = $p < .01$ * = $p < .05$

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative research consisting of 33 interviews helped inform the discussion and showed how national-scale findings are reflected at the local level. Creating new interview questions allowed for more control over the pool of questions asked, referencing the ANES study and adding questions. The question from ANES about perceived change in inequality over time is edited to instead ask about perceived size of income gap. Political behavior questions are added to prompt knowledge of local government jurisdiction.

Interview Recruitment

To recruit interview participants, I first tried passive recruitment: posting fliers in high-traffic areas. I contacted local organizations including homeless shelters and other community organizations⁷ which provide services to low-income individuals. Through this method of recruitment, I gained one participant, who was the contact point at one of the locations and wanted to participate. After nearly one month, I received one more inquiry from a flyer I had posted at a location and then shifted to active recruitment. I made plans to visit American Rescue Workers twice in one week, once to the Social Services Center on food distribution day and the other to the men's shelter during lunch hour.

When I arrived at the Social Services Center, I found a line of people waiting outside the door of the house which hosts the program and a parking lot full of still more patrons waiting in their cars. I walked toward the group, wearing street clothes and carrying a stack of consent forms, and walked to the back of the line, noticing the people as I passed. I started with the individuals I was closest to at the back of the line, explaining who I was, what I was doing, and asking if they wanted to participate in my research in exchange for a \$10 Walmart gift card⁸. Some of the individuals were alone, others with partners, children, or grandchildren. Each seemed surprised to see a new face and hear about my goals. Some signed my consent form and referred me to friends and neighbors in other parts of the line, like a mother and her children who had just moved to the area and could benefit from the gift card. I worked my way up to nearly the front of the line and back to where I started to catch those who arrived during the process. On this day, 22 individuals signed my consent form and provided me with a phone number to reach

⁷ American Rescue Workers, Family Promise, James V. Brown Library, Lycoming College Wertz Dining Hall kitchen, Thrive International Programs, Transitional Living Center, YMCA, and YWCA.

⁸ Walmart was selected because River Valley Transit, the public bus system in Williamsport, travels to the Walmart in Montoursville.

them at. Some also gave me times of day or days of the week which were best available to reach them, many of whom said I could reach them at any time. Only 2 individuals told me they did not want to participate, and one individual was brought to tears as she expressed her gratitude that a young person was taking the time to learn about the experience and attitudes of this marginalized group.

With 22 signed consent forms in hand, I was nearly halfway to my goal in just one afternoon, and hoped to recruit the rest of my participants during lunch at the men's shelter the next day. That night, Thrive International Programs shared my flyer on their Facebook page. I woke up the next morning to 22 emails of additional interested participants. I decided to cancel my visit to the men's shelter so as not to have to turn away any of the participants I had already recruited and began distributing my consent form to the email list to obtain virtual written consent. Emails continued to roll in over the coming days and weeks, and before I knew it I had almost 60 contacts. Eventually I got to a point where I had to respond and turn away email participants because I wouldn't have the budget to pay each of them for participating. Then came the time to schedule all my interviews based on individuals' preferred times and fill in the gaps with people who didn't give a preferred time. I blocked out an entire weekend to complete 29 interviews, many back-to-back, and held 4 during the week based on individual preferences.

Each step of the process, participants waned off. This is especially evident among the group who emailed me to participate: of those who initially expressed interest, not all of them responded to my asking for consent. Of those who responded to my request for consent, not all of them responded to schedule a time. Of all those who scheduled a time, not all of them showed up for our meetings. A similar sentiment can be observed in the many individuals I recruited at the Social Services Center who did not return my phone call when I called them to participate. I

ended up interviewing 33 individuals, a combination of those I actively recruited and those who reached out to me.

Measurement Indices

The interviews included six questions related to political efficacy and ten questions related to political behavior. I also asked what the most important issue in the United States is and how the government is handling it. To study perceived inequality, I asked whether the individuals thought the difference in incomes between rich and poor in the United States is large or small. To better compare scores of efficacy and political behavior, I created two indices.

The efficacy index has possible scores of 0-8. Each of the four questions asked is worth 2 points. In this coding, 0 means no, 1 means maybe or no answer, and 2 means yes. The three questions scored this way in this index are: “Do you think that you and people you know have a say in what the government does?”, “Do you think it matters whether you vote or not?”, and “Do you think public officials care what you and people you know think?”. The fourth question included in the index is “How much do you think the government pays attention to what the people think when it decides what to do?” and the answers are 0 for none, 1 for some, do not know, or no answer, and 2 for a lot.

The political behavior index has possible scores of 0-5. I asked 5 questions of which a no response is given a 0 and a yes response is given a 1. Questions include whether the individual voted last November whether they have ever attended any political rallies or protests, whether they have displayed a campaign’s memorabilia, donated to a political party or candidate, or contacted a public official to give their opinion about something that should be done. Social desirability bias may be apparent in these scores, as only one individual out of 33 participants

received a 0/5. The most frequent index score was 2. The average score was 2.5 with a standard deviation of 1.3.

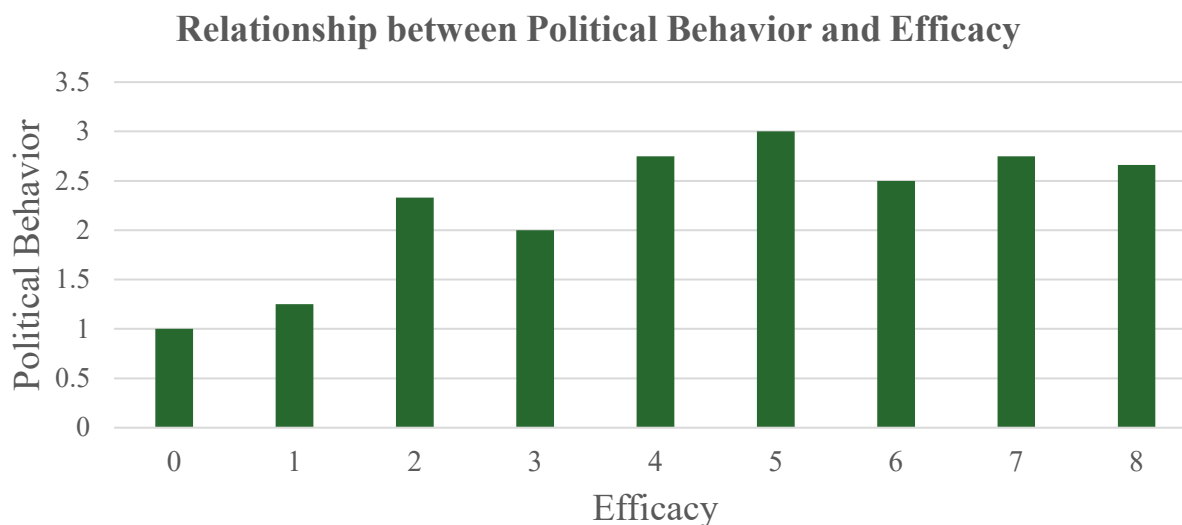
Testing Hypotheses

For hypotheses 1 and 2, inequality is the independent variable. I use perceived inequality because there would be no variance in the Gini coefficient since all the people I interviewed lived in the same area. Of all respondents to the question on perceived inequality, only one individual reported that they believed the income gap to be small. There is not enough variance to draw substantive conclusions on H1 and H2 based on the population interviewed, however the near-unanimous response that the income gap is large is noteworthy.

To test H1, compare respondents' perceptions of inequality and whether they voted in the recent midterm election. Of the 27 individuals who answered whether they believe the gap in incomes is large or small, only one person said the gap was small and that person also did not vote. Out of all 33 survey respondents, 10 indicated that they had not voted in the midterm election and the other 23 had.

To test H2, I compare the individual's perceived inequality and their score on the efficacy index. The one person who did not vote scored a 1 on the efficacy index, when possible scores ranged from 0 to 6.

To test H3, I compare the individual's efficacy index score and whether they voted in the recent midterm election. Even with the small sample size of 33, a positive correlation between efficacy and political behavior is visible.

Figure 3

Subgroups Emerge

Clear differences emerged between the group which I actively recruited at the Social Services Center (Group A) and the group who reached out after the flyer was shared on Facebook (Group B). These discrepancies began before the interviews did. One individual I called from Group A asked me to call back the next day because their child had a mental health crisis and “ran away from home again.” Others from this group were watching children or grandchildren while we spoke. Participants in Group B maintained quieter environments as we spoke, and I did not hear other voices or sounds except for the occasional car passing. Some of the lowest incomes I observed were in Group A, and the few who exceeded my income threshold were in Group B. The average political efficacy was also lower in Group A (2.2) than in Group B (5.04). Perhaps I sampled some of the least efficacious and some of the most efficacious individuals from those making less than \$40,000 in Lycoming County because of how I recruited them. Participants in Group A were waiting in line for food distribution and other income-based services when I approached them and taking care of children in multi-generational households.

Many participants in Group B saw my flyer on Facebook and were inclined enough to reach out. Group A is also almost entirely white, non-Hispanic and Group B is almost entirely Black and half Hispanic, half non-Hispanic.

Another observation relating to political efficacy is the pattern of middling efficacy levels: a high score in one measure of efficacy did not predict a high score in another measure of efficacy. For example, some participants who responded that they do have a say in what the government does also responded that they don't believe the government pays attention to what the people think when deciding what to do. Others who believe their vote matters also believe that the government does not care what they think. These responses together show higher feelings of internal political efficacy than external political efficacy.

Sympathy Toward Government

One pattern that emerged was a sentiment that the government is "trying their best" to handle what the respondents identified as the most important issue in the United States today. This was especially prevalent in Group B but also emerged in Group A. In most cases this feeling was shared in the context that the government is working to combat these issues, but that the work they have done so far has not been enough.

"They're trying their best, but the people in government are humans too."

Perhaps this sentiment emerged because I sought out low-income individuals who have experienced times in which they wish someone would have given them more grace and recognized that the circumstance they are in is beyond their control. The average political

efficacy score of all participants was 4.6 with a standard deviation of 2.4. In general, the frequency of high scores⁹ was higher than I anticipated, which is not reflected in the mean.

Political Knowledge and Behavior

Though I did not ask questions relating to political knowledge, I can infer a low level of political knowledge because very few referenced current events or recent elections in their responses to the questions I asked. If the participants had high levels of political knowledge, they likely would have referenced specific examples when asked about interactions with campaigns and the most important issues in the country. Most of the few individuals who did reference recent candidates were in group B.

Differences emerged in responses related to displaying campaign memorabilia or yard signs, though many admitted they had not participated in politics in these ways. A few participants deflected onto close friends and relatives, stating that their knowledge of politics was limited in comparison to another person in their lives or inspired by another person in their lives. Two of the few participants who admitted to having worn campaign memorabilia also shared that these items belonged to another, more politically involved, peer.

“I wore a t-shirt from my brother. He’s more into politics than I am.”

A similar sentiment was observed in other means of political behavior as well.

Have you ever attended any political rallies or protests? “No, but my sister has.”

In some cases, this acknowledgment of not being as politically involved or interested as others is presented as peer pressure.

⁹ Of the 33 interviews, 6 participants scored a 6, 4 participants scored a 7, and 3 participants scored an 8.

[If “yes” to “did you vote last November?”] What sorts of things did you consider when deciding who to vote for? “I voted because everyone else was, and I didn’t want to feel left out. I don’t have an interest in politics.”

Participants had varying levels of interest and interaction with politics. In some cases, their behavior was framed by the audience and presented as code switching.

Do you discuss politics with family and friends?

“Yes, but it depends on which family members. With my mom’s side, yes. With my dad’s side, no.”

“It depends on the person. There are people I void that topic with at all costs. Others I will talk to, the ones whose views line up with mine.”

In general, participants reported being more inclined to talk about politics around election time.

Overall political behavior was sometimes grounded in political knowledge.

Did you vote last November? “No, I couldn’t believe in what the government was doing anymore.”

Most Important Issues

Responses about what is the most important issue in the United States today included a mix of economic and social causes. In some cases, individuals introduced social causes relating to members of a marginalized group they are in. In other cases, sometimes to my surprise, the responses they provided were not directly related to those social causes as I may have expected. Examples of this are demonstrated by the two openly transgender individuals I interviewed.

What do you think is the most important problem in the U.S. today?

“Second amendment rights and how far they’ve gone. We should be allowed to have guns, but they should be regulated.”

“The amount of hate. If we all came together, we could make the world better.”

Individuals in Group A all discussed social issues, while participants in Group B highlighted a mix of social and economic concerns. Discussions of economics included inequality and inflation.

“Not much has been done [about inequality]. The gap still remains. The rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer.”

“There's a big gap between the top dogs and ordinary citizens.”

Racism was the most common answer overall.

What do you think is the most important problem in the United States today?
 “Police brutality against Black individuals.”

Other social concerns included partisanship and corruption.

How good of a job is the government doing in dealing with partisanship?
 “They are not doing really well. Their jobs are to maintain that division.”

What do you think is the most important problem in the United States today?
 “The government doesn't listen to the plea of the people.”

“I think a lot of [people in government] say what we want to hear until they get into office, then do what they want to do. They're looking out for people who have money.”

“Perception of division along party lines. It is trendy to talk about, but I think if you subscribe to one part of a political belief system, you are assumed to be fully on board with that. If I express one conservative view, I can't be a Democrat.”

Qualitative Summary

Across all respondents a surprisingly high level of efficacy is observed despite low incomes, as well as a trend of positive views of the government. Another trend that I observed, particularly within Group A, was foregone state benefits. While several respondents shared that they do receive state benefits, including medical assistance and food stamps, still others with extremely low annual household incomes are not receiving benefits which they probably qualify for. A

similar trend exists with individuals not seeking help from the government. I asked two questions to prompt responses of the individuals seeking government aid, and, in most cases, they responded that they would figure out problems on their own or take to the internet and search for solutions instead of contacting local government.

Surprisingly, income and efficacy were negatively related. This could in part be attributed to the small sample size and small level of variation of incomes. Inequality and efficacy were also negatively related, as expected. Additionally, perceived inequality and efficacy were positively related, which is not what I predicted but does follow with the results of the turnout tests.

Discussion

Table 1 does not support H1 because it shows that individuals who perceive more inequality vote more. Table 2 supports Hypothesis 2 that individuals experience less efficacy when there is more economic inequality. This is reflected in the entire voting population, regardless of income.

Further research should observe these trends within individual income brackets to observe how income level when compared to actual and perceived inequality influence the individual's likelihood of voting. Hypothesis 3 is supported by the findings in Table 3 which show that individuals with lower levels of efficacy vote less. These findings show that low income and high perceived inequality discourage voters while high inequality and low political efficacy motivate voters.

Findings from the qualitative analysis cannot, as easily, be applied to hypotheses 1 and 2 because of the extremely low variance¹⁰ and small sample size. However, even with a small sample size, evidence emerges to suggest that H3 applies in this community sample. The makeup of the populations in the two studies varies drastically, from a national survey where nearly every American adult had the opportunity to be selected to a local set of interviews which yielded participants who patronize the same organizations.

One factor which could have contributed to mixed findings is the circumstance of the people recruited. Those recruited at the food distribution are likely among the poorest and least efficacious of the population. Those who reached out to participate in the research are likely more efficacious than average, as they were probably more interested or knowledgeable about politics since they reached out to participate. Another consideration is the makeup of the group who responded based on the Facebook advertisement. Thrive International Programs, who shared my flier right before I got an influx of emails, provides services, such as translation and legal aid, to immigrants. Those who have immigrated to the United States may have more money, which allowed them to travel here, and higher levels of efficacy, as they believe more in the government system of the country they chose to live in.

Conclusion

This research highlights economic and affective barriers which exist and discourage individuals from voting. Barriers which have been previously identified are being actively combatted by policy proposals and awareness campaigns, but are these programs taking the right

¹⁰ One participant perceived the income gap between rich and poor in the United States as small and only one participant indicated that they had not voted in the previous midterm election.

approach? Mobilizing voters will only do so much if faith in the system is broken and a registered voter feels no need to cast a ballot out of lethargy that their voice will not be heard. Even if morale isn't the answer, or if it can't be measured through political efficacy, what changes can be made to reinstate faith in the government and energize voters?

One option that should be considered is widespread sharing of records showing how legislators voted. Having access to this information will show constituents whether their elected officials are voting as they would have hoped. Another means of spreading awareness is for government offices to track the number of constituent correspondences they receive and the number of which they resolve or respond to. This would help the public be aware of the level to which their elected officials are helping them or responding to their feedback. Third, more widespread knowledge of the services government offices can provide would be beneficial, motivating individuals to seek help in government offices and learn what the staff can do for them. These strategies would bring greater transparency to the level at which government officials consider and act on their constituents needs and interests. Ultimately, if those with lower efficacy scores are right, these efforts will only highlight the failures of government to meet constituent needs.

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APPENDIX – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Efficacy index:

Do you think that you and people you know have a say in what the government does?

[If yes:] why?

[if no:] why not?

Do you think it matters whether you vote or not?

[If yes:] why?

[if no:] why not?

Do you think public officials care what you and people you know think?

[If yes:] why?

[if no:] why not?

How much do you think the government pays attention to what the people think when it decides what to do?

Why do you think this?

Other questions on perception of government:

Do you think politics and government are too complicated for you and people you know to understand what is going on?

[If yes:] why?

[if no:] why not?

On a scale of 0-10, how much do you trust the government, where 0 is least trusting, 10 is most trusting, and 5 means neither trust nor distrust?

[if idk to any or all:] why do you say that?

Political behavior index:

Did you vote last November?

[If so:] What sorts of things did you consider when deciding who to vote for?

[If not or unsure:] What sorts of things would you have considered when deciding who to vote for?

Have you ever attended any political rallies or protests?

[If so:] What was the protest or rally about??

[If so:] When was the last time you did?

Have you ever displayed a campaign's memorabilia, such as a t-shirt, hat, button, sticker, or sign?

Have you ever donated money to a political party or individual candidate running for public office?

Have you ever written a letter, made a phone call, or spoken to a public official to give them your opinion about something that should be done?

[If so:] What did you want them to know?

Other questions on political behavior:

Do you discuss politics with family and friends?

[If so:] How often?

Are you registered with a political party?

[If so:] Which one?

How often do you pay attention to what's going on in government and politics?

What would you do if you saw a problem in your community that needed to be fixed, like a pothole that needed to be filled or a playground that needed to be maintained?

What would you do if you needed help with personal paperwork, like applying for a replacement birth certificate or a disability parking placard?

Most important issue

What do you think is the most important problem in the U.S. today?

How good of a job is the government doing in dealing with this problem?

Perceived inequality

Do you think the difference in incomes between rich and poor in the U.S. is large or small?

[If large:] How large?

[If small:] How small?

Demographics

What is your gender?

Are you Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino?

What race do you consider yourself to be, such as white, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian, Pacific Islander

What is your age?

Hand participant card of income brackets. What was the total income of all members of your household in 2022?

Do you receive any social services from the state, such as unemployment, food stamps, or medical assistance?

What is the highest level of school you have completed?

Are you currently employed?

[If yes:] What kind of work do you do?

[If no:] What kind of work did you do?

Do you or have you ever served as a member of the United States military?