Are All Politics National?
County-Level Social Contexts and Inequality Remediation Attitudes, 2006-2012

Andrew M. Lindner
Skidmore College

Jason N. Houle
Dartmouth College

ABSTRACT

Despite growing economic inequality in recent decades, public support for government intervention to address it has been stable. A substantial literature has documented the individual-level demographic, social, and political characteristics that are associated with the extent to which individuals favor government intervention to reduce inequality. However, less work has examined how the local social environments that individuals are embedded in shape attitudes regarding inequality remediation. Using data from the General Social Survey (2006-2012) and other data sources, we examine whether local economic and social characteristics are associated with individuals' support for government intervention to address income inequality in the U.S. Specifically, we link restricted General Social Survey data with place-level identifiers to county-level data on local income inequality, racial segregation, and partisan leanings. Broadly, we find that while national and individual-level conditions are strongly correlated with perceptions about inequality remediation, most local-level characteristics were not strongly nor significantly associated with individual attitudes regarding government intervention to address inequality. These findings tend to suggest that individuals formulate policy stances regarding inequality based on national messaging, rather than on observations within their own communities.

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* Direct correspondence to Andrew M. Lindner (alindner@skidmore.edu), Department of Sociology, Skidmore College, 815 N. Broadway, Saratoga Springs, NY.

INTRODUCTION

In the lead up to the Great Recession, scholars, policy makers, the media, and the general public became increasingly concerned with rising inequality by income and wealth in the United States. Income inequality has been rising steadily since the past several decades, and inequality today is at least as high if not higher than inequality during the Gilded Age of the 1920s. As inequality has risen, so too has public concern over the issue. The Occupy Wall Street protests of the early 2010s propelled inequality into national prominence. With slogan “We are the 99%”, the movement called attention to the rising gap between the richest Americans (the 1%) and everybody else, and spurred politicians to do something to reduce inequality. In his final State of the Union address, President Obama argued that rising income inequality was one of the four biggest questions facing the United States (Obama 2016). In turn, scholars have recently examined how the public perceives inequality: specifically, whether these perceptions are accurate (Gimpelson and Treisman 2015; Norton and Ariely 2011), whether the public thinks there is too much or too little inequality (McCall 2013; Kenworthy and McCall 2008), and whether or not they perceive it as a corrosive social problem (Fairbrother and Martin 2013; Hastings 2019; Pickett and Wilkinson 2015).

A plausible, and commonly stated, hypothesis is that as inequality increases, the public will be more inclined to believe something should be done to remediate it (McCall and Kenworthy 2009; Sands 2017; Wright 2017; Jordan 2018). But to date, research on this topic shows public attitudes about inequality—particularly redistribution—have not changed in response to rising income inequality (Breznau and Hommermich 2019; VanHeuvelen 2017; Wright 2018; McCall and Kenworthy 2009; Kenworthy and McCall 2008). **Figure 1** demonstrates that, over time, there is essentially no correlation between increases in income

inequality (as measured by the Gini Index) and changes in the American public's attitudes about whether the government should do something to reduce it¹. Other research suggests similar patterns for other attitudinal measures about inequality remediation, including whether income differentials in the United States are "too large," whether the government should be responsible for reducing income differences, and support for government action to redistribute wealth (McCall 2013). The question, then, is what *does* matter for shaping individual attitudes about inequality remediation?

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

In light of these patterns, a growing literature highlights the individual-level social, structural, and cultural characteristics that are associated with the extent to which individuals feel something should be done about rising inequality. For example, people of color, women, low-income individuals, and those who are politically liberal are more likely to report that the government should do something to reduce inequality than their counterparts (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Davis and Robinson 1991; Cech 2017; McCall 2013). However, less work has examined how the immediate social environments that individuals are embedded in may shape perceptions of social inequality and what should be done about it. For example, those who live in more socially unequal environments may be more or less likely to endorse government action to reduce inequality. Similarly, high levels of segregation by race and social class may skew how Americans perceive inequality, as they are often surrounded by those who share their outlooks and social position in life. Recent experimental work provides suggestive evidence that social context shapes individuals' perceptions about whether inequality should be reduced (Chavanne

¹ In this paper, we use the phrase "support for inequality remediation" as shorthand to refer to our dependent variable. Specifically, it is a measure of whether "the government ought to reduce the income differences between rich and poor" (and, confusingly, dubbed "eqwlth" in the General Social Survey).

2018; Heiserman and Simpson 2017; McCall et al. 2017; Sands 2017). Other evidence suggests that higher inequality in US states associated with a reduced sense of financial satisfaction (Hastings 2019). Still, no research we are aware of has explicitly examined the contextual correlates of inequality remediation.

In this paper, we ask how local social and economic context is associated with individual attitudes about inequality remediation. To do this, we use restricted data from The General Social Survey coupled with county level data from the American Community Survey and other sources to examine whether local economic and social characteristics are associated with individuals' perceptions of what should be done to reduce social inequality in the U.S. Broadly, we find that while national and individual-level conditions are strongly correlated with attitudes about inequality remediation, local-level characteristics—including measures of social inequality—are not strongly associated with individual perceptions of inequality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Economic inequality in the United States in the 21st century is extreme both compared to most other nations and over time (Keister and Lee 2014; Piketty and Saez 2014). Inequality, both in terms of income and wealth, have grown substantially in recent decades. In 1980, the top one percent of households' share of income was about 10%. By 2015, it had more than doubled to 22% (Stone et al. 2018). Income inequality is now at levels not seen since the Gilded Age of the late 19th century (Acemoglu and Autor 2011; Piketty and Saez 2003). Scholars have long hypothesized that growing inequality is socially corrosive in that it, undermines trust (Fairbrother and Martin 2013; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009), limits social mobility (Bradbury and Triest 2016), creates dissatisfaction with one's economic position (Hastings 2019), and damages mental

and physical well-being (Pickett and Wilkinson 2010; Pickett and Wilkinson 2015; Diez-Roux, Link, and Northridge 2000). While research on this topic has been mixed and generated debate (Beckfield 2004; Gelman, Kenworthy, and Su 2010; Henderson et al. 2004), one question that animates and underlies this work is how individuals respond and react to high and rising levels of income inequality.

Attitudinal research has consistently shown that people in both the U.S. and worldwide radically underestimate how high the current levels of economic inequality are (Gimpelson and Treisman 2015; Norton and Ariely 2011). But, when presented with various hypothetical distributions of income, the vast majority of Americans indicate a preference for a more equal distribution than the current levels (Norton and Ariely 2011). Likewise, people who perceive higher levels of inequality tend to support redistributive policies (Gimpelson and Treisman 2015).

But despite the evidence documenting the harmful consequences of extreme inequality and the seeming preference for redistribution in experimental settings, surveys indicate that the U.S. public remains divided over inequality and what should be done about it. Prior research has largely focused on the individual-level correlates of perceptions about inequality. One of the most consistent findings within this body of research is support for what is known as the “underdog thesis,” or the idea that people who are disadvantaged in systems of inequality tend to perceive it more and support greater remediation (Cech 2017; Davis and Robinson 1991). People in lower social class positions, women, and people of color are more likely to express critical views of inequality and are more likely to favor redistributive government programs (McCall 2013). In an era of growing partisan polarization and heightened sorting of policy preferences by party identification (McCarthy, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016; Mason 2018; Sides, Tesler, and

Vavreck 2018), the two parties and their adherents have adopted highly divergent stances regarding inequality remediation. Democrats overwhelmingly favor government action to address inequality, while the majority of Republicans oppose it (Horowitz, Igielnik, and Kochhar 2020). Meanwhile, research has shown that perceptions and attitudes about social inequality have remained steady even in the face of rising income inequality at the national level (Brezna and Hommerich 2019; VanHeuvelen 2017; Wright 2018; McCall and Kenworthy 2009; Kenworthy and McCall 2008), raising questions about how and whether the broader social context influences individual's attitudes towards social inequality.

How might social conditions in communities affect individual perspectives on inequality? Common sense would suggest that if one lives in a community with greater economic inequality, one would be more aware of it. Hastings (2019) found that individuals in U.S. states with greater inequality had lower satisfaction with their current financial situation, suggesting that people may formulate relative comparisons based on local environments. Whether it is riding the subway with people across the class spectrum or having the oldest car at school drop-off in the morning, encountering the cultural manifestations of economic inequality ought to make people perceive it more. At a minimum, local contexts ought to add to a long list of considerations about inequality that individuals derive from a wide variety of sources. However, simply living in a community where inequality is observable, may not necessarily translates into a commitment to inequality remediation.

Even in an era of extreme partisan polarization, researchers examining attitudes about political issues have long-noted a relatively high degree of “response instability” (Converse 1964; Friedman 2016; Lauderdale, Hanretty, and Vivyan 2018; Zaller 1992). That is, even committed partisans can fluctuate dramatically in their policy stances. Beginning with Zaller

(1992), research has shown that rather than having fixed opinions, most people have a range of often conflicting “considerations” on a given issue (Jordan 2018; Lauderdale, Hanretty, and Vivyan 2018). Many of these considerations originate with politicians, pundits, and other elite claimsmakers who make policy claims on TV news shows, in newspapers, and on social media. Other considerations stem from firsthand experiences or conversations with friends and family. Of course, informed partisans are able to filter out incoming elite messaging that contradicts their pre-dispositions, such as when a liberal Democrat tunes out a Fox News pundit’s anti-taxation rant. But relatively few Americans are informed enough about politics to filter effectively. When asked for their stance on a policy issue by a survey researcher, people tend to “average” the most readily available and salient considerations and offer up their answer at that moment (Friedman 2016; Zaller 1992). When it comes to inequality and redistributive policy, elite claimsmakers undoubtedly contribute to the public’s set of considerations, but there is good reason to suspect that local contexts may add considerations as well.

Some relatively recent experimental research offers evidence to suggest that exposure to inequality may shape their thinking about the issues in various ways (Chavanne 2018; Heiserman and Simpson 2017; McCall et al. 2017; Sands 2017). McCall et al. (2017), for example, found that introducing people to information about growing inequality made them more likely to attribute success and failure to structural explanations. While most of these studies make use of experimentally-manipulated vignettes, Sands (2017) conducted a field experiment in which she randomly exposed participants to confederates who appeared either poverty-stricken or affluent. They were then asked to sign a petition by another confederate calling for a redistributive policy called, “the millionaire’s tax.” Sands found that exposure to poverty decreased affluent participants’ support for redistribution. These results are suggestive that participants are less

supportive of inequality remediation when primed by potential policy beneficiaries who seem “undeserving.” Similarly, using survey data, Mijs (2019) draws from cross-national evidence to argue that high levels of social inequality hardens individuals’ meritocratic beliefs. Taken together, these studies show—somewhat paradoxically—that as inequality increases, individuals may become less concerned about it and see it as a legitimate societal outcome of meritocratic successes and failures.

These studies indicate that attitudes about inequality are not merely baked into to our identities and political commitments. Rather, they tend to suggest that stories we read and encounters we have may shape our views about inequality. However, these questions have only been approached using experimental methods, not survey research, which would allow us to understand how local conditions affect attitudes about inequality in natural settings. Living in a community with high levels of inequality or with visible signs of economic distress is quite different from responding to a questionnaire shortly after a one-off encounter with poverty-stricken confederates in an experiment. Hastings’s (2019) research has shown that higher state-level inequality is associated with greater financial dissatisfaction, but many states may be too geographically expansive and residentially segregated for residents to notice the inequality within them. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, no study to date has explored the effects of local inequality on attitudes regarding inequality remediation using survey data.

Living in a place with greater inequality and more signs of economic distress may increase the chances that respondents have readily-available and salient considerations from everyday life that might heighten their perception of the extent of inequality. The flip-side of this theorized relationship is that people in more equal, homogeneous, and affluent communities may be less aware of inequality. In recent decades, Americans are increasingly sorted into more

racially, economically, and ideologically homogeneous communities (Bischoff and Reardon 2014; Intrator, Tannen, and Massey 2016; Sussell 2013). This “Big Sort” has occurred both through structural mechanisms that inhibit greater integration (e.g., discriminatory home-lending practices) as well as simple homophily within social networks. As Keister (2018:7) writes, “we tend to sort ourselves into smaller groups or cliques of similar others. As a result, we encounter a small slice of the population on most days and rarely see evidence of inequality.” Living in a place with high inequality is no guarantee that one frequently encounters people with different economic circumstances than one’s own, but living in a county with very little inequality ought reduce that chance further. Perhaps, as goes a common news media assertion, the United States’ increasingly homogeneous communities prevent people from recognizing inequality and supporting interventions to address it (Badger 2015; Illing 2018; PBS Newshour 2011).

Given that past research has shown perceptions of inequality are associated with support for more redistributive policies (Gimpelson and Treisman 2015; McCall et al. 2017), we hypothesize (H_1) that people in counties with higher levels of inequality (as measured by the Gini coefficient) and with more signs of economic distress (as measured by median income, unemployment rates, and the percent with college degrees), there will be more support for government policies to address inequality. We expect that where inequality and economic distress are more visible, people will be more likely to perceive a need for redistribution.

Apart from the economic conditions of a county, it is possible that the local political context could also affect one’s considerations regarding inequality. Democratic and Republican partisans tend to share their parties’ respective views on inequality and redistributive policies, with Democrats tending to favor greater redistribution of income. Likewise, net of party identification, more liberal people tend to more strongly favor government intervention to

address inequality (Keister and Lee 2014; McCall 2013). But beyond individual political leanings, it is possible that local political conditions may stir additional support for or opposition to redistributive policies. Given that Americans now live in more ideologically-sorted communities (Bishop and Cushing 2008; Sussell 2013), it may be that being surrounded by more likeminded individuals reinforces political policy commitments. Over informal conversations at the coffee klatch or at family gatherings, living in a more Democratic-leaning community ought to provide individuals with more pro-redistribution considerations. Additionally, in communities where one party is more dominant, we would expect more issue advocacy by the local party and civil society groups as well as stronger party operations that draw attention to partisan considerations regarding inequality. Thus, we hypothesize (H₂) that in counties with higher support for the Democratic presidential candidate, there will be more support for government policies to address inequality.

Finally, local racial composition may affect considerations regarding inequality. Nationally, political rhetoric regarding economic redistribution and welfare state spending is often racialized (Edsall and Edsall 1991; Logan 2011; McCall 2013; Mettler 2011; Piston 2018; Winter 2006). Republicans, at least as far back as the Reagan administration, have campaigned in strict opposition to the expansion of the welfare state and redistributive policies, often deploying racially-coded language that identifies the non-white beneficiaries of redistribution as “the undeserving poor” (Edsall and Edsall 1991; Mettler 2011; Piston 2018). Unsurprisingly then, at the individual-level, whites are less supportive welfare state spending and economic redistribution than blacks and other non-whites (McCall 2013; Piston 2018).

But how does the racial composition and the level of racial segregation of one’s community affect attitudes about government intervention to address income inequality? As the

United States has sorted into more ideologically homogeneous communities, racial segregation has largely persisted in much of the country due to housing preferences, disparities in access to credit, and discriminatory real estate practices (Billingham and Hunt 2016; Emerson, Chai, and Yancey 2001; Intrator, Tannen, and Massey 2016; Massey and Tannen 2017). Following our previous logic, we suspect that in more segregated communities, people will have fewer contacts with members of other racial groups and, therefore, tend to view the poor more sympathetically – an attitude that is less likely to be extended to members of racial out-groups (Piston 2018; Reeskens and van Oorschot 2012; Nosek, Banaji, and Greenwald 2002). Ironically then, increased racial segregation may have the effect of increasing support for redistribution as people see those around them as more deserving of government intervention. In other words, the homogeneity in racially segregated communities creates more opportunities for people to gather pro-redistribution considerations. Consequently, we hypothesize (H₃) that in counties with higher levels of racial segregation (as measured by the dissimilarity index), there will be more support for government policies to address inequality.

The Current Study

This study explores how county-level economic inequality, political composition, and racial segregation are associated with individual attitudes about inequality remediation. We do so by examining between-county differences, pooled from multiple years of The General Social Survey from 2006-2012. However, another possibility exists: perhaps, it is not the absolute levels of inequality and segregation in a county that matter, but the relative change over time that shapes individuals' thinking about inequality remediation. To address this concern, we also examine the effects of within-county changes of several key variables on inequality remediation.

Taken together, these results contribute to the existing literature by offering the first survey evidence regarding whether social and economic conditions in local contexts inform individuals' considerations about inequality remediation.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

Data from this study are drawn from three main individual and county-level data sources. Individual-level data are from the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a nationally representative repeated cross-section of U.S. adults (Smith, Davern, Freese, and Morgan 2016). We use restricted data with geographic-level identifiers and pool data from the 2006 (n=4,510), 2008 (n=2,023), 2010 (n=2,044), and 2012 (n=1,974) survey waves (total N=10,551). We limit our sample to respondents who were asked questions about their perceptions of social inequality (respondents who were randomly assigned GSS ballots B or C) in 2006 (n=1,989), 2008 (n=1,365), 2010 (n=1,377), and 2012 (n=1,338), for a total sample size of 5,988². To ensure that our county-level estimates are not biased by small sample sizes, we further limit our GSS sample to respondents who are in counties with at least 14 other GSS respondents (2006 n=1,893; 2008 n=1,298; 2010 n=1,289; 2012 n=890; total n=5,370 respondents in 190 counties³). After accounting for missing data on all study variables, our final sample size is 5,078 respondents.

Contextual data are primarily from the five-year American Community Survey county-level files. These data were extracted via Social Explorer (www.socialexplorer.com). American

² Because respondents were randomly assigned to GSS ballots, these data are missing completely at random (MCAR), and thus do not bias our study findings.

³ One concern is that the counties included in our study are systematically different from the counties that were excluded from the study. Additional analyses reveal that included and excluded counties are quite similar on key variables in the study—including respondents' perceptions of inequality, county-level economic inequality (Gini coefficient), and median household income. However, counties that were excluded tended to be smaller than the counties that were included in the analysis.

Community Survey (ACS). The ACS county level estimates are aggregated from an annual nationally representative survey of approximately 3 million US households, conducted by the US Census Bureau. Response to the ACS is required by law, thus ensuring very high response rates (approximately 98%) (U.S. Census Bureau 2013). To increase reliability of the measures, county-level indicators are averaged over five years by the ACS. To capture local county-level social and economic conditions experienced by GSS respondents from 2006-2012, we average county-level variables from the ACS across four five-year periods: 2005-2009, 2006-2010, 2007-2011, and 2008-2012. We also draw on county-level presidential election data from 2012 and 2016 that were published by *The Guardian* and Townhall.com and are available on Github (McGovern 2018).

Variables

Local (County) Economic and Social Conditions: We measure local social and economic conditions with an array of variables that are theoretically germane for respondents' perceptions of social inequality. Economic Inequality is measured with the Gini coefficient which broadly indicates the level of income inequality in a county (where 0 indicates a perfect equality of income and 1 indicates perfect inequality of income). Racial and Ethnic Segregation and Composition is measured with the index of dissimilarity, which indicates the separation of racial groups within a county (Iceland 2009). This measure was calculated for the respective proportions of blacks and whites at the Census tract-level (relative to the county as a whole) and, then, aggregated to the county-level. We also measure racial and ethnic diversity with two additional measures: the percent of the population that is non-Hispanic black and the percent of the population that is foreign-born. We measure local socioeconomic context with three measures: the percent of the population that is unemployed in the county, the median household

income (in \$10k dollars), and the percent of the population that has a college degree or more.

Political context is measured by the (average) percent of the population that voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012. We also adjust for population density and region (1=county is in the south; 0=not) in all models.

Individual-Level Covariates: We account for a variety of individual-level factors that previous research indicates is strongly predictive of perceptions of inequality, and may confound the association between local context and inequality perceptions (McCall and Kenworthy 2009; Kenworthy and McCall 2008; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Davis and Robinson 1991; Cech 2017; McCall 2013). These include gender (1=woman; 0=man), race (white [referent], black, other race), age in years, total household income, employment status (employed full time [referent], part-time employed, unemployed, not in labor force), and educational attainment (less than high school [referent], high school degree, some college, 4-year college or more). Following McCall (2013), we measure political ideology and affiliation with two measures. Political ideology indicates whether individuals think of themselves as liberal, moderate [referent] or conservative. Political affiliation is measured via party identification (republican, democrat [referent], independent, or other party). Finally, all models include year dummies for the year respondents were interviewed for the GSS (2006 [referent], 2008, 2010, 2012). These year fixed effects essentially capture all national between-county time-trends.

Analytic Strategy

We use Hierarchical Linear Models (HLM) to estimate the association between the local context and individual's perceptions about inequality. Hierarchical modeling techniques are preferred to OLS when dealing with multilevel (ex. nested) data because they can better deal with shared variance and non-independence with grouped data (Raudenbush and Bryk 2012). In

our specific case, HLM's can correct for the fact that individuals (level 1) clustered within counties (level 2) are more similar than individuals in different counties than we would expect due to random chance. HLM models also allow us to decompose the variance in Y (inequality perceptions) into county (level 2) and individual (level 1) level components. The multilevel model can be reduced to the following equation:

$$(1) Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_1 X_{ij} + \beta_2 Z_j + r_{ij}$$

Where Y is the predicted outcome variable (inequality perceptions for individual *i* in county *j*, β_{0j} is the model intercept in county *j*, X_{ij} is an individual-level characteristic (such as age or employment status) for individual *i* in county *j*, and Z_j is a county-level (level-2) predictor, such as economic inequality. r_{ij} is the random error associated with respondent *i* in county *j*. All models also include year fixed effects (dummy variables for each year), which account for all national-level time trends that are stable across counties. We estimate random intercept models and adjust our standard errors for intracluster correlation within counties. All models are estimated in STATA 15.0 using the “mixed” command.

RESULTS

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

We begin by presenting descriptive statistics for all study variables in Table 1. The first column displays univariate descriptive statistics for the full sample, while the second and third columns show descriptive statistics stratified by whether or not individuals reported fully supporting government intervention to reduce inequality, or fully opposing it. A few key patterns are worth highlighting. First, replicating prior research (McCall and Kenworthy 2009; Kenworthy and McCall 2008; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Davis and Robinson 1991; McCall

2013), we find that individual level characteristics are associated with inequality attitudes, including race, political party and beliefs, socioeconomic status, sex and age. Second, at a national level, respondents were least supportive of government intervention in 2010, at the height of the Great Recession, a finding that aligns with prior research (McCall 2013; Brooks and Manza 2013; Weakliem 2018). Finally, we find that there is significant variation in inequality remediation attitudes across different types of counties, as measured by the variables in this study. Respondents who believe the government should take action to reduce inequality live, on average, in counties that have lower median incomes, are slightly more unequal, have more unemployment, a larger proportion of black people, are more segregated, more liberal (as measured by % of the population that voted for Obama), more urban, and less educated. This suggests that there is at least some variation in inequality attitudes across U.S. counties, though it is not clear whether this variation reflects differences in the composition of the individuals that live in these counties, or contextual differences that may sway the attitudes of those who live in these counties. To test whether county-level characteristics are associated with inequality attitudes net of individual-level characteristics, we turn to the results from multivariate hierarchical linear models.

Before asking the extent to which county-level social and economic conditions are associated with inequality attitudes, we first must ask how much variation in inequality attitudes exist at the county-level. Based on the variance components from a null multi-level model that includes only the dependent variable, we find that approximately 15% of the total variance in inequality attitudes is at the county level. Thus, while the majority of the variance in inequality attitudes is likely to be explained by individual-level characteristics, there is significant variation across counties.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

In Table 2, we show results from hierarchical linear models that estimate the association between inequality attitudes, county level social and economic conditions, and individual-level characteristics. In Model 1, we include only county-level characteristics. In Model 2, we add individual-level characteristics. Finally, in Model 3, we add year fixed effects, to account for all between-county national time trends that may be associated with attitudes about inequality remediation.

Across all models, we find little support for the notion that county social and economic conditions are associated with inequality remediation attitudes. Regardless of whether we include controls for individual-level characteristics or year fixed effects, the only county-level characteristic that is significantly associated at standard alpha levels with inequality remediation attitudes is the percent of county residents that voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012. In Model 3, a one percentage point increase in county support for Obama is associated with a .01 point increase in inequality remediation attitudes. That is, controlling for individual-level characteristics, individuals who live in more liberal counties are more likely to support government intervention to reduce inequality than those who live in less liberal counties. While statistically significant, this is a substantively small association. *Ceteris Parabis*, we would predict that a respondent who lived in a county where 25% of the residents voted for Obama would score about .25 points lower on a 7-point scale of inequality remediation than a respondent who lives in a county with 50% Obama vote share.

While we do find what appears to be a strong negative association between county income inequality remediation attitudes—such that people who live in more unequal counties are less supportive of intervention to reduce inequality—we would point out three things: first, while

this appears to be a large effect, the Gini coefficient is measured as a proportion (or ratio), and this coefficient reflects a move from perfect equality ($Gini=0$) to perfect inequality ($Gini=1$). Second, this coefficient is only marginally significant ($p<.1$ in Models 2 and 3). Finally, the bivariate association between county income inequality and remediation attitudes is substantively quite small (see Table 1).

If county-level social and economic conditions are not highly predictive of remediation attitudes, than what is? Broadly, we find that individuals' racial identification, sex, socioeconomic status, and age are predictive of remediation attitudes, net of county-level characteristics and year fixed effects. Similar to prior research (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Davis and Robinson 1991), we find broad support for the “underdog thesis”, such that those groups who have direct experience with social disadvantage—due to their position in the racial, gender, or class hierarchy—are more likely to support intervention to reduce inequality than those in more advantaged positions. As McCall and her colleagues have found (McCall and Kenworthy 2009; Kenworthy and McCall 2008; McCall 2013), we find particularly strong effects of individuals' political ideology and partisan identity on remediation attitudes, net of county-level characteristics and year fixed effects.

We also find that differences across survey years are relatively large, suggesting that national-level factors may play an important role in shaping attitudes towards inequality remediation. For example, respondents who were interviewed in 2010 were substantially less likely to support government intervention to reduce inequality, even after adjusting for all individual and contextual level variables. The difference in inequality remediation attitudes between 2006 and 2010 is about as large as the difference in remediation attitudes between liberals and moderates, and substantially larger than the difference between men and women.

Thus far we find that county-level social and economic conditions are not generally associated with individuals' desire to remediate social inequality. But there are some unanswered questions that merit further investigation. The first is about changes in local conditions: whether people tend to feel differently about inequality if they live in counties that experienced rapid changes in social and economic conditions over the study period—that is, if the county became more or less unequal, or more or less economically distressed. This is particularly important to consider given that our respondents were observed during the Great Recession, a period of immense social and economic upheaval that was experienced unequally across counties. Unfortunately, we cannot examine annual or yearly changes in local conditions because county-level estimates from the ACS are averaged over five-year intervals.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

What we can do however is examine whether changes in county conditions from the first five-year interval (2005-2009) from the last five year interval (2008-2012) are associated with attitudes about inequality remediation.⁴ In Table 3, we show results from hierarchical linear models, which incorporate the percent-change variables. Model 4 includes only county-level variables, while Model 5 incorporates individual-level characteristics and Model 6 adds year dummy variables. Across all of these models, the main effects are largely unchanged from Table 2. Both the percent change in county income inequality and percent change in Dissimilarity Index are negatively and significantly associated with inequality remediation attitudes (both $p < .05$). Controlling for individual-level characteristics, individuals in counties with growing inequality and increasing segregation were less likely to support inequality remediation than

⁴ In these models, we include a variable that reflects the average of the local conditions over the study time period (2005-2012) as well as a measure of change between the first and last ACS five-year estimate. This is statistically equivalent to a hybrid effects model (Firebaugh, Warner, Massoglia 2013), which allows us to estimate how within county changes and between-county differences are associated with inequality remediation attitudes.

those in counties with slower or negative changes in income inequality and segregation.

However, while significant, both coefficients are so small as to be substantively unimportant. As in the previous models, individual-level characteristics account for much more of variation in inequality remediation attitudes. In sum, we find no support for the notion that individuals who lived in counties that experienced more social and economic change were any more likely to support government intervention for reducing inequality. If anything, net of individual factors, increased segregation and growing income inequality are associated with less support for inequality remediation.

Another potential shortcoming of our analysis is it may not adequately capture the association between local conditions and inequality perceptions if there is heterogeneity in the association across different social groups. For example, if racial segregation was associated with more desire for redistribution among blacks, but less desire for redistribution among whites, these countervailing effects may cancel one another out in the aggregate. To examine this possibility, in a set of analyses available upon request, we tested for several theoretically relevant cross-level interactions between selected individual-level characteristics (notably race, gender, education, income, and employment) and our county-level predictors. Across these models, we found no consistent evidence that the association between local conditions and perceptions about inequality varied by race, gender, or social class.

DISCUSSION

As Figure 1 illustrates, over the past forty years, despite rising inequality in the United States, public opinion for greater government intervention to address it has not grown consistently. Likewise, in this study, contrary to our hypotheses, we find no evidence that

individuals in counties with greater inequality or particularly rapidly increasing inequality are more likely to favor action. Though with marginal significance and effects of miniscule magnitude, to the extent that county-level income inequality and increasing racial segregation have any effect, it would be to reduce support for inequality remediation. Rather, individual-level factors, particularly political ideology and partisan identity, are far more strongly associated with inequality remediation attitudes.

On the face of it, these findings run contrary to some research indicating that exposure to inequality in vignettes (Chavanne 2018; Heiserman and Simpson 2017; McCall et al. 2017) or field experiments (Sands 2017) increases structural explanations for inequality and support for redistribution. But there is a difference between brief exposure to a novel experimental condition and observing inequality within the natural setting of one's own community. The better parallel to the current research is Hastings' (2019) survey research showing that higher state-level inequality is linked with greater financial dissatisfaction. One reason for seeming disparity between those findings and ours is that the mechanisms which contribute to the formation of abstract policy opinions may be different from those for sizing up one's financial situation. In other words, it is possible that while local inequalities inform an individual's sense of their current financial well-being, more enduring characteristics (e.g., race, gender, and social class) as well as mass media and political discourse inform attitudes about policy to address inequality.

The largely null findings of this study also raise a deeper puzzle of how forms of inequality become visible to people. Most people are not regularly monitoring their county's Gini coefficient or even looking at each other's paychecks with any frequency. Rather, inequality may be inferred from visible signs of economic growth (e.g., new businesses opening up) or distress (e.g., home foreclosures). The findings here suggest that county-level inequality and

segregation are not, in and of themselves, enough to move the needle on attitudes regarding inequality remediation. Future research might compare visible and invisible forms of inequality within communities. Additionally, the very question of what constitutes a “community” is worthy of further study. This research examined counties, but, perhaps, metro areas, towns, or even neighborhoods are the places where inequalities are most visible to people. Indeed, the basic geographic unit at which individuals can observe inequality may vary widely across various parts of the United States with distinct degrees of density and mobility.

Still, this research does not directly measure whether people notice inequality. Instead, we examine their policy preferences regarding government intervention to address inequality. The findings of this study does offer some indication that local political context may shape individual attitudes about inequality remediation. Our findings did reveal a small but consistent effect of being in a more liberal county on inequality remediation attitudes, net of individual factors. That could be because being a “Strong Democrat” in New York City means something a tad more progressive than being a “Strong Democrat” in rural Alabama. But it may also reflect local organizing efforts, more union mobilization, or other factors otherwise unmeasured in the model.

Though local contextual effects are the primary focus of this paper, the best predictors of inequality remediation are individual-level political ideology and partisanship. A great deal of research has documented the growing partisan divide in the United States and the increasingly tidy sorting of policy preferences by political party (McCarthy, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016; Mason 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). Government action to address inequality is not exception to this general rule, with Democrats and Republicans quite divided. (Horowitz, Igielnik, and Kochhar 2020). One reasonable interpretation of the findings of this study is that

nationalized politics may swamp many other considerations. That is, even if people observe inequality locally, they may formulate their policy prescriptions nationally drawing on the talking points of cable news pundits and online news stories from national outlets.

In closing, it is worth further contextualizing our findings in light of the rapidly evolving Coronavirus crisis. This research is a study of inequality remediation attitudes in the era of the Great Recession. As we write, we are in the midst of a pandemic, in which inequality is fast increasing nationwide (Scheidel 2020; Quart and Serkez 2020). Ironically, physical distancing means many people are not seeing anything of their own communities, but are drawing cues from media. Initial survey evidence indicates a growing sense of solidarity alongside increased tolerance for inequality (Cappelen et al. 2020). Depending on how re-openings occur, people will, at some point, have the chance to observe the consequences of the pandemic firsthand. But the results of this study suggest that how individuals view government intervention to address inequality is more strongly associated with their individual characteristics than what they're seeing in their communities.

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Figure 1. Gini Index and Support for Inequality Remediation, 1978-2018

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Full Sample mean/prop.	<i>Should Government Take Action to Reduce Inequality?</i>		
		Yes	No	t-test
Inequality Remediation Attitudes (1=no action to reduce inequality; 7=action)	4.298 (1.993)			
<i>County-Level Characteristics (2005-2012)</i>				
Median Household Income (\$10,000)	5.490 (1.431)	5.331 (1.367)	5.596 (1.435)	***
Income Inequality (Gini Coefficient)	0.453 (0.0335)	0.454 (0.0359)	0.450 (0.0316)	**
% Unemployed	8.514 (2.180)	8.716 (2.299)	8.319 (1.929)	***
% Non Hispanic Black	12.76 (13.16)	14.45 (14.60)	11.53 (12.00)	***
% Foreign Born	12.08 (10.63)	12.51 (11.43)	11.29 (10.01)	*
Index of Dissimilarity	0.491 (0.129)	0.499 (0.136)	0.471 (0.120)	***
% Obama Vote (2008; 2012 average)	52.20 (14.22)	53.43 (15.09)	49.49 (12.65)	***
County is in the South (1=yes)	0.365	0.405	0.402	
Population Density (per square mile)	2020.4 (6436.7)	2272.9 (6811.0)	1160.7 (3041.6)	***
% w/ College Degree (age 25+)	27.57 (10.08)	26.43 (9.840)	27.81 (9.822)	**
<i>Individual-Level Characteristics</i>				
Sex (1=female; 0=male)	0.555	0.597	0.460	***
<u>Race</u>				
White	0.749	0.636	0.856	***
Black	0.144	0.241	0.0704	***
Other Race	0.107	0.123	0.0733	***
<u>Political Views</u>				
Liberal	0.281	0.385	0.125	***
Moderate	0.377	0.380	0.265	***
Conservative	0.342	0.235	0.610	***
<u>Political Party</u>				
Republican	0.329	0.162	0.622	***
Independent	0.177	0.199	0.141	**
Democrat	0.527	0.682	0.273	***
Other Party	0.0181	0.0168	0.0381	**
<u>Total Family Income</u>				
Less than \$25,000	0.268	0.395	0.180	***
\$25,000-\$49,999	0.223	0.228	0.163	***

Table 1 Continued on Next Page

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\$50,000-\$89,999	0.228	0.182	0.245	**
\$90,000+	0.282	0.195	0.412	***
<u>Employment Status</u>				
Unemployed	0.0673	0.0906	0.0352	***
Not in Labor Force	0.342	0.362	0.355	
Employed Part-Time	0.104	0.0990	0.0909	
Employed Full-Time	0.487	0.448	0.519	**
<u>Educational Attainment</u>				
< High School Degree	0.145	0.223	0.116	***
High School Degree	0.487	0.502	0.477	
Some College	0.182	0.115	0.230	***
4-year College Degree or more	0.285	0.185	0.334	***
Age	47.60	47.24	52.95	***
	(17.49)	(17.29)	(17.13)	
<u>Year of Survey</u>				
2006	0.353	0.349	0.304	*
2008	0.240	0.265	0.226	+
2010	0.242	0.206	0.299	***
2012	0.165	0.179	0.172	

Notes: N=5,078; standard deviations in parentheses; + p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

Table 2: HLM estimates predicting Inequality Remediation Attitudes, 2006-2012

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>
<i>County-Level Characteristics (2005-2012)</i>			
Median Household Income (\$10,000)	-0.053 (0.045)	-0.029 (0.039)	-0.027 (0.039)
Income Inequality (Gini Coefficient)	-1.689 (1.618)	-2.716+ (1.423)	-2.616+ (1.419)
% Unemployed	-0.022 (0.019)	-0.019 (0.016)	-0.019 (0.016)
% Non Hispanic Black	0.003 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.003)
% Foreign Born	-0.001 (0.005)	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.004)
Index of Dissimilarity	0.343 (0.304)	0.374 (0.266)	0.355 (0.265)
% Obama Vote (2008; 2012 average)	0.017*** (0.004)	0.009** (0.003)	0.010** (0.003)
County is in the South (1=yes)	-0.021 (0.093)	0.026 (0.081)	0.034 (0.081)
Population Density (per square mile)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
% w/ College Degree (age 25+)	-0.014* (0.007)	-0.005 (0.006)	-0.006 (0.006)
<i>Individual-Level Characteristics</i>			
Sex (1=female; 0=male)		0.141** (0.052)	0.143** (0.052)
<u>Race (white=referent)</u>			
Black		0.287*** (0.085)	0.284*** (0.085)
Other Race		0.045 (0.089)	0.028 (0.089)
<u>Political Views (Moderate = referent)</u>			
Liberal		0.342*** (0.066)	0.345*** (0.066)
Conservative		-0.464*** (0.064)	-0.468*** (0.064)
<u>Political Party (Democrat = referent)</u>			
Republican		-1.015*** (0.068)	-1.013*** (0.068)
Independent		-0.414*** (0.074)	-0.416*** (0.074)
Other Party		-0.919*** (0.194)	-0.887*** (0.193)

Table 2 Continued on Next Page

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Total Family Income (<\$25,000=referent)

\$25,000-\$49,999	-0.185*	-0.198**
	(0.075)	(0.075)
\$50,000-\$89,999	-0.344***	-0.349***
	(0.078)	(0.077)
\$90,000+	-0.561***	-0.570***
	(0.075)	(0.075)
<u>Educational Attainment (<HS Degree = referent)</u>		
High School Degree	-0.133*	-0.124+
	(0.066)	(0.065)
Some College	-0.250*	-0.260**
	(0.100)	(0.099)
4-year College Degree or more	-0.187+	-0.169+
	(0.101)	(0.101)
<u>Employment Status (Full-Time=referent)</u>		
Unemployed	0.313**	0.344**
	(0.105)	(0.105)
Not in Labor Force	0.057	0.069
	(0.065)	(0.065)
Employed Part-Time	-0.007	0.005
	(0.088)	(0.088)
Age	-0.009***	-0.009***
	(0.002)	(0.002)
<u>Year of Survey (2006 = referent)</u>		
2008		0.036
		(0.067)
2010		-0.348***
		(0.067)
2012		-0.015
		(0.077)
Constant	4.835***	6.546***
	(0.746)	(0.666)
		6.565***
		(0.663)

Notes: N=5,078; standard errors in parentheses; + p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

Table 3. HLM estimates predicting Inequality Remediation Attitudes with Percent Change Measures, 2006-2012

	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>	<i>Model 6</i>
<i>County-Level Characteristics (2005-2012)</i>			
County is in the South (1=yes)	-0.030 (0.089)	0.016 (0.079)	0.025 (0.079)
Population Density (per square mile)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
% w/ College Degree (age 25+)	-0.014* (0.007)	-0.006 (0.006)	-0.006 (0.006)
Median Household Income (\$10,000)	-0.052 (0.043)	-0.031 (0.038)	-0.028 (0.038)
Income Inequality (Gini Coefficient)	-2.044 (1.571)	-2.805* (1.396)	-2.709+ (1.393)
% Unemployed	-0.017 (0.019)	-0.017 (0.017)	-0.017 (0.017)
% Change in Median Household Income	0.006 (0.011)	0.002 (0.009)	0.002 (0.009)
% Change in Gini	-0.040** (0.015)	-0.031* (0.014)	-0.031* (0.014)
% Change in Unemployment	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)
% Non Hispanic Black	0.005 (0.004)	0.000 (0.003)	0.000 (0.003)
% Foreign Born	0.001 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.004)
Index of Dissimilarity	0.361 (0.297)	0.298 (0.263)	0.279 (0.262)
% Change in % Black	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
% Change in % Foreign Born	0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)
% Change in Index of Dissimilarity	-0.005+ (0.003)	-0.006* (0.003)	-0.005* (0.003)
% Obama Vote (2008; 2012 average)	0.018*** (0.004)	0.011** (0.003)	0.011** (0.003)
% Change in Obama Vote	-0.003 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.008)	-0.007 (0.008)
<i>Individual-Level Characteristics</i>			
Sex (1=female; 0=male)		0.138** (0.052)	0.141** (0.052)
<u>Race (white=referent)</u>			
Black		0.289*** (0.085)	0.285*** (0.084)
Other Race		0.045 (0.089)	0.029 (0.089)

Table 3 Continued on Next Page

Table 3 Continued from Previous Page
Political Views (Moderate = referent)

Liberal	0.352***	0.355***
	(0.066)	(0.066)
Conservative	-0.452***	-0.456***
	(0.064)	(0.064)
<u>Political Party (Democrat = referent)</u>		
Republican	-1.019***	-1.016***
	(0.068)	(0.068)
Independent	-0.414***	-0.415***
	(0.074)	(0.074)
Other Party	-0.951***	-0.919***
	(0.195)	(0.194)
<u>Total Family Income (<\$25,000=referent)</u>		
\$25,000-\$49,999	-0.184*	-0.196**
	(0.075)	(0.075)
\$50,000-\$89,999	-0.336***	-0.340***
	(0.078)	(0.078)
\$90,000+	-0.557***	-0.564***
	(0.075)	(0.075)
<u>Educational Attainment (<HS Degree = referent)</u>		
High School Degree	-0.127+	-0.118+
	(0.066)	(0.066)
Some College	-0.242*	-0.252*
	(0.100)	(0.099)
4-year College Degree or more	-0.184+	-0.167+
	(0.101)	(0.101)
<u>Employment Status (Full-Time=referent)</u>		
Unemployed	0.308**	0.340**
	(0.105)	(0.105)
Employed Part-Time	-0.006	0.005
	(0.089)	(0.088)
Not in Labor Force	0.043	0.055
	(0.065)	(0.065)
Age	-0.009***	-0.009***
	(0.002)	(0.002)
<u>Year of Survey (2006 = referent)</u>		
2008		0.039
		(0.067)
2010		-0.344***
		(0.067)
2012		-0.007
		(0.078)
Constant	4.945***	6.537***
	(0.744)	(0.670)
		6.556***
		(0.669)

Notes: N=5,078; standard errors in parentheses; + p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001