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When does inequality demobilize? New evidence from the American states

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ABSTRACT

Income inequality has been rising throughout the industrialized world, particularly in the United States. This long been thought to depress turnout, but extant research has yielded mixed findings. Here, I argue that the inequality-turnout relationship is conditional, depending crucially on election salience. I test this by using three decades (1984–2014) of panel data from the U.S. states and by leveraging the fixed and exogenous occurrence of presidential (higher-salience) and midterm (lower-salience) elections. Overall, I find a negative and statistically significant relationship between income inequality and voter turnout in midterm election years, but a substantively small and non-significant relationship in presidential election years. I attribute this to the ability of presidential contests, relative to midterms, to counteract the demobilizing influence of high inequality, by piquing voters' interest and activating citizens who would otherwise abstain. Overall, these findings help us to better understand of the politics of electoral participation in an era of high, and rising economic inequality.

Economic inequality has been rising for several decades, particularly in the United States (Alvardeo et al., 2018; Pikkety 2014). This has long been thought, in part by structuring the political agenda in line with the preferences of wealthy interests (Gilens and Page 2014; Hacker and Pierson 2010), to depress political participation, particularly among the less affluent (Schattschneider 1960; Solt 2008). Despite decades of rising inequality and long-standing concerns about low and unequal political participation (Dalton 2017; Lijphart 1997; Schlozman et al. 2018), direct evidence on the relationship between economic inequality and electoral participation is relatively sparse, and extant research has yielded mixed findings (Cancela and Geys 2016; Jensen and Jespersen 2017; Stockemer 2017).

A majority of studies, both in the U.S. and cross-nationally, find evidence of a negative relationship between income inequality and electoral participation (Anderson and Beramendi 2008; Galbraith and Hale 2008; Goodin and Dryzek 1980; Huijsmans et al. 2020; Lancee and Van de Werfhorst, 2012; Schäfer and Schwander 2019; Solt 2008; 2010; Theodossiou and Zangelidis 2020; Wilford 2020). However, others find evidence of a null relationship between inequality and participation (Fumagalli and Narciso 2012; Horn 2011; Stockemer and Parent 2014; Stockemer and Scruggs 2012), or a conditional one, depending on the extent to which left parties compete to mobilize the less affluent (Anderson and Beramendi 2012) or the degree to which major parties are polarized on issues of economic redistribution (Polacko et al., 2020). In short, extant research has not clearly demonstrated (1) *if* inequality demobilizes, and (2) *when* inequality demobilizes.

Past work suffers from two main limitations. One limitation is reliance on either survey self-reports of turnout or aggregate-level measures of voting age population (VAP) turnout. These measures include potentially ineligible voters, e.g., non-citizens or felons, as part of the eligible electorate and may yield incorrect inferences (McDonald and Popkin 2001). A second limitation is that past work has not adequately specified *when* income inequality demobilizes. For instance, two of the moderating variables discussed above, intra-party competition on the left (Anderson and Beramendi 2012), and left-right party polarization (Polacko et al., 2020) are valuable contributions to the literature but do not seem to apply very well to the most unequal industrial democracy—the United States (Alvaredo et al., 2018). First, a two-party system means that the U.S. lacks variation in left-wing intra-party competition. Second, there has been an inconsistent pattern between U.S. party polarization and voter turnout. For example, the 1960s saw high turnout alongside historically low levels of polarization, while the 1990s saw low turnout alongside comparatively high polarization.

Here, I improve upon past work by (1) using a measure of voter eligible population (VEP) turnout and (2) by advancing a more parsimonious moderator—election salience. Importantly, I ensure that this conditioning variable is not endogenous to the dependent variable of voter turnout. I do this by leveraging the fixed and exogenous occurrence of presidential (higher-salience) and midterm (lower-salience) elections. I argue that income inequality *can* demobilize, but that this depends crucially on the type of election (low vs. high salience) under consideration. Highly salient elections, characterized by large-scale

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mobilization efforts and voluminous media coverage, expand the scope of the issue agenda and pique ordinary citizens' interest, bringing additional voters to polls, many of whom would otherwise abstain. This can, I argue, help to counteract the otherwise demobilizing influence of income inequality. I test this claim by using four decades (1984–2014) of panel data from the 50 American states.

Using high-quality state-level measures of income inequality and voter turnout, I show that there is a negative and substantively significant relationship between income inequality and voter turnout in midterm election years, but a substantively small and non-significant relationship in presidential election years. These findings help us to better understand the inequality-turnout relationship and, more broadly, the politics of electoral participation in an era of high, and rising economic inequality.

1. When should inequality demobilize?

As Solt (2008, 48–50) notes, there are three broad theoretical perspectives on the relationship between economic inequality and political participation. The first is relative power theory. This theory predicts that higher inequality will be associated with lower levels of political participation in general, with declines among all income groups, but in particular among the less affluent. Relative power theory argues that higher inequality will result in wealthy interests and affluent citizens gaining greater control over the political issue agenda, i.e., seeing their preferred policy outcomes more frequently enacted and keeping issues from being seriously debated. This subtle, but consistent pattern of the rich "controlling" the political agenda should result in less affluent citizens abstaining from politics and in their more affluent counterparts, generally content with their political power, seeing little need to increase their already high levels of participation. The second is resource theory. This theory predicts that higher inequality will be associated with a bifurcated pattern of participation. Resource theory argues higher inequality will, by unequally distributing socio-economic resources, should result in a bifurcated pattern of political participation, i.e., higher levels of participation among more affluent citizens and lower levels of participation among less affluent citizens. The third is conflict theory. This theory predicts that higher inequality will be associated with higher levels of political participation in general, with class conflict spurring *increased* political participation in general, with both rich and poor citizens participating more in an effort to respectively defend and improve, their economic status.

As discussed in the introduction, most existing work, but not all, finds support for the main tenet of relative power theory, i.e., that higher country and state-level income inequality is associated with lower levels of political participation. However, this line of work is less clear about *when* inequality demobilizes. I argue that the (generally) negative observed relationship between income inequality and political participation should be conditioned by election salience.

As discussed above, the logic underlying relative power theory is that high inequality fosters an environment in which the most affluent members of society hold a disproportionate share of the income and wealth. This means that the political influence of the affluent is strengthened while the influence of the non-affluent is weakened. In short, a large socio-economic gap between the economic "haves" and "have-nots" in society allows rich citizens and wealthy interests to see their preferred policies more frequently enacted, or conversely to ensure that certain issues are kept off the political agenda. The subtle, but consistent success that the rich have in controlling the political agenda means that the less affluent will eventually conclude that participation is not worth the effort and will lead affluent citizens, who are generally content with the political status quo, should see little need to increase their already (comparatively) high levels of participation. This should not be the case in all elections, however. Specifically, I argue that inequality should be less likely to depress turnout in more exciting, competitive, and salient elections.

Fraga and Hersh (2010) argue that the determinants of turnout are unlikely to be the same across elections, specifically competitive vs. noncompetitive ones. The test this by examining how electoral competition conditions the relationship between inclement weather (heavy rain and snow) and county-level voter turnout in U.S. presidential elections. They find that the ordinarily demobilizing influence of inclement weather (Gomez et al. 2007) is significantly mitigated by electoral competition, that is, bad weather has a negative and substantively large effect on voter turnout in noncompetitive states, but a substantively weak effect (and even slightly positive relationship) in competitive states. Extending this, I argue that the *generally* demobilizing influence of high economic inequality can be mitigated by the occurrence of competitive, exciting, and salient elections, these being contests for the American presidency.

Control of the presidency and the federal executive branch is the ultimate electoral prize in American politics and has enormous policy consequences, particularly in the economic domain (Bartels 2016; Faricy 2015; Kelly 2009). Partisan control of the executive branch dictates, for example, whether the national government focuses on expanding public health insurance, combating climate change, and taxing the wealthy versus limiting and/or reversing action in those domains.[1] Although midterms are important, there is no contest, that has the same clear, visible policy consequences as winning the presidency. Even if most ordinary voters care little about policy (Achen and Bartels 2016), a debate that is far from settled (Fowler 2020; Rogers 2020), they should still be far more excited about the prospects of their preferred party winning the presidency, relative to winning for example, a particular governorship or a seat in/control of the U.S. Congress and/or a state legislature.

Relative to midterm contests, presidential elections expand the scope of the issue agenda (Schattschneider 1960) as the major party candidates make issue and group-based appeals to a broader swath of the electorate in an effort to marshal a national coalition of voters (Aldrich 2011; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). All of this activates partisan loyalties (Singh and Thornton 2019) and contributes to an on-year "surge" of voters (Campbell 1960; Shaw and Petrocik 2020), one that tends to recede in subsequent off-year elections. In contrast, midterm elections, due to their comparatively lower stakes, narrower mobilization efforts, and more limited media coverage, simply lack the same ability to incentivize electoral participation and to mobilize voters. In short, midterm elections simply lack the same ability to pique voter interest, and by extension, to counteract the demobilizing influence of high inequality. Formally, I hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis. Income inequality should have a stronger negative relationship with voter turnout in midterm election years than in presidential election years.

2. Data and methods

I use panel data from the 50 U.S. states from 1984 to 2014 to test this hypothesis. I restrict the data analyses to this 30-year time frame for two reasons. The first is due to the data availability of my key dependent and

[1] Though there is some disagreement over whether Democrats (Republicans) provide better substantive representation to the less (more) affluent, with interesting heterogeneity across economic and social/cultural issues (Lax et al. 2019; Maks-Solomon and Rigby 2019), it is clear that Democratic and Republican administrations would pursue vastly different policy agendas.

independent variables. The second is to ensure that I have an equal number of observations in both midterm and presidential election years.[2]

My dependent variable is voter-eligible population (VEP) turnout in each state-year. Unlike the voting-age population (VAP) turnout, a widely available and commonly used measure that simply calculates the percentage of each state's adult (18 and over) population that voted, VEP turnout excludes non-eligible populations such as felons and non-citizens, instead calculating the percentage of *eligible* voters who cast a ballot. This provides a more accurate measure of the percent of *possible voters* who cast a ballot. These data are, at the time of this writing, available from 1980 through 2018 (data is missing for Louisiana in 1982) and are made publicly accessible by Michael McDonald.[3]

My main independent variable is state income inequality. To measure this, I use the pre-tax income shares of the most affluent citizens (the top 5%, top 1%, and top 0.1%) in each state-year. These data are based on IRS (Internal Revenue Service) tax returns and are, at the time of this writing, available at the state level from 1917 through 2015. These data are made publicly accessible by Mark Frank.[4] The use of top income shares, rather than a general Gini coefficient, for example, more accurately reflects the *nature* of U.S. inequality, i.e., a growing gulf between the super-rich and everyone else (Bartels 2016; Pikkety, Saez, and Zucman 2018). Indeed, relative power theory, the dominant paradigm for understanding the inequality-participation relationship, focuses on the economic and political power of the super-rich. As such, this measure (top income shares) is more conceptually appropriate than a general Gini coefficient, which simply measures how much redistribution would be necessary for all members of society to have the same amount of income, and does not explicitly tell us how well-off the most affluent members of society are, relative to everyone else. Another strength of these data are the use of federal tax returns, rather than survey self-reports, i.e., from the U.S. Census Bureau. Survey-based measures, which tend to top-code very high incomes, are likely to underestimate the true extent of subnational income inequality.[5]

The conditioning variable of interest is an indicator for midterm vs. presidential election year (0 = midterm; 1 = presidential). To help guard against spuriousness and omitted variable bias, I account for several socio-demographic variables that can plausibly shape both income inequality and voter turnout.[6] I specifically control for educational attainment (% with a college degree), racial/ethnic diversity (% non-white), labor union density, and whether there is a concurrent gubernatorial and/or U.S. Senate election. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the main dependent (state-year VEP turnout) and independent variables (the top income shares in each state-year). As shown in Table 1, voter turnout is considerably higher in presidential years than in midterms. Importantly, there is also meaningful variation in both voter turnout and income inequality.

3. Testing the inequality-turnout relationship

I test my hypothesis in Figs. 1 and 2, and in Tables 2 and 3. In Fig. 1, I graphically illustrate the simple bivariate relationship between state income inequality and state voter turnout in midterm (a, b, c) and presidential years (d, e, f). Fig. 1 shows, consistent with hypothesized expectations, that the inequality-turnout relationship differs across elections. In midterm years, the correlations (a, b, c) between income inequality and voter turnout are negative and statistically significant (mean Pearson's r = −0.15; mean p-value = 0.01). However, in presidential years, the correlations (d, e, f) are slightly *positive* and fall short of statistical significance (mean Pearson's r = 0.08; mean p-value = 0.13).

In Table 2, I interact these three measures of state income inequality (the top 0.1%, top 1%, and top 5% income shares) with a dummy variable indicating whether each of the 800 state-year elections took place during a midterm or presidential year (0 vs. 1). I do not include any fixed effects (dummy variables for each election year and for each state) in

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for key variables, 1984–2014.

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max	N
Midterm Turnout	41.9	7.9	20.2	64.1	400
Presidential Turnout	58.3	7.1	40.2	78.4	400
Top 0.1% Income Share	7.1	3.1	2.8	22.5	800
Top 1% Income Share	15.8	4.5	8.2	34.4	800
Top 5% Income Share	30.1	5.3	19.1	51.9	800

Note: Shows descriptive statistics for the key dependent and independent variables (state-year voter turnout and state-year income inequality). Midterm election years = 1986–2014. Presidential election years = 1984–2012.

[2] To ensure that I have a balanced dataset (an equal number of state-year observations in both midterm and presidential elections), The data could theoretically span from 1980 through 2018, but I restrict it to range from 1984 through 2014. I do this for two reasons. The first is that data is missing for VEP turnout for Louisiana in 1982. As such, this would result in a slightly unbalanced dataset, i.e., there would be an unequal number of state-year observations in midterm and presidential election years. The second is that data for state income inequality (the top income shares based on IRS tax data) are not available beyond 2015. As such, the best way to ensure that I have high-quality and valid measures of state voter turnout and income inequality, as well as an equal number of observations in both midterm and presidential election years, is to restrict the main data analyses to range from 1984 through 2014. This yields 400 state-year observations in both midterm and presidential years along with high-quality and conceptually appropriate measures of state income inequality over this same time period. To demonstrate that my results are not simply a product of this particular sample, I extend the analyses (see Appendix Table B1) to range from 1982 to 2016 (using 2015 inequality data to stand-in for 2016). These results (N = 899) show, similarly to the 1984–2014 data, that election salience significantly conditions the inequality-turnout relationship.

[3] http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data.

[4] https://www.shsu.edu/~eco_mwf/inequality.html.

[5] One weakness of this measure is that it does not take effects of the tax system into account. However, the differences in national pre/post tax inequality are relatively small (Pikkety, Saez, and Zucman 2018). Furthermore it is unclear as to how this data limitation would alter the conclusions reached here, i.e., that the inequality-turnout relationship is conditioned by election salience.

[6] See Cancela and Geys (2016) for a recent review of the myriad factors that correlate with voter turnout. See Supplemental Appendix A for detail regarding data sources and variable coding.

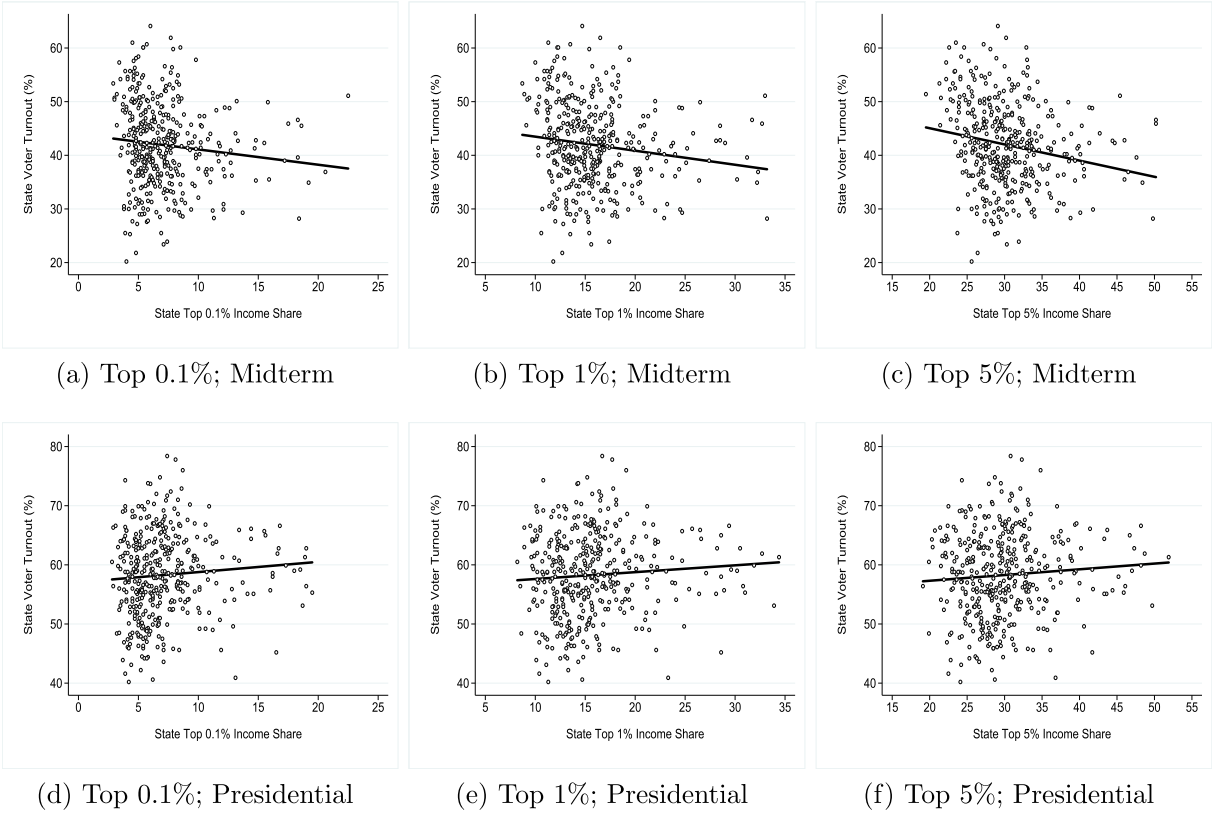


Fig. 1. Scatterplots of Income Inequality and Voter Turnout By Election Type, 1984–2014. Note: Shows scatterplots of the bivariate relationship between state income inequality (on the x-axes of each plot) and state voter turnout (on the y-axes of each plot) in midterm (a, b, c) and presidential election years (d, e, f). Each dot represents an individual state-year observation. Each plot includes 400 observations. Midterm election years = 1986–2014. Presidential election years = 1984–2012.

Table 2. I do this for two reasons. The first is a desire to maximize variation in the data, i.e., over time, across states, and within states. The second is because my conditioning variable (midterm vs. presidential election year) is statistically equivalent to including two election-year dummy variables.[7] In Table 3, I include state and year fixed effects to further demonstrate the robustness of my results.

Overall, the results in Table 2 show, consistent with hypothesized expectations and with the results in Fig. 1, that the inequality-turnout relationship is conditioned by election salience. This is indicated in Table 2 by the positive and statistically significant interactions between state income inequality (top 0.1%, top 1%, and top 5%, respectively) and the type of election under consideration (midterm vs. presidential).[8] In Figs. 2 and 3, I illustrate the marginal effects of the interaction terms from Table 2. These results show, similar to the bivariate scatterplots in Fig. 1, that income inequality is negatively and significantly associated with turnout, but only in midterm election years.

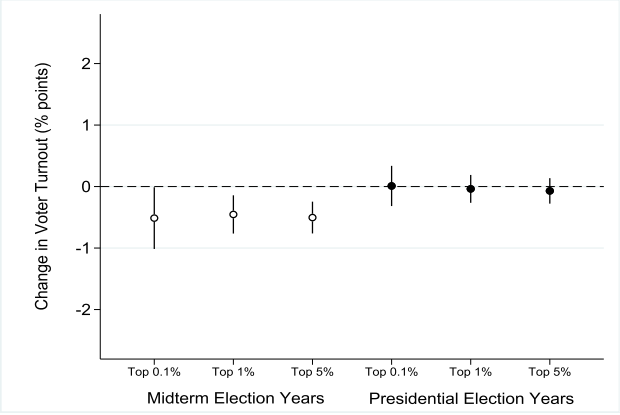
The results in Fig. 2 shows that a one percentage point increase in state income inequality is, on average, associated with an approximately 0.50 percentage point decrease in state-level voter turnout, but only in midterm election years. A slightly larger one standard deviation (see Table 1) increase in state income inequality is, on average, associated with an approximately two percentage point decrease in state-level midterm-year voter turnout. The magnitude of this relationship is substantively significant and could make a difference in close electoral contests. In presidential election years however, the state-level inequality-turnout relationship is substantively small (near zero) and is not statistically significant.

Fig. 3 shows predicted state-level voter turnout across the observed range of state income inequality (setting "presidential election year" at a value of either "0" or "1" and holding the other controls constant) in midterm (a, b, c) and presidential (d, e, f) election years. At the lowest levels of state income inequality, midterm voter turnout is predicted to be approximately 45% of the eligible population. This declines to approximately 40% at the median level of inequality, and declines further to approximately 35% at the highest levels of inequality. In contrast, presidential-year turnout does not substantively nor significantly differ (as indicated by the flat slopes) across the observed range of state income inequality.

Despite a battery of controls, the results in Table 2 are potentially vulnerable to omitted variables bias. To help assuage concerns about this, I run six additional models in Table 3 that account for both year and state fixed effects (dummy variables for each election year and for each state). These are more conservative models that restrict variation to *within* states, rather than leveraging variation across and between states. Though not a panacea, a two-way fixed effects model is far more robust to the threat of omitted variable bias (Angrist and Pischke 2015, Chapter 5). Year fixed effects can account for general trends in inequality and

[7] An indicator variable for midterm vs. presidential year, where 0 = (1982, 1986, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014), and 1 = (1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012) is statistically equivalent to including two year fixed effects in each regression model.

[8] The base categories in Table 2, that is, income inequality (top 0.1%, top 1%, and top 5%, respectively) not interacted with "presidential election" represents the association between state income inequality and state voter turnout in midterm election years (when the "presidential election" dummy variable is set to a value of "0" rather than a value of "1"). The coefficients for "presidential election year" show the association between state-voter turnout and the occurrence of a presidential election relative to a midterm election when the most affluent citizens in each state have a *zero percent* share of income. Such values (for income shares of the most affluent) of course, do not exist in this dataset nor in the real world.



Note: Based on the OLS regression models in Table 2. The point estimates show the marginal effect of a one-percentage point increase in state income inequality on state voter turnout (VEP) in midterm (white circles) and presidential (black circles) election years. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Fig. 2. Income Inequality and Voter Turnout By Election Type, 1984–2014, *Note*: Based on the OLS regression models in Table 2. The point estimates show the marginal effect of a one-percentage point increase in state income inequality on state voter turnout (VEP) in midterm (white circles) and presidential (black circles) election years. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

turnout over time as well as election-specific factors, e.g., the general competitiveness of a particular year. State fixed effects can account for unobserved state-level factors such as a general participatory culture, geography, and/or historical events that may shape both inequality and turnout. Because of these fixed effects, I do not control for the occurrence of a gubernatorial election, as this does not vary within states. I also split the data into midterm and presidential election years, instead of interacting state income inequality with a variable indicating the presence of a midterm or presidential election year. This allows for me to include *both* state and year fixed effects in the regression models.[9]

The main results of these fixed effects models are presented in Table 3. I save space by including, but not displaying the control variables, constant terms, and fixed effects (the full models are in Appendix Table B2). Overall, the results in Table 3 show a similar pattern as the main models in Table 2. Regardless of which measure of state income inequality is used (top 0.1%, top 1%, or top 5%), there is a negative and statistically significant relationship between income inequality and voter turnout in midterm election years, but a substantively small and non-significant relationship in presidential election years. These results are also consistent with hypothesized expectations.

4. Exploring how presidential elections mobilize

The results thus far have shown, consistent with hypothesized expectations, that higher income inequality is associated with lower voter turnout in midterm election years, but not in presidential election years. It is less clear as to *why* this is the case, however.

In this section, I explore several plausible mechanisms through which presidential elections can boost electoral participation and by extension, help to counteract the otherwise demobilizing influence of high income inequality. One plausible mechanism is that voters are more likely to be personally contacted in presidential election years, relative to midterms, as the major parties seek to assemble and mobilize a national coalition of voters. A second is that presidential contests and the highly visible prize, control of the White House, that comes along with victory, raises the electoral stakes and makes voters more likely to care about which party/candidate wins the election. A third is that the information-rich media environment of presidential contests, relative to midterms, informs voters and increases their levels of political knowledge (Alvarez 1998; Lipsitz 2011).

Each of these factors: being contacted by a political party, caring about the election outcome, and possessing sufficient political information, are well-established correlates of voter turnout (Brady et al. 1995; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).[10] In Table 4, I explore whether presidential elections' ability to mobilize voters, and by extension to counteract the demobilizing influence of high inequality, is driven primarily by one of these factors, or by a combination of them. I test this by using survey data from the Cumulative ANES (American National Election Study) from 1980-2004.[11]

The results in Table 4 show that there is a trivial and non-significant difference in the frequency of direct party contact across midterm and

Table 2
Income inequality and voter turnout by election type, 1984–2014.

	DV = State Voter Turnout		
Top 1% Income Share	−0.513**		
	(0.250)		
Top 0.1% × Presidential Year	0.523***		
	(0.164)		
Top 1% Income Share		−0.453***	
		(0.155)	
Top 1% × Presidential Year		0.416***	
		(0.097)	
Top 5% Income Share			−0.504***
			(0.129)
Top 5% × Presidential Year			0.433***
			(0.078)
College Degree %	0.724***	0.763***	0.824***
	(0.118)	(0.123)	(0.131)
Non-White Population %	−0.203***	−0.199***	−0.192***
	(0.037)	(0.036)	(0.036)
Labor Union Density	0.176**	0.175**	0.163**
	(0.085)	(0.081)	(0.077)
U.S. Senate Election	1.251***	1.215***	1.188***
	(0.297)	(0.305)	(0.303)
Gubernatorial Election	2.166***	2.166***	2.121***
	(0.798)	(0.794)	(0.779)
Presidential Election Year	14.007***	11.118***	4.587*
	(1.274)	(1.653)	(2.471)
Constant	33.503***	36.372***	43.491***
	(2.820)	(3.019)	(3.771)
Year Fixed Effects	No	No	No
State Fixed Effects	No	No	No
Observations	800	800	800
R^2	0.694	0.699	0.707

Note: Dependent variables are voting eligible population (VEP) turnout in each state-year. Midterm election years = 1986–2014. Presidential election years = 1984–2012. OLS coefficients with robust standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1, two-tailed.

[9] Recent work, both in the United States and cross-nationally, finds that higher voter turnout is associated with lower levels of economic inequality (e.g., Avery 2015; Theodossiou and Zandelidis 2020); a relationship that may partially result from the election of more left-leaning governments (e.g., Fowler 2013). Thus, it is possible that the inequality-turnout relationship runs exclusively in the opposite direction, with electoral turnout driving economic inequality, rather than the reverse. In short, my results could endogenous, reflecting the fact that I misspecified the inequality-turnout relationship, i.e., that I have gotten it "backwards." However, even if variation in voter turnout does shape economic inequality, this does not mean that inequality cannot (or does not) shape turnout. Furthermore, it is unclear as to why such endogeneity (to the extent that it is present) would manifest in midterm election years, but not in presidential election years.

[10] These are not the only ways through which highly salient elections, i.e., contests for the presidency, can mobilize voters, but they are certainly within the universe of plausible mechanisms.

[11] Unfortunately the ANES stopped conducting midterm election surveys in 2002. Restricting the ANES analyses to range from 1980 to 2004 partially overlaps with the state-level data (1984–2014) and also ensures that I have an equal number of ANES survey years in both midterm and presidential elections (6 each).

Table 3
Fixed effects models of income inequality and voter turnout, 1984–2014.

	DV = State Voter Turnout					
	Midterm Election Years			Presidential Election Years		
Top 0.1%	−0.572***			−0.142		
	(0.140)			(0.179)		
Top 1%		−0.431***			−0.122	
		(0.115)			(0.125)	
Top 5%			−0.338***			−0.038
			(0.122)			(0.107)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	400	400	400	400	400	400
R^2	0.768	0.768	0.766	0.866	0.866	0.865

Note: Dependent variables are voting eligible population (VEP) turnout in each state-year. All models include controls for: the share of the state's population with a college degree, the share of the state's population that is non-white, state labor union density, whether the state has a concurrent election for the U.S. Senate, and dummy variables for each election year and for each state. These controls, dummy variables for each election year and each state, and the constant terms are not displayed here. Midterm election years = 1986–2014. Presidential election years = 1984–2012. OLS coefficients with robust standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1, two-tailed.

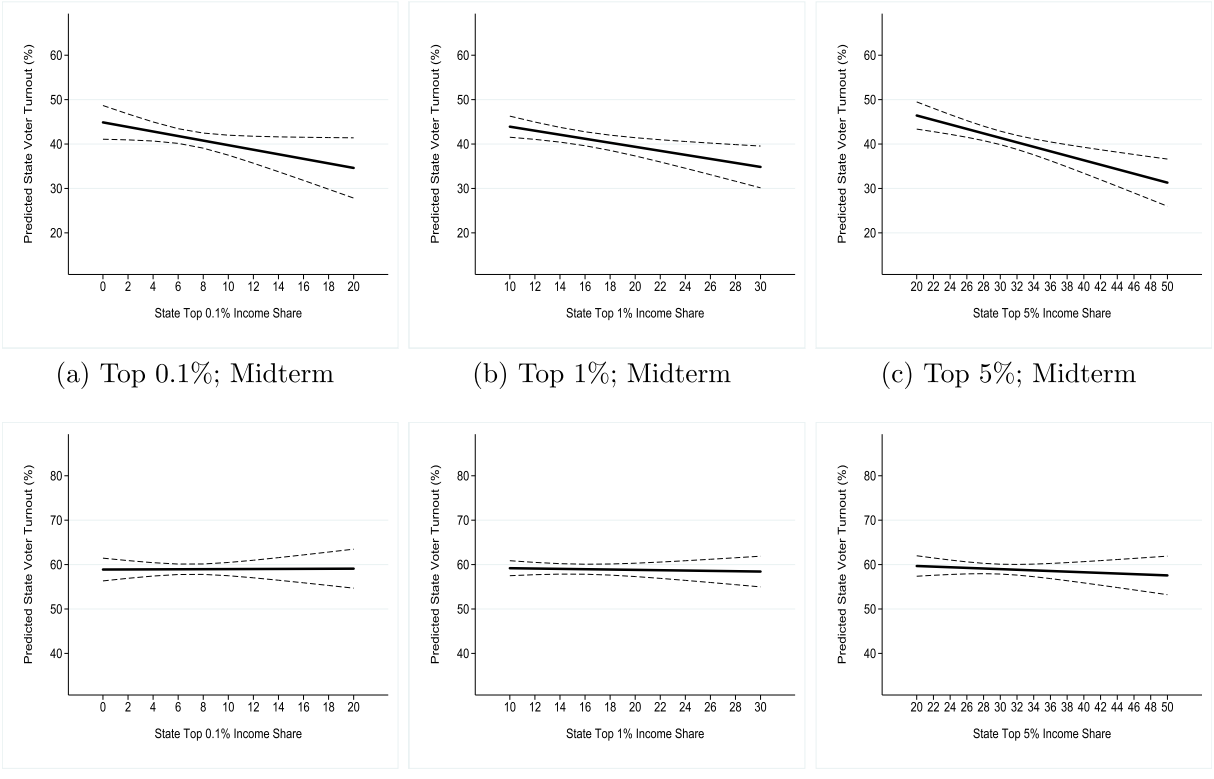


Fig. 3. Income Inequality and Voter Turnout By Election Type, 1984–2014. Note: Shows predicted state-level voter turnout (y-axes) across the observed range of state income inequality (x-axes) in midterm (a, b, c) and presidential (d, e, f) election years. The thick black lines represent the predicted values; thin dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals. Based on the OLS regression models in Table 2. Midterm election years = 1986–2014. Presidential election years = 1984–2012.

Table 4
Exploring how presidential elections mobilize voters, 1980–2004.

	Contacted by a major party?	Care about the election outcome?	High levels of political information?
Midterm	27.0	55.1	32.9
Presidential	27.0	71.9	36.1
Difference	0.0	16.8	3.2
P-value	0.965	0.000	0.001

Note: Shows the percentage of respondents who report being contacted by either major party, who say that they care about the election outcome, and who have high ("very high" or "fairly high" vs. "average", "fairly low", or "low") levels of political information (according to the post-election interviewer ratings) in midterm (1982, 1986, 1990, 1994, 1998, and 2002) and presidential (1980, 1984, 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004) election years. Source is the Cumulative ANES, survey weights applied. N ranges from 8,859 to 11,003. The Difference and P-value rows compare the means across midterm and presidential election years.

presidential election years. The results also show a statistically significant, but substantively modest difference in political knowledge levels. There are, however, sizable differences in the percentage of respondents who report caring about the election outcome.[12] Indeed, just over half of respondents report caring about the outcome of the midterm congressional elections, while over two-thirds report caring about which party/candidate wins the presidential election. This supports the "electoral stakes" mechanism over the "campaign contact" and "information provision" mechanisms and suggests that high-profile contests for the presidency primarily mobilize voters, and by extension help to offset the otherwise demobilizing influence of high inequality, by making more citizens care about the election outcome.[13]

5. Conclusion and political implications

Overall, these results have shown that income inequality *can* demobilize, but that this relationship is not constant across elections, primarily manifesting itself in lower-salience midterm elections. Even if the demobilizing influence of high inequality is largely confined to midterm years, this can still have important consequences. Variation in subnational turnout can, for example, determine party control of Congress, governorships, and state legislatures (Burmila and Birkhead 2017; Citrin et al. 2003; Fowler 2015; but see Shaw and Petrocik 2020). Indeed, state governments are becoming increasingly important political actors in an era of partisan polarization and congressional gridlock (Caughey et al. 2017; Franko and Witko 2018; Grumbach 2018).

Future work could focus more on *who* is demobilized by high income inequality, i.e., whether it disproportionately demobilizes racial/ethnic minorities and those of lower socio-economic status, or if inequality demobilizes relatively equally across the electorate. Future work could also examine whether the inequality-turnout relationship is further conditioned by the competitiveness of high-profile statewide races, e.g., campaigns for governor or the U.S. Senate (Jackson 2002). It would also be useful to examine whether the presidential-year inequality-turnout relationship varies between swing states and non-swing states (Gimpel et al. 2007). Future work could also look beyond the United States, perhaps by examining the European continent and comparing the inequality-turnout relationship in domestic parliamentary elections vs. contests for the European parliament. Such studies should, however, take care to ensure that electoral competition is not itself endogenous to voter turnout (e.g., Hansford and Gomez 2010).

Overall, these findings show that the inequality-turnout relationship is conditioned by election salience. It is also important to note what these findings do not show. They do not reject the main tenet of relative power theory, that high inequality tends to depress, rather than incentivize, overall levels of political participation. But they do add an important caveat, showing that this is not the case in all circumstances, specifically when people care about the election outcome and feel as though participating is worth their time and effort. These findings also do not reject the idea that growing economic inequality contributes to an "elite capture" of the political system (e.g., Bartels 2016; Gilens 2012; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Page et al. 2018). They do suggest, however, that a vicious cycle, in which rising economic inequality reduces electoral participation which, in turn, further increases inequality (Avery 2015; Solt 2008; Theodossiou and Zandelidis 2020), is not inevitable nor omnipresent.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102282. Replication data and code can be found at the Harvard Dataverse https://dataverse.harvard.edu/.

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[12] All three ANES variables are coded to be dichotomous (0 vs. 1). Party contact is created from VCF9030a, caring about the election is created from VCF0311 (midterm) and VCF0312 (presidential), and political information is created from VCF0050b. See Supplemental Appendix A for greater detail.

[13] It is possible that voters will increasingly care about midterms as these elections become increasingly nationalized (Abramowitz and Webster 2016), and as partisan polarization continues to grow (McCarty et al. 2016). Even if this is the case, it should not change the degree to which people care *more* about presidential contests vs. midterms. For instance, data from a December 2006 NBC/WSJ poll showed that only 25% of Americans thought that there would be "a great deal" or "quite a bit of change" (versus "just some" or "not that much") in the direction of the country after the midterm elections. These percentages were 24% and 21% in 2010 and 2014 NBC/WSJ post-election polls, respectively. In contrast, data from NBC/WSJ polls conducted in February of 2009 and 2017 showed that 61% (2009) and 57% (2017) of Americans thought that it was "very" or "fairly likely" (versus "just somewhat" or "not that likely") that Barack Obama and Donald Trump would bring real change in the direction of the country. Results from these polls were obtained by searching the Roper Center's iPoll archives. In short, contests for the presidency are seen as more consequential and simply "matter more" to ordinary voters.

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