

# Class Attitudes, Political Knowledge, and Support for Redistribution in an Era of Inequality

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*Objective.* Why, despite positive feelings toward the poor and working classes, relative to the rich and big business, has American public support for redistribution failed to appreciably increase during an era of high, and rising, income inequality? *Methods.* I argue that this puzzling disconnect is due, in part, to a lack of general political knowledge. Using survey data from the 2012 American National Election Study, I test how political knowledge conditions the relationship between people's economic class group attitudes and their support for redistribution. *Results.* People with low (high) levels of political knowledge weakly (strongly) connect their class attitudes with support for redistributive spending and progressive taxation. Data from four ANES panel studies show that this does not result from the less knowledgeable holding weak "nonattitudes" toward these class groups. Rather, consistent with Converse's classic work, I attribute this to less knowledgeable individuals lacking awareness about how redistributive policies benefit different social groups. *Conclusion.* These findings help us to better understand an important puzzle in American politics: why a mass public that purports to favor the poor and working classes over the economic elite has not turned more strongly in favor of redistribution during an era of historic inequality.

Why has American public support for redistribution failed to increase during an era of high, and rising, inequality? Income disparities have reached levels not seen since prior to the Great Depression, and despite periods of strong economic growth (interspersed with several recessions) since the 1970s, the vast majority of Americans have seen minimal gains (e.g., Bartels, 2016; Piketty, Saez, and Zucman, 2018). Furthermore, economic mobility has declined (Chetty et al., 2017), putting the "American Dream" further out of reach for many people. Despite this, public support for redistribution has remained largely unchanged (Ashkok, Kuziemko and Washington, 2015; McCall and Kenworthy, 2009; Shaw and Gaffey, 2012), and people do not seem to be linking their opposition to inequality (Page and Jacobs, 2009; Norton and Airely, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2017) with support for redistribution (Hayes, 2014; Wright, 2018, but see Franko, Tolbert, and Witko, 2013). This is theoretically puzzling, given that people, particularly the less affluent, have economic incentives to support redistribution when inequality rises (Kelly and Enns, 2010; Meltzer and Richard, 1981).

It is also puzzling because large majorities of Americans express warm feelings and sympathy toward the poor and working classes, and negative affect toward the economic elite (McCall, 2013; Piston, 2018). Given decades of rising inequality and a growing divide between the superrich and ordinary Americans, it is puzzling as to why the mass public has not "soaked the rich," that is, responded to growing inequality by turning more strongly in

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favor of economic redistribution.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I examine this disconnect in greater detail, examining why a mass public that professes to favor the lower classes over the economic elite has not responded with greater support for redistribution.

I argue that this disconnect (between Americans' feelings toward the economic lower and upper classes and their support for economic redistribution) does not result from a lack of knowledge regarding inequality, that is, a failure to recognize that it is higher today than in decades past, but rather, in part, from a lack of *general political knowledge*. Building on recent work by Piston (2018), who shows that Americans' attitudes toward inequality and redistribution are powerfully grounded in how they feel about two prominent social groups, the rich and the poor, I argue that a lack of political knowledge hinders people's ability to connect their warm feelings for the poor and working classes over the rich and big business with support for policies meant to reduce income disparities, that is, policies meant to favor the lower classes over corporations and the affluent.

Using cross-sectional data from the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES), and keeping with a group-centric view of public opinion (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Converse, 1964; Nelson and Kinder, 1996), I show that political knowledge significantly conditions the relationship between people's economic class group attitudes (evaluations of the poor and working class relative to the rich and big business) and their support for government spending and progressive taxation. People with low and moderate levels of political knowledge only weakly connect, at best, their feelings toward the lower and upper classes with their attitudes toward government spending and progressive taxation.<sup>2</sup> I also show, using data from four ANES panel studies, that this is not an artifact of less politically knowledgeable individuals possessing weakly held "nonattitudes" toward these social groups (the lower/upper classes). Rather, I attribute the generally weak and nonsignificant relationship between economic class group attitudes and support for redistribution among the less sophisticated to a lack of understanding about how government spending and taxation will benefit/harm different social groups, that is, the economic lower and upper classes.

This article is distinct from prominent past work and makes a novel contribution by considering how the interaction between political knowledge and class attitudes can help us to better understand the puzzling response, or lack thereof, to decades of rising income inequality. It builds on Piston (2018) by emphasizing the importance of class attitudes in explaining American opinion toward redistribution and social welfare programs. However, instead of focusing on how and why class attitudes shape support for economic redistribution, I ask why Americans' class attitudes, which tilt decidedly in favor of the less affluent over the more affluent, have not prompted greater support for redistribution during an era of high, and rising, inequality. This work also differs from Bartels (2016), who examined, among other things, how political knowledge, and its interaction with partisanship and ideology, shaped support for two inegalitarian policies, the Bush tax cuts and the federal estate tax, by exploring how political knowledge and class attitudes *interact* to shape American public support for a wide range of redistributive policies. Finally, this article makes a broader contribution to our understanding of public opinion by exploring the mechanisms through which political knowledge conditions the relationship between citizens' evaluations of social groups (e.g., the rich and poor) and their support for policies meant to benefit those particular groups.

<sup>1</sup>Recent work suggests that people can be responsive to growing inequality in their states (e.g., Franko, 2016; Macdonald, 2019) and more localized areas, for example, counties and zip codes (Johnston and Newman, 2016; Newman, 2019; Newman and Hayes, 2019). These important results notwithstanding, we still observe a puzzling aggregate-level trend of tepid support for economic redistribution among the mass public during an era of high, and rising, income inequality.

<sup>2</sup>I use the terms "political sophistication" and "political knowledge" interchangeably.

Political knowledge is not a panacea, but these findings do suggest that a more informed mass public can, by more strongly connecting its support for the lower classes over the economic elite, with support for redistribution, incentivize elected officials to stem the tide of rising income inequality.

### Class Attitudes, Political Knowledge, and Support for Economic Redistribution

In a recent book, Piston (2018) shows that there is widespread support for redistributive policies, including both means-tested spending and higher taxes on the rich. He convincingly argues that this results, in large part, from two factors: resentment of the rich and sympathy for the poor. Piston shows that feelings toward the rich and poor are meaningfully held, are distinct from general opposition to inequality, and are powerful correlates of support for economic redistribution and social welfare spending.

Building on this work, I argue that people who lack political knowledge are less likely to connect this opposition to inequality, reflected by warm (cold) feelings toward the economic lower (upper) classes, with support for government policies meant to reduce income disparities. This can help us to better understand the puzzle of why widespread support for the poor and working classes and disdain toward the economic elite has not translated into stronger support for redistribution as inequality has risen.

Nelson and Kinder (1996:1055–56) contend that “public opinion on matters of government policy is *group-centric*: shaped in powerful ways by the attitudes citizens possess toward the social groups they see as the principal beneficiaries (or victims) of the policy.” This perspective has its roots in Philip Converse’s classic study on mass belief systems (Converse, 1964). Having demonstrated that few Americans think about politics in a structured, ideological manner, Converse suggests that many people’s political attitudes were grounded in how they felt about prominent social groups in society. Nelson and Kinder (1996:1056–57) also state that “group-centric opinion requires that citizens see for themselves a connection between government policy, on the one hand, and some visible social grouping, on the other; this connection may be tangible, as in the redistribution of particular benefits or symbolic, as when policies bestow recognition and legitimacy upon one group as against another; in neither case can we assume that all citizens will make the connection.” In short, social group evaluations become consequential in shaping policy preferences when people perceive that certain groups are the target of a particular policy.

When the beneficiaries of a policy are made clear, people’s social group attitudes are brought to bear, that is, they help to shape mass policy preferences. Piston (2018) found evidence of this, showing that political knowledge significantly conditions the relationship between class group attitudes and redistributive support, examining four policies: (1) government services/spending, (2) the Affordable Care Act, (3) education spending, and (4) a limit on corporate campaign contributions. The findings are mixed, however, and Piston argues that political knowledge is only consequential (it helps people to connect their sympathy for the poor/resentment of the rich with policy support) when the group beneficiaries of a policy are unclear, for example, for complex policies such as the federal estate tax or the home mortgage interest deduction. Indeed, Piston (2018:Ch. 5) shows that when people are experimentally informed about the beneficiaries of the federal estate tax, when respondents are told that it only benefits a small number of families, people act in a less “unenlightened manner” (Bartels, 2016), and bring their class attitudes (sympathy for the poor and resentment of the rich) to bear on their policy preferences.

In contrast, I argue that political knowledge matters more for redistributive support more broadly, not just for complex/obscure policies. I argue, consistent with Converse (1964) and Nelson and Kinder (1996), that we should not assume that citizens will recognize how certain social groups will benefit from government policies, even for well-known programs such as spending on welfare, health, and education (all broadly defined). Specifically, I argue that political knowledge helps citizens to connect their economic class group evaluations, which tilt in favor of the less affluent over the rich, with their support for progressive taxation and redistributive spending. Formally, I hypothesize:

Hypothesis: Political knowledge strengthens the relationship between economic class group feelings and support for government spending and taxation.

## Data and Methods

I use data from the 2012 ANES to test this hypothesis. This survey has a large battery of factual political knowledge questions, feeling thermometer ratings of the poor, working class, big business, and the rich, as well as questions asking about redistribution—both spending and taxation. The 2012 ANES, which was conducted relatively soon after the 2011 Occupy Wall Street Movement, should also provide a “hard test” of the hypothesis. The heightened salience of economic inequality and class themes in the Obama-Romney contest (Sides and Vavreck, 2013) means that citizens’ class attitudes are easily primed and made cognitively accessible. Thus, even if people pay minimal attention to politics, it should be easier in 2012 (compared to other election years) for people to draw on their class group attitudes. In other words, political knowledge should matter *less* in 2012 because of the class-themed presidential contest. In all analyses, I employ survey weights and follow recommended guidelines for analyzing ANES data (DeBell, 2010).<sup>3</sup>

## Dependent Variables—Support for Redistribution

I examine eight different outcome variables, measuring support for both social welfare spending and progressive taxation. One reason is because past research shows that American public opinion tends to respond to inequality by favoring education spending rather than welfare spending (Franko, 2016; McCall, 2013), as the former tends to be more strongly associated with expanding equality of opportunity, while the latter has a negative connotation in American political discourse (Gilens, 1999). Another reason is because some have found that Americans’ attitudes toward government spending are structured along a single social welfare dimension (Jacoby, 1994), while others find that people differentiate among different spending programs, depending on the perceived target group (Goren, 2008), or whether redistribution is delivered via direct spending or via the tax code (Ellis and Faricy, 2019; Haselwerdt and Bartels, 2015). Finally, it is also useful to see if opposition to inequality is more strongly linked to one type of “policy prescription over another,” that is, upward taxation versus downward spending (taxing the rich vs. spending on the poor), given work by Cavallé and Trump (2015), who found that citizens in four European countries differentiate between redistribution that spends on the poor versus redistribution that taxes the rich.

<sup>3</sup>It is particularly important to use these weights in the 2012 ANES, which oversampled blacks and Hispanics in the face-to-face component of the survey. The results are similar for the unweighted data.

Four questions ask about expenditures on (1) welfare, (2) health, (3) education, and (4) Social Security. I also use three questions asking about taxation: (5) whether taxes should be increased on millionaires, (6) if the deficit should be reduced by raising taxes on people who make over \$250,000, and (7) if the deficit should be reduced by raising taxes on corporations. Finally, I use a variable measuring (8) latent support for government activism. This is a factor score that combines responses to two seven-point scales asking respondents about: government services and spending, and a guarantee of jobs and a good standard of living, and two questions asking about government's role in dealing with income inequality (eigenvalue = 2.38, variance explained = 59.4 percent). The use of factor analysis to construct a latent measure of redistributive support can help to reduce measurement error resulting from the use of a single survey question (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder, 2008).<sup>4</sup>

### ***Primary Independent Variable—Class Group Attitudes***

This variable is constructed out of four 101-point (0–100) feeling thermometer ratings of (1) the poor, (2) the working class, (3) the rich, and (4) big business. I sum the feeling thermometer ratings of the poor and the working class (0–200) and then subtract the combined feeling thermometer rating of the rich and big business (0–200). This newly constructed variable (lower class feelings – upper class feelings) ranges from –200 to 200, with higher numbers indicating warmer feelings toward the economic lower class (the poor/working class), and lower numbers indicating warmer feelings toward the economic upper class (the rich/big business). I divide this variable by 100 so that it ranges from –2 to 2. Figure 1 displays a histogram for economic class group feelings, showing that majorities of Americans feel warmer toward the economic lower classes than the upper classes.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Conditioning Variable—Political Knowledge***

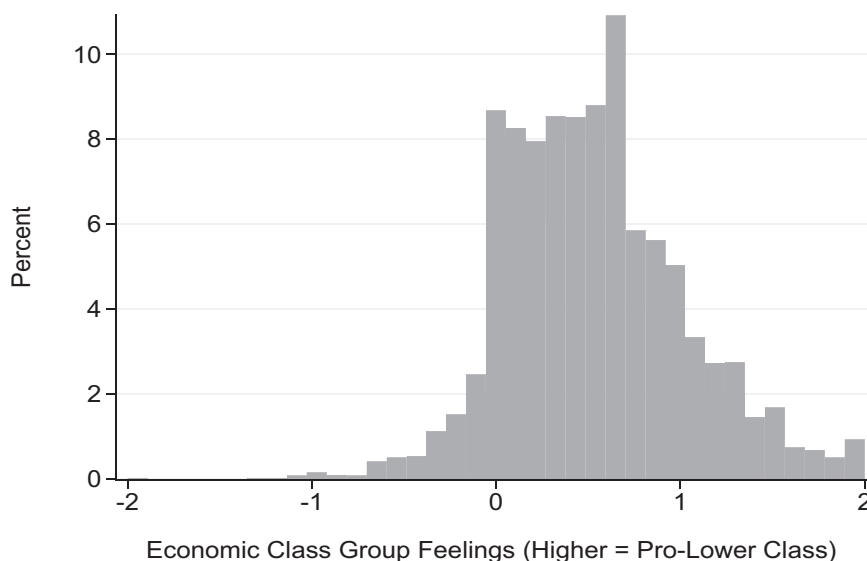
This is defined as “the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory” (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1997:10). I measure it by responses to 26 objective knowledge questions that ask respondents about: the offices held by prominent political figures, ideological and issue placements of the Democratic and Republican parties, partisan control of Congress, and basic constitutional questions such as the length of a U.S. Senate term. These questions reflect what Barabas et al. (2014:841) refer to as “general knowledge” and “static facts” rather than “policy-specific” or “surveillance facts,” that is,

<sup>4</sup>The four survey questions asking about expenditures (welfare, education, health, and Social Security) are recoded to range from 1 to 3 (1 = less, 2 = same, 3 = more); the three taxation questions are recoded to be dichotomous (0 = do not favor increase, 1 = favor increase). I recode these to three- and two-category variables for reasons of parsimony, that is, it is easier to model support for “more spending” or “more taxation” rather than differentiating between “greatly increase spending” and “slightly increase spending,” for example. The collapsing of these categories is conceptually appropriate as well, as I am interested in whether people support government doing “more” or not doing more. The factor score ranges between 0 and 1, with higher values indicating more economically liberal policy preferences, that is, a desire for greater government activism. See supplementary Appendix A for greater detail on variable coding.

<sup>5</sup>This measure differs slightly from Piston's (2018) work. He separately examined the influence of sympathy for the poor and resentment of the rich on support for redistributive policies and social welfare spending. Here, I look at the influence of people's feelings toward the poor/working classes *relative* to the rich/big business. Nevertheless, the concept is similar, and I expect that positive feelings toward the less affluent relative to the economic elite will be associated with greater support for economic redistribution.

FIGURE 1

Histogram of Economic Class Group Feelings



NOTE: The y-axis shows the percentage of respondents in the distribution. The x-axis ranges from  $-2$  to  $2$ , with higher (lower) values indicating warmer feelings for the economic lower (upper) classes. Number of observations = 5,417.

SOURCE: 2012 ANES.

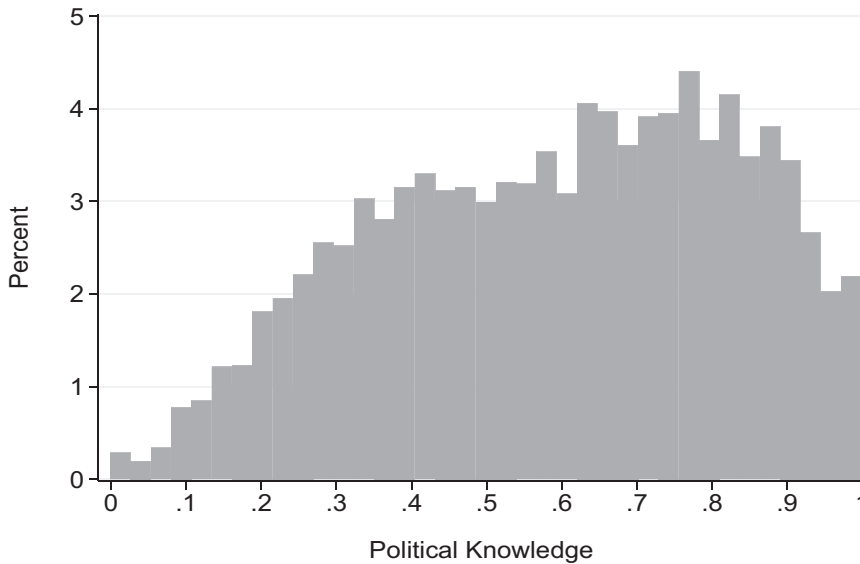
specific political events that happen to be salient in the news media at that time.<sup>6</sup> I use principal components factor analysis to construct this measure (eigenvalue = 6.95, variance explained = 26.7 percent), rescaling it to range between 0 and 1. Unlike an additive index, the use of a factor score does not assume that each question contributes equally to an underlying latent measure of political knowledge, that is, correctly identifying the secretary of the treasury may not be equivalent to correctly placing where the Democratic/Republican parties stand on the issue of government services and spending. Figure 2 shows a histogram for this measure of political knowledge in the 2012 ANES. I interact economic class group attitudes with this measure of political knowledge to test the main hypothesis.

### Control Variables

I account for several demographics: age (in years), income (five categories), education (college degree vs. not), race (white vs. nonwhite), gender (female), survey mode (online vs. face to face), marital status (married vs. not), home ownership (own home vs. not), and party identification (the traditional seven-point scale). I opt for a simple set of demographics

<sup>6</sup>People who refused to answer a particular question or said that they “don’t know” are simply coded as giving an incorrect response. A question asking about the office held by John Roberts is coded (0 = not correct, 0.5 = partially correct, 1 = correct) in the 2012 ANES. I maintain that coding here. All other knowledge questions are coded (0 = not correct, 1 = correct). See supplementary Appendix A for the full battery of knowledge questions used as well as the distribution of correct/incorrect responses. The results are nearly identical if an additive knowledge index is used instead.

FIGURE 2  
Histogram of Political Knowledge



NOTE: The y-axis show the percentage of respondents in the distribution. The x-axis ranges from 0 to 1, with higher (lower) values indicating higher (lower) levels of political knowledge. Number of observations = 5,510.

SOURCE: 2012 ANES.

and partisanship rather than a larger set of controls such as ideology, core values, and racial attitudes. Partisanship, a powerful and stable political predisposition (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002), and these demographics can at least partially capture the effects of these other variables and assuage concerns about omitted variable bias.<sup>7</sup>

## Main Results

Table 1 shows that influence of economic class group attitudes on support for redistribution is strongly conditioned by political knowledge. This supports hypothesized expectations.<sup>8</sup> Figure 3A and 3B illustrate the results graphically, plotting marginal effects

<sup>7</sup>These additional controls, for example, ideology and core values, could also be conditioned by political knowledge (Goren, 2013; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017); interacting additional variable with political knowledge could quickly lead to an unwieldy model with many interaction terms. Furthermore, the purpose of this article is to examine how political knowledge conditions the relationship between attitudes toward inequality—reflected by feelings toward the lower/upper classes—and redistributive support, rather than maximizing the number of correlates of redistributive support. In supplementary Appendix B, I show that the relationship between economic class group attitudes and support for spending/taxation (noninteracted) is robust to controls for: ideological identification, beliefs about government waste, the core value of egalitarianism, feeling thermometer ratings of “illegal immigrants,” and stereotypes about blacks’ work ethic.

<sup>8</sup>The results are similar (the influence of class group attitudes on redistributive policy support is stronger among the more knowledgeable than among the less knowledgeable) if the data are split into three political knowledge categories (low, middle, and high), showing that the results are not dependent on a particular model specification (Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu, 2019), for example, a linear interaction between class group attitudes and political knowledge. See supplementary Appendix B for these models.

TABLE 1  
Class Group Feelings, Political Knowledge, and Public Support for Redistribution

	(1) Spend Welfare	(2) Spend Education	(3) Spend Health	(4) Spend Social Security	(5) Tax Millionaires	(6) Tax \$250,000	(7) Tax Corporations	(8) Govt Activism
Class attitudes	-0.354*** (0.132)	-0.373** (0.148)	-0.261** (0.127)	-0.093 (0.149)	0.209 (0.194)	0.015 (0.174)	0.283* (0.155)	-0.061** (0.027)
Political knowledge	-1.361*** (0.165)	-0.748*** (0.167)	-0.775*** (0.150)	-1.424*** (0.169)	-0.362* (0.209)	-0.439** (0.191)	0.116 (0.182)	-0.330*** (0.030)
Class attitudes × PK	1.090*** (0.205)	1.301*** (0.231)	1.133*** (0.207)	0.845*** (0.223)	1.405*** (0.331)	1.492*** (0.286)	0.931*** (0.250)	0.308*** (0.039)
Partisanship	-0.169*** (0.013)	-0.123*** (0.013)	-0.141*** (0.013)	-0.025** (0.012)	-0.197*** (0.016)	-0.220*** (0.015)	-0.161*** (0.014)	-0.049*** (0.002)
Age	0.002 (0.001)	-0.008*** (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.007*** (0.002)	0.003* (0.002)	-0.004** (0.002)	-0.001*** (0.000)
Female	0.021 (0.046)	0.064 (0.047)	0.102** (0.045)	0.044 (0.044)	0.175*** (0.061)	0.007 (0.055)	0.063 (0.053)	0.011 (0.008)
White	-0.168*** (0.056)	0.093 (0.059)	0.007 (0.055)	-0.090 (0.059)	0.392*** (0.075)	0.362*** (0.067)	0.212*** (0.066)	-0.028*** (0.009)
Income	-0.082*** (0.020)	0.051** (0.020)	-0.042** (0.020)	0.001 (0.020)	0.018 (0.026)	0.018 (0.025)	-0.003 (0.022)	-0.009*** (0.003)
College	0.176*** (0.053)	0.112** (0.057)	0.106* (0.055)	-0.231*** (0.050)	0.202*** (0.075)	0.243*** (0.067)	0.090 (0.064)	0.020** (0.009)
Married	-0.037 (0.051)	0.037 (0.051)	-0.083 (0.052)	-0.080 (0.051)	-0.055 (0.065)	-0.014 (0.062)	0.004 (0.057)	-0.018** (0.009)
Homeowner	-0.194*** (0.057)	-0.065 (0.058)	-0.038 (0.056)	-0.030 (0.058)	0.052 (0.076)	0.015 (0.069)	-0.004 (0.067)	-0.015 (0.010)
Online survey mode	-0.028 (0.058)	-0.251*** (0.056)	-0.119** (0.053)	-0.070 (0.049)	-0.186*** (0.072)	-0.192*** (0.064)	-0.281*** (0.059)	0.008 (0.009)

Continued



TABLE 1  
Continued

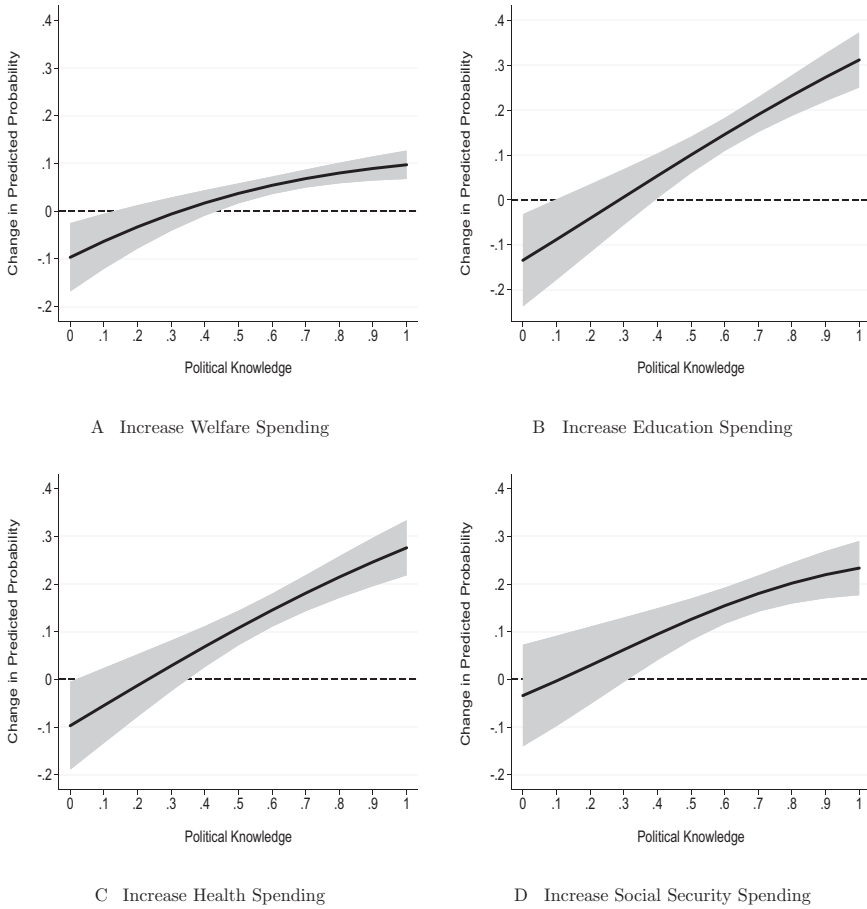
	(1) Spend Welfare	(2) Spend Education	(3) Spend Health	(4) Spend Social Security	(5) Tax Millionaires	(6) Tax \$250,000	(7) Tax Corporations	(8) Govt Activism
Constant cut1	-1.739*** (0.150)	-2.502*** (0.150)	-1.911*** (0.142)	-2.038*** (0.150)				
Constant cut2	-0.436*** (0.148)	-1.502*** (0.146)	-0.806*** (0.139)	-0.436*** (0.144)				
Constant					0.827*** (0.189)	1.062*** (0.164)	0.820*** (0.165)	0.860*** (0.024)
Observations	4,846	4,867	4,849	4,841	4,860	4,863	4,844	4,185
R <sup>2</sup>	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.478

NOTE: Models 1–4 use ordered probit (dependent variables range 1–3), Models 5–7 use probit (dependent variable is 0, 1), Model 8 uses OLS (dependent variable ranges 0–1). Higher values = greater support for spending and taxation. Robust standard errors are in parentheses below the coefficients. PK, political knowledge. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ , two-tailed.

SOURCE: 2012 ANES; survey weights applied.

FIGURE 3A

The Conditioning Influence of Political Sophistication on Public Support for Government Spending and Taxation



NOTE: Average marginal effects based on Models 1–4 in Table 1. Figure 3A shows the marginal effect of shifting a person’s economic class group feelings by 1 point the pro-lower class direction (ranges –2 to 2) at different levels of political knowledge. These four subparts (A–D) show the change in the predicted probability of favoring increased spending. Gray areas represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

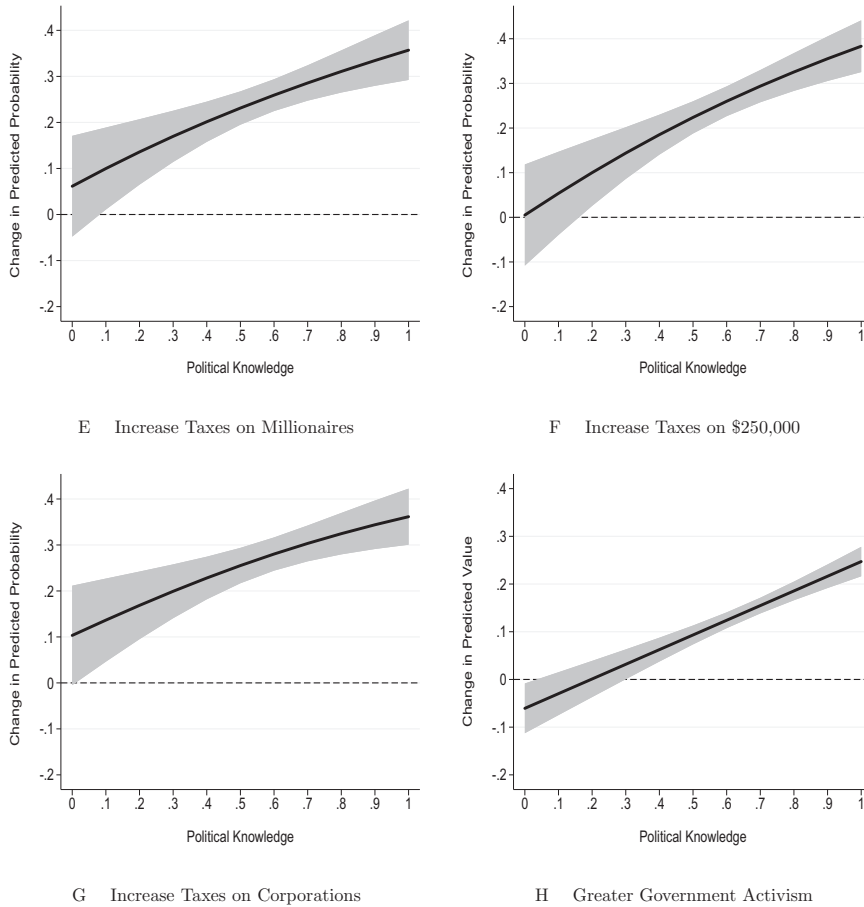
for the class attitudes × political knowledge interaction. The results consistently show that higher political knowledge strengthens the connection between Americans’ class group attitudes and their support for redistributive spending and progressive taxation.

At low levels of political knowledge (roughly 1SD below the mean value of 0.60, a value of approximately 0.30 on the 0–1 scale), people’s class group attitudes are only significantly associated with support for increased redistribution in five of eight cases (Social Security, taxing millionaires, incomes over \$250,000, corporations, and latent government activism).<sup>9</sup> The relationship is nonsignificant in three of eight cases (welfare, education, and health). At the mean level of knowledge (a value of approximately 0.60 on the 0–1

<sup>9</sup>The relationship between economic class group attitudes and support for increased spending/taxation is marginally significant for Social Security ( $p = 0.071$ ) and latent government activism ( $p = 0.046$ ).

FIGURE 3B

The Conditioning Influence of Political Knowledge on Public Support for Government Spending and Taxation



NOTE: Average marginal effects based on Models 5–8 in Table 1. Figure 3B shows the marginal effect of shifting a person’s economic class group feelings by 1 point the pro-lower class direction (ranges –2 to 2) at different levels of political knowledge. Subparts (E–G) show the change in the probability of favoring tax increases. Subpart (H) shows the change in latent support for government activism. Gray areas represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

scale), a 1-point shift in the pro-lower class direction significantly increases the probability of supporting more spending by 5 percent (welfare), 15 percent (education), 15 percent (health), and 15 percent (Social Security). It has an especially strong influence on support for progressive taxation: 26 percent (taxing millionaires), 26 percent (taxing incomes over \$250,000), and 28 percent (taxing corporations). A 1-point shift in class attitudes is also associated with a 0.12 increase in support for latent government activism. At high political knowledge levels (roughly 1SD above the mean value of 0.60; a value of 0.90 on the 0–1 scale), these effect sizes grow in magnitude to 9 percent (welfare), 27 percent (education), 25 percent (health), 22 percent (Social Security), 33 percent (millionaires), 36 percent

TABLE 2  
Two-Year Stability of Class Group Attitudes by Political Knowledge

	Feelings Toward Poor People		Feelings Toward Big Business	
	Below Avg PK	Above Avg PK	Below Avg PK	Above Avg PK
1972 → 1974	0.445	0.520	0.367	0.493
1974 → 1976	0.472	0.465	0.378	0.546
1992 → 1994	0.467	0.477	0.408	0.506
1994 → 1996	0.510	0.551	0.488	0.514
2000 → 2002	0.367	0.361	0.332	0.543
2002 → 2004	0.482	0.452	0.487	0.593
Mean correlation	0.457	0.471	0.410	0.532

NOTE: Table 2 shows the two-wave (over a two-year period) correlation for each group feeling thermometer rating. Sources are the 1972–1974–1976; 1992–1994–1996; and 2000–2002–2004 ANES panel studies. Avg, average. PK refers to “political knowledge” and is calculated by averaging the interviewer’s subjective rating across three panel waves. The mean correlation at the bottom of the table is for each column, averaging the two-year correlation across panels. Number of observations ranges between 247 and 665.

(incomes over \$250,000), 34 percent (corporations), and a 0.22 increase in support for government activism.

### Exploring Plausible Mechanisms

The results in Table 1 and Figures 3A and 3B show that political sophistication strongly conditions the relationship between Americans’ attitudes toward inequality—reflected by their feelings toward the economic lower/upper classes—and their support for economic redistribution (both spending and taxation). It is not clear as to *why* this relationship exists, however.

One plausible mechanism is that less knowledgeable citizens, due in part to the limited attention they pay to politics, do not hold meaningful attitudes toward economic class groups. Thus, they simply lack meaningful group attitudes upon which to draw when forming their opinions on issues of government spending and taxation. If this is a plausible mechanism, then we should observe that less politically knowledgeable citizens exhibit less stable attitudes toward these economic class groups.

Evidence from four ANES panel studies (1972–1974–1976; 1992–1994–1996; 2000–2002–2004; and 2012–2013) in Tables 2 and 3 does not support this mechanism. These panel data show that all Americans, across the knowledge spectrum, hold relatively meaningful attitudes toward the economic lower and upper classes.<sup>10</sup> Table 2 shows, using two-year panel studies (1970s, 1990s, 2000s), that while there are differences in the stability of class attitudes across political knowledge levels (based on the interviewer’s subjective rating), the differences are not very large. Table 3 shows a similar pattern, using a one-year

<sup>10</sup>Majorities of people also rated these social groups: the poor, big business, and the rich (unfortunately these panels did not ask about the working class) the same across two panel waves. By this, I mean that they rated the group as either cold (0–49), neutral (50), or warm (51–100) in both waves. The percentage of Americans who did this ranged from 45.4 percent (big business, below-average political knowledge, 2000–2002 ANES panel) to 84.5 percent (poor people, below-average political knowledge, 1974–1976 ANES panel). The chances of someone giving the same rating (cold, neutral, warm) across two panel waves by randomly guessing (assuming that opinions in  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  are independent of one another) is 11 percent ( $1/3 \times 1/3$ ).

TABLE 3  
One-Year Stability of Class Group Attitudes by Political Knowledge

	Feelings Toward Poor People			Feelings Toward Rich People		
	Low PK	Middle PK	High PK	Low PK	Middle PK	High PK
Correlation	0.400	0.428	0.410	0.533	0.548	0.586

NOTE: Shows the correlation for each group feeling thermometer rating between 2012 and 2013. Sources are the 2012 ANES time series study and the 2013 ANES Internet Recontact Study, serving here as a panel. PK refers to “political knowledge” and is based on 26 factual questions asked in the 2012 ANES. Low, middle, and high categories are created by splitting this political knowledge score into three roughly equal groups. Number of observations ranges between 313 and 687.

panel study (2012–2013) and an alternative measure of political knowledge (based on objective factual questions).<sup>11</sup> In short, nearly all citizens appear to have moderately stable, meaningful class group attitudes, and should, as a result, be able to think about income inequality in terms of these social groups. Importantly, people should also be able draw on them in forming their opinions on social welfare spending/progressive taxation.

These panel analyses help to rule out one potential mechanism, that people low in political knowledge lack meaningful class group attitudes. These analyses are *suggestive* of an alternative mechanism. This mechanism, consistent with Converse (1964) and Nelson and Kinder (1996), is that political knowledge helps people to think through how government spending and taxation will benefit certain social groups over others, that is, the poor/working classes over the rich/big business. Indeed, Converse (1964:41) said that in order for group-centric opinion to manifest itself, “the individual must be endowed with some cognitions of the group as an entity and with some interstitial ‘linking’ information indicating why a given party or policy is relevant to the group.” Converse (1964:41) also states that “neither of these forms of information can be taken for granted” and that “as the general bulk of political information declines, the probability increases that some key pieces of information relevant to this group-politics equation will not show up.” In short, these panel analyses show that virtually everyone, not just the politically sophisticated, possesses meaningful attitudes toward salient economic class groups. These analyses also suggest that one reason why the less politically knowledgeable exhibit weak connections between their economic class group attitudes and their redistributive support is because, in contrast to their more knowledgeable counterparts, they lack the political information needed to realize how government redistributive policies will benefit certain social groups over others.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion and Political Implications

Political knowledge is a central construct in studies of public opinion and political behavior (Barabas et al., 2014). As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1997:8) state “political

<sup>11</sup>See supplementary Appendix A for more details on these panel analyses.

<sup>12</sup>Another reason why the less sophisticated only weakly connect, at best, their class group attitudes with their support for redistributive policies may be because they have less defined policy attitudes (e.g., Berinsky, 2002). As a result of having less defined/stable policy attitudes, it is likely the case that the less politically knowledgeable are ignorant of government spending policies in general, and thus less aware of how they would benefit particular target groups. This would be consistent with Converse’s (1964) claim and with the mechanism advanced here—that people low in political knowledge are unlikely to make the appropriate group-policy linkage.

information is to democratic politics what money is to economics: it is the currency of citizenship.” Political knowledge has important consequences, as evidenced by the past work that shows that collective opinion would look different in a more informed citizenry (Althaus, 2003). In this article, I have shown that political knowledge, or a lack thereof, has consequences for income inequality and economic redistribution. Political knowledge is not a panacea, however, as research that experimentally informs citizens about inequality demonstrates.<sup>13</sup>

Bartels (2016:120) states that “even a ritualistic endorsement of the folk wisdom that ‘the rich get richer and the poor get poorer’ may signal unhappiness with this apparently self-reinforcing reality. But then again, it may not.” I agree that these class attitudes and (majority) opposition toward high inequality *can* be meaningful, provided that people have the requisite political knowledge to link them with support for redistributive policies. The findings here can also speak to the importance of framing and elite rhetoric, but also its limits. If politicians such as Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren make inequality salient, and prime people’s economic class attitudes, they can use this to their advantage, seeking to marshal (majority) opposition to high inequality. However, a lack of knowledge among large segments of the electorate will likely blunt the ability of politicians to shape mass opinion in such a manner, as less politically aware citizens will be unlikely to meaningfully connect their opposition to high inequality and affect toward the less affluent with their support for government spending and progressive taxation.

Rising inequality has important political implications (Stiglitz, 2012). High inequality also undermines political equality, enhancing the influence that the wealthy have over public policy (Gilens, 2012; Hacker and Pierson, 2010; Page, Seawright, and Lacombe, 2018; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, 2012). This can contribute to a vicious cycle, whereby inequality depresses participation (Solt, 2008, 2010), further exacerbating socioeconomic biases in political influence and representation (Avery, 2015; Franko, Kelly, and Witko, 2016). High levels of income inequality have been linked to partisan polarization (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2016; but see O’Brian, 2019), which increases gridlock, and can further constrain government’s ability to enact policies that reduce inequality (Enns et al., 2014).<sup>14</sup>

Recent work showing an upper-class bias in policy making and responsiveness (Gilens, 2012; Gilens and Page, 2014; but see Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien, 2017; Enns, 2015), and that politicians perceive their constituents to be more economically conservative than they actually are (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenerger, and Stokes, 2019), resulting in part from the powerful influence that business interests exert (Gilens and Page, 2014; Hacker and Pierson, 2010). These biases notwithstanding, prospects for redistribution would arguably be higher if people were more strongly connecting their attitudes toward inequality with their support for spending/taxation. At the very least, politicians would find it more difficult to enact egalitarian policies, for example, tax cuts for the rich and for large corporations. Political knowledge is not a panacea,

<sup>13</sup>Some find large effects (Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2018; McCall, 2017), with information about inequality increasing support for progressive taxation and decreasing belief in economic meritocracy. Others find smaller effects (Kuziemko et al., 2015), with this information increasing concern about inequality, but only minimally increasing support for government spending and taxation. In contrast, others find that informing people about inequality can actually backfire, leading them to upwardly adjust the amount of inequality that is acceptable as they seek to psychologically justify an unequal status quo (Trump, 2018).

<sup>14</sup>Recent work by Franko and Witko (2018) shows that the federal government’s general inaction in dealing with economic inequality has prompted U.S. state governments to take a more active role in combating inequality. That being said, gridlock and congressional polarization still matters, and arguably hinders the federal government’s ability to enact policies that can reduce inequality.

but a more informed mass public would, I argue, by more strongly connecting its majority opposition to inequality with support for redistribution, incentivize government to respond by enacting policies to reduce inequality, or at the very least, not exacerbating income disparities.

The most effective manner of reducing income inequality is likely to elect more Democratic candidates, given the partisan political differences in economic inequality observed under Republican and Democratic administrations (Bartels, 2016; Widstrom, Hayes, and Dennis, 2018) and the extent to which a Democratic versus a Republican Congress and/or president would favor the lower and middle classes over the upper classes (Faricy, 2015; Hacker and Pierson, 2010). Consider the policy proposals of the George W. Bush and Donald Trump Administrations versus the Barack Obama Administration. These two unified Republican governments enacted tax cuts that disproportionately benefited the wealthy, while the most recent unified Democratic government enacted the Affordable Care Act, the largest social welfare program since the 1960s. Even taking partisan control of government into account, however, the prospects for enacting policies that reduce, rather than increase, inequality are arguably higher if the mass public strongly links its opposition to high inequality with support for redistributive spending and progressive taxation. Absent this, elected officials will have little incentive to stem the tide of high, and rising, inequality.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics (2012 ANES)

**Table 2:** Principal Components Factor Analysis for Latent Government Score

**Table 3:** Additive Models of Class Attitudes and Support for Spending and Taxation

**Table 4:** Low Knowledge Citizens' Class Attitudes and Support for Spending and Taxation

**Table 5:** Mid Knowledge Citizens' Class Attitudes and Support for Spending and Taxation

**Table 6:** High Knowledge Citizens' Class Attitudes and Support for Spending and Taxation