I Z A Institute
of Labor Economics
Initiated by Deutsche Post Foundation

DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

IZA DP No. 18066

Top vs. Bottom: Experimental Evidence on Priming, Information, and Redistribution Preferences

Luna Bellani
Nona Bledow

AUGUST 2025

I Z A Institute
of Labor Economics

Initiated by Deutsche Post Foundation

DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

IZA DP No. 18066

Top vs. Bottom: Experimental Evidence on Priming, Information, and Redistribution Preferences

Luna Bellani
Ulm University and IZA

Nona Bledow
IZT

AUGUST 2025

ISSN: 2365-9793

IZA – Institute of Labor Economics

Schaumburg-Lippe-Straße 5–9
53113 Bonn, Germany

Phone: +49-228-3894-0
Email: publications@iza.org

www.iza.org

ABSTRACT

Top vs. Bottom: Experimental Evidence on Priming, Information, and Redistribution Preferences*

This paper examines how priming and information about inequality affect support for redistribution. Using a large-scale randomized survey experiment in Germany, we vary both the focus (top vs. bottom of the income distribution) and the delivery (subtle priming vs. factual information) of inequality cues. We document three key findings. First, simply directing respondents' attention to different ends of the distribution shifts redistributive preferences—especially when focusing on the rich. Second, information about top incomes has a larger effect than equivalent information about the poor, revealing asymmetric responses. Third, while both priming and information temporarily influence attitudes, these effects fade within one year. Our findings help reconcile mixed results in the literature and underscore the importance of framing, informational content, and message durability in shaping redistribution preferences.

JEL Classification: D31, H24, C93

Keywords: income inequality, redistribution preferences, survey experiments, framing effects

Corresponding author:
Luna Bellani
Department of Economics
Ulm University
Helmholtzstraße 18
89081 Ulm
German
E-mail: luna.bellani@uni-ulm.de

* We would like to thank Konstantin Mozer for his exceptional support in the survey implementation, Kattalina Berriochoa for her invaluable help with the SOEP database, and Sarah Fenzl and Marie-Sophie Houben for their excellent research assistance. This project is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG – German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy – EXC-2035/1 – 390681379. Usual disclaimers apply.

1 Introduction

Rising economic inequality has become a central topic in public discourse and academic research. Yet support for redistributive policies often remains limited—even in societies where inequality is widely perceived as excessive. This disconnect has prompted growing interest in understanding how individuals form perceptions of inequality, how these perceptions are shaped, and how they ultimately influence political preferences. Clarifying the formation and malleability of inequality perceptions is critical, not only for normative reasons but also for the effective design of tax policies, communication strategies, and public opinion surveys.

Existing research highlights substantial divergences between subjective perceptions of inequality—both in terms of individual income placement and aggregate income distributions—and objective economic realities (Stantcheva, 2021; Kuziemko et al., 2015; Alesina et al., 2018). However, empirical evidence on whether correcting these misperceptions influences redistributive preferences remains inconclusive. While some studies find significant shifts in attitudes following informational interventions (Kuziemko et al., 2015; Cruces et al., 2013), others report weak or null effects, or even backlash responses (Trump, 2018; Engelhardt and Wagener, 2018).

A potential explanation for these inconsistent findings lies in the framing of inequality information. Individuals may respond differently depending on whether attention is directed toward the top or bottom of the income distribution. Prior studies show that framing inequality around wealthy versus poor groups activates distinct cognitive or emotional responses, thus shaping policy preferences in nuanced ways (McCall et al., 2017; Chong and Druckman, 2007). Nevertheless, few studies systematically vary both the targeted segment (rich vs. poor) and the type of intervention (factual information vs. cognitive priming), limiting our understanding of their distinct and combined impacts.

This paper addresses these gaps by using a factorial survey experiment conducted in Germany, explicitly distinguishing between subtle cognitive priming and explicit factual information. We randomly assign respondents to focus on either the richest or poorest 10% of households, further randomizing whether factual information on the actual income share of that group is provided. Our experimental design allows us to separately identify the causal impacts of attentional focus (”priming”) and factual corrections (”information”) on general inequality perceptions and specific policy preferences.

We make three primary contributions. First, we provide causal evidence demonstrating that the direction of inequality framing critically matters: Information correcting misperceptions about the richest 10% significantly reduces perceived inequality and lowers support for redistribution, whereas information about the poorest 10% has negligible impact. Second, we demonstrate that subtle cognitive priming—merely directing respondents' attention toward either the rich or the poor—independently influences redistributive attitudes, revealing an

important yet underexplored psychological mechanism. Third, using a follow-up survey one year later, we assess the temporal durability of these effects and find they dissipate rapidly. This result underscores the limitations of one-time informational interventions and highlights the potential need for repeated or reinforced messaging to achieve lasting changes in attitudes.

Taken together, our findings help reconcile previously inconsistent results in the literature by clarifying that both the *direction* (top vs. bottom) and the *mode* (priming vs. explicit information) of inequality cues are crucial in shaping public attitudes toward redistribution. These findings challenge influential political economy models—such as Meltzer and Richard (1981)—that assume accurate and stable perceptions of inequality among voters. Instead, our evidence reinforces insights from Stantcheva (2021), emphasizing the importance of perception gaps in determining public support for redistributive policies.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 introduces our data and describes the experimental design. Section 3 presents our empirical results, including both short-term and long-term effects. Section 4 concludes by discussing policy implications, methodological limitations, and directions for future research.

2 Data and Experimental Design

2.1 Dataset and Main Variables

The data for this study are drawn from the *Inequality Barometer*, an original representative survey of more than 6,000 adults conducted in Germany in autumn 2020, with a follow-up wave in autumn 2021. The survey is representative at the NUTS-2 regional level by age, education, and gender.[1] Our analysis leverages both observational and experimental survey components. The observational measures capture baseline perceptions of inequality, self-placement in the income distribution, and beliefs about economic mobility. The experimental component randomly assigns respondents to treatments involving cognitive priming and factual information about income inequality. Key outcomes measured immediately after treatment include respondents' normative evaluations of inequality, general support for state-led redistribution, and preferences regarding specific redistributive policies, such as willingness to pay higher income taxes to reduce inequality. These variables capture distinct but complementary dimensions: (i) Normative evaluations (general views on inequality), (ii) Abstract support for redistribution (general belief about state intervention), (iii) Concrete policy preferences (personal willingness to incur tax costs to reduce inequality). This measurement framework allows us to explore nuanced effects of priming and information treatments, distinguishing between impacts on beliefs, general attitudes, and specific policy preferences. For detailed descriptions and construction of these variables, see Appendix A.1.

[1] More information about the broader project is available at: https://www.exc.uni-konstanz.de/en/inequality/topics/the-inequality-barometer/. Additional details can be found in Bellani et al. (2021b,a).

2.2 Experimental Setup and Identification Strategy

We implement a 2x2 factorial survey experiment that varies both the *target of attention* (top 10% vs. bottom 10%) and the *type of treatment* (priming only vs. priming + factual information).

Figure 1 depicts the structure of the experiment. In a first stage, half the respondents are randomly assigned to focus on the top 10% or bottom 10% of the income distribution. In a second stage, respondents are further randomized to receive either no additional information (priming only) or factual information about the income share of the group in focus. The randomization is orthogonal across levels and ensures comparability between groups.

The priming intervention consists of textual cues that direct attention to either the top or bottom 10% of households. Respondents are asked to estimate the income share held by that group. [2] Measuring perceptions of society-wide inequality presents methodological challenges, particularly respondents' difficulty in accurately conceptualizing percentages.[3] After careful pretests, we settled on the following question format. We asked respondents what percentage, out of the overall income in Germany, they thought either the poorest or the richest 10 households, out of 100 households representing the population in Germany, earn. The question text is: "Now, please think about the net income in Germany. Imagine 100 households representing the German population. What do you think, what is the percentage of total income in Germany that the poorest/richest 10 households earn?"[4]. The answer options consisted of a slider that could be moved to indicate amounts between 0 and 100. Below the slider, an additional sentence was displayed, repeating the answer given in the slider, with the corresponding value adjusting itself as the slider moved: "The 10 poorest / richest households earn [slider value] percent of the total income in Germany".[5]

Respondents in the information treatment condition are immediately presented with the true income share of the top or bottom 10% in Germany, mirroring the wording used in the priming question. For instance, respondents assigned to the poorest 10% treatment read: "In Germany, the poorest 10 households receive 2.5% of total income."[6]

Randomization ensures the comparability of treatment groups and enables the estimation of causal effects. Our

[2] We asked for the perceived income distribution on three geographical levels: Germany, the European Union, and the Bundesland in which a respondent resides. The order in which we asked for the levels was randomized. The level at which treatment occurred was also randomized. The structure of randomization was such that the level at which the treatment occurred was the last level to be asked about. The geographical levels are thus orthogonal to the top/bottom split. For the main part of the paper, we will focus on the level of Germany, while in Appendix A.3 we will also look at the other two geographical levels.

[3] In fact, the challenges to measuring are such that Hadavand (2018) argues that part of the discrepancies observed between objective and subjective measures of inequality may be due to mismeasurements of the latter.

[4] The original text in German is: "Denken Sie jetzt bitte an Nettoeinkommen in Deutschland. Stellen Sie sich 100 Haushalte vor, die die Bevölkerung in Deutschland repräsentieren. Was glauben Sie, wie viel Prozent des Gesamteinkommens in Deutschland bekommen die ärmsten/reichsten 10 Haushalte?"

[5] The original text in German is: "Die ärmsten/reichsten 10 Haushalte bekommen [Slider-Wert] Prozent des Gesamteinkommens in Deutschland".

[6] The original text in German is: "In Deutschland bekommen die ärmsten 10 Haushalte 2.5% des Gesamteinkommens"

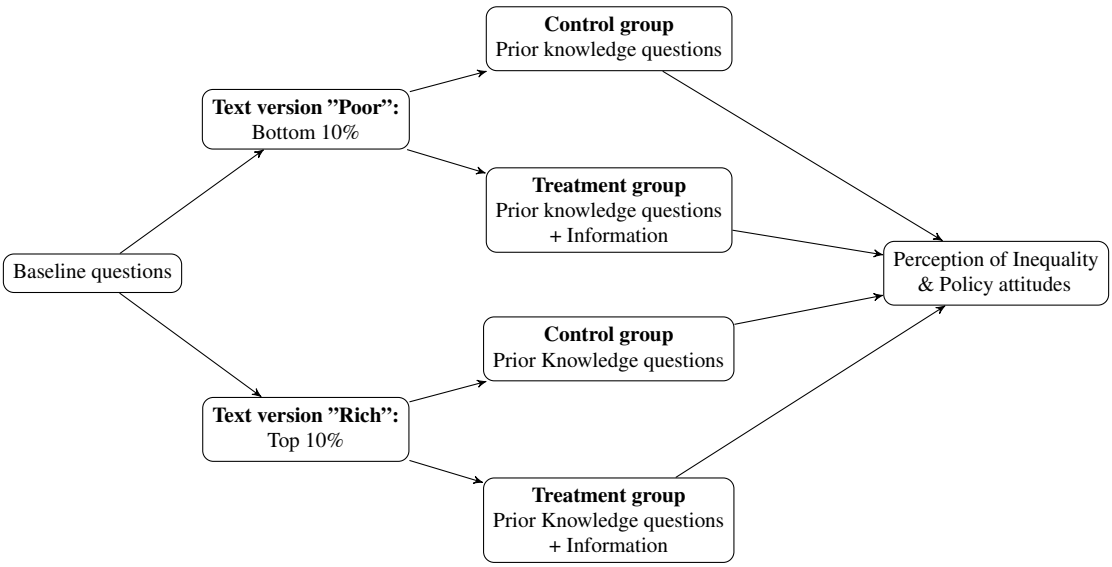


Figure 1: Experimental Design

main econometric specification is a linear probability model:

$$Support_{ij} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Treat_i + \alpha_2 Text_i + \alpha_3 Treat_i \times Text_i + \mathbf{X}_i' \alpha_4 + u_i \tag{1}$$

where $Support_{ij}$ is the outcome of interest (e.g., support for redistribution), $Treat_i$ indicates assignment to the information treatment, $Text_i$ indicates the direction of the inequality frame (rich or poor), and $\mathbf{X}_i$ includes covariates such as age, gender, education, and income. Robust standard errors are used throughout. Summary statistics and randomization checks across treatment groups are reported in Appendix Table A4.

2.3 Attrition Analysis

In autumn 2021, approximately one year after the baseline survey, we re-contacted respondents to assess the persistence of treatment effects. The follow-up used the same questionnaire module to elicit outcome variables, enabling within-subject comparisons over time. Approximately 50% of the original sample completed the follow-up wave. Attrition rates are balanced across the four experimental groups, ranging between 49.1% and 51.5% (see Appendix Table A5). We formally test for differential attrition across treatment conditions by regressing an attrition indicator on treatment group indicators. Results (reported in Appendix Table A6) show no significant differences in attrition rates between groups, confirming balanced attrition. Thus, selective attrition is unlikely to bias our estimates of treatment effects over time. All analyses of long-term outcomes are therefore conducted on this balanced panel subsample.

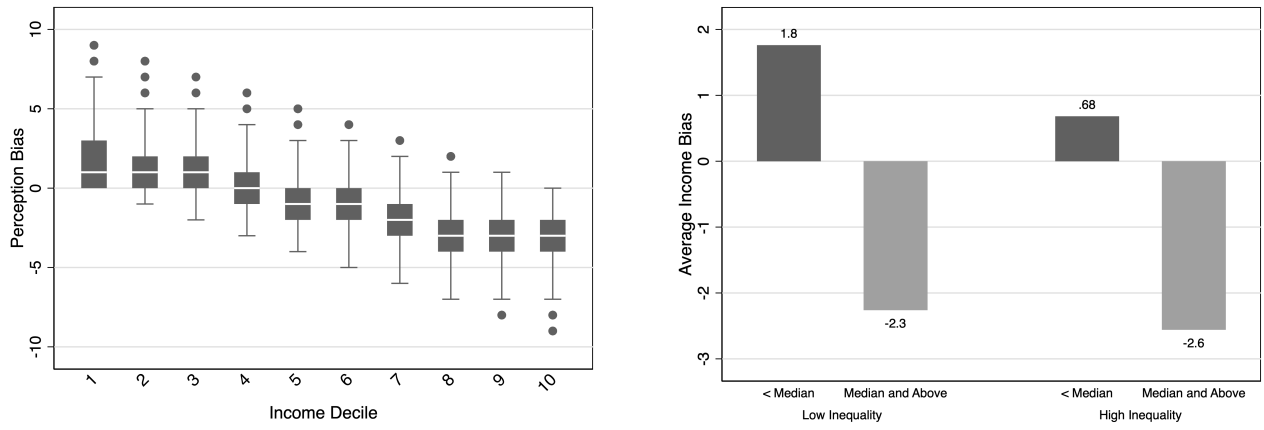
3 Results

3.1 Baseline Perceptions and Misperceptions

Before turning to treatment effects, we first describe key patterns in inequality perceptions and redistributive preferences in the control group. These descriptive findings provide important context for interpreting treatment heterogeneity and identifying potential channels of effect.

Perceptions of Inequality. A large majority of respondents perceive inequality in Germany as substantial. Over 90% characterize the income gap between the richest and poorest deciles as either "rather large" or "very large," with nearly three-quarters choosing the highest category. Perceptions of wealth inequality follow a similar pattern, though they are somewhat less pronounced—despite empirical evidence indicating that wealth is more unequally distributed than income in Germany.

Self-Placement and Perception Bias. Respondents' beliefs about their own relative income position exhibit a pronounced centrality bias. Individuals in the lower part of the income distribution tend to overestimate their standing, while those in higher deciles tend to underestimate it. Figure 2a displays the distribution of income bias, defined as the difference between a respondent's perceived position on the 10-rung income ladder and their actual decile based on reported household income. This misperception is systematically related to inequality beliefs: respondents who overestimate their own relative income tend to perceive lower overall inequality. Figure 2b illustrates that a downward bias in perceived inequality is more common among those with upward-biased self-placement.



(a) Bias in self-placement by actual income decile

(b) Bias and perceptions of inequality

Figure 2: Income bias and inequality perceptions.

Notes: Panel (a) shows the average bias in respondents' perceived income decile relative to their actual position, grouped by true decile. Panel (b) plots the average income bias by respondents' perceptions of inequality

Redistributive Preferences. Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for our main outcome variables. Normative concern about inequality is high: 69% of respondents in the control group agree that income differences in

	Mean	SD
Inequality Perception High	.69	.463
Support for Income Redistribution	.77	.421
Support for Income Tax	.31	.463
N	1463	

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics: Redistributive Preferences (Control Group)

Notes: Table reports means and standard deviations (SD) for the control group only. See Appendix for variable definitions. Sample size is $N = 1{,}463$.

society are too large. General support for redistribution is similarly strong—77% of respondents agree that it is the responsibility of the state to reduce inequality, with roughly equal shares expressing partial or full agreement. Support drops substantially, however, when redistribution involves concrete personal costs. Only about one-third of respondents report willingness to pay higher income taxes to reduce inequality in Germany. These figures point to a well-known gap between abstract support for redistribution and concrete policy action.

In sum, respondents perceive inequality as high and express normative concern, but their self-placement suggests limited awareness of where they stand in the distribution. While general support for redistribution is widespread, enthusiasm for specific redistributive policies—especially those involving taxation—is notably lower. This disconnect may partly reflect information gaps, motivated reasoning, or framing effects—issues explored in the experimental results that follow.

3.2 Effects of Priming on Inequality Perceptions and Policy Preferences

Priming refers to the non-conscious activation of concepts that then shape subsequent judgments and choices. In social psychology, exposure to subtle cues, such as contextual prompts or descriptive trait adjectives, enhances the activation of associated schemas in memory, thus shaping impressions and behaviors unconsciously (Chartrand and Bargh, 1996). Political science extends this by showing how media and campaign messages 'prime' voters - making particular issues more prominent and thus more likely to influence evaluations of policies or candidates (Hetherington, 1996). In our experiment, directing attention to either the top or bottom decile of the income distribution serves as such a prime, framing participants' evaluative lens before they state their redistribution preferences. In the first step of the analysis, we examine this effect by comparing two groups: one receiving the "rich framing" and the other receiving the "poor framing,", both of which do not receive additional information treatments.

The results[7] shown in Figure 3 indicate that receiving the rich priming (but not the treatment) has no significant impact on the normative evaluations of inequality by the respondents or their support for an increase in income tax aimed at reducing inequality. However, it does have a positive effect on agreeing that it is the role of the state

[7]The full results are presented in Table A7

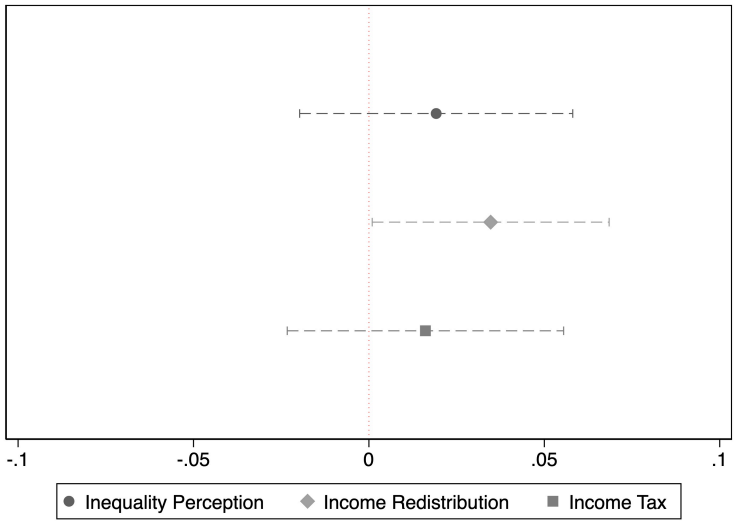


Figure 3: Effects of Rich vs. Poor Priming

Notes: The figure shows the effects of being primed to think about the rich compared to being primed to think about the poor on perceived inequality and preferences for redistribution and taxation. Vertical lines represent 90% confidence intervals. Estimates are based on linear regressions with covariates and state fixed effects.

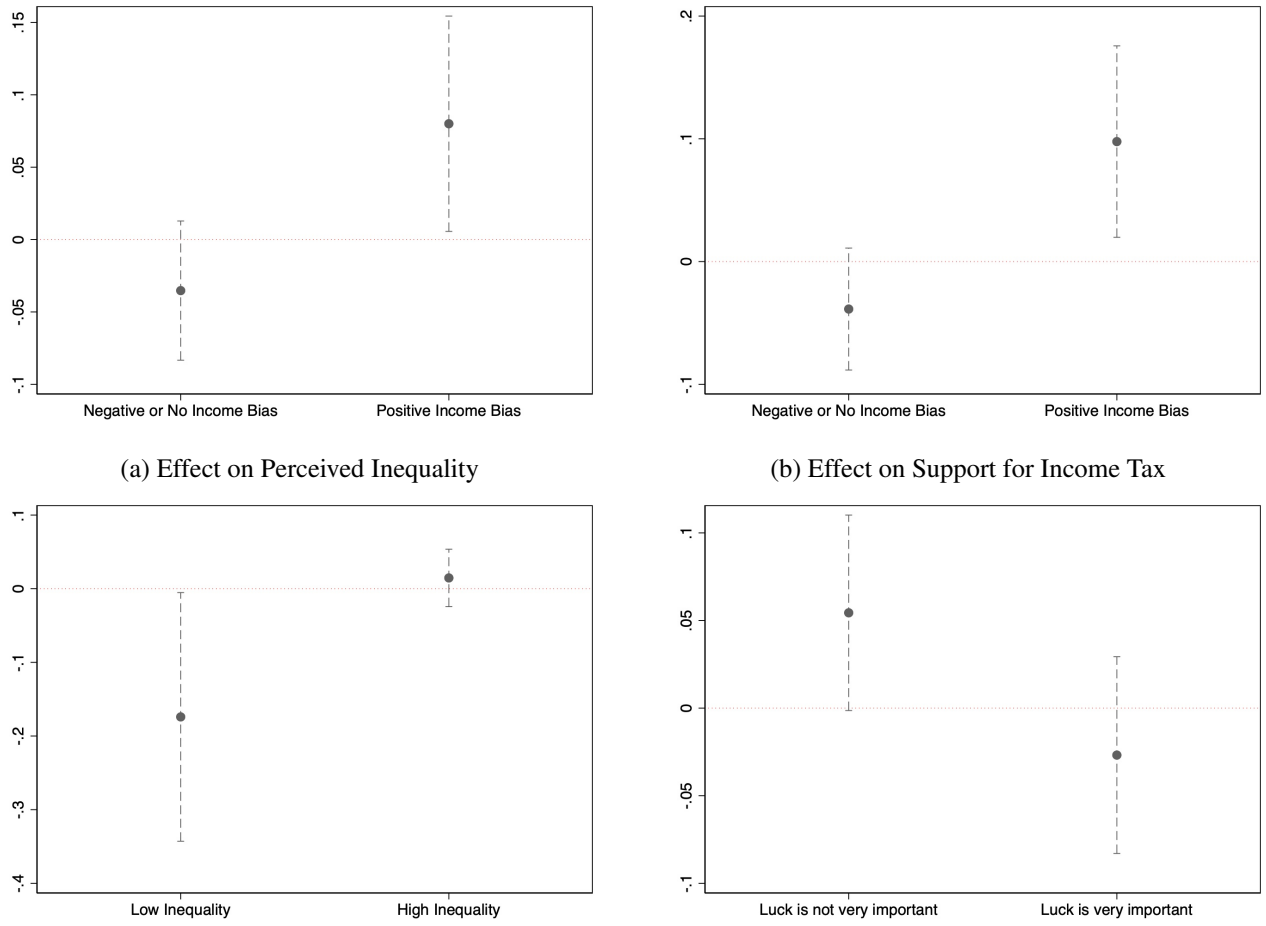
to reduce income inequality. Specifically, priming respondents to think about the upper end of the distribution, rather than the lower end, increases support for the state's redistributive role by approximately 4 percentage points (or 5% at the mean).

Priming effects are far from uniform. While the average effects suggest a modest shift in support for state intervention, there is significant heterogeneity in how priming influences respondents, depending on their perceptions of inequality and their self-assessment of their income position.

As shown in Figure 4, the impact of priming is particularly pronounced among those who overestimate their own income rank. For these respondents, being primed to think about the rich (instead of the poor) increases the likelihood of perceiving income differences in society as too large by nearly 10 percentage points. Furthermore, the rich priming also increases their support for an income tax increase by 9.5 percentage points. This suggests that those who overestimate their position in the income distribution are particularly responsive to cues emphasizing the wealthier segments of society.

Another source of heterogeneity arises from respondents' general perceptions of inequality in society. As discussed earlier, we asked participants their perceptions of inequality prior to the priming manipulation. Figure 4(c) shows that the priming effects are more pronounced among respondents who already perceive high levels of inequality. In contrast, priming individuals who perceive inequality as low tends to reinforce this belief, leading to a decrease in the perceived extent of societal inequality.

Finally, we observe heterogeneity in responses based on respondents' views on the role of luck in life success. Specifically, as shown in Figure 4(d), individuals who do not consider luck to be an important factor in getting



(a) Effect on Perceived Inequality

(b) Effect on Support for Income Tax

(c) Effect on Normative Evaluation of Inequality

(d) Effect on Support for Income Tax

Figure 4: Heterogeneity in Priming Effects

Notes: The figure shows heterogeneous effects of being primed about the rich (relative to being primed about the poor) across subgroups defined by income bias, inequality perception, and beliefs about luck. Dependent variables include normative evaluation of inequality, and support for income taxation. Vertical lines represent 90% confidence intervals. Estimates are based on linear regressions with covariates and state fixed effects.

ahead in life are more likely to support income tax increases when primed to think about the wealthy. This suggests that respondents who believe in meritocracy may see a greater need for redistribution when they are encouraged to focus on the rich.

In summary, our findings indicate that priming can influence respondents' perceptions, particularly for specific subgroups. Nudging individuals to focus on the rich versus the poor does have an effect, but the magnitude and direction of the effect depend on respondents' preexisting beliefs and perceptions. Those who overestimate their income position, perceive high levels of inequality, or believe in meritocracy are particularly responsive to this priming, showing increased support for state intervention in the form of income redistribution.

These findings underscore the importance of accounting for heterogeneity in priming effects, particularly the role of individual beliefs and prior perceptions in shaping responses to inequality cues. Two practical implications follow. First, communicators aiming to build support for redistributive policies should carefully tailor the content of their message—specifically, whether it highlights the top or bottom of the distribution. Second,

researchers and survey designers must recognize that seemingly innocuous elements such as question order or framing can act as implicit primes, potentially biasing responses and distorting observed preferences.

3.3 Effect of Information on Inequality Perceptions and Policy Support

To examine how information about the income distribution shapes perceptions of inequality and, in turn, influences support for redistribution, we randomly provided respondents with one of two "information treatments": the actual share of total income received by either the poorest 10% or the richest 10% of households. We then measured changes in both their perceived inequality and their policy preferences.

Baseline Misperceptions. Regardless of whether we asked about the poorest or the richest decile, most respondents misjudged the true values. Specifically, a majority overstates both the income share of the poorest 10% and that of the richest 10%. Consequently, when shown the statistic for poor households, most respondents revise their perceptions upward, whereas those shown the rich-household statistic typically revise downward. Because these adjustments move in opposite directions, we cannot cleanly separate the effect of "upper-end vs. lower-end framing" from that of "higher-than-expected vs. lower-than-expected revelation." However, the dominant effect appears to be driven by the upper-end framing: about 20% of respondents in the poor treatment learn that inequality is lower than they thought, while roughly 30% of those in the rich treatment learn that it is higher than expected. The share of respondents who overestimate the income share of their assigned group is reported in Appendix Table A2, and the average magnitude of overestimation is shown in Appendix Table A3.[8]

To rule out that these misperceptions are merely based on difficulty handling percentages, we compared slider-based estimates to a simpler qualitative question: respondents rated income differences between the richest and poorest deciles on a five-point scale (from 'no difference' to 'very large difference'). We find a coherent pattern: those who judge the gap as 'very large' tend to underestimate the share of the poor decile and overestimate the share of the rich decile (and vice versa).

Treatment Effects. Figure 5 displays the marginal effects of each information treatment. This is in fact an intention to treat effect, since it includes not only those who actually read the statement, but everyone for whom the information was shown on the screen. Moreover, this effect does not distinguish between respondents with different levels of confidence in their previous knowledge. With our data, we can only distinguish between respondents who are correct or not in their guess (and we know that on average 85% of them overestimate the share), but we cannot distinguish between respondents who are more or less convinced about their guesses. Based on the results of our follow-up survey, where we also asked how certain they were, we believe that the majority of our respondents had no real knowledge of the information we provided, which could also be

[8] Treatment values were based on actual income shares from Eurostat and SOEP data (2018). See Appendix Table A1 for the exact values.

inferred from how far they were on average from the true values.[9]

Our results indicate that information about the top 10% significantly reduces the perception that income differences in society are too large and leads to lower support for redistributive policies. Those who receive the treatment focusing on the rich, which for the majority of the respondents means learning that the rich get a smaller share of the overall income than they thought, are less likely to agree with the statement that the income differences in the society are too big by almost 12 percentage points, 16% at the mean of the control group. They are also less likely to support income redistribution both at a general level (by 6 percentage points, 7.7% at the mean) and with more concrete tax policy (5 percentage points, 17% at the mean). In contrast, information about the bottom 10% has no detectable impact on either perceived inequality or policy preferences. This asymmetry is striking and warrants further discussion. One reason for why this may be the case is a potential ceiling effect for those who receive the poor-households treatment: they tend to learn that inequality is higher than they thought, but the perception that inequality is a problem is already very high, 69% of the respondent in the control group already think so, so for many respondents there is little room to shift this perception further.

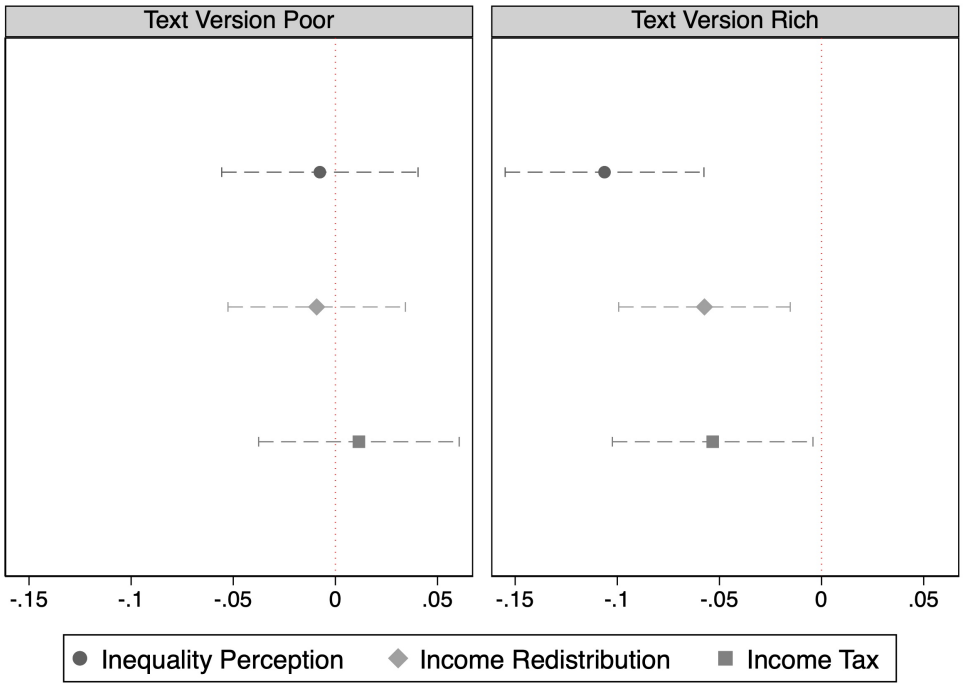


Figure 5: Marginal Effects of Information Treatments

Notes: The figure shows the estimated marginal effects of information treatments compared to the control group on key outcomes: perceived inequality, support for redistribution, and preferred income tax. Treatments vary whether respondents received statistics about the top or bottom 10% income share. Horizontal lines represent 90% confidence intervals. Each coefficient comes from a separate model estimated on the full sample. Estimates are based on linear regressions with covariates and state fixed effects.

[9] As shown in Figure A7 in the Appendix, among the respondents in the second wave who did not receive any information in the first wave, around a quarter is in the middle between unsure and sure of their guesses, while a large group of respondents in the "poor priming group" is unsure about their answer (49% are rather unsure), in the "rich priming group" somewhat fewer respondents are unsure (36.8%) and in both cases only around 4% are very sure.

The pronounced effect of the rich-household treatment may reflect the heightened salience of top-end inequality in public discourse. In recent years, considerable public and media attention has been devoted to the concentration of income and wealth among the richest segments of society (e.g., Piketty, 2014; Saez and Zucman, 2019). This increased focus may contribute to both stronger support for redistributive policies when inequality is framed in terms of the rich and to systematic overestimation of the share of resources held by top income groups. Upon receiving corrective information through the treatment, respondents may adjust their perceptions and, correspondingly, their preferences for redistribution. This interpretation would be consistent with existing research on the role of salience and information provision in shaping attitudes toward inequality and redistribution. As inequality continues to rise, the perception of the 'undeserving rich' can also change, potentially influencing how individuals respond to information about the wealthiest members of society.

To examine the impact of learning whether inequality is higher or lower than anticipated, we divided the sample into participants whose initial estimates indicated that both treatments would shift their perceptions in the same direction, either upwards or downwards. As already mentioned, given the very small percentage of respondents who underestimate the share of the poor or of the rich, the sample in column (1) of Table 2 is mainly formed by respondents receiving the poor text version, while column (2) consists of respondents receiving the rich text treatment. Nevertheless, the table shows that the results are consistent with the expectation and complement the results presented above: we find a significant impact of the treatment that decreased perceived inequality yields a significant effect, mirroring the rich-household results (Table 2). This suggests that "reducing" perceived inequality has a larger impact on attitudes than "increasing" it.

In the context of income inequality, it appears that people in Germany perceive inequality to be so pronounced that additional information highlighting actual levels of inequality offers little potential to further increase either perceived inequality or support for redistributive policies. Instead, information tends to correct overestimations, which subsequently leads to lower perceptions of inequality as a problem and reduced support for redistribution. Information treatments correct misperceptions in both directions, but only downward corrections meaningfully shift attitudes. In a context of widely acknowledged high inequality, information that reveals "less inequality than feared" reduces both perceived severity and support for redistribution. Although perceptions and preferences correlate strongly, our design cannot cleanly disentangle direct effects of treatments from the indirect causal pathway through corrected perceptions.[10]

In contrast to the priming effect, we do not find any heterogeneity in the effect of the information treatment with respect to the individual's income bias. Yet we do find some interesting heterogeneity, focusing on the "rich" treatment: As expected, we find a stronger impact of information treatment (-.19 percentage points) on

[10]Because treatments likely operate through both informational and priming channels, and we cannot instrument perceptions independently, a causal mediation analysis is infeasible here.

Table 2: Average Treatment Effect by Direction of Correction

	(1) Increasing Inequality	(2) Decreasing Inequality
Inequality Perception	0.022	-0.149***
	(0.509)	(0.000)
Observations	1,578	1,346
Income Redistribution	-0.019	-0.060**
	(0.531)	(0.044)
Observations	1,532	1,302
Income Tax	0.017	-0.071*
	(0.609)	(0.066)
Observations	1,501	1,287

Notes: The table reports average treatment effects separately for respondents who corrected their beliefs upward or downward after receiving information. "Increasing Inequality" indicates that the treatment value was higher than the respondent's prior belief; "Decreasing Inequality" indicates the opposite. Outcomes include perceived inequality, normative evaluations, and support for redistribution and taxation. All estimates are based on linear regressions with covariates and state fixed effects. p-values in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

the normative evaluation of inequality for the individuals whose initial perception of inequality, which we asked before administering the treatment, was high, but interestingly, this difference is not reflected in their policy preferences. For the group who believes luck is very important to get ahead in life, it is exactly the opposite: inequality perceptions are not affected differently across those who think luck is important compared to those who do not. Yet, redistributive preferences are affected differently: for respondents who believe that luck is important to succeed in life, the effect of the information treatment on the general support for redistribution is significantly larger (-.09 percentage points).

3.4 (In)stability of the Treatment Effects

A year after our first survey, we re-contacted a random subsample of the original respondents and asked them again about their inequality perceptions, attitudes, and policy preferences. As in the initial wave, we presented respondents with a perception question regarding the income distribution, using the same two text versions: one focusing on the top end of the distribution and one on the bottom.

Our analysis reveals no detectable improvement in the accuracy of respondents' answers nor in their confidence in those answers, even for those who had been exposed to the correct information a year earlier. This suggests that the effects of the information treatment on factual perceptions did not persist over time.

We also repeat the main outcome questions concerning inequality as a societal problem and preferences for redistribution. This allowed us to assess the (in)stability of treatment effects on attitudes and preferences over the one-year period. Our results, presented in Table 3, show that the initial effects of treatment on attitudes and policy preferences decreased markedly over time, with no evidence of long-term persistence. In columns 1, 3, and 5, we report estimates from the main model specifications. In alternative specifications (columns 2,

4, and 6), we pool all treatment arms—including both country-level and supra/subnational variants—to assess the robustness of treatment effects under broader informational exposure. This allows us to verify that the absence of sustained effects is not driven by limited sample sizes within individual treatment arms but reflects a consistent lack of significant long-term impacts. Importantly, this attenuation appears to be driven by the treated respondents returning to their perceptions and preferences before treatment, rather than by changes in the control group. As shown in Figure 6, a comparison of baseline and follow-up outcomes among control respondents confirms that their perceptions and policy preferences remained largely stable during the 1-year period, further underscoring that the observed convergence is primarily attributable to changes within the treated group. As a result, we observe no significant differences between the two groups one year after the intervention.

Table 3: Average Effect of the Treatment After One Year

	(1) Inequality Perception	(2) Inequality Perception	(3) Income Redistribution	(4) Income Redistribution	(5) Income Tax	(6) Income Tax
Text Version Poor	-0.002	-0.000	0.003	0.044	0.025	-0.008
	(0.969)	(0.993)	(0.948)	(0.183)	(0.654)	(0.829)
Text Version Rich	0.034	-0.018	0.013	0.030	-0.021	-0.032
	(0.517)	(0.608)	(0.787)	(0.348)	(0.697)	(0.389)
Observations	953	1,798	922	1,740	914	1,724

p-values in parentheses

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Notes: The table reports average treatment effects on perceived inequality, preferences for redistribution and taxation, measured approximately one year after the initial intervention. Columns 1, 3, and 5 show estimates from the main specification. Columns 2, 4, and 6 report results from an alternative model that pools all treatment groups, including the state-level and EU-level variants. Estimates are based on linear regressions including baseline covariates and state fixed effects. The analysis is restricted to respondents who completed both survey waves. p-values in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

These findings contribute to a growing body of evidence suggesting that while informational interventions can produce immediate shifts in perceptions and preferences, their effects are often short-lived. The lack of persistence in both factual perceptions and redistribution preferences observed here may reflect the strength of prior beliefs, motivated reasoning, or the influence of ongoing public narratives that reinforce existing views on inequality. Moreover, the social and political salience of inequality in Germany during this period may have led respondents to discount or forget information that was incongruent with their broader worldview or the dominant public discourse. The results also highlight the challenge of achieving durable attitudinal change through isolated information treatments, especially in policy domains characterized by complex value judgments and entrenched opinions.

4 Conclusion

This paper provides new causal evidence on how cognitive focus and factual information affect perceptions of inequality and preferences for redistribution. Using a large-scale factorial survey experiment in Germany, we

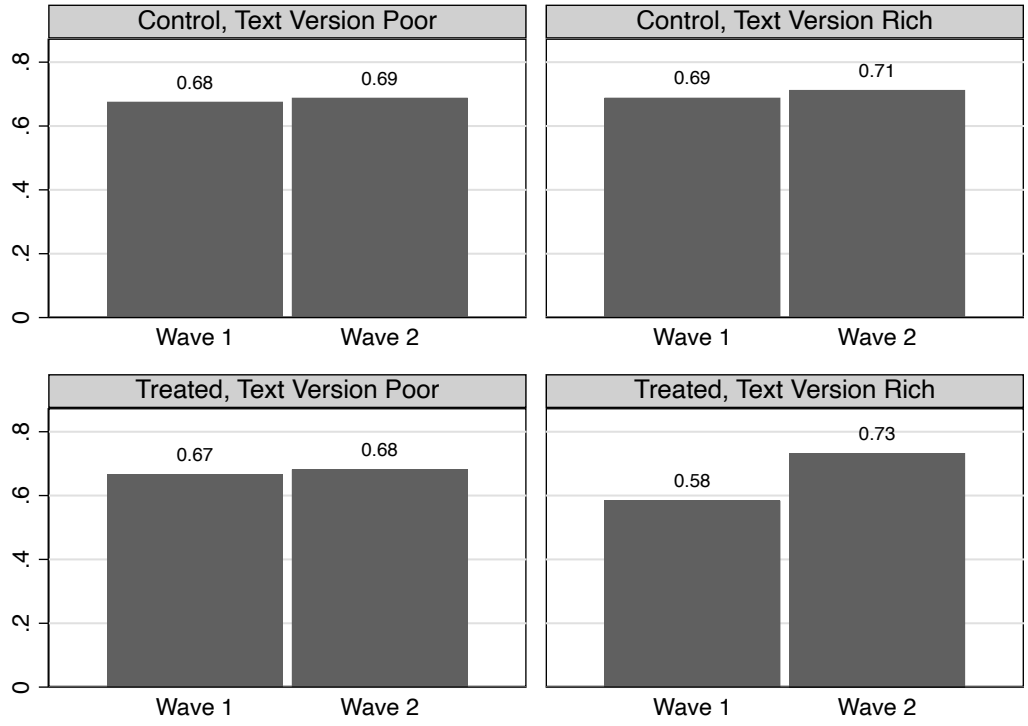


Figure 6: Mean Support for Redistribution by Treatment Group and Survey Wave

Notes: The figure shows average support for income redistribution across treatment groups in the baseline and follow-up survey waves.

identify three main insights.

First, we show that priming—subtly directing attention to either the top or bottom of the income distribution—can shape redistributive attitudes. Respondents primed to think about the richest 10% express stronger concern about inequality and greater support for redistribution, even in the absence of factual correction. This underscores that not only content, but also cognitive salience and framing, meaningfully shape public attitudes.

Second, we document asymmetric effects of factual information. Information about the actual income share held by the top 10% significantly reduces perceived inequality and weakens support for redistribution. In contrast, analogous information about the bottom 10% has little impact. We interpret this asymmetry as reflecting a ceiling effect: perceptions of inequality are already high in Germany, and there is limited scope to further increase concern. Conversely, correcting overestimates of top-end inequality leads to downward updates and attenuated support for redistributive policies.

Third, both priming and information effects are short-lived. One year after treatment, we observe no lasting shifts in attitudes or beliefs. This temporal decay suggests that one-off messaging or information efforts are insufficient to durably shape public opinion. Reinforcement and repeated exposure may be necessary to translate perceptual updates into lasting changes in redistributive preferences.

Taken together, these results underscore the difficulty of producing lasting changes in inequality perceptions

and policy preferences through isolated informational treatments, and highlight the importance of considering both the durability and the context dependence of such interventions.

Our findings help reconcile mixed results in the literature on inequality information and policy preferences. By explicitly distinguishing between priming and information, and between top- and bottom-directed cues, we show that both the *mode* and *direction* of inequality framing matter. These findings challenge canonical political economy models that assume voters hold accurate beliefs about inequality, and instead support existing work emphasizing the centrality of misperceptions in shaping policy attitudes (e.g., Stantcheva, 2021).

From a policy perspective, our results suggest that framing strategies emphasizing top-end inequality can be effective in increasing support for redistribution by shaping perceptions and attitudes—though their impact is context-dependent and may require sustained reinforcement to achieve lasting change, especially in contexts where factual information about the rich can temper support by correcting overestimations. Future research should explore the mechanisms behind the decay of treatment effects and test whether repeated or institutionalized informational interventions can produce longer-term shifts in public attitudes toward inequality and redistribution.

References

Alesina, A., Stantcheva, S., and Teso, E. (2018). Intergenerational Earnings Mobility and Preferences for Redistribution. *American Economic Review*, 108(2):521–554.

Bellani, L., Bledow, N., Busemeyer, M., and Schwerdt, G. (2021a). Perception of inequality and social mobility in germany: evidence from the inequality barometer. *Working Paper No. 3, Cluster of Excellence "The Politics of Inequality"*.

Bellani, L., Bledow, N., Busemeyer, M., and Schwerdt, G. (2021b). When everyone thinks they're middle-class: (mis-)perceptions of inequality and why they matter for social policy. *Policy Paper 06: Inequality Barometer – Inequality and Social Mobility*.

Chartrand, T. L. and Bargh, J. A. (1996). Automatic activation of impression formation and memorization goals: Nonconscious goal priming reproduces effects of explicit task instructions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71(3):464–478.

Chong, D. and Druckman, J. N. (2007). Framing public opinion in competitive democracies. *American Political Science Review*, 101(4):637–655.

Cruces, G., Perez-Truglia, R., and Tetaz, M. (2013). Biased perceptions of income distribution and preferences for redistribution: Evidence from a survey experiment. *Journal of Public Economics*, 98:100–112.

Engelhardt, C. and Wagener, A. (2018). What do Germans think and know about income inequality? A survey experiment. *Socio-Economic Review*, 16(4):743–767.

Hadavand, A. (2018). Misperceptions: An analysis of subjective economic inequality. *Research on Economic Inequality*, 26(2018):247–281.

Hetherington, M. J. (1996). The media's role in forming voters' national economic evaluations in 1992. *American Journal of Political Science*, 40(2):372–395.

Kuziemko, I., Norton, M. I., Saez, E., and Stantcheva, S. (2015). How elastic are preferences for redistribution? evidence from randomized survey experiments. *American Economic Review*, 105(4):1478–1508.

McCall, L., Burk, D., Laperrière, M., and Richeson, J. A. (2017). Exposure to rising inequality shapes americans' opportunity beliefs and policy support. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(36):9593–9598.

Meltzer, A. H. and Richard, S. F. (1981). A rational theory of the Size of Government. *Journal of Political Economy*, 89(5).

Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Harvard University Press.

Saez, E. and Zucman, G. (2019). *The Triumph of Injustice: How the Rich Dodge Taxes and How to Make Them Pay*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Stantcheva, S. (2021). Understanding tax policy: How do people reason? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 136(4):2309–2369.

Trump, K. S. (2018). Income Inequality Influences Perceptions of Legitimate Income Differences. *British Journal of Political Science*, 48(4):929–952.

A Appendix

A.1 Variable Construction and Measurement

This paper employs both observational and experimental data from the survey. Below we provide detailed descriptions of the key variables used in the analysis:

Pre-Treatment Variables

Perceived Inequality: Respondents are asked to assess the perceived difference in income between the richest and poorest 10% in society. Answer options include: *no difference, rather small, small, rather large, and large*.

Self-placement in the Income Distribution: To capture subjective positioning, respondents were presented with a visual ladder containing 10 rungs, anchored by the top (richest 10%) and bottom (poorest 10%) of the income distribution. Respondents indicated the rung they believed represented their own income position. To calculate misperception (bias), we compared respondents' subjective placement with their objective position derived from separately reported household income. A positive bias indicates overestimation of income rank; a negative bias indicates underestimation.[11]

Beliefs About Mobility: We asked respondents about the importance of luck in achieving economic success, with answer categories ranging from *not important at all* to *extremely important*. This captures respondents' beliefs about economic fairness and mobility. All these pre-treatment variables were measured prior to the experimental intervention and used for baseline analyses and subgroup heterogeneity investigations.

Post-Treatment Outcome Variables

After the experimental intervention, we collected several outcome measures to capture perceptions, normative evaluations, and policy preferences related to inequality and redistribution:

Normative Evaluation of Inequality: Respondents indicated agreement with the statement: *"Income differences in society are too large"*, on a seven-point Likert scale. We defined agreement with the highest two response options as a perception of "high inequality."

General Support for Redistribution: Respondents indicated their agreement with the statement: *"It is the task of the state to reduce the differences between people with high and low incomes"*. Response categories were *completely disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, and completely agree*. We generated a binary variable equal to 1 if respondents *somewhat or completely agree*, and 0 otherwise.

Specific Policy Preferences: Respondents expressed their willingness to pay higher income taxes to decrease inequality in Germany. Response categories were: *no, tendency towards no, tendency towards yes, and yes*. We created a binary indicator equal to 1 for responses *tendency towards yes* or *yes*, and 0 otherwise.[12] All post-treatment outcomes were collected immediately after the experimental manipulation unless explicitly noted otherwise in the analysis.

[11] Note that the subjective question refers to individual placement, while objective data rely on household income. This introduces minor measurement imprecision.

[12] In Appendix A.3, we present analogous questions about willingness to pay taxes at the respondent's state and EU level.

A.2 Other Tables and Graphs

Table A1: Top and Bottom 10% Income Shares by Region (Treatment Values)

Region	**Bottom 10%**	**Top 10%**
European Union	2.8	24
Germany	2.5	25
Baden-Wuerttemberg	2.3	24
Bavaria	2.5	24
Berlin	2.8	25
Brandenburg	2.5	23
Bremen	2.4	26
Hamburg	2.2	27
Hesse	1.9	29
Mecklenburg-West Pomerania	2.8	25
Lower Saxony	2.6	24
North Rhine-Westphalia	2.4	25
Rhineland-Palatinate	2.5	23
Saarland	2.5	25
Saxony	3.0	22
Saxony-Anhalt	2.8	24
Schleswig-Holstein	2.5	24
Thuringia	2.6	23

Notes: Values indicate the income shares of the bottom 10% and top 10% of the income distribution, as presented in the survey treatments. Sources: Eurostat and author's calculations based on SOEP data for 2018 (the most recent year available at the time of the survey).

Table A2: Percent Overestimating Income Share, by Treatment

	Bottom 10%	Top 10%	Difference
Control	0.88	0.81	0.07***
Treated	0.89	0.81	0.08***
Difference	-0.01	0.00	

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Notes: The table reports the proportion of respondents who overestimate the income share of the top or bottom 10%, shown by treatment group. Overestimation is defined as reporting a perceived share greater than the actual value. See Table A3 for average magnitude of overestimation.

Table A3: Average Overestimation of Top Income Share, by Treatment

	Bottom 10%	Top 10%	Difference
Control	16.7	29	-12.3***
Treated	16.6	28	-11.4***
Difference	0.1	1	

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Notes: This table shows the average overestimation of the top or bottom 10% income share by treatment group. Overestimation is calculated as the difference between respondents' perceived and actual income shares. Results complement Table A2, which reports the share of respondents overestimating.

Table A4: Descriptive Statistics by Treatment Group

Variable	Control	Treated	Diff_CT	Bottom	Top	Diff_BT
Father born in Germany	0.98	0.96	0.02	0.96	0.97	-0.01
Mother born in Germany	0.94	0.94	0.00	0.94	0.94	-0.00
Respondent born in Germany	0.98	0.98	0.00	0.97	0.98	-0.01
Children under 18 in household	78.09	78.94	-0.85	78.14	79.31	-1.18
Male	0.47	0.49	-0.02	0.48	0.49	-0.01
Female	0.53	0.51	0.02	0.52	0.51	0.01
Age: 18–39	0.28	0.30*	-0.02	0.29	0.29	0.01
Age: 40–59	0.38	0.35	0.02	0.35	0.37	-0.02*
Age: 60+	0.35	0.35	0.00	0.36	0.34	0.02
Lower education	0.35	0.34	0.01	0.34	0.35	-0.01
Medium education	0.32	0.31	0.01	0.31	0.31	0.01
Higher education	0.33	0.35*	-0.03	0.35	0.34	0.00
Baden-Württemberg	0.13	0.12	0.00	0.13	0.12	0.01
Bavaria	0.16	0.15	0.01	0.14	0.16	-0.02*
Berlin	0.04	0.05	-0.01*	0.05	0.04	0.01***
Brandenburg	0.03	0.03	0.00	0.03	0.03	0.00
Bremen	0.01	0.01	-0.00	0.01	0.01	-0.00
Hamburg	0.02	0.02	0.00	0.02	0.03	-0.01**
Hesse	0.08	0.08	0.00	0.08	0.09	-0.01
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.01	0.01*
Lower Saxony	0.08	0.09	-0.00	0.08	0.09	-0.01
North Rhine-Westphalia	0.23	0.23	0.00	0.23	0.22	0.02*
Rhineland-Palatinate	0.05	0.05	-0.01	0.05	0.05	0.00
Saarland	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	-0.00
Saxony	0.05	0.06	-0.01	0.06	0.06	0.00
Saxony-Anhalt	0.03	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.03	-0.00
Schleswig-Holstein	0.03	0.03	-0.00	0.03	0.03	-0.00
Thuringia	0.02	0.03	-0.00	0.03	0.03	0.00
Full-time employment (30+ hours)	0.46	0.46	-0.00	0.44	0.47	-0.03*
Part-time employment	0.12	0.10	0.02*	0.11	0.11	-0.00
Mini-job (less than 10 hours)	0.02	0.03	-0.00	0.02	0.03	-0.00
Short-term work or temporary leave	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	-0.00
Retired	0.28	0.28	-0.00	0.28	0.27	0.01
Housework, childcare, or caregiving	0.03	0.03	0.00	0.02	0.03	-0.00
Permanently unable to work due to illness or disability	0.02	0.02	-0.00	0.02	0.02	0.00
Not employed but seeking work	0.02	0.03	-0.00	0.03	0.02	0.01
Not employed and not seeking work	0.01	0.02	-0.01*	0.02	0.01	0.00
Other employment	0.03	0.04	-0.00	0.04	0.03	0.01
Single	0.20	0.18	0.01	0.18	0.19	-0.01
Married	0.48	0.48	0.00	0.48	0.47	0.01
In a relationship but not married	0.19	0.21	-0.02	0.20	0.20	0.00
Divorced	0.07	0.07	-0.01	0.08	0.07	0.01
Widowed	0.05	0.05	0.00	0.05	0.05	-0.00
In a registered partnership	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.00
No answer on marital status	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	-0.00
Income under €1,140 net	0.10	0.10	-0.00	0.10	0.10	0.00
Income from €1,140 to €1,560 net	0.10	0.10	0.00	0.09	0.10	-0.01*
Income from €1,560 to €1,950 net	0.07	0.08	-0.01	0.08	0.09	-0.01
Income from €1,950 to €2,330 net	0.11	0.11	0.01	0.11	0.10	0.01
Income from €2,330 to €2,740 net	0.09	0.10	-0.01	0.09	0.09	-0.00
Income from €2,740 to €3,200 net	0.10	0.10	0.00	0.10	0.10	-0.00
Income from €3,200 to €3,750 net	0.09	0.08	0.01	0.09	0.08	0.00
Income from €3,750 to €4,470 net	0.07	0.09	-0.02*	0.09	0.08	0.01*
Income from €4,470 to €5,670 net	0.09	0.09	0.01	0.09	0.09	0.01
Income of €5,670 or more net	0.06	0.06	-0.00	0.06	0.06	-0.01
No answer on income	0.11	0.11	0.00	0.11	0.11	0.00

Notes: Table reports means by treatment group. Significance levels refer to pairwise comparisons between the control group and each treatment group based on two-sided t-tests. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A5: Attrition by Treatment Group

Treatment Group	**Baseline** N	**Follow-up** N	**Attrition Rate (%)**
Rich Prime + Info	768	388	49.5
Poor Prime + Info	754	378	49.9
Rich Prime Only	790	383	51.5
Poor Prime Only	794	404	49.1

Notes: The table shows the number of respondents by treatment group at baseline and at follow-up. Attrition rates are computed as the share of baseline respondents not re-interviewed in the second wave. Rates are balanced across groups, suggesting minimal differential attrition.

Table A6: Differential Attrition by Treatment Group

	Coefficient	**Std. Error**	**t-statistic**
Treatment Group			
Poor Prime + Info	0.0168	0.0192	0.87
Rich Prime Only	0.0299	0.0191	1.57
Poor Prime Only	0.0056	0.0190	0.30
Constant (Rich Prime + Info)	0.292***	0.0135	21.53
Observations		4,659	
R-squared		0.0006	

Notes: The dependent variable is an indicator equal to 1 if the respondent did not participate in the follow-up survey (attrition). Rich Prime + Info is the reference category. None of the treatment group differences are statistically significant. These results suggest no evidence of differential attrition across treatment groups. Robust standard errors are reported. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

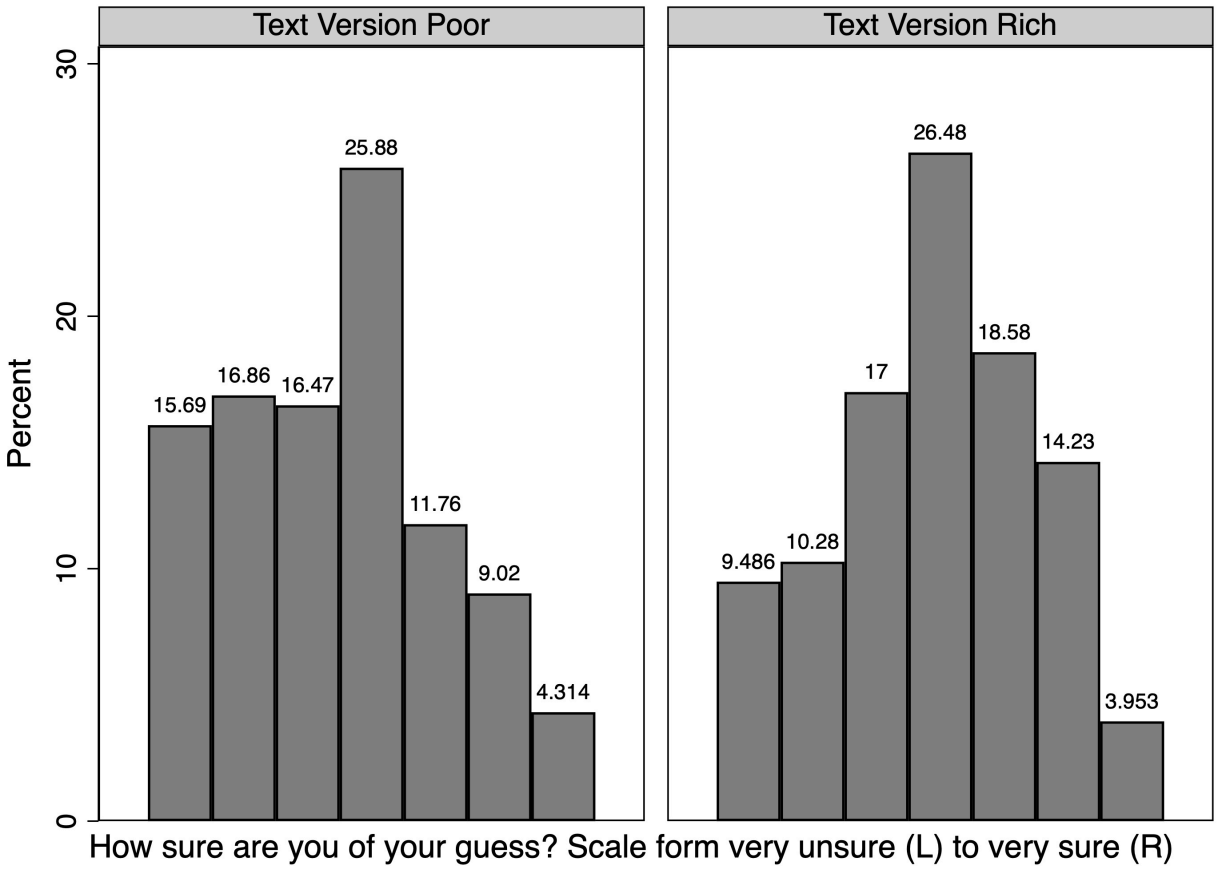


Figure A7: Confidence Levels in Guess Accuracy — Follow-up Survey

Notes: The figure shows respondents' self-reported confidence in the accuracy of their income share estimates, measured during the follow-up survey. Bars represent the distribution of confidence levels across treatment groups. Values reflect raw proportions; no covariate adjustment is applied.

Table A7: Effects of Priming Treatments on Key Outcomes

	(1) Inequality Perception	(2) Inequality Perception	(3) Income Redistribution	(4) Income Redistribution	(5) Income Tax	(6) Income Tax
Text Version Rich	0.001	0.008	0.034	0.037*	0.013	0.012
	(0.952)	(0.726)	(0.114)	(0.080)	(0.576)	(0.613)
Order: Germany > EU > State	0.005	-0.007	0.021	0.016	0.018	0.025
	(0.901)	(0.867)	(0.579)	(0.662)	(0.673)	(0.554)
Order: State > Germany > EU	0.034	0.036	-0.011	0.005	-0.013	-0.005
	(0.392)	(0.373)	(0.770)	(0.900)	(0.741)	(0.901)
Order: State > EU > Germany	0.005	0.000	0.028	0.022	-0.017	-0.014
	(0.903)	(1.000)	(0.441)	(0.545)	(0.683)	(0.733)
Order: EU > Germany > State	0.038	0.035	0.004	0.003	-0.009	0.012
	(0.356)	(0.381)	(0.911)	(0.931)	(0.819)	(0.770)
Order: EU > State > Germany	0.039	0.036	0.042	0.052	0.085**	0.095**
	(0.347)	(0.388)	(0.259)	(0.166)	(0.050)	(0.027)
Female		-0.012		0.045**		-0.086***
		(0.630)		(0.045)		(0.001)
Age 40-59		0.025		-0.026		-0.054*
		(0.418)		(0.358)		(0.083)
Age 60+		-0.003		-0.032		0.015
		(0.949)		(0.456)		(0.764)
Medium education		-0.037		-0.011		0.065**
		(0.211)		(0.673)		(0.034)
Higher education		-0.043		-0.048		0.120***
		(0.161)		(0.101)		(0.000)
Father born in Germany		0.019*		0.014		0.001
		(0.092)		(0.229)		(0.951)
Mother born in Germany		-0.019		-0.023		-0.020
		(0.588)		(0.459)		(0.430)
Respondent born in Germany		-0.007		0.028		-0.007
		(0.868)		(0.372)		(0.783)
Part-time employment		0.019		0.020		0.026
		(0.636)		(0.584)		(0.510)
Mini-job (under 10 hrs/week)		0.014		0.069		0.094
		(0.854)		(0.300)		(0.263)
Short-time work or temporary leave		0.058		-0.115		0.094
		(0.595)		(0.330)		(0.419)
Retired		0.035		0.028		0.118**
		(0.435)		(0.484)		(0.015)
Homemaking/care work		0.140*		0.035		0.202**
		(0.057)		(0.588)		(0.018)
Permanently unable to work		0.026		0.048		0.132
		(0.749)		(0.487)		(0.172)
Unemployed		0.071		0.053		0.092
		(0.345)		(0.416)		(0.279)
Not working, not seeking work		0.040		-0.103		0.017
		(0.761)		(0.443)		(0.895)
Other employment status		-0.048		0.041		-0.074
		(0.495)		(0.472)		(0.251)
Children under 18 in household		0.000		0.000		0.000
		(0.663)		(0.256)		(0.796)
Married		0.067*		0.033		-0.085**
		(0.074)		(0.313)		(0.026)
Single/in relationship		0.068*		0.054		-0.033
		(0.082)		(0.117)		(0.416)
Divorced		0.041		0.044		-0.117**
		(0.447)		(0.345)		(0.032)
Widowed		0.014		-0.014		-0.158***
		(0.828)		(0.814)		(0.010)
Registered partnership		-0.092		0.249***		0.096
		(0.541)		(0.007)		(0.554)
No marital status reported		-0.204		0.136*		-0.102
		(0.110)		(0.096)		(0.415)
Net income €1,140–1,560		-0.004		0.041		-0.008
		(0.942)		(0.334)		(0.885)
Net income €1,560–1,950		-0.016		0.039		-0.030
		(0.762)		(0.405)		(0.605)
Net income €1,950–2,330		-0.049		-0.004		0.015
		(0.334)		(0.929)		(0.792)
Net income €2,330–2,740		-0.089		-0.001		0.007
		(0.110)		(0.977)		(0.910)
Net income €2,740–3,200		-0.100*		-0.039		0.077
		(0.071)		(0.435)		(0.196)
Net income €3,200–3,750		-0.026		-0.037		0.000
		(0.650)		(0.469)		(0.997)
Net income €3,750–4,470		-0.064		-0.059		0.031
		(0.296)		(0.300)		(0.623)
Net income €4,470–5,670		-0.139**		-0.088		0.018
		(0.023)		(0.112)		(0.772)
Net income €5,670 or more		-0.239***		-0.366***		-0.111*
		(0.000)		(0.000)		(0.076)
Prefer not to say income		-0.092*		-0.019		-0.015
		(0.086)		(0.697)		(0.786)
Constant	0.666***	0.592***	0.743***	0.631***	0.291***	0.307***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
State dummies	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	1,579	1,579	1,525	1,525	1,495	1,495

Notes: The table reports the effects of being primed to think about the rich instead of the poor on perceived inequality, preferences for redistribution and taxation. p-values in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A8: Average Treatment Effects

	(1) Inequality Perception	(2) Inequality Perception	(3) Income Redistribution	(4) Income Redistribution	(5) Income Tax	(6) Income Tax
Info-Treatment	-0.011	-0.008	0.010	-0.009	0.035	0.012
	(0.659)	(0.795)	(0.669)	(0.729)	(0.155)	(0.699)
Text Version Rich	0.006	0.015	0.037*	0.041*	0.018	0.017
	(0.802)	(0.528)	(0.086)	(0.052)	(0.455)	(0.470)
Info-Treatment × Text Version Rich	-0.091***	-0.099***	-0.043	-0.048	-0.067*	-0.065*
	(0.008)	(0.004)	(0.169)	(0.118)	(0.051)	(0.060)
Constant	0.683***	0.652***	0.755***	0.731***	0.298***	0.299***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	3,010	3,010	2,916	2,916	2,870	2,870

p-values in parentheses

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Notes: The table reports average effects of information treatments on perceived inequality, support for redistribution, and income tax preferences. Estimates are based on linear regressions. *p*-values in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A9: Average Overestimates — Full Sample

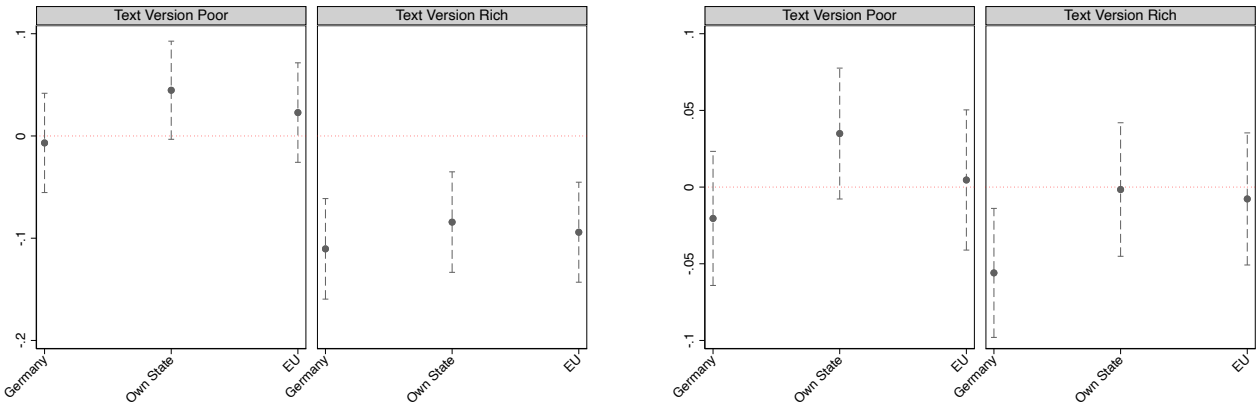
	Bottom 10%	Top 10%	Difference
Overestimate Germany	0.89	0.81	0.07***
Overestimate Europe	0.86	0.82	0.03***
Overestimate own Federal State	0.92	0.78	0.14***
Overestimate all levels	0.80	0.70	0.11***
Mean Overestimate Germany	16.65	28.22	-11.57***
Mean Overestimate Europe	16.67	28.16	-11.49***
Mean Overestimate own Federal State	17.13	24.52	-7.39***
Mean Overestimate all levels	16.89	27.06	-10.17***

Notes: The table shows the average overestimation of the top 10% income share across treatment groups for the full sample (including control and all information/priming conditions). Overestimation is defined as the difference between the perceived and actual income share. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

A.3 Effects of Inequality across Geopolitical Reference Levels

To explore which geopolitical reference frame most strongly shapes individuals' inequality perceptions, we extended our information treatment design by varying the level at which income share information was presented: (i) the respondent's own Bundesland (state), (ii) Germany as a whole (national), and (iii) the European Union. By comparing these three levels, we assess whether proximity ("people you interact with daily") or broader social contexts exert a greater influence on perceived inequality and redistributive preferences. Each respondent was randomly assigned to receive factual information about the share of total income that accrues to the poorest or richest decile at one of the three levels. We hypothesized that the most local frame, state-level data, would exert the strongest corrective effect, given its proximity to everyday experience.

Figure A8a displays the marginal effects of each information treatment on the perceptions of the respondents about whether the income differences are too large. Contrary to our expectation, we observe no significant differences in belief update across the three reference levels: state, national, and EU-level data all produce statistically indistinguishable shifts (near zero) in perceived inequality. This pattern holds even after accounting for baseline misperceptions and respondents' confidence in their initial guesses (see Appendix Tables A1–A9 and Figure A9). By contrast, only national-level treatment yields a significant impact on support for general income redistribution (Figure A8b). Neither state-level nor EU-level treatments significantly alter the willingness of respondents to levy additional taxes to reduce inequality, either in abstract terms or framed as specific tax proposals.



(a) Perception of Inequality

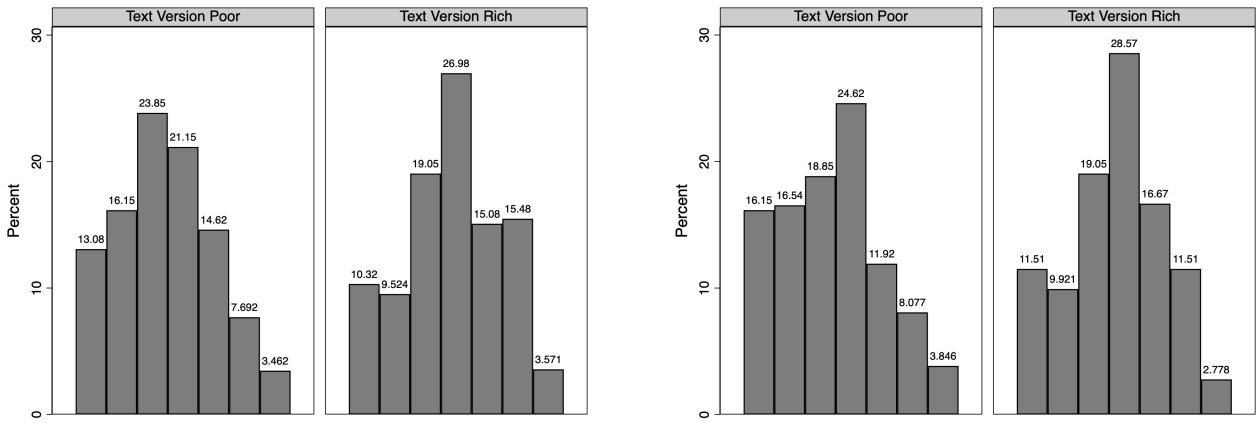
(b) Support for Redistribution

Figure A8: Marginal Effects of Information by Geopolitical Level (90% C.I.)

Notes: The figure shows marginal effects of information treatments across different geopolitical levels (state, national, and EU). Panel (a) reports effects on the perception of inequality; panel (b) shows effects on support for redistribution. Estimates are based on linear regressions with covariates and state fixed effects. Vertical lines represent 90% confidence intervals. Treatment values vary by region (see Appendix Table A1).

The unique sensitivity to national-level information suggests that public discourse and media coverage predominantly frame inequality in national terms, rendering state and supranational frames less salient. This concentration on the national context may explain why only federal data meaningfully shift attitudes toward redistribution, despite comparable baseline misperceptions at all three levels.

These findings are not driven by differences in the prior knowledge of the respondents or by varying degrees of actual inequality between levels (Appendix Tables A1–A9) nor by differential confidence in initial estimates (Figure A9). The absence of state- or EU-level effects underscores the dominant role of the national reference frame in shaping both perceptions and policy preferences regarding income inequality.



(a) Own State

(b) European Union

Figure A9: Self-Reported Confidence in Income Share Estimates (Scale: Very Unsure to Very Sure)

Notes: The figure compares respondents' confidence levels when estimating income shares for their own state (panel a) versus the European Union (panel b). The horizontal scale runs from "very unsure" (left) to "very sure" (right). Bars represent the proportion of respondents in each confidence category.