"Inequality, Fairness Perceptions, and Satisfaction with Democracy in Latin America"

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Abstract:
Economic inequality challenges a fundamental principal of democracy and undermines citizens' support for the political system. My research contributes to a growing body of literature on inequality and political support by examining the causal mechanisms that link inequality to satisfaction with democracy. Drawing from social justice and equity theories, I argue that perceptions of distributive unfairness (i.e., unfair *outcomes*) are a key causal mechanism linking inequality to political dissatisfaction. Using a cross-national analysis of data from 18 Latin American countries, I first demonstrate that satisfaction with democracy is negatively and significantly correlated with perceptions of distributive unfairness. Moreover, this relationship is strongest for citizens on the left of the left-right ideological continuum. Yet, the presence of fair government procedures (i.e., procedural fairness) weakens the relationship between perceived distributive unfairness and satisfaction with democracy. Second, to test the causal relationship between perceived distributive unfairness and satisfaction with democracy, I design survey experiments that I have previously piloted in Mexico and the U.S. Given the promising results from my pilot data, I will next use funding I was awarded from an NSF DDRIG to field survey experiments on nationally representative samples in Argentina and Mexico.

Satisfaction with democracy is vital for democratic consolidation, particularly in the face of economic inequality. Satisfaction with democracy is important for acceptance of political outcomes people disagree with (Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence 2005; Tankebe 2013), and low levels of satisfaction undermine the legitimacy required for democracy to consolidate (Linz and Stepan 1996). Despite its importance, however, satisfaction with democracy is at troubling low levels in a number of Latin American countries. In Mexico, for instance, less than 20 percent of the people interviewed in the 2015 Latinobarometer survey indicated that they were satisfied with the way democracy works in their country, and in Brazil, barely 22 percent of respondents were satisfied with democracy. This stands in stark contrast to countries such as Ecuador or Uruguay, where citizens' satisfaction with democracy ranges between 60 and 70 percent. Figure 1 graphs the average levels of satisfaction with democracy to illustrate this disconcerting trend across Latin America.

Figure 1. Satisfaction with Democracy Across 18 Latin American Countries
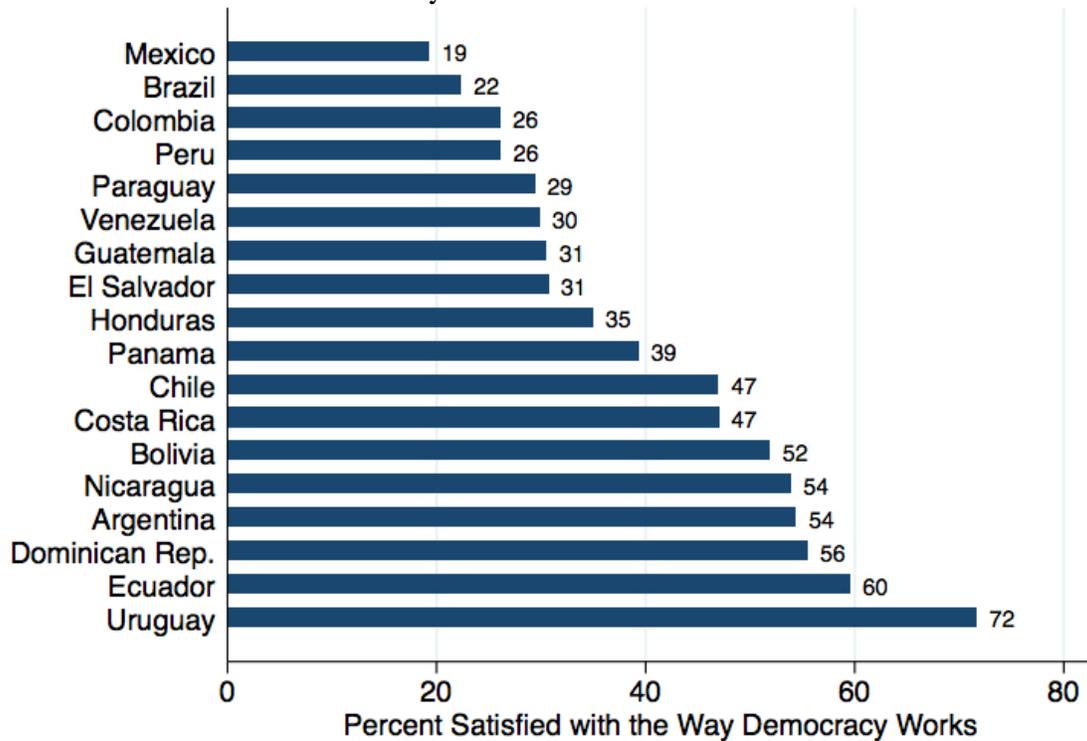
Note: Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents in each Latin American country (2015 Latinobarometer) indicating they are either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the way democracy works in their country.

Scholars have grappled to understand why satisfaction with democracy is so low in a number of Latin American countries. Latin America hosts the highest level of income inequality in the world (López-Calva and Listig 2010), and extant research demonstrates that high levels of income inequality depress a variety of indicators of political support, from trust in local government, to support for and satisfaction with democracy itself (Anderson and Singer 2008; Córdova and Layton 2016; Krieckhaus et al. 2014). At the same time, however, if objective levels of income inequality drive political support, we should have witnessed an uptick in satisfaction with democracy in countries where aggregate levels of income inequality have actually declined over the last decade. During the mid-2000s, for instance, countries such as Brazil enacted a number of programs designed the reduce disparities in income, health, and education. Between 2000 and 2015, Brazil's Gini coefficient for income inequality declined from 51.5 to 44.9, a 15 percent change in overall levels of inequality (Solt 2016). The *Bolsa Família* programs was remarkably successful at reducing overall levels of poverty and inequality (Tepperman 2016), yet, satisfaction with democracy has steadily declined over the last decade in Brazil.

Objective economic conditions are only part of the story as far as citizens' satisfaction with democracy is concerned. What fuels or erodes satisfaction with democracy, I argue, is the extent to which individuals *perceive* the income distribution in their country to be fair or unfair. More specifically, I argue that citizens' perceptions of distributive unfairness—i.e., unfair *outcomes*—which are further shaped by individuals' political ideology and the fairness of government procedures (i.e., procedural fairness), are what matters for political support. Specifically, I show that perceived distributive unfairness has the most pernicious influence on satisfaction with democracy for those citizens on the left of the political spectrum. I also show that fair government procedures, such as transparency and accountability, good governance, and impartiality in the use of power can reduce the negative impact of perceptions of distributive unfairness on democratic satisfaction. In this way,

I demonstrate an important principle of fairness theory—that the procedural fairness of the democratic process can help mitigate the impact of negative distributive outcomes. One important contribution of my research is that I investigate the factors that give rise to the frequently documented connection between economic conditions and political support, such as satisfaction with democracy. Another contribution is that I draw upon social justice theory to derive new hypotheses about how people formulate fairness judgments and use them to evaluate democratic governments.

In the sections that follow, I begin with a discussion of why investigating the connection between high levels of economic inequality and low levels of satisfaction with democracy in Latin America is an important topic of investigation. I then draw from social justice research to theorize that perceptions of distributive unfairness are the critical mechanism by which high levels of inequality are linked to low levels of satisfaction with democracy, and that this linkage is conditioned by political ideology and the procedural fairness of government. I next develop and test hypotheses that derive from my theory using a two-pronged research strategy. As a first test of my hypotheses, I conduct a multilevel analysis of four waves of Latinobarometer public opinion data from 18 Latin American countries. I then turn to a series of survey experiments to evaluate the causal mechanisms posited in my cross-national analysis. Here, I describe the survey experiments I have designed. I plan to field these survey experiments in Argentina and Mexico in the coming months with NSF funding I was recently awarded. I end the paper with a discussion of the implications of my findings for democratic stability and consolidation and how the pernicious effects of economic inequality can be avoided.

The Sources of Legitimacy and Political Support

Developments in the Americas in the last two decades suggest that political support, as reflected in satisfaction with democracy, or support for "how the democratic regime works in

practice" (Linde and Eckman 2003), is at disturbingly low levels in several countries. In particular, a number of democracies in the region are experiencing crises of representation (Mainwaring 2006), party system collapses (Morgan 2011), and the rise of undemocratic populist leaders and political outsiders (Carreras 2012). Low levels of democratic satisfaction are important because even though such measures of support are not considered indicators of what Easton (1975) and others term, "diffuse" support, they are stable enough to resist the kind of short-term fluctuations of "specific" support that political authorities tend to face (Dalton 2004). Hence, a prolonged period of democratic dissatisfaction is likely to have serious consequences for the stability and consolidation of democracies in the region.

Research on political support posits a number of potential causes of low satisfaction with democracy. One set of explanations focuses on political institutions and the representative outcomes they produce. Citizens are generally less satisfied when their normative expectations about representation and accountability do not align with actual democratic outcomes (Singh and Carlin 2015). Moreover, democratic satisfaction suffers when citizens are on the losing side of election (Anderson et al. 2005; Conroy-Krutz and Kerr 2015), yet this satisfaction gap between electoral winners and losers is smaller in more proportional systems than in majoritarian ones (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Cho and Bratton 2006).

Another set of explanations focuses on citizens' evaluations of government performance, and suggest that favorable economic outcomes are key to understanding political support (Booth and Seligson 2009; Dalton 2004). In particular, negative evaluations of the economy have an especially damaging influence on political support in newer, less consolidated democracies (Dahlberg, Linde, and Holmberg 2015). Meanwhile, others have suggested that citizens care not only about government outputs, but about the fairness of democratic procedures as well (Theiss-Morse 2001; Van Ryzin 2011). For instance, citizens are generally less satisfied with democracy when they

live in countries with high corruption (Anderson and Tverdova 2003), as effective rule of law is critical for widespread citizens satisfaction with authorities (Tyler 2003). By contrast, citizens are more satisfied with democracy when they perceive that elections hold representatives accountable and guarantee the voices of all voters are represented (Aarts and Thomassen 2008).

A growing body of research has also shown that economic inequality is associated with decreased political support, such as satisfaction with democracy (Anderson and Singer 2008), support for democracy (Kriechhaus et al. 2014), and trust in local government (Córdova and Layton 2016). Despite these robust empirical relationships, however, extant research has yet to fully unpack the psychological mechanisms linking economic inequality to individual-level political support. Below, I advance this scholarly line of research by assessing how and why economic inequality leads to dissatisfaction with democracy.

Linking Inequality to Political Support

Economic Inequality and Fairness Perceptions

Economic inequality challenges a fundamental human motivation—people's desire to live in a just world (Kay and Jost 2003; Lerner and Miller 1978). Classic models of inequality and democratization assume that under democracy the poor will demand wealth redistribution, thus decreasing economic inequality (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Meltzer and Richard 1981). An implication of this "conventional wisdom" is that certain groups of people (i.e., the poor) dislike inequality, and they dislike it as a matter of resource attribution: resources are finite, economic resources are concentrated in the hands of the rich, and the poor want a larger share of these economic resources. Yet, psychological research on social justice suggests that *all* citizens—rich and poor alike—should dislike inequality, albeit for different reasons.[1] Drawing on equity theories that

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[1] Indeed, in Latin America, perceptions of distributive unfairness are remarkably similar across wealth quintiles (Latinobarometer 2009-2015).

date back to Aristotle, this research suggests that people care deeply about proportionality, that is, whether the outcomes that people receive (income and other resources) are proportional to their inputs (e.g., time and effort) (Jost and Kay 2010). For instance, if a CEO is paid 300 times the salary of an average worker for what is perceived to be the same amount of time and effort, this outcome violates the distributive justice concept of *desert*, or deservingness (Miller 1999). Although this disproportionate outcome clearly disadvantages the worker, leaving her to feel angry or resentful, the CEO should feel guilty about being over-benefitted and should seek to restore equity (Schmitt et al. 2000; Waksalk et al. 2007).

Just because individuals dislike inequality, however, it remains unclear where citizens should direct their dissatisfaction for perceived distributive injustice. Yet, there is evidence from Latin America to suggest that citizens draw strong connections between government (in)action and economic inequality. In Argentina, for instance, the vast majority of citizens believe the government should redistribute wealth to reduce economic inequality (Lupu 2016). Elsewhere in the region, anywhere from 70 to 90 percent of citizens indicate that the government "should enact firm policies to reduce inequality" (Seligson, Smith, and Zechmeister 2012). These data suggest that people understand how government *could* implement policies that reduce inequality, and in a context of economic inequality they recognize that the government is not doing as much as it could to alleviate this problem. When people perceive economic inequality as an unfair distributive outcome, resulting from the inaction of democratic governments, their political satisfaction is likely to suffer. In other words, being upset with the democratic government for what is viewed as an unfair distributive outcome is a key psychological factor linking high inequality to political dissatisfaction. Given this, I posit:

Hypothesis 1: On average, citizens who perceive the distribution of income in their country as unfair will express lower levels of satisfaction with democracy than individuals who view the income distribution as fair.

The Conditioning Effect of Political Ideology

Although social justice theories suggest everyone should dislike economic inequality, for reasons related to the desire for proportionality and equity, not everyone will respond to inequality in the same manner. In particular, the relationship between economic inequality, perceptions of fairness, and political support should vary depending on individuals' political ideology. Indeed, Anderson and Singer (2008) find that inequality's negative influence on political support is mainly driven by those on the political left. This finding is in line with research on the moral foundations of political ideology, which suggests that left-leaning individuals are more likely to be upset with inequality and to view disproportionate economic outcomes as unfair, for reasons related to deep-seated cognitive processes. In particular, this research demonstrates that those on the left are more likely to moralize outcomes they perceive as unfair or harmful to others, whereas those on the right are more likely to moralize threats to order, authority, or the status quo (Graham et al 2009; 2012). Extending this logic, leftist citizens should be most distressed by high levels of economic inequality that have a disproportionately negative impact on the poor, and they should be more likely than right-leaning citizens to blame the government for an economic distribution that is continually concentrated in the hands of a small group of wealthy citizens.

The above research suggests that those on the political right should be less concerned than those on the left with economic inequality in the first place, yet even when right-leaning individuals can acknowledge distributive unfairness, they should still be less likely than left-leaning individuals to express political dissatisfaction as a result. The propensity of those on the political right to moralize threats to order and authority (Graham et al 2009; 2012) should make them less likely to criticize the political status quo when looking for someone to blame. Moreover, people have a variety of ways to deal with the discomfort that equity theory predicts should result from observing economic inequality. In particular, individuals can respond behaviorally (e.g., protesting) or cognitively (Jost

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and Kay 2010). Cognitive reaction often manifest themselves in victim blaming (Hafer et al. 2005), or adopting legitimizing beliefs about the economic status quo (Tyler 2006), such as the notion that the poor are lazy or undeserving, that serve to justify group differences (Cassese and Holman 2017). Indeed, research on system justification suggests that political conservatism is itself a legitimizing ideology, with those on the right being more likely to stereotype and express hostility toward low-status out-groups, such as the poor (Jost et al 2003; 2009).

In sum, political psychology research suggests that those on the left should be more upset with inequality in the first place, and more likely to moralize and perceive it as unfair, compared to those on the right. Yet, even when those on the right acknowledge that economic inequality represents a form of distributive unfairness, they should still be less likely than individuals on the left to express political dissatisfaction as a result. For right-leaning individuals, criticizing the government for unfair distributive outcomes poses a threat to the political and economic status quo. Moreover, when "cognitively adjusting" to inequality, those on the right should be more likely than those on the left to blame the poor for perceived distributive injustice, than express dissatisfaction with the political system. Thus, I posit:

Hypothesis 2: The negative relationship between perceived distributive unfairness and satisfaction with democracy should be stronger among those on the left than those on the right.

Integrating Inequality, Distributive Fairness, and Procedural Fairness

The above theory and hypotheses suggest that the relationship between perceptions of distributive fairness and political support varies individually by political ideology. Yet, contextual factors should influence this relationship as well. People care deeply about the procedures by which political outcomes are produced (André and Depauw 2017; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001). In particular, when in a context of high inequality, procedural fairness—or the fairness of government

policies and procedures—should diminish the extent to which perceived distributive unfairness erodes political support.

People often lack the information they need (e.g., information about the distribution of economic resources) to make accurate social comparisons (van den Bos, Wilke, and Lind 1998). For example, the economic voting literature has long acknowledged that subjective economic evaluations are imperfect predictors of macroeconomic indicators (Evans and Anderson 2006). Moreover, people tend to underestimate the true magnitude of income disparities, especially at high levels of inequality (Osberg and Smeeding 2006), and studies linking inequality to low levels of political support remind us that their findings assume people experience and accurately perceive inequality (e.g., Anderson and Singer 2008). If and when accurate social comparisons are lacking, Fairness Heuristic Theory (FHT) suggests that people use noneconomic information from their environments to help form perceptions of fairness, and consequently evaluations of political support (Magalhães 2016; Van Ryzin 2011). Specifically, FHT argues that when information about distributive outcomes—such as social comparisons—is lacking, people will substitute or incorporate information about the fairness of policies and procedures (procedural fairness) for information about distributive fairness when deciding whether or not they can trust the authorities (van den Bos, Lind, and Wilke 2001; van den Bos, Wilke, and Lind 1998; Van Ryzin 2011).

There is some reason to expect that individuals in Latin America are able to make accurate social comparisons regarding the distribution of economic resources. As noted at the outset, economic inequality is highly salient in Latin America, and ordinary citizens are likely aware of their economic standing, given the existence of high-profile conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs in a number of countries, such as Brazil's *Bolsa Família*. Yet, even when individuals have the requisite information to make accurate social comparisons, they should still draw on, or incorporate, multiple

sources of information when forming their judgments about fairness and democracy (André and Depauw 2017).

Fair Process Effect research further suggests that procedural fairness shapes people's expectations about the outcomes they receive and their responses to distributive unfairness (Adams 1965; Tyler and van der Toorn 2013; van den Bos et al. 1997; van den Bos, Wilke, Lind, and Vermunt 1998). People desire fair procedures because they are perceived to produce fair outcomes (Thibaut and Walker 1975). For instance, people are generally more satisfied with outcomes— unfavorable or otherwise—when they are permitted to voice their opinion in the decision making process (van den Bos 2005). Following the above logic, in a context of high procedural fairness, citizens should react less unfavorably to economic inequality in the first place, and moreover, the presence of fair democratic procedures, such as the impartial exercise of public power (Linde 2012) should make individuals less likely to express political dissatisfaction for any perceived distributive injustice that results. Thus:

Hypothesis 3: *Procedural fairness will reduce the negative influence of perceived distributive unfairness on satisfaction with democracy.*

Testing the Effects of Perceived Distributive Unfairness on Political Support

To test the hypotheses I have developed, I rely on two separate studies. First, I use multilevel modeling techniques to analyze survey data from 18 Latin American countries to show the conditions under which perceptions of distributive unfairness are associated with lower levels of satisfaction with democracy. Second, given that extant research posits a number of determinants of political support, such as satisfaction with democracy, I turn to original survey experiments to test the causal mechanisms suggested by my cross-national analysis.

Study 1: Cross National-Analysis of Latin American Public Opinion Data

In this study, I conduct a multilevel analysis of individual responses from four different waves of the Latinobarometer survey, in conjunction with country-level measures of income inequality and procedural fairness. Latinobarometer covers 18 Latin American countries, and the temporal span under investigation ranges from 2009 to 2015. Given the nested nature of my survey data, as well as variables at the country-level that vary over time, I estimate a multilevel ordered logit model in which individuals i are nested within countries j and years k. Following Snijders and Bosker (2012), I rely on a model featuring a random intercepts specification because of my theoretical reason to believe that there is an interaction between individual level and higher-order group level variables.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable of interest in this study is *satisfaction with democracy*. As previously mentioned, satisfaction with democracy represents an important dimension of state legitimacy (Norris 2011) that taps the level of support "for how the democratic regime works in practice" (Linde and Eckman 2003). To measure satisfaction with democracy, Latinobarometer asks respondents, "In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, quite satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the working of democracy in your country?" Responses in the analysis are coded such that "not at all satisfied" (coded 1); "not very satisfied" (2); "quite satisfied" (3); and "very satisfied" (4).

Independent Variables

The primary individual-level predictor of satisfaction with democracy, *perceptions of distributive unfairness*, is based on the Latinobarometer question, "How fair do you think the income distribution is in your country?" This survey item is deal for the research at hand: it maps onto the core theoretical concept—i.e., *fairness perceptions*, as opposed to assessments or evaluations of inequality— remarkably well, and it captures the underlying mechanism that I theorize links inequality and

political support. Cross-national public opinion surveys frequently ask respondents whether they think the gap between the rich and poor is getting bigger or smaller, but recall that for inequality to negatively influence political support, people need to perceive it as an unfair outcome. Moreover, just because individuals perceive inequality to be on the rise, they will not necessarily respond negatively to it. Latinobarometer is one of the few surveys that consistently asks this question about *distributive fairness* perceptions. Responses range from "very fair" (coded 1) to "very unfair" (4).

I also hypothesize that the strength of the relationship between perceptions of distributive unfairness and political support hinges on political ideology, with people on the left of the political spectrum being more dissatisfied than people on the right with what are perceived to be unfair distributive outcomes. *Political ideology* comes from the question, "in politics, people normally speak of "left" and "right." On a scale where 0 is left and 10 is right, where would you place yourself?"

In addition to individual-level factors, I hypothesize that evaluations of distributive outcomes map onto satisfaction with democracy in different ways depending on the context in which an individual lives. In particular, I suggest that procedural fairness should ameliorate the negative influence of perceived distributive unfairness on political support. Previous research has identified a number of different ways for measuring procedural fairness. One of the most important predictors of procedural fairness, however, is corruption. Corruption is highly salient and pervasive in a number of Latin American countries, at all levels of government. In the 2015 Latinobarometer, for instance, nearly 20 percent of all respondents indicated that they or a family member had personally witnessed an act of corruption or bribe taking by a politician or government official in the last year. Corruption on the part of government officials violates the procedural fairness element of *trust*, or "the belief that the authority makes genuine attempts at being fair and ethical" (Magalhães 2016, 525; Tyler and Lind 1992). It sends a signal that certain people are above the law, and that all citizens are not treated equally: "Besides having damaging effects, corruption contravenes what has

been put forward as the basic principle of quality government—namely *impartiality in the exercise of public power* (Linde 2012).

Although corruption is perhaps the best measure of procedural fairness, we can also think about procedural fairness as involving equal treatment of all citizens before the law, elections that give voice to citizens and allow them to hold their representatives accountable, and transparency on the part of government officials (Magalhães 2016; Tyler 2003; Tyler and Lind 1992). In the results below, I operationalize procedural fairness as *control of corruption*, using a measure from the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) project. *Control of corruption* captures "[expert] perceptions of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption, as well as 'capture' of the state by elites and private interests." The *control of corruption* figures used in this analysis correspond to the year immediately preceding the respective Latinobarometer wave. The *control of corruption* measure theoretically ranges from -2.5 to 2.5, with higher values indicating lower levels of corruption. In this sample, the *control of corruption* measure ranges from -1.38 (Venezuela in 2015) to 1.56 (Chile in 2013). But, as I demonstrate in Table B1 of the appendix, my results are robust to a number of operationalizations of procedural fairness, including WGI measures of governance quality, voice and accountability, and rule of law.

Control Variables

To control for potential sources of spuriousness, I include a number of individual-level variables that existing research consistently shows to be important predictors of support for the political system and that theoretically could correlate with perceptions of distributive unfairness, namely: support for the incumbent government and perceptions of the national economy (e.g., Anderson et al. 2005; McAllister 1999). *Support for the incumbent* comes from the Latinobarometer question, "Do you approve or not of the performance of the government led by President (name)?" Responses are recoded such that 0=Disapprove and 1=Approve. *Perceptions of the national economy*

comes from the question, "Do you consider the country's present economic situation to be better (coded 1), a little better (2), the same (3), a little worse (4), or much worse (5) than 12 months ago?" To rule out the possibility that socioeconomic factors are driving both satisfaction with democracy and perceptions of distributive unfairness, I control for wealth quintile (Córdova 2009) and education, as well as respondent's sex, age, and whether the respondent lives in a rural area.

In addition to the above individual-level covariates, I also control for aggregate levels of income inequality, measured at the country-level. My aim here is to isolate the particular mechanism thought to underlie the relationship between economic inequality and satisfaction with democracy. I rely on a measure of net national-level income inequality from the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (Solt 2016). Inequality figures represent the most recent available Gini coefficients prior to the survey year.

Results of the Cross-National Analysis

Model 1 in Table 1 presents the baseline model without any interactions. The first thing to notice in Model 1 is that the variable for *perceived distributive unfairness* has a negative and statistically significant coefficient, thus lending support to *Hypothesis 1*. On average, citizens are less likely to be satisfied with democracy as their perceive their country's income distribution to be increasingly unfair. In Model 2, my fully specified model, I include two interaction terms: perceived distributive unfairness and political ideology, and a cross-level interaction between perceived distributive unfairness and procedural fairness. Lending preliminary support to both of my conditional hypotheses, the interaction terms in Model 2 are both significant. The control variables in Table 1, which allow me to account for a number of possible sources of spuriousness, all behave largely as expected and consistent with prior research. In particular, the models in Table 1 allow me to assess the effect of perceived distributive unfairness on satisfaction with democracy, independent of actual

levels of inequality, economic evaluations, incumbent approval, and a number of socioeconomic

factors such as wealth and education that have previously been shown to predict political support.

Table 1. Effect of Perceived Distributive Unfairness on Satisfaction with Democracy

	Model 1	Model 2
Perceived Distributive Unfairness	-.60***	-.64***
	(.01)	(.02)
Political Ideology (0=Left; 10=Right)	-.01*	-.06***
	(.00)	(.01)
Procedural Fairness	.44***	-.17
	(.11)	(.13)
Perceived Distributive Unfairness X Political Ideology		.02***
		(.00)
Perceived Distributive Unfairness X Procedural Fairness		.21***
		(.02)
Individual-Level Control		
Economic Perceptions (Worse)	-.42***	-.41***
	(.01)	(.01)
Education	-.01***	-.01***
	(.00)	(.00)
Rural	.02	.03
	(.02)	(.02)
Incumbent Approval	.80***	.80***
	(.02)	(.02)
Wealth Quintile	.02***	.02***
	(.01)	(.01)
Sex (Female=1)	-.02	-.02
	(.02)	(.02)
Country-Level Controls		
Income Inequality	-.05*	-.05*
	(.02)	(.02)
Cut 1	-7.18***	-7.14***
	(.94)	(.98)
Cut 2	-4.82***	-4.77***
	(.94)	(.98)
Cut 3	-2.70**	-2.65**
	(.94)	(.98)
Observations N=	54261	54261
Country N=	18	18
Year N=	4	4
Wald Chi²	9425.32	9585.16

* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001 (Standard Errors), multilevel ordered logit coefficients.
All models were estimated using the meologit command in Stata 14.2.

Although the results in Table 1 lend support to the hypothesized effect of perceived distributive unfairness on satisfaction with democracy (*Hypothesis 1*), substantive effects are difficult to intuit from nonlinear models. With this in mind, I use the results in Table 1, Model 2 to calculate a series of predicted probabilities. In substantive terms, when an individual views the income distribution in her country as "very fair," she has about a .25 probability of being "very satisfied" with democracy (*satisfaction*=4). Conversely, an individual who views her country's income distribution as "very unfair" only has about a .07 probability of being "very satisfied" with the way democracy works in her country. In other words, moving from "very fair" to "very unfair" perceptions of the income distribution is associated with a substantial decrease in predicted satisfaction with democracy.

Turning to *Hypothesis 2*, there is a positive and significant coefficient on the interaction between perceived distributive unfairness and political ideology in Table 1, Model 2. However, assessing the conditioning effect of political ideology on the relationship between perceived distributive unfairness and political support is complicated. Specifically, numerous scholars remind us that care must be exercised when interpreting the sign or significance of interaction coefficients and their constituent parts, thus I follow the advice of Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2006) and present the substantive effects of the interactions from Table 1 graphically. Since *Hypothesis 2* posits that the negative effect of perceived distributive unfairness on political support should be stronger for those on the political left than for those on the right, I calculate and plot the marginal effect of perceived distributive unfairness on the probability of being "very satisfied" (*satisfaction*=4), across the left-right political ideological spectrum.

The marginal effects plotted in Figure 2 represent the average effect of an increase in perceived distributive unfairness. When interpreting marginal effects, the further away a point estimate is from y=0, the stronger the effect on the dependent variable. Negative (positive) marginal

effects mean that an increase in the independent variable is associated with a decrease (increase) in the dependent variable. The first thing to notice in Figure 1 is that all the marginal effect estimates are negative and statistically different from 0 (the 95 percent confidence intervals do not overlap with y=0). The second thing to notice is that the marginal effect estimates weaken, or become less negative, as we move from left to right on the political ideology spectrum. The marginal effect for those on the far left is -.063, compared to -.042 for those on the far right. In other words, although perceived distributive unfairness has a negative effect on satisfaction with democracy across the ideological spectrum, consistent with *Hypothesis 2*, an increase in perceived distributive unfairness has a stronger negative influence on satisfaction with democracy for those on the left than for those on the right.

Figure 2. Conditioning Effect of Political Ideology
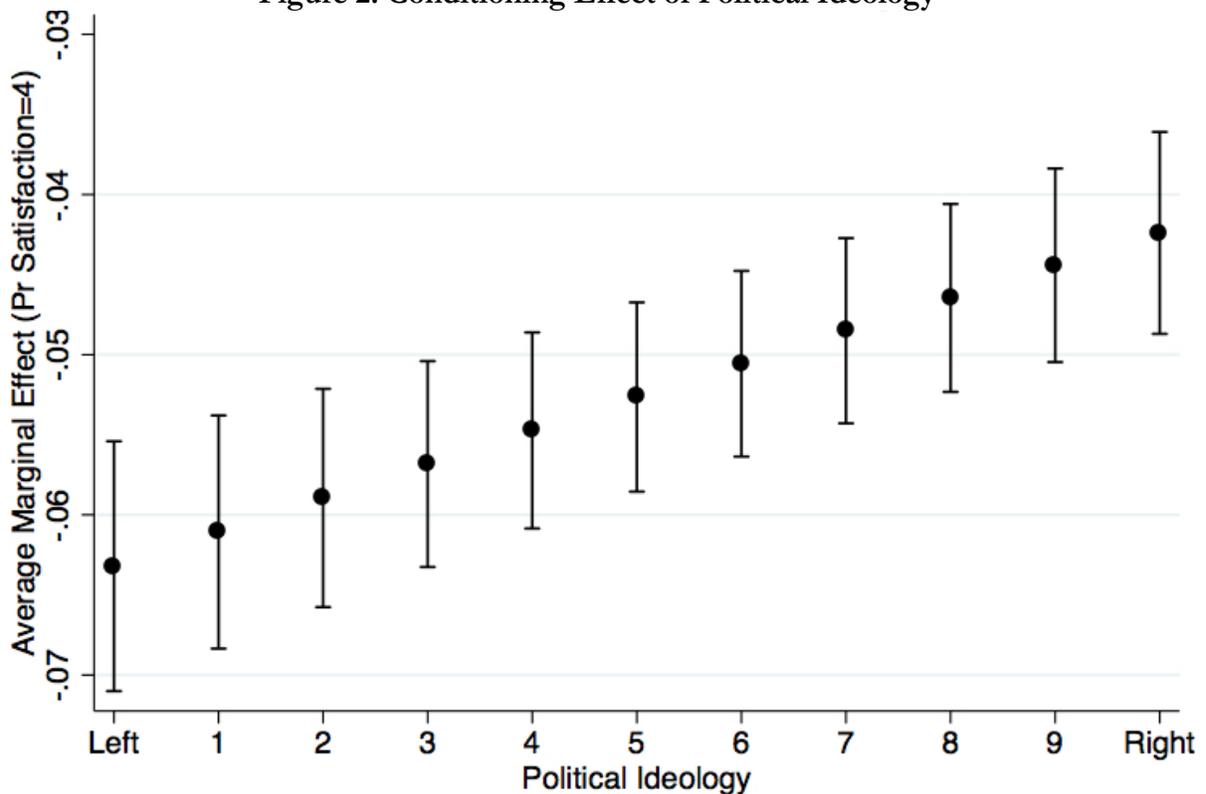
Note: Point estimates represent the average marginal effect of an increase in *perceived distributive unfairness* on satisfaction with democracy across the left-right political spectrum. Lines around marginal effects represent 95% confidence intervals. Marginal effects were calculated using the results in Model 2, Table 1. All marginal effects are negative and statistically different from 0, however, the negative effect is strongest for those on the political left.

To evaluate *Hypothesis 3*—that procedural fairness ameliorates the negative influence of perceived distributive unfairness on satisfaction with democracy—I turn to Figure 3. As in Figure 2, Figure 3 plots the average marginal effect of an increase in perceived distributive unfairness on
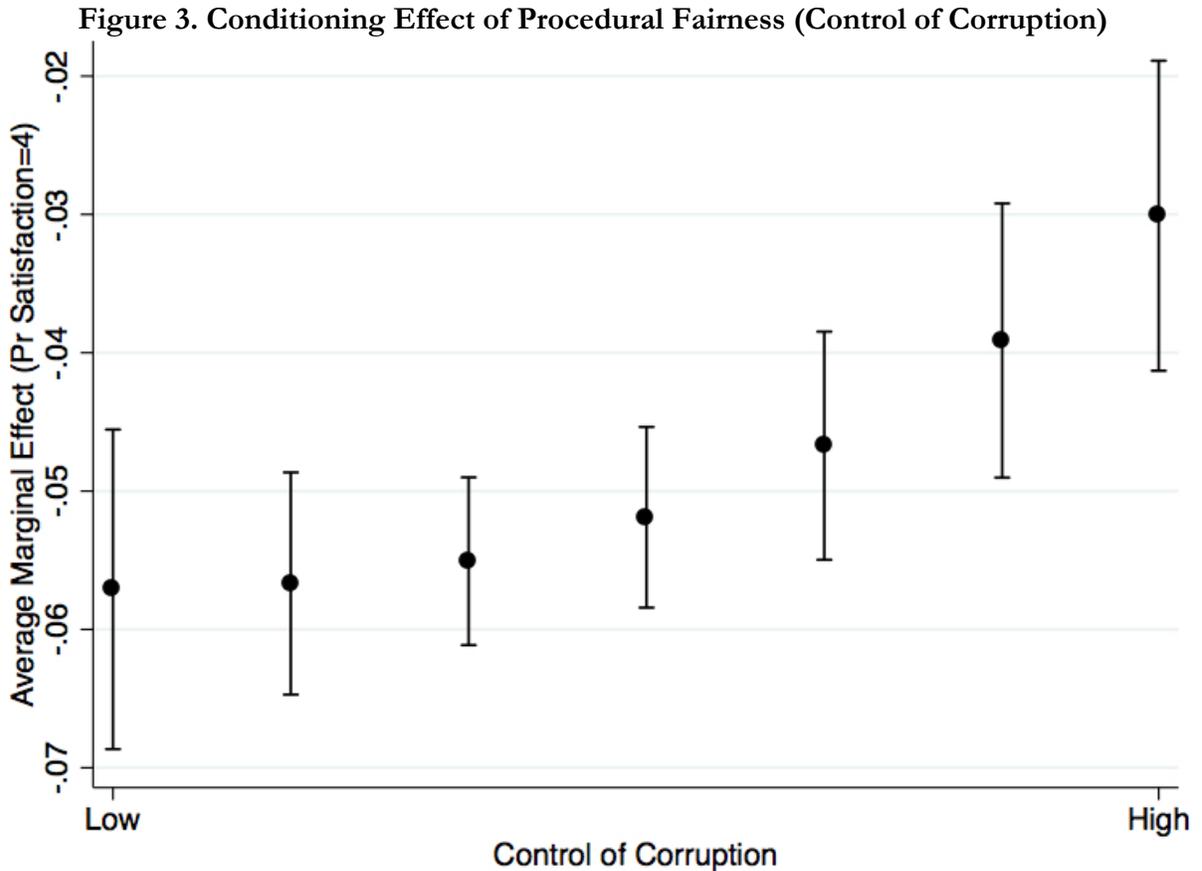
Figure 3. Conditioning Effect of Procedural Fairness (Control of Corruption)

Note: Point estimates represent the average marginal effect of an increase in *perceived distributive unfairness* on satisfaction with democracy from low to high levels of procedural fairness. Lines around marginal effects represent 95% confidence intervals. Marginal effects were calculated using the results in Model 2, Table 1. All marginal effects are negative and statistically different from 0, however, the negative effect is strongest for individuals in countries with low levels of procedural fairness.

satisfaction with democracy. If *Hypothesis 3* is correct, we should observe the marginal effect estimates weakening, or becoming less negative, as government control of corruption—the measure of procedural fairness employed in this analysis—improves. Indeed, this is exactly what Figure 3 shows: at the lowest level of procedural fairness (a control of corruption value of -1.38 in Venezuela in 2015), the marginal effect of an increase in perceived distributive unfairness on the probability of

being "very satisfied" with democracy is -.057. As we move from left to right on the x-axis and procedural fairness improves (i.e., there is less corruption), the marginal effect become less negative. At the highest level of procedural fairness in the sample (a corruption control value of 1.56 in Chile in 2013), the marginal effect is only -.030, still negative, but significant less negative than at low levels of procedural fairness.

Study 2: Experiments on Inequality, Fairness Perceptions, and Satisfaction with Democracy

Although the results from *Study 1* are suggestive that perceptions of distributive unfairness are the causal mechanism linking inequality and satisfaction with democracy, the do not actually allow me to measure fairness perceptions accurately or to isolate them as the causal mechanism. Hence, I turn to an experimental design, which offers a number of advantages over purely observational studies when it comes to isolating causal effects. Experiments give researchers control over the data generating process—in particular, control over exposure to the independent variable, or treatment—thus allowing for greater certainty that an observed change in the dependent variable is the result of the independent variable. In this section, I describe two different survey experiments that I plan to field in Latin America in the coming months with NSF funding I recently received. I have also appended two different survey instruments to the end of this paper.

Experiment 1: Distributive Fairness

For the first experiment, participants will begin by answering two pre-treatment questions meant to measure their perceptions of economic inequality and their perceptions of distributive unfairness. Next, I will randomly assign each participant to receive one of three experimental treatments, or to be in a control group. Specifically, each participant will be randomly assigned to read one of the following vignettes: "In 2017, [COUNTRY] has the Xth largest economy in Latin America, which is consistent with previous years.

Control: No sentence.

Treatment 1 (Economic and Inequality Information): Despite this, the gap between the rich and poor in [COUNTRY] has been increasing.

Treatment 2 (Economic and Inequality Information + Unfair Outcome): Despite this, the gap between the rich and poor in [COUNTRY] has been increasing. According to an independent, nonprofit organization, this increase in income inequality is a fundamentally *unfair* economic outcome.

Treatment 3 (Economic and Inequality Information +Fair Outcome): Despite this, the gap between the rich and poor in [COUNTRY] has been increasing. According to an independent, nonprofit organization, this increase in income inequality is a fundamentally *fair* economic outcome.

After reading one of the above vignettes, each participant will be asked to indicate how satisfied they are with the way democracy works in their country, as well as their level of trust in the national government. Later in the survey, participants will answer two manipulation check questions meant to assess whether the treatments were effective in changing people's perceptions of fairness and inequality in their country.

Based on my theory, the cross-national results presented in this paper, and previous versions of this survey experiment that I have already piloted in the U.S. and Mexico, I expect that participants receiving the first and second treatments will express significantly lower levels of political support than participants in the control group (see the Appendix for average treatment effects from these two pilot studies, using "trust in government" as the dependent variable). Moreover, I expect that average treatment effects for the first and second treatments groups will be similar, given my theory that perceptions of distributive unfairness explain the relationship between economic inequality and political support that prior research has empirically demonstrated. Compared to people who are only told that inequality is increasing (Treatment 1), providing additional information about distributive unfairness in Treatment 2 does not offer participants any new or conflicting information. However, reframing inequality as a *fair* distributive outcome (Treatment 3) does offer new information that should cause participants to reevaluate their perceptions of inequality and subsequent political support. In pilot versions of this experiment,

participants receiving Treatment 3 express slightly lower levels of political support compared to the control group, but unlike Treatments 1 and 2, these differences are no longer statistically significant. This finding from my pilot data suggests that when people are given identical information about the economy and inequality, political support does not suffer nearly as much as when rising inequality is framed as a *fair* distributive outcome.

Experiment 2: Procedural Fairness, Corruption

For my second survey experiment, I aim to evaluate how different forms of procedural fairness moderate the relationship between perceptions of inequality, distributive unfairness, and political support. In particular, I am interested in two different forms of corruption as my indicator of procedural fairness: bribery and theft of public resources. It is often unclear what exactly citizens have in mind when answering questions about corruption, as corruption can take many forms. In the Latin American context, corruption might take the form of civil servants demanding bribe in exchange for access to public goods and services. In this case, citizens can still access public goods, but they are distributed in an unfair or procedurally unjust manner. Or, corruption might take the form of outright theft of public resources by government officials, in which case economic inequality is perpetuated by an unfair process that leaves fewer overall public resources to be redistributed.

Drawing on my theory, as well as pilot experiment data from the U.S. and Mexico, I begin with the assumption that most people will assume that rising inequality represents a form of distributive unfairness. In both of my prior pilot studies, average treatment effects for Treatments 1 and 2 in Experiment 1 were nearly identical, with participants indicating significantly lower levels of political support compared to the control group. For my second experiment, participants learn that income inequality as been increasing in recent years at the same time that incidence of bribe taking

or theft of public resources are [increasing/decreasing/staying the same]. See the appendix for full versions of each treatment and control.

As with Experiment 1, I plan to place pre-treatment questions about inequality and distributive fairness before and manipulation check questions after the experimental vignettes participants will read. Immediately following the vignette, participants will be asked to indicate how satisfied they are with the way democracy works in their country and how much they trust the national government. If procedural fairness ameliorates the negative influence of perceived distributive unfairness on political support, as my theory and cross-national analysis suggest it does, I should expect to see higher average levels of trust and satisfaction when individuals are told that despite increasing levels of inequality, fair democratic procedures are in place.

Discussion and Conclusion

Political support is at troubling low levels in a number of Latin American countries. Whereas some may be inclined to attribute a number of anecdotal explanations to low levels of democratic satisfaction in specific countries, such as the highly contested 2006 presidential election in Mexico which left the country bitterly divided between PDR and PAN supporters, or the recent corruption scandals coupled with a severe economic recession in Brazil, a growing body of literature suggests that high levels of economic inequality also explain why satisfaction with democracy is low in a number of countries. Despite a robust empirical relationship between high inequality and low political support that prior research has illustrated (e.g. Anderson and Singer 2008; Krieckhaus et al. 2014), however, our understanding of the specific conditions under which inequality erodes political support remains incomplete. This paper advances this scholarly line of inquiry by examining the psychological factors linking economic inequality to political dissatisfaction. Drawing on a diverse set of literature on political legitimacy and social justice, I theorize that perceptions of distributive

unfairness—i.e., unfair outcomes—are key to understanding the link between inequality and political support. That is to say, when individuals perceive the distribution of economic resources in their country, such as income, to be unfair, they will express lower levels of satisfaction with democracy. Moreover, I show that the extent of this relationship hinges on political ideology and the procedural fairness of the democratic system.

Although purely observational research designs, as in *Study 1*, do not afford scholars an airtight exposition of causality, results from my multilevel analysis are consistent with my theory that individuals are, on average, less likely to be satisfied with democracy when they view their country's income distribution to be unfair. Moreover, this result holds even after controlling for other previously theorized determinants of political support, such as aggregate levels of income inequality, as well as approval of the incumbent government, retrospective economic evaluations, and socioeconomic factors such as wealth and education. This large-N cross-national analysis also suggests that the relationship between perceptions of distributive fairness and satisfaction with democracy is conditional. Although perceptions of distributive unfairness undermine satisfaction for all citizens, this negative influence is weaker for individuals on the political right, as well as for citizens living in countries that are effectively controlling corruption. Stated differently, perceptions of distributive unfairness have the *most* damaging influence on political support for those on the political left, and for individuals living in countries with low levels of procedural fairness. To further isolate the causal effects of inequality, distributive fairness, and procedural fairness on satisfaction with democracy, I have designed a series of survey experiments that will allow me to test the causal mechanisms posited by my theory. Pilot experimental data I have already collected show that individuals are less likely to support the political system when they perceive their country's income distribution to be unfair, and that perceptions of distributive unfairness are a key factor linking inequality to political support.

Economic inequality is a widespread problem that has the potential to undermine political engagement and participation (Solt 2008; 2010), trust in local government (Córdova and Layton 2016), satisfaction with democracy (Anderson and Singer 2008), and even support for democracy (Krieckhaus et al. 2014). In other words, economic inequality is shown to have pernicious effects on specific and diffuse forms of political support, to use Easton's (1975) terminology. The findings here suggest that fairness perceptions are central to understanding the link between inequality and political support that prior research has uncovered. Put simply, people care a great deal about fairness. When they perceive patently unfair outcomes, such as an unfair distribution of wealth or income, they are less likely to be satisfied with their democratic government. On the one hand, this may be troubling for the prospects of democratic consolidation in regions such as Latin America: despite some recent declines in inequality, inequality remains very high by global standards, and citizens across Latin America overwhelming perceive their countries' income distributions as unfair. As my research shows, high levels of perceived distributive unfairness harm satisfaction with democracy, and thus undermine the widespread democratic buy in that is so crucial for democracy to consolidate (Linz and Stepan 1996). Yet, these results also provide some room for optimism. By delivering high levels of procedural fairness—in particular, by effectively controlling corruption—political authorities in democracies can effectively offset the negative influence of perceived distributive unfairness on satisfaction with democracy. Although overall levels of economic inequality in Latin America are unlikely to dramatically decline in the near future, democratic governments do have control over the decision to foster accountability, transparency, and rule of law. When fair procedures for governing are in place, citizens may perceive unfair distributive outcomes, but they should also believe that democracy is the most legitimate vehicle for addressing their country's most pressing concerns.

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Appendix A: Survey Experiment Instruments

Experiment 1: Distributive Fairness and Political Support in Argentina

Control (Information abut the Economy): In 2017, Argentina had the fourth largest economy in Latin America. According to an independent, non-profit organization, the size of Argentina's economy was consistent with previous years.

Treatment 1 (Economic Information + Inequality): : In 2017, Argentina had the fourth largest economy in Latin America, which is consistent with previous years. An independent, non-profit organization explained that, nevertheless, the gap between the rich and the poor in Argentina is larger than it's been in 12 years.

Treatment 2 (Economic Information + Inequality + Unfair): In 2017, Argentina had the fourth largest economy in Latin America, which is consistent with previous years. Nevertheless, the gap between the rich and poor in Argentina is larger than it's been in 12 years. According to an independent, non-profit organization, increasing inequality is a fundamentally *unfair* economic outcome.

Treatment 3 (Economic Information + Inequality + Fair): In 2017, Argentina had the fourth largest economy in Latin America, which is consistent with previous years. Nevertheless, the gap between the rich and poor in Argentina is larger than it's been in 12 years. According to an independent, non-profit organization, increasing inequality is a fundamentally *fair* economic outcome.

With this in mind, how satisfied are you with the way democracy functions in Argentina
1) Very Satisfied
2) Satisfied
3) Unsatisfied
4) Very unsatisfied

How much trust do you have in the national government?
1) A lot
2) Some
3) A little
4) None

Experiment 2: Inequality, Procedural Fairness, and Political Support in Argentina

Procedural Fairness, Corruption as Theft Experiment

Control (no change): In recent years, the provision of public goods and services in Argentina has remained the same with no change in the theft of public resources by government officials. At the same time, the gap between the rich and poor in Argentina continues to increase.

Treatment 1 (theft decreasing): In recent years, the provision of public goods and services in Argentina has improved with theft of public resources by government officials on the decrease. Despite these improvements, the gap between the rich and poor in Argentina continues to rise.

Treatment 2 (theft increasing): In recent years, the provision of public goods and services in Argentina has worsened with theft of public resources by government officials on the rise. In addition to these shortcomings, the gap between the rich and poor in Argentina continues to increase.

Procedural Fairness, Corruption as Bribery Experiment

Control (no change): According to an independent, non-profit organization, the incidence of bribe taking by government officials has not changed in recent years. At the same time, the gap between the rich and poor in Argentina continues to rise.

Treatment 1 (bribery decreasing): According to an independent, non-profit organization, the incidence of bribe taking by government officials has decreased in recent years. Despite these improvements, the gap between the rich and poor in Argentina continues to rise.

Treatment 2 (bribery increasing): According to an independent, non-profit organization, the incidence of bribe taking by government officials has increased in recent years. In addition to these shortcomings, the gap between the rich and poor in Argentina continues to rise.

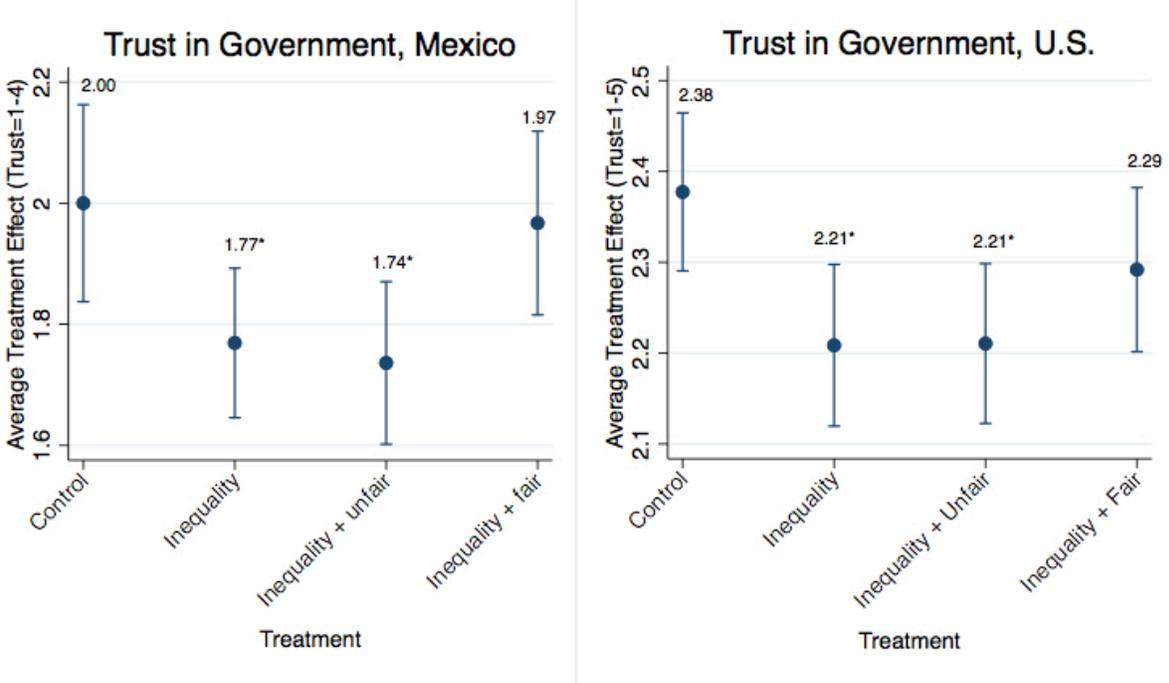
With this in mind, how satisfied are you with the way democracy functions in Argentina?
1) Very Satisfied
2) Satisfied
3) Unsatisfied
4) Very unsatisfied

How much trust do you have in the national government?
1) A lot
2) Some
3) A little
4) None

Figure A.1. Average Treatment Effects, Mexico and U.S. Pilot Experiments (Distributive Fairness)

*Difference between treatment and control significant at p<.05 (two-tailed t-test)

Note: When presented with information that inequality is rising and/or this represents an *unfair* distributive outcome, participants express significantly lower levels of trust in government, on average, compared to the control. When rising inequality is framed as a *fair* distributive outcome, however, average levels of trust in government are significantly indistinguishable from the control. Point estimates represent average treatment effects for each treatment group and the control. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals around mean levels of trust.

Appendix B: Supplemental Analysis

Table B1. Effect of Perceived Distributive Unfairness, Procedural Fairness Measures

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Perceived Distributive Unfairness	-.60***	-.64***	-.60***	-.72***	-.60***	-.58***
	(.01)	(.02)	(.01)	(.02)	(.01)	(.03)
Political Ideology	-.01*	-.05***	-.01*	-.05***	-.01*	-.05***
	(.00)	(.01)	(.00)	(.01)	(.00)	(.01)
Perceived Unfair X Ideology		.02***		.02***		.02***
		(.00)		(.00)		(.00)
Governance	.33*	-.40*				
	(.16)	(.17)				
Perceived Unfair X Governance		.24***				
		(.02)				
Voice & Accountability			.55***	-.30		
			(.15)	(.16)		
Perceived Unfair X Voice				.29***		
				(.02)		
Rule of Law					.33**	-.33*
					(.12)	(.13)
Perceived Unfair X Rule of Law						.22***
						(.02)
Individual-Level Control						
Economic Perception (Worse)	-.42***	-.41***	-.42***	-.41***	-.42***	-.41***
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)
Education	-.01***	-.01***	-.01***	-.01***	-.01***	-.01***
	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)
Rural	.02	.03	.02	.03	.02	.03
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)
Incumbent Approval	.80***	.80***	.80***	.79***	.80***	.79***
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)
Wealth Quintile	.02***	.02***	.02***	.02***	.02***	.02***
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)
Female	-.02	-.02	-.02	-.02	-.02	-.02
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)
Country-Level Control						
Income Inequality	-.05*	-.05*	-.05**	-.05*	-.06*	-.05*
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)
Observations	54261	54261	54261	54261	54261	54261
Country N=	18	18	18	18	18	18
Year N=	4	4	4	4	4	4
Wald Chi^2	9408.15	9569.90	9422.62	9614.07	9412.65	9596.41

* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001 (standard errors). Multilevel ordered logit coefficients