Low incomes make poor more conservative, study finds

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You might think that in a time when more money is concentrated in fewer hands and incomes vary wildly from billions to subsistence, poor people might increase their support for government policies that offer some help.

Not in America.

New research findings add complexity to the basic assumption that humans act in their own economic self-interest. By analyzing hundreds of survey questions from 1952 to 2006, Peter Enns, assistant professor of government, and Nathan Kelly of the University of Tennessee found that as inequality rises, low income individuals' attitudes toward redistribution become more conservative. Their paper appears in the October issue of the *American Journal of Political Science*.

"It's a bit of a conundrum," Enns admits.

The researchers also examined public opinion data on the question: Should government increase spending on welfare, keep it the same or decrease it? "As inequality rose, the high- and low-income respondents on average become less supportive of spending on welfare," Enns said. "And this is not because low-income people are unaware of inequality; our results show they are more aware of it than most people."

The researchers found that higher levels of household income inequality in the United States generate more conservative public opinion. "We

broke down pubic opinion by income group and found the high- and low-income groups responding in a similar way, both becoming more conservative when inequality rises," Enns said. "We were very surprised to observe that the self-reinforcing aspect of inequality holds for high- and low-income groups, and how they move together in parallel over time."

Previous economic models predicted that low-income individuals will consistently support government redistribution. "If anything, when inequality rises, low-income people should become more supportive, and that's not what we observe in the data," said Enns, a member of the Institute for Social Sciences theme project on Judgment, Decision Making, and Social Behavior and faculty director of the Cornell Prison Education Program.

Conversely, when inequality declines, the public becomes more liberal. The public works projects and other social programs following the Great Depression helped promote decades of declining inequality into the 1960s, Enns said. "And then there's a shift," he said. "Once inequality starts going back up, it appears to be perpetuated by public opinion. If inequality declined in the United States, our results suggest that then the public would become more supportive of government redistribution."

Nevertheless, people in the lowest income group favor more redistribution than those in the highest income group.

How might political parties make use of his research? "I could envision both parties finding an angle from these research conclusions to support what they want," Enns said. "On the one hand, someone could say that even low-income individuals want less government redistribution when inequality rises and we should listen to the people. Alternately, you could envision Democrats saying, inequality is rising, so it's necessary for the government to intervene."

Enns and Kelly are developing a proposal to the National Science Foundation to fund research on why conservatism appeals to the poor more when inequality rises, perhaps including an extensive content analysis of news media in print, on TV and online. One hypothesis: The public is following how media talks about household income inequality and how it relates to government, as opposed to inequality itself.

Provided by Cornell University

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