

# UC San Diego

## UC San Diego Previously Published Works

**Title**

Taking Credit

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3jp3s0x1>

**Journal**

World Politics, 69(4)

**ISSN**

0043-8871

**Authors**

Ahlquist, John S

Ansell, Ben W

**Publication Date**

2017-10-01

**DOI**

10.1017/s0043887117000089

Peer reviewed

## TAKING CREDIT

### Redistribution and Borrowing in an Age of Economic Polarization

John S. Ahlquist and Ben W. Ansell

Forthcoming in *World Politics*

Several recent accounts link rising income inequality in the United States to the global financial crisis, arguing that American politicians did not respond to growing inequality with fiscal redistribution. Instead people saved less and borrowed more in order to maintain relative consumption in the face of widening economic disparities. We propose a theory in which fiscal redistribution dampens the willingness of citizens to borrow to fund current consumption. A key implication is that pre-tax inequality will be more tightly linked with credit in less redistributive countries. The long-run partisan composition of government is, in turn, a key determinant of redistributive effort. Examining a panel of 18 OECD democracies we find that those countries with limited histories of left-wing participation in government are significantly more likely see credit expansion as pre-fisc inequality grows compared to those where the political left has been more influential.

JEL codes: E02, E21, E44, G01, G18, G21, G28, P16, D31

Word Count: 9635 (including abstract, footnotes, captions, and headers but excluding references and supplementary materials)

**Acknowledgements:**

Versions of this paper were presented at IPES, MPSA and ISNIE meetings, as well as colloquia at Duke; Higher School of Economics; Konstanz; London School of Economics; Nuffield College, Oxford; Princeton; Purdue; Stanford; UCSD; UIUC; UNC; and Wisconsin. We thank Pablo Beramendi, William Bernhard, Carles Boix, Barry Burden, Gary Cox, Tim Frye, Scott Gehlbach, Guy Grossman, Robert Gulotty, Gordon Hanson, Florian Hollenbach, Karen Jusko, Mark Kayser, Bill Keech, Desmond King, Edmund Malesky, Yotam Margalit, Layna Mosely, Philipp Rehm, Graeme Robertson, Jonathan Rodden, Bryn Rosenfeld, David Rueda, Kenneth Scheve, David Soskice, Milan Svolik, Jack van Thomme, and Dwayne Woods for helpful conversations. Sarah Bouchat and Ryan Powers provided research assistance.

**Bios:**

John Ahlquist is Associate Professor in the School of Global Policy and Strategy at the University of California, San Diego. His work on comparative and international political economy has appeared in outlets including the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, and *International Organization*. Princeton University Press published his prize-winning book, *In the Interest of Others* (with Margaret Levi).

Ben Ansell is Professor of Comparative Democratic Institutions in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford and Professorial Fellow at Nuffield College. He is currently co-editor of *Comparative Political Studies*. His work examines the interplay of economic inequality, public policy, and political regimes. He has authored two books with Cambridge University Press, which have received the William Riker Prize for best book in political economy and the Woodrow Wilson prize for the best book on public affairs (with David Samuels) from the American Political Science Association. His work has been published in the *American Political Science Review*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *International Organization*, and *World Politics*, among other venues.

Pre-tax income inequality has risen dramatically across the advanced industrial world since the early 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The causes of this shift in relative earnings are much debated but the consequences are what concern us here. In high-profile and widely read works, several prominent academics and journalists have argued that these growing income and wealth disparities were at the root of the 2008–09 financial crisis.<sup>2</sup> All these authors suggest a similar core relationship: widening gaps in access to economic resources produce turmoil among voters as many see themselves falling further behind while others reap spectacular fortunes. Policies stimulating immediate consumption by extending credit at easier terms were more politically feasible than direct fiscal redistribution from the rich. Rajan states this succinctly, with reference to the USA:

[S]triving to rectify the inequality [through fiscal redistribution] may precipitate the very conflict the citizenry wants to avoid. Politicians have therefore looked for other ways to improve the lives of voters. Since the early 1980s the seductive answer has been easier credit . . . Easy credit has large, positive, immediate, and widely-distributed benefits whereas all the costs lie in the future.<sup>3</sup>

More provocatively, Piketty claims that

In my view there is no doubt that the increase of inequality in the United States contributed to the nation's financial instability. The reason is simple: one consequence of increasing inequality was virtual stagnation of the purchasing power of the lower and middle classes in the United States, which inevitably made it more likely that modest households would take on debt, especially since unscrupulous banks and financial intermediaries, freed from regulation and eager to earn good yields on the enormous savings injected into the system by the well-to-do, offered credit on increasingly generous terms.<sup>4</sup>

These claims that widening income inequality leads to greater levels of house-hold borrowing and increased financial fragility have four embedded premises. First, rising inequality affects people's demands for access to economic resources. Second, these

demands for more resources could be satisfied either by redistributing income from richer to poorer citizens or alternatively by providing access to credit. That is resources could either be transferred across income groups or across time periods. Third, politicians in the United States found direct, redistributive policies politically unattractive. Accordingly, politicians promoted credit policies that made household borrowing easier.<sup>5</sup> Hence, widening pre-tax income gaps in the US induced households to save less of current income in order to maintain relative consumption, thereby driving demand for credit. Fourth, this level of borrowing was unsustainable and led to the financial crisis.

In this paper we do not interrogate each step in the argument. Rather, we turn to an implication of the first three: in the face of rising inequality more aggressively redistributed pre-tax income would have resulted in less borrowing. We move beyond existing claims in two ways. First, the theoretical mechanisms presented by Rajan and Piketty connecting inequality, redistribution and credit are underspecified. Our theoretical approach provides a clear mechanism, related to positional goods, demonstrating how prevailing levels of redistribution shape the connection between inequality and credit. Second, while Rajan focuses on the United States, properly examining this implication necessarily entails a cross-national, comparative approach that takes seriously variation in how rising inequality might translate into differential demand for credit depending on the institutional and policy context.

We emphasize a demand-side mechanism connecting inequality, redistribution and credit, that combines models of “expenditure cascades” and fiscal redistribution.<sup>6</sup> We argue that rising income inequality produces positional externalities in consumer spending.<sup>7</sup> These externalities, especially in housing and education, induce households to reduce savings or borrow in order to maintain relative consumption. Fiscal redistribution can blunt this effect of inequality on credit demand by reducing the gap in disposable incomes between rich and poor. The extent of fiscal redistribution, in turn, is conditional on the historical patterns of government partisanship. Countries in which left-wing parties are frequently represented in governing coalitions have substantially higher levels of redistribution than those where the center and right dominate.<sup>8</sup> In sum, we argue that in countries with

traditions of left-wing government the connection between inequality and credit will be substantially weaker.

We rely on variation in the relationship between long-run partisan control of government and the prevailing level of redistribution to gain empirical leverage on the connection between income inequality and household borrowing. Our empirical strategy for better identifying the relationship between inequality and borrowing takes advantage of the long-run nature of partisan control, related at least in part to rarely-changing electoral systems established several decades in the past.<sup>9</sup> This provides us with a way of circumventing obvious endogeneity and measurement problems with fiscal redistribution. We build a Bayesian hierarchical model and establish that, among 18 OECD democracies, increased pre-tax inequality is linked to more rapid growth in credit, but only in countries where left parties rarely participate in government. Our findings have implications for financial system risk: in an era of rising inequality countries with less redistributive governing coalitions could be particularly prone to household-driven credit booms.

The paper is composed of four sections. The next section reviews current thinking around inequality, redistribution, credit and financial crises. In section 2 we build on existing models to describe the link between inequality, household consumption decisions, and the politics of redistribution. Section 3 presents our empirical models and the final section concludes.

## **Existing Work**

### *Inequality and the Demand for Credit*

The connection between inequality and redistribution is well-tilled soil in political economy, with a wide range of theoretical expositions and empirical estimations. By contrast, scholarship connecting inequality and the demand for credit is far more limited. In the former case, Meltzer and Richard provide the canonical model linking inequality and fiscal redistribution, developing a mechanism by which rising inequality in pre-tax incomes produces incentives for the median voter to demand higher taxes in order to

redistribute some of the new-found income from the wealthy further down the income ladder.<sup>10</sup> Despite the clarity and intuitiveness of this “Robin Hood” model, empirical support for the claim is, at best, mixed. Cross-nationally, among developed countries the reverse pattern appears to hold, with more unequal countries redistributing less. Kenworthy and Pontusson find some evidence that within-country increases in inequality do lead to more redistribution, although Iversen and Soskice note that this result appears to be due to built-in features of existing policy rather than any shift in citizen preferences or a change in policy.<sup>11</sup> Gimpelson and Treisman find that people are generally poorly informed about their place in the income distribution, but those who perceive themselves as relatively disadvantaged prefer greater redistribution.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of the existing empirical relationship, it remains the case that redistribution *could* provide one policy solution to median voter demands for a share of the spoils of rising inequality.

Studies connecting inequality to borrowing and credit are less numerous and worth dwelling on at greater length. Previous work has usually taken one of two approaches to link inequality to credit. The first emphasizes the ways in which inequality affects *credit supply*. Kumhof, Ranci re, and Winant construct a model in which increased inequality leads to increased savings by the rich and hence greater credit availability, and ultimately to credit booms and crashes.<sup>13</sup> The supply of capital from the enriched elite explains one part of the connection between inequality and credit. Individuals further down the income distribution borrow more in order to smooth their consumption following a loss of income associated with rising inequality.<sup>14</sup> This view that inequality alters the ability of individuals with different incomes to save dates back to John Maynard Keynes.

A very different strand of work—and one on which we draw heavily—emphasizes how inequality might affect the *demand for credit*, building on Fred Hirsch and Robert Frank’s notion of “positional goods.”<sup>15</sup> Positional goods are those from which individuals derive benefit, at least in part, from the good’s social scarcity, i.e., the fact that not everyone can have it, regardless of how rich they are. Like a purely private good, the consumption of a positional good,  $G$ , by person  $i$  prevents person  $j$  from enjoying  $G$ . But unlike a private good,  $i$ ’s consumption of  $G$  also imposes a cost on  $j$  for not having acquired  $G$ . Canonical examples of positional goods include desirable housing and access

to elite educational institutions for which many expend resources competing but only few win positions.<sup>16</sup> If you get the spot at the elite college and I do not then not only do I not get the elite college experience, but I also pay the cost of having not gone to the elite college while you have. Indeed this notion is baked in to the very word “elite.”

Competition over positional goods is thus reminiscent of an auction in which *relative* income determines who gets to enjoy the good. “Positional externalities” emerge as too many people bid in the auction because the final price of the good does not factor in the costs imposed on the losers. Importantly, positional externalities can emerge without invoking emotional motivations like “aspirational consumption” or envy, although such motivations can clearly play a role as well.

How does inequality connect to positional consumption? Frank, Levine, and Dijk argue for the existence of “expenditure cascades.”<sup>17</sup> As the dispersion of incomes increases, those at the top spend relatively more competing over positional goods. This, in turn, affects relative prices for important positional goods for the next income group, driving up spending through the income distribution. A canonical example is housing. Matlack and Vigdor show that rising inequality increases average rents in tight housing markets.<sup>18</sup> Concern for relative position not only affects immediate consumption choices but, once intertemporal decision-making is examined, it also affects savings and borrowing.<sup>19</sup> The intuition here is twofold. First, agents are making choices in the early period that affect their likely position in the consumption distribution in later periods, inducing a willingness to gamble on future position. Second, certain positional goods may need to be purchased “early” to have value in terms of relative consumption. For example, sending children to private school cannot be done when the children are beyond school age.<sup>20</sup> Notably, housing and education, particularly higher education, are both important positional goods, and are also those for which people readily go into debt.<sup>21</sup> Even in the case of public education, housing prices reflect perceived school quality and drive increased mortgage debt.<sup>22</sup> In sum, the positional consumption literature suggests rising income inequality should translate into higher borrowing for spending on positional goods. Importantly, this literature implicitly focuses on disposable income, ignoring the redistributive wedge between pre- and post-fisc incomes.



Empirical studies at the micro- and macro-level confirm a link between inequality and individual consumption and borrowing choices. Drechsel-Grau and Schmid use German panel data to show that increasing consumption by richer households leads to substantially increased consumption by those lower down the income ladder.<sup>23</sup> Georgarakos, Haliassos, and Pasini use Dutch survey data to show that those with incomes below the average of their social peers are more likely to take out both collateralized and unsecured loans.<sup>24</sup> Bertrand and Morse look at variation in inequality across US states.<sup>25</sup> They find evidence that greater expenditures by the rich (those above a state's 80th income percentile) are associated with greater consumption by everyone else in addition to greater reported financial duress and higher rates of personal bankruptcy. Finally, laboratory experiments have shown that positional externalities reduce savings and increase consumption by lower-ranked individuals.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of cross-national data, Bordo and Meissner use a panel dataset and find no evidence of greater inequality leading to more credit in the economy.<sup>27</sup> Malinen, using a different dataset, finds the opposite: rising inequality is indeed linked to greater private sector borrowing.<sup>28</sup> Both use pre-tax inequality but neither accounts for cross-national heterogeneity in how inequality might affect credit demand. In particular, neither study accounts for the potential importance of redistributive interventions by the state that might moderate the impact of inequality on credit: the focus of our theoretical and empirical account in the following sections.

### *Politicians and the Supply of Credit*

Following the credit boom and bust of the first decade of the twenty-first century, scholars have also begun examining the political economy of the *supply* of credit. Implicit in much of this analysis has been the assumption that rising inequality has produced greater demands for resources from the citizenry in the wake of stagnating median wages and that easier access to credit has been a politically convenient way to satisfy these demands. Political economists have examined a wide range of credit-access policies in the USA and beyond. While these studies provide engrossing accounts of the pressures on politicians from both citizens and interest groups to provide cheap credit, particularly in the absence of redistributive programs, they often lack explicit,

generalizable theoretical mechanisms. After setting out the contemporary literature on the politics of credit we thus move in the next section to providing a clear account connecting inequality, credit and redistribution

The lion's share of work on the politics of credit in recent years has focused on the American case, not least because of its identification as the "patient zero" in the global financial crisis. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal argue that US politicians tried to stimulate private borrowing in lieu of more aggressive fiscal redistribution. However, the focus of their argument about the trade-off between redistribution and credit is largely limited to policies promoting home-ownership rather than the broader redistributive terrain: for example, they argue that aversion to redistribution meant housing policy avoided fiscal transfers for down-payments in favor of a "loosely-regulated mortgage market".<sup>29</sup>

A series of important book-length treatments also argue that American politics has a particular bias towards providing credit rather than redistribution. For Prasad access to housing credit in the US—in her terms "American Mortgage Keynesianism"—substitutes for the welfare state, an argument that draws on seminal work by Kemeny.<sup>30</sup> Prasad argues that US citizens are willing to forego social insurance provided they can privately insure against risk through housing but that access to housing requires cheap and readily available credit.<sup>31</sup> For Krippner, by contrast, the expansion of consumer credit in America is a response to the inflation of the 1970s and "fiscal crisis of the state" in the 1980s that forced a reliance on open capital flows and the financialization of the economy.<sup>32</sup> Similarly Chinn and Frieden argue that endemic US fiscal deficits from the 1980s onwards led to an ever-growing dependence on borrowing from abroad. This had "attractive political features ... for thirty years, working-class and middle-class Americans had seen their incomes stagnate ... access to easy credit and easily financed consumption helped take the edge of this resentment."<sup>33</sup>

Finally, Mian, Sufi, and Trebbi focus on the incentives of American politicians to increase home-ownership among low-income Americans, arguing this lowered lending standards set the stage for the financial crisis.<sup>34</sup> Adelino, Schoar, and Severino, by contrast, argue that middle-income Americans, as well as poor Americans, borrowed

unsustainably, implying that both policies supplying cheap credit and inequality-induced demand for cheap credit played roles in the credit bubble.<sup>35</sup> Thus cheap credit emerges as a solution to weak provision of social insurance, the need to finance deficits, and well-meaning measures to aid poorer citizens. While each argument casts the American experience quite distinctly, the commonality is that higher taxation and redistribution ought to have reduced incentives for US politicians to support high borrowing. Our argument below makes this claim explicit.

While the US has been a crucial case for the literature on the politics of credit, a number of scholars have examined cross-national patterns in credit provision. Rosenbluth and Schaap argue that the cost of borrowing is higher for consumers in countries with proportional representation or mixed electoral systems such as Germany and Japan (pre-1995) than in countries with majoritarian electoral systems such as the UK and the USA.<sup>36</sup> Schwartz provides a more extensive account of comparative differences in consumer financing, particularly for housing, arguing for structural differences between net borrowers (the “Americanized Rich”) and net lenders (the “Repressed Rich”) across the OECD.<sup>37</sup> Schelkle, however, notes that the US in fact had a smaller housing “bubble” and longer term mortgage contracts than did Britain and France, although the American response to the crisis was indeed more hands-off than in Europe.<sup>38</sup> Trumball argues that the French and American consumer finance regimes are in fact substantially more similar than Schwartz’s dichotomy suggests.<sup>39</sup> This implies that similar relationships between inequality and credit may well hold cross-nationally, albeit moderated by the effects of national institutions.

Although these works on the politics of credit are timely and insightful, they lack a systematic account of how rising inequality feeds through to growth in credit as well as how the redistributive policy landscape shapes this relationship. The mechanisms offered tend to be country- or period-specific. Exactly how a larger welfare state or more redistribution might reduce credit remains largely unspecified. To understand cross-national variation in the connection between inequality and credit we need a clearer account of exactly *how* differences in the redistributive environment matter. We now turn to developing our own argument linking inequality, redistribution, and credit.

## Theory: Inequality, Redistribution, and Credit

In this section we build a simple formal model of positional goods, redistribution, and borrowing decisions. The model shows that rich-to-poor redistribution reduces positional externalities in consumption and accordingly greater levels of redistribution limit the effects of rising pre-tax inequality on borrowing. In the supplementary materials we provide a full development of an “expenditure cascade” model that includes a redistributive tax. Here we provide the basic framework of our theory. Doing so enables us to develop hypotheses about cross-national variation in the inequality-credit connection which we examine empirically in the following section.

We begin by setting out the argument informally. We draw on the “positional goods” argument made by Robert Frank to argue that rising inequality increases individuals’ desire to engage in greater consumption in the present, driving up borrowing.<sup>40</sup> Put simply, where ‘average’ citizens see the rich spending more, they adjust their own consumption upwards, drawing on future resources by borrowing. The mechanism behind this could be a pure ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ effect drawn from the psychological need to engage in conspicuous consumption for status reasons.<sup>41</sup> Alternatively it could emerge as the rich drive up the costs of positional goods such as housing and education even as median incomes stagnate.<sup>42</sup> Redistributive taxation weakens this connection in two ways. First, on the tax side it reduces the net incomes of the rich, thereby curtailing their consumption and its effect on positional goods. Second, it increases the net incomes of poorer and middle-income citizens reducing their demand for credit in order to maintain or increase consumption. Hence, in countries with higher levels of redistribution, all else equal, the connection between pre-tax inequality and credit should be weaker.

We now turn to a formal development of this claim. Our model draws together the effects of inequality and redistribution on positional consumption.<sup>43</sup> We follow Iversen and Soskice and Persson and Tabellini, and examine a two-period economy with three equally-sized groups  $J \in \{H, M, L\}$ , each with group-specific exogenous first period incomes,  $y_J$ , where  $y_H > y_M > y_L$ .<sup>44</sup> Following Frank, Levine, and Dijk, individuals have Cobb-Douglas preferences over first (current) and second (future) period

consumption.<sup>45</sup> Each decides what proportion of their incomes, net of taxes, to consume during the first period, denoted  $c_J$ , receiving the remainder in the second period. We assume a flat income tax rate,  $t$ , on first period income is used to fund a lump sum transfer,  $g$ , received by all citizens in the first period. We also assume that individuals have exogenous second period income,  $f_J$ , which permits them to borrow today (hence setting  $c_J > 1$ ).<sup>46</sup>

To capture positional consumption we allow agents to care about consumption relative to their peers. We assume that in the first period lower and middle-income citizens compare their consumption  $c_J y_J$  to the expected consumption of the rich  $\hat{c}_H y_H$ .<sup>47</sup> We use the parameter  $\pi$  to capture the importance of positional consumption. Putting this all together we have the following group-specific utility function:

$$u_J = [(1-t)c_J y_J + g - \pi(1-t)(\hat{c}_H y_H - c_J y_J)]^{(1-\alpha)} [(1-t)(1-c_J)y_J + f_J]^\alpha \quad (1)$$

In the supplementary materials we present a full derivation of each agent's preferred level of consumption, denoted  $c_J^*$ . We then examine the effects of an increase in inequality (produced by a rising  $y_H$ , holding the other two groups' incomes constant) on the preferred consumption of the poorer two groups,  $L$  and  $M$ . This produces the following result:

$$\frac{\partial c_J^*}{\partial y_H} = \alpha \left[ \pi(1-t) \hat{c}_H - \frac{t}{1-t} \frac{1}{y_J} \right] \quad \text{for } J \in \{L, M\} \quad (2)$$

Rising inequality has two consequences for the consumption (and borrowing) decisions of middle and lower-income citizens. First, there is a positive effect,  $\pi(1-t) \hat{c}_H$ , which represents the impetus for both groups to consume more and save less as the consumption of the rich rises - this is the positional goods effect. Second, there is a negative effect,  $-t/((1-t)y_J)$ , which occurs because higher inequality produces a greater absolute amount of redistribution to lower and middle-income groups in the first period: this higher net income reduces their desire to borrow more to engage in current consumption.

Higher taxation thus has *two* negative impacts on the desire to borrow galvanized by rising inequality: by reducing the size of the first effect and increasing the size of the

second one (put formally,  $\partial^2 c_j^* / \partial y_H \partial t < 0$ ). First, higher taxes reduce the net income of the rich, and therefore their level of consumption. Accordingly, higher taxes compress the difference in consumption between the rich and the rest and thereby reduce the positional consumption effect. Second, higher taxes lead to larger redistributive transfers that therefore increase income in the first period, reducing the incentive to consume private income in that period. Where redistribution is higher, we should be less likely to see demands for higher consumption and hence less demand for credit in response to growing inequality.

To recap the basic intuition of the model, suppose there is a median-preserving rise in income inequality such that the rich became relatively richer. If positional consumption motivations are important this results in greater consumption and reduced savings (or borrowing) among the middle-income and poorer groups as the relative price of positional goods rises. Assuming that many positional goods must be bought earlier rather than later this preference for higher consumption also produces a greater demand for credit as agents borrow against future earnings. All else equal, a widening gap in incomes increases credit demand. Higher levels of redistribution weaken this effect because they reduce the gap in disposable incomes that can be used to buy positional goods. The rich are post-fisc poorer and the poor are post-fisc richer. Thus the positive effect of pre-tax inequality on credit demand is reduced as redistribution rises.

While the model most clearly builds off relative consumption comparisons among citizens, it also fits the case where rising inequality produces credit demand because of stagnating median wages. Positional consumption motivations tend to emerge when citizens compete over goods whose supply is fixed in the short or medium term—goods such as housing and quality education. Rising inequality allows the rich to bid up the prices of these goods. If poorer citizens have inelastic demand for these goods and cannot simply reduce their consumption then they find more and more of their income devoted to expenditure on them. When rising inequality is produced by stagnant median wages and rising incomes at the top, the prices of positional goods rise and middle-income citizens find themselves saving less or borrowing more to purchase the same goods—just as in our simple model. Credit demand can emerge from the “base” motivation of

keeping up with the Joneses *and* from the “squeeze” on middle-class incomes produced by the rising cost of goods such as housing and education. Both mechanisms are essentially positional.

Credit demand provides a mechanism connecting redistribution to an attenuated relationship between pre-tax inequality and credit. However, examining contemporary levels of redistribution alone is problematic from a theoretical and empirical standpoint. If inequality and redistribution are connected, as the Meltzer-Richard model implies, then we need to be able to separate out those effects of redistribution that occur in response to rising inequality (and hence are endogenous) from those that reflect long-run historical patterns of fiscal development that predate recent rises in inequality. Indeed, our model takes the redistributive environment as *fixed* and examines borrowing choices. In other words private consumption decisions are substantially more flexible than prevailing national levels of redistribution. Accordingly, if we wish to explain cross-national differences in the connection between rising inequality and growing credit, we must turn to theories explaining long-run cross-national differences in redistribution.

While tax and spending levels are themselves political decisions, they display marked stability due to the policy design of welfare state institutions and tax codes. Many scholars have argued that major public policy programs, especially the welfare state, exhibit “path dependence” for both economic and political reasons.<sup>48</sup> The level, structure, and fiscal progressivity of redistribution are produced by the slow accretion of policy decisions over decades and, once in place, are difficult to alter rapidly. Cross-national differences in redistribution are, we argue, largely a produce of the partisan composition of government over the long-run. Here we follow in the tradition of scholars from both the power resources and comparative political economy traditions in arguing that cumulative left-wing control of government produces higher rates of spending and taxation.<sup>49</sup> Since governments can rarely reverse all of the policy accomplishments of their predecessors, what matters is the frequency with which left and right parties have governed in the postwar era as opposed to the particular partisanship of the prevailing government at any particular period.

In our empirical analysis below we accordingly use cumulative left-government as our proxy for long-run levels of redistribution that shape the expectations of citizens when they make borrowing and consumption choices. Frequent left-wing participation in government has been more common in countries operating under proportional electoral systems<sup>50</sup> - institutions that are themselves exogenous to recent credit demand. Empirically, however, we find that cumulation of left-wing rule itself, rather than other aspects of electoral proportionality, appear to drive this relationship. This finding bolsters our confidence that redistributive policy is driving cross-national variation in the inequality-credit demand relationship.

Finally, what about cross-national differences in credit supply—another potential connection between inequality and borrowing? We do not deny that there are systematic cross-national patterns in the price and supply of credit that are related to the governance and regulation of the financial sector.<sup>51</sup> However, the arguments relating credit supply *to inequality*, for example Kumhof, Ranci re, and Winant, are less likely to be affected by cross-national differences.<sup>52</sup> These arguments assume that inequality pushes up credit supply because of the rich becoming richer but having lower propensity to consume. This new glut of savings however is not nationally constrained—it increases the supply of global savings available to borrow across *all* countries. Hence there is likely to be a weaker connection between national inequality and national credit supply, as opposed to the national inequality and credit demand story where domestic rates of taxation are key to the mechanism.

## **Empirics**

Our empirical strategy is to estimate reduced form models and then compare the empirical results with the expectations derived from our theoretical framework. Our theory implies that higher levels of fiscal redistribution will attenuate any relationship between rising pre-tax inequality and household savings and credit use. However, rigorous examination of this claim poses a number of challenges. Measuring fiscal redistribution requires comparable data on both the pre- and post-tax income distributions; the availability of such data, especially on a consistent longitudinal basis, is



extremely restricted. Even if such data were available, simply regressing credit on redistribution runs in to serious endogeneity problems since both redistribution and credit may be endogenous to pre-tax inequality.

The path diagram in Figure One outlines the rationale for our approach. The long-run history of partisanship and its effect on the development of redistributive policy developed over many years prior to the period we analyze and is credibly exogenous to existing levels of inequality and credit, thereby providing a way around the data limitations and endogenous inequality-redistribution relationship.

*<Figure One About Here>*

Figure One also clarifies why we are focusing on *pre-tax* incomes in the empirical analysis. The positional consumption argument holds that rising disposable income inequality will lead to reduced saving and more borrowing. In other words, all else equal, the relationship between credit and post-fisc inequality should be the same regardless of the level of redistribution, telling us nothing about whether fiscal redistribution and consumer credit are substitutes. Moreover, the dashed line represents the fact that all else may not be equal. Long-run government partisanship may affect credit levels in other ways beyond the partisan/redistributive channel. As a result post-fisc inequality is uninformative about the mechanisms in our argument.

Long run government partisanship cannot be used as a formal instrument for redistribution because we do not have sufficient data on redistribution and we find the exclusion restriction unsustainable here. But we can discern whether long-run partisanship conditions the relationship between credit and pre-tax inequality, giving us the ability to empirically examine parts of our argument and make substantial progress over the existing literature.

### *Data & Measurement*

Our core analysis uses a panel dataset covering eighteen OECD countries from 1980–2010.<sup>53</sup> The main constraint that generates this restricted time period is the availability of several covariates. Simpler models excluding these covariates are reported in the

supplementary materials. Findings with the longer time frame are actually stronger than those reported here, but we discuss the full model in the main text since we believe it important to condition on as many potential confounders as possible given the observational nature of the study.

To measure the extent of private sector credit we follow the current standard and use real credit as percent of GDP, taken from the 2012 update of the well-known cross-national dataset on financial sectors by Beck, Demirgüç-Kunt, and Levine.<sup>54</sup> This measure includes credit provided by both banks and non-bank financial institutions and displays substantial variation both across countries and over time. While scholars focusing on the financial crisis in the United States have zeroed in on housing credit and mortgage securitization as the relevant policy areas we have no reason to believe real estate finance is the only policy area relevant to household credit conditions. We therefore look at the outcome of interest—aggregate private borrowing—rather than specific credit types or policy variables. Note that this variable is an economy-wide aggregate; it cannot speak to who is borrowing (or where). While this is unfortunate, we view this as a necessary initial price to pay in order to take advantage of cross-national differences in redistributive context. Future work will be needed to both better identify what parts of the income distribution react to changing inequality most readily and the geographic context in which these people are embedded.

We include three covariate terms to model the relationship of theoretical interest: pre-tax income inequality, a measure of long-term partisanship, and an interaction between the two. We use the Piketty-Saez top income shares data, specifically the top 1% income share (including capital gains, when available), as our indicator of inequality, updated to 2010.<sup>55</sup> In addition to being a *pre-tax* measure of market income inequality, the top income shares data have the virtue of better cross-country availability and comparability and better longitudinal coverage than any alternative. The top 1% measure also resonates with the claims made by Rajan, Chinn and Frieden, Piketty and others.<sup>56</sup> We interpolate missing values for intermittently reported series and lag this variable by one year.

We construct a series of statistical models using long-run cabinet composition as the core mechanism connecting electoral system to redistribution.<sup>57</sup> Our preferred indicator is

“cumulative Left government,” defined for country  $i$  in year  $t$  as the proportion of cabinet seats held by parties of the left, as defined in Armingeon et al, averaged over 1960 to  $t$ .<sup>58</sup> This measure changes slowly for the years we analyze (1980-2010) yet still incorporates contemporary government conditions.<sup>59</sup> Below we discuss the links between our cumulative left government variable and three measures of electoral institutions.

Figure Two suggests that there is a visible positive connection between lagged top income shares and credit in the domestic economy over the 1961-2010 period.<sup>60</sup> But the figure also highlights that the strongest part of this relationship is driven by country-years that have high levels of inequality and limited history of left government.

*<Figure Two About Here>*

Observed credit in the economy is an equilibrium quantity, so we include a slate of additional covariates meant to conform with other studies and account for other plausible drivers of private sector credit demand and supply. We include GDP (logged) and GDP growth to capture business cycle effects and the fact that our response variable is standardized by GDP. To capture the business cycle experienced by consumers we include the harmonized unemployment rate, taken from the OECD. We also include log population and population growth. The GDP and population variables are taken from the updated Penn World Tables.<sup>61</sup> We include the proportion of the population 65 years old and over to account for possible life cycle/demographic trends.<sup>62</sup>

There may be concerns that our use of total credit combines both credit to households as well as firms. To capture firms’ investment activities we follow Bordo and Meissner and Malinen and condition on gross fixed capital formation (GFCF) as percent of GDP, taken from the OECD.<sup>63</sup> Note that in the supplementary materials we report models using the average household savings rate as our dependent variable, producing results with a similar interpretation to those shown below. Government borrowing may also affect credit availability indirectly by crowding out private borrowing, so we include the lag of the government budget balance (negative numbers imply deficits).

International economic flows can affect credit availability.<sup>64</sup> We include the lag current account balance to directly account for capital inflows. Several commenters on the global

financial crisis, including Rajan, have also expressed concern with savings imbalances and a global “savings glut.” To address broader international savings conditions we follow Bracke et al. and, for each year, sum the absolute value of current account balances for all reporting countries in the world and divide by world GDP.<sup>65</sup> We refer to this variable as *world savings*. Note that this variable is constant across countries within a year, so we omit year effects in the model for the mean. We expect both a local current account deficit and more money in the global system to be associated with greater credit availability, all else equal.

Finally, a word on monetary policy and central bank independence. We might imagine that less-independent central banks would provide an additional policy lever for elected governments to pull: they can directly stimulate borrowing by keeping interest rates low and inflate away debts, both public and private. From a purely practical angle, existing measures of *de jure* bank independence are almost entirely time-invariant within the countries we are considering here, substantially complicating any attempt to tease out the relationships between credit, inequality, and long-run government partisanship, the latter two changing very slowly. Furthermore, as shown by Adolph, *de jure* measures of bank independence fail to capture the incentives facing central bankers.<sup>66</sup>

We therefore turn to a behavioral measure of monetary conditions: broad money (M3) growth. We construct our measure from three different sources. We started with the “broad money growth (annual %)” indicator in the World Bank’s World Development Indicators.<sup>67</sup> The WDI defines broad money growth as “the sum of currency outside banks; demand deposits other than those of the central government; the time, savings, and foreign currency deposits of resident sectors other than the central government; bank and traveler’s checks; and other securities such as certificates of deposit and commercial paper.” This is by far the single most complete source for these data. That said, historical data for several countries are not included in the WDI’s broad money series, including France, Germany, Portugal, and Spain. For these countries, we calculate percentage growth rates from annual M3 stocks as reported in the IMF’s International Financial Statistics Database.<sup>68</sup> After 1999, we use the “monetary aggregate M3” indicator from the European Central Bank’s Statistical Data Warehouse for all country-years in the

Eurozone.<sup>69</sup> We take the mean of these monthly annual growth rates as the percentage growth rate for the Eurozone in a given year.

### *Hierarchical ECM*

We are interested in the dynamic conditional relationships among slow-moving variables. Whether due to common economic shocks, cross-border financial holdings, or coordinated monetary policies there is reason to believe that country-specific effects may not be independent of one another. Missing data may pose inferential challenges. Standard fixed effects (within-country) models for panel data analysis suffer significant weaknesses in such situations. We adopt a fully Bayesian hierarchical framework for the flexibility needed to address these issues. We build a hierarchical linear-Normal error correction model incorporating temporal dynamics, and non-constant variance over time and space.<sup>70</sup> Letting  $\Delta$  be the first difference operator, the model for country  $i$  in year  $t$  is

$$\Delta \text{credit}_{it} \sim N(\theta_{it}, \sigma_{it}^2) \quad (3)$$

$$\theta_{it} = \alpha_i + \lambda_i \text{credit}_{it-1} + \beta' \mathbf{x}_{it-1} + \zeta' \Delta \mathbf{x}_{it} \quad (4)$$

$$= \alpha_i + \beta_1 \text{Ineq}_{it-1} + \beta_{12} \text{Left Gov}_{it} + \beta_3 \text{Ineq}_{it-1} \times \text{Left Gov}_{it} + \zeta_1 \Delta \text{Ineq}_{it} + \zeta_2 \Delta \text{Ineq}_{it} \times \text{Left Gov}_{it} + \tilde{\beta}' \mathbf{z}_{it-1} + \tilde{\zeta}' \Delta \mathbf{z}_{it} \quad (5)$$

$$\alpha_i = N(\mu_a, \sigma_a^2) \quad (6)$$

$$\sigma_{it}^2 = \exp(\gamma_i + \eta_t + \xi_{\text{euro}}) \quad (7)$$

$$\gamma_i \sim N(0, \sigma_\gamma^2) \quad (8)$$

$$\eta_t \sim N(0, \sigma_\eta^2) \quad (9)$$

The  $\mathbf{x}_{it}$  are vectors of time varying covariates while  $\beta$  and  $\zeta$  are vectors of to-be-estimated regression coefficients. Equation 5 makes explicit our modeling of the most theoretically interesting components, where  $\mathbf{z}_{it}$  represents the remaining covariates and  $\tilde{\beta}$ ,  $\tilde{\zeta}$  are  $\beta$  and  $\zeta$  excluding  $\beta_1$ ,  $\beta_2$ ,  $\beta_3$  and  $\zeta_1$  and  $\zeta_2$ , respectively.  $\lambda_i$  is the error correction term, describing the rate at which the system returns to long-run equilibrium.

Importantly, we allow this to vary by country. We assume independent negative Beta(1,1) priors on the  $\lambda_i$ , reflecting the constraint that the error correction parameter lie in the (-1,0) interval. The  $\alpha_i$  are the country-level effects. Finally, we explicitly model error variance in equations 7, 8, and 9 using country ( $\gamma_i$ ) and year ( $\eta_t$ ) effects as well as a variable indicating membership in the Eurozone, under the hypothesis that credit variance should decline relative to country-specific means once in the Eurozone. We put diffuse Normal priors on  $\beta$ ,  $\zeta$  and  $\xi$  while variance hyperparameters have diffuse uniform priors.

### *Estimation*

We generate samples from the joint posterior distribution of the model parameters by relying on Gibbs sampling and MCMC techniques, as implemented in WinBUGS/GeoBUGS.<sup>71</sup> Data were mean-centered and standardized<sup>72</sup> to speed MCMC convergence. Missing values for both covariates and the response were imputed as part of the MCMC estimation process.<sup>73</sup> We ran three chains for 30,000 iterations each, discarding the first 10,000 draws as burn-in and thinning the chain by saving every tenth iteration. Visual inspection of the trace plots and the Gelman-Rubin  $\hat{R}$  statistics indicate that the chains in fact converged.<sup>74</sup>

### *Results*

We first consider whether there is any evidence that the relatively complicated hierarchical structure was needed. Figure Three displays the estimates for the higher-order variance terms in the model. In a pattern repeated in subsequent figures, the thinner bar represents the 95% Bayesian credible interval (BCI), the thicker bar represents the 68% BCI and the solid dot is the posterior median. We do, in fact recover large standard deviations for the country effects ( $\sigma_a$ ), identifying significant cross-national heterogeneity in credit variability. We also recover large standard deviations for the country ( $\sigma_\gamma$ ) and year ( $\sigma_\eta$ ) effects in the model for the error variance. The Eurozone dummy is negative and far from 0, as expected: country-years in the Eurozone have lower private sector credit volatility.

<Figure Three About Here>

In Figure Four we examine this cross-country heterogeneity in more detail. The left panel displays the country-level error correction parameters,  $\lambda_i$ , which describe the speed of re-equilibration after a shock to a covariate. The differences across countries are noteworthy, if subject to substantial posterior uncertainty. In six of the countries, credit levels return to equilibrium relatively quickly (posterior median  $\lambda_i \leq -0.6$ ), but in others the process is slow to adjust, most notably in Denmark, Spain, the Netherlands, Ireland and the UK. The right panel of the figure displays the estimated country-level intercepts, again reinforcing cross-national differences.

*<Figure Four About Here>*

Figure Five displays the posterior distributions for the regression slope parameters. Interpretation of regression parameters in an ECM context is somewhat more complicated than in a standard regression since the effect of a covariate perturbation is distributed over future periods.<sup>75</sup> The coefficients on the first differenced terms represent the immediate (within period) impact of a shock to that variable. The long run multiplier, i.e., total effect on credit in country  $i$  generated by a permanent change in covariate  $k$  is given by  $-\beta_k/\lambda_i$  (recall that  $\beta$  is the vector of coefficients on the lagged covariate). In this figure we omit the coefficients for GDP, GDP growth, population and population growth since these coefficients are relatively uninteresting and were large enough to make the plot difficult to read for the remaining parameters. GDP and population are both strongly distinguishable from zero and, respectively, positively and negatively signed. The BCI for both growth variables are wide and covered 0.

*<Figure Five About Here>*

Looking first at the “control” variables we see that government borrowing appears to crowd out private sector credit in the long term while capital inflows (current account deficits) are associated with substantially more credit in both the short and long term. Once we account for local capital conditions, however, the global savings level has no noticeable relationship with domestic private credit. Monetary aggregates correlate with credit in the expected ways: looser monetary policy, in the form of faster growth in M3,

is associated with both short and long term increases in credit in the economy. Unemployment has both a short term and long term (albeit with less precision) positive relationship with credit growth. Once we account for other covariates, investment levels by firms show no discernible relationship with credit levels.

Most importantly for our argument, we find strong evidence of a relationship between inequality and credit that is conditional on long-run government partisanship. Increases in inequality, both in the immediate period and longer term are associated with more private sector credit usage but this effect goes away in countries with histories of electorally successful left-wing parties.

To interpret this more substantively we calculate the implied long-run effect of a change in inequality equivalent to the increase seen in the USA between 1980 and 2000. For illustrative purposes we compare the predicted effect in the USA to that for Germany. In both countries we set the value of cumulative left government to their respective 2001 levels. To calculate the equilibrium long run effect we use each country's respective  $\lambda_i$ . The top panel of Figure Six displays the posterior median and 95% Bayesian credible intervals for these long run predictions. In the USA this increase in inequality shows up as a large predicted increase in private sector credit whereas the same change in the German pre-tax income distribution has no consistent effect on German credit usage. While the shock to the income distribution considered here is large and unlikely to occur in a single year, the magnitude of the change does reflect the accumulated change witnessed in the USA. To give a sense of the scale, the model predicts that this increase in inequality in the USA would increase credit in the USA by about 1.2 standard deviations or 56% of GDP. The actual change in private credit in the US economy between 1980 and 2000 was 75% of GDP, or 1.6 standard deviations, well within the 95% BCI for the long run effect.

*<Figure Six About Here>*

In the lower panel of Figure Six we report the long-run predicted effect of this same shock to the income distributions for all the countries in the sample. Predicted effects are generated using country-specific error correction estimates and each country's 2001



cumulative left government value (standardized). Since 95% BCI bands overlap and some are quite wide so we not plot BCI bars. Countries for which the 95% BCI for the posterior predictive long run effect do not contain zero are identified using blue triangles; those for which  $0 \in 95\%$  BCI are denoted using orange circles. As expected, rising inequality is only associated with greater credit in those countries that had very low levels of Left participation in government since 1960. Inequality has no discernible long run relationship with credit in most of the countries, though much of this uncertainty is driven by the uncertainty in the  $\lambda_i$ . Interestingly, Sweden and Norway appear at the other extreme, where increased pre-tax inequality show a significant negative long run impact on private sector credit usage.

The ECM specification lets us further examine the dynamics of a shock to inequality. Figure Seven displays how a one time, permanent shock to inequality plays out over time. The shaded regions represent 95% BCI around the predictive density. In the American setting (solid line) the effects of the shock are incorporated in the first two years, with most of the influence becoming visible in the year after the shock. In Germany (broken line), however, we again see that there is no meaningful effect on credit from a shock to the income distribution.

*<Figure Seven About Here>*

### *Model comparisons*

For the sake of comparison we also fit several alternative and simpler models. The first alternative model omits the conditioning relationship of left-wing cumulative government on inequality. The second omits equation [var1], the model for the variance, but allows the error variance to differ by country. The third alternative relaxes the assumption that the country-level intercepts are uncorrelated while allowing us to account for possible spatial correlation in credit levels induced by, e.g., extensive cross-border financial linkages and coordinated monetary policies. In this model we put a conditionally autoregressive prior (CAR) on the  $\alpha_i$ .<sup>76</sup> A CAR prior is defined as

$$\alpha_i | \alpha_{j \neq i} \sim N(\bar{\alpha}_i, \frac{\sigma_{\alpha}^2}{d_i})$$

$$\bar{\alpha}_i = \frac{1}{d_i} \sum_{j \in \delta_i} \alpha_j$$

Under this specification the country effects are normally distributed with mean equal to the mean of the random effects of country's neighborhood.<sup>77</sup> The  $\delta_i$  defines  $i$ 's neighbors;  $d_i = \|\delta_i\|$ . For this application we use two difference connectivity matrices. The first (distance) defines two countries as neighbors if they have minimum distance less 501km; we also define Australia and New Zealand as neighbors.<sup>78</sup> Japan is the only isolate in the dataset. The second connectivity matrix (language) defines neighboring countries to be those that share at least one official language. In Table One we report the DIC and an  $R^2$  calculated from the posterior median residuals. The base model we focus on performs better than all the alternatives on a DIC basis. Looking at  $R^2$ , the base model performs better than the alternatives except the model with a simpler variance expression; the simpler variance model has a much higher posterior variance around the reported  $R^2$ , however. There is good evidence that the model with the interaction terms in it are preferable to the one without. Our central finding—the relationship between inequality and credit is mediated by long-run government partisanship—holds in the simpler variance model and both the CAR models.

*<Table One About Here>*

### *Partisanship or Institutions?*

In our theoretical section we mentioned the Iversen and Soskice model of electoral institutions.<sup>79</sup> In their model proportional electoral rules induces post-election coalition formation more favorable to frequent center-Left government, leading to more redistribution over the longer term. This raises the question of whether left-wing partisanship is simply a proxy for electoral institutions that might affect policymaking through other non-partisan channels. For example, Chang et al. and Rosenbluth and Schaap argue that majoritarian systems are more responsive to consumers relative to

producer groups.<sup>80</sup> Austen-Smith highlights PR systems generate higher taxes and more distributive spending in order for parties to buy and hold together governing coalitions.<sup>81</sup> We can use alternative ways of measuring electoral institutions to further examine whether long-term government partisanship is the mechanism at work.

We re-fit our model, substituting three different indicators of electoral institutions for our cumulative Left government variable. First, we use the simple indicator for majoritarian electoral systems taken from Golder and extended through 2010 for the OECD cases under study here.<sup>82</sup> Second, based on Rogowski et al.'s arguments about "seats-votes elasticity," we use a direct measure of the disproportionality of the electoral system (the Gallagher index) taken from Armingeon et al.<sup>83</sup> Third, a series of well-known formal models of electoral systems and redistribution argue that higher taxes and more distributive spending are the result of attempts to buy off and hold together governing coalitions.<sup>84</sup> Lijphart shows that PR induces a more fragmented party systems inducing more frequent coalition government.<sup>85</sup> To examine this mechanism we refit models using the the effective number of legislative parties (ENLP), taken from Armingeon et al.<sup>86</sup> For space considerations we omit full descriptions of all model parameters, instead focusing on the coefficient estimates and 95% BCI for lagged and differenced inequality, the institutional variable and their interactions.<sup>87</sup> These results along with data on comparative model fit are displayed in Figure Eight.

*<Figure Eight About Here>*

Based on the DIC all these alternative models present an inferior fit to the data when compared to our base model using historical left-wing cabinet participation. The majoritarian dummy model has coefficients on the "right" side of zero, but there is considerable uncertainty about this relationship, especially for the long-term effect. The Gallagher index model is similarly weak. Looking at ENLP, however, we again find results consistent with what we found in our base model: countries with less-fragmented party systems show a stronger relationship between inequality and private credit.

These findings are noteworthy for several reasons. First, they reinforce our conclusion that long-run government partisanship is the most statistically visible relationship in the

data.<sup>88</sup> Other variables encoding electoral institutions generate weaker in-sample fit and less precisely-estimated relationships. Second, we see that, while electoral institutions do have consequences for the frequency of left wing government, it is left government itself, presumably associated with more redistributive policies, that generate our strongest findings. Third, the majoritarian dummy variable is essentially collinear with so-called “Liberal Market Economies” or Anglo-Saxon countries.<sup>89</sup> Once we account for other covariates we find no strong evidence linking this dummy variable to credit. This further strengthens our conclusion that the cross-national differences in credit relate to the level of fiscal redistribution rather than the constellation of policies and institutions purporting to define LMEs.<sup>90</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Rising income inequality and the global financial crisis were perhaps the two biggest economic stories of the first decade of the 21st Century. We argue that their joint emergence was not a coincidence, but neither was it inevitable. In fact, greater levels of borrowing appear closely related to changes in income inequality but only in those countries where left-wing government is less frequent. We interpret this finding as reflecting long-run, systematic, and partisan differences in redistributive effort. Redistribution, in turn, dampens the positional consumption incentives produced by stagnant real wages at the bottom of the distribution and by rising incomes at the top. Thus in countries with histories of left-wing government and substantial redistribution, rising inequality failed to produce an associated surge in borrowing. In those where both left-wing government and redistribution were less prevalent, inequality and credit rose together.

Our finding that the relationship between top income shares and credit availability is conditioned by the long-run consequences of government partisanship is important for several reasons. First, it makes it difficult to sustain the argument that increased availability and use of credit is a common, cross-national response to rising top income shares. Countries that engage in greater fiscal redistribution dampen the turn to credit and

borrowing. Political choices still matter, even in an era of rising inequality and global capital mobility.

Second, policy affecting the supply of credit, such as government underwriting of mortgages, backstopping banks, or loosely regulating consumer finance, does appear to play a role, even though we have not investigated such mechanisms here. If credit use were purely a demand-driven occurrence then we should see *higher* prices for credit and financial services as wages and incomes diverge as the demand curve shifts outward. But, as noted earlier, credit and financial services are *cheaper* in those countries with traditions of center-right government that redistribute less.<sup>91</sup> Although global supply of credit is the crucial determinant of interest rates in an era of global capital flows, domestic credit access policies still matter at the margin. If low-redistribution countries are already prone to higher credit demand, this accommodating policy may accentuate the connection between inequality and credit. Renewed, comparative investigation of specific policy levers is an important channel for future research.

Third, our finding has implications for future financial stability under conditions of rising inequality. In the industrialized world, countries that redistribute less may be more prone to instability in the finance sector as households resort to credit-based consumption.<sup>92</sup> Past experiences with banking crises may not be a good predictor of the future risk insofar as past experience does not cover periods of such rapidly increasing pre-tax income inequality at the very top. As gaps between rich and poor grow in the largest economies in the world, how governments respond has implications for global financial stability. If governments fail to address rising consumption demands or pursue myopic policies of enabling borrowing through consumer credit policies, bankruptcy laws, or (de)regulation of the financial sector, the prospects for more frequent and dangerous financial crises increase. And we have all learned that spillover can be rapid and deep.

## Bibliography

- Adelino, Manuel, Antoinette Schoar, and Felipe Severino. 2016. "Loan Originations and Defaults in the Mortgage Crisis: The Role of the Middle Class." *Review of Financial Studies* 29 (7): 1635–70. doi:10.1093/rfs/hhw018.
- Adolph, Christopher. 2013. *Bankers, Bureacrats, and Central Bank Politics: The Myth of Neutrality*. New York: Cambridge Univ Press.
- Ahlquist, John S., and Christian Breunig. 2012. "Model-Based Clustering and Typologies in the Social Sciences." *Political Analysis* 20 (1): 92–112.
- Alvaredo, Facundo, Anthony B. Atkinson, Thomas Piketty, and Emmanuel Saez. 2014. "The World Top Incomes Database." <http://topincomes.g-mond.parisschoolofeconomics.eu/>.
- Ansell, Ben. 2014. "The Political Economy of Ownership: Housing Markets and the Welfare State." *American Political Science Review* 108 (02). Cambridge Univ Press: 383–402.
- Armingeon, Klaus, Romana Careja, David Weisstanner, Sarah Engler, Panajotis Potolidis, and Marlène Gerber. 2012. "Comparative Political Data Set Iii 1990–2010." *Institute of Political Science, University of Berne*.
- Austen-Smith, David. 2000. "Redistributing Income Under Proportional Representation." *Journal of Political Economy* 108 (6): 1235–69.
- Banerjee, Sudipto, Bradley P. Carlin, and Alan E. Gelfand. 2002. *Hierarchical Modeling and Analysis for Spatial Data*. Chapman & Hall/CRC.
- Beck, Thorsten, Asli Demirgüç-Kunt, and Ross Levine. 2000. "A New Database on the Structure and Development of the Financial Sector." *The World Bank Economic Review* 14 (3). World Bank: 597–605.
- Bertrand, Marianne, and Adair Morse. 2016. "Trickle-down Consumption." *Review of Economics and Statistics* 98 (5): 863–79.

- Besag, Julian, and Charles Kooperberg. 1995. "On Conditional and Intrinsic Autoregressions." *Biometrika* 82: 733–46.
- Bilancina, Ennio, and Leonardo Boncinelli. 2012. "Redistribution and the Notion of Social Status." *Journal of Public Economics* 96: 651–57.
- Bogaerts, Tess, and Mario Pandelaere. 2013. "Less Is More: Why Some Domains Are More Positional Than Others." *Journal of Economic Psychology* 39. Elsevier: 225–36.
- Boix, Carles. 1998. *Political Parties, Growth and Equality: Conservative and Social Democratic Economic Strategies in the World Economy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bordo, Michael D., and Christopher M. Meissner. 2012. "Does Inequality Lead to a Financial Crisis?" Working Paper 17896. NBER.
- Bracke, Thierry, Matthieu Bussière, Michael Fidora, and Roland Straub. 2008. "A Framework for Assessing Global Imbalances." 78. *Occasional Paper Series*. European Central Bank.
- Bradley, David, Evelevyn Huber, Stefanie Moller, Francois Nielsen, and John D. Stephens. 2003. "Distribution and Redistribution in Postindustrial Democracies." *World Politics* 55 (02). Cambridge Univ Press: 193–228.
- Caballero, Julian A. 2016. "Do Surges in International Capital Inflows Influence the Likelihood of Banking Crises?" *Economic Journal* 126 (591): 281–316.
- Chang, Eric C. C., Mark Andreas Kayser, Drew A. Linzer, and Ronald Rogowski. 2010. *Electoral Systems and the Balance of Consumer-Producer Power*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Chinn, Menzie D., and Jeffrey A. Frieden. 2011. *Lost Decades*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- De Boef, Suzanna, and Luke Keele. 2008. "Taking Time Seriously." *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (1): 184–200.

Drechsel-Graua, Moritz, and Kai D. Schmid. 2014. "Consumption–savings Decisions Under Upward-Looking Comparisons." *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 106: 254–68.

European Central Bank. n.d. "Statistical Data Warehouse." <http://sdw.ecb.europa.eu/>.

Feltovich, Nick, and Ourega-Zoé Ejebu. 2014. "Do Positional Goods Inhibit Saving? Evidence from a Life–cycle Experiment." *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*.

Frank, Robert. 2013. *Falling Behind: How Rising Inequality Harms the Middle Class*. Vol. 4. Univ of California Press.

Frank, Robert H. 1985. *Choosing the Right Pond: Human Behavior and the Quest for Status*. Oxford University Press.

Frank, Robert H, Adam Seth Levine, and Oege Dijk. 2005. "Expenditure Cascades." *Cornell University Mimeograph*. Ithaca: Cornell University.

Georgarakos, Dimitris, Michael Haliassos, and Giacomo Pasini. 2014. "Household Debt and Social Interactions." *Review of Financial Studies* 27 (15): 1404–33.

Gimpelson, Vladimir, and Daniel Treisman. 2016. "Misperceiving Inequality."

Gingrich, Jane. 2015. "Varying Costs to Change? Institutional Change in the Public Sector." *Governance* 28 (1). Wiley Online Library: 41–60.

Gingrich, Jane, and Ben Ansell. 2014. "Sorting for Schools: Housing, Education and Inequality." *Socio-Economic Review* 12 (2). SASE: 329–51.

Gleditsch, Kristian S., and Michael D. Ward. 2001. "Measuring Space: A Minimum Distance Database and Applications to International Studies." *Journal of Peace Research* 38 (6): 749–68.

Golder, Matt. 2005. "Democratic Electoral Systems Around the World, 1946-2000." *Electoral Studies* 24: 103–21.



- Hacker, Jacob, and Paul Pierson. 2010. *Winner-Take-All Politics*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Hall, Peter A., and David Soskice. 2001. *Varieties of Capitalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Heston, Alan, Robert Summers, and Bettina Aten. 2002. "Penn World Table." *Center for International Comparisons at the University of Pennsylvania*.
- Hirsch, Fred. 1978. *Social Limits to Growth*. 2nd ed. Routledge.
- International Monetary Fund. n.d. "International Finance Statistics."
- Iversen, Torben, and David Soskice. 2006. "Electoral Institutions and the Politics of Coalitions: Why Some Democracies Redistribute More Than Others." *American Political Science Review* 100 (2). Cambridge Univ Press: 165–81.
- . 2015. "Democratic Limits to Redistribution: Inclusionary Versus Exclusionary Coalitions in the Knowledge Economy." *World Politics* 67 (02). Cambridge Univ Press: 185–225.
- Kemeny, Jim. 1981. *The Myth of Home-Ownership: Private Versus Public Choices in Housing Tenure*. Routledge.
- Kenworthy, Lane, and Jonas Pontusson. 2005. "Rising Inequality and the Politics of Redistribution in Affluent Countries." *Perspectives on Politics* 3: 449–71.
- Krippner, Greta R. 2012. *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kumhof, Michael, Romain Rancière, and Pablo Winant. 2015. "Inequality, Leverage, and Crises." *The American Economic Review* 105 (3). American Economic Association: 1217–45.
- Lewis, Michael. 2010. *The Big Short*. New York: W. W. Norton.

- Lijphart, Arend. 2012. *Patterns of Democracy*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lizzeri, Alessandro, and Nicola Persico. 2001. "The Provision of Public Goods Under Alternative Electoral Incentives." *American Economic Review* 91 (1): 225–39.
- Malinen, Tuomas. 2013. "Is There a Relationship Between Income Inequality and Credit Cycles?" 2013–292. Society for the Study of Economic Inequality.
- Matlack, Janna L, and Jacob L Vigdor. 2008. "Do Rising Tides Lift All Prices? Income Inequality and Housing Affordability." *Journal of Housing Economics* 17 (3). Elsevier: 212–24.
- McCarty, Nolan, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. 2013. *Political Bubbles: Financial Crises and the Failure of American Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Meltzer, Allan, and Scott Richard. 1981. "Rational Theory of the Size of Government." *Journal of Political Economy* 101 (49-83).
- Mian, Atif, and Amir Sufi. 2015. *House of Debt: How They (and You) Caused the Great Recession, and How We Can Prevent It from Happening Again*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mian, Atif, Amir Sufi, and Francesco Trebbi. 2010. "The Political Economy of the Us Mortgage Default Crisis." *The American Economic Review* 100 (5). American Economic Association: 1967–98.
- OECD. 2014. "OECD.stat." OECD. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/data-00285-en>.
- Persson, Torsten, and Guido Tabellini. 1999. "The Size and Scope of Government: Comparative Politics with Rational Politicians." *European Economic Review* 43: 699–735.
- Pierson, Paul. 2000. "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics." *American Political Science Review* 94 (02). Cambridge Univ Press: 251–67.

Piketty, Thomas. 2014. *Capital in the 21st Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Piketty, Thomas, and Emmanuel Saez. 2006. "The Evolution of Top Incomes: A Historical and International Perspective." *The American Economic Review* 96 (2). American Economic Association: 200–205.

Prasad, Monica. 2012. *The Land of Too Much: American Abundance and the Paradox of Poverty*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rajan, Raghuram G. 2010. *Fault Lines*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ray, Debraj, and Arthur Robson. 2012. "Status, Intertemporal Choice, and Risk-Taking." *Econometrica* 80: 1505–31.

Rogowski, Ronald, and Mark Andreas Kayser. 2002. "Majoritarian Systems and Consumer Power." *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (3): 526–39.

Rogowski, Ronald, Eric C. C. Chang, and Mark Andreas Kayser. 2008. "Electoral Systems and Real Prices: Panel Evidence for the Oecd Countries, 1970-2000." *British Journal of Political Science*.

Rosenbluth, F., and R. Schaap. 2003. "The Domestic Politics of Banking Regulation." *International Organization* 57 (02). Cambridge Univ Press: 307–36.

Schelkle, Waltraud. 2012. "A Crisis of What? Mortgage Credit Markets and the Social Policy of Promoting Home Ownership in the United States and Europe." *Politics & Society* 40 (1): 59–80.

Schwartz, Herman. 2009. *Subprime Nation*. Cornell University Press.

Solnick, Sara J, and David Hemenway. 2005. "Are Positional Concerns Stronger in Some Domains Than in Others?" *The American Economic Review* 95 (2). JSTOR: 147–51.

Sullivan, Theresa A., Elizabeth Warren, and Jay Lawrence Westbrook. 2006. "Less Stigma or More Financial Distress: An Empirical Analysis of the Extraordinary Increase in Bankruptcy Filings." *Stanford Law Review* 59 (2): 213–56.

Ticchi, Davide, and Andrea Vindigni. 2009. "Endogenous Constitutions." *The Economic Journal* 120: 1–39.

Trumbull, Gunnar. 2012. "Credit Access and Social Welfare: The Rise of Consumer Lending in the United States and France." *Politics & Society* 40 (1): 9–34.

Veblen, Thorstein. 2009. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Oxford University Press.

World Bank. n.d. "World Development Indicators."

<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/FM.LBL.BMNY.ZG>.

**Table One:** In-sample model comparison diagnostics for the base model and several alternatives.  $R^2$  is the coefficient of determination calculated from the medians of posterior residuals.

<b>Model</b>	<b>DIC</b>	<b><math>R^2</math></b>
Base Model	14190	0.47
Without Interaction	14208	0.45
Without Variance Terms	14319	0.52
With CAR Prior (Distance)	14235	0.46
With CAR Prior (Language)	14339	0.34

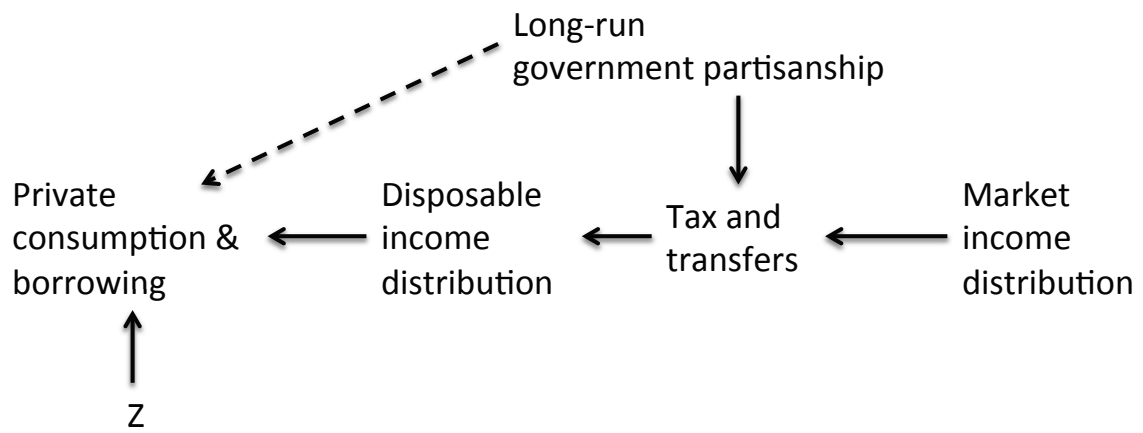


Figure One: Static path diagram underlying the empirical model.  $Z$  are other exogenous covariates

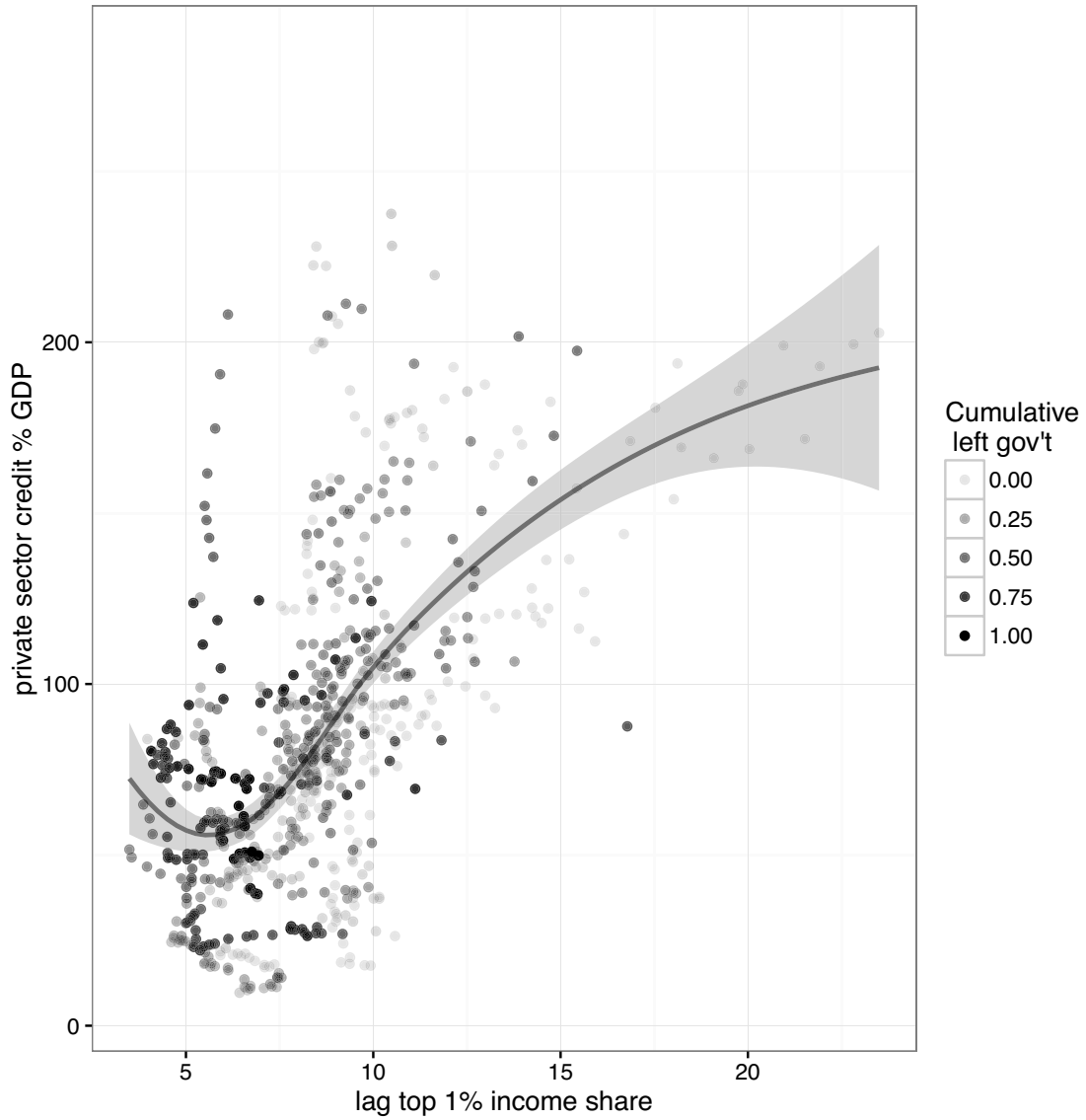


Figure Two: Credit to the private sector and inequality by the long-term Left government, with nonparametric loess curve superimposed. Points represent all available country-years from 1961–2010, shaded based on the cumulative years of left-party government since 1960 as proportion of years since 1960.

### Posterior median with 68% & 95% BCI

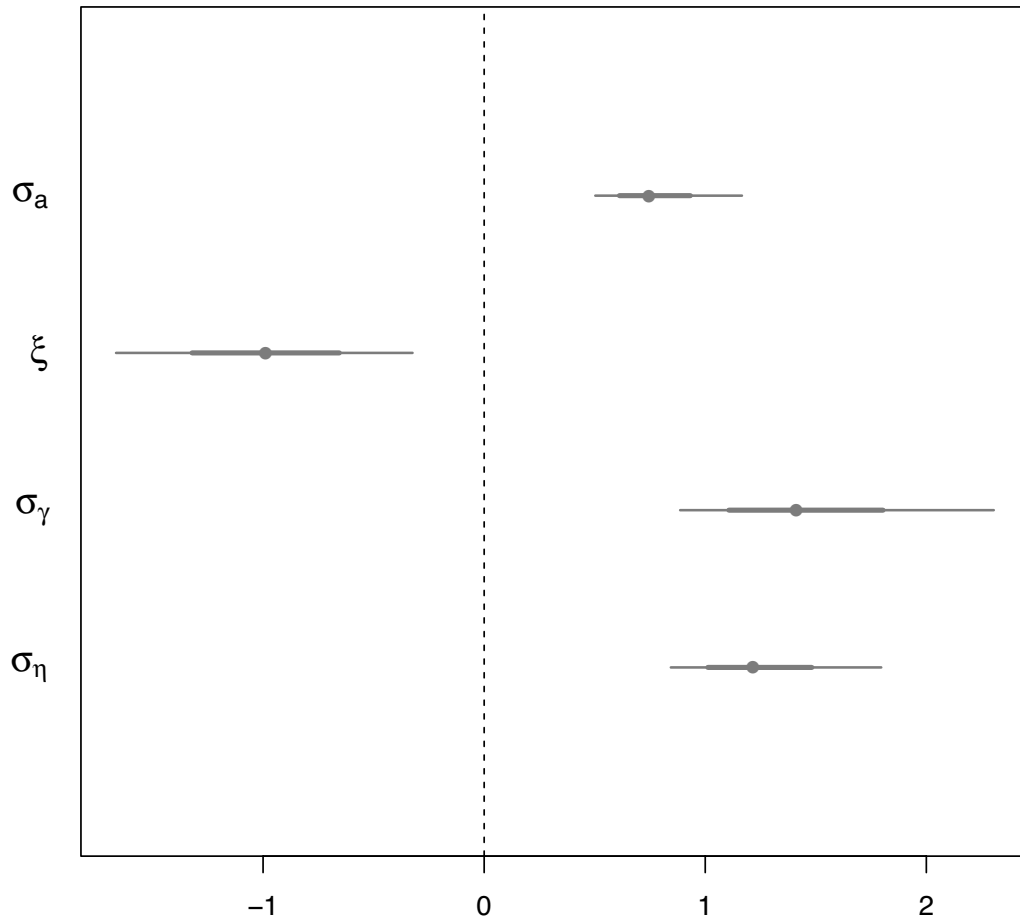


Figure Three: Posterior medians with 68% and 95% Bayesian credible intervals for higher-order variance parameters. N = 558, number of countries = 18.



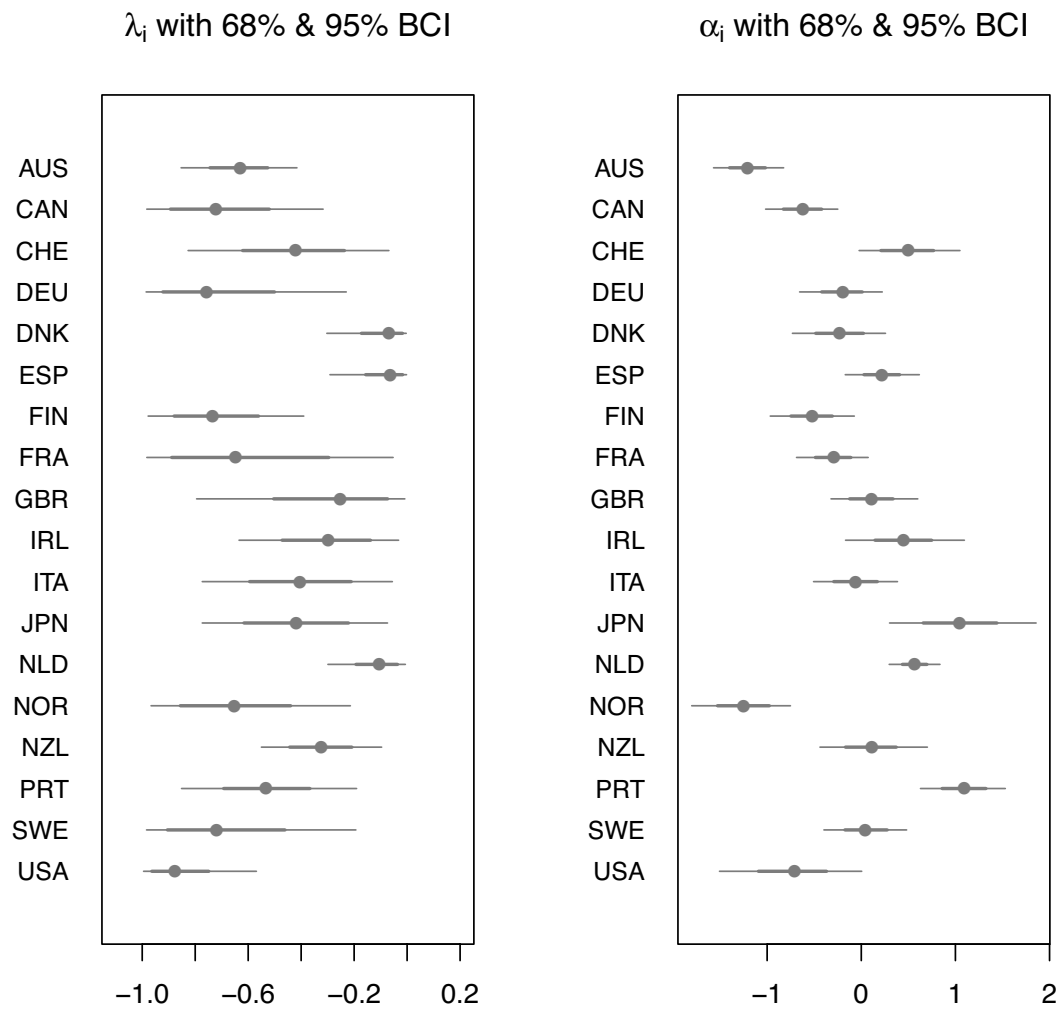


Figure Four: Cross-country heterogeneity: posterior medians with 68% and 95% Bayesian credible intervals for country-level error correction parameters (left) and intercepts (right). N = 558, number of countries = 18

### Posterior median with 68% & 95% BCI

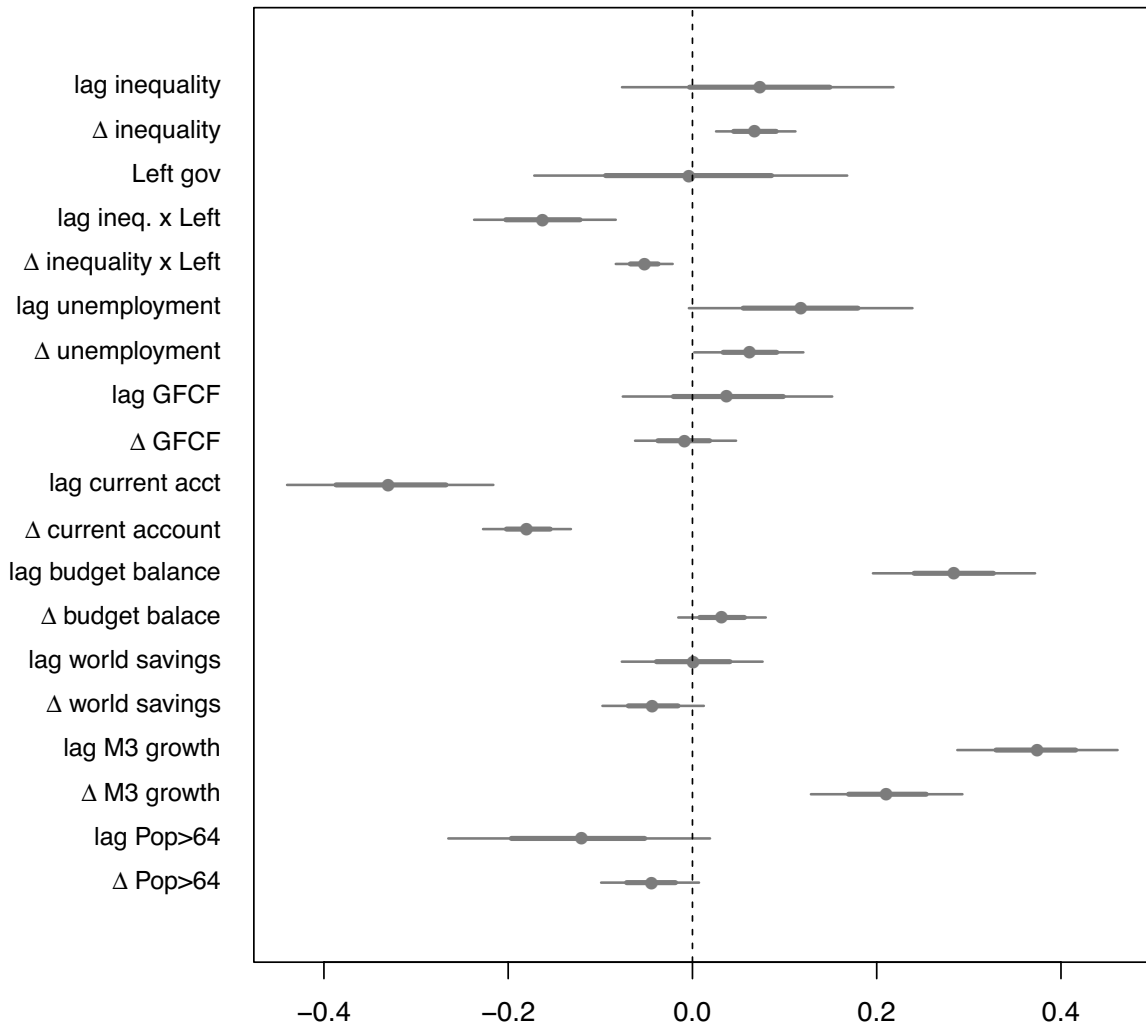


Figure Five: Posterior medians with 68% and 95% Bayesian credible intervals for regression slope parameters. N = 558, number of countries = 18. Parameters for log GDP, GDP growth, population and population growth are omitted for ease of visualization.

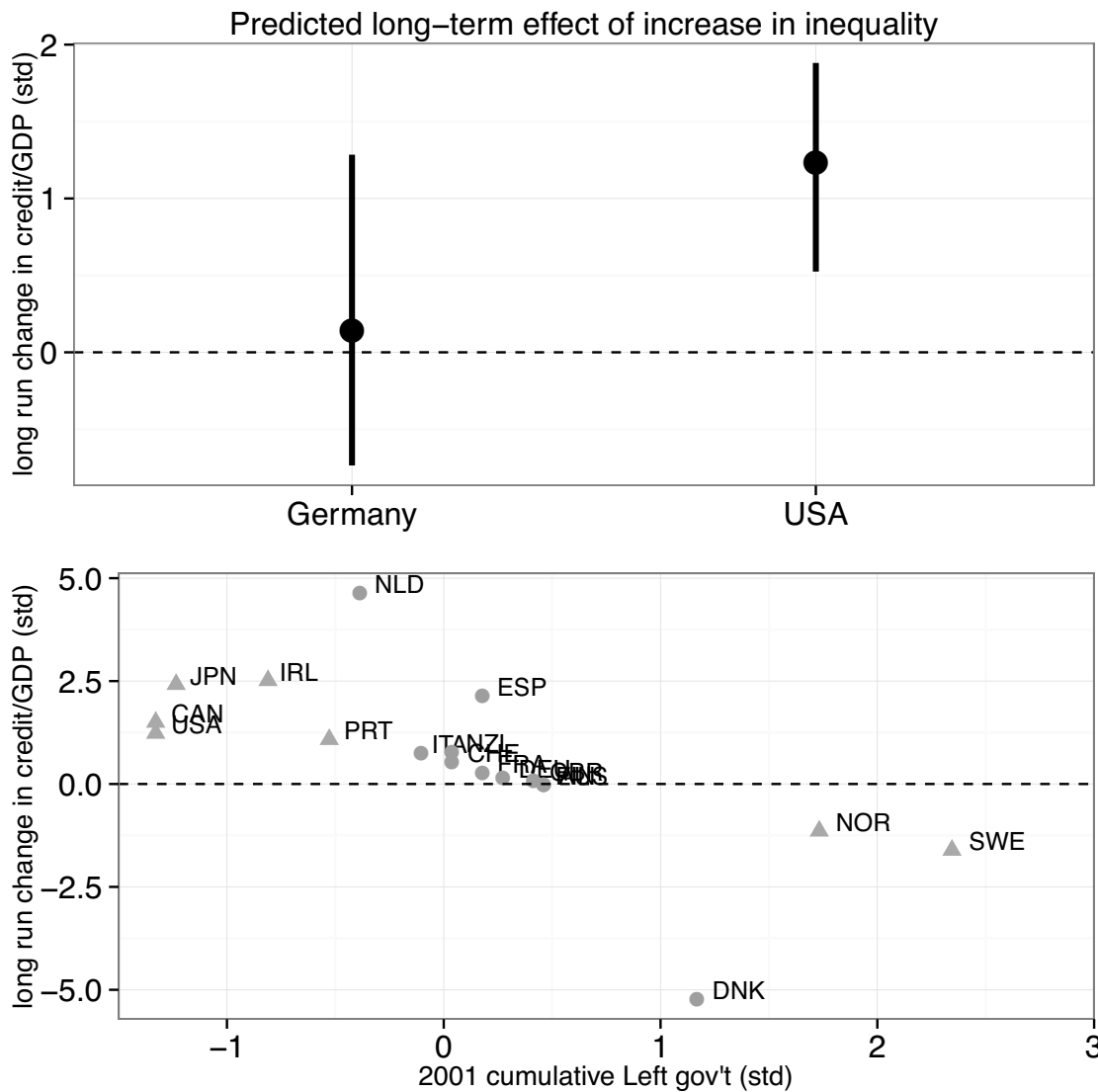


Figure Six: Top panel: posterior predictive density medians and 95% Bayesian credible intervals for the long-run effect on credit of a change in top 1% income share equivalent to that observed in the USA from 1980 to 2000 for the USA and Germany. Bottom panel: posterior predictive density medians for the long run effect on credit of the same shock to inequality. Countries marked with blue triangles have posterior 95% BCI that do not contain 0.

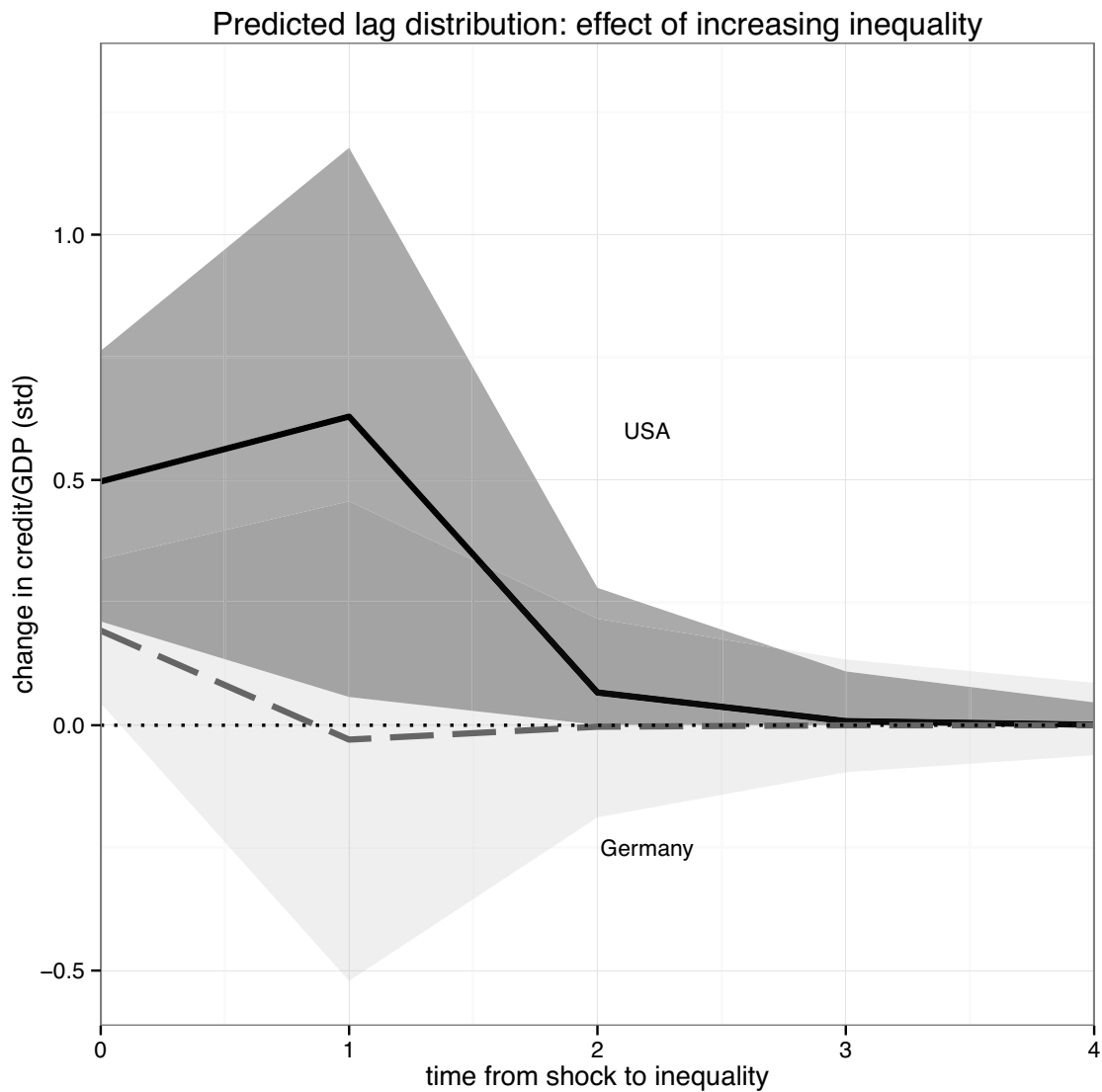


Figure Seven: Posterior predictive density medians for short run distributed effect on credit of a one-time, permanent shock to the top 1% income share equivalent to that observed in the USA between 1980 and 2000 for both the USA (solid line) and Germany (broken line). The darker shaded region is the 95% BCI for the USA; the lighter is the same for Germany. Cumulative Left values are set at their 2001 values.

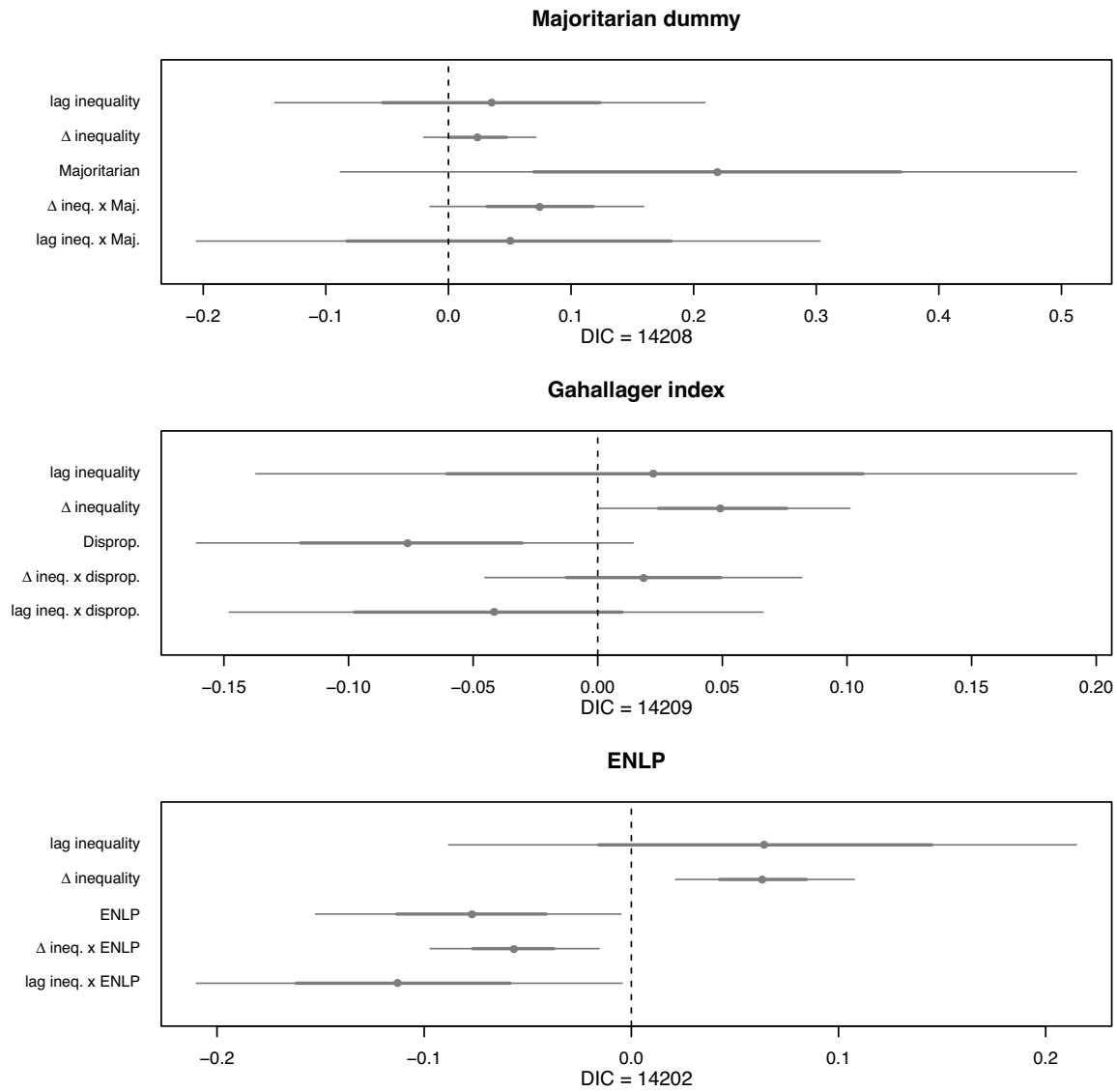


Figure Eight: Posterior medians with 68% and 95% Bayesian credible intervals for selected regression slope parameters using alternative indicators for electoral institutions. All other covariates are as in the base model above. N = 558, number of countries = 18.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Alvaredo et al., 2014.
- <sup>2</sup> Chinn and Frieden, 2011; Hacker and Pierson, 2010; Lewis, 2010; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2013; Piketty, 2014; Rajan, 2010.
- <sup>3</sup> Rajan 2010, 31
- <sup>4</sup> Piketty 2014, 297.
- <sup>5</sup> Note that Rajan, Piketty and others are equivocal about whether policy makers choose credit- promoting policies specifically to address widening income disparities or whether these policies emerged for other reasons but had a catalytic effect on borrowing.
- <sup>6</sup> Respectively, Frank, Levine and Dijk 2005; Meltzer and Richard 1981.
- <sup>7</sup> Hirsch 1978.
- <sup>8</sup> Iversen and Soskice 2006.
- <sup>9</sup> Ticchi and Vindigni 2009
- <sup>10</sup> Meltzer and Richard 1981.
- <sup>11</sup> Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005; Iversen and Soskice 2015.
- <sup>12</sup> Gimpelson and Treisman 2016.
- <sup>13</sup> Kumhof, Ranci ere, and Winant 2015.
- <sup>14</sup> Other than cross-national variation in inequality, however, it is not obvious what explains variation in credit supply in this model. Furthermore, presuming internationalized credit markets, we would expect credit supply to be determined by trends in *global*, rather than domestic, inequality.
- <sup>15</sup> Hirsch (1978) and Frank (1985)
- <sup>16</sup> Frank 1985; Bogaerts and Pandelaere 2013; Solnick and Hemenway 2005.
- <sup>17</sup> Frank, Levine, and Dijk 2005.
- <sup>18</sup> Matlack and Vigdor 2008.
- <sup>19</sup> Ray and Robson 2012.
- <sup>20</sup> Frank 1985, 196.
- <sup>21</sup> Sullivan, Warren, and Westbrook 2006.
- <sup>22</sup> Gingrich and Ansell 2014.
- <sup>23</sup> Drechsel-Graua and Schmid 2014.
- <sup>24</sup> Georgarakos, Haliassos, and Pasini 2014.
- <sup>25</sup> Bertrand and Morse 2016.
- <sup>26</sup> Feltovich and Ejebu 2014.
- <sup>27</sup> Bordo and Meissner 2012.
- <sup>28</sup> Malinen 2013.
- <sup>29</sup> McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2013, 129.
- <sup>30</sup> Prasad 2012; Kemeny 1981.
- <sup>31</sup> See also Ansell 2014.
- <sup>32</sup> Krippner 2012.
- <sup>33</sup> Chinn and Frieden 2011, 15.
- <sup>34</sup> Mian, Sufi, and Trebbi 2010. See also Mian and Sufi 2015.
- <sup>35</sup> Adelino, Schoar, and Severino 2016.
- <sup>36</sup> Rosenbluth and Schaap 2003.
- <sup>37</sup> Schwartz 2009.
- <sup>38</sup> Schelkle 2012.
- <sup>39</sup> Trumball 2012.
- <sup>40</sup> Frank 1985, Frank 2013.
- <sup>41</sup> Veblen 2009.
- <sup>42</sup> Frank 2013.
- <sup>43</sup> See Frank, Levine, and Dijk 2005 on inequality and Bilancina and Boncinelli 2012 on redistribution.
- <sup>44</sup> Iversen and Soskice 2006, Persson and Tabellini 1999.
- <sup>45</sup> Frank, Levine, and Dijk 2005.

---

<sup>46</sup> By restricting taxation and redistribution to the first period we thus focus our attention on how changes to net current income affect private saving and borrowing decisions. We discuss this assumption at greater length in the supplementary materials.

<sup>47</sup> This comparison could be purely “aspirational”, capturing “keeping up with the Jones” motivations, or it could reflect the increased cost—relative to a group’s fixed income—of positional goods as the incomes of the richest group rise. These goods typically need to be bought “earlier” to be valued (schooling is the most obvious example), accordingly the comparison to the consumption of the rich is made during only the first period.

<sup>48</sup> Pierson 2000, Gingrich 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Boix 1998, Bradley et al. 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Iversen and Soskice 2006.

<sup>51</sup> See Chang et al. 2010, Rosenbluth and Schaap 2003.

<sup>52</sup> Kumhof, Ranci re, and Winant 2015.

<sup>53</sup> In the supplementary materials we report results from iteratively removing each country. Substantive conclusions do not change.

<sup>54</sup> Beck, Demirg c-Kunt, and Levine 2000.

<sup>55</sup> Piketty and Saez 2006. Results are qualitatively similar if we use inequality excluding capital gains. See the supplementary materials.

<sup>56</sup> Rajan 2010, Chinn and Frieden 2011, Piketty 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Iversen and Soskice 2006.

<sup>58</sup> Armingeon et al. (2012). Within each year cabinet seat representation is weighted by days for which each party was in the cabinet. We also note that empirical results replacing cumulative left participation with the cumulative average partisanship of the government, also taken from Armingeon et al. (2012), are nearly identical: see the supplementary materials.

<sup>59</sup> We also fit models using lagged government partisanship rather than cumulative Left government as the key variable. Simple partisanship variables did not appear as meaningful predictors of credit, giving us further confidence that our cumulative partisanship variable is capturing the enduring impact of political institutions rather than a simple contemporary partisanship “effect”.

<sup>60</sup> We have data for ten countries in 1961, thirteen by 1963, and eighteen by 1982.

<sup>61</sup> Heston, Summers, and Aten 2002.

<sup>62</sup> OECD 2014.

<sup>63</sup> Bordo and Meissner 2012, Malinen 2013, OECD 2014.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Caballero 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Bracke et al. 2008.

<sup>66</sup> Adolph 2013.

<sup>67</sup> World Bank, n.d.

<sup>68</sup> International Monetary Fund, n.d.

<sup>69</sup> European Central Bank, n.d.

<sup>70</sup> See De Boef and Keele 2008 on the use of the ECM outside of conventional analysis of cointegrated time series from a frequentist perspective.

<sup>71</sup> Data and all estimation code is available on that authors’ online data archives.

<sup>72</sup> Note that this centering was variable by variable for the whole sample *not* country by country. Indicator variables were not altered in any way.

<sup>73</sup> Results for models using only complete cases are in the supplementary materials. Note that estimated relationships are stronger when we do not impute. We feel that imputation is the most principled and conservative way to proceed here.

<sup>74</sup> Illustrative convergence diagnostics for the regression parameter on the lag inequality  $\times$  left government interaction term are in the supplementary materials; plots for other parameters displayed similar convergence properties.

<sup>75</sup> De Boef and Keele 2008.

<sup>76</sup> Banerjee, Carlin, and Gelfand 2002.

<sup>77</sup> The CAR prior uses a sum-to-zero constraint on the random effect. This necessitates the inclusion of the constant term which is assigned an improper flat prior (Besag and Kooperberg 1995). The CAR precision,  $1/\sigma_\alpha^2$ , is assigned a Gamma (0.5, .0005) prior.

- 
- <sup>78</sup> Gleditsch and Ward 2001.
- <sup>79</sup> Iversen and Soskice 2006.
- <sup>80</sup> Chang et al. 2010, Rosenbluth and Schaap 2003.
- <sup>81</sup> Austen-Smith 2000.
- <sup>82</sup> Golder 2005.
- <sup>83</sup> Chang et al. 2010, Rogowski and Kayser 2002, Rogowski, Chang, and Kayser 2008, Armingeon et al. 2012.
- <sup>84</sup> Austen-Smith 2000, Lizzeri and Persico 2001, Persson and Tabellini 1999.
- <sup>85</sup> Lijphart 2012.
- <sup>86</sup> Armingeon et al. 2012.
- <sup>87</sup> Correlations among the various indicators are presented in the supplementary materials.
- <sup>88</sup> Moreover, in our supplementary materials we show that the effect of partisanship is driven by left-wing parties not centrist parties such as Christian Democratic parties who, while they may be common in countries with sizable welfare states in Continental Europe, are not generally associated with higher redistribution, as shown in (Bradley et al. 2003).
- <sup>89</sup> Hall and Soskice 2001.
- <sup>90</sup> See Ahlquist and Breunig (2012) on why we should not attempt to control for “LME” clusters using a categorical dummy variable.
- <sup>91</sup> Rosenbluth and Schaap 2003.
- <sup>92</sup> Kumhof, Ranci re, and Winant 2015.