Anti-elite parties and political inequality: how challenges to the political mainstream reduce income gaps in internal efficacy

Paul Marx, University of Southern Denmark (marx@sam.sdu.dk)
Christoph Nguyen, Free University of Berlin (christoph.nguyen@fu-berlin.de)


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Abstract:
There is growing interest in political inequality across income groups. We contribute to this debate with two arguments about political involvement: 1) poverty depresses internal political efficacy by undermining cognitive and emotional resources and 2) dissent in the party-system reduces the efficacy gap to higher incomes. Specifically, we expect conflict between anti-elite and mainstream parties to simplify political decisions and to stimulate political attention among poor voters. We support the arguments with comparative and experimental analyses. Comparative survey data shows that the income gap in efficacy varies with a novel measure of the anti-elite salience in the party system. The causal impact of anti-elite rhetoric is established though a representative survey experiment. Finally, we investigate how these mechanisms affect both electoral and other forms of political participation.
INTRODUCTION

There is a growing interest among political scientists in the unequal participation and representation of poor voters. By now, there is solid evidence for two patterns that probably reinforce each other (Piven and Cloward 1988): relatively low turnout among poor voters and stronger responsiveness of political elites to the preferences of better-off citizens (Erikson 2015; Gilens and Page 2014; Rosset et al. 2013).

These patterns have arguably been facilitated by and contributed to growing income inequality. If the (poorly represented) poor withdraw from politics, they diminish incentives to represent their interests in redistribution and anti-poverty policies (Avery 2015; Mahler 2008; Pontusson and Rueda 2010). The resulting social inequality could, in turn, alienate the poor even further (Iversen and Soskice 2015; Jensen and Jespersen 2017; Solt 2008). Although the causal relationship is complex, there should be little doubt by now that many Western democracies have experienced such a twin process of growing social inequality and political disaffection of (lower-class) citizens with political elites (Armingeon and Schädel 2015; Kuhn et al. 2016; Schäfer 2013).

Against this background, our goal is to contribute to the rather limited knowledge about factors that are conducive to a better integration of poor citizens into politics. We do so by addressing what we see as two important gaps in the existing comparative literature on the political integration of the poor. First, this literature has paid limited attention to the factors that explain poor citizens’ lower involvement in the first place (Iversen and Soskice 2015). In particular, it has ignored contributions from psychology and behavioral economics on how cognitively and emotionally absorbing poverty is (Haushofer and Fehr 2014; Mani et al. 2013). Based on this literature, we argue that one (albeit certainly not the only) mechanism underlying the poor’s withdrawal from politics is that social problems impede the development of subjective political competence (or internal political efficacy).

Second, while there is ample evidence that income gaps in political participation are magnified by social inequality, the literature has paid limited attention to how party system characteristics moderate the political inclusion of the poor (a recent exception is Anderson and Beramendi 2012). Based on research about the effects of polarization on political behavior (Dalton 2008; Evans and Tilley 2012; Smidt 2017), our broad intuition is, as we elaborate below, that a diverse party landscape might be beneficial for poor voters’ political involvement. Given the recent growth of populist anti-elitist parties that draw support disproportionately from lower classes
(Arzheimer 2009; Golder 2016; March and Rommerskirchen 2015), we are particularly interested in whether those parties’ radical opposition to the political establishment might help to strengthen poor voters’ sense of political efficacy. The bulk of previous research in this literature focuses on the characteristics of populist parties and their supporters (Akkermann et al. 2014; Golder 2016), while “not much is known about the way in which populist messages affect citizens’ attitudes” (Rooduijn et al. 2016: 34; see also Mudde 2013). Probably even less is known about how these messages affect (gaps in) citizens’ political engagement (Immerzeel and Pickup 2015). Hence, although we primarily address the literature on poor voters, our findings are relevant for populism research as well.

Our theoretical argument therefore combines literatures on the psychology of poverty, polarization, and anti-elite populism and can be summarized as follows: the experience of poverty reduces citizens’ cognitive, emotional, and social resources, which in turn undermines their ability and motivation to acquire political information and to develop internal political efficacy. This mechanism is weaker in political systems characterized by intense anti-elite discourses, because such discourses clarify and simplify party differences, provide additional motivation to engage in politics, and facilitate mobilizing emotions. Although we are agnostic as to whether populists generally represent the poor in a ‘better’ way, we find it plausible that their anti-elite rhetoric contributes to a stimulating political environment that strengthens their sense of agency.

We analyze the link between poverty, political efficacy and anti-elite rhetoric in two related studies that combine correlational and causal inference. First, we show with data from the European Social Survey (ESS) that the poor on average have lower political efficacy. This efficacy gap across income groups varies with a novel measure of the salience of anti-elite politics derived from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Polk et al. 2017). Second, we establish causality in a survey experiment in Germany (a country that only recently experienced intense anti-elite mobilization). In line with our theory, it shows that priming anti-elite rhetoric leads to a significant increase in internal efficacy, but only among low-income respondents. Finally, we return to the observational data from the ESS to analyze whether our findings for efficacy extend to political participation. The analysis reveals that this is the case for non-electoral forms of participation, but not for voting.
POVERTY AND POLITICAL EFFICACY

For two non-exclusive reasons, poor citizens on average show lower political engagement than other income groups. First, they are disenchanted because of insufficient substantive and descriptive representation. As described above, there might be a vicious cycle of disengagement and neglect by elites. This would explain why income gaps in participation are positively correlated to income inequality (Solt 2008). In this explanation, the mechanism linking poverty and political (non) participation is depressed external political efficacy.

Second, and less frequently reflected in comparative research, economic disadvantage also compromises internal efficacy, because it undermines the resources needed to engage with politics (Iversen and Soskice 2015). Internal efficacy is defined as confidence in one’s ability to understand and participate in politics. It is a strong predictor of different forms of participation and therefore an important aspect of political involvement (see Verba et al. 1995 and work cited in Beaumont 2011). Mechanisms through which economic problems impair internal efficacy and its precedents have been discussed for the special case of the unemployed (Jahoda et al. 1972; Marx and Nguyen 2016; Rosenstone 1982). Here we would like elaborate how poverty more generally relates to internal efficacy.

One scarce resource for the poor is time, because they often need to develop sophisticated strategies to cope with material hardship. Hence, the opportunity costs of acquiring political information should grow with exposure to social problems. As Hassell and Settle (forthcoming: 4) put it “every minute spent engaging in politics is time not spent addressing other financial or personal problems.” Besides a shortage of time to acquire political information, social problems also trigger cognitive and emotional processes that are likely to impede the processing and retrieval of information. Recent research shows how poverty and efforts to cope with it contribute to depleting mental resources (Haushofer and Fehr 2014, Mani et al. 2013; Vohs 2013). The underlying mechanisms are stress, a mentally exhausting exercise of self-regulation, and distraction through ruminating thoughts about material problems. These cognitive processes make it plausible that the poor have difficulties to translate (the already lower) exposure to political information into political knowledge, competence, and efficacy.

Besides cognitive impairment, the poor typically also have to deal with intense negative emotions. Their material situation deprives them, in a fundamental way, of control over their lives. The resulting emotions of anxiety and helplessness translate into a depressed sense of agency (Fryer 1997; Gallo and Mathews 2003). In addition, the stigmatization of poverty can
undermine feelings of self-worth (Hall et al. 2013). In a nutshell, poverty can be highly stressful, distracting, frustrating, shameful, and disheartening. These psychological states are likely to spill over into a depressed sense of general efficacy as well as *internal* political efficacy (Marx and Nguyen 2016; Beaumont, 2011; Caprara et al. 2009). Without denying the relevance of insufficient representation, we focus on this understudied aspect and hence use internal political efficacy as our dependent variable.

**Hypothesis 1**: Holding everything else constant, the poor have lower internal efficacy than middle and high income groups.

Although poverty should depress political involvement everywhere, its precise effect should depend on the political context (Piven and Cloward 1988). Recent comparative studies on income gaps in political involvement tend to focus on socio-economic country variation, such as income inequality or welfare state generosity (Cicatiello et al. 2015; Jensen and Jespersen 2017; Schäfer 2013; Solt 2008). We argue that party system characteristics should also moderate the link between poverty and engagement (see also Anderson and Beramendi 2012). In particular, we are interested in the role of (frequently populist) anti-elite parties\(^1\) at the left or right fringes of the political spectrum (Judis 2016; Polk et al. 2017; Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017).

**CAN ANTI-ELITE RHETORIC DECREASE INCOME GAPS IN EFFICACY?**

How could anti-elite discourses contribute to restoring the depressed sense of internal political efficacy among the poor? We depart from the general notion that some elite dissent is important for democracies (Schattschneider 1960). In the words of Chantal Mouffe (2013: 204), a “vibrant clash of democratic political positions” provides a “terrain in which passions can be mobilized around democratic objectives”. By contrast, “[t]oo much emphasis on consensus and the refusal of confrontation lead to apathy and disaffection with political participation.” Many observers

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\(^1\) Populism combines anti-elitism with anti-pluralist claims to represent the will of a unified people (Mudde 2004). As will become clear below, we are interested in the anti-elite aspect rather than in anti-pluralism. For this reason, we prefer to use the terms anti-elite party/rhetoric/discourses and only occasionally refer to populism to connect to related research.
agree that such a ‘vibrant clash’ has largely disappeared from European party systems. This is reflected most famously by the cartelization argument of Katz and Mair (1995; 2009), but also by findings that many former working-class parties have converged to neoliberal policies (Mudge 2011; Schumacher 2012). And indeed, many contributions on the effects of polarization (to which we return below) have shown that ideological differences between parties generally facilitate citizens’ participation (e.g. Dalton 2008; 2010). In the following sections, we argue that a diverse and contested party landscape is particularly important for poor voters.

However, we are primarily interested here in a particular type of political contestation that goes beyond ideological distance: The fundamental rejection of the political mainstream as an unresponsive elite, as it is often formulated by populist parties (Mudde 2004; 2013). Such discourses, which pit “ordinary people” against the selfish and morally corrupted elite in a stylized friend-foe dichotomy, have recently gained salience in most Western democracies (Judis 2016; Müller 2016). A well-known contemporary example is Donald Trump’s victorious “drain the swamp” campaign. European examples include parties such as Alternative für Deutschland, Front National, Movimento 5 Stelle, Podemos, or UKIP. While social problems are sometimes discussed as motivations to support such parties (Arzheimer 2009; Golder 2016), we are interested in how their discourses influence political engagement among the poor (even if they do not vote for them).

We argue that the emergence or growth of anti-elite mobilization could increase the relative internal efficacy of the poor. Concretely, we would expect that anti-elite parties 1) make decisions (as well as expressing opinions) easier because they radically simplify political questions; 2) emphasize stark differences between parties and thereby illustrate the relevance of party choice; 3) translate diffuse frustrations about the political system into concrete arguments and demands and thereby restore a sense of political agency; 4) stimulate emotions of anger and indignation which typically have a mobilizing effect; and 5) dramatize politics with their confrontational style, which could make it more exciting and entertaining for relatively disinterested citizens.²

² Another, but less visible, possibility is that anti-elite parties influence perceptions of the political system by incentivizing the centre left’s responsiveness to the poor (Anderson and Beramendi 2012).
The first two mechanisms link back to the polarization literature. Although they usually do not differentiate by income, many studies suggest that polarization makes it is easier for citizens to connect their preferences to parties (Dalton 2010; Jansen et al. 2013; Lachat 2008; Lupu 2015) and to participate in politics (Dalton 2008; Moral forthcoming; Steiner and Martin 2012; Wilford forthcoming; for a critical view see Rogowski 2014). Moreover, it is often argued that groups with on average lower political sophistication and attention (such as the poor) benefit disproportionately from a diverse and stimulating party system (Dalton 2010; Smidt 2017).3 Evans and Tilley (2012) show, for instance, that the convergence of British parties has coincided with a decline of support for any party that is considerably stronger among low-income voters. Because anti-elite parties tend to emphasize (or even exaggerate) ideological distance to other parties, they might simply facilitate the poor’s political engagement through particularly intense polarization so that the poor would have to invest less time and cognitive resources to learn about where parties stand (Smidt 2017). Cognitive effort should be further reduced, because anti-elite parties often radically simplify political questions, “dichotomizing them into black and white and calling for yes or no answers” (Golder 2016: 479). Additionally, the easy solutions typically advocated (Moffitt 2015) convey the message that politics is not all that complicated. Finally, the portrayal of stark ideological differences might foster an impression that party choice actually matters (Immerzeel and Pickup 2015). This could provide a motivation to engage with politics despite distraction through material worries. A party system with strong anti-elite discourses therefore might facilitate subjective competence among the poor to understand politics.

Our third mechanism rests on the assumption that many poor people experience at least a diffuse frustration about politics. This follows from the literature on lacking representation and responsiveness cited above. Although this should primarily lead to low external efficacy, it could also depress internal efficacy. If the disappointed poor feel they cannot influence politics anyway, they probably stop bothering and withdraw from it. This is a plausible reaction, because - for the reasons described above - they tend to lack the resources to voice criticism and to protest against unresponsive elites. In such a situation, anti-elite parties can help to restore a sense of individual agency. Their general attack on elites provides a rhetoric to

3 It has to be added, however, that the studies cited above produce inconsistent results in this regard.
translate more or less diffuse grievances into concrete criticism (Spruyt et al. 2016). This should make it easier for the poor to express what they dislike about politics. That this dislike is shared by a visible organization with many supporters should facilitate the feeling that it rests on competent and legitimate political attitudes.

This argument is related to our fourth mechanism on the emotional level. Anti-elite rhetoric typically is highly emotional. It often combines anxiety-inducing threats (e.g. the socio-economic consequences of immigration) with frames that blame irresponsible elites and thereby incite anger (Hameleers et al. forthcoming; Moffitt 2015; Mudde 2004). Anger is not only a useful coping mechanism for anxious voters, it also is a distinctly mobilizing emotion that is associated with increased certainty, optimism, and risk-taking (Lerner and Keltner 2001). Importantly, it is linked with greater political news consumption and participation (Valentino et al. 2009; 2011). In other words, voters that are responsive to anti-elite parties’ emotionalized blame attribution are likely to feel more competent and internally efficacious as a consequence. Populists’ externalization of blame could be particularly effective for lower classes that suffer from (internalized) stigmatization and a tendency towards self-deprecation (Anduiza et al. 2016; Spruyt et al. 2016).

Our fifth and final mechanism refers to the performative dimension of anti-elite politics - or its ‘entertainment value’. As illustrated best by Donald Trump’s provocative tweeting, the style of anti-elite parties is unconventional, confrontational, and often quite spectacular (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). The use of simple, colloquial language by charismatic leaders is often combined with a calculated violation of conventions and political correctness (Mudde 2004). Although, or even because, many voters may dislike this coarse style, it should attract attention - much more than quibble about policy details and technocratic language that characterize ‘normal’ politics. This entertainment effect of anti-elite rhetoric could be magnified by media reporting, which is biased in favor of the spectacular (Hameleers et al. forthcoming; Mudde 2004; Rooduijn 2014). Again, this additional motivation through excitement should disproportionately benefit previously disengaged groups such as the poor.

Based on these mechanisms, we expect that anti-elite rhetoric boosts internal efficacy of the poor. Two clarifications are in order. First, while mechanisms three and four apply to supporters, the other three are also relevant for non-supporters. Polarization, simplification, and excitement should even benefit voters who emphatically dislike anti-elite parties. We therefore think it is appropriate to study the salience of anti-elite rhetoric on the level of party systems.
Hypothesis 2: The gap in internal efficacy between the poor and other income groups is smaller in party systems characterized by pronounced anti-elite rhetoric.

The second clarification concerns citizens with higher incomes. Our main argument underlying Hypothesis 2 is about poor citizens, because we expect mobilization through anti-elite rhetoric to be stronger in this relatively inattentive income group. But it could also be that anti-elite rhetoric has the opposite effect on better-off citizens (which would contribute to reducing income inequality in internal efficacy). Middle and high incomes probably feel more comfortable with a centrist political consensus as well as with the policy output and socio-economic outcomes it produces. Anti-elite mobilization then might appear as a challenge of their privilege and as a disruptive attack on their taken-for-granted understanding of politics. This should be the case in particular for voters who identify with the attacked elite (which often also includes cultural, financial, or academic elites). Overall, we can expect that many better-off citizens feel insecure about what is the best political approach in a party landscape fundamentally changed by anti-elite parties. Without being able to theorize this aspect in detail here, we find it plausible that anti-elite rhetoric could also reduce the income-efficacy gap by depressing the internal efficacy of higher income groups.

INCOME, EFFICACY, AND ANTI-ELITE SALIENCE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Data and methodology

We have argued that poor voters suffer from reduced internal efficacy and that anti-elite rhetoric may offset this effect. Our first study explores this relationship cross-nationally. This requires individual level data for income and internal efficacy as well as a measure for anti-elite discourses in the respective party systems. For the individual level we use the European Social Service (ESS). The second aspect is more difficult to operationalize, because there is no agreed-upon indicator for anti-elitism in party systems that would allow large cross-national comparisons (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017). Fortunately, the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) has recently made an effort to fill this gap by including a variable on the salience of anti-elite rhetoric on the party level (see Polk et al. 2017 for details and validation of the measure). This indicator is only available for 2014, which restricts us to the most recent ESS wave collected in the same year. Both surveys jointly cover 17 countries (Figure 1) and 25792 individuals. A full discussion of data sources and summary statistics can be found in the appendix.
Our dependent variable is respondents’ internal efficacy. It is constructed as an additive index based on three items capturing respondents’ confidence in their ability to understand and participate in politics (Crombach α= 0.84, see appendix for question wording and construction). The index ranges between 0 and 10, where higher values indicate a greater sense of internal efficacy. The explanatory variable is respondents’ household after-tax income. The ESS places all respondents into country-specific income deciles, which we recoded into low (deciles 1-3), middle (4-7), and high income (8-10). This is a rather broad definition of poverty, but our results are robust to alternative specifications such as focusing on the difference between lowest decile and median income or if we treat income as a linear variable (see Appendix Tables 7 and 8).

To capture the intensity of anti-elite discourses in the political system, we rely on the CHES, which asks national experts to rate the “salience of anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric” for each party. Salience scores range from 0 (low) to 10 (high). This measure is extremely useful for us, because it allows us to go beyond a dichotomous party family approach (which would produce little variation in contemporary Europe) and to operationalize anti-elite rhetoric as a continuous phenomenon. However, the translation of these party scores into party system characteristics requires an important analytical choice. On the one hand, we could use the maximum value among parties that gained a seat in the national parliament. This indicator captures the intensity of anti-elite rhetoric. However, by ignoring electoral performance, it does not consider the relative success of anti-elite parties. On the other hand, we could use the vote share of anti-elite parties (which we define as being above 75th percentile in anti-elite salience). This indicator does take into-account relative success, but cannot account for variations in intensity and is sensitive to the selection of the cut-off point. Which indicator is more appropriate cannot be decided a priori, as this would require a theory about whether electoral relevance or intensity of anti-elite discourses matter more, an aspect we are agnostic about. Fortunately, both indicators are correlated and produce virtually the same results (See Figure 1 and 2 as well as Appendix Table 10). For the main analysis, we rely on vote share of anti-elite parties.

\[\text{vote share of anti-elite parties}\]

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4 This cutoff excludes the Dansk Folkeparti (DF), which is just below the value but usually considered an anti-elite party. However, using a lower cut-off point that includes DF does not change our results (see Appendix Table 9).
Ideally, we would complement our party-system indicators with information on how salient anti-elite sentiments are in broader public discourses (e.g. in the media, Rooduijn 2014), but to our knowledge there is no readily available comparative indicator for this aspect.

Figure 1: Maximum anti-elite score in parliament and vote share of anti-elite parties (2014)


All individual-level control variables are taken directly from the ESS. We prefer a parsimonious model and therefore include only the main socio-economic controls that have been found to matter for internal efficacy: respondents’ main activity in the last seven days, gender, and years of education. Other political orientations and membership in political organizations obviously do influence efficacy as well (Marx and Nguyen 2016). But based on our theory these factors should mediate rather than confound the effect of low income. That said, our results remain
unchanged if we also control for ideology, party affiliation, religiosity, and trade union membership (Appendix Table 6).

Given our nested data structure, we use a multi-level random intercept model. With only 17 countries, we are restricted regarding the number of macro control variables. We control for post-communist countries with their less mature democracies and different party-system dynamics (which are already illustrated by Figure 1). We also control for the effective number of political parties, because the availability of alternatives might be a separate mechanism facilitating or complicating party choice (Wilford forthcoming). The number of parties should also pick up differences in electoral systems. Finally, we include income inequality within the country (Gini coefficient). This variable captures efforts of the welfare state to support the poor, which could be beneficial for their political involvement (Iversen and Soskice 2015; Marx and Nguyen 2016). Inequality should also affect the political salience of income differences.

Results

Table 1 reports the results of three hierarchical random-intercept models. To facilitate comparisons between coefficients, we mean-center all continuous explanatory variables and divided them by two standard deviations. The coefficient estimates for continuous variables now represent a movement of one standard deviation, and can be compared directly to the coefficients of binary and factor variables (Gelman, 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1: Individual Level</th>
<th>2: Country Characteristics</th>
<th>3: Cross-Level Interactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household Income - Ref: Medium</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>-0.51***</td>
<td>-0.51***</td>
<td>-0.51***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>0.54***</td>
<td>0.54***</td>
<td>0.54***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-Level Interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Elite Vote Share</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.34)</td>
<td>(0.34)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Elite Vote Share x Low Income</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.13*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Elite Vote Share x High Income</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.15*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Activity - Ref: Paid Employment</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.23***</td>
<td>0.23***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first model controls for individual characteristics, the second model adds country level controls, while the third model also includes cross-level interactions. The findings reported in Table 1 support our hypotheses. Income has a consistent and statistically significant effect on internal efficacy. Compared to medium income respondents, low-income respondents exhibit lower internal efficacy, while high-income respondents have, on average, a higher level of
internal efficacy. Moving from the middle to the lower end of the income distribution is associated with reductions in internal efficacy similar to the difference between men and women or moving from full-time employment to being sick and disabled. Adding country variables improves the model fit considerably.\(^5\) A legacy of communism is associated with a sizable reduction in internal efficacy. However, neither inequality, anti-elite salience, nor the number of parties appear to have a significant direct effect on efficacy.

Figure 2: Marginal Effect of Low Income given Anti-Elite Salience / Polarization

More importantly, however, both Table 1 and Figure 2 support Hypothesis 2: anti-elite salience does reduce the effect of low income on efficacy. All other things being equal, the effect of moving from medium to poor income in Austria (where the anti-elite FPO and Team Stronach

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\(^5\) The interclass-correlation of the empty model is 0.125, so differences in country characteristics explain about 12% of differences in internal efficacy. Including country characteristics reduces the variance at level 2 by roughly 50%. The empty model specification is reported in Appendix Table 4
had a combined vote share of 26.2% is approximately 35% less severe than in Germany (where the AfD and the NPD combined captured less than 5% of the vote share). However, while Figure 2 shows that anti-elite salience is associated with a considerable reduction of the income gap in efficacy, the gap is not closed entirely.

As we demonstrate in more detail in the Appendix (Appendix Tables 11 and 12), the results do not seem to depend on our operationalization of anti-elite salience. Panel B of Figure 2 shows that results do not change if we instead use the maximum anti-elite score in parliament. Because our argument partly rests on a more polarized party landscape, we also replicate the analysis with an interaction of income and two polarization indicators: an updated version of Dalton’s (2008) measure of the perceived left-right party system polarization and a measure of party platform polarization (Finseraas and Vernby 2011). Both show a similar moderation pattern and confirm our expectation that income gaps in efficacy become smaller in more polarized party systems (Panel C and D in Figure 2).

In short, there is evidence that party-system differences moderate the effect of income on internal efficacy. While these patterns are suggestive, it is difficult to base firm conclusions on them at this stage. Both, income and anti-elite salience are likely correlated with potentially relevant factors we cannot account for in our model. Moreover, a purely cross-sectional approach cannot establish temporality, making causal inference difficult. Iversen and Soskice (2015) argue, for instance, in contrast to our theory, that polarization is the consequence of more politically knowledgeable lower-class voters. In the two following studies, we therefore provide additional evidence that helps us to isolate the causal effect of exposure to anti-elite rhetoric on internal efficacy.

PRIMING ANTI-ELITE RHETORIC IN A SURVEY EXPERIMENT

We have argued that anti-elite rhetoric can increase internal efficacy of lower income voters. While the results of the previous study support this hypothesis, the observational nature of the data does not allow for a more causal interpretation. To address this shortcoming, we designed an experiment embedded in a representative survey of the German population. Germany is a suitable case, because it recently experienced an intense growth of anti-elite mobilization. As shown in Figure 1, it had one of the lowest anti-elite score in our 2014 sample. Die Linke was the most radical party in parliament with a very moderate anti-elite salience score 5.4, while the more extreme anti-elite parties only gained 5.4% of the vote share. However, this changed dramatically in recent years because of the emergence of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a
new radical right wing party. The AfD was founded in 2013 as a protest party against bail-outs of Eurozone countries and barely missed the five-percent threshold to enter parliament in the 2013 national election. Although the turn to a radical anti-immigration platform occurred later (after a party split), the 2014 CHES already assigns an anti-elite score of 7.8 to the AfD. Since 2015, it polls comfortably above the electoral threshold and will most likely enter parliament in the 2017 elections. The recency of intense anti-elite mobilization and the fact that AfD is not yet represented in parliament is advantageous for our analysis. Because voters have not yet grown accustomed to (or weary of) anti-elite frames, we have a chance to experimentally prime a real-world discourse that has not yet unfolded its full effect on the baseline efficacy of poor voters (as would probably be the case in party systems with more established anti-elite parties).

Data and methodology

Around 1200 computer-assisted web interviews of the target group between 18 and 65 years were conducted by YouGov in February 2017. The goal of the experiment was to assess the causal influence of anti-elite rhetoric on internal political efficacy. To this end, we conducted a simple priming experiment that randomly exposed respondents to anti-elite statements. All participants received a standard question measuring internal efficacy (“How confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics?” with answer options ranging from 0 “Not at all confident” to 10 “Completely confident”). The treatment group was asked before to respond to the following three items that were designed to resemble typical anti-elite rhetoric:

1) “Political parties often spread lies to get elected”

2) “Politicians are more interested in their careers than in the good of the country”

3) “Politicians in Berlin have abandoned ordinary people”

While the statements certainly formulate blunt criticisms, they are not more extreme than the typical accusations of anti-elite parties. We deliberately refrain from pointing to criminal offenses, such as corruption, and believe that the statements could be easily encountered in a German pub or other places where politics are discussed. To avoid conflation of anti-elite sentiments with priming ideology, we excluded messages that explicitly focus on concrete issues such as immigration. As such, the treatment is not designed to provide any new information, but merely to prime anti-elite criticism and thereby to activate it as a salient interpretative frame for thinking about politics. According to our theory, low-income
participants should feel more internally efficacious if they apply this interpretative frame to politics.

The case numbers do not allow a fine-grained analysis of income differences. We use a rough income measure and divide respondents into two groups below and above a threshold of 2500 Euros as net monthly household income. After list-wise deletion of missing values, we have 487 respondents below the threshold (245 treated) and 411 above (208 treated). Our analysis consists of comparing means and confidence intervals of the four groups that result from our design (Figure 3).

Results

The patterns in the control group confirm what we observed in the previous study based on ESS data. Respondents in the bottom half of the income distribution express on average considerably lower internal efficacy (the mean is 5.2 compared to 6.3 in the upper half). This difference virtually disappears, however, once respondents are exposed to an anti-elite frame. This happens because the treatment is, as expected, associated with significantly higher internal efficacy in the bottom half (in which the difference between control and treated group is 0.72,
p=.003). Given that internal efficacy is often thought of as being rooted in rather stable characteristics, this is not a small effect. In a more narrowly defined low-income group below 1500 EUR (not shown) the treatment effect is 0.78 with p=.015. At the same time, the anti-elite prime causes the opposite effect among respondents with higher income (-0.35). However, this effect is not statistically significant (p=.128). Hence, the results are exactly what we would expect based on our theory.

DOES ANTI-ELITE SALIENCE REDUCE INEQUALITY IN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION?

Our observational and experimental data suggest that anti-elite parties can strengthen the internal political efficacy of poorer voters. But we cannot necessarily assume that this directly translates into higher participation. Attitudes might be more responsive than actual behaviors. And even if beneficial for internal efficacy, anti-elite parties could weaken other prerequisites for political participation (Immerzeel and Pickup 2015; Rooduijn et al. 2016). We therefore briefly address the issue of political participation of the poor, without claiming to give full justice to this important point.

To this end, we simply reproduce the ESS analysis presented above with two new dependent variables: self-reported participation in the last national election and an index of alternative, non-electoral forms of participation. The latter captures additively whether or not respondents engaged in the following activities in the last 12 month: worn a campaign badge, signed a petition, contacted a political official, worked in a political party or action group, or participated in a public demonstration. The indicator increases by one for each activity, so that it ranges from zero to five.
Figure 4: Marginal Effect of Low Income given vote share of anti-elite parties

Table 2: Income, Anti-Elite Salience and Political Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Voting</th>
<th>Other Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Household Income - Ref: Medium</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>-0.26***</td>
<td>-0.11***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>0.28***</td>
<td>0.15***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cross-Level Interactions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Elite Vote Share</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Elite Vote Share x</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.10***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Elite Vote Share x</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Income</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Additional Controls Omitted*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Voting</th>
<th>Other Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>24080.60</td>
<td>73083.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIC</td>
<td>24243.28</td>
<td>73255.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log Likelihood</td>
<td>-12020.30</td>
<td>-36520.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Num. Individuals</td>
<td>25181</td>
<td>26766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Num. Countries</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Var: Country (Intercept)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Var: Residual</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05
Table 2 and Figure 4 summarize the relationship between poverty, anti-elite salience, and political participation. Again, all continuous independent variables have been standardized (full models can be found in the appendix). As expected, poor voters are less likely to participate in elections or in other ways. However, the moderating role of anti-elite salience is ambiguous. With regards to voting, we do not find a statistically significant moderation effect. As Panel A in Figure 4 shows, poor citizens’ lower probability to vote remains constant across party systems. Poorer citizens do, however, benefit from the presence of anti-elite parties when it comes to other forms of political participation. As Panel B shows, poor respondents do no longer show significantly reduced participation if anti-elite parties reach about 25 per cent of the vote in a country.

How can we make sense of these inconsistent findings? First, we cannot rule out that the non-finding for voting results from systematic measurement error. Self-reported voting is usually inflated by social-desirability bias (Selb and Munzert 2013), a problem that might be exacerbated by the retrospective ESS question and the varying time gap between survey and last election. Indeed, a comparison with actual turnout (in the appendix) reveals strong over-reporting of voting in the ESS, which could artificially dampen the income gradient (Erikson 2015). Because unconventional forms of participation are less of a ‘civic duty’ and because the question refers to the past 12 months, social desirability and recall bias might be less severe.

But there also is a possible substantive interpretation of the non-result for voting. It is rather plausible that anti-elite salience might undermine other aspects of political involvement than internal efficacy, namely external political efficacy and political trust (Rooduijn et al. 2016). Anti-elite parties might draw support from previous non-voters and thereby increase participation in elections. However, if they contribute to eroding external efficacy among voters who, for one reason or another, are not inclined to support a radical party, this could also reduce electoral participation. Our argument implies that some voters gain relative internal efficacy because of simplified and dramatized competition between elites and populist challengers. It is not difficult to imagine, however, that some of these voters are disgusted and alienated from this competition (Rogowski 2014). Particularly if the anti-elite party is not an option (because of fundamental disagreement about values, political socialization, social desirability, conflict aversion, or disappointment with the party’s performance), intense anti-elite discourses might leave no trustworthy political actor in the electoral arena to turn to. From this perspective, there is no theoretical reason why internal and external efficacy as well as electoral and
unconventional participation would have to react in the same way to anti-elite rhetoric. Unbundling these processes is a fascinating and important task for future research.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have developed and tested a novel argument according to which internal efficacy is an important component of the lower political engagement of poor citizens. Moreover, we have argued that anti-elite rhetoric counteracts the negative effect of poverty on internal efficacy. We have shown that the salience of anti-elite rhetoric on the party-system level robustly correlates with the size of the efficacy gap between poor and non-poor voters. This relationship is not simply correlational. Using a representative survey experiment, we demonstrate that random exposure to anti-elite statements significantly increases internal efficacy of lower-income respondents. While both approaches have limitations, their joint evidence lends strong support to two conclusions. Poverty tends to reduce internal political efficacy: and anti-elite rhetoric tends to reduce the gap between the poor and the rich.

What are the broader implications of this observation? Despite our findings for internal efficacy, we are hesitant to endorse the proliferation of anti-elite parties as a means for reducing political inequality. As we have shown, it is not clear whether higher efficacy does actually lower the income gradient in voting, even if this seems to be the case for other forms of participation. We could only deal with this important aspect in passing and hope that future research will return to it with more suitable data.

If we assume for a moment that the lower efficacy gap we observed does translate into more equal participation in elections, what would be the political implications? Could anti-elite parties possibly contribute to breaking the vicious cycle of unequal participation and unequal representation? Can anti-elite parties contribute to policy change that reflects the interest of the poor (or, more accurately, what we interpret as their interests)? This would be possible through two mechanisms that could be studied empirically: directly, through mobilizing poor voters who increase the coalition in favor of redistribution and welfare state generosity. And indirectly, by forcing center-left parties to compete for lower-income voters and thereby incentivizing a better representation of this group.

But there are also reasons to be skeptical. Policy advances for the poor are particularly questionable in the case of radical right-wing parties, whose ideology dictates excluding some of the most vulnerable groups in society. While many right-wing parties project a pro-welfare
image, they often advocate cuts in programs with a reputation of benefiting immigrants (e.g. social assistance, child benefits). Such ‘welfare chauvinism’ can actually harm poor natives as well. Hence, anti-elite salience is but one feature of a party and we cannot assess its broader impact without looking at the entire profile. Future research should therefore contextualize our findings by including the specific ideology of anti-elite parties as well as the programmatic response of the mainstream.
REFERENCES


