The Effect of Raising Income Expectations on Tax Preferences

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Abstract

Do voters internalize their future income position into their current redistributive preferences? To test this proposition, I field a personalized survey experiment on university students (N = 1,020) who are given credible information on their future earnings. I find that two-thirds of the respondents underestimate their future income position relative to the provided information and that these respondents then prefer less taxation on their plausible future income group when informed. Concretely, treated respondents prefer 2,5 pp. lower taxes on the rich. Female and left-wing respondents hold the lowest expectations, but likewise update taxation preferences when treated. Assessing the mechanism, I argue that voters on average are well informed about what they will earn in absolute terms, but underestimate in relative terms where they will be placed in relative terms.

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Most recent version. Link to appendix

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For PE-attendees: I intend to submit this as a research note. I do not intend to extend the length of this brief draft. I do intend to increase the quality. Any suggestions for doing so are welcome on marchvidkjaer@fas.harvard.edu.

1 Introduction

The rise of the "knowledge economy" and skill-biased technological change creates clearer divisions between those who are getting ahead and those who feel left behind (Ansell, Hjorth, Nyrup, and Larsen 2021). The existing literature has largely focused on the political consequences of experiencing or expecting a decline in social status, causing voters to turn to anti-establishment parties (Kurer and Van Staalduinen 2022; Engler and Weisstanner 2021; Gidron and Hall 2017; Ansell, Hjorth, Nyrup, and Larsen 2021; Burgoon, Noort, Rooduijn, and Underhill 2019). Less attention has been given to those voters who should expect to get ahead, and to what extent the prospect of upward mobility changes their political attitudes and support for the welfare state (Häusermann, Kurer, and Zollinger 2023; Rueda and Stegmueller 2019).

In this study, I show that voters who should expect to get ahead generally underestimate their future income position. When they receive persuasive information that raises their expectations, they then update their preferences for how much high-income earners ought to be taxed. I study the case of Danish university students, as they arguably have similar present incomes, which are concentrated towards the bottom of the income distribution[1]. However, students vary by their expected income, where some students should expect a steep rise to the top of the income distribution. To make a comparison, art student graduates, *cand.art.perit*, earn 163.900 DKK (23K USD) after 10 years on the labor market, which would rank them among the 20% poorest in the income distribution. On the other hand, graduates in actuarial mathematics, *cand.act*, earn on average 916.000 DKK (130K USD) after 10 years on the labor market, which would rank them among the 10% richest in the income distribution (Sources: AE, CEPOS). Hence, expected income position should serve as a better source of explaining redistributive preferences generally, and taxation preference specifically, than present income.

Although the study of expected income position is of great importance to generally understanding redistributive preferences, little experimental work exists (Bernasconi and Neunhoeffer 2023). Cox

[1] In Denmark, all students in higher education receive a stipend of 850$, education is free, and it is possible to have some additional earnings from part-time jobs.

(2024) is a notable exemption, which employs a similar design with Chile as a case. Interestingly, Cox (2024) reaches the opposite conclusions than in this experiment. Cox (2024) only finds an effect of respondents being disappointed in their expected income and then demanding *more* redistribution, while I find raise the income expectations of the respondents and find respondents demanding *less* taxation. I attribute this difference to two factors. For one, there is a slight difference in design, as Cox (2024) only provides respondents with absolute information, whereas I provide respondents with absolute and relative information. This difference matters; I find that respondents seem to be relatively well-informed of the absolute amount of earnings they will earn in the future, but underrate their relative position in the income distribution. This affirms prior work on redistributive preferences, which emphasizes how information on relative placement in social groups affects redistributive preferences (Hvidberg, Kreiner, and Stantcheva 2023). The second factor for why the results differ may be due to the general welfare state context, where I study respondents in a mature universal welfare state, whereas the Chilean case is in a developing phase.

These findings contribute to the general literature on material self-interest and redistributive preferences. First, many studies do not find that respondents react to information in line with their supposed material interests (For a review, see Culpepper, Shandler, Jung, and Lee 2024: 3). And when respondents react to information, it is usually when they are treated with negative information (Weber 2023; Cox 2024). My experimental findings show that respondents update their redistributive preferences when they receive information which raises their expectations. This highlights that rising inequality may not only contribute to changing preferences in those voters who fear decline but also for those voters who expect to move further upward in society.

The main limitation of this study is the representativeness of the sample, which was self-collected via social media. The sample is fairly representative of the Danish student population in terms of gender and political placement, but I have a heavy over-representation of political science students. While an unrepresentative sample is less of a concern for the main experimental results, it does lower the external validity (Coppock 2019).

2 Expectations and Tax Preferences

What decides tax preferences? A sizable literature in political economy builds on the canonical argument presented by Meltzer and Richard (1981), which formalized the relation between voters' income and preferred level of the size of government. The Meltzer and Richard (1981) model focuses on the relation between the median voter and the mean income and states that the median voter will vote to increase the size of government as long as they stand to benefit from more redistribution. More generally, the Meltzer and Richard (1981) model has been used as a theoretical heuristic by scholars, to state that rational voters form their attitudes to redistribution from their position in the income distribution (e.g. Rueda and Stegmueller 2019; Cavaillé 2023).

This approach assumes that voters 1) vote out of their current income position and 2) know their position in the income distribution. The latter point is often used as a point of departure for a large empirical literature on redistributive preferences, where voters are seemingly poorly informed of their position in the income distribution (Engelhardt and Wagener 2014; Kuziemko, Norton, Saez, and Stantcheva 2015; Cansunar 2021; Hvidberg, Kreiner, and Stantcheva 2023, but see Weisstanner and Armingeon (2022) for a criticism). Here, the argument broadly is that the voters misinterpret their position in the income distribution and therefore hold misinformed preferences for redistribution. The rich do not know how high they are in the income distribution, whereas the poor do not know how far down they are. When voters receive information on their true income position, they then update their beliefs of where they are in the income distribution, and hence their tax preferences.

Further, a theoretical extension to the Meltzer and Richard (1981) has been to focus on what income position voters expect to attain (Benabou and Ok 2001; Piketty 1995). From this view, the voter incorporates their expected income into their current tax preferences. Piketty (1995) and Benabou and Ok (2001) argue that patterns of intergenerational mobility are an important determinant of expectations. Rueda and Stegmueller (2019) propose a more general model, where they argue that the voter uses income information of labor market peers to form expectations of what they themselves will earn.

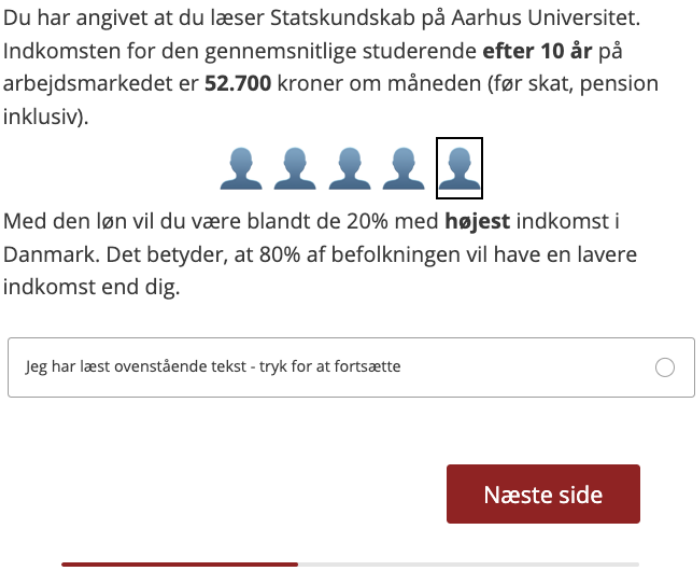
This present contribution combines these two approaches. Like Rueda and Stegmueller (2019), I

argue that voters form their preferences for redistribution by using the income of peers as a benchmark for what they will earn in the future. Building on the notion of imperfect information, I then also argue that voters are not correctly able to assess their – now expected – position in the income distribution, and when they receive persuasive information, they will update their beliefs of where they will be in the income distribution, and hence their personal preferences for taxation.

3 Experimental Design and Data

To test my theoretical proposition, I develop a survey where I measure what income position respondents expect to attain and then provide the treatment group with a personalized treatment to inform their income expectations. This information vignette is based on the respondent's exact educational degree and institution. In the treatment, respondents are provided two pieces of information, 1) the average salary obtained by holders of the same degree ten years after graduating, and 2) where this salary is placed in income quintiles. That is, I give *absolute* and *relative* information to respondents on their earnings (the information is based on registry data, with Statistics Denmark and Caspersen (2023) as sources). The treatment condition is shown below, with the informational treatment given to a political science student from Aarhus is given as an example:

Figure 1: Treatment example



Translation: "You have indicated that you study Political Science at Aarhus University. The income for the average graduate **after 10 years** on the labor market is **52.700 DKK** a month (pre-taxes, pensions inclusive). With that wage, you would be part of the 20% with the highest income in Denmark. That means that 80% of the population would have a lower income than you.

Respondents who were not given the treatment received instead a placebo, which visually was identical to the one above but substantively was about the number of educational degrees offered in the given Danish Region (see appendix A). This placebo thereby also had the feature of being personalized but was based on information that implausibly could have affected the tax preferences of the respondent. Below, the general flow is visualized. One important note is that respondents convey their prior belief of where they will end in the income distribution before receiving the treatment. When evaluating the treatment effect, I will focus on respondents who hold expectations different than those presented in the treatment.

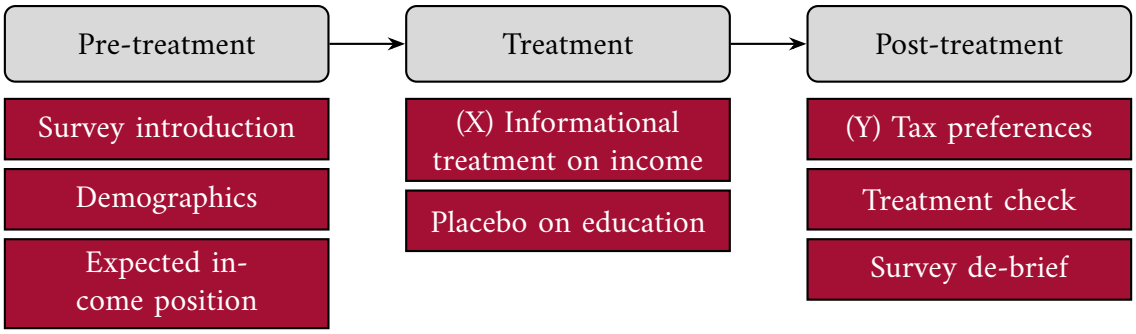


Figure 2: Survey Flow

3.1 Expected Income Position

I measure "expected income position" in terms of income quintiles. There are theoretical, substantial, and practical reasons why this is preferable. Theoretically, the literature on redistribution often writes of class three coarse categories, with a focus on the pivotal median voter and whether this voter decides to side with voters with a larger or smaller income than them (e.g. Iversen and Soskice 2001; Elkjær and Iversen 2023). Substantively, the Danish tax system is progressive, and the "top-tax rate" is set at around 52%. The coverage of the top tax rate has varied over time, from around 10% in 2024 to about 20% of income earners 10 years ago. Finally, prior descriptive research has asked in terms of five groups, as it is a cognitively accessible way to present the income distribution for respondents (Laméris, Garretsen, and Jong-A-Pin 2020; Cojocaru 2014).

However, the way I measured expected income groups is more extensive than current work (Laméris, Garretsen, and Jong-A-Pin 2020; Cojocaru 2014; Cox 2024). Existing work typically measures expectations through a single-item question, where the ISSP question is "*thinking ahead 10 years from now, where do you think you will be on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the top and 1 the bottom?*". I opt for a probabilistic measure, where respondents express a distribution of expectations (this "balls-in-bins" setup is inspired by Delavande and Rohwedder 2008; Caplin et al. 2023). This is particularly important when measuring expectations, as there is no "exact" estimate of where respondents will end. Using this approach, respondents distribute 20 balls, which provides me with a well-considered average and the uncertainty associated with the bid. Survey items of this kind are commonly used

in pension economics to understand what income consumers expect to attain and investigate their spending behavior (Caplin et al. 2023) and present a viable approach for future research on expectations.

3.2 Tax Preferences (Y)

I use a simple slider item where respondents are asked: "If you could freely choose, how much do you think different income groups should pay in taxes? Drag the slider to show where you think the tax rate ought to be.". Items of this kind have been used in prior experimental work (Mathisen 2021). One concern with this type of item is that respondents do not use the full variation provided. That is, they set the slider to the extremes (0 or 100). As I show in Appendix A, this is not the case, and the outcome is continuously distributed.

3.3 Data Collection

The data was collected throughout April 2024 and was self-collected by distribution on social media. Respondents were incentivized to participate and complete the survey to obtain one of three guides that were made for the survey. The sample is evenly representative of the population on gender. However, there is an over-representation of respondents from the Capitol Region, social science students, and students specifically in Political Science. This limits the generalizability of the descriptive results, albeit a skewed sample is less of a concern for the generalizability of the experimental component of the survey (Coppock 2019; Mullinix, Leeper, Druckman, and Freese 2015).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

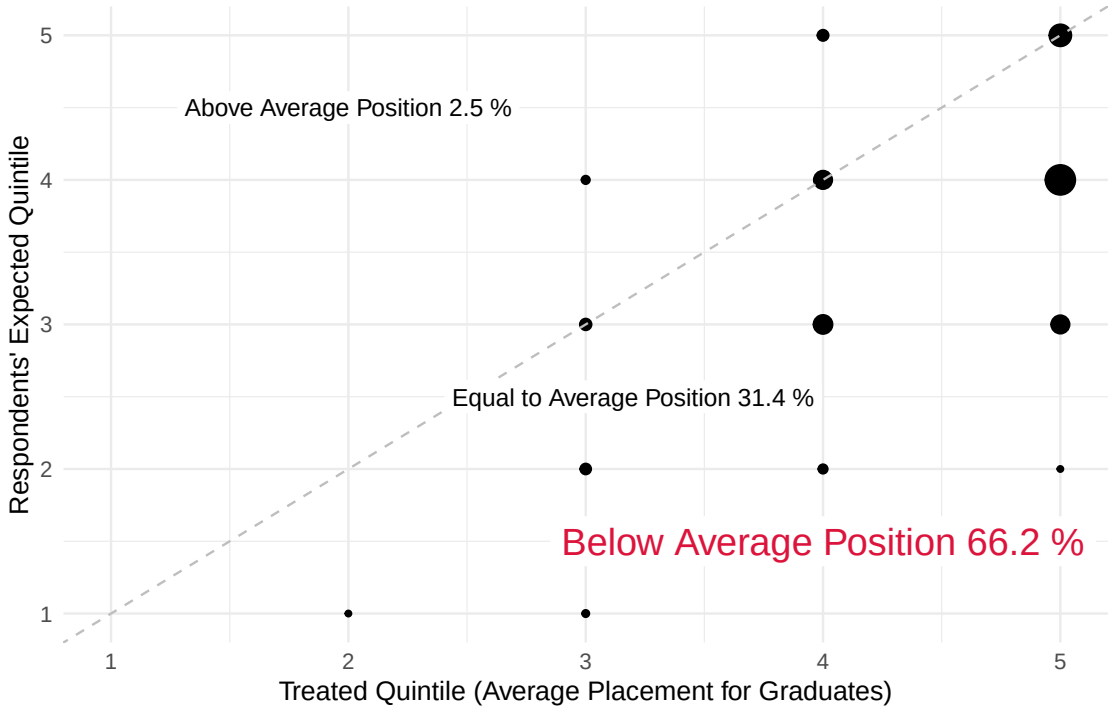
Category	Variable	N	Percent
Gender	Men	643	47.95
	Women	673	50.19
	Other	25	1.86
Region	Capitol Region	1075	80.22
	Other	265	19.78
Political Placement	Center	93	9.57
	Left wing	598	61.52
	Right wing	281	28.91
Degree	Other	134	11.38
	University	1044	88.62
Political Science	Other	725	61.54
	Political Science	453	38.46

4 Analysis

4.1 Expectations Relative to Treatment

If the treatment is to have an effect, then respondents must hold expectations of their future income position that are different than the information they are treated with. In the case that their expectations are equal to the treatment information, they may have fully internalized their prospective income into their preferences, and no effect would appear. In figure 3, I compare the income position respondents expect to hold to the treatment information. We see that two-thirds of the respondents underestimate their future income position relative to the average graduate, while one-third hold expectations equal to the average graduate's income position after 10 years in the labor market. In this setting, virtually no respondents hold expectations above the average graduate.

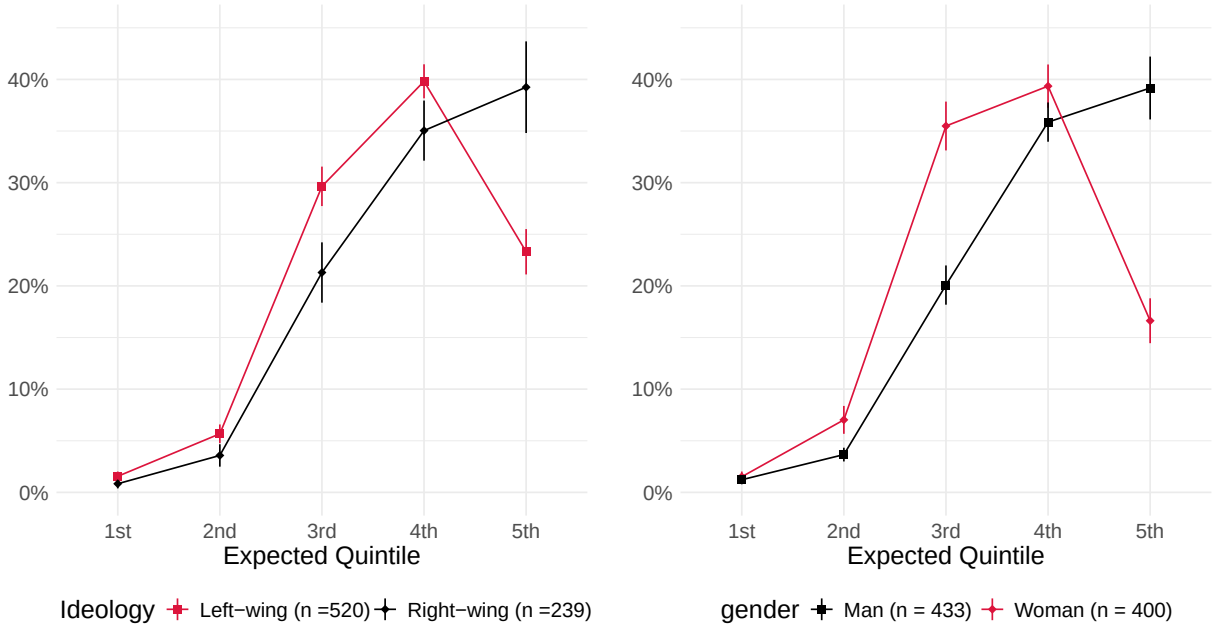
Figure 3: Distance between expected income position and treated income position



Note: Dot size represents the amount of respondents. The visualization contains the full sample, where half of the sample receives information which should raise their expectations of future income position, while the other half does not receive the information. Observations: 1,020.

Respondents who underestimate their prospects are qualitatively different from the rest. As seen on 4, they are predominantly female and left-wing. This is not solely due to a selection effect into different tracks of education; when solely focusing on political science students, this pattern persists (Appendix A.3). This ideological division is consistent with the logic of voters internalizing prospects into current redistributive preferences (Benabou and Ok 1998; Rueda and Stegmueller 2019; Cojocaru 2014). If voters believe they will be part of the top of the income distribution, they have an incentive to prefer lower tax rates and be right-leaning. If voters underrate their prospects and do not internalize the cost of paying top tax rates in the future, they will ex-ante prefer higher levels of redistribution and lean toward the left, and ex-post prefer lower taxes if their expectations are raised.

Figure 4: Mean Distribution of Expected Income Position by Ideology and Gender

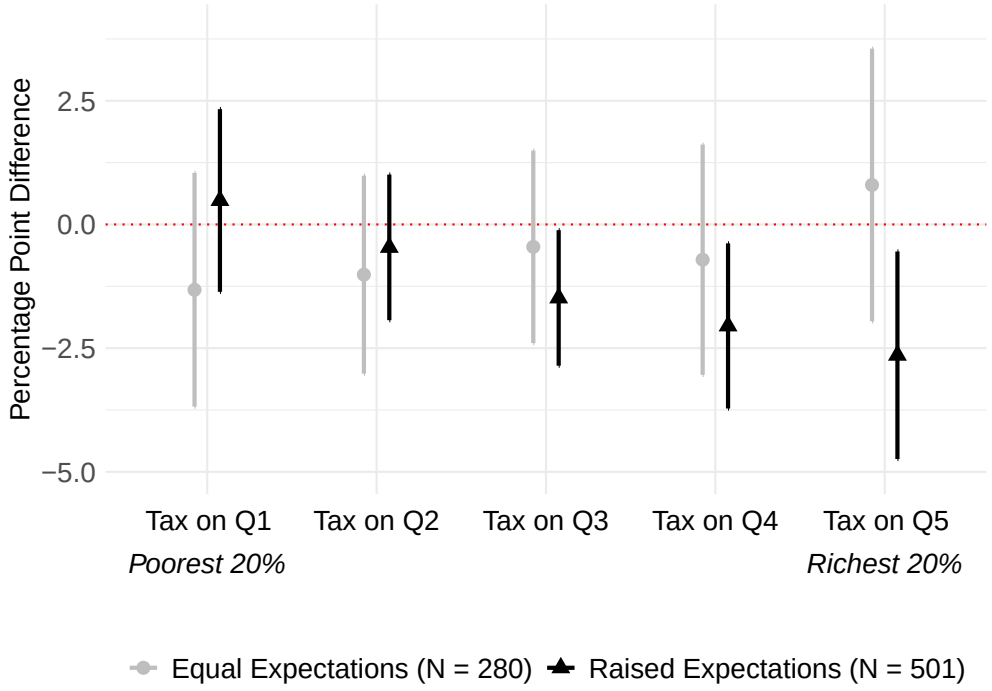


Note: Confidence intervals are set at the 95% level.

4.2 The Effect of Raising Income Expectations on Tax Preferences

To evaluate the effect of receiving income information, I distinguish between respondents whose expectations were *raised*, and respondents whose expectations were the same as the information provided in the treatment. In figure 5, we see that receiving information that raises the expectations of the respondents has a clear negative effect on taxation preferences on top earners. Preferences for taxing the poor remain unchanged (Tax on Q1, Q2), while preferences for taxing top income decisively decrease by 2.5 percentage points (Tax on Q4 = p-value<0.01; Tax on Q5 = p-value<0.05). In relative terms, the 2.5 decrease of taxes on the fourth and fifth quintile corresponds to a 5.4% and 4.8% average treatment effect. In Denmark, a 2.5

Figure 5: The Effect of Raising Expected Income Position on Tax Preferences



Note: Conditional Average Treatment Effects, dividing between respondents whose expectations were raised (pre-treatment expectations less than treatment) and respondents who held expectations equal to the treatment. The independent variable is the treatment condition, and the dependent variable is preferred tax rate for the given group, which is scaled from 0 to 100. Confidence intervals are set to the 95% level.

In the appendix, I gauge whether this effect is sensitive to ideological predispositions. Previous studies have found that material expectations only affect preferences when they align with the ideology of respondents. Laméris, Garretsen, and Jong-A-Pin (2020) find that only right-wing respondents vary in their support for redistribution by expectations, whereas left-wing respondents are constantly pro-redistribution, regardless of what position they expect to achieve. Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso (2018) likewise find that providing negative information on mobility affects the redistributive preferences of left-wing respondents, whereas right-wing update their views on mobility but not their redistributive preferences. This builds on the notion of motivated reasoning, where respondents resist information that goes against strongly held priors (Bartels 2005; Slothuus and Bisgaard 2021; Taber and Lodge 2006). I find that left-wing respondents *do* update their tax preferences, counter to previous work and consistent with Coppock (2022) argument of parallel persuasion.

Further, I include a series of robustness checks in the appendix. I run the main model with robust

standard errors and see no difference. Further, I test whether extreme observations bias the results. This could be the case with the slider item, where respondents may give extreme answers (setting the tax rate to 0 or 100). I show that respondents use the full range of the distribution and that when extreme observations are excluded, the results hold.

Assessing the mechanism

The main question in evaluating the treatment is whether respondents in the control condition were familiar with the information provided in the treatment condition. Given that the information I provide is freely accessible and possibly also a source of information that respondents use to select their education, the treatment may be limited if respondents already are familiar with the information.

To evaluate this effect, respondents in the control condition were asked what the average future salary for graduates with the same degree as themselves is. In other words, they were asked what the treatment information was. Likewise, the treated group had to recall what income their given educational degree could expect after ten years, to check whether respondents had retained the information provided to them.

Figure 6: Treatment evaluation

Note: Dot size represents the amount of respondents. Respondents were asked in what the average salary after 10 years was for graduates holding the same degree as the respondents. For the treatment condition, this constitutes a treatment check. For the control condition, I evaluate the extent to which respondents are pre-treated by income information. The gray dotted lines represent a +/- 5000 DKK interval. Within this range, I interpret responses within this range as correct, as respondents guessed from a scale of 10.000 DKK to 100.000 DKK.

As seen on the left side of figure 6, respondents in the control condition are equally spread between overestimating, underestimating, and estimating correctly what the average future salary is for graduates with the same educational degree as themselves. It does not seem that respondents systematically underestimate future wages but that respondents, on average, have a good impression of what the future salary of their degree is. Given that respondents react to the treatment information in terms of tax preferences, it, therefore, seems probable that the effect of the relative information is the one driving the attitudinal change seen in figure 5. In other words, respondents have a good idea of the absolute income they can expect to earn but seem to underestimate their future relative position in society.

Looking to the right side of figure 6, we see that the treated respondents are relatively good at recalling the income information. Most respondents recall correctly what the average graduate from their institution can expect to earn, and the distribution is more compressed relative to the placebo

group. However, almost a fourth of the respondents do not correctly recall the information. This may express that my estimates of the treatment effect are conservative, given that some respondents did not fully internalize the information. It may also suggest that the treatment was too cognitively demanding for respondents.

5 Discussion

In assessing the effect of receiving information that may raise the expectations of voters, I see that there is a significant effect of receiving information on potential future position and income on taxation preferences. Respondents become less punitive of the groups at the top which they may become part of, and no less punitive of the groups at the bottom, which they see little probability of becoming part of. Assessing the mechanism, I see that the control condition seems to be relatively well informed of their future wages, meaning that they both over- and underestimate wages obtained by graduates holding the same degree. The most probable reason why respondents change taxation preferences is that they are unaware of what position this income puts them in in society. This corroborates the mechanism purported in research which states that voters are uninformed of their position in society, and upon receiving information about their social position, they update preferences (Hvidberg, Kreiner, and Stantcheva 2023).

This result runs counter to research suggesting that material conditions matter little and that pure information provision has little effect (Culpepper, Shandler, Jung, and Lee 2024). When respondents receive concrete information on what group they will become part of, they update their preferences for this group. Perhaps what previous studies have failed to do is provide specific information on personal conditions and measure outcomes that directly relate to this outcome. Often, the treatment in these surveys provides broad information on inequality in the country, with the outcomes on general attitudes to redistribution, where several steps are required from the respondent to update their preferences. Here, with the personalized design, the chain of reasoning is more direct from information to preference.

Furthermore, studies employing the same design as I have only found that respondents update their preferences when given negative information (Weber 2023; Cox 2024). Cox (2024) only finds an effect of income information when it disappoints the respondent, and Weber (2023) only finds an effect of providing information on mobility when it is lower than the respondent thought. My results show that respondents also update their preferences when presented with information that raises their aspirations. Particularly in relation to Cox (2024), one reason that I find an effect of raising expectations may be that I provide relative information on where future income places respondents in the income distribution. In the case of Cox (2024), who solely provides absolute income information, respondents might not be able to deduce where this ranks them in the income distribution. Through the information I provide in the experiment, respondents are directly aware of what position they might attain in the income distribution, and the outcomes measure their attitudes to the specific tax rates that may affect them. Finally, I do not find evidence of motivated reasoning by left-wing respondents who are ideologically predisposed to support redistribution. Instead, I see this effect run in parallel, confirming recent work calling the motivating reasoning argument into question (Coppock 2022).

Another reason why the results differ from Cox (2024) may be due to different levels of welfare development. Denmark has an expansive welfare state and is commonly seen as a prime proponent of the "universalist" welfare model, where access to welfare is unrestricted (Esping-Andersen 1998). While social policy is moving in a more universalistic direction in Chile, this welfare regime is not yet fully matured (Pribble 2013). In this sense, when Danes in the survey prefer lower tax rates when treated, the baseline is higher. Recall, that the control group expresses that the appropriate tax on top 20% earners is near 52% (Figure 5). In this sense, the results do not indicate that top earners want to dismantle the welfare state, but rather that they demand slight calibrations when they learn that they will be part of the top income group.

The generalizability of the experimental results is partially limited due to the unrepresentative sample, which heavily features political science students. It is unclear whether the estimates presented in this sample represent conservative or sensitive estimates. On the one hand, if respondents are more

sophisticated than the relative population and react less to the treatment because the information is known, these estimates can be interpreted as conservative. On the other hand, it may be that the respondents have adequate sophistication to internalize the complex information conveyed in the treatment, and the results could be interpreted as sensitive.

Having stated these limitations, these results and this research design serve as a methodological and empirical contribution to the study of subjective income expectations and redistributive preference. Empirically, it shows that respondents not only update their preferences when presented with bad news but also when their expectations are raised. Methodologically, I present a new survey measure to attain a fine-grained measure of expectations, which gives a more valid picture of how respondents reason about their future position. Furthermore, I contribute to the nascent survey experimental work which fields personalized treatments, demonstrating a new way to visualize relative position in the income distribution. Given that few studies have found an effect, the setup I present may be a viable instrument for future research.

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