

Entertainment, News, and Income Inequality: How Colombian Media Shape Perceptions of Income Inequality and Why It Matters

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This study integrates theories of mass-media effects with research on relative deprivation to explore the relationship between media exposure, perceptions of inequality, and political outcomes. Based on a representative sample of the Colombian adult population ($N = 1,031$), this study shows a negative relationship between news exposure and perceptions of income inequality but also a positive link between entertainment content and citizens' understanding of income gaps. Moreover, our findings suggest that more realistic perceptions of inequality, shaped by media exposure, are positively associated with redistributive policy and participation behaviors, with a moderating role of socioeconomic stratum.

Keywords: Colombian media, news, entertainment, income inequality

Over the past decade, a vibrant debate has emerged around the relationship between perceived inequality and citizens' engagement in the public sphere (Justino & Martorano, 2016; Noah, 2010). In particular, issues related to perceptions of inequality are very significant in Colombia, where a recent economic boom has not been accompanied by a reduction of inequality ("Gini Back in the Bottle," 2012; World Bank, 2014). Income inequality is so acute in Colombian society that socioeconomic differences between neighborhoods are often extreme (Lustig, 2010) and have clear implications for the lives and well-being of Colombian citizens (Hoffman & Centeno, 2003).

As in the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, the Indignados in Spain, and the demonstrations in Brazil surrounding the World Cup, protests organized by Colombian citizens have demanded that more attention be paid to issues of social justice and redistribution. In 2013, for example, several groups, including farmers, students, and health workers, joined rallies around the nation to protest

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the free-market economic policies of the government (Vieira & Martinez, 2013). However, issues of economic redistribution have not always been at the center of the political debate in the country ("Colombians Protest Inequality," 2012), despite Colombia being one of the most unequal countries in the world (World Bank, 2014). The political and social history of Colombia plays an important role in this process. Indeed, the perceptions of and debate about income inequalities in Colombia are profoundly shaped by class differences and by the conflict between social actors such as political elites, guerrilla groups, citizens, and media institutions (Giraldo, 2006; Hoffman & Centeno, 2003).

Academics and journalists often portray Colombia as a country that has deep levels of inequality but also has low mobilization around issues of economic inequalities. Are Colombian citizens aware of the levels of inequality in their country? Do mass media contribute to the shaping of perceptions of inequality?

Media representations of class, particularly of the poor and the rich, can deeply affect how individuals perceive members of these two socioeconomic groups (Bullock, Fraser Whyche, & Williams, 2000; Clawson & Trice, 2000). On the one hand, research shows that media portrayals that describe the poor as undeserving and lazy contribute to the formation of negative impressions of individuals in the lowest income brackets (Gilens, 1996). On the other hand, positive and aspirational representations of the rich are connected with more positive attitudes toward people with higher incomes (Kendall, 2011). Although communication scholarship gives us an understanding of the effects of media portrayals of the rich and the poor, research is unclear on how representations of different socioeconomic groups can shape citizens' perceptions of wealth and income gaps and whether these perceptions may affect democratic outcomes.

To investigate this gap in the literature, this study integrates theories of the effects of mass-mediated communication with sociological theories of economic deprivation to build a model that links media exposure, perceived inequality, and redistribution preferences and participation. Within this framework, specific types of media content might be more likely to highlight income gaps and, consequently, lead to higher support for redistributive policies and more participation.

Given the low levels of interaction among citizens of different socioeconomic backgrounds, citizens might have to rely on mediated communication to make sense of economic disparities (Chalmers et al., 1997; Roberts, 2002). In the Colombian context, studies show that news content is not likely to highlight differences between socioeconomic groups (Pardo Abril, 2008). However, research on mass media in Colombia shows that some forms of entertainment can provide useful information about class differences (Mazziotti, 1993) and therefore may enlighten citizens about the differences between the rich and the poor.

Deprivation theory offers a theoretical lens through which to understand how perceptions of inequality highlighted by mass media content are likely to affect preferences for redistribution and participation. According to deprivation theory, the greater the perception of deprivation for a particular social group, the greater the likelihood that members of that group will engage in politics and in collective action (Gurr, 1980; Gurr & Duvall 1973). In the context of our study, more awareness of inequality, as

shaped by mass media content, should lead to higher levels of participation and stronger support for more equitable redistribution policies.

Based on data from a Colombian National Survey conducted in 2012 ($N = 1,031$), this study has three goals. First, it investigates perceptions of income inequality in Colombia. Second, it examines the relationship between media exposure and perceptions of inequality. Third, it tests whether perceptions of inequality, shaped by media exposure, are associated with support for redistributive policies and political participation.

The Colombian Context: Class, Inequalities, and Public Opinion

In their study of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) likened the democratic process to a fight for the meaning of important social categories, with various groups battling each other for the redefinition of these categories. In Colombia, actors including political elites, citizens, and mass media fiercely battle over the meaning of class differences and inequality. The issue of inequality is of particular value in postmodern capitalistic societies where the lines between consumers and citizens are often blurred. Canclini (1990, 2001) proposed a new definition of citizenship that goes beyond mere civic engagement and recognizes issues of class, economic inequalities, redistribution, and access to public goods as central to the democratic process, particularly for countries with very high levels of inequality such as Latin American countries.

How are struggles over issues of inequalities defined in Colombian society? Colombia has the distinction of being the longest standing democracy in Latin America and has a strong history of civic engagement and citizens' participation in the public sphere (Clark, 2012). However, there are two issues that obstruct the country from maximizing its democratic potential (Murillo & Avirama, 2004; Pearce, 1990). First, the governmental institutions designed to facilitate democracy are rife with elites who often serve themselves at the expense of the public (Giraldo, 2006; Hoffman & Centeno, 2003). Second, Colombia has a history of violent conflict with guerilla force FARC. The conflict with FARC further destabilizes political order, undermines democratic institutions (Taylor, 2009), and negatively affects economic development (Thoumi, 2002). Because these conflicts occur in rural areas, rural Colombians are affected more than those living in the cities, therefore exacerbating the inequalities between rural and urban areas. These factors provide insight into why Colombia has such high levels of inequality. In fact, research indicates that Colombia has some of the highest levels of income disparities in the world (Hoffman & Centeno, 2003). The gap between income brackets, especially the wealthiest and the poorest, is larger than in other nations. In other terms, there is a deep distinction between the working class and the upper class, a distinction that is clear in many areas of Colombian society (Hoffman & Centeno, 2003).

It is important to note here that inequality and poverty are two related yet distinct concepts. Poverty describes a general state of scarcity characterized by insufficient material possessions and money (Lustig, Lopez-Calva, & Ortiz-Juarez, 2013). Inequality is a relative indicator of the difference in the economic well-being of different groups or people, particularly the poor and the rich, in a given country (Ravallion, 2011). Data from the World Bank shows that Latin America is one of the regions in the world with high levels of inequality (World Bank, 2014). In 2012, the region had an average GINI score of

inequality of 0.53 compared to 0.342 for OECD countries. Overall, in democratic countries including the United States and Colombia, inequality seems to be on the rise, even if some scholars argue with this interpretation (Gabaix, Lasry, Lions, & Moll, 2016). The level of inequality in Colombia is particularly high, even when compared to other countries in the region. Reports indicate that 30.6% of the population lives in poverty (DANE, 2013). Colombia is also the third most unequal country in Latin America and 10th most unequal in the world (Lievano, Tellez, & Lora, 2015). During the 1990s, Colombia had an average GINI score of 0.56 and in 2011 its GINI score was still 0.55 (World Bank, 2014). These statistics indicate that the gap between the rich and the poor remains very stark (World Bank, 2014).

Over the last 10 years, other countries in the region, such as Brazil and Argentina, have been successful in reducing income inequality (De Ferranti, Perry, Ferreira, & Walton, 2004; Gasparini & Lustig, 2011; World Bank, 2014). In Colombia, the story is quite different. There has not been a strong push for a reduction of inequality in the country, and conservative governments have not promoted more redistributive economic programs, instead opposing policies aimed at reducing income disparities (De Ferranti et al., 2004; "Gini Back in the Bottle," 2012). There seem to be two different worlds in Colombia, one where its richest citizens lead lives that are close to the middle and upper classes in developed democracies, and another one where despair, lack of access to social services, and poverty are widespread (Hoffman & Centeno, 2003).

Given these very deep social and economic divisions, are Colombian citizens aware of these high levels of inequality? Do they favor a more equal income distribution, or are they content with the status quo? According to data collected by the Latino Barometro (Solimano, 2005), 87% of the Colombian population claimed that an unequal distribution of income was unfair, but these data do not clarify how accurate individuals' perceptions of inequality were. In the U.S. context, a recent study (Norton & Ariely, 2011) investigated these phenomena, showing that most people in the United States underestimate the level of wealth inequality and yet would also prefer a more equal income distribution. Should we expect different findings in the Colombian context when it comes to perceptions of income inequality?

In light of the research presented in this section, we propose the following research questions to investigate in our study:

RQ1: What are the preferences of Colombian citizens for income distribution?

RQ2: How accurate are citizens' perceptions of income inequality in Colombia?

What Media Tell Us About Income Gaps

News Consumption and Income gaps

Exposure to media content can significantly influence individuals' perceptions of income and wealth gaps. Broadly, models explaining levels of political knowledge posit that media exposure can help citizens gain information about economic issues (Popkin, 1991). Models of two-step flows (Brosius & Weimann, 1996) and communication mediation models (Shah et al., 2007) confirm that political

messages, including messages with important economic information, are often diffused by media through social and interpersonal networks.

Exposure to mass-mediated content is particularly important for the acquisition of information about members of groups that are different from our own (Giles, Reid, & Harwood, 2010), including members of different socioeconomic groups. This phenomenon might be particularly true in Colombia, a country with strong class divides and where interpersonal contact across social classes may not be very frequent (Roberts, 2002; Scott, 2005). Therefore, we expect that, in Colombia, perceptions of income gaps between the rich and the poor should be more heavily influenced by an individual's exposure to media messages rather than by political conversations. It remains to be seen to what extent and in what forms media messages can influence citizens' perceptions of inequality.

Research on the effects of media on perceptions of income inequality is scarce (Kendall, 2011). In fact, the majority of media research on income inequality examines the way that mass media frame poverty (Clawson & Trice, 2000; Gilens, 2009; Hancock, 2004; Kendall, 2011; Limbert & Bullock, 2009). Framing grants mass media a central position in the public's perception of income inequality (Hackett, 2001). Indeed, media frames provide interpretative schemas that affect how the public interprets issues, events, and experiences of the poor. In addition, these frames influence the public's perception of income inequality by defining problems, suggesting responsibility, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies for issues related to the poor. On the one hand, media frames for the poor and the working class are often abstract, incomplete, or negative (Kendall, 2011; Pardo Abril, 2008). For example, news media often rely on statistics for stories about poverty or homelessness. Although statistics might be more objective than other measures, these stories provide an impersonal and faceless representation of the poor (Pardo Abril, 2008). Iyengar (1990, 1996) investigated media frames of poverty and found that frames that highlight poverty as caused by individual character and actions, rather than societal problems, are more likely to be associated with negative perceptions of low-income individuals. On the other hand, representations of the rich are often more complex, more elaborate, and more positive (Kendall, 2011).

In Latin American countries a trend toward adopting professional journalistic practices similar to those used in the United States could contribute to this detached manner of presenting information about people of lower socioeconomic status (Porto, 2007). Pardo Abril (2008) argues that Colombian newspapers overwhelmingly discuss poverty with statistics or statistical rhetoric. He laments that the emphasis on statistical discourse decontextualizes and obstructs a comprehensive understanding of the reality of poverty. Previous experimental research on the public's considerations for generalizations concluded that "statistical summary information does not have the impact on inferences that normative considerations require" (Hamill, Wilson, & Nisbett, 1980, p. 582). Hence, numbers rarely leave impressions on individuals, and therefore, people who consume a lot of news media content might be less likely to perceive high levels of inequality. Unfortunately, news stories that do include personalized features on individuals usually evoke negative stereotypes of race, gender, and work ethic (Kendall, 2011).

Another factor to consider when investigating the effects of news on perceived inequality is the influence of market-driven neoliberal economic mechanisms that have shaped Latin American media

systems, including the Colombian one. Market mechanisms push media companies to focus on profitability, rather than a public service mission that can highlight important socioeconomic problems (Waisbord, 2006).

In addition, the neoliberal ideology that permeates corporate media, based on promoting free markets and lower government spending, tends to deemphasize class conflict and income differences that are at the core of citizens' understandings of perceived inequality (Hallin, 2008). Moreover, governmental influences on Colombian mass media may have implications for how journalists talk about social issues such as poverty and inequality (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002; Waisbord, 2006). News outlets may decide to present economic information that is more favorable to the government and that helps to avoid stirring social unrest.

In sum, given the literature on the portrayal of perceived inequalities, it remains to be seen whether portrayals of different socioeconomic classes provide citizens with relevant information about inequality as well.

Soap Opera Consumption and Income Gaps

Beyond news formats, entertainment media may also affect the public's perception of income inequality (Kendall, 2011; La Pastina, Rego, & Straubhaar, 2003; Mazziotti, 1993;). In the U.S. context, Kendall (2011) finds that mass media rarely discuss notions of class explicitly; however, certain frames are commonly used for the depictions of specific socioeconomic groups. Specifically, Kendall's (2011) research suggests that entertainment television tends to reinforce negative stereotypes of low-income citizens but to promote positive stereotypes for higher income individuals. Conversely, popular television shows made in the United States, such as *Grey's Anatomy* and *Law & Order*, depict poverty-stricken individuals as addicts, violent, and mentally unstable (Kendall, 2011). Furthermore, other studies contend that certain racial (Gilens, 2009), gender (Abramovitz, 2006), and class (Abramovitz, 2006; Kendall, 2011) cues evoke negative and stereotypical views of the poor. In short, these studies assert that the upper class receives the most frequent and favorable representation in entertainment content, whereas the poor are often not represented in entertainment content or are portrayed in a negative light.

Although research on news media coverage of income inequality in Colombia has paralleled the findings of such research in the U.S. context, research on entertainment media in Colombia finds key distinctions from its U.S. counterpart. Specifically, a staple of entertainment media in Latin America is the soap opera. Soap operas are broadcast in prime time and designed to appeal to a wider audience than in the United States (Lugo, 2008). More importantly, central themes of these shows often revolve around class conflicts that could highlight differences between different socioeconomic groups (Mazziotti, 1993). These shows also tackle issues relevant to their respective countries; for example, the Peruvian show *Simplemente Maria* dealt heavily with issues of urban migration (Zdrenghea, 2007). Other issues portrayed in these kinds of shows have also included women's liberation and political corruption (La Pastina et al., 2003; Porto, 2011; Vink, 2002) and various issues related to social justice and social protest (Merayo, 2013). However, other themes identifiable in soap operas may lead to different outcomes when it comes to perceptions of inequality. In particular, some soap operas tend to have narrative arcs

that depict individuals who rise from poverty and become part of the elite (Mazziotti, 1993). These themes could negatively influence perceived inequality because they may suggest that economic inequalities are not very deep in Colombian society and that social mobility is more common than in reality.

In sum, the literature on soap operas in Colombia suggests that this media format may be more effective in highlighting the differences between the rich and the poor. However, research remains unclear on the relationship between watching soap operas and perceived inequality.

Given the findings on the relationship between mass media consumption and perceived inequalities in Colombia, we propose the following research questions:

RQ3: In Colombia, what is the relationship between exposure to news and perceived inequality?

RQ4: In Colombia, what is the relationship between exposure to soap operas and perceived inequality?

Mass Media, Perceptions of Inequality, and Political Outcomes

Perceptions of inequality that citizens form through media exposure can have important consequences for political outcomes, particularly support for redistributive policies and participation. There is a tension in the literature on income inequality. On one hand, research shows that in countries with high levels of inequality, citizens often support policies and vote for political parties that reinforce economic inequalities (Bartels, 2010; Gilens, 2005;). On the other hand, when asked, citizens tend to overwhelmingly support a more egalitarian distribution of wealth (Norton & Ariely, 2011).

This contradiction may be related to the fact that individuals tend to underestimate levels of inequality. If citizens learn about income inequalities through mass-mediated messages, what will be the consequences for policy support and participation? To address this question, we use theories of relative deprivation to explain the relationship between perceptions of inequality and political outcomes. According to deprivation theory (Gurr, 1980; Gurr & Duvall, 1973; Sweeney, McFarlin, & Inderrieden, 1990), if citizens perceive a discrepancy between their income and what they think they deserve, they will be more likely to participate in the public sphere to bring about social justice.

Applying this framework to perceptions of economic inequality, we expect that citizens with greater perceptions of inequality will be more likely to support equal distributive policies and to participate in the public sphere. In particular, in this context, citizens from lower strata would be more motivated to participate when they perceive higher levels of inequality because they are part of the group that is more affected by economic deprivation (Sweeney et al., 1990). This mechanism does not describe citizens from a lower socioeconomic background as being less aware of income inequality or less likely to participate compared to richer citizens; instead it identifies one important way in which these citizens can be mobilized and engaged in the public sphere. Moreover, citizens that are ideologically on the left of the political spectrum should be more likely to participate when their perceptions of inequality are high, motivated by a willingness to bring inequality in line with their preferences (Alesina & Giuliano, 2009).

Based on the proposed mechanism of relative deprivation theory, we pose the following hypotheses:

- H1: Perceptions of inequality, in part arising from media exposure, will be positively associated with (a) preferences for an equitable income distribution and (b) political participation.*
- H2: Social stratum will moderate the relationship between perceived inequality and preference for (a) an equitable income distribution and (b) political participation.*
- H3: Ideology will moderate the relationship between perceived inequality and (a) preferences for an equitable income distribution and (b) political participation.*

Method

Data. This study relied on national survey data collected from August 29 to September 17, 2012, in 10 cities in Colombia by a large Midwestern university and a university in Colombia as part of their biennial study of communication and political attitudes in Colombia. The sample was designed to represent Colombia's adult urban population—75% of Colombia's 46 million inhabitants live in urban areas (DANE, 2012).

Survey respondents were selected using a multistep stratified random sample procedure that selected households randomly based on city size and census data. First, a number of households was allocated for a given city, and a number of city blocks was selected randomly according to housing district and socioeconomic stratum. Then, individual households were randomly selected within each block. Finally, the study used the adult-in-the-household-who-most-recently-celebrated-a-birthday technique to identify an individual respondent at random. Up to three visits to each household were made (if needed) to increase participation in the survey. A local professional polling firm, Deproyectos Limitada, collected the data, and 1,031 face-to-face completed responses were obtained for a response rate of 83%.

Measures

Control variables were age, gender, education, social stratum, income, ideology, and political interest. These controls were included in the analysis to make sure that the relationships between our variables of interest could not be explained by demographic factors and overall political attitudes.

An open-ended question asked respondents' age ($M = 41.12$, $SD = 16.21$). Respondents also indicated whether they were male or female (0 = male, 1 = female; $M = 0.53$, $SD = 0.50$). An eight-point interval scale (0 = none; 8 = graduate) measured education ($M = 5.12$; $SD = 1.54$). The survey measured social stratum by using the Colombian system of national household energy levels, ranging from 1 = lowest stratum to 6 = highest stratum ($M = 2.91$; $SD = 1.09$). Social stratum in the Colombian context is used as an important indicator of socioeconomic status. Individuals with a lower classification in the national household classification live in poorer neighborhoods, with lower levels of energy use and lower income levels (Medina & Morales, 2007).

In addition, a 10-point scale (0 = left; 5 = center; 10 = right) measured political ideology ($M = 5.57$; $SD = 1.97$). The block of controls also included an index of political interest ($M = 1.9$; $SD = 1.5$; $\alpha = .93$), which was measured with three questions about respondents' interest in (a) local or regional politics, (b) national politics, and (c) international politics on a scale from 0 to 5, with 0 = no interest at all and 5 = a great deal of interest.

We used two measures of news exposure and one measure of entertainment exposure to capture mass-media-use variables. For news consumption ($M = 2.10$; $SD = 1.23$; $\alpha = .72$), we created an index of seven questions on how often—on a scale from 0 to 5, where 0 = never and 5 = often—respondents consume the following news formats: national daily newspapers, national news magazines, national TV shows on news, regional TV shows, international cable news, and Internet news. In addition, we had a variable of soap opera consumption, measured by one question: How often—on a scale from 0 to 5, where 0 = never and 5 = often—did respondents watch soap operas? ($M = 2.89$; $SD = 1.85$.)

For political talk, we measured two variables. A measure of talk with strong ties ($M = 2.62$; $SD = 1.5$; $\alpha = .772$) was assessed by two items, asking how frequently respondents have talked about news or politics (a) with their family members and (b) with their friends (0 = never and 5 = often). A measure of talk with weak ties ($M = 3.63$; $SD = 3.22$; $\alpha = .882$) was assessed by two items, asking how frequently respondents have talked about news or politics (a) with their coworkers and (b) with their neighbors. These two measures are considered distinct in the literature on political talk because weak ties refer to political talk with people that citizens are not particularly close with, whereas strong ties refer to political talk with people that citizens have longstanding relationships with (Granovetter, 1983; Wojcieszak, 2010).

A measure of egalitarian beliefs contained two items that gauged beliefs about redistribution in Colombia, both measured as agreement on scale from 0 = total disagreement to 5 = total agreement: (a) Income distribution in Colombia should be more equitable; (b) the government should try to reduce income differences among Colombians. Higher values for this variable indicate greater egalitarian beliefs ($M = 4.37$; $SD = 1.02$; $r = .61$, $p \leq .05$). Beliefs refer to abstract beliefs about fair income distribution rather than a preference for a specific distribution.

Perceived inequality was measured by subtracting the percentage of income that respondents thought goes to the poorest quintile of the population from the percentage of income that respondents thought goes to the richest quintile of the population ($M = 22.2$; $SD = 27.4$). Higher values for this variable indicate that respondents perceive a greater gap between the richest and the poorest quintiles.

Distribution preference measures respondents' preferences for how income should be distributed. The variable is a dichotomization of the question that asks respondents to choose one of three ways a country can distribute its income (distribution 1: 20%, 20%, 20%, 20%, 20%; distribution 2: 30%, 25%, 20%, 15%, 10%; distribution 3: 62%, 18%, 11%, 6%, 3%). For the purpose of this study, we coded responses that chose distribution 2 and distribution 3 as 0 and those choosing absolute equality as 1 ($M = 0.95$; $SD = 0.21$). Therefore, higher values of this variable indicate greater preferences for equal income distribution.

Our index of political participation contains responses from 10 questions that asked respondents whether, over the past year, they had participated in the following activities: attended a political rally, attended a public meeting of your city, participated in a local municipal council, signed a petition, worked for a movement or political party, wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine, called in to a live radio or television show to express your opinion, donated money or other objects to a political party or movement, attended a social or political protest, protested by blocking a street ($M = 0.78$, $SD = 0.04$, $\alpha = .76$). The index was additive. Every act of participation was coded as 1 if citizens participated and 0 if citizens did not participate in that specific action.

Analysis

In our analysis, we first illustrate the overwhelming preference for an equitable income distribution and the overwhelming underestimation of inequality levels in Colombia with simple descriptive analysis. Second, we use hierarchical regression to examine media effects on perceptions of inequality and logistic regression to examine media effects on preferences for income distribution, while controlling for a host of demographic variables. Third, we use hierarchical regression to investigate the impact of perceived inequality on participation behaviors.

Results

Preference for an Equal Income Distribution

For RQ1, our findings show that the vast majority of Colombians (78%) prefer an equal income distribution, whereas 17.1% prefer a distribution with a moderate level of inequality, and 4.9% chose the most unequal income distribution (see Figure 1). This finding differs from Norton and Ariely's (2011) data on the United States, where the majority of the population prefers an income distribution with some level of inequality.

When it comes to perceptions of the income distribution, RQ2, most Colombians underestimate the level of inequality in their country (Figure 2). From the highest to the lowest quintile, the actual percentages of income earned by each quintile are 62%, 18%, 11%, 6%, and 3%, whereas the perceived distribution was 35%, 22%, 17%, 12%, and 13%.

The perceived gap between the percentage of income that goes to the highest quintile and the percentage that goes to the lowest quintile of the population is 22 percentage points, compared with a real gap of 59 points.

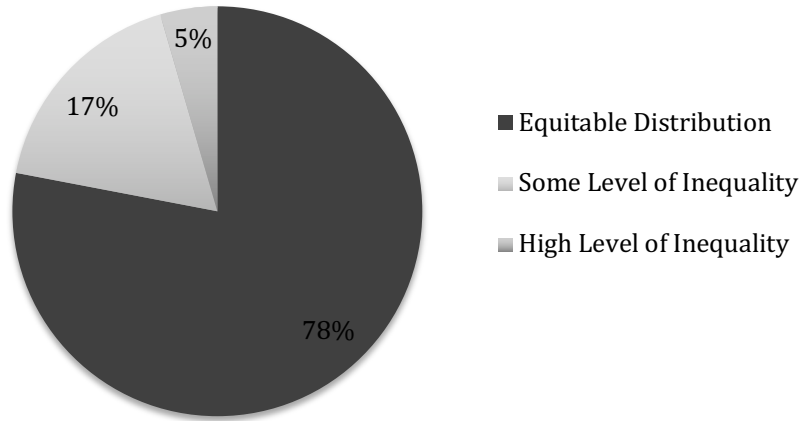


Figure 1. Preference for income distribution.

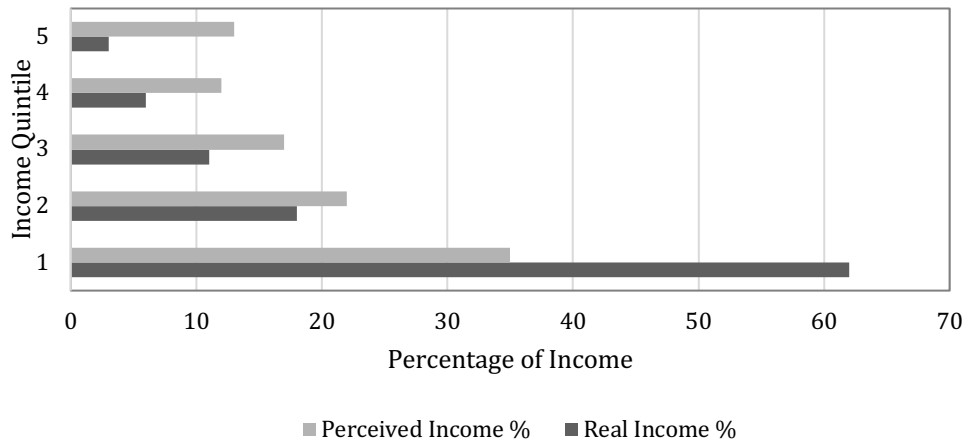


Figure 2. Differences between perceived and real income inequalities.

Antecedents of Perceived Inequality

For the perceptions of inequality model (see Table 1), the amount of variance explained was fairly modest ($R^2 = .05, p < .001$). Of the control variables, age ($\beta = .09, p < .05$) and ideology ($\beta = -.13, p < .01$) were significant, suggesting that older people are more likely to perceive high levels of inequality and that people on the right of the political spectrum are less likely to perceive high levels of inequality. For the media variables, we find that exposure to news ($\beta = -.26, p < .05$) leads to lower

perceptions of inequality, whereas exposure to TV entertainment content leads to greater perceptions of inequality ($\beta = .14, p < .01$). These findings provide some clarification for RQ3 and RQ4.

Perceived Inequality and Preferences for Income Distribution

For preferences in income distribution (Table 2), the amount of explained variance in the dependent variable was 10.4% (pseudo $R^2 = .104, p < .05$). Among the control variables, talk with strong ties ($B = .22, p < .05$) was significant, suggesting that talking with family members and friends leads to higher preferences for equal income distribution. Moreover, perceived inequality had a positive significant relationship with preferences for income distribution ($B = .01, p < .05$), suggesting that the greater gap citizens perceive between the highest and lowest quintiles of the income distribution, the more likely they are to have egalitarian preferences.

Table 1. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Perceived Inequality.

Block 1: Individual factors:	β
Gender	-.02
Age	.09*
Education	.03
Stratum	-.08
Income	.01
Political interest	-.07
Ideology	-.13**
Incremental R^2 (%): 2.6*	
Block 2: Political talk:	
Talk with weak ties	-.06
Talk with strong ties	.06
Incremental R^2 (%): 0.5*	
Block 3: Media exposure:	
News consumption	-.26*
Soap opera consumption	.14**
Incremental R^2 (%): 2.6*	
Final R^2 (%): 5.7**	

Note. Standardized betas, adjusted R^2 values are shown; p values are for two-tailed tests of significance.

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

*** $p \leq .001$.

This finding provides support for H1a and suggests that more awareness of income inequality could lead to stronger egalitarian preferences. However, we couldn't find any support for the interaction between perceptions of inequality and ideology and social stratum, and therefore H2a and H3a were not supported.

Perceived Inequality and Participation Behavior

With respect to political participation, we find that several of the control variables had an effect: age ($\beta = -.09, p < .01$), political interest ($\beta = .11, p < .001$), and ideology ($\beta = .06, p < .05$). These findings suggest that younger people and people with greater political interest are more likely to participate, as are citizens on the right of the political spectrum. Exposure to news ($\beta = .29, p < .01$) was significant, indicating that news exposure has a positive relationship with participation. Perceived inequality is a positive and significant predictor as well ($\beta = .07, p < .05$), providing support for H1b.

To test H2b and H3b on the moderating effects of social stratum and ideology on the relationship between perceived inequality and participation, we introduced interaction terms to the model. In both cases we used the same technique to calculate the interaction: We multiplied the standardized scores of the two variables. The interaction between stratum and perceived inequality was significant ($\beta = -.16, p < .05$), suggesting that individuals from a lower stratum tend to participate more when they perceive higher levels of inequality, whereas the opposite is true for those of higher strata (see Figure 3). Therefore, H2b was supported. The interaction between stratum and ideology was not significant ($\beta = -.07, p > .1$), suggesting that ideology does not moderate the relationship between perceived inequality and participation. Therefore, H3b was not supported. The variance explained by the initial model was 12.9% ($R^2 = .129, p < .001$). The model with interactions explains 13.4% of the variance ($R^2 = .134, p < .001$).

Table 2. Perceived Inequality, Preference for Income Distribution, and Participation.

Independent variable:	Logistic Regression for Preference for Income Distribution		Hierarchical regression for Political Participation
	B	SE	β
Gender	-.49	(.47)	.02
Age	.02	(.02)	-.09**
Education	-.17	(.22)	-.02
Stratum	.28	(.26)	.05#
Political interest	.01	(.05)	.11***
Ideology	.03	(.11)	.06*
News consumption	.04	(.03)	.29**
Soap opera consumption	-.01	(.07)	-.10#
Talk with weak ties	-.13	(.10)	.10*
Talk with strong ties	.22*	(.10)	.05
Perceived inequality	.01*	(.01)	.07*
Perceptions of inequality \times ideology	.12	(.09)	-.07
Perceptions of inequality \times stratum	.02	(.03)	-.16*
Constant	.41		---
Pseudo R^2	.10		---
Adjusted R^2	---		13.4

Note. Unstandardized betas for logistic regression and standardized betas for hierarchical regression are indicated; p values are for two-tailed tests of significance.

$p \leq .1$.

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

*** $p \leq .001$.



Figure 3. Interaction between perceived inequality and stratum with political participation as dependent variable.

Discussion

Overall, our results provide important insights into the processes that influence perceptions of income inequality. In Colombia, a country with a very high level of income inequality, 78% of citizens prefer an equitable income distribution. Moreover, citizens tend to overestimate the share of income that goes to the poorest quintile and underestimate the share of income that goes to the highest quintile, resulting in a lower perceived income gap between the two groups.

Individual-level factors and media exposure are both important for perceptions of inequality. In our analysis, news consumption had a negative relationship with perceptions of inequality. These results are in line with Pardo Abril's (2008) argument that the detached manner and statistical rhetoric used to cover poverty fails to fully convey the gravity of the issue. An explanation that could support this finding may be that Colombian news media, similarly to U.S. media, lionize the wealthy but denigrate the poor (Abramovitz, 2006; Hancock, 2004; Kendall, 2011).

The finding on the effects of entertainment on perceived inequality is intriguing. In fact, it suggests that exposure to TV entertainment in Colombia gives citizens a more vivid picture of the gap between the poor and the rich in the country. This result corroborates research done in the United States that showed how individuals are exposed to politically relevant information outside of traditional news media outlets (Baum, 2003, 2005).

Overall, the finding that media exposure, rather than personal interactions, had an effect on perceived inequality confirmed that citizens form their perceptions of income inequality primarily from mass media rather than from personal interactions.

Results on the relationship between income inequality and preferences for a more equal income distribution are fascinating. These results suggest that the more inequality citizens perceive, the more they think the actual income distribution is unjust and, therefore, the more they support an equal distribution of income to correct this injustice.

Our analysis on participation indicates that the more inequality citizens perceive, the more likely they are to participate in the public sphere. Moreover, this mechanism works differentially for citizens from different strata. These results are in line with the framework proposed by deprivation theory (Gurr, 1980; Gurr & Duvall, 1973), which links a high level of perceived inequality with a high level of participation for individuals of lower socioeconomic strata.

Our study has some limitations. First, our sample is from a cross-sectional survey, and we are not able to fully account for causality on how media coverage influences citizens' attitudes and behaviors over time. It is possible that an experimental design could address issues of causality.

More importantly, our study could provide a more interesting story if data on perceptions of inequality and preferences for income distribution were coupled with a comprehensive analysis of media coverage of inequality in Colombia. In addition, some of our concepts were measured with single-item scales, and although we used measures that were previously used in other studies, this measurement strategy could surely be improved in future studies.

Our measure of perceived inequality is a numerical measure of perceived inequality, and it could be critiqued because citizens are not very knowledgeable about statistics. However, this measure has been used by other studies as a valid measure of perceived inequality (Norton & Ariely, 2011; Norton, Neal, Govan, Ariely, & Holland, 2014). Moreover, in our study, citizens' perceptions of inequality were fairly accurate, except about the shares of income that go to the top and bottom of the distribution.

Notwithstanding these limitations, our study significantly contributes to the literature on media effects on income inequalities. Our analysis clarifies how media shape perceptions of inequality and how these perceptions relate to participation. On one hand, Colombia is a country dramatically divided by economic inequalities, with implications for education, health, and occupation disparities. On the other hand, the vast majority of its citizens prefer a perfectly equal income distribution. Furthermore, Colombians think they live in a country that is much more equal than it is in reality. This underestimation might contribute to an explanation for why Colombians are not rebelling against the high levels of inequality. In our analysis we see that individuals who perceive higher levels of inequality are more likely to participate as active citizens in the political debate and make their voices heard, compared with citizens who perceive lower levels of inequality. This finding should make us think about the importance of increasing citizens' awareness of income disparities. Some media formats could be more effective than others to achieve this goal. Perhaps because of the focus on statistics, impersonal data, and a tendency to

lessen distinctions between socioeconomic groups, Colombian news does not do a good job of presenting a realistic image of inequality. How could news outlets better achieve their role of informing the public? Maybe in the Colombian case they can learn some lessons from entertainment programs, which have been more successful in presenting a clearer picture of the divisions between the poorest and the richest in the country.

In addition, the moderating role of stratum, and not ideology, tells us an interesting story about how class, rather than ideology, is important in the relationship between perceived inequality and participation. Perceived inequality is important for participation for individuals with a lower socioeconomic background, rather than just for people on the left. This finding suggests that class appeals, rather than ideological appeals, are more effective to motivate citizens in connection with perceived inequality. This finding should be investigated by further research that examines class and ideological appeals in relationship to inequality.

Our results offer interesting insights for broader democratic theory as well. In 1961, Robert Dahl admonished that economic inequalities might affect political equality and, subsequently, political representation. Rawls (1971), with his concept of "justice and fairness," claimed that democratic nations should aim to reduce economic inequalities to a minimum. Michael Schudson (1998) also worried that excessive levels of inequality might pose important obstacles to the full exercise of citizenship. Although the functionalist sociological literature claims that some degree of inequality is necessary to have a functioning society and a prosperous economy (Land, 1970), empirical research in economics, sociology, and political science suggest that very high levels of inequality are connected with several negative outcomes for the well-being of a country, including less social mobility (Gottschalk & Spolaore, 2002), larger health disparities (Casas, Dachs, & Bambas, 2001), and fewer educational and occupational opportunities (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Reimers, 2000).

In addition, several political scientists have observed an association between economic inequalities and the democratic health of a country (Houle, 2009; Muller, 1995). With a concentration of resources at the top of the income distribution, well-funded individuals and organizations can directly influence policy decisions, pushing regulations that favor the richest citizens (Hacker & Pierson, 2011; Mainwaring, 1995). Clearly, high levels of income inequality pose a threat to democratic outcomes, creating additional barriers to political participation, and more broadly, to the representation of citizens in the public arena.

However, this grim picture should not discourage social scientists in pursuit of policy solutions that might reduce the inequality in a country. The most common culprits for an increase in income inequality have been globalization and technological change (Mann, 1997). However, as Stiglitz (2002) and Hacker and Pierson (2011) claim, countries that have used stronger governmental interventions and progressive taxation have been more successful at reducing inequalities than countries that have been held hostage to the strict requirements of international organizations.

In sum, although income inequalities can have negative effects on democratic outcomes, national policies enacted by democratically elected governments can still contribute to reducing the income gap

between the poorest and the richest citizens. Even in our hyperglobalized world, there seems to be a space for citizens to influence policies that can shape their countries' income distributions. Therefore, it is crucial for social scientists to understand how we can help citizens be more aware of income gaps so they can be more active in the public sphere and demand policies that can address issues related to inequality.

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