



Subjective inequality and attitudes to labor unions: Evidence from Latin America

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ABSTRACT

Labor unions play a key role in the defense of workers' rights and in the construction of more egalitarian societies. Despite this, few empirical investigations have analyzed how attitudes toward labor unions are shaped by subjective manifestations of inequality. Bringing together the sociological and social-psychological research on inequality, in this article we do so by studying how attitudes towards unions are shaped by class identification and by ideal inequality, understood as the level of inequality that people consider ideal or fair. Using data from the 2020 Latinobarómetro survey for 18 Latin American countries, we find that pro-union attitudes are significantly higher among those who identify with the lower-middle class but not among those who identify with the lower class. We also find a negative relationship between ideal inequality, measured by a pseudo-Gini index of ideal inequality, and pro-union attitudes: those who want less economic inequality have more positive attitudes towards unions. Finally, we find that the effect of class identification and ideal inequality is moderated by individual political orientations. At the end of this article, we explain these findings and show how they contribute to the recent research on subjective inequality and attitudes toward labor unions.

1. Introduction

Labor unions play a prominent role in defending workers' rights and in constructing more equal societies (Kerrissey, 2015; Kollmeyer, 2017; Wallace et al., 2022). Building upon this premise, in the last few years, scholarly researchers have started to devote more attention to the study of attitudes to labor unions (Givan & Hipp, 2012; McAleese & Day, 2022; Oliver & Morelock, 2021). According to these scholars, studying attitudes to unions is crucial for analyzing the extent to which workers consider labor unions legitimate representatives of their interests (Frangi et al., 2017; Hadziabdic & Frangi, 2022).

Based on this premise, scholarly research shows that attitudes to unions tend to be more positive among those located in subordinate positions in the labor market or the relations of production; for example, the unemployed, working-class individuals (i.e., low-income or unskilled workers), women, and the young (D'Art & Turner, 2008; Frangi et al., 2017; Givan & Hipp, 2012). Scholarly literature has explained these findings by noting the importance of material interests. Frangi and

his collaborators (2017) argue that attitudes about labor unions are usually based on rational mechanisms associated with material interests, that is, mechanisms through which people evaluate the extent to which unions help improve their material living conditions. This argument is consistent with the Marxist perspective of unions, which posits that unions are a collective response by workers to their subordinate position in production relations (Hyman, 1989; E. O. Wright, 1997).

This research has advanced the understanding of the role of labor unions by showing how objective socioeconomic position—most notably, social class—shapes individual attitudes toward unions. In this article, we contribute to this research by analyzing how attitudes to labor unions are shaped by subjective manifestations of inequality, broadly defined as how people perceive and evaluate inequality. Using data from the 2020 Latinobarómetro survey for 18 Latin American countries, we bring together the sociological and social-psychological research on inequality and study how attitudes to unions are shaped by class identification—i.e., by how people define their position in the class structure (Mann, 1973), and by ideal inequality, understood as the

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level of inequality that people consider ideal or fair (Norton & Ariely, 2011). We also consider recent research suggesting that attitudes about labor unions are affected not only by material (class-based) interests but also by individual political and ideological orientations (Frangi et al., 2017; McAleese & Day, 2022). Thus, we also test whether individual political orientations moderate the effect of class identification and ideal inequality.

We focus on Latin America because this region has high levels of inequality and a labor market with high rates of job precariousness and informality (OIT, 2022). Additionally, in Latin America labor unions have been one of the main supporters of distributive and antineoliberal platforms (Silva & Rossi, 2018). As we show below, in the 2000s and 2010s the development of these platforms was accompanied in some countries by a resurgence of the left, the renewal of party-union alliances, and the revitalization of labor movements (Collier, 2018; Etchemendy, 2019; Frangi & Memoli, 2014). Despite this, no research has yet studied how Latin Americans' evaluations of inequality shape their attitudes towards labor unions.

Our findings suggest that pro-union attitudes are significantly higher among those who identify with the lower-middle class but not among those who identify with the lower class. We also find statistically significant interaction effects between class identification and political orientation: differences in political orientation widen the class divide in attitudes to unions only for the (self-identified) middle-class and upper-class groups but not for the self-identified lower-class group (in this latter group, the probability that someone would have pro-union attitudes is essentially the same regardless of their political orientation). All in all, these findings are partially consistent with our initial hypotheses.

Concerning ideal inequality, and broadly consistent with our hypothesis, we find that those who want less economic inequality have more positive attitudes towards unions. Additionally, we find statistically significant interaction effects between ideal inequality and political orientation. However, in contrast to the hypothesis that the negative effect of having a nonegalitarian attitude is higher for those who identify with the right, we find that the largest effect occurs when the respondent has a centrist political position.

All things considered, our findings indicate that class identification and ideal inequality represent two distinct mechanisms through which inequality shapes individual attitudes towards organizations which, like labor unions, act collectively to reduce inequality between classes. As we argue below, class identification is an indicator of class identity, which derives from people's location in the class structure (Curtis, 2016; Elbert & Pérez, 2018; Oddsson, 2018). Therefore, class identification is key for understanding not only people's perception of their objective class position, but also their attitudes toward class dynamics and conflicts (e.g., toward class boundaries, power, and redistribution) (Haddon & Wu, 2022; Robison & Stubager, 2018; E. O. Wright, 1997). Ideal inequality, on the other hand, is a motivational process that shapes how much inequality people believe to exist, and how much inequality they consider ideal or fair (García-Sánchez et al., 2018; Norton & Ariely, 2011). Thus, studying it is fundamental to understanding who are more likely to endorse actions to reduce inequality (Chow & Galak, 2012; Franko, 2017).

Building upon this conceptualization of class identification and ideal inequality, the main contribution of this article is to show that the way in which inequality is ideally desired and how people identify themselves with a social class is fundamental for explaining who is more likely to support labor unions. At the end of this article, we argue that our finding has important implications for labor union revitalization. In unequal regions like Latin America, unions could revitalize themselves among the public if they emphasize how their actions help reduce inequality.

2. Subjective inequality and attitudes to unions

In recent years, scholars have become more interested in studying how subjective inequality shapes individual sociopolitical attitudes (see,

for example, García-Sánchez et al., 2022). Subjective inequality encompasses various dimensions and aspects. It reflects individuals' perceptions, evaluations, and attitudes towards economic inequality. Therefore, unlike objective inequality, it pertains to the personal interpretation and emotional response to disparities (Hwang, 2024).

In sociology, the study of subjective inequality has usually focused on class identification (Andersen & Curtis, 2012; Andersson et al., 2023; Haddon & Wu, 2022; Oddsson, 2018; Pérez Ahumada, 2014). This refers to personal feelings through which people define their position in the class structure and who is similar to and different from themselves (Mann, 1973). From a Marxist perspective, Wright (1997) argues that class identity also implies the definition of who is a potential "friend" or "enemy" within the economic system.

As a subjective expression of class inequality, class identity is strongly correlated to people's objective class positions (Curtis, 2016; Elbert & Pérez, 2018; Oddsson, 2018). In fact, although middle-class identities have become prevalent in most affluent countries (Andersen & Curtis, 2012), in Latin America people in the subordinated classes—e.g., unskilled workers and the informal self-employed—are significantly more likely to identify with the working or lower classes than those who occupy privileged or middle-class positions (e.g., employers, expert managers or supervisors) (Elbert & Pérez, 2018; Pérez Ahumada & Andrade, 2023).

Class identity is, nonetheless, more than an outcome of class location. Class identity also has significant effects on individual sociopolitical interests (Pérez Ahumada, 2014; Robison & Stubager, 2018; E. O. Wright, 1997), and these effects are independent of the effect of class location (Wallace & Junisbai, 2003; E. O. Wright, 1997). Whether in Latin American or in more affluent regions, those who identify with the working or lower classes perceive stronger conflicts between classes and are more likely to perceive class boundaries as rigid than those who identify with the upper class (Haddon & Wu, 2022; Pérez Ahumada, 2014; Robison & Stubager, 2018; Wallace & Junisbai, 2003). Moreover, Haddon and Wu (2022) analyzed the interaction effects between objective class position and subjective class identification, and found that those who deflate their class identity (e.g., are in the upper [salariat] class and have a working-class identification) share similar perceptions of class conflict to those who occupy an objective working-class location. This suggests that class self-identification is a psychological process that reflects not only a person's class location but also shapes individual views of conflict between classes (Haddon & Wu, 2022). In line with this evidence, Marshall (2021) found that Latin Americans who identify with the upper or upper-middle class are less likely to trust unions than those who identify with the middle, lower-middle, or lower class. All in all, this evidence is consistent with the argument that class identity is a precondition for more complex expressions of class consciousness, e.g., recognition of oppositional interests and support for class-based collective action (Mann, 1973; Pérez Ahumada, 2014; E. O. Wright, 1997).

That said, there are reasons to believe that the relationship between class identification and attitudes to unions might be non-linear. In neoliberal economies, an important portion of workers are employed in flexible, independent, or low-quality work arrangements, in which the probabilities of unionization are very low (Bensusán, 2019; Jensen, 2020). Building upon this premise, some scholars argue that the working class is currently divided between a segment of "insiders" (workers with highly protected jobs) and "outsiders" (precarious or unprotected workers), and that this division creates a dilemma for unions because most of their membership are insiders who push them to favor their interests at the expense of outsiders' interests (Culpepper & Regan, 2014; Rueda, 2005). In Latin America, the distinction between insiders and outsiders is associated with the existence of low-quality jobs and informal employment, mostly associated with self-employment (Bensusán, 2019; OIT, 2022). In this region, 50 % of workers are employed in informal occupations, with percentages for each country ranging from 26 % (Chile) to 82 % (Bolivia) (OIT, 2022, pp. 57–58).

Although informal self-employed workers are the most likely to identify with the working/lower class (Elbert & Pérez, 2018), they might not have positive attitudes towards labor unions because unions concentrate their actions mostly on “protected workers” (Bensusán, 2019). These protected workers, in turn, have class identities that are closer to the “lower-middle” (or even “middle”) class than to the “lower” class (Elbert & Pérez, 2018; Pérez Ahumada & Andrade, 2023). Thus, our first hypothesis is that:

H1. The relationship between class identification and pro-union attitudes is similar to an inverted U-shaped relationship: the probability of having pro-union attitudes is lower among those who identify with the lower and upper classes, and higher among those who identify with the middle-classes (particularly with the lower-middle class).

Departing from the sociological emphasis on class identification, social psychology researchers have analyzed subjective inequality by focusing on how people’s perceptions and attitudes about inequality shape sociopolitical orientations (e.g., the degree of perceived inequality or the tolerance of it). This research suggests that subjective inequality influences people’s political attitudes more significantly than objective inequality (Willis et al., 2022). This occurs because people adjust their attitudes to their perception of reality. In other words, attitudes toward inequality are determined by the ideas one holds about it (Sainz et al., 2023). Consistent with this argument, Bamfield and Horton (2009) show that when high incomes are perceived as deserved, people do not oppose them. Similarly, Pellicer et al. (2019) demonstrate that when people believe that inequality is inevitable, they are less willing to act against it (see also Soler-Martínez et al., 2023).

Within this field of literature, scholars have started to pay attention to the sociopolitical effects of ideal inequality, understood as the levels of inequality people consider ideal or fair (Norton & Ariely, 2011). Ideal inequality is a motivational process related to people’s perception of inequality (i.e., how much inequality they perceive to exist) and their evaluation of the levels of inequality that should exist in society (García-Sánchez et al., 2019). Ideologies condition this motivation because ideologies shape how people would like society to function (García-Sánchez et al., 2018). Therefore, ideal inequality is closely correlated with individual political orientations and attitudes (Willis et al., 2015): those who desire lower levels of inequality are more likely to support redistributive policies such as taxation for wealthy groups (Chow & Galak, 2012) or the provision of social assistance to the poor (Franko, 2017). Furthermore, Sánchez-Rodríguez et al. (2024) demonstrate that individuals typically accept degrees of economic inequality that align with the pursuit of their personal life objectives based on their values. People tend to prefer greater economic inequality when they show less concern for the welfare and interests of others (self-transcendence value) or when they prioritize their own goals over those of others (self-enhancement value). From a different perspective, García-Castro et al. (2024) show that trust in labor unions is longitudinally correlated with egalitarianism: trusting unions as organizations formed to reduce power imbalances between workers and employers helps reinforce people’s egalitarian orientations over time.

Based on this evidence, scholars argue that analyzing people’s ideal level of inequality is crucial for understanding perceived inequality and under what conditions citizens would endorse policies to reduce economic disparities (García-Sánchez et al., 2018). Building upon this argument, recent empirical studies have started to study the relationship between ideal and perceived inequality (García-Sánchez et al., 2018; Willis et al., 2015) and, to a much lesser extent, between ideal inequality and individuals’ engagement with their communities and political institutions (Arsenio, 2018).

These investigations have contributed to the study of subjective inequality by showing how ideal inequality is a motivational mechanism that affects individuals’ sociopolitical attitudes. However, to our knowledge, no empirical study has yet analyzed how people’s attitudes toward inequality (particularly the level of inequality they consider

ideal) shape their attitudes toward collective actors such as labor unions.

Despite this research gap, recent sociological research suggests that there should be a negative, linear relationship between ideal inequality and attitudes to labor unions: those who desire less inequality should have more positive attitudes towards unions. This probably occurs because attitudes toward unions are not shaped only by people’s material (class-based) interests, but also by ideational mechanisms associated with normative, ideological, or political orientations through which people evaluate unions—or any other organization—and their role in society (Frangi et al., 2017; McAleese & Day, 2022). In fact, those who identify with the left are significantly more likely to trust unions because they have more progressive and egalitarian attitudes (Frangi et al., 2017; Marshall, 2021). Conversely, those who identify with the right are more likely to trust private institutions such as banks, because they have political values that place more importance on individualism and competition than on equality (Fungáčová et al., 2019). Building upon this evidence, our second hypothesis is that:

H2. There is a negative relationship between ideal inequality and attitudes towards unions. Those who desire less inequality have more positive attitudes towards unions.

3. Class politics and labor unions in Latin America

Like the rest of the world, Latin American labor movements formed through alliances between unions and left-wing or populist, labor-based parties (De la Garza, 2001; Drake, 1996). In countries such as Argentina, México, Venezuela, and Brazil (until the 1980s), unions allied with populist parties in power to become the backbone of state-corporatist arrangements. These arrangements provided unions significant institutional power resources, such as provisions that limited union competition and centralized bargaining at the sectoral or occupational levels (Bensusán, 2016; Cook, 2007; De la Garza, 2001). By contrast, in countries such as Chile, Bolivia, and Uruguay, the unions were not part of corporatist arrangements, nor did they have access to significant institutional power resources derived from corporatist labor laws. As a result, the main power resource available for unions was the construction of linkages with strongly ideological left-wing parties, typically Marxists, that mostly played oppositional roles (De la Garza, 2001; Drake, 1996; Pérez Ahumada, 2023). These linkages gave rise to class-based unionism that persisted until at least the end of the twentieth century (De la Garza, 2001).

Differences aside, these two types of unionism were severely affected by the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s and by the neoliberal reforms carried out in the 1980s and 1990s (Cook, 2007; De la Garza, 2001). In one way or another, the military regimes tried to destroy (and, in cases such as Chile, successfully destroyed) the ties between unions and left or center-of-left parties (De la Garza, 2001; Drake, 1996; Pérez Ahumada, 2023). Similarly, neoliberal policies initiated in the 1980s and 1990s dismantled the economic foundations articulated in the Import Substitution Industrialization model, upon which twentieth-century unionism had been built (Roberts, 2002). These policies were accompanied by legislative changes that made hiring and firing more flexible and eliminated or weakened the regulations that centralized collective bargaining and protected unions’ bargaining power (Bensusán, 2016; Murillo, 2005). Furthermore, during the same period, and similar to the rest of the world, many Latin American parties distanced themselves from labor movements and began to promote political agendas in which unions played, at best, a secondary role (Carneiro et al., 2020; Roberts, 2002).

In some countries, this scenario changed in the 2000s with the resurgence of antineoliberal protests and left-wing parties (Almeida, 2023; Silva & Rossi, 2018). For example, in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, the electoral triumph of left or center-of-left parties coincided with renewed alliances between parties and unions. As a result, labor unions were revitalized and started to play a central role in formulating

post-neoliberal redistributive policies (Collier, 2018; Quiñones, 2011; Senén, 2011). That said, the renewal of the party-union alliance did not occur to the same extent in all countries that turned to the left. For instance, in Ecuador, Venezuela, and, to a lesser extent, Bolivia, left-wing parties came to power with the support of various popular movements. However, these parties lacked strong ties to the traditional labor movement, and their relationships with unions were, at best, instrumental (Collier, 2018). Despite this, the turn to the left observed in the first decades of the twenty-first century resulted in expanded social rights, the reversal of several policies enacted during the neoliberal turn, and, more generally, in the reincorporation of the popular sectors—including the labor movement—into the political arena (Silva & Rossi, 2018). As a result, despite its diversity, the revitalization of the left in Latin America produced a political context that, compared to that observed during the neoliberal period, was more favorable for unions. In some cases (e.g., Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay), unions regained their bargaining power vis-à-vis employers, became more influential as political actors, and sometimes even improved their legitimacy as representatives of workers (see, for example, Etchemendy, 2019; Frangi & Memoli, 2014).

These processes may have increased the political polarization in Latin America, particularly the polarization regarding the role of unions. This probably occurs because political conflict reflects antagonism between classes (e.g., between workers and employers) and between the political parties representing their interests—e.g., between left and right parties (Korpi, 2018). This explains why, in most capitalist democracies, labor unions promote egalitarian policies through their linkages with left-wing parties (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2018; Kerrissey, 2015). Similarly, this explains why, as shown above, left-wing orientation is strongly associated with more positive attitudes towards unions (D'Art & Turner, 2008; Frangi et al., 2017; Marshall, 2021).

Building upon this argument, it might be possible to hypothesize that political orientations moderate (increase) the effect of class identification and ideal inequality. More specifically, it might be possible to hypothesize that:

H3.1. Political orientation increases the class divide in the attitudes towards unions, e.g., the divide between those self-identified as lower-middle class and those self-identified as upper-class: those who self-identify with the lower-middle class and the left will have *more* positive attitudes towards unions than those who identify with the upper classes and the political right.

H3.2. Political orientation (particularly, having a right-wing orientation) increases the negative effect of ideal inequality: the negative effect of having a nonegalitarian attitude will be *higher* for those who identify with the right relative to those who identify with the left.

4. Data and methods

In this article, we used data from the 2020 Latinobarómetro Survey. The survey contains nationally representative information obtained through face-to-face interviews (except in Argentina, where it was conducted online). The survey included 18 countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Although the Latinobarómetro survey has been conducted for several years, we only analyzed the data for 2020 because that year's survey included the questions needed to measure ideal inequality.

2020 was certainly not a “normal” year. Like in the rest of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed Latin American labor markets. Not only did it increase unemployment and inflation rates, but it also had detrimental effects on job security and incomes (ILO, 2021). Although in countries such as Argentina and Uruguay, labor unions played an essential role in defending labor rights and working conditions, in most countries, unions' capacity to influence government

policies was low (Pérez Ahumada, 2020; Sánchez Daza & Martínez de Ita, 2023; Silverman & Moisés Elicabide, 2023). This fact may call into question the extent to which our findings hold true in other contexts. However, recent investigations show that citizens' trust in unions remained the same in most countries before and during 2020 (Pérez Ahumada & Carrasco, 2024). Based on this evidence, and despite the atypical year in which our data were collected, we believe our findings can apply to other (nonpandemic) contexts.

Due to the objectives of this study, the sample included only individuals who were employed or provided information about their last employment. After listwise deletion, our final sample consisted of 9703 cases.

4.1. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable was measured through a question that asked about the belief in the utility/functionality of labor unions. This question was: “For each of the groups, institutions, or individuals on the list, how much trust do you have that *they operate to improve our quality of life?* (italic ours)” The response options varied from 1 = *a lot* to 4 = *none*. Following previous studies (Frangi et al., 2017), we constructed a dichotomous variable, and the categories were as follows (percentages in parentheses): 1 = *a lot or some trust* (28%), and 0 = *little or no trust* (72%). We interpreted the value of 1 as indicating a “pro-union” attitude, and the value of 0 as indicating a “anti-union” attitude.

We decided not to label this variable as “trust in unions” because the survey question used in this article differs from the traditional question used to measure trust, which does not ask respondents to evaluate unions' performance in *improving quality of life* (see, e.g., Frangi et al., 2017). This focus on unions' capacity to improve quality of life may certainly have affected our results by underestimating citizens' attitudes towards unions: when unions are weak, people's belief in unions' capacity to improve their lives is probably low. That said, we believe that our dependent variable is a good proxy to study attitudes towards unions because it measures an attitude that involves a relatively lasting view of unions, which can function as the basis of their legitimacy.

4.2. Independent and control variables

The main independent variables were two:

1. *Class identification*: This variable was measured using a standard self-identification question incorporated in the survey: “People sometimes describe themselves as belonging to a social class. Would you describe yourself belonging to...”: The response options were (percentages in parentheses): upper class (1.4%), upper-middle class (6.5%), middle class (37.3%), lower-middle class (33.0%), and lower class (21.8%).
2. *Ideal inequality*: This variable refers to the level of inequality that people consider “ideal.” It was calculated by considering the degree of economic inequality the respondents believe a country should have. In the Latinobarómetro survey, respondents were asked to answer the following question: “Imagine that (country) is divided into five groups: Group 1 is the poorest and Group 5 is the richest. Imagine that the total amount of money that [country] has is 100. Now imagine that you can decide how much each group should have. How much would you assign to each group?” Building on prior research (Browman et al., 2022), we entered the respondents' wealth estimates for the five groups into the “ineq” function from the *ineq* package in R (Zeileis, 2004), and calculated a pseudo-Gini index of perceived inequality. This index ranged from 0 to 0.8 ($M = 0.24$; $SD = 0.27$). Lower scores indicate that the respondent wants less inequality (e.g., a 0 score indicates that she/he thinks the five groups should have the same amount of money). By contrast, higher scores indicate that she/he is more disposed to accept inequality (i.e.,

she/he believes one group should concentrate most of the country's wealth).

Prior research suggests that attitudes towards unions are also affected by objective class location and other sociopolitical factors, such as people's trust in institutions, their interest in politics or their perceptions of unions' level of power (Frangi et al., 2017; Marshall, 2021; Pérez Ahumada & Carrasco, 2024). Therefore, our analyses also included the following controls:

Objective class position was measured through a variable inspired by the model proposed by Erik O. Wright (E. O. Wright, 1997) and applied in recent studies for the region (Elbert & Pérez, 2018; Pérez Ahumada & Andrade, 2023). To construct the class scheme, we used four questions from the questionnaire that capture the occupational status, type of work, educational level, and subjective income of the surveyed individuals. Based on these criteria, we constructed a scheme of 6 class categories (percentages in parentheses): 1. Large employers (1.9%), 2. Small employers (11.7%), 3. Petite bourgeoisie (self-employed professionals) (8.9%), 4. Middle class (professional salaried workers and middle-level managers) (24.1%), 5. Working class (skilled and unskilled workers) (14.6%), and 6. Informal (unskilled) self-employed (38.8%).

Political position was measured through the survey question, "In politics, people normally speak of 'left' and 'right.' On a scale where 0 is left and 10 is right, where would you place yourself?" To include the respondents that did not identify with the left-right continuum, this variable was recoded into four categories (percentages in parentheses): Left (scores 0 to 3 in the original scale) (29.1%); Center (scores 4 to 6) (28.6%); Right (scores 7 to 10) (27.8%); and No identification ("none," "don't know," or "no response") (14.5%).

Trust in political institutions was measured through an additive scale ranging from 0 to 9, where a higher score indicates greater trust ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 2.15$). This scale was constructed based on a question that measures how much trust the respondent has in the following political institutions (0 = no trust to 3 = a lot of trust): 1) congress; 2) government, and 3) political parties. The scale is unidimensional and internally consistent: Cronbach's alpha = 0.75; Factor Analysis (Principal Axis Method): Eigenvalue = 1.52; Explained Variance = 51%.

Interest in politics, measured through a 0 to 3 interval scale ($M = 1.06$; $SD = 1.01$), resulting from the survey question "How interested are you in politics?" Higher scores indicate higher interest.

Perception of unions' power. This variable was constructed from the survey question "Who do you think has more power in (country)?" The question highlights a series of groups or institutions (large companies, political parties, unions, etc.), allowing for a maximum of 3 alternatives to be chosen. Our variable was coded 1 = the respondents think that unions are part of the powerful groups in their country (12.76%) and 0 otherwise (87.24%).

Additionally, all our models included *age*, measured in years ($M = 40.69$, $SD = 14.43$) and *gender*: 1 = female (38.85%) and 0 = male (61.15%).

4.3. Method

Due to the binary nature of our dependent variable, we tested the hypotheses using binary logistic regressions. In addition to the independent variables of interest and the control variables, the models included fixed effects for each country. Doing so allowed us to control for country-specific characteristics that were not directly measured (Bryan & Jenkins, 2016).³

³ All data and R codes used to generate our results can be found in the OSF repository associated with this article: https://osf.io/tj5zm/?view_only=ff34b8cfc45467aa48da7543386c3e5

5. Results

Table 1 shows the results of four logistic regression models. Model 1 includes class identification, ideal inequality, and sociodemographic controls (objective class location, gender, and age). Model 2 includes all the variables from Model 1 plus political position and political controls (trust in institutions, interest in politics, and perceptions of unions' power). Finally, Model 3 shows the interaction effects between class identification and political position (Model 3.1) and between ideal inequality and political position (Model 3.2).

The models show a statistically significant relationship between class identification and attitudes towards unions. More specifically, Model 2 suggests that, compared to those who self-identify as lower class, those who identify as lower-middle class are significantly *more* likely to have positive attitudes towards labor unions. Using the *ggeffects* package in R (Lüdtke, 2021), we calculated the average marginal probability of having pro-union attitudes for each self-identified class category, holding all other variables constant at their means (quantitative variables) or reference categories (categorical variables). The results are presented in Fig. 1. This figure shows that the probability that a person who self-identifies with the lower-class holds pro-union attitudes is 21 %, whereas the probability of someone who self-identifies as lower-middle class is 25 %. The percentage difference is small (this explains the overlap in the confidence intervals). However, it is statistically significant (p -value < 0.001). This means that, while identification with the lower-middle class increases the propensity to hold pro-union attitudes, that does not occur for those who self-identify as lower class. Furthermore, the probability that someone who self-identifies with the lower-class has pro-union attitudes (21 %) is *not* statistically different from the probability of someone who self-identifies with the upper class (22 %). These results and the shape of the probabilities depicted in Fig. 1 implies that H_1 should be accepted (although the inverted U-shape is not perfect as the probability of having pro-union attitudes among those who identify as upper class is equal—not *lower*—than that of those who identify as upper-middle class).

Additionally, Model 2 shows a statistically significant and negative relationship between ideal inequality and attitudes towards unions. Those who desire less inequality are more likely to have positive attitudes towards unions. The probability of having pro-union attitudes of those who are more disposed to accept inequality (i.e., those who have the highest score on the pseudo-Gini index of perceived inequality) is 20 %, whereas the probability for those who want less equality (i.e., have the lowest score on the pseudo-Gini index) is 25 %. Again, the effect size is not substantially large, but it is statistically significant (p -value < 0.01). This is consistent with H_2 .

Model 2 also indicates that there is a statistically significant relationship between political identification and attitudes towards unions. For example, the predicted probabilities indicate that the probability that a person who identify with the left holds pro-union attitudes is 23 %, whereas the probability for someone who identify with the right is 17 % (p -value < 0.001).

As for the interaction effects, Model 3.1 shows that the interaction between class identification and political position is statistically significant. This means that the relationship between class identification and attitudes towards unions is moderated by political position. To facilitate interpretation, we transformed the coefficients of the interaction terms into average marginal probabilities. These probabilities are presented in Fig. 2. This figure shows that political position widens the class divide in the pro-union attitudes. For instance, the probability of having positive attitudes towards unions for someone self-identified as lower-middle class *and* leftist is 25 %. This probability drops to 16 % for someone who self-identifies with the upper class and with the political right. In other words, when differences in political position are considered, the percentage difference between those who identify with the lower-middle and the upper class increases to 9 %. This difference is larger than the 3 % difference obtained from the direct effects of these two

Table 1

Logistic regression models estimating attitudes to labor unions in Latin America, 2020 (log-odds, standard errors in parentheses).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3.1	Model 3.2
<i>Class identification (ref.: lower class)</i>				
Lower-middle class	0.257*** (0.067)	0.197** (0.071)	0.352** (0.119)	0.198** (0.071)
Middle class	0.218** (0.067)	0.116 (0.071)	0.325** (0.119)	0.118 [†] (0.071)
Upper-middle class	0.263* (0.106)	0.021 (0.112)	0.010 (0.203)	0.026 (0.112)
Upper class	0.352 [†] (0.196)	0.043 (0.211)	0.811* (0.351)	0.030 (0.212)
Ideal inequality	−0.300*** (0.090)	−0.304** (0.095)	−0.306** (0.095)	−0.201 (0.161)
<i>Political position (ref.: Left)</i>				
Center		−0.153* (0.063)	0.077 (0.146)	−0.046 (0.083)
Right		−0.377*** (0.065)	−0.084 (0.147)	−0.382*** (0.087)
No position		−0.266** (0.084)	−0.155 (0.172)	−0.313** (0.113)
<i>Interaction effects</i>				
Center*Lower-middle			−0.197 (0.179)	
Center*Middle			−0.386* (0.177)	
Center*Upper-middle			0.115 (0.292)	
Center*Upper			−2.360** (0.769)	
Right*Lower-middle			−0.342 [†] (0.185)	
Right*Middle			−0.372* (0.180)	
Right*Upper-middle			−0.261 (0.280)	
Right*Upper			−0.941* (0.479)	
No position*Lower-middle			−0.223 (0.219)	
No position*Middle			−0.108 (0.217)	
No position*Upper-middle			0.483 (0.410)	
No position*Upper			−1.041 (0.870)	
Center *Ideal inequality				−0.504* (0.245)
Right* Ideal inequality				0.018 (0.242)
No position*Ideal inequality				0.187 (0.302)
Sociodemographic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Political controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	−1.864*** (0.233)	−2.716*** (0.253)	−2.852*** (0.262)	−2.743*** (0.255)
McFadden's pseudo-R ²	0.04	0.12	0.12	0.12
AIC	11068.256	10256.798	10257.973	10255.894
BIC	11283.662	10515.285	10602.622	10535.921
Log Likelihood	−5504.128	−5092.399	−5080.986	−5088.947
Deviance	11008.256	10184.798	10161.973	10177.894
Observations	9703	9703	9703	9703

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05; [†] p < 0.1

Note: dependent variable coded as 1 = having a pro-union attitude (see main text for definitions).

To save space, sociodemographic controls (objective class location, gender, and age) and political controls (trust in institutions, interest in politics, and perceptions of unions' power) are not reported in the table.

class categories (see Fig. 1). Therefore, this result is consistent with our hypothesis.

That said, Fig. 2 also suggests that political position is only important for some self-identified class groups. More specifically, it suggests that political divides are largely irrelevant for those who identify with the lower class. Within this group, the probability of having pro-union attitudes is essentially the same, regardless of whether the respondent identifies herself with the right or the left; these probabilities range between 18 % for the right-wingers and 20 % for the centrists. By contrast, political divides are much more salient for those who identify with the lower-middle class or middle class, and especially those who self-identify with the upper class. In the first two self-identified class groups (lower-middle and middle classes), the probability that someone with a leftist position would have positive attitudes towards unions is around 25 %. On the other hand, the probability that someone with a right-wing position would hold pro-union attitudes is around 17 %. In the second group (upper class), the probability changes are even larger, although the main divide is between those with a left-wing and a *centrist* position. The average probability that an upper-class left-winger would have pro-union attitudes is 35 % (the highest probability among all the interaction terms), whereas the probability that someone with a centrist position would have positive attitudes towards unions is only 5 % (the lowest probability among all). These results suggest that left-wing orientations can be more important in reinforcing pro-labor views in the (self-identified) middle and upper classes than in the (self-identified) lower class. Therefore, H_{3,1} can only be partially accepted.

Finally, the results from Model 3.2 indicate statistically significant interaction effects between ideal inequality and political position. These effects are presented in Fig. 3, which shows the average marginal probability of having positive attitudes towards unions for people who have different political positions and have contrasting attitudes toward inequality—specifically, people who believe that all groups should have the same amount of money (score 0 on the pseudo-Gini index) or that believe one group should concentrate all the country's wealth (score 0.8). The results in Fig. 3 suggest that the relationship between ideal inequality and attitudes towards unions changes by political position. More specifically, they suggest that having a centrist position increases the negative effect of ideal inequality on attitudes towards unions. The probability of having positive attitudes towards unions for someone who accepts inequality (i.e., someone who has a score of 0.8 on the pseudo-Gini index) and identifies herself with the political center is 15 %—that is, 8 % points lower than someone with the same political position but that has strong egalitarian attitudes (as indicated by a score of 0 on the pseudo-Gini index). For other political positions, this difference is much lower. For instance, the percentage difference between those who desire less and more inequality and identify with the left is 3 %, and that between those who identify with the right is only 2 %. These results are consistent with our hypothesis that political position moderates the relationship between ideal inequality and attitudes to unions (H_{3,2}). However, these results and the coefficients from Model 3.2 suggest that the political divide that produces significant moderating effects is not that between left-wing and right-wing positions, but the divide between having or not having centrist positions.

6. Discussion

Class identification refers to personal feelings through which people define their position in the economic system, and who are similar to and different from them (Mann, 1973; E. O. Wright, 1997). In Latin America, identification with the lower class is highest among labor market outsiders, who are, in turn, less likely to work in union protected positions (Bensusán, 2019; Elbert & Pérez, 2018; OIT, 2022). Considering this, we hypothesized an inverted U-shaped relationship between class identification and attitudes towards labor unions. Largely consistent with our hypothesis, our findings suggest that, compared to those who self-identified as lower class (or upper class), the propensity to have

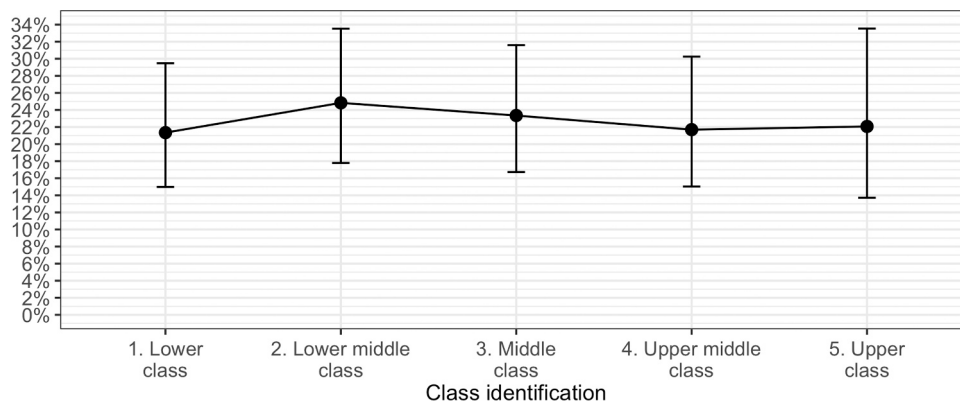


Fig. 1. Predicted probabilities of having pro-union attitudes by class identification.

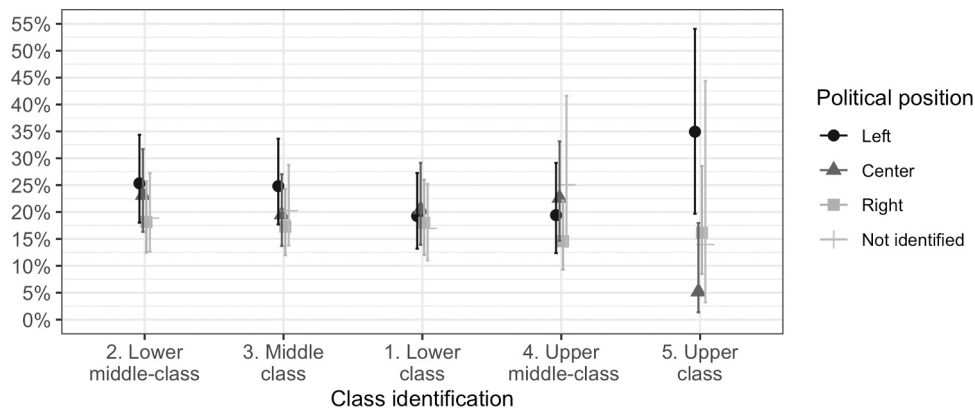


Fig. 2. Predicted probabilities of having pro-union attitudes for the interaction between class identification and political position —.

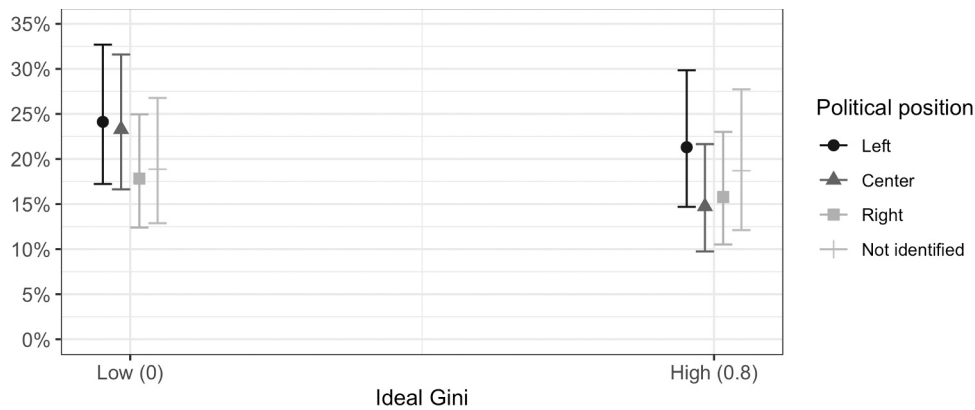


Fig. 3. Predicted probabilities of having pro-union attitudes for the interaction between ideal inequality and political position —.

pro-union attitudes is significantly higher among those who identify themselves with the lower-middle class.

Our Latinobarómetro data show that the highest percentages of identification with this the lower-middle class (37 %) are found among respondents located in a (objective) working-class position. Assuming that attitudes to labor unions are partly shaped by people's material interests derived from their position in the economic system (Frangi et al., 2017; E. O. Wright, 1997), our finding suggests that class identification is an important mechanism that reinforces workers' understanding of class interests. Moreover, our finding implies that this subjective mechanism is independent of class location. This explains why the effect of class identification is statistically significant even when controlling for objective class location.

As hypothesized, we also found that identifying with the lower class does *not* significantly improve the attitudes towards labor unions. This result may indicate the existence of a gap in union representation between labor market outsiders and insiders (Rueda, 2005), at least as measured by the distinction between the informal self-employed and salaried workers. Consistent with this interpretation, our Latinobarómetro data show that 39 % of the employed population belongs to the informal self-employed class, and that 50 % of them identify with the lower class. By contrast, only 15 % of the working-class respondents identify with the lower class ($\chi^2 = 327.374, p < 0.000$). This reaffirms the argument that lower-class identification is prevalent among independent workers (Elbert & Pérez, 2018), and that due to the extended vulnerabilities of the Latin American labor markets, these independent

workers are very unlikely to unionize (Bensusán, 2019; OIT, 2022). As a result, these workers' attitudes to labor unions are *not* exceptionally positive, even though their lower-class identities are strong and their position in the labor market is highly vulnerable.

Our analysis of the interaction between class identification and political position indicates that the attitudes towards unions within the self-identified lower-class group are essentially the same regardless of political position. In other words, differences in political orientation matter (i.e., they widen the class divide in attitudes towards unions) only for the self-identified middle-class and upper-class groups but not for the self-identified lower-class group. This finding may suggest that the separation between left parties and popular sectors in Latin America is deeper and more persistent than previously thought. The "turn to the left" in the early 2000s meant revitalizing the ties between left-wing parties and the popular sectors (Silva & Rossi, 2018). However, such revitalization might not have been enough to fill the gaps produced during the neoliberal period, when most labor parties abandoned class politics and the popular sectors were excluded from politics (Roberts, 2002). Research has demonstrated that when this happens, the lower classes are less likely to vote for or identify with left parties (Bargsted & Somma, 2016; Jansen et al., 2013). Consistent with this evidence, our result suggests that identification with the left does not increase the (self-identified) lower-class support for unions.

On the other hand, as we expected, we found that those who want less economic inequality have more positive attitudes to unions. Unions are a tool for the working class to improve their working and living conditions. When unions have more bargaining power, wages are higher and economic inequality is lower (Kerrissey, 2015; Kollmeyer, 2017). Our finding adds weight to this "power resource" argument by showing that, as a motivational process, those who want more equality are more likely to view unions as a tool to achieve it. This explains why desiring greater economic equality is associated with more positive attitudes toward unions (McAleese & Day, 2022).

We also expected the effect of ideal inequality to be stronger in people on the left with greater egalitarian attitudes than in people on the right with less union-friendly orientations (Marshall, 2021; McAleese & Day, 2022). What we did not expect, however, was that the negative effect of having inegalitarian attitudes would be stronger for people who consider themselves centrist. This can occur because people with a centrist political orientation may be more sensitive to their motivations and attitudes about inequality and unions than people with more extreme and rigid ideological orientations, such as those on the left or right (García-Sánchez et al., 2019). Left-wing people can have pro-union attitudes, and right-wing people can have anti-union attitudes, regardless of their attitudes and motivations toward inequality.

All in all, our findings shed light on how subjective mechanisms associated with inequality help explain individual attitudes towards class-based organizations which, like labor unions, are formed to fight inequality. We believe that our findings can also help explain cross-national differences in attitudes to labor unions. Pérez Ahumada and Carrasco (2024) have recently shown that trust in unions in Latin America is shaped, at the country level, by factors associated with the labor market and class politics. They show, for example, that trust in unions is higher where labor informality is lower (e.g., Chile and Uruguay), where left parties are more powerful (e.g., Brazil and Uruguay), or where citizens' willingness to protest is higher (e.g., Colombia and Chile).

Our findings suggest that these country differences could also be explained by how people evaluate inequality and ideally desire it. To explore this suggestion, we used the coefficients from Model 2 (Table 1) and calculated the average marginal probability of having pro-union attitudes for each country. Then we computed the country-level mean values of the pseudo-Gini index of ideal inequality and the percentage of respondents who identify with either the lower class or the lower-middle class in each country. Finally, we estimated the correlations between these country-level independent and dependent variables. This

exploratory analysis suggested that, at the country level, the correlation between lower-middle class identification and pro-union attitudes is negative but very weak (Pearson's $r = -0.06$). By contrast, the correlation between lower-class identification and pro-union attitudes, and between the later and the pseudo-Gini index are negative and stronger ($r = -0.36$ in the first case, and $r = -0.23$ in the second case). These two correlations are presented in Fig. 4. The figure's panel (a) suggests that in Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay, pro-union attitudes are high because identification with the lower class is low. In the case of Chile and Uruguay, this probably reflects their comparatively low levels of labor informality (OIT, 2022). On the other hand, Panel b) indicates that in Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay, pro-union attitudes are high because the pseudo-Gini score is low, i.e., because citizens' attitudes are more egalitarian. Finally, Fig. 4 suggests that in countries such as Venezuela, pro-union attitudes are low because identification with the lower class is very high, which probably reflects the country's high levels of informality and inflation (Pérez Ahumada & Carrasco, 2024).

7. Conclusion

Labor unions are key for protecting workers' rights and, consequently, for constructing more egalitarian societies (Kerrissey, 2015; Kollmeyer, 2017; Wallace et al., 2022). Building upon this premise, in this article, we showed that pro-union attitudes are significantly higher among those who self-identified with the lower-middle class and among those who desire less inequality. We also found that the effect of class identification and ideal inequality is moderated by political orientation. This allowed us to show, for example, that differences in political orientation increase the class divide in attitudes towards unions only for the (self-identified) middle-class and upper-class groups but *not* for the lower-class one. We interpreted this as a consequence of the divorce between left parties and the popular sectors, which, according to our interpretation, might have been much more profound than what some analysts believe. Similarly, our analysis showed that ideal inequality's effect on attitudes towards unions was stronger among those with a centrist position. We believe this finding adds weight to the argument that centrist political positions are less rigid—and therefore more sensitive to individual attitudes to inequality—than far-rightist or leftist positions.

All in all, our findings suggest that the way in which inequality is ideally desired and how people identify themselves with a social class is fundamental for explaining who is more likely to support labor unions. More specifically, our findings indicate that ideal inequality and class identification represent two distinct mechanisms through which inequality shapes individual attitudes towards organizations which, like labor unions, are formed to reduce economic disparities and power imbalances between workers and employers.

We believe that our findings have important implications for union revitalization. In recent years, scholars have suggested that labor unions can increase their power and influence by strengthening their social legitimacy, as expressed through citizens' trust in and support for their actions (Schmalz et al., 2018; C. F. Wright & McLaughlin, 2021). Adding weight to this argument, our findings imply that, in unequal contexts, unions could revitalize themselves if they mobilize narratives that emphasize how their actions are crucial for constructing more egalitarian societies. This could also help reduce the representation gap that, according to our data, may exist between labor market outsiders and insiders.

It is important to note that our findings are based on a survey conducted in Latin America in 2020. As we explained above, 2020 was an atypical year in which, due to the pandemic, most people were exposed to socioeconomic problems such as inflation, unemployment, and labor insecurities. Recent research has suggested that in most Latin American countries, these issues did not substantially affect citizens' attitudes to unions (Pérez Ahumada & Carrasco, 2024). Despite this, we cannot rule out the possibility that the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic

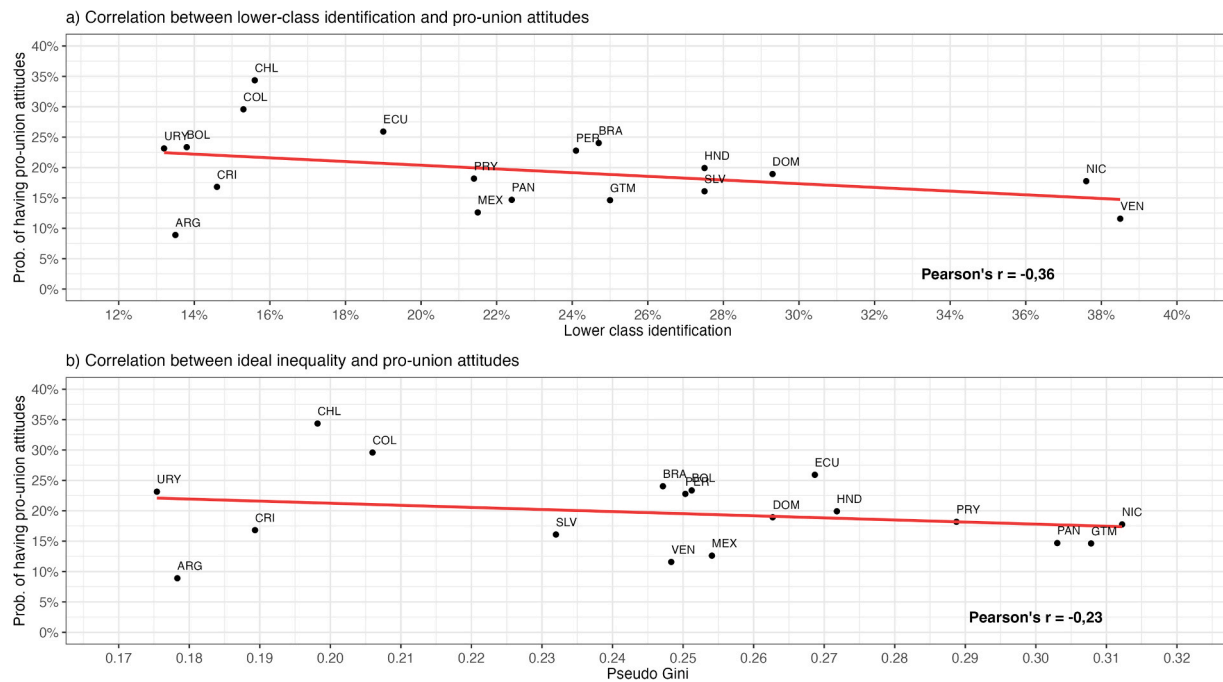


Fig. 4. Country level correlations.

somehow influence our findings.

Our focus on a particular area of the world can also affect our findings. The existing research shows that attitudes toward unions and the effect of subjective inequality on them are influenced by the sociopolitical and institutional context in which unions operate (Frangi et al., 2017; McAleese & Day, 2022). Latin America is one of the most unequal areas in the world, where social unrest and political instability is high (Almeida, 2023). Additionally, in Latin America, collectivist values are culturally emphasized (Krys et al., 2022). This implies that the finding that people who ideally want more equality have more positive attitudes to unions may be context conditioned by the region under study. Future cross-context studies should analyze whether this is the case. In doing so, they could delve deeper into the relationship between subjective inequality and attitudes toward unions. Additionally, further research relying on multilevel modelling could investigate whether cross-national differences in subjective inequality help explain national patterns in attitudes towards unions, such as our exploratory country level analysis suggested.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Juan Diego García-Castro: Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Pablo Pérez-Ahumada:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

none.

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