

“Making America Great Again”: System Justification in the U.S. Presidential Election of 2016

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The U.S. presidential election of Donald Trump in 2016 was interpreted by many as a repudiation of the social and economic status quo. Others suggested that support for Trump reflected opposition to social change, as exemplified by the nostalgic slogan “Make America Great Again.” We consider the possibility that many American voters were indeed frustrated by the consequences of global competition under capitalism but were unwilling or unable to criticize the capitalist system and the existing social order. Consistent with this notion, we observed—in a nationally representative sample of 1,500 American respondents who were surveyed shortly before the election—that economic and gender-specific system justification were positively associated with support for Trump, but after adjusting for these variables general system justification was negatively associated with support for Trump (and positively associated with support for Hillary Clinton). Trump supporters clearly rejected liberal governance under President Obama, which they may have perceived as threatening to the traditional social order, but they strongly justified economic and gender-based disparities in American society.

What is the significance of this article for the general public?

In a nationally representative survey of 1,500 Americans conducted shortly before the 2016 election, we observed that belief in the legitimacy of the economic system and gender relations in society were positively associated with support for Donald Trump (over Hillary Clinton), but after adjusting for these variables support for the legitimacy of the social system overall was negatively associated with support for Trump (and positively associated with support for Clinton). These findings are consistent with the notion that Trump supporters rejected the status quo of liberal governance under President Obama but justified economic and gender-based disparities in society.

Keywords: system justification, gender, capitalism, economic attitudes, political ideology

Let’s make America great again.
—Campaign slogan, Ronald Reagan for President,
1980

The surprising election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America in

2016 was interpreted by many as a revolt against the status quo. Throughout the campaign, Trump was widely perceived as an outsider, having never held any political office, attacking “business as usual” in Washington,

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and railing against the “failed” legacies of the Obama, Bush, and Clinton administrations with promises to “drain the swamp.” Trump’s most enthusiastic supporters seemed to be Republicans who were furious with the government (e.g., [Bump, 2016](#); [Guo, 2016](#)).

The Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, meanwhile, was derided as the “establishment candidate.” Trump’s running mate, Mike Pence, for instance, referred to her as “Secretary of the Status Quo.” Thus, on the morning after the election, the *Washington Post* concluded: “Donald Trump was elected the nation’s 45th president in the stunning culmination of a campaign that defied expectations and conventions at every turn and galvanized legions of aggrieved Americans in a loud repudiation of the status quo” ([Tumulty, Rucker, & Gearan, 2016](#)).

Pundits lined up to support this general interpretation. According to an opinion editorial in the *New York Times*, “Mr. Trump personified the vote against the status quo, one still not working out for [the White working class],” and that is why “many Trump supporters held a progressive outlook” ([Kuhn, 2016](#)). Likewise, [Packer \(2016\)](#) wrote,

The great truth was that large numbers of Republican voters, especially less educated ones, weren’t constitutional originalists, libertarian free traders, members of the Federalist Society, or devout readers of the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page. They actually wanted government to do more things that benefitted *them* (as opposed to benefitting people they saw as undeserving) . . . The Republican Party hasn’t been truly conservative for decades. Its most energized elements are not trying to restore stability or preserve the status quo. Rather, they are driven by a sense of violent opposition: against changes in color and culture that appear to be sweeping away the country they once knew; against globalization, which is as revolutionary and threatening as the political programs of the Jacobins and the anarchists once were.

No less an intellectual authority than Cornel West declared that Trump’s election signaled the “end of neoliberalism,” as practiced by Obama, Bush, and Clinton—all of whom ignored “Wall Street crimes,” rejected homeowner bailouts, and presided over increasing economic inequality and “war crimes” abroad. According to West, it was a “lethal fusion of economic insecurity and cultural scapegoating” that “brought neoliberalism to its knees”—not in line with progressive populism, as [Kuhn](#)

(2016) and [Packer \(2016\)](#) implied, but with a staunchly reactionary “neofascist bang.”

Not quite everyone was convinced that the election of 2016 was a “change” election, however. [Chapman \(2016\)](#) argued that it “would be more accurate to say the outcome stemmed from too much change”—and that the mood of the populace signified resistance to an “endless transformation [that] extends to the realms of culture, religion and family life” and that has provoked tremendous anxiety. Thus, Trump supporters were “voting for something old. ‘Make America Great Again’ is a cry of nostalgia.” Indeed, Trump’s favorite slogan was borrowed from the successful presidential campaign of Ronald Reagan, the revered conservative steward of American business and “family values” in the 1980s.

There is also something strange about the suggestion that working-class Whites’ dissatisfaction with capitalism—and the “neoliberal global order”—pushed them into the arms of Donald Trump. After all, Trump has long been one of the nation’s best-known *capitalists*—a billionaire real estate mogul who inherited much of his wealth and became especially famous as a star of “reality television.” As Garrison Keillor remarked, “The disaffected white blue-collar workers elected a Fifth Avenue tycoon to rescue them from the elitists.” Americans could have elected Bernie Sanders, who (as a democratic socialist) would have posed a genuine danger to the economic status quo; instead they chose a famous businessman, a country club owner, a successful maven of the financial elite.

So which is it? Was Trump’s election fueled by an utter repudiation of the status quo, and a popular thirst for genuine change in America? Or was it a reaction against too many changes wrought by the forces of globalization and a desperate attempt to restore much-needed stability and order to American society? Similar questions were raised a few years earlier about the Tea Party, a right-wing movement that promised to “restore America’s founding principles of fiscal responsibility, constitutionally limited government, and free markets” (www.teapartypatriots.org/ourvision). On a certain level, the Tea Party posed a challenge to the status quo, especially to the presidency of Barack Obama. On another level, however, the Tea Party represented an effort to defend “the

American way” against threats directed at the prevailing social order that were perceived as coming from liberal governance.

General, Economic, and Gender-Specific System Justification

A study of attitudes toward the Tea Party was conducted by Hennes, Nam, Stern, and Jost (2012) under the auspices of system justification theory, which holds that people are motivated (often at a nonconscious level of awareness) to legitimize aspects of the societal status quo (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Because the social systems on which human beings depend provide a sense of safety, security, familiarity, predictability, and solidarity, it is psychologically painful to regard them as irredeemably awful or unjust. To maintain some semblance of psychological equanimity, then, most people prefer to defend and justify the status quo than to tear it down literally or metaphorically (Jost & Hunyady, 2003, 2005; Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008). Thus, Hennes and colleagues (2012) observed that support for the Tea Party was associated not with criticism of the American system but with a spirited ideological defense of it. Importantly, supporters (vs. detractors) of the Tea Party scored significantly higher on general (or diffuse, societal) system justification, endorsing statements such as these: “In general, the American system operates as it should,” and “Most policies serve the greater good.” They also scored higher on economic system justification, which is measured with items such as these: “Economic positions are legitimate reflections of people’s achievements,” and “Most people who don’t get ahead in our society should not blame the system; they have only themselves to blame.”

From a system justification perspective, it can be difficult—for psychological reasons—for people to denounce the social systems and institutions on which their livelihoods depend, even if they are relatively disadvantaged by those very institutions, such as capitalism (Jost & Hunyady, 2003, 2005). For example, it may be the case that the economic interests of the working class would be best served by electing a democratic socialist like Bernie Sanders, and yet members of this group may find it psychologically aversive to support his policies. If this analysis is valid, it is easy to see how American

workers could be enraged by the *results* or *consequences* of global competition under capitalism (and the “neoliberal world order”) without actually criticizing or rejecting the capitalist system at an ideological level. That is, defensive motivational processes may inhibit people from diagnosing the economic causes of their dissatisfaction and lead them to direct their anger elsewhere, often at convenient scapegoats, such as immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, liberals, feminists, atheists, activists, and so on (see also Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 2006; Lundskow, 2012). It may be counterintuitive, but it is consistent with a system justification perspective that people would suffer under the status quo and yet behave in such a way as to maintain important elements of it (e.g., van der Toorn et al., 2015).

In thinking about the dynamics of the presidential election of 2016, it is important to bear in mind that there is a multiplicity of “systems” that people are capable of criticizing or defending. In the research literature on system justification, a number of different scales have been developed to measure ideological support for American society in general, which includes the government (Kay & Jost, 2003), as well as the economic system (Jost & Thompson, 2000) and the system of gender relations between men and women, including the division of labor within the family (Jost & Kay, 2005). Although scores on these various scales are usually positively correlated with one another—and all tend to be positively correlated with political conservatism (Cichocka & Jost, 2014; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008), it is possible for people to be enthusiastic supporters of some systems (or aspects of the societal status quo) but not others.

In the case of Donald Trump’s supporters, they appeared to be strong critics of the government, especially under President Obama, but it seems unlikely that they were especially critical of the capitalist system or of traditional gender roles in society. On the contrary, Trump represented for many the pinnacle of economic success under capitalism, and the attitudes he expressed about gender issues during the campaign would be characterized as fairly traditional and socially conservative, if not down-right sexist (see also Wayne, Valentino, & Ocen, 2016). It may be most reasonable, then, to posit that Trump supporters were system-

challenging in a few respects but system-justifying in several others.

A Pre-Election Survey of American Public Opinion

In the months leading up to the 2016 presidential election, we hired a professional survey firm (SSI; www.surveysampling.com) to recruit a nationally representative sample of 1,500 Americans and to administer a variety of online questionnaires designed to measure social and political attitudes, including general (Kay & Jost, 2003), economic (Jost & Thompson, 2000), and gender-specific system justification scales (Jost & Kay, 2005).¹ The demographic characteristics of the sample, which closely mirrored the population at large, are listed in Table 1. We also asked respondents for their evaluations and preferences with respect to the major presidential candidates, including Republicans Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, Jeb Bush and Rand Paul, as well as Democrats Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. The results of the survey revealed clear patterns of correspondence between the holding of system-justifying attitudes and political preferences.

Consistent with past research (Jost, Nosek et al., 2008; Jost et al., 2014), people who identified themselves as rightist (vs. leftist), more socially and economically conservative (vs. liberal), and more (vs. less) religious scored significantly higher on measures of general, economic, and gender-specific system justification (see Table 2). As shown in Figure 1, Republicans also scored higher than Democrats on all three types of system justification, with Independents scoring in the middle on two of the three types.

At the same time, there were some interesting differences with respect to system justification in different domains. For one thing, Independents scored lower than Democrats on general (or diffuse) system justification. For another, people who were higher in general system justification tended to rate *both* Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton as slightly more likable (r 's = .10 and .07, respectively, both p 's < .01). However, those who endorsed economic and gender-specific system justification judged Trump as significantly more likable (r 's = .41 and .39, p < .001) and Clinton as significantly *less* likable (r 's = -.39 and -.32, p < .001).

When we entered all three types of system justification (plus religiosity as an adjustment variable) in multiple regression models, we obtained even clearer results. Liking for Trump was positively associated with economic (β = 0.73, t [1,495] = 8.41, p < .001) and gender-specific (β = 0.67, t [1495] = 8.90, p < .001) system justification, but it was negatively associated with general system justification (β = -0.47, t [1,495] = -7.15, p < .001). Liking for Clinton, on the other hand, was negatively associated with economic (β = -0.85, t [1495] = 10.61, p < .001) and gender-specific (β = -0.65, t [1,495] = -9.42, p < .001) system justification, but it was positively associated with general system justification (β = 0.90, t [1,495] = 14.65, p < .001).

In Figure 2, we have plotted general, economic, and gender-specific system justification scores as a function of specific candidate preferences. Results reveal that supporters of the conservative standard-bearer, Jeb Bush, exhibited high levels of system justification across the board, whereas supporters of the liberal/progressive challenger, Bernie Sanders, exhibited low levels of system justification across the board. Consistent with the results for candidate evaluations, supporters of Hillary Clinton exhibited fairly high levels of general system justification and low levels of economic and gender-specific system justification. The opposite combination was observed among supporters of the Republican candidates. Followers of Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and especially Rand Paul were low in general system justification but high in terms of economic and gender-specific system justification.

As shown in Figure 3, these basic patterns cut across lines of social class. At every level of respondent income, Trump supporters were significantly higher than Clinton supporters in both

¹ The survey was fielded from August 16 to September 16, 2016. Of the 2,424 participants directed to the survey, 1,885 finished the survey (attrition rate 22%). We followed recommendations to minimize the problem of careless responding in online studies (Meade & Craig, 2012). Specifically, we employed 10 attention questions and time controls to check for data quality. There were 385 participants who failed more than one attention check or finished the survey in under ~22 min and were therefore excluded from the sample. For the 1,500 participants who successfully finished the survey, completion time was 67 min on average (MD: 51 min).

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

	Data Frequencies	U.S. Census Frequencies	Data vs. Census	Data vs. Census in %
18–24 years	193	196	–3	–1.55
25–34 years	264	263	1	.38
35–44 years	263	263	0	.00
45–54 years	292	288	4	1.37
55–64 years	234	233	1	.43
65+	254	258	–4	–1.57
Subtotal Age	1,500	1,500	—	—
Female	760	738	22	2.89
Male	740	762	–22	–2.97
Subtotal Gender	1,500	1,500	—	—
Less than \$15,000	178	195	–17	–9.55
\$15,000–\$24,999	180	180	0	.00
\$25,000–\$34,999	176	165	11	6.25
\$35,000–\$49,999	227	210	17	7.49
\$50,000–\$74,999	292	270	22	7.53
\$75,000–\$99,999	192	180	12	6.25
\$100,000–\$149,999	160	180	–20	–12.50
\$150,000+	95	120	–25	–26.32
Subtotal Income	1,500	1,500	—	—
Less than High-school	51	210	–159	–311.76
High-school	475	435	40	8.42
Some college	471	435	36	7.64
Bachelor	310	270	40	12.90
Graduate	193	150	43	22.28
Subtotal Education	1,500	1,500	—	—
Democrat	747	750	–3	–.40
Republican	753	750	3	.40
Subtotal Party ID	1,500	1,500	—	—

Note. Table 1 shows the distribution of responses in the collected data for each criterion (age, gender, income, education, and party identification). The first column displays the frequencies of collected data while the second reports on the expected frequencies based on the 2014 U.S. Census (http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_14_1YR_S0201&prodType=table).

economic and gender-specific system justification. Perhaps surprisingly, there were no differences (at any income level) between Trump and Clinton supporters with respect to general system justification.

We also conducted logistic regression analyses in which the three types of system justification were used to predict voting choices between Trump and Clinton. Once again, economic and gender-specific system justification were associated with an increase in the probability of voting for Trump, whereas general system justification was associated with a decrease in the probability of voting for him. Each unit increase in mean economic system justification increased the odds of voting for Trump by a factor of 2.95 ($\beta = 1.08$, Wald $\chi^2[1] = 10.10$, $p < .001$), holding all other variables constant; and each unit increase in

mean gender-specific system justification increased the odds of voting for Trump by a factor of 2.25 ($\beta = 0.80$, Wald $\chi^2[1] = 9.20$, $p < .001$). Conversely, a one unit increase in the mean of general system justification decreased the odds of voting for Trump by a factor of 0.46 ($\beta = 0.78$, Wald $\chi^2[1] = -9.80$, $p < .001$).

This study demonstrates that there are multiple meaningful dimensions (or domains) of system justification. That is, there is more than one sense in which someone may be said to accept or reject the societal status quo. The same person may be an enthusiastic defender of the capitalist economic system (or the gendered division of labor within the family) but not the federal government (or vice versa). Overall, we found strong support for the notion that these different forms of system justification make in-

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics, Including Correlations Among Social and Political Attitudes

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Left/right ideology	5.31	2.45	—					
2. Social conservatism	4.93	2.76	.84	—				
3. Economic conservatism	5.48	2.63	.82	.72	—			
4. Religiosity	5.15	2.79	.46	.53	.35	—		
5. General SJ	5.06	1.32	.15	.10	.17	.11	—	
6. Economic SJ	4.93	1.10	.53	.48	.57	.20	.38	—
7. Gender-specific SJ	5.44	1.37	.46	.42	.45	.21	.52	.61

Note. We used Spearman’s correlations, $p < .001$ ($N = 1,500$) for all cases. We adjusted for familywise error rate with Holm correction. All variables ranged from 1 to 9, with higher values reflecting more right-wing orientation, more conservatism, more religiosity, and higher scores on system justification.

dependent contributions to political preferences. In statistical terms, general, economic, and gender-specific system justification explained unique amounts of variance in voting intentions. Overall, by taking into account all three types of system justification, this model accurately classified candidate choices 77% of the time.

Concluding Remarks

When Blanchar (2017) asked a sample of 503 Americans to try to explain why Donald Trump had won the recent presidential election, he discovered that the most popular answer was that “voters desired a change from the status

quo.” There is one rather limited sense in which our findings, which are based on a nationally representative sample of 1,500 Americans, are consistent with this explanation. Supporters of Donald Trump did score lower in general (or diffuse) system justification than supporters of Jeb Bush, and they scored as low on this measure as supporters of Hillary Clinton.

More to the point, when general, economic, and gender-specific forms of system justification were entered as simultaneous predictors of voting intentions, we observed that general system justification was positively associated with the likelihood of voting for Clinton over Trump. In a limited historical sense, then, it

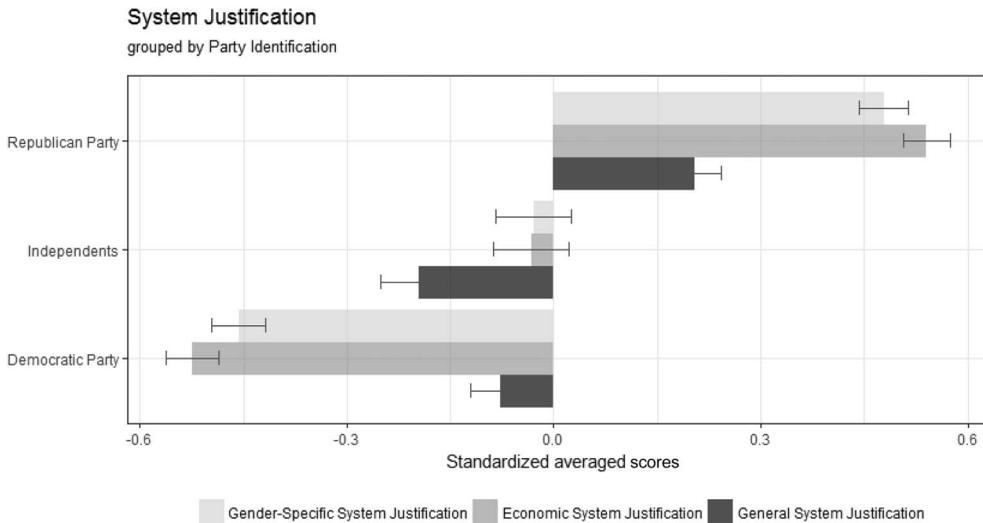


Figure 1. General, economic, and gender-specific system justification as a function of political partisanship.

System Justification grouped by Candidate Preference

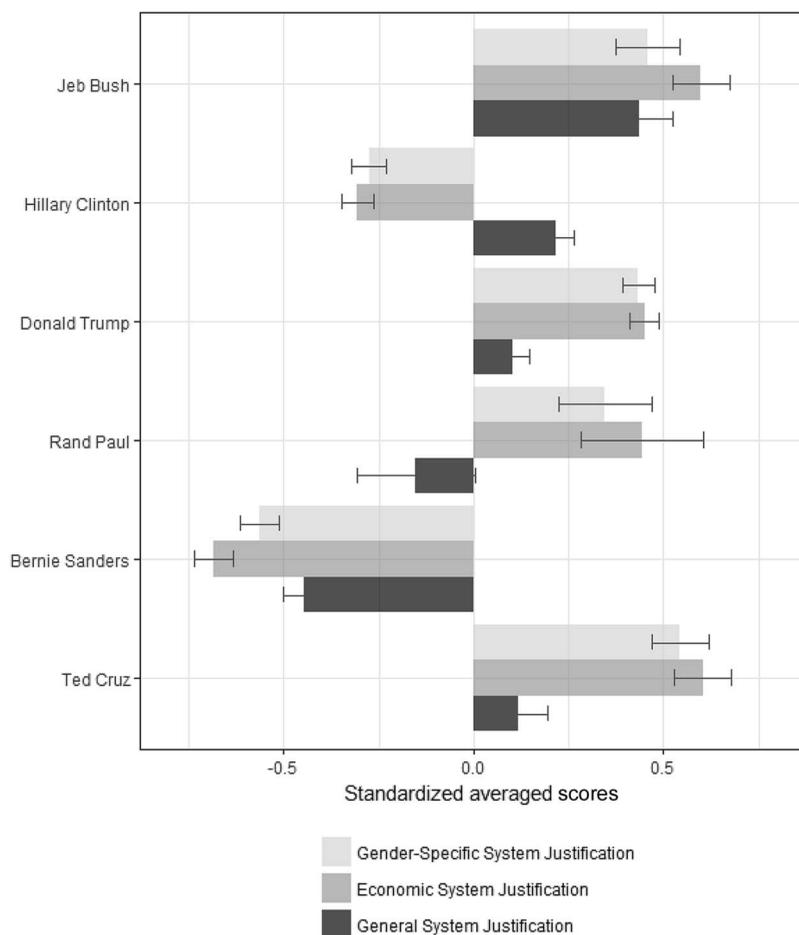


Figure 2. General, economic, and gender-specific system justification as a function of candidate preferences.

appears that Clinton was indeed regarded as the “status quo” candidate, and that this was seen as undesirable by a good number of voters. In retrospect, it is conceivable that the Clinton campaign may have overestimated the extent to which voters—especially potential Democratic voters—preferred social stability over social change.

After all, liberals and Democrats tend to score consistently lower on all types of system justification, in comparison with conservatives and Republicans (e.g., Jost, Nosek, et al., 2008). We replicated this result once again. And, despite the fact that Trump sup-

porters exhibited less general system justification than supporters of Jeb Bush, they exhibited very high levels of economic and gender-specific system justification. When all three types of system justification were entered as simultaneous predictors of voting intentions, it was very clear that economic and gender-specific system justification were positively associated with the likelihood of voting for Trump over Clinton. Thus, Trump supporters did reject the status quo of liberal, Democratic governance under President Obama, which they may have perceived as threatening to mainstream cultural traditions

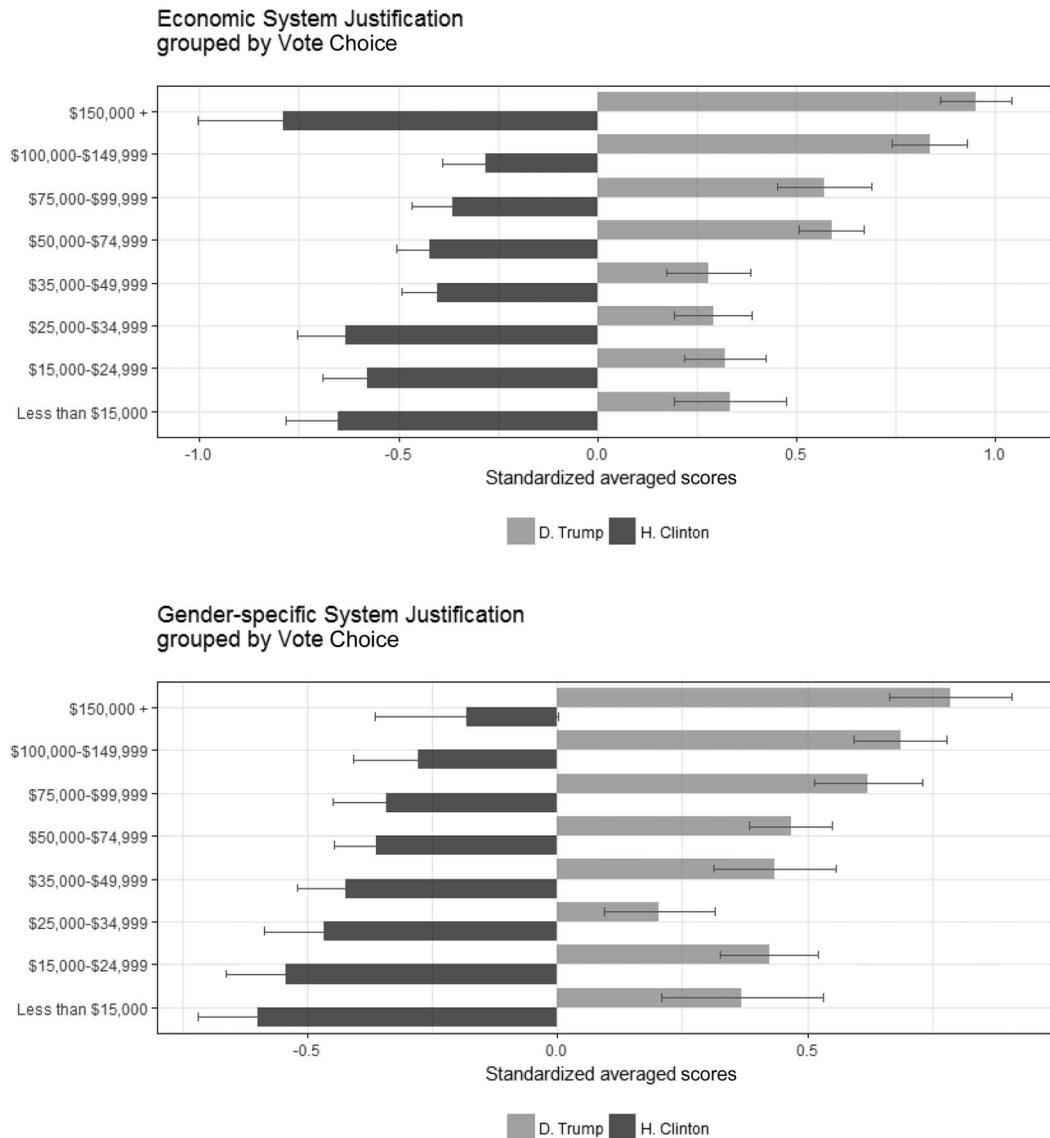


Figure 3. Economic (top) and gender-specific (bottom) system justification as a function of preferences for Trump versus Clinton at various levels of respondent income.

(see also Hennes et al., 2012), but they certainly did not challenge the status quo in a more profound sense.

On the contrary, Trump supporters—like political conservatives in general—strongly justified economic and gender-based disparities in society. These findings cast doubt on the proposition that voting for Trump reflected anything like a self-conscious, ideo-

logical challenge to the neoliberal, “free market” system or to other extant institutions and social arrangements. Supporters of Donald Trump may well have been deeply frustrated by the economic consequences of the capitalist system in the United States, but—at this point at least—we see no evidence that they placed any blame upon the system that was the source of those frustrations.

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- To select the appropriate reviewers for each manuscript, the editor needs detailed information. Please include with your letter your vita. In the letter, please identify which APA journal(s) you are interested in, and describe your area of expertise. Be as specific as possible. For example, “social psychology” is not sufficient—you would need to specify “social cognition” or “attitude change” as well.
- Reviewing a manuscript takes time (1–4 hours per manuscript reviewed). If you are selected to review a manuscript, be prepared to invest the necessary time to evaluate the manuscript thoroughly.

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