

The Paradox of the Wealthy: Local Economic Decline and the Backlash Against Global Governance*

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Abstract

Local economic decline has contributed to the backlash against globalization, but we know little about the effects on citizens' trust in global governance. While economic geography theory predicts that trust in international institutions is lower in historically poorer areas due to feelings of being left behind, the evidence is surprisingly mixed. In this article, we explain this puzzle by proposing reference dependence as a crucial cognitive bias leading individuals to evaluate local economic decline relative to their locale's wealth in the past. Citizens in poorer areas evaluate economic outcomes against lower baselines, making economic decline less salient and reducing the tendency to attribute losses to international economic institutions (IEIs). This helps explain why richer areas, where decline is more salient, tend to blame IEIs. Our argument yields testable hypotheses, which this registered report proposes investigating in a survey experiment based on representative samples of the United States and two American counties experiencing economic decline. In a priming experiment, we will assess how raising the salience of local decline, and decline relative to other areas, affects trust in IEIs, and the extent this effect depends on both salience and blame attribution. The results are expected to explain why historically rich, declining areas are less likely to trust IEIs, than historically poor areas, across partisan lines and other group divisions.

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1 Introduction

Western democracies have seen profound local economic transformations due to the forces of globalization (Autor and Dorn 2013; Broz et al. 2021). Because local economic activity is distributed unevenly, so too, does globalization have uneven impacts. Many areas in the West are in distress from deindustrialization, suffering from the relocation of production sites, such as by offshoring in the automotive and manufacturing sectors. Other areas have disproportionately benefited from globalization and associated flows of technological development, and have become more prosperous. Often, rural areas are less able to flexibly adjust to globalization (Rickard 2020; Neumann 2016). Thus, the local economic decline of some counties and the resulting income disparities between local areas, often referred to as ‘local inequality’ in theories of economic geography, have deepened over the past three decades (Beckfield 2019; Case and Deaton 2020; Broz et al. 2021).

These shifts have had profound effects on the backlash against globalization. A growing body of research in public opinion research and behavioral International Relations has shown that residents of economically declining areas, often for decades, have seen fewer opportunities to prosper and experienced community decline (Dellmuth 2021), and so have expressed their discontent at the ballot box. Motivated by a struggle to cope with the challenges of globalization, associated with rising economic insecurity, many people feel increasingly left behind and alienated with mainstream political forces (Rodríguez-Pose 2018; Dijkstra et al. 2020; Jacobs and Shea 2024). Economic decline often mobilizes feelings of socio-economic change, community deterioration, and cultural anxieties, and so has increased: votes for populist parties (Mansfield et al. 2021; Reinl et al. 2023; Schraff and Pontusson 2024; Colantone and Stanig 2018; Ejrnæs et al. 2024; Ford and Goodwin 2014; Koeppen et al. 2021) public support for economic nationalism (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Colantone and Stanig 2019; Autor et al. 2020b; Steiner and Harms 2023), and public opposition to regional governance (Katsanidou and Mayne 2024; Ejrnæs et al. 2024).

However, we know little about how the economic decline experienced in marginalized localities across western democracies influences trust in international economic institutions (IEIs). This study is the first to address this gap. Given the association between local economic decline with shifts in globalization and global economic governance that has facilitated these shifts—including for example more global trade and international offshoring of production sites—we posit that local decline prompts communities to blame and increasingly distrust IEIs, as they are the central pillars of global economic governance.

In doing so, we argue that levels of absolute decline alone do not predict the extent the decline undermines trust in IEIs. While economic geography theory predicts that trust in global governance would be lower in

poorer areas due to feelings of being ‘left behind’ (Rodríguez-Pose 2018; Rickard 2020), the empirical evidence documenting the geographic distribution of discontent with globalization is surprisingly mixed. Some studies find that low-income areas are more Euroskeptic (e.g. De Dominicis et al. 2022; Dijkstra et al. 2020; Lipps and Schraff 2021b). Others find Euroskepticism to be more prevalent in rich regions (e.g. Nicoli and Reinl 2020; Stockemer 2017; Dijkstra et al. 2021; Vasilopoulou and Talving 2024) or no effect of local income (e.g. Katsanidou and Mayne 2024). Yet others find public support for the European Union (EU) to be lower in wealthy areas in the EU, but find greater support for regional governance institutions in low-income areas outside the EU (e.g. Dellmuth and Tallberg 2023). To explain this puzzle, scholars have yet to clarify the mechanisms driving the linkages of local decline and public opinion (Frieden 2022).

In this article, we tackle this challenge by introducing ‘reference dependence’ (Tversky and Kahneman 1991) as a crucial cognitive bias explaining how individuals evaluate local economic decline, thereby affecting trust in IEIs. IEIs are the key pillars of rules-based global economic governance—international organizations (IOs) and multilateral trade treaties. Reference dependence means that people react to gains and losses defined relative to a reference point. Their perceptions of the local economy and potential blame attribution might therefore depend on how people perceive either their local economy in the past or the economies of other locales in the present. If a past prospering area is the reference point, then economic decline will be more salient and people are more likely to shift responsibility to actors in a blame attribution process, than if the reference value is a less prosperous past. The theory allows us to explain why local decline, and local decline compared to other areas, might lead people to blame global institutions in historically rich areas. In contrast, previous theories of retrospective voting have proposed that local economic decline matters due to cueing, status threat, or loss aversion, which makes people feel left behind by mainstream political parties, but which cannot explain why the political responses to decline may be stronger in more prosperous areas. In developing our argument in the context of economic geography, we thus draw from research traditions on blame attribution (Quinn et al. 2021) and reference dependence in cognitive psychology (Tversky and Kahneman 1991) to explain this puzzle.

Our argument yields testable hypotheses about the conditions under which people make responsibility shifts to global governance institutions, which this registered report proposes investigating using a novel survey experiment based on a nationally representative sample in the United States (US) and two additional samples of respondents from counties either experiencing economic decline in absolute terms or economic decline as compared to other counties that likely serve as a reference point. The county level is widely used in behavioral IR and has been shown to be a meaningful entity which people identify with, influencing attitude

formation (Gaikwad et al. 2022). The experimental design includes three randomly assigned groups: one group gets a prime about their perceptions of economic decline over a long-term period of 10 years and a second group gets a prime about the economic decline of their area relative to other areas. The third is the control group which does not receive any prime. The main outcome of interest is trust in various IEIs. In the post-treatment questionnaire we will also ask respondents to report their beliefs in the weight of globalization for local decline relative to other influences (salience), and the responsibility of global economic governance for growth in their area (attribution), to examine to what extent salience and blame attribution mediate an effect of local decline on trust in IEIs.

Our study will shed much needed light on how local economic decline, a surprisingly overlooked factor, affects trust in global governance and the backlash in public opinion against it. It is crucial to understand the determinants of trust in global economic governance as it is central to the ability of global economic governance institutions to shore up financial and ideational support for their policies, and to enforce compliance with their norms and rules. When trust erodes, international economic organizations and international agreements are more likely to be ignored and defied by global publics and the governments that represent them (Marien and Hooghe 2010). This is critical for IEIs, which, compared to national political institutions, lack coercive means to enforce rules and thus depend on voluntary compliance and trust rather than force (Hurd 1999). Low trust can foster disengagement and mobilize calls for withdrawal, as seen in the Brexit referendum (Hobolt 2016) or when referenda have been held that have undermined other global governance institutions (Walter et al. 2018). Conversely, when citizens trust IEIs, national governments are more likely to support them politically and financially (Sommerer and Tallberg 2026).

Besides economic factors, cultural factors are central in explaining the backlash (Norris and Inglehart 2019). They often interact with economic factors in shaping populist attitudes and voting behavior (Gidron and Hall 2017). While previous research has shown that part of this variation can be explained by the interactions between local decline and individual factors, such as education (e.g. Dijkstra et al. 2020; Katsanidou and Mayne 2024; Gordon 2018) and perceptions of local decline (e.g. Green et al. 2025; Arzheimer et al. 2024), as well as elite communication more generally (e.g. Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2023). Moreover, the urban-rural divide matters, as it brings complex patterns, as urban areas have economic problems, too, which can greatly exacerbate (Dellmuth 2021; Neumann 2016). This article is concerned with an economic argument, bracketing such important other explanations.

Taken together, the results are expected to explain why historically rich, declining areas are less likely to trust IEIs, than historically poor areas, across partisan lines and other group divisions. These results will

have important implications for debates about the behavioral consequences of local decline, and the role it plays fomenting the backlash against international institutions in public opinion.

2 Local Economic Decline and the Backlash against Globalization

Structural economic change, domestic and global, has shifted the distribution of productivity and precipitated economic decline in many localities across western democracies. This decline has taken on a notably geographic dimension, as some areas have benefited from sustained growth while others have experienced the opposite. Where it occurs, this decline has been strong enough to shape nearly every important economic and social outcome: from higher unemployment and poverty to lower levels of psychological wellbeing and higher rates of drug abuse (Frieden [2022](#); Case and Deaton [2020](#)).

Much of the literature on the political consequences of these adverse economic changes finds that residents in declining areas feel a lack of prospects and “left-behind.” Relatedly, Broz et al. ([2021](#)) find that populist backlashes and anti-globalist voting tend to be stronger in these areas. Commonly referred to as to as the China shock literature, extensive research has explored the domestic politics impacts of China’s rapid rise as a major global manufacturing exporter in the countries it exports to and competes with. Local exposure to import competition and offshoring has also been shown to engender polarization and sympathies for populist far-right politicians (Autor et al. [2020a](#); Colantone and Stanig [2018](#)). Moreover, such local disruptions have effects on demand for reciprocity and thus unilateral behavior in trade and finance (Steinberg and Tan [2023](#); Chilton et al. [2020](#)).

Although this work shows that economic disparities foment nationalist, isolationist and anti-globalization attitudes (Solt [2011](#)), we know little about whether and how such disparities spill over on to perceptions of IEs. This constitutes a conspicuous gap in the literature, given that it is one of the consequential and politically salient economic shifts that many developed countries have experienced in the last three decades and has been brought on, at least in part, by economic globalization which IEs have accelerated. Moreover, understanding how local decline shapes support for IEs is important, as IOs and treaties are often tasked with helping areas experiencing this decline (cf. Schraff and Pontusson [2024](#)).

A few studies have examined how systemic factors including economic change more broadly, and economic decline more specifically, affect trust in the EU (e.g. Vasilopoulou and Talving [2024](#); Lipps and Schraff [2021b](#); Díaz-Lanchas et al. [2021](#); Mayne and Katsanidou [2023](#)). This emerging body of work has examined how globalization and the distributive consequences of the EU have shaped gaps between places that have

‘pulled ahead’ economically and those that have been ‘left behind’. These studies draw from a broader line of reasoning about the ‘revenge of the places that don’t matter’ (Rodríguez-Pose 2018), which has been shown to have come through an unexpected source – voting for populist parties – especially in the regions that experienced long-term economic and social decline (Schraff and Pontusson 2024; Dijkstra et al. 2021). Moreover, in distressed areas, residents are also more likely to vote for anti-establishment parties and distrust political institutions (Rodríguez-Pose 2018; Reinl et al. 2023; Dellmuth and Chalmers 2018; Dijkstra et al. 2020; Ejrnæs et al. 2024), and were also more likely to vote for Brexit (Hobolt 2016). Given the primary interest in this strand of literature in retrospective voting, little is known about how local economic decline impacts trust in regional and global governance institutions besides the EU and outside of Europe.

3 Theory: Local Economic Decline, Reference Dependence, and Trust in International Economic Institutions

In this section, we develop our theoretical argument. We first conceptualize the dependent variable and discuss research seeking to explain variation in trust in international economic institutions (IEIs). We then present the argument about why and when local economic decline affects trust in IEIs, and derive hypotheses about when these effects are particularly strong.

3.1 The Determinants of Trust in International Institutions

Our main outcome of interest is trust in IEIs. Political trust refers to people’s basic evaluative and affective orientation to the institutions and actors governing their political system (Citrin and Stoker 2018), where trust reflects the belief that the actor would produce preferred outcomes (Easton 1975). This implies that political trust can be based both on utilitarian evaluations of outcomes and moral considerations. For one, political trust reflects what people think about how a political system has benefited them. Political institutions are judged on the basis of whether they yield a specific payoff, which tends to be a function of the performance of an institution (Dalton and Eichenberg 1998). Another aspect of political trust reflects a basic loyalty toward and belief in the legitimacy of an institution. Institutional trust thus also implies that people accept the rules and requirements of political institutions when they are seen as conformant to their “own sense of what is right and proper in the political sphere” (Jackson et al. 2014; Suchman 1995, p. 574).

While the objects of trust include various national and international actors and structures of a political system (Devine and Fairbrother 2026), we focus on the two key types of IEIs: IOs and multilateral treaties.

IOs are the bureaucratic organizations at the core of the multilateral economic order, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Pevehouse et al. 2020; Gray 2018). Multilateral trade treaties, such as the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA) (formerly the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)), are agreements between three or more countries to create a common framework for trade aimed at increasing economic integration. Nowadays they operate based on a complex web of multilateral treaty-based institutions, which are often more informal and based on minilateralism, including the G20 and the Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) (Hicks et al. 2014; Barnett et al. 2021; Slaughter 2004; Vabulas and Snidal 2021; Panda and Park 2024). In this article, we bracket newer actors and structures in global economic governance that are market- or network-based (Abbott et al. 2016; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Westerwinter 2021; Avant et al. 2010), as well as the issue of overlapping and potentially competing forms of authority (Haftel and Lenz 2021; Morse and Keohane 2014). Instead, we focus on the IEIs with most authority, which has three main advantages. First, we will provide evidence about the institutions that are most politically relevant in the multilateral economic order. Second, we increase the likelihood that citizens hold distinct attitudes toward these institutions. Third, we build on trust research that traditionally focuses on political institutions as objects of trust.

In the 1990s and 2000s, we have seen IEIs become more visible and contested in public debates (O’Brien 2000). During the 2010s, public debate and contestation of global governance has increased, which has paralleled increasing, though tamer, changes in public opinion toward IEIs (Walter 2021). This is also shown in lower trust of citizens in economic organizations due to their distributional circumstances, than in human security organizations, such as the World Health Organization, which have a less controversial mandate (Dellmuth et al. 2022). Thus, while global governance has long flown under the radar of public debates, a growing research agenda documents its increasing contestation and salience in domestic public debates (Zürn 2018; De Vries et al. 2021; Hooghe et al. 2019; Walter 2021). Thus, the long-standing belief among observers and public opinion scholars about the public ignorance of global governance has been replaced with one of structured and predictable attitudes toward international cooperation (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2026).

The dominant literature on perceptions of international institutions explains variation primarily through individual-level characteristics. Research shows that socioeconomic status, education, and political values shape attitudes toward IOs such as the IMF and the World Bank (Edwards 2009). A particularly strong explanation is socio-economic status. Higher-educated, more affluent, and cosmopolitan individuals tend to be more supportive of IOs, whereas lower-skilled or economically insecure groups tend to be more skeptical (Bearce and Joliff Scott 2019). Political ideology plays a particularly strong role in shaping attitudes toward

IOs and trade agreements in polarized settings, such as the US (Brutger and Clark 2023; Rathbun et al. 2016; Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2024). As public opinion toward international issues is malleable (De Vries et al. 2021), research has also explored how individuals respond to elite cues and partisan framing (Spilker et al. 2020; Schlipphak 2015; Ghassim et al. 2022; Schlipphak et al. 2022; Ghassim 2024b; Ecker-Ehrhardt et al. 2024; Steinberg and McDowell 2024; Brutger and Clark 2023; De Vries 2018). When political leaders or parties criticize or endorse IOs, public opinion tends to follow, in particular when elites are trusted, for example when they belong to the political party that citizens identify with (Essig et al. 2021; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2023).

Thus, the literature has predominantly focused on how the sources of public opinion toward international institutions differ across social groups. Moving beyond research into how social group differences matter, economic geography research has shown that individuals do not only form political attitudes based on group belonging, but that the place in which they live, through psychological attachment, has additional explanatory power (Cramer 2022; Munis 2022). Based on these insights, local decline and growing inequality has been shown to be a significant cause of the broader globalization backlash (Rickard 2020; Rodríguez-Pose 2018). As discussed above, this body of economic geography research has almost exclusively focused on how local inequality shapes retrospective voting for economically nationalist and right-wing political parties, and has only started linking local decline and public support for the EU. We pay tribute to this emerging strand by studying the effects of local decline on trust in IEs more broadly.

3.2 Hypotheses

Our main focus is on the effects of the economic decline of many localities. Economic hardship sours peoples' perceptions of government that is often diffusely perceived as responsible for economic outcomes (Rodríguez-Pose 2020; Dijkstra et al. 2020). Moreover, where economic decline is attributed to changes in the global system, people may hold regional organizations responsible for local inequalities (Dellmuth 2024; Schraff and Pontusson 2024).

We identify reference dependence as crucial for understanding an effect of local decline on trust in IEs. In cognitive psychology, reference dependence refers to the tendency to evaluate outcomes relative to a reference point—such as prior expectations or the status quo—rather than in absolute terms (Kahneman and Tversky 1979). This implies that political blame is most likely when outcomes violate prior expectations rather than when hardship in absolute terms is experienced (Tversky and Kahneman 1991). This is in part because people adapt expectations to past events. When negative conditions are persistent or expected, they

no longer generate strong affective responses (Frederick and Loewenstein 1999). Under such circumstance negative outcomes may not be salient. This is because outcomes that are consistent with expectations also are less salient to people, implying that they are less likely to search for actors to blame. Relatedly, blame occurs when the decline is perceived to be violating expectations, and thus saliency for people, is a known mechanism in cognitive psychology (Quinn et al. 2021).

Applied to people’s perceptions of the local economy and potential blame attribution, those might be dependent on how people perceive the local economy in the past. If a more prosperous time is the reference point, then people are more likely to shift responsibility to actors in a blame attribution process than if the reference value is a previous less prosperous time. Thus, reference dependence is an after-the-fact bias that a) increases the salience of the issue in question, b) blame attribution, and c) lowers trust in the blamed actors.

By implication, the blame is not only diffuse. Global economic governance is implicated because its core pillars, the IEs, have served as the architects and enablers of the global economic order. They have promoted and institutionalized the flows of goods, capital, and reduced trade barriers, thereby bringing about overall welfare increases and poverty reduction. However, many believe they have deepened geographic divides. Not only have people perceived these institutions to be at fault, academic findings in certain instances empirically substantiate these beliefs. For instance, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is estimated to have taken away half a million jobs in the United States and disproportionately affected lagging regions (Scott 2011). Based on these insights, we posit that local decline translates into diminished trust in IEs not as a diffuse response to globalization, but because they are perceived as directly implicated in producing and perpetuating the global order that generates this decline. Following this, we hypothesize:

H1: In historically poor areas, **economic decline** lowers trust in IEs less than in rich areas.

Instead of benchmarking ones’ own locality against its past performance, the relevant reference point individuals may use to evaluate the economic performance of their own locality may be other counties in the present. Widening economic divides that accompany growing local inequality and relative deprivation, defined as feeling worse off compared to others, can have psychological and attitudinal consequences, even if ones’ own economic status has not deteriorated. Individuals are not only risk averse, weighing potential losses more heavily than potential gains (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Tversky and Kahneman 1981), but they are also ‘inequity averse’ (Brutger and Rathbun 2021), implying that people favor relative gains over relative losses. This inequity aversion is based on a fundamental human preference to be fairly treated

relative to others. In line with this, income rank predicts life satisfaction more than absolute income, widening inequality increases unhappiness even when overall incomes remain stable, and feeling relatively disadvantaged can provoke a strong sense of resentment and hostility, even in the absence of absolute decline (Dijkstra et al. 2020; Munis 2022).

We posit that people are likely to perceive outcomes as unfair when other communities with similar preconditions, that may serve as references points, are doing relatively better. Where this occurs, the growing disparities may be perceived to reflect systemic failures or institutional bias. Existing research has found that relative deprivation and economic decline likewise inspire political discontent (Alesina and Perotti 1996; Lenzi and Perucca 2021). Similarly, studies across Africa, Europe, and North America consistently show that perceived relative deprivation undermines trust in governing institutions, as citizens come to view the system as biased or serving others (Bobzien 2023; Barone and Mocetti 2016; Palmisano and Sacchi 2024; Isbell 2023). Relatedly, local areas lagging behind others in the same country have been shown to exhibit lower trust in the EU in some circumstances (Schraff and Pontusson 2024; Lipps and Schraff 2021a; Mayne and Katsanidou 2023).

We extend this logic to external actors beyond the EU and predict that communities that see themselves losing ground to faster growing counties are likely to interpret these outcomes as unfair (Rodden 2019; Dijkstra et al. 2020) and attribute responsibility to IEIs that they blame for the growing divide. In this way, where people perceive place-based inequality or relative decline to be growing, it will precipitate grievances and distrust towards IEIs. We consider a locality to have experienced relative economic decline as compared to another county if its growth rate is lower than that of the other counties. This brings us to our second hypothesis.

H2: In poor areas, **relative economic decline** lowers trust in IEIs less than in rich areas.

Following the logic above, we also hypothesize that for economic decline to impact trust in IEIs, (relative) economic decline must become more salient and increase the extent IEIs are blamed. As discussed above, salience might be low when decline is expected, making it less likely for citizens to search for actors to blame. Conversely, blame occurs when the decline is perceived to be violating expectations, and thus salient. When salience and blame attribution are low, levels of trust may remain the same, or, where local decline is found to depress trust in IEIs, it might be due to a spurious correlation. This brings us to our last hypothesis:

H3a: The effect predicted in H1 and H2 is larger when decline is salient.

H3b: The effect predicted in H1 and H2 is larger when blame is attributed to IEI.

In sum, although our argument is based on the idea that negative outcomes are less expected in richer regions, in part because people tend to weigh losses more than gains, we argue that when losses are perceived as normal or expected, individuals are less likely to blame global economic institutions. Citizens in poorer areas evaluate economic outcomes against lower baselines, making both economic decline and decline relative to other areas less salient and reducing the tendency to attribute losses to IEIs. This helps explain why historically rich areas, where decline is more salient, tend to blame IEIs more, compared to poorer areas.

4 Research design

To investigate our hypotheses, we will carry out a pre-registered online experiment with three samples in the United States: one that is nationally representative, another that includes a county that has experienced economic decline in absolute terms, and a third that includes a county that has experienced decline as compared to more prosperous counties. We included these three samples for two main reasons. First, the national sample allows us to estimate the effects of local economic decline in a way that is generalizable across the entire US population. Second, the two county samples enable us to shed particular light on specific types of declining counties that are often assumed to have borne the brunt of the burden from globalization.

The experiment will be embedded within an online survey which will start with a pre-treatment questionnaire capturing respondents' demographic characteristics including, among others, age, gender, and marital status, for the purpose of balance tests (Mutz et al. 2019). To ensure the data is reliable, there will be an attention check in the pre-treatment questionnaire. Next, survey participants will take part in an experiment in which they will be exposed to primes that vary based on the study arm they have been randomly assigned to. The survey will conclude with a post-treatment questionnaire. The survey instrument in its entirety, including the embedded experiment, can be found in the appendix.¹

The firm we will use to carry out the survey experiment will recruit respondents using quota sampling to ensure variation across age, gender, education and region. Quota sampling by region is especially important to help increase adequate representation from both low- and high-growth counties in the national sample, since a subgroup analysis will be used to compare how treatment effects differ between them. Quota online

¹From start to finish, the survey minimizes the costs and potential risks to participants and adheres to the highest ethical standards set forth by the (APSA 2020). Before beginning the pre-treatment questionnaire, respondents will be asked to sign a consent form and will be told that they can end their participation and withdraw their survey answers at any time. Only adults will be eligible to participate and only if they consent to doing so. Once they have completed the post-treatment questionnaire, participants will be provided contact details in case they are interested in learning more about the purpose of the experiment or would like to express a concern. The entire process will take approximately 10 minutes. Given the non-invasive nature of the proposed experiment, the risks to and costs for participants are miniscule. The questions will not involve deception nor be of a highly personal nature. For the participants, the only cost will be the minimal time they spend completing the experiment, for which they will receive a small financial compensation.

samples have been shown to perform similarly than random samples (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2014), and have become the dominant sampling method in experimental International Relations (Schliphak et al. 2022; Kertzer et al. 2014; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2023; Ecker-Ehrhardt et al. 2024; Ghassim 2024b; Brutger and Clark 2023; Anderson et al. 2019). The firm we will use to field the survey will be active in the US, have a track record of using nationally and county representative samples, and offer quota sampling based on the necessary demographic and geographic variables.

Testing the hypotheses requires examining the effect of different reference points to evaluate local economic decline. The reference point in H1 is past economic performance, where counties are perceived as historically rich or poor. In H2, an alternative reference point regards other counties within the same country. There is an ongoing discussion regarding which reference point people use to judge local decline (Lipps and Schraff 2021b; Dellmuth 2024; Schraff and Pontusson 2024), and it ultimately requires an empirical test to examine which comparison matters. As people already have pre-existing perceptions of local economic decline, we rely on priming to ascertain how making local economic decline salient influences trust in IEs.

The experimental design in the two samples of declining counties will include three randomly assigned groups: one group gets a prime about their perceptions of economic decline in comparison to a long distant past (10 years) and a second group gets a prime about the economic decline of their area relative to other areas. The third is the control group, which will not receive any prime. In each sample we will include 2100 respondents spread across three study arms.²

In the first treatment arm, which operationalizes H1, respondents will be primed on their own county's economic decline by performing a writing exercise that invites them to reflect on how their county has performed in recent years compared to in the previous decade. Respondents who receive this treatment will be asked the following priming question:

Do you feel [name of respondent's county] County in recent years has experienced economic decline as compared to a decade ago? Please take a minute to write your answer.

In the second treatment arm, which operationalizes H2, respondents will be primed to think about growing decline across counties by being asked to reflect on how their own county's economic trajectory compares to other counties. A respondent in this treatment arm would be primed with the following question:

²To ensure the study is adequately powered, simulations were run using the DeclareDesign package. Based on a review of similar studies (notably, Dellmuth and Tallberg (2023), Ghassim (2024a), and Steinberg and McDowell (2024)), using an outcome variable measuring levels of trust in IEs on a 11-point scale, we expect an average effect size of .16. To have an 80 percent probability of detecting an effect of this magnitude with 95 percent confidence across samples and between study arms, we will survey 700 respondents in each arm of each sample for a total of 6,300 people.

Do you feel [name of respondent’s county] County has experienced greater economic decline in the past decade as compared to other counties in the United States? Please take a minute to write your answer.

In the national sample, which also includes growing areas, we reformulate the writing exercise in the second arm in order to avoid treatment inconsistency. We ask people in the second treatment arm to reflect on how about decline across counties by being asked to reflect on how their own county’s economic trajectory compares to other counties. A respondent in this treatment arm would be primed with the following question:

Do you feel [name of respondent’s county] County has experienced greater economic decline or growth in the past decade as compared to other counties in the United States? Please take a minute to write your answer.

After being presented with one of the primes, respondents in each group will receive a post-treatment questionnaire in which they will be asked to report their perceptions of the importance of local decline and local decline relative to other economic issues (salience), the responsibility of IEIs for their area’s economic performance (blame), and their trust in various IEIs (trust). Respondents in the control group will receive these questions without having received any prime. To ensure treatment was effective, there will be a manipulation check in the post-treatment questionnaire.

Regarding the main outcome of interest, trust, the questions in this last part of the survey will capture variables related to trust in the three most important IEIs for the US. These entities were chosen because they are the most important for trade in the United States and most directly affect the distribution of growth across American counties. Primarily, to measure this, respondents will be asked how much do they trust these different IEIs do what is right, randomizing the order in which these items appear: NAFTA, CAFTA-DR, and the WTO. In line with the formatting of similar questions included in the European Social Survey, respondents will be asked to report their level of trust in each separately on a scale from zero to ten, ranging from no trust at all (0) to complete trust (10) (European Social Survey [2022](#)).

To operationalize H3, the post-treatment questionnaire will also include questions designed to capture different mechanisms that we hypothesize mediate the relationship between decline between counties and trust in IEIs, in a randomized battery of three questions. Two questions about salience will ask “How concerned are you about the economic decline in your county, compared to other economic issues?” Another will ask “How concerned are you about the growing economic gap between your county and other counties in the US, compared to other economic issues?” The question about blame will ask: “How concerned are you about the impact of international economic institutions on your county’s growth?” When answering

these questions, respondents will be given an option to answer on a scale from zero to ten, ranging from not concerned at all (0) to extremely concerned (10).

We will test H1, predicting local economic decline undermines trust in IEIs less in counties that were historically poor, using the following regression specification:

$$Trust_i = \alpha + \beta_1 Decline_i + \beta_2 Decline_i \times PoorCounty_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Trust captures the self-reported level of trust for individual i and β_1 captures the difference in means of the outcome variable between the control and the first treatment group which is primed to think about local economic decline. The relevant outcome measures will be trust in NAFTA, CAFTA, the WTO, and an index that captures the average levels of trust in these three IEIs. *Decline* takes a value of 1 for participants that were primed to reflect on local economic decline, and a 0 otherwise. *PoorCounty* takes a value of 1 for participants in counties that historically have been poor, and a 0 otherwise. If we find that β_2 , the coefficient capturing the interaction effect of *Decline* and *PoorCounty*, is positive, it would indicate that economic decline has a less negative effect on trust in poor counties and provide support for H1.

To test H2, predicting that relative economic decline undermines trust global economic governance less in counties that were historically poor, the same model to test H1 will be used, except the variable *Decline* will be replaced with *RelativeDecline*. The model takes the following form:

$$Trust_i = \alpha + \beta_1 RelativeDecline_i + \beta_2 RelativeDecline_i \times PoorCounty_i + \varepsilon_i$$

RelativeDecline takes a value of 1 for participants that were primed to reflect on the relative decline of their county in comparison to others and a 0 otherwise. If β_2 takes a positive value, it would indicate that relative economic decline has a less negative effect on trust in poor counties and align with H2.

Lastly, in H3 we hypothesize economic decline to shape trust in IEIs by affecting the salience of the decline and the extent people blame that decline on IEIs. Following the methodology developed by Imai et al. (2013) and Imai et al. (2011), we will test H3 by conducting a mediation analysis that estimates the average causal mediation effect (ACME) of our proposed mechanisms. The two mechanisms will be tested separately and will each be tested twice. First, with absolute economic decline as the independent variable in the model, and then with relative economic decline. As explained by Arriola et al. (2022): “Causal mediation analysis requires the specification of an intermediate variable that mediates the causal relationship between the treatment and outcome variables.” In this context the intermediate variables (i.e. the mechanisms) are the salience of the economic decline and blame attribution, which can be analyzed both as separate mediators

and together in a moderated mediation analysis. Thus, we are able to test H3 by estimating whether there is ACME for the salience of economic decline and blame attribution on trust in global economic governance.

5 Conclusion

The experimental findings in this article will make three main contributions to economic geography research on the globalization backlash, and the literature on public opinion toward IOs and multilateral agreements.

First, they will advance our understanding of the mechanisms through which local decline shapes trust in IELs. While scholars have examined the effects of local economic disparities on retrospective voting (e.g. Margalit 2011; Jensen et al. 2017) and the backlash against globalization (e.g. Autor et al. 2020a; Steiner and Harms 2023), they have not been linked to public perceptions of global economic governing bodies or multilateral treaties, with the exception of the EU (e.g. Lipps and Schraff 2021a; Mayne and Katsanidou 2023). The bulk of the literature on public opinion toward IOs and multilateral treaties examines the individual, institutional, and communicative sources of public opinion toward IOs (cf. Hobolt and Vries 2016; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2026), neglecting the local sources. By focusing on local inequality, this current study extends our understanding of the determinants of trust in IELs, and thus connects the literature on economic geography with public opinion research on global economic governance.

Second, the experimental design will allow us to disentangle two closely related but analytically distinct processes. It has been a perennial question whether people build or lose political trust based on experiences with absolute deprivation or relative losses (e.g. Dellmuth 2024; Pastor Mayo 2025; Schraff and Pontusson 2024; Lipps and Schraff 2021b), inspired by a large literature about the trade attitude effects of absolute versus relative economic losses (e.g. Lü et al. 2012; Brutger and Rathbun 2021). However, in the context of local inequality, the literature has been hampered by inconclusive findings. While economic decline is predicted to depress trust in IOs, trust is often weaker in richer and prospering areas. We will weigh in on this debate by introducing reference dependence as a cognitive mechanism that explains why people in richer areas, as both decline within the area, and compared to other areas, is more salient than in poorer areas, are more likely to search for blame and trust global economic governance less.

Third and finally, the study offers a methodological contribution in its sampling strategy. To our knowledge, this is the first project on the political effects of local decline to combine a nationally representative sample with two county-level representative samples. Providing rich empirical insights from locales, both in the aggregate and in specific counties, has proven important to elucidate the complex behavioral effects

from global impacts more broadly (e.g. Gaikwad et al. 2022; Brulé and Gaikwad 2021). In this article, this design enables us to probe heterogeneity in treatment effects with unusual precision and to capture variation across declining contexts which are typically masked in national samples.

Taken together, these contributions will shed much needed light on how one of the most pressing challenges of our time, local economic decline, impacts in the US and in other western democracies, the backlash against global economic governance and IEIs, in particular. While not all contestation of global economic governance is bad (Agné and Söderbaum 2022; Hurd 2019), and in fact distrust might be the result of healthy and constructive skepticism (Norris 2022), today’s transboundary challenges require effective cooperation in IOs and multilateral treaties. Trustworthiness of IEIs has been questioned by citizens, both those who are critical of international cooperation and delegation of sovereignty, but also those who believe in global problem-solving but think the system requires reform due to its shortcomings in relation to effectiveness, democracy, and justice. The system of global economic governance is thus contested both from within while at the same time facing pressures from external authoritarian forces and their supporters (Adler and Drieschova 2021). Given these pressures, it is important to understand why citizens (do not) trust global economic governance.

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