

Perceptions of Group Inequality and Support for Redistribution and Sectarian Politics: Experimental Evidence from Lebanon

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Introduction

The Puzzle: Economic Inequality Without Class Politics

Income inequality has risen worldwide. However, we have seen little emergence of political coalitions organized around **class or economic interests**. Instead, political coalitions are structured around **religious, ethnic, or cultural lines**.

- Cultural polarization in the **US and Europe**: left-right economic questions vs cultural and identity cleavages.
- Political mobilization centered on Hindu vs. Muslim polarization in **India**.

Our central question

In contexts of severe inequality, can citizens be encouraged to view themselves and national politics along class lines rather than identity-based ones?

Specifically, we investigated whether correcting misperceptions about out-groups' economic conditions can help explain that.

Misperceptions as a potential explanation

We highlight a **demand-side mechanism**: people's biased beliefs about inequality between groups and how those distorted beliefs weaken cross-group solidarity and class-based voting.

Lebanon as a case study

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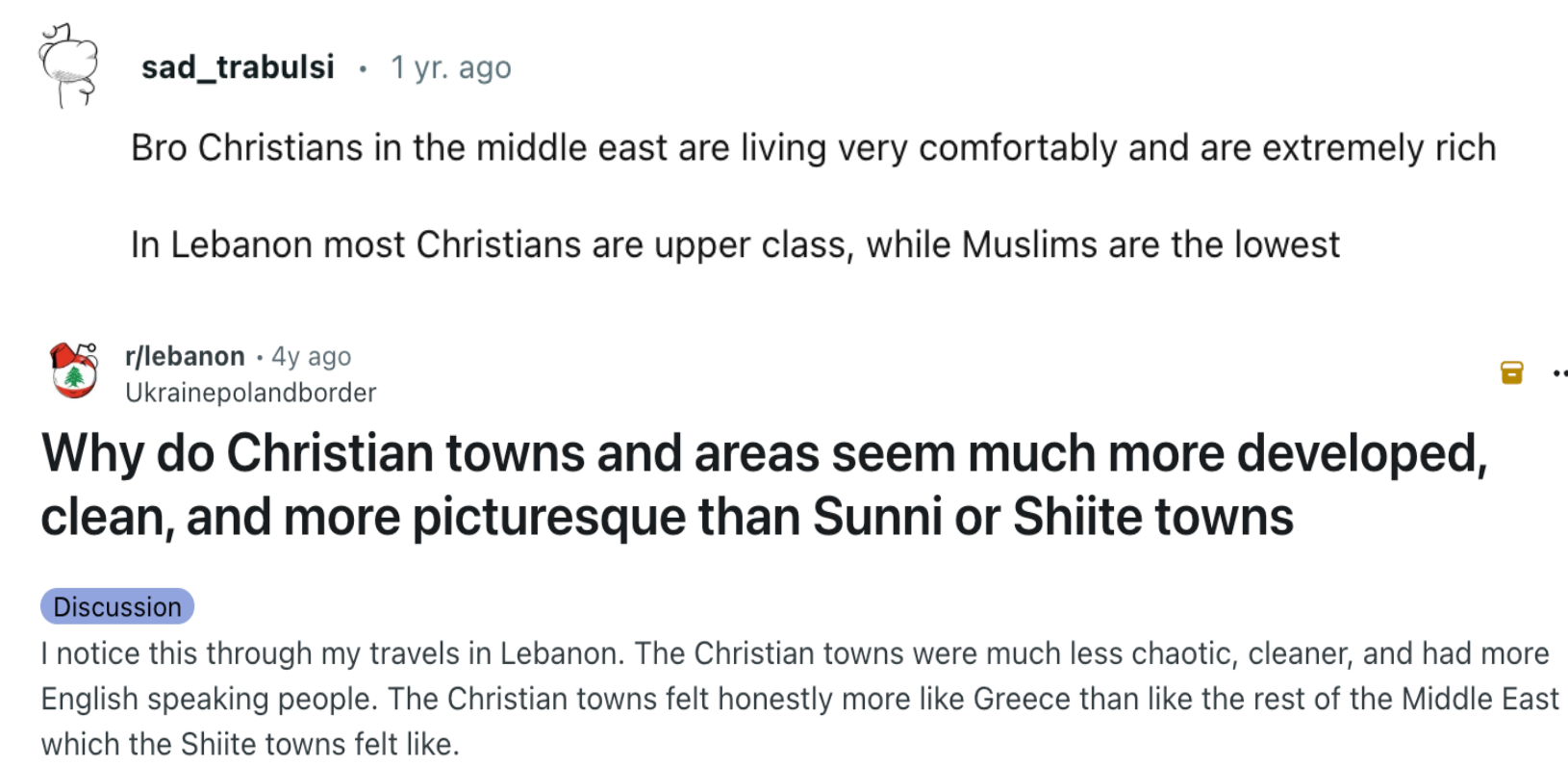


Figure 1: Examples from social media (Reddit)

Methods

Data Collection

- **Goal**: Testing whether correcting out-groups' misperceptions about economic conditions helps explain limited support for redistributive and cross-sectarian policies.
- **Sample**: Face-to-face interviews with 3,300 adults in Greater Beirut, conducted between May and July 2025.
- **Eligibility**: people between 18 and 45 years old who self-identified as Christian, Sunni, or Shia.
- **Stratified**: one-third from each religious sect.

Measuring misperceptions

- **Survey question**: "Imagine 100 Lebanese in the k-income group. How many are Shia, how many are Sunni, how many are Christians?"
- $k \in \{\text{poor, middle-class, rich}\}$.
- i. Sunni and Shia perceive Christian as the richest.
- ii. Christians perceive Shias as the richest.

The treatment

- **Randomized informational experiment**: 7-minute video randomly assigned in the survey with the main message that while income inequality in Lebanon is high, inequality between the three main religious groups is relatively small.

Acknowledgements

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Results

➤ Belief updating on inequality:

- The treatment successfully reduced perceived inequality.
- Increase in the likelihood that respondents rated their own group's economic situation as similar to each out-group.
- No detectable change found in the perception of overall inequality in Lebanon.

➤ Policy preferences and support for pro-poor:

- Do treatment shifts support redistribution along economic rather than religious lines? We measured this through support for 3 policy outcomes:
 - Increasing the top marginal income tax rate;
 - Exempting low earners from the income tax; and
 - Expanding social protection.
- **Treatment respondents move towards target pro-poor policies** with more progressivity at the top and greater social protection.

- **Political preferences**: We assessed whether information shifts political preferences from sectarianism and the current political status quo by asking the following questions

- Preferred system of governance between a sectarian system similar to the current one, a civil/secular system, or a sectarian federal system;
- Support for introducing civil marriage in Lebanon, a highly sensitive issue that serves as a proxy for openness to secular political change; and
- Support for the current prime minister, Nawaf Salam, who does not belong to the traditional sectarian political class.

- **No detectable effects were found**.

- **Qualitative evidence Supporting these findings**: In our survey open-ended question asking participants to name three things they learned about the video we found that

- 68.7% of treatment responses used a cross-sectarian framing;
- 23.1% used action-oriented language (calls for change, policy demands, proposed solutions).
- This supports previous findings: people updated their beliefs on inequality, but behavior outcomes (low cost vs high costs) remained unchanged.

➤ Class identity

- Does the video have any impact on the perceived importance of class identity as opposed to religious or national identities? We did that through an allocation task that introduces a trade-off by requiring respondents to distribute a fixed amount of importance points across these three categories
- Only a **small reallocation of identity salience** towards class was found

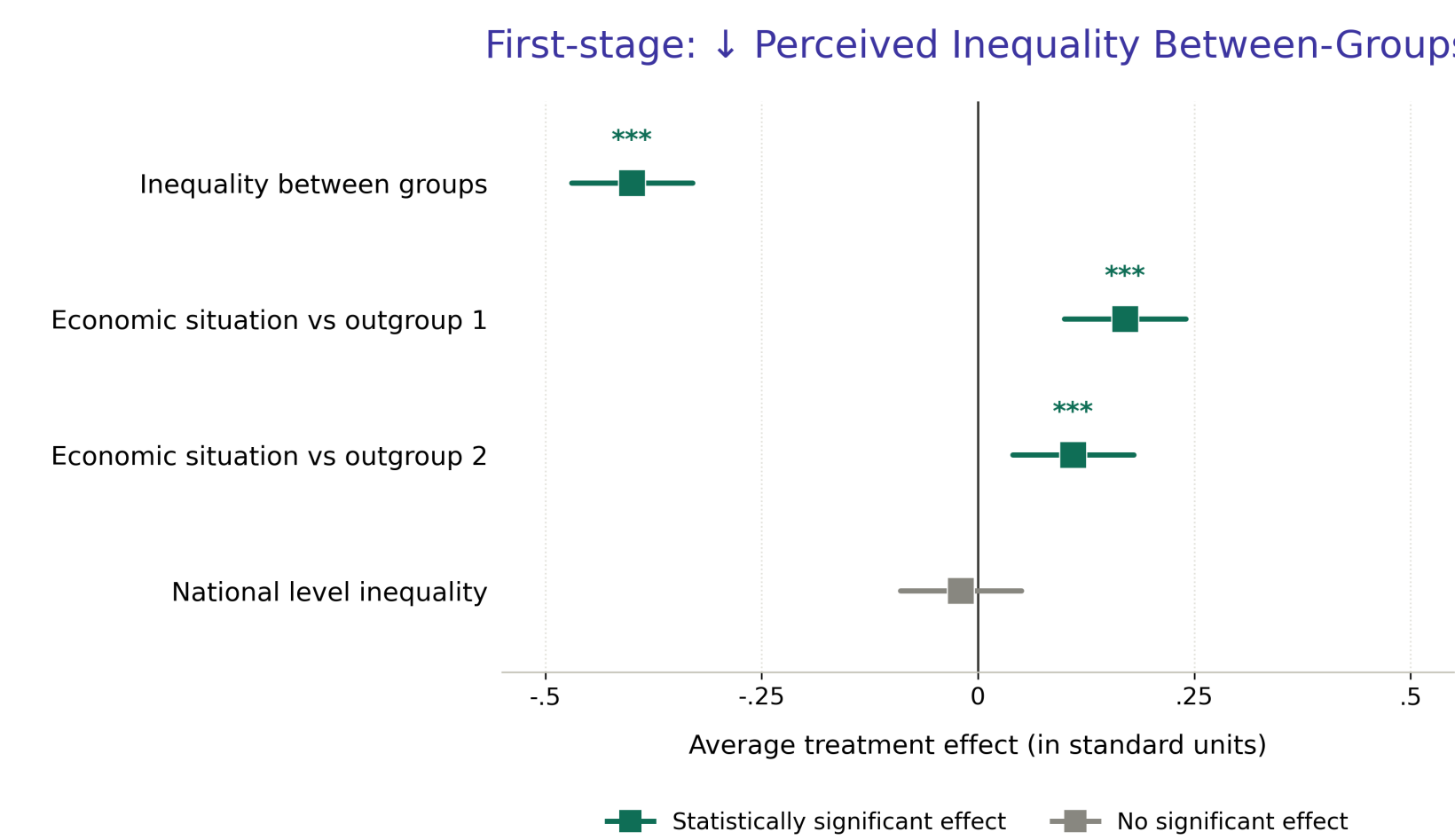


Figure 2: Belief updating on inequality

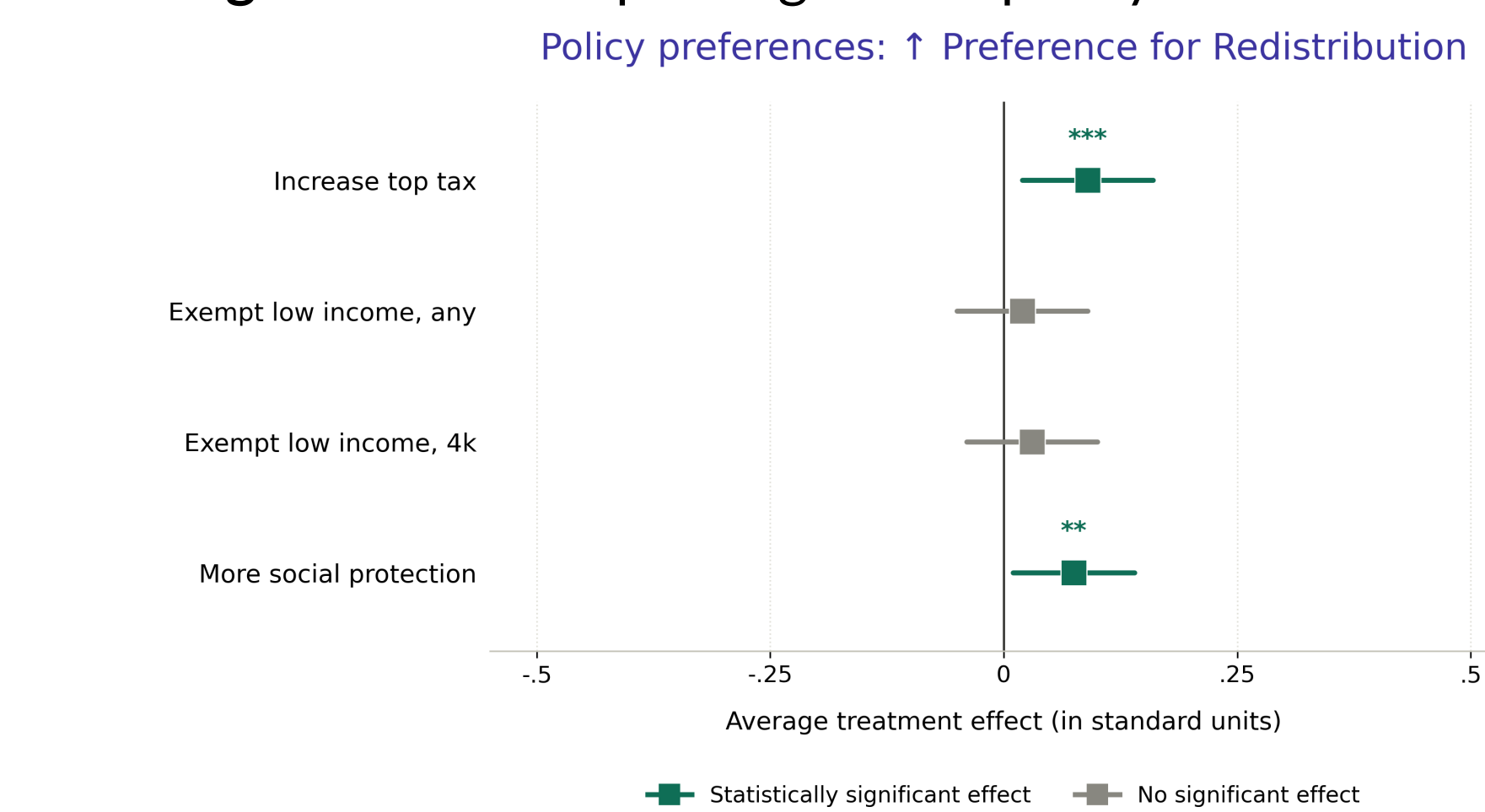


Figure 3: Policy preferences and support for pro-poor

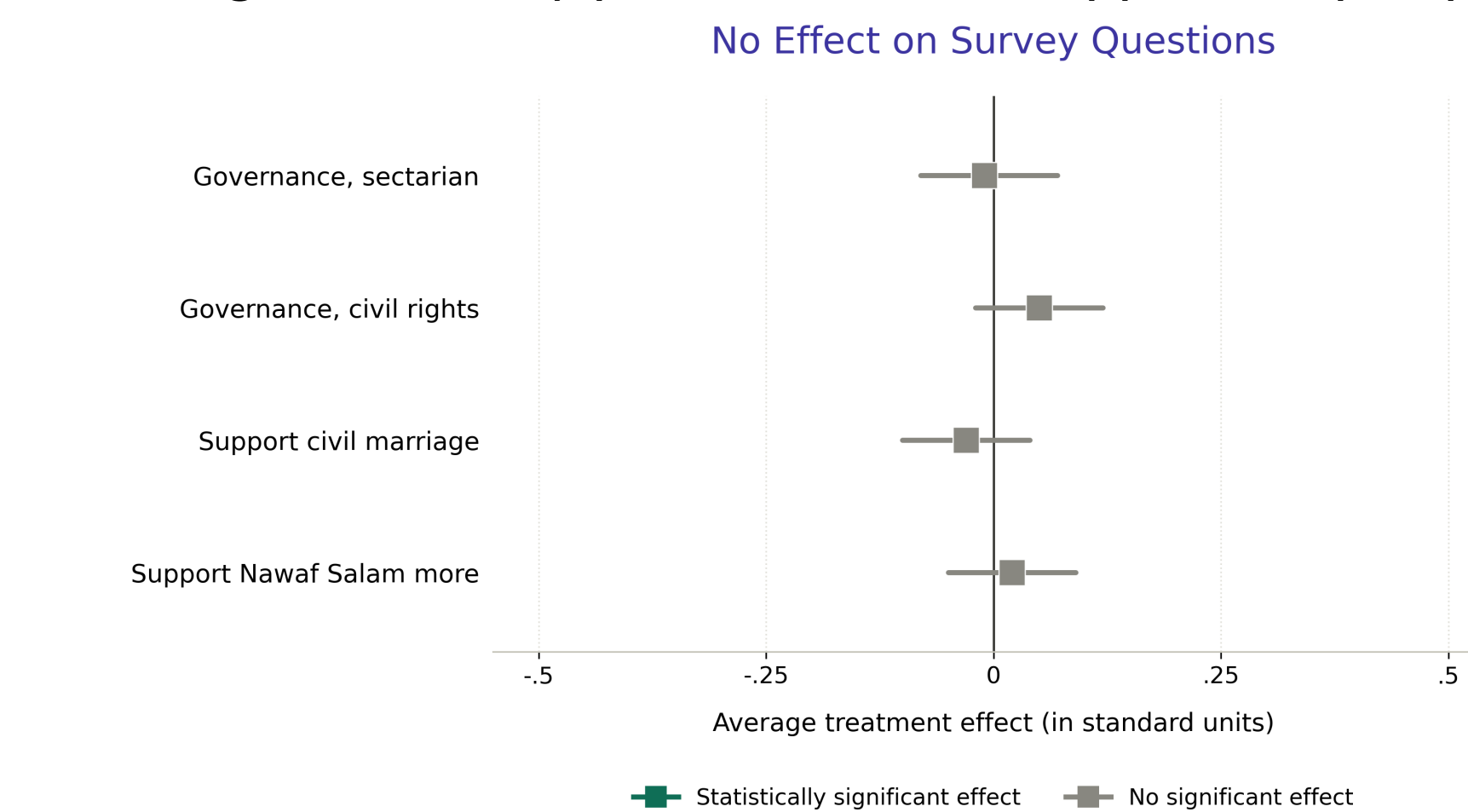


Figure 4: Political preferences

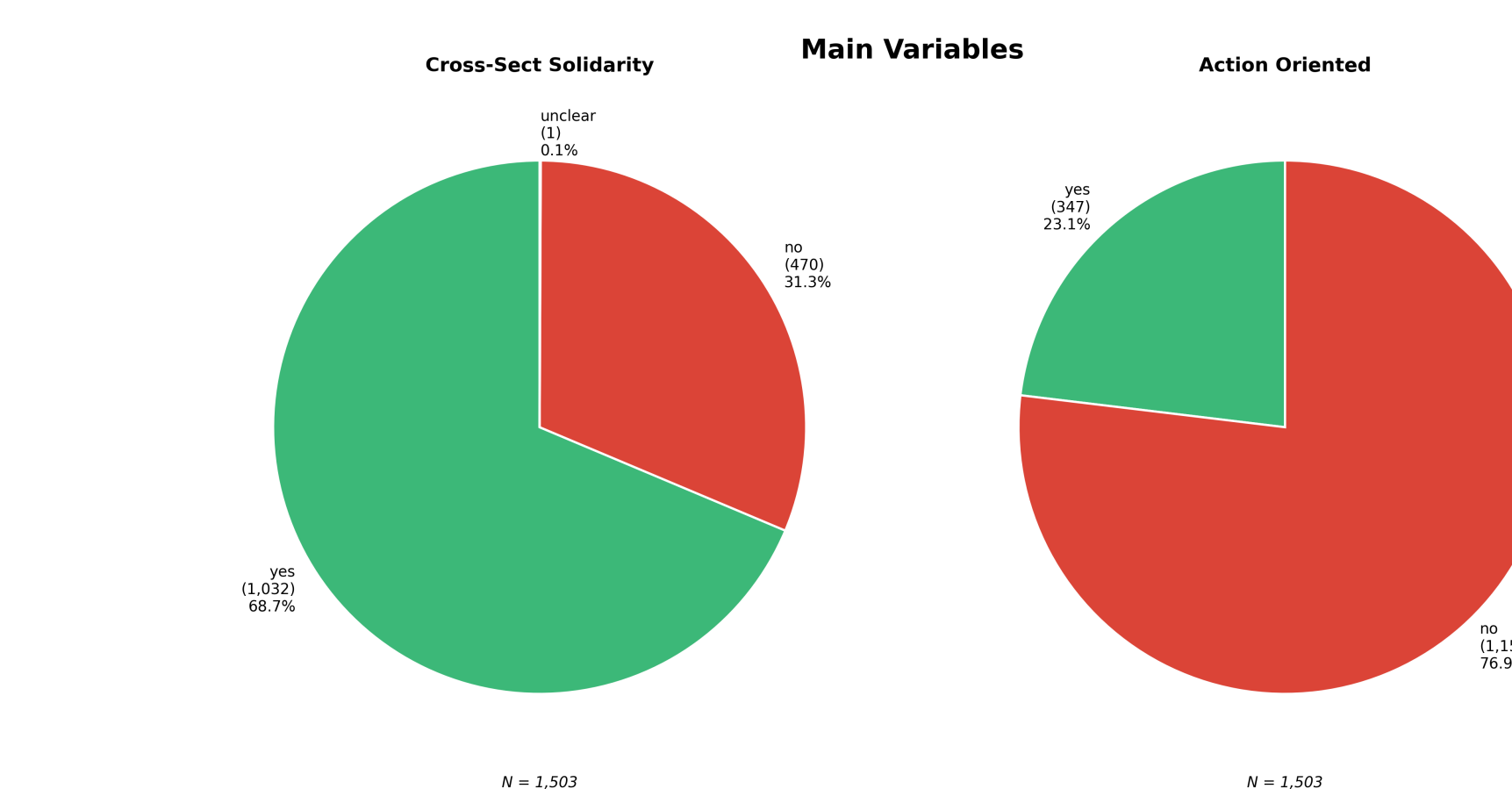


Figure 5: Qualitative evidence from survey open-ended question

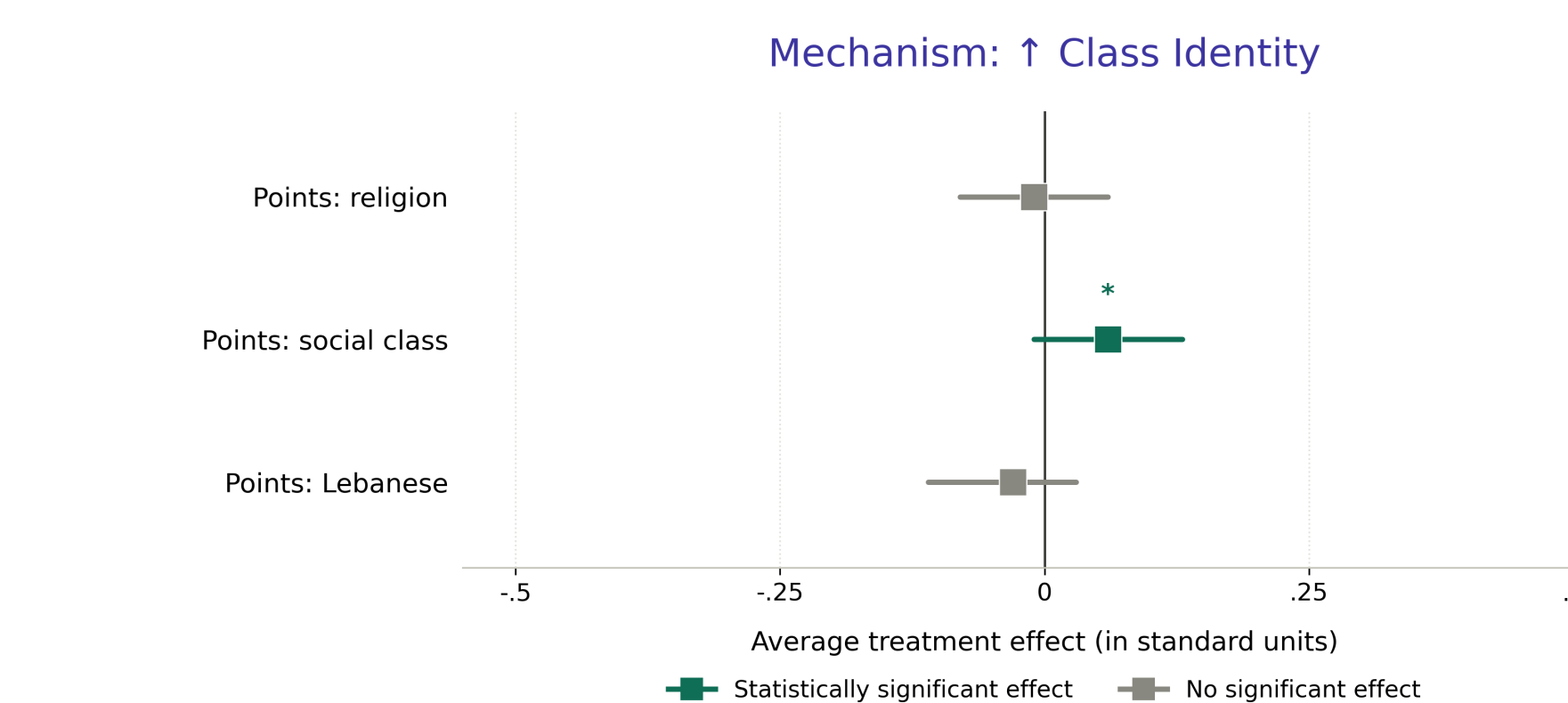


Figure 6: Class identity salience

Conclusion

- **We documented sizable misperceptions across religious groups**: Christians, Sunnis, and Shias overestimate economic gaps between groups, despite similar income distributions.

- **Correcting these misperceptions increases support for redistribution**, driven by stronger class identity, greater anger toward elites, and a strong presence cross sectarian framing towards the Lebanese economic reality

- **But it is harder to shift entrenched political preferences**: Sectarian attachment and reliance on clientelistic networks seem to limit change.

Similar issues in other countries?

- Religious violence in **India** partly fueled by perceptions of large economic differences
 - Income between Hindus and Muslims: 5% (NSHIE 2011)
- 1994 genocide in **Rwanda** partly fueled by perceptions that Tutsis controlled the economy... despite similar economic conditions
 - Income between Hutus and Tutsis pre-genocide: 4%

- Several other examples of misperceptions about the income/wealth of religious or ethnic groups fuelling violence throughout history
 - Armenians in the Ottoman Empire (Panossian 2006)
 - Jews in Europe (Toch 2013).

Mechanisms: Reactions to Video Treatment

"Our problem is not sects, our problem is classes. Sect did not bring us together. Pain brought us together."

"I wish we could change something and stop the thing called sects so we could live in peace."

"Poverty is common to all sects. There is no division of income that reflects a difference between sects, rather it is between rich and poor within each sect."

"I felt great anger seeing how much these youth are suffering... anger at the state."

"It is necessary to raise taxes on the rich so that they can provide a living wage to the poor."

Figure 7: Cross-sectarian framing and action-oriented language used by respondents in open survey question

Next Steps

- **LLM Analysis**: Finalizing and refining the results to investigate more patterns of class salience, cross-sectarian framing, and the sentiment directed towards poor and rich groups in the survey open-ended question.
- **War exposure analysis**: through the question of respondents' villages of origin, use georeferencing techniques to map these villages and analyze if there is any correlation between being in an area that was affected by the war with Israel and the support for parties and media channels that are cross-sectarian (support for specific media channels and political parties were both asked in the survey).

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