

False Consciousness or Class Awareness? Local Income Inequality, Personal Economic Position, and Belief in American Meritocracy

Benjamin J. Newman University of Connecticut
Christopher D. Johnston Duke University
Patrick L. Lown Stony Brook University

Existing research analyzes the effects of cross-national and temporal variation in income inequality on public opinion; however, research has failed to explore the impact of variation in inequality across citizens' local residential context. This article analyzes the impact of local inequality on citizens' belief in a core facet of the American ethos—meritocracy. We advance conditional effects hypotheses that collectively argue that the effect of residing in a high-inequality context will be moderated by individual income. Utilizing national survey data, we demonstrate that residing in more unequal counties heightens rejection of meritocracy among low-income residents and bolsters adherence among high-income residents. In relatively equal counties, we find no significant differences between high- and low-income citizens. We conclude by discussing the implications of class-based polarization found in response to local inequality with respect to current debates over the consequences of income inequality for American democracy.

Income inequality has increased in the United States since the 1970s. This trend, in conjunction with recent salient events, such as the 2008 financial crisis, has reinvigorated interest in the effect of inequality on the American populace (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Hacker and Pierson 2011; Kelly and Enns 2010; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006).

Within leading research, the primary focus is on analyzing the effects of aggregate inequality, in terms of both temporal variation (Bénabou and Ok 2001; Kelly and Enns 2010; Kenworthy and McCall 2008; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006) and cross-national variation (Dallinger 2010; Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005; Moene and Wallerstein 2001). Largely ignored, however, is the substantial variation in local income inequality present in citizens' day-to-day lives, with some citizens residing in local areas with a relatively even distribution of wealth and others residing in areas with pronounced inequality. At present, little to no research has explored the impact

of variation in inequality across citizens' local residential contexts.

In addition, the bulk of the leading research focuses on the effect of inequality on public support for government redistribution (Kelly and Enns 2010; Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005; Moene and Wallerstein 2001). While this focus reflects the end goal of understanding the impact of inequality on public policy, it has come at the expense of attention to other politically important and intervening variables, such as beliefs about the fairness of the economic system itself. Past research has demonstrated that perceived economic fairness—typically hinging upon beliefs about the causes of individual economic success and failure—strongly influences support for social welfare policies (Alesina and La Ferrara 2005; Bénabou and Tirole 2006; Fong 2001; Gilens 1999; Hasenfeld and Rafferty 1989; Kluegel and Smith 1986).

Despite the well-studied link between inequality and social welfare, and the established importance of

Benjamin J. Newman is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Connecticut, 365 Fairfield Way, U-1024, Storrs, CT 06269 (benj.newman@uconn.edu). Christopher D. Johnston is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Duke University, Box 90204, Durham, NC 27708 (christopher.johnston@duke.edu). Patrick L. Lown is a Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Political Science, Stony Brook University, Social and Behavioral Science Building, 7th Floor, Stony Brook, NY 11794 (patrick.lown@stonybrook.edu).

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economic fairness perceptions as a predictor of welfare policy preferences, the literature is surprisingly bare when it comes to analyzing the impact of inequality on the perceived fairness of the market economic system. Further, we are unaware of any study to date that explores the impact of citizens' local experiences of economic inequality on such perceptions.

What effect does the day-to-day experience of economic inequality in one's local environment have on beliefs about meritocracy? In the U.S. and other market-based systems, the idea of economic fairness is encapsulated in the concept of meritocracy, where material outcomes are awarded based upon individual initiative, hard work, and ability. The notion of meritocracy is commonly deemed a centerpiece of American political ideology and a core tenet of the cultural belief system referred to as the "American dream" (Hochschild 1995), "American creed" (Huntington 1981), or "American ethos" (McClosky and Zaller 1984). Indeed, the deep entrenchment of meritocracy in American culture has long been identified by scholars as a primary factor stymieing public support for redistribution in the face of economic inequality (Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote 2001; Hochschild 1981; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Foner 1984).

In this article, we analyze the sources of American citizens' belief in meritocracy in a manner that goes beyond prior work focusing on individual-level factors, such as income, education, and race (e.g., Kluegel and Smith 1986; Kreidl 2000), or more recent work focusing on personality (e.g., Jost et al. 2003). Here, we focus on the *contextual sources* of support for meritocracy and offer a theory of *activated class conflict*. We argue that residence in high-inequality contexts, compared to relatively equal contexts, increases the salience of economic comparisons and one's own relative economic position, and thus polarizes public belief in meritocratic ideology across income-based lines. Among low-income Americans, we argue that exposure to high inequality will stimulate rejection of meritocracy by increasing the salience of their disadvantaged position within a conspicuous local economic hierarchy. We label this the *activated disillusionment hypothesis*. Among higher-income Americans, we argue that residing in a highly unequal environment will bolster support for meritocracy, thereby defending and rationalizing their position and the economic system enabling such privilege. We label this the *activated loyalty hypothesis*. In local environments where income is more evenly distributed, we expect personal income to play a substantially smaller role in structuring meritocratic beliefs.

Utilizing pooled national survey data combined with census data on county-level inequality, we find strong

support for our theory of activated class conflict. Our theory and findings work toward a reconciliation of competing self-interest and "false consciousness" theories concerning the effect of socioeconomic class in shaping economic ideology among the mass public. By demonstrating the conditions under which low-income citizens remain faithful to or reject meritocratic ideology, we reconcile these competing theories and provide an important launching point for future research.

Public Belief in American Meritocracy

In American society, political socialization and popular culture play a powerful role in inculcating public support for capitalism and belief in meritocratic ideals (Hochschild 1981, 1995; McClosky and Zaller 1984). Indeed, relative to many European countries, there is a marked tendency among Americans to view individual agency as responsible for economic success versus failure (Oorschot and Halman 2000). Nevertheless, survey data over the past 30 years consistently uncover variation and ambivalence in public attitudes toward meritocracy in America. For example, Kluegel and Smith (1986) found that a majority of citizens agreed that *both* "hard work and initiative" *and* "good luck, and being in the right place" were important explanations for economic success. In a 1994 poll, an estimated 39% of Americans agreed that "hard work offers little guarantee of success," and an estimated 35% in a poll conducted in 2012 agreed that "success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control."¹ In seeking to explain the sources of this variation, we find that the literature is dominated by individual-level explanations, and that personal economic position lies at the center of most theories. There is, however, an interesting tension in the literature characterized by countervailing predictions concerning the relationship between economic position and adherence to meritocratic ideology.

On the one hand, rational choice (see Lau 2003) and economic self-interest (Downs 1957; Sears et al. 1980) perspectives on opinion formation would expect higher-income individuals within economically stratified societies to be more likely than lower-income individuals to defend the economic system because they

¹Sources for these data are the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press July 1994 New Political Landscape and the April 2012 Values Surveys, available at www.people-press.org/category/datasets.

personally benefit from it and desire its continuation. Among lower-income citizens in economically unequal societies, however, these theories expect rejection of the economic system and subsequent adoption of system-challenging beliefs that form the basis of support for changes to the status quo and redistributive policies (Kluegel and Smith 1986). This relationship between income and meritocratic beliefs constitutes the crux of a realistic interest-based conception of class conflict expected by traditional Marxist theory (Schumaker, Kiel, and Heilke 1996) and contemporary realistic group conflict, relative deprivation, and social dominance theories (see Huddy 2003). These expectations are supported by research demonstrating that lower-income citizens are less likely than higher-income citizens to perceive general and personal opportunities for economic advancement, more likely to view themselves as victims of external barriers to advancement, and more likely to attribute economic success to structural versus personal explanations (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Kreidl 2000).

Countering this perspective are neo-Marxist theories of ideological hegemony (Mahutga and Stepan-Norris 2007) and false consciousness (Pines 1993), and more recently, system justification theory (SJT; Jost and Banaji 1994; Jost and Hunyady 2005).

Collectively, these theories provide a foundation for the prediction that lower-income citizens, despite their less privileged status and putative self-interest in rejecting meritocracy and challenging economic inequities, will nevertheless endorse meritocratic ideals. Theories of ideological hegemony and false consciousness collectively argue that members of the lower class possess representations of reality that conceal or obscure their own subordination, exploitation, and domination. Such representations reflect the internalization of beliefs held and disseminated by, and to the benefit of, the dominant classes in society. Belief in ideas that promote the interests of the dominant class consequently legitimize and reproduce social and economic arrangements that generate inequality and material deprivation for the lower class (Pines 1993; Schumaker, Kiel, and Heilke 1996). Complementing these theories, SJT argues that individuals possess a psychological need to see the world as predictable and fair rather than capricious (Jost et al. 2003; Lerner 1980); thus, for economically disadvantaged citizens, engaging in “system justification” serves a palliative function by increasing contentment with their situation (Jost and Hunyady 2005).

In contrast to rational actor and self-interest theories, these theories together suggest that personal income will play a negligible role in structuring meritocratic beliefs, as low-income citizens are expected to align with their

high-income counterparts in upholding the economic system as meritocratic. This perspective is reinforced by the general finding in political science that economic self-interest often plays only a minor role in shaping an individual’s political behavior and policy preferences (Citrin and Green 1990; Sears and Funk 1991; cf. Jaeger 2006; Margalit 2013). In short, in attempting to understand the sources of support for meritocracy, specifically as far as personal income is concerned, we are left with a definite puzzle within the literature characterized by countervailing perspectives and conflicting empirical evidence.

Local Inequality and Activated Class Conflict

We seek to resolve these competing perspectives by developing a theory of activated class conflict. This theory attempts to reconcile countervailing economic and psychological theories concerning the role of personal income in shaping meritocratic belief by arguing that individuals’ objective economic position does inform their attitudes, but that these position-based effects remain “latent opinion” (Key 1961; Zaller 2003), requiring a situational trigger to activate them. According to our theory, the presence of income inequality in citizens’ local economic context will activate these latent attitudes by increasing the salience of relative economic comparisons and one’s own relative economic position, such that lower- and upper-income citizens will polarize in their belief in meritocratic ideology.

Economic Position as Latent Opinion

Political scientists have long been interested in the effect that personal economic conditions—such as financial distress and unemployment—play in shaping political attitudes and behavior (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Schlozman and Verba 1979; Sears and Funk 1991). The received wisdom is that citizens’ economic position and associated self-interests play little to no role in shaping their attitudes or behavior. Building upon this work, however, research demonstrates that the connection of personal economic experiences to politics can be triggered by media stories (Mutz 1994), priming (Chong, Citrin, and Conley 2001), and conditions in one’s local economic context (Mondak, Mutz, and Huckfeldt 1996). This research suggests the experiences and interests associated with one’s economic position can be conceptualized as latent opinion (Key 1961; Zaller 2003),

remaining dormant until a facilitating agent, event, or situational trigger (Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004) “activates” the opinion within the political arena.

With this research in mind, we view one’s personal economic position as imparting a set of class-based experiences and interests that creates a propensity to view the economic system, and how resources are distributed, as either fair or unfair. The working poor should be inclined to view assertions of meritocracy as inconsistent with their own experience of economic hardship despite hard work, and should thus be disposed toward regarding the economic system as unfair. Wealthy citizens, on the other hand, may find meritocratic ideology entirely consistent with their own lived experience and/or a normatively desirable narrative to embrace in accounting for their arrival in their current economic position. The activation of these latent propensities into explicit acceptance or rejection of meritocracy, however, may depend upon relevant situational triggers.

Local Income Inequality as the Situational Trigger

There is strong theoretical reason to believe that the level of economic inequality in citizens’ local context should serve as a situational trigger, bringing personal economic position to the fore in shaping belief in meritocracy. Variation in exposure to inequality and its severity should serve as a trigger by leading to variation across local contexts in the salience of (1) relative economic comparisons and (2) one’s own relative economic position. In relatively equal environments, where income is more evenly dispersed, residents in general should find extant income differences less salient. In economically unequal local environments, however, where the gulf between those with lower and higher incomes is more drastic, all residents should be more aware of stark economic hierarchy and their own position in this hierarchy. This logic suggests that compared to lower (upper) income individuals in more equal contexts, lower (upper) income individuals in more unequal contexts will be more aware that they are “poor” (“wealthy”) and that others around them are doing much better (worse) than themselves.

In short, highly unequal contexts may enhance class awareness by serving as a contextual force inducing a contrast effect (Aronson 1999), whereby lower- and upper-income citizens’ awareness of inequality and perception of their own position is accentuated by the availability of more extreme economic counterparts for day-to-day observation and comparison. By increasing the salience of economic differences, contextual inequality

should introduce the *motivation*—absent in relatively equal contexts—for citizens’ class-based experiences and latent beliefs about the fairness of the economic system to crystallize into an explicit attitude. This motivation should qualitatively differ for lower- and upper-income citizens.

Activated Disillusionment and Loyalty

Due to experienced hardships and held economic grievances, lower-income citizens may possess latent beliefs about economic fairness and success that ultimately ascribe outcomes to exogenous factors; however, such oppositional beliefs to the dominant ideology of meritocracy may remain inchoate and dormant in the absence of motivation for such beliefs to be deployed in conscious awareness. For poor Americans, we believe that this motivation comes in response to the heightened sense of relative deprivation (Walker and Pettigrew 1984) and threat to one’s self-esteem (Jost, Burgess, and Mosso 2001) generated by residing in economically unequal contexts, and the concomitant awareness of being at the bottom of a more conspicuous local economic totem pole. The cohabitation of such underprivileged individuals in the same local context as those who are better off would serve as a continual reminder of the differences that exist between stations, both materially and socially. Combined, these context-induced experiences should provide a strong source of motivation for lower-income citizens to engage in ego justification (Aronson 1999; Jost and Banaji 1994), which is a form of motivated social cognition (Kruglanski 1996) involving embracing beliefs that restore and/or protect self-esteem. For lower-income citizens, this may involve viewing one’s disadvantaged position as a reflection of external factors beyond one’s control, rather than as a reflection of personal deficits or shortcomings. Such external circumstances may include bad luck, inadequate opportunities, structural barriers, or an unfair economic system more generally. Embracing these beliefs constitutes an attitudinal shift toward the rejection of meritocratic ideals and development of an “oppositional consciousness” (Mansbridge and Morris 2001) that directly challenge dominant ideology. This leads to our first hypothesis:

Activated Disillusionment Hypothesis: Among lower-income Americans, those residing in local contexts with high levels of income inequality should be more likely to reject meritocratic ideology than those residing in more economically equal contexts.

Countering the experience of those at the lower end of the economic hierarchy are those at the higher

end. Our framework suggests that compared to well-off citizens in relatively equal contexts, those residing in highly unequal contexts should be more acutely aware of their own relative privilege while simultaneously being more aware of the existence of economic deprivation and poverty. Facing blatant inequality in light of one's own privilege may generate negative affective states, such as dissonance or guilt (Jost and Hunyady 2002). However, unlike for lower-income citizens, it is plausible to expect that for higher-income citizens the potential experience of negative feelings in response to inequality coexists with a self-interest-based motive to preserve one's privileged position and the economic system that affords it. Thus, higher-income citizens in high-inequality contexts may find a synergy between the motive to reduce negative affective states and to act in their own economic self-interest in the form of bolstered defense of the fairness of the economic system and the centrality of individual effort in determining one's position. Our second hypothesis follows from this expectation:

Activated Loyalty Hypothesis: Among higher-income Americans, those residing in local contexts with high levels of income inequality should be more likely to uphold meritocratic ideology than those residing in more economically equal contexts.

Combined, these two hypotheses suggest a process of activated class conflict, where increasing levels of local inequality lead to polarization between lower- and higher-income citizens over belief in meritocracy. We believe our activated class-conflict framework resolves extant tension between self-interest and false-consciousness theories by stipulating the conditions under which lower- and upper-income citizens will uphold or reject meritocratic ideology.

Expected Racial Heterogeneity and Hypothesis Testing

In testing our hypotheses, we believe it is important to perform separate tests for white Americans and nonwhite racial minorities. This belief is informed by a set of theoretical and methodological considerations. Beginning with theoretical considerations, prior research demonstrates the existence of a "race gap" in public opinion between whites and racial minorities that is composed of both differences in economic, social, and political attitudes as well as differences in the *factors shaping* such attitudes. Compared to white Americans, racial minorities are significantly less sanguine about the existence of economic opportunity while significantly more supportive

of welfare provision (Hasenfeld and Rafferty 1989; Hochschild 1995; Hunt 2004; Kinder and Winters 2001; Kluegel and Smith 1986).

Paralleling these differences, prior research uncovers racial heterogeneity in the effect of contextual and individual predictors on mass opinion across myriad policy issues (Hall and Ferree 1986; Kinder and Winters 2001; Nteta 2013; Young 1991). In short, higher levels of perceived distributive injustice motivated by racial identity and group experience among minority citizens imply not only between-group differences in the amount of variance in meritocratic belief to be explained, but also potential differences in the sensitivity of such attitudes to variation in personal economic situations or local economic conditions.

Turning to methodological considerations, it is plausible that the effects we hypothesize, if observed in data including all racial groups, could be driven by racial differences in economic outlooks in combination with the tendency of comparisons between low- and high-income individuals in high-inequality contexts relative to equal contexts to involve attitudinal contrasts between lower-income minority and higher-income white respondents. In other words, what may appear as evidence for "activated disillusionment" may be driven by unequal contexts containing a greater presence of lower-income black respondents holding more dissident economic attitudes relative to better-off whites. This possibility finds support in our data; while 22% of whites in our data reject meritocracy, meritocracy is rejected by 31.3% of black respondents. Further, we find a positive correlation ($r = .38$) at the county level between the percent black and income inequality. Taken together, these considerations suggest the importance of testing our hypotheses separately among whites and racial minorities. In addition to reflecting the expectation of racial heterogeneity in the dynamics of economic opinion, doing so also serves to control for the possible conflation of activated disillusionment with race-based disillusionment.

Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we merged four nationally representative surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press: (1) the 2005 News Interest Index Poll ($N = 1,502$), (2) the 2006 Immigration Survey ($N = 2,000$), (3) the 2007 Values Survey ($N = 2,007$), and (4) the 2009 Values Survey ($N = 3,013$).² These surveys were selected based upon their common

²All surveys employed standard list-assisted random-digit dialing (RDD) methodology, sampling adults living within the continental

inclusion of items tapping belief in meritocracy, county-level geo-codes for all respondents, and theoretically relevant demographic and political control variables. Given that we expect heterogeneity in the operation of our hypotheses for whites and racial minorities, we divide our merged sample for the purposes of the present analysis into $n = 6,449$ non-Hispanic white respondents and $n = 2,073$ nonwhite minority respondents. Considering all racial groups, our merged data contain respondents spanning across 1,844 counties, 48 states, and the District of Columbia. In addition to increasing the statistical power of our hypotheses tests, one benefit of analyzing our merged data is that the 2005–09 time frame enables us to test our hypotheses with data collected before and after the 2008 financial crisis.

The central construct we seek to explain is individual belief in meritocracy, which centers upon the idea that the economic system rewards individuals based upon their initiative, hard work, and ability, and that one can achieve economic success through such means. Conversely, belief in meritocracy should also involve rejection of the opposing idea that the achievement of wealth and success is largely determined by forces outside of the hands of the individual, such as good luck, inherited privileges and resources, political connections, and other forms of structural advantage or preferential treatment. Prior scholarship has typically measured individual opinion on meritocracy with items that tap perceptions of the factors determining economic wealth and success—specifically, the importance of hard work (Fong 2001; Hochschild 1995; Jost et al. 2003; Kluegel and Smith 1986). In keeping with this research, we measure belief in meritocracy with a survey item contained in the 2005 and 2006 Pew surveys presenting the following pair of statements and asking respondents to choose which statement comes closest to their own view: “Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they’re willing to work hard” or “Hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people.” From this item, we constructed a dichotomous variable, labeled *Meritocracy*, which was coded 1 for respondents reporting agreement with the latter statement and 0 for those agreeing with the former statement.

The 2007 Pew survey contained very similar items, but presented in a slightly different format. Respondents

United States. The 2005 survey was conducted December 7 through December 11, 2005, and achieved a response rate of 24.5%. The 2006 survey was conducted February 8 through March 7, 2006, and achieved a response rate of 30.2%. The 2007 survey was conducted December 12, 2006, through January 10, 2007, and achieved a response rate of 23%. The 2009 survey was conducted March 31 through April 21, 2009, and achieved an overall response rate of 18.3%.

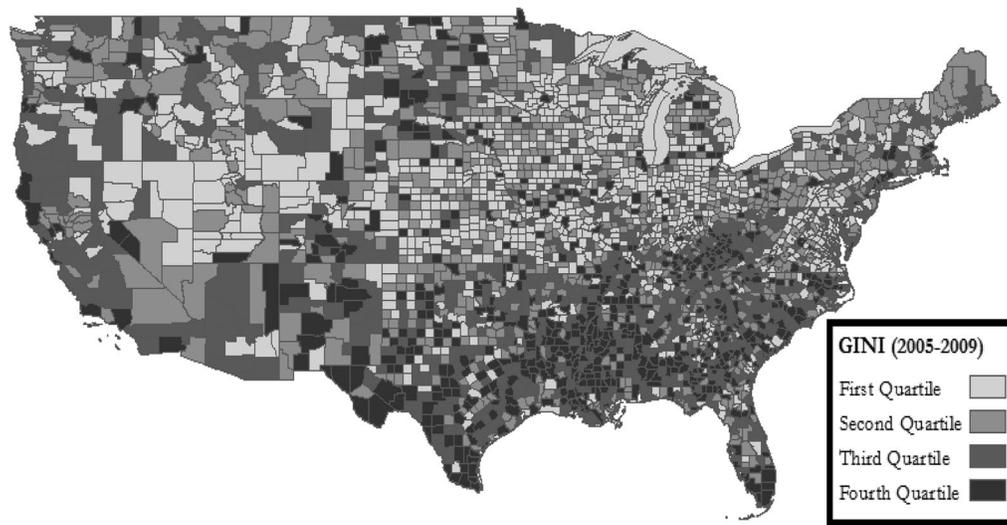
were presented with a series of statements and asked to report their level of agreement with each statement. Respondents were separately presented with the following two statements: (1) “Hard work offers little guarantee of success,” and (2) “Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control.” The four ordered-response options for these items ranged from “completely agree” to “completely disagree.” To translate responses to these items into a format consistent with the prior items, and thus enabling merging of the 2007 survey with the 2005–06 surveys, we constructed a dichotomous item from responses to these two items, which was coded 1 for respondents who “completely agreed” or “mostly agreed” with both statements and 0 otherwise. Last, in the 2009 survey, respondents were asked to report their level of agreement with the following statement: “Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control.” The four ordered-response options for this item ranged from “completely agree” to “completely disagree,” and we again constructed a dichotomous item coded 1 for respondents who “completely agreed” or “mostly agreed” with this statement and 0 otherwise.³ Collectively, utilizing our merged 2005–09 Pew data, we find that roughly 22% of white and 29% of nonwhite respondents reject the meritocratic notion that hard work affords success in favor of the disillusioned position that success is determined by forces outside of our control and that hard work and determination do not guarantee success for most people.⁴

To measure variation in income inequality across citizens’ local contexts, we rely upon county-level estimates of the Gini coefficient for household income inequality obtained from the 2005–09 American Community Survey (ACS; five-year estimates)⁵ conducted by the U.S.

³We should note that the results presented in the following section are not an artifact of variation in question wording and dependent variable measurement, as the results completely hold when analyzing only the 2005–06 surveys (see Supplemental Appendix B in the supporting information).

⁴The response frequencies for each individual survey (for whites and nonwhites combined) are as follows: (1) 2005 survey—32.6% reject meritocracy, (2) 2006 survey—32.3% reject meritocracy, (3) 2007 survey—17.8% reject meritocracy, and (4) 2009 survey—17.3% reject meritocracy. We should also note that missing data for our *Meritocracy* variables were very minimal; in our merged data set, there was a total of $N = 113$ incidents of missing data for *Meritocracy* ($N = 21$, 2005 survey; $N = 62$, 2007 survey; $N = 10$, 2007 survey; and $N = 20$, 2009 survey). In subjecting missing cases to regression analysis, we fail to find any evidence that *Gini Index* or *Income* exert any influence over refusal to respond to the *Meritocracy* items. To view results from this analysis of missing data, see Supplemental Appendix B in the supporting information.

⁵We use the ACS five-year file because, compared to the ACS one-year files, the five-year file provides complete information for all counties in the United States. ACS one-year files only include data

FIGURE 1 Variation in County Income Inequality across the United States

Census Bureau.⁶ A Gini coefficient of 0 (minimum value) would indicate equal dispersion of income across households within a county, whereas a value of 1 (maximum value) would indicate the possession of all income by a single household. Use of the Gini coefficient is standard

for geographies with a population of 65,000 or more, and estimates are much less reliable than the five-year estimates. Given that inequality might have varied from year to year over our period of observation (i.e., 2005–09), we reestimated the models in Table 1 using ACS one-year file estimates (2006, 2007, and 2009 ACS one-year files) of *Gini Index* and all other contextual variables. This alternative model ensures that county inequality is as closely temporally matched to the year of survey response as possible; we were unable to match the 2005 Pew survey to 2005 one-year data because the ACS does not provide a 2005 one-year file. The results from this analysis are presented in Supplemental Appendix B. As can be seen, while the sample size suffers due to incomplete data for all counties in each one-year file, the results nonetheless hold when performing this robustness check.

⁶Here, as with most contextual opinion research, our selection of the geographic unit used as the measure of local context reflects a necessary balance between that which is theoretically appropriate and practical limitations imposed by data availability. For example, geographic data below the county level, such as for zip codes, are only available in the decennial censuses and not in the ACS conducted in the years between decennial censuses. Beyond considerations of data availability, existing research suggests that the use of the county is more appropriate when measuring economic context than other contextual factors, such as racial context. Indeed, for the latter, smaller geo-units are more appropriate when attempting to measure factors such as residential integration and intimate interracial contact. For economic context, however, county boundaries tend to correspond to labor markets and commuting to work (Oliver and Mendelberg 2000), and thus capture differences in diffuse factors such as economic competition, unemployment, and economic inequality across contexts in which most citizens live, work, commute, and shop. Further, the use of the county represents a vast improvement over existing work, which focuses on the effects of inequality measured at the national or state level.

practice in measuring income inequality, and in keeping with leading research in the field (Alesina, Di Tella, and MacCulloch 2004; Kelly and Enns 2010; Kenworthy and McCall 2008).

The resulting county-level variable, which we label *Gini Index*, ranges from .33 to .606 in our merged data, with a mean of .44 and standard deviation of .036. We present a graphical illustration of the distribution of this variable throughout the United States in Figure 1. As can be seen, inequality tends to be regionally concentrated in the South, Northeast, and West, and is less prevalent in the Midwest and Mountain regions. This said, extremely high (darkest gray) and low (lightest gray) inequality counties appear throughout the United States, indicating that even in relatively high (low) inequality states or regions, many citizens reside in a local area with relatively low (high) inequality. To measure personal income, we relied upon a question included in all surveys asking respondents to report their total pretax family income from all sources. This item provided nine ordered-response options, ranging from (1) “Less than \$10,000” to (9) “\$150,000 or more.” From this item, we created a variable labeled *Income*, with a mean of 5 (i.e., “\$40,000 to under 50,000”) and a standard deviation of 2.3.

Our analyses included a standard set of demographic and political control variables, as well as additional theoretically relevant contextual and individual-level controls. First, we control at the county level for the *Median Household Income*, *Percent Black*, *Total Population*, and *Bush Vote 2004* to account for the distinct effects of variance in absolute economic conditions, racial composition, county size, and political culture across respondents’ county of

TABLE 1 Mixed Effects Logistic Regression Analysis of Local Inequality, Personal Income, and Rejection of Meritocracy

	White Rs		Nonwhite Rs	
<i>Fixed Effects</i>				
County Level				
GINI Index	1.708*	(.782)	-.082	(.227)
Median Household Income	-.512*	(.249)	-.008	(.076)
Percent Black	-.360	(.275)	.013	(.067)
Total Population	-.128	(.266)	.019	(.055)
Bush Vote 2004	-.175	(.306)	.168	(.091)
Individual Level				
Income	-.087	(.516)	-.187	(.170)
Age	-.001	(.002)	.000	(.000)
Gender	.022	(.065)	.033	(.020)
Education	-.656***	(.134)	-.100**	(.041)
Party ID	-.770***	(.101)	-.121***	(.033)
Ideology	-.495**	(.157)	-.029**	(.041)
Religious Attendance	-.231*	(.106)	-.018	(.033)
Union Membership	.158	(.092)	.013	(.030)
Unemployed	.114	(.084)	-.005	(.030)
Cross-Level Interaction				
GINI Index × Income	-2.682*	(1.184)	-.002	(.357)
Survey Controls				
2006 Survey	.028	(.093)	.013	(.032)
2007 Survey	-.994***	(.098)	-.113***	(.098)
2009 Survey	-.880***	(.088)	-.150***	(.088)
Constant	.707	(.420)	.677***	(.133)
<i>Random Effects</i>				
Income		.000		.066
County (Intercept)		.000		.035
Likelihood Ratio Test		.000		.164
Number of Individuals (Level 1 units)		6,346		2,062
Number of Counties (Level 2 units)		1,688		698

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from a mixed-effects logistic regression model estimated using the Zelig model `logit.mixed` (Imai, King, and Lau 2012) in the software package R. Standard errors are in parentheses.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Reported significance levels are based upon two-tailed hypothesis tests.

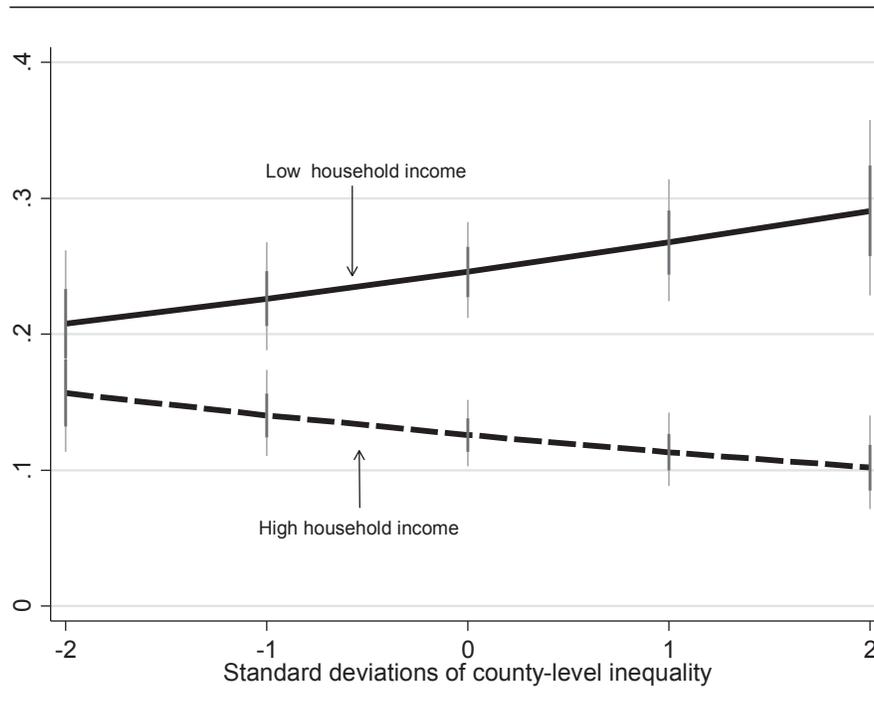
Source: 2005 Pew News Interest Index Poll, 2006 Pew Immigration Poll, 2007 Pew Values Survey, and 2009 Values Survey.

residence.⁷ At the individual level, we include standard controls for *Education*, *Age*, *Gender* (1 = male), *Employment Status* (1 = unemployed), *Union Membership* (1 =

respondent and/or spouse is union member), *Party Identification* (5-point scale; 5 = “strong Republican”), *Ideology* (5-point scale; 5 = “very conservative”), and *Religious Attendance*. We control for unemployment and union membership as standard controls in research analyzing attitudes toward the economy and government redistribution (e.g., Anderson and Pontusson 2007; Fong 2001; Scheve and Slaughter 2004), and for religious attendance because religiosity has been linked to general ideological orientations, such as humanitarianism and

⁷Data for median household income, racial composition, and total population at the county level were obtained from the 2005–09 American Community Survey (five-year estimates) of the U.S. Census Bureau. *Bush Vote 2004* is the percent of voters in each county voting for George W. Bush in the 2004 presidential election; this was obtained from David Leip’s “Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections” at <http://uselectionatlast.org>.

FIGURE 2 The Polarizing Effect of Local Inequality on Belief in Meritocracy across Income Levels for White Americans, 2005–09



egalitarianism (Bartels 2008; Feldman and Steenbergen 2001) and social welfare policies (Sears et al. 1997). For ease of interpretation, all continuous and ordinal independent variables were recoded to range from 0 to 1. For more information about question wording and variable measurement, see Supplemental Appendix A in the supporting information.

Given the dichotomous nature of our dependent variable, the hierarchical structure of our data (individuals embedded within counties), and our desire to estimate a cross-level interaction between county Gini and individual income, we estimate a logistic regression model with a random intercept and a random coefficient for income. This model allows us to estimate the marginal effect of individual income across levels of local inequality while accounting for unobserved heterogeneity in both average levels of support for meritocracy and effects of income at the county level. Among white respondents, we expect a positive and significant coefficient on the Gini constituent term, indicating increased rejection of meritocracy among low-income respondents as local inequality increases, and a negative and significant interaction term, indicating increased support for meritocracy among high-income respondents as inequality increases. Among minority respondents, we expect null results for these key variables.

Results

The results from our analysis are presented in Table 1. Beginning with whites (column 1), and focusing first on the effect of county Gini, the estimates reveal that, among those with the lowest incomes, an increase in county inequality is associated with a significant increase in the probability of rejecting meritocracy ($B = 1.71$, $S.E. = .782$, $p < .05$). This result strongly supports our activated disillusionment hypothesis, as it reveals that among low-income citizens, those residing in highly unequal contexts are significantly more likely to reject meritocratic ideals than those in relatively equal contexts. Turning to the interaction term between Gini and income, the negative and statistically significant coefficient ($B = -2.68$, $S.E. = 1.18$, $p < .05$) indicates that as we move from those with the lowest to highest incomes, the effect of increasing county inequality reverses and is associated with a decrease in the probability of rejecting meritocracy. This reversal in the marginal effect supports our activated loyalty hypothesis, as it indicates that wealthy citizens residing in unequal contexts are more likely to defend the economic system than their wealthy counterparts residing in low-inequality contexts. Last, the coefficient for personal income indicates that in low-inequality areas, lower- and upper-income citizens are equally likely to

adhere to meritocratic ideology. In contrast, at high levels of local inequality, belief in meritocracy is strongly polarized by income.⁸

These effects are depicted in Figure 2, which plots the predicted probability of rejecting meritocracy across levels of county inequality for citizens at the 5th and 95th percentiles of household income. This figure depicts the magnitude of ideological polarization occurring between low- and high-income citizens as a function of local inequality. For example, for citizens with the lowest incomes, moving from low to high contextual inequality is associated with a .08 increase in the probability of rejecting meritocracy. However, for those with the highest incomes, this range of movement in contextual inequality is associated with a .06 drop in the probability of rejecting meritocracy. Again, what is important to note is that while there are no class-based differences in fidelity to the “American dream” in low-inequality settings, we observe nearly a 20% difference in the probability of rejecting meritocracy along class-based lines in high-inequality settings.

Turning to the contextual controls, the results reveal that variation in absolute wealth across counties emerged as a significant predictor, as those residing in wealthier areas—holding inequality constant—are significantly less likely to reject meritocracy. In estimating an additional model including an interaction between median household and personal income, the interaction between Gini and income remains intact, whereas the interaction between median and personal income is insignificant. The other contextual controls exerted no effect. What is important to reiterate is that we observe effects for Gini holding constant absolute economic conditions, racial composition, local political culture, and variation in county size. Moving on to individual-level controls, the results reveal that disillusionment with the promise of meritocracy is more prevalent among younger citizens and those who are members of a union or married to a unionized worker. On the other hand, more educated and religious citizens are more likely to adhere to meritocracy, and, unsurprisingly, so too are conservatives and strong Republicans.

Turning now to nonwhite Americans, the results in column 2 of Table 1 reveal no effects for local inequality for those residing at either end of the income distribution. These results conform to the expectation of heterogeneity in attitudes and, more importantly, in the

effect of inequality and income across racial groups. In demonstrating differences in the responsiveness of meritocratic ideology to income and contextual inequality across basic white/nonwhite racial lines, these results support our decision to estimate separate models for whites and nonwhites. We interpret these null results as comporting with the expectation that for racial minorities, group-based experiences of discrimination and underclass status in the United States have altered the dynamics underlying fairness perceptions, causing them to be less responsive than they are for whites to fluctuations in personal and contextual economic conditions, and likely more responsive to variation in group identity and other environmental conditions, such as political climate.

Indeed, one finding among nonwhites that is interesting to note, and that departs from that found for whites, is that the probability of rejecting meritocracy among racial minorities increases ($B = .168$, $S.E. = .091$, $p = .06$) when moving from politically liberal to conservative local contexts. This finding is intriguing, as it depicts racial differences in which types of characteristics of one’s local environment serve to trigger “oppositional consciousness.” For whites, we find that economic conditions are a trigger, but that variation in the local dominance of liberal versus conservative views exerts no effect. For minorities, however, the findings allude to a process where the likely inundation of economically (and potentially racially) conservative ideals (e.g., celebrating individual initiative and condemning the indolent) might render group-based experiences of discrimination and underclass status more salient and operative in arousing an oppositional consciousness. In the end, we believe that further examination of these types of racial differences should be undertaken in future research.

As a general summation, the results from our merged data offer several key take-home points. First, with respect to belief in the American dream, we find that the occurrence of what could be construed as ideological class conflict between rich and poor citizens is conditioned by the presence of inequality as a palpable feature of the local environment. In local areas where wealth is relatively equally dispersed, higher- and lower-income citizens uphold the American dream at equal rates, which some readers could interpret as indicating the presence of “false consciousness” among the lower class. However, in contexts with pronounced inequality, we observe a significant divergence in belief reminiscent of class-based awareness and conflict. Second, this process of activated class conflict does not appear to apply to racial minorities. Rather, and in contrast to whites, we find that while the meritocratic beliefs of nonwhites are

⁸We should note that these results are robust against alternative model specifications, such as in estimating pared-down models or models including random intercepts or fixed effects for state of residence. To view results from these alternative models, see Supplemental Appendix B.

TABLE 2 Analysis of Local Inequality and the Perception of America as Divided into “Haves” and “Have-Nots”

County Level		
GINI Index	1.31*	(.584)
Median Household Income	.107	(.490)
Percent Black	-.194	(.465)
Total Population	.632	(.484)
Bush Vote 2004	1.50**	(.494)
Individual Level		
Income	-.365	(.286)
Age	.002	(.004)
Gender	-.114	(.132)
Education	.435	(.284)
Party ID	-1.41***	(.214)
Ideology	-.909**	(.322)
Religious Attendance	.164	(.213)
Union Membership	.364*	(.184)
Unemployed	.143	(.156)
Constant	-.746	(.531)
Likelihood Ratio Test		.000
Number of Individuals (Level 1 units)		1,119
Number of Counties (Level 2 units)		677

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from a random-intercept logistic regression model estimated in the software package Stata. Standard errors are in parentheses.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Reported significance levels are based upon two-tailed hypothesis tests.

Source: 2006 Pew News Interest Index Survey.

rather insensitive to contextual inequality, they are responsive to variation in the dominant local political culture, as residing in a more conservative political context increases rejection of meritocratic ideology among racial minorities.

Corroborating the Mechanism

Given that we find evidence in support of our hypotheses among white Americans, we now turn to the question of the hypothesized mechanisms underlying these findings. Our results hinge upon two untested assumptions concerning the mechanisms linking local income inequality to beliefs about meritocracy: first, that residing in a high-inequality context raises the salience of inequality and relative economic comparisons, and second, that it raises the salience of one's own relative position in the economic hierarchy. To provide a test of these assumptions, we retrieved an additional national data set conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2006 containing a unique set

TABLE 3 Analysis of Local Inequality and Self-Identification as a “Have-Not”

Fixed Effects		
County Level		
GINI Index	2.27	(1.50)
Median Household Income	.625	(.677)
Percent Black	-.082	(.632)
Total Population	1.09	(.835)
Bush Vote 2004	1.95***	(.661)
Individual Level		
Income	-1.76*	(1.05)
Age	-.008	(.006)
Gender	.156	(.170)
Education	-.679*	(.361)
Party ID	-1.49***	(.274)
Ideology	-.538	(.401)
Religious Attendance	-.058	(.273)
Union Membership	.274	(.235)
Unemployed	-.358*	(.205)
Cross-Level Interaction		
GINI Index × Income	-4.59*	(2.62)
Constant	.396	(.869)
Random Effects		
Income		.087
County (Intercept)		.000
Likelihood Ratio Test		.000
Number of Individuals (Level 1 units)		1,067
Number of Counties (Level 2 units)		661

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from a mixed-effects regression model estimated using the Zelig model `logit.mixed` (Imai, King, and Lau 2012) in the software package R. Standard errors are in parentheses.

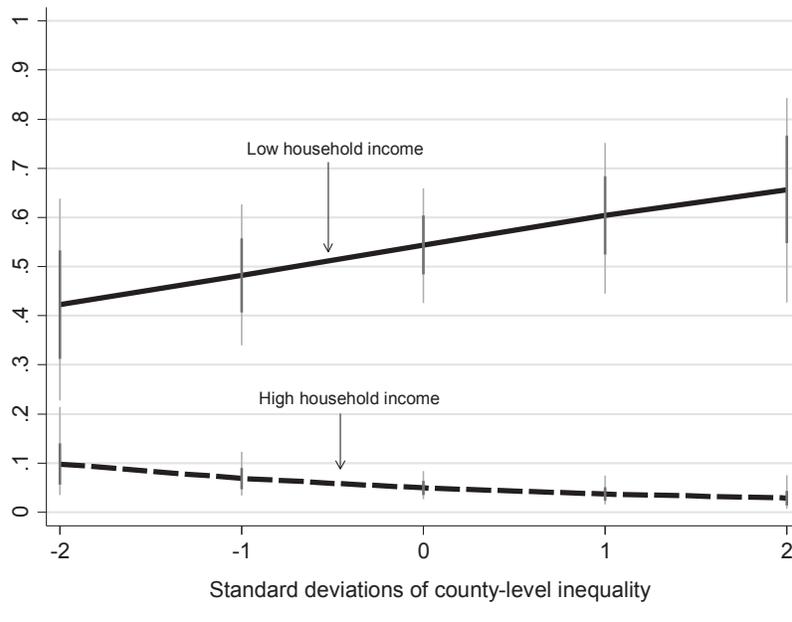
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Reported significance levels are based upon one-tailed hypothesis tests.

Source: 2006 Pew News Interest Index Survey.

of questions tapping perceptions of economic hierarchy and inequality and respondents' perception of their own position within such a hierarchy. Respondents were asked the following question: “Some people think of American society as divided into two groups, the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots,’ while others think it's incorrect to think of America that way. Do you, yourself, think of America as divided into haves and have-nots, or don't you think of America that way?” Following this question, respondents were asked, “If you had to choose, which of these groups are you in, the haves or the have-nots?” Using the former item, we created a variable coded 1 for those respondents perceiving America as possessing this degree of inequality and 0 for those not perceiving the

FIGURE 3 The Polarizing Effect of Local Inequality on Class Identity across Income Levels for White Americans



United States as economically polarized in this manner. From the second item, we created a variable coded 1 for respondents identifying as a “have-not” and 0 otherwise. For more information about these items, see the supporting information.

Utilizing these two items, we performed two analyses among white respondents. First, we regressed whether respondents perceive the United States as divided or not on county-level Gini and the same set of controls used above in order to test our assumption that income inequality and relative economic comparisons will be more salient among citizens residing in high- than low-inequality contexts. Second, we regressed whether citizens identify as a “have-not” upon Gini, personal income, and the interaction of the two (plus controls) to test our assumption that lower- and higher-income citizens’ perception of their own economic position will be accentuated by inequality. The results from these analyses are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Beginning with Table 2, we find that an increase in county-level inequality is associated with a significant increase in the salience of inequality, as evinced by an increased probability of perceiving the United States as economically divided into haves and have-nots. In terms of magnitude, movement from the 5th to the 95th percentile value of Gini is associated with a .14 increase in the probability of perceiving society as economically divided. The results in Table 3 reveal a significant interaction between Gini and income that mirrors those in Table 1, such that

the lowest-income citizens are more likely to self-identify as a have-not when residing in a high (versus low) inequality environment, and conversely, upper-income citizens, while less likely than poorer citizens to see themselves as a have-not when residing in equal contexts, are even less likely when residing in a high-inequality context. These results are presented in graphic form in Figure 3, which depicts the increasing polarization in class identity among low- and high-income citizens as local income inequality increases. Taken together, these results provide corroborating evidence for two key assumptions underlying our theory of activated class conflict.

Conclusion

Economic inequality has been on the rise since the late 1960s, its growth has increased precipitously since the turn of the millennium, and in 2012, its national level finally surpassed the previous historical high mark observed in 1928. Accompanying mounting inequality over the last decade was a string of events signaling serious cracks in the financial system: mass mortgage defaults, the bankruptcy of major financial institutions, high-profile corporate scandals, a massive taxpayer-funded bailout for Wall Street, and overall economic recession. In response to these events, the country—and global community—witnessed a serious public backlash against the financial

sector, crystallizing in the Occupy Wall Street movement, which was relatively successful in highlighting inequality and pushing into mainstream political discourse questions about the fairness of the American political economic system.

This chain of events has reinvigorated debate within the academic community over the significance of inequality, its impact on public opinion and policymaking, and its broader normative implications for the American political system (Isaac 2013). Within the political science literature, there exist two general opposing perspectives concerning the relations between capitalism and inequality, on the one hand, and democracy and government policy on the other. The redistributive democracy perspective (see Kelly and Enns 2010) argues that political democracy creates the potential for “correcting” inequality generated by the market system via the electoral participation of mid-to-low-income citizens who compose the bulk of the electorate and are able to procure income redistribution through government policy. From this view, the relationship between inequality and redistribution is one that should be self-correcting over time: As inequality grows, so too does demand for redistribution. Opposing redistributive democracy is the unequal democracy perspective (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012), which has sounded the alarm against what it views as the interrelated empirical realities of unabated growth in income inequality in the United States and the inordinate influence of the wealthy over government policy. This view warns that rising inequality in conjunction with the political marginalization of the poor may signal the victory of capitalism over democracy in American society.

The foreboding take on the current economic and political climate that the unequal democracy perspective offers is only strengthened by the lack of compelling evidence to date for the core corrective mechanism suggested by the redistributive perspective—that is, that citizens will respond to increased inequality with heightened demand for redistribution. In the face of rising inequality over the past 30 years, American citizens have markedly failed to respond by demanding that the government enhance redistribution. For example, leading research in political science demonstrates that, over the past half century in the United States, increases in aggregate inequality are associated with *lower*—not higher—levels of public support for redistribution (Kelly and Enns 2010). Reinforcing this finding, public opinion research over the past 30 years reveals that economic self-interest has at best a minimal role in structuring citizens’ policy preferences or voting behavior (Citrin and Green 1990; Sears and Funk 1991), and to the extent that economic interests or grievances do matter, they have only been shown to matter under

limited circumstances (Brody and Sniderman 1977; Feldman 1982). In response to the seeming failure of American citizens to respond to inequality in the manner theorized by the redistributive democracy perspective—and on par with citizens in most European nations—scholars have flagged as culprit the accentuated prevalence and power of learned ideological beliefs in America that serve to undermine support for redistributive policies among mid-to-low-income citizens who would economically benefit from such policies (Hochschild 1981; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004).

This article takes this last observation regarding the American public as its point of entry into the scholarly debate. The primary contribution of the theory and results presented in this article is the suggestion that the corrective mechanism theorized by redistributive democracy, at least with respect to a core feature of American ideology, does appear to function, but under a more nuanced set of personal and environmental conditions than identified by scholars in the past. As the level of economic inequality confronting poorer citizens in their local environment grows, so too does their tendency to abandon the belief in meritocracy. This process of disillusionment, given the link found in prior work between the rejection of meritocracy and support for redistribution, may thus serve as an important intermediate step in instigating demand among poorer citizens in unequal contexts for government redistribution. The results of this article thus identify local inequality and lower personal status on the economic totem pole as key conditions under which the corrective mechanism theorized by the redistributive democracy perspective may ultimately obtain. However, in more economically equal contexts lacking blatant inequality as a facilitating factor, our analysis suggests that the predictions of unequal democracy may hold true: Poorer individuals maintain that the system is fair, believe that hard work can get anyone ahead, and by extension, may evince lower levels of subsequent support for redistribution than their lower-income counterparts in high-inequality local contexts.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

Appendix A: Question Wording from Pew Surveys

Appendix B: Auxiliary Analyses