

**The Undeserving Rich:
Beliefs about Inequality in the Era of Rising Inequality***

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ABSTRACT

Inequality in the United States is high by both historical and international standards, but the issue seems to have received scant public attention. Many argue that this is because Americans care more about equality of opportunity than equality of outcomes, but we actually know little about American beliefs during the era of rising inequality. This paper examines changes in attitudes toward income inequality across four years of data from the General Social Survey's Social Inequality Modules. The findings indicate that a large share of Americans care about inequality of outcomes, and that this share increased substantially in the early and middle 1990s. I introduce the concept of the "undeserving rich" to explain why attitudes shifted during this period and argue that beliefs about inequality need to be decoupled empirically and conceptually from those about poverty, opportunity, and redistribution, which are commonly framed in terms of the "undeserving poor" and studied to a much greater extent than beliefs about income inequality and the rich.

INTRODUCTION

A noted feature of economic growth in the United States in the postwar period is that it was equally distributed among income groups. From the late 1940s to the early 1970s, both earnings and income grew at about the same rate for individuals and households at the bottom, middle, and top of the earnings and income distributions (Ellwood 2000). Moreover, inequality had decreased significantly during the prior decades of the 1930s and 1940s (Goldin and Katz 2001). These trends led many theorists to expect that declining inequality and increasing living standards were an enduring feature of advanced industrial democracies (e.g., Kuznets 1955; Muller, Bollen, and Jackman 1995). It was therefore a surprise when economic inequality began to increase in the 1970s and 1980s. Far from a temporary anomaly, inequality continues to rise for most measures of inequality. One measure in the media spotlight is the share of income held by the top one percent of tax filers (Piketty and Saez 2003). Inequality according to this measure is as high today as it was before World War II, prompting the *New York Times* to declare this a “New Gilded Age” (Uchitelle, 2007).

These two periods of falling and then rising inequality—what I will call the eras of equal and unequal growth (by income rather than by race or gender)—have received considerable academic attention, particularly from economists seeking to understand the causes of rising inequality (Freeman 1997). By comparison, there has been relatively little public attention to the issue, leading one economist to conclude that “America is now more unequal than at any time since the 1920s, and it has happened with hardly any discussion” (Madrack 2003:257). To be sure, there have been episodes of media scrutiny, as appears to be the case in recent months. But even so, it is not uncommon for journalists to assume that the broader public is not interested in

the issue because they aspire to “join the rich, not soak them”.¹ Scholars have come to similar conclusions when faced with the lack of public and political demand for traditional redistributive policies (i.e., progressive taxes and welfare). For example, Schlozman et al. (2005) conclude that “although Americans support a high level of equality among social groups and favor equality of opportunity, they appear to be less concerned about inequality in economic outcomes. For example, there is little public support for a massive redistribution of income or wealth” (Schlozman et al. 2005: 28). And an author of a nuanced study of the issue, prompted in part by increasing media coverage of rising inequality in the mid-1990s, concluded that “there’s little evidence that rising income inequality ever captured the public’s imagination” (Bowman 2000; see also Ladd and Bowman 1998).²

While a large body of scholarly literature supports the idea that Americans prioritize equality of opportunity over equality of outcomes—and the corollary that they are more inclined toward policies that equalize educational opportunities than redistribute income (e.g., Lipset 1996; Shapiro and Page 1992)—it has also been shown that Americans have inconsistent and ambivalent beliefs about inequality (Hochschild 1981; Kluegal and Smith 1986). In particular, while in principle inequality is regarded as the “just deserts” of individual effort and talent, as

¹ This comes from the opening sentence of the *Economist*’s recent cover story on US inequality. The full quotation is: “The gap between the rich and poor is bigger than in any other advanced country, but most people are unconcerned. Whereas Europeans fret about the way the economic pie is divided, Americans want to join the rich, not soak them. Eight out of ten, more than anywhere else, believe that though you may start poor, if you work hard, you can make pots of money. It is a central part of the American Dream” (*Economist* 2006:28). The 2007 *New York Times Magazine* cover article on the income gap made a similar observation: “Some redistribution is clearly good for the entire economy—providing public schooling, for instance, so that everyone gets an education. But public education aside, the US has a pretty high tolerance for inequality. Americans care about ‘fairness’ more than about ‘equality’. We boo athletes suspected of taking steroids but we admire billionaires” (*NYT Magazine* 6/15/2007).

² Other scholars link Americans’ tolerance for inequality to general indicators of well-being. For example, Alesina, DiTella, and MacCulloch (2004:2035) use happiness as an indicator of tolerance for inequality across countries and conclude that “Americans are willing to tolerate quite large disparities in wealth as long as they perceive that wealth is the result of effort and that everyone can make it if enough effort and talent is devoted to the task.”

well as a spark for innovation and prosperity, Americans tend to be more critical of inequality in practice. They view actual levels of inequality as excessive, and the pay of some as too much (e.g., CEOs, doctors, celebrities) and others too little (e.g., factory workers, teachers, clerical workers) (Kluegal and Smith 1986:120; Kelley and Evans 1992). In opposing strict equality of outcomes, Americans are not saying that *any* degree of inequality is acceptable. Why, then, do they find the recent period of rising inequality acceptable?

In investigating this question, I focus directly on attitudes about income inequality as an indicator of tolerance for inequality of outcomes. In discussions of American views of rising inequality, researchers and journalists have examined tolerance for income inequality using data on other topics, such as perceptions of individual opportunity (e.g., whether success is determined by hard work, luck, connections, ability, discrimination), expressions of general well-being (e.g., happiness, economic security), preferences for government redistribution (e.g., estate taxes, welfare), and comparisons of these responses to those in other countries. While there are strong theoretical and empirical reasons to connect beliefs about inequality to each of these topics in a comparative framework (and to continue to do so), most of the survey questions on opportunity and redistribution were developed in the era of equal growth, without the issue of rising income inequality foremost in mind. At the time, other dimensions of inequality were of greater interest, as reflected in the longer time series of questions on racial inequality, gender inequality, poverty, and egalitarianism in general (e.g., DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo 2000). Indeed, survey designers and pollsters seem to have avoided the words “economic inequality” because they assumed only policy experts were familiar with them (Ladd and Bowman 1998: 3). Thus the conceptual fit between beliefs about income

inequality and existing questions about opportunity and redistribution may not be as tight as we would like for the period of rising income inequality in the United States.

There is, however, a more recent and shorter time series available that includes three questions directly on beliefs about income inequality. The series begins in 1987 with the Social Inequality Module of the International Social Survey Program. The three questions were then replicated in 1992, 1996, and 2000, forming the longest time series available on the subject of income inequality.³ Since this time series does not cover the period of equal growth or the very beginning of unequal growth, we do not have a base period in which the “treatment” (i.e., rising inequality) is not present. Still, the time series covers the period in which rising inequality first became widely acknowledged among academics and other experts, probably some time in the early 1990s (e.g., Levy and Murnane 1992).⁴ As I discuss below, sporadic media and political coverage then followed in the early to middle 1990s. This is perhaps more important than the trend in inequality itself, which follows no single pattern. After the initial and pervasive surge in inequality in the early and mid 1980s, the trend varied for different parts of the distribution (e.g., top versus middle, middle versus bottom), demographic groups (e.g., individuals, families), and measures of inequality (e.g., Gini coefficient, percentile shares). Some types of inequality fell, but most either continued to increase or reached a temporary plateau in the late 1990s (see Figures 1 and 2 in Appendix A). It is unlikely that the general public was aware of these details,

³ The American National Election Studies (ANES) has a battery of questions on equality dating back to 1984. These questions focus mainly on equality of opportunity (e.g., equal chances to succeed and equal rights) rather than equality of outcomes. More importantly, they do not refer to any specific type of equality, permitting a respondent to answer with different kinds of inequalities in mind (i.e., gender and racial inequality).

⁴ This is not to say that there was no discussion of inequality in the late 1980s (e.g., Harrison and Bluestone 1988; Phillips 1990). However, widespread acknowledgement that the trend was not simply a temporary blip did not occur until later.

though they could have been aware of the general trend of increasing inequality that was well underway by the first year of this study.

In addition to shifts in awareness about rising inequality, the time series covers a period of shifts in other economic, social, and political conditions that will prove useful, especially a peak and trough of the business cycle. Although space does not allow for a detailed description of these conditions, I use them to theorize the factors that might alter beliefs about inequality. After briefly summarizing the reasons why Americans support inequality in principle, I examine the reasons why Americans are less supportive of inequality in practice. Since there were a number of in-depth studies on beliefs about inequality in the 1970s and 1980s, before the era of rising inequality became entrenched, I adapt the framework of this literature to the social context of unequal growth in the 1980s and 1990s. I suggest that a new conceptual frame for understanding beliefs about inequality—the “undeserving rich”—emerges from this new social context.

This frame clearly builds on the concept of the “undeserving poor,” which describes public antipathy toward the poor under particular conditions (e.g., if they are not working or belong to a minority group) (e.g., Katz 1989; Gilens 1999). In an analogous way, I suggest that the “undeserving rich” describes public antipathy toward the rich under particular conditions: when economic growth is perceived as accruing to the rich without benefiting society overall—that is, without making opportunity widely available by “lifting all boats”. Concerns about inequality are elevated when inequality takes this form, whereas concerns subside when the rich are perceived as “deserving” of their riches by having a hand in creating widespread prosperity. This occurs even if those at the top are gaining disproportionately as in the period of unequal growth. Thus in the same way that scholars have connected perceptions of the poor to

Americans' tolerance for poverty and social policies related to poverty, I suggest that perceptions of the rich are connected to Americans' tolerance for inequality. I provide evidence to this effect, but more research is needed as there is far less research (and data) on the rich than on the poor.⁵ More generally, this framework provides a clearer analytical separation between inequality and poverty than currently exists, a separation that is needed to better understand the new era of inequality.

After developing this theoretical framework in greater detail in the first section, the following two sections describe the three questions on income inequality from the Social Inequality Modules of the ISSP/GSS and the statistical model that is used to analyze them. I then empirically assess whether Americans' tolerance for inequality is high and static over the four time points of the data, as is implied by the claim that Americans are generally tolerant of inequality and unphased by rising inequality. The fourth section presents the results, showing a nonlinear pattern of increasing and then decreasing concerns about income inequality over the course of the 1990s. During the peaks of concern in 1992 and 1996, a clear majority agreed to the three questions: that (1) "income differences are too large", (2) "inequality continues to exist to benefit the rich and powerful", and (3) "large disparities in income are not necessary for prosperity". This nonlinear pattern of widespread concern is robust to compositional and behavioral controls, as well as to controls for endogeneity bias. The fifth section returns to the theoretical framework to explain these nonlinear trends and the final section discusses the implications for future research on beliefs about inequality.

⁵ This is changing. For the first time, the American National Election Study included "rich people" and "business people" (as opposed to "big business") in its time series of "feeling thermometer" questions, which has included a long list of other social groups since the 1960s and 1970s, including the poor (1972), welfare recipients (1976), and big business (1964).

BELIEFS ABOUT INEQUALITY

There are numerous detailed studies of beliefs about inequality, equality, and distributive justice, as well as a large field of experimental research on distributive justice (see Miller 1991 for a review). Much of this literature is based on in-depth surveys that were conducted at a single point in time, though changes over time in some items are discussed (Lane 1962; Rainwater 1974; Jasso and Rossi 1977; Hochschild 1981; Halle 1984; McClosky and Zaller 1984; Verba and Orren 1985; Kluegal and Smith 1986; Shepelak and Alwin 1986; Kelley and Evans 1993). Fortunately, there is considerable agreement in findings and interpretations across these studies. After briefly reviewing the literature on beliefs about inequality in principle, I discuss beliefs about inequality in practice and focus on factors that are likely to affect beliefs about inequality during the era of rising inequality. I then conclude with a framework for interpreting beliefs about inequality under the rubric of the “undeserving rich”.

In Principle: Inequality in the Economic Sphere, Equality in the Political Sphere

According to Hochschild (1981), individuals apply different principles of distributive justice to different domains of society. The principle of equality is applied to the political and social realms and the principle of differentiation is applied to the economic realm (see also Walzer 1983; Verba and Orren 1985; Lane 1986). The two key premises of differentiation in the economic realm are that individuals differ with respect to their economic worth (e.g., ability, talent, effort, achievement, etc.) and that opportunities to exercise individual economic worth are open to all. Following these premises, unequal rewards given in proportion to unequal contributions may be considered a fair outcome (i.e., “just deserts”). Rewarding individuals in this way is also

considered beneficial to society overall because it spurs individuals to succeed, leading to innovation and growth (Lane 1962, 1986).

Yet however firmly they hold to principles of differentiation, Americans do not embrace market inequality wholeheartedly. Americans strive for greater equality and meaning in other domains, such as family life, social life, consumption, and politics, which may offset ethical misgivings or material hardships associated with economic inequality (Lane 1962, Halle 1984, Lamont 2000). For example, principles of equality followed in the political realm often involve some form of economic equalization, such as the right to basic needs satisfaction (Hochschild 1981, Lane 1986). Even when Americans express strong anti-government sentiments as “ideological conservatives”, they often turn around and support government programs as “operational liberals,” combining “generosity with individualism” (Free and Cantril 1966; Page and Shapiro 1992). The inclination to invalidate strict equality in the economic domain but to seek it in other domains, perhaps in a contradictory or ameliorative manner, is a common explanation of the lack of forceful opposition to high levels of inequality in the private economy that does not imply that Americans are unmoved by disparities in material well-being (Jackman and Jackman 1983).

In Practice: Challenges to Inequality in the Economic Sphere

An individual’s beliefs about inequality vary not only across social spheres but within them. In the economic realm, beliefs about inequality in principle often collide with beliefs about inequality in practice. Kluegal and Smith (1986: 5ff) discuss this process in terms of “potential challenges” to the “dominant ideology”, the phrase they use to describe the principle of economic differentiation. They focus on two types of challenges: (1) individual experiences of

inequality and (2) “social liberalism” arising from objections to poverty and inequality by gender and race. These are the issues that had been given “increased attention” during the two decades prior to their study (Kluegal and Smith 1986: 38). They argue that the “prevalence and stability of belief in the dominant ideology, in the face of enduring objective features of the stratification system and changing beliefs and attitudes in some areas related to inequality, produces the inconsistency, *fluctuation*, and seeming contradiction in the attitudes toward inequality and related policy found in the American public” (Kluegal and Smith 1986: 6-7, my emphasis). I discuss these two types of challenges in terms of those that are based in individual experiences or knowledge of inequality and those that are based in perceptions of wider social transformations during the period of rising inequality in the 1980s and 1990s.⁶

Challenges Based in Individual Experiences or Knowledge of Inequality

Kluegal and Smith (1986) find the pattern of ambivalent adherence to the dominant ideology widespread among individuals. Many researchers likewise emphasize the weaker effects of self-interest on beliefs about inequality, and other social issues and social policies, than rational theorists would predict, as well as the tendency for changes in attitudes to occur uniformly across the population (e.g., Hochschild 1981, 1995; Verba and Orren 1985; Mansbridge 1990; Page and Shapiro 1992). Still, previous research does find that social and political characteristics affect the extent of adherence and opposition to the dominant ideology within a certain range. For example, blacks, women, and low-income individuals are more likely to perceive structural barriers to economic opportunity and to support redistributive policies even though they are no less likely to justify inequality in principle.

⁶ Additional evidence of the “context dependence of beliefs about justice” can be found in experimental studies of small groups and vignette studies (Miller 1991: 589; see also e.g., Jasso and Rossi 1977; Shepelak and Alwin 1986).

In an analogous fashion, the median voter model implies that opposition to inequality will be determined by one's position in the distribution of income and education (Meltzer and Richard 1981; Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005). The model predicts that the median voter would be better off supporting redistributive programs when median income falls below mean income (as it does in times of rising inequality), implying that voters with income at the median or lower should be more likely to oppose increasing levels of inequality. Individuals with lower skills and less education have also seen their earnings decline in real terms, particularly men, which could result in heightened concern for inequality among this group (see Figure 3 in Appendix A for the trend in median male earnings). However, many scholars throughout the 1980s and 1990s noted a rise in economic insecurity that overtook a broad swath of Americans (e.g., Newman 1988, 1993; Greenberg 1996).⁷ If the adverse effects of rising inequality were widely felt throughout the middle class (above and below the median), shifts in beliefs might be more universal in nature rather than concentrated among those on the lower rungs of the income and education ladders.

Some individual characteristics matter, however, for reasons other than apparent self-interest. In particular, characteristics that are indicators of one's level of information and knowledge have received considerable attention in the broader public opinion literature (e.g., Althaus 2003). In the literature on beliefs about inequality, higher education has received more attention than political information per se, and it has been shown to produce greater exposure to ideas that challenge the dominant ideology (i.e., "social liberalism"), leading paradoxically to more skepticism about meritocracy and the American Dream than exists among those without a

⁷ Hacker (2006: 19) cites data from a private firm showing that over the 1979 to 2005 time period, feelings of job insecurity peaked in the mid-1990s with 45 percent of respondents saying they were "frequently concerned about being laid off". It is notable that this peak did not occur during either the early 1980s or early 1990s recessions.

college degree (Hochschild 1995). Similarly, those with higher education may be less apt to blame rising inequality on individual deficiencies, such as low skills, and more apt to perceive rising inequality as unfair. While this may reflect a tendency toward social liberalism among the highly educated, it may also reflect a tendency to consider counter-hegemonic ideas by those with access to better information.⁸ In shaping beliefs about inequality, it is difficult to predict in advance whether individual access to information will outweigh experiences of inequality stemming from one's educational background.

Like education, political ideology can affect how individuals filter new information about changes in social and economic conditions. Also like education, the relationship between political ideology, information, and attitudes is not straightforward. On the one hand, strong party identification and ideology may function as an indicator of political knowledge and awareness (e.g., those who are strong Democrats or strong Republicans are likely to follow politics more closely), prompting greater shifts among these groups as they acquire information about inequality. On the other hand, strong political and ideological orientations could lock in preconceived orientations toward an issue, as the sources of information for conservatives/liberals zero in on the aspects of the issue that are most consistent with their ideological orientation (Zaller 1992, 2004; Althaus 2003). This latter possibility accords well with Zaller's (2004: 204) finding that "low information" voters tend to be more centrist and labile in their attitude formation and thus more apt to respond when "societal problems arise." In sum, as also noted above, we cannot predict in advance whether shifts will occur mainly among the most politically and ideologically engaged or, alternatively, among the broad middle of the ideological and partisanship continuum.

⁸ That is, the hegemonic claim is that inequality is an inevitable consequence of technological change, innovation, and growth, whereas the empirical evidence casts doubt on this relationship (e.g., Kenworthy 2005).

Challenges Based in Socio-Economic Transformations

The foregoing discussion assumes that there are broader socio-economic conditions that present challenges to the dominant ideology. Gender and racial inequalities and poverty are the structural challenges that occupy center stage in Kluegal and Smith's account, but the inflation and unemployment of the 1970s is also mentioned as a potentially new challenge on the horizon. These conditions could limit respondents' perceptions of opportunity and dispose them to a more structural interpretation of unequal outcomes, as opposed to one rooted in individual responsibility and just deserts. Other scholars recorded significant shifts—or the potential for them—during this period as well. Hochschild (1981), for example, argues that “[i]t does not seem farfetched to see the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s as an era of expansion and optimism, and to see the 1970s as an era of slowing down and of increasing pessimism. That leaves the 1980s poised for an explosion of anger and demands for change among those left behind earlier” (Hochschild, 1981:15). Also writing at this time, McCloskey and Zaller report that “levels of public confidence in business were higher in the more prosperous decade of the 1960s: as late as 1968, for example, 70 percent of the public expressed confidence that ‘business tries to strike a *fair balance between profits and the interests of the public,*’ compared with only 15 percent in 1977” (McCloskey and Zaller 1985:134, my emphasis). Also in the mid-1970s, Americans were concerned about big business holding “too much power” and trusted big business the least among a group of twenty-four institutions.⁹

The exact causes of these shifts in American beliefs about inequality in the 1970s may never be known, but both the theory and data discussed above suggest that the perceived fairness

⁹ Affirmative responses to the Louis Harris poll about whether the “rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer” also show an increase over the 1970s, from 67 percent in 1972 to 77 percent in 1977.

and prosperity of the market economy are important factors in the formation of beliefs about inequality *even when income inequality itself is not increasing* (as it was not in the 1970s).

Disagreements then turn on *whether* economic conditions are fair and prosperous or perceived as fair and prosperous. As the above quotations suggest, there seems to be little disagreement about the fairness and prosperity of the pre-1970s era of abundant growth. In contrast, more recent research reveals that there is considerable disagreement about the fairness and prosperity of the 1970s era and beyond. After describing the consensus on the postwar period, I present three positions on the post-1970s period, incorporating perspectives from scholars writing in the 1980s and 1990s.

First, during the postwar decades until the 1970s, many indicators of equality and opportunity moved in tandem with each other and with economic prosperity in a single juggernaut of equal growth. According to Lisabeth Cohen, “[f]aith in the mass consumption postwar economy hence came to mean much more than the ready availability of goods to buy. Rather, it stood for an elaborate, integrated ideal of economic abundance and democratic political freedom, both *equitably distributed*, that became almost a national civil religion from the late 1940s into the 1970s” (2003: 127, my emphasis). The postwar private economy was not only considered fair and efficient but was given credit for the kinds of redistributive norms and rights of social citizenship that typically belong to the public welfare state in Europe (Howard 1997; DeGrazia 1998; Hacker 2002).¹⁰ Nor were corporations or executives maligned as much in the US as in Europe, where some had profited from collaborations with Germany in World War II (Judt 2005). To be sure, major conflicts over inequalities continued to exist, but visible (in

¹⁰ These include mainly health and retirement benefits. The critical point here is that the private economy was the proximate source of the kinds of redistributive benefits provided by the state in Europe, so the US government’s hand in subsidizing these benefits was not visible. Consequently, redistribution became associated with collective bargaining and welfare capitalism in the private sector (Lichtenstein 1989; Jacoby 1997; Cohen 2003).

terms of consumption) and real (in terms of the distribution of national income) gains were made by families across the income distribution.¹¹ The key exceptions were glaring—African Americans and women—but these exceptions tended to be laid at the feet of a discriminatory society. They were not considered evidence of an inherently unequal market economy but of a distortion in which white men were unfairly concentrated in the best jobs (MacLean 2006).

In contrast, there is considerable disagreement about the actual and perceived fairness of the post-1970s era. There are three general views. First is the “break with the past” view expressed above, in which the economic environment of the 1970s is considered less fair and prosperous than in prior decades. In addition to rising inequality, proponents of this view cite the slow pace of productivity and employment growth, the decline and stagnation of real earnings for the majority of men and a minority of women, and little progress in reducing poverty from the 1970s to the late 1990s (Blank 1997). *Attention* to increasing inequality and insecurity seems to have peaked in the early 1990s and mid-1990s as well (Greenberg 1996). Media coverage focused on such issues as the first “jobless” recovery from a recession, the downsizing of middle class employees, the loss of American competitiveness to Japan and jobs to Mexico, and the excessive pay and lifestyles of the rich.¹² Politicians joined in the chorus as well.¹³ But soon

¹¹ Lane (1986: 393-396) argues, for example, that Americans view profits as legitimate rewards because they are “the source of ‘good times’ and future income” for all Americans. Lane further argues that this “harmony of interest takes the place of justice, and [therefore] claims of justice will be muted” (p. 395-6). However, I do not want to exaggerate the degree of consensus, particularly given legitimate criticisms of public opinion surveys for minimizing expressions of conflict (Fantasia 1988).

¹² Several scholars writing at this time mention the negative media coverage of the economy (e.g., Newman 1993; Jacoby 1997; Ladd and Bowman 1998). These conclusions are also supported by an analysis of articles in *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *US News & World Report* for every year from 1980 to 2000 (see Figure 4 in Appendix A). The articles were searched for key words related to inequality, insecurity, and class. A poisson model was estimated with total number of articles regressed on year dummies with 1987 as the excluded category (1987 is the first year of data on attitudes about inequality). The coefficients for 1980, 1992, and 1996 are not significantly different for one another and are significantly higher than all other years except 1982 and 1983. The coverage in the early 1980s was dominated by issues of unemployment and insecurity whereas inequality was more prominent in the 1990s. A negative

after the “media bombardment of stories about fabulous salaries and extravagant lifestyles” (Ladd and Bowman 1998:1-2,114), economic conditions unexpectedly improved in the late 1990s. Prosperity returned in the form of high productivity, employment, and growth rates. Real earnings rose across the board, even if unevenly so that the high overall levels of inequality were mostly left intact (Piketty and Saez 2003). Thus the “break with the past” view is accurate in describing the new period of unequal growth, but it is not accurate in describing the degree of economic prosperity that was still possible.

According to the second view—what I will call “American exceptionalism”—the basic fairness and prosperity of the US economy was never really in doubt during the structural shifts and hardships of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Here the emphasis is on the ultimate payoffs of skill-biased technological change in creating more highly skilled jobs, greater productivity, and lasting prosperity. Those in low skill jobs are hurt, but unemployment is low and higher education is widely available. Based on this evidence, Lipset argues that “[s]tories of America’s post-1970 economic decline have clearly been exaggerated,” and that the “leaner and meaner” restructuring of the American economy has led to a “rebirth of America’s competitive standing” and “more improvements in occupational status than declines” (Lipset 1996: 55-59). It is noteworthy that Lipset wrote this prior to the economic boom of the late 1990s and at the height

binomial regression yielded the same results. For similar findings on media coverage of downsizing in the mid-1990s, see Baumol, Blinder, and Wolfe (2003).

¹³ For example, Patrick Buchanan’s visibility in the Republican primaries amplified the message of insecurity and inequality, aiming “his rhetoric at top executives such as Robert E. Allen, the head of AT&T, who receive huge salaries while laying off thousands of workers” (Jacoby 1997:262). But coverage was broader than any one candidate. Murphy also describes the importance of the issue of excessive executive pay in the presidential campaign of 1992 (Murphy 1997). These examples might suggest that election years affect beliefs about inequality because Democrats invoke such issues in their campaigns. However, despite majority support for the Democratic presidential candidate in the 1992, 1996, and 2000 elections, only in the first two did issues of inequality receive substantial coverage. Moreover, the surveys occurred during the primary season and not during the general election, minimizing the influence of the campaign on the general population.

of the negative media coverage mentioned above (and also noted by Lipset himself) (Lipset 1996: 17). After the boom began, mainstream media coverage of the issue dissolved and concerns about inequality were considered misplaced in the midst of widespread prosperity.¹⁴ The conclusion of Lipset, as well as others cited in the introduction, was that the American Dream of economic growth and opportunity was never threatened by rising inequality.

Finally, in the third view—what I will call the “business cycle” view—American attitudes toward inequality are linked to the business cycle rather than to an entire period of equal or unequal growth, or to trends in inequality itself. In a recent review, for example, Schlozman et al. (2005:23) write that “[a]ttitudes appear to vary somewhat with the business cycle and with international events. Economic downturns tend to produce more egalitarian sentiments, and extra sacrifices are sought from the affluent during major wars.” Media and political accounts also frequently imply that concerns about inequality subside when economic growth is strong and “lifts all boats”, implying that economic growth is the redistributive policy most favored by Americans.¹⁵ But although Gilens (1999) found evidence for counter-cyclical fluctuations in support for redistributive policies such as welfare, there is no research that I know of that shows whether views of income inequality vary with the business cycle, either in the postwar period or in recent decades. Moreover, the timing and extent of both job and wage growth following a recession—factors that presumably would have an impact on attitudes about inequality—has

¹⁴ In a December 11, 2000 editorial in *USA Today*, Dinesh D’Souza wrote that “an excessive focus on inequality carries the presumption that the explosion of affluence we are experiencing is cause for mourning, when in fact it is cause for celebration: the United States has extended to millions of ordinary people the avenues of freedom and personal fulfillment previously available only to the aristocratic few.”

¹⁵ It is particularly common for the media and political analysts to identify economic growth as Americans’ preferred solution to inequality: “The political consensus, therefore, has sought to pursue economic growth rather than redistribution of income, in keeping with John Kennedy’s adage that ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’” (*Economist* 2006:28), and a Democratic pollster said that he found “little appetite for policies that would redistribute income as his party has advocated over the years...Instead, people were looking for pro-growth policies that were neither traditionally Democratic nor Republican” (Leonhardt, *NYT* 2006:12).

varied from one business cycle to another. Although I consider the role that the business cycle plays below, the precise dynamics of this link need to be more fully explored in future research.

Equitable Growth or the Undeserving Rich?

In sum, what distinguishes these three views from one another is not their position on whether income inequality increased or not; all acknowledge that it did. Instead, they differ on whether the economy is perceived as prosperous and fair. Although difficult to pin down, a fair and prosperous economy can be defined as one that is growing and delivering the fruits of growth to all Americans, as the “lifting all boats” metaphor implies. As a legacy of the postwar period of equal growth, one could argue that fairness also implies an equal distribution of growth.

However, according to Lane (1962), the standard is much lower: “[p]eople tend to care less about *equality* of opportunity than about the availability of *some* opportunity... They need only chances (preferably with unknown odds) for a slightly better life than they now have” (Lane 1962: 79, emphasis in the original). This suggests that as long as everyone gains from economic growth, unequal growth will be considered fair. As predicted by the second view of American exceptionalism, growth does not have to be equal to be considered *equitable*. Everyone will be (more or less) deserving of their fates and inequality will be tolerated.

In a situation in which some are gaining and others are losing, however, perceptions of the winners and losers may come into play, affecting whether the outcome is considered equitable or not. On the one hand, consistent again with the second view, it is conceivable that the efforts and rewards of the winners and losers are perceived as fairly distributed (e.g., Bill Gates and a high school dropout), or that dislocations in the short term are justified by prosperity in the long term (e.g., if productivity growth requires the displacement of low-skill

manufacturing workers by automation). On the other hand, troubled economic times may elicit resentments toward the winners. Economic leaders may be blamed for their mishandling of the economy and for enriching themselves at the expense of ordinary Americans in a zero sum fashion. This seems to have been the case in the 1970s and 1990s to a degree unseen in the postwar decades when top incomes were less noteworthy. In this new context, the rich will be considered undeserving, unequal growth will be perceived as inequitable, and concerns about inequality will grow, as predicted by the first “break with the past” view. Concerns about inequality may grow during a downturn in the economy for similar reasons, but they may also (or primarily) reflect sympathy for those on the losing end, who are there by no fault of their own. The third “business cycle” view, in other words, does not distinguish between sympathy towards the poor and antipathy towards the rich in fomenting concerns about inequality during recessions.¹⁶

DATA, HYPOTHESES, AND MODELS

Dependent Variables

The data on beliefs about income inequality come from the Social Inequality Modules of the General Social Survey (GSS) in 1987, 1996, and 2000, and the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) in 1992 (Kelley et al. 2002).¹⁷ There are three relevant questions that are present in all four years in which the module was included in the survey:

¹⁶ The “undeserving rich” perspective focuses on the conditions that alter beliefs about income inequality and does not deny that other actors and institutions may be blamed for the economic troubles that accompany inequality (e.g., anti-government sentiment related to economic matters seems to have been high in the early and mid-1990s) (Greenberg 1996).

¹⁷ The ISSP and GSS also include questions about the actual and preferred pay rates of a select group of occupations, and these data have been used to analyze attitudes about inequality. However, these questions are not as suitable for over-time analysis for three reasons: (1) they are not available in 1996, (2) the selection of occupations varies across the other years, and (3) top coding of responses is set at a

Do you agree or disagree:

1. Differences in income in America are too large.
2. Inequality continues to exist because it benefits the rich and powerful.
3. Large disparities in income are necessary for America's prosperity.

To simplify the interpretation of results, I have inverted the third question to read "Large disparities in income are *unnecessary* for America's prosperity" so that agreement to each question implies a lack of tolerance for inequality. The intensity of tolerance or intolerance can also be gauged from these questions, as the responses range across the five categories of strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree, and strongly disagree. As a short hand, I will refer to these questions as the "too large", "benefits", and "prosperity" questions, respectively.

Several theoretical and methodological points should be noted about these questions. First, the questions are not factual in nature but ask respondents whether actual levels of inequality are *acceptable*, whether they are *fair* in the sense of benefiting all Americans and not just the rich and powerful, and whether they are justified by necessity in the sense of generating greater *prosperity* for the society as a whole. The latter two questions correspond to the two key notions of fairness and prosperity discussed in the previous section, while the first question is a straightforward referendum on the actual level of income inequality in practice. In addition to reflecting central theoretical dimensions of beliefs about inequality, the questions are framed in two different ways so that agreement bias does not run in the same direction for all three questions (the first two are toward opposition and the third is toward support of inequality). Finally, the first question is asked in a different part of the survey than the second and third questions, providing at least some check on the problem of priming from one question to the

relatively low one million dollars for all years, which is particularly problematic for analyzing trends in perceptions of executive pay. See Kelley and Evans (1993) and Osberg and Smeeding (2006) for point-in-time analyses of these questions.

next. While additional checks on the reliability and validity of these data would no doubt be preferable, especially through the inclusion of other questions and sequences, these data are unique in their focus on income inequality, coverage of multiple conceptual themes, replication over time, and attention to issues of survey question bias.

Hypotheses

According to the three views presented above, concerns about inequality should be either: (1) sensitive to the new economic conditions of the 1980s and 1990s (according to the “break with the past” view), (2) indifferent to these conditions (according to the “American exceptionalism” view), or (3) only somewhat sensitive to shifts in the business cycle (according to the “business cycle” view). If respondents become more likely to agree to the three questions on income inequality, this would provide support for the first view. If the timing of shifts in these beliefs conformed to the business cycle, which hit a trough in 1991/1992 and a peak in 2000, then this would support the third view (see Figure 5 in Appendix A for the trend in unemployment). Specifically, opposition should be highest during the trough (1992), lowest during the peak (2000), and somewhere in between at other points in the business cycle (1987 and 1996, with 1996 posting somewhat better economic conditions than 1987).¹⁸ Finally, if the level of agreement to the questions about inequality is low and unchanging throughout this period, this would support the second view that rising inequality never registered with the American public.

¹⁸ Growth rates were slightly higher in the last quarter of 1995 and first quarter of 1996 and unemployment rates were at least a full percentage point lower in the last months of 1995 and first months of 1996, relative to the same periods in 1986 and 1987 (the GSS surveys were administered in March). The rates of real GDP growth in the fourth quarter of 1986, the first quarter of 1987, the fourth quarter of 1995 and the first quarter of 1996 were: 2.0, 2.7, 3.0, and 2.9. Annual rates of GDP growth for 1986, 1987, 1995, and 1996 were 3.5, 3.4, 2.5, and 3.7 (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis). The unemployment rates in the last three months of 1986 and first three months of 1987 ranged from 6.6 to 7.0 percent, and from 5.5 to 5.6 percent in the same months of 1995 and 1996. Long-term unemployment was the same in each period (1.8 percent) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics).

This is a liberal test, as opposition could have occurred prior or subsequent to the period of this study.

At the individual level, our expectations run in two divergent directions. On the one hand, following rational choice models, opposition is expected to be greatest among those who have been on the losing end of inequality and least among those who have benefited, namely those who are objectively or subjectively positioned in the bottom and top of the economic structure, respectively. We would further expect that these positions would intensify over this period, leading to greater polarization in beliefs about inequality. On the other hand, we also saw that social group differences in attitudes about inequality-related issues were not as strong as one might expect, and that increases in economic insecurity were widespread, suggesting that shifts in beliefs might be more universal in nature. Likewise, we may expect polarized views on inequality to arise from extremes in political ideology and partisanship or we may find that large mainstream groups are the most responsive to the issue.

Models

To determine whether, and if so how, beliefs about inequality shifted over the 1987 to 2000 period, I estimate pooled cross-sectional logistic regression models with year dummies. I use additional microdata from the GSS and ISSP to determine whether individual characteristics affect beliefs about inequality. Other characteristics are included to control for compositional and behavioral shifts in the population that may also be associated with shifts in beliefs over time. Individual characteristics included in the models are: demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, race, age, family status, residential location, etc.), direct or objective economic status (i.e., education and family income), indirect or subjective economic status (i.e., subjective class

identification and chances for upward mobility), and political orientation and ideology (i.e., partisan identification and political ideology). A list of all dependent and independent variables, along with descriptive statistics, is included in the Appendix.

The primary model of analysis takes the following general logistic form, in which all outcome variables are coded so that positive effects indicate greater opposition to inequality and negative effects indicate greater tolerance of inequality:

$$\text{Ln}(p_i/1-p_i) = \alpha + \sum \beta_j X_{ij} + \sum \gamma_k T_{ik} + \sum \delta_m (X_{ij} * T_{ik})_{im} \quad (1),$$

where: p_i = probability of opposing inequality for individual i

X_j = one of J covariates

T_k = one of $K=3$ year dummies for 1992, 1996, and 2000

$(X_j * T_k)_m$ = one of M interactions with year dummies.

The β_j simply indicate which individual characteristics X_j are associated with intolerance (a positive coefficient) or tolerance (a negative coefficient) of inequality. Nested models are estimated in which X_j and then $(X_j * T_k)_m$ are added to the model to assess the relative impact of compositional and behavioral shifts on the overall time trend, γ_k . A compositional shift occurs when social groups that oppose inequality—for example, those who are most hurt by it— increase in proportion and contribute to an overall increase in opposition (or decrease in proportion and prompt an overall decline in opposition). A behavioral shift occurs when oppositional groups grow stronger in their opposition over time and contribute to an overall increase in opposition (or grow weaker in their opposition over time and contribute to an overall decline in opposition). If there is a time trend and shifts in composition and behavior fully account for that trend, we will be able to explain shifts in beliefs about inequality in terms of

individual experiences and ideologies. If the time trend is not fully accounted for by these shifts—that is, the γ_k remain significant after all relevant X_j and $(X_j * T_k)_m$ are entered—we may infer that unexplained shifts in opposition reflect a more general, population-wide shift in opposition.¹⁹ The coefficients on time are therefore of primary interest in the analysis.

For the outcome of this logistic regression model, I focus is on the “strongly agree” category in a binary logistic regression equation. There are several reasons to focus on this response category. First, it is the most valid measure of the intensity of concern or opposition. Second, it offers a conservative estimate of the share of people who oppose inequality, since it does not include those who simply “agree” that income differences are too large. Finally, the proportionate changes in responses over time vary widely for each of the five categories (strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree, and strongly disagree), suggesting that the parallel regressions assumption of an ordered logistic regression is too restrictive.²⁰ In effect, I am estimating a subset of the outcomes in an ordered, cumulative odds logistic regression analysis. Other outcomes were tested as well (e.g., strong agreement and agreement=1, strongly disagree=1, and neither=1), but they do not add to the substantive conclusions while greatly expanding the number of parameters. I report on their results where appropriate. To further test

¹⁹ It is also possible that people have changed their understandings of what inequality means, which is plausible given the high degree of abstraction inherent in the term. However, it is still unlikely that large numbers of Americans changed their levels of tolerance *systematically* due to changes in their *individual* conceptions of what inequality means. A more likely scenario is that individuals were subject to similar information that shifted the meaning of inequality in similar ways.

²⁰ This is the case with the effect of time on the outcome variables considered here. The *brant* and *gologit2* commands in Stata were used to examine the parallel regressions assumption (Long and Freese 2003; Williams 2006).

the robustness of the findings for the “strongly agree” category, I estimate an OLS regression of an index that adds the responses of the inequality questions together.²¹

One last issue that I address in the analysis is the problem of endogeneity, particularly with respect to the subjective factors. For example, awareness of inequality may result in shifts in political orientation or optimism about mobility later in time, rather than vice versa. As will become clear in the discussion of results, however, subjective factors such as political ideology, partisan identification, and subjective social class tend to be much more stable over time than the attitudes about inequality that I consider as outcomes, particularly over the relatively short time period I examine, and they are routinely included as right-hand side variables (see Appendix B for descriptive statistics) (Erikson et al. 2002: chp. 4).

Perceptions of opportunities for upward mobility, however, are less stable and more closely aligned theoretically and empirically with attitudes toward inequality. The question about upward mobility is worded as follows: “The way things are in America today, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living—do you agree or disagree?” For estimation purposes, it is important to know whether this question is tapping an individual’s sense of their own chances for mobility or their sense of opportunities in society more broadly (individuals tend to be more optimistic about the former and pessimistic about the latter). If it is the former, the variable may be considered an exogenous measure of subjective economic position, much like subjective social class. Because the question is clearly asking about “me and my family” and not society overall, this is the most plausible interpretation of the question, and there should be no problems of statistical inference. If it is the latter, however, it may be considered an endogenous variable in one of two senses: it may be an intervening

²¹ The “benefits” and “too large” questions are more highly inter-correlated (.40) than either is with the prosperity question (.06 and .22, respectively). With only three questions and low inter-correlations, the scale reliability index is also low (0.46).

explanatory variable, correlated with the same omitted macro-level explanatory factors that affect opposition to inequality, or it may be a simultaneously determined outcome. The reference to “*people like me and my family*” in the question could prompt responses about opportunities more broadly. I test for this source of endogeneity bias, which produces inconsistent coefficients for the endogenous variable as well as for other explanatory variables. Since my main interest is the time trend and not the causality of the mobility variable—the issue that motivates most tests of endogeneity bias—my focus will be on providing more consistent estimates of the time trend in opposition to inequality.

TRENDS IN BELIEFS ABOUT INEQUALITY

Descriptive Trends for All Response Categories

Figure 1 charts the predicted probabilities of selecting each of the five response categories to the “too large” question.²² The figure indicates a high level of agreement that income differences are too large. Agreement is the modal category in all four years, rising from over 40 percent in 1987 to 50 percent in 1992 and then dropping back to just below its 1987 level in 2000.

Although agreement peaks in 1992, strong agreement peaks in 1996, rising from 15 to 33 percent between 1987 and 1996 and then falling to a level in 2000 (25 percent) that was still higher than in 1987. This growth in strong agreement over the entire period from 1987 to 2000 was counterbalanced by a decline in disagreement, whereas most of the other categories returned to their 1987 levels by the year 2000. For example, those who neither agreed nor disagreed fell from 22 to 12 percent and then ended up at 21 percent in 2000.

²² These probabilities are calculated from a series of binary logits for each response category. Each logistic regression equation includes only dummy variables for the years 1992, 1996, and 2000.

Similar patterns of shifting opposition to inequality are apparent in the responses to the other two questions. As shown in Figures 2 and 3, agreement is the modal category again and there was a large increase in the share of respondents who strongly agreed to these questions in the 1990s. The percent who strongly agreed that income differences continue to exist because they benefit the rich and powerful doubled from 14 to 28 between 1987 and 1996. Even stronger is the increase in those who strongly agreed that income differences are unnecessary for prosperity, rising from 6 to 26 percent between 1987 and 1996. In 2000, levels of strong agreement subsided to a point very close to the level in 1987 for both questions, and in fact the entire distribution in 2000 is similar to that in 1987.

Two main stories emerge from these descriptive trends. First, there is a substantial and fairly constant level of agreement that inequality is too large, unfair, and unnecessary. Agreement is the modal category and constitutes between a third and half of respondents throughout the time series. Second, there is substantial growth in intense opposition to income differences from 1987 to 1992 and then again in 1996. By 1996 a substantial minority of respondents (between a quarter and a third) expressed intense opposition to existing levels of inequality as well as to the fairness and necessity of inequality. This intense opposition then fell by the end of the 1990s.

It is important to note that polarization seems to have been greatest in 1996 as well. For example, the highest level of strong disagreement occurred in 1996, accompanied by the highest level of strong agreement. The share of “neither” responses also dipped considerably in 1996.²³

²³ Binary logistic regressions with strong disagreement as the outcome (equal to 1) and full compositional controls confirm that strong disagreement was significantly greater in 1996 than in all other years for all three questions. See below for similar results on strong agreement. When “neither” is the outcome, responses are significantly lower in 1996 than in all other years for the “prosperity” and “benefits” questions. For the “too large” question, neither responses are less in 1992 than in 1996 ($p=.06$), but less in 1996 than in 1987 and 2000.

On the other hand, consensus seems to be greatest in 1992. Combining agreement and strong agreement to the “too large” question, total agreement rose from 58 to 77 percent between 1987 and 1992 and then fell to 66 percent in 1996 and 2000. Total disagreement was also at its low point in 1992. For two of the three questions, kurtosis tests confirm that polarization was greatest in 1996, while for all three questions, variance tests show that 1996 was the year with the greatest variance in responses. By 2000, polarization had subsided and the distribution of responses more closely resembled the distribution in 1987.²⁴ Because this nonlinear pattern of polarization over time was most pronounced for the “too large” question, *average* levels of opposition declined between 1992 and 1996 for this question (see Appendix B).

Cross-sectional Results and Compositional Shifts

Who, then, was most likely to oppose inequality and did they grow in number in the early and middle 1990s, resulting in the increase in opposition to inequality? Or was opposition widespread, cutting across groups? As can be seen in Models 1, 3, and 5 of Table 1 and Model 1 of Table 2, the trend cannot be explained by compositional shifts (interactions with year are not included in these four models). Regardless of how the outcome is specified, the time trend remains strong and positive throughout the series of models that control for family income, education, other demographic and individual characteristics, subjective class, perceived

²⁴ Thus there appears to be no trend toward polarization over time with these data, in contrast to the findings of Osberg and Smeeding (2006) using data on occupational pay disparities. Kurtosis figures by year (from 1987 to 2000) for the three questions are the following (values are subtracted from 3=normal distribution, with positive numbers indicating greater consensus and negative numbers greater polarization) (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996): -0.5, 0.5, -0.5, and 0 for “too large”; -0.7, -0.7, -0.7, and -0.6 for “benefits the rich”; -0.8, -0.8, -1.1, and -0.7 for “necessary for prosperity”. While polarization is greatest in 1996 for the first and third questions, it is about the same in all years for the second question. And while consensus is greatest in 1992 for the first question, there is little indication of consensus in any year for the latter two questions, where the least polarized year is 2000.

opportunity for mobility, party identification and ideology. In the three binary logistic models, strong opposition to inequality is significantly greater in 1996 than in the other three years (significant tests across all time dummies are not shown). In the OLS regression of the index, the coefficients in 1992 and 1996 are not statistically different from each other but are significantly greater than in the other two years. In three out of the four models, the increase in opposition from 1987 to 2000 is smaller but still significant after compositional shifts are taken into account. This unexplained increase in opposition to inequality in both 1992 and 1996, and to a lesser extent in 2000, suggests that opposition was widespread throughout the general population.²⁵

Although the increase in opposition to inequality was broad-based, some groups were more likely than others to oppose inequality in all four years and changes in the size of these groups account for some of the trend in opposition to inequality over the years of the study. The demographic variables (i.e., race, gender, age, marital status, household size, region, employment status, etc.) have little effect on the time trend and are not of strong substantive interest, so I do not discuss them further for lack of space. Taken as a whole, the subjective and political variables are more highly associated with attitudes toward inequality than objective indicators such as income and education.²⁶ Although I experimented extensively with the functional form of both the income (including individual as well as family income) and education variables, in few of the models predicting strong opposition to inequality were both consistently significant, particularly relative to the consistency and strength of the subjective factors but also when these

²⁵ This is consistent with Page and Shapiro's (1992: chp. 7) finding of parallel changes in public opinion among sub-groups on a wide range of other issues.

²⁶ This is consistent with much previous research (Verba and Orren 1985; Kluegal and Smith 1986; Gilens 1999) but also might be the result of common method and endogeneity bias among the attitudinal variables. Comparisons of the strength of effects are based on standardized coefficients, which are not shown.

factors were omitted. However, the effects of these objective indicators were important in some specifications, particularly in the behavioral and index models.

The results generally indicate that family income and education are not associated with opposition to inequality in the same way. As expected, the sign of the family income coefficient is negative in all equations with strong agreement as the outcome, indicating that those with lower incomes are more likely to oppose inequality. But this negative effect is only marginally significant in one of these equations (for the “prosperity” question). When we examine the entire distribution of responses with the index measure (Table 2), family income is consistently significant and negative. In many specifications not shown here, most of the income distribution is similar in its opposition to inequality whereas the top quintile and the top decile stand out in their weaker opposition to inequality. As a general matter, then, family income does not appear to be decisive in fostering intense opposition to inequality though it does affect the full distribution of responses.

Education generally has the opposite effect than income. Where education is strongly and linearly significant, it is in a positive direction. Those with higher education are more likely to strongly agree that inequality is “unnecessary for prosperity” and to express more opposition to inequality when all three questions are combined in the index models. The effect of education therefore does not appear to reflect personal experiences of economic inequality for high and low skill groups. Rather, the question is considerably more theoretical in nature than the other two questions and may elicit a more counter-hegemonic response by those individuals with better information or a more socially liberal perspective (also gained from advanced education). Part of this effect could be attributed to response bias as well. Recall that this question is unique in that agreement signified support for inequality in its original wording. Opposition to inequality would

therefore have to be registered by disagreement in the original wording. Because agreement bias tends to be greater for those with less education, the strong positive effect of education could reflect this bias (i.e., among those who were opposed to inequality, the educated were more likely to respond with disagreement than the less educated) (Zaller 1992). Given the strength of the relationship between education and opposition to inequality, most likely both information and response bias play some role.

Subjective factors having to do with relative economic standing and especially perceived opportunities for mobility are more strongly associated with both opposition to inequality and shifts in opposition to inequality. Except for the “prosperity” question, subjective social class is negatively associated with opposition to inequality at the $p < .001$ level when entered as a single linear variable and not as dummies, which is consistent with the direction of the relationship between family income and opposition to inequality. Also like income, however, the effect depends on whether the outcome is intense opposition or the full range of opposition. For the “too large” and “benefits” questions, the lower class stands apart in its intense opposition to inequality, relative to both the working and middle class.²⁷ Otherwise, it is only the upper class that stands apart in its weak opposition to inequality when the index is the outcome. Although stronger, the impact of subjective social class is similar to that of family income in not having as clear and consistent an impact on attitudes toward inequality as one might expect given increases in income inequality over time.

The variable that does the most to explain the impact of economic status on shifts in attitudes about inequality is a subjective measure of perceived opportunities for upward economic mobility. This variable is consistently strong in every specification of the dependent

²⁷ While opposition to inequality is consistent among the lower class, their numbers are small (5 percent) and stable (see Appendix B). In contrast, 90 percent of the sample identifies as either working or middle class, with roughly equal shares of both.

variable, indicating that pessimism about future mobility results in greater opposition to inequality. Moreover, as pessimism about the future increased from 1987 to 1992 and 1996 (from 10.5 percent of respondents strongly disagreeing and disagreeing that “people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living” in 1987 to 25.1 and 24.3 percent in 1992 and 1996, respectively), it had a notable impact on increasing opposition to inequality in the early to middle 1990s. As Table 3 shows, the largest reduction in the time trend in strong agreement in 1992 and 1996 occurs when this variable is entered into the equation, for all three questions. For example, the odds of strong agreement in 1996 relative to 1987 dropped from 2.94 to 2.67 for the “too large” question, from 2.40 to 2.19 for the “benefits” question, and from 6.17 to 5.87 for the “prosperity” question. Thus part of the increase in the time trend of opposition to inequality is due to the increase in the share of mobility pessimists in the population. However, the time trend remains strong, and mobility pessimism did not increase between 1992 and 1996 along side intense opposition to inequality.

The distinctiveness of strong opposition to inequality in 1996 holds up even after controlling for the endogeneity bias of the mobility variable.²⁸ As shown in Table 4, there is a significant correlation of errors (*rho*) between perceptions of inequality and opportunity, an indication of endogeneity (though the evidence is stronger in the first panel than in the second

²⁸ Endogeneity is measured by the correlation (*rho*) of errors between the two endogenous variables (i.e., opposition to inequality and pessimism about upward mobility). Bivariate probit and instrumental variables (2SLS) probit test for endogeneity and provide consistent estimates of the equation’s full parameters (at the expense of efficiency) (Wooldridge 2002: 472-478; Baum et al. 2003). For the bivariate probit models, the mobility variable is recoded into a binary variable with pessimism about upward mobility equal to 1 and measured by strong disagreement and disagreement that one’s standard of living will improve. For the instrumental variables equations, I present estimates only from the equation in which valid instruments could be found, namely the equation with the “prosperity” question as the outcome. Because demographic variables and objective and subjective economic status variables were not significant in the “prosperity” models, but were significantly associated with the mobility variable (in a reduced form equation), I use them as instruments. The results for this outcome provided stronger evidence of endogeneity than in similar tests for the other outcomes using weaker instruments.

panel of the table). But endogeneity appears to be weakest in 1996: responses to the two questions on inequality and opportunity appear to be less interdependent and more reflective of opposition to inequality than pessimism about mobility than in other years. As shown in the top panel of Table 4, the joint likelihood in a bivariate probit model of strong opposition to inequality *without* pessimism about upward mobility is highest in 1996 for all questions (i.e., the probability that the inequality variable=1 and the mobility variable=0). The overall likelihood of not having the same response to the two questions is also highest in 1996, underscoring the lower degree of interdependence at this time (i.e., either inequality=1 and mobility=0 or inequality=0 and mobility=1). By contrast, the mobility dimension is most salient in 1992, the year when the likelihood of concerns about upward mobility alone (and not inequality) are highest. The second panel of Table 4 shows that the time trend in opposition to inequality is also robust to corrections for endogeneity using the instrumental variables approach. These results lend support to the idea that the mobility variable is a better measure of perceptions of one's own chances for upward mobility than of perceptions of opportunity more broadly, which in theory should be more closely tied to attitudes about inequality (and trends in these attitudes) than we see here.

Finally, political ideology and partisanship are strongly and consistently associated with attitudes toward inequality in the expected direction: Republicans and conservatives are significantly less inclined to oppose current levels of inequality relative to Democrats and liberals (the omitted categories). Importantly, the population became slightly *more* conservative in the 1990s relative to 1987 (see the Appendix for descriptive statistics), so political shifts were not conducive to raising opposition to inequality. Consequently, the time trend in strong agreement becomes stronger when these variables are included as shown in Table 3. Had the

population not shifted in a more conservative direction, the increase in opposition to inequality would have been even greater.

Overall, then, compositional shifts do not account for the significant time trend toward increasing and then decreasing opposition to inequality in the 1990s. While one's economic position does affect one's views of inequality in largely expected ways, these factors cannot account for the shift in opposition to inequality over the 1990s. On net, the negative effect of a shift in a conservative direction counterbalanced the positive effect of a shift toward pessimism about future mobility. After including both sets of variables, the year effects are almost as strong as (or stronger than) they were in the baseline model with year dummies only (compare the first and last lines in each panel of odds ratios in Table 3). As the predicted probabilities in Table 3 show, strong opposition to inequality in 1996 was 2.28, 1.92, and 5.20 times more likely than in 1987, even when all variables are held constant at their means. Strong agreement in 1996 is also significantly higher than in 1992 for all three questions. Ordered logistic regressions further show that opposition to inequality was significantly higher in 1996 than in all other years for the "prosperity" and "benefits" questions. Since the "too large" question is affected by polarization of responses in 1996, the ordered logistic regression shows that opposition was higher in 1996 than in 1987 and 2000 ($p=.09$) but lower than in 1992 ($p=.06$). The predominance of the evidence, then, suggests that shifts in opposition were relatively widespread in nature in the 1990s.

Behavioral Shifts

The interaction effects offer additional evidence that inequality may have made an impression on the mainstream of American society in the early and middle part of the 1990s (see models 2, 4,

and 6 of Table 1 and model 2 of Table 2). There are two significant findings that support this conclusion while there are two that show evidence of increased polarization in attitudes about inequality. First, the behavioral models show that the positive effect of education on strong agreement to the “prosperity” question declined during the height of opposition to inequality in 1996. In more detailed analyses not reported here, there was no difference across the five education groups in responses to this question in 1996 whereas the most educated individuals had significantly more positive responses in all other years. This suggests that the biases toward the educated that are built into this question were somehow overcome during the early and middle 1990s, facilitating more widespread agreement that inequality is not necessary for prosperity.²⁹

A second indication that large, middle of the road segments of the population were more likely to oppose inequality during the early and middle 1990s comes from shifts in political ideology. Moderates grew significantly more opposed to inequality in 1996. For example, moderates differed little from conservatives in their likelihood to strongly agree that income differences are too large in 1987, 1992, and 2000 (i.e., the coefficients on moderates and conservatives in model 2 of Table 1 are not significantly different). By contrast, as shown in Figure 4, moderates became more likely *than liberals* to strongly agree to this question in 1996. The gap between moderates and conservatives was significantly greater in 1996 in the index model as well. Unlike the oppositional groups discussed above, such as the lower class and the mobility pessimists, moderates are a large share of the population, accounting for some 40 percent of the sample. Thus an elevated awareness that inequality was too large and unfair was not confined to small, aggrieved or highly politically active segments of the population. This is

²⁹ This is consistent with Althaus’ (2003) contention that information bias is mitigated when information is more widely available (as when an issue is receiving a lot of media attention).

consistent with Zaller's (2004: 204) finding that "low information" voters tend to be more centrist and labile in their attitude formation and thus more apt to respond critically when "societal problems arise".³⁰

While I have stressed an increase in mainstream opposition to inequality in the mid-1990s, the signs of increasing polarization that we saw in Figures 1-3 are evident in the interactions effects as well. There are two effects to note. First, the effect of family income becomes significantly more negative in 1996, particularly with respect to the likelihood of strongly agreeing that income differences are too large or benefit the rich. This interaction is also significant in the index model. Consequently, even though family income does not appear to affect the intensity of opposition in most years, it does have that expected effect during the height of opposition to inequality. Second, we see some evidence of polarization among political partisans in the behavioral shifts, but in 2000 and not in 1996. Unlike any of the other oppositional groups, strong Democrats and other party members (the excluded category) maintained their high levels of opposition to inequality all the way into 2000, relative to Republicans. This suggests that they may be better informed of the actual trends in inequality (i.e., that most forms did not decline) or they may have transformed or intensified their views on inequality, or both.

In sum, in the models presented here and in others not shown, the most consistently significant interaction effects in the early and mid 1990s were those with family income, education, and moderates. Some degree of polarization occurred by income but other indicators of objective and subjective economic status showed no signs of polarization. For education, the

³⁰ To determine whether the composition of moderates changed significantly in a liberal direction from 1987 to 1996, explaining the increase in intense opposition among them, I examined the party identification of moderates and found that moderates actually became significantly more conservative in their party identification (moving toward the Republican end of the scale, $p=0.018$ with no other controls).

results indicate that opposition to inequality became less concentrated among the most educated groups. For moderates, the results are a clear indication of increased sensitivity to inequality among a large mainstream segment of the population. Since it was large mainstream groups who accounted for most of the behavioral shifts, such shifts can be interpreted as part of the unexplained time trend that reflects an increase in broad-based opposition during the early and middle 1990s.

DISCUSSION

American views of income inequality are both less static and more oppositional than would be expected if Americans were unconcerned about the period of unequal growth. Broader social transformations help in deciphering why these shifts in opposition took place at the particular times they did. As argued above by proponents of the third view, business cycle conditions likely play an important role, as opposition rose during the recessionary period of 1992 and fell during the boom of 2000. To the extent that American views of inequality bounced back to more tolerant levels in 2000, when the fruits of economic restructuring were more widely distributed than in the 1970s and 1980s, the second view also finds some support. In particular, the claim that Americans are less concerned about inequality as long as they perceive opportunity to be widely available is consistent with this trend, provided we assume that Americans were aware that most measures of inequality continued to be high by historic standards (or that this news would have made little difference). More troublesome for both of these views, however, is the degree of opposition in 1996, a year in which economic conditions were technically better than in both 1992 and 1987, and yet opposition was significantly greater.

As argued by proponents of the first view, in which the post-1970s period is considered a “break from the past,” significant shifts in the perceived fairness and prosperity of the economy should generate challenges to the status quo acceptance of inequality. The mix of conditions that converged in the mid-1990s seems to fit that bill. There was no growth in jobs during the first several years after the recession, leading to the first jobless recovery in recent history, and no growth in earnings for the median male earner. Jobs for middle class workers were being lost to downsizing while the media and some politicians portrayed executive pay and perks as excessive. Both the media and politicians discussed the issue of inequality more generally as well. These conditions opened up a space to question whether inequality was necessary for prosperity or whether it benefited the rich at the expense of ordinary Americans.

Several of the findings from the survey data shed light on these aspects of opposition to inequality during the mid-1990s. The absolute increase from 1992 to 1996 in strong agreement was much greater for the “prosperity” and “benefits” questions than for the “too large” question, an indication that these were particularly salient dimensions of the inequality issue in 1996. The absolute increase for the “prosperity” question is also larger than for any other question, and yet bias toward opposition in the wording of this question is less than for the other two questions. And the endogeneity of beliefs about mobility and inequality are weakest in 1996. Even the greater degree of polarization in responses in 1996, accompanied by a smaller showing of “neither” responses, suggests something unusual about this time period. Those with a stake in rising inequality responded to the increasingly negative spotlight on inequality by defending its necessity. Later in the decade, when the economy improved for the average American and celebrations of the new economy were ubiquitous, concerns about inequality abated and polarization declined.

These results suggest that while American beliefs about inequality can take a back seat to their beliefs about opportunity, they can also take center stage when inequality itself becomes a symbol of unfairly restricted opportunities. While economic growth is one of the factors that affects everyday perceptions of opportunity (along with, for example, the openness of the educational system), economic growth alone is not sufficient. An economy that is not only growing but is distributing the fruits of growth to most Americans—equitable growth as opposed to equal growth—is what seems to have mattered in the 1990s. During this time, perceptions of equitable growth were shaped by the perceived deservingness of the rich: whether they were enriching only themselves (undeserving) or the nation at large (deserving). In the early to middle part of the decade, prosperity had not spread throughout the population and yet executives and the rich seemed to be living well, if not lavishly. Later in the decade, the rich gained at the same time that most Americans did, so the rich could be seen as deserving of their riches. The data suggests that this is the case even though the rich gained at a much greater rate than everyone else in the late 1990s, though unfortunately we cannot be sure how much of this unevenness was understood by most Americans.

The (un)deserving rich contrasts usefully with the concept of the (un)deserving poor, which has shaped much scholarship on redistribution and the welfare state in the United States. Specifically, even though beliefs about the poor are often linked to beliefs about inequality (e.g., lack of support for welfare implies a lack of concern for inequality), it is unlikely that concern for the deserving poor motivated increased opposition to inequality in the mid-1990s. Instead, this was the very time in which the drive for welfare reform was coming to fruition, even though negative images of welfare recipients were greater at the start of this drive in the 1960s and 1970s (Misra et al. 2003). In a separate analysis, I found that Americans were no more likely to

support traditional redistributive programs for the poor in 1996 than in 1987, and they were less likely to do so in 1996 than in 1992. Moreover, shifts in opposition to inequality had no effect on this trend. Thus Americans grew more conservative towards the poor—as well as in terms of political self-identification, as shown in the analysis of compositional shifts—at the same time that opposition to inequality mounted throughout the country. This underscores the distinctiveness of the issue of inequality as well as its distinctive relationship to redistributive policies, at least during this time period. In fact, it may have been helpful that the poor and welfare could no longer function as scapegoats, allowing the spotlight to shine fully on inequities in the economic sphere.

CONCLUSION

One of the dominant themes in discussions of American beliefs about inequality is that inequality of outcomes is tolerated as long as equality of opportunity is widely available. By comparison, the inconsistency and ambivalence of American attitudes toward inequality has received less attention, especially in the era of rising income inequality. One reason for this may be the lack of high quality time series data, as the increase in income inequality postdated the rise in public opinion surveys in the 1970s. More readily available are data on issues of longer standing interest: beliefs about opportunities to get ahead, redistributive programs, and the poor. Such data does not present a picture of American dissatisfaction with rising inequality, though it be could argued that social problems other than income inequality (i.e., race and gender inequality, poverty) shape responses to these questions. As an alternative strategy, the survey questions examined in this paper ask specifically about attitudes toward income inequality and they do not confound these attitudes with those about government policy. The analysis has focused

empirically on the inconsistency that is fostered by inequality in practice and theoretically on the conditions under which inequality becomes a cause for concern, as these data suggest it did in the early and mid-1990s. In this concluding section, I discuss the broader implications of these findings for the study of American beliefs about inequality more generally.

First, the relative importance of concerns about inequality of opportunity and inequality of outcomes may need to be reassessed. On the one hand, it is true that beliefs about equality of opportunity are a more fundamental element of American beliefs about inequality. In principle, beliefs about opportunity are a *condition* of beliefs about outcomes: if equality of opportunity prevails then inequality of outcomes is considered just. On the other hand, this crisp analytical separation and asymmetry between opportunity and outcomes is not always as evident in practice. To see this, we first need to observe that inequities in opportunity are typically understood by scholars in terms of individual chances for educational and occupational achievement, which in turn are affected by individual attributes (i.e., ability and effort) and the social networks and institutions that individuals interact with (i.e., families and schools). Almost by definition, then, more attention is given to the process of *individual attainment* than to the process of *social distribution* once a given structure of positions is already in place. Inequalities of outcomes are not entirely precluded from discussion, however. Discrimination, for example, is a common explanation of the lack of opportunity and is often measured by the amount of racial and gender inequality in outcomes (Kluegal and Smith 1986). Similarly, I suggested that perceptions of the undeserving rich and inequitable growth shaped perceptions of opportunity in the mid-1990s. In these examples, the conventional relationship between opportunity and outcomes is turned on its head, so that perceptions of opportunity depend on perceptions of outcomes.

Unfortunately, at this point in time, we simply do not have a systematic handle on the kinds of issues or the frequency of issues that signal an excessive degree of inequality in both outcomes and opportunities. There are many complications in making this determination, which ideally requires some knowledge of actual levels and trends in inequality. For example, the pattern of opposition to inequality in the 1980s and 1990s mapped only loosely onto the actual increases in earnings inequality shown in Appendix A. Does this mean that Americans care more about the context and consequences of inequality than about levels of inequality per se, as I argued above? Or does it mean that they were unaware of the degree of inequality or were influenced primarily by the normative spin of the media and politicians? If the context of inequality does matter, what other kinds of issues can activate concerns about inequality (e.g., corporate scandals, inequities in health care provision)? How important are portrayals of the rich, the poor, the middle class, and zero-sum relationships among them (e.g., when do portrayals of the poor matter more than portrayals of the rich)? Within an individual-centered framework, the factors that affect perceptions of opportunity are well established—individual traits, families, and schools—but much less is known about the factors that affect perceptions of opportunity within an outcomes-centered framework, at least in the United States (for other parts of the world, see Kluegel, Mason and Wegener 1995; Kelley and Zagorski 2005).

A second implication of the findings of this paper is closely related to the first and is better posed as a question: to what extent do the distinctions and relationships between opportunity, inequality (of outcomes), and redistribution vary with changes in social conditions? On the one hand, one could argue that they vary in only a trivial or temporary way. Over the course of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, for example, the United States migrated from the pole of equal growth to the opposite pole of unequal growth, and then moved slightly back in the

direction of equal growth (at the end point of our data in 2000). The period of unmitigated unequal growth—before the boom of the late 1990s—was relatively short lived relative to the long period of equal growth in which the assumptions of a fair and prosperous private sector economy were constructed and solidified in the postwar era. It is not surprising, then, if this remains the framework in which aspirations for mobility are embedded and troubled economic times are considered only “temporary but correctable anomalies in an otherwise well-functioning system” (Hochschild 1995: 256). Injustices in the allocative process may unfairly reduce opportunities for some individuals and some groups and some time periods but they do not appear to reduce them in any permanent way. Americans therefore continue to look primarily toward the private sector rather than the government to ameliorate inequality and to redistribute resources, even though the government’s capacity to do so expands during prosperous times.

On the other hand, scholars of inequality have noted that while inequality is perceived as too high by a large share of Americans, this is often overlooked because of the narrow windows of opposition and the few avenues available for expressing such sentiments (Jackman and Jackman 1983, Hochschild 1981; Verba and Orren 1985).³¹ This makes Americans’ concerns about inequality more a matter of activation than ideology, which underscores the importance of political platforms, agenda setting, and menu choice in shaping opinions (e.g., Sniderman and Bullock 2004). Theories of institutional change by comparative historical scholars also suggest that durable transformations may eventually occur, but in a nonlinear fashion (Campbell 2004; Pierson 2004). In this event, new interpretive frames (both political and cultural) are needed, especially when the issues involved are relatively abstract and complex, as is the case for

³¹ And these avenues may have been diminishing over time. In his historical analysis of party platforms, Gerring argues that the “spectacular increase in social inequality from the 1970s to the 1990s occasioned little comment from Democratic orators, [whereas] it is difficult to imagine Bryan, Wilson, Roosevelt or Truman remaining silent on such matters” (1998: 236).

inequality. I have likewise suggested that interpretative frames played an important role in challenging the juggernaut of equal growth in the early and middle 1990s. What is perhaps interesting in this regard for future research is that opposition to inequality continued to be significantly greater in 2000 than in 1987 even though adverse media coverage of inequality disappeared. Does this indicate an incremental step toward a new rubric of unequal *and* inequitable growth?

Only additional data over a longer period of time can answer this and other questions about American views of inequality raised by this analysis. As compared to the volume of research on American views of the poor and social policies related to the poor, we know very little about views of the rich and social policies related to the rich, though this is changing with new research on views about taxation and greater media coverage of the superrich and executives (e.g., Bartels 2005; Morgan 2005). Both micro-level data on attitudes about inequality, opportunity, and redistribution and macro-level data on changing social conditions are needed to fill out our picture of American views of inequality. The next step is to analyze these data across domains, comparing views of inequality to those of opportunity and redistribution, for example, within a theoretical framework that can incorporate changing social conditions. Since the era of high and rising levels of inequality does not appear to be ending any time soon, collection and analysis of such data would seem to be a high priority for future research.

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Figure 1. Are Differences in Income Too Large?

(Source : General Social Survey)

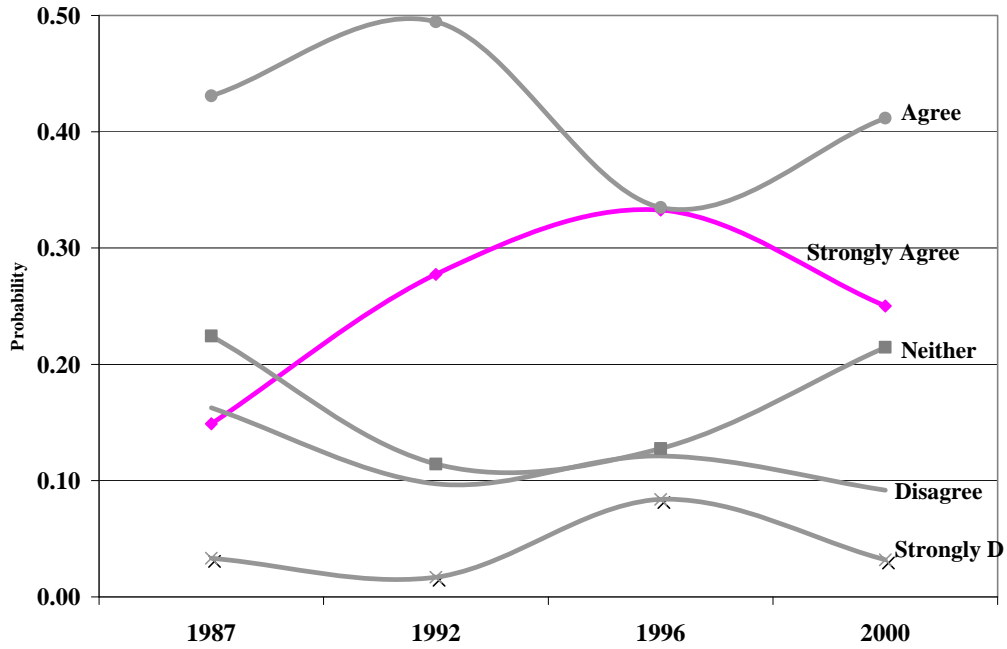


Figure 2. Does Inequality Continue to Exist to Benefit the Rich and Powerful?

(Source : General Social Survey)

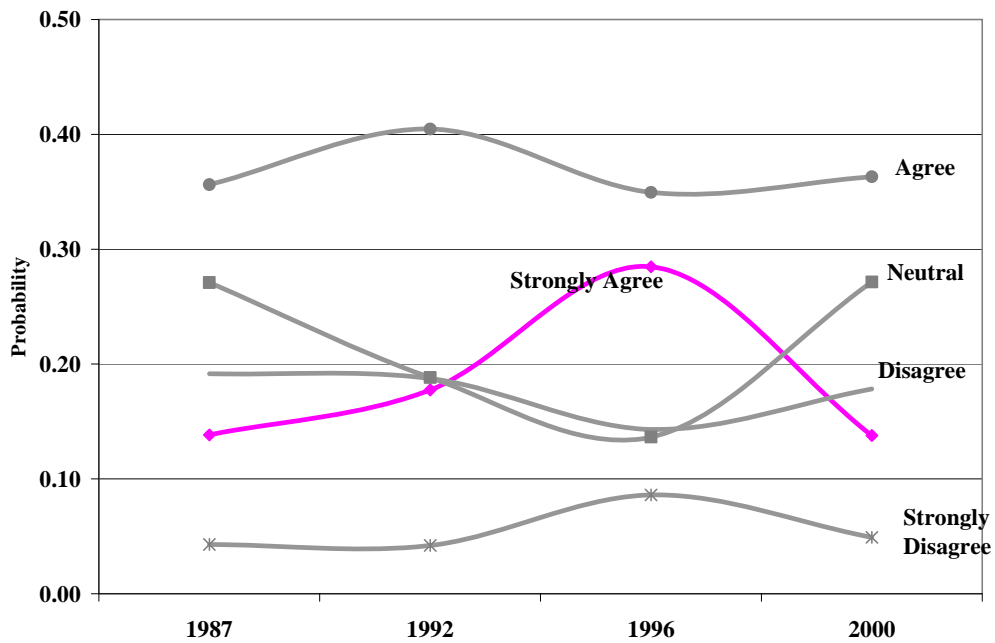


Figure 3. Are Large Disparities in Income Unnecessary for Prosperity?

(Source : General Social Survey)

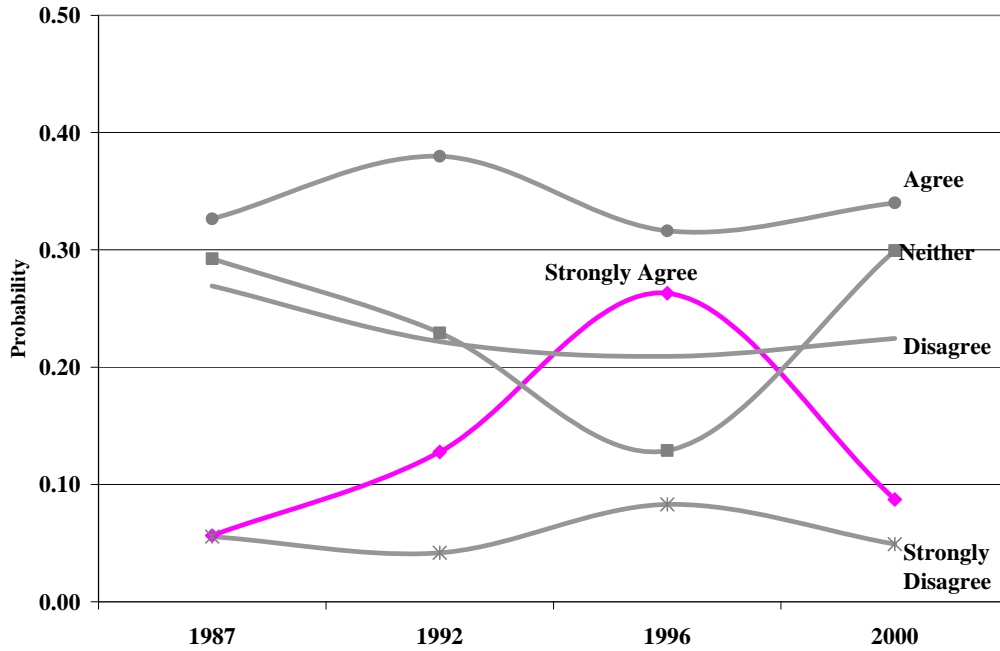


Figure 4. Strong Agreement That Income Differences are Too Large
Mean Predicted Probabilities by Ideology and Year (from Table 1, Model 2)

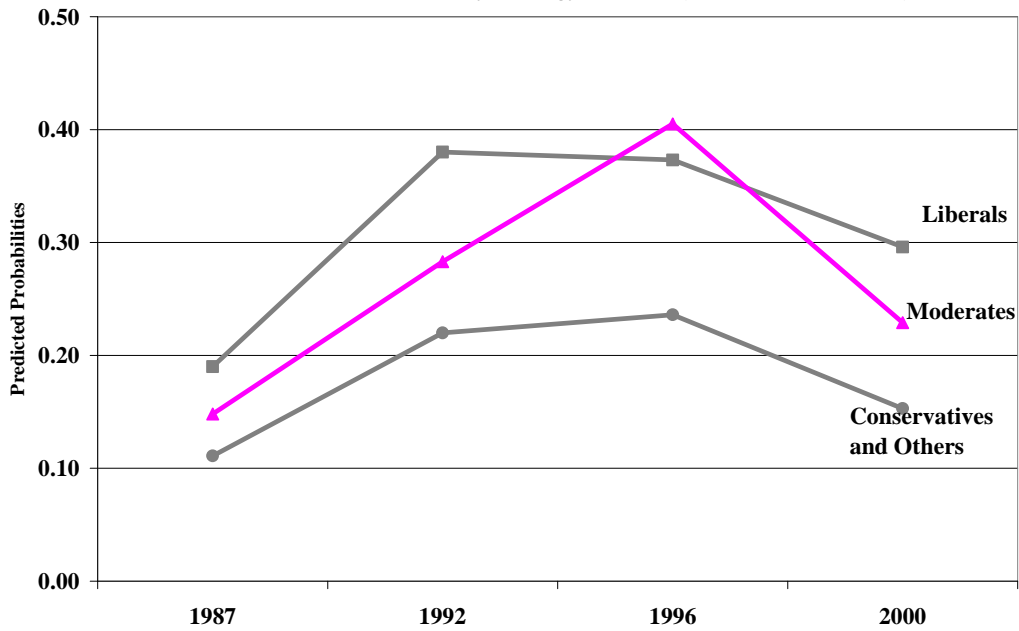


Table 1
Strong Agreement to Three Questions About Income Inequality
Binary Logistic Regression Coefficients

Income Differences....	“Are Too Large”		“Benefit the Rich”		“Are Unnecessary for Prosperity”	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Constant	-0.323 (0.461)	-0.399 (0.465)	1.581** (0.510)	1.476** (0.514)	-0.816 (0.585)	-1.055 [†] (0.599)
1992	0.816** (0.125)	0.786** (0.124)	0.094 (0.141)	0.076 (0.256)	0.872** (0.176)	0.862** (0.176)
1996	1.095** (0.121)	1.284** (0.216)	0.858** (0.128)	1.290** (0.207)	1.850** (0.160)	2.371** (0.311)
2000	0.506** (0.132)	0.635** (0.148)	-0.028 (0.152)	-0.029 (0.151)	0.551** (0.193)	0.537** (0.194)
Family Income	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 [†] (0.000)	-0.000 [†] (0.000)
Education (LHS=1 to Postgrad=5)	0.065 (0.041)	0.063 (0.042)	0.031 (0.046)	0.032 (0.047)	0.276** (0.052)	0.348** (0.063)
Other Demographic Controls	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Subjective Class (Lower Class)						
Working Class	-0.521** (0.191)	-0.500** (0.194)	-0.474* (0.206)	-0.446* (0.208)	-0.179 (0.253)	-0.170 (0.254)
Middle Class	-0.789** (0.199)	-0.772** (0.202)	-0.686** (0.215)	-0.653** (0.217)	-0.330 (0.263)	-0.316 (0.264)
Upper Class	-0.504 [†] (0.309)	-0.428 (0.311)	-0.547 (0.355)	-0.476 (0.356)	0.007 (0.381)	-0.034 (0.382)
Standard of Living Will Improve (Strongly Disagree=1 to Strongly Agree=5)	-0.255** (0.042)	-0.267** (0.043)	-0.375** (0.047)	-0.383** (0.047)	-0.317** (0.052)	-0.312** (0.052)

Continued, Income Differences....	“Are Too Large”		“Benefit the Rich”		“Are Unnecessary for Prosperity”	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Party Identification (Strong Democrats and Other Party)						
Democrats and Independents	-0.482** (0.117)	-0.492** (0.117)	-0.565** (0.126)	-0.577** (0.126)	-0.534** (0.147)	-0.546** (0.148)
Republicans	-0.832** (0.133)	-0.760** (0.141)	-0.966** (0.148)	-0.977** (0.149)	-0.840** (0.170)	-0.856** (0.171)
Ideology (Liberals)						
Moderates	-0.156 (0.109)	-0.313** (0.123)	-0.168 (0.120)	-0.176 (0.121)	-0.467** (0.142)	-0.461** (0.142)
Conservatives	-0.508** (0.121)	-0.494** (0.121)	-0.549** (0.136)	-0.557** (0.136)	-0.348* (0.149)	-0.343** (0.148)
Interactions with Year						
Family Income * 1996		-0.000** (0.000)		-0.000** (0.000)		
Education * 1996						-0.175* (0.089)
Moderates * 1996		0.516** (0.197)				
Republicans * 2000		-0.491* (0.249)				
LR Chi-Square (df)	302.4(22)	321.6(25)**	284.5(22)	291.5(23)**	331.5(22)	335.3(23)*
N	3242	3242	3165	3165	3204	3204
Pseudo R ²	0.0851	0.0916	0.0957	0.0981	0.1304	0.1319

Source: The General Social Survey for 1987, 1996, and 2000, and the International Social Survey Program for 1992.

Notes: Demographic variables include dummies for gender, race (white=1), region (South=1), employment status (employed=1), and children (any under 18 in the household=1), as well as controls for size of place (6 categories from large to small), marital status (5 categories from married to never married), age, and household size. Family income is transformed from a categorical variable to a continuous variable by assigning the midpoint of each category range and then converting to 2000 dollars (using the PCE deflator). Probability levels are indicated by **, $p \leq .01$; *, $p \leq .05$; †, $p \leq .10$. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Table 2
Index of Three Questions on Income Inequality
OLS Regression Results

	Three Question Index	
	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	1.714** (0.211)	1.676** (0.211)
1992	0.356** (0.053)	0.349** (0.053)
1996	0.403** (0.053)	0.580** (0.101)
2000	0.195** (0.055)	0.193** (0.055)
Family Income	-0.000** (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)
Education	0.080** (0.018)	0.080** (0.018)
Other Demographic Controls	YES	YES
Subjective Class (Lower Class)		
Working Class	-0.002 (0.096)	0.023 (0.096)
Middle Class	-0.148 (0.098)	-0.121 (0.098)
Upper Class	-0.475** (0.142)	-0.430** (0.142)
Standard of Living Will Improve (Strongly Disagree=1 to Strongly Agree=5)	-0.239** (0.020)	-0.244** (0.020)
Party Identification (Strong Democrats and Other Party)		
Democrats and Independents	-0.266** (0.057)	-0.273** (0.056)
Republicans	-0.609** (0.061)	-0.618** (0.061)
Ideology (Liberals)		
Moderates	-0.142** (0.050)	-0.199** (0.059)
Conservatives	-0.402** (0.053)	-0.401** (0.053)

Continued	Three Question Index	
	Model 1	Model 2
Interactions with Year		
Family Income * 1996		-0.000** (0.000)
Moderates * 1996		0.220* (0.093)
N	3057	3057
Adjusted R2	0.1803	0.1759

Source: The General Social Survey for 1987, 1996, and 2000, and the International Social Survey Program for 1992.

Notes: Demographic variables include dummies for gender, race (white=1), region (South=1), employment status (employed=1), and children (any under 18 in the household=1), as well as controls for size of place (6 categories from large to small), marital status (5 categories from married to never married), age, and household size. The responses to each question separately are coded as: 1=strongly agree, 0.5=agree, 0=neither, -0.5=disagree, and -1=strongly disagree. The three question index was constructed by adding the responses to all three inequality questions (thus ranging from -3 to +3). Coefficients are unstandardized. Probability levels are indicated by **, $p \leq .01$; *, $p \leq .05$; †, $p \leq .10$.

Table 3
Odds Ratios for Year Coefficients in Nested Models and Predicted Probabilities by Year
Binary Logistic Regression with Strongly Agree=1

	1987	1992	1996	2000
(1) "Are Income Differences Too Large?"				
Year Dummies		2.20	2.85	1.91
+ Demographic Variables		2.17	2.84	1.87
+ Family Income and Education		2.26	3.03	1.94
+ Subjective Class		2.25	2.94	1.90
+ Standard of Living will Improve		1.98	2.67	1.61
+ Party Identification/Ideology		2.26	2.99	1.66
Full Compositional Model:				
Mean Predicted Probability ^a	0.15	0.28	0.34	0.22
Predicted Probability ^b (constant means)	0.14	0.26	0.32	0.21
(2) "Do Income Differences Benefit the Rich?"				
Year Dummies		1.34	2.48	1.00
+ Demographic Variables		1.27	2.39	0.94
+ Family Income and Education		1.25	2.41	0.91
+ Subjective Class		1.26	2.40	0.91
+ Standard of Living		1.05	2.19	0.97
+ Party Identification/Ideology		1.10	2.36	0.97
Full Compositional Model:				
Mean Predicted Probability ^a	0.14	0.16	0.28	0.14
Predicted Probability ^b (constant means)	0.13	0.14	0.25	0.12
(3) "Are Large Income Disparities Unnecessary for Prosperity?"				
Year Dummies		2.45	5.98	1.60
+ Demographic Variables		2.64	5.96	1.61
+ Family Income and Education		2.66	6.24	1.63
+ Subjective Class		2.68	6.17	1.64
+ Standard of Living		2.31	5.87	1.77
+ Party Identification/Ideology		2.39	6.36	1.74
Full Compositional Model:				
Mean Predicted Probability ^a	0.06	0.14	0.28	0.09
Predicted Probability ^b (constant means)	0.05	0.11	0.26	0.09

Source: Table 1, models 1, 3, and 5.

Notes: ^a Mean predicted probability of all observations included in the analysis in each year. These probabilities include the effects of compositional differences across years. ^b Predicted probability for each year when all variables are held constant at their pooled (cross-year) mean.

Table 4
Results from Endogeneity Tests of Perceptions of Mobility and Inequality

	1987	1992	1996	2000
Mean Predicted Probabilities^a from Separate Bivariate Probit Regressions for Each Year				
Mobility and “Are Income Differences Too Large?”				
Inequality=1, Mobility=1	0.032	0.096	0.099	0.054
Inequality=1, Mobility=0	0.116	0.186	0.237	0.165
Inequality=0, Mobility=1	0.068	0.147	0.116	0.090
Inequality=0, Mobility=0	0.784	0.571	0.548	0.690
Rho	0.334**	0.215**	0.205**	0.269**
Mobility and “Do Income Differences Benefit the Rich?”				
Inequality=1, Mobility=1	0.029	0.077	0.091	0.039
Inequality=1, Mobility=0	0.113	0.088	0.191	0.099
Inequality=0, Mobility=1	0.074	0.169	0.129	0.107
Inequality=0, Mobility=0	0.784	0.667	0.589	0.755
Rho	0.291**	0.375**	0.282**	0.328**
Mobility and “Are Large Income Disparities Unnecessary for Prosperity?”				
Inequality=1, Mobility=1	0.013	0.058	0.081	0.032
Inequality=1, Mobility=0	0.044	0.082	0.200	0.063
Inequality=0, Mobility=1	0.086	0.185	0.140	0.111
Inequality=0, Mobility=0	0.857	0.675	0.579	0.794
Rho	0.313**	0.259**	0.180**	0.425**
Coefficient Estimates for Year Dummies in Prosperity Equation (with endogeneity test statistics)				
Baseline Binomial Probit Regression		0.451**	1.008**	0.277**
Same Eq. Bivariate Probit Regression ($p=.000$) ^b		0.528**	1.045**	0.275**
SU/IV Bivariate Probit Regression ($p=.095$) ^c		0.352**	0.900**	0.216*
IV Probit ($p=.046$) ^c		0.272*	0.860**	0.266**
2-Step IV Probit ($p=.064$) ^d		0.307**	0.909**	0.287**

Notes: In all bivariate probit equations, the mobility variable is recoded into a binary variable with strongly disagree and disagree equal to 1. The inequality variables are coded as in Table 1. Interaction terms with year are excluded from all equations but full compositional controls are included (i.e., Table 1, models 1, 3, and 5). Probability levels are indicated by **, $p \leq .01$; *, $p \leq .05$; †, $p \leq .10$.

^a Mean predicted probability of all observations included in the analysis in each year. Explanatory variables are the same for each outcome (i.e., the full set of compositional controls excluding the mobility variable).

^b All explanatory variables are the same for each outcome. Exogeneity test is of $\rho=0$.

^c The mobility equation is reduced form and includes the instruments (sex, white=1, 3 dummies for subjective class, family income) and all other explanatory variables. The inequality equation includes the mobility variable and all explanatory variables except the instruments. Exogeneity test is of $\rho=0$.

^d The first equation is an OLS reduced form regression of the mobility variable on the instruments (sex, white=1, 3 dummies for subjective class, family income) and all other explanatory variables. The second equation is a probit of the inequality variable on the mobility variable, the residuals from the first equation, and all other explanatory variables (excluding the instruments). Exogeneity test is of the coefficient for the residuals (=0).

Appendix A: Contextual Trends, 1980-2000

Figure 1. Gini Coefficient of Household Income

(Source: U.S. Census Bureau)

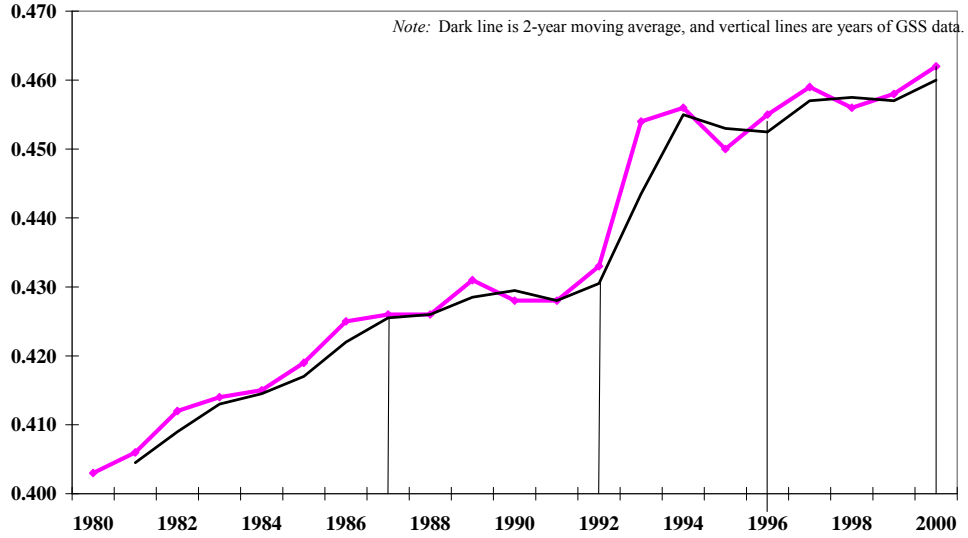


Figure 2. 90th/50th and 50th/10th Ratio of Male Hourly Wages

(Source: Economic Policy Institute)

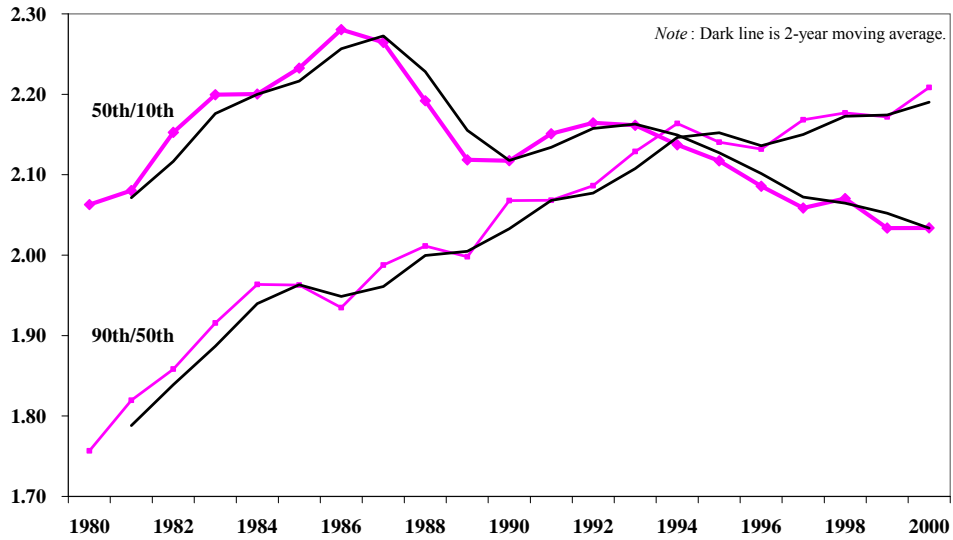


Figure 3. Real Median Male Hourly Wages, 2000 Dollars
 (Source: Economic Policy Institute)

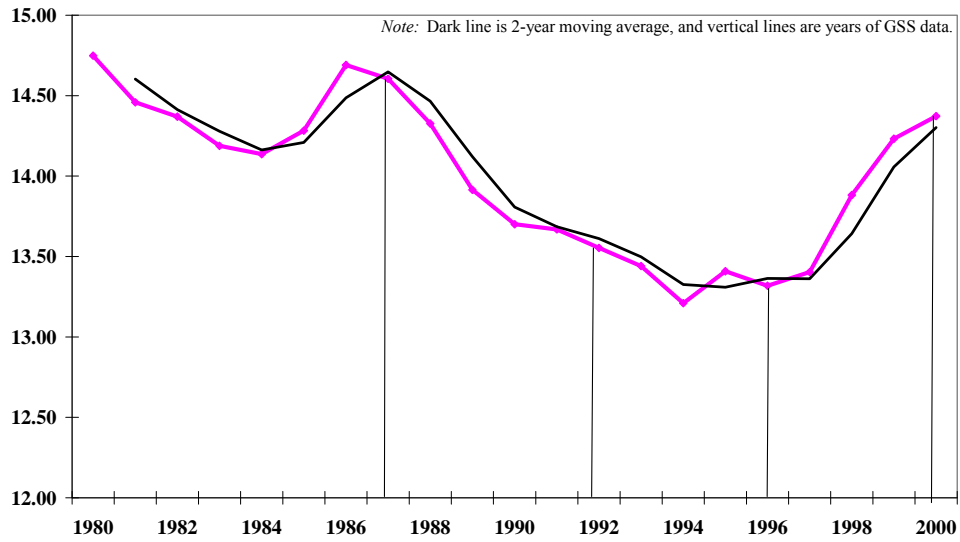


Figure 4. Number of Articles in Newsweeklies, All Subjects
 (Source: Authors analysis of Readers Guide for Periodical Abstracts)

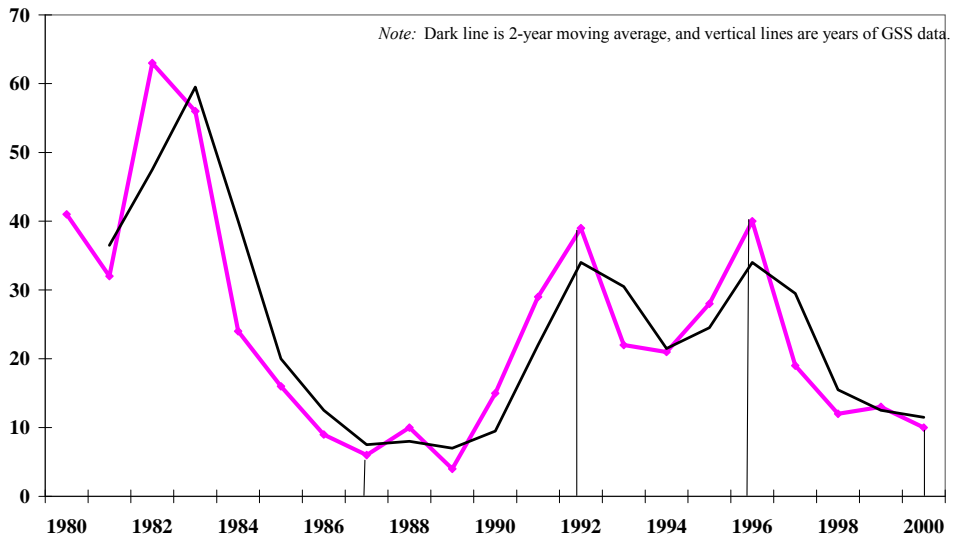
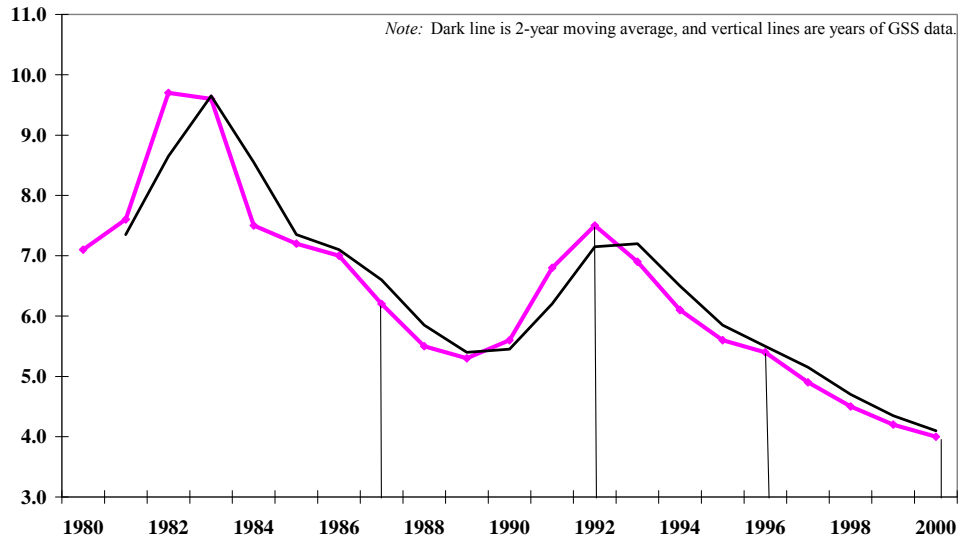


Figure 5. National Unemployment Rate
(Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics)



Appendix B. Descriptive Statistics for Dependent and Independent Variables

	1987	1992	1996	2000
Are income differences too large?				
Mean ^a (SD=-1 to SA=1)	.250	.459	.356	.378
Mean ^b (SA=1 to SD=5)	2.50	2.08	2.29	2.24
N	1230	1244	1395	1188
Does inequality continue to exist to benefit the rich and powerful?				
Mean ^a (SD=-1 to SA=1)	.178	.244	.302	.181
Mean ^b (SA=1 to SD=5)	2.64	2.51	2.40	2.64
N	1185	1211	1348	1138
Are large disparities in income unnecessary for prosperity?				
Mean ^a (SD=-1 to SA=1)	.029	.165	.233	.096
Mean ^b (SA=1 to SD=5)	2.94	2.67	2.53	2.81
N	1207	1222	1373	1159
Mobility: People like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living.				
Strongly Disagree	1.5	4.9	3.8	2.5
Disagree	9.0	20.2	20.5	11.6
Neither	17.3	20.2	11.1	9.1
Agree	53.1	44.0	51.4	53.4
Strongly Agree	19.2	10.7	13.3	23.4
Mean ^b (SD=1 to SA=5)	3.79	3.35	3.50	3.84
N	1246	1235	1895	1877
Subjective Social Class				
Lower Class ^c	5.1	4.9	5.9	5.1
Working Class ^c	43.6	41.3	45.2	45.7
Middle Class ^c	47.0	51.6	51.6	45.4
Upper Class ^c	4.3	2.2	2.2	3.9
Mean ^b (Lower=1 to Upper=4)	2.51	2.51	2.47	2.48
N	1444	1265	2884	2803
Political Ideology^d				
Liberal ^c	28.7	24.6	25.4	26.5
Moderate ^c	39.0	36.8	38.1	39.9
Conservative ^c	32.3	38.6	36.5	33.7
Mean ^a (Lib=1 to Con=3)	2.04	2.14	2.11	2.07
Mean ^b (7 categories, 1-7)	4.04	4.23	4.19	4.10
N	1378	1120	2743	2644

	1987	1992	1996	2000	
Partisan Identification^c					
Strong Democrat ^c	19.5	17.2	15.3	16.5	
Democrat/Independent ^c	43.4	46.7	48.0	49.8	
Republican ^c	37.1	36.1	36.8	33.7	
Mean ^a (SD=1 to R=3)	2.18	2.19	2.21	2.17	
Mean ^b (8 categories, 1-8)	3.70	3.90	3.88	3.83	
N	1459	1258	2898	2805	
In Sample Means				Full Sample Means	
Three Question Index	0.46	0.88	0.91	0.64	0.70
Too Large	0.15	0.28	0.34	0.22	0.24
Benefits	0.14	0.16	0.28	0.14	0.18
Prosperity	0.06	0.14	0.28	0.09	0.14
Sex (Male=1, Female=2)	1.56	1.56	1.54	1.56	1.56
Race ^c (White=1)	0.85	0.84	0.80	0.79	0.78
Age	44.5	44.9	44.3	45.0	45.5
Marital Status ^f	2.17	2.14	2.35	2.51	2.39
HH Size	2.72	2.77	2.51	2.56	2.60
Children ^c (any under 18yrs=1)	0.39	0.42	0.37	0.37	0.38
South ^c (=1)	0.33	0.30	0.34	0.35	0.35
Location Size (1-6, Lg to Sm)	4.57	4.47	4.46	4.51	4.49
Employed ^c (=1)	0.65	0.65	0.67	0.66	0.65
Family Income (2000\$)	45821	50604	47939	48267	45777
Education (1-5, LHS to COL+)	2.59	2.84	2.87	2.82	2.76
Lower Class ^c	0.05	0.03	0.07	0.04	0.05
Working Class ^c	0.43	0.39	0.43	0.45	0.44
Middle Class ^c	0.49	0.54	0.46	0.47	0.47
Upper Class ^c	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.04
Mobility	3.81	3.39	3.56	3.84	3.66
Republican ^{c,e}	0.38	0.41	0.39	0.37	0.36
Democrat/Independent ^{c,e}	0.43	0.43	0.46	0.46	0.48
Strong Democrat ^{c,e}	0.18	0.16	0.14	0.17	0.17
Liberal ^{c,d}	0.29	0.25	0.23	0.28	0.26
Moderate ^{c,d}	0.40	0.35	0.39	0.38	0.39
Conservative ^{c,d}	0.32	0.40	0.37	0.34	0.35
N	1161	801	859	755	Varies

Source: 1987, 1996, and 2000 GSS and 1992 ISSP.

Notes: ^a Recoded values for analysis. ^b Original values. ^c Coded as dummy variables for analysis. ^d “Conservatives” includes slightly conservative, conservative, and strongly conservative; “Moderates” includes only moderates; and “Liberals” includes strong liberals, liberals, and slight liberals. ^e “Republican” includes strong Republicans, Republicans, and independents/near Republicans; “Democrats and Independents” includes independents, independents/near Democrats, and Democrats; “Strong Democrats and Other Party” includes strong Democrats and other party, ^f Marital status consists of five categories from married=1 to never married=5.