# CHAPTER FIVE

## Why Do Americans Care About Income Inequality?

## The Role of Opportunity

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Revised: November, 2011

### Background

This chapter follows a chapter that examines the trend in beliefs about income inequality over time using data form the General Social Survey/International Social Survey Program modules on Social Inequality in 1987, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2008, and 2010. The three main questions about income inequality ask whether income differences are too large, continue to exist because they benefit the rich and powerful, and are unnecessary for prosperity (these questions constitute the main outcomes in this chapter as well). The previous chapter identifies the time trend and seeks to explain why Americans become more concerned about income inequality at some times more than others. It finds that strong opposition to income inequality does not increase steadily over time as income inequality grows but rather peaks in the early and especially mid 1990s (i.e., at the 1992 and 1996 data points), even relative to the latest available data in 2008 and 2010 during the financial crisis and the Great Recession. The previous chapter tests whether compositional shifts in education, income, demographic groups, or political orientation, or changes in the intensity of beliefs among groups, accounts for the trend over time, but they do not. Nor does the trend in concerns about income inequality follow the trend in actual income inequality, unemployment, consumer confidence, or the presidential election cycle. After considerable testing, I conclude that the trend in beliefs is most consistent with trends in media coverage of the issue (analyzed in Chapter Three), which peaks in the early and mid-1990s, and frequently focuses on themes of constrained opportunities for the middle class as the economy expands for those at the top but not for the rest. This theme is also discussed in an earlier chapter on the history and theories of beliefs about inequality in America (Chapter Two). The relationship between beliefs about opportunity and inequality are therefore explored in detail in the present chapter (chapter 5).

[Note that after the first section that develops five definitions of opportunity, the chapter can easily be read selectively in sections. Each section empirically examines one of the definitions of opportunity and does not depend on other sections. The concluding section summarizes the results.]

# CHAPTER FIVE

## Why Do Americans Care About Income Inequality?

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Americans are not satisfied with existing levels of income inequality and their concerns have only intensified since the 1980s. In trying to account for why Americans have these concerns and why they have grown, the previous chapter examined a number of explanations that social scientists think should be important. Political economists, for example, might expect views about income inequality to be divided along income lines, with those at the bottom becoming increasingly angry about the growing concentration of income among the richest of Americans. Political economists might also expect growing political polarization between Democrats and Republicans to fuel this anger, so that the rise and fall of concerns about inequality will mimic the rise and fall of Democratic politicians (especially presidents) who are the more likely advocates of reducing inequality. Finally, some may think that what Americans fundamentally care about is economic growth, and so when Americans express concerns about income inequality, they are really expressing concerns about the state of the national economy. While I found some support for each of these compelling explanations, the evidence was relatively weak and the trend in concerns about income inequality among the population as a whole remained strong.

This chapter explores an alternative explanation for why Americans care about income inequality: they view it as an indicator of unfairly restricted opportunities. On the one hand, this explanation appears obvious. It follows naturally from the theory that Americans (and their counterparts in many advanced industrial nations) accept inequality as long as opportunity is widely available. If we find that Americans are dissatisfied with existing levels of inequality, it must be because they perceive cracks in the facade of equal opportunity.[1] On the other hand, most commentators and scholars find that, in fact, Americans retain a great deal of faith in the availability of opportunities to get ahead, even amidst growing inequality.[2] Based on such findings, there might seem little reason to ponder the question of whether, let alone why, Americans care about inequality. Moreover, even if a different sort of evidence could reveal a greater degree of skepticism about opportunity in America, it would not necessarily help in proving the hypothesis that I explore in this chapter, namely that concerns about inequality flare up not only from concerns about restricted opportunities but from concerns that *inequality itself is restricting opportunities*.

But perhaps the most important reason to explore these matters in greater detail is that there has been little empirical analysis of any persuasion on the connection between American beliefs about inequality and their beliefs about opportunity. This is a consequence of several factors: a strong and understandable interest in cross-country comparative analysis, where researchers have been more intrigued by aggregate differences in support for redistribution across nations than in

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[1] Jencks and Tach (2006:25) report that "[a]lmost all adults in West Germany, Britain, and the United States agree that economic inequality is fair, 'but only if there are equal opportunities,'" citing the International Social Justice Project (note that Japan shows a much lower level of agreement).

[2] Sawhill and Morton (2007: 5) provide evidence from the same sources as I do that Americans "have tended to be far more optimistic about their ability to control their own economic destinies through hard work, less likely to believe that coming from a wealthy family is important to getting ahead, less likely to think that differences in income within their country are too large, and less likely to favor the government's taking responsibility to reduce those differences." Similarly, although Haskins and Sawhill (2009: 1-2, 5) regard rising income inequality as both important and connected to opportunity, they say that they "focus more on opportunity than on inequality and poverty [because] Americans…are far more interested in equal opportunity than in equal results."

variation in beliefs among individual Americans[3]; the lack of data on beliefs about both income inequality and opportunity in the same survey data; and, related, a tendency to infer beliefs of one kind (e.g., opportunity) from beliefs of a different kind (e.g., inequality) when data are sparse, an inclination that I discussed in the last chapter. There, it was because beliefs about inequality are so often inferred from beliefs about opportunity that I argued for the need to examine beliefs about inequality on their own terms, divorced from the issue of opportunity. Having done that, it is now time to consider the two sets of beliefs in concert.

I begin in the next section with a conceptual discussion of how Americans think about the meaning of equal opportunity. This conceptual discussion is necessary for two reasons. First, because "opportunity is a vague thing," it is important to consider a wide range of definitions of equal opportunity, and whether beliefs about inequality are more attuned to some interpretations of opportunity than to others.[4] While scholars have sought to probe deeper into American beliefs about inequality and opportunity before, they have tended to focus on the complexities stemming from beliefs about racial and gender discrimination.[5] I consider these too but extend the discussion to include unequal treatment according to family background, social connections, contributions to society, and job performance, among other possible sources and meanings of unequal opportunities. Because of this book's focus on income inequality, I devote greater attention to how opportunity is perceived to be allotted to individuals of different economic standing rather than of different racial, ethnic, or national backgrounds, though these will come into play at times. Drawing from popular

[3] Research in experimental psychology examines variation among Americans in their beliefs about the legitimacy of group hierarchies but does not focus on the distinction between beliefs about opportunity and income inequality (e.g., Jost and Major 2001).

[4] Roemer (1998: 24).

[5] See, for example, Hochschild (1995), Kluegal and Smith (1986), Lamont (2000), Young (2006).

discourse as well as academic research, I describe five different versions or "tropes" of equal opportunity

Second, it is also important to conceptualize how beliefs about opportunity and inequality are related to one another rather than how they are opposed. For reasons that I hope are obvious by now, I do not assume that Americans care only about opportunity and not inequality. At the same time, I do not assume that these concerns are always on an equal footing. When faced with the forced choice between equalizing opportunity and equalizing outcomes, Americans will overwhelmingly favor the former.[6] But less appreciated is the fact that Americans view inequalities in outcomes as an impediment to equal opportunity. For example, although it is customary to think of concerns about income inequality as derived from prior assessments of opportunity (e.g., outcomes are unfair because of uneven access to education), I examine the possibility that Americans' views of income inequality function as a signal of unequal opportunities rather than as a consequence of already-formed beliefs about opportunity.[7] This possibility turns the conventional relationship between beliefs about inequality and opportunity on its head and, I argue, is more

[6] When asked what they "think is more important for this country: to reduce inequality or to ensure everyone has a fair chance of improving their economic standing," 71 percent select the latter (Pew Charitable Trusts 2009: 18).

[7] Questions that ask about this possibility are rare. One that did revealed an overwhelming majority of respondents (71 percent) agreeing that "greater economic inequality means that it is more difficult for those at the bottom of the income leader to move up the ladder" (Pew Charitable Trusts 2009:18). Similarly, but wiithout direct questioning, Sawhill and Morton (2007:7) hint that "the nation is ill at ease and seems to be wondering whether increasing inequality is affecting one's ability to get ahead." And Kluegal and Smith (1986) found that 62 percent of respondents thought that "more equality of incomes would allow my family to live better." Aside from beliefs, studies of the relationship between income inequality and intergenerational income mobility find a negative correlation between the two and suggest that inequality inhibits mobility (e.g., Esping-Anderson 2007, Kopczuk, Saez, and Song 2009). More generally, the original rationale for equalizing opportunity was in fact to eliminate the effect of differences in social class background (i.e., income inequality) on the educational and economic opportunities and outcomes of children (e.g., Young 1958). For a full discussion of previous research on opportunity and inequality, see chapter two.

appropriate for understanding beliefs about unequal opportunities in the labor market than unequal opportunities in education.

After elaborating further on this conceptual framework in the next section, the following sections follow an empirical strategy that is similar to the one pursued in the last chapter. One of the key findings of that chapter was that pessimism about one's own chances of upward mobility – an indicator of both general economic anxiety and economic opportunity – was powerfully associated with concerns about income inequality but inconsistent with changes in concerns about income inequality over time. This suggested that the peak of American concern about income inequality in the early and mid-1990s (1992 and 1996) was not due primarily to concerns about one's own economic circumstances or to concerns about the national economy (since peaks in mobility pessimism coincided with recessionary periods). Building on the theoretical and media analyses of earlier chapters, the most promising alternative hypothesis was that concerns about income inequality were related to concerns not about economic growth per se but about the *distributional* nature of economic growth, or the lack of expanding opportunities throughout the population as a whole. This hypothesis is explored in much greater detail in this chapter by applying the same method used in the previous chapter with a larger number of questions about perceptions of opportunity. I examine how strongly each is related to beliefs about income inequality and whether changes in one correspond to changes in the other. The results reveal a remarkably logical coupling of particular views about income inequality with particular views about economic opportunity, enabling a novel look into the black box of exactly why Americans care about income inequality.

## FIVE TROPES OF OPPORTUNITY

As discussed in the first chapter, the achievement of equality of opportunity is no simple matter. It requires the elimination of "birth, nepotism, patronage or any other criterion which allocates place, other than fair competition open equally to talent and ambition."[8] In this and other definitions, the allocation of "place" refers to positions in educational institutions and in the labor market. Factors such as "birth" and "any other criterion" refer to all that is arbitrary or beyond an individual's control, though some may want to insert "talent" into that list. Academic researchers are painfully aware of how difficult (if not impossible) it is to achieve this idyllic state in practice, as well as the prior difficulty of agreeing upon the set of factors that create unfair advantages and disadvantages in the first place.[9]

In comparison to the complexity of these debates among researchers and policymakers, views about opportunity among the public at large, as gleaned from social survey and public opinion data, are rudimentary. There is, however, much more than first meets the eye. In this section, I discuss five common tropes in public discourse that express relatively distinct versions or visions of equal opportunity. Although there is overlap among them, I present them first as separate ideas and later as interdependent concepts. I also consider how these tropes either explicitly or implicitly incorporate the issue of income inequality, paying particular attention to how perceptions of opportunity and inequality influence one another. In the following empirical sections, I evaluate the public opinion record on indicators of beliefs about each of these tropes and income inequality.

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[8] Bell (1973:426)

[9] Perhaps the most contentious issue is whether ability and effort (and other relevant heritable characteristics) are considered accidents of birth and therefore undeserving of disproportionate rewards, in which case true equality of opportunity is impossible and equality of results is the default principle of distributive justice, or whether such characteristics are considered a fair basis for inequalities in rewards as long as opportunities along other dimensions (e.g., family background, race, gender) are equal. See debates in Bell (1973), Jencks et al. (1972), and Roemer (1998).

**Table 5.1.** Five Tropes of Opportunity

| | |
|---|---|
| *Level playing field* | Equal opportunities to prepare for the labor market (especially through education). |
| *Bootstraps* | The opportunity to "get ahead" in life through hard work and perseverance. |
| *Rising tide* | The availability of good jobs for all who want them. |
| *Equal treatment* | Equal employment opportunities (including pay) for individuals with equal qualifications, regardless of race, gender, or other characteristics unrelated to job performance. |
| *Just deserts* | Compensation commensurate with contribution and performance. |

The first trope shown in Table 5.1 is the familiar one of the "level playing field." In its literal sense, the level playing field requires that all players are equally equipped in order for the game, and the outcome of the game, to be considered fair. If one team is equipped with outdated gear and the other with the latest technology, a victory by the better equipped team would not be counted a victory by the better team because of its advantage unrelated to talent. Figuratively, the trope of the level playing field defines equality of opportunity as having an equal chance to prepare for the game of life.[10] More specifically, it typically refers to equality of educational opportunity, as education is widely viewed as the best preparation for economic success. Because education precedes employment, and information about educational quality is widespread (as most everyone participates in the educational system), views about educational opportunity will tend to precede and shape views about the fairness of disparities in economic outcomes. Consequently, if

[10] For example, in introducing affirmative action as a policy to level the playing field between racial groups, President Johnson used the metaphor of a race between a shackled and unshackled runner (Bell 1973:429).

Americans are concerned about inequality of outcomes, it may be because of their prior belief that everyone has not been given an equal shot at a good education. This sequence of both "events" (educational attainment followed by labor market experience) and perceptions about those events describes the dominant conceptualization of how Americans think about opportunity and inequality, with beliefs about educational equality shaping beliefs about income inequality.

The second trope is the idea that opportunity is created by "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps." In a way, the "bootstraps" trope of hard work conquering all is the trope that trumps all others. It implies that economic success is possible against all odds, even against a tilted playing field, if you just work hard and persevere. There are so many celebrated examples of Americans who have triumphed over trying circumstances, with the latest example being Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayer, that it is virtually impossible *not* to subscribe in some measure to the notion that a strong work ethic will eventually pay off, commensurate with natural ability and talent. This implies that if American society is not perfectly open, it is open enough, or at least more open than anywhere else.[11] At a societal level, then, it is unlikely that Americans will ever find this form of opportunity, of hard work paying off, to be in serious jeopardy. At an individual level, however, one's own experience and that of family members and friends could lead to a sense that upward mobility has become more of a challenge. If the obstacles appear to be unnecessary or unfair, even if they are not fully understood, Americans may question the legitimacy of disparities in outcomes. Here again, the sequence of events and perceptions of those events follows the dominant conceptualization of views about opportunity and inequality, with views about outcomes based on prior views about economic opportunity.

[11] Robert Lane argues that Americans expect *some* but not *a lot* of opportunity (Lane 1962).

In contrast to the "bootstraps" trope, the next three tropes refer unambiguously to circumstances that are not within an individual's control and yet have significant consequences for the extent of opportunity in a society. The first of these is the "rising tide lifts all boats" trope. The historic abundance of work opportunities in the United States, from the western frontier to the era of mass production and the digital revolution, is one of the key reasons America hails as the land of opportunity. An ever-expanding economic pie generates opportunities for all who seek them, extinguishing sympathy for those who are unable to provide for themselves and their families.[12] Given the centrality of economic prosperity to notions of opportunity, and given the ready availability of information on the state of the economy through non-stop reporting on unemployment, inflation, the stock market, and so on, it is likely that Americans will be both aware of economic downturns and concerned about the consequent narrowing of economic opportunities.[13] Under the premise that the pain should be spread reasonably evenly among the population, these concerns could in turn reduce the willingness of Americans to tolerate large disparities in income (as was discussed in greater detail in the previous chapter). As others have

[12] The central role that abundance and economic expansion plays in the American imagination is discussed in chapter 2.

[13] The "the state of the economy" is considered essential or very important in determining economic mobility by 62 percent of Americans. This share is less than for factors such as hard work, ambition, education, health, and a stable family, but considerably more than for knowing the right people, having educated parents, coming from a wealthy family, luck (21 percent), gender and race (Pew Charitable Trusts 2009: 15). Eighty-one percent of Americans also see "keeping jobs in America" as a very effective way for government to improve economic mobility, a higher share than all other policies, including "making college more affordable" (Pew Charitable Trusts 2009:17). Regarding information about the economy, Enns and Kellstedt (2008: 438,450) argue that "the economy is a relatively easy cue or heuristic to use to update political attitudes [because] economic news is pervasive" and find that "[e]ven the least sophisticated receive and respond to objective economic indicators." With regard to perceptions of general economic trends, then, there is more "signal" than "noise" among nearly all Americans even though at times economic news and reporting can be distorted and these distortions can have political consequences (Hetherington 1994).

noted, then, economic conditions can alter the public mood on a range of issues, among which I include inequality of outcomes.[14]

The fourth trope is the one of "equal treatment." Although this trope is of legalistic rather than popular origin, it expresses the group-based definition of equal opportunity that often comes to mind when the term "equal opportunity" is uttered. Nowadays Americans almost universally support the formal legal doctrine of equal treatment, in which individuals from different racial and ethnic groups, as well as men and women, must be accorded equal rights and afforded an equal chance to succeed in education, employment, and politics.[15] While not enshrined in law, Americans also regard preferential treatment and other advantages stemming from family background or social connections as a violation of the spirit of equal treatment. In essence, any circumstance in which someone is given an opportunity or advantage (broadly defined to include an educational opportunity or a job, promotion, raise, bonus, or any other employment-related advancement) on the basis of a social characteristic unrelated to merit is not in keeping with the principle of equal treatment.

In the particular realm of employment, equal treatment requires equal access to jobs and promotions for individuals of equal qualifications; it also requires equal pay for equal work. But because the sum of employment and compensation practices for each and every individual is difficult to observe in total, legal discrimination has often been defined in terms of unequal *outcomes*, such as the underrepresentation of women and minorities in elite occupations, rather than unequal *treatment* with discriminatory intent. Although contested, these group-based inequalities in

[14] Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002).

[15] However, "the near-universal support for abstract principles of racial equality" must be contrasted to "lackluster support for policies" (Kryson 2000: 140). Women are also seen to be more legitimate victims of discrimination than are blacks (Kluegal and Smith 1986).

outcomes are used as evidence or signals of inequalities in opportunity that occur earlier in the pipeline and constitute preferential treatment in training, testing, hiring, promotion, and compensation.[16] Thus if Americans are concerned about visible disparities in outcomes, this may reflect a deeper concern that individuals who should be treated equally are not. This sequence of belief formation, with beliefs about outcomes preceding or coinciding with beliefs about opportunity, is the *reverse* of the sequence associated with the previous three tropes and with most conceptualizations of American beliefs about opportunity and inequality.

The fifth and final trope is "just deserts," and it presents a second example of how the line between beliefs about outcomes and opportunities can become blurred or the arrow reversed. Unlike the previous four tropes, just deserts is a phrase that is not in common parlance; nevertheless, it refers to the familiar idea that "you get what you deserve." In the economic realm, just deserts defines fair economic rewards as those that are commensurate with performance and contribution, or to put it differently, with accomplishments rather than with formal qualifications. While this may sound like an issue of inequality and not opportunity, it is plausible to think of it as both. Take the example of unequal treatment in which an unqualified individual is hired for a job because he is a friend of the employer, a form of cronyism. In the equal treatment context, a job opportunity for a qualified individual has been sacrificed, triggering a violation of equal treatment opportunity. But this example can be extended further to illustrate a violation of just deserts

[16] Some scholars infer discrimination from unequal outcomes among equally qualified individuals, while others argue that unobservable job-related characteristics explain unequal outcomes. In law, unequal outcomes among otherwise equally qualified individuals can be used as evidence of "disparate impact" discrimination, suggesting that there may be bias in seemingly neutral procedures (for a recent review, see Pager 2008). Even in the domain of education, Roemer (1998:7, 13) defines equal opportunity as the distribution of resources that equalizes *outcomes* such as "educational achievements or future earnings." Similarly, Bell criticizes Coleman (in the Coleman Report) for having "redefined equality of opportunity from *equal access to equally well-endowed schools (inputs) to equal performance on standardized achievement tests (equality of outcomes)*" (Bell 1973: 431, emphasis in original). That is, equal outcomes became the measure of equal opportunity.

opportunity. Suppose that the family friend performs badly on the job and yet is rewarded with a lavish bonus. In the just deserts context, the individual is undeserving of his pay *because of his poor performance* and not because of his use of connections to secure a job. That is, a perceived injustice may have occurred even in the absence of knowledge of or concern about bias arising from social connections. In fact, perceptions of injustice may occur even if the person attained their job in an openly competitive manner. This example hints at a violation of equal opportunity in an additional sense: unmerited pay of this kind, or what Daniel Bell referred to as an "unjust meritocracy," could lead to economic distortions and inefficiencies that adversely affect the job opportunities, pay and morale of other employees and citizens more generally.[17]

Violations of just deserts come into play at the other end of the job ladder as well. If for example an occupation is underpaid relative to its perceived value or relative worth (i.e., compared to other occupations in an organization), workers will be deprived of the financial rewards they believe they deserve. This and the above example demonstrate that equal opportunity entails a system of fair pay as well as fair employment. And while it is the idea of fair pay that distinguishes the just deserts paradigm, this paradigm also asserts that jobs and pay are interdependent (e.g., excessive pay at the top may constrain job and earnings opportunities for others down the line) or

[17] The distortions introduced by the employment and excessive pay of this individual (and others in similar situations) are analogous to those that would be introduced by excessive pay compression. Bell (1973: 453, 454), an otherwise enthusiastic supporter of meritocracy and a critic of those who attack the principle of meritocracy, describes the possibility of an "unjust meritocracy" in which distinctions of merit are "invidious and demean those below" and "those at the top convert their authority positions into large, discrepant material and social advantages over others." Bell (1973:451) advocates policy supports for the disadvantaged but also a fair distribution of rewards based on achievement ("one of the most vexing questions in a post-industrial society"). This unappealing side of meritocracy was also "counter-argument" to Michael Young's "argument" for meritocracy in his influential and satirical book coining the term, *The Rise of Meritocracy* (1958). In "Meritocracy Revisited," Young (1994: 88-89) worries both about the corrupting power of technocratic elites, who could be "ruthless in pursuing their own advantage," and the potential demoralization of the less favored, who could be "damaged in their own self-esteem." See chapter two for a fuller discussion.

are jointly constitutive of equal opportunity (e.g., workers deserve a "good" job commensurate with skills as opposed to just "a job"). Thus if Americans are concerned about disparities in outcomes, it may be because of a perception that distortions in the structure of pay propagate and reflect distortions in the structure of opportunity, again reversing the ingrained order of beliefs about opportunity and inequality.

Although each of these tropes has an independent logic unto itself, subsets of the five tropes are interdependent in a number of crucial respects as well. For example, Americans often think of meritocracy as fusing their ideals of opportunity and equality, but a closer look reveals meritocracy's more limited scope and appeal. Using the terminology of the five tropes, a fully functioning meritocracy can be thought of as requiring a level playing field in education, equal treatment in employment, and just deserts in compensation. But note that within this meritocratic apparatus, a person can succeed by deploying talent over effort. Effort is not irrelevant but nor is it the linchpin: a high quotient of ability to effort can out-produce a high quotient of effort to ability.[18] The framework of meritocracy also does not require prosperity of the "rising tide lifts all boats" variety. A meritocracy demands only that merit determine success and says nothing of an abundance of jobs. Since it is unlikely that Americans would espouse a society with only a few jobs going to only the brightest citizens, the predominant American view of opportunity is most likely one that extends beyond meritocracy strictly defined.[19]

[18] The greater emphasis on merit defined as intelligence (especially via intelligence tests), talent, ability, and "cleverness" rather than effort is clear in early descriptions of meritocracy, such as Young (1958) and Bell (1973). One of the main objectives of meritocracy was to increase national competitiveness by harnessing the previously untapped *talent* of the lower classes.

[19] Now lost in academic and popular discourse, this is another unappealing aspect of meritocracy projected by Michael Young's "argument" for meritocracy in his influential and satirical book coining the term, *The Rise of Meritocracy* (1958). For further discussion, see chapter two.

This extension is necessary in order to include both "bootstraps" and "rising tide" opportunity as central components of the American definition of opportunity. Because such high regard is bestowed upon individuals who levitate above their difficult circumstances to succeed against all odds, the "bootstraps" trope is perhaps the quintessential trope of the land of individual opportunity. It prevails as a virtue even (or especially?) in a society that is not fully meritocratic (i.e., in which unfair preferential treatment continues to exist).[20] Because individual economic initiative is meaningless in an environment wanting in material resources, the "rising tide" trope is either a close rival to the "bootstraps" trope or more likely its implicit condition. Americans are held responsible for their station in life precisely because opportunity is perceived to be so plentiful. For these reasons, it is useful to think of the "rising tide" and "bootstraps" tropes as two sides of the same coin (i.e., demand and supply) and to distinguish them from the requirements of a meritocracy as it was originally defined. Which of these elements stirs the American psyche at any given moment, and in any given combination with the others, will shed considerable insight on the nature of beliefs about income inequality in America.

Finally, it is worth raising something that is often invoked in discussions of opportunity but I have avoided thus far: the issue of luck. Beliefs about hard work are famously contrasted with beliefs about luck in getting ahead, with Americans emphasizing hard work and Europeans luck.[21] I do not discuss luck explicitly in any of the five tropes because, as far as I can discern, it is not a visible element of the American discourse of opportunity, which is perhaps why fewer Americans

[20] For both ideological and psychological reasons, beliefs in a just world are common in unjust societies, fostering both social legitimacy and pro-social behavior (e.g., Hochschild 1995, Jost and Major 2001). However, these beliefs vary across nations as well as across individuals, with beliefs in fairness appearing to be higher in more unequal societies but lower among minority groups (e.g., Benabou and Tirole 2006, Fong 2001, O'Brien and Major 2005, Svallfors 2006).

[21] Fong 2001; Alesina and Glaser 2004, Benabou and Tirole 2006.

than Europeans select it as a survey response. In addition, research on attitudes about luck and hard work is concerned primarily with the impact of these attitudes on redistribution and not inequality. In fact, beliefs about the role of luck are often regarded as the litmus test for whether a society believes that government should provide a strong social safety net. However, I do examine factors that are considered "beyond an individual's control" in several of the tropes (i.e., in the "rising tide," "equal treatment," and "just deserts" tropes). I therefore suggest that luck may be masquerading under different, more vernacular, guises. For this reason, beliefs about luck and examples of luck are included in the empirical analysis, though in an indirect manner.

**BELIEFS ABOUT OPPORTUNITY AND INEQUALITY**

Much like beliefs about income inequality, there are no systematic and comprehensive data on beliefs about opportunity, encompassing all five tropes. The most common questions on beliefs about opportunity are contained in modules on egalitarianism, equal treatment of legally protected groups, and economic mobility. On the topic of egalitarianism, for instance, respondents are asked whether they support general egalitarian principles such as equal rights, equal treatment, and equal chances to succeed. While these questions do not reference particular social groups, such as the poor, rich, minorities, or women, other questions focused more explicitly on equal treatment opportunity ask specifically about the extent and causes of opportunities and inequalities between racial, ethnic, and gender groups.

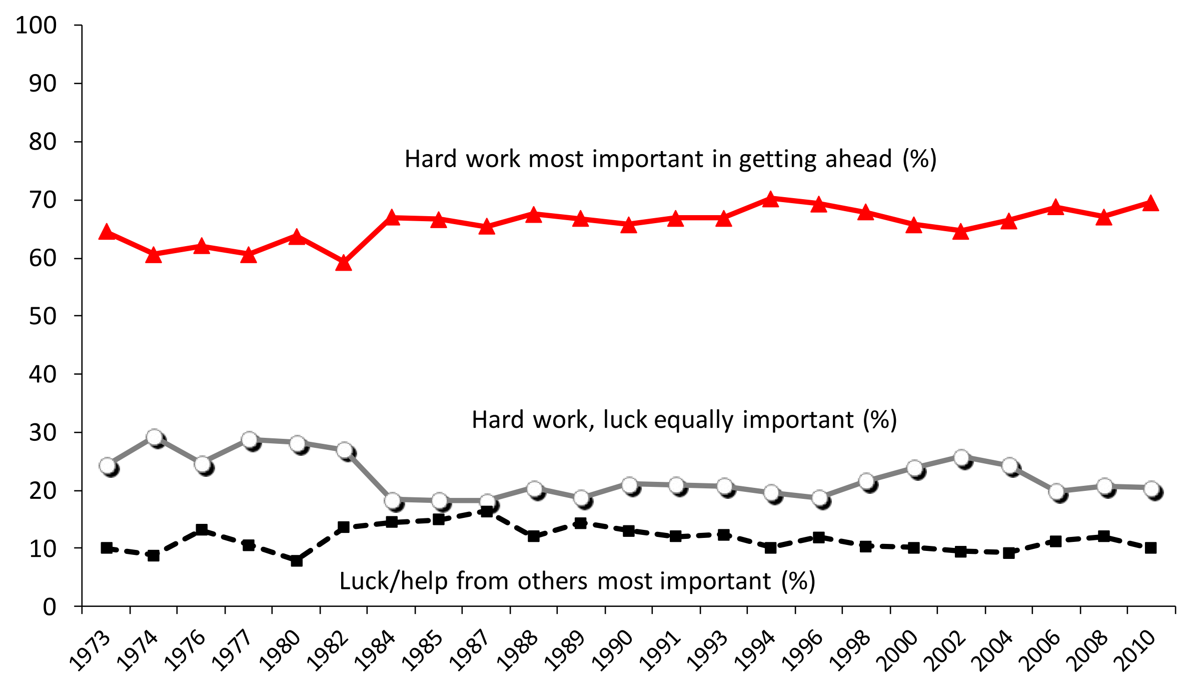
Perhaps the most commonly cited questions about equal opportunity are, not surprisingly, about bootstraps opportunity. Beliefs about this form of opportunity can be derived from questions about economic mobility that inquire about the process of "getting ahead" through hard work or improving one's "standard of living." Some of these questions also include references to getting ahead through education, family background, other social connections, and general economic conditions, invoking aspects of the level playing field, equal treatment, and rising tide tropes. As will become clear, still other questions pit one of these explanations of how opportunity works against another.

Asked less often are questions that touch directly on notions of just deserts and rising tide opportunity. One series of questions asks about how much individuals in a select and small group of occupations earn and how much they should earn, permitting an assessment of perceptions of fair pay. It is also illuminating to use responses to questions about sympathies toward specific groups, such as the poor and the rich, to understand whether such groups are considered deserving or undeserving. Regarding the rising tide form of opportunity, there are few questions on the role that economic growth plays in generating or constraining opportunity, with the exception of the question on income inequality introduced in the previous chapter (e.g., "are income differences necessary for prosperity"). Nevertheless, in conjunction with beliefs about income inequality, views about the state of the economy and one's own personal financial situation distill useful information on rising tide opportunity. The only trope that is not examined separately here is the "level playing field" trope. Because this trope has strong affinities with equal treatment in the labor market (the emphasis of this chapter), it is touched on in those sections, as well as in the next chapter when social policy preferences for educational reform are discussed in greater detail.

### ***Bootstraps versus Equal Treatment Opportunity***

Although the conceptual boundaries of the five tropes are often blurred in the empirical data, this presents something of an advantage in appraising the appeal of bootstraps opportunity relative to other concepts of opportunity. Perhaps the most frequently cited question on American beliefs about opportunity is a forced choice question that asks whether the "most important" reason that "people get ahead" is "their own hard work," "lucky breaks or help from other people," or "both equally." This question incorporates a clear reference to hard work and its ranking relative to unequal treatment (i.e., help from others) and luck. It has also been asked as part of the core modules in the General Social Survey since its inception, providing a lengthy series of responses from the early 1970s to the present that coincides with all years in which questions about income inequality are asked. In a more limited number of years, these options are disaggregated into a sequence of questions with several additional options. I discuss the forced-choice item first and follow with a discussion of the extended battery of items.

**Figure 5.1.** Do people get ahead by hard work, lucky breaks and help from others, or both?

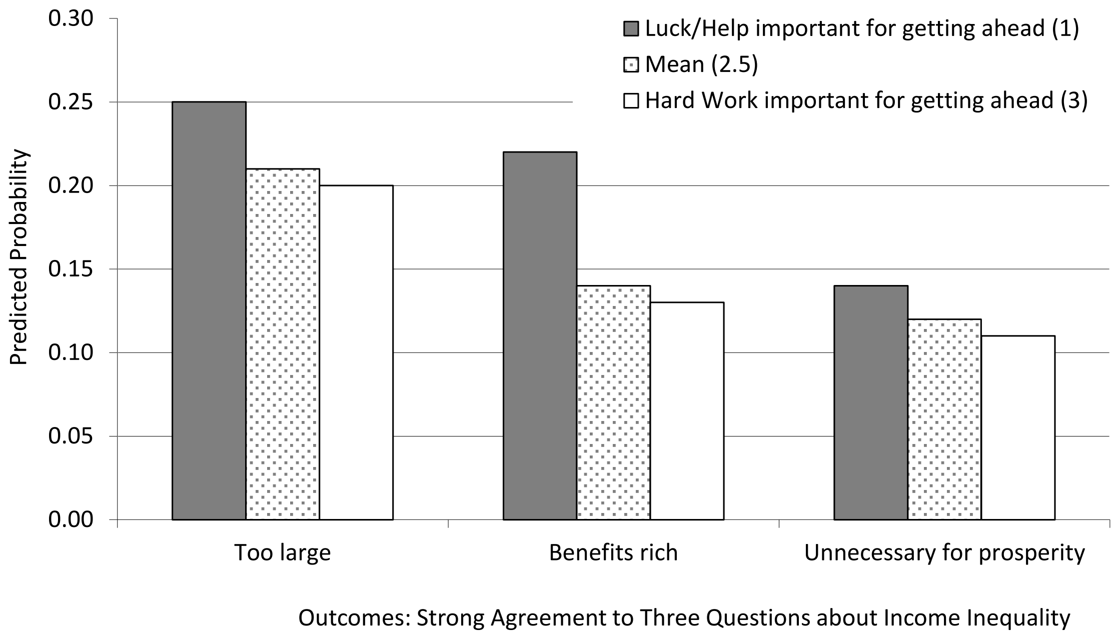


The responses to the forced-choice question are charted in Figure 5.1 and show remarkable consistency across the same twenty-four-year time period in which we have responses to questions about income inequality (1987 to 2010). From the late 1980s to the present, 65 to 70 percent of respondents said that hard work is the most important reason that people get ahead. The low point for the "hard work" option occurred before this time period, between the mid-1970s and 1982, when the percentage of responses hovered in the low sixties and dipped to 59 in 1982. From this it is tempting to conclude that the deep recession of 1982 was responsible for the dip in optimism, especially given another much weaker dip in 2002 on the heels of the 2001 recession. There is probably some truth in this conjecture, suggesting a positive association between an ebbing tide and pessimism about the ability of hard work to deliver financial rewards. (In the last chapter, we saw the same association between downturns in the economy and pessimism about improving one's standard of living.) However, there was little change during the recessions of 1991 and 2008, and the changes that do occur are quite modest relative to the high degree of overall optimism about the payoff of hard work.

On the face of it, this level of optimism and consistency does not bode well for explaining beliefs about inequality or changes in beliefs about inequality from the late 1980s to the late 2000s. This expectation is mostly but not completely borne out. As apparent in Figure 5.2, there is a significant effect of beliefs about getting ahead on beliefs about income inequality, but the effects are weak in size for two of these, the "too large" and "prosperity" outcomes.[22] By comparison, the impact of optimism about improving one's own standard of living (shown in the previous chapter

[22] As discussed in the previous chapter, the three questions on income inequality that serve as outcomes in this chapter are likert items (with strong agreement, agreement, neither, disagreement, and strong disagreement as response categories) and ask about whether "differences in income in America are too large," "inequality continues to exist because it benefits the rich and powerful," and "large differences in income are unnecessary for prosperity." The models on which Figure 5.2 is based is provided in the first panel of Appendix Table A5.1.

**Figure 5.2.** The effect of beliefs about getting ahead on beliefs about income inequality for a typical respondent (source: see Appendix Table A5.1).




and in Appendix Table A5.1) is measured and distributed in much the same way as the "get ahead" variable, with three categories in total and a mean of 2.5, but it has both a consistently significant effect across all three outcomes and a larger effect on all three outcomes. As shown in Appendix Table A5.1, a one point decline in mobility optimism would increase strong agreement that income differences are too large by 4.1 percentage points, or a 20 percent increase above a typical level of strong agreement to this question, which is 21 percent. By contrast, a one point decline in the belief that hard work is important for getting ahead would increase strong agreement by less than two thirds as much, or 2.6 percentage points.

There is an important exception to these generally weak effects, however. Beliefs about hard work in getting ahead have a stronger impact on beliefs about the benefits of income inequality for the rich and powerful. A one point decline in either mobility optimism or believing in hard work would increase strong agreement that income differences are too large by either 4.6 or 4.1 percentage points, or a 30 to 33 percent increase above a typical level of strong agreement to this question, which is 14 percent. As shown in Figure 5.2, those who think that lucky breaks or help from others is the most important factor in getting ahead are much more likely than those who choose hard work to strongly agree that income inequality continues to exist because it benefits the rich and powerful (22 versus 13 percent). This is the average effect across years, but in 1996, it is magnified due to the more intense concern about income inequality at that time. Nearly two fifths (38 percent) of those who thought that lucky breaks or help from others is the most important factor in getting ahead were also in strong agreement that income inequality exists to benefit the rich and powerful. By contrast, about a quarter (24 percent) of those who thought hard work is the most important in getting ahead were in strong agreement about the role of the rich and powerful in perpetuating inequality.

The strength of this particular relationship, coupled with weak relationships overall, offers mixed evidence of the role that beliefs about bootstraps opportunity play in shaping beliefs about income inequality. Since this may be a consequence of the forced-choice format of the "get ahead" question, these relationships are examined further with the extended battery of questions on opportunities to get ahead for a more limited number of years (1987, 1992, 2000, and/or 2010). Respondents were asked the importance of various factors for getting ahead in life and could decide for each one whether it was essential, very important, fairly important, not very important, or not important at all. The factors can be grouped into two broad categories corresponding to the two

**Table 5.3.** Detailed questions about the importance of individual and structural factors in getting ahead (pooled across available years, in percentages).

| Importance for getting ahead in life... | Essential | Very Imp. | Fairly Imp. | Not Very Imp. | Not at all Imp. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hard work | 40.8% | 50.9 | 7.3 | 1.0 | 0.1 |
| Having good education | 33.8 | 53.1 | 11.9 | 1.0 | 0.3 |
| Ambition | 40.8 | 49.3 | 8.7 | 0.9 | 0.2 |
| Natural ability | 11.2 | 45.1 | 38.1 | 5.2 | 0.5 |
| Knowing right people | 10.0 | 33.9 | 42.1 | 11.7 | 2.3 |
| Well educated parents | 6.2 | 37.7 | 39.5 | 12.8 | 3.8 |
| From wealthy family | 3.9 | 18.4 | 30.0 | 32.2 | 15.5 |
| Race | 2.1 | 11.3 | 22.2 | 33.7 | 30.8 |

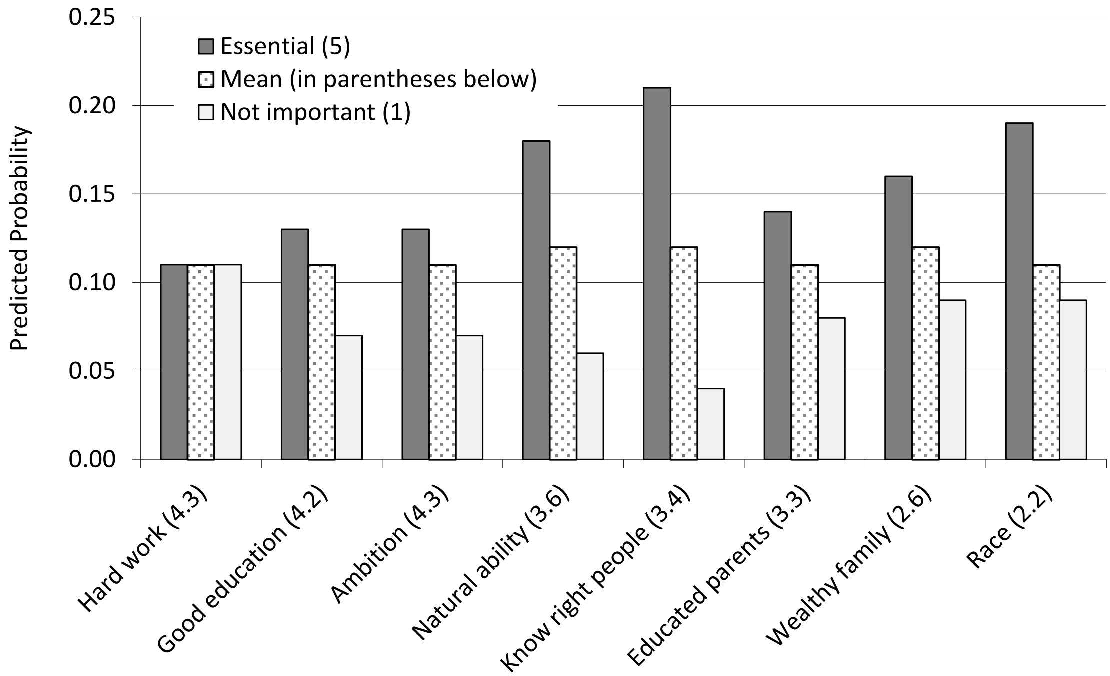
responses to the forced-choice question. First, there is one question that asks specifically about the importance of hard work and additional questions that ask about other characteristics potentially within an individual's control, such as "having a good education yourself," and "ambition." Second, there are a number of questions that can be construed as examples of having "lucky breaks or help from others," such as "knowing the right people," "coming from a wealthy family," "having well educated parents," and "a person's race." An eighth factor, "natural ability," could be perceived as either an individual characteristic that legitimately confers rewards or a characteristic determined by luck, and thus I do not place it in either category *a priori*. In short, these eight factors span the divide between those associated with bootstraps opportunity and those that suggest a violation of equal treatment or a level playing field.

Consistent with the large number of Americans who selected hard work in the forced-choice question, individual characteristics are the ones most often deemed "essential" for getting ahead in life. As shown in the top panel of Table 5.3, 40.8 percent of respondents think that ambition and hard work are each essential, while 33.8 percent think that having a good education is essential.

When responses in the “very important” category are added to those in the “essential” category, over 87 percent of Americans consider all three of these individual factors to be of greatest significance for getting ahead in life. The core American belief in bootstraps opportunity is thus strongly supported in these data, even more strongly than in the responses to the forced-choice question. However, perhaps because of the prevalence of these convictions, beliefs about the importance of hard work and having a good education have no impact on beliefs about income inequality. As shown starkly in Figure 5.3 (and in Appendix Table A5.1), this is just as true for beliefs about the benefits of income inequality for the rich and powerful. Thus the bootstraps notion of opportunity is not only stable and enduring over time, it has *no discernable impact* on beliefs about income inequality in one way or another. As such, it is erroneous to cast it as an indicator of tolerant beliefs about income inequality, as is so often done.

In contrast, beliefs about income inequality *are* related to beliefs about aspects of opportunity that are prosaic indicators of luck. Looking again at the results in Table 5.3, large minorities of Americans believe that, if not essential, “knowing the right people” and “having well educated parents” – potential violations of equal treatment and a level playing field – are very important in getting ahead. When the “essential” and “very important” categories are combined, 44 percent of Americans consider each of these important. The more direct question about family background, “coming from a wealthy family,” receives much less support; only 22 percent of respondents ranked this as essential or very important. A person’s race receives still less support, with only 13 percent ranking it as essential or very important. Keep in mind that these responses are subject to norms and biases about the explicit role of race and class in affecting life chances and do not represent strictly factual assessments. As such, they identify the terms that Americans prefer in describing luck and other structural barriers to opportunity.

**Figure 5.3.** The effects of beliefs about bootstraps and equal treatment opportunity on strong agreement that inequality continues to exist to benefit the rich and powerful for the typical respondent (source: see Appendix Table A5.1).




Each of these structural factors has a significant impact on beliefs about income inequality, with the strongest and most consistent effect coming from "knowing the right people".[23] Beliefs about the role of the rich and powerful in maintaining inequality are once again consistently implicated in these beliefs about opportunity (see Figure 5.3 and Appendix Table A5.1), but so is the straightforward referendum on whether inequality is excessive. The perceived necessity of having

[23] This average marginal effect (0.046) is also larger than the marginal effect of the forced-choice "get ahead" question (0.041) on beliefs about the rich and powerful despite having more categories (5 versus 3 categories).

the right family background and social connections in order to succeed in life leads to stronger agreement that income differences are too large. Notably, none of these factors has an effect on beliefs about the relationship between inequality and prosperity, something I discuss in greater detail in a moment.

Based on these more detailed questions, the above results for the forced-choice question, in which the effects were weak except for the “benefits” question, do not appear to be a fluke of format. In fact they become even more crystalized when respondents are permitted to evaluate distinct barriers to opportunity in separate questions. This is because American beliefs are multidimensional, with a bedrock layer of individualism overlaid with skepticism about whether the playing field is level. As Table 5.4 shows, well over half of respondents (60.2 percent) believe that *both* hard work and at least one of the factors unrelated to individual initiative are essential or very important for getting ahead. Less than a third think that only hard work is essential or very important, and only 4.7 percent think that only non-individual characteristics are essential or very important. This multidimensionality, or what has also been labeled inconsistency and ambivalence, and what I prefer to call the difference between principle and practice, has been studied extensively with respect to attitudes about racial inequality and social welfare policy but not, in the era of rising inequality, with regard to income inequality. Here we have examined multiple dimensions of both opportunity and income inequality, finding a very specific and coherent association between beliefs about social advantages in getting ahead and the role of the rich and powerful in maintaining income inequality. Although we cannot be sure which comes first, it is clear that perceptions of social group advantages in getting ahead go hand in hand with perceptions of elite group advantages in how income is distributed, and in turn with disapproval of the level of inequality.

**Table 5.4.** Beliefs about getting ahead through hard work *and* social advantages (pooled across available years).

| **Importance of hard work for getting ahead (weighted %):** | **Essential/ very important** | **Fairly/not very/ not at all important** |
|---|---|---|
| **Importance of non-individual characteristics for getting ahead** (including knowing the right people, coming from a wealthy family, having well-educated parents, and race)**:** | | |
| **Essential/very important** | 60.2 | 4.7 |
| **Fairly/not very/not at all important** | 31.5 | 3.6 |

Before turning to the question of whether growing concerns about social advantages in getting ahead may account for some of the growing concern about income inequality, there are two other factors connected to getting ahead that we have yet to discuss: ambition and natural ability. Although ambition is often thought of as a straightforward indicator of individual initiative and natural ability a more complicated indicator of individual worth on the one hand and luck on the other, each was associated with beliefs about income inequality in the same way, as indicators of the perpetuation of social advantage. Those who think that having ambition and natural ability are important are more likely to associate the benefits of income inequality with the rich and powerful. Those who find ambition important also think that current levels of income inequality are excessive. Again, neither of these is associated with thinking that inequality is necessary for prosperity. While the finding for natural ability is somewhat expected – natural ability may be perceived as a function of luck and therefore unfair – the findings for ambition are surprising. Either Americans believe that ambition is unfairly inherited or cultivated in individuals from privileged backgrounds, or they classify it as a necessary but unsavory element of getting ahead, joining the ranks of the rich and powerful, and perpetuating a cycle of inequality. Both are perhaps consistent with evidence that Americans do not generally "like" the rich.[24]

Is it possible, then, that Americans thought that ambition and social advantages were becoming more important in shaping opportunities to get ahead at the same time that they thought that the rich and powerful were playing a more important role in fostering income inequality? The most straightforward way to determine whether changes in beliefs about the role of hard work and social advantage in getting ahead was responsible for some of the changes in concerns about income inequality is to see whether such changes occurred, whether they occurred at the same time, and whether they occurred in the likely direction. We focus on the forced-choice question because it is available for the most number of years. We have already seen the flat line in Figure 5.1 that shows very little change in beliefs about the importance of hard work for getting ahead relative to lucky breaks or help from others. In addition, however, the estimates for each year show that the percentage of respondents who are placing their faith in hard work actually increased slightly over this period, from 65.4 in 1987 to 69.3 in 1996, 65.8 in 2000, 67.1 in 2008, and 69.6 in 2010. Meanwhile, strong agreement that inequality exists to benefit the rich and powerful grew in 1992 and peaked in 1996 but was no larger in 2000 and 2008 than in 1987.

Thus concerns about hard work being thwarted by social advantage did not rise in tandem with concerns about income inequality. In fact, beliefs about bootstraps opportunity and income inequality favoring the rich were less interdependent in the mid-1990s than in other years.[25]

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[24] Bartels (2008), Lamont (2000).

[25] This conclusion is based on separate year-by-year bivariate probit models with the first outcome defined as strong agreement to the "benefits the rich" question and the second outcome defined as *not* thinking that hard work alone is the most important factor in getting ahead (i.e., selecting luck/help from others or both luck/help from others and hard

Similarly, none of the trends in beliefs about income inequality were altered by changes in beliefs about the role of hard work, education, ambition, natural ability, knowing the right people, or the education, wealth, or race of your parents for getting ahead (although only a few years of responses are available for these questions).[26] In anything, then, Americans became more likely to support the bootstraps notion of opportunity in 1996 while at the same time they became more likely to express concerns about the unfairness of income inequality.[27] Increasing concerns about income inequality are not, therefore, explained by increasing skepticism about the payoffs of hard work and increasing concerns about the role of social advantages.

In sum, support for the bootstraps notion of opportunity barely wavered during the period of rising income inequality and rising concerns about income inequality. This has important implications for understanding beliefs about income inequality for three reasons. First, and most significantly, beliefs about income inequality are routinely inferred from beliefs about bootstrap opportunity yet we found little empirical basis for such an inference. Thus Americans should not be cast as unconcerned about income inequality because of their enduring confidence in the possibility (with unknown probability) of bootstrap opportunity. In fact, in tougher times, Americans may feel more pressure to rely on hard work as their only hope for achieving economic security.

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work). As a measure of endogeneity, the correlation of errors of these two outcomes is relatively low and not as high as in a separate bivariate probit regression with mobility pessimism as the second outcome. Moreover, the correlation of errors is highest in 1987 (.207)**, followed by 2008 (.181)*, 1996 (.165)**, and 2000 (.104). The forced-choice "get ahead" question is not asked in 1992, but the more detailed questions about getting ahead are. The only factors that are endogenous with the "benefits" question are "knowing the right people" and "coming from a wealthy family." The correlation of errors for these factors as the second outcome is higher in 1992 than in 1987 and 2000 (the only other years of data for these questions).

[26] There is little change in the coefficients for the year variables when the "get ahead" variables are included in regressions in which strong agreement to the inequality questions are the outcomes.

[27] This may seem like an unlikely combination of trends but several studies argue that Americans respond to economic hardship not by demanding government intervention but by resorting to their own devices, which suggests a greater emphasis on the necessity of hard work during difficult times (e.g., Feldman 1982, Greenberg 1996).

At the same time, however, there is an additional dimension to how Americans think about bootstraps and equal treatment opportunity that involves views about the rich. Those who believe that opportunity is heavily influenced by an individual's social environment, and especially by "knowing the right people," are more likely to associate income inequality with elite social groups (i.e., the rich and powerful), and in a disapproving way, as they are also more likely to object to existing levels of income inequality. Such beliefs about social advantages in getting ahead may not have intensified and set fire to concerns about income inequality in the mid-1990s, but they are a key component of those concerns at any given time, much like concerns about one's own chances for upward mobility.

While we cannot determine whether these particular perceptions of unequal opportunity precede, accompany, or follow perceptions of unfair outcomes, it is plausible that the "end result" of social advantages in life, when a superstar is thrown into the spotlight and their background is thus revealed, is at least as visible to the general public as the progression of advantages enjoyed by the affluent throughout their early lives. Indeed, it is the end result of a Supreme Court Justice Sotomayer or a President Clinton that ratifies the notion of bootstraps opportunity and not the hard won successes in the development of their individual careers, which are reported only in retrospect after fame sets in. Similarly, we may not have known about the poor grades of George W. Bush had he not assumed the presidency of the United States. In either the case of having overcome adversity or reaped social advantages, perceptions of outcomes become precursors to perceptions of opportunities rather than the other way around.

Third, and finally, the connections between beliefs about outcomes and opportunities discussed in this section are considerably more coherent than anyone would have expected. The unfairness of using social advantages in one generation to reproduce social advantages in the next generation is implied in the question about income inequality “continuing to exist because it benefits the rich and powerful,” but it is not stated directly. It is only the coupling of this question with the questions on “getting ahead” that evokes public concerns about the transmission of inequality across generations. Moreover, these particular questions about getting ahead and income inequality are embedded in *separate* batteries of questions about opportunity and inequality, respectively, and yet they are the ones that stand out in relation to one another. There is therefore no reason to believe that the results in this section are a consequence of question ordering or priming. Instead, they suggest that a significant minority of Americans are crafting a coherent and positive connection between inequalities in opportunity and inequalities in outcomes that is consistent with the intergenerational reproduction of class.

### ***Just Deserts Opportunity***

Just deserts opportunity is distinguished from bootstraps and equal treatment opportunity by its emphasis on fair pay as the core component of equal opportunity. In this rendering, pay is pertinent to the definition of opportunity irrespective of whether jobs are acquired by hard work, talent, or preferential treatment. Although fair pay is defined as *pay* commensurate with performance and contribution, unfair pay may have consequences for *job* opportunities. Much like potential inefficiencies introduced by excessive pay compression, excessive pay inequality could result in distorted incentives, weakened firm performance, and sluggish economic growth of the rising tide variety. The various accounting, financial, and other corporate scandals of the past decade and a half demonstrate this all too well. As discussed in Chapter Two, an “unjust meritocracy” also has the potential to discourage and demean those at the bottom, as Young and Bell prophesied, spawning a downward spiral of lost opportunities.

The proposition that unfair and extreme inequalities in pay function as a signal of inequalities in opportunity has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. As shown in Chapter Three, at times even the media contemplates this relationship in an almost taken for granted manner. Fortunately, this proposition is implied in one of the main questions about income inequality in the General Social Survey. The question of whether “large differences in income” are necessary for prosperity embeds the principle that generous monetary rewards spur innovation and growth. If one disagrees with this principle and concludes to the contrary that inequality is *not* necessary for prosperity, one is saying that a prosperous society is not predisposed to high levels of income inequality. We may speculate further that inequality’s reputation is itself compromised, for its potential role in curtailing opportunity in the various ways mentioned above.

These interpretations of the relationship between perceptions of opportunity and income inequality are explored in this section. As mentioned earlier in the book, large majorities of Americans think that occupations at the top are overpaid while those at the bottom are underpaid. This is a consistent finding across numerous studies with the unequivocal message that there is more inequality in pay than Americans believe is warranted. Here I examine the type of data upon which these studies are based and extend the inquiry to determine how closely perceptions of fair pay are related to more explicit judgments about income inequality. Although questions on perceptions of occupational pay are asked in only four of the six years in which questions on attitudes about income inequality are available, the four years span more than two decades of rising inequality (1987, 1992, 2000, and 2010). Over time comparisons are facilitated further by the inclusion of two occupations in all four years that cover opposite ends of the earnings distribution:

executives and unskilled workers.[28] Given this range, we can investigate whether beliefs about income inequality are shaped more by concerns about fair pay at the top or bottom, and whether this has changed over the course of the 1990s and 2000s.

Beginning with perceptions of changes in *pay* (rather than pay inequality), Americans appear to have been remarkably cognizant of the stagnation of earnings at the bottom and the skyrocketing of earnings at the very top. This is true especially for the periods between 1987 and 1992 and 2000 and 2010. In the first period, the average perceived pay of CEOs rose by 148 percent and the average perceived pay of unskilled factory workers declined by 7 percent, as shown in Figure 5.4 and Table 5.5. By comparison changes in perceived earnings were small from 1992 to 2000. Moreover, Americans distinguished trends in pay at the very top from those among mere professionals. The average perceived earnings of doctors grew almost imperceptibly, from $136,883 in 1987 to $150,915 in 1992 and $144,347 in 2000. These same patterns for unskilled workers and doctors are replicated in the 2000s, but the perceived earnings of executives soars by 250 percent from 2000 to 2010. Thus Americans had a relatively refined sense of who was getting ahead and who was not in absolute terms, as well as how this may have shifted across decades.[29]

At the same time, Americans increasingly believed that CEOs deserved much less than they earned and skilled and unskilled workers deserved more. On average, unskilled workers were

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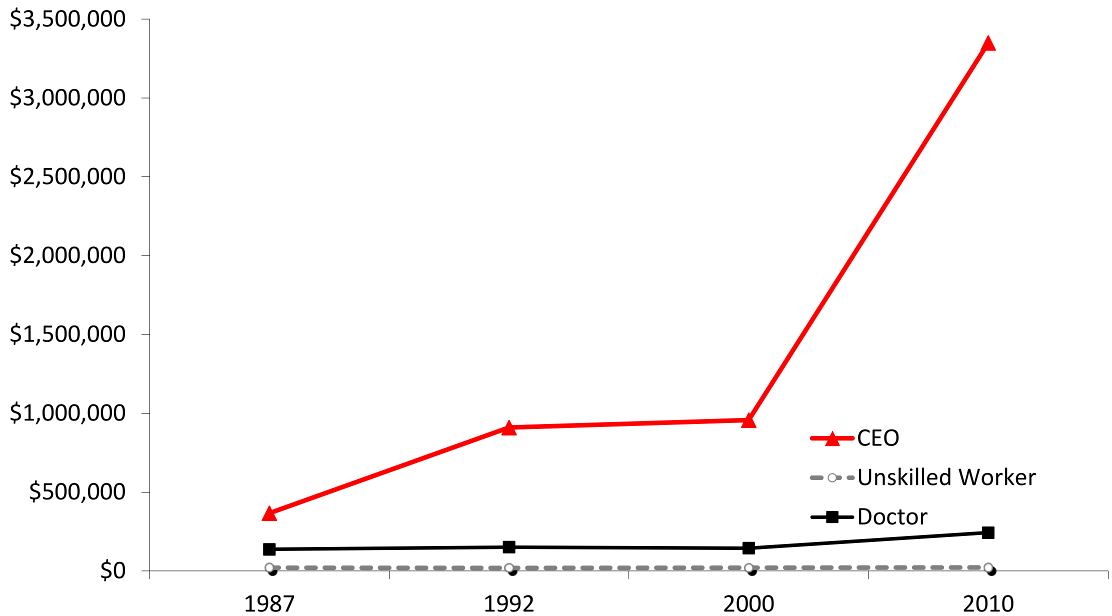
[28] In three of the four years, five occupations are available: executives, cabinet ministers, doctors, skilled workers, and unskilled workers. Unfortunately, in 2010, skilled workers were excluded from the survey, leaving three high level and only one low level occupation in all four years. Therefore, I focus on only the two occupations at the top and bottom that are available in all four years. Analyses with the five occupations in three years are consistent with these results.

[29]The figures here are based on the actual amounts reported by respondents for CEOs, unskilled workers, and doctors, some of which were not disclosed in the public use sample of the GSS that contains only a single top-coded category of one million dollars or more. The raw data were then top coded to eliminate outliers: the top .2% of cases for unskilled workers, the top .3% for doctors, the top .4% for the desired pay of executives, and the top .7% for the perceived pay of executives.

**Figure 5.4.** Perceived occupational earnings over time (2000 $).




deemed underpaid by 14 percent in 1987 and 26 percent in 2010, as shown in the far right column in the first panel of Table 5.5. There was also a marked increase in the share of Americans who said that unskilled workers should be earning more than they currently do. From 1992 forward, two-thirds of Americans believed that unskilled workers were short changed, up from 54 percent in 1987. By contrast, more Americans came to the conclusion that CEOs were overpaid. Those who thought CEOs should earn less than a quarter of what they earn rose from 9 percent of all respondents in 1987 to an astounding 39 percent in 2010, as shown in Figure 5.5. This was balanced out by many fewer Americans who thought CEOs deserved more or less what they earned,

**Table 5.5.** Perceived and desired pay and pay ratios of CEOs and unskilled factory workers.

| **Year** | **Mean perceived pay (2000 $)** | | **Mean desired/mean perceived** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Executives | Unskilled workers | Executives | Unskilled |
| 1987 | $ 366,617 | $20,591 | 0.54 | 1.14 |
| 1992 | $ 909,483 | $19,236 | 0.28 | 1.23 |
| 2000 | $ 956,906 | $20,129 | 0.35 | 1.31 |
| 2010 | $3,350,051 | $21,835 | 0.25 | 1.26 |
| | **Median ratio: (1) desired/actual pay** | | **(2) desired/actual pay inequality** | |
| | Executives | Unskilled workers | Executives/unskilled workers | |
| 1987 | 0.70 | 1.11 | 0.60 | |
| 1992 | 0.57 | 1.22 | 0.44 | |
| 2000 | 0.67 | 1.25 | 0.50 | |
| 2010 | 0.40 | 1.20 | 0.32 | |

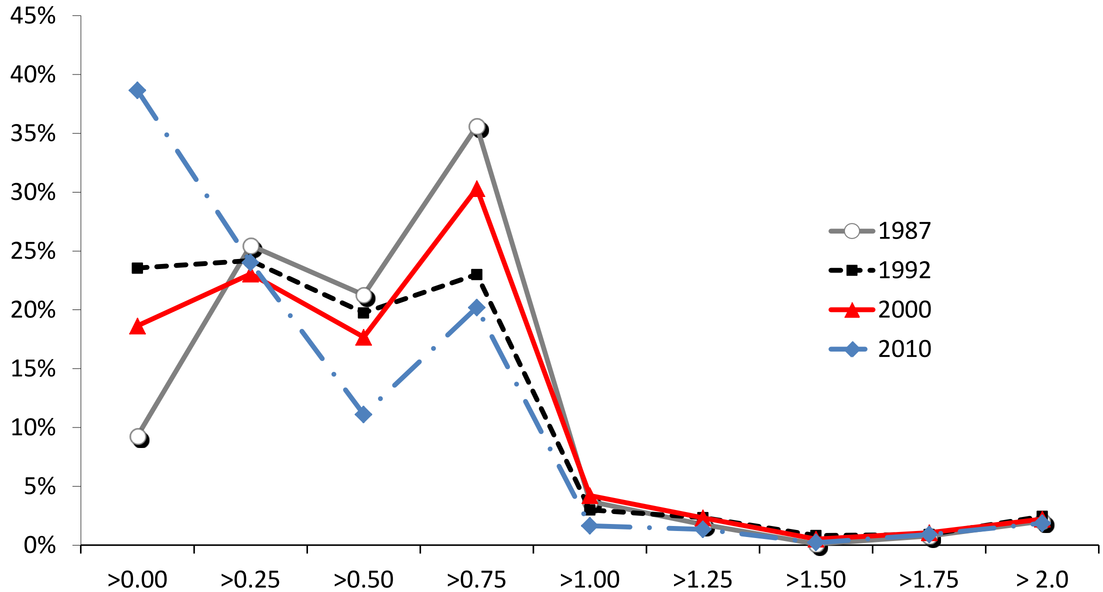
declining from over a third in 1987 to a fifth in 2010. There is a distinctly non-linear pattern to these beliefs, however, that confirms the trends found in beliefs about income inequality in the previous chapter: Americans found executives to be more deserving in 2000 than in either 1992 or 2010, though still less so than in the base year of 1987.[30] While calibrating beliefs to shifts in context, then, Americans in growing numbers over the course of the 1990s and 2000s were adducing a widening rift between what executives and ordinary workers deserved and what they earned. This portends a more serious breach of the principle of just deserts than ever before.[31]

The consequence of these differences in perceived and desired *pay* is that the desired level of *pay inequality* is much less than the perceived level of pay inequality. This too has changed significantly over time. Figure 5.6 and Table 5.5 show the ratio of desired pay inequality to perceived pay inequality, with each form of inequality calculated as the ratio of executive to

[30] See Table 5.5 for the ratios of desired to perceived pay for executives. Note there is also no evidence of a linear trend toward growing polarization once the actual values above the top-coded category for CEOs are used (cf. Osberg and Smeeding 2006).

[31] Across all years, 64 percent believed unskilled workers deserved more than they earned and the same percent believed that executives deserved less than they earned.

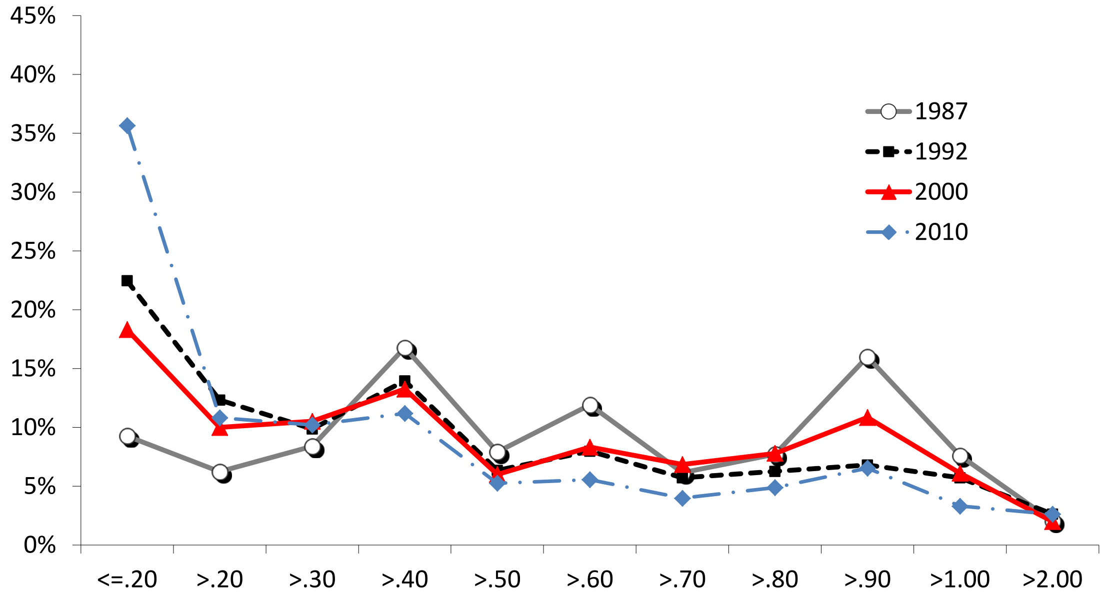
**Figure 5.5.** Ratio of desired to perceived pay of chairman of large national corporation.




unskilled earnings.[32] The median level of inequality preferred by Americans in 1987 was three-fifths the level they thought existed at the time. This dropped to 44 percent in 1992, rose to 50 percent in 2000, and then fell precipitously to just 32 percent in 2010. The impression given by the full distribution in Figure 5.6 is similar to the one given by the median: a shift toward preferences for less inequality relative to perceived inequality in 1992, a shift back toward greater tolerance of inequality in 2000, and then a large increase in those preferring much less inequality in 2010, especially among those desiring less than 20 percent of what they perceive exists. Polarization

[32] Many other variations on this basic measure were tested as well with similar results (Jasso 1999; Osberg and Smeeding 2006; Kelley and Evans 1993). Most of the change is occurring because of changes in perceptions of actual pay inequality and not desired pay inequality.

**Figure 5.6.** Ratio of desired pay inequality to perceived pay inequality.




declines over the decades as more Americans prefer less inequality in 2010 than in 1987.

Although these non-linear trends in beliefs about inequality should be familiar from the last chapter, they are also distinctive in one striking respect. On the one hand, the increase in desires for less *pay inequality* between 1987 and 1992 and then again between 2000 and 2010 is consistent with the increase in concerns about *income inequality* during these same periods, as is the greater tolerance for both kinds of inequality in 2000. On the other hand, desires for less pay inequality are at their unambiguous peak in 2010, whereas this is not the case for desires for less *income inequality*, which attain their peak in the early and middle 1990s. If opposition to inequality was a straightforward byproduct of knowledge of inequality, shouldn't the heightened recognition of and distaste for extreme disparities in pay that we see in 2010 provoked a tidal wave of intolerance? If not, why not? To answer these questions, we need to examine the relationship between beliefs about pay inequality and beliefs about income inequality directly rather than assume their identity. The apparent eruption of awareness about rising pay disparities in the 2000s helps to explain rising concerns about income inequality but it is not the only factor involved.

First, unlike perceptions of bootstrap opportunity, perceptions of just deserts opportunity do exert a strong overall impression on beliefs about income inequality. Americans who desire a lower level of pay inequality than they believe exists are also more likely to express concerns about income inequality, resulting in the significant negative effects shown in the first panel of Table 5.6 and illustrated in Figure 5.7.[33] This is true for every year and for every outcome, though only the results for all years pooled together are given in the first panel of Table 5.6, and the results for 1992 are graphed in Figure 5.7. In 1992, for example, the year with the highest level of concern about income inequality among the four years of data, a person at the 90th percentile of the distribution was content with the perceived level of pay inequality (i.e., desired pay inequality = perceived pay inequality) and had only an 8.6 percent chance of strongly agreeing with the statement that inequality was unnecessary for prosperity, controlling for other factors. By contrast, a person at the 10th percentile of the distribution, who preferred a level of income inequality that was just 7 percent of existing levels (i.e., desired pay inequality = .07 * perceived pay inequality), had a 15.4 percent chance of strongly agreeing to this statement (recall that many more agreed to this statement). Comparable shifts are evident for the other two questions on income inequality, in which the likelihood of strong agreement increases by 50 percent as satisfaction with existing pay disparities sinks from the 90th to the 10th percentile.

[33] All occupational pay variables are logged and standardized to eliminate the rightward skew of the distribution.

Second, the effects of beliefs about fair pay on *changes* in beliefs about income inequality are substantial but they also vary over time. The results are presented in the second panel of Table 5.6. In the period from 1987 to 1992, for example, there was an increase in the share of Americans who strongly agreed (of about 7.6 percent on average) that the nation can prosper without large differences in income, and about 17 percent of this increase was due to an increase between 1987 and 1992 in the share of individuals who preferred less pay inequality.[34] In the period from 1987 to 2010, when the increase in desires for less pay inequality was more pronounced, 39 percent of the increase in strong agreement that inequality was unnecessary for prosperity was accounted for by the shift in preferences toward less pay inequality. The growing discrepancy between desired and perceived pay inequality over time also accounts for some of the increase in strong agreement that income differences are too large, with the impact again much more salient in the period from 1987 to 2010 (accounting for 34 percent of the increase in strong agreement that income differences are too large versus 13 percent in the period from 1987 to 1992). Overall, then, we observe less of an increase over time in concerns about income inequality once perceptions of occupational pay disparities are recognized, and this is especially so in 2010. Yet however much rising awareness of pay disparities prompted a flare up in concerns about income inequality in 2010, it was not enough to surpass the degree of dissatisfaction with income inequality in the early 1990s. Evidently perceptions were accurate and critical enough even in the 1990s to underwrite elevated concerns about inequality at that time.[35]

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[34] As shown in the second panel of Table 5.6, the average marginal increase in strong agreement to the "prosperity" question from 1987 to 1992 is reduced from 0.076 to 0.063 points (or by (1-(0.063/0.076))*100 = 17 percent) when preferences for less pay inequality in 1992 are taken into account. This obtains for y-standardized coefficients as well.

[35] Note that strong agreement to the question about the benefits of income inequality for the rich is highest in 1996 but we do not have occupational data for that year and thus cannot assess how much perceptions of pay disparities affected beliefs about this aspect of income inequality.

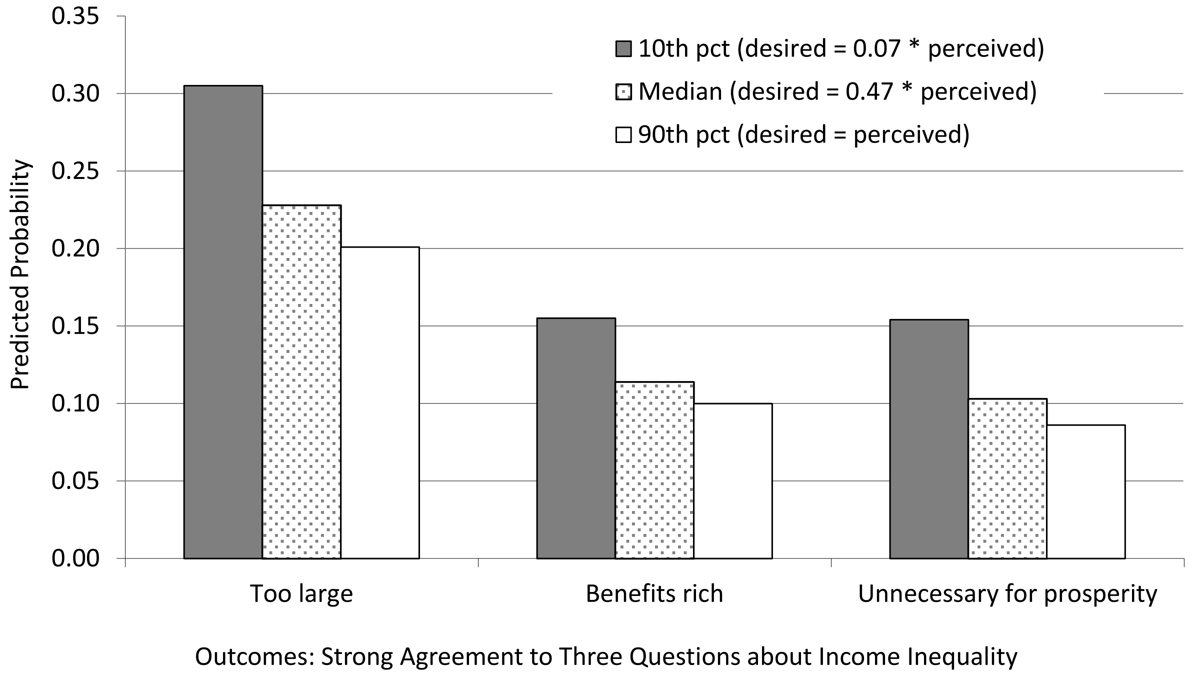
**Table 5.6.** The effect of beliefs about occupational pay inequality on beliefs about income inequality (binary logistic regression estimates).

| **Strong agreement that inequality is ...** | **"Too Large"** | **"Benefits Rich and Powerful"** | **"Unnecessary for Prosperity"** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Probability of strong agreement for typical respondent[a]:** | .190 | .111 | .091 |
| **(1) Average marginal effects[b] of pay inequality (logged and standardized):** | | | |
| Desired pay inequality/perceived pay inequality | | | |
| Executives relative to unskilled[c] | -0.038 (0.007)** | -0.023 (0.006)** | -0.024 (0.006)** |
| Desired pay/perceived pay: | | | |
| Unskilled worker | 0.025 (0.007)** | 0.010 (0.006)† | 0.009 (0.006) |
| Executive | -0.033 (0.007)** | -0.021 (0.006)** | -0.023 (0.006)** |
| **(2) Discrete change of time dummies:** | | | |
| 1992, without pay ineq variable | 0.138 (0.025)** | 0.011 (0.015) | 0.076 (0.022)** |
| 1992, with pay ineq variable | 0.120 (0.024)** | 0.003 (0.015) | 0.063 (0.021)** |
| 2000, without pay ineq variable | 0.092 (0.027)** | -0.002 (0.017) | 0.050 (0.023)* |
| 2000, with pay ineq variable | 0.077 (0.026)** | -0.008 (0.016) | 0.040 (0.022)† |
| 2010, without pay ineq variable | 0.100 (0.024)** | -0.010 (0.014) | 0.067 (0.021)** |
| 2010, with pay ineq variable | 0.066 (0.023)** | -0.027 (0.014)* | 0.041 (0.019)* |

**Source:** General Social Survey in 1987, 2000, 2010, and International Social Survey Program in 1992.

**Notes:** [a] A typical respondent is female, white, married, employed, and not living in the South; self-identifies as middle class, a democrat or independent, and moderate; has mean age, age squared, household size, children, education, and family income; and has mean values on the year dummies.
[b] Average marginal effects are evaluated for the typical respondent (defined above).

**Figure 5.7.** The effect of just deserts opportunity on beliefs about income inequality for the typical respondent (source: see Table 5.6).




We have seen that Americans are dissatisfied with pay disparities, that this dissatisfaction grew dramatically over the 2000s, and that this explains a substantial portion of the growing dissatisfaction with income inequality, but we do not yet know whether this is because Americans are disturbed by pay disparities at the bottom of the occupational ladder or the top. Beyond our interest in understanding the nature of American beliefs about economic fairness, the answer to this question has obvious implications for public policy, to be discussed in later chapters. The additional results in the first panel of Table 5.6 present convincing evidence that it is concerns about unfair pay at the top that strike a chord with Americans. The more Americans think executives are overpaid, the more likely they are to strongly agree that income differences are too large, exist to benefit the rich and powerful, and are unnecessary for prosperity. Moreover, beliefs about the fairness of executive pay are as salient as desired levels of pay inequality in their impact on beliefs about income inequality. Whether Americans viewed excessive executive pay as a *cause* of economic malaise or simply an injustice in times of economic hardship for many Americans is impossible to determine, but certainly the former interpretation was entertained by journalists (see Chapter Three). Either way, perceptions of the deservingness of executives were bound up more tightly than perceptions of the deservingness of workers with concerns about income inequality.

We have found throughout this section, in sum, that views about just deserts opportunity are intermeshed with views about income inequality. Beliefs about just deserts have their strongest and most consistent impact on beliefs about the relationship between income inequality and prosperity. While an analogous pattern emerged in the previous section between views about violations of equal treatment opportunity and views about the rich and powerful in maintaining income inequality, it was somewhat more natural to grasp that relationship than this one. As argued in that section, the idea that social group advantages in getting ahead would contribute to social group capacities for perpetuating income inequality, and vice versa, is a coherent proposition about intergenerational immobility, albeit one that social scientists do not expect Americans to grasp. By contrast, pay disparities are typically conceptualized as measures of inequality and not economic prosperity, despite a venerable tradition of economic research on the relationship between income inequality and economic growth. Likewise, preferences for less pay inequality are typically construed as norms of fairness, conferring no information about perceptions of macroeconomic conditions.

But provided that prosperity is considered a central component of opportunity (i.e., "rising tide" opportunity), pay disparities may indeed function as signals of opportunity because of the motivational role they are intended to play in a meritocratic society bent on maximal levels of technological change and economic growth. To be sure, norms of fairness are violated by excessive pay at the top and insufficient pay at the bottom, but an "unjust meritocracy" also reflects distorted economic incentives that have potentially adverse economic consequences for the nation at large by restricting opportunities for good jobs at good wages (at least according to the public). Conversely, Americans ought to be more accepting of exorbitant executive pay when the rising tide is "lifting all boats." Executives will be seen as justly rewarded for their beneficial stewardship of the economy, as was the case when concerns about inequality subsided in the boom year of 2000. In short, just deserts are not only a norm of fairness, nor are they simply a matter of individual opportunity in the form of rewards for individual merit. They are also a requirement for maintaining a virtuous and prosperous society for all Americans.

### ***Rising Tide Opportunity***

In perceiving a connection between fair pay and economic prosperity, Americans are making a more general connection between income inequality and rising tide opportunity. They are differentiating between a rising tide for the well off and a rising tide that lifts all boats. They are expressing a preference for equitable growth over growth only for growth's sake. This was also apparent in the findings from the previous chapter. Americans did not temper their concerns about income inequality between 1992 and 1996 when the economy began to recover from the early 1990s recession. In fact, their concerns intensified during the jobless expansion of the mid-1990s. Only once the economy took off for the bottom as well as for the top at the end of the 1990s did concerns about income inequality subside. Concerns about income inequality are not simply dressed up concerns about an imperiled economy, then; they are concerns about the democratic nature of economic growth.

In this section, I explore this subtle but crucial point using data from sources other than the General Social Survey, namely the American National Election Studies (ANES). While the GSS has a superior time series of questions on income inequality, with the question on prosperity particularly apropos, the ANES have superior questions on perceptions of economic conditions. These questions allow us to examine whether perceptions of economic conditions mimic the trajectory of actual economic conditions (e.g., as measured by the unemployment rate), and whether and how perceptions of economic conditions are associated with beliefs about income inequality. Even if macroeconomic indicators sparkle in an objective sense, Americans may not be convinced, and they may conflate their (erroneous?) subjective concerns about the economy with their concerns about income inequality. In other words, it is often asserted that Americans are festering about the economy and not about income inequality per se. We therefore want to be certain that it is income inequality that they object to rather than general economic malaise.

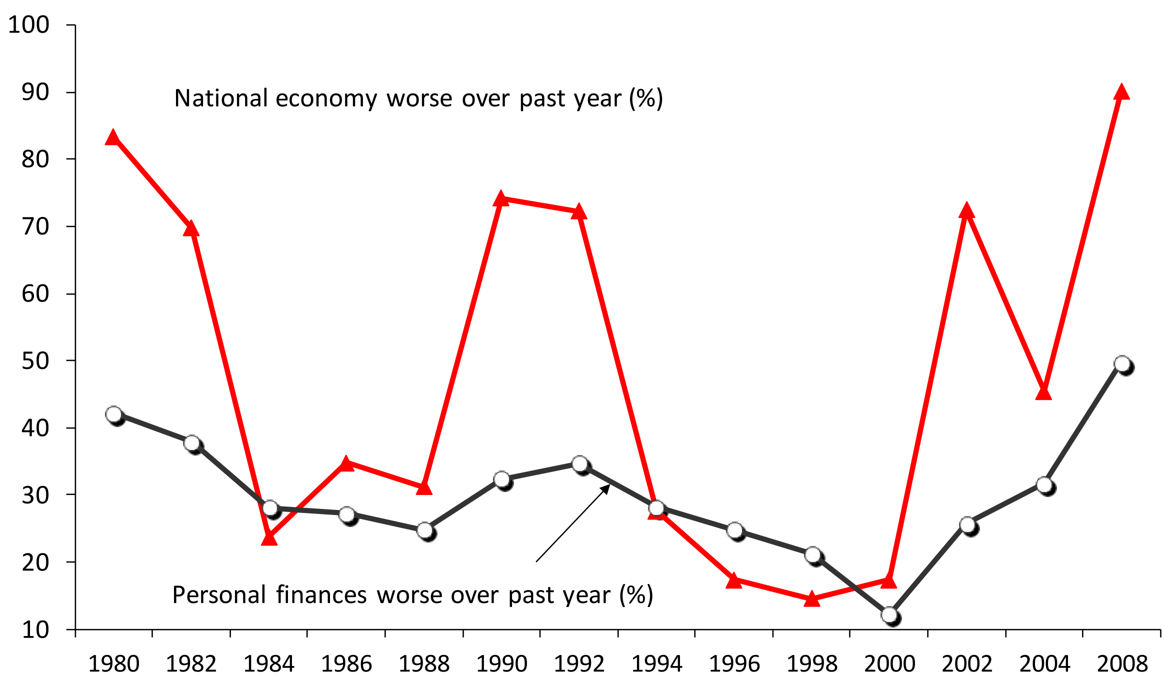
To measure perceptions of economic conditions, the ANES has a set of questions about how much better or worse the national economy has become over the past year as well as how much better or worse off the respondent is financially. These questions are typically used to distinguish between "pocketbook" voting based on individual finances and "sociotropic" voting based on national conditions,[36] and thus are repeated as part of the ANES core modules throughout the time period of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. To measure beliefs about income inequality, the ANES has a special module of questions in 2002 and 2004 and a more limited replication in 2008. Although this

[36] Enns and Kellstedt (2008), Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2007).

small number of years is not ideal, these questions are unique in providing information about whether Americans knew about rising inequality (whether income differences grew larger or smaller over the past twenty years) and what they thought about it (whether it was a "good thing" or a "bad thing"). At least for these three years, we can assess the extent to which perceptions of personal and national economic conditions are involved in forming opinions about income inequality. We examine this question after first determining how closely subjective perceptions of personal finances and national economic conditions overlap with objective indicators.

The data show resoundingly that subjective perceptions overlap with objective conditions very closely. As seen in Figure 5.8, Americans had a much sunnier outlook as the 1990s wore on. In the twenty-nine year period from 1980 to 2008, the third and fourth highest shares of Americans who thought that the economy was worse than a year ago appear in 1990 and 1992. These are the

**Figure 5.8.** Perceptions of national economic and personal financial conditions (ANES).



bookend years of the 1990-1991 recession, in which 74 and 72 percent of respondents thought the economy had “gotten worse” over the past year. By 1996, 1998, and 2000, however, perceptions had changed dramatically: the lowest shares of Americans over the twenty-four period (15 and 17 percent) thought worse of the national economy relative to the previous year. These figures are more than 50 percentage points lower than the highs earlier in the decade. Because Americans are almost always more optimistic about their own financial situation than about the financial situation of others, the swings are not as exaggerated on this dimension. Still, they show the same pattern of pessimism at the dawn of the 1990s (35 percent saying their own financial situation was worse than a year ago in 1992) followed by increasing optimism as the decade progressed (25 percent in 1996 and 12 percent in 2000). Thus Americans were not misperceiving objective economic conditions, making them out to be more dismal than they actually were, at the same time that their concerns about income inequality grew. They were as optimistic on this score during the middle 1990s as they had been at almost any other time between 1980 and 2008.

Even though we have only two years of complete data on *both* beliefs about income inequality and perceptions of economic conditions in the ANES, we see almost exactly the same pattern as we saw in the previous chapter, in which concerns about inequality failed to dissolve as the economy began its recovery. In a helpful coincidence, the two years of ANES data differ in objective economic conditions and perceptions of those conditions. For instance, by the end of 2002 when the first questions on income inequality were asked, the economy had already passed into its second year of recovery but the official announcement of the end of the recession came, as is usually the case, much later in July of 2003.[37] Unemployment, a lagging indicator, was declining at

[37] The recession lasted from March to November of 2001 (Business Cycle Reporting Committee, National Bureau of Economic Research, http://www.nber.org/cycles/july2003.html).

the end of 2002 but it was still a half percentage point larger than two years later (5.9 in late 2002 versus 5.4 percent in late 2004). In turn, the share of Americans who thought the national economy was worse than a year ago was over 1.5 times as high in 2002 as in 2004 (72 percent versus 45 percent), the second year that questions about inequality were asked.[38] A stark change of this magnitude in perceptions of the economy over such a short period of time should have at least some impact on concerns about income inequality if such concerns are motivated by macroeconomic conditions narrowly construed. However, we find the opposite: concerns about income inequality actually increase from 2002 to 2004. The share that believed that income inequality had increased and that this was a bad thing rose from 41.3 percent in 2002 to 47.6 percent in 2004.[39]

This increase in concern about income inequality was small but it nonetheless symbolizes the distinctiveness of concerns about income inequality relative to concerns about economic growth and prosperity, or rising tide opportunity. This difference is clear not only in the relative stability of beliefs about income inequality as concerns about the economy plummeted but in how other factors come into play in shaping both kinds of beliefs. For example, political factors weigh much more heavily in perceptions of the national economy than in perceptions of income inequality. As shown in Figure 5.9, which extends the analysis into 2008, partisanship differences in assessments of the economy were narrow in 2002 and 2008 but gaping in 2004, owing presumably to the widespread

[38] Across the two years of 2002 and 2004, we can only compare perceptions of national economic conditions and not personal finances. Respondents are asked explicitly whether their financial situation is the "same" in 2002 but not in 2004 (the wording in 2004 is the more typical). Fortunately, perceptions of national economic conditions have a much stronger effect on beliefs about economic inequality than do perceptions of personal finances.

[39] These are weighted percentages derived from responses to two questions about whether income inequality is larger than twenty years ago and whether this is a good or bad thing, respectively. The joint distribution is measured as: 5=much larger and bad thing; 4=somewhat larger and a bad thing, or somewhat smaller/much smaller and a good thing; 3=unsure of trend, or declined and no opinion; 2=larger and no opinion; 1=larger and good thing or smaller and bad thing. The percentages listed include categories 4 and 5 but exclude those who thought income inequality fell. The mean of the joint variable rose as well, from 3.33 in 2002 to 3.46 in 2004. The scale is adapted from Bartels (2008: 146).

**Figure 5.9.** Effect of party identification on perceptions of economy and inequality (ANES).

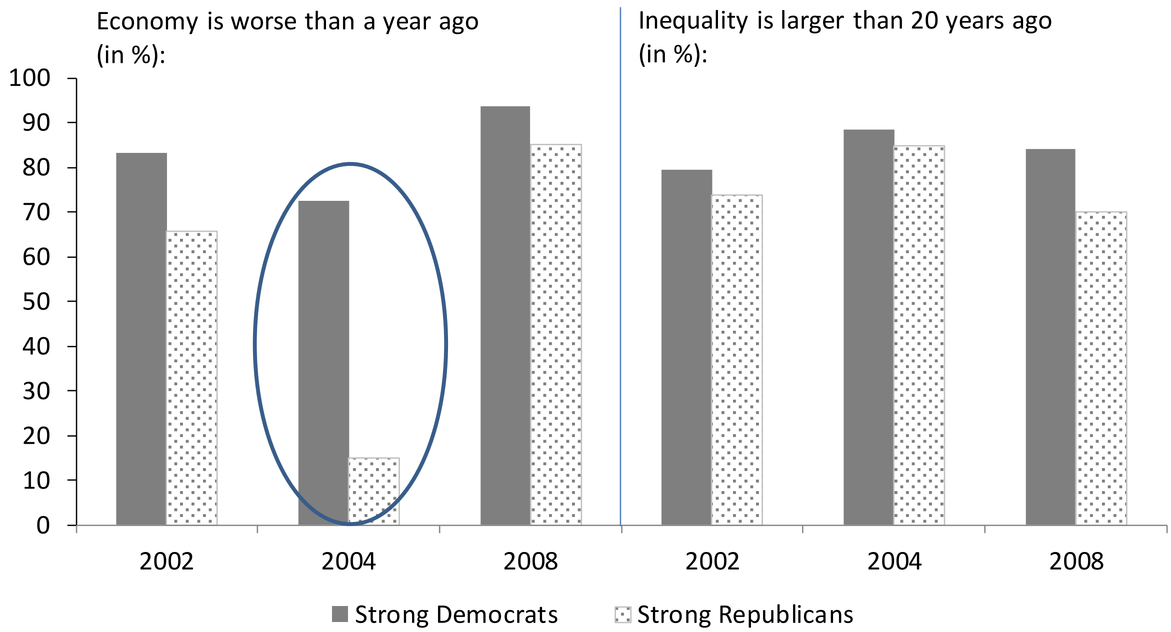
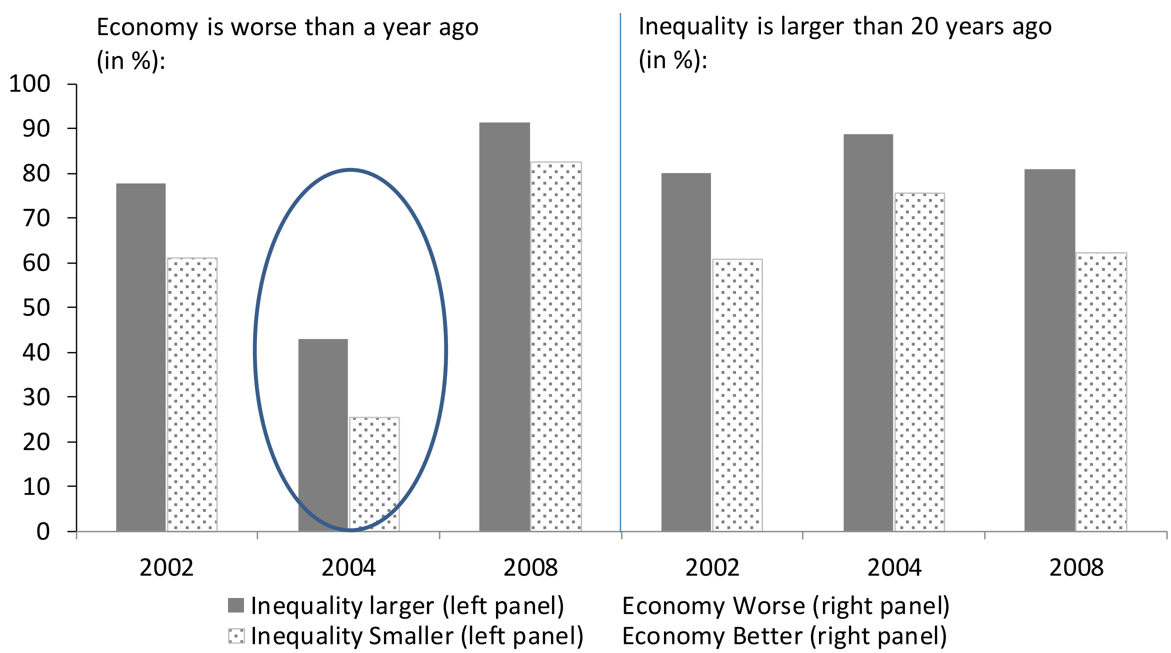



**Figure 5.10.** Effect of perceptions of economy and inequality on one another (ANES).



acknowledgement of the recession in 2002 and 2008 and to the partisan rancor of the presidential election in the non-recessionary year of 2004. In 2002, for instance, 83 percent of strong Democrats and 66 percent of strong Republicans thought the economy was worse than a year ago, a typical ordering of perceptions during a Republican administration, whereas this difference exploded into a 72 versus 15 percent gap in 2004. By contrast, there was little change in partisanship effects in 2002 and 2004 on the factual question of whether income inequality was larger than 20 years ago (the only question available in 2002, 2004, and 2008). In both years, there was a difference of only 4 to 6 percentage points in the degree to which strong Democrats and strong Republicans perceived that income differences had grown larger.[40] A more substantial partisan effect appeared in 2008 but the gap was still just 14 percentage points, with the overwhelming majority of both strong Democrats and strong Republicans agreeing that income inequality was larger (84 and 70 percent, respectively). As also seen in the previous chapter, perceptions about income inequality are not as driven by partisan polarization as other issues appear to be.

But while distinct, and following different trajectories over time, beliefs about income inequality and broader economic conditions ultimately share a good deal in common at any given time. Across years, beliefs about income inequality are highly correlated with beliefs about economic conditions. Drawing from the same models discussed above in Figure 5.9, Figure 5.10 shows that having the most negative views on the economy, relative to having the most positive views, increases the chances of thinking that income inequality has grown larger over time. This

[40] These results are predicted probabilities derived from two separate ordered probit regressions in which perceptions of national economic conditions and income inequality are the outcomes, respectively. The regression for national economic conditions included variables for political views, party identification, education, year dummies for 2004 and 2008, an interaction between the 2004 dummy and party identification, and views about whether income inequality changed. The regression for income inequality included variables for political views, party identification, education, year dummies, an interaction between the 2008 dummy and party identification, and views about the national economy. Control variables were set to the mid-points on their scales to derive predicted probabilities.

likelihood is greater for those with negative views about the economy by between 13 and 19 percentage points in 2002, 2004, and 2008. This is more than twice the size of the effect of partisanship on beliefs about income inequality in 2002 and 2004 and about the same as the partisan effect in 2008. Similarly, believing that income inequality grew larger increased the chances of thinking that the economy grew worse over the past year by 9 to 18 percentage points. This effect is comparable to the effect of partisanship on perceptions of economic conditions in the recessionary periods of 2002 and 2008. Moreover, when a range of additional controls and explanatory factors are added to these models, both effects remain strongly statistically significant. This is the most direct evidence we have that perceptions about the overall health of the economy make a strong impact on perceptions of income inequality, and vice versa.

In sum, the link between beliefs about rising tide opportunity and income inequality is consistent with the link we saw in the previous chapter. There we discovered an *expanding economy* on the heels of the 1990-1991 recession and yet *growing concerns* about income inequality, contrary to expectations. Similarly, here we found increasingly positive impressions of the economy following the 2001 recession and yet slightly more widespread perceptions of growing income inequality and its unpopularity between 2002 and 2004. While it is true that Americans are less likely to tolerate income inequality during tough economic times, it is also true that they will not ease up on their intolerance simply because the economy is growing. Similarly, Americans will judge the economy less favorably if they are concerned about income inequality, but they will not hide their heads in the sand or follow their partisan noses and deny that rosier economic conditions have arrived. They *will* hold out, however, for rosier times still, rosy enough to raise the bottom as well as the top. The sequence of events that we have observed suggests that while macroeconomic conditions provide an important foundation upon which to evaluate the fairness of income inequality – by providing an indication of the availability of opportunity, for example – they are not a *sufficient* explanation of those judgments. Americans care not only about a rising tide but about a rising tide that lifts all boats, including, as we saw in the previous section, fair rates of pay.

***Group-Based Equal Treatment Opportunity***

In this last empirical section, we examine what is perhaps the most well-known and certainly the most general set of questions about equality of opportunity available: the six questions on equal opportunities, chances, rights, and treatment that comprise the "egalitarianism" scale in the ANES. These questions were introduced in 1984 and have been replicated in most of the ANES surveys up to 2008. Like the ANES questions on economic conditions, this time series of questions can be used to determine whether concerns about equality of opportunity arose at the same time that concerns about income inequality did, as well as whether they motivate concerns about income inequality at any given point in time. We will then be able to determine how useful this widely used set of questions on egalitarianism is for understanding beliefs specifically about *income* inequality.

As part of this investigation, we also examine whether beliefs about income inequality are motivated by concerns about violations of equal treatment based on the legally protected categories of race and gender. Such violations are sanctioned by anti-discrimination laws and are commonly associated with the term "equal opportunity" (e.g., as in equal employment opportunity). Given this association, it is possible that the egalitarian scale reflects beliefs about this particular view of equal opportunity (i.e., for protected groups) more than it reflects beliefs about income inequality. We therefore supplement our analysis of the egalitarian scale with an analysis of questions that ask specifically about racial and gender inequality. Our purpose is the same: to determine how they have changed over time as well as how they are associated with egalitarian beliefs in general and beliefs about income inequality in particular. Based on the partial interdependence of beliefs about equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes demonstrated throughout this chapter, we should expect to find at least some overlap among those who care about each of these dimensions of inequality. Once again, however, our interest is in refining our understanding of beliefs about income inequality as both related to and distinct from beliefs about opportunity.

The six questions in the ANES egalitarianism scale are shown in Table 5.7. All but one contain explicit references to equal opportunity, chances, treatment, or rights, but none contain explicit references to particular social groups. Table 5.7 indicates a wide range of support for these general egalitarian values, with the highest share of respondents (88 percent on average over the 1984 to 2008 time period) strongly agreeing or agreeing somewhat that "our society should do whatever is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed." Although not nearly as high, support is also above 50 percent for the other two questions that are worded such that agreement is an expression of support for egalitarianism. For example, 67 percent agree that "if people were treated more equally in this country we would have many fewer problems." Support for greater egalitarianism is lower for the three questions in which disagreement rather than agreement signals support. For instance, only 37 percent somewhat or strongly disagree that "this country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are." Taken together, these responses are surprisingly tepid. Support for equality of opportunity is not as rock solid as is often assumed. In fact, in a 1987 ANES pilot study of beliefs about inequality of outcomes, the desire for less inequality of outcomes was comparable to the desire for less inequality of opportunity. For example, 60 percent of respondents agreed that "it would be better for everyone if the distribution of wealth in this country were more equal."[41]

[41] Feldman 1987.

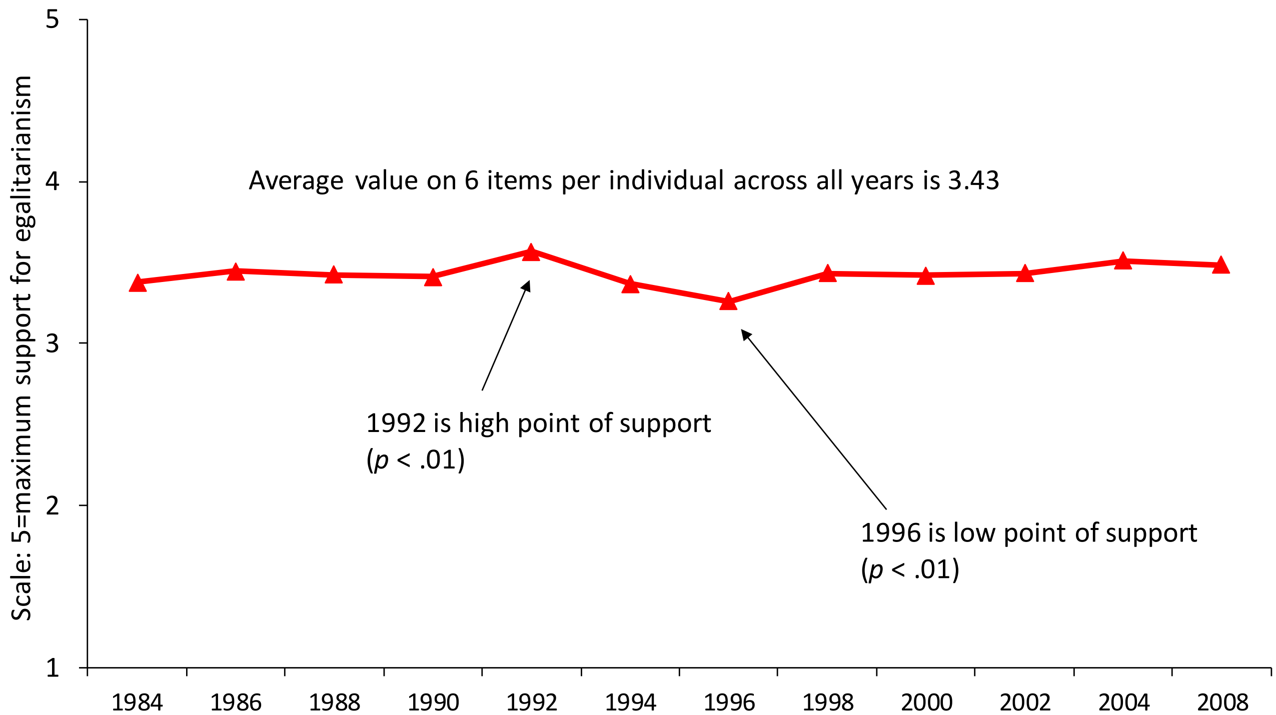
**Table 5.7.** Beliefs about equal opportunity, rights, chances, and treatment.

| | Average Agreement/Disagreement, 1984-2008 | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Somewhat** | **Strongly** |
| **Question wording, agree/disagree response, and range of dis/agreement over time:** | | |
| Our society should do whatever is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed (agree). Range: 82 to 91 percent. | 61.6 | 26.8 |
| If people were treated more equally in this country we would have many fewer problems (agree). Range: 61 to 83 percent. | 31.8 | 33.9 |
| One of the big problems in this country is that we don't give everyone an equal chance (agree). Range: 47 to 64 percent. | 23.2 | 29.7 |
| It is not really that big a problem if some people have more of a chance in life than others (disagree). Range: 45 to 53 percent. | 20.9 | 28.6 |
| We have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country (disagree). Range: 32 to 47 percent. | 19.1 | 20.7 |
| This country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are (disagree). Range: 31 to 43 percent. | 15.9 | 20.8 |

**Source:** American National Election Study, Cumulative File, 1984 to 2008.

Support for equal opportunity also varies substantially over time. On average, total agreement to the GSS questions varies by 14, 19, and 20 percentage points over the 1987 to 2008 time period; similarly, the range over the 1984 to 2008 time period for the ANES questions is from 8 to 17 points. It is therefore possible that the ANES questions on egalitarianism follow the same trend as the GSS questions on income inequality, indicating an overlap in concerns about egalitarianism and income inequality. Figure 5.11 reveals that this is not the case, however. During the 1984 to 2008 period, a combined scale of support for equality of opportunity was at its highest point in 1992 and its lowest point in 1996. The scale ranges from 1 to 5 and is calculated as the

**Figure 5.11.** Six item scale of support for egalitarianism (ANES).




average score on the six questions for each respondent (with 1 indicating lack of support and 5 indicating support). The average over the twenty-year period is 3.42, falling between neutral and moderate support for equality of opportunity. The highest value for any given year is 3.57 in 1992 and the lowest value is 3.26 in 1996. These patterns persist with controls for a wide range of factors. Because support for equality of opportunity fluctuated over the period in which concerns about income inequality were escalating, it is unlikely that general concerns about egalitarianism were the source of concerns about income inequality at that time.

More obvious to lay and expert observers alike, concerns specifically about inequalities of opportunity for blacks and women were also on the wane, really in long term decline, during the period of heightened concerns over income inequality. The ANES question with the longest time series of data on views about racial inequality asks about the government's responsibility in improving "the social and economic position of Negroes and other minority groups" and not more simply about whether equality of opportunity for blacks and other minorities is a problem. Still, if equal treatment opportunity for blacks and other minorities was of growing concern, one might expect heightened support for government action. The long term trend is toward *less* support for government action on behalf of blacks and minorities (except for a sharp and inexplicable blip in 1998), however. Paul Kellstedt provides a more thorough analysis of racial policy preferences and also shows that after a period of rising liberalism during the 1970s and early 1980s, racial policy preferences turned in a more conservative direction in the 1990s. Kellstedt contends that the trend toward conservatism marked a shift toward beliefs in norms of individualism and away from norms of equal opportunity, at least regarding race.[42] Finally, regarding equal opportunity for women, the best available time series is on the topic of support for women's equality, and this shows steady increases over time in such support.[43]

There is little indication, then, that a swell of opposition to violations of group-based equal opportunity arose in the 1990s and coincided with heightened opposition to income inequality. Nevertheless, at any given point in time, support for equality of opportunity and for racial and gender equality may represent different facets of a more general egalitarian ethos that includes a desire for less income inequality. We actually know remarkably little about how views about each

[42] Kellstedt (2000). In separate analyses, I found trends to be similar for comparable questions in the GSS (HLPBLK, NATRACEY, and NATRACE), which also have no effect on the time trend of the inequality outcomes.

[43] This question measures support for women's equality rather than concerns about the lack of equality between men and women. The latter type of question is not available in either the ANES or the GSS. Thus we must infer that concerns about gender inequality would not have grown at the same time as support for gender equality.

of these dimensions of inequality are related to one another and whether and how they are constructed from views about particular social groups, such as blacks, women, the rich, and the poor.[44] This is too large a topic to tackle in any depth here, and the data are extremely sparse, but we do have one or two years of ANES data that contain information on egalitarian attitudes, attitudes about gender and racial inequality, attitudes about a wide range of social groups (i.e., feeling thermometers about the poor, the rich, the working class, the middle class, blacks, Hispanics, immigrants, labor, and big business), and attitudes about income inequality, all from the same set of respondents. With this unique combination of data, we can compare the extent to which general egalitarian views on the one hand and views about income inequality on the other are an outgrowth of views about gender inequality and racial inequality and about particular racial, ethnic, gender, and social class groups.

The results are presented in Table 5.8 and are both fascinating and puzzling. First, the egalitarianism scale is strongly and positively associated with support for women's equality and government action to improve the condition of blacks and minorities. The values of these coefficients remain virtually unaltered from baseline models when no other factors are included in the equation. Racial identity also has a robust effect on egalitarian views, with blacks much more likely than all other racial groups to endorse egalitarian principles. By contrast, concerns about

[44] One thing we know is that Americans are much more likely to attribute gender inequality to discrimination than they are to attribute racial inequality to discrimination (Kluegal and Smith 1986). In an analysis of the 2002 ANES special modules on explanations of gender, racial, and income inequalities, "discrimination holds women back" had the largest share of respondents that thought it was "very important" (41 percent) in explaining gender inequality in jobs and incomes (among six explanations offered). This was followed in order of importance by two other "structural" explanations: "government policies help men more" (25 percent) and "women don't get a chance to get a good education" (22 percent). By contrast, only 20 percent thought discrimination was a "very important" explanation of racial disparities. The most important explanation of both racial disparities and disparities between high and low income groups was the lack of education (28 percent thought this was a very important explanation of racial disparities and 56 percent of income disparities).

**Table 5.8.** The relationship between beliefs about groups, group-based inequality, equal opportunity, and income inequality.

| **Outcomes** | **Egalitarianism Scale (standardized)** (linear regression estimates) | **Inequality much larger & bad thing** (ordered probit marginal effects) | **Inequality much larger** (ordered probit marginal effects) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Variables** (categories and coding): | | | |
| Govt. aid to blacks (7, no to yes) | 0.092 (0.017)** | 0.020 (0.011)† | 0.018 (0.010)† |
| Equal role for women (7, no to yes) | 0.053 (0.021)** | -0.034 (0.011)** | 0.018 (0.012) |
| Black | 0.643 (0.081)** | -0.211 (0.062)** | -0.047 (0.049) |
| Hispanic | 0.112 (0.100) | 0.011 (0.057) | 0.026 (0.048) |
| Female | 0.073 (0.057) | -0.043 (0.030) | -0.052 (0.029)† |
| Feeling thermometers (0-100, neg. to pos.): | | | |
| Blacks | 0.004 (0.002) | 0.004 (0.001)** | -0.000 (0.001) |
| Hispanics | 0.000 (0.002) | -0.004 (0.001)** | -0.002 (0.001) |
| Illegal immigrants | 0.003 (0.002) | -0.002 (0.001)* | -0.003 (0.001)** |
| Rich people | -0.001 (0.002) | -0.003 (0.001)** | -0.003 (0.001)** |
| Big business | -0.009 (0.002)** | -0.003 (0.001)** | -0.002 (0.001)** |
| Egalitarianism scale | ----- | 0.053 (0.024)* | 0.070 (0.021)** |
| Inequality larger | 0.101 (0.033)** | ----- | ----- |
| Select controls (# of categories): | | | |
| Party id (7, Dem. to Repub.) | -0.030 (0.019) | -0.026 (0.010)** | -0.010 (0.009) |
| Political views (7, lib. to cons.) | -0.145 (0.026)** | -0.020 (0.016) | -0.014 (0.014) |
| Econ. conditions (3, better to worse) | 0.054 (0.022)** | 0.029 (0.010)** | 0.022 (0.010)* |
| Year 2008 | -0.118 (0.063)† | NA | 0.005 (0.034) |
| R-squared | 0.39 | 0.12 | 0.07 |
| Root MSE/Wald chi2(df) | 0.82 | 217(24) | 159(25) |
| N | 1254 | 642 | 1254 |

**Source:** American National Election Study, 2004 and 2008. Estimates from ordered probit models are average marginal effects on the outcome category listed in the title (i.e., “inequality is much larger and a bad thing” and “inequality is much larger”).

racial and gender issues seem to be less pressing in the minds of individuals who are troubled by income inequality. Those who support government action to improve the condition of blacks and minorities are more likely to be concerned about income inequality, but the effect is weakened by controls. More perplexing, support for women's equality *reduces* concerns about income inequality, as does being black (i.e., whites are disproportionately likely to be concerned about income inequality). In addition, feeling less warmly towards Hispanics and illegal immigrants *increases* concerns about income inequality, suggesting that Latino immigrants may be scapegoats for inequality.[45] In all, the tenor of these results differs substantially from those for the egalitarianism scale. On the one hand, egalitarian values are strongly influenced by concerns about gender, racial, and ethnic inequalities, identities, and sympathies. On the other hand, concerns about income inequality are either not influenced by such factors to the same degree or are associated with views that are hostile towards minorities, women, and/or immigrants.

Given this conclusion, one might expect to find a similar divergence between the two outcomes in their relationship to views about social class distinctions. But while we do find one important difference, we also find a number of similarities. First, the feeling thermometers for "big business" and the "rich" are both strongly and consistently associated with views about income inequality. Negative feelings toward big business and the rich are each independently significant in raising concerns about income inequality. In a separate analysis shown in the third column of results in Table 5.8, negative views towards the rich and big business also increase the likelihood of correctly answering the factual question about income inequality, that is, that income differences have grown much larger over the last twenty years. For those who support egalitarian views,

[45] However, warm feelings towards blacks result in greater concerns about inequality.

however, it is only negative views about big business that matter and not negative views about the rich.

Second, and surprisingly, sentiments about all other social class groups – the poor, the middle class, the working class, labor, and welfare recipients – have no impact whatsoever for any of the outcomes once other factors are taken into account (results not shown). Similarly, other factors tend to weaken the effect of egalitarian values on views about income inequality and vice versa, even though they remain significant. This relationship, between general beliefs about equality of opportunity and inequality of outcomes, is mediated by more fundamental beliefs about politics and especially economics: liberal party identification or political views and pessimism about the economic outlook of the past year each raises egalitarian sentiments and concerns about income inequality. Amidst these many similarities, then, the differences that stand out are that knowledge of and concerns about income inequality are aligned with distaste for the rich and big business and surprisingly little consolation, if not outright disinterest and disdain, for issues of racial, ethnic, or gender inequalities.

It does not appear, in sum, that it would be useful to infer beliefs about income inequality from general egalitarian views about group-based equality of opportunity or vice versa. Egalitarian values of this sort tap more into sympathies for inequalities based on race, ethnicity, and gender than for those based on income and social class distinctions. Beliefs about income inequality are in turn unique in their implication of the rich. This is consistent with findings from the GSS on the role of the rich in maintaining income inequality and the role of executive/worker pay disparities in shaping perceptions of economic prosperity. Particularly provocative is the finding in this section that feelings toward the rich affect both *factual* and *normative* judgments about the trend in income inequality. Because of the accuracy of the factual judgment (i.e., that income inequality has increased), it does not make sense to interpret negative feelings toward the rich as a form of bias that leads to (mis)perceptions of the trend in income inequality. Although we cannot definitively test causal directions, we do know that the public perceives the rich as unfair beneficiaries of income inequality at best and causal agents of income inequality at worst.[46] Neither the fact nor the importance of these associations between the rich and income inequality has been recognized in past research, nor are they compatible with the common assumption that Americans do not resent the rich.

## CONCLUSION

Large numbers of Americans believe that hard work is the key to economic success. This belief has changed little over time. It remains high even when a larger portion of the population think their chances for upward mobility are limited, the economy is deteriorating, the rich make more than they should and the working class less, and inequality is too large, benefits the rich, and is unnecessary for prosperity. The fact that Americans have faith in the possibility of hard work to transform rags into riches is not an indication, then, of their tolerance for income inequality. But because American acceptance of income inequality *is* typically inferred from their beliefs about hard work and getting ahead, exactly how Americans reconcile what appear to be contradictory views about opportunity and inequality is crucial to decipher.

The conclusion that emerges from exploring this question is that although Americans extol their country as the land of opportunity, in practice many believe it fails to live up to this promise. This is a hardly surprising yet rarely acknowledged depiction of American beliefs about

[46] That is, either the rich are especially unpopular when income inequality is excessive (i.e., individuals turn sour on the rich, especially if they are living as well as ever, if income inequality has grown to unwanted levels); or the rich are maligned for their negligent stewardship of the economy (i.e., for delivering inequitable rather than equitable growth).

opportunity. More surprising, perhaps, is the belief that barriers to greater opportunity are bound up with barriers to greater equality. How the two are bound together, however, depends on how each is conceptualized. I distinguished the dominant "bootstraps" notion of opportunity, which emphasizes the role of hard work, from several other notions of opportunity redolent in American culture. I highlighted the roles of equitable growth in providing a "rising tide that lifts all boats," fair pay in ensuring that workers and executives receive their "just deserts," and "equal treatment" regardless of family background and social connections in facilitating upward social mobility. Americans custom tailor their beliefs about these different dimensions of opportunity to their beliefs about inequality, coherently matching particular violations of equal opportunity to corresponding problems with excessive inequality. Beliefs about inequality are distinctive and multidimensional in their own right while at the same time demonstrating strong affinities with perceptions of opportunity other than the "bootstraps" variety. I summarize three examples of such affinities in closing.

The first example concerns the matching of beliefs about the importance of social advantages in getting ahead, and especially "knowing the right people," to beliefs about the role of the rich and powerful in perpetuating income inequality. Every violation of "equal treatment" opportunity (e.g., advantages stemming from social and family connections) is associated with this particular rendering of income inequality as an instrument of the rich and powerful. By contrast, *none* of the violations of equal treatment opportunity are associated with the view of income inequality as an instrument of economic growth or decline. Americans appear to have a sophisticated awareness of how social advantages are passed down from one generation to the next, restricting opportunity and reproducing existing inequalities at one and the same time. Yet they do not seem to believe that this particular violation of equality of opportunity is especially detrimental to economic growth and prosperity. Consistent with social psychological theories of system justification, perhaps, Americans may surmise that a certain degree of intergenerational reproduction is both inevitable and, as consequences of inequality go, relatively innocuous.

In the second example, Americans draw a tighter connection between violations of equal opportunity and economic prosperity. When opportunity is defined as "just deserts" opportunity, fair pay according to performance and contribution, the violations are more flagrant than in other realms, with large majorities asserting that low-end workers are underpaid and high-end workers overpaid. Furthermore, when perceptions of existing pay disparities exceed desired pay disparities, as they routinely do, Americans are more likely to strongly agree that income differences are too large, exist to benefit the rich and powerful, and are unnecessary for prosperity. Although it would seem that measures of perceived pay disparities and beliefs about income inequality are one and the same thing, preordaining these results, the two do not follow the same trends over time, and the relationship between the two varies over time. We also uncovered an equally strong and consistent association between violations of fair pay for executives (and not unskilled workers) and concerns about each aspect of income inequality. This suggests that the issue of fair pay is not only about abstract principles of fairness but about practical consequences as well, such as the potential thwarting of broader economic opportunities by unfair pay practices at the top.[47]

The third example is closely related to the second and concerns the more general relationship between income inequality and economic prosperity, or what I call "rising tide" opportunity. Here again is compelling evidence that Americans are discerning in their views about opportunity and inequality. As discussed in detail in the last chapter and replicated in this chapter

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[47] It is possible that unfair pay for other occupations at the bottom or in the middle (besides unskilled workers) would affect attitudes toward inequality as well, but these are not available in the complete time series.

with data from the American National Election Study, American views about income inequality do not track the business cycle in a straightforward fashion, becoming more intolerant as the economy turns sour and less so as the economy rebounds. Instead, in the two instances in which we have data immediately following a recession and a few years later (1992/1996 in the GSS and 2002/2004 in the ANES), Americans expressed *greater* concern about inequality as both the economy and their perceptions of the economy improved. In the GSS data, for which we have a longer time series, it was not until 2000 that concerns subsided, presumably in conjunction with a rising tide that finally "lifted all boats." Views about the economy and income inequality are intertwined, to be sure, but they cannot be reduced to one another. Ultimately, Americans care about equitable growth rather than growth per se.

The primary goal of this chapter was to expand our ideas of what Americans think opportunity means well beyond the prototypical idea of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps through hard work and perseverance. I went so far as to conceptualize inequality in outcomes as itself a perceived barrier to opportunity. In the next chapter, I examine the implications of recasting beliefs about income inequality as a matter of opportunity for understanding how Americans think their concerns about inequality and opportunity should be addressed in the policy arena.

**Appendix Table A5.1.** The effect of beliefs about getting ahead on beliefs about income inequality (binary logistic regression estimates).

| **Strong agreement that inequality is ...** | **"Too Large"** | **"Benefits Rich and Powerful"** | **"Unnecessary for Prosperity"** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **(1) Average marginal effect of single "get ahead" variable[a]:** | | | |
| **Probability of strong agreement for typical respondent[b]:** | .207 | .143 | .114 |
| Getting ahead through hard work[c] | -0.026 (0.009)** | -0.041 (0.009)** | -0.013 (0.008)† |
| Standard of living will improve[d] | -0.041 (0.009)** | -0.046 (0.008)** | -0.031 (0.007)** |
| N | 3327 | 3285 | 3314 |

**(2) Average marginal effects of separate "get ahead" questions[a]:**

| **Strong agreement that inequality is ...** | **"Too Large"** | **"Benefits Rich and Powerful"** | **"Unnecessary for Prosperity"** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Probability of strong agreement for typical respondent[b]:** | .210 | .116 | .085 |
| **Importance for getting ahead in life...[e]** | | | |
| Hard work | -0.001 (0.011) | -0.000 (0.008) | -0.007 (0.007) |
| Having good education | 0.018 (0.011) | 0.014 (0.008)† | 0.004 (0.007) |
| Ambition | 0.042 (0.012)** | 0.018 (0.009)* | 0.005 (0.008) |
| Natural ability | 0.007 (0.011) | 0.034 (0.011)** | -0.009 (0.009) |
| Knowing right people | 0.055 (0.009)** | 0.046 (0.008)** | 0.004 (0.005) |
| Well educated parents | 0.052 (0.010)** | 0.017 (0.007)** | -0.003 (0.006) |
| From wealthy family | 0.025 (0.007)** | 0.017 (0.005)** | -0.003 (0.004) |
| Race | 0.025 (0.008)** | 0.024 (0.006)** | -0.007 (0.005) |

**Source:** General Social Survey in 1987, 1996, 2000, 2008, 2010, and International Social Survey Program in 1992.

**Notes:** [a] Average marginal effects are evaluated for the typical respondent (defined below). Only one focal opportunity variable is included at a time. [b]A typical respondent is female, white, married, employed, and not living in the South; self-identifies as middle class, a democrat or independent, and moderate; has mean age, age squared, household size, children, education, and family income; and has mean values on the year dummies. [c] The codes for this variable are 1=luck/help from

others; 2= both; 3=hard work**.** The within-sample mean is 2.5. [d] The codes for this variable are 1=strongly disagree and disagree; 2= neutral; 3=agree and strongly agree. The within-sample mean is 2.5. [e] The codes for these variables range from essential=5 to not at all important=1. Sample sizes vary with each variable as not all are included in the same years.
$^{**}$ $p <= 0.01$; $^{*}$ $p <= 0.05$; $^{\dagger}$ $p <= 0.10$.

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