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The Impact of Economic Inequality and Political Polarization on Attitudes toward Democracy

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

PSYCHOLOGY

by

Desiree A. Ryan

JUNE 2024

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Table of Contents

List of Tables…….. iv

List of Figures……. v

Abstract……... vi

Dedication…….. viii

Acknowledgments…… ix

Literature Review……... 1

Economic Inequality…….. 3

Political Polarization…….. 21

Attitudes Toward Democracy…… 23

Study 1…… 28

Methodology…….. 29

Results……... 36

Discussion…….. 42

Study 2…… 46

Methodology…….. 47

Results……... 51

Discussion……. 57

General Discussion……. 61

Tables…….. 64

Figures…… 77

Measures……. 79

References…….. 99

List of Tables

Table 1: Study 1 Demographic Information by Political Party…….. 64

Table 2: Study 1 Differences Between Republicans and Democrats on Perceived Income Inequality, Political Polarization, and Attitudes Toward Democracy…… 66

Table 3: Study 1 Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations Between Variables……. 68

Table 4: Study 1 Regression Coefficients for Model with Predictors of Attitudes Toward Democracy …… 69

Table 5: Study 2 Demographic Information by Political Party…….. 70

Table 6: Study 2 Differences Between Republicans and Democrats on Perceived Income Inequality, Political Polarization, and Attitudes Toward Democracy…… 73

Table 7: Study 2 Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations Between Variables……. 75

Table 8: Study 2 Regression Coefficients for Models with and without Ideological Mediating Variables……. 76

List Figures

Figure 1: Study 1 Strength of Political Affiliation…… 77

Figure 2: Study 2 Strength of Political Affiliation…… 78

Abstract

The Impact of Economic Inequality and Political Polarization on Attitudes toward Democracy

Desiree A. Ryan

The United States is among the richest countries in the world yet one of the most unequal in terms of income and wealth inequality. Among its many negative consequences, economic inequality may contribute to heightened political polarization and decreased support for democracy. Understanding these relationships, as well as the beliefs that legitimize economic inequality, is crucial to addressing concerns about declining support for democratic governments. For example, economic system justification (ESJ), social dominance orientation (SDO), and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) may contribute to acceptance of economic inequality and, in turn, greater political polarization and anti-democratic attitudes.

To examine relationships among economic inequality, political polarization, and anti-democratic attitudes, two studies with national U.S. samples of Republicans and Democrats were conducted. Study 1 investigated whether perceived economic inequality and political polarization predicted anti-democratic attitudes and examined political group similarities and differences in perceptions of economic inequality and political polarization. Study 1 included 168 (83 Republicans and 85 Democrats) participants. Consistent with expectations, Republicans were significantly more likely than Democrats to perceive the current rate of income inequality as being lower than it is, prefer higher rates of income inequality, and oppose taxing the wealthy.

Although members of both parties were expected to express similar levels of polarization, Democrats were more politically polarized than Republicans. Importantly, perceived economic inequality and political polarization were found to be significant predictors of anti-democratic attitudes.

Building on Study 1, Study 2 further assessed these relationships as well as the role of system-justifying ideologies (i.e., ESJ, SDO, RWA, and perceptions of economic mobility) in mediating the relationship between perceived economic inequality, political polarization, and attitudes toward democracy. Study 2 included 195 participants (96 Republicans and 99 Democrats). Consistent with Study 1 findings, Republicans were more likely than Democrats to perceive lower rates of income inequality, prefer higher rates of income inequality, and oppose taxing the wealthy. Again, Democrats were more politically polarized than Republicans. SDO mediated the relationship between perceived economic inequality and anti-democratic attitudes.

Collectively, both studies document the damaging impact of high rates of economic inequality and political polarization on attitudes toward democracy and illuminate the mediating relationship of legitimizing beliefs, notably SDO. These findings make clear that strategies and interventions to bolster support for democracy must consider interconnections among economic inequality, political polarization, and belief systems. Further research is needed to assess the impact of legitimizing beliefs beyond SDO in mediating relationships between economic inequality, political polarization, and anti-democratic attitudes.

Dedication

To my mother, Gigi, who never left me until she had to.

Thank you for fostering my love of education and giving me the space and opportunity to discover who I was and what I love to do.

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while I was in the trenches. Being a confidant to each of you has been the greatest honor of my life.

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The Impact of Economic Inequality and Political Polarization on Attitudes toward Democracy

Although the United States is one of the richest nations in the world, it is characterized by extreme—and sharply increasing—rates of income inequality (Alvaredo et al., 2018). The top 1% earned $1,341,000 annually, and the top 0.1% earned 4.5 times as much. Unsurprisingly, estimates soar further from here, with the top 0.01% and 0.001% having annual incomes of $28,773,000 and $124,821,000, respectively (Saez, 2019). The top 10% of U.S. earners earn more than nine times that of the bottom 90%, while the top 1% and .01% capture 39 and 188 times that of the bottom 90%, respectively (Saez, 2019). The consequences are far-reaching. High levels of income inequality are associated with political polarization (Bonica et al., 2013; Voorheis et al., 2015) and the erosion of democracy (Krieckhaus et al., 2014).

Psychological research documents that economic inequality is legitimized by deeply entrenched hierarchy-enhancing beliefs (Costa-Lopes et al., 2013). These beliefs include economic system justification (ESJ; i.e., the belief that social and economic disparities are fair, legitimate, necessary, and inevitable), social dominance orientation (SDO; i.e., endorsement of group-based hierarchies and inequalities), right-wing authoritarianism (RWA; i.e., beliefs that emphasize the importance of conventionalism, social control, and submission to authoritarian leaders), and the belief that one will be socially and economically mobile. Legitimizing beliefs are endorsed by both privileged and disadvantaged groups and function to preserve the status quo and hierarchical systems (Jost et al., 2004). The endorsement of

system-justifying beliefs is correlated with conservatism, intensifying already problematically high levels of political polarization regarding economic issues.

In the United States, Democrats and Republicans endorse different beliefs about the causes of economic inequality and how the government should respond. While Democrats tend to attribute poverty to structural factors (e.g., discrimination, low wages, systemic inequities), Republicans tend to perceive poverty as resulting from individualistic causes such as personal effort (Bullock & Reppond, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2017). Consequently, Democrats are three times more likely than Republicans to believe that the government should assist people in need (i.e., supporting public assistance programs and redistributive policies; Pew Research Center, 2017).

Differences in political party polarization around responses to economic inequalities are accompanied by affective polarization or "the tendency of ordinary partisans to dislike and distrust those from the other party" (Druckman et al., 2022, p. 2). Much of the research regarding the consequences of affective polarization (henceforth referred to as "political polarization") focuses on nonpolitical topics, such as implications for intergroup romantic relationships, friendships, and community space preferences (Iyengar, 2012; Iyengar et al., 2018; Nicholson et al., 2016; Pew Research Center, 2017). However, a growing body of research addresses a concern often discussed in the media– the negative influence of political polarization on the health of democracy (Phillips, 2024).

Given the high rates of U.S. economic inequality and political polarization, it is vital to understand how economic inequality and political polarization work independently and intersect to influence attitudes toward democracy. Social science research consistently shows the damaging consequences of economic inequality, including higher crime rates (Elgar & Aitken, 2011), lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017), increased mental health concerns (Burns et al., 2014), and decreased health and well-being (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015). However, an underexplored area is how economic inequality and political polarization operate independently and intersect to influence attitudes toward democracy. Further, it is important to examine how dominant ideologies such as ESJ, SDO, RWA, and perceptions of social mobility are related to anti-democratic attitudes.

The current research addresses this gap by examining how economic inequality and political polarization, both independently and in concert with each other, influence attitudes toward democracy. I was particularly interested in assessing how commonly endorsed beliefs (i.e., ESJ, SDO, RWA, and perceived economic mobility) mediate the relationship between economic inequality and political polarization and damaging political outcomes such as influencing attitudes toward democracy.

Economic Inequality

Economic inequality refers to the unequal distribution of income and opportunity between different societal groups (American Psychological Association,

2024). Researchers distinguish between three forms of economic inequality: (1) income inequality; (2) pay inequality; and (3) wealth inequality (The Equality Trust, n.d.). Measures of economic inequality are based on income and wealth disparities (The Equality Trust, 2019). Income constitutes all money received from employment, including wages, salaries, bonuses, investments (e.g., savings accounts and dividends from shares and stocks), pension plans, and rental properties. Income is measured at the personal (i.e., one individual) or household (i.e., income of all adults residing in a household) level. Pay and income are closely related constructs, however, pay is narrower and only includes earnings received from an employer but not bonuses and benefits. For this reason, income is widely considered a more valuable indicator than pay and is more commonly reported. Wealth refers to the amount of personal or household assets (The Equality Trust, n.d.). Throughout this analysis, the term economic inequality is used to broadly encompass income and wealth disparities, however, I focus primarily on income rather than wealth inequalities because wealth statistics are calculated less frequently.

Rising Economic Inequality in the United States

In 2022, the median household income was $74,580, representing a 2.3 decline from 2021 and a 4.7 drop from 2019 (Guzman & Kollar, 2023). While households in the lowest quintile brought in an average of $30,000 or less, those in the highest quintile had an average income of $153,000 or more. Earners in the top 5% averaged $295,00 or more (Guzman & Kollar, 2023). Those in the middle quintiles– second, third, and fourth quintiles– earned an average income of $30,000 -

$58,020, $58,021 - $94,000, $94,001 - $153,000, respectively (Guzman & Kollar, 2023).

When assessing economic inequality, it is also important to consider how much of the total national income each group holds. While the bottom 50% of all earners shared just 13% of the total national income in 2021, the top 10%, which is made up of a much smaller population than the bottom 50% combined, held over three times as much of the total income (Chancel, 2023). Wealth inequality in the United States also reveals startling disparities between the top 10% and the bottom 50% of American residents (Alvaredo et al., 2018; Chancel et al., 2023). In 2021, the average wealth for the top 10% of American residents was almost 3 million dollars, approximately 11 times as much as the middle 40% (Chancel et al., 2023).

Income and wealth inequalities must be understood in relation to poverty rates. Just as the income and wealth held by the top 10% of Americans are startlingly high, so too is the percentage of people living below the official poverty threshold. In 2021, 11.6% of the U.S. population, or 37.9 million people, lived in poverty (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). In other words, almost 40 million people earned under $14,097 for 1-person households or under $33,705 for 5-person households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

Gender and Racial Disparities in U.S. Economic Inequality

A large body of literature examines *how* income is distributed, but equally crucial is understanding *who* holds the greatest shares of income and wealth. Income groups are not heterogeneous. In the United States, gender and racial disparities are

pervasive, with men and Whites having significantly higher incomes than women and people of color (Semega et al., 2020; Shapiro, 2006; Shapiro et al., 2013). In 2023, women were paid almost 22% less on average compared to men, suggesting the devaluation of "women's" work and gender discrimination (Gould, 2024). Gendered wage disparities persist across all socioeconomic groups, decreasing from 23.2% in 1994 to 21.8% in 2023 (Gould, 2024). Between 2017-2019, Black workers were paid 76%, and Latinx workers 73%, of White earnings. (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Discrimination, occupational segregation, and lack of opportunity are significant contributors to racialized wage disparities (Miller, 2020).

Intersectional analyses of income and wealth inequalities show that women of color are particularly economically disadvantaged (Institute for Policy Studies, n.d.). The wage gap between Black and Hispanic/Latinx women is especially alarming. While White and Asian American and Pacific Islander women earn 83.1% and 90.3%, respectively, of what White men are paid, Black women take home only 69.8% that of White men's wages (Gould, 2024). Earning an even smaller percentage of White men's pay than Black women is Hispanic/Latinx women, who earned just 64.4% of White men's wages (Gould, 2024). While it is important to consider income disparities between economic groups, understanding disparities within groups– such as disparities between racial and ethnic groups and gender– is crucial. Without assessing economic inequality through an intersectional lens, any interventions to remedy growing disparities will likely only benefit White men.

Income and Social Class Differences Among Republicans and Democrats

Income and social class closely align with partisanship. Almost 60% of lower-income voters identify as Democrat compared to 36% who identify as Republican (Pew Research Center, 2024). Over 50% of upper-income voters also identified as Democrat. While the upper- and lower-income groups tend to identify as Democrats, the majority in the upper-middle income bracket identify as Republican. Those in lower-middle and middle income brackets were split in identifying as Republican or Democrat (Pew Research, 2024).

Social class categories are largely composed of a person's income and education level (Brenan, 2024). The upper and upper-middle class usually include people with high annual incomes and post-graduate degrees, while the working class includes lower incomes and a high school education (Brenan, 2024). A new Gallup Poll shows that although Democrats are more likely to identify themselves as middle class, Democrats and Republicans were equally likely to report their social class as upper middle class. Interestingly, more Republicans than Democrats stated they were part of the working and "lower" class (Brenan, 2024). This trend counters previous poll results, which revealed Republicans as the party more likely to identify themselves as upper and upper middle class and the least likely to identify themselves as part of the working or "lower" class (Brenan, 2024).

Misperceptions of Economic Inequality

Despite high rates of economic inequality, addressing these disparities is not prioritized by the American public (Horowitz et al., 2020). A 2020 Pew Research poll

found that while 70% of respondents believed that U.S. economic inequality is too high, fewer (i.e., 42%) regarded reducing this inequality as a top priority (Horowitz et al., 2020).

Misperceiving the severity of economic inequality may contribute to its lack of prioritization. Evidence from the United States and internationally documents that many people struggle to understand the extent of economic inequality (Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018; Hauser & Norton, 2017; Norton & Ariely, 2011; Norton et al., 2014). In Norton and Ariely's (2011) seminal analysis, participants believed the wealthiest quintile of Americans owned approximately 59% of the nation's wealth—a vast underestimation of the 84% of wealth that was held by the top quintile when the study was conducted. The researchers also assessed Americans' ideal wealth distribution, finding that wealthier respondents preferred a more unequal distribution of wealth than lower-income respondents (Norton & Ariely, 2011). Although lower-income participants preferred a more equal distribution than wealthier participants, both groups preferred a more equal distribution than they estimated to be the case in the United States. Based on their findings, the researchers propose that Americans have a "normative standard" regarding acceptable levels of inequality, regardless of which policies they endorse to shift this distribution (Norton & Ariely, 2011).

Misperceiving the extent of economic inequality varies by partisanship (Chambers et al., 2014; Norton and Ariely, 2011; Stantcheva, 2021). Chambers and colleagues (2014) show that, overall, participants underestimated the incomes of Americans. Participants reported that almost half of all American earners bring in less

than $35,000 annually. In reality, it is 37% of American residents who earn less than $35,000 (Chambers et al., 2014). This finding differed by political ideology, with liberals underestimating to a greater extent than conservatives. Liberal participants also diverged from conservatives in their perceptions of economic inequality trends. Liberals were more likely to suggest economic inequality was growing at a much faster rate than conservatives (Chambers et al., 2014). Overall, Chambers and colleagues (2014) assert that liberals were more negative in their views of economic conditions than conservatives, aligning with previous research (e.g., Duch et al., 2000).

Underestimating economic inequality has numerous consequences, such as shaping voting behavior. For example, Cruces and colleagues (2013) found that when Argentinians learned that their income was lower than they originally perceived or that they were relatively poorer in comparison to other Argentinians, they were more supportive of redistributive policies. On the other hand, in a Swedish experiment, when participants learned their income placed them in a higher earning bracket than they initially believed, they were more supportive of the conservative political party and less likely to endorse redistributive policies (Karadja et al., 2017). These findings illustrate how perceptions of economic inequality influence policy attitudes. If people believe they are comparatively better off than they actually are, and that their nation's wealth and income are more evenly distributed than they actually are, they are unlikely to support policies to level the economic playing field, further deepening inequality (Norton & Ariely, 2011). Conversely, if they believe they are worse off,

they are likely to demand redistributive policies be put into place (Cruces et al., 2013).

Political Party Differences in Reducing Economic Inequality

A report from Pew Research Center corroborates previous findings that show a political party difference in who deems the level of economic inequality as too high, with 78% of Democrats and 41% of Republicans suggesting there is too much economic inequality (Horowitz et al., 2020). Similarly, Horowitz et al. (2020) found a divergence in who Democrats and Republicans viewed as responsible for reducing inequality. Of those who said there is too much inequality, 75% of Democrats and 44% of Republicans said the federal government is responsible for addressing it. Sixty-seven percent of Democrats, compared to 51% of Republicans, indicated large businesses and corporations should be responsible for reducing inequality (Horowitz et al., 2020). A similar trend emerged when considering wealthy individuals, with 51% of Democrats and 34% of Republicans endorsing this item as who should be responsible for reducing inequality. Overall, Democrats were more likely than Republicans to hold each group accountable for reducing economic inequality, but the largest divergence between political groups was when assessing the federal government. This finding is unsurprising given Republicans were more likely to suggest personal factors such as life choices and work ethic were the cause of economic inequality compared to Democrats, who were more likely to suggest structural factors as causes such as discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities and tax system (Horowitz et al., 2020).

When assessing specific measures to reduce inequality, Democrats were almost twice as likely to assert that expanding Medicare to cover Americans of all ages, eliminating college debt, expanding government benefits for people experiencing poverty, and increasing taxes on the wealthiest Americans would reduce inequality (Horowitz et al., 2020). In other words, Democrats were more likely to endorse redistributive policies and expansion of the social safety net as viable options for reducing inequality. On the other hand, there was only one option Republicans endorsed more than Democrats. Forty-five percent of Republicans, compared to 8% of Democrats, reported that they believed reducing immigration would assist in reducing inequality (Horowitz et al., 2020). Overall, while the majority of Democrats and almost half of Republicans believe economic inequality is too high, there is little to no overlap on who is responsible for assisting in reducing inequality and what specific measures are viable options (Horowitz et al., 2020).

Legitimizing Beliefs and the Maintenance of Economic Inequality

A large body of scholarship examines the beliefs that contribute to the maintenance of economic inequality. If inequality is such a pervasive issue with far-reaching implications, how and why does it persist? Why is economic inequality not prioritized as a top policy issue? Why is economic inequality believed to be acceptable and "natural?" To answer these questions, social psychologists investigate ideologies and beliefs about economic inequality.

Ideologies are a form of motivated reasoning that may be used to legitimize oppressive hierarchies and uphold the status quo (Hennes et al., 2012; Jost, 2017;

Jost et al., 2003a, 2008; Kahan, 2012). Some ideologies, often referred to as "legitimizing myths" or "legitimizing beliefs," are hierarchy attenuating or hierarchy enhancing (Aiello et al., 2018; Pratto & Stewart, 2012). Hierarchy attenuating beliefs emphasize equality by asserting that all people, regardless of their social identity or group membership (e.g., race, ethnicity, citizenship status, social class), should be afforded the same rights, privileges, and freedoms (Pratto & Stewart, 2012). Hierarchy-enhancing beliefs maintain inequality by claiming that rights, privileges, and freedom should be reserved for certain people (i.e., dominant group members) and either imply or explicitly specify who should be excluded via racism and nationalism, for example (Pratto & Stewart, 2012).

This research examines the impact of hierarchy-enhancing ideologies (i.e., ESJ, SDO, RWA**,** and perceptions of social mobility**)** as they relate to economic inequality, political polarization, and democracy. Before turning to these beliefs, I discuss system justification, a theory that seeks to unify explanations for why people are motivated to maintain and bolster existing unequal, hierarchical social systems (Jost & Hunyady, 2003).

System Justification

Most people are not economic elites, yet many people support systems that uphold economic inequality. System justification theory seeks to explain why "the existence of widespread economic inequality does not currently pose a threat to the legitimacy of the capitalist systems or that of major national governments in countries with high levels of inequality (Jost & Hunyady, 2005, p. 112). Building on

Marxism-feminism, cognitive dissonance theory, justice research, and social identity theory, system justification seeks to explain why people maintain or bolster the legitimacy of the established social order (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). Specifically, system justification theory asserts that people are motivated to legitimize the prevailing status quo whether they are conscious of it or not (Jost et al., 2002, 2003, 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Jost, 2017).

Importantly, system justification can help us understand the beliefs held by members of both disadvantaged and advantaged groups. Compared to advantaged groups, disadvantaged groups may engage in greater system justification to rationalize their disadvantage and lower their expectations (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). In this sense, system justification acts as a protective factor, guarding disadvantaged group members against discomfort and dissonance when faced with disparate outcomes that result from social systems they cannot change. On the other hand, members of advantaged groups may engage in system justification to legitimize their advantage over other groups. System justification enables advantaged group members to assuage their own feelings of guilt and discomfort (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). In both cases, system justification serves palliative functions, insulating both groups from the negative feelings that arise from inequality (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Jost et al., 2003a).

The power of system justification is demonstrated by Jost and colleagues' (2002) finding that members of marginalized groups internalize negative messages about their own group and prefer higher-status groups. Undergraduates enrolled at

San Jose State University (i.e., a “lower-status” institution) and Stanford University (i.e., “higher-status” institution) took an implicit association test (i.e., measures that assess automatic responses) in which they quickly paired the ingroup (their own university) and the outgroup (the other university) with positive and negative words and stereotypes. Compared to students from the “higher-status” institution, students from the “inferior” university were twice as likely to display outgroup favoritism (i.e., preference for the “higher-status” institution; Jost et al., 2002). Stereotype internalization (i.e., Stanford students are stronger academically) was also prevalent among both groups of undergraduates. This study is illustrative of how system justification functions implicitly among members of advantaged and disadvantaged groups. When both groups endorse the stereotype that students from "higher-status” institutions are academically stronger and superior, the status difference between the two institutions becomes legitimized, justifying differential experiences and outcomes. System justification provides members from disadvantaged groups a reason for their inferior status, potentially placating feelings of discomfort while also assuaging guilt advantaged students may experience due to the privilege associated with their status.

Findings such as these underscore the problematic nature of system justification. If marginalized group members internalize stereotypes about their group and favor outgroup members, it is unlikely that they will fight for economic and social justice. When higher-status groups are associated with positive traits (e.g., hard work, effort), their status is unlikely to be questioned. Challenging inequality is

difficult when the higher-status group members are seen as deserving of their privilege and lower-status group members are perceived as deserving of disparate outcomes and less privilege.

Economic System Justification

ESJ is a belief system falling under the umbrella of system justification theory (Goudarzi et al., 2020). ESJ refers to "the belief that the capitalist system provides individuals with equal opportunity to succeed and that outcomes are based upon personal deservingness and merit" (Goudarzi et al., 2020, para. 2). The idea that people have control over their outcomes, such as their income and social class, legitimizes inequalities, thus mitigating any feelings of discomfort and distress. In other words, perceptions of control over one's fate serve as a palliative function. When the palliative function is activated, people are not likely to support redistributive policies that would reduce economic inequality (Jost & Hunyady, 2005).

Across two studies utilizing different methodologies, Wakslak and colleagues (2007) show that the palliative function of system justification mutes emotional responses to people experiencing disadvantages, specifically emotional distress and moral outrage. Furthermore, the researchers found that the dampening of moral outrage directly affects support for redistribution policies (Wakslak et al., 2007). Findings show that the palliative function invoked when people consider the fairness and deservingness of economic outcomes is central to reducing emotional distress,

which, in turn, mitigates any support for redistributive policies and ensures that the status quo is maintained.

Research findings indicate that maintaining the system is a function of political ideology, with conservatives being the most likely to support the status quo (Jost et al., 2003b). Economic system justification and ESJ are both associated with conservatism (Jost et al., 2008; Jost & Thompson, 2000; Kay & Jost, 2003). Across 6 studies with over 2,500 participants in total, Jost and colleagues (2008) found that political conservatism was positively correlated with all forms of system justification. The strongest correlations were between conservatism and the general system justification scale and ESJ, indicating the acceptance of economic inequality is a core factor in conservative ideology (Jost et al., 2008).

Social Dominance Orientation

Social dominance theory seeks to understand processes that "create and recreate group-based social hierarchy" (Sidanius et al., 2004, p. 849). SDO, a key facet of this theory, refers to support for group-based dominance and hierarchical structures in which one group is perceived as superior to other groups (Sidanius et al., 2004). SDO is positively correlated with a wide range of beliefs that maintain group-based hierarchies, including nationalism, racism, sexism, and homophobia (Sidanius et al., 2004). In a study assessing correlates of SDO, Pratto and colleagues (2000) found that across countries (i.e., Canada, Taiwan, Israel, and China), SDO was positively correlated with sexism, and in Canada, Taiwan, and Israel, high levels of SDO were associated with more ethnic prejudice (Pratto et al., 2000). Additionally,

SDO was positively correlated with political conservatism and hegemony (Pratto et al., 2000).

SDO is considered to be a stable individual trait or characteristic, but it may be heightened in threatening contexts, such as in times of high economic inequality as is the case in the United States. Experimental evidence shows that in non-threatening contexts, people are equally likely to engage in discriminatory behavior, however, once under threat, discrimination increases significantly among those high in SDO. Among those low in SDO, levels of discrimination remain the same following an induced threat (Pratto & Shih, 2000). Extrapolating from these findings, members of high-status groups (e.g., the wealthy) might potentially feel threatened when asked to consider redistributive policies that would increase taxes paid on their assets. Feeling threatened could motivate discriminatory thinking, such as using classist beliefs to justify the inequality between groups. For example, leveraging classist stereotypes, such as perceiving the cause of a person's financial hardship to be due to laziness or lack of effort and the cause of someone's wealth to be due to hard work and determination, functions to mitigate feelings of unfairness. Once these feelings of unfairness are mitigated via the invoking of classist thinking, the maintenance of the status quo is ensured.

Right-Wing Authoritarianism

RWA is an ideology that is associated with right-wing politics, fundamentalist religiosity, aggression towards nonconformity and deviance, ethnocentrism, and prejudice (Altemeyer, 1981; Duckitt et al., 2010). Together, SDO and RWA are two of

the most well-documented individual difference constructs underlying prejudice (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). Similar to those high in SDO, people who score high on authoritarianism believe that they are morally superior and perceive outgroup members as threatening (Whitley, 1999). Following prescriptive norms laid out by authority figures, authoritarians derogate "amoral" individuals as well as those who buck traditional values (Whitley, 1999). Marginalized groups such as African Americans and women, who are overrepresented among people experiencing poverty, tend to be targets of dominant group members' prejudice (Altemeyer, 1981).

Research findings suggest that RWA is correlated with both conservatism and system justification (Azevedo et al., 2019). In other words, a higher endorsement of RWA is related to more system-justifying beliefs (i.e., the economic condition is fair, and both elites and those experiencing hardship are deserving of their situations). These results are consistent across participants who are both aware and unaware of economic indicators such as unemployment rates and earnings (Azevedo et al., 2019). Importantly, this research highlights that being aware of inequality does not necessarily motivate people to delegitimize unfair systems. It also underscores that support for legitimizing ideologies varies by political ideology– specifically, conservatism is associated with bolstering the status quo.

Beliefs about Upward Economic Mobility

Beliefs about economic mobility also help us understand the relatively low priority nations place on addressing economic inequality (Day & Fiske, 2017; Shariff et al., 2016). In a nationally representative U.S. survey, Davidai and Gilovich (2015)

found that participants overestimated their chances of moving up the socioeconomic ladder while also underestimating the likelihood of downward mobility. Similarly, across four studies, Kraus and Tan (2015) found that participants consistently overestimated social class mobility by 23%, suggesting that belief in the American dream and meritocratic ideals (i.e., hard work, effort, and talent will pave the way to success and financial gains) are deeply ingrained.

Belief in upward mobility and meritocratic beliefs interact to shape perceptions of economic inequality and mobility (Davidai, 2018; Day & Fiske, 2017). In an experiment by Day and Fiske (2017), participants read one of two vignettes (i.e., low mobility and moderate mobility) and then completed a series of measures assessing system-defending beliefs. In the moderate mobility vignette (titled "Moving on Up!"), the researchers presented statistics in such a way as to communicate that moving up the socioeconomic ladder was fairly easy. In the low mobility vignette, the researchers manipulated the title to an ambiguous question ("Moving on Up?") and utilized the same statistics but framed mobility as unlikely (Day & Fiske, 2017). Compared to those who were in the moderate mobility condition, participants exposed to the low mobility frame were less likely to endorse meritocratic beliefs and defend the economic status quo. In other words, participants who read a more realistically framed story, as compared to those who read the rosier version of the social mobility story, were less likely to endorse and defend the system.

In the U.S., where the "American dream" prevails and rags-to-riches stories are amplified, the grimmer truth of social mobility is obscured. Studies such as Day

and Fiske's (2017) shed light on why people in highly unequal societies support the system—they believe they too will climb the ladder to the highest rungs. When faced with a realistic trajectory, such as that offered by the low-mobility vignette, expectations of joining the ranks of economic elites, along with defending the system, are curtailed. Providing people with a realistic outlook on social mobility reduces justification of the status quo (Day & Fiske, 2017).

In addition to understanding how perceptions of social mobility affect system defense, researchers have also examined how belief in social mobility influences concern about economic inequality (Shariff et al., 2016). Using a similar vignette design as Day and Fiske (2017), Shariff and colleagues (2016) asked participants to read mock news articles about high or low social mobility then measured perceptions of generational social mobility and concerns about economic inequality. Across conditions, participants indicated they believed that they—and to an even greater extent, their children—would be upwardly mobile; furthermore, for those who read the high-mobility condition, economic inequality was tolerated more than by those who read the low-mobility condition (Shariff et al., 2016).

To investigate *why* reading about high mobility increases acceptance of economic inequality, the researchers utilized the same vignettes. Participants were asked to identify where they believed they fell in terms of income relative to other U.S. residents, along with their perceptions that their own hard work and effort got them to their "economic stations" (Shariff et al., 2016). When participants believed social mobility was probable (i.e., the high mobility condition), they were more likely

to describe their current economic standing as resulting from their own efforts and to perceive this outcome as "fair." Further, those in the high mobility condition also indicated they were more tolerant of economic inequality (Shariff et al., 2016). These findings have far-reaching implications for contesting the current economic system. If people believe they will be socially mobile, then they are more likely to tolerate the status quo. With this misperception about upward social mobility dominating people's mindset, it is less likely they will support redistributive policies that could level the playing field, such as adopting universal basic income or taxing the wealthy.

Similar to other legitimizing ideologies, perceptions of social mobility vary by political ideology (Chambers et al., 2015). Across two studies, Chambers and colleagues show that liberals are more likely to underestimate the likelihood of upward social mobility while also overestimating the decline of mobility over recent years. This effect was stronger for those from working-class and low-income backgrounds (Chambers et al., 2015). These findings complement the political group differences in endorsement of legitimizing ideologies. Taken together, conservatives are more likely than Democrats to endorse ESJ, SDO, and RWA, and perceive a higher likelihood of upward economic mobility. Conservatives' endorsement of these ideologies accepts and maintains inequality.

Political Polarization

Scholars, media pundits, and Americans alike assert political polarization has increased to damaging levels (Brown University, 2020; Heltzel & Laurin, 2020; Lee,

2022; McCoy & Press, 2022). In 2014, Pew Research Center documented that partisan antipathy and ideological division were higher than at any point in the previous two decades. Negative views toward the other party doubled from 1994 to 2014, with the majority of Americans reporting the opposing party is a threat to the nation's well-being and that they would be unhappy if a close relative married a political outgroup member (Pew Research Center, 2014). Research documents higher rates of polarization, with over 60% of respondents indicating opposing party members are more close-minded, dishonest, and immoral than other Americans (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Previous research shows that dislike for the opposing party members is now outpacing ingroup love (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018). A growing body of scholarship documents that partisans negatively stereotype political outgroup members (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2022). For example, when given a list of potential stereotypical characteristics, respondents overwhelmingly believed Republicans were evangelical and had higher incomes than average Americans (i.e., earning over $250,000). Conversely, a majority of respondents believed that more Democrats identify as LGBTQ+ and are labor union members than is actually true (Ahler & Sood, 2018). This pattern varied by political party, with Republicans characterizing Democrats more stereotypically than vice versa (Ahler & Sood, 2018). These misperceptions predicted how extreme participants believed Republicans and Democrats would be in their policy endorsements as well as animus toward members of the opposing party and distancing between political groups (Ahler & Sood, 2018).

Polarization in the United States is rising faster than in other nations (Boxell et al., 2021). In a cross-national comparison study, Boxell and colleagues (2021) found that across 12 countries (i.e., Switzerland, France, Denmark, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, Australia, Britain, Norway, Sweden, West Germany, and the United States), the United States topped the list with the highest rate of polarization. As one of the researchers explains, "A lot of analysis on polarization is focused on the U.S., so we thought it could be interesting to put the U.S. in context and see whether it is part of a global trend or whether it looks more exceptional…We found that the trend in the U.S. is indeed exceptional" (Brown University, 2020, para 4). Actual and perceived high rates of political polarization have far-reaching implications for intergroup distrust (Lee, 2022), confidence in government (Jones, 2015), and the strength and stability of American democracy (McCoy, 2019).

Attitudes toward Democracy

As economic inequality and political polarization continue to increase in the United States, so too have concerns over the stability of U.S. democracy. Research documents increasingly negative attitudes toward democracy (Claassen & Magalhães, 2023; Jones, 2024; Wike et al., 2024). A December 2023 Gallup poll (Jones, 2024) found that Americans are the least satisfied with democracy than at any other point in the past 40 years (Jones, 2024). Only 28% of respondents indicated satisfaction with U.S. democracy which is a decrease from 35% satisfaction after the January 6th Capitol insurrection (Jones, 2024). Although the majority of respondents were not dissatisfied with democracy, Republicans were twice as likely as Democrats to report

dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working compared to Democrats (Jones, 2024).

To better understand perceptions of democracy and declining support across democratized nations, Pew Research Center (Wikes et al., 2024) surveyed over 30,000 people across 24 countries from February to May 2023. Across countries, 59% of respondents reported being dissatisfied with how their democracy is functioning, 74% believed elected officials do not care what they think, and 42% believed that no current political party represents their viewpoints (Wikes et al., 2024). Between 46% to 50% of respondents believed policies in their country would improve if more women, people who are working-class or low-income, and young adults were elected (Wikes et al., 2024). The majority of respondents (77%) believed that a democracy that accurately reflects its people would be beneficial.

Economic inequality is an important predictor of attitudes toward democracy (Krieckhaus et al., 2014). Krieckhaus and colleagues (2014) found that across 40 democratized countries, higher levels of economic inequality were associated with reduced support for democracy. Interestingly, this finding was consistent across social classes, however, in nations with high rates of economic inequality, people experiencing poverty reported being slightly less unhappy with democracy. The researchers speculate that these findings may be due to the belief among low-income respondents that they will benefit from the future redistribution of income and wealth thought to come from democratic systems (Krieckhaus et al., 2014).

Political polarization is also related to anti-democratic attitudes (McCoy & Press, 2022; Somer et al., 2021). To assess how high political polarization affects attitudes toward democracy, McCoy and Press (2022) analyzed data from Varieties of Democracy, a longitudinal dataset focusing on democracy. Severe polarization, as is characteristic of the United States, was found to be associated with declining democracy (McCoy & Press, 2022). The researchers note, "Quite striking, the United States is the only advanced Western democracy to have faced such intense polarization for such an extended period. The United States is in uncharted and very dangerous territory" (Press & McCoy, 2022, para. 3).

The United States is in uncharted territory with regard to such deep-rooted political polarization and anti-democratic attitudes. McCoy and Press (2022) suggest examining the fate of democracies in other highly polarized countries to grasp the potential future of U.S. democracy, pointing to similar polarized nations that fell way to authoritarianism. Indeed, scholars and journalists alike have suggested that Donald Trump's presidency and current second candidacy show signs of authoritarian rule (Kellner, 2018; Nawaz & Khan, 2023; Pettigrew, 2017; Van Assche et al., 2019; Pettigrew, 2017). The other fate McCoy and Press (2022) suggest is depolarization– however, historical examples of polarized democratized nations depolarizing show repolarization is a significant concern.

Research Goals

Two questionnaire studies were designed and conducted to enhance understanding of how perceived economic inequality and political polarization

influence attitudes toward democracy. The negative consequences of economic inequality are well documented. For example, economic inequality is correlated with reduced mental (Burns et al., 2014) and physical health concerns (Pickett & Wilkinson), decreased life satisfaction (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017), higher crime rates (Elgar & Aitken, 2011), and increased political polarization (Bonica et al., 2013; Voorheis et al., 2015). Despite potential connections, less is known about the possible consequences of economic inequality on Americans' attitudes toward democracy. Moreover, political polarization is typically treated as a consequence of economic inequality, yet it may be the case that political polarization is an independent phenomenon that functions separately from economic inequality or interacts with it to influence outcome variables such as attitudes toward democracy.

To address these gaps, two studies were conducted examining political polarization and economic inequality as predictors of attitudes towards democracy as well as their interaction effects. Study 1 investigated political party differences in perceived economic inequality and political polarization and the effects of these variables on attitudes toward democracy. Study 2 examined the ideological underpinnings in the relationships between economic inequality, political polarization, and anti-democratic attitudes. Both studies were guided by the following core questions:

(1) How do Republicans and Democrats perceive economic inequality? Do they differ in their perceptions of the current distribution of income? Do they differ in their preferred distribution of income?

(2) How do Republicans and Democrats perceive their own party and the opposing party? Do they differ in their feelings of warmth or coldness toward one another (i.e., political polarization)?

(3) Does perceived economic inequality and political polarization predict anti-democratic attitudes?

(4) What role do system-justifying ideologies (i.e., economic system justification [ESJ], right-wing authoritarianism [RWA], and perceptions of economic mobility) play in mediating the relationship between perceived economic inequality, political polarization, and attitudes toward democracy?

Hypotheses, methods, and findings for each study are reported in the following two chapters.

Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to examine potential differences and similarities in perceptions of economic inequality among Republicans and Democrats. Political polarization between the political parties was also assessed. Potential effects of perceived economic inequality and political polarization on attitudes toward democracy were considered independently as well as their interactive effects across party lines. The following hypotheses were tested:

Hypothesis 1: No differences will be found between Republicans and Democrats in strength of political affiliation.

Hypothesis 2: Republicans will be more likely than Democrats to underestimate the current distribution of income and to prefer higher levels of inequality.

Hypothesis 3: Republicans will be less likely than Democrats to support taxing the wealthy to provide benefits to people who are experiencing poverty.

Hypothesis 4: No differences will be found between Republicans and Democrats in terms of intergroup liking/disliking (i.e., equal levels of polarization across groups).

Hypothesis 5: Economic inequality and political polarization will both be negatively associated with attitudes toward democracy. Greater perceived economic inequality and greater political polarization will be associated with less positive attitudes toward democracy.

Hypothesis 6: There will be an interaction between economic inequality and political polarization, with increased political polarization strengthening the relationship between economic inequality and attitudes toward democracy.

Methodology

Participants

One hundred and seventy participants completed an online questionnaire via Prolific, a data collection platform. One participant was removed from the sample because they indicated that they were both Republican and "somewhat liberal" and another for reporting that they were both Democrat and "somewhat conservative." In both cases, there was concern regarding the potential invalidation of the political (group) polarization questions.

The final sample for Study 1 included 168 participants, with 49.4% (n = 83) identifying as Republican and 50.6% (n = 85) as Democrat. The majority of participants identified as male (n = 86, 51.2 %), White (n = 119, 70.8%), and middle class (n = 59, 35.1%). Ages ranged from 19-75 years old. Please see Table 1 for detailed participant demographic information by political party identification.

Design

Study 1 utilized a correlational design. Predictor variables included economic inequality, political polarization, and the interaction between economic inequality and political polarization. The dependent variable was attitudes toward democracy. Participants' social class and gender were held constant. Additional analyses included

independent samples t-tests on the political ingroup and outgroup traits rating variable and intergroup antipathy and distancing variable.

Measures

All scales utilized 7-point Likert scales with "1" indicating strong disagreement and "7" indicating strong agreement.

Perceived Current Distribution of Income

Perceptions of the current distribution of income and preferred distribution of income were measured via an adaptation of Heiserman and Simpson's (2021) pie charts (Please see Appendix A for all measures). To assess estimates of income inequality, participants were instructed to, "Think about all the money that people in the United States earn as one giant pie" and then asked, "How much of this pie do you think goes to each of the following five income groups, ranging from the richest 20% of Americans (people with the highest incomes) to the poorest 20% of Americans (people with the lowest incomes)? In your opinion, which of the following choices comes closest to how income is currently distributed in the United States?" Participants chose one of five charts depicting: (1) far more extreme income inequality than in the United States; (2) more extreme income inequality than in the United States; (3) the actual rate of income inequality in the United States; (4) less extreme income inequality than in the United States; (5) significantly less extreme income inequality than in the United States (i.e., no income inequality). This measure was used to conduct a t-test analysis.

Preferred Distribution of Income

The same pie charts (Heirserman & Simpson (2021) and response choices were employed for participants to select their *preferred* distribution of income in the United States. This measure was used to conduct a t-test analysis.

Attitudes Toward Taxing the Wealthy

Participants answered three questions from Brown-Iannuzzi and colleagues (2015) about their beliefs regarding taxation policy. Items included: (1) In general, the wealthy should be taxed to provide benefits to the poor; (2) The wealthy should be taxed more than they are now to provide greater benefits to the poor; (3) People should be able to keep the money they earn without government taxation. A composite variable was created with these items and an average score was calculated for each participant. The composite variable was used in a t-test analysis.

Political Ingroup and Outgroup Characteristics Ratings

Participants were presented with a list of 29 characteristics and instructed to "Think about the typical [Republican/Democrat]. Below are a series of personal characteristics. Regardless of your own political identification, think about the typical [Republican/Democrat] and indicate how much you disagree or agree that the typical [Republican/Democrat] holds each characteristic." Each participant endorsed responses for both "the typical Republican" and "the typical Democrat." Example positive traits included, "politically savvy," "educated," and "hard-working." Example negative traits included, "violent," "Islamophobic," and "ignorant."

Traits were categorized into positive and negative characteristics for analysis. Eight composite variables were constructed (i.e., four composite variables per political group): (1) Republican endorsement of positive ingroup traits; (2) Republican endorsement of positive outgroup traits; (3) Republican endorsement of negative ingroup traits; (4) Republican endorsement of negative outgroup traits; (5) Democrat endorsement of positive ingroup traits; (6) Democrats endorsement of positive traits for their outgroup; (7) Democrat endorsement of negative ingroup traits; and (8) Democrat endorsement of negative outgroup traits.

These eight composite variables were subsequently collapsed into four variables: (1) Participant endorsement of positive traits for ingroup members; (2) Participant endorsement of negative traits for other ingroup members; (3) Participant endorsement of positive traits for outgroup members; and (4) Participant endorsement of positive traits for outgroup members. These final four variables were used to run t-tests by political party.

Intergroup Antipathy and Distancing

To assess Republican and Democrat antipathy and distancing toward members of their respective political ingroup and outgroup, participants answered four questions from Pew Research Center (2014): (1) "The Republican Party's policies are so misguided that they threaten the nation's wellbeing;" (2) "The Democrat Party's policies are so misguided that they threaten the nation's wellbeing;" (3) "I would be unhappy if a member of my immediate family told me they were going to marry a Republican;" (4) "I would be unhappy if a member of my immediate family told me

they were going to marry a Democrat." Four composite variables were constructed via the same process used for political ingroup and outgroup characteristics ratings. The final composite variables were used to conduct t-test analyses to evaluate partisan attitudes.

Perceptions of Economic Inequality

Seven items from Horowitz and colleagues (2020) were used to capture perceptions of economic inequality. Example items included "Income inequality in the United States is a significant issue," "Most Americans would be better off if income inequality was lower," and "I would personally be better off if income inequality was lower." A composite variable was created with these items and an average score was calculated for each participant. This variable served as a predictor variable for the regression analysis.

Political Polarization

To assess (affective) political polarization, a feeling thermometer was adapted from Druckman and Levendusky (2019). Participants were asked to rate their feelings of coldness or warmth toward members of their political outgroup (i.e., Democrats or Republicans) and political ingroup (i.e., Democrats or Republicans). Scores range from 0 to 10, with lower degrees on the thermometer reflecting colder feelings and higher degrees on the thermometer reflecting warmer feelings. A difference score was created for each participant by taking their ingroup rating (e.g., Republicans) and subtracting it from their outgroup (e.g., Democrats) rating. This yielded two new variables: (1) a difference score variable for Republicans and (2) a difference score

variable for Democrats. Higher numbers are indicative of greater polarization. I created a composite variable by combining the two difference score variables into one (i.e., difference score for Republicans and difference score for Democrats) to capture political group polarization. This final composite variable served as the second predictor variable.

Attitudes Toward Democracy

To assess attitudes toward democracy, participants answered two questions (Akkerman, 2014). "In a democracy, it is important to make compromises among differing viewpoints" and "It is important to listen to the opinions of other groups" (a = .743).

Procedure

Participants were recruited via Prolific, an online data collection platform. Prolific sent an invitation link to the questionnaire, which was hosted by Qualtrics, to eligible participants (See Appendix B for the study invitation, consent form, and debriefing forms). To be eligible for this research, participants had to be 18 years of age and identify as either a Republican or Democrat in their Prolific demographic information. After receiving the invitation, participants had the option to accept or decline participation. Those who choose to take the questionnaire first read a consent form and then read a cover story describing the study as being about social issues. Next, participants responded to a series of measures assessing perceived economic inequality, political polarization, and attitudes toward democracy. All measures were presented in a counterbalanced order. Participants were then asked to provide

demographic information (e.g., age, gender, social class). Please see Appendix A to review demographic questions. Upon completion of the materials, participants received a debriefing statement explaining the study's purpose and factual information about economic inequality and political polarization in the United States.

Analyses

I first tested assumptions for t-tests (i.e., data accuracy, normally distributed data, homogeneity of variance). After conducting t-test analyses, I tested the statistical assumptions of linear regressions, including accuracy and normality of the data, normality of residuals, linearity, and lack of multicollinearity. Linearity and normality were assessed by visual inspection of histograms, density plots, scatterplots, and skew statistics. Multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factors. Violated assumptions were addressed by transforming (e.g., square root, log) the variable. A discussion of unmet assumptions and their corrections is provided with my findings.

To gain a better understanding of Republican and Democrat participants in my sample, I first conducted descriptive analyses per group and then tested hypotheses related to group differences via t-tests. A regression analysis was conducted to predict attitudes toward democracy, with perceived economic inequality, political polarization, and their interaction as predictors. All variables in the regression models were continuous and included participant social class and gender as control variables.

Results

Strength of Political Affiliation and Voting Record

To assess whether Republicans and Democrats differed in their strength of political affiliation (Hypothesis 1), descriptive analyses were conducted. No differences were found in terms of strength of affiliation (i.e., "very liberal," "liberal," "somewhat liberal," "moderate," "somewhat conservative, " "conservative," and "very conservative"). The majority of Republican participants (*n* = 59, 71%) identified as either "somewhat conservative" (*n* = 30, 36.1%) or "conservative" (*n* = 29, 34.9%), with smaller percentages identifying as "moderate" (*n* = 9; 10.8%) or "very conservative, far-right" (*n* = 15; 18.1%). Democratic respondents were more extreme in their political affiliation, with the majority self-identifying as "very liberal 'far-left'" (*n* = 25, 29.4%) or "liberal" (*n* = 39, 45.9%). Fewer Democrats identified as "somewhat liberal" (*n* = 14, 16.5%) or "moderate" (*n* = 7, 8.2%). Please see Figure 1 for party affiliation information by political party.

Descriptive analyses were also conducted to assess political news engagement and vote choices. Over 76% (*n* = 65) of Democrats and 71% (*n* = 59) of Republicans reported being "quite" to "very" interested in political news. The majority of Republican participants reported voting for Donald Trump in the 2020 U.S. presidential election (*n* = 61, 73.5%), while 16.9% (*n* = 14) did not vote, 7.2% (*n* = 6) voted for Joe Biden, and 2.4% (*n* = 2) voted for Jo Jorgensen. Most Democrats also reported voting for their party's candidate in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Joe Biden (*n* = 75, 88.2%), while 10.6% (*n* = 9) did not vote, and 1.2% (*n* = 1) voted for

Jo Jorgensen. No Democrats reported voting for the 2020 U.S. Republican candidate Donald Trump.

Perceptions of Economic Inequality

Perceived Current Distribution of Income

To assess whether Republicans are more likely than Democrats to estimate a lower rate of income inequality (Hypothesis 2), a t-test was conducted. This variable was positively skewed. I used the log transformation to bring the data within data within +/- 3 or 4 standard deviations units from the mean (Tabachnick, Fidell, & Ullman, 2013). There was not an issue with kurtosis. T-test results show a significant difference between Republicans ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.02$) and Democrats ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 0.83$) in their perceived rate of income inequality, $t(164) = 4.15$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.04, .12]. Republicans were significantly more likely than Democrats to estimate lower levels of income inequality (see Table 2 for detailed Study 1 t-test results).

I also conducted additional analyses to examine whether there were differences between political groups in their preferred distribution of income. The variable capturing this construct was negatively skewed, but none of the statistical transformations brought the data within a +/- 3 or 4 standard deviation range of the mean. I chose to leave the data untransformed as this data was the closest to a normal distribution. It is also important to note that the question that composes this variable asks participants to report their ideal level of "inequality," so a negative skew was expected. A t-test revealed that there was a significant difference between Republicans ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.11$) and Democrats ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.73$) regarding

their preferred distribution of income, $t(166) = -3.48$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.79, -.22]. Republicans were significantly more likely than Democrats to prefer a higher level of economic inequality.

Attitudes Toward Taxing the Wealthy

To test whether Republicans will be less likely than Democrats to support taxing the wealthy to support those experiencing poverty (Hypothesis 3), I conducted a t-test analysis. All data points fell within +/- 3 to 4 standard deviations units of the mean, so no transformations were needed. A t-test showed a significant difference between Republicans *(*$M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.58$) and Democrats ($M = 5.93$, $SD = 0.96$) on this variable, $t(165) = -10.53$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-2.53, -1.73]. Republicans were significantly less likely to indicate the wealthy should be taxed to provide benefits to people experiencing poverty.

Polarization and Beliefs about Political Outgroups

To test whether there are differences between Republicans and Democrats in their beliefs about political outgroup members (Hypothesis 4), I conducted t-tests to see between-group differences in polarization. The political polarization variable was within the normal skew and kurtosis range (i.e., +/- 3 or 4 standard deviation units from the mean) and did not require transformation.

Overall, Republicans ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.00$) and Democrats ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.90$) differed significantly in their assignment of favorable traits to their respective political outgroup, $t(164) = 3.46$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.22, 0.80]. Specifically, Republicans perceived “the typical Democrat” as possessing more

favorable traits than did Democrats when asked about "the typical Republican." There was also a significant difference between Republicans (M = 3.56, SD = 1.09) and Democrats (M = 4.48, SD = .91) in who ascribed unfavorite traits to their political outgroup members, $t(162) = -5.85$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-1.23, -0.61]. Democrats were significantly more likely than Republicans to ascribe unfavorable traits to Republicans than Republicans were to Democrats.

Nonsignificant differences were found between Republicans (M = 4.97, SD = 0.84) and Democrats (M = 4.85, SD = 0.68) in terms of their assignment of favorable characteristics to their political ingroup, $t(163) = 1.06$, $p = .291$, 95% CI [-.11, .36]. Similarly, there was no significant difference between Republicans (M = 2.67, SD = .85) and Democrats (M = 2.80, SD = 0.68) regarding their assignment of unfavorable traits to their political ingroup, $t(165) = -1.12$, $p = .263$, 95% CI [-.37, .10]. In other words, Republicans and Democrats perceived their ingroup members similarly in terms of favorable and unfavorable characteristics. However, with respect to their respective political outgroups, Republicans perceived Democrats more favorably than Democrats perceived Republicans.

Intergroup Antipathy and Distancing

I also conducted additional t-test analyses on intergroup antipathy (i.e., "the other party's policies are a threat to the nation") and distancing (i.e., "I would be unhappy if a member of my immediate family married someone from the other political party." Findings show that Democrats (M = 5.62, SD = 1.54) were

significantly more likely than Republicans (M = 5.05, SD = 1.69) to believe that the other party's policies were misguided and threatened national well-being, $t(166) = -2.31$, $p = .022$ 95% CI [-1.07, -.08]. Unsurprisingly, no significant difference was found between Republicans (M = 2.13, SD = 1.20) and Democrats (M = 2.12, SD = 1.27) regarding perceptions of their own party's policies as misguided and threatening, $t(166) = .078$, $p = .938$, 95% CI [-.36, .39].

Analysis of the distancing measure revealed that Democrats (M = 4.27, SD = 1.94) were more likely than Republicans (M = 3.13, SD = 1.81) to report unhappiness with an immediate family member marrying a member of their political outgroup (i.e., Republican or Democrat), $t(166) = -3.92$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-1.71, -.57]. As with ingroup antipathy, there were no significant differences between Republicans (M = 1.78, SD = 1.26) and Democrats (M = 1.56, SD = 1.05) in regard to unhappiness toward political ingroup marriages, $t(166) = 1.29$, $p = .200$, 95% CI [-.12, .58]. Overall, Democrats were more likely to express political outgroup antipathy and distance themselves from Republicans than Republicans were from Democrats.

Attitudes Toward Democracy

A t-test analysis was conducted to assess whether there were significant differences between Republicans and Democrats regarding their attitudes toward democracy. No significant differences were found between Republicans (M = 5.72, SD = 0.99) and Democrats (M = 5.78, SD = 0.86) attitudes toward democracy, $t(166) = -0.46$, $p = .648$, 95% CI [-.35, .22].

Predictors of Anti-Democratic Attitudes

To assess whether perceived economic inequality and political polarization predict attitudes toward democracy (Hypothesis 5) and to test the interaction of perceived economic inequality and political polarization as another predictor of attitudes toward democracy (Hypothesis 6), I conducted a regression analysis. The measure assessing perceptions of economic inequality was negatively skewed more than +/- 3 or 4 standard deviation units from the mean, violating the data normality assumption of regression analyses (Tabachnick, Fidell, & Ullman, 2013). This issue was addressed by using a reflected log transformation. All other variables were normally distributed. Correlations between all variables are presented in Table 3.

The regression analysis revealed that perceived economic inequality, political polarization, and the interaction between them significantly predicted attitudes toward democracy, $R^2 = .149$, $F(5, 156) = 5.48$ $p < .001$. Main effects were found for both perceived economic inequality and political polarization, with a stronger belief that economic inequality is too high *(b** = -.264, *SE* = 0.392) and higher levels of perceived political polarization *(b** = -.224, *SE* = 0.025) associated with stronger endorsement of anti-democratic attitudes. No interaction was found between economic inequality and political polarization (*b** = -.142, *SE* = 0.135). Please see Table 4 for all Study 1 regression coefficients, standard error values, and significance levels.

Study 1 Discussion

This study provides insight into intergroup differences between Republicans and Democrats. Both Republicans and Democrats strongly identified with their party, with participants in both parties clustering toward the extremes rather than the middle of the political spectrum. This finding aligns with longitudinal analyses documenting that political affiliation and partisanship have increased since 2012 (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; McKenzie, 2023). Although participants from both parties identified strongly with their respective parties, Democrats were more likely than Republicans to express strong political leanings, disconfirming Hypothesis 1 (i.e., there would be no difference between political groups in the strength of political affiliation). This finding is supported by research showing that Democrats have moved further to the left than Republicans have moved to the right (Abramowitz, 2023).

Study 1 findings confirm Republicans were significantly more likely than Democrats to underestimate rates of U.S. economic inequality (Hypothesis 2). This finding corroborates previous research showing that Democrats are more pessimistic about economic inequality than Republicans (Chambers et al., 2014; Duch et al., 2000). Findings also confirm that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to prefer economic inequality (Hypothesis 2). With a large body of social psychological scholarship documenting conservatism's association with support for economic inequality (Jost et al., 2003; Napier & Jost, 2008), this finding is unsurprising. Additional analyses document further partisan differences, notably that Republicans

were significantly more likely than Democrats to *prefer* a higher level of economic inequality.

Attitudes toward taxes were also examined, with findings showing that Republicans were significantly less likely than Democrats to support taxing the wealthy to provide benefits to people experiencing poverty, confirming Hypothesis 3. These findings are consistent with research documenting that Democrats are more likely than Republicans to support taxation of any kind (Tolbert et al., 2019). Yet, given current rates of economic inequality, one might expect increased support for redistributive policies among Republicans, given that relatively few people are in top earning brackets. Republicans in this study were also more likely than Democrats to underestimate current rates of U.S. economic inequality. It is plausible that this underestimation of economic inequality affected Republicans' understanding of their own economic status and, in turn, other economic groups.

A primary goal of this study was to examine political polarization. Counter to the expectation that Republicans and Democrats would not differ in their levels of political polarization (Hypothesis 4), participants were not equally polarized. Democrats were significantly more likely than Republicans to be polarized. In other words, Democrats were more likely to assign unfavorable traits (e.g., "dishonest," "racist," "angry") to Republicans, while Republicans were more likely to ascribe favorable traits (e.g., "friendly," "intelligent," "sophisticated") to Democrats than Democrats were to Republicans.

Although I hypothesized Republicans and Democrats would be equally polarized given rising polarization across both political parties, the findings are consistent with Ahler and Sood's (2018) finding that Democrats are more likely than Republicans to stereotype the opposing party. Other research (Pew Research Center, 2022) finds that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to negatively characterize political outgroup members. Future research should continue to examine polarization among Republicans and Democrats. Understanding who is more likely to view the opposing party unfavorably and processes that contribute to these judgments (e.g., classism, sexism, racism) can inform interventions to reduce political polarization.

Perhaps most importantly, findings from this study illuminate the importance of perceived economic inequality and political polarization as predictors of anti-democratic attitudes. As hypothesized (Hypothesis 5), stronger belief that economic inequality is too high and higher levels of political polarization predicted more negative attitudes toward democracy. However, unexpectedly, perceived economic inequality and political polarization did not interact to influence attitudes toward democracy. These findings provide insight into how perceptions of economic inequality and political polarization– two defining characteristics of the U.S. sociopolitical field– shape attitudes toward democracy. Participants who perceived high levels of economic inequality were more likely to hold anti-democratic attitudes. Additionally, participants who were politically polarized (i.e., respondents who derogated political outgroup members) were also more likely to hold anti-democratic

attitudes. Taken together, both of these factors undermine democracy. The lack of an interaction effect suggests that these perceptions of increasing economic inequality and political polarization act independently of one another, and both would need to be addressed individually to stabilize or reduce the trends. Addressing one issue would not necessarily assist in countering the other's negative role in declining democracy.

Study 1 showed the importance of perceived economic inequality and political polarization as predictors of anti-democratic attitudes. However, it is not clear why these two phenomena influence attitudes towards democracy. In other words, it would be beneficial to understand what psychological mechanisms support these relationships. With the knowledge of what facilitates these associations, it is possible to disrupt these pathways. Study 2 builds on Study 1 to identify what belief systems mediate the relationships between perceived economic inequality, political polarization, and anti-democratic attitudes.

Study 2

Goals and Hypotheses

Building on Study 1, Study 2 included potential mediators of the relationship between economic inequality and political polarization, both independently and their combined interactive effect on attitudes toward democracy. Similar to Study 1, in this study, both perceived economic inequality and political polarization were treated as predictors of attitudes toward democracy. Mediating variables included economic system justification (ESJ), social dominance orientation (SDO), right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), and belief in social mobility.

Study 2 Hypotheses

In addition to retesting Study 1 hypotheses, Study 2 hypotheses included the following:

Hypothesis 1. Taken together, economic inequality, political polarization, and ideological variables (i.e., ESJ, SDO, RWA, and perceived social mobility) will predict attitudes toward democracy.

Hypothesis 2. ESJ will mediate the relationship between perceptions of economic inequality and attitudes toward democracy.

Hypothesis 3. SDO will mediate the relationship between perceptions of economic inequality and attitudes toward democracy.

Hypothesis 4. RWA will mediate the relationship between perceptions of economic inequality and attitudes toward democracy.

Hypothesis 5. Belief in social mobility will mediate the relationship between perceptions of economic inequality and attitudes toward democracy.

Hypothesis 6. ESJ will mediate the relationship between political polarization and attitudes toward democracy.

Hypothesis 7. SDO will mediate the relationship between political polarization and attitudes toward democracy.

Hypothesis 8. RWA will mediate the relationship between political polarization and attitudes toward democracy.

Hypothesis 9. Belief in social mobility will mediate the relationship between political polarization and attitudes toward democracy.

In Study 1, no significant interaction was found between economic inequality and political polarization. For this reason, no interaction effects for attitudes toward democracy were expected in Study 2.

Methodology

Two hundred participants completed an online questionnaire via Prolific approximately 3 weeks after Study 1 data was collected. Five participants were excluded from the sample: 2 Democrats indicated that they were "somewhat conservative" or "conservative;" 2 Republicans identified as "somewhat liberal" or "liberal;" and 1 respondent did not complete the political affiliation measure. As with Study 1, these cases were removed from the sample to protect against potential invalidation of political polarization items.

The final sample for Study 2 included 195 participants, with 49.2% (n = 96) identifying as Republican and 50.8% (n = 99) as Democrat. The majority of respondents self-identified as male (n =119, 61 %), White (n = 138, 70.8%), middle class (n = 68, 39.5%), and had a Bachelor's degree (n = 61, 31.3%). Ages ranged from 19-80 years old. Please see Table 5 for detailed Study 2 participant demographic information by political party identification.

Design

Similar to Study 1, this study also utilized a correlational design. Predictor variables included perceived economic inequality, political polarization, and the interaction between perceived economic inequality and political polarization. The dependent variable was attitudes toward democracy. Study 2 included the following mediator variables: ESJ, RWA, SDO, and perceptions of economic mobility. Participants' social class and gender were held constant. Additional analyses included independent samples t-tests on the political ingroup and outgroup traits rating variable and intergroup antipathy and distancing variable.

Measures and Procedure

All Study 1 scales were also utilized in Study 2 and were treated identically, using the same 7-point Likert scales with "1" indicating strong disagreement and "7" indicating strong agreement. Study 2 procedure was identical to Study 1 with the exception of four additional measures assessing ESJ, RWA, SDO, and perceptions of social mobility.

Economic System Justification

Participants completed 17 items from Jost and Thompson (2000) regarding their beliefs about the economic system. Sample items included: (1) Equal distribution of resources is a possibility for our society; (2) Economic positions are legitimate reflections of people's achievements; and (3) There are many reasons to think that the economic system is unfair. A composite variable was created with these items, and an average score was calculated for each participant. The composite variable was used in the regression analysis. Please see Appendix A for all measures used.

Social Dominance Orientation

Participants completed 15 items about their beliefs regarding social dominance and hierarchy (Ho et al., 2015). Sample items included: (1) Some groups of people must be kept in their place; (2) An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom; and (3) No one group should dominate in society. A composite variable of these items was created, and an average score was calculated for each participant. The composite variable was used in a regression model and a mediation analysis.

Right-Wing Authoritarianism

RWA was measured using Zakrisson's (2005) 15-item scale. Sample items include: (1) The "old-fashioned ways" and "old-fashioned values" still show the best way to live; (2) Our country needs free thinkers who will have the courage to stand up against traditional ways, even if this upsets many people; (3) Our country needs a

powerful leader, in order to destroy the radical and immoral currents prevailing in society today. A composite variable was created with these items, and an average score was calculated for each participant. The composite variable was used in a regression model.

Social Mobility Beliefs

Beliefs regarding social mobility were measured using 8 items from Browman and colleagues (2017). Sample items include: (1) The status a person has in society is something very flexible about them, and it can change a lot; (2) People cannot substantially change their status in society; (3) People can do things differently, but their status in society can't really be changed. A composite variable was created with these items and an average score was calculated for each participant. The composite variable was used in a regression model.

Analyses

Similar to Study 1, I first tested assumptions for t-tests. After conducting t-test analyses, I tested the statistical assumptions of linear regressions. Linearity and normality were assessed by visual inspection of histograms, density plots, scatterplots, and skew statistics. Multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factors. Violated assumptions were addressed by transforming (e.g., square root, log, and inverse) the variable. A discussion of unmet assumptions and their corrections is provided with my findings.

To gain a better understanding of Republican and Democrat participants in my sample, I first conducted descriptive analyses per group and then tested hypotheses

related to group differences via t-tests. A regression analysis was conducted to predict attitudes toward democracy, with perceived economic inequality, political polarization, and their interaction as predictors. All variables in the regression models were continuous and included participant social class and gender as control variables. Lastly, I conducted a mediation analysis to assess the role of SDO as a mediating variable in the relationship between perceived economic inequality and anti-democratic attitudes.

Results

Strength of Political Affiliation and Voting Record

Study 2's pattern of participant demographic characteristics closely mirrored Study 1's findings, with Democrats identifying more strongly with liberalism. While only 12.5% (n = 12) of Republicans placed themselves on the more extreme end of the political spectrum (i.e., "very conservative, far-right"), over twice as many Democrats (n = 32, 32.3%) endorsed this positionality (i.e., "very liberal, far-left"). The majority of both Republicans (n = 51, 53.1%) and Democrats (n = 48, 48.5%) reported being "conservative" and "liberal," respectively. Twenty-five percent (n = 24) of Republicans indicated they were "somewhat conservative," and just over 15% (n = 15) of Democrats reported being "somewhat liberal." Approximately 9% (n = 9) of Republicans and 4.0% (n = 4) of Democrats selected the "moderate" answer choice. Please see Figure 2 for party affiliation information by political party.

Over 80% (n = 78) of Democrats and approximately 75% (n = 74) of Republicans reported being "quite interested" to "very interested" in political news.

Most Republican participants (n = 82, 85.4%) reported that they voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, 7.3% (n = 7) did not vote, 5.2% (n = 5) voted for Democratic candidate Joe Biden, and 2.1% (n = 2) voted for Jo Jorgensen. Eighty-seven percent (n = 86) of Democrats voted for Joe Biden, 11.1% (n = 11) did not vote, 1% (n = 1.0) voted for Jo Jorgensen, and 1 reported voting for "other." Similar to Study 1, no Democrat participants indicated they voted for Donald Trump.

Perceptions of Economic Inequality

Perceived Current Distribution of Income

To confirm Study 1's finding that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to perceive a lower rate of income inequality, a t-test was conducted. I first used the log transformation to address the skewed distribution which brought it within a +/- 3 or 4 standard deviation units range of the mean (Tabachnick, Fidell, & Ullman, 2013). There was no issue with kurtosis. Confirming findings found in Study 1, there was a significant difference between Republicans (M = 2.13, SD = 1.03) and Democrats (M = 1.77, SD = 1.02) regarding their perceptions of the current rate of income inequality, $t(192) = 2.44$, p = .016, 95% CI [.07, .65]. Republicans were significantly more likely to perceive a lower level of income inequality compared to Democrats (see Table 6 for detailed Study 1 t-test information).

I also conducted a t-test to confirm Study 1's finding that Republicans were significantly more likely than Democrats to prefer higher levels of economic inequality. Unlike Study 1, there was not an issue with a skewed distribution. A t-test analysis revealed a significant difference between Republicans (M = 3.72, SD = 0.90)

and Democrats (M = 4.29 , SD = 0.73) regarding their preferred distribution of income, $t(193) = -4.89$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.81, -.34]. Republicans were significantly more likely than Democrats to select an income distribution reflecting higher levels of economic inequality. This finding corroborates findings from Study 1 that Republicans have a preference for more economic inequality compared to Democrats.

Attitudes Toward Taxing the Wealthy

To confirm Study 1's findings regarding attitudes toward taxing the wealthy, I ran a t-test analysis. Similar to Study 1, the data was distributed normally and did not require transformations. Confirming findings in Study 1, there was a significant difference between Republicans (M = 4.12, SD = 1.13) and Democrats (M = 5.19, SD = .70) on this variable, $t(192) = -7.90$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-1.33, -0.80]. Republicans were significantly less likely to indicate the wealthy should be taxed to provide benefits to people who are poor.

Polarization and Beliefs about Political Outgroups

There was a significant difference between Republicans and Democrats regarding who was more likely to assign favorable traits to their outgroup members, $t(191) = 2.43$, $p = .016$, 95% CI [.07, .66]. Specifically, Republicans (M = 3.71, SD = 1.14) agreed more strongly that "the typical Democrat" holds favorable traits than Democrats (M = 3.35, SD = 0.90) agreed that Republicans held the same favorable traits. Democrats (M = 2.29, SD = 0.80), on the other hand, more strongly endorsed unfavorable traits for Republicans than Republicans (M = 3.80, SD = 1.03) ascribed to Democrats, $t(188) = 6.52$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.60, 1.13]. There was no

significant difference between Republicans (M = 5.07, SD = 0.76) and Democrats (M = 4.89, SD = 0.72) when assessing which group more strongly endorsed favorable traits for their ingroup members, $t(189) = 1.65$, $p = .102$, 95% CI [-.04, .39]. There also was no significant difference between Republicans (M = 2.64, SD = 0.95) and Democrats (M = 2.89, SD = 0.80) regarding which group more strongly endorsed unfavorable traits for their ingroup members, $t(189) = -1.93$, $p = .055$, 95% CI [-.49, .01]. These results align closely with Study 1 results.

Intergroup Antipathy and Distancing

Democrats (M = 5.89, SD = 1.27) were significantly more likely than Republicans (M = 5.30, SD = 1.76) to believe that the other party's policies were misguided and threatened national well-being, $t(193) = -2.73$, $p = .007$, 95% CI [-1.03, -.17]. No significant difference was found between Republicans (M = 2.39, SD = 1.60) and Democrats (M = 2.12, SD = 1.24) regarding perceptions of their own party's policies as misguided or threatening, $t(192) = 1.31$, $p = .192$, 95% CI [-1.36, .67]. Results from the distancing indicator show that Democrats (M = 4.55, SD = 2.06) were significantly more likely than Republicans (M = 3.47, SD = 2.05) to say they would be unhappy if a member of their immediate family told them they were going to marry to a member of their political outgroup (i.e., Republican or Democrat), $t(193) = -3.67$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-1.66, -.50]. As with ingroup antipathy, no significant difference was found between Republicans (M = 1.81, SD = 1.28) and Democrats (M = 1.67, SD = 1.24) regarding how unhappy they would be if a member of their immediate family told them they were going to marry another political

ingroup member, $t(192) = 0.77$, $p = .444$, 95% CI [-.22, .50]. These results also align with the findings in Study 1.

Attitudes Toward Democracy

Similar to Study 1, I conducted an additional t-test analysis to assess whether there were significant differences between Republicans and Democrats regarding their attitudes toward democracy. Diverging from Study 1's findings, the t-test result showed that Democrats ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 0.77$) held more positive attitudes toward democracy than Republicans ($M = 5.58$, $SD = .95$), $t(192) = -2.00$, $p = .046$, 95% CI [-.49, -.00].

Predictors Anti-Democratic Attitudes

Before conducting regression analyses, the data was checked for violated assumptions. The measure assessing perceptions of economic inequality was negatively skewed more than +/- 3 or 4 standard deviation units from the mean, violating the data normality assumption of regression analyses (Tabachnick, Fidell, & Ullman, 2013). This issue was addressed by using a reflected square-root transformation (Tabachnick, Fidell, & Ullman, 2013). All other variables were normally distributed. There were no multivariate outliers and inspection of residuals showed no issues with homoscedasticity, linearity, or normality. All predictor variables were centered before completing regression analyses. Correlations between all variables are presented in Table 7.

The first step was to confirm Study 1 findings. The regression analysis showed that perceived economic inequality, political polarization, and the interaction

effect of economic inequality and political polarization, taken together, significantly predicted attitudes towards democracy, $R^2 = .083$, $F(5, 187) = 3.27$ $p = .007$. Gender and social class were put in the model as control variables. Similar to Study 1, Study 2 revealed a main effect of both perceived economic inequality and political polarization on attitudes toward democracy. In study 2, a stronger belief that economic inequality is too high *(b** = -.455, *SE* = .198) was associated with stronger endorsement of anti-democratic attitudes. Higher levels of political polarization (*b** = -.070, *SE* = .023) predicted anti-democratic attitudes. The interaction between perceived economic inequality and political polarization (*b** = .082, *SE* = .064) was not significant, as was the pattern in Study 1. Please see Table 8 for all regression coefficients, standard error values, and significance levels.

SDO Mediates the Relationship Between Economic Inequality and Democracy

To assess whether economic inequality, political polarization, and ideological variables (i.e., ESJ, SDO, RWA, and perceived social mobility), taken together, will predict attitudes toward democracy (Hypothesis 1). I conducted a regression with perceptions of economic inequality and political polarization as predictor variables in Block 1, all potential ideological mediating variables (i.e., ESJ, SDO, RWA, and perceived social mobility) in Block 2, and anti-democratic attitudes as the outcome variable. When the four potential ideological mediators were included as predictors to the regression equation, they explained a significant increase in variance, $R^2_{\text{Adjusted change}} = .063$, $F(2, 4) = 3.049$, $p = .019$, confirming Hypothesis 1. With the potential mediating variables included in the equation, political polarization's direct

effect (b^* = -.271, SE = .023) remained unchanged, indicating ESJ, SDO, RWA, and perceived social mobility are not potential mediators for this relationship (disconfirming Hypotheses 6-9). However, with the potential mediators in the model, the direct effect for perceptions of economic inequality (b^* = -.014, SE = .301) on attitudes toward democracy disappeared, indicating this variable might be mediated by one of the ideological variables. When examining the coefficients of each potential mediating variable, SDO (b^* = -.246, SE = .082) was the only one that approached conventional statistical significance (disconfirming Hypotheses 2, 4, and 5). These analyses were conducted again with gender and social class as additional predictors but this did not change the reported patterns. SDO did not reach statistical significance, however, due to the exploratory nature of this research, I conducted a mediation analysis using the SPSS Process Macro (Hayes, 2023) with SDO as a mediator between perceptions of economic inequality and political polarization. SDO reliably mediated the relationship between perceived economic inequality and anti-democratic attitudes. The 95% confidence interval was -.6790 to -.0191 which excludes zero, indicating SDO mediates the relationship between perceived economic inequality and anti-democratic attitudes, confirming Hypothesis 3.

Study 2 Discussion

Consistent with Study 1 findings, Study 2 Democrats were more likely than Republicans to self-identify on the more extreme end of the political spectrum, overestimate the extent of economic inequality and prefer more equality. These

findings corroborate a large body of literature documenting conservatives' underestimation of economic inequality (Jost et al., 2003; Napier & Jost, 2008).

Study 2 investigated relationships among perceptions of economic inequality, political polarization, legitimizing ideologies, and attitudes toward democracy. Both perceptions of economic inequality and political polarization were found to predict anti-democratic attitudes, confirming findings from Study 1. A stronger belief that economic inequality is too high and higher levels of political polarization were both associated with a stronger endorsement of anti-democratic attitudes. A small body of literature is starting to examine economic inequality as a predictor of attitudes toward democracy (Krieckhaus et al., 2014). Additionally, political polarization's influence on attitudes toward democracy is also an underexamined area in the scholarly literature. The current study's findings contribute to these developing areas of research.

As hypothesized, the inclusion of legitimizing beliefs in the regression model explained a significant increase in variance, demonstrating the relationship of ideology to perceived economic inequality, political polarization, and attitudes toward democracy. SDO, ESJ, and RWA explained the relationship between perceived economic inequality and anti-democratic attitudes. However, the effect of political polarization on anti-democratic attitudes remained stable, even with legitimizing beliefs included in the equation, indicating these ideologies do not explain this relationship. SDO was the only potential mediator of this relationship.

A follow-up mediation analysis showed that SDO was a significant mediator between perceptions of economic and anti-democratic attitudes, supporting Hypothesis 4. There was no evidence to support ESJ, RWA, and perceived social mobility as mediating the relationship between perceived economic inequality and anti-democratic attitudes (i.e., Hypothesis 2, 3, and 5). The lack of mediation effects for ESJ, RWA, and perceived social mobility (Hypotheses 2, 3, and 5) suggests that despite being related to attitudes toward democracy, these beliefs do not mediate the relationship between perceived economic inequality and anti-democratic attitudes as SDO does. These findings underscore the power of SDO in political contexts and illustrate the unique influence of SDO in connecting perceptions of rising economic inequality to anti-democratic attitudes. Acknowledging this function of SDO is crucial to understanding how economic inequality threatens democracy.

These findings align with social psychological research documenting the relationship between the SDO and acceptance of inequality (Pratto et al., 1994; Rodriguez‐Bailon et al., 2017). Moreover, higher levels of SDO are associated with reduced support for policies to reduce inequalities, further deepening the gap between economic elites and the rest of society (Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017). With respect to the current findings, SDO legitimizes the economic dominance of top U.S. earners.

Research examining the impact of legitimizing ideologies on anti-democratic attitudes is lacking. However, insight can be gained from Acemoglu and colleagues (2014) finding that democracy is viewed as a path to equality via the implementation of government policies (e.g., redistributive policy). Taken together, these previous

research findings help explain how SDO mediates the relationship between economic inequality and anti-democratic attitudes. If people accept economic inequality as legitimate and fair, it is unlikely that they will support systems or policies that are capable of reducing inequality.

General Discussion

The goal of this dissertation was to examine relationships between three increasing trends in the United States– economic inequality, political polarization, and anti-democratic attitudes. These trends are associated with damaging outcomes at the personal level (e.g., Burns et al., 2014; Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015) and societal level (e.g., Bonica et al., 2013; Phillips, 2024; Voorheis et al., 2015). Findings from both studies illustrate associations among perceived economic inequality, political polarization, and attitudes toward democracy.

Results across both studies demonstrate that rising political polarization (i.e., assigning negative stereotypes to members of the opposing political party) is associated with greater endorsement of anti-democratic attitudes. In this research, anti-democratic attitudes were conceptualized as undervaluing intergroup compromise and devaluing listening to countering opinions. It is unsurprising that negative views of political outgroup members predicted less compromise. However, intergroup compromise is central to stable democracies. The current research suggests that if political polarization continues to increase, the underlying core facets of democracy will continue to erode.

Importantly, compromise between Democrats and Republicans, the two major political parties in the United States, could challenge the status quo, including reducing economic inequality. Economic redistribution runs counter to SDO, explaining why this legitimizing belief mediates the relationship between perceived economic inequality and anti-democratic attitudes.

Limitations and Future Directions

A limitation of both studies are their relatively low sample sizes. With the inclusion of more participants, it is possible that another ideological mediator would have been significantly associated with attitudes toward democracy. Further research investigating the mediating role of the legitimizing ideologies examined in this study (i.e., ESJ, SDO, RWA, perceived economic inequality) as well as others (e.g., belief in a just world, protestant work ethic) is needed. Additionally, the limited sample sizes did not allow for more complex statistical analyses such as moderated mediation or structural equation modeling analyses. Future research should investigate intergroup differences in the reported relationships. For example, SDO may mediate the relationship between perceived economic inequality and anti-democratic attitudes among Republicans but not Democrats or among higher-income groups but not working-class groups.

Future research could also expand how attitudes toward democracy is conceptualized. The current study focused on political compromise and valuing beliefs held by political outgroup members because these are core facets of democracy (U.S. Mission to the Organization of American States, n.d.). The inclusion of other central facets of democracy (e.g., respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, freedom of expression and of the press) would provide a multifaceted conceptualization of attitudes toward democracy and help identify which aspects of democracy are vulnerable to increasing economic inequality and ideological attack.

Implications

This research has significant implications for understanding the impact of economic inequality and political polarization on anti-democratic attitudes. Not only do these findings deepen our understanding of how both of these trends threaten democracy, they also reveal psychological mechanisms that undergird the relationship between economic inequality and anti-democratic attitudes. Importantly, this knowledge can be leveraged to inform interventions designed to reduce anti-democratic attitudes. Unpacking social dominance and explaining how it facilitates the maintenance of hierarchical structures and inequalities can inform strategies for reducing anti-democratic attitudes as well as support for economic inequality.

The findings regarding political polarization also have important implications. The effect of political polarization on anti-democratic attitudes was found to be direct and stable, remaining unchanged with the inclusion of legitimizing beliefs. Without intervention, political polarization will continue to erode U.S. democracy. Addressing both economic inequality and political polarization, as well as legitimizing ideologies that maintain the status quo, can assist in stabilizing democracy and, in turn, promote egalitarian policies

Table 1
Study 1 Demographic Information by Political Party

	Total Sample (n = 168)		Republicans (n = 83)		Democrats (n = 85)	
Race and Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
European American	119	70.8	66	79.5	53	62.4
Multiracial	18	10.7	9	10.8	9	10.6
Hispanic or Latinx	13	7.7	4	4.8	9	10.6
African American	7	4.2	3	3.6	4	4.7
Asian American	4	2.4	1	1.2	3	3.5
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	1.2	0	0.0	2	2.4
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	1	.6	0	0.0	1	1.2
Gender						
Man/Male	86	51.2	42	50.6	44	51.8
Woman/ Female	79	47.0	41	49.4	38	44.7
Non-Binary	3	1.8	0	0.0	3	3.5

Social Class						
Poor	14	8.3	5	6.0	9	10.6
Working Class	48	28.6	24	28.9	24	28.2
Lower Middle Class	32	19.0	13	15.7	19	22.4
Middle Class	59	35.1	30	36.1	29	34.1
Upper Middle Class	14	8.3	11	13.3	3	3.5
Wealthy	1	.6	0	0.0	1	1.2
Age	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
	38	13	41	13	35	12

Table 2

Study 1 Differences Between Republicans and Democrats on Perceived Income Inequality, Political Polarization, and Attitudes Toward Democracy

	Republicans		Democrats		*t*	*p*	Cohen's *D*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Perceived Current Distribution of Income	2.22	1.02	1.64	0.83	4.15	<.001	0.13
Preferred Distribution of Income	3.67	1.11	4.18	0.73	-3.48	<.001	0.93
Attitudes Toward Taxing the Wealthy	3.80	1.58	5.93	0.96	-10.53	<.001	1.31
Assignment of Favorable Traits to Political Outgroup Members	3.81	1.00	3.29	0.90	3.46	<.001	0.95
Assignment of Unfavorable Traits to Political Outgroup Members	3.56	1.09	4.48	0.91	-5.85	<.001	1.00
Assignment of Favorable Traits to Political Ingroup Members	4.97	0.84	4.85	0.68	1.06	.291	0.77
Assignment of Unfavorable Traits to Political Ingroup Members	2.67	0.85	2.80	0.68	-1.12	.263	0.77
Outgroup Antipathy	5.05	1.69	5.62	1.54	-2.31	.022	1.61
Ingroup Antipathy	2.13	1.20	2.12	1.27	.078	.938	1.23
Outgroup Distancing	3.13	1.81	4.27	1.94	-3.92	<.001	1.88

Ingroup Distancing	1.78	1.26	1.56	1.05	1.29	.200	1.15
Attitudes Toward Democracy	5.72	0.99	5.78	0.86	-0.46	.648	0.93

Table 3
Study 1 Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations Between Variables

	1	2	3
1. Perceived Economic Inequality	–		
2. Political Polarization	.030	–	
3. Attitudes Toward Democracy	.251**	-.237**	–
$\bar{x}$	5.33	4.34	5.75
SD	1.16	2.75	.925
α	.849	–	.743

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 4
Study 1 Regression Coefficients for Model with Predictors of Attitudes Toward Democracy

Predictors	*b**	*SE*	*p*
Perceived Economic Inequality	-.264	.392	.001
Political Polarization	-.224	.025	.003
Interaction of Perceived Economic Inequality and Political Polarization	-.142	.135	.061
Social Class	.117	.063	.141
Gender	-.063	.129	.402
$R^2 = .149$, $p < .001$			

Table 5
Study 2 Demographic Information by Political Party

	Total Sample (n = 195)		Republicans (n = 96)		Democrats (n = 99)	
Race and Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
European American	138	70.8	83	86.5	55	55.6
Asian American	23	11.8	6	6.5	17	17.2
Hispanic or Latinx	12	6.2	3	3.1	9	9.1
African American	9	4.6	1	1.0	8	8.1
Multi-racial	10	5.1	1	1.0	9	9.1
Other	2	1.0	2	2.1	0	0.0
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	0.5	0	0.0	1	1.0
Gender						
Man/Male	119	61	63	65.6	56	56.6
Woman/ Female	73	37.4	33	34.4	40	40.4
Non-Binary	3	1.5	0	0.0	3	3.0

Social Class						
Poor	17	8.7	1	1.0	16	16.2
Working Class	52	26.7	26	27.1	26	26.3
Lower Middle Class	37	19.0	17	17.7	20	20.2
Middle Class	68	34.9	39	40.6	29	29.3
Upper Middle Class	20	10.3	12	12.5	8	8.1
Wealthy	1	0.5	1	1	0	0.0
Education						
Less than a High School Degree	2	1.0	2	2.1	0	0.0
High School Graduate (or GED)	38	19.5	13	13.5	25	25.3
Some College But No Degree	48	24.6	22	22.9	26	26.3
Associate's Degree	23	11.8	11	11.5	12	12.1
Bachelor's Degree	61	31.3	35	36.5	26	26.3

Master's Degree	18	9.2	8	8.3	10	10.1
Profession-al Degree	3	1.5	3	3.1	0	0.0
Doctoral Degree	2	1.0	2	2.1	0	0.0
Age	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
	40	14	43	15	38	14

Table 6

Study 2 Differences Between Republicans and Democrats on Perceived Income Inequality, Political Polarization, and Attitudes Toward Democracy

	Republicans		Democrats		*t*	*p*	Cohen's *D*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Perceived Current Distribution of Income	2.13	1.03	1.77	1.02	2.44	.016	1.03
Preferred Distribution of Income	3.72	0.90	4.29	0.73	-4.89	<.001	0.82
Attitudes Toward Taxing the Wealthy	4.12	1.13	5.19	0.70	-7.90	<.001	0.94
Assignment of Favorable Traits to Political Outgroup Members	3.71	1.14	3.35	0.90	2.43	.016	1.04
Assignment of Unfavorable Traits to Political Outgroup Members	3.80	1.03	2.29	0.80	6.52	<.001	0.92
Assignment of Favorable Traits to Political Ingroup Members	5.07	0.76	4.89	0.72	1.65	.102	0.74
Assignment of Unfavorable Traits to Political Ingroup Members	2.64	0.95	2.89	0.80	-1.93	.055	0.87
Outgroup Antipathy	5.30	1.76	5.89	1.27	-2.73	.007	1.53
Ingroup Antipathy	2.39	1.60	2.12	1.24	1.31	.192	1.43
Outgroup Distancing	3.47	2.05	4.55	2.06	-3.67	<.001	2.05

Ingroup Distancing	1.81	1.28	1.67	1.24	0.77	.444	1.26
Attitudes Toward Democracy	5.58	0.95	5.82	0.77	-2.00	.046	0.87

Table 7
Study 2 Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations Between Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Perceived Economic Inequality	–						
2. Political Polarization	.104	–					
3. ESJ	-.754**	-.178*	–				
4. SDO	-.572**	-.116	.783**	–			
5. RWA	-.613**	-.039	.700**	.714**	–		
6. Perceived Social Mobility	-.439**	-.168*	.512**	.327*	.333*	–	
7. Attitudes Toward Democracy	.143*	-.149*	-.144*	-.233**	-.241**	.026	–
$\bar{x}$	5.27	4.80	3.40	2.82	3.34	4.61	5.71
SD	1.17	2.96	1.19	1.37	1.28	1.28	0.87
α	.262	–	.909	.946	.915	.931	.590

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 8
Study 2 Regression Coefficients for Models with and without Ideological Mediating Variables

	Attitudes Toward Democracy					
	Without Mediators			**With Mediators**		
	*b**	*SE*	*p*	*b**	*SE*	*p*
Perceptions of Economic Inequality	-.455	.198	.023	-.014	.301	.902
Political Polarization	-.070	.023	.003	-.217	.023	.004
ESJ		–	–	.199	.118	.210
SDO	–	–	–	-.246	.082	.054
RWA	–	–	–	-.194	.076	.082
Social Mobility	–	–	–	-.042	.059	.632

Figure 1
Study 1 Strength of Political Affiliation

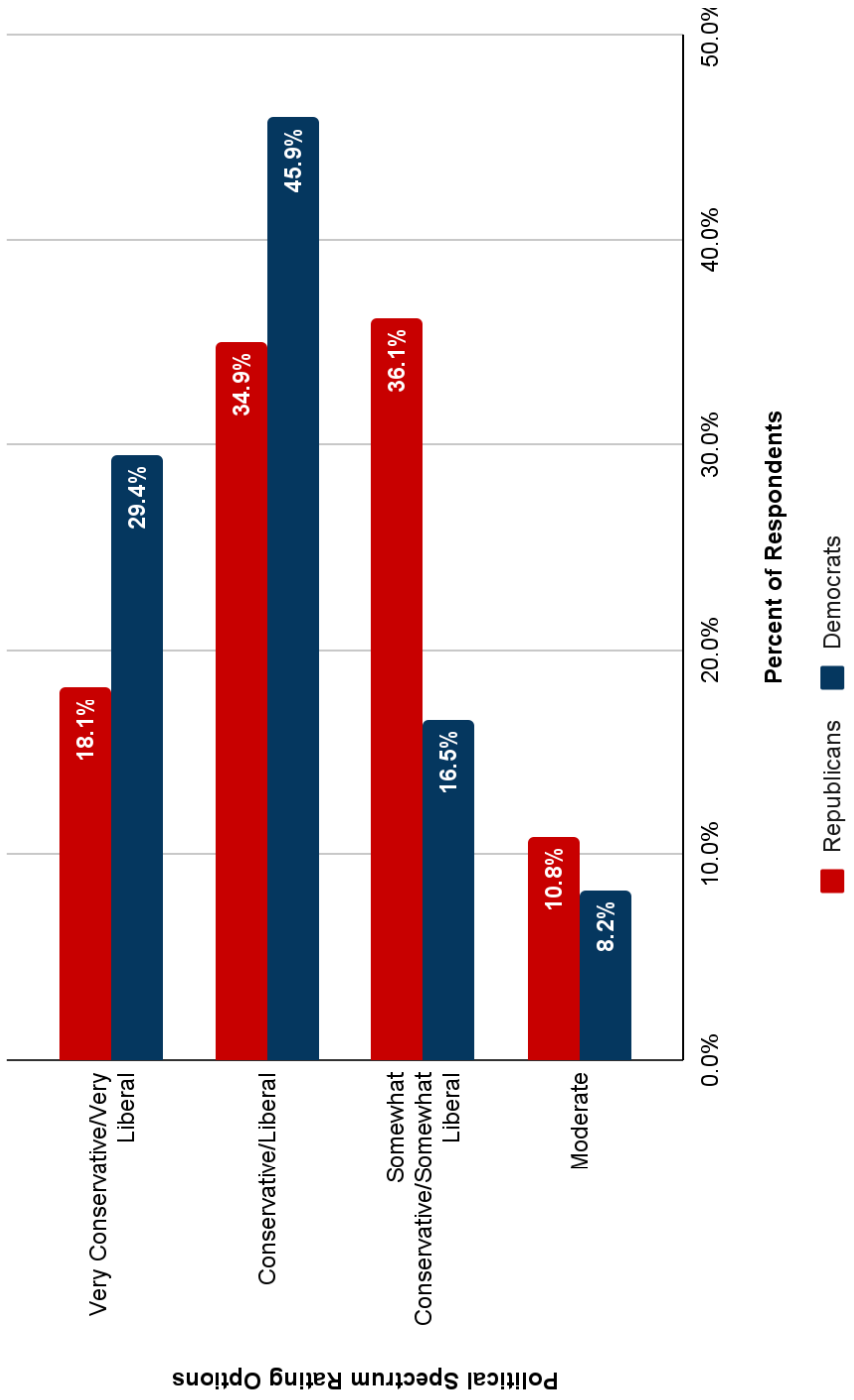
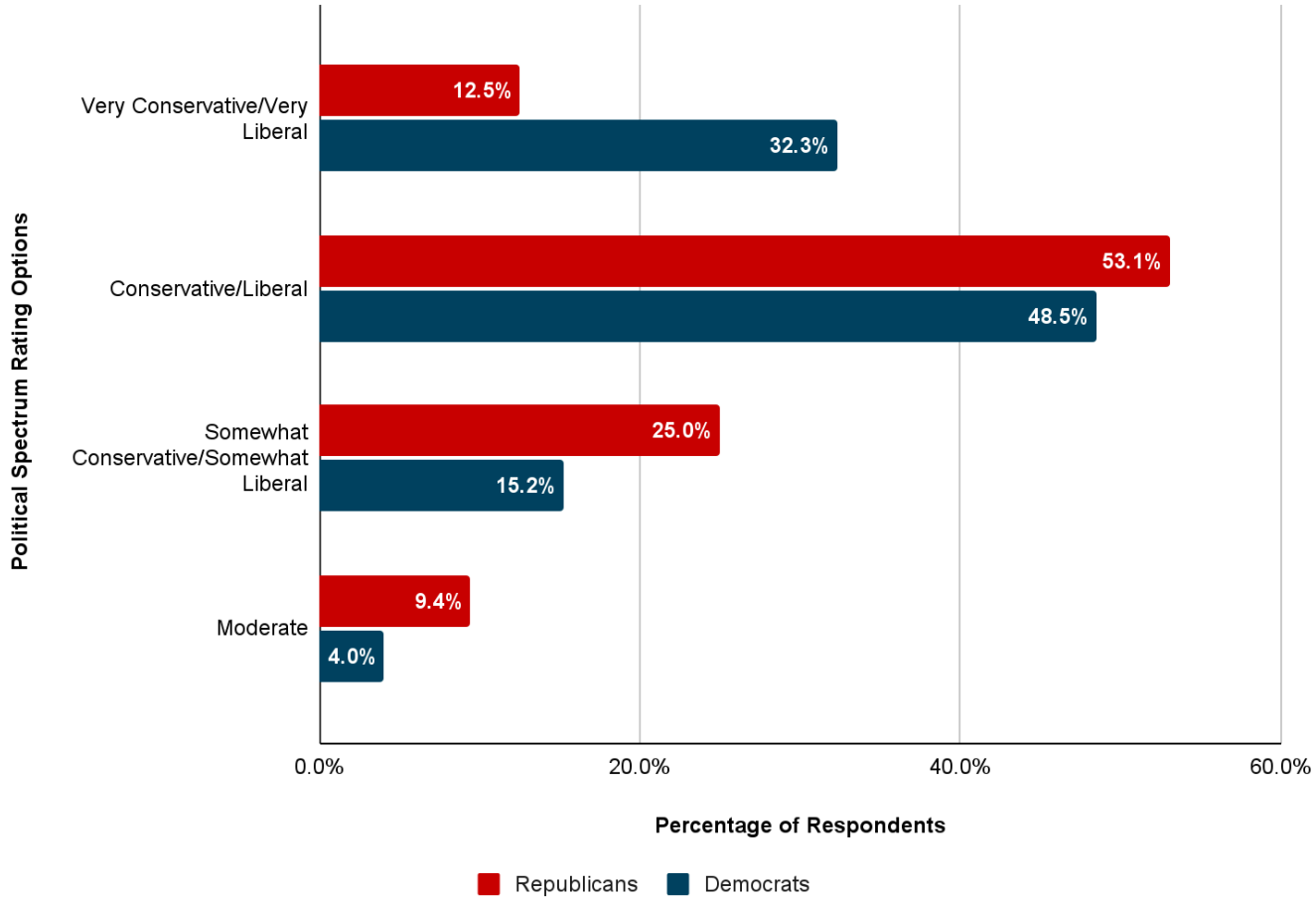


Figure 2

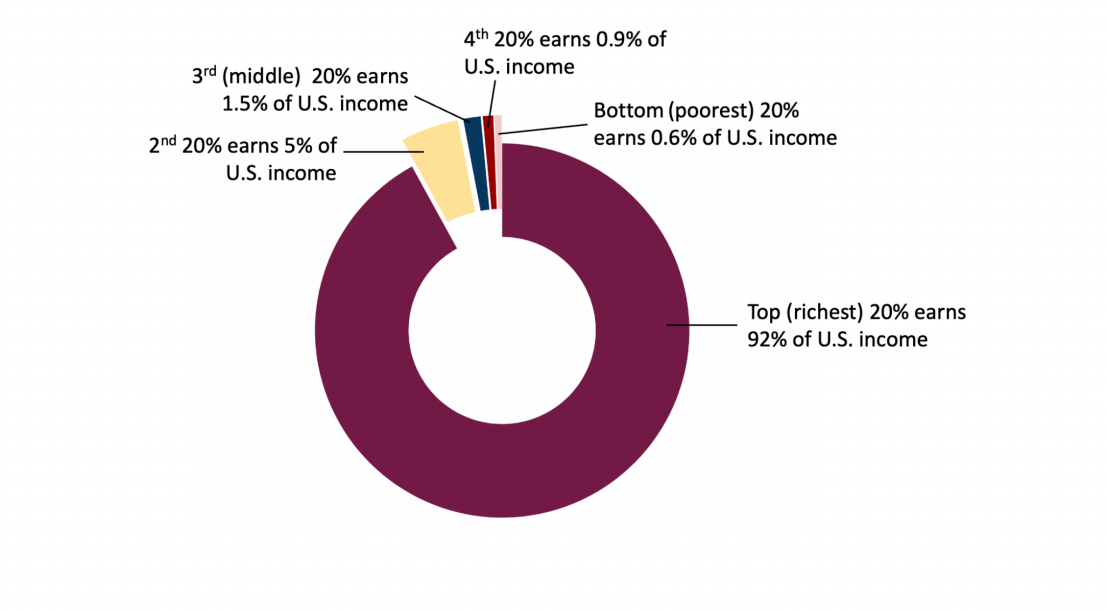
Study 2 Strength of Political Affilitation

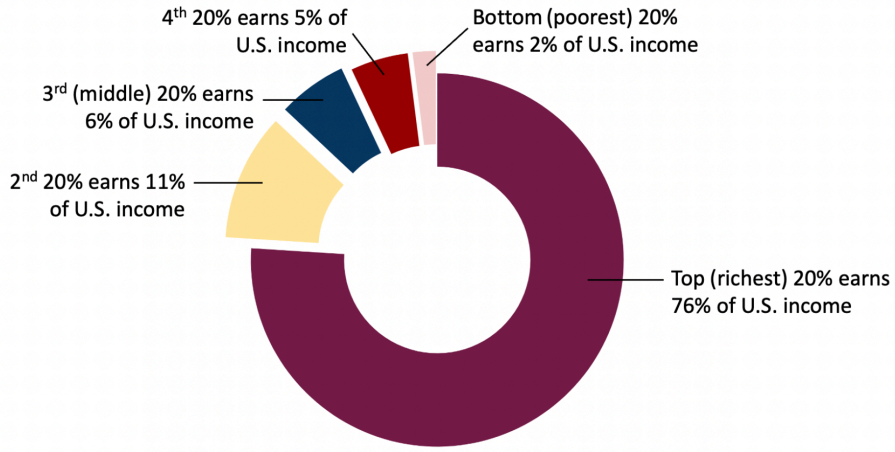


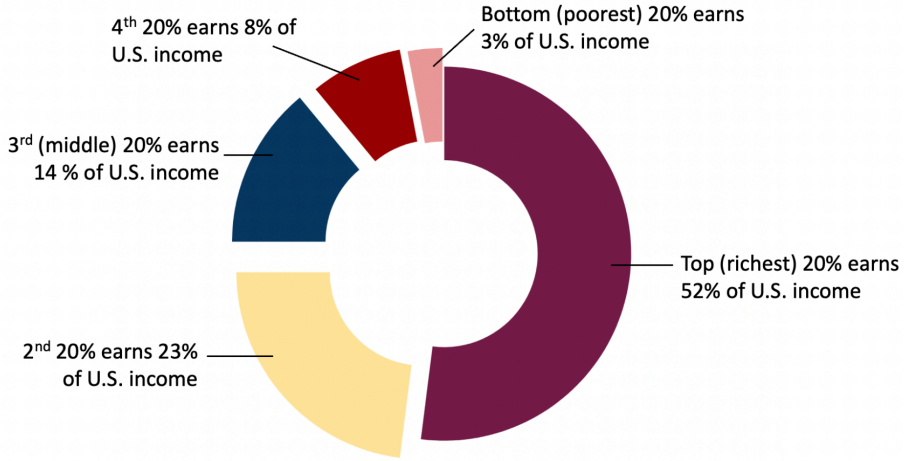
Appendix A

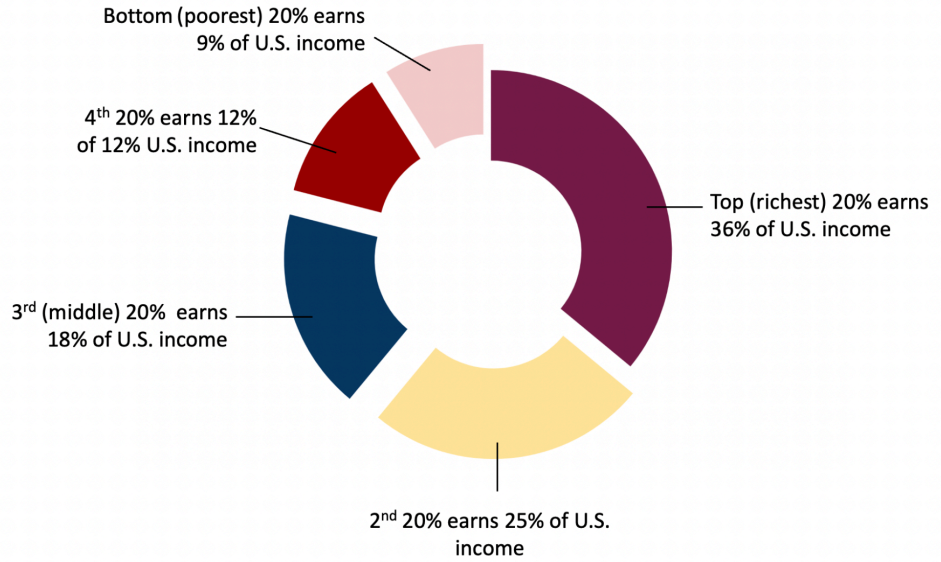
Perceived Current Distribution of Income (Heiserman & Simpson, 2021)

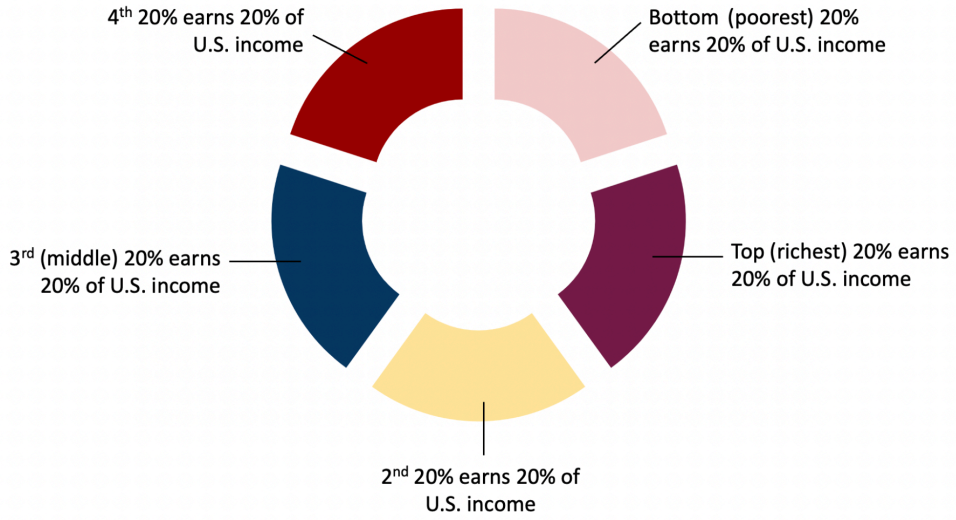
Think about all the money that people in the United States earn as one giant pie. How much of this pie do you think goes to each of the following five income groups, ranging from the richest 20% of Americans (people with the highest incomes) to the poorest 20% of Americans (people with the lowest incomes)? In your opinion, which of the following choices comes closest to how income is currently distributed in the United States?




4th 20% earns 5% of U.S. income
Bottom (poorest) 20% earns 2% of U.S. income
3rd (middle) 20% earns 6% of U.S. income
2nd 20% earns 11% of U.S. income
Top (richest) 20% earns 76% of U.S. income

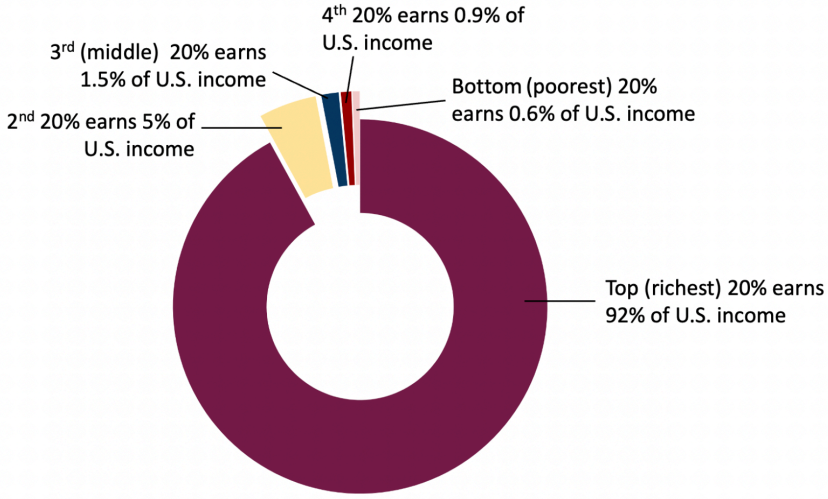

4th 20% earns 8% of U.S. income
Bottom (poorest) 20% earns 3% of U.S. income
3rd (middle) 20% earns 14 % of U.S. income
Top (richest) 20% earns 52% of U.S. income
2nd 20% earns 23% of U.S. income

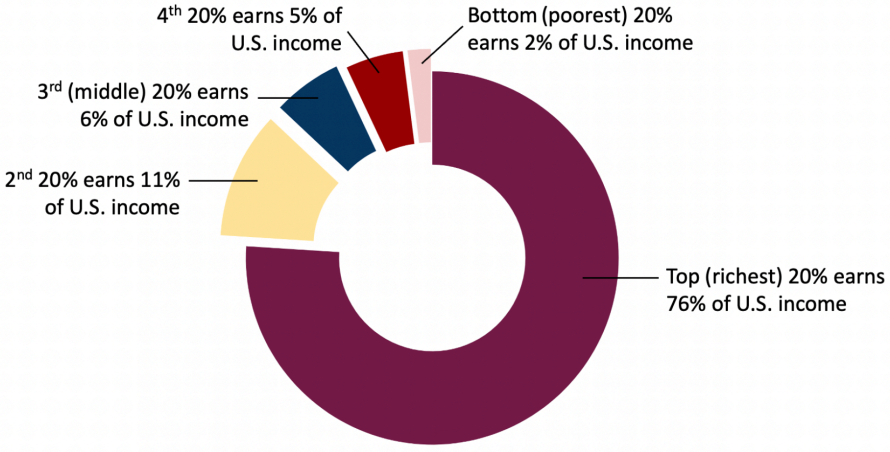

Bottom (poorest) 20% earns 9% of U.S. income
4th 20% earns 12% of 12% U.S. income
Top (richest) 20% earns 36% of U.S. income
3rd (middle) 20% earns 18% of U.S. income
2nd 20% earns 25% of U.S. income

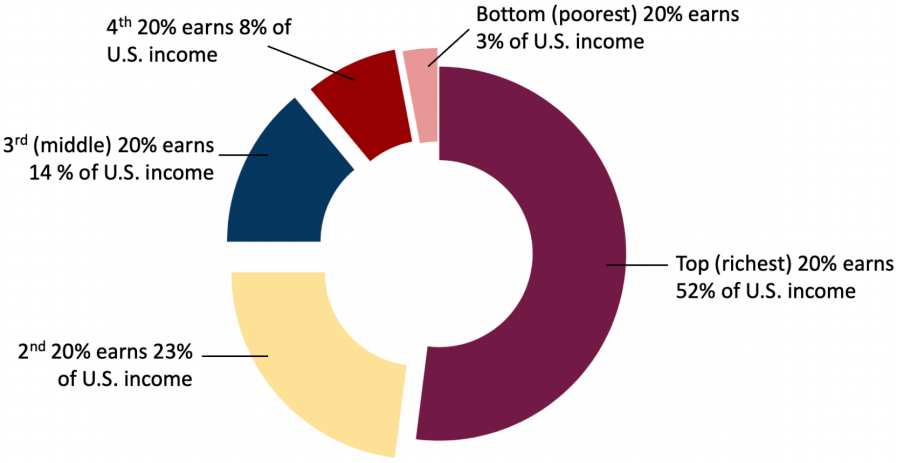

4th 20% earns 20% of U.S. income
Bottom (poorest) 20% earns 20% of U.S. income
3rd (middle) 20% earns 20% of U.S. income
Top (richest) 20% earns 20% of U.S. income
2nd 20% earns 20% of U.S. income

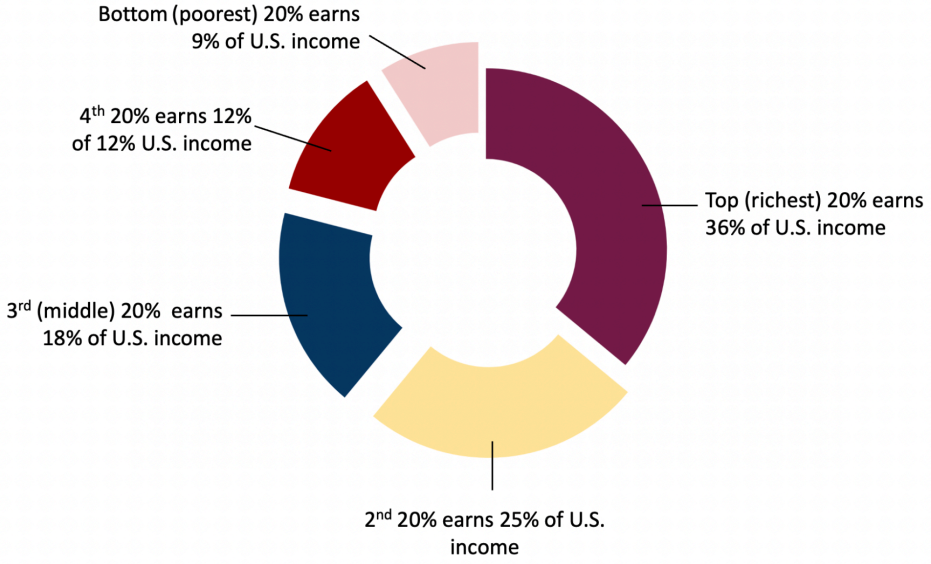
Preferred Distribution of Income (Heiserman & Simpson, 2021)

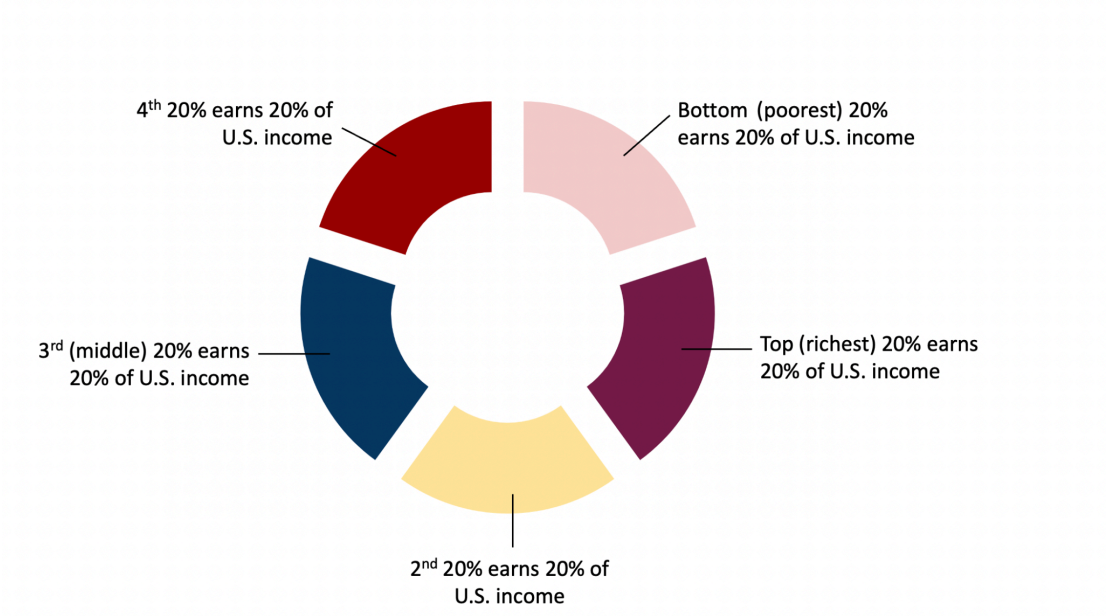
Again, please think about all the money earned by people in the United States as one giant pie. How much of this pie do you think should go to each of the following five income groups, ranging from the richest 20% of Americans (people with the highest incomes) to the poorest 20% of Americans (people with the lowest incomes)? Which of the following choices comes closest to your ideal distribution of income?






4th 20% earns 8% of U.S. income
Bottom (poorest) 20% earns 3% of U.S. income
3rd (middle) 20% earns 14 % of U.S. income
Top (richest) 20% earns 52% of U.S. income
2nd 20% earns 23% of U.S. income


Bottom (poorest) 20% earns 9% of U.S. income
4th 20% earns 12% of 12% U.S. income
Top (richest) 20% earns 36% of U.S. income
3rd (middle) 20% earns 18% of U.S. income
2nd 20% earns 25% of U.S. income



Attitudes Toward Taxing the Wealthy (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015)

Below you will see some opinions about taxation. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each statement?
Scale: 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*)

1. In general, the wealthy should be taxed to provide benefits to the poor.
2. The wealthy should be taxed more than they are **now** to provide greater benefits to the poor.
3. People should be able to keep the money they earn without government taxation. (reverse scored)

Political Ingroup and Outgroup Characteristics Ratings

Now, think about the typical [Republican/Democrat]. Below are a series of personal characteristics. Regardless of your own political identification, think about the typical [Republican/Democrat] and indicate how much you disagree or agree that the typical [Republican/Democrat] holds each characteristic.
Scale: 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*)

Note: items with asterisks were separated out and combined into a composite variable capturing "endorsement of positive traits." Items without asterisks were combined into one composite variable to capture "endorsement of negative traits."

1. Rude
2. Friendly*
3. Intelligent*
4. Likable*
5. Sophisticated*
6. Weak
7. Hard-working*
8. Sexist
9. Classist
10. Angry
11. Well-informed*
12. Ignorant
13. Disinterested in Politics
14. Highly educated*
15. Racist
16. "Trailer trash"
17. "Redneck"
18. Violent
19. Islamophobic
20. Dishonest
21. Elitist
22. Nationalistic
23. Lazy
24. Ugly
25. Politically savvy*
26. Narcissistic
27. Highly motivated*
28. "Know it all"
29. Trustworthy*

Intergroup Antipathy and Distancing (Pew Research Center, 2014)

Below, you will see a series of questions about Democrats and Republicans. Think about the United States and indicate to what extent you disagree or agree with each of the following statements.
Scale: 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*)

1. The Republican Party's policies are so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being.
2. The Democrat Party's policies are so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being.
3. I would be unhappy if a member of my immediate family told me they were going to marry a Republican.
4. I would be unhappy if a member of my immediate family told me they were going to marry a Democrat.

Perceptions of Economic Inequality (Horowitz et al., 2020)

1. There is too much inequality in the United States.
2. There is too little inequality in the United States. (reverse scored)
3. Some amount of income inequality is acceptable. (reverse scored)
4. Income inequality in the United States is a significant issue.
5. Income inequality in the United States is too high.
6. Most Americans would be better off if income inequality was lower.
7. I would personally be better off if income inequality was lower.

Political Polarization (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019)

Please indicate how cold (negatively, unfavorably) or warm (positively, favorably) you feel toward [Democrats/Republicans] with a score of "0" being the coldest and a score of "10" being the warmest.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Not Applicable

Attitudes Toward Democracy (Akkerman, 2014)

Below you will see more statements about democracy. Please indicate to what extent you disagree or agree with each statement.
Scale: 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*)
Note: Items with asterisks were reverse coded.

1. In a democracy, it is important to make compromises among differing viewpoints.
2. It is important to listen to the opinions of other groups.

Demographics

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Race/Ethnicity
    a. African American/Black
    b. Asian American
    c. European American
    d. Hispanic
    e. American Indian and Alaska Native
    f. Latino or Hispanic
    g. Native Hawaiian Other Pacific Islander
    h. Other: Please Specify
4. What social class do you feel you currently belong to?
    a. Poor
    b. Working Class
    c. Lower Middle Class
    d. Middle Class
    e. Upper Middle Class
    f. Wealthy
5. When it comes to politics, how would you describe your position?
    a. Very Liberal, “Far Left”
    b. Liberal
    c. Somewhat Liberal
    d. Moderate
    e. Somewhat Conservative
    f. Conservative
    g. Very Conservative, “Far Right”

6. How would you describe your interest in politics?
    a. Very Interested
    b. Quite Interested
    c. Hardly Interested
    d. Not at all Interested
7. Who did you vote for in the 2020 election?
    a. Donald Trump
    b. Job Biden
    c. Howie Hawkins
    d. Jo Jorgensen
    e. I did not vote

Economic System Justification (Jost & Thompson, 2000)

Below you will see a series of questions about various economic situations. Think about the United States and indicate to what extent you disagree or agree with each of the following statements

1. If people wanted to change the economic system to make things equal, they could. (reverse scored)
2. Economic positions are legitimate reflections of people's achievements.
3. The existence of widespread economic differences does not mean that they are inevitable. (reverse scored)
4. Society reflects an illegitimate distribution of resources. (reverse scored)
5. Laws of nature are responsible for differences in wealth in society.
6. Equal distribution of resources is unnatural.
7. It is unfair to have an economic system which produces extreme wealth and extreme poverty at the same time. (reverse scored)
8. There are no inherent differences between rich and poor; it is purely a matter of the circumstances into which you are born. (reverse scored)
9. If people work hard, they almost always get what they want.
10. There is no point in trying to make incomes more equal.
11. Equal distribution of resources is a possibility for our society. (reverse scored)
12. There are many reasons to think that the economic system is unfair. (reverse scored)
13. It is virtually impossible to eliminate poverty.
14. Social class differences reflect differences in the natural order of things.
15. There will always be poor people, because there will never be enough jobs for everybody.
16. Most people who don't get ahead in our society should not blame the system; they have only themselves to blame.
17. Poor people are not essentially different from rich people. (reverse scored)

Social Dominance Orientation (Ho et al., 2015)

Below you will see a series of questions about groups of people in the United States. Think about the United States and indicate to what extent you disagree or agree with each of the following statement

1. Some groups of people must be kept in their place.
2. It's probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom.
3. An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom.
4. Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups.
5. Groups at the bottom are just as deserving as groups at the top. (reverse scored)
6. No one group should dominate in society. (reverse scored)
7. Groups at the bottom should not have to stay in their place. (reverse scored)
8. Group dominance is a poor principle. (reverse scored)
9. We should not push for group equality.
10. We shouldn't try to guarantee that every group has the same quality of life.
11. It is unjust to try to make groups equal.
12. Group equality should not be our primary goal.
13. We should work to give all groups an equal chance to succeed. (reverse scored)
14. We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups. (reverse scored)
15. No matter how much effort it takes, we ought to strive to ensure that all groups have the same chance in life. (reverse scored)
16. Group equality should be our ideal. (reverse scored)

Right-Wing Authoritarianism (Zakrisson, 2005)

Below you will see a series of questions about societal norms and values. Think about the United States and indicate to what extent you disagree or agree with each of the following statements.

1. God's laws about abortion, pornography, and marriage must be strictly followed before it is too late, violations must be punished.
2. Society needs to show openness towards people thinking differently, rather than a strong leader, the world is not particularly evil or dangerous. (reverse scored)
3. The situation in the society of today would be improved if troublemakers were treated with reason and humanity. (reverse scored)

4. Many good people challenge the state, criticize the church and ignore "the normal way of living." (reverse scored)
5. Our country needs free thinkers who will have the courage to stand up against traditional ways, even if this upsets many people. (reverse scored)
6. People ought to put less attention to the Bible and religion, instead they ought to develop their own moral standards. (reverse scored)
7. If the society so wants, it is the duty of every true citizen to help eliminate the evil that poisons our country from within.
8. Our country needs a powerful leader, in order to destroy the radical and immoral currents prevailing in society today.
9. Our forefathers ought to be honored more for the way they have built our society, at the same time we ought to put an end to those forces destroying it.
10. It would be best if newspapers were censored so that people would not be able to get hold of destructive and disgusting material.
11. Our society would be better off if we showed tolerance and understanding for non traditional values and opinions. (reverse scored)
12. There are many radical, immoral people trying to ruin things; society ought to stop them.
13. It is better to accept bad literature than to censor it. (reverse scored)
14. Facts show that we have to be harder against crime and sexual immorality, in order to uphold law and order.
15. The "old-fashioned ways" and "old-fashioned values" still show the best way to live.

Social Mobility Beliefs (Browman et al., 2017)

1. People can do things differently, but their status in society can't really be changed. (reverse scored)
2. Just by doing a few things differently, people can greatly change their status in society.
3. The status a person has in society is something basic about them, and it can't be changed very much. (reverse scored)
4. The status a person has in society is something very flexible about them, and it can change a lot.
5. People cannot substantially change their status in society. (reverse scored)
6. People can substantially change their status in society.
7. The status a person has in society at one point in their life is likely the same status that they will have at a later point in their life. (reverse scored)
8. No matter what status a person has in society at one point in their life, they can always change it a lot.

Appendix B

Study Invitation

All Prolific participants will see the following information when choosing to take part or not take part in this study.

Study Description: You are invited to take part in a University of California, Santa Cruz online research study titled, "U.S. Residents' Political Attitudes and Beliefs" (UCSC IRB#: HS FY2023-36). In this research study, you will be asked to answer questions regarding your beliefs about the current economic situation in the United States. Next, you will be asked to answer questions about your political attitudes and beliefs. Lastly, you will be asked to answer questions about yourself. The purpose of the study is to learn more about attitudes toward current social, economic, and political conditions in the United States. To participate, you must identify as a man or a woman, identify as a Republican or a Democrat, be 18 years of age or older, and live in the United States. In all, the study should take no longer than 30 minutes. If you have any questions, you may contact Desiree Ryan at daryan@ucsc.edu.

Compensation: For your participation, you will be awarded the amount advertised on the panel provider website ($10.00)

Study Consent Form

U.S. Residents' Political Attitudes and Beliefs
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

You are invited to participate in an online research study titled, "U.S. Residents' Political Attitudes and Beliefs" (UCSC IRB #HS-FY2023-36) conducted by Desiree Ryan, M.A. and Heather Bullock, Ph.D. from the Psychology Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Before you decide whether you would like to participate in the study, please read this form and email any questions to Desiree Ryan (daryan@ucsc.edu) if there is anything that you do not understand. There will be about 200 participants in this study.

Purpose of the project: The purpose of the study is to learn more about attitudes toward current social, economic, and political conditions in the United States. If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer questions about: (1) economic trends in the United States; and (2) political attitudes and beliefs. You will also be asked to complete brief demographic information.

What you will do in the study: If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked a series of questions on an online survey using Qualtrics about income and wealth, policy attitudes, and beliefs about the U.S. government. You will also be asked questions about your background.

Time required to participate: Completing the materials will take approximately 30 minutes.

Risks or discomfort: Participating in this study may lead you to reflect more fully on your political and economic attitudes. We do not anticipate that your participation will cause discomfort. The information that you share with us will be held in strict confidence, and your name will not be associated with your responses. There is a risk that your identifiable information could be accidentally disclosed. Although we do not expect any breaches of confidentiality to occur, information that you share about your social class and/or your political opinions could be embarrassing or stigmatizing if disclosed. Protections will be taken against breaches of confidentiality. While researchers follow procedures to maintain your confidentiality, as with any internet activity, we cannot guarantee confidentiality of intercepted data sent via the Internet by any third parties.

Please know that your participation is voluntary. You can skip any question that you prefer not to answer and can stop participating at any time. Even if you decide to participate, you are free to change your mind at any time and quit the study. Regardless of whether you complete the study in its entirety, you will be compensated.

Benefits of this study: You will not personally benefit from participating, however, you may appreciate the opportunity to share your attitudes and beliefs.

Privacy Protection: Your panel provider will keep track of your Prolific email address in a manner consistent with other studies conducted through this service. Prolific will share only your Prolific email address with the research team. When the researchers receive a final data file, they will assign you a random alphanumeric code and strip your Prolific-generated email address from the dataset to ensure that your response cannot be traced back to you. Only Heather Bullock and Desiree Ryan will have access to data that includes your Prolific-generated email address.

Information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Identifiable research data will be encrypted and password protected. Results of this research may be shared at an aggregate level for publication purposes. You will not be identified in any report or publication of this study.

Because of the nature of the study information being collected, it may be possible for someone to deduce your identity. However, there will be no attempt to do so and your information will be reported in a way that will not identify you. You will not be identified in any report or publication of this study.

Data maintenance and ensuring confidentiality: Data will be stored in an encrypted format on Qualtrics servers until the researchers retrieve it. All data will be de-identified after data collection is completed. Your responses will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in an encrypted and password protected file. Only the researchers will have access to the file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list will be destroyed. Participant information will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

Decision to quit at any time: The decision to participate in this study is completely voluntary.

You do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free to change your
mind at any time and quit the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. Whatever you decide, there will be no negative consequences, and you will receive full compensation.

Can you be withdrawn from the study without your consent?: You may be withdrawn from the study if you do not follow the instructions given to you by the study investigators.

Compensation: For your participation, you will be awarded the amount advertised on the panel provider website ($10.00). Your panel provider will convert your compensation to a form in accordance with your existing agreement with your panel provider. The converted amount will match the approximate value of the monetary compensation mentioned above.

***Future research*:** De-identified information might be used for future research without additional consent.

Rights and concerns: If you have questions about this research, please contact Heather Bullock at hbullock@ucsc.edu or (831) 459-5018. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance Administration at the University of California at Santa Cruz at 831-459-1473 or orca@ucsc.edu.

☐ **I agree to participate in this study**: By checking this box, you are agreeing that you understand the information given to you in this form and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the research described above.

☐ **I do not agree to participate in this study**: By checking this box, you are denying consent to participate in this study. You will be redirected to thank you page where you can then exit the study.

Study 1 Debriefing Form

[STUDY 1]

Debriefing Statement

Thank you for completing this study and sharing your perspectives. We would like to share some information about our study.

You answered a series of questions about your feelings toward members of your own political party and members of the opposing political party. We are interested in examining how positive or negative people feel toward those in their political outgroup. We are using these scores as an index to measure political polarization. Social science research documents that political polarization is dangerously high and increasing more rapidly in the United States than in other democracies.

You also answered questions about your perceptions of economic inequality in the United States. Like the rate of political polarization, the level of economic inequality is problematically high and is associated with negative outcomes such as increased crime rates and decreased mental health and well-being. We are interested in understanding how high or low people feel the level of economic inequality is in the United States. We are exploring how polarization and perceptions of economic inequality correlate with trust in government, endorsement of elitist and pluralistic attitudes, and attitudes toward democracy.

It is important for researchers to examine how people's beliefs, attitudes, and preferences shift depending on how high they perceive economic inequality to be and how polarized they are, therefore, we could not tell you at the outset that we were using feelings toward political ingroup and outgroup members to capture political polarization nor could we say we are correlating these answers with your attitudes toward democracy. Along with levels of economic inequality and political polarization being concerningly high in the United States, attitudes towards democracy are becoming increasingly negative. Researchers need to better understand if these variables are associated with one another, and if so, how they interact, or influence, one another. Results from this study will contribute to the understanding of these relationships.

To learn more about economic inequality in the United States, visit the Pew Research Center by clicking here or view information about how the United States compares to other countries here.

For more information about political polarization in the United States, you can access information from Brown University by clicking here or from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace by clicking here.
If you are interested in reading poll results about American's current perceptions of U.S. democracy, you can access information from NPR by clicking here.

Again, thank you for your participation in this study. Your contribution is invaluable.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach us at daryan@ucsc.edu or hbullock@ucsc.edu.

If you no longer want to participate in this research, please navigate out of the survey. If you'd still like to participate in this research and submit your responses, please click the "submit" button and your responses will be saved.

Study 2 Debriefing Form

[STUDY 2]

Debriefing Statement

Thank you for completing this study and sharing your perspectives. We would like to share some information about our study.

You answered a series of questions about your feelings toward members of your own political party and members of the opposing political party. We are interested in examining how positive or negative people feel toward those in their political outgroup. We are using these scores as an index to measure political polarization. Social science research documents that political polarization is dangerously high and increasing more rapidly in the United States than in other democracies.

You also answered questions about your perceptions of economic inequality in the United States. Like the rate of political polarization, the level of economic inequality is problematically high and is associated with negative outcomes such as increased crime rates and decreased mental health and well-being. We are interested in understanding how high or low people feel the level of economic inequality is in the United States. We are exploring how polarization and perceptions of economic inequality correlate with trust in government, endorsement of elitist and pluralistic attitudes, and attitudes toward democracy.

It is important for researchers to examine how people's beliefs, attitudes, and preferences shift depending on how high they perceive economic inequality to be and how polarized they are, therefore, we could not tell you at the outset that we were using feelings toward political ingroup and outgroup members to capture political polarization nor could we say we are correlating these answers with your attitudes toward democracy. Along with levels of economic inequality and political polarization being concerningly high in the United States, attitudes towards democracy are becoming increasingly negative. Researchers need to better understand if these variables are associated with one another, and if so, how they interact, or influence, one another. You also answered questions about beliefs and ideologies you may hold (e.g., belief in upward economic mobility). We are examining what role these beliefs play in the relationships outlined above. Results from this study will contribute to the understanding of these relationships.

To learn more about economic inequality in the United States, visit the Pew

Research Center by clicking here or view information about how the United States compares to other countries here.

For more information about political polarization in the United States, you can access information from Brown University by clicking here or from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace by clicking here.
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If you no longer want to participate in this research, please navigate out of the survey. If you'd still like to participate in this research and submit your responses, please click the "submit" button and your responses will be saved.

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