Do They Know and Do They Care?

Americans' Awareness of Rising Inequality*

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DRAFT: Comments welcome.

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ABSTRACT

Inequality now stands at pre-World War II levels but it seems to have received little attention by politicians or the media. Does the lack of attention reflect a lack of knowledge or a lack of concern among the general public? Presumably in a democracy public policies are shaped by the public's awareness and tolerance of social problems and yet we have little information about Americans' awareness and tolerance of rising inequality. An analysis of survey data from 1987 to 2000 shows that despite the prevailing image that Americans are tolerant of inequality, well over half of the population thinks that inequality is too high, and more importantly, this share rose significantly over the period of rising inequality and then fell significantly during the late 1990s economic "boom", suggesting that Americans were indeed aware of the trend. I examine the economic and political underpinnings of this shift—who was most likely to oppose inequality and whether there is increasing consensus or polarization in views about inequality—as well as the role of the media in affecting attitudes towards inequality.

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"America is now more unequal than at any time since the 1920s, and it has happened with hardly any discussion."

-- Jeff Madrick (2003)

"If anything is a truism in American politics, it is that people do not care about income inequality."

-- Alan Wolfe (1999)

Those who study and care about rising income inequality would no doubt agree with Jeff Madrick that there seems to have been little public discussion of the issue. Assuming that what the public thinks matters, one possible explanation is that Americans simply don't care about income inequality. Alan Wolfe expresses this view, but he is not alone. Karlyn Bowman (2000) argues that "there's little evidence that rising income inequality ever captured the public's imagination", and in a study of the impact of inequality on levels of happiness (as a measure of well-being) across countries, Alesina, DiTella, and MacCulloch (2003) concluded that "[c]ountries differ greatly in the degree of income inequality that they tolerate…Americans are willing to tolerate quite large disparities in wealth as long as they perceive that wealth is the result of effort and that everyone can make it if enough effort and talent is devoted to the task". This was also the conclusion of the only study to date that focuses on attitudes about inequality in the era of rising inequality (Ladd and Bowman 1998).[1]

As a general matter, there is considerable evidence that supports these and related claims about American views of inequality. Americans tend to be conflicted, resulting in a kind of

[1] Ladd and Bowman write: "[T]here is some ambivalence about wealth in the United States but no particular resentment...Americans tolerate great differences in wealth if they believe that opportunity is broadly present" (1998:3).

"qualified acceptance" of inequality.[2] Yet however true this may be of core American values, there has been little research on whether Americans have *changed* their views in light of the historic increases in inequality over the 1980s and 1990s. More fundamentally, claims that Americans don't care about rising income inequality assume that Americans *know* about rising inequality. Theoretical work that posits a relationship between high levels of inequality and support for redistributive policies (in a democratic society) also hinges on the unexamined prior assumption that people know that inequality is high or has increased.[3] But if Madrick and others are right about the lack of attention to the issue, perhaps the lack of concern reflects a lack of knowledge.

In this paper, I examine whether Americans know and care about rising inequality. In the process, I also evaluate the claim that there has been little public attention to the issue.

AWARENESS OF RISING INEQUALITY: WHAT DO WE KNOW ALREADY?

Surprisingly absent in the proliferation of public opinion surveys over the past several decades are questions about inequality—or at least the kind of "rich versus poor" inequality that has been on the rise in the United States since the 1970s. Most surveys and public opinion polls focus instead on a wide range of other social issues, such as racial inequality and discrimination, poverty, and the role of the government in reducing inequality.

On the one hand, the lack of attention to inequality is not surprising. In the last couple decades, the social issues dominating public discourse are the ones that emerged from the social policies and movements of the 1960s, and in particular the anti-poverty and civil rights

[2] A number of scholars have explored the conflicts and contradictions of American beliefs about inequality (e.g., see Hochschild 1981; Verba and Orren 1985; Kluegal and Smith 1986).
[3] See, for example, Moene and Wallerstein (2001) for recent work on the relationship between inequality and redistribution based on the median voter model.

movements. Moreover, the post-1960s social agenda developed over a period in which long-term changes in the economy and in inequality were either little known or little understood. Up until the late 1980s, few people knew about rising inequality and researchers were divided over both its magnitude and persistence. And if Americans knew anything at all about inequality, it was that it had been declining steadily over the course of the great postwar expansions of the 1950s and 1960s, or perhaps that it had be declining along with declining racial and gender inequality. Finally, class divisions have never been terribly salient in the United States. Americans tend to view themselves and the country as a whole as more “middle class” than stratified or polarized.

On the other hand, the seeming lack of public attention to rising inequality *is* surprising. Economic issues are by no means relegated to back-page coverage. Fluctuations in inflation, unemployment, growth, productivity, consumer confidence, and the stock market are all closely watched and covered by the mainstream media. Even issues that are more directly tied to inequality have at times garnered significant attention, such as downsizing, jobless recoveries, soaring executive pay, contingent (temp) work, globalization, deindustrialization, corporate fraud and malfeasance, and the increasing need for a college degree and two earners to make a decent living for one’s family. Government policies that ameliorate inequality, such as the minimum wage and progressive taxes, are also routinely covered. Perhaps most importantly, the negative consequences of declining wages and increasing inequality were spread much more widely across the population than is the case for either poverty or racial inequality, creating a potentially large and receptive audience on the subject.

What, then, explains the lack of attention to rising inequality by the media and public opinion researchers? The reasons given above—about the greater emphasis on poverty and race, for example—are probably a good part of the explanation, but that begs the question of *why* there is greater emphasis on these issues rather than on inequality as such. There are reasons, I think, that run deeper than the legacy of the social policy focus of the 1960s and 1970s on poverty and race. Inequality is distinct from these other issues in several respects.

First, as compared to poverty and racial inequality, the normative implications of inequality are more ambiguous. Consider the recent release of a Congressional Budget Office report in which the share of income among the top 1 percent is said to be the largest since "at least 1936 and probably 1929" (*NYT*, 9/25/03). If poverty or racial inequality were at 1929 levels, it is hard to imagine anything short of an uproar. In contrast, the *Times* report on inequality appeared on the second page of the business section. Part of the normative ambiguity stems from the possibility that inequality can increase at the same time that the standard of living of the entire population increases. The fact that this was not the form that rising inequality took over the past couple decades, however, suggests that the normative ambiguity runs deeper, to include even circumstances in which the poor get poorer while the rich get richer. Perhaps the poor and the rich deserve their fate: the poor for not working hard enough and the rich for superior talent and effort. Or inequality serves a positive function—it motivates individuals to succeed, the cumulative effect of which is innovation and growth (Kluegal and Smith 1986). In either case, this normative ambiguity can be seized upon to cloud the discussion of inequality and ultimately to push it to the sidelines.

Second, inequality suffers from another handicap: it is a highly abstract concept. The social groups to which inequality refers are not as clear as in the case of poverty (the poor) and racial inequality (racial and ethnic groups). Existing survey questions typically ask not only about the rich and the poor, but about the middle class, the "haves" and "have-nots", and so on.

The term “inequality” is rarely (if ever) used, substituted most often with “income differences”. Apparently the problem of abstraction is one of which pollsters and survey researchers are well aware. As the authors of the only existing study on attitudes about rising inequality argue (who also bemoan the lack of trend data in particular on income gaps), “pollsters appear to have concluded, correctly in our view, that buzzwords such as *economic inequality*—common in political discussions—do not convey much to most Americans” (Ladd and Bowman 1998: 3, emphasis in original).

Third, even if one is opposed to inequality, the remedies are not as clear cut as in the cases of poverty and racial/gender inequality. First, racial and gender inequality are proscribed by law, whereas “rich versus poor” inequality is neither illegal nor easily amenable to legal circumscription. Realistically the government must be the agent of remedy for poverty whereas the private sector might be seen as solely responsible for addressing inequality (Hochschild 1981, Verba and Orren 1985). This has been made all the worse by the portrayal of technological change and globalization as inevitable forces of economic growth. Conceptualizing inequality as a private matter in these ways leaves little room for the development of a public discussion of inequality. This is especially the case in the United States where the association between tax policy and inequality is weak (Bartels 2003). It is not particularly transparent that increasing taxes on the wealthy makes the non-rich better off, rather than simply making the rich worse off.[4] Thus, in the US, the link between inequality and redistributive government policies is tenuous, removing one of the prime justifications for a sustained public discussion of inequality.

For these three reasons, it is easy to suspect that Americans may not be fully aware of rising inequality. And if they are aware of rising inequality, their lack of concerted opposition to

[4] Based on focus group discussions, Greenberg (1996) argues that working and middle class workers tend to view taxes as going from themselves to the poor rather than from the rich to themselves.

it may reflect genuine confusion over causes, consequences, and remedies, rather than a lack of concern (Jackman and Jackman 1983). To determine whether Americans are aware of rising inequality, despite considerable obstacles to obtaining relevant information about it, we need to examine questions that distinguish between knowledge and tolerance of inequality, and that do so for the period over which inequality was rising. Even though coverage of inequality has been spotty in existing public opinion surveys, they are the natural place to begin.

A time series of polls asking about whether the "rich get richer and the poor get poorer" can be pieced together from Gallup, Louis Harris and Associates, and Princeton Survey Research Associates for the period stretching from 1972 to the present (see Table 1). This is about as close to a factual question as we get and it shows that agreement peaked at roughly 80 percent in 1991. This peak coincides with a recession, but unfortunately there is no data point for 1980 or 1982 in order to compare with previous recessionary years. The data point for February, 2002, however, shows a significantly lower level of agreement (68 percent), so it appears that the high level of agreement in the early 1990s is not attributable only to the recession. Agreement then declines in the middle 1990s, but it declines only to its levels in the late 1970s, which are still quite high (76/77 percent). Overall, then, there was increased sensitivity to inequality after the steep rise in inequality (see Figures 1a and 1b, which I discuss below), but, surprisingly, Americans were no more likely in 1996 to think that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer than they were in the 1970s, before the run-up in inequality. This indicates some awareness but not very much; stability is a more accurate depiction of the trend—the vast majority of Americans agree, throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, that American society is structured in a way that benefits the rich and penalizes the poor.

Stability also characterizes the longest available time series of polls that can be pieced together on the "care" question. The question asks: "Do you feel that the distribution of money and wealth in this country today is fair, or do you feel that the money and wealth in this country should be more evenly distributed among a larger percentage of the people?"[5] Again, the vast majority agrees that there ought to be a more even distribution of money and wealth, but the percentage drops significantly from 84 percent in 1974 to 60 percent in 1984. It then rises slightly to 63 percent and doesn't budge in 1987, 1990, 1996, 1998, or 2003. These data obviously suggest that there is *greater* tolerance of inequality in the era of rising inequality.

Most other relevant questions were asked in isolated instances or over shorter periods of time. With this shortcoming in mind, these questions present a somewhat different impression of awareness that inequality is increasing. For example, between 1974 and 1984, those who thought that an increasing gap between the haves and have-nots was likely to happen in the future increased from 36 to 40 percent (Ladd and Bowman 1998: 102). In surveys taken in the mid-1990s, 65 percent responded that the income gap between the rich and poor (and the wealthy and middle class) was widening or was wider than 20 years ago (Ladd and Bowman 1998:90). In a comparable question in the 2002 National Election Study, 74 percent said income differences were larger than 20 years ago (Bartels 2003). If we piece these disparate but similar survey questions together, it appears that awareness of rising inequality did grow from the 1970s to the present. Additional evidence of growing awareness and sensitivity is found in questions about whether society is divided between the haves and have-nots. Those who thought it was divided rose from 26 to 44 percent between 1988 and 2000, and the share who viewed themselves as have-nots rose from 17 to 33 percent (Draut 2002).

[5] Polls were taken from Yankelovich, Skelly and White for *Time* and from Gallup (*Public Perspective* 1999: 11).

In sum, Americans are probably aware of *some* trend, but the estimates vary widely and a case can be made that some of the available data overstate the level of knowledge. At first I supposed that questions of a factual nature were needed to determine levels of awareness. But I have since come to suspect that such questions might have several problems. First, they are leading questions that are biased in favor of agreement. Inequality must have increased if a question is being asked about it; otherwise, why would the question be put on the survey? By the same token, it is also possible that the questions are biased toward disagreement, in that they could force respondents to ponder whether perceptions do not match reality, but this involves much more analytical work than the former reaction does. Second, a bias toward agreement could also stem from a general tendency to think that "things are getting worse". While I am sure there is a way to ask factual questions without a built-in bias toward agreement with the factual reality, I have not found questions on inequality that succeed in this regard and certainly not questions that are repeated over time in order to assess whether awareness varies with changes in the trend itself.

THE ISSP SOCIAL INEQUALITY MODULES

Existing public opinion polls on inequality suffer from a number of other problems, most important of which is that the raw microdata is usually not available for a more detailed analysis of changes in awareness of inequality. The only individual-level data that I have been able to locate on questions about inequality that are replicated over time come from the Social Inequality Modules of the General Social Survey (GSS) and International Social Survey Program (ISSP). The questions are not factual in nature but instead ask respondents whether inequality is too high and whether inequality is justified by, for example, generating greater prosperity for the society as a whole. Specifically, there are three relevant questions:

Do you agree or disagree:

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

If the third question is inverted to read "Large disparities in income are *un*necessary for America's prosperity", agreement to each question implies a lack of tolerance or justification for inequality. Moreover, the range of answers to these questions—strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree, strongly disagree—allows us to gauge not only whether respondents care about inequality but how intensely they care.

Since these questions were asked in four separate survey years, we can also assess whether Americans have become more or less tolerant of inequality over time. The four years are the 1987 GSS, 1992 ISSP, 1996 GSS, and 2000 GSS. Over this period, as Figures 1a and 1b show, the $90^{th}/10^{th}$ ratio of wages leveled off, the $90^{th}/50^{th}$ ratio continued to grow steadily, and the $50^{th}/10^{th}$ ratio returned to 1970s levels by the end of the 1990s. These patterns permit a fairly stringent test of awareness because attitudes should shift not only once but twice, during the upswing and downswing of the trend. Assuming that the underlying determinants of attitudes about inequality do not change, then if Americans care about *rising* inequality we would expect an increase in intolerance and a decrease in justifications of inequality during the middle years of the study. We would expect the reverse at the end of the study period as inequality levels off in the late 1990s. Even in the absence of a *decline* in inequality, the late 1990s boom may have made Americans more tolerant of inequality and more willing to justify it, given that it raised wages at the bottom unlike the 1980s expansion. The unemployment rate also fell more than a full percentage point lower in the late 1990s than it did in the late 1980s.

As may already be obvious, these expectations regarding how attitudes about inequality should follow actual trends in inequality rest on one crucial assumption: that there is a lag in knowledge about the actual trend. As Figures 1a and 1b illustrate, the $90^{th}/10^{th}$ wage gap increased the most during the 1980s and began to level off early in the 1990s. If awareness of rising inequality was instantaneous—not completely implausible given the economic turmoil unleashed by the deep recessions of the early 1980s and at least some attention to the "disappearing middle class" during the rest of the decade—we might expect that the peak of opposition to inequality would be in the first year of our study, 1987 (e.g., see Newman 1988, 1993; Harrison and Bluestone 1988; Phillips 1990). But however important personal experiences of economic hardship were during this period, and however prescient critics were of the growing polarization spawned by Reagonomics, there was little consensus among experts about rising inequality until the early 1990s, which then spawned a flood of research on the extent and causes of inequality in the following years. This, coupled with continued instability in the economy and labor market, and no sign that inequality was reversing course, suggests that the 1990s is the decade in which inequality as such emerged as a "social fact". While it would obviously be best to have a longer time series stretching back to the 1970s, 1987 predates the escalation of interest in the issue by experts and advocates, as well as by the media (which I discuss in greater detail later in the paper).

While determining whether Americans care about rising inequality is fairly straightforward with the GSS and ISSP questions, determining whether Americans know about inequality is not as difficult as might first appear. The leap to inferring knowledge about inequality from tolerance of inequality rests on the assumption that tolerance should not change significantly without a trigger. One trigger might be a shift in the composition of the population, in which groups that tend to oppose inequality increase in proportion. If this is the case, knowledge probably plays little role. Another trigger might be that oppositional groups grow stronger in their opposition over time. If so, this could signal a "pure" increase in intolerance or, more likely, an increase in intolerance based on knowledge of greater inequality.[6] If neither shifts in composition nor effects fully account for a time trend toward increasing intolerance, the trigger is probably an increase in knowledge of inequality. Finally, if there are few differences among groups in changing levels of tolerance, this would suggest a fairly generalized awareness of rising inequality.[7] In short, if we are willing to settle for a more indirect and inductive approach to the question of knowledge, the GSS/ISSP Social Inequality Modules may provide a less biased reflection of knowledge than factual questions do.

DO THEY CARE?

Because answering the "do they know" question requires controlling for changes in composition and effects, I begin with the "do they care" question. Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c chart the probabilities of selecting each of the five response categories to the question "Are income differences too large?" (see also Appendix Table 1 for frequency distributions).[8] Figure 2a indicates a fairly high level of agreement that income differences are too large. Agreement is the modal category in all four years, rising from over 40 percent in 1987 to 50 percent in 1992 and

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[6] One possibility that I discuss later in the paper is that intolerance could have increased as a result of increasingly negative coverage of inequality. Since such coverage was generally linked to reports of rising inequality, it is not possible to fully disentangle the separate effects of factual information and negative attention.

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

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

then dropping back to its 1987 level in 2000. There is a decline in agreement in 1996, but that is because agreement shifted to strong agreement, as shown in Figure 2b. The share of respondents who strongly agreed that income differences were too large more than doubled from 1987 to 1996, rising from 15 to 33 percent before falling to 25 percent in 2000. Adding the two agreement categories together, as shown in Figure 2c, total agreement rose from 58 to 77 percent between 1987 and 1992 and then fell to 66 percent in 1996 and 2000.

The two main stories emerging from these data are already apparent in these figures. First, a static story: a large and fairly constant level of agreement that inequality is too large. Second, a dynamic story: a substantial growth in intense opposition to income differences since 1987, particularly in 1996 but also in 1992 and 2000. This growth in strong agreement was counterbalanced by a decline in disagreement from 1987 to 2000, whereas most of the other categories returned to their 1987 levels by the year 2000. For example, those who neither agreed nor disagreed fell from 22 to 12 percent and then ended up at 21 percent in 2000. A closer look at the trend lines for total agreement and total disagreement in Figure 2c indicates that consensus was greatest in 1992, in which there was the most total agreement and the least total disagreement. In contrast, polarization was greatest in 1996, in which the greatest total disagreement was accompanied by a high level of total agreement (though not as high as in 1992).[9]

The static and dynamic stories are more or less replicated in the answers to the other two questions. Agreement is the modal category (as shown in Figures 3a and 4a and Appendix Table 1) and there was a large increase in the share of respondents who strongly agree to these questions (as shown in Figures 3b and 4b). The percent who strongly agree that income differences benefit the rich and powerful doubled from 14 to 28 between 1987 and 1996. Even

[9] Variance and kurtosis statistics confirm these patterns of consensus and polarization as well.

more remarkable was the increase in those who strongly agree that income differences are unnecessary for prosperity, rising from 6 to 26 percent between 1987 and 1996. As I discuss in greater detail below, this question appears to be tapping into something beyond simple knowledge and tolerance of rising inequality. It asks a much more complicated question about the relationship between growth and inequality that will prove helpful in explaining responses to the question of whether income differences are too large. I therefore focus the rest of the analysis on what I think is the best and most straightforward question about tolerance of inequality—whether income differences are too large—and return to the prosperity question later.[10]

WHO CARES?

By 1996 a substantial minority of respondents (one third) expressed intense opposition to existing levels of inequality. Who, then, was most likely to oppose inequality? Or was opposition widespread, cutting across groups? In particular, are the groups that have fared the worst from rising inequality the most likely to oppose it and increasingly so? Median voter models imply that this might be the case. If the median voter is inclined to support redistributive programs when median income falls below mean income, voters with income at the median or lower ought to be more likely to oppose increasing levels of inequality. That is, support for redistributive programs presumes opposition to inequality, although opposition may not be sufficient. Alternatively, since inequality had a widespread impact on the broad middle and lower class, at least during a large span of the 1980s and 1990s, there may *not* be as much income differentiation in attitudes towards inequality as there are towards poverty or as one might theoretically assume based on arguments of the economic self-interest of median voters.

[10] The results of an analysis of the "inequality benefits the rich and powerful" are similar to those of the "income differences are too large" question, and these two questions are more highly inter-correlated (.40) than either is with the prosperity question (.05 and .22, respectively).

To answer these questions and, more fundamentally, to determine whether the increase in opposition stands after controlling for changes in composition and effects, I estimate a series of binary logistic regression models of the form[11]:

Pr(*Strongly Agree* = 1) = *F*(*year dummies*,
demographic controls,
education and income,
subjective class,
opportunity for mobility,
party identification and ideology),

where the probability of selecting "strongly agree" is a function of time, direct or objective socioeconomic status (i.e., education and income), indirect or subjective socioeconomic status (i.e., subjective class and opportunity for mobility), and political orientation and ideology. The objective and subjective measures of socioeconomic status will indicate whether opposition to inequality is linked to one's position in the distribution of income, education, and long-term economic mobility. The political and ideological variables serve as controls for underlying beliefs about inequality and overall political awareness and knowledge. They also have substantive relevance as indicators of politically-based shifts in opposition and/or intensity of opposition to inequality.[12] Nested models are estimated in which the variables on each line of the equation are added to the variables listed on the previous lines in order to assess the relative

[11] The outcome variables are ordered and categorical, suggesting that ordered logistic regression would be the appropriate form of analysis. In ordered logistical regression, there is an intercept for each category of the outcome variable and the independent variables are constrained to have the same proportionate effect on each category of the outcome variable relative to the intercept for that category. With an outcome variable that has more than two categories, however, it is possible that changes are balanced out very unevenly across only a subset of the categories—for example, with large increases in one matched by large decreases in a second, while the other categories change little by comparison. This is the case with the effect of time on the outcome variables considered here. Many of the other independent variables also fail to have proportionate effects across outcome categories. Consequently, it is necessary to estimate a fully unconstrained model in which the coefficients vary for each category of the outcome (i.e., in a binary logistic regression model). The substantive conclusions are the same, though slightly muted, in an ordered logit analysis.

[12] Although in this case, and with the other subjective measures as well (e.g., of mobility opportunities), deciphering cause from effect is not straightforward—awareness of inequality may result in shifts in political orientation or optimism about the future.

impact of each set of covariates and to determine how much they diminish or explain the overall time trend.

The singular focus on "strongly agree" as the main outcome of interest is based on several considerations. First, it is the best indicator of the intensity of care (or intolerance) and therefore a sign of potential sentiment in favor of policies to reduce inequality, a concern that underlies my interest in this subject as well as that of others.[13] Second, it offers a conservative estimate of the share of people who oppose inequality, since it does not include those who simply "agree" that income differences are too large. Finally, the "strongly agree" category shows the greatest change over time of all the categories. It therefore focuses our attention on the second of our two main stories—the dynamic story.

As can be seen in Tables 2 and 3, the dynamic story holds up very well. The time trend remains strong and positive throughout the series of models that control for income, education, demographic characteristics, subjective class, perceived opportunity for mobility, party identification and ideology. Without any controls, respondents were over two times as likely in 1992 as in 1987 to strongly agree with the statement that income differences are too large and 2.85 times as likely in 1996 (see the odds ratios listed on the first line of Table 4). The increase in 1992 does not budge significantly after controls are added, but the increase in 1996 does decline. Still, even after adding all controls, respondents were over twice as likely to intensely oppose high levels of inequality in 1996 as they were in 1987 (see the sixth line of Table 4).[14] The increase from 1987 to 2000, however, is fully explained by the controls, as the coefficient for the year 2000 turns insignificant in the last model (Model 6 of Table 3). In brief, there was a widespread, cross-group, increase in opposition to inequality in both 1992 and 1996.

[13] The relationship between knowledge, intolerance, and policy preferences will be examined in future work.
[14] This does not include the role of the prosperity variable, seen in line 7 of Table 4, which I discuss later.

Although the increase in opposition to inequality was broad-based, some groups were more likely than others to oppose inequality in all four years. Taken as a whole, the subjective and political variables are much more important in determining opposition to inequality than objective indicators such as income and education (see Tables 2 and 3).[15] Education is not significant in any of the models and income is small in absolute terms relative to the subjective factors and loses significance once subjective class and opportunity for mobility are added. In experimenting with the functional form of the income variable, I found that most of the income distribution is similar in its opposition to inequality whereas the top quintile and the top decile stand out in their *lack* of opposition to inequality.[16] Still, these results are not robust, holding up only in the baseline models. The demographic variables (i.e., race, gender, age, marital status, household size, region, employment status, etc.) have little effect as well.

Subjective factors having to do with relative economic standing and perceived opportunities for mobility are strongly associated with opposition to inequality, so strong, in fact, that they are not simply picking up the indirect effects of income. Subjective class, for example, remains strong throughout all models. The four categories of this variable—lower class, working class, middle class, and upper class—are not as finely tuned as one would like, but they show a clear distinction between those who identify as lower class on the one hand and middle class on the other hand. Even the working class differentiates itself sharply from the lower class in terms of its tolerance for inequality. The upper class, however, is the most similar to the lower class; its coefficient eventually turns insignificant. This configuration of class orientations toward inequality can be seen in Figure 6a (drawn from Model 4) where the lower class clearly stands apart from the rest, with levels of opposition to inequality that are generally 10 percentage points

[15] This is consistent with much previous research (Verba and Orren 1985; Kluegal and Smith 1986; Gilens 1999).
[16] The goodness of fit statistic for the series of quintile dummies as a block is equivalent to that for the linear income variable included in these models.

greater than for the other groups. The middle class has the lowest level of opposition, with a 15 percentage point gap with the lower class in 1996.

While opposition to inequality is strong among the lower class, their numbers are small (5 percent) and stable (see Appendix Chart 1a). In contrast, 90 percent of the sample identifies as either working or middle class, with roughly equal shares of both. Working and middle class identification therefore seems to obscure one's position in the income distribution, since both groups lost out relative to the top over the entire period of this study. In absolute terms among *families*, however, the middle class was able to maintain its standard of living through the increased working hours of wives over the 1980s and 1990s (Mishel, Bernstein, and Schmitt 2001). This is perhaps why the objective family income variable says so little about opposition to inequality, in addition to the twin desires to identify with the middle class and disidentify with the lower class.

This brings us directly to the implications of believing that one's standard of living will improve. The specific wording of the question is: "The way things are in America today, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living—do you agree or disagree?" This question is at the heart of Jennifer Hochschild's first and second tenets of the American dream, which posit that everyone has a reasonable chance of achieving the American dream (Hochschild 1995).[17] In the recoding of the variable that I use in Models 4-6, "strongly disagreeing" that one's standard of living will improve is the omitted category, "disagreeing" is the next category (equal to 1) and "neither", "agree", and "strongly agree" are all grouped together in the third category (equal to 2). The reason for this recoding is that there were no

[17] This question taps an individual's sense of their own chances for mobility, not those of others or the society as a whole. Individuals tend to be more optimistic about their own chances even when they are increasingly pessimistic about mobility chances in the society as a whole (e.g., Kluegal and Smith 1986). Unfortunately, there are no questions in the GSS that tap this societal-level perception of opportunities for mobility that are also included in all four years.

differences in opposition to inequality among those who were either neutral or agreed that their standard of living would improve. To be concise, this latter group is referred to as the mobility “optimists” and the former group, consisting of those who strongly disagree and disagree, are referred to as the mobility “pessimists”.

The mobility optimists constituted fully three quarters of the sample, and that was at their low point in 1992 and 1996 (see Appendix Chart 1b). In 1987 and 2000, the optimists constituted 90 and 85 percent of the sample, respectively. The mobility pessimists, in contrast, ranged from a low of 10 percent in 1987 to a high of 25 percent in 1992 and 1996; then they drop back to around 15 percent in 2000. Although the number of pessimists seems quite low, the increase in insecurity about the future has a notable impact on opposition to inequality in the mid-1990s (Table 2 shows the reduction in the time coefficients and Table 4 in the odds ratios when this variable is included in Model 4). The time trend is reduced because it is partly accounted for by an increase in the share of individuals who are pessimistic about their chances for upward mobility, individuals who are much more likely to oppose inequality in all four years. Figure 6b shows that majorities of those who strongly disagree that their standard of living will improve express intense opposition to inequality in 1992 and 1996, and near majorities do so in 2000. There is almost a 30 percentage point difference between this group and the optimists in their opposition to inequality.

Despite evidence of significant divergence in views toward inequality, however, none of the groups discussed so far—the mobility pessimists or the lower class—increased their opposition to inequality in the 1990s relative to other groups. Neither did the mobility optimists or the working and middle classes increase their tolerance of inequality relative to other groups during this period. In other words, the extent of polarization in views about inequality between the lower class and the middle class or between mobility pessimists and mobility optimists has not changed. These groups are not becoming increasingly polarized in their attitudes toward inequality. The increase in opposition to inequality in the 1990s was spread equally throughout the population and the time trend remains strong despite an increase in the share of oppositional groups, such as mobility pessimists, in the population.[18]

Although the type of inequality that we are discussing is economic in nature, attitudes toward inequality are not shaped only by an individual's economic circumstances. Beliefs about inequality are shaped by political and ideological convictions about the causes of inequality and the function and purpose of inequality as well (Verba and Orren 1985; Kluegal and Smith 1986; Gilens 1999). Those who believe that factors beyond an individual's control are responsible for poverty, unemployment, or inequality are more likely to oppose inequality and to support redistributive programs. On the other hand, those who believe that individuals are largely to blame for their situation are more likely to view inequality as a result of lack of effort or talent. Although I do not have room to empirically explore the connection between beliefs about inequality and support for redistributive programs in this paper, ultimately that is the aim of understanding the extent of knowledge and tolerance of inequality in an era of historically high levels of inequality.

Ideally we would like variables that directly measure explanations for poverty, unemployment, inequality, and related outcomes, but such variables are not available for most of the years covered in this study. In their place, more general indicators of party identification and liberal/conservative ideology can serve as a reasonable approximation of the extent to which a respondent endorses structural versus individualist explanations of unequal economic outcomes.

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[18] This is consistent with Page and Shapiro's (1992: 285-320) finding of parallel changes in public opinion among sub-groups on a wide range of issues.

Both indicators will also allow us to begin linking attitudes toward inequality more directly to the electoral arena as they will potentially reveal party-based and ideology-based segments of the population that consider inequality to be a serious social problem; or, allowing for the endogeneity of political and ideological orientation, such indicators could point toward political shifts by those who are concerned about growing inequality. This is especially apropos given that three of our four survey years coincide with election years.[19] Finally, party identification and ideology both measure political knowledge and awareness (e.g., those who are strong Democrats or strong Republicans are likely to follow politics more closely), something that we would like to control for in our investigation of the level of knowledge of rising inequality.

As shown in Model 5 of Table 3, these variables are strongly associated with attitudes toward inequality and they are in the predictable direction: Democrats and liberals are significantly more likely to oppose current levels of inequality relative to Republicans and conservatives (the omitted categories).[20] And because the population became more conservative in the 1990s, relative to 1987 (see Appendix Charts 1c and 1d), the time trend becomes stronger when these variables are included in Model 5. Had the population not shifted in a more conservative direction, the increase in opposition to inequality would have been even greater.[21] On net, the negative effect of a shift toward self-identified conservatives and Republicans, who are more likely to tolerate inequality, was counterbalanced by the positive effect of a shift toward

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[19] Apparently this was unintended. The timing of survey years for the Social Inequality Modules was established by the International Social Survey Program, which could not avoid election years in all participating countries.

[20] After experimenting with a number of different forms of these variables, I found the best fitting model to be one in which I grouped the 7 (ideology) and 8 (party identification) categories into 3 dummy variables for each measure. For the party identification variable, "Republicans" is the omitted category and it includes strong Republicans, Republicans, and independents/near Republicans; "Democrats and Independents" includes independents, independents/near Democrats, and Democrats; "Strong Democrats and Other Party" includes strong Democrats and other party. For the ideology variable, "Conservations" is the omitted category and includes slightly conservative, conservative, and strongly conservative, as well as slightly liberal (whose coefficient was very similar to the conservatives); "Moderates" includes only moderates; and "Liberals" includes strong liberals and liberals.

[21] See the increase in odds ratios from line 4 to line 5 in Table 4.

mobility pessimists, who are more likely to oppose inequality. After including both sets of variables, the year effects are as strong as they were in the baseline model with year dummies only (as seen in comparing lines 1 and 5 of Table 4).

The fact that Americans grew more conservative—in terms of self-identification as well as in terms of opposition to social policies such as welfare—at the same time that opposition to inequality mounted throughout the country, underscores the salience of the issue of inequality. It also raises something of a conundrum. One possible implication is that whatever was behind the narrow Clinton victories in 1992 and 1996 was also behind the increase in opposition to inequality, or possibly even that the latter fueled the former. Once again, this assumes that people knew that inequality increased, but let's leave that question aside for the moment.

One indication that there was indeed a shift of a *political* nature that was associated with the opposition to inequality is illustrated in Figure 7b (based on Model 6 of Table 3). Moderates grew substantially more opposed to inequality in the mid-1990s. In 1987 and 1992, moderates were as tolerant of inequality as conservatives were. In 1996, they became more similar to liberals in their opposition to inequality, with 38 percent in strong agreement that income differences were too large. This compares with 13 percent of moderates in 1987 and 24 percent in 1992. Moreover, unlike the other oppositional groups (i.e., the lower class and the mobility pessimists), moderates are a large share of the population, accounting for some 35 percent of the sample.

Thus the issue of inequality appears to have made its way into the mainstream by 1996. This is the clearest indication so far that awareness of inequality was not confined to small, aggrieved or highly politically active segments of the population. As far as political activists are concerned, we see evidence of their influence for the first time in Model 6 of Table 3 as well.

Unlike any of the other oppositional groups, strong Democrats and other party members maintained their high levels of opposition to inequality all the way into 2000 (see the year interaction effects in Model 6 and in Figure 7a). As I discuss in more detail below, this suggests that they might be the only ones to have knowledge of continuing high levels of inequality or to have more permanently transformed their views on inequality than other oppositional groups, or both. More interesting, perhaps, is the possibility that knowledge of historically high levels of inequality *led* some Americans to become more strongly Democratic or to endorse third parties, something that should be explored in future research.

* * *

Before turning to a discussion of the "do they know" question and further speculation regarding the "do they care" question, let me summarize the results in terms of whether they account for the large, unexplained increase in intense opposition to inequality that occurred in 1992 and 1996. First, compositional shifts toward an increase in groups that are opposed to inequality cannot explain the large increase in opposition to inequality that we observe in 1992, 1996, and to a lesser extent, 2000. As line 5 of Table 4 shows, after all variables are included, intense opposition to inequality is 2.26 times more likely in 1992, 2.96 times more likely in 1996, and 1.57 times more likely in 2000, relative to 1987. These factors are *greater* than they were in the baseline model with no controls whatsoever. Thus, on net, the population shifted towards groups that were *more* likely to be *tolerant* of inequality over the course of the 1990s. The year interactions have a greater impact on the time trend, however, as would be expected. The interaction with moderates reduces the year effect in 1996 by about a quarter, and the remainder of the increase in opposition in 2000 is completely eliminated by the interaction with strong Democrats and other party members. In sum, although we know much more about who opposes inequality and who tolerates inequality in all four years, the substantial *increase* in intense opposition to inequality in 1992 and 1996 is still largely unexplained.

DO THEY KNOW?

Do Americans know about rising inequality? The answer appears to be yes. As I argued above, a large increase in intense opposition to current levels of inequality does not occur without a trigger. Tolerance should not change so significantly, so quickly. Yet the trigger was not a change in the composition of the population, in which oppositional groups grew in number relative to non-oppositional groups. This happened to a certain extent but was counterbalanced by an increase in the number of people who tend to be tolerant of inequality. Except in 2000, the trigger also was not a greater increase in intensity of opposition among oppositional groups relative to other groups, as the year interaction effects were largely insignificant. The one exception proves the rule: moderates were significantly more likely than conservatives to oppose inequality in 1996 even though they were no different from conservatives in any other year. That a large and mainstream segment of the population, which under normal circumstances is predisposed to tolerate inequality, all of a sudden became intolerant of inequality in 1996 suggests a widespread awareness that inequality had increased to intolerable levels and that people knew about it.

Another reason to think that Americans were aware of rising inequality is that shifts in opposition follow a reasonable time trend, increasing and decreasing with trends in actual inequality. Assuming a lag in public awareness that follows the lag in expert knowledge about inequality, which did not come to consensus around rising inequality until the early 1990s, the rise in opposition to inequality in 1992 and 1996 follows the rise in inequality while the decline in opposition to inequality follows the leveling off of inequality in the second half of the 1990s. Strong Democrats continued their opposition into 2000 perhaps because they were privy to more specialized knowledge about different forms of inequality, many of which either continued to rise (i.e., the $90^{th}/50^{th}$ ratio) or leveled off at historical levels (i.e., the $90^{th}/10^{th}$ ratio). Shifts in overall opposition, then, were fostered by broad-based (if approximate) knowledge of rising inequality in the early 1990s and the equalizing effects of strong growth and low unemployment in the late 1990s.

But even if one believes that these questions indirectly tap knowledge of inequality, this still begs the question of exactly *how* people became aware of changes in inequality. There are other complications as well: were changes in inequality as such the basis for opposition to inequality or were changes in the overall health of the economy responsible? To answer these questions, I take a closer look at media coverage of inequality over the time period of this study.[22] To my surprise—because of the common impression that inequality has not been a subject of public discussion—the trend in opposition to inequality seems to track media coverage of inequality suspiciously closely. Media coverage of inequality begins in earnest in the late 1980s (e.g., Phillips 1990), increases steadily thereafter with a focus on excessive executive pay in 1992 and on the jobless recovery and downsizing in the mid-1990s. Coverage tapered off in 2000 and was replaced by an emphasis on how inequality is less important when all boats are lifted by a strong economy, as was widely believed to have happened in the late 1990s.[23]

[22] As Page and Shapiro (1992:319) write: "[P]olitical information and interpretations conveyed to the public have become highly unified…Practically all Americans are exposed to the same facts and ideas, through network television news and the wire service reports that dominate daily newspapers and provide the grist for discussion by friends and neighbors." The role of the media is especially important when there are few other sources of economic and political information, such as workers' associations and other kinds of mass-based associations.

[23] The following interpretation of shifts in media coverage over the late 1980s and 1990s is based on a Lexis/Nexis search of newspaper articles on inequality.

For example, Kevin J. Murphy, an economist and expert on executive compensation, wrote:

> "Although the US business press had followed CEO pay for decades, the CEO pay debate achieved international prominence in the early 1990s. The controversy heightened with the November 1991 introduction of Graef Crystal's expose on CEO pay, *In Search of Excess*, and exploded following President Bush's ill-timed pilgrimage to Japan in January 1992, accompanied by an entourage of highly paid US executives. What was meant to be a plea for Japanese trade concessions dissolved into accusations that US competitiveness was hindered by its excessive executive compensation practices as attention focused on the 'huge pay disparities between top executives in the two countries.' Consistent with *Time* magazines's labeling of CEO pay as the 'populist issue that no politician can resist,' high CEO salaries emerged as a bipartisan campaign issue among the leading candidates in the 1992 presidential election" (Murphy 1997:417-18).[24]

To shed light on the specific issue of awareness of excessive CEO pay and pay gaps between CEOs and ordinary workers, I turn to a series of interesting questions that appear in 1987, 1992, and 2000 as part of the Social Inequality Modules. The questions ask respondents to estimate the actual earnings of executives, doctors, skilled workers, and unskilled workers. Many scholars may be familiar with a similar set of questions which ask what individuals *should* earn in these occupations (Verba and Orren 1985; Kelley and Evans 1992; Osberg and Smeeding 2003). But for our purposes, changes over time in perceived *actual* earnings are more illuminating if we are interested in knowledge of changes in *actual* inequality. We can compare changes in average perceived pay levels over time to see whether, after adjusting for inflation, some occupations are perceived to have benefited by the economy of the 1990s while other occupations are perceived to have benefited less or, worse, taken a big hit. Furthermore, we can determine whether there is an increasing gap in the figures respondents report for occupations located at the top and bottom of the occupational distribution.

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[24] Murphy cites the *Wall Street Journal* (1/21/92 and 1/15/92) and *Time* (5/5/92). Although I focus on executive pay here, as Katherine Newman wrote in 1993 (p. ix), coverage was not limited only to this issue: "News of economic disaster has dominated the media for the past four years, gathering strength as the election season of 1992 neared".

Figures 5a and 5b report these changes in perceptions of pay for executives, doctors, skilled workers, and unskilled workers. In Figure 5a, we see that estimates of executive pay were much higher in 1992 than in 1987 and the increase was greater than for another high-income occupation, doctors. The share of respondents who selected the top-coded category of one million dollars for executive earnings rose from 4 percent in 1987 to 20 percent in 1992 and then to 24 percent in 2000. Meanwhile, remarkably, perceived estimates of pay for skilled and unskilled workers either *stagnated* or *fell*. The perceived pay of doctors was also less in 2000 than in 1987. As a result, Figure 5b shows that the perceived gaps between the earnings of executives and skilled or unskilled workers rose over the 1990s whereas the pay gaps with doctors were the same in 1987 and 2000.[25] These data indicate that Americans were already aware in 1992 that pay soared for executives but not for the average worker or even for other professionals such as doctors.

From 1992 media attention grew and focused much more on the specific issue of inequality. Whereas 1992 coverage was limited to the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and a few other big city newspapers, coverage spread to a larger number of regional papers. Most pointed was a report on December 7, 1995, in the *Washington Post* in which Steven Pearlstein wrote:

> "The growing income gap between the rich and poor has become the central issue in American politics, and the party that figures out what to do about it—or that makes the right noises about it—will dominate American politics. That was the message from the left and the right, Democrat and Republican, politician and pollster, economist and financier at a forum on inequality held yesterday on Capital Hill."

[25] However, the pay ratio between executives and unskilled/skilled workers (in the 8-15 range) is still in the range of the pay ratio between executives and auto workers and elevator operators in Verba and Orren's (1985) study conducted in the early 1980s.

Indicative of the increasingly political salience of the issue of inequality, this quotation was reprinted in the opening pages of a 1998 American Enterprise Institute report on public attitudes about inequality. In fact, the report seems to have been motivated at least in part by the growing negative media coverage of inequality during the mid-1990s (Ladd and Bowman 1998).

Once again we can turn to the General Social Survey to shed light on the role of media coverage in fostering knowledge of rising inequality in the mid-1990s. For this we finally return to the "prosperity" question: "Do you agree or disagree that income differences are unnecessary for prosperity?" (Recall that I inverted the question so that those who strongly agree to this question are expressing opposition to inequality.) As I argued above, this question refers to an aspect of inequality that is more complicated than the question of whether income differences are too large. It asks whether inequality is necessary for prosperity or growth, something that is the subject of longstanding debate among economists. Consequently, following Zaller (1992), one would expect that educated elites might have greater access to information about such an issue; that is, that the answer to this question would be more sensitive to contemporary currents in elite discourse. Moreover, in the mid-1990s, media coverage on the economy emphasized increasing inequality as well as slow growth and a jobless recovery, suggesting that inequality was *not* necessary for growth, and even perhaps that inequality was *bad* for growth.

Table 5 replicates Models 1, 2, 4, and 5 but with the outcome now equal to those who strongly agree that inequality is unnecessary for prosperity. Although educational background had no impact whatsoever on views about whether income differences are too large, Table 5 shows that education has a strong effect on how one responds to the prosperity question. The most educated are almost four times as likely as the least educated to strongly agree that inequality is *unnecessary* for prosperity—exactly the opposite of what we might expect based on economic self-interest. Meanwhile, income and subjective class have no effect, while most of the other variables have the same effect as in previous versions of these models. The main exception is that moderates adhere to the conservative line in their belief that inequality is *necessary* for prosperity. Finally, the standardized time coefficient for 1996 is much larger than in any other year (~ .47), and much larger than it was for the "income differences are too large" question. This indicates a particularly sharp overall increase in strong agreement that inequality is unnecessary for prosperity. This accords with the raw trends reported above, where strong agreement to the prosperity question increased from 6 to 26 percent between 1987 and 1996 (see Figure 4b and Appendix Table 1). This is what we would expect if elite discourse on inequality was more intense during this period and was focused on this specific aspect of inequality. And apparently this emphasis spread, spilling over into the minds of the general public as well.

By the end of the 1990s, however, coverage took a turn towards qualified acceptance of inequality. In 2000, there is still media coverage of inequality but the tone has changed. In a December 11, 2000 editorial in *USA Today*, Dinesh D'Souza wrote:

> "We are right to be troubled by such extremes [in inequality]. But an excessive focus on inequality carries the presumption that the explosion of affluence we are experiencing is cause for mourning, when in fact it is cause for celebration: the United States has extended to millions of ordinary people the avenues of freedom and personal fulfillment previously available only to the aristocratic few…But we should understand that inequality is the inevitable byproduct of a growing and prospering economy. In our zeal to improve the conditions of the less well-off, we should not imperil the engine of economic growth that lifts all of us, rich and poor alike, to a higher standard of living".

Similarly, others wrote about the lack of concern for inequality in a high-growth economy that was perceived as fair and open to anyone who worked hard to succeed or acquired the skills rewarded in the new economy.[26] Although CEO pay was still high, coverage of celebrity CEOs was glowing, as they were considered responsible for the bull market and booming economy of the late 1990s (Khurana 2002). The reputations of CEOs, and that of the high-tech economy more generally, had not yet been tarnished by the bursting of the stock market bubble and the Enron-spawned corporate scandals.

* * *

Throughout the time period of this study, then, media coverage seems to have had an impact on awareness of inequality. In particular, uneven media coverage of inequality could help explain the rising and then falling opposition to inequality over the course of the 1990s. Because coverage was both informative (about factual trends) and negative (against inequality) in the early to middle 1990s, we cannot fully disentangle the effects of information from those of negative coverage. It may be that increasing opposition was fed by the message that inequality was worrisome rather than that inequality was rising and therefore worrisome, although one was inextricable from the other in the media accounts I surveyed. A more serious objection is that the overall health of the economy, as much as inequality itself, could have driven the shifts in opposition. Economic growth certainly seems to have been driving the decrease in opposition to inequality that we see in the year 2000. This line of argument, however, would suggest that Americans were more concerned about the jobless recovery in the mid-1990s than they were about the recession in 1992—in other words, that absolute unemployment and growth rates are not as much the issue, at least not for intense opposition to inequality (for unemployment was obviously greater in 1992 than in 1996). Similarly, this would suggest that what matters in the late 1990s is the record growth of the economy and not inequality as such, since the decrease in

[26] It is an indication of the broader salience of the issue of inequality that conservative commentators such as Dinesh D'Souza were compelled to write about it.

intense opposition to inequality is much greater than the decrease in actual inequality. Thus attitudes about inequality may well stand-in for a broader range of concerns about the state of the economy.

CONCLUSION

> "Progressives have relished talking about the bleakness of the economy for working people and presumed that was the end of the story. We now understand that it is only the beginning."
> -- Stanley Greenberg (1996)
>
> "Americans seek to reconcile their belief in equal opportunity with obvious disparities in life circumstances by believing that some inequalities are *temporary* but correctable anomalies in an otherwise well-functioning system."
> -- Jennifer Hochschild (1995, emphasis added)

Americans seem to both know and care about inequality, and this was particularly the case in the mid-1990s. In 1996, roughly a third of Americans strongly agreed and another third agreed that income differences are too large. Strong agreement had more than doubled between 1987 and 1996, fed in part by increasing and increasingly negative media coverage of rising inequality. Intense opposition to inequality then dropped back to about a quarter of the population in the year 2000, after several years of strong economic growth and low unemployment.

Was 1996 and the late 1990s a missed opportunity to capitalize on increasing intolerance and a strong economy to enact redistributive programs (broadly speaking to include education, health care, and so on)? The quotations by Stanley Greenberg and Jennifer Hochschild offer two different answers to this question, I think. One view would be that the middle to late 1990s were a missed opportunity in which advocates of less inequality and more redistribution (again, broadly speaking) failed to convey a convincing message about how to reduce inequality and the growing economic insecurity that it fostered. In earlier work, Jackman and Jackman (1983) identified a similar problem—the availability of few viable alternatives to a level of inequality that is perceived as too high by a large share of Americans (see also Hochschild 1981). As I discussed in the first section of the paper, this problem is made all the more intractable by some of the unique hurdles that must be overcome in discussing the issue of inequality (i.e., that it is more normatively ambiguous and more abstract than other forms and aspects of inequality, such as poverty, racial inequality, and gender inequality). In this view, the will to reduce inequality is present among the American public but not among American politicians or dominant interest groups. In his historical analysis of party platforms, Gerring argues that the "spectacular increase in social inequality from the 1970s to the 1990s occasioned little comment from Democratic orators, [whereas] it is difficult to imagine Bryan, Wilson, Rossevelt or Truman remaining silent on such matters" (1998: 236).

In a second view, the will is not really there among the American public, for their intense opposition to inequality is only a temporary blip in a long history of qualified acceptance of inequality that effectively "privatizes" the issue from public and political action (Verba and Orren 1985; Hochschild 1981). Importantly, this view might suggest that prosperous times are not generous times; in fact, they may be the opposite as Americans look toward the economy rather than the government to ameliorate inequality.[27] This view accords well with the role that economic growth played in conceptualizations of inequality in postwar America. As Lisabeth Cohen writes: "Faith in the mass consumption postwar economy hence came to mean much more than the ready availability of goods to buy. Rather, it stood for an elaborate, integrated ideal of economic abundance and democratic political freedom, both equitably distributed, that became

[27] Gilens (1999) finds, for example, that support for welfare generally increases during recessions and falls during expansions, although the 1980s were an exception in which support for welfare continued during the expansion. Gilens speculates that this might have occurred because Americans knew that the benefits of the expansion were skewed toward the top. If this is the case, then Americans may have viewed the late 1990s expansion as more equitable.

almost a national civil religion from the late 1940s into the 1970s" (2003: 127). Of course the difference between postwar America and the late 1990s is dramatic: inequality reached its low point in the century during the former period and one of its high points during the latter. Moreover, the obvious counter example is the 1960s, in which the Great Society and anti-discrimination law were enacted at the height of industrial capitalism when racial inequality and poverty were clear and glaring problems, made visible by the civil rights movement.

The "exception" of the 1960s, along with the substantial shifts in opposition to inequality that occurred over the relatively short time span of this study and the high absolute levels of opposition to inequality that characterize all four years, reflects the kernels of truth in both views. Americans clearly want a less unequal society, but in the face of few transparently beneficial alternatives, they choose what they think is the path of least resistance (economic growth). This is all well and good if economic growth *always* results in a more equitable distribution of income; it will not suffice, however, in a new economy shorn of all the equalizing forces of earlier eras—internal labor markets, equity norms, regulated industries, unions, and the minimum wage, not to mention two world wars. A key challenge, then, is to shatter the illusion that today's economic growth is the same as it once was.

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Figure 1a
Trends in Male Hourly Wage Ratios, 1973-2001

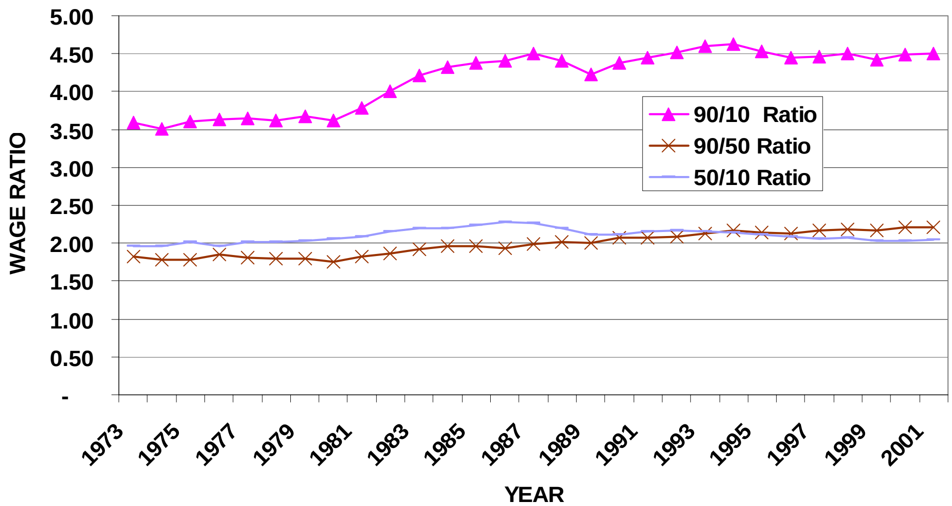
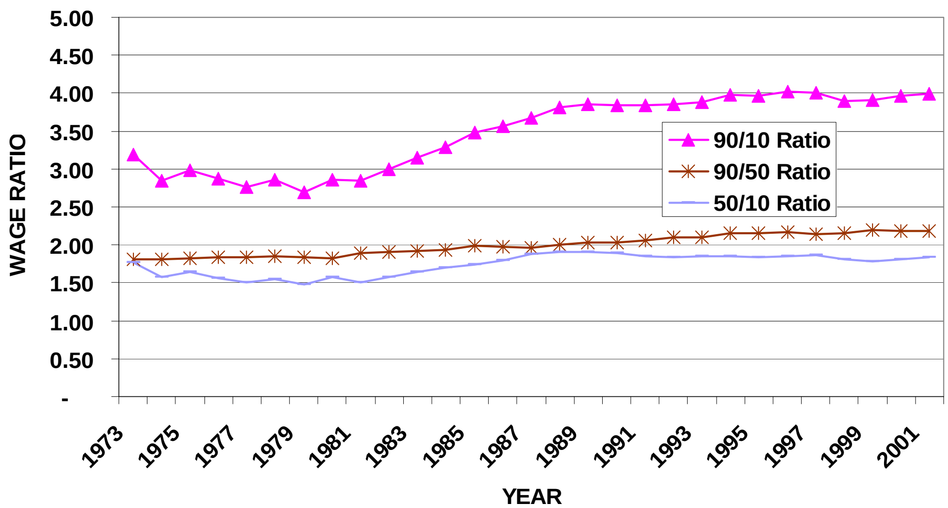


Figure 1b
Trends in Female Hourly Wage Ratios, 1973-2001



Source: Economic Policy Institute, Washington, D.C. http://www.epinet.org.

Figure 2a
Q: Are Income Differences Too Large?
Agreement by Year (excluding "Strongly Agree")

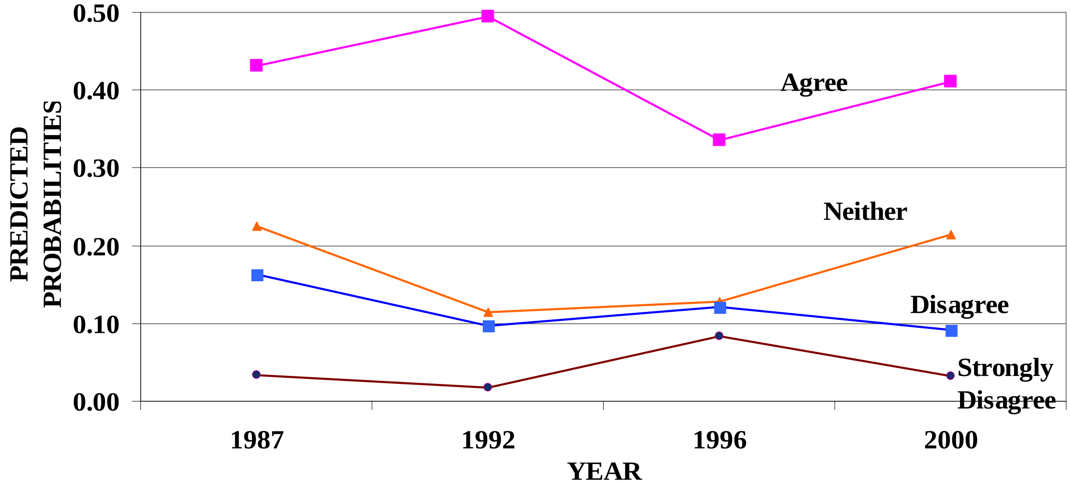


Figure 2b
Q: Are Income Differences Too Large?
"Strongly Agree" by Year

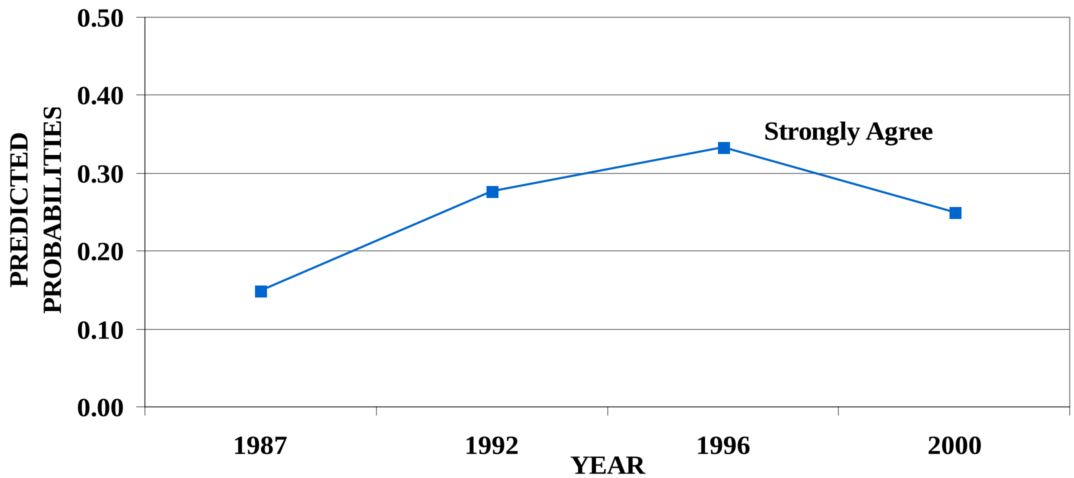


Figure 2c
Q: Are Income Differences Too Large?
Cumulative Probabilities for (SA and A) and (SD and D)

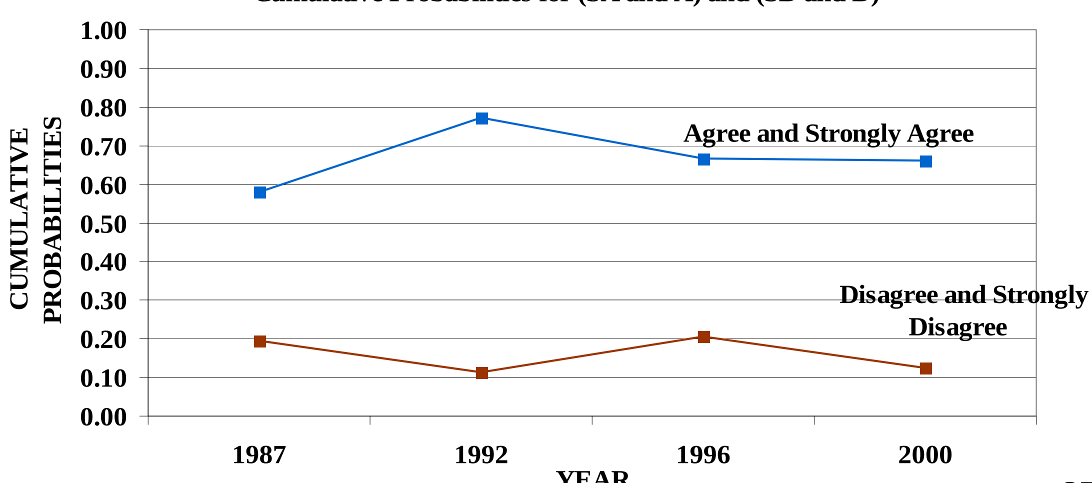


Figure 3a
Q: Do Income Differences Benefit the Rich?
Agreement by Year (excluding "Strongly Agree")

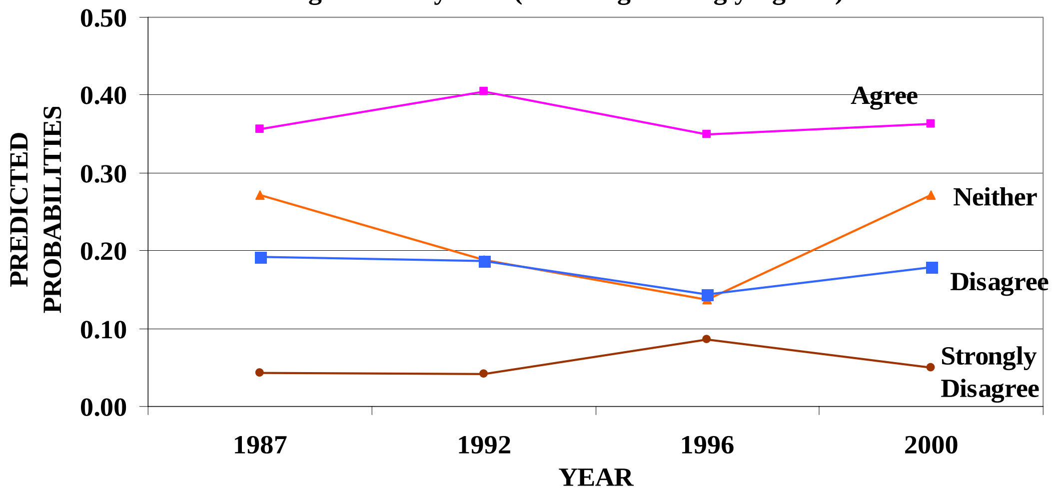


Figure 3b
Q: Do Income Differences Benefit the Rich?
Agreement by Year (excluding "Strongly Agree")

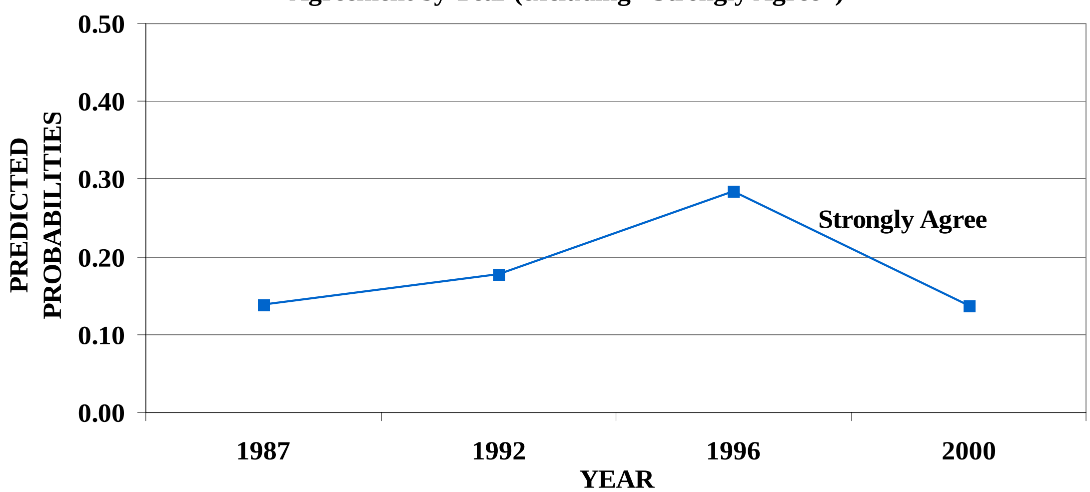


Figure 3c
Q: Do Income Differences Benefit the Rich?
Cumulative Probabilities for (SA and A) and (SD and D)

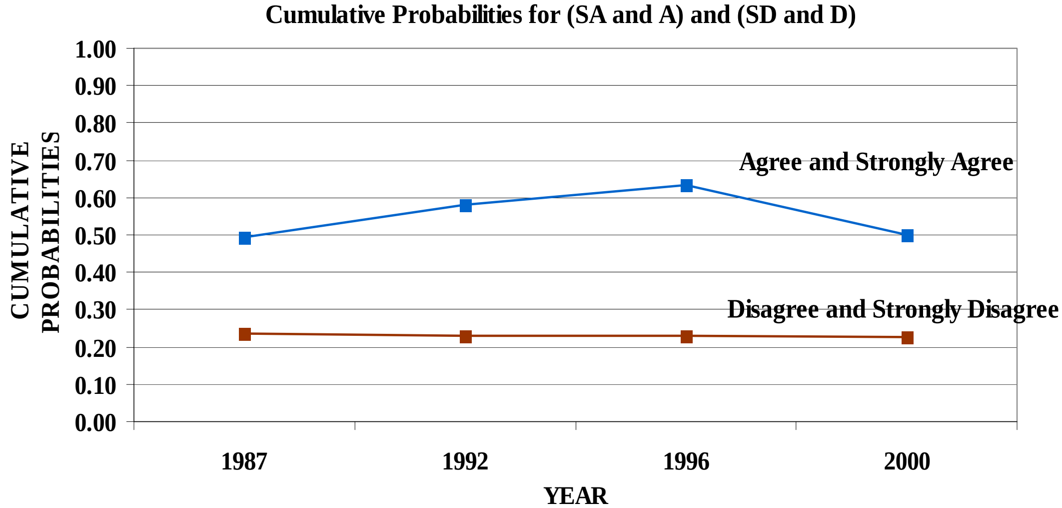


Figure 4a
Q: Are Income Differences Unnecessary for American Prosperity?
Agreement by Year (excluding "Strongly Agree")

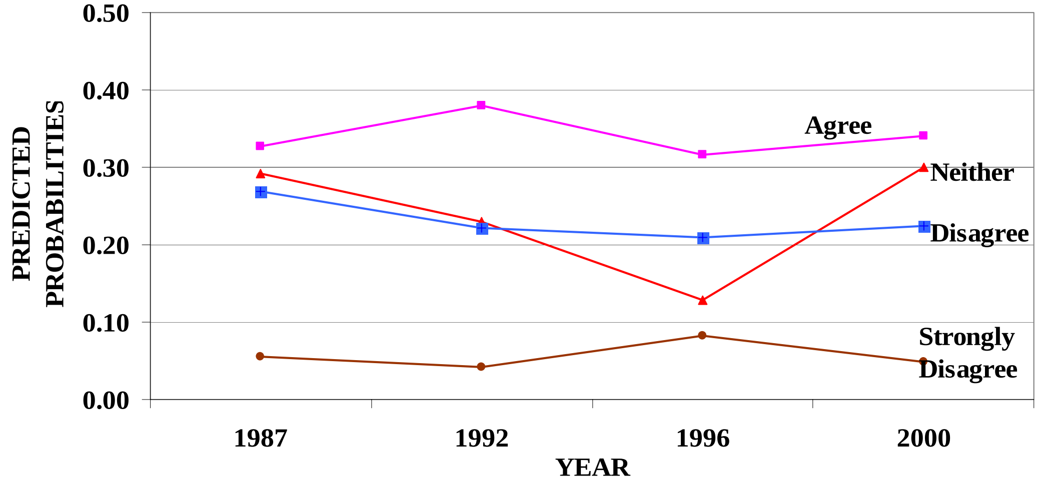


Figure 4b
Q: Income Differences Are Not Necessary for American Prosperity?
"Strongly Agree" by Year

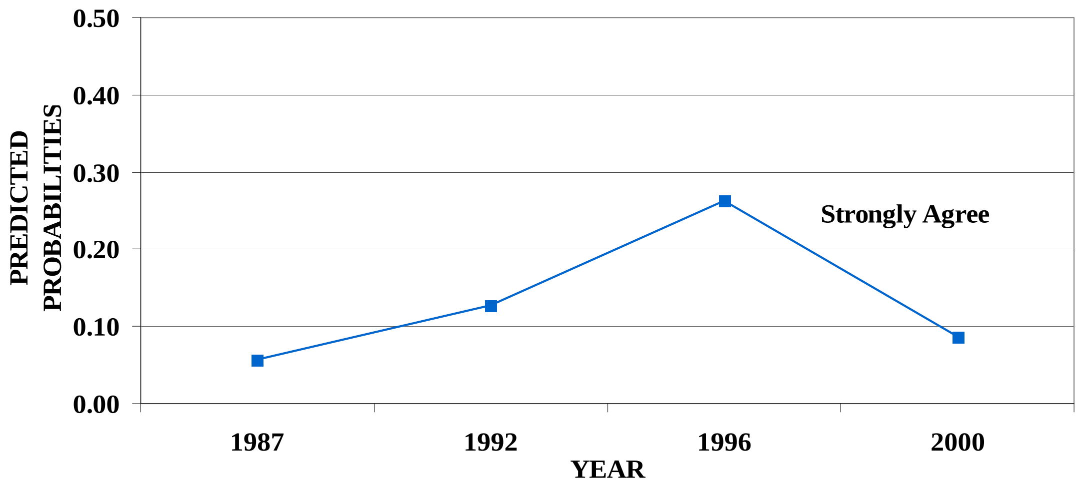


Figure 4c
Q: Income Differences Are Not Necessary for American Prosperity?
Cumulative Probabilities for (SA and A) and (SD and D)

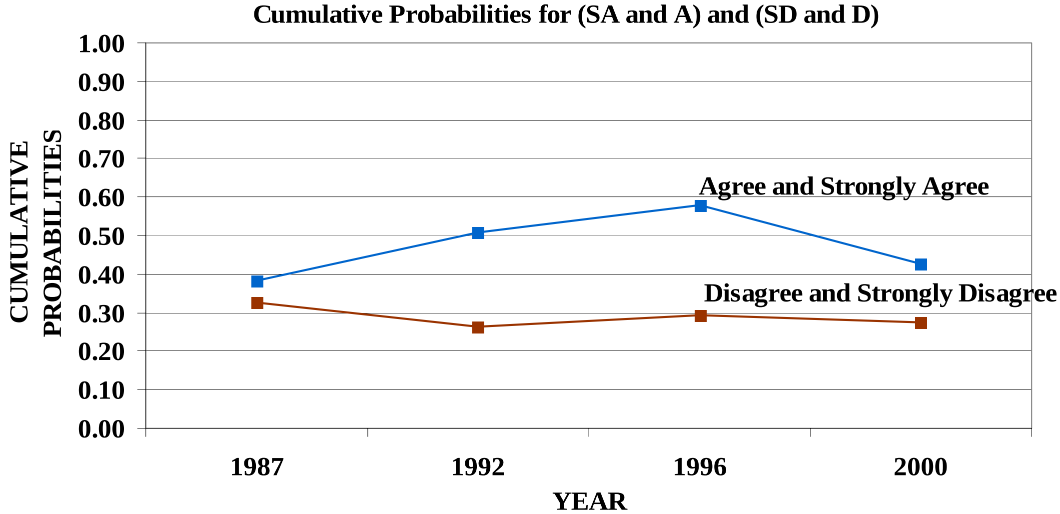


Figure 5a
Perceived Earnings by Occupation
(Q: What do you think a Doctor makes?, etc.)
Estimated Log Earnings Change by Year

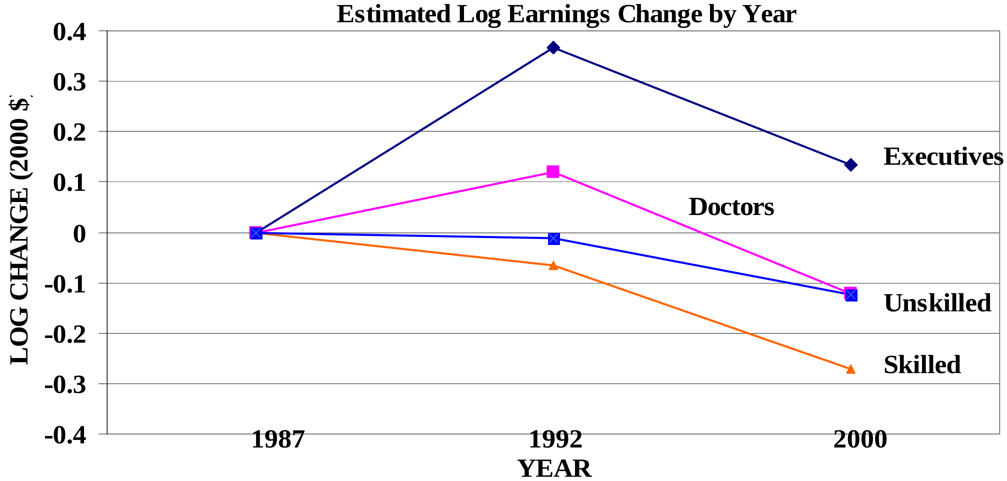


Figure 5b
Perceived Log Earnings Differentials (Exponentiated) by Year

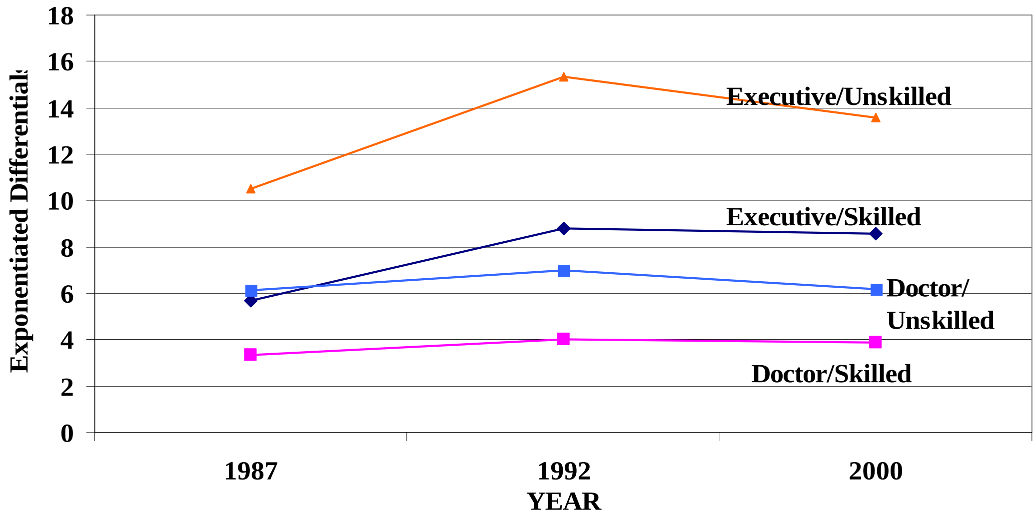


Figure 6a
Logit of "Strongly Agree" to Q: Are Income Differences Too Large?
By Subjective Class and Year (after controls)

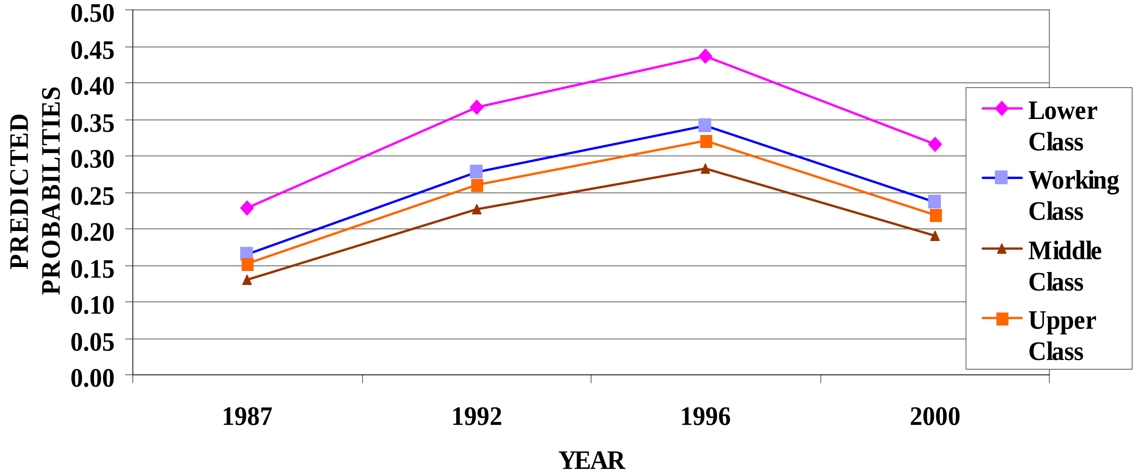


Figure 6b
Logit of "Strongly Agree" to Q: Are Income Differences Too Large?
By Year and Response to Q: Standard of Living Will Improve

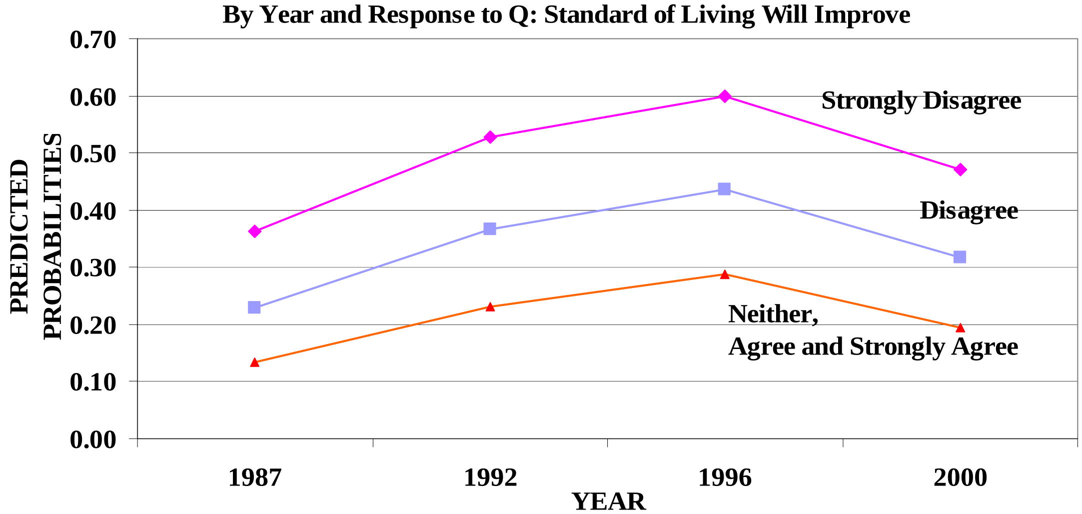


Figure 7a
Logit of "Strongly Agree" to Q: Are Income Differences Too Large?
By Party Identification and Year (including controls)

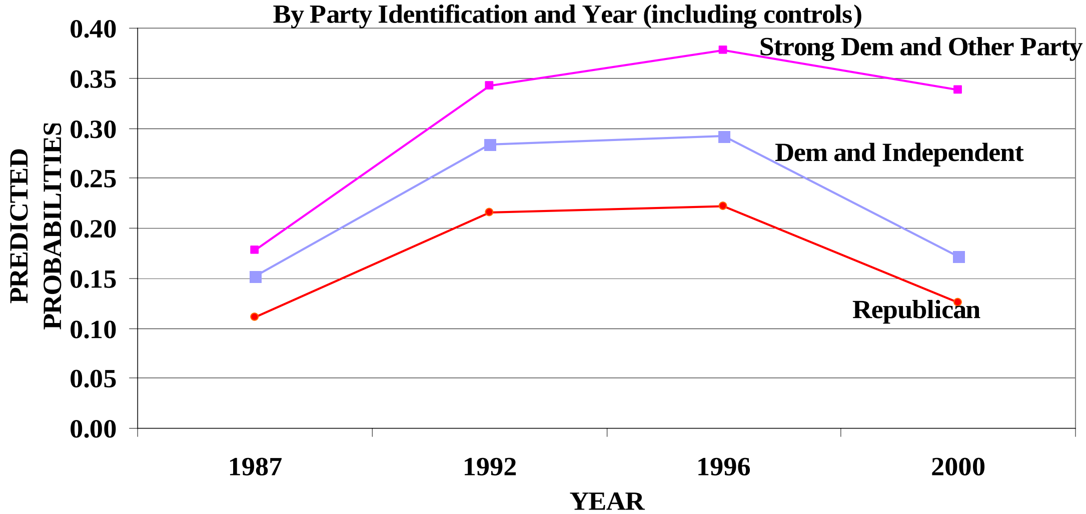


Figure 7b
Logit of "Strongly Agree" to Q: Are Income Differences Too Large?
By Ideology and Year (including controls)

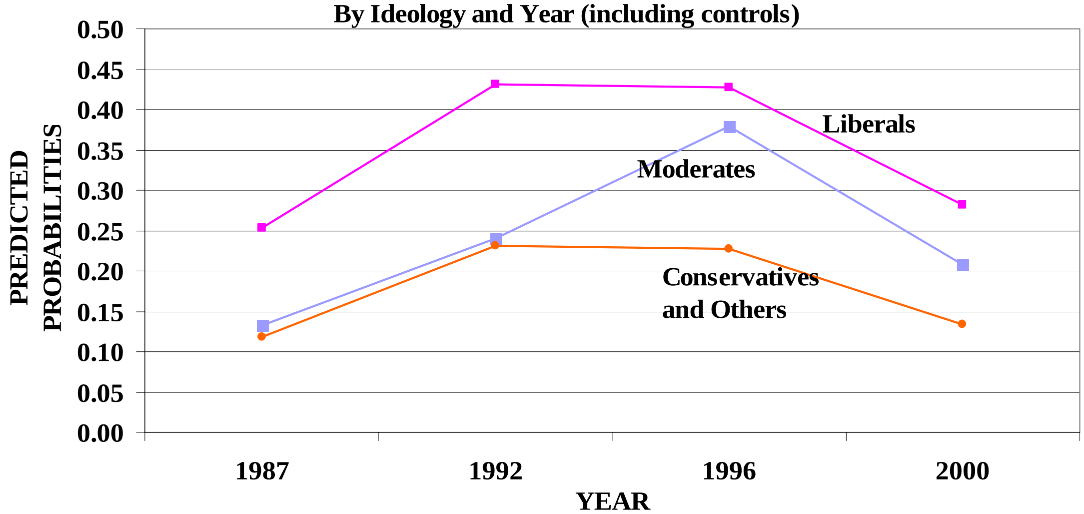


Table 1
Q: “Do the Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Poorer?”
Percent Responding YES/AGREE

Year		Louis Harris	Gallup/Princeton
	Answer:	YES	AGREE
1972		67	
1977		77	
1985		79	
1987			74
1988			76
1989			78
1990		82	78
1991		83	80
1992		83	79
1993		81	
1994		78	71
1995		79	
1996		76	
2002 (February)			68

Source: Ladd and Bowman (1998: 99).

Table 2
Logit of "Strongly Agree" to Q: Are Income Differences Too Large?
Standardized Coefficients

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
(1987)				
1992	0.1550**	0.1613**	0.1602**	0.1318**
1996	0.2743**	0.2917**	0.2836**	0.2513**
2000	0.1678**	0.1742**	0.1684**	0.1154**
Family Income		-0.0891**	-0.0537*	-0.0455
Education		0.0143	0.0364	0.0429
Demographic Variables		YES	YES	YES
Subjective Class (Lower Class)				
Working Class			-0.1096**	-0.1111*
Middle Class			-0.1934**	-0.1867**
Upper Class			-0.0768**	-0.0517
Standard of Living Will Improve				
(Strongly Disagree=0 to Strongly Agree=2)				-0.1744**
N	5057	4288	4263	3419
Pseudo R2	0.0221	0.0382	0.0427	0.0634

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

Notes: Demographic variables include employment status (employed=1) gender, race (white=1), age, marital status (married=1), household size, parental status (children=1), size of residential area, and a dummy for living in the South. Education is a 4-category variable: less than high school (omitted category), high school, some college, and college or more. Family income is transformed from a categorical variable to a continuous variable by assigning the midpoint of each category range and then converting to 2000 dollars (using the PCE deflator).

**, p = < .01; *, p <= .05.

Table 3
Logit of "Strongly Agree" to Q: Are Income Differences Too Large?
Standardized Coefficients

	Model 1	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
1992	0.1550**	0.1318**	0.1606**	0.1576**
1996	0.2743**	0.2513**	0.2841**	0.2036**
2000	0.1678**	0.1154**	0.1167**	0.0307
Family Income		YES	YES	YES
Education		YES	YES	YES
Demographic Variables		YES	YES	YES
Subjective Class (Lower Class)				
Working Class		-0.1111*	-0.1277**	-0.1283**
Middle Class		-0.1867**	-0.1960**	-0.1952**
Upper Class		-0.0517	-0.0498	-0.0488
Standard of Living Will Improve (Strongly Disagree=0 to Strongly Agree=2)		-0.1744**	-0.1760**	-0.1780**
Party Identification (Republicans)				
Democrats and Independents			0.0986**	0.1008**
Strong Democrats and Other Party			0.1580**	0.1136**
Ideology (Conservatives)				
Moderates			0.0998**	0.0329
Liberals			0.1816**	0.1788**
Interactions with Year				
Moderates * 1996				0.1135**
Strong Democrats * 2000				0.0893*
N	5057	3419	3242	3242
Pseudo R2	0.0221	0.0634	0.1012	0.1056

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

Notes: Demographic variables include employment status (employed=1) gender, race (white=1), age, marital status (married=1), household size, parental status (children=1), size of residential area, and a dummy for living in the South. Education is a 4-category variable: less than high school (omitted category), high school, some college, and college or more. Family income is transformed from a categorical variable to a continuous variable by assigning the midpoint of each category range and then converting to 2000 dollars (using the PCE deflator).

**, p = < .01; *, p <= .05.

Table 4
Logit of Strongly Agree to Q: "Are Income Differences Too Large?"
Odds Ratios for the Year Coefficients

	1992	1996	2000
MODELS			
(1) Year Dummies	**2.20**	**2.85**	**1.91**
(2) + Demographic Variables, Family Income, Education	**2.27**	**3.05**	**1.95**
(3) + Subjective Class	**2.25**	**2.95**	**1.91**
(4) + Standard of Living	**1.95**	**2.61**	**1.56**
(5) + Party Identification and Ideology	**2.26**	**2.96**	**1.57**
(6) + Year Interactions with Party ID and Ideology	**2.22**	**2.18**	**1.13**
(7) + **Prosperity**	**2.11**	**1.88**	**1.09**

Table 5
Logit of "Strongly Agree" to Q: Are Pay Differences Unnecessary for Prosperity? (Standardized Coefficients)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
(1987)				
1992	0.1767**	0.1908**	0.1602**	0.1693**
1996	0.4680**	0.4777**	0.4550**	0.4796**
2000	0.1220**	0.1253**	0.1297**	0.1224**
Family Income		-0.0826**	-0.0541	-0.0527
Education		**0.1857****	**0.2126****	**0.1922****
Demographic Variables		YES	YES	YES
Subjective Class (Lower Class)				
Working Class			**-0.0221**	**-0.0356**
Middle Class			**-0.0710**	**-0.0730**
Upper Class			**-0.0044**	**0.0013**
Standard of Living Will Improve				
(Strongly Disagree=0 to Strongly Agree=2)			-0.1954**	-0.1825**
Party Identification (Republicans)				
Democrats and Independents				0.0933**
Strong Democrats and Other Party				0.1712**
Ideology (Conservatives)				
Moderates				-0.0320
Liberals				0.1163**
N	4961	4207	3359	3204
Pseudo R2	0.0658	0.0920	0.1151	0.1374

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

Notes: Demographic variables include employment status (employed=1) gender, race (white=1), age, marital status (married=1), household size, parental status (children=1), size of residential area, and a dummy for living in the South. Education is a 4-category variable: less than high school (omitted category), high school, some college, and college or more. Family income is transformed from a categorical variable to a continuous variable by assigning the midpoint of each category range and then converting to 2000 dollars (using the PCE deflator).

**, p = < .01; *, p <= .05.

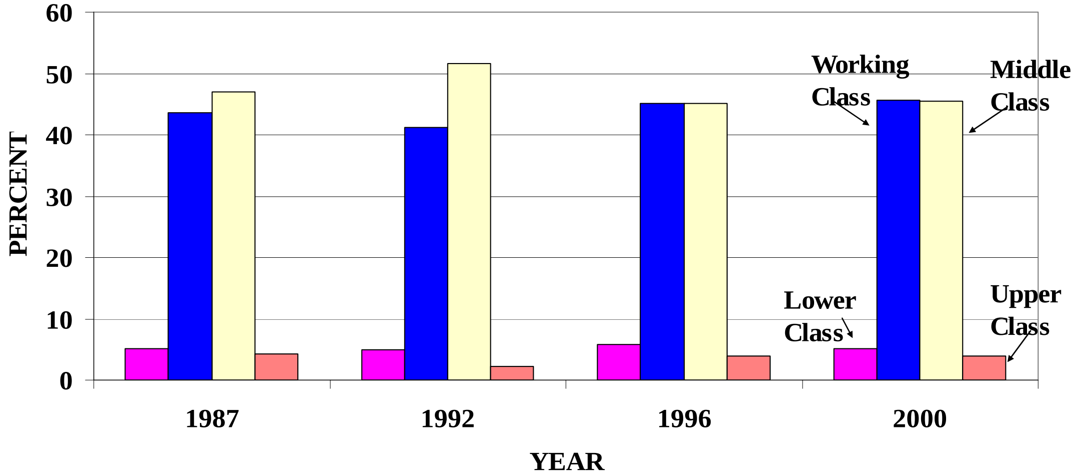
DATA APPENDIX

Appendix Table 1
Frequency Distributions for the Three Inequality Questions

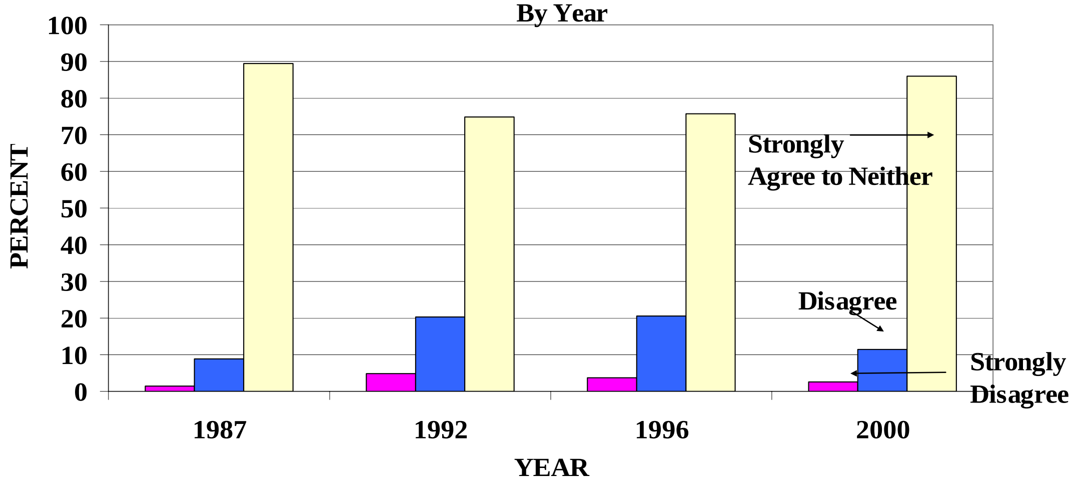
	1987	1992	1996	2000
Are Income Differences Too Large?				
Strongly Agree	14.9	27.7	33.3	25.0
Agree	43.1	49.4	33.5	41.2
Neither	22.4	11.4	12.8	21.5
Disagree	16.3	9.7	12.1	9.2
Strongly Disagree	3.3	1.7	8.4	3.2
Mean	2.50	2.08	2.29	2.24
N	1230	1244	1395	1188
Does Inequality Continue to Exist to Benefit The Rich and Powerful?				
Strongly Agree	13.8	17.8	28.5	13.8
Agree	35.6	40.5	34.9	36.3
Neither	27.1	18.8	13.7	27.2
Disagree	19.2	18.7	14.3	17.8
Strongly Disagree	4.3	4.2	8.6	4.9
Mean	2.64	2.51	2.40	2.64
N	1185	1211	1348	1138
Are Large Disparities in Income Unnecessary for Prosperity?				
Strongly Agree	5.6	12.8	26.3	8.7
Agree	32.6	38.0	31.6	34.0
Neither	29.3	22.9	12.9	29.9
Disagree	26.9	22.2	20.9	22.4
Strongly Disagree	5.6	4.2	8.3	4.9
Mean	2.94	2.67	2.53	2.81
N	1207	1222	1373	1159

Note: The categories are coded from strongly agree=1 to strongly disagree=5.

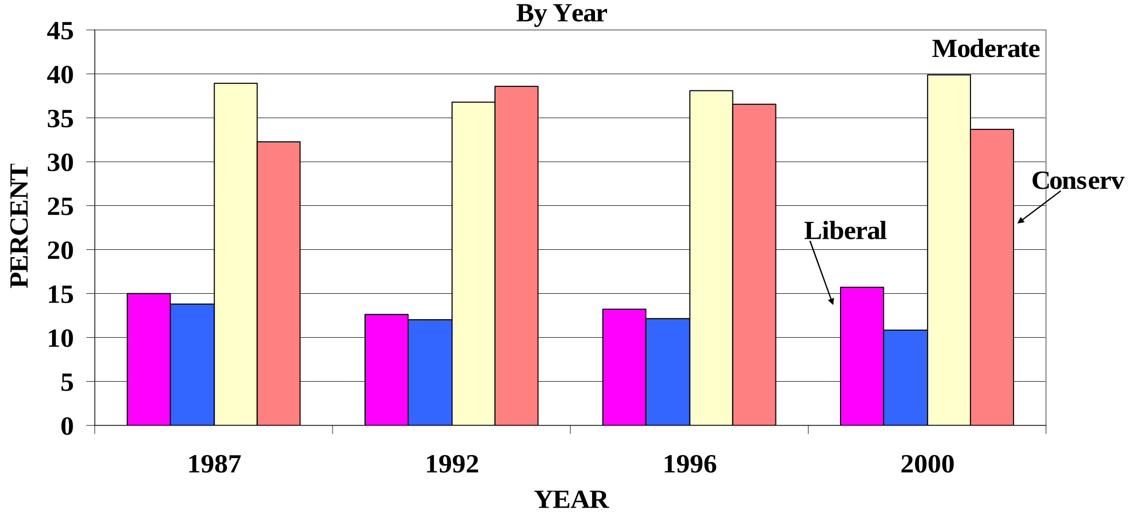
Appendix Chart 1a
Responses to Subjective Class Identification Question
By Year



Appendix Chart 1b
Responses to Q: Standard of Living Will Improve
(for people like me and my family)?
By Year



Appendix Chart 1c
Responses to Ideology Question
By Year



Appendix Chart 1d
Responses to Party Identification Question
By Year