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The relevance of meritocratic beliefs for redistributive preferences increases with income[☆]

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ABSTRACT

A leading explanation for why in democratic societies the rich are not taxed more is that meritocratic beliefs breed tolerance for inequality. We problematize this account by claiming that, unlike the rich, the poor support greater redistribution regardless of how meritocratic they perceive society to be. The claim is tested using a cross-national survey and a preregistered experimental game that exogenized both income and perceptions of meritocratic fairness. Analysis of both survey and experimental data supports the proposed interaction effect between income and perceived meritocratic fairness on demand for redistribution. We conclude that while meritocratic beliefs can explain why the rich do not support more redistribution, it fails to explain the poor's inequality acceptance.

1. Introduction

Contemporary democratic nations maintain substantial net income inequality despite those with below-average earnings holding a majority vote on issues of redistribution (Margalit, 2019; McCall and Percheski, 2010; Neckerman and Torche, 2007; Rueda and Stegmueller, 2019; Lupu and Pontusson, 2023). To explain “why the poor don’t soak the rich” (Shapiro, 2002), a growing body of literature suggests that meritocratic beliefs — that one’s standing in society and the income ladder stems from individual talent and effort (Young, 1958) — not only serve for the elites to legitimize their position on the income distribution (Littler, 2017; Friedman and Laurison, 2020; Sandel, 2020), but also shape mass attitudes towards redistribution (Alesina and Angeletos, 2005; Cavaillé and Trump, 2015). Meritocratic beliefs would render inequality self-sustaining because when people believe observed inequality to be merit-based they are less likely to support redistributive policy (Alesina and Angeletos, 2005; Benabou and Tirole, 2006; Cappelen et al., 2020; Durante et al., 2014; Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Starmans et al., 2017).

The majority of citizens across Western nations do believe life success is determined by talent and hard work (Mijls, 2018b), which supports the prevailing explanation of stagnant redistributive demands in the age of growing disparities. Building on the assumption that such beliefs in meritocracy tame redistributive demands, the literature has focused on explaining why people hold

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such beliefs even if they find themselves on the losing end of inequality (e.g. McCall, 2013; Mijs, 2021; Morris et al., 2022; Bartram, 2023; Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Kim, 2023). In this paper we instead problematize this assumption. We argue that the meritocratic beliefs of a large portion of the electorate — lower income strata — do not matter much for their redistributive demands: The poor's material need and the psychological burden of being “non-winners” blunt their responsiveness to meritocratic considerations.

In support of this argument, we (1) propose an interaction effect between income and meritocratic beliefs in shaping redistributive demand, (2) show cross-national survey evidence for such an interaction across the Western world, and (3) causally test the interaction in an experimental setting. The causal test concerns a preregistered online experiment on a large sample of the UK adult population ($N = 3781$) where individuals enter a raffle for a £1000 prize either via meritocratic competition or via luck. The aim of the experiment is to exogenize both meritocracy and income, which in the observational surveys are endogenous to other factors such as ideology, socialization, socio-economic background, social networks, or skill.

Both our survey and experimental results support the argument that income moderates the effect of meritocratic beliefs on support for redistribution. The survey analysis shows that the effect of meritocratic beliefs on redistributive preferences, while negative for rich respondents, is indistinguishable from zero for poor respondents. Analogously, results from the experiment indicate that while the source of inequality being merit instead of luck leads winning subjects to redistribute less, it has no discernible impact on losing subjects' distributional choices. We also find that the experience of losing in a merit-based game does not evoke more positive emotional reactions than losing in a luck-based game.

Our paper has two broader implications. First, the findings suggest the reason why taxes are not higher and social welfare not more expansive may have less to do with how fair society is perceived to be in lower income strata, and more with the meritocratic beliefs of the rich and the myriad mechanisms through which wealthy actors exert disproportionate influence on the democratic process, e.g. through disinformation, corruption, lobbying, and disenfranchisement (Volscho and Kelly, 2012; Martin, 2010). Second, our experimental results cast doubt on the palliative effects previously attributed to meritocratic beliefs (cf. Jost et al., 2008; Hadarics et al., 2021; Osborne and Sibley, 2013; Bahamondes et al., 2019; Morris and Lampropoulos, 2024), suggesting they do not tame individuals' negative emotional reactions to ending up on the losing end of inequality.

2. Three theoretical perspectives on how income and meritocratic beliefs shape redistributive demands

We develop the argument that income and meritocratic beliefs interact in the determination of redistributive demands in Section 2.3 below. We contrast the argument with existing theoretical work that has meritocratic beliefs¹ operate via income — Section 2.1 — or shape redistributive demands independently of income — Section 2.2.

2.1. Meritocratic beliefs operate via income

One theoretical perspective understands the relationship between redistributive demands and meritocratic beliefs as shaped by income. In this perspective, people embrace ex-post the fairness beliefs that serve their economic self-interest. Within this broad perspective, the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) argues that the trade-off between selfishness and fairness motives produces a psychological tension that people will try to reduce in order to reach some psychological balance. Relatedly, the “self-serving bias” hypothesis posits that people “tend to conflate what is fair with what benefits oneself” (Babcock and Loewenstein, 1997, p. 110). This theoretical perspective predicts that income shapes meritocratic beliefs in terms of the redistributive demands that are implied by them. An individual's redistributive demands will be shaped by income and their distributive choices ex-post rationalized by updated beliefs about whether this income was achieved fairly. In other words, one's position on the income ladder determines the extent to which one needs to adopt a meritocratic ideology to justify it.

Empirically, this view is compatible with evidence that high earners and elites often develop inequality justifying narratives out of a psychological need to justify their position on the income ladder and that the rich tend to be more likely to express meritocratic fairness beliefs (Khan, 2011, 2012; Suhay et al., 2020; Sherman, 2017). At the same time, there is research showing low earners often also express beliefs that inequality in the societies they live in is merit-based (Solt et al., 2016; McCoy et al., 2013; Morris et al., 2022). This pattern is not negligible: Overall, evidence shows that most people in Western countries express a meritocratic understanding of inequality, against their material self-interest (Mijs, 2018b).

2.2. Income and meritocratic beliefs shape redistributive demands independently

Even though when coining the term “meritocracy” sociologist Michael Young meant to satirize a dystopian future (Young, 1958), belief in meritocracy has since grown across Western societies. Social scientists, in turn, have argued it is a powerful ideology operating as an “opium of the masses” of sorts that tames popular demands to fight inequality even though most would benefit from such policies (Cavaille, 2023; Littler, 2017; Markovits, 2019; Sandel, 2020). Some correlational evidence even suggests that meritocratic ideology has palliative psychological effects (e.g. Hadarics et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2022; Morris and Lampropoulos, 2024).

¹ Meritocratic fairness is the view that regards inequality as fair if it reflects differences in merit and unfair if it reflects differences due to luck or other external factors. Meritocratic fairness is one of three fairness views in the typology of Almås et al. (2010) and Cappelen et al. (2007, 2020) alongside egalitarian and libertarian. Both in our survey and experimental analysis we measure individuals' belief that there is meritocratic fairness. We use meritocratic fairness interchangeably with meritocratic beliefs.

Researchers began to introduce meritocratic fairness to the study of redistributive demands in response to shortcomings of income-based explanations (Meltzer and Richard, 1981; Romer, 1975). Such models predicted that the poor would ‘soak the rich’ and demand total redistribution (Shapiro, 2002). Empirically, levels of redistribution have remained lower than these economic theories would predict. As a response, a literature emerged around the claim that the extent to which people view economic outcomes as fair is a very important factor shaping redistributive demands (Alesina and Angeletos, 2005; Fong, 2001). This literature tends to view belief in meritocracy as an ideology expected to shape redistributive demands independently from income and is markedly interdisciplinary: Economists (e.g. Cappelen et al., 2020; Alesina and Angeletos, 2005), political scientists (e.g. Solt et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2015), and sociologists (e.g. Mijs, 2021; Morris et al., 2022; Bartram, 2023) have all pointed to the role of meritocratic beliefs in the perpetuation of inequality. Over the years, this research has shown that even though a plurality of fairness ideals exists in the world, the belief that success results from talent and hard work is prevalent both in the laboratory and in the field (Fong, 2001; Cappelen et al., 2007, 2013, 2020; Piketty, 1995; Alesina and Angeletos, 2005; Benabou and Tirole, 2006; Mijs, 2018b).

Emotions are the main psychological micro-mechanisms that have been postulated to link perceptions of meritocracy with redistributive demands. Ahrens (2019) proposes a link based on equity theory and Adams (1965) argues that people react to perceived unfairness in income inequality with a negative emotional response. People then reduce or eliminate the tension of this negative emotional response by demanding redistribution (Ahrens, 2019). Negative emotional responses when perceiving unfairness apply across the income spectrum, so this is a theoretical proposition with no interaction between income and perceived meritocratic fairness.

2.3. Income conditions the effect of meritocratic beliefs on redistributive demands

The two perspectives reviewed above treat the relationship between meritocratic beliefs and redistributive preferences as uniform across income groups: either meritocratic beliefs are themselves the product of income (Section 2.1), or they shape redistributive demands independently of income (Section 2.2). We propose as a third theoretical possibility that the effect of meritocratic beliefs on redistributive preferences is heterogeneous by income.

Our core claim is that meritocratic beliefs matter more for the redistributive preferences of the well-off than for those of the poor. Income thus moderates the influence of meritocratic beliefs. We identify two mechanisms, one rooted in material needs, the other in psychological reactions to merit-based failure, that together predict a flattening of the meritocracy–redistribution relationship among low-income individuals.

Mechanism 1: Material need dampens the influence of meritocratic beliefs

Research in psychology suggests that when people face economic insecurity, material needs dominate other considerations. Classic need-based theories posit that individuals first attend to basic, physiological well-being before engaging with higher-order evaluative principles (Maslow, 1958). In the context of redistribution, this implies that for individuals near or below subsistence thresholds, the immediate utility of additional income outweighs fairness-based concerns.

Related work on altruism and redistribution supports this logic. Rueda (2018) argues that the rich can afford to be altruistic more than the poor can. Dimick et al. (2016) show lesser sensitivity of the poor to income inequality in their support for redistribution. One may then similarly expect the immediate material needs of those in economic hardship to override considerations of meritocratic fairness in the determination of their redistributive demands. Experimental evidence supports this expectation: unlike higher-income individuals, the unemployed do not condition their redistributive decisions on whether initial endowments were earned or random (Barr et al., 2015, 2016).

This first mechanism can be restated using standard assumptions made in models of redistributive choice. In such models, individuals trade off self-regarding utility from income against the disutility of deviating from a fair allocation (Fehr and Schmidt, 1999; Alesina and Angeletos, 2005; Cappelen et al., 2007; Barr et al., 2015; Dimick et al., 2018). Marginal utility is higher at low income levels, making income losses relatively more costly for the poor. Under decreasing absolute risk aversion (Arrow, 1965; Menezes et al., 1980), individuals become increasingly willing to trade off income for fairness as their income rises. As a consequence, the self-regarding component of utility dominates the fairness component for low-income individuals, and their optimal redistributive choices respond less to changes in fairness beliefs than those of the rich.

Mechanism 2: Asymmetric emotional costs of failure in meritocratic systems

A second mechanism operates through emotional reactions to being a winner or non-winner under different distributions of merit and luck. This mechanism contrasts the rich and the poor not by the difference in their material needs, but rather by their status as winners and non-winners in a fair or unfair system. We define a meritocratically fair system as one where merit is rewarded and an unfair one as a system where it is not. We argue that it is psychologically less taxing for winners to accept the redistributive consequences of an unfair system than it is for non-winners to accept those of a fair system. For winners, accepting meritocratic fairness is psychologically comfortable: it aligns with a flattering self-assessment. And even when they lose, attributing failure to bad luck is less threatening to the self. By contrast, losing in a world described as meritocratic is psychologically costly. It implies personal inadequacy rather than bad luck. For non-winners, accepting meritocracy would thus mean accepting that they deserve their lower position and are less entitled to compensation.

This asymmetry implies that non-winners have strong incentives to reject meritocracy as a justification for a lack of redistribution. Meritocratic beliefs therefore exert weaker effects on their policy preferences. Winners, in contrast, are more responsive: accepting meritocratic narratives both affirms their deservingness and justifies resisting redistribution. Our argument thus qualifies the

literature that tends to assume belief in meritocracy contributes to the self-perpetuation of inequality by taming redistributive demands (e.g. [Mijs, 2021](#); [Bartram, 2023](#); [Larsen, 2016](#); [Kim, 2023](#)) as applying primarily to the well-off. It also questions the literature that argues that meritocratic beliefs' palliative function can reduce the gap in well-being between the haves and have-nots ([Jost et al., 2008](#); [Hadarics et al., 2021](#); [Bahamondes et al., 2019](#))

The second mechanism resonates with the often-neglected argument in [Young \(1958\)](#): the ideology is not “opium of the masses”, but a source of humiliation for the lower classes, whose status becomes morally charged. This emotional burden is likely to diminish how much meritocratic narratives shape the poor's views on redistribution, even as it reinforces the rich's opposition. Such humiliation may even be viewed as linked to support for populist movements and parties ([Markovits, 2019](#); [Sandel, 2020](#); [Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2021](#)).

3. Data and methods

We test whether the effect of meritocratic perceptions on redistributive preferences differs by income groups. In Study 1 we use a large cross-national surveys (the IV Social Inequality Module of the International Social Survey Programme)² to investigate if there is an interaction between income and fairness considerations when predicting support for redistribution (36 liberal democracies, $n = 46844$, see Section 1 of the Online Appendix for a list of included countries).³ Study 2 uses a preregistered online experiment on a large sample of the UK adult population ($n = 3781$) to exogenize both meritocracy and income, which are endogenous in the surveys.⁴ Because the income differences generated in the experiment are of trivial magnitude, it tests only the emotional costs mechanism we have proposed and not the material needs mechanism.

3.1. Study 1: cross-national survey evidence

3.1.1. Data

We use the IV Social Inequality module of the ISSP collected in 2009.⁵ In our analysis of this survey, there are two measures of redistributive preferences. The first one is a question that asks “Is it the responsibility of the government to reduce differences in income between people with high incomes and low incomes?” where 1 indicates strong agreement and 5 indicates strong disagreement. The second measure is a question that asks whether income differences in the respondent's country are too large and 1 indicates strong agreement and 5 indicates strong disagreement. We invert both scales so that higher values mean stronger agreement with the statement. To measure income, we rely on a measure of pre-tax monthly household income (see Appendix section 1 for specific item wording). Based on this measure, we classify respondents in deciles based on the distribution of the household income variable in each country in the IV survey wave. To capture the merit versus luck dimension we employ the answers to a question asking whether hard work is important to get ahead in life where 1 is coded as essential and 5 indicates it being not important at all. We invert the scale so that higher values mean a stronger belief that hard work is important to get ahead in life.

All variables used in our analysis are not a handpicked selection but include all measures in the survey that reasonably capture belief in meritocracy, redistributive preferences, and income. Even though we are using a widely used cross-national survey that aims for comparable and high quality data collection, it is nevertheless possible that data quality regimes differ by location. To investigate the extent to which such differences may drive the results, we run heterogeneity analyses by country income group and by whether country is Western or not.

3.1.2. Statistical analysis

For survey analysis, we estimate an interaction model of the following form:

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{income}_i + \beta_2 \text{merit}_i + \beta_3 \text{income}_i * \text{merit}_i + \varphi \mathbf{x}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where y_i captures the redistributive preference of individual i , income_i measures their income, merit_i measures the belief that merit rather than luck explains success in life. Finally, ε_i is an error term, φ a vector of coefficients and \mathbf{x}_i a vector of control variables: country fixed effects,⁶ gender, age, education, employment status, and survey wave. The coefficient of interest is β_3 , capturing the interaction effect between a respondent's income and their beliefs about the role of merit versus luck in life success on support for redistribution. Our interaction argument predicts that among individuals with higher incomes, a stronger belief in merit correlates with lower support for redistribution, implying a negative and significant sign on coefficient β_3 .

² We strengthen external validity in the Supplementary Information (SI) Appendix by presenting results from two additional large population surveys. While these surveys do not capture redistribution preferences and meritocracy beliefs as precisely as the ISSP, our main findings hold with alternative operationalizations, showing the results are not specific to question formulation.

³ The criterion for including a country within a given survey is that it can be classified as a liberal democracy (polity IV score of 6 or higher) during the period in which data was collected.

⁴ Crucially, because the experiment exogenizes both these variables, it allows us to determine that it is indeed income influencing the effect of meritocratic beliefs on redistribution preferences, as opposed to the effect of income varying by someone's meritocratic beliefs.

⁵ In the Appendix Section 3 we expand our analyses and show results using the World Values Survey and the European Social Survey. These two surveys are not used in the main analyses because the items that capture income, redistributive preferences, and meritocratic beliefs are imperfect. More specifically, in the WVS income is measured as a subjective self-placement on a 10 point decile scale, which captures a different concept than objective income. Further, one of the WVS items we use to measure redistributive preferences is inherently linked to the concept of democracy. Finally, the ESS does not have items that capture only belief in meritocracy. Rather, there are items on attitudes toward social benefits and services for the unemployed and those in need which reflect not only meritocratic beliefs but also welfare state attitudes. With these caveats in mind, we report and expand our results to these two surveys in the Appendix

⁶ With this design, we leave out of the analysis between country variation that may be due to country level characteristics such as GDP per capita, political regime, or democracy index

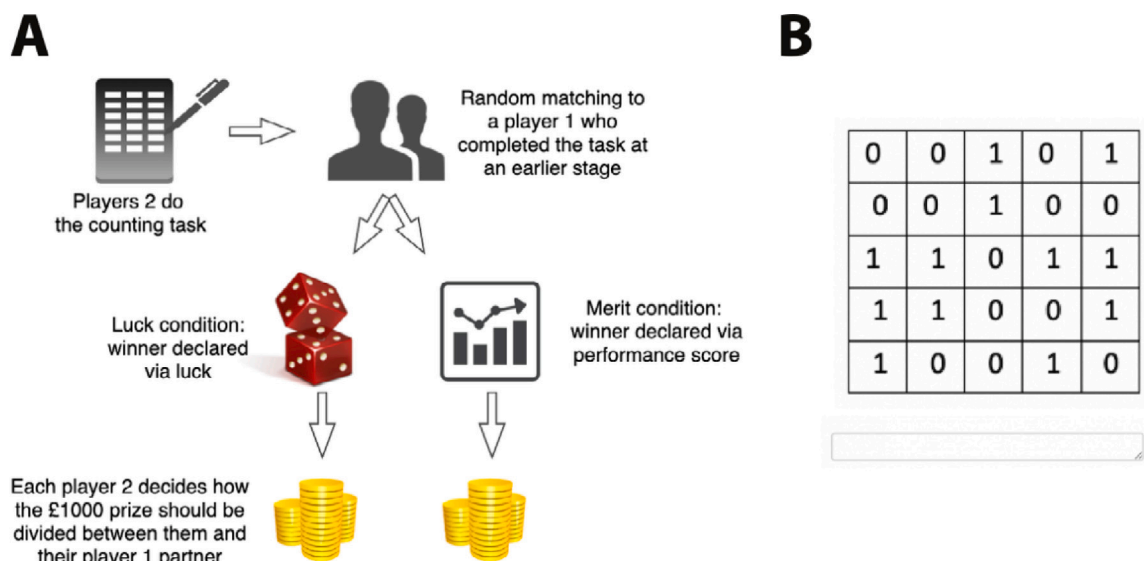


Fig. 1. Experimental design: overview (panel A) and the counting task (panel B). *Note:* See Online Appendix section 4 for the exact text respondents saw and for screenshots of the experimental task.

3.2. Study 2: Experiment

3.2.1. Experimental design and data

We complement our survey correlational results with a pre-registered online experiment conducted on a quota sample representative of the UK population with respect to age, gender, and geographical region ($n = 3781$, see Appendix Table S20 for further details on the sample).⁷ The goal of the experiment is to provide causal evidence of our argument, ensuring that meritocratic beliefs have an impact on redistribution preferences, and that this relationship is causally moderated by income. In the experiment, respondents were told they were going to play a game against another player and (1) would be randomly assigned to a world where inequality was established via merit or via luck and (2) they could either win or lose the game — i.e. find themselves on the losing or winning end of inequality. The main outcome of the experimental game was the amount a given player wants to redistribute to the other player. We incentivized the study by having pairs of participants enter a raffle for £1000 to be divided between the two of them. The expected material consequences of winning in the game are inevitably minimal, hence the experiment does not test the needs-based mechanism behind the proposed interaction effect, but rather the psychological mechanism.

The game was played in two rounds, held on two separate days. Fig. 1A summarizes the experimental design. In the first stage, a small sample of 152 subjects ('players 1' from now on) were asked to execute to the best of their ability a standard counting task where they had to count the number of 1s in a matrix (Charness et al., 2018). The task is to solve as many matrices as one can in 90 seconds (see Figure S5 in the Appendix for a screenshot of the task instructions and Fig. 1B for an example of such a matrix). To solve a matrix, subjects have to count the number of 1s in it, enter the correct number into a box, and click "next" so that the next matrix appears. They continue solving matrices and clicking next until time is up, after which they automatically advance to the next screen. We calculated a player's score as the number of correct answers divided by average response time. Players 1 performance on this task provided us with a distribution of scores but we do not use any allocation data from these players.

In the second stage, a larger sample of 3781 subjects ('players 2') performed the same task, after which each subject was matched with a randomly selected player 1 from the first part. After finishing the counting task and matching to a player 1, the pair was then randomized into either a 'luck' or 'merit' treatment condition. In the luck condition, players 2 were told that the winner would be determined via a coin toss. They were informed that they won/lost the coin toss and were hence the winner/loser. Whether players won or lost in the luck arm was thus unrelated to their performance in the counting task. Their income was decided entirely on the basis of their luck in the coin toss. In the merit condition, the player with the highest score was declared winner.⁸ Players 2 were informed of their own score and their partners' and that they won/lost because they had the higher/lower score. Crucially, the random nature of the matching introduced a controlled stochastic element in the link between player 2's score and player 2's status as 'winner' or 'loser' in the counting task, which we exploit as an instrument for causal identification that exogenizes whether someone finds themselves on the winning or losing end of inequality in the merit treatment arm.

After learning whether they won or lost, players 2 were shown a screen where they were informed that if their pair were to be picked in the raffle, the winner would be allocated £1000,⁹ and the loser nothing. We then gave player 2 the opportunity to change

⁷ The experiment did not involve deception, was approved by the Ethics Committee of the authors' institute and respondents gave informed consent.

⁸ With response times measured in tenths of a second, this procedure avoided ties in performance scores.

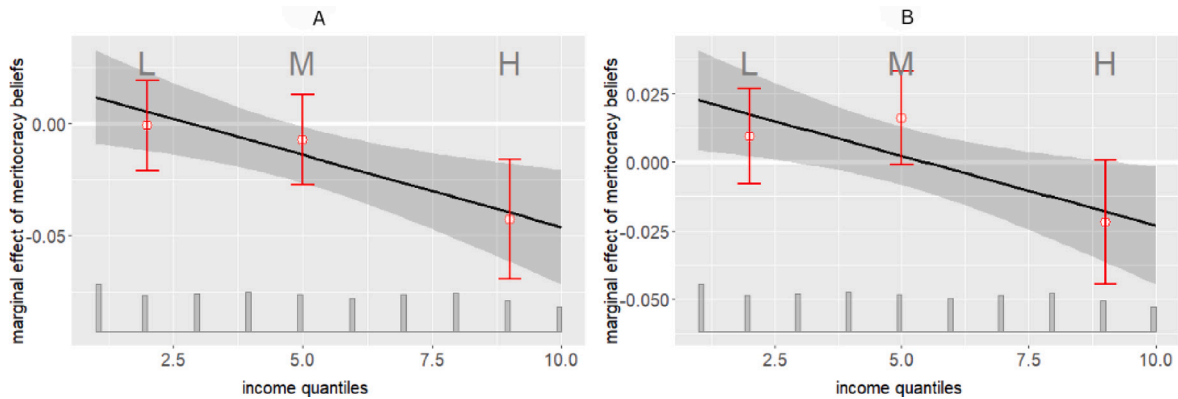


Fig. 2. Redistributive preferences by income and merit beliefs.

that allocation between them and their matched player 1 as they saw fit. It is player 2's redistribution to player 1 that is our main outcome of interest (see SI Appendix section 4 for a screenshot of this decision moment in the experiment).¹⁰ This experimental set up allows us to investigate the interaction between the merit and winning conditions, a situation that amounts to a dictator game (e.g. Bolton et al. 1998), with player 2 in the role of dictator. Our prediction stated in game-theoretic terms is that the social preferences that form the basis for the dictator's behavior are informed by who won and whether the game was played in the merit or luck condition, as follows: In the final allocation, the difference between the luck and merit condition will be smaller among losers than among winners.

3.2.2. Statistical analysis

Since in the merit condition relative performance determines winning or losing, players 2 with higher scores — achieved through skill or effort — have a lower chance of losing. As a result, winning and the interaction between winning and luck are confounded in their effects on redistributive decisions with everything that correlates with player scores. Nevertheless, *conditional* on player 2's score, winning in the merit arm is also randomly determined. That is, when we compare two players 2 with the same score, who wins and who loses is decided entirely by the score of the player 1 they are randomly matched with. Hence, under the assumption of a linear score effect (and results do not notably change under alternative specifications), the following regression model with a linear control for player 2's score isolates the interaction effect of winning and merit on redistributive preferences:

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{winner}_i + \beta_2 \text{merit}_i + \beta_3 \text{winner}_i * \text{merit}_i + \phi \text{score}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

Here, players 2 are denoted by i , y_i captures how many pounds from the £1000 prize player 2 allocates to the losing player, winner_i is a dichotomous variable that equals 1 if player 2 won and 0 otherwise, and merit_i is a dichotomous variable that equals 0 in the luck condition (winner declared via coin toss) and 1 in the merit condition (winner declared via score comparison). Score_i captures player 2's score on the matrix task. Our estimand of interest is β_3 , which captures to what extent the effect of the fairness of the game on redistribution preferences depends on whether a subject won the raffle for the £1000 or not. Our interaction argument predicts that player 2's allocation to the loser will depend less on fairness if player 2 is the loser.

4. Results

4.1. Study 1

In Fig. 2, Panels A and B show results from analyzing the International Social Survey Programme survey data (see the Appendix section 3 for further analyses using the World Values Survey (WVS) and the European Social Survey ESS)). Both plots show how the marginal effects of meritocratic beliefs on redistributive demands vary at different levels of income. To create this plot we used R's package *interflex*, which creates three equally sized bins of the moderator using percentiles. These results are based on the multivariate regression model shown in Eq. (1), containing the key interaction term (income and meritocracy belief) and control variables with 95% confidence intervals (see SI Appendix Section 2, Table S14 for the full regression results in table format).

The interaction effect is negative across all specifications and reaches statistical significance at the 95% level (see SI Appendix Table S14 for results in table format. In the analyses using the WVS and ESS shown in the SI Appendix section 3 Table S15, the interaction effect is significant at this level in five of the seven cases). Fig. 2's panel A shows the marginal effect of meritocratic beliefs

⁹ Only one of many participants wins this prize, so the expected value of the allocation decision is close to 0 pounds.

¹⁰ We informed players 2 that should their pair be picked in the raffle, their decision would be implemented. (Players 1 who completed the task at the first stage did not get to make a redistributive decision.)

on redistributive demands by income group using the first redistribution outcome available in the ISSP (an item asking whether it is the responsibility of the government to reduce differences in income between people with high incomes and low incomes). The letters L, M and H indicate the Low, Middle, and High income groups as defined by creating three equally sized bins of the income variable.¹¹ The plot shows that the marginal effect of meritocratic belief on redistributive demands is indistinguishable from 0 for the low income group and negative and statistically significant for the high income group. Fig. 2's panel B shows the marginal effects of meritocratic beliefs on redistributive demands using a second item as the outcome: an item asking whether income differences in the respondent's country are too large. The pattern is similar to Fig. 2A: the marginal effect of meritocratic belief on redistributive preferences is indistinguishable from 0 whereas the marginal effect for the high income group is negative and statistically significant. The negative effect of meritocratic belief for the high income group is of larger magnitude in Fig. 2A, where the outcome is arguably a stronger measure of demands for redistribution than in panel B.

To corroborate the visual patterns more formally, we next test whether the differences in the marginal effects between the low and high income group are statistically significant. To this end, we perform a Wald test comparing the effects of meritocratic belief in the lowest and highest income-quantile bins. For Fig. 2A, the test indicates they differ by 0.042 ($SE \approx 0.016$); $\chi^2(1) = 6.76$, $p = 0.009$. Hence, meritocratic belief reduces the outcome by about 0.04 units more in the highest bin than in the lowest bin, a statistically significant difference. For Fig. 2B, the Wald test comparing the effects in the lowest and highest income-quantile bins indicates they differ by 0.031 ($SE \approx 0.013$); $\chi^2(1) = 5.38$, $p = 0.020$. Thus, meritocratic belief reduces support for redistribution by about 0.03 units more in the highest bin than in the lowest bin, a statistically significant difference.

All in all, the predicted interaction effect between income and meritocratic beliefs is remarkably robust across different survey measures and datasets representing different populations.¹² The interaction term shows an enhancing pattern: among low-income respondents, meritocratic beliefs are only weakly related to redistributive preferences, while among higher-income respondents, stronger meritocratic beliefs are associated with considerably lower support for redistribution. A further exploration of the extent to which the interaction effect may exist only in some localities (see SI Appendix Section 3, Tables S16, S17, and S18) shows that the effect does not differ depending on whether a given country is high income or not and there is no conclusive evidence that it is driven by countries with high inequality. The interaction effect does seem to be driven by Western countries.¹³ Further, a key limitation common to all surveys is the correlational nature of the evidence. A conclusive test of the hypothesized interaction effect requires that income and meritocracy be exogenously and independently varied. We address this limitation in Study 2 which presents the results of a large-scale, preregistered experiment.

4.2. Study 2

4.2.1. Main result

Fig. 3 graphically depicts the main experimental results. We show predicted values for the outcome — how much of the £1000 prize the loser gets — based on the regression specified above in Eq. (2). Results indicate that the source of the inequality in income — either due to merit or due to luck — matters only to winners. That is, whether the money was earned via merit or via luck influences the winners' redistribution decisions, but not the losers'. Like in the survey results, this interaction also follows an enhancing pattern: meritocratic fairness considerations influence redistribution decisions among winners but have little impact among losers. The β_3 coefficient (Eq. (2)) capturing the interaction between winning and the merit condition is negative and strongly statistically significant ($\beta_3 = -48.42$, $p < .01$), while the main effect of the merit condition is small and insignificant ($\beta_2 = +0.85$, $p = .937$). Winning subjects in the merit condition allocate £291 (29.1% of the prize) to the loser and winners in the luck condition allocate £338 (33.8% of the prize), while there is no difference in allocation among losers.

4.2.2. Mechanisms

The main purpose of the experiment was to perform a causal test of the proposed interaction effect, which it was designed to generate. However, we additionally collected attitudinal measures that may be cautiously used to suggest what mechanisms may be responsible for the effect.

We hypothesized that perceived fairness reduces support for redistribution less so for the poor than for the rich. The experimental evidence for the predicted interaction effect, however, leaves open the alternative possibility that contrary to our argument the fairness effect does not depend on income after all, but that instead players always perceive the game as unfair when they lose, while winners' perceptions do differentiate fair from unfair. This could happen for example if losers resolve the cognitive dissonance created by a fair loss by updating their fairness perceptions (Barr et al., 2015, 2016).

¹¹ We show results using alternative bin sizes in Figs. S3 and S4 in the SI Appendix section 3. The main results shown above use the default option of R's package *interflex*: three equally sized bins. The further analyses run for robustness use two bins to group rich vs poor respondents as well as the original 10 bins of the income decile variable. The 10 binning shows weak monotonicity. That is, there is not a significant jump upwards in the wrong direction among any consecutive bins). The 2 bins figures show a significant difference between poor and rich.

¹² Nevertheless, we acknowledge that, since WVS results shown in the Appendix section 3 are based on self-reports of income, results from this survey should be interpreted with caution since objective and subjective income position assessments are often not aligned.

¹³ One way to interpret these three-way interaction effects is in light of Lowes and Nunn (2025), who show how some of the survey items asking whether success is primarily determined by hard work or luck do not always travel well beyond Western contexts. More specifically, they discuss challenges with this survey item in Congo due to the (misplaced) assumption that luck is a well-defined and universally understood concept. In many non-Western contexts, it is not because the world tends to be seen as a fully deterministic system. Relatedly, some interpretations of luck include the birth lottery (e.g. constitutive luck in philosophy). All in all, we acknowledge more work is needed to understand how meritocratic beliefs operate in non-Western contexts.

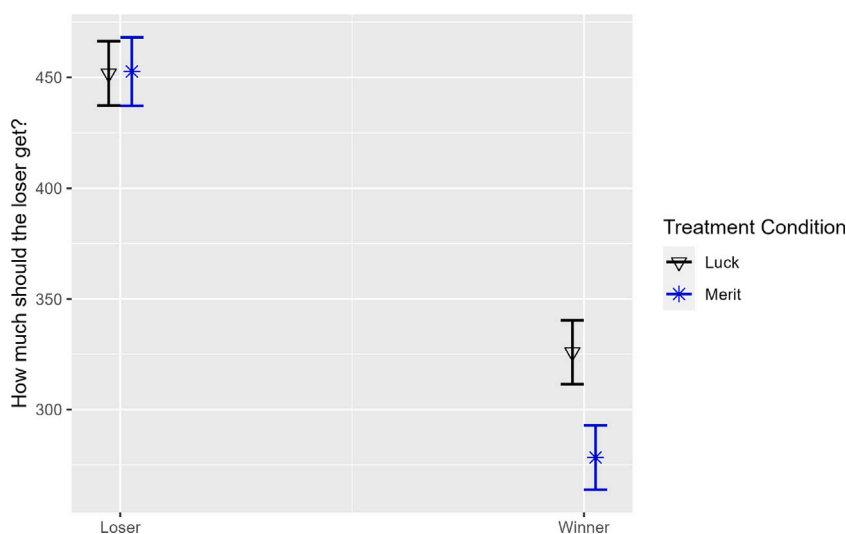


Fig. 3. Average redistribution to the losing player (in pounds), by winning and condition. *Note:* The figure shows predicted positions on the outcome variable from the multivariate regression model shown in Eq. (2). Only winners' support for redistribution depends on the role of luck. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. Regression tables can be found in Section 6, Table S21 of the Appendix.

To investigate this possibility, we estimated the same regression model with instead as dependent variables two measures of fairness perceptions. Fig. 4 shows predicted values of respondents' perception of how fair the game was (panel A) and how important the role of merit vs. luck was in the game. (Full regression results are in SI Appendix section 5). Results do confirm that fairness evaluations are self-serving: Winners thought both luck and merit games were more fair and based on merit than losers. However, crucially, *both* winners and losers perceived luck to have played a greater role in the luck condition than in the merit condition and both evaluated the game as fairer in the merit condition. These differences in perceptions were about equally strong among winners and losers. These results suggest that the main interaction effect between winning and fairness on redistributive preferences is not driven by an ability to tell fair from unfair that is unique to winners. Rather, whether they win or lose, subjects clearly recognize when outcomes happen due to bad luck or as a result of their own shortcomings, but it appears that only if they win are they willing to attach any redistributive consequences to it.

In Fig. 5, we aim to investigate whether merit reduces the negative feelings of being on the losing end of inequality. To this end, we measured emotional reactions to the game right after collecting our main distributive outcome.¹⁴ Results align with our expectation that negative emotional reactions among losers in the merit condition are not more negative than those in the luck condition. In other words, being in the merit condition does not seem to alleviate negative emotional reactions for those on the losing end of inequality. For the case of anxiety (panel A), losing subjects show even higher levels in the merit game than in the luck game. The patterns in Fig. 5 show believing inequality to be due to merit does not seem to palliate the discomfort of being on the losing end of inequality. Results for those on the winning end are inconsistent with our theory, which predicted that being in the merit condition alleviates negative emotional reactions to inequality for this group. That is, that being on the winning end of inequality would create a smaller emotional discomfort when due to merit than due to luck. One possible reconciliation is that the emotional reactions are interpreted to correspond to feelings felt after making the redistributive choice. Winners in the luck condition redistributed significantly more than winners in the merit condition. Such higher redistribution may have already alleviated some of the emotional discomfort among winners in the luck condition, which could render the pattern we observe for winners in Fig. 5 consistent with our theory.

Section 6 in the Online Appendix shows that our experimental findings are not driven by subgroups of the sample with lower incomes or more financial hardship. Further, we show that our main findings (Fig. 3) remain consistent when using alternative identification strategies beyond Model 2 to identify the effect of winning in the merit condition. Specifically, employing a Regression Discontinuity Design with Players 2's scores as the running variable, nearest-neighbor matching on score, or instrumenting winning using Players 1's scores all yield estimands of similar magnitude (Table S27).

5. Discussion

This paper was motivated by the growing attention among political scientists, economists, and sociologists to meritocratic ideology and the extent to which it may help explain whether inequality perpetuates itself by producing meritocratic beliefs that

¹⁴ The exact wording of the item was "How did the game make you feel? Move the slider to indicate the extent to which you felt any of the following". Respondents could then move sliders ranging from 0 to 100 to indicate the extent to which they felt anxious, angry, happy, sad, indifferent, and excited. We embedded the negative emotions among other positive or neutral emotions so as not to prime respondents to think negatively.

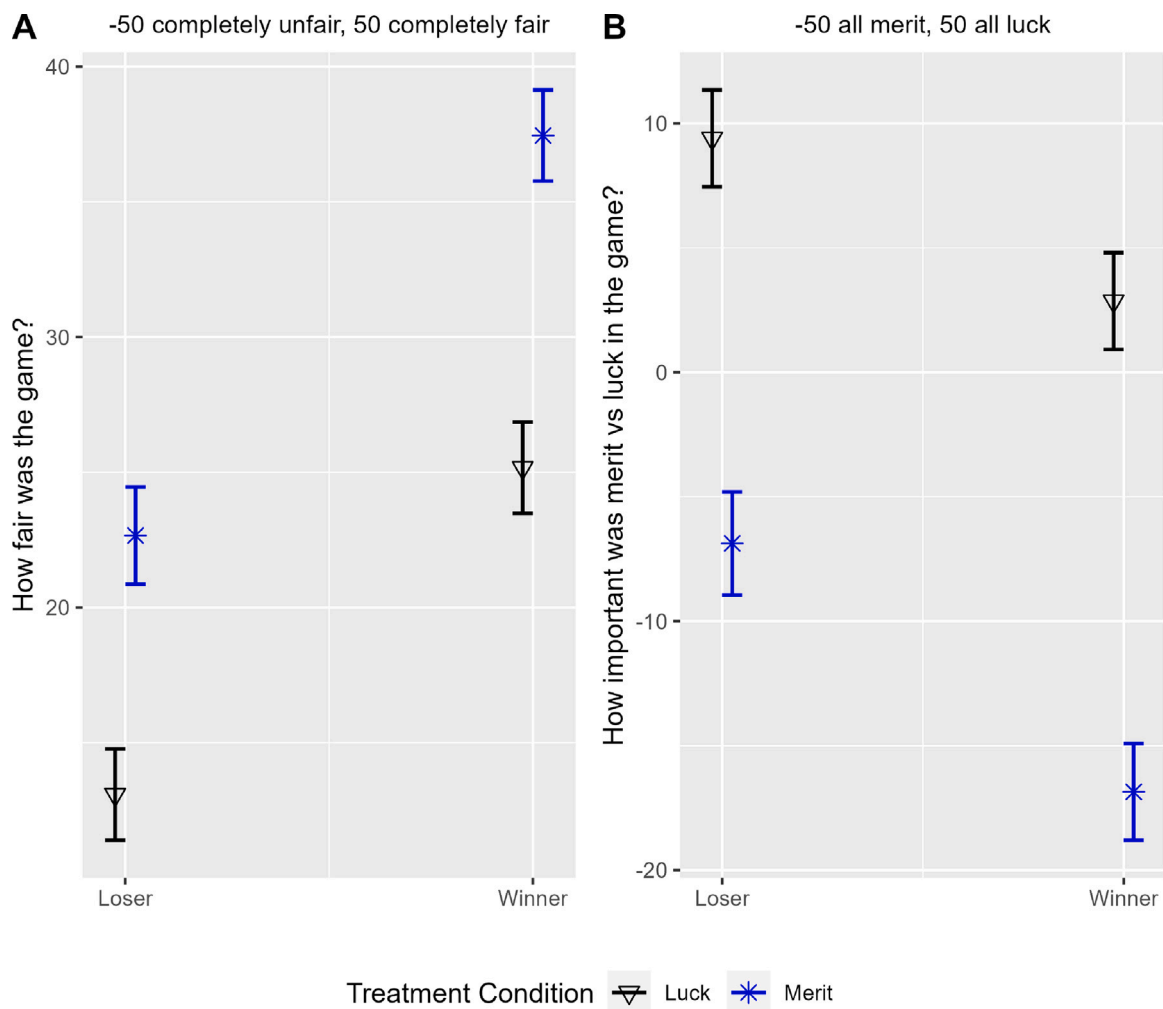


Fig. 4. Average evaluations of fairness and importance of merit vs. luck for winning, by winning and condition. *Note:* The figure shows predicted positions on the outcome variables. Both winning and losing players perceive greater fairness and a more minor role of luck in the merit condition. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. Regression tables can be found in Section 6, Table S22 of Appendix.

justify a lack of redistribution. Such a self-reinforcing dynamic requires that beliefs translate into redistributive demands (cf. [Mijs, 2021](#); [Bartram, 2023](#); [Morris et al., 2022](#); [Solt et al., 2016](#); [Newman et al., 2015](#)). In this paper, we have problematized this account by claiming that, unlike the rich, the poor support greater redistribution regardless of how meritocratic they perceive society to be. Both results from our cross-national correlational analysis and our large online experiment support this. Our evidence thus qualifies the relevance of recent findings in the literature that people may care more about fairness than inequality per se ([Starmans et al., 2017](#)) and may remain staunch believers in meritocracy despite living in the most unequal localities or despite empirical evidence showing declining economic mobility (e.g. [Mijs, 2021](#); [Solt et al., 2016](#); [Morris et al., 2022](#); [Larsen, 2016](#); [Kim, 2023](#)): Even to the extent that lower income strata do believe their low standing on the income ladder to be the result of a meritocratic process, this does not matter much for their redistributive preferences. Only for the rich are fairness perceptions relevant.

Some important limitations of the evidence presented must be considered. First, the experimental evidence is limited to a single Western country. The findings must be seen in light of potential Western or even UK-specific norms about merit and redistribution. It is unclear to what extent these contextual factors condition the results. Second, our survey analysis pooled 36 countries, which may individually vary. Nonetheless, results not reported here show that the interaction effect can also be found for most countries in individual-country analyses, suggesting generalizability.

These limitations notwithstanding, our evidence carries with it an important implication. At the foundation of democracy is the poor's electoral ability to rein in exploitation by the rich, raising the core question of why contemporary democratic societies exhibit only modest redistribution in the face of considerable inequality. A dominant explanation is that inequality is more acceptable when believed to be rooted in merit ([Ahrens, 2020](#); [Cappelen et al., 2020](#); [Mijs, 2018a, 2021](#); [McCall et al., 2017](#); [Trump, 2020](#)). The results presented in this paper expose an important limitation of this argument: The extent to which we observe muted policy responses

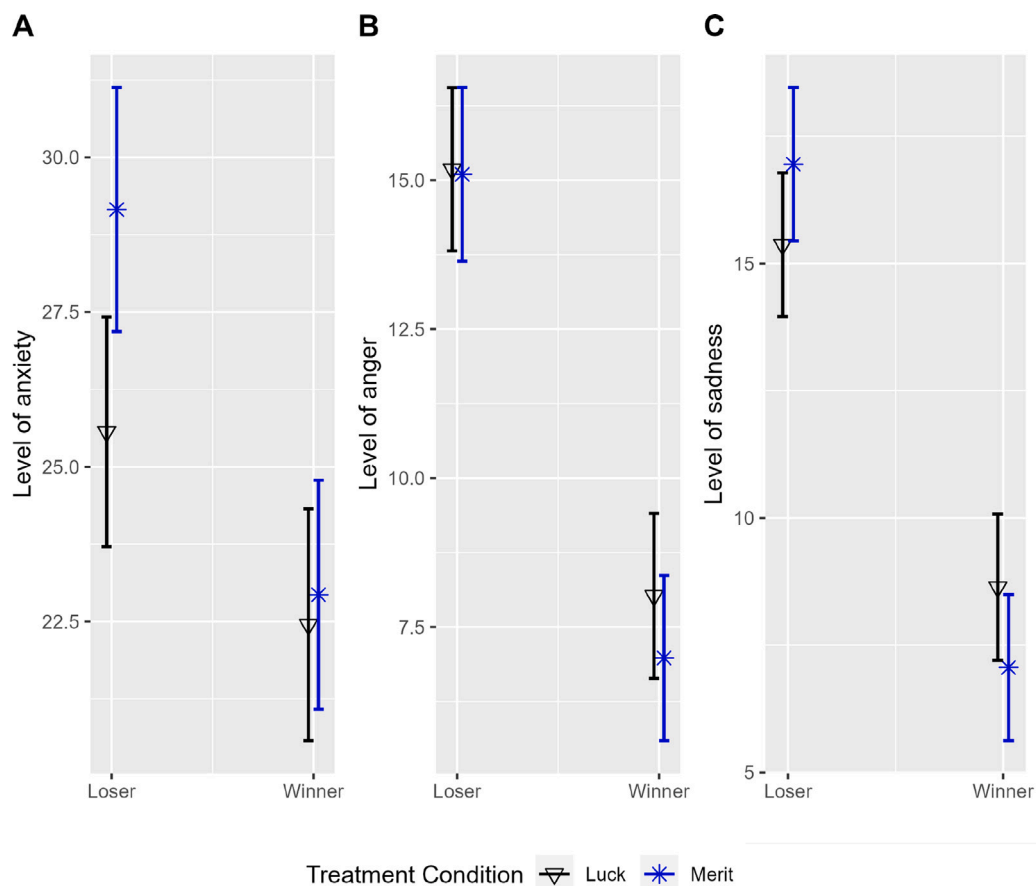


Fig. 5. Emotional reactions to the game. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. Regression tables can be found in Section 6, Table S23 of Appendix.

to growing disparities cannot be explained by low and middle income earners being firm believers in a meritocratic narrative. Instead, the results indicate that variation in redistributive outcomes is more likely driven by the beliefs and political behavior of higher-income groups than by meritocratic convictions among those with lower or middle incomes.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Irene Pañeda-Fernández: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Software, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Jonne Kamphorst:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Arnout van de Rijt:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Balaraju Battu:** Software, Investigation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2025.103294>.

Data availability

The replication files that replicate all analyses in the current study are available here: https://osf.io/jtsmu/overview?view_only=1d4fd65f62034f9c9e7e325cb8c8c91f. The pre-registration for the experiment (Study 2) can be found here: https://osf.io/wa2mv/overview?view_only=96f66c49402d407fbba14b3b39fb47e1.

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