Determinants of Beliefs about Economic Inequality

Rebecca Smith

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DETERMINANTS OF BELIEFS ABOUT ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Rebecca Smith
Arcadia University
Abstract

The income gap in America has grown radically over the last several decades and rivals the income gap during the Gilded Age. And yet, economic inequality is not a highly salient issue in American politics. To understand this, it is necessary to consider how Americans think about the issue. This thesis attempts to determine what factors contribute to the ways in which Americans think about economic inequality. Public opinion about economic inequality is an important topic because it has a concrete effect on policies that can either mitigate or exacerbate economic inequality. To answer this question, scholars generally center around four factors: socioeconomic status, normative frameworks, information levels, and the media. This paper investigates whether just one of these factors shapes public opinion about economic inequality, or if various factors play important roles. I argue that normative frameworks, economic status, and some social characteristics are all factors that influence opinions about economic inequality.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although mine is the only name to appear on the cover of this thesis, a great many people contributed to its completion. Here, I would like to formally express my appreciation to those people, as this is probably the last good opportunity to express my gratitude, in writing, to the many individuals who have instructed and supported me throughout the development of this thesis and over the course of my formal education.

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Introduction

Economic inequality has been dramatically increasing in the United States for decades, but there seems to be little concern for this among the general American public.\(^1\) Robert A. Dahl writes

For all the emphasis on equality in the American public ideology, the United States lags well behind a number of other democratic countries in reducing economic inequality. It is a striking fact that the presence of vast disparities in wealth and income, and so in political resources, has never become a highly salient issue in American politics or, certainly, a persistent one.\(^2\)

To understand why economic inequality has never become a significant issue in the minds of American people, it is important to understand what influences the way Americans think about inequality. This is because public beliefs about inequality have concrete political outcomes in relation to policy preferences for taxation and social spending.\(^3\) Therefore, public opinion on inequality has a very real influence over policies that can mitigate or exacerbate economic inequality in the United States. Given the increasing economic inequality in the United States in recent decades, why has economic inequality yet to become a highly salient issue in American politics? The answer, at least partially, lies in the way Americans understand the issue.

As several scholars have already shown, Americans do not seem too bothered by the existence of economic inequality, even when it directly affects them.\(^4\) Moreover, Americans do not have a very clear or accurate perception with regards to the extent of income inequality in the United States.\(^5\) This raises many questions about how the American public thinks and what


\(^{3}\) Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*, 134.


factors contribute to shaping American public opinion on income inequality. Scholars have tried to answer these questions by claiming that socioeconomic status, normative frameworks, information level, or the media affect public opinion on economic inequality. To date, however, there is little research on the overlap between all four of these factors. Does just one factor shape public opinion on economic inequality, or do various factors work together to shape public opinion on economic inequality, and if so how? Through an analysis of multiple potential factors, I ultimately argue that normative frameworks have the strongest correlation to public opinion on economic inequality, but economic status and some social characteristics also play a role.

**Background**

Before understanding public opinion on economic inequality it is also important to have a contextual understanding of recent trends in inequality and the current state of inequality in America. Inequality and movements for more equality are deeply entrenched in American history. Verba and Orren write, “The demand for equality has lain at the epicenter of the major upheavals that have erupted on the American political scene: the Revolution, the Jacksonian era, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, the Populist-Progressive period, the New Deal, and the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s.”\(^6\) However, it is important to note that, for the most part, attempts for more equality in America results in greater political equality, or the expansion of political rights, rather than the narrowing of economic inequality.\(^7\) Thus, while there is a history of increasing political equality in the U.S., economic inequality has always existed in America and

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\(^7\) Ibid, 22.
has been steadily increasing for the past four decades. There are two important aspects to comprehending trends in rising economic inequality: the income gap and the wealth gap.

The gap in take-home pay in America today rivals the income gap during the Great Depression. While economic inequality has always existed in America, income inequality narrowed following World War II. The mid-1900s into the 1970s were years of general growth across all income levels. Since the 1970s, however, those with high incomes experienced abundant and nearly uninterrupted income growth, reflecting pre-WWII trends in income inequality. Generally, the inflation-adjusted income in 2015 dollars of the average family fell by $2000 since 1970. Wages for those in lower and middle incomes stagnated in the 1970s, but the incomes of the richest continued to sharply increase. From 1979 to 2000, real income of the lowest fifth of income earners increased by 6% and the middle fifth’s income increased by 12%. In contrast, income at the top fifth rose by 70% and the income of the top 1% of earners soared 184%. This trend resulted in an income disparity unseen in nearly a century.

Moreover, the gap in wealth is larger than the income gap. Wealth – the sum of an individual or family’s total assets minus all debts – is more concentrated at the top than just income. While the top 1% of Americans earn 17% of all U.S. income, they control more than double this in wealth. Meanwhile, the bottom 90% of the population earns about 58% of the income, but holds only 29% of the wealth. In looking at the wealth gap, it is also important to

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12 Page and Jacobs, Class War?, 7.
14 Ibid.
consider the super-wealthy in addition to the wealthy top 1%. According to estate-tax data, the top 101 wealthiest Americans (the top 0.000032%) held 59,619 times more wealth than the bottom 90% of Americans in 2000. Figure 1 represents the disparity in the distribution of income and wealth in the U.S. by income quintile.

**Figure 1: Income and Wealth Distribution in the U.S.**

These trends and the above chart indicate very high levels of economic inequality that have been and continue to be rising. However, as Verba and Orren point out, economic inequality is long-established and well-founded in American history. This leads to the argument that Americans generally just accept inequality and believe that inequalities are “ultimately to benefit most people” through rewarding hard work. Others argue that Americans just do not

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13 Page and Jacobs, *Class War?*, 8.
understand the true extent of economic inequality. At the same time, though, there is also consistent evidence over the last thirty years that a majority of Americans think that the wealth distribution is unfair. While this speaks to what Americans think about economic inequality, scholars still debate on why Americans believe what they believe.

**Literature Review**

To answer this question, scholars generally tend to center around four factors influencing public opinion on economic inequality: socioeconomic status, normative frameworks, information level, and the media. Because the broad nature nature of these schools of thought, scholars often tend to focus on the internal debates of each factor instead of engaging the other groups. To examine the possibility that multiple factors may have a significant relationship to public opinion about economic inequality, this paper focuses broadly on all four schools of thought with consideration for the internal debates of each group. In this section I explore these four factors and discuss how scholars in these fields relate (or do not relate) to one another.

**Socioeconomic Status**

The scholars arguing that socioeconomic status is the primary factor influencing public opinion believe that people hold biases as a result of their own experiences. Socioeconomic status refers to an individual’s economic and social position in relation to others, especially an individual’s position in regards to income distribution or income quintiles. Generally, this school of thought favors the role of an individual’s self-interest when one forms opinions about economic inequality and the policies that may mitigate it, such as tax reform and social spending

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policies. Scholars who argue this option believe that people are rational and capable of choosing the opinions and policy options that best suit that person’s individual needs. Within this group of scholars, there are two main sub-groups. The first looks almost exclusively at economic self-interest, while the second considers economic interests in conjunction with personal experience, cultural factors, and other demographic characteristics, such as age, race, gender, religion, and marital status.

Formulating opinions based on economic self-interest means that individual opinions correspond to financial incentive. Franko, Tolbert, and Witko examine the role of economic self-interest through conducting a case study of public opinion regarding Washington State Proposition 1098. Although the proposition did not pass, the goal of the proposition was to provide lower and middle class tax relief by reducing the state property tax by 20% and eliminating business and occupation taxes for small businesses. The cuts and a new trust fund for education and health services would have been funded by a tax increase on individuals earning over $200,000 or joint incomes over $400,000.\footnote{Initiative Measure No. 1098 (Washington, 2010), 1.} In this study, Franko, Tolbert, and Witko show that misconceptions about policy initiatives that can mitigate economic inequality are widespread. However, they also argue that once distributional consequences of policies are clear, people formulate opinions based on their own self interest. As a result, people with lower incomes strongly favored Washington State Proposition 1098.\footnote{William Franko, Caroline J. Tolbert, and Christopher Witko, “Inequality, Self-Interest, and Public Support for ‘Robin Hood’ Tax Policies,” \textit{Political Quarterly} 66, no. 4 (2013): 923.}

Similarly, Berensky’s work supports the argument that economic self-interests drive public opinion. He argues that the largest supporters of social welfare policies are the
economically disadvantaged, calling them “natural supporters of the welfare state.” Other scholars also argue for the influence of economic status by asserting that people have biases towards redistributive policies based on their own position in the income distribution. Finally, while also admitting that public opinion regarding economic inequality is a complicated issue that has multiple influential factors, McCall and Manza also argue that class is a major determinant of opinion. They perform an empirical analysis of the effects of five different indicators of socioeconomic status (income, education, occupation, subjective social class, and optimism about economic mobility) on economic policy opinions. Ultimately, McCall and Manza conclude that class is highly important to opinions on economic policy. Overall, this group of scholars generally claims that people with lower incomes will favor more equality and the policies that would achieve this.

On the other hand, some scholars within this school of thought do not think that solely looking at income captures the full picture. Alesina and Giuliano contribute to this argument through examining preferences for income redistribution. Ultimately, they determine that personal experiences, history, and cultural factors are the primary elements influencing preferences for equality or tolerance of inequality. Slemrod also argues that socioeconomic factors are important in relation to public opinion on economic inequality. However, instead of focusing on personal experiences, like Alesina and Giuliano, he argues that demographic factors,

25 Ibid, 16.
specifically age and gender, are important to consider in addition to income.\textsuperscript{28} While the socioeconomic group of scholars advocating for factors other than economic self-interest do not deny that the economic motivation exists, they do not believe that it accounts for the whole picture. Rather, they argue that one should consider other social indicators as well.

The argument that socioeconomic indicators do not capture the full picture is a central critique of the argument that socioeconomic status is the primary factor influencing public opinion on economic inequality. For example, Bartels admits factors like age, sex, race, location, and church attendance all have some influence over a person’s opinion about equality. Bartels also claims that social characteristics only have a relatively small influence and that other factors are more important.\textsuperscript{29} On the other hand, one of the greatest strengths of this position is that it is not subject to some of the definitional issues that other schools of thought must debate and that McCall and Manza say has “plagued” work in the study of public opinion in relation to economic inequality.\textsuperscript{30} Indicators like income, age, sex, race, and church attendance are all fairly simple to define.

**Normative Frameworks**

On the other hand, some scholars do not believe that socioeconomic status is the primary factor shaping public opinion regarding economic inequality. Instead, many scholars argue that normative frameworks, or the “assumptions about values, attitudes, identities, and ‘other collectively shared expectations’” an individual has are the most important factor shaping public


\textsuperscript{29} Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*, 133.

\textsuperscript{30} McCall and Manza, “Class Differences in Social and Political Attitudes,” 2.
opinion on economic inequality. According to this school of thought, the values, norms, and principled beliefs a person has regarding the economy, politics, and policy shape public opinion. Principled beliefs are the ideas a person has that allow her or him to distinguish right from wrong. An example of a principled belief is an individual’s stance on whether the existence of high levels of economic inequality in a country is beneficial or harmful for that country. Multiple scholars argue that such beliefs can be strong enough to override the self-interests that the socioeconomic status group of scholars argues shapes public opinion.

These normative frameworks can include political ideology, or whether a person is conservative or liberal, which often manifests in identification with a political party. Sometimes, however, a normative framework can transcend partisanship or political ideology. Widespread normative frameworks embedded in a culture can develop into worldviews. Worldviews are the “big ideas” of a culture that intertwine with that culture’s identity. An example of this is the American Dream. The idea that people who work hard can get ahead and that failure to do so is an individual failure, not due to structural problems or societal inequalities abounds in American culture. The American Dream has strong roots in individualism, which focuses heavily on the importance of self-reliance. The opposite of individualism is egalitarianism, which is the idea that all people are equal. Like individualism, there is also a basis for egalitarianism in America. The Declaration of Independence states: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are

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34 Goldstein and Keohane, Ideas and Foreign Policy, 8
created equal.” These two ways of looking at normative frameworks (conservative vs. liberal or individualism vs. egalitarianism) are two subgroups of the scholars advocating that values, norms, and principled beliefs are the primary factor influencing public opinion about economic inequality.

Political ideology is the most important determinant of opinions on economic inequality for one group of scholars. Arthur Lupia and his colleagues argue this perspective through examining opinions concerning the 2001 and 2003 Bush tax reforms. They show that Republicans generally support the Bush tax policies at extremely high levels, regardless of income, the level of information a person had about the policies, and other factors. Ragusa also uses tax policy as a vehicle for understanding preferences for equality. However, he argues that political ideology is the most important factor for liberals, while a mix of ideology and “deservingness” stereotypes about the wealthy are the most important factors for conservatives.

On the other hand, some scholars argue that salient cultural normative frameworks, or worldviews, are most important in determining opinions about economic inequality rather than party ideology. Proponents of the individualist argument contend that the valued idea of choice, the notion that people who succeed chose to work hard and those who fail chose not to, is extremely important. In fact, they argue that people use this concept of choice as a justification to accept inequality. They further argue that the concept of choice is extremely important in

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swaying American opinions. Funk takes a more optimistic approach, in arguing that people are willing to engage in self-sacrifice of their own interests at times to support societal interests (e.g. willing to pay more in taxes in order to increase social spending). She does, however, note that the belief in what is best for society rests in individual beliefs, particularly whether a person supports individualism or egalitarianism. Several other scholars take similar stances in arguing for the role of an individual’s belief in egalitarian principles in formulating opinions on economic inequality.

There are strengths and weaknesses to this school of thought. Looking at normative frameworks from a political ideology perspective can be useful because there is ample information about how liberals and conservatives talk about economic inequality. Critics of the normative frameworks school of thought however, tend to argue that concepts like political ideology cannot capture the entire picture. For example, McCall and Kenworthy argue that political ideology only appears to be an important factor because people who lack information are susceptible to popular party rhetoric. Furthermore, measuring normative frameworks is difficult because beliefs are not stationary, concrete indicators; they frequently change and develop over time or can mean different things to different people.

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McCall and Kenworthy belong to a larger school of thought advocating that information is the most important factor in determining public opinion on economic inequality. While this school of thought can manifest in the most direct dimension of knowledge – level of education – many scholars focus on the amount of relevant information an individual has. Other scholars focus on education from a system-level perspective. Koçer and van de Werfhorst argue that the structure of an educational system affects opinions on economic inequality, as well as the extent that opinion on the fairness of economic inequality diverges from the mean.\(^4\) Similarly, Meyer speaks to the power of the educational system to mold and reinforce elite opinions.\(^5\)

On the other hand, many scholars focus less on the education system itself and instead assert that levels of relevant economic knowledge play a key role in shaping public opinion about economic inequality. Like McCall and Kenworthy, Caplan argues that there is a widespread lack of knowledge about relevant economics, which leads people to hold ideological biases. According to Caplan, this means that people will base opinions off of belief rather than fact. However, he argues that increasing relevant economic knowledge decreases this effect.\(^6\)

Bartels also believes that a lack of relevant information is the most important thing influencing opinions and policies that affect income inequality. He argues that people do not understand the relationship between their opinions on economic inequality and the policies that affect economic inequality.\(^7\) Other scholars, however, take a different perspective in arguing that the lack of information is real and important. Instead of focusing on lack of information about economic or

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\(^7\) Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*, 163.
policy details, they determine that the most important misconception is a lack of awareness about the true extent of inequality of incomes in America.

There are benefits and drawbacks to the information level approach. A major strength of this approach is that it is both an answer to the question and a solution to the problem. If a person’s level of relevant information leads to a general lack of understanding about important policy issues affecting economic inequality, then spreading more accurate information mitigates this effect. On the other hand, though, like the critics of socioeconomic or ideological indicators, critics of information level approach say that education does not accurately explain the issue – educated people can, and often do, have opposing or dissonant opinions.\(^\text{48}\)

**Media**

The final group of scholars believes that media is the most important factor shaping public opinion on economic inequality. Unlike the other schools of thought, there is not a major internal debate within the media framework. Here, media refers to popular and organized methods of mass communication to a population, particularly television, radio, and newspapers/online news. Petrova argues that mass media can manipulate public opinion even when people understand media bias.\(^\text{49}\) McCall, who argued for other factors in previous articles, stresses the importance of media coverage of economic inequality and claims that America is in “a new era of beliefs about inequality.”\(^\text{50}\) In a separate paper, McCall and Kenworthy show that changes in public opinion about economic inequality are consistent with changes in the level of

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\(^\text{48}\) Lupia et al, “Were Bush Tax Cut Supporters ‘Simply Ignorant?’” 2


inequality and with media reports of those changes.\textsuperscript{51} Additionally, Mutz discusses the ability of high levels of media exposure about economic news to prime the public to think in a desired way.\textsuperscript{52}

Like the other schools of thought, there are both strengths and weaknesses to arguing that media is the primary factor influencing public opinion on economic inequality. A strength to this school of thought is that there is already an extensive body of literature about the ability of the media to frame, agenda set, and prime its audience. This school of thought can apply those principles to the narrower study of public opinion on economic inequality. A drawback to this school of thought, though, is that it is difficult to distinguish whether people hold their opinions based on the news they receive, or whether they listen to certain news outlets because of their opinions. An individual may choose a media outlet for ideological reasons leading to the assessment that media cannot capture this issue clearly.

\textit{Assessment of the Literature}

Thus far, research attempting to determine which factors that influence public opinion regarding economic inequality has resulted in four main groups of scholars who all answer this question differently. Across all of these groups – socioeconomic status, normative frameworks, information level, and media – the biggest critique is a failure to accurately capture the full picture; this critique applies to all four schools of thought. As such, Bartels and Lupia and their colleagues use the same data to come to two opposing conclusions. The struggle to form a compelling argument that captures the full effect of these factors on influencing public opinion

\textsuperscript{51} Leslie McCall and Lane Kenworthy, “Explaining Americans’ Beliefs about Income Inequality,” unpublished manuscript, Northwestern University, Evanston IL (2009): 1-2.

on economic inequality has left gaps in the research of this field. While most scholars will consider socioeconomic status and other demographic indicators in their analyses, current literature does not test normative frameworks, information level, and the media with the same level of consistency. Another weakness in previous research is the assumption of many scholars that one factor will affect everyone in an identical way, when in reality different factors may influence people in varying ways and to varying extents. To address these gaps in the research, this paper seeks to explore how these factors work together to shape public opinion on economic inequality.

Analytic Framework

Before looking at how these factors contribute to public opinion on economic inequality, it is useful to know more specifically how to recognize these factors. As the purpose of this study is to investigate how factors work together to shape public opinion on economic inequality, this study draws its variables from the four general factors that other scholars identify: socioeconomic status, normative frameworks, information, and the media. Since a schism exists among different schools of thought, this paper examines multiple different factors in an attempt to bridge the gaps between the currently largely separated arguments. Furthermore, it also tries to mitigate some of the definitional issues that fill the existing literature in order to lay groundwork for more consistent definitions in studies on this topic in the future.

Socioeconomic Status

There are a number of important indicators to consider when examining the relationship between socioeconomic status and public opinion on economic inequality. These indicators
include economic status, age, gender, race, religion, and marital status. To measure economic status, this paper examines actual income, perceived economic class, and satisfaction with family financial situation. This is a useful form of measurement for economic status because it is more comprehensive than just measuring real income. Since forming opinions based upon self-interest is important to scholars of this school of thought, it is imperative to understand how economic self-interest manifests itself. According to the socioeconomic status school of thought, wealthy self-interested individuals tend to favor low taxes and low social spending because these individuals achieve the most benefit from keeping their money. Generally, they will also be against progressive tax reform for the same reason. On the other hand, lower income individuals tend to favor more social spending and generally favor progressive taxes.

For some scholars looking at public opinion on economic inequality, economic status and the self-interested policy opinions that coincide with an individuals’ economic status is the most important indicator of public opinion. However, some scholars argue that the social part of socioeconomic status also has significant ties to public opinion on economic inequality. Indicators like age, gender, race, religion, and marital status are all important in this regard.53 Thus, in examining the role of socioeconomic status in connection to public opinion on economic inequality, this paper considers both economic status and social indicators separately to examine whether either or both are influential in shaping public opinion about economic inequality.

Normative Frameworks

In addition to the examination of socioeconomic status, this paper also investigates how normative frameworks shape public opinion on economic inequality. Political ideology manifests itself in a political identification that is either conservative or liberal. There are several different ways to express this identification, but for the purposes of this study it is most useful to concentrate on economic conservatism and economic liberalism. Economic conservatives favor a free-market approach to the economy, wherein people succeed on their own abilities. They favor minimal government involvement in the economy, less government spending, and lower taxes. Economic liberals, on the other hand, favor a greater role for the federal government in reducing inequalities. This means that economic liberals tend to support government intervention in the economy, more government spending, and higher taxes.

Culturally salient ideas, particularly individualism and egalitarianism are also important to the understanding of the relationship between normative frameworks and public opinion on economic inequality. Funk, who uses both of these to support her argument, defines individualism as “placing a priority on personal goals over group goals.”\(^{54}\) This manifests in motivations to make choices that best benefit oneself. Proponents of individualism favor self-reliance and believe that hard work leads to success.\(^{55}\) Individualists tend to express this through opposing social spending programs or other government intervention to mitigate economic inequality or the economic hardship of others. In contrast, egalitarianism refers to favoring equal opportunity. Rather than individual motives, egalitarians support societal interest and social responsibility. Egalitarianism focuses on collective outcomes instead of individual results.\(^{56}\)

\(^{54}\) Funk, “Dual Influence of Self-Interest and Societal Interest,” 42.
\(^{55}\) Ibid.
\(^{56}\) Ibid.
Thus, an egalitarian would favor programs and policies designed to decrease economic inequality, even if she or he does not benefit directly from such policies, as egalitarianism reflects group interests over self-interest.

Information Levels

Much like the normative frameworks and socioeconomic status arguments, there are also two factions of scholars arguing that information plays a key role in public opinion on economic inequality. Both of these groups have a different concept of what level of information is the most important to consider. In an effort to address gaps in research failing to connect alternate explanations, both educational attainment and relevant economic knowledge are important to consider in this paper. Educational attainment refers to an individual’s highest level of schooling. There are multiple categories of educational attainment: no education, elementary school, some high school, high school degree, some college, college degree, master’s degree, and doctorate. For the purposes of this research, the most important indicator of educational attainment is the highest degree achieved. To measure levels of relevant economic knowledge, this paper looks at overall comprehension of the survey questions this study relies on. This is a measure of relevant information because the survey covers a wide range of pertinent questions, including topics related to the income gap, government spending on social programs, and the welfare of the nation. Looking at relevant knowledge and educational attainment together allows for a broader sense of how each of these shape public opinion.
Media

Media is the fourth major factor to consider in connection to public opinion on economic inequality. In this paper, the most important distinction is the medium by which individuals get their main source of news, such as TV, radio, internet, or newspaper. While this definition is restrictive in some ways, as it does not account for differences in content across news programs within each medium, this study is subject to already existing data on the correlation between media and opinion on economic inequality. Currently, there is very little data examining this particular relationship across types of media. However, examining the information available is an important starting point to beginning to understand how media shapes public opinion on economic inequality. The second indicator that this study examines in relation to news and public opinion on economic inequality is the frequency that an individual reads the news. This is useful in looking at whether the news has an important correlation to public opinion on economic inequality because it allows this study to examine whether there is a difference in opinions between people who frequently read the news and never read the news. A difference in opinions would indicate that the news does have an influential relationship to public opinion on economic inequality. Table 1 outlines the specific variables this study uses to examine each of the four schools of thought.
Table 1

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</table>

**Method**

To evaluate how different factors shape opinions on economic inequality, this paper compares differences in public opinion based on each of the variables outlined in the previous section. I conduct this analysis of differing opinions by using already existing data from the 2012 General Social Survey, with a focus on questions that pertain to the main variables of this study (e.g. different education levels, political ideologies, income levels, etc.).

In order to analyze divergent opinions, I use descriptive statistics. The purpose of descriptive statistics is to summarize and describe data in order to gather information about a
population.\textsuperscript{57} My primary objective is to examine differences in opinion on economic inequality among those from different socioeconomic statuses, with different normative frameworks, with different levels of information, and with different levels of media access. For example, if people with low incomes and people with high incomes have differing opinions on economic inequality, then there may be a correlation between income and public opinion on economic inequality. An inspection of the similarities and differences among the main variables of this study is important in understanding whether a correlation exists between the variables and public opinion on economic inequality. To supplement this, I present a correlation table that allows me to examine the statistically significant correlations between the dependent variable of interest and my key independent variables. Consequently, I conduct the analysis across all four factors identified by scholars, which is lacking in much of the literature. This allows for a fuller picture of the overarching factors demonstrated by scholars.

Data

As stated previously, definitional issues plague the study of public opinion on economic inequality. So as to not privilege one group of scholars over another, I choose to use the definitions and measurements used by the 2012 General Social Survey (GSS) for two reasons. First, it is one of two most commonly used surveys (the National Election Survey is the other). Second, it also includes data that captures all of the variables, rather than just two or three. This is important in maintaining consistency throughout the analysis.

To conduct the analysis, I match the variables outlined in Table 1 to the closest related GSS question or questions. Then, I compare these independent variables to another question

\textsuperscript{57} Bob Botsch, “Scope and Research Methods in Political Science: Descriptive Statistics,” University of South Carolina Aiken (November 1999).
from the GSS looking at opinions on the income gap. The comparison allows for an examination of how these variables correlate to public opinion on economic inequality. The central GSS question I use to conduct this analysis, coded and referred to as INCGAP, is “Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Differences in income in America are too large.”58 The GSS bases answers on a five point scale:

1. Strongly agree  
2. Agree  
3. Neither  
4. Disagree  
5. Strongly Disagree  

Drawing on the literature and the indicators suggested by the literature, as outlined in Table 1, Tables 1-5 in Appendix A detail the independent variables this study uses to examine how socioeconomic status, normative frameworks, information, and the media relate to public opinion on economic inequality.

*Socioeconomic Status*

This study uses three indicators to examine an individual’s economic status: actual income, perceived social class, and happiness with that individual’s financial situation. While the GSS breaks down INCOME06 into twenty-five separate income brackets, this study consolidates them into five income brackets that most closely resemble the distribution of income quintiles as described by the U.S. Census Bureau to gain a better understanding of how income groups think about the income gap.59 In comparison to INCGAP, if economic status

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correlates to public opinion on economic inequality, I would expect for a difference to exist between low income and high income individuals, people who identify as lower or upper class, and people who are satisfied and dissatisfied with their financial situation.

In line with the economic self-interest argument described by the socioeconomic status literature, I expect that those with lower incomes, those who identify as lower or working class, and those who are financially dissatisfied to be more likely to agree with the INCGAP question. Table 1 in Appendix A further details the three GSS questions this study uses to examine public opinion about economic inequality.

To measure social characteristics, this study uses race, sex, age, religion, church attendance, and marital status. I use these because they are social indicators widely used in literature pertaining to public opinion on economic inequality. While the GSS looks at ages in eighty-nine separate categories, this study consolidates ages into generational cohorts to gain a better understanding of how different age groups think about economic inequality. If social indicators are important in connection with public opinion on economic inequality, I would expect for differences in responses to INCAP based on different races, genders, ages religions, and marital statuses. Based on the literature, I would generally expect individuals belonging to minority or traditionally underrepresented groups to think that the income gap is too large in America at higher rates than their more privileged counterparts. For example, if social characteristics are important in driving differences in public opinion on economic inequality, I would expect women to strongly agree to the INCGAP question at higher rates than men. Table

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60 While years of birth and ages for the different generations can differ slightly, this study uses the generational age groups as defined by the Pew Research Center; Richard Fry, “This year, Millennials will overtake Baby Boomers,” Pew Research Center, last modified January 16, 2015, accessed March 10, 2016, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/01/16/this-year-millennials-will-overtake-baby-boomers/.
2 in Appendix A details the measurement of the social characteristics used in this paper more specifically.

**Normative Frameworks**

This survey uses both political party affiliation and political ideological leanings to measure political ideology. If political ideology is important in connection with public opinion on economic inequality, I would expect differences in opinion between people who identify as Democrat and liberal versus Republican and conservative in relation to the INCGAP question.

HELPOOR, EQWLTH, and NATFARE all measure individualism and egalitarianism. Answers 1-2 for HELPPOOR, 1-3 for EQWLTH, and 1 for NATFARE constitute egalitarian views. Answers 4-5 for HELPPOOR, 5-7 for EQWLTH, and 3 for NATFARE indicate individualist opinions. For either of these worldviews to be important to the study of public opinion on economic inequality, I expect egalitarian answers and individualist answers to differ in connection to the INCGAP question.

According to the literature, liberals and egalitarians should agree to the INCGAP question at the highest rates, whereas conservatives and individualists should disagree and strongly disagree at higher rates. For more details on the questions used to examine normative frameworks, see Table 3 in Appendix A.

**Information Levels**

The GSS questions this study uses to examine information levels are DEGREE and COMPREND. DEGREE measures educational attainment through measuring the highest degree level the respondent has achieved. COMPREND, on the other hand, measures how well the
respondent understands the questions in the GSS, which indicates whether or not she or he has an understanding of relevant issues, such as the income gap. For each of these, if they are important in connection to INCGAP, I would expect a difference between people with less information and more information, and/or lower and higher degrees. As information levels increase (degree and/or better comprehension), I expect agreement with the INCGAP question to increase. This is because scholars from the information school of thought argue that increased information decreased misunderstandings about the extent of inequality. Table 4 in Appendix A further details the DEGREE and COMPREND variables used in this paper.

*Media*

NEWSFROM and NEWS are the GSS questions used to measure the media’s relationship to public opinion on economic inequality. While the literature suggests that source of news outlets (such as FOX or MSNBC) may be important in shaping public opinion about economic inequality, no such GSS question measuring this exists to date. NEWSFROM, which examines an individual’s choice of news medium, may have an interesting relationship, though, and can serve as a foundation for beginning to understand the connection to public opinion about inequality. The NEWSFROM and NEWS variables look at where individuals get information from and how often they read the news. For there to be a connection between these variables and public opinion on economic inequality, I would expect for there to be a difference in opinions based on where people get their information and how often they read the news. For more information regarding these variables, see Table 5 in Appendix A.

Together, investigating all four of these potential factors allows for a better sense of how socioeconomic status, normative frameworks, information, and media shape public opinion on
economic inequality. I examine each of these variables in connection to relevant questions from the GSS. Next, I compare these variables to the INCGAP question to observe whether or not there are deviations of opinion within the variables. Deviations mean that the independent variable does have a relationship to public opinion on economic inequality and the lack of any clear deviation means that the independent variable does not have an important correlation. I will proceed through my analysis by looking at each group, as outlined in Tables 1-5 (Appendix A) for the distinctions discussed above.

To conduct the analysis, I use the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research’s (ICPSR) online crosstab analysis feature. The data used for this study has both strengths and weaknesses. This study is, in many ways, limited by the data available. While the GSS is the survey that best captures the indicators described in Table 1, it does not capture relevant knowledge of economic issues or the types of media people use to gain economic information very comprehensively. Therefore, this study uses the closest related GSS questions available. A survey with more extensive data on which media outlets people get news from and how much economic knowledge an individual has would be interesting variables in a future study with a survey that includes these elements.

Relying on the GSS questions does have several strengths, though. As a reputable study with wide-ranging questions, scholars widely use the GSS. Using the same data across many studies from several different scholars lends some regularity to a field riddled with other inconsistencies, such as definitional issues. Furthermore, using one survey to capture all of the variables of this study maintains consistency through this paper because it ensures that all data comes from the same sample, at the same time, and during the same political climate.
Data Analysis

Keeping in mind the expectations discussed in the previous section, this section tests each hypothesis against the variables operationalized in Tables 1-5 (Appendix A) in connection to the INCGAP question. For a complete list of all variables and the GSS coding for these variables that this paper uses, see the list in Appendix B. The most important indicator of a connection is differing opinions among subgroups from each independent variable. For example, if people who identify as female and people who identify as male have different opinions about the income gap, then there may be a correlation between gender and public opinion on economic inequality. Following a test of all potential factors through the ICPSR’s online crosstab feature, I conduct a correlation analysis to test the statistical significance of all potential factors that may drive differences in public opinion about economic inequality.

Socioeconomic Status

To evaluate whether socioeconomic status is important in influencing public opinion on economic inequality, this study looks at economic indicators and social indicators separately. This is because the literature identifies two distinct groups of scholars that both agree that economic status is important, but disagree about the importance of social indicators, such as race, gender, and age.

A slight relationship does appear to exist between an individual’s economic status and her opinion about economic inequality. The poorest respondents strongly agree and agree that differences in income in America are too large at higher rates than any other income group. Of all respondents earning between $0 and $29,999 per year, 29.7% strongly agree and 43.9% agree that income differentials in the United States are too large. The second poorest income group
follows, with 27.6% strongly agreeing and 39.9% agreeing that the income gap is too large. Furthermore, the second wealthiest and the wealthiest strongly agree at the lowest rates and disagree at the highest rates.

However, the difference between these opinions across all income quintiles is less than 10%, and the wealthiest agree that the income gap is too large at higher rates than any other income group. Finally, the distribution of opinions is similar across all of the income groups, as shown in Figure 2. Therefore, while a slight relationship does appear to exist between income and the likelihood of strongly agreeing that the income gap in America is too large, it does not appear to be a highly significant connection.

**Figure 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INCOME</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$0-$29,999</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>$30,000-$49,999</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>$50,000-$74,999</td>
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<td>45%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>10%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75,000-$129,999</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$130,000 or more</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There also does not seem to be a highly significant relationship between an individual’s subjective class identification and her or his opinion on economic inequality (see Figure 3).
Much like actual income, the lower and working classes strongly agree that the income gap is too large at higher rates (39.2% and 25.8% respectively) than those who identify as upper or middle class. The upper class also strongly disagrees that the income gap is too large at a higher rate than the other classes (14.4% versus the next highest rate at 5%). However, 54.2% of the upper class agrees that the income gap is too large – more than each of the other subjective class groups. This aside, the combined strongly agree and agree rates for the lower (67.4%) and working classes (69.2%) are still higher than the combined strongly agree and agree rates of the upper class (59.2%). This shows that those who identify as lower class generally think that differences in income are too large at higher rates than those who identify as upper class.

Figure 3

Finally, a person’s satisfaction with her or his income does appear to have a connection to their opinion on economic inequality (see Figure 4); those not satisfied with their current
financial situations strongly agree that the income gap is too large at much higher rates than those who are financially satisfied (36.5% compared to 17.0%). Additionally, 14.2% of financially satisfied individuals disagree with the INCGAP question and 6.2% strongly disagree. These are slightly higher rates of disagreement than those who are not at all satisfied with their financial situation (10.2% disagree and 2.5% strongly disagree). Thus, it appears that an individual’s economic status appears to have a slight connection to public opinion on economic inequality. There is a relationship, as demonstrated in Figures 2-4, between the likelihood that an individual strongly agrees that the income gap in America is too large and his or her income, subjective class identification, and financial satisfaction.

**Figure 4**

![Bar chart showing the relationship between SATFIN and agreement on income gap](chart.png)

Next, I examine whether social indicators also have a connection to opinions on the income gap. The social indicators this paper examines are race, gender, age, religion, and
marital status, those do not appear to drive significant differences regarding public opinion about economic inequality, as shown in Figures 5, 6, and 7. Across races, 25% of people strongly agree that the income gap is too large. Rates of agreeing, disagreeing, and strongly disagreeing are similar across races as well. Similarly, there is not much distinction between opinions about economic inequality and different genders, except that females are slightly less likely to disagree that the income gap is too large. Most age groups also follow a similar distribution of opinions. The only distinction is that Millennials (22-34) strongly agree at slightly lower rates than other generations. The slight difference levels out, however, into similar levels of total agreement in comparison to other age groups because they agree that the income gap is too large at higher rates than the other age groups. The lack of divergence among opinions on the income gap in connection to race, gender, and age suggests that these social characteristics are not creating differences in opinions about economic inequality.

**Figure 5**
**Figure 6**

![Gender Chart]

**Figure 7**

![Age Chart]
Religious preference does appear to have a moderate affect on opinions about economic inequality, but frequency of attending religious services does not (see Figures 8 and 9). Buddhism and other Eastern religions agree or strongly agree that the income gap in America is too large at the highest rates (100%). Those with no religion, a religion other than those listed, Christians (aside from Protestant, Orthodox-Christian, and Catholic), and Buddhists also agree or strongly agree with the INCGAP question at high rates. In contrast, Inter-nondenominational individuals disagree that the income gap is too large at extremely high rates (80%). Orthodox-Christians, Protestants, and Catholics also disagree at higher rates than other religions. However, there is not much divergence among the opinions of people who attend religious services more or less frequently. While at times it may seem like the differences in opinion are large, there is no coherent relationship between attending religious services more or less often and belief that the income gap is too large. For example, those who never attend religious services and those who attend 2-3 times per month agree that the income gap is too large at very close rates.
Figure 8

![Chart showing RELIG distribution across total agree, neither, and total disagree categories, with specific religion labels such as Protestant, Catholic, Christian, Orthodox-Christian, Other Eastern, Buddhism, Hinduism, Muslim, Inter-nondenominational, and None.]

Figure 9

![Chart showing ATTEND distribution across agree, neither, and disagree categories, with specific attendance labels such as Never, Less than once a year, Once a year, Several times a year, Once a month, 2-3 time a month, Nearly every week, Every week, and More than once a week.]
It also appears that an individual’s marital status has a slight relationship with whether or not s/he agrees that the income gap in America is too large (see Figure 10). Divorced, separated, and never married respondents tend to agree or strongly agree at slightly higher rates than married or widowed individuals. Similarly, married and widowed respondents were more likely to disagree than never married, divorced, and separated respondents. However, the opinions are not highly divergent, which suggests that this relationship is not incredibly significant.

**Figure 10**

[Diagram showing marital status and opinions on income gap]

Generally, then, it does not appear that social indicators are very important for shaping opinions on whether or not the income gap is too large. While religious preference and marital status appear to have a slight correlation, race, gender, age, and church attendance do not.
Therefore, while there is some disagreement among scholars focused on socioeconomic factors, it seems that economic status, rather than demographic factors, is the most important indicator to consider when looking at socioeconomic status in connection to public opinion on economic inequality.

**Normative Frameworks**

The next potentially influential factor shaping public opinion on economic inequality is normative frameworks. To examine this, I look at both political ideology and worldviews (individualism and egalitarianism) because there are groups of scholars arguing for both of these subgroups. An analysis of these variables in connection to the INCGAP question shows that both have an important connection to public opinion about economic inequality.

To examine political ideology, I look at political party preference and ideological leanings. Party preference appears to have a relationship to opinions on whether or not the income gap is too large (see Figure 11). Strong Democrats, Independents near Democrats, and not strong Democrats are much more likely to strongly agree that the income gap is too large than strong Republicans, not strong Republicans, and Independents near Republicans. Conversely, strong Republicans, Independents near Republicans, and not strong Republicans are most likely to strongly disagree that the income gap is too large. Party identification appears very influential because opinions are both divergent and polarized according to party identification. For example, 42% of Strong Democrats strongly agree that the income gap is too large, while only 15% of Strong Republicans felt the same. In contrast, 11% of Strong Republicans strongly disagree that the income gap is too large, while only 2% of Strong Democrats answered the same.
An individual’s identification as conservative or liberal also shapes answers to the INCGAP question (see Figure 12). People who identify as extremely liberal, liberal, and slightly liberal strongly agree that the income gap is too large at much higher rates than moderates, slightly conservative individuals, conservatives, and extremely conservative people. 58.0% of extremely liberal individuals, 42.0% of liberals, and 37.8% of slightly liberal respondents strongly agreed that the income gap in America is too large. In contrast, only 17.2% of extremely conservative respondents, 15.1% of conservatives, and 18.8% of extremely conservative individuals strongly agreed. Furthermore, extremely conservative, conservative, and slightly conservative respondents strongly disagree at the highest rates in comparison to extremely liberal, liberal, and slightly liberal respondents. 9.4% of extremely conservative people, 8.6% of conservatives, and 7.0% of slightly conservative individuals strongly disagreed.
that the income gap is too large. In comparison, only 2.9% of slightly liberal respondents, 1.7% of liberals, and 1.0% of extremely liberal individuals also strongly disagreed with the INCGAP question. Through looking at both party identification and political ideological identification, it is evident that political ideology is important in shaping public opinion on economic inequality.

**Figure 12**

There is also a group of scholars, however, that contends that the most important factor shaping public opinion on economic inequality is whether a person is individualist or egalitarian. To measure these variables, I look at the HELPPOOR, EQWLTH, and NATFARE questions of the GSS and compare these answers to the INCGAP question. Recall that support for government aid to the poor, government reducing the income gap and increased welfare spending indicate an egalitarian. Support for the idea that individuals help themselves, belief
that the government should not concern itself with reducing the income gap, and support for decreased spending on welfare denote an individualist. An analysis of these variables shows that individualism and egalitarianism are also important factors shaping public opinion. Egalitarians strongly agree with the INCGAP question at higher rates than individualists across all three indicators of egalitarianism and individualism. Simultaneously, individualists strongly disagree that the income gap is too large at higher rates than egalitarians across all three indicators of egalitarianism and individualism. Below, Figures 13, 14, and 15 show this relationship across the HELPPOOR, EQWLTH, and NATFARE indicators.

**Figure 13**
Figure 14

EQWLTH

Figure 15

NATFARE
Evidence shows that both political ideology and worldviews on individualism and egalitarianism are important in connection to how one answers the INCGAP question. Democrats, liberals, and egalitarians tend to strongly agree that the income gap in America is too large. Conversely, Republicans, conservatives, and individualists are more likely to strongly disagree that the income gap is too large. Therefore, normative frameworks do drive differences among public opinion about economic inequality.

Information Levels

To consider information levels in connection to public opinion on economic inequality, I examine both educational attainment and amount of knowledge. To do this, I assess an individual’s highest achieved degree and her or his comprehension of the GSS questions in comparison to the INCGAP question. Ultimately, I conclude that information levels do not significantly drive differences in public opinion on economic inequality.

An individual’s highest degree level does not result in divergent opinions about the income gap. It is notable that individuals with a graduate degree are far more likely to strongly agree that the income gap is too large (41%) than the next highest rate of strong agreement (less than high school, 29%). However, there is no further discernable pattern between level of education and agreeing or disagreeing that the income gap in America is too large. While diversions in opinions between different levels of education do exist, they do not correspond to the INCGAP question linearly. Those with graduate degrees are most likely to strongly agree that the income gap is too large, followed in order by those with less than a high school diploma, those who completed junior college, those with bachelor’s degrees, and those with a high school diploma. In order, those most likely to strongly disagree that the income gap is too large are
people with less than a high school education, bachelor’s degrees, high school degrees, junior college degrees, and those with a graduate degree. Because these divergent opinions do not appear to follow any pattern, there is not a clear relationship between level of educational attainment and public opinion about economic inequality.

Similarly, there is also not a very significant distinction between comprehension of the GSS questions and belief that the income gap is too large. There is some distinction between those with a poor understanding of the survey topics; however, this distinction is less clear when looking at the aggregate strongly agree and agree answers. When looking at the total general agreement that the income gap is too large in America, separated by those with good, fair, and poor comprehension of the survey questions, the divergence between these groups is less distinct. Even still, those with a poor understanding are more likely to agree that the income gap is too large. 70.9% of those with a poor understanding of the survey questions either agree or strongly agree that the income gap is too large, while 65.5% of those with a good understanding of the survey questions either agree or strongly agree. This is a very small difference in opinion though, which suggests that relevant knowledge does not have a very significant effect on public opinion about economic inequality. Figures 16 and 17, below, represent the relationships between educational attainment and relevant information to the INCGAP question.
Thus, there is no very distinct relationship between educational attainment or relevant knowledge and public opinion on economic inequality. However, there are slight divergences among those with graduate degrees and those with a poor comprehension of the survey questions in their likelihood to strongly agree that the income gap is a problem. Despite this slight affect of information on public opinion on economic inequality, the distribution of opinions is similar across different education levels and levels of relevant information. This indicates that information does not appear to significantly shape public opinion on economic inequality.

*Media*

News medium does appear shape public opinion on economic inequality, but the frequency of reading the news does not (see Figures 18 and 19). More specifically, the medium people choose to get their information is important for whether or not an individual agrees or disagrees that the income gap in America is too large. People who get their main source of information from books or other printed material are unanimous in strongly agreeing or agreeing that the income gap is too large. In contrast, only 39.1% of those who get their main source of news from magazines strongly agree or agree that the income gap is too large and 56.5% disagree. In addition to books, people whose main source of news comes from family or friends and colleagues are also highly likely to strongly agree or agree with the INCGAP question (79.2%), while people who get their news from the radio are more likely to strongly disagree or disagree than any other news medium except magazines (25.0%). The frequency of reading the news, however, does not appear to have a strong connection to public opinion on economic inequality (see Figure 17). This is similar to how religious affiliation had a relationship to opinions on the income gap, but frequency of attendance at religious services did not. There
appears to be no significant divergence of opinions on the income gap between people who read the news everyday, a few times per week, once per week, less than once per week, and never.

**Figure 18**

![Graph showing news sources by agreement degree](attachment:image.png)

- **Internet**
- **TV**
- **Radio**
- **Newspapers**
- **Magazines**
- **Books, other printed material**
- **Family**
- **Friends, colleagues**
Correlation Analysis

A crosstab analysis showed that normative frameworks (both political ideology and worldviews) have an apparent relationship to public opinion about economic inequality. Economic status, religious affiliation, marital status, and news medium also appeared to drive differences in opinions. In contrast, race, gender, age, church attendance, degree level, relevant information, and frequency of reading the news did not appear to have much connection to the INCGAP question. To further test the relationship of socioeconomic status, normative frameworks, information, and news to public opinion about economic inequality, I conduct a correlation analysis. Such an analysis allows for a better understanding of the statistical significance of the relationships identified by the crosstab analysis.
The results of the analysis support the significance of the relationships that emerged in the crosstab analysis. Income, subjective class, financial satisfaction, religious preference, marital status, party identification, political views, and all three indicators of individualism and egalitarianism have a statistically significant correlation to opinions on the income gap. Interestingly, in the crosstab analysis sex did not appear significant, but did in the correlation analysis, as the data is coded. This analysis shows that being a woman is moderately correlated with agreeing that the current income gap in the U.S. is too large, and it is statistically significant. Of all of the significant variables from this analysis, normative frameworks appear to be the most important factor shaping public opinion about the income gap (see Table 2). In addition to normative frameworks, the correlation analysis also confirmed that economic status and some of social characteristics – namely religious preference, marital status, and sex – also appear important in shaping public opinion about economic inequality in the United States. This analysis did not show a statistically significant relationship between the INCGAP question and information levels or the media. Generally, the correlation analysis supported the findings drawn from the crosstab analysis.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<td>1.098</td>
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<td>0.061</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

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61 For a compete table of all correlations (which may be useful in understanding the relationship between the independent variables) see Appendix C.
Moreover, both the crosstab analysis and the correlation analysis revealed that there are multiple important factors shaping public opinion about economic inequality. Generally, there has been very little research on the possibility that more than one of the above mentioned schools of thought may play an influential role in shaping public opinion. While the analyses revealed that not every factor appears important in shaping public opinion about economic inequality, it did show that political ideology, worldviews, economic status, gender, religion, and marital status all have a role in shaping public opinion about income inequality in the United States.

Political ideology, worldviews, economic status, and some social characteristics play important roles in shaping public opinion about economic inequality. While this does reveal, generally, that both the normative frameworks school of thought and the socioeconomic status school of thought contribute important ideas to this field of study, it also reveals some information about the internal debates within each group. Of all schools of thought, normative frameworks appear to have the strongest correlation to the INCGAP question. Moreover, while scholars from this school of thought discuss political ideology and worldviews as two separate elements, the correlation analysis revealed a strong positive correlation between an individual’s political ideology and her worldviews. Therefore, not only are both these components of normative frameworks important in shaping political opinion about economic inequality, but these factors are also statistically significant in connection with each other. Furthermore, many of the variables used to measure socioeconomic status also have a significant connection to the variables measuring normative frameworks. Understanding the interconnectedness of these variables is pivotal to recognizing that multiple variables can shape beliefs about the income gap and to understanding why Americans hold the beliefs they do about economic inequality.
Conclusion

The point of this paper is to investigate why Americans hold the opinions they have about economic inequality. Ultimately, I argue that normative frameworks are the most influential factor shaping public opinion about economic inequality, but economic status and some social characteristics are also important. Understanding the factors that shape the way Americans think about economic inequality is important because beliefs about inequality have influence over policies that can mitigate or exacerbate economic inequality in the United States.62

Furthermore, this paper also investigates the possibility that more than one factor can shape public opinion about economic inequality. Allowing for more than one important factor is important, because people are not all identical – different factors can shape different people in different ways and to differing extents. Although examining the different ways these elements effect different groups of people is not the focus of this paper, the correlation analysis did reveal some interesting connections between age and normative frameworks. Given that normative frameworks are the most important factor shaping public opinion about economic inequality, and given that we millennials have a distinct worldview and now outnumber baby boomers, this is particularly relevant insight into what issues could become important as more millennials reach voting age.63

This said, there are numerous opportunities for future research. This paper addressed definitional issues and assumptions about the existence of only one very influential factor influencing public opinion about economic inequality and revealed that normative frameworks, economic status, and some social characteristics are all important. However, the survey used in

---
this study (chosen to ensure that this study lends some regularity to the field) does not comprehensively address respondents’ relevant economic knowledge and news sources. A future study that addresses these areas more fully would be beneficial to this field of study. Indeed, a framework for an interesting assessment of relevant economic information already exists. The k-score method, developed by Blinder and Krueger, grades individuals on a scale of zero to one hundred based on answers to nine questions designed to gauge levels of relevant economic knowledge. Further studies about the relationship between media and public opinion about economic inequality may also want to consider the different news outlets (such as MSNBC and FOX) that individuals choose for their news.

It is important that we continue to try to understand public opinion on economic inequality and the what influences those opinions have on the political and policy process in a country with such “vast disparities in wealth and income.” Despite this, as Dahl points out, the existence of high levels of economic inequality “has never become a highly salient issue in American politics or, certainly, a persistent one.” Understanding what shapes public opinion on economic inequality is a step forward into comprehending why this has not become a prominent topic in America. However, due to the connection between age to normative frameworks and normative frameworks to belief that the income gap is too large, this issue may become an increasingly salient issue as more millennials become old enough to vote.

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65 Dahl, Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy, 175.
66 Ibid
Bibliography


DOI:10.1177/1940161211417334.


Tables; General Social Survey, 2012 Merged Data, Including a Cultural Module [United States]. Analysis ran on 2016-03-05 (7:47 PM EST) using SDA 3.5: Tables.


McCall, Leslie, and Lane Kenworthy. "Explaining Americans' Beliefs about Income Inequality." Unpublished manuscript, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, last modified March 26, 2009. PDF.


## Appendix A

### Table 1: Economic Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLE NAME</th>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>MEASUREMENT</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| **Economic Status**<sub>1</sub> | INCOME06 | In which of these groups did your total family income, from all sources, fall last year – 2011 – before taxes, that is. Total income includes interest or dividends, rent, Social Security, other pensions, alimony or child support, unemployment compensation, public aid (welfare), armed forces or veteran’s allotment. | 1. $0-$29,999  
2. $30,000-$49,999  
3. $50,000-$74,999  
4. $75,000-$129,000  
5. $130,000 or more |
| **Economic Status**<sub>2</sub> | CLASS | If you were asked to use one of four names for your social class, which would you say you belong in: the lower class, the working class, the middle class, or the upper class? | 1. Lower class  
2. Working class  
3. Middle class  
4. Upper class |
| **Economic Status**<sub>3</sub> | SATFIN | So far as you and your family are concerned, would you say that you are pretty well satisfied with your present financial situation, more or less satisfied, or not satisfied at all? | 1. Pretty well satisfied  
2. More or less satisfied  
3. Not satisfied at all |
Table 2: Social Indicators

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<th>VARIABLE</th>
<th>VARIABLE NAME</th>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>MEASUREMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Social indicator<sub>1</sub> | RACE | What is your race? | 1. White  
2. Black  
3. Other |
| Social indicator<sub>2</sub> | SEX | What is your gender? | 1. Male  
2. Female |
| Social indicator<sub>3</sub> | AGE | Respondent’s age | 1. 22-34  
2. 35-50  
3. 51-69  
4. 70 or older |
| Social indicator<sub>4</sub> | RELIG | What is your religious preference? | 1. Protestant  
2. Catholic  
3. Christian  
4. Orthodox-Christian  
5. Other Eastern  
6. Buddhism  
7. Hinduism  
8. Muslim  
9. Inter-nondenominational  
10. Other  
11. None |
| Social indicator<sub>5</sub> | ATTEND | How often do you attend religious services? | 1. Never  
2. Less than once a year  
3. About once or twice a year  
4. Several times a year  
5. About once a month  
6. 2-3 times a month  
7. Nearly every week  
8. Every week  
9. Several times a week |
| Social indicator<sub>6</sub> | MARITAL | Are you currently – married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married? | 1. Married  
2. Widowed  
3. Divorced  
4. Separated  
5. Never married |
### Table 3: Normative Frameworks

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<tr>
<th>VARIABLE</th>
<th>VARIABLE NAME</th>
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<th>MEASUREMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Ideology&lt;sub&gt;2&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>POLVIEWS</td>
<td>I’m going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal – point 1 – to extremely conservative – point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?</td>
<td>1. Extremely liberal 2. Liberal 3. Slightly liberal 4. Moderate 5. Slightly conservative 6. Conservative 7. Extremely conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism or Egalitarianism&lt;sub&gt;1&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>HELPPPOOR</td>
<td>Should the government do everything possible to improve the living of all poor Americans, or should each person take care of [her]self?</td>
<td>1. Strong gov’t should improve living standards 2. Gov’t should improve living standards 3. Agree with both answers 4. People should take care of themselves 5. Strongly people should take care of themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism or Egalitarianism&lt;sub&gt;2&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>EQWLTH</td>
<td>Should the government reduce income differences between the rich and poor, perhaps by raising taxes of wealthy families or by giving assistance to the poor, or should the government not concern itself with reducing differences?</td>
<td>1. Gov’t should do something to reduce income differences 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. Gov’t should not concern itself with income differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism or Egalitarianism&lt;sub&gt;3&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>NATFARE</td>
<td>Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on welfare?</td>
<td>1. Too little 2. About right 3. Too much</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4: Information Levels

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLE NAME</th>
<th>VARIABLE NAME</th>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>MEASUREMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Information₁ | DEGREE        | Respondent’s highest degree | 1. Less than high school  
2. High school  
3. Junior college  
4. Bachelor  
5. Graduate |
| Information₂ | COMPREND      | Was respondent’s understanding of the questions… | 1. Good  
2. Fair  
3. Poor |

### Table 5: Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLE NAME</th>
<th>VARIABLE NAME</th>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>MEASUREMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Media₁        | NEWSFROM      | We are interested in how people get information about events in the news. Where do you get most of your information about current news events? | 1. Newspapers  
2. Magazines  
3. Internet  
4. Books, or other printed material  
5. TV  
6. Radio  
7. Family  
8. Friends, colleagues |
| Media₂        | NEWS          | How often do you read the newspaper? | 1. Every day  
2. A few times a week  
3. Once a week  
4. Less than once a week  
5. Never |
Appendix B

List 1: All Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL OF THOUGHT</th>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>LABEL</th>
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<td>INCOME</td>
<td>Total family income</td>
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<td>CLASS</td>
<td>Subjective class identification</td>
</tr>
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<td>SATFIN</td>
<td>Satisfaction with financial situation</td>
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<td>RACE</td>
<td>Race of respondent</td>
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<td>Sex of respondent</td>
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<td>AGE</td>
<td>Age of respondent</td>
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<td>RS religious preference</td>
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<td>How often R attends religious services</td>
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<td>Think of self as liberal or conservative</td>
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<td>HELPPOOR</td>
<td>Should government improve standard of living?</td>
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<td>EQWLTH</td>
<td>Should government reduce income differences?</td>
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<td>Welfare spending</td>
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<td>Information</td>
<td>DEGREE</td>
<td>RS highest degree</td>
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<td>COMPREND</td>
<td>RS understanding of questions</td>
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<td>NEWSFROM</td>
<td>Main source of information about news events</td>
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<td>NEWS</td>
<td>How often does R read news</td>
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<td>Dependent variable</td>
<td>INCGAP</td>
<td>Income differentials in USA too big</td>
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## Appendix C

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<tr>
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**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.
<table>
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**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.
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