

***Debating the American Dream***

***How Beliefs about the Causes of Inequality Polarize U.S. Politics***

Elizabeth Suhay

Department of Government, American University

suhay@american.edu

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## Introduction: Debating the American Dream

In the spring of 2020, former Vice President Joe Biden clinched the Democratic nomination for President. His triumph was unexpected—he was an older, White, straight, moderate man in an increasingly young, diverse, and ideologically progressive party. But, in a crowded primary field, he managed to capitalize on support from a reliable coalition of committed Democrats, including relative moderates and African Americans. Further, most Democrats, distraught after four years under President Trump, were desperate for a candidate they thought could win the general election. From an electability perspective, Biden’s experience, history of bipartisanship, and perhaps even his sex were assets (see Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2020 for extended discussion of the Democratic primary). Of course, not all Democrats were happy with this choice. Many activist progressives—who had supported Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren in the primary—balked at what they perceived as a milquetoast agenda as well as the idea that he could win the general election running on it. As they had in 2016—to Hillary Clinton’s detriment—Sanders’ supporters threatened to withhold their votes from Biden (Rao 2020).

This ongoing rift within the Democratic Party may be substantial, but it is not unusual. The two major political parties in the U.S.—Democrats and Republicans—are coalitions of diverse interests with intense and sometimes clashing demands. Biden’s next step was well within a seasoned politician’s handbook: going further than Clinton had in 2016, he announced a “unity task force” between the more moderate and progressive wings of the Democratic Party to keep progressive leaders, activists, and interest groups on board with his candidacy (Sprunt 2020). Nearly all the extensive policy recommendations negotiated by the task force could be summed up with one word: equity (Biden-Sanders Unity Task Force 2020). The task force greatly influenced the Democratic Party’s 2020 platform, making it the most progressive platform in recent memory. While a Democratic Party under Biden would

not promise Sanders' or Warrens' most progressive policies—most notably, “Medicare for All” or a wealth tax—it nevertheless pledged to move the country substantially to the left. Democrats were promising to take a dizzying array of steps to combat economic, political, and social inequality, including tackling poverty, raising the minimum wage, breaking up monopolies, expanding health care and educational access, confronting systemic racism, making citizenship available to more people, and taking a variety of steps to strengthen democracy.

The effort to unite the Democratic Party worked. Sanders, Warren, and newer progressive leaders such as Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez pledged their support to Biden and urged their followers to vote for him come November. Whereas support for Sanders was negatively correlated with support for Clinton among Democratic primary voters in 2016, support for Sanders was positively correlated with support for Biden in 2020 (Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2020). Yet, the Democrats faced a new problem: their agenda included commitments that not only were far to the left of the average American but also were to the left of many in the Democratic Party itself (Pew 2021; Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2020). In bridging the party's moderate-progressive division, party leaders threatened to undermine Biden's electability in the general election. Here again Biden faced a dilemma that was substantial but not unusual. In bending the party's agenda to satisfy powerful members of the Democratic coalition, he had created an agenda out-of-step with the electorate (Bawn et al. 2012). In response, Biden and other party leaders did what parties usually do: they persuaded citizens to support their agenda with compelling justificatory arguments that combined appeals to shared values and factual claims.

Given the party's move to the left, the accompanying arguments would have to persuade more moderate Democrats and swing voters that a variety of redistributive, regulatory, and social justice policies were urgently needed. To do this, the party did not need to persuade citizens that the American people deserved equal access to abundant opportunity, i.e., the American Dream. They already believed

that. The Democratic Party needed to persuade people that the all-important American Dream was unavailable to many, perhaps even most, Americans. This required factual assertions about existing inequities and related suffering.

The 2020 Democratic platform is chock full of such assertions—related to each arena of proposed reform. In the section “Building a Stronger, Fairer Economy,” the party writes:

[O]ur economy was rigged against working families and the middle class even before the novel coronavirus sickened millions and killed more than 150,000 Americans and counting. Working families' incomes have been largely stagnant for decades, while the cost of basic needs—from housing to health care, higher education to child care—keep rising at precipitous rates. Meanwhile, the rich have been capturing a larger and larger share of the economic pie, with incomes for the top one percent growing five times faster than those of the bottom 90 percent.

America bills itself as the land of opportunity, but intergenerational mobility has plummeted; children born in the United States are less likely to move up the income ladder than those in Canada, Denmark, or the United Kingdom. Women still earn just 82 cents to every dollar men earn, with even greater disparities for women of color. Median incomes are lower and poverty rates are higher for Black Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and certain Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, compared to median white households. And there is a persistent, pernicious racial wealth gap that holds millions of Americans back, with the typical white household holding six times more wealth than the typical Latino family and 10 times more wealth than the typical Black family. President Trump's recession threatens to deepen existing inequities, as Black and Latino workers are less likely to work in jobs that can be done safely from home, less likely

to have savings to fall back on, and less likely to be able to access unemployment insurance and other emergency programs electronically....

That is why Democrats commit to forging a new social and economic contract with the American people—a contract that invests in the people and promotes shared prosperity, not one that benefits only big corporations and the wealthiest few.

In a subsection on homeownership, the party continues:

Homeownership is at the center of the American Dream—and yet it has never been in reach for all. Decades of red-lining, rising income inequality, and predatory lending practices targeting low-income families and people of color have made homeownership all but impossible for millions of working families. Homeownership has long been central to building generational wealth, and expanding access to homeownership to those who have been unfairly excluded and discriminated against is critical to closing the racial wealth gap.

Finally, in a section entitled “Protecting Communities and Building Trust by Reforming Our Criminal Justice System,” the party writes:

Our criminal justice system is failing to keep communities safe—and failing to deliver justice. America is the land of the free, and yet more of our people are behind bars, per capita, than anywhere else in the world. Instead of making evidence-based investments in education, jobs, health care, and housing that are proven to keep communities safe and prevent crime from occurring in the first place, our system has criminalized poverty, overpoliced and underserved Black and Latino communities, and cut public services. Instead of offering the incarcerated the opportunity to turn their lives around, our prisons

are overcrowded and continue to rely on inhumane methods of punishment. Instead of treating those who have served their time as full citizens upon their return to society, too many of our laws continue to punish the formerly incarcerated, erecting barriers to housing, employment, and voting rights for millions of Americans.

Democrats believe we need to overhaul the criminal justice system from top to bottom.

With this language, the Democratic Party took for granted that its readers supported equal treatment, justice, and opportunity for all Americans. Their arguments depended instead on the twin claims that the nation was falling woefully short of those ideals and that *their* policies—not Republicans’—would allow the nation to reach them.

Few people read party platforms of course, but Biden and his surrogates repeated these claims on the campaign trail. These ideas were further amplified in the media, especially in outlets allied with the Democratic Party. Throughout the summer and fall of 2020, more and more Democrats and independents throughout the U.S. climbed on board the party’s progressive agenda, and rhetoric. As I show in Chapter 3, by 2021, Democrats were the most pessimistic they had ever been—at least as captured in representative public opinion surveys—about the fairness of the economy. Republicans’ beliefs about the economy were relatively stable, and much more optimistic. This type of perceptual difference is not uncommon but is, I argue, an underappreciated aspect of party polarization. Today, party elites and citizens are polarized not only with respect to their policy preferences and affect toward one another but also with respect to their factual beliefs (Suhay, Tenenbaum, and Bartola 2022).

In November 2020, Biden would narrowly beat Trump, performing especially well in urban and suburban areas and winning more votes from working class Whites than his predecessor, Hillary Clinton. For a short time, a majority of the nation seemed united behind a president, and party, that believed the

nation was falling far short of delivering on the American Dream and therefore required substantial progressive government action—especially in the economy and criminal justice system—to address its shortcomings.

### *America's Dominant Ideology?*

The progressive political rhetoric and opinion so common in the United States in 2020 belied the country's reputation as a deeply conservative nation, especially economically. During the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the opening decades of the 21<sup>st</sup>, economic inequality in the U.S. soared and the average American's economic and physical well-being declined. Life expectancy in the U.S. has long been stagnant and even declined in the last two years, such that a person born today can expect to live as long as a person born in 1996 (Bernstein 2022). Rather than address these problems, the federal government's domestic policy has—with a few notable exceptions—gravitated rightward for years. Even during Trump's supposedly "populist" administration, the tax code became less redistributive, business regulations were loosened, and federal agencies pursued a variety of neoliberal goals, such as privatizing education and turning over public lands to corporations.

Underlying contemporary economic conservatism is a faith in markets and meritocracy: with minimal regulation, a capitalist economy will reward merit—hard work and skill—with economic success. According to this perspective, those without success lack these positive attributes. Thomas Piketty refers to meritocracy as the "dominant ideology" of all contemporary capitalist economies (Piketty 2020). Many argue that this ideology is especially prevalent in the U.S. (Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Huber and Form 1973; Kluegel and Smith 1986; McCloskey and Zaller 1984). Colloquially, this ideology is captured by the idea of the American Dream. The United States is said to be a place with unusual opportunity for economic advancement owing to its strong—and fair—economy. If success is believed to be securely linked to merit,

both wealth and poverty are just deserts. Perhaps extreme poverty should be relieved with some minimal government aid, but the system is fundamentally sound.

Americans are famous for embracing the American Dream (hence the name). I argue that this embrace is misunderstood. Americans almost uniformly believe in the American Dream as an ideal. They believe there *ought to be* abundant, and equal, opportunity. But the American Dream as a factual claim is, today, rejected just as frequently as it is embraced. As a result, while many Americans oppose redistribution, economic regulation, and generous social welfare because they believe economic outcomes are fair, many others support these policies because they believe economic outcomes today are deeply unfair.

Why do so many observers of the American scene, including many scholars, misunderstand Americans' views on meritocracy? Some confuse widespread commitment to the *ideal* of meritocracy and the American Dream with belief that these things have been achieved (Sandel 2020). In other words, they interpret Americans' values as synonymous with their perceptions of the facts on the ground. Other observers don't consider how public opinion has evolved over time. Decades ago, more Americans felt sanguine about the economy than today, likely because it *was* fairer for most people during the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bartels 2016; Hacker and Pierson 2010). But times have changed. Growing inequality has led to growing skepticism about the Dream, at least in some quarters. Finally, many overlook the fact that the Democratic Party, from its beginnings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has been the party of the working class. Its entire *raison d'être* is to challenge concentrated wealth and power. To persuasively do so, the party must argue these inequalities are unfair. This challenge has waxed and waned over time but, today, activists and interest groups within the Democratic Party have returned to this narrative with great fervor, fundamentally reshaping American politics and public opinion.

In this book, I argue that the through line of U.S. politics in recent decades is not *belief* in the American Dream but rather *debate* over whether it is being realized. We are witnessing a struggle between a formerly dominant narrative of a meritocratic economy and a rising counternarrative that, for many people, the economy is unfair. Where we go from here is uncertain, but this ideological change is likely an important part of a fundamental shift away from the neoliberalism of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries to a new era (Gerstle 2022).

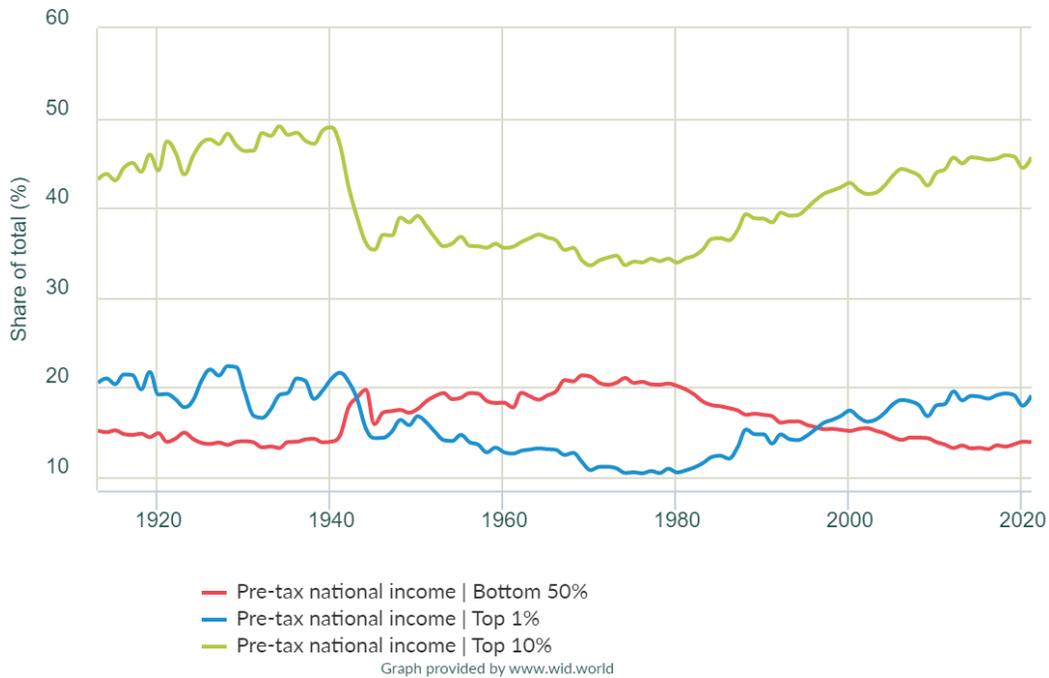
### *Characterizing the Debate*

Thomas Piketty and collaborators Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, among others, have famously estimated economic inequality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the U.S. (as well as other countries). Figure 1, created from their World Inequality Database (wid.world), displays the share of national income in a given year accruing to the top 1%, top 10%, and bottom 50% of adult earners. Throughout this period, the earnings of the top 10% ranged from a low of approximately 35% to a high of 50% of all income. The earnings of the top 1% ranged from about 10% to 20% of income. The bottom 50% earned between roughly 15% and 20% of national income. In recent decades, the U.S. has consistently experienced greater income inequality than all other advanced industrial democracies, ranging from Germany to Japan to Israel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm>. Accessed September 27, 2022.

Figure 1: Income Inequality in the U.S., 1913-2021



Given these great—and growing—disparities, why does any substantial portion of the country believe the economy rewards merit? I argue that the Republican Party has been an important carrier of the American Dream mythos for most of its history. Their job is made easier by the fact that there is a kernel of truth to this mythos. The U.S., very early in its history, did offer higher living standards and equality to White immigrants than the nations they were leaving behind (Lindert and Williamson 2016). Even as sharp economic inequality became the rule, the U.S. throughout its history has been a destination for immigrants from developing nations seeking greater economic opportunity than they could find in their home countries. And, during some time periods—such as the three decades following World War II—Americans from all backgrounds were upwardly mobile. Yet, while there is some truth to the American Dream as an empirical claim, Republican leaders have often painted a picture that greatly distorts reality.

Republican elites tend to argue that high earners *deserve* their substantial slice of the pie because they work very hard and ultimately create opportunities for others. For that, they should be handsomely rewarded. Low earners, on the other hand, generally do not work hard and often behave irresponsibly. They are to blame for their circumstances and thus do not deserve to be rewarded by the labor market or government. Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney summed up this view well when he argued in 2012 that 47 percent of Americans would vote for his Democratic opponent (Barack Obama) “no matter what” because they are people “who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it.” He added: “[M]y job is not to worry about those people. I’ll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives.”<sup>2</sup> Many Republican politicians and allied interest groups and media pundits have made such claims consistently since Reagan, and in earlier eras too. This continues today even as some argue the Republican Party has become populist and/or working class. The result of this consistent rhetoric, I argue, has been mass persuasion among ordinary citizens aligned with the Republican Party and likely many others.

The Democratic Party shares a very different message. They too exaggerate; although, today, their depiction of the American economic landscape is likely closer to reality than Republicans’. Like their Republican counterparts, Democratic leaders have consistently emphasized the American Dream as an ideal. But they have been more likely to argue that the ideal is *not being met* (Gerring 1998). This criticism has long waxed and waned but has rapidly increased among Democratic leaders and left-leaning interest groups and media in recent years. In the Democratic story, Romney’s moochers are *not* to blame for their circumstances and thus deserve assistance. They work hard, are smart, and play by the rules but have had too few opportunities, whether due to discrimination or simply a lack of good schools and jobs where they

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fact-checking-romneys-47-percent-comment/>. Accessed September 28, 2022.

live. This Democratic message about the *unfairness* of the economy has become increasingly consistent, and compelling, to the Democratic base and many independents.

The combined effect of these opposing party messages is an underappreciated polarization over the reality of the American Dream.

It is one thing to describe political trends. It is another to understand why they occur. Why does the Republican Party insist on one factual narrative about economic inequality, and the Democratic party on another? Here, I situate my work in a much broader literature in political science on the importance of powerful policy-demanding interests within party coalitions (e.g., Bawn et al. 2012; Gerring 1998; Grossman and Hopkins 2016; Hacker and Pierson 2010).

Republican politicians and their predecessors<sup>3</sup> have long represented big business and the wealthy, powerful interests within their broader coalition. Thus, the party tends to make policy decisions favored by the owners of large businesses (for example, opposing anti-trust efforts) and the wealthy (for example, reducing tax rates of the affluent). This said, these policies are unlikely to naturally appeal to voters who are not themselves business executives or affluent, i.e., the vast majority of the electorate (Hacker and Pierson 2020). This tension has become even greater in recent decades as the Republican Party's base has become less affluent.

The Republican Party shores up its popular support in two ways. The first is to champion *other* policies popular among middle- and working-class voters, such as socially conservative stands on abortion and LGBTQ rights (Frank 2004; Hacker and Pierson 2020). The second is to persuade Republicans and independents in the electorate that the party's economic positions are fair as well as advantageous to them. The factual components of the American Dream provide much of that justification. If the economy

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<sup>3</sup> The Republican Party, formed in 1854, grew out of the Whig Party.

is thought to provide abundant and equal opportunity for all—to start and grow a successful business or simply earn a decent living—it would be unfair to hinder those at the top or help those at the bottom (Huber and Form 1973; Suhay and Jayaratne 2013; Weiner 1995). If poor people are receiving government assistance *despite* a fair economy, this represents an illegitimate siphoning of successful Americans' tax dollars to undeserving unsuccessful ones. In addition, the Dream holds out the promise that those few low-income people who *are* hard-working simply have not made it *yet*. These arguments have been easier to make in the U.S. context because of the nation's racial divisions. Most Republicans are White, and low-income people are disproportionately Black and Latino. Racism allows many White Americans to easily envision racial minorities as lazy and, thus, undeserving of government assistance. Although less true today, the relative economic comfort in which most Republicans lived in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also meant that they had less to gain from redistributive economic policy or a strong safety net.

On the other hand, the Democratic Party has long represented poorer Americans—first farmers, then workers, and much later women and racial minorities. Its platforms have reflected these groups' interests: opposing concentrated wealth, protecting the right of all to participate equally and safely in the economy, and expanding social welfare. While these goals naturally appeal to a broader group than Republicans', Democratic political elites must justify their positions too. Democrats have had to justify their efforts to advance the economic and political rights of marginalized members of their coalition—including women and racial minorities—who have suffered from widespread prejudice, including among fellow Democrats. More recently, the party has had to persuade the increasing number of affluent people in its ranks to accept higher tax rates. Finally, Democrats must answer to their opponents' insistence that the U.S. economy is meritocratic and that their policies are unnecessary at best and unjust at worst.

I argue that official party rhetoric about the causes of inequality not only persuades lay partisans but also has downstream effects on their electoral and policy preferences, as the parties intend.

Republican citizens are persuaded that the U.S. provides ample and relatively equal opportunity to all and, in part as a result, endorse small-government conservatism of little material benefit to them. Democratic citizens are persuaded that the American Dream is broken for most people, especially for Black and Latino Americans and women, and therefore support government assistance to low-income people and groups even if they themselves do not benefit.

Of course, not everything hinges on partisanship. First, many Americans describe themselves as political independents. Their views about the economy and inequality are more diverse and on average lie between the views of their fellow Democratic and Republican citizens. However, because independents are unaligned with either major party, the extent to which they believe the American Dream is real or a mirage holds even more sway over their policy and voting preferences. Second, there is substantial variation *among* partisans in the extent to which they “buy” their party’s line on economic fairness. Relative pessimists in the Democratic Party are more likely to champion economically progressive policies and candidates than others in the party. Relative optimists in the Republican Party are more likely to support economically conservative policies and candidates than their more pessimistic counterparts. Third, and related, partisan rhetoric is not the only influence on people’s adherence to the American Dream mythos. Partisanship aside, people’s social group memberships, their level of education and religiosity, and their prejudices all influence their views on the American economy to some degree.

I focus in this book on Americans’ beliefs about why some people and groups are more economically successful than others—what most people have in mind when they think about the American Dream. However, at the end of the book, I extend this examination to beliefs about why some are more likely to be caught up in the criminal justice system. While these two domains appear on the surface to be quite different, the two parties often link them. In keeping with their skepticism of whether the U.S. is meritocratic, Democrats are more likely than Republicans to argue that people accused of

crimes are innocent or less culpable due to mitigating circumstances. In keeping with their faith in American meritocracy, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to argue that those accused of crimes deserve blame due to personal failings. These fact perceptions are associated with partisans' preferred criminal justice policies—more forgiving among Democrats and more punitive among Republicans. This indicates that debates over meritocracy encompass more aspects of American life than just economics.

### *Complicating the Debate*

So far, I have tidily portrayed Americans' views of the American Dream and politics. In short, Republican elites and citizens tend to believe the nation is meritocratic and thus consider disparate economic and related outcomes unproblematic. This justifies their opposition to policies intended to promote greater equality. Democratic elites and citizens tend to see these systems as *unmeritocratic* and therefore consider disparate outcomes unjust. This justifies their support for egalitarian policy.

This picture turns out to be a bit too tidy. A clear exception to this pattern among partisan leaders is Trump. One might argue that he won the Republican nomination in 2016 because he addressed the economic struggles of rural and working-class White Americans. He even kicked off his campaign with a speech declaring that “the American Dream is dead” (Wolak and Peterson 2020). In short, he argued, as Democrats often do, that the American economy was not providing enough jobs and, therefore, not rewarding merit. Yet, his narrative differed in important ways from the typical Democratic one. In his telling, most of the unrewarded were White. He also pointed fingers not at American business owners or the affluent but at globalization, bad trade deals, and immigrants invading from the south. When it came to domestic economic policy, he tended to echo Republican talking points, criticizing social welfare and affirmative action for rewarding the undeserving. His challenge to the dominant ideology of meritocracy was, thus, limited. Many Americans had lost good jobs and wages but, by and large, the nation's steep inequality was unproblematic. The nation should negotiate better trade deals and limit immigration but

expanded government programs and redistribution were not required. Furthermore, by the 2020 election, Trump was no longer an economic pessimist. According to him, over four years, the Trump administration had restored the American Dream and could, thus, steady its course (see Chapter 2).

Although his “populist” challenge to Republican orthodoxy has been overstated by some, Trump’s rhetoric did highlight important changes in the American economy and politics. Economic inequality has increased and more Americans—including more White Americans—are experiencing financial precarity and associated stress. At the same time, rural and working-class Whites have gravitated to the Republican Party and more affluent Americans to the Democratic Party, resulting in parity between the two parties’ coalitions with respect to on-average income (Zacher 2022; also see Chapter 1). Some members of the Democratic coalition are flourishing relative to others, including many who live in large urban areas and certain minority groups (e.g., Asian Americans). Thus, the Democratic and Republican “party lines” on the fairness of the American economy—with Democrats sympathetic to the poor and Republicans critical of them—better reflect the economic circumstances of the party coalitions forty years ago than today. These misaligned interests are largely kept out of partisan debate. Whereas certain debates are so common they have become scripted—the causes of economic inequality in general, between women and men, and between Black and Latino Americans and White Americans—Democrats *and* Republicans (not named Trump) tend to ignore the fact that many rural residents and White Americans are struggling economically whilst some racial and religious minority groups have, on balance, been quite successful.

Thus, when most Americans think and speak about economic inequality, they tend to follow distinct partisan scripts that not only justify or criticize inequality but implicitly assume socioeconomic inequalities of a certain type. This does not imply that Americans always imagine poor people as non-White or as women, but—in keeping with reality—Black, Latino, and female Americans are much more likely to be considered poor than affluent (Condon and Wichowsky 2020). When lay partisans are explicitly

asked to consider *unscripted* inequalities, the previously crisp partisan division in views on inequality blurs (see Chapter 6). We can see echoes of the party line as people think about these novel inequalities. For example, Democrats are sympathetic even toward rural residents while Republicans remain hesitant to seek excuses for rural Americans' lower incomes. But to some degree partisans become unmoored from their usual inequality paradigms when considering these novel inequalities. Democrats become less skeptical of the fairness of the economy, and Republicans more skeptical. These shifts are likely associated with important partisan differences in attitudes toward race and social hierarchy.

The lessening of partisan polarization surrounding unscripted inequalities provides further evidence that the partisan divides we *do* find are substantially driven by party politics. In our polarized era, my argument here may not seem surprising. However, in making a case for the persuasiveness of partisan rhetoric, I am also arguing *against* the notion promoted by some scholars that firm ideological principles or deep-seated personality differences underlie Americans' beliefs about meritocracy. While claims about the American Dream lie at the center of polarization and partisan conflict today, there is no reason to believe these views are completely static, giving hope to reformers who wish to educate the public on the ways in which our society both meets and falls short of the American Dream.

## **Chapter Outline**

In the chapters that follow, I lay out my case that American politics to a significant degree revolves around a specific type of belief polarization: polarized assumptions about whether the American Dream is fact or fiction.

Chapter 1, *Political Justification and Its Attitudinal Consequences*, lays out the key dynamics linking political elites' and lay people's explanations for economic inequality to their political commitments. I begin by discussing an increasingly popular view in political science that powerful

organized interests, working together as party coalitions, play an outsized role in determining the two main parties' formal policy agendas. This inevitably results in party agendas that include many elements that are not immediately appealing to a majority of voters and, thus, that require compelling justification. Such justifications are made up of arguments that mix together value and fact claims in support of a party's policy agenda.

In this book, I focus on economic policy agendas and common justifications for them. In support of an economically conservative agenda, Republican elites claim the American Dream has been realized—that unequal outcomes reflect unequal merit. Therefore, the economy is largely fair, and the status quo should prevail. In support of an economically progressive agenda, Democrats claim many Americans do not have access to the Dream—that unequal outcomes reflect unequal opportunities. Thus, the government ought to step in to help them. These messages persuade many in the public, especially strong and attentive partisans. While no scholars to my knowledge have tested the success of parties in disseminating these specific messages, a great deal of political science research has established the importance of “elite cues” in shaping ordinary citizens' policy views. There is also increasing evidence that such cues influence politicized factual beliefs, such as those I examine here. My story is not only about persuasion, however. To some degree these factual beliefs about what underlies economic inequality have a life of their own. Once accepted, they tend to independently evoke corresponding normative views. Blaming lower income groups naturally leads to less interest in assisting them; “excusing” them leads to a desire to help, primarily via government action.

In a final section of this chapter, I connect my research to other work within the voluminous literature on economic inequality, making the case that my theoretical framework helps to solve an important puzzle: why an increasingly financially stressed public is not more supportive of redistribution.

In short, Republican Party rhetoric dampens demands for progressive change on the political right and among Republican-leaning independents.

Chapter 2, *Equal Opportunity in Historical Context*, combines original data from party platforms with a review of historically oriented scholarship to describe how Americans' views about economic inequality have evolved over time, especially among political leaders. To a surprising degree, American culture and politics revolve around the *ideal* of the American Dream. Nearly everyone agrees that ample and equal opportunity are critical prerequisites for a fair society. Yet, debates often emerge over *why* economic and other social outcomes are in fact substantially unequal. Historically, the default position has been to blame the players losing the game because of the widespread assumption that the United States provides mobility for all who work hard. This said, conventional takes on American political culture tend to underappreciate the Democratic Party's frequent challenges to this idea over time. Throughout history, the Democratic Party has—to continue the metaphor—often questioned whether the players are competing on an equal playing field and whether the umpires are fair. This Democratic challenge has grown louder in recent elections, especially with respect to race.

In Chapter 3, *Americans' Changing Beliefs about Opportunity*,<sup>4</sup> I examine the public's beliefs regarding the American Dream over the past four decades, drawing on publicly available data from the American National Election Study, the General Social Survey, and the Pew Research Center. This chapter demonstrates two general patterns. First, Americans' belief in the reality of the American Dream declined over this period, especially the past two decades. Americans became more skeptical that low-income people and Black Americans were responsible for their economic circumstances, increasingly blaming societal barriers to success. Second, Democratic and Republican party identifiers polarized during this time. Republicans' beliefs remained stable or grew more optimistic about the American Dream, whereas

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<sup>4</sup> This chapter is written with Mark Tenenbaum and Austin Bartola.

Democrats grew more pessimistic, especially in the last two decades. This means that the increasing on-average skepticism among Americans regarding equal opportunity has been concentrated among Democrats and, to a lesser degree, independents. These patterns generally reflect the fluctuations in party elite rhetoric described in Chapter 2 and are robust to many different question framings and foci.

In Chapter 4, *How Americans Today Explain Inequality*, I introduce the reader to two original representative surveys of the U.S. public conducted in 2016 and 2018. The surveys tackle similar content as those in the public domain but have the advantage of asking about Americans' explanations for multiple types of socioeconomic inequality using identical question wording. With these data, we can assess the extent to which Americans' views on the causes of inequality change as they consider not only economic inequality in general or between Black and White Americans but also between female and male, rural and urban, and White and Asian Americans. The surveys also probe Americans' beliefs about a wider range of possible causes of inequality than is typical in public opinion surveys, including perceived differences in how hard people work, in their access to good schools and jobs, in cultural influences, in discrimination, and in innate talents. Finally, the surveys also carefully assessed Americans' political views, including their partisanship, policy attitudes, and presidential candidate preferences.

In this chapter, I provide a big-picture overview of Americans' explanations for inequality in the aggregate. We see that the nation is not full of people persuaded that the American Dream is available to all. This is especially true when survey respondents are asked to consider why, on average, Black and Latino Americans earn less than White Americans and why women earn less than men. Causal narratives that highlight a lack of access to good jobs and education as well as discrimination are surprisingly popular. We also see our first direct evidence that individuals have relatively consistent views with respect to the causes of inequality, tending to blame lower income people and groups or tending to blame societal inequities for unequal outcomes.

I also dive into qualitative data—people talking about the causes of inequality in their own voice. These data allow me to assess whether the closed-ended survey measures described above and used throughout the book capture the most common categories of explanation for inequality employed by ordinary Americans. Thankfully, the open-ended responses suggest survey takers were satisfied with the range of explanations provided them. This said, the qualitative responses also reveal important differences in how some respondents interpreted the closed-ended questions about inequality. For example, when asked to consider White Americans’ on-average lower incomes relative to Asian Americans’, many respondents focused on perceived characteristics and behaviors of Asian Americans rather than the possibly problematic ones of White Americans. Other differences involved unexpected normative interpretations. For example, some survey respondents creatively reframed rural people and women’s lower incomes by arguing that they resulted from positive life choices, such as living a less materialistic lifestyle or staying home with children. In sum, the qualitative evidence largely reinforces the book’s quantitative measurement strategy but also offers important and intriguing nuance.

In Chapter 5, *Social Roots of Explanations for Inequality*, I begin a two-chapter investigation of what factors might underlie variation in individuals’ causal attributions for inequality. As social identity theory would predict, people are more likely to defend low-income social groups (locating the cause of inequality outside the individual or group) if they are “in-groups” and are more likely to blame low-income social groups (by locating the cause of inequality inside the individual or group) if they are “out-groups.” For example, women are more likely than men to say that women earn less due to discrimination, as opposed to a lack of hard work. However, in contrast to some conventional wisdom, these associations are relatively weak. More determinative of a person’s explanations for inequality is their level of education and religiosity, with highly religious people more likely to see the economy as meritocratic and highly educated people less likely to do so. Together, these findings suggest that socialization shapes beliefs about inequality more than self- or group-interested motivated reasoning.

In Chapter 6, *Partisan Roots of Explanations for Inequality*, I return to how lay partisans differ in their explanations for inequality, examining this topic systematically. Democrats are more likely than Republicans to see a lack of jobs or education as well as discrimination as underlying economic inequality, and Republicans are more likely than Democrats to see a lack of hard work. I also find suggestive evidence that these differences are likely due to the “top down” influence of political elites. Partisan differences are not consistent across types of inequality; rather, they follow the contours of elite debate—large differences for scripted inequalities and small ones for unscripted inequalities—especially so among respondents paying the closest attention to politics. In addition, belief differences between partisans are much greater than belief differences between demographic groups (i.e., education, religiosity, age, income, race, sex), and partisan differences persist when we control for these and other possible confounding variables, including Social Dominance Orientation and racial prejudice. This said, it is also clear that these predispositions play an important role in shaping partisans’ explanations for inequality.

In Chapter 7, *Explanations for Inequality and Political Preferences*, I ask whether respondents’ explanations for inequality map in expected ways to their economic policy and Presidential candidate preferences. I focus here on the three causal narratives that are most indicative of whether Americans do, or do not, believe lower earning people are deserving of assistance: hard work, lack of access to good schools and jobs, and discrimination. If we consider these three narratives together—comparing survey respondents who are the most sympathetic toward lower earning people to those who are the least sympathetic—we can explain approximately one-third of the variance in their economic policy preferences. Importantly, this large “on average” effect occurs among White survey respondents as well as Black and Latino respondents. These associations diminish, as expected, when I control for partisanship and individual-level prejudice, but they remain important even with stringent statistical controls, especially among political independents. This said, an important caveat remains: the link between causal narratives and political attitudes is strongest when people are thinking about inequality in general and

difficulties experienced by women and Blacks and Latinos; asking them about unscripted inequalities (rural-urban and especially White-Asian) attenuates the belief-preference link.

In Chapter 8, Explanations for Criminal Justice Inequality, I seek to understand whether the partisan dynamics surrounding explanations for economic inequality might emerge in other domains. There is an *a priori* case to be made for both similarities and differences between economic and criminal justice inequality. On the one hand, those most likely to be caught up in the criminal justice system tend to be lower income. Arguments over the fairness of this overrepresentation often sound similar to those over the fairness of economic inequalities, with people seeking to blame those convicted of crimes or to identify mitigating circumstances. At the same time, the actual causes of criminal activity and the associated moral and societal implications are vastly different than those for economic difficulties. In the former case, a person must take an action that breaks the law, often knowingly, and the action in question usually has caused one or more people harm. In the latter case, a person may or may not have taken actions leading to their economic struggles and usually has not caused anyone harm but themselves. The outcome of the judicial process can lead to a denial of a person's freedom and, in some rare cases, their death. I find that respondents' explanations for racial criminal justice inequality are remarkably similar to those for racial economic inequality—in the aggregate, and between Democrats and Republicans. They are also linked in expected ways to criminal justice policy preferences. However, respondents' explanations for an unscripted criminal justice inequality, again, look different from the usual patterns.

I conclude the book, in Chapter 9, by revisiting the book's findings and considering several shortcomings. First, although my theoretical framework includes causal claims about the underpinnings of Americans' beliefs about the fairness of the economy, the data throughout the book are observational. Description is an important part of social science, helping us to understand the world as it is and allowing us to generate hypotheses as to *why* it is as it is (Gerring 2012). I have taken some steps to improve my

framework's internal validity but leave more careful study of causal linkages to future study. Second, I acknowledge that rhetoric in political party platforms may sometimes be performative to satisfy policy demanders in the moment; down the line, the party may not follow through where these demands clash with others deemed more important for electoral reasons. This may be especially true of the Democratic Party today, which is beholden to a wide range of activists and interest groups. Third, in examining Americans' beliefs about inequality and opportunity, I focused on what I considered to be the main set of causal attributions that have long been a part of the American political conversation—debates over the relevance of work ethic, innate talent, culture, discrimination, and access to education and jobs. I left to the side concerns over inherited wealth, the belief that welfare disincentivizes work, and the likelihood that globalization has negatively impacted some American workers. With the benefit of hindsight, I would add these topics to my surveys if I were to conduct them again.

The remainder of the concluding chapter shifts gears to consider the policy implications of my findings. Throughout the book, I have studiously avoided saying very much about who is right about the causes of inequality in the U.S. I am a public opinion expert, not an economist. However, in this chapter, I draw on high-quality social scientific evidence published by others to sketch the extent to which opportunity is available to Americans from different walks of life. I then evaluate partisan rhetoric and perceptions in light of scholarly consensus where I can find it. By extension, I also consider the ways in which party policy does *not* match the facts on the ground, likely frustrating efforts to make the American Dream available to more people.

At present, the Republican Party's usually rosy portrait of opportunity in the U.S. grossly misunderstands the myriad obstacles facing lower income Americans. This denial of the pervasiveness and seriousness of unequal opportunity is associated with opposition to government policies that would lift millions out of poverty and from the working class into the middle class as well as to the tax increases

on affluent people and businesses that would pay for them. Admittedly, some contemporary Republican elites, such as Trump, publicly opine about declining opportunity; however, these worries tend to be part of a nationalist populism, which blames people from other countries—and the political opposition—for fewer jobs and declining wages without requiring greater regulation of big business or redistribution. The policies to which these complaints point *can* benefit American workers. Yet, the menu of promising economic options associated with national populism is limited.

As for Democratic policymakers, they are closer to the mark in pointing out that the U.S. system is very far from providing ample and equal opportunity. As I have discussed, the 2020 Democratic platform was remarkable both in its denunciation of unequal opportunity and its proposing of many serious economically progressive proposals. While some of this rhetoric did not get far beyond the written page, the party enacted many significant economic reforms and pushed for many more that were not enacted due to Republican opposition. The Biden administration has also, more quietly, made progress in enforcing anti-trust statutes to reverse the trend toward monopolization of the economy (Wolfe 2022). Yet, like the Republican Party, the Democratic Party is a political actor in a system that demands fealty to powerful coalitional interests and accompanying rhetoric to support it, leading to missteps. One such misstep is a tendency to cater to groups within its coalition but not those outside of it—such as rural Americans. A second, and very different, oversight is the extent to which the Democratic Party is limited in its progressive aspirations by the affluent members of its coalition as well as its ongoing relationship with the business community, especially the tech sector.

Where we are headed is uncertain. On the one hand, we are likely to see a version of this debate play out far into the future. Republicans and Democrats have been foils for one another on the subject of economic inequality for far too long—with Republicans taking the side of big business and capital and Democrats taking the side of workers and those of modest means—to expect a radical change in course.

On the other hand, class de-polarization between the parties may yet reduce belief, and policy, polarization. Given skyrocketing inequality and the declining well-being of the American populace, I have my money on a political future that includes not only on more bipartisanship but also a coalescing around more economically progressive factual narratives and policy.

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## Chapter 6: Partisan Divides over Explanations for Inequality

In the previous chapter, I investigated how Americans' demographic characteristics relate to their explanations for inequality. Many assume that people are inherently prejudiced and thus gravitate toward causal narratives that reflect well on them and their kind and that disparage outgroups. Thus, when considering inequalities, people should offer meritocratic explanations for in-group success and out-group failure, effectively saying their success and others' failures are both deserved. On the other hand, they should offer *anti*-meritocratic explanations for out-group success and in-group failure, indicating that *their* failures—and others' successes—are not deserved. A related school of thought posits that people who belong to “dominant groups” *in general* (e.g., men, White people, the affluent) consistently use meritocratic arguments because they justify the status quo. We saw some evidence for both theories, especially the former.

Yet, the largest and most consistent differences in people's explanations for inequality emerged *not* between Whites and non-Whites, women and men, or high- and low-income earners. Rather, the greatest disagreements related to education and religiosity. Those with college and graduate degrees, and those for whom religion is not important, were more likely than others to be skeptical of the fairness of the economy. These patterns were apparent when respondents considered the reasons for economic inequalities in general and salient socioeconomic inequalities (female versus male; Black and Latino versus White). This said, differences often disappeared when people considered the reasons for less commonly discussed socioeconomic inequalities: between rural and urban and White and Asian Americans.

These findings suggest that explanations for inequality are rooted more in socialization and the cultures that surround people than in general psychological tendencies to defend in-groups and disparage

out-groups, or to dominate those with less power. I continue this line of inquiry in this chapter, investigating the relationship between Americans' *partisan identifications* and their explanations for inequality. A person's partisan identification (synonyms include "party ID" and "partisanship") is their feeling of attachment, or belonging, to a political party (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004). In the U.S., that party will nearly always be the Democratic or Republican Party. Partisans have many things in common. They share an overarching social identity; they have similar values and biases; and they are exposed to similar cultural messages from political elites and peers. As discussed, many share demographic characteristics as well. Any of these could drive partisans' beliefs about inequality.

We have already observed, in Chapter 3, that Republican citizens are much more likely than Democratic ones to believe in meritocracy—in other words, to be optimistic about the American Dream. Democrats not only are consistently more skeptical of the fairness of the American economy but also have become *more* skeptical in recent years. This partisan belief polarization roughly maps to changing rhetoric found within the Democratic and Republican platforms, suggesting that party messaging has influenced identifiers' beliefs about the origins of economic inequality.

Yet, the data in Chapter 3—bivariate analyses limited to a narrow selection of publicly available survey questions—do not allow us to thoroughly investigate lay partisans' explanations for inequality. In particular, the historical survey data cannot tell us whether Republican citizens *consistently* argue that the U.S. economy is meritocratic, no matter what explanation is considered or socioeconomic inequality is in view. If Republicans consistently argue the economy is meritocratic—and Democrats consistently argue it is not—then we might conclude that partisan belief polarization is driven by deeply rooted differences in ideology or personality traits. It is also possible that partisans' belief in meritocracy is contingent on whose inequality is being considered. Due to different levels of social prejudice between the two parties,

partisans may only follow the party line when historically marginalized groups (Blacks and Latinos; women) are depicted as being lower income, abandoning it when considering the fact that rural and White Americans have lower incomes on-average than some others. Finally, a third possibility is that lay partisans' relative belief in meritocracy is reflective of the dominant political rhetoric in a party—in other words, partisans mirror well-known partisan scripts that dictate the validity of specific explanations for inequality in specific socioeconomic contexts.

I draw several conclusions from the data about the relationship between partisanship and explanations for inequality. First, it is clear we can dismiss the notion that Republicans are always American Dream optimists and Democrats pessimists. The relationship between partisanship and meritocratic or anti-meritocratic explanations for inequality is often strong—indeed, stronger than the demographic relationships observed in the last chapter—but it is also unsystematic. Republicans *usually* are more persuaded than Democrats that the U.S. economy is meritocratic, but there are also areas of agreement between members of the two parties and occasional reversals. The patterns of division (and lack thereof) suggest influence by party messages on the party base. This is especially apparent when we compare patterns of polarization among the most and least politically attentive citizens. The data also indicate considerable influence of citizens' predispositions, including various forms of social prejudice, on their beliefs about inequality, but this only moderately diminishes the impact of partisanship.

### **Partisan Disagreements Over the Causes of Inequality**

The scholarly literature provides reason to expect any of the three patterns of partisan disagreement over the causes of inequality that I have briefly described. Most studies of causal attributions argue that, if partisan or related ideological divisions occur, they reflect *meritocratic consistency* (Hunt and Bullock 2016; Morgan, Mullen, and Skitka 2010; Robinson 2009). These studies suggest that Republicans are

always more likely than others to say that inequality is caused by individuals' choices and characteristics and Democrats to say that inequality is caused by larger societal forces outside of individuals' control.

Meritocratic consistency assumes that people develop attributional styles that they use time and again to interpret the social world (Gill and Andreychik 2014).<sup>1</sup> Many scholars have provided evidence that conservatives and liberals have distinct attributional styles. A belief that meritocracy tends to prevail characterizes Americans on the right, and doubt about the prevalence of meritocracy characterizes those on the left. This empirical pattern is so often found in the scholarly literature that Skitka and colleagues have given it a name: the "ideo-attribution effect" (Morgan, Mullen, and Skitka 2010). Because Democrats tend to be liberal and Republicans conservative, this could explain why the parties differ in their beliefs about inequality. It is important to note that this could also in part explain the *growing* Democratic-Republican divide over inequality observed in Chapter 3: as liberals have sorted into the Democratic Party and conservatives into the Republican Party over time (Levendusky 2009), the former has grown more skeptical of the American Dream and the latter more certain of it. If meritocratic consistency is the rule, not only should we observe Republicans individualizing inequality at every possible opportunity, but we also should find ideology to be considerably more predictive of beliefs about inequality than partisanship.

The possible reasons for meritocratic consistency among conservatives and liberals are many. Some scholars argue that personality differences play a key role in shaping conservative and liberal styles of thinking. Conservatives may be less tolerant of ambiguity and more cognitively rigid and liberals more open-minded and less tied to simplistic narratives of events (Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Johnston, Lavine, and Federico 2017; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway 2003). Those on the left may be more empathic than those on the right, i.e., more likely to take the point of view of a person or social group

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<sup>1</sup> Empirical results in Chapter 4 cast doubt on the likelihood of finding such a systematic difference in the public. Nevertheless, such consistency could emerge among partisan subgroups.

experiencing some difficulty (Morris 2020). Or they may be more forgiving of mistakes, having grown up in “nurturing mother” as opposed to “strict father” homes (Lakoff 2002). Another possibility is that conservatives and liberals engage in value-driven motivated reasoning (Lodge and Taber 2013), with conservatives always seeking to justify small government conservatism by individualizing inequality and liberals seeking to justify government intervention by contextualizing it (Suhay and Jayaratne 2013). Whatever the origins of the ideological difference, the result—it is claimed—is two distinct ideologies strongly associated with the two major political parties.

But not all scholars find a left-right divide in the public’s causal attributions (Gill and Andreychik 2014; McCall 2013). If people on the left and right differ in attributional style, then they should evaluate *all* types of inequality similarly—as stemming primarily from differences in effort or “God-given talents,” the two pillars of meritocracy, or as the result of forces beyond the individual. It is possible that scholars have created the impression of consistency because they tend to study exactly those inequalities on which Democrats and Republicans consistently disagree—for example, poverty, homelessness, or Black-White inequality. Might this consistency disappear if scholars studied other types of inequality? Some evidence supports this idea. Cooley, Brown-Iannuzzi, Lei, and Cipolli (2019) find that liberals increased their blame of poor Whites (but not poor Blacks) after reading about White privilege. Skitka and colleagues (Morgan, Mullen, and Skitka 2010) have similarly discovered reversals of the “ideo-attribution effect” when asking study participants to explain the behavior of conservative-leaning individuals or groups.

A second, less rigid, partisan pattern of attribution is contingent on *whose* inequality is being considered. Although the relatively weak predictive power of racial identity, sex, and income in Chapter 5 indicate demographic characteristics are less relevant than many expect, it is possible that people’s overall tendency toward racism, sexism, or social dominance is determinative of people’s beliefs about inequality, with those high in these traits tending to cluster within the Republican Party (Kinder and Sanders 1996;

Sidanius and Pratto 1999). Thus, on balance, Republicans may tend to assume low-earning members of historically marginalized groups (Black and Latino Americans; women) deserve their economic status due to lack of merit but that low-earning members of other groups do not (rural Americans; Whites). And vice versa for Democrats. If this drives partisan beliefs about inequality, then we ought to see Republicans individualizing inequality—and Democrats externalizing inequality—when poor people, women, or a racial minority group is said to be earning less than others. These patterns should be driven by prejudice or social dominance, not partisanship. Finally, we ought to see (prejudiced) Republicans leap to the defense of low-earning rural and White Americans by emphasizing structural biases in these circumstances, and (egalitarian) Democrats disparage them by emphasizing individual deficiencies.

A third and final possible pattern—*partisan persuasion*—reflects salient partisan messages. Skitka and colleagues refer to this as an “ideological script” or “party line” people learn. This general model is most closely associated with the work of John Zaller (1992; also see McGuire 1968). Subsequent researchers have generated additional support (e.g., Berinsky 2009; Lenz 2012). I differ somewhat from these authors in expanding who counts as “elite.” In this group, we should include not only elected leaders and appointed party officials but also party-aligned activists, interest groups, and think tanks (see Zaller 2012). As an example, consider that even the *official* party line—the party platform, discussed at length in Chapter 2—is the product of negotiation among party leaders, elected politicians, and powerful party activists and interest groups. The ideas within platforms are further disseminated by these actors as well as allied media and then, as with all political communication, make their way to others via more informal channels (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Siegel 2020).

Why would lay partisans necessarily be influenced by the party line, especially with respect to factual assertions? First and foremost, unless they are social scientists (or read social science research closely), people do not have access to data and analysis on the causes of broad societal inequalities. They

can extrapolate from their day-to-day experiences and first-hand observations but, otherwise, must learn these beliefs second-hand. Differentiating true from false claims is far more difficult for lay people than many academics assume, especially as many politically relevant facts are highly contested (Toff 2021). While there are many possible sources of such information, we would expect partisan differences to emerge in the public for two main reasons: differential exposure and trust. People with partisan preferences tend to receive information from those who share their political perspectives (Stroud 2011). Even if they avoid ideological bubbles, people are more likely to adopt co-partisans' positions, a tendency most likely mediated by their identification with the party (Toff and Suhay 2018; also see Petersen, Osmundsen, and Tooby 2021). These patterns are especially strong among those most interested in, and attentive to, politics. Such individuals are especially likely to engage in selective attention—paying attention to news sources that align with one's partisan identity (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, and Shehata 2012)—as well as directional motivated reasoning (Lodge and Taber 2013; Zaller 1992). Although this type of information transfer has rarely been investigated in research on causal attributions, Kluegel and Smith (1986) argue in their canonical work that changing explanations for inequality among progressive politicians and activists in the 1960s and 1970s shifted public views, especially among Democrats.

If explanations for inequality originate with party elites (broadly understood), then we would expect a different pattern than in the case of ideological motivated reasoning or prejudice toward marginalized groups. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Republican Party since Reagan has justified its commitment to small government conservatism by championing the work ethic. *You can make it if you try; and, if you didn't make it, you probably didn't try.* Accusations that lower earning individuals and groups do not work as hard as others have often been accompanied by the argument that dysfunctional socialization as well as government welfare encourage irresponsible behavior (Gilens 1999; Kinder and Sanders 1996). Consistent with this emphasis, the Republican Party tends to deny that structural barriers—such as lack of jobs or discrimination—impede the upward mobility of lower income groups.

This said, the Republican Party has rejected one traditional component of meritocratic thinking: the idea that low-income people and groups are inherently less intelligent or skilled. In fact, this has not been a formal aspect of *any* major party's messaging since at least the mid-twentieth century. (And, at that time, one could find such utterances more often among Dixiecrats—Southern Democrats—than Republicans.)

Another inconsistency in Republican Party elites' meritocratic rhetoric involves which inequalities are under scrutiny. Republican narratives surrounding the import of hard work and culture have been used to explain poverty in general and among racial minorities—especially Black and Latino Americans—but less so among women and not at all among others. Republican leaders have mostly remained silent about economic struggles within their coalition, neither blaming nor excusing. An exception, of course, is Trump. He expressed sympathy over job and wage loss among rural and White working-class Americans, blaming various outsiders—especially immigrants, China, and, of course, Democrats (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). In so doing, he relieved these groups from blame but without mounting a serious challenge to the overarching fairness of the American economy.

In recent years, Democratic leaders' messaging has been almost a mirror opposite of Republicans'. The Democratic Party has become a consistent critic of the fairness of the American economy, especially its treatment of racial minorities. Democratic politicians, activists, and interest groups not only studiously avoid blaming lower income people or groups for their economic circumstances, but they also point to structural factors in society that create inequality. As we saw in Chapter 2, Democratic politicians tend to argue that the economy is biased against poor people and racial minorities and, to a lesser degree, women. More moderate Democratic elites tend to focus on a concerning lack of educational and job opportunities; more progressive ones add concerns about systemic discrimination, particularly racism. What about other types of inequality? The modern Democratic Party birthed its Johnson-era War on Poverty with attention to rural areas, but this emphasis has dwindled to only an occasional passing

reference in recent years—perhaps because rural citizens are no longer a part of the Democratic coalition. As for White Americans: according to Democratic elites, they have “white privilege” and, thus, are not victims of societal bias.

We might sum up this complicated set of narratives offered by the parties as a *Responsibility Narrative* (Republicans) versus an *Unequal Opportunity Narrative* (Democrats) that is relevant to economic inequality in general, between White Americans and racial minorities (at least, those with below-median incomes), and, to a lesser extent, between men and women. If partisan scripts influence the public at large, then these differences should not only appear but should also persist even when accounting for ideological and prejudicial differences between the parties. They should also be greater among those lay partisans paying the closest attention to politics. In unscripted domains, this “party line” should diminish in the public; however, we are unlikely to see partisans completely fall away from their party’s inequality paradigm as we would if they were strictly motivated by bias against (or in favor of) historically marginalized groups.

### **Investigating Partisan Divides in the Public**

The survey data allow us to investigate the relationship between partisanship and Americans’ explanations for inequality in detail. As a reminder, the surveys asked a representative sample of Americans to indicate their level of agreement with various explanations for economic inequality in different social domains: in general; between Black and Latino Americans and White Americans; between women and men; between rural and urban residents; and, finally, between White and Asian Americans. Survey respondents rated five explanations for inequality: variation in people’s work ethics, differences in innate intelligence, cultural influences, lack of access to good schools and jobs (or, for women, lack of access to childcare), and discrimination.

Each survey measured partisan identification in two stages. First, people were asked: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a ... ” This was followed by the answer choices: “Democrat,” “Republican,” “Independent,” “Other,” “Not sure.” This question was followed with a probe to tease out a person’s strength of partisanship. A person who chose Democrat was asked whether they were a “Strong Democrat” or “Not very strong Democrat.” Someone who chose Republican was asked whether they were a “Strong Republican” or “Not very strong Republican.” Finally, those who chose one of the other answers were asked whether they leaned toward the Democratic or the Republican Party. These probes allow for the creation of a seven-point measure of partisanship: strong Democrat, not strong Democrat, Democratic leaner, true Independent, Republican leaner, not strong Republican, and strong Republican.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Partisan Disagreements Over Scripted Inequalities*

We begin our analyses where the prior chapter left off. In Figure 5 in the last chapter, I regressed three Unequal Opportunity Indexes onto seven demographic variables: income, sex (male), race (White), rurality, religiosity, education, and age. I repeat these analyses here, adding survey respondents’ partisanship as a predictor variable and, later, several additional control variables. As a reminder, the Unequal Opportunity Indexes are each made up of three items measuring the extent to which respondents believed that the lack of resources in a lower earning group is driven by discrimination and other barriers to opportunity and is *not* driven by a deficient work ethic. These outcome measures thus capture belief variation along the responsibility versus unequal opportunity continuum. People were asked separately about the reasons for poor people’s, women’s, and Black and Latino Americans’ lower incomes,<sup>3</sup> creating three separate indexes. The outcome variables are scored 1-6, in keeping with the six

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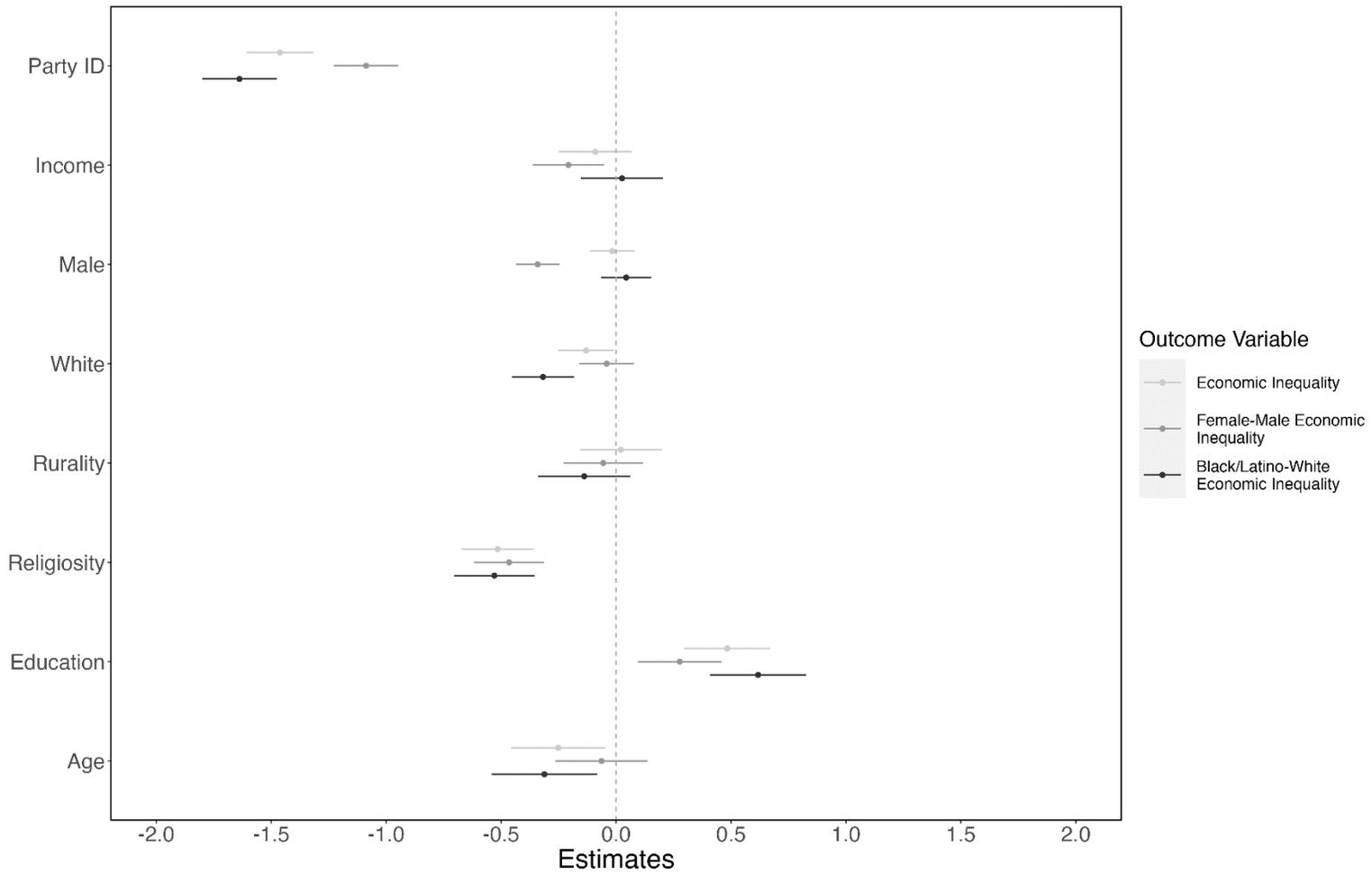
<sup>2</sup> I leave to the side the small number of people who do not fall into one of these categories.

<sup>3</sup> In the 2016 survey, respondents were asked to explain some people’s and groups’ “worse jobs and lower incomes.” In the 2018 survey, they were asked to explain their “lower incomes and less wealth.”

answer options of strongly agree to strongly disagree for each scale item, and all predictor variables are scored 0-1 to ease comparison of effect sizes.

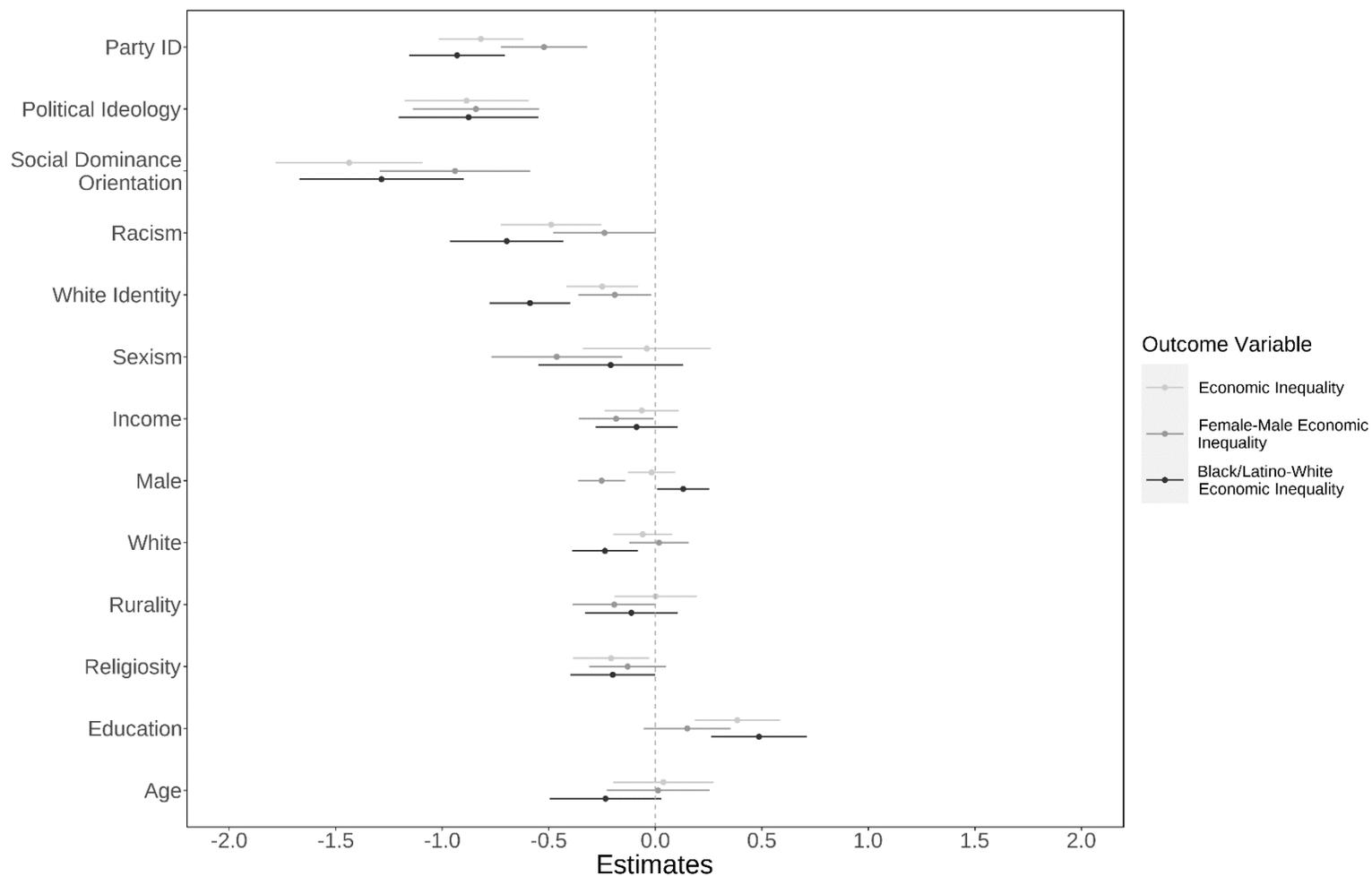
Figure 1 plots the regression coefficients for three models that include partisanship and the demographic variables. Partisan divides are much greater than the demographic ones. Strong Democrats and strong Republicans differ by one to two points on the outcome variables (or, more accurately, 22-33% of their range). These differences are approximately three times the effect sizes of the two most important demographic variables—education and religiosity. Not surprisingly, the inclusion of partisanship has also reduced the associations between many of the demographic variables and the Unequal Opportunity Indexes, especially race, rurality, religiosity, and education. Upon reflection, the demographic findings in Chapter 5 likely in part reflect the fact that the two parties have distinct electoral coalitions. This said, clear demographic effects remain. Men are less likely than women to say women experience unequal opportunity. Likewise, Whites are less likely than non-Whites to say Blacks and Latinos (and, to a lesser extent, poor people in general) face unequal opportunity. As before, religious people are less likely to believe unequal opportunity is a problem, and educated people are more likely to.

**Figure 1: Coefficient Plot of Unequal Opportunity Indexes Regressed on Partisanship and Demographic Variables (2016)**



*Note:* Coefficient plots with estimates from three separate linear regressions, with Unequal Economic Opportunity, Unequal Economic Opportunity for Women, and Unequal Economic Opportunity for Blacks and Latinos as outcome variables. Predictor variables are scored 0 to 1 and outcome variables are scored 1 to 6.

**Figure 2: Coefficient Plot of Unequal Opportunity Indexes Regressed on Partisanship, Demographics, Ideology, and Prejudice (2016)**



*Note:* Coefficient plots with estimates from three separate linear regressions, with Unequal Economic Opportunity, Unequal Economic Opportunity for Women, and Unequal Economic Opportunity for Blacks and Latinos as outcome variables. Predictor variables are scored 0 to 1 and outcome variables are scored 1 to 6.

As we consider the reasons for this partisan schism, some may be skeptical that it is truly partisan in origin. Perhaps this divide is more accurately considered *ideological*? Or, might it be driven by differences in how Democrats and Republicans think about gender roles or race relations? Relatedly, could it be due to Republicans' relative preference for a hierarchical society—i.e., Social Dominance Orientation—and Democrats' interest in challenging hierarchy? Figure 2 displays results from the same set of regressions with these predispositions added to the regression models as additional predictors. (Item wording can be found in the appendix.) In nearly every case, these variables are associated with Americans' explanations for inequality; political ideology and Social Dominance Orientation are especially closely related. Due to the addition of these variables, the effect size of partisanship is approximately halved. Yet, even including so many possible confounding variables, partisanship is still associated with nearly a one-point difference on the six-point responsibility-unequal opportunity continuum.

In sum, we have evidence so far that Republicans are consistent “American Dream believers” and Democrats consistent “American Dream skeptics.” These differences are rooted in part in partisanship itself and in part in other factors correlated with partisanship—ideology and social prejudice. Yet, we have examined beliefs regarding a relatively limited number of socioeconomic inequalities. To better understand the landscape of partisan explanations for inequality, and to better understand what might be driving them, we must examine whether (and how) partisans grow less consistent as other explanations and inequalities come into view.

### *How Partisans Explain Many Inequalities*

In the analyses that follow, I examine the association between partisanship and each unique explanation for inequality one-by-one. Drawing on the 2018 survey data, I expand the analysis to include beliefs about

the lower earnings of rural residents (relative to urban residents) and White Americans (relative to Asian Americans).<sup>4</sup> Analyses include the demographic variables in Figure 1 and display 95% confidence intervals.

Figures 3 and 4 each combines results from a total of ten separate linear regressions. In each, we see the relationship between partisanship on the X-axis (the predictor variable) and various explanations for inequality on the Y axis (the outcome variables). Coefficients for other variables are suppressed. A title above each panel indicates which explanation/outcome is depicted. The specific type of socioeconomic inequality being explained is indicated in the key. Figure 3 shows the relationships between partisanship and explanations for Black/Latino-White inequality and female-male inequality, and Figure 4 shows that between partisanship and explanations for rural-urban and White-Asian inequality.

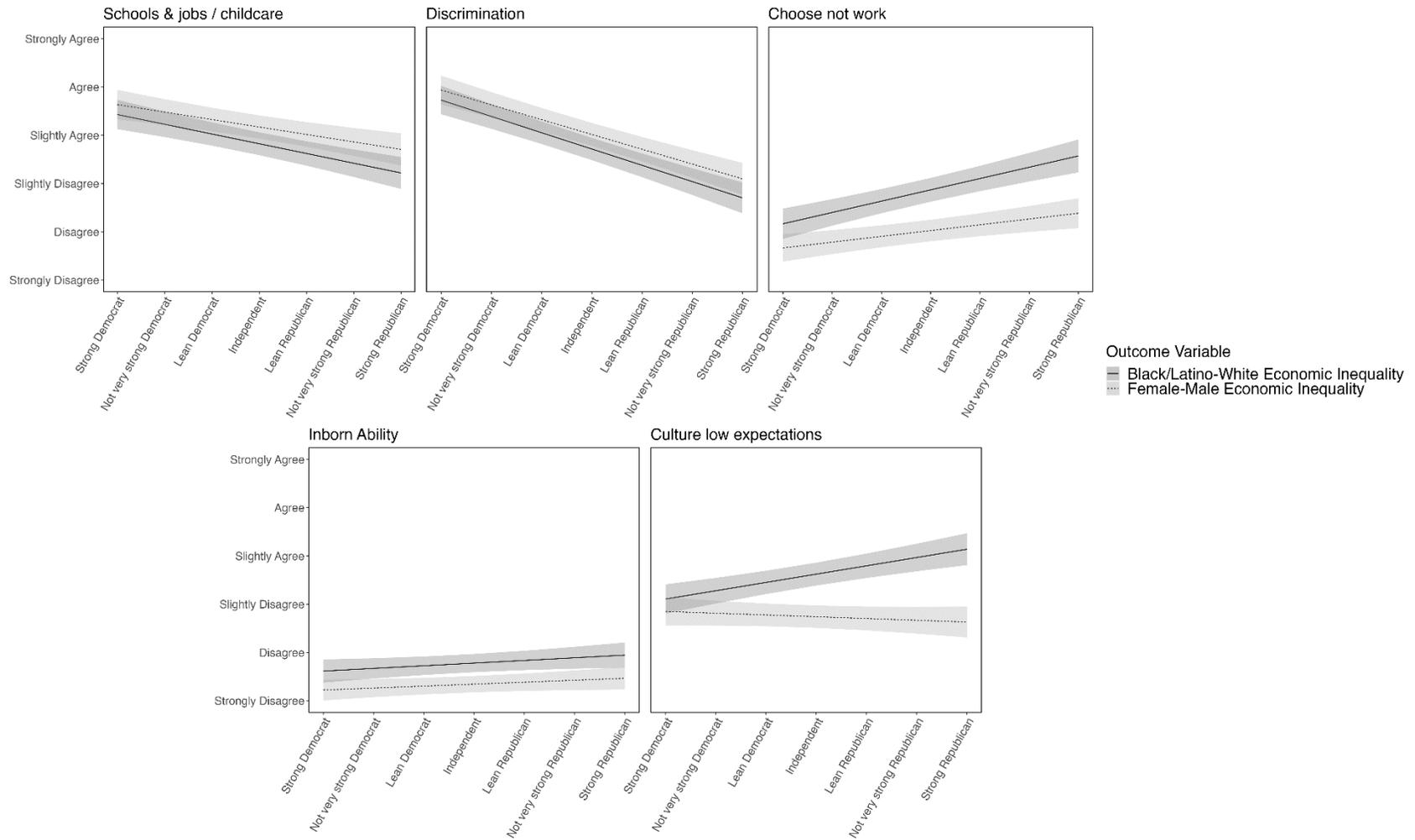
Beginning with Figure 3, when people are asked why Blacks and Latinos earn less on average than Whites and why women on average earn less than men, there are large partisan differences for discrimination (with Democrats agreeing) and more moderate sized ones for access to opportunity (Democrats agreeing) and hard work (Republicans agreeing). The latter diminishes, however, in the case of female-male inequality. Culture is quite inconsistent, with Republicans slightly more likely than Democrats to make this argument when considering inequality by race/ethnicity but less likely to make the argument when considering inequality by sex. This is not surprising considering the partisan scripts discussed in Chapter 2 and the qualitative findings from Chapter 4. Finally, as expected given its absence from partisan debate, the idea that inborn intelligence drives economic inequalities was rejected by all, although Republicans disagreed slightly less resolutely for Black/Latino-White inequality ( $p < .10$ ).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> One downside of this survey is its smaller sample size ( $N =$  approximately 500), which yields less precise estimates.

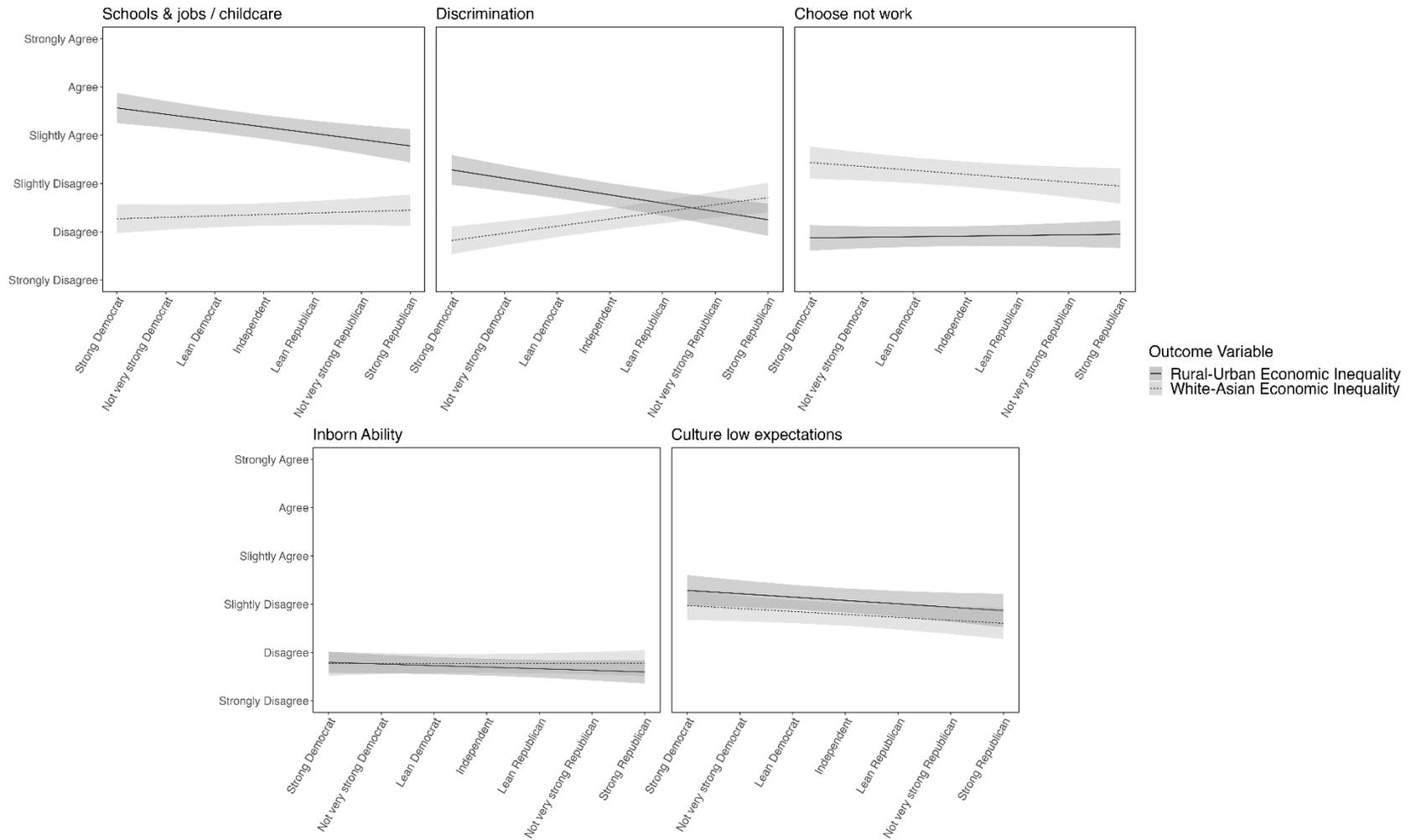
<sup>5</sup> Respondents' arguments about culture and racial inequality differed dramatically from their arguments about culture and inequality by sex. In the former case, respondents discussed described aspects of a "culture of poverty," including family breakdown and exposure to drug culture. By contrast, in the latter case, respondents tended to focus on traditional gender roles, of which they tended to be critical.

**Figure 3: Associations between Partisanship and Explanations for Less Income/Wealth of Blacks, Latinos, and Women (2018)**



*Note:* Each panel displays predicted probabilities from two separate linear regressions. Outcome variables are explanations for inequality—for Black/Latino-White and female-male inequality. Control variables (income, sex, race/ethnicity, rurality, religiosity, education, age) are held at their means.

**Figure 4: Associations between Partisanship and Explanations for Less Income/Wealth of Rural Residents and Whites (2018)**



*Note:* Each panel displays predicted probabilities from two separate linear regressions. Outcome variables are explanations for inequality—for rural-urban and White-Asian inequality. Control variables (income, sex, race/ethnicity, rurality, religiosity, education, age) are held at their means.

Next, we consider whether partisans change their tune when asked to consider economic inequality between rural and urban residents. The answer is: in part. See Figure 4. Democrats remain more likely than Republicans to emphasize discrimination and schools/jobs when explaining rural Americans' fewer resources, although the partisan differences are somewhat smaller than before (especially for discrimination). However, partisan differences disappear completely with respect to the hard work explanation. This null result is due to Republican hesitance to say people living in rural areas do not work as hard as those living in urban areas. As in the case of inequality between women and men, Republicans here are slightly *less* likely than Democrats to draw on cultural explanations. With respect to innate intelligence, all disagree approximately equally.

Finally, when survey respondents were asked to consider why White Americans earn less on average than Asian Americans, any remaining trace of the typical meritocratic partisan divide evaporates. Democrats are no longer more likely than Republicans to say the lower earning group has less access to good schools and jobs. Rather, *both* sides doubt that White Americans lack access to these opportunities. Republicans are now somewhat *more* likely than Democrats to assert that discrimination matters; however, this is the result of Democrats shifting toward disagree (as opposed to Republicans shifting toward agree). In another change, Democrats are now slightly *more* likely than Republicans to say hard work generates inequality. This reversal is due to Democrats moving away from disagreement toward the mid-point of the answer scale. Finally, as in the case of female-male and rural-urban inequality, Republicans are again slightly less likely than Democrats to agree with cultural explanations (although the difference is not statistically significant), and all disagree about equally with respect to innate intelligence.

Taking a step back from these various patterns to consider them together, the observed partisan differences offer no support for the idea that there exists a *consistent* meritocratic divide between

Democrats and Republicans in the public and considerable support for the hypothesis that differences are highly dependent on *whose* inequality in conjunction with *what type* of explanation is being considered.

Republicans on balance employed meritocratic thinking more than Democrats. Republicans were more likely than Democrats to endorse narratives of hard work; Democrats were more likely than Republicans to agree with the “unequal opportunity” narrative—that discrimination and lack of access to education and jobs (or, for women, childcare) keep people from succeeding. But this meritocratic difference was not consistent. Republicans argued that “culture” held Black and Latino Americans back but no others, and they disagreed that innate differences drove any inequality. Further, each group of partisans fell away from their party line when considering lower earnings among rural and White Americans. Democrats were somewhat less convinced of unequal opportunity in the case of rural people and—in line with scripts regarding “white privilege”—dismissed the idea that White Americans had less opportunity to succeed than Asian Americans. Republicans became less blame-oriented when considering lower earnings among rural or White Americans. Yet, partisans did not endorse the other sides’ inequality script. For the most part, Democrats did not problematize the work ethics of rural or White Americans. They also resisted the opportunity to disparage these groups’ cultures or innate abilities. And Republicans never endorsed structural inequality as underlying unequal economic outcomes, even among Whites. In sum, these patterns reflect salient party scripts regarding the causes of inequality as well as a tendency for partisans to criticize (Republicans) or defend (Democrats) marginalized groups but not others.

### **Do Politically Attentive Partisans Explain Inequality Differently?**

An important weakness in the discussion thus far is the difficulty of disentangling the effect of partisanship from correlated predispositions, especially orientations toward prejudice and Social Dominance Orientation. In this final section, I investigate whether causal narratives might emerge from partisan elite

rhetoric by examining whether the narratives of the most politically attentive partisans resemble those of party elites more so than others’.

Political scientists routinely find that partisan disagreements are strongest among citizens who follow politics closely (Berinsky 2009; Zaller 1992). This has been demonstrated not only with respect to political preferences but also with respect to politically charged factual beliefs. In Chapter 1, I discussed the remarkable politicization of climate science. However, there are many other examples. For example, Jones (2020) draws on data over a sixty-year period to demonstrate that partisan polarization over evaluations of the economy not only mirror patterns in elite communication but also are greatest among the most politically aware. Elsewhere, I have shown that conservatives and liberals exposed to politicized science communication are more likely to disagree over the causes of perceived racial differences (Morin-Chassé, Suhay, and Jayaratne 2017). Of course, partisan leaders do not always disagree. Where there is elite agreement, one would not expect such divides in the public (Dost, Hochschild, and Suhay 2022).

To investigate this hypothesis, I measured political attention with the following question: “Some people seem to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others aren’t that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs ... Most of the time, Some of the time, Only now and then, Hardly at all.”<sup>6</sup>

Figure 5 displays predicted probabilities from linear regressions. Each of the five explanations for *economic inequality in general* were regressed onto partisanship (Democrat or Republican, with independent as the excluded category), level of attention to politics, and the interaction of these two

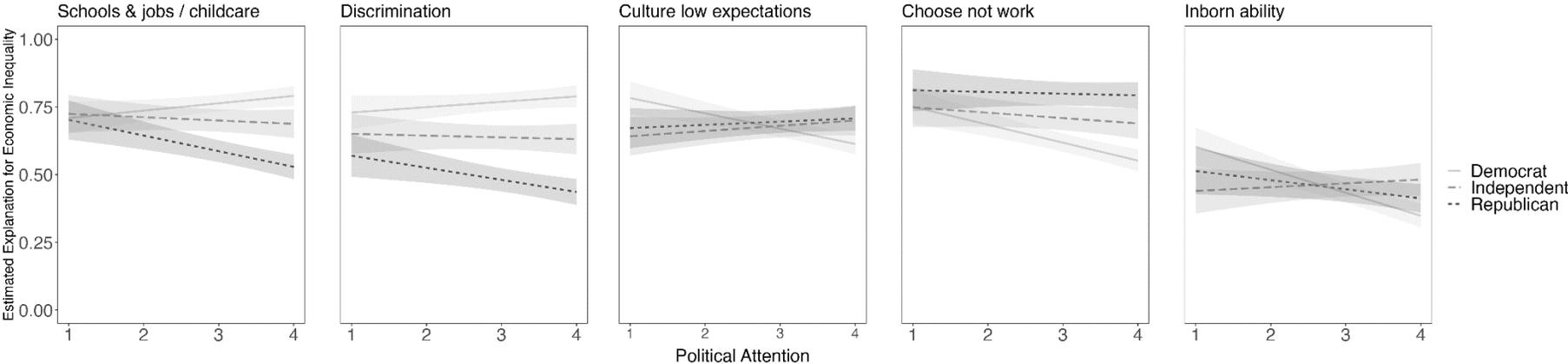
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<sup>6</sup> Scholars have conceptualized and measured what I call “political attentiveness” in different ways. Zaller (1992) relies primarily on neutral political knowledge to measure “political awareness”; however, such a measure would be conceptually inappropriate and methodologically suspect in a study of politicized factual beliefs. Education is also sometimes used as a proxy for attentiveness; however, these two variables are only moderately associated (Luskin 1990), and additional years of education do not appear to increase interest (Highton 2009). Furthermore, as the empirical findings in Chapter 5 made clear, higher levels of education in the U.S. are associated with learning fact claims that may not be politically neutral.

variables. Control variables were included as before and held at their means in the figure. The X-axis represents level of political attention, and the Y-axis represents extent of agreement or disagreement with a particular explanation for inequality.

We see that disagreements between highly attentive and strong partisans are always in the expected direction, with Republicans much more likely to locate the causes of inequality between poor and rich people within individuals (work ethic) and Democrats to say the causes of inequality are external to lower income individuals (discrimination, schools and jobs). Small differences emerge for cultural and innate explanations as well. Among the inattentive, partisan differences are nonexistent, minimal, or in some cases reverse direction. Similar patterns also emerge when the outcome variables are explanations for inequality between Black and Latino Americans and White Americans and between women and men (although, for the latter, only for structural biases). See appendix. Note that these patterns emerge even when controlling for prejudice, Social Dominance Orientation, and their interactions with partisanship. Finally, when examining partisans' explanations for rural-urban inequality and White-Asian inequality, there are no discernable patterns by level of attentiveness besides an unexpected tendency for Republicans with *low* levels of attentiveness to endorse the idea that White Americans have fallen behind Asian Americans economically due to discrimination.

**Figure 5: Attentive Partisans Disagree More about the Causes of Economic Inequality (2016)**



*Note:* Each panel displays predicted probabilities from one linear regression with partisanship interacted with political attention. Outcome variables are explanations for economic inequality. Control variables (income, sex, race/ethnicity, rurality, religiosity, education, age) are held at their means.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, we have considered whether lay Democrats and Republicans disagree over how to explain inequality and, thus, whether the American economy rewards merit. While many people assume the two partisan camps think about inequality differently, prior research points to many different patterns of disagreement. These range from the possibility that Democrats and Republicans have consistent attributional styles—i.e., that Republicans stubbornly insist that every inequality is legitimate and that Democrats likewise protest each and every one—to the possibility that differences between Democrats and Republicans are highly contingent on the inequality context. Underlying these patterns may be ideology, various forms of prejudice, or partisan scripts. Prior research, which has focused on a narrow set of cases, has been unable to shed much light on the above questions.

The analyses in this chapter allow us to rule out the idea that partisans are ideologically rigid in how they understand inequality. While Republicans perceive much more meritocracy than Democrats—a tendency correlated with partisanship as well as left-right ideology—they do not subscribe to innate explanations and their tendency to criticize lower income groups' work ethics melts away when considering rural or White inequality. Likewise, while Democrats perceive much *less* meritocracy than Republicans, they refuse to attribute the resource gap between White and Asian Americans to structural biases (discrimination or a lack of access to education or jobs) in the American economy.

Partisan differences in how citizens explain inequality are better understood as a mixture of a tendency to mirror “the party line” along with prejudicial predispositions (or the lack thereof). At the elite level, the two parties have been vocal in endorsing the importance of personal responsibility (Republicans) or unequal opportunity (Democrats), especially in reference to economic inequality in general and between racial minorities (usually Blacks and Latinos) and Whites. This is where we see the largest differences between the beliefs of lay partisans, and this is where we see differences grow as we compare

inattentive to attentive partisans. When considering inequalities that are rarely discussed, at least in national politics—the fact that rural residents earn less than urban ones, or that White Americans earn less on average than Asian Americans—these tendencies diminish. To some degree the particulars of this diminishment reveal racial prejudice lurking underneath these patterns: Republicans easily blamed poor people in general and Black and Latino Americans for earning less than others but would not similarly blame rural or White Americans when they were on the losing end of the stick. On the other hand, beliefs surrounding these unscripted inequalities also illustrate a continuing influence of the party line—lay Republicans continuing to deny that structural inequality matters when considering rural-urban and White-Asian inequality, and Democrats (mostly) continuing to deny that work ethic caused the difference.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the findings in this chapter relate in important ways to research on Racial Resentment (Kinder and Sanders 1996). As others have established, Republican partisanship is strongly positively associated with the belief that Black (and Latino) Americans have fallen behind due primarily to a lack of work ethic and that discrimination and a lack of opportunity have little to do with it. The fact that Republicans are hesitant to similarly blame other groups (rural residents, White Americans, and to some degree women) provides evidence for the distinctive racial character of Republicans' belief in meritocracy. The fact that Republicans *do not* adhere to innate explanations for racial inequality—while perhaps surprising to some scholars—will not be surprising to those familiar with racial resentment and related theories of modern and symbolic racism (e.g., Sears and Henry 2003). As norms turned against such explicit racism decades ago, politicians followed suit (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Mendelberg 2001).

Yet, consistent with longstanding criticisms of research on Racial Resentment (e.g., Feldman and Huddy 2005; Sniderman and Tetlock 1986), beliefs about the origins of racial inequality are intermingled with important elements of conservative and Republican perspectives on the origins of inequality. When asked about the reasons for economic inequality in general—with no mention of race—Republicans tend

to disparage lower income people's work ethics and Democrats to excuse them by pointing to structural inequalities. When asked about lower earning rural and White people, Republicans retreat from blame but also refuse to argue in favor of structural inequalities; at least for rural Americans, Democrats largely persist with their sympathetic bent. As I argued in Chapter 2, Republicans' championing of meritocracy extends far back in time—at least to the early twentieth century—long before the contemporary racial divide between the two parties. In the contemporary era, the meritocratic mindset is intermixed with racism, but to consider Republicans' adherence to meritocracy as *only* racism misses an important bigger picture. It also overlooks the dynamics that brought about the melding of Republicanism with Racial Resentment in the first place: those who wished to resist Black American equality amidst the Civil Rights Movement and thereafter found a natural home in a Republican Party unwilling to redistribute wealth to low-income groups, whatever their background, and intent on carefully justifying this resistance.<sup>7</sup>

In the next chapter, I investigate the impact of these causal narratives on Americans' political views. We have learned that many people have clear ideas about what drives economic inequality, especially the oft-discussed inequalities between poor and rich, Black and Latino and White, and female and male. We know that demographic, prejudicial, and partisan divisions underlie these views. Are these narratives simply symbols of societal division that are themselves of little consequence? Or, as the two parties seem to intend, do they play a role in shaping people's policy and voting preferences?

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<sup>7</sup> Scholars increasingly question whether Racial Resentment should be considered synonymous with racial prejudice and acknowledge its focus on beliefs about the origins of racial inequality (Cramer 2020). For example, Kam and Burge (2018) argue that the Racial Resentment scale ought to be renamed the "Structural versus Individual Attributions for Black Americans' Economic and Social Status." However, most continue to argue that these beliefs are *sui generis* as opposed to an integrated part of a broader conservative and Republican orthodoxy.

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## CHAPTER 6 APPENDIX

### Question Wording

Social Dominance Orientation (Sidanius and Pratto 1999)

*An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom.*

*No one group should dominate in society.*

*Group equality should not be our primary goal.*

*We should work to give all groups of people an equal chance to succeed.*

### Explicit Racism

*Imagine for a moment that you are moving to another community. In deciding where to live, how important would it be to you to live in a place where most people were of the same race and ethnicity as you?*

*How do you think you would react if a member of your family told you they were going to marry a person who was of a different race or ethnicity? Would you be...Very happy, Somewhat happy, Somewhat unhappy, Very unhappy*

### White Identity (Jardina 2019)

*In your opinion, how important is it that white Americans work together to change laws that are unfair to whites?*

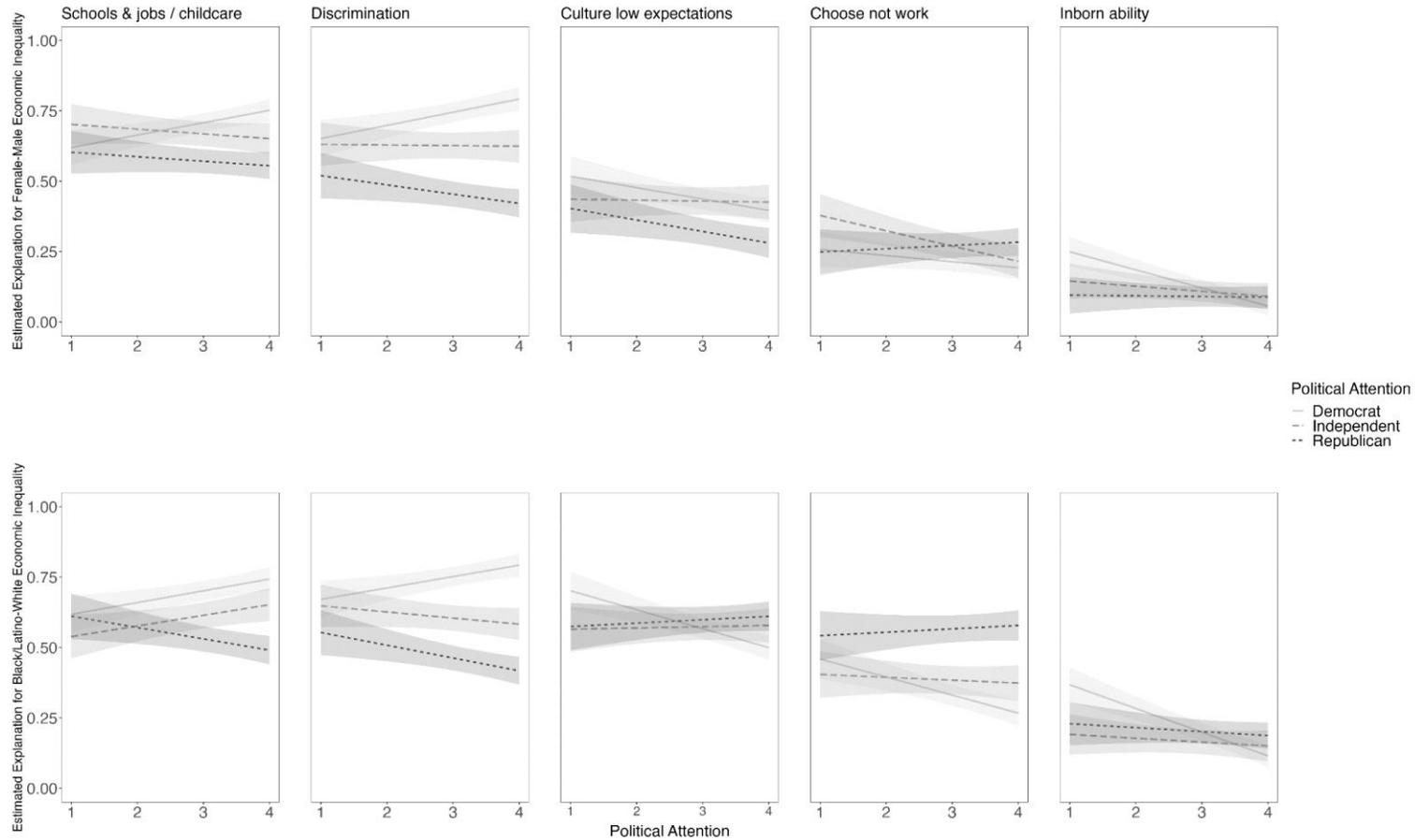
Belief in Traditional Gender Roles (Kinder and Burns 2011)

*A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.*

*It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family.*

*It's fine for a husband to stay home to take care of home and family instead of working outside the home.*

**Appendix Figure 1: Attentive Partisans Disagree More about the Causes of Race and Sex Inequality (2016)**



*Note:* Each panel displays predicted probabilities from one linear regression with partisanship interacted with level of political attention. Outcome variables are explanations for economic inequality between women and men (top row) and Black and Latino Americans and White Americans (bottom row). Control variables (income, sex, race/ethnicity, rurality, religiosity, education, age) are held at their means.