

# Desert and Redistribution: Justice as a Remedy for, and Cause of, Economic Inequality

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## Abstract

Social and policy scientists have made a convincing case that justice motivates personal behavior and public opinion, but they have not adequately explained why, and through what mechanisms, such moral concerns exert their influence. Additionally, they have noted the diverse conceptions of justice across communities, but not fully grappled with its effects on policy. I argue that, if justice is the rewarding of desert (Mill 1957), then desert is an emergent social institution that helps resolve multiple-equilibria problems allocating resources, socioeconomic station, and public burdens and responsibilities. As a social institution, community members have built-in incentives to enforce and perpetuate communal understandings of desert through external sanctions and inculcation (Ostrom 2005). Moreover, as an evolutionary phenomenon, what constitutes upright, moral behavior will vary across communities and contexts (Binmore 2011; Skyrms 1996), leaving some avenues closed to policymakers. Institutional theory, and desert specifically, undergirds many of post-positivist policy's key insights.

Public opinion concerning economic inequality and redistribution illustrates an emergent desert's empirical usefulness to policy scholars. It also illustrates justice's dual nature. Justice, it turns out, is not necessarily a friendly a goal. A call for justice without a common definition of desert will beget (from your perspective) both just and unjust outcomes. Surveying a 1,000-person national sample, I find that an individual's support for redistributive policies is driven by her (i) belief in and (ii) definition of economic deservingness. People tolerate grave inequalities if they think those inequalities are deserved. Indeed, if outcomes appear deserved, altering them constitutes an unjust act. Moreover, people who assign a significant role to personal responsibility in their definitions of economic desert will oppose large-scale redistribution policies because government intervention makes it harder for people to (by their definition) deserve their economic station. In short, people must perceive inequality as undeserved to motivate a policy response, and the means of combating inequality must not undermine desert.

# 1 Theoretical contribution

The idea of distribution is fundamental to human interactions, informal and formal, on scales intimate and grand. Social scientists and laypeople alike tend to use “distribution” in reference to allocations of material wealth and economic resources, which determine our physical comfort and safety, and also indirectly effect social and political power (e.g., Bartels 2008). But we directly distribute power, too, entrusting certain of our fellows with this or that responsibility while naming others categorically ineligible to operate levers of authority. Treatments are similarly scarce and strategically distributed. We dole out ire or kudos to neighbors and colleagues, but no one can be angry or congratulatory all the time so we reserve those nuanced modes of interpersonal conduct for when they might reasonably affect how others act (e.g., McKean 1992). More formally, sanctions and rewards are effective at influencing behavior, but they are also expensive. City prosecutors, for example, must determine if a crime is worth further burdening an understaffed judicial system and an overcrowded penal system (Hill & Martin 2019).

Because distributions are important in social science, so is justice. In its simplest construction, justice is getting what one *deserves* (Mill 1957). The misallocation of a resource, treatment, or responsibility to undeserving parties is, by definition, an injustice, and injustices appear to have measurable social consequences. Researchers in organizational and social psychology, for example, have produced entire subfields<sup>1</sup> devoted to the study of justice, always with important findings, but often at the expense of linguistic and conceptual clarity (Greenberg 2011; Jost & Kay 2010). Policy theorists and researchers have also contributed mightily to the topic of justice, hewing markedly closer to the concept’s core connection to deservingness.<sup>2</sup> Social construct theory (e.g., Schneider & Ingram 1993), the narrative policy framework (e.g., Stone 2002), and recent political science investigations (e.g., Cramer Walsh 2012) have made a convincing case for the effect of normative, moral concerns—including desert, specifically—on everyday human behavior and broader societal functioning.

Although empirically rigorous and theoretically compelling, researchers working in these veins do not clearly explain why moral concerns such as those related to justice might motivate human

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<sup>1</sup>And sub-subfields. There is active research into “interpersonal”, “informational”, “restorative”, and “procedural” justices, to name a few. See Greenberg (2011) for an overview.

<sup>2</sup>The term in moral philosophy is “desert”, but many readers prefer “deservingness”. I use both throughout this paper.

behavior in the first place, nor how they might influence policies meant to regulate that behavior. In this paper, I hope to provide these pioneering policy frameworks and findings with a solid theoretical footing. To do that, I first make explicit what is currently an implicit relationship with modern equity theory (e.g., Adams 1963). Modern equity theory posits that a perceived injustice induces mental distress, which provokes action to rectify the injustice and thereby eliminate the distress. I then attempt to delineate, beyond a vague appeal to universal psychological mechanisms, where this internal turmoil originates and how the necessary sensitivity to justice is inculcated. I argue, in short, that desert is a social institution, with built-in incentives to conform and perpetuate.

Desert is emergent, fashioned over repeated interactions among humans trying to solve multiple-equilibria problems (i.e., problems with many possible, enduring solutions). Material wealth and child rearing responsibilities, for example, can be distributed in all sorts of ways that could constitute a stable equilibrium. Rather than rehash the issue anew at every meeting, the people involved eventually arrive at a regularity of distributional behavior, and they often codify this expected behavior in a moral vernacular—much akin to a narrative—identifying who deserves what, and why. Violating your community’s desert formula comes at a cost. Your fellow community members will be impelled—for their own good, they believe—to correct the mismatch of deserved object and deserving subject, and sanction anyone complicit in that mismatch. Over time, these sanctions take root in peoples’ minds and they police themselves. In short, “[p]eople are not preoccupied with justice because they are moral, per se,”(Bower-Bir 2017, 4) but because they are rational, responding to the external and internal costs incurred by violating institutional boundaries.

I back this argument with an empirical demonstration. If an emergent social institution, the criteria that make someone deserving of a given resource, responsibility, or treatment will vary across communities and time and will specifically influence how community members rectify injustices (Binmore 2011). Save a few qualitative descriptions of political desert narratives (e.g., Stone 2002), the current state of policy, political, and psychological theories around justice do not require investigators to explain what it means to the actors under study to deserve the good or treatment at stake. It is enough for their analyses to know whether and to what degree the actors perceive a situation as just (i.e., whether and to what degree actors believe deserved objects have been delivered to deserving subjects) (e.g., Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyady 2003; McCall 2013). I show that policy and political scholars also need to account for peoples’ particular definitions of

economic desert.

People will tolerate grave inequalities—inequalities that trouble them, even—if they think those inequalities are deserved. If undeserved, however, people may nonetheless oppose policies aimed at economic leveling when those policies conflict with their definitions of desert. Many Americans want to reduce economic inequality. Those same Americans will oppose government efforts to reduce inequality if they consider personal responsibility a key economic desert basis. For these people, progressive taxation and redistribution rectify an unjust situation, but through unjust means. Government intervention undermines economic desert. Not so if your economic desert bases do not include personal responsibility. This findings helps resolve a major conundrum regarding American public support for economic redistribution policies. In resolving this puzzle, moreover, I illustrate the potentially destructive quality of justice. The variety of desert norms makes public calls to justice—absent a definition of desert—unintelligible, and often counter productive in the eyes of the caller.

Before turning to this empirical test in Sections 2–6, I flesh out my theoretical argument in the remainder of this section.

### **1.1 Showing that morals matter: Social constructions and policy narratives**

Following the discipline’s “argumentative turn” turn (Fischer & Forester 1993), policy theorists began grappling with the seemingly messy influence of language and deliberation on the policy process, from shaping citizens’ and leaders’ preferences all the way through implementation and assessment. No longer taking as given an objective political reality to be cleanly modeled and measured, scholars in policy and related fields now recognize that some primary forces governing our world are socially constructed (e.g., Fischer 2003; Roe 1994; Stone 2002). To navigate their physical and social environments, humans ascribe or assign meanings to events, objects, symbols, and behaviors. Meaning generation is of particular interest to social and policy scientists because pretty much any problem or task confronting a community is fundamentally ambiguous and open to many meanings. That is, it can be tackled in any of a number of ways by any constellation of actors depending on how people interpret and understand it. Once a particular interpretation of the problem or task takes hold, that community may be walking down a path radically different than if they had landed on an alternate interpretation, with a different set of winners and losers

and a unique host of intended and unintended consequences (Zahariadis 2007).<sup>3</sup>

To make sense of, and choose between, the range of interpretations potentially applicable to a given problem or task, humans tell themselves and one another stories. Storytelling is fundamental to human thought and “a primary means by which individuals organize, process, and convey information” (Jones & McBeth 2010, 330). Because public decisions inevitably yield winners and losers, various interests will hawk their preferred interpretation of the task at hand.<sup>4</sup> Scholars working within the narrative policy framework show how social elites and interest groups weaponize narratives, casting themselves as victims and others as villains (Stone 2002). They transmit their easily-digestible stories to political decision-makers (Jones & McBeth 2010) and through the media to the wider citizenry (Blair & McCormack 2016).<sup>5</sup>

Widespread adoption of a particular narrative can have lasting social effects, as can continued competition between narratives. Research in social construct theory shows how policymakers and policies convey powerful, enduring messages about what target populations deserve from government, and what society should expect from those populations. These messages about who deserves what, and why, will reinforce or alter the political and material advantages of specific groups, often at the expense of others, all without exercising traditional levers of power (Ingram, Schneider, & deLeon 2007; Schneider & Ingram 1993). Stories about who deserves what are not only relevant at grand societal scales. They influence interactions at intimate scales, too, as when street-level bureaucrats including police and teachers eschew standard operating procedures and adjust their delivery of social services based on personal assessments of citizen/client deservingness (Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2003, 2012). Among the general citizenry, these stories drive public opinion to surprising places, as when those most injured by economic inequality defend it as fair and oppose government redistribution (Bower-Bir 2014; Starmans, Sheskin, & Bloom 2017). Narrative-

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<sup>3</sup>For example, global pandemics can be framed as issues of public health, national security, and trade and commerce. If a nation’s legislative body primarily understands an outbreak as an economic issue, they will direct government resources towards propping up businesses and keeping families financially afloat during the immediate crisis. A public health or national security interpretation, conversely, may lead to forward-looking investment in viral research and monitoring, but with very different beneficiaries. The public health framing would yield a windfall for an international community of scientists, whereas a security interpretation would enrich internal defense agencies and contractors.

<sup>4</sup>By “public decisions”, I mean any decision confronting a group. Stories are as central to formulating and communicating why I should not have to do the dishes tonight as they are to arguing that teachers should get vaccinated first during a viral outbreak.

<sup>5</sup>Although specifically political actors are frequently deliberate in crafting and disseminating narratives, humans generally may be constrained by biases and subconscious motives when formulating stories meant to aid personal and communal understanding of an issue.

informed public opinion filters back up the policy chain during elections when citizens vote for policymakers apparently at odds with their economic interests, relying instead on their perceptions of a candidate's delivery of benefits to deserving or undeserving populations (Cramer Walsh 2012; McCall 2013).

## 1.2 Explaining why morals matter: Emergent social institutions

That normative issues like justice matter for policymaking is clear, but the question remains: Why do moral concerns motivate people to action? Social factions, interest groups, etc. bother perpetuating or undermining narratives about who deserves what because those narratives influence policymakers and public opinion, both of which shape public policy,<sup>6</sup> to the advantage of some and disadvantage of others. There is a strategic incentive to control narratives pertaining to desert, but that does nothing to tell us why these normative stories ought to inspire political behavior, let alone behavior seemingly at odds with personal interests.

To answer this question, we must expand the scope of the benefits and costs that constitute our personal interests beyond pocketbooks and political power. Although not (to my knowledge) explicitly mentioned in the forgoing literature, the abovementioned theories and frameworks may be doing just that by tacitly building their insights atop modern equity theory (e.g., Adams 1963, 1965), which gets decent traction among syllabuses in organizational studies, public management, and related policy courses (e.g., Schay 1988; Thompson & Rainey 2003). According to modern equity theorists, humans experience psychological distress when they perceive injustice—specifically inequity—which inspires them to correct the imbalance between (i) a person or group's contributions to an undertaking and (ii) that person or group's subsequent payoffs (Walster, Berscheid, & William 1973).<sup>7</sup> This psychological turmoil, which presents as disappointment, anger, or guilt, is a cost people want to avoid. Equitable outcomes, conversely, produce contentment. From this perspective, political battles over narratives and social constructions of deservingness are attempts to strategically inspire or suppress these emotional costs to the benefit of specific interests.

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<sup>6</sup>At least, public opinion helps shapes public policy in American state and national legislatures (e.g., Erikson, Wright, & McIver 1993), a finding that has come into question with rising economic, and consequently political, inequality (Bartels 2008; Gilens & Page 2014), but one that continues to more-or-less hold (Bashir 2015; Enns 2015).

<sup>7</sup>For example, an employee who receives too small a bonus check after a lucrative job deserves more money, and a criminal who gets too harsh a sentence for a petty crime deserves reduced punishment.

Making explicit this link is mutually beneficial. Modern equity theory provides post-positivist<sup>8</sup> policy frameworks a mechanism by which the normative concerns at their core might spur a behavioral response. Reciprocally, post-positivist policy frameworks explain how competition among elites yields the variety of moral interpretations different people bring to the same interpersonal interactions and social distributions. The story, however, remains incomplete. Equity theory ignores all those occasions where people’s conception of justice has nothing to do with balancing inputs and outputs, resting instead on need, equality, or some other basis (Jost & Kay 2010). Questions remain even when equity is the defining principle. How, for example, are competing desert narratives sufficiently ingrained into people’s minds so as to induce psychological duress? And what accounts for the myriad understandings of equity, fairness, and justice that operate in small communities over everyday distributions not worth concerted politicking (e.g., Elster 1992; Westermarck 1906; Young 1995)? It may be that humans have a mental hair trigger when it comes to injustice, and that the morals imparted by higher-stake narratives spill-over into the quotidian realm, but this is to ignore a commonsense, well-researched phenomenon that tidies the picture: social institutions.

Although “the new institutionalism” is by now old, what many researchers and laypeople continue to call “institutions” (e.g., the U.S. Congress and art museums) are, in the jargon of institutional economics and political science, “organizations” (North 1990; Polski & Ostrom 2017). “Institutions” are considerably more general. They are “the prescriptions that humans use to organize all forms of repetitive and structured interactions including those within families, neighborhoods, markets, firms, sports leagues, churches, private associations, and governments at all scales” (Ostrom 2005). Institutions tell you what to do and when to do it. They tell others what to expect from you, and vice versa. In generating this regularity of social interaction, institutions free up our cognitive resources and reduce transaction costs.

Policy theory can be thought of as an especially visible, especially salient focus of institutional theory. Whereas policy scholars study how people use language-mediated meaning to wrangle ambiguity in formal public settings, institutional scholars study how shared meaning-making allows humans to associate and thereby confront the broader category of multiple-equilibria problems—problems with many possible, enduring solutions (Binmore 1994; Ostrom & Ostrom 2004). All

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<sup>8</sup>Although I use the term “post-positivist” to refer to a broad class of research programs including the narrative policy framework and social construct theory, scholars in these areas make important empirical observations using rigorous qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Dodge, Ospina, & Foldy 2005; Jones & McBeth 2010).

communities face multiple multiple-equilibria problems, there being innumerable ways—and no inherently correct way—to divvy resources, responsibilities, and treatments. Solutions to these problems may be the result of strategic wrangling in formal bodies, scientific experimentation and dumb trail-and-error among everyday people, or any combination thereof.<sup>9</sup> The most straightforward institutions—called “strategies”—direct people toward prudent behavior, solving, however elegantly, this or that interpersonal conundrum. You can follow them or not as you like. More complex institutions—called “norms” and “rules”—are trickier to shirk (Crawford & Ostrom 1995). These institutions are *self-reinforcing*, with built-in incentives to conform and perpetuate (e.g., Grief 2004; North & Weingast 1989). It is this self-reinforcing quality that will help explain why moral concerns like justice motivate behavior and policy.

In short, people face costs for violating norms and rules. Alternatively, people may be rewarded for maintaining and expanding norms and rules. It works as follows. Once a good-enough solution<sup>10</sup> to a communal problem—say, maintaining enough fish in a shared lake, or determining who is going to manage a town’s sewage—has been hit upon, community members have a direct incentive to keep the newfound institution running, lest the problem worsen or return. For their own good, community members will sanction/reward their peers who violate/uphold communal norms and rules. These communally administered sanctions and rewards are called “external delta parameters”. They may be unspoken and entirely unnoticed by community outsiders (e.g., raised eyebrows or an averted gaze), heavy-handed and physically exacted (e.g., a monetary fine), and/or brought to bear in settings seemingly unrelated to the institution being undermined or buttressed (e.g., ostracism from a social celebration). Eventually, the threat/promise of external delta parameters around a specific action will ingrain itself in people’s minds to the point that people preemptively punish/reward themselves for the discouraged/encouraged behavior. These “internal delta parameters” manifest as guilt or self-approbation. People, in deciding (consciously or unconsciously) whether to observe or violate norms and rules will factor into their decision both external and internal delta parameters (Crawford & Ostrom 1995; Ostrom 2005). Sufficient feedback from external and internal sanctions/rewards will perpetuate an institution over time, and may even

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<sup>9</sup>Officials in auspicious deliberative bodies are perfectly capable of grasping for answers, just as humans in humbler settings are capable of strategic cunning.

<sup>10</sup>“Good enough” meaning the new arrangement is an equilibrium. It may not be the most efficient or even-handed arrangement, but moving to an equilibrium superior on whatever metric is, for the time, unlikely.



expand the range of scenarios on which it bears.<sup>11</sup> Insufficient feedback from delta parameters, and the institution will shrink in applicability and may eventually die out (Grief 2004).

As students of the narrative policy framework might expect, institutions are not all wrath and recompense. Humans contemplate, communicate, and inculcate institutional arrangements via language and stories. Indeed, the variety of institutional types, and the multiple academic descriptions of them, can be expressed in a common “institutional grammar”, whose syntax yields “institutional statements” (Crawford & Ostrom 1995). Policy scholars are starting to pay serious attention to the institutional grammar (Siddiki et al. in press) so I will not belabor its specifics here. For our purposes, the key component of the institutional grammar is the “deontic operator”, which permits or prohibits certain actions and separates norms and rules from mere strategies.

Whether expressed in the formal institutional syntax or ordinary language, deontic operators come with a moral flavor. They specify, for example, whether an action “may”, “must”, or “must not” occur (Crawford & Ostrom 1995). Such institutional statements are already laden with a normative urgency that can be exacerbated if expressed with explicitly normative operators such as “should” or “should not”. Add to that the temporal and physical distance many community members have from the issue an institution evolved to address. If you are not, as in our example social problems, directly aware of how your institutional adherence maintains a viable fish stock or keeps town sewage at healthy levels, then your understanding of that institution is divorced from its practical implications. For you, the institution is a matter of ritual or principle, but internal and external delta parameters continue to weigh on you.<sup>12</sup> Taken together, it is natural for norms and rules take on a decidedly normative character (Sugden 1989) while still motivating human conduct. “What economists study as individually prudent or socially advantageous behavior, everyday humans learn and perpetuate as ‘good’ behavior” (Bower-Bir 2014, 3).

### 1.3 Desert as an institution, and justice as a double-edged sword

In the foregoing discussion I argued that social institutions—which emerge naturally from otherwise ungoverned human interaction to generate reliable, self-reinforcing patterns of human association—

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<sup>11</sup>Perpetuated institutions are said to be “weakly self-reinforcing.” Expanding institutions are said to be “self-reinforcing” (Grief 2004). Note that such institutions may be, or may become, maladaptive (Maddamsetti & Bower-Bir 2018).

<sup>12</sup>See pages 10–12 of Maddamsetti and Bower-Bir (2018, 11) for an example of how “[w]hat was at first a narrow, prudent aim has been replaced by a broad, moral imperative.” The implications are both interesting and troubling.

explain why normative concepts studied by post-positivist policy scholars motivate human behavior. But can they specifically be tied to the distributional stories politicians, bureaucrats, and citizens tell themselves and one another about who deserves what resources, responsibilities, and treatments? Yes, because desert itself is a social institution (Binmore 2010, 2011).

Recall that justice is getting what one deserves (Feldman 1995; Mill 1957; Rescher 1966; Sidgwick 1962).<sup>13</sup> Desert, then, is the meriting of some resource, responsibility, or treatment (Feldman 1995; Rescher 1966). In moral philosophy, a meaningful statement regarding desert has at least three components: a deserving *subject*, a deserved *object*, and a desert *basis* (McLeod 2013).<sup>14</sup> A desert statement clarifies who deserves what, on what grounds. In some cases, it may also be prudent to specify the *source* from which the subject deserves the object (Kleinig 1971). This formulation has the basic components of a narrative (Jones & McBeth 2010): a protagonist (the subject), a villain (the source), a conflict (the object), and a lesson or moral (the basis). Crucially, desert statements can be translated into institutional statements via the institutional grammar (Bower-Bir 2014, 2020a). For all the reasons discussed earlier, the traditionally metaphysical notion of justice (i.e., the rewarding of desert) can also be grounded in natural, evolutionary processes (Binmore 2010, 2011).

Under the “natural” (i.e., evolutionary, institutional) interpretation, justice is simultaneously important and meaningless. It is important because the desire for justice—the desire to reward desert—seems to be a universal human trait insofar as desert is an emergent, self-enforcing social institution (Binmore 2009, 2011; Bower-Bir 2014, 2020a). For that same reason, definitions of desert are widely variable, changing across communities and time (Elster 1992; Westermarck 1906; Young 1995), and with the object being distributed (e.g., Deutsch 1975, 1985; Reis 1984; Tornblom & Foa 1983). A call for justice absent a specification of desert is unintelligible, except among people in your immediate community and in communities that, by whatever fluke, evolved the same definitions of desert that you leave unstated. Asking people to act justly is as likely to undermine your distributional goals as to aid them. To ensure you are on the same page as others,

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<sup>13</sup>Even philosophers who debate this straightforward definition acknowledge the patent the link between justice and desert (e.g., Feinberg 1963; Lucas 1980; Sher 1987; Slote 1973).

<sup>14</sup>Note that a deserved object need not be a physical good. It may be a responsibility or treatment. Moreover, none of the three desert ingredients are necessarily singular. For ease of exposition I will assume a singular subject, object, and basis, though any could be made plural as the situation requires, in which case there would be “subjects”, “objects”, and “bases”.

you must specify who deserves what, on what grounds. Otherwise, you and your supposed allies may be working toward vastly different ends, all in the name of justice.

Think of justice as harborage, a general notion of sheltered water, and we are out at sea. Everyone in the boat sets to rowing, but not necessarily toward the same harbor. Some sailors are headed toward naturally sheltered coasts while others cannot conceive of anything but man-made ports and jetties. Desert is the much needed orientation, the specification of which calm waters we seek. Once identified, we may find that some of us prefer to be in other boats, but perhaps better that than rowing against one another.

There exists a widespread misconception among laypeople and scholars alike that power in the service of justice will necessarily lead to more equal distributions of resources and influence. Quite the opposite, many peoples' conceptions of justice demand that resources and influence be selectively apportioned, identifying certain people as deserving more and others less. As with all social institutions, a community's peculiar definition of desert is apt to reflect and perpetuate the power asymmetries at play therein. Consider public opinion towards economic inequality and government redistribution, a topic to which we will return in later sections. Rather than promote altruism and a narrowing between haves and have-nots, justice can lead people to defend and exacerbate economic inequalities. Despite his moral outrage at labor's exploitation, Marx was famously suspicious of justice as a motivating force, recognizing that "certain conceptions of justice would be used to provide ideological cover for the status quo" (Jost & Kay 2010, 1127). And yet many researchers are surprised when subjects with the greatest sensitivity to matters of morality and justice are the least willing to share their earnings (Decety et al. 2015), or when the poorest are least likely to demand a greater portion of the economic pie (Bartels 2008; Jost et al. 2003). These scholars tacitly equate just outcomes with equal (or at least pro-social) outcomes, which is by no means a given. Rather than appreciate the evolved, social nature of deservingness (and, consequently, of justice) they conclude that their subjects are hypocritical (Decety et al. 2015), stupid (Bartels 2008), or deluded (Jost et al. 2003), being either unprincipled or ignorant of a more self-serving policy position.

These researchers are undoubtedly correct much of the time for much of the population, but there are clear occasions when, for some groups of people, a just outcome is an unequal outcome, and the cost to violating that social institution is viewed as dearer than supporting a distribution

that might otherwise materially benefit them.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, I do not mean to imply that these researchers and their preferred explanations of redistributive preferences are wrong; only that they are not the full story. These theories sit alongside one another, and alongside my theory, accounting for the others' gaps, such that, for example, respondents in the upper-right quadrant of Figure 4 are a combination of hypocritical, self-hating, delusional, and/or ignorant, and some are also expressing a rational response to their "moral" institutional pressures.

Natural justice is problematic for more than egalitarians and altruists. It has the potential to frustrate anyone with a preferred criteria on which to apportion a given resource for the simple reason that not everyone will agree with your preferred criteria. Aristotle (2002, 162) presented justice as a matter of equity—a matching of inputs and outputs, worth and reward—but with a caveat: "[E]verybody agrees that what is just in distributions must accord with some kind of merit, but everybody is not talking about the same kind of merit [...]" Citizens from different communities will have different, potentially conflicting conceptions of merit (which in our formulation is better styled as a "desert basis"). Indeed, the desert bases to which communities adhere may strike outsiders as perplexing or downright downright reprehensible (Bower-Bir 2020b).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, members of multiple communities (e.g., a religion, a race, and a profession) and overlapping or nested communities (e.g., a nuclear family in a town and within an extended family across towns) might be internally torn over the proper bases along which to divvy some good.

Proliferating definitions of desert are difficult enough to track. Our terminology around justice should not be. That is why I am adamant about focusing on desert, and why it is remarkable that post-positivist policy scholars have highlighted that term in their work. It is a qualitatively investigable and empirically measurable concept, conversant with moral philosophy and social science, that resolves much of the trouble wrought by lax use of serious words. Entire disciplines of social scientists use "fairness" and "justice" interchangeably (Greenberg 2011), while neighboring disciplines and philosophers contend that fairness and related procedural matters are but a

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<sup>15</sup>Alternatively, the benefits from upholding their community's institutions surrounding the distribution in question may outweigh the benefits they expect from a distribution that would materially benefit them.

<sup>16</sup>For example, American farmers "rightly" divvy farmsteads among uninterested kin rather than committed partners (Rogers & Salamon 1983), and certain conservative Christians "appropriately" distribute household roles according to sex (Sherkat 2000). Though baffling to me and other outsiders, kinship and sex are desert bases for these groups when it comes to the specified objects being distributed. Their members will sanction other members for not rewarding these bases as their norms and rules require. For some readers, this may smack of moral relativism. See Binmore (2009, 12–13) and Bower-Bir (2020b, 9) for a rebuttal.

facet of justice (Feinberg 1974).<sup>17</sup> Similarly, equal and equitable distributions are often conflated with fairly derived distributions (e.g., Starmans et al. 2017), and certain legal traditions have consciously introduced not-quite-commonplace terms to sidestep ordinary-but-fraught moral language (Kutz 2004).<sup>18</sup> With only three ingredients—a deserving subject, a deserved object, and a desert basis—desert parsimoniously bridges these and their attending concepts. It unifies the otherwise separate distributional principles that characterize outcomes: equality, equity, and need can all be meaningfully, and more accurately, addressed in terms of desert, and doing so exposes the often illusory divisions between them (Wagstaff 1994).<sup>19</sup> Desert also links those distributional concerns with fairness’s procedural concerns (Bower-Bir 2014, chap. 2).<sup>20</sup>

In bridging justice and fairness, distributional outcomes and processes, desert forces clarity on the relationship between oft-confused moral concepts. This clarity, together with the institutional theory outlined above and my empirical findings below, exposes justice as a double-edged sword when it comes to redistribution. Americans’ redistributive policy preferences are deeply tied to their quest for justice—they want to reward desert—but they have conflicting assessments of who belongs where on the socioeconomic ladder, and divergent ideas of what qualifies you for a specific rung. As I will show, justice pulls Americans to support *and* oppose government intervention in economic inequality. If you disagree with your audience on who deserves what and why, then your calls for justice will inspire them to pursue distributions you consider unjust. They are rowing for a harbor, but not the one you had in mind. We must look deeper than justice, uncovering

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<sup>17</sup>The issue is undoubtedly complicated by Rawls (1958), who distinguishes between the two concepts on the first page of his seminal article, but titles said article “Justice as Fairness”.

<sup>18</sup>For example, a punishment can be “warranted”, which legal theorists intend to mean the same thing as “deserved” in ordinary language, but they avoid the latter term due to its peculiar use in certain philosophical circles. See Kutz (2004) and Bower-Bir (2020b) for an extended discussion.

<sup>19</sup>For example, you can frame universal suffrage as a matter of *equality*—one person deserves one vote—but it just as ably illustrates the *equity* principle. The desert bases for a vote are adulthood and citizenship. From an equity approach the inputs must correspond to the outputs, so two people who are equal in their adulthood and citizenship will have the same voting power. Both adulthood and citizenship are (or are often treated as) binary categories so an equitable distribution among adult nationals is also an equal distribution among adult nationals. Similarly, you can distribute 2000 calories of food to all adult human males every day as a matter of equality and equity—their equal statuses as adults, humans, and males makes them deserving of equal treatment—or as a matter of *need*, 2000 calories being about what an adult human male needs to maintain weight. See Bower-Bir (2014, chap. 2) and Bower-Bir (2020a) for further discussion and examples.

<sup>20</sup>Failing to meet a desert basis *negates* your deservingness. Failing to follow proper procedures in assessing whether you meet the basis *calls into question* your deservingness. For example, the system for promoting employees at your job does not take into consideration that Steve is drinking buddies with one of the managers on the promotion committee (i.e., there is no “bias suppression” (Leventhal 1980)). Scholars from different fields will argue over whether the promotion process and/or promotion decision are unfair or unjust, while others will think there is no debate because they are all the same thing. But we can all agree that when it comes to a promotion, Steve is a *suspect* deserving subject.

what different communities mean by “deserving” as it applies to wealth, economic station, and the responsibilities that come with each.

## 2 Empirical puzzle: Redistribution preferences

Americans overwhelmingly espouse egalitarian views in the abstract (Bartels 2008, chap. 5). This egalitarian fervor, however, is decidedly not manifest in Americans’ estimation of redistributive policy. Even minimally progressive tax structures like those employed in federal income and local property taxes are routinely rated the “worst” and “least fair”, whereas regressive sales and payroll taxes receive markedly more favorable reviews (Page & Shapiro 1992, 165). Indeed, specific instances of tax policy blatantly favoring the wealthy receive sizeable support and almost no opposition from ordinary, egalitarian-minded Americans, even as those same Americans diagnose the policies in question as exploitative.

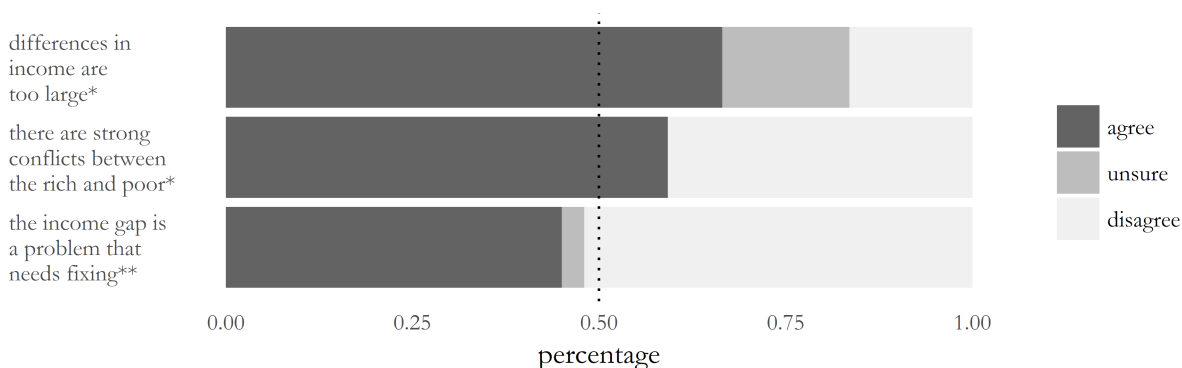
Consider the example afforded by President Bush’s 2001 tax cuts. Poll after poll showed a clear majority of Americans expressing support for the measure. The cuts, however, were essentially a “massive government-engineered transfer of wealth from the lower and middle classes to the rich” (Bartels 2008, 162). Did Americans see this policy for what it was? By and large, yes. Three-quarters of Americans acknowledged that the cuts would inordinately benefit the rich, two-thirds of Americans recognized that they would not personally enjoy any measurable benefits, and a majority of Americans conceded that low- and middle-income citizens would similarly see no gains (Bartels 2008, 172–173).

The alleged inconsistency extends to public opinion on the economy more broadly. Popular perception holds that the economic system is fundamentally just despite widespread awareness of inequality. So it has been for decades (Fong 2001; Hochschild 1981; Lane 1959), and as Figure 1 shows, so it continues to be. While 67% of citizens believe that differences in income are “too large” and 59% of Americans recognize that there are “strong conflicts” between the rich and poor, 52% think the disparity is not something that needs to be “fixed.”

Majorities simultaneously despair at economic inequality and refuse to address it. These odd patterns are more than an aggregate phenomenon. Attempts to ascertain the individual foundations of the aforementioned pattern have been made by capable social scientists, and their micro-level

results are as surprising as macro-trends. Economic and social have-nots are weirdly respectful of the tax burdens borne by their financial superiors and are quick to defend the existing economic arrangements that work to their disadvantage (Bartels 2008, 140–143; Jost et al. 2003).

Figure 1: Incongruent public opinion?



Sources: \* Calculations based on 2010 General Social Survey data (n = 1,512).

\*\* Calculations based on Nov. 28–Dec. 1, 2011 Gallup poll data (n = 1,012)

We have a conundrum. Americans recognize and are troubled by market-driven inequalities, unhappy with the distribution of economic outcomes. Concurrently, they do not want to *re*-distribute wealth to correct disparities. What explains these apparent inconsistencies in public opinion? How can egalitarian Americans defend the integrity of a system with admittedly prejudiced aftermaths? Many capable thinkers and researchers have proposed explanations, among them: a flawed understanding of wealth distribution and tax incidence (Bartels 2008; Slemrod 2006), self-delusion (Jost et al. 2003; Lerner & Miller 1978), an overriding concern for national economic growth (Page & Shapiro 1992), optimism regarding personal financial wellbeing (Blakeley 2011; Brooks 2005), and general skepticism of government (Page & Jacobs 2009). No one explanation accounts for the phenomenon overall, but each exposes an important reality. In this paper, I will add an additional explanation to this list.

I argue that people tolerate grave inequalities—knowing full well the social and personal costs of those inequalities—if they think those inequalities are deserved. Indeed if outcomes appear deserved, altering them would constitute an immoral act. Conversely, economic standing meted unjustly requires correction. My theory does not require people to be confused, greedy, or irrational (although they can be, and probably are to varying degrees), and it treats justice as a natural phe-

nomenon open to empirical study, rather than a metaphysical one reserved for contemplation, or an apparition at which people reflexively grasp (although it can be those things, too). Support for redistribution is largely a moral issue, explained by an individual’s (i) belief in and (ii) definition of economic desert. As such, what may appear irrational policy preferences—opposition to redistributive measures inconsistent with ideology and/or self-interest—may in actuality be reasonable when taking into consideration an individual’s read on relevant moral norms, and the costs associated with their violation.

We know from previous research that an individual’s assessment of economic justice—whether or not she believes people receive their economic due—influences her generosity when voluntarily redistributing personal earnings in an experimental setting (Bower-Bir 2014, chap. 3). In this paper, I show that *assessment of economic justice* (i.e., belief that economic desert is accurately rewarded) also influences an individual’s policy preferences for redistribution on a grander scale, and in the real world. If you believe wealth is going to people who deserve it, then its distribution requires no tampering, at least not on any moral grounds. Redistribution here would be “immoral”, violating community norms. If, on the other hand, you believe there exists pervasive economic injustice and wealth is not going to whom it should, you will have cause to redistribute. Broad evaluations of economic justice matter, but more important is *who* gets (or doesn’t get) what they deserve. Although redistributive efforts are supposedly meant to uplift the poor, I find that an individual’s support for those efforts is primarily driven by their punitive effect on the rich. Whether or not you think poor and middle-class Americans get their economic due certainly influences your policy preference, but not nearly to the degree that your assessment of rich deservingness does.

I also show that an individual’s specific *definition of economic desert* partly determines her redistributive policy preferences. Because it is emergent, what counts as deserved takes on a local flavor, varying with context and culture (e.g., Elster 1992; Young 1995). We know that Americans generally want people to be personally responsible for their economic situation, but some individuals value economic agency—the direct exercise of control over their economic wellbeing—more than others (Bower-Bir 2020b). The more importance you place on personal responsibility in economic matters, the more you have an incentive to limit government intervention in economic activity so as to avoid dampening people’s work ethic and reliance on government assistance.

Finally, I test but find only suggestive evidence for an *interactive relationship* between my



two explanatory variables, whereby belief in desert's reward moderates the influence of desert's definition of redistributive preferences. My two explanatory variables appear to have an additive rather than interactive relationship.

### **3 Existing explanations for redistribution preferences**

Given the importance of large-scale redistribution to economic inequality and the delivery of basic services, social scientists have long sought to explain popular support for and opposition to it. The literature is vast, but Alesina and Giuliano (2011) succinctly organize the major theoretical strands, arguing that redistributive preferences depend on an individual's (i) current and anticipated consumption, (ii) assessment of inequality's positive and negative externalities, (iii) ideal levels of inequality, and (iv) concern for fairness.

#### **3.1 Personal consumption, current and future**

Early static models of redistributive preferences posit individuals with different productivities but who care only about their consumption and the income that enables it (Meltzer & Richard 1981; Romer 1975). Progressive redistribution will take money from the rich—who will oppose such measures—and give it to the poor—who will support such measures. More recent studies add dynamic elements to the model, whereby people consider future as well as current income when weighing policy options (Bénabou & Ok 2001). Whether an individual thinks redistribution will limit her future earning potential or provide much needed income transfers depends on changes in the political environment, fluctuations in economic growth, movements in and optimism about personal social position, and tolerance for risk.

#### **3.2 Inequality, indirectly**

Redistributive policies, in lessening or exacerbating economic inequality, also have an indirect effect on people's consumption. For example, if reducing inequality stands to reduce crime and therefore expenditures on security (Fajnzlber, Lederman, & Loayza 2002), then wealthy citizens may see some benefit in redistributive measures they would otherwise oppose. Working in the opposite direction, if inequality motivates laborers to work longer hours (Bell & Freeman 2001), then the

wealthy—as the beneficiaries of the resulting increase in productivity—have indirect cause to oppose redistribution.

### 3.3 Inequality, directly

Closer to the focus of this article are models that build inequality directly into individual support for redistribution. In such utility functions, concern for social justice is relevant beyond its influence on an individual’s consumption and takes on a fundamentally aesthetic quality. People have in mind “an ideal profile of inequality in a society” alongside their desire to safeguard or increase their personal consumption (Alesina & Giuliano 2011, 111).<sup>21</sup> An individual’s preferred level of inequality is determined by a range of factors, from her political ideology and religious affiliation to the strength of her family ties and the homogeneity of her current polity.

### 3.4 Fairness and effort

Still closer to notions of desert and economic justice are people’s perceptions of fairness, although researchers use the term so cavalierly that it has come to mean different things in different disciplines. Lay persons and researchers alike tend to append “(un)fair” as a qualification to both outcomes and processes, but upon closer inspection the former is generally meant to mean outcomes that were achieved through the latter. As such, fairness is most directly applicable to matters of procedure (Bower-Bir 2014, chap. 2). Mercifully, economists generally appreciate this insight and tend to use the term to indicate the means by which an actor arrives at her economic station. That may mean playing by the defined rules of a game (Alesina & Angeletos 2005b) and not taking advantage of other actors (Alesina & Giuliano 2011). Most often, however, economists use the term to distinguish between luck and effort, where a fair route to riches requires effort and lessens the influence of stochastic factors.

Many philosophers argue (Pojman 1997; Rawls 1971), and many Americans agree (Bower-Bir 2020b), that a just economic system is one that affords its actors agency. With a few important exceptions, a person must be personally responsible for her economic lot to deserve it. Rather than

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<sup>21</sup>An individual’s financial aspirations and her hopes for society at large may pull her in opposite directions when it comes to backing this or that redistributive policy. Rather than strain their allegiance to either personal consumption or ideology, however, many people will amend their beliefs (i.e., lie to or delude themselves) about the likely effects of a policy.

disentangle the notions of agency, personal responsibility, and desert, economic and public opinion researchers tend to draw a related albeit simpler distinction. Effort encompasses “all activities that require ‘pain’ or a utility cost for the individual” and luck “represents those factors that deliver income to individuals without any pain or loss of utility to obtain it” (Alesina & Giuliano 2011, 127). This distinction has proven empirically useful. While various notions of fairness are shown to influence a person’s tolerance for redistribution in isolation, the importance an individual places on hard work over luck is the only one to maintain statistical significance when tested against competing notions and relevant control variables (Alesina & Angeletos 2005a; Alesina & La Ferrara 2005; Fong 2001).

## 4 Proposed explanations for redistribution preferences

If, as I argue at the outset, justice is a natural phenomenon centered about an emergent social institution we commonly call “desert”, then social institutions pertaining to economic deservingness will influence people’s willingness to redistribute economic resources. Essentially, my theory replaces and refines Alesina and Giuliano’s (2011) third and fourth explanations, respectively.<sup>22</sup> Whatever a person’s preferred level of inequality (Sec. 3.3), it is trumped by the more basic question: Is the distribution we have just? It may be personally disadvantageous and socially deleterious, but it may be deserved and therefore just, at least according to the specific communal institutions that bear upon us. Calling for reapportionment of communally sanctioned distributions would invite reprobation and other costs from our peers.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, I refine the alternately vague and narrow concerns for “fairness” and “effort/luck” (Sec. 3.4) with the more robust “definition of economic desert” as it pertains to personal responsibility. Understanding what, for an individual, makes a subject deserving of a particular economic resource is crucial to understanding what policies pertaining to the distribution of that resource the individual considers permissible. Someone who believes (by virtue of their institutional milieu) that deserving income requires personal agency in its acquisition will see third party redistribution of income as undermining economic desert and therefore justice. Such a person would experience institutional pressure to oppose, say, progressive

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<sup>22</sup>Note that these are not Alesina and Giuliano’s (2011) explanations, per se, but their distillation of explanations proposed and tested in the broader literature.

<sup>23</sup>As always with social institutions, this scenario can be framed in the reverse: Defending communally sanctioned distributions would invite approbation and other benefits from our peers.

taxation and government redistribution schemes.

In short: rather than an ideal profile of inequality or a simple effort-luck dichotomy, I argue that an individual's faith in and understanding of economic desert determine her stance on economic redistribution. Specifically, predicting a person's support for redistribution requires knowledge of (i) her confidence that economic desert is rewarded, (ii) the importance of personal responsibility to her definition of economic desert, and potentially but not necessarily (iii) the interaction between the two. I examine the rationale behind each in the remainder of this section.

#### **4.1 Faith that the prevailing economic system is just (i.e., rewards desert)**

As a matter of government policy, redistribution involves a third party taking resources from one person or set of people and giving them to another person or set of people. Prior to such intervention, I want to know whether and to what degree an individual considers the existing distribution of resources just. A just economic system, from the naturalist perspective, is one that delivers to people their economic due, and a just outcome is one that is deserved.

Regardless of how you define economic desert, if you think that people by-and-large get the economic resources they deserve, then you will be reluctant to tamper with economic outcomes, at least on moral grounds. You may not like the current distribution of resources for reasons of efficiency, ideology, or aesthetics, but redistributing those resources will not (in your mind) facilitate economic justice—it will not get deserved outcomes to deserving subjects. In fact merit (for you) is being actively punished. Redistribution would take from people resources to which they are entitled and transfer those resources to people who, as near as you can tell, have no claim to them. In this case, economic outcomes following redistribution would no longer accurately reflect desert.

Now consider a person convinced that economic desert is not, in general, accurately rewarded. The prevailing system appears unjust. Redistribution would take from people resources they do not deserve and hopefully transfer those resources to more deserving citizens. I say “hopefully” because—while an individual who considers the current resource distribution unjust has no moral qualms appropriating undeserved resources—doling those resources to deserving persons requires a more developed worldview than supporters may have. It is cognitively easier to be against redistribution than for redistribution. Support for redistribution requires that (i) current resource holders not deserve those resources and (ii) the ensuing policy will transfer those resources to people

more deserving of them. The first condition may apply to any redistribution scheme, but the second will depend on the specific policy. Accordingly, as long as redistributive policy is apt to increase distributional justice (i.e., will not transfer resources to people less deserving than the present owners), individuals skeptical of prevailing economic justice will see moral cause to redistribute.

## 4.2 Definition of economic desert

An individual may subscribe to any among countless definitions of economic desert, as Binmore (2011) suggests and Westermarck (1906) and Elster (1992) show, but there are some dimensions of desert that cut across definitions. For example, social psychologists tend to tacitly equate desert and personal responsibility (Greenberg 2011; Jost & Kay 2010), while moral philosophers point out that the connection is not only unnecessary, but that personal responsibility sometimes *undermines* the case for desert (Cupit 1996; Feldman 1996).<sup>24</sup> Between these extremes, recent survey analysis finds that many people consider personal responsibility a key ingredient of economic desert, though to varying degrees and in a way that varies predictably with demographic and experiential variables (Bower-Bir 2020b). Personal responsibility can be more or less important to an individual's definition of economic justice, and that variation will alter an individual's stance on redistribution.

All else equal, the more crucial personal responsibility is to your definition of deservingness, the less you support redistribution. If you, as many Americans do, associate economic deservingness with industry, diligence, and other qualities that seem within an individual's control, redistributive policies threaten to undermine the very values you want instilled in your fellow citizens by encouraging people to absolve themselves of personal responsibility over their financial wellbeing. Why work hard when a third party can appropriate your wealth in times of financial plenty and/or cover your needs should you be in financial distress? If a person works for and consequently deserves (in your view) her high income, taking a portion of that income is in itself a punitive act. It becomes outright unjust when that money is transferred to people who in your estimation worked for and deserve a lower income.

The thrust of this theory is akin to three other strands of literature, although I frame it specif-

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<sup>24</sup>It is a bystander's innocence—her lack of personal responsibility—that may make her deserving of compensation for some suffering.

ically in the moral language of desert and so bring to bear the internal and external motivations for conformance (i.e., the “delta parameters,” in the parlance of institutional economists such as Crawford and Ostrom (1995)) that come with that social institution. Compare this to psychologists and sociologists, who find that people who exhibit the so-called “Protestant Work Ethic” tend to oppose welfare policies out of fear such policies will inspire lethargy in themselves and others (Furnham 1983). Political scientists find that people who subscribe to “social ideologies” promoting personal diligence similarly exhibit skepticism toward welfare policies (Hansenfeld & Rafferty 1989). And then there are the economists I mentioned earlier, who show that the relative importance an individual attaches to effort and luck partly determines her redistributive preferences, supposedly as a matter of redistribution’s incentives for individual effort.

### **4.3 Interaction between definition of economic desert and faith in economic justice**

Finally, an individual’s faith in the justness of the economy may moderate the marginal influence her definition of justice has on her redistributive preference. As previously discussed, individuals who define a just economic system as one in which people have control over their economic well-being will be inclined to oppose progressive taxation so that people retain their incentive to work hard and assume responsibility over their economic standing. But not all of these individuals will be equally convinced that economic outcomes accurately reflect desert as they define it. Apparent injustice may curb the marginal negative influence their definition of desert has on their redistributive preferences.

Consider an individual who wants but is skeptical of the control she and others wield over their economic fates. It is possible that her definition of justice and her assessment of justice’s existence have the simple linear influences on her distribution preferences that I outline above, such that the two variables draw her in opposite directions: Her definition pushes her to oppose redistribution while her assessment pushes her to support redistribution. It is also possible that the two variables interact such that the marginal effect of her definition is contingent on her assessment. That is, she only brings her definition of desert to bear on policy when things appear unjust. First, hold her assessment at a low level, where she thinks the prevailing economic system unjust. Increasing the import she places on personal responsibility yields only a small marginal decrease in support for

redistribution. Her assessment keeps the effect of her definition in check. Next, raise her assessment so that she thinks the prevailing economic system just, and then hold it constant again. Increasing the import she places on personal responsibility now yields a larger marginal decrease in support for redistribution. Her assessment is doing less to restrain the effect of her definition.

## 5 Testing the proposed explanations

I test my proposed explanations of redistribution preferences using novel survey data. Internet-based panels provide the best balance between survey cost and survey sample representativeness (Clifford & Jerit 2014). Panel provider SocialSci uses a three-stage randomization procedure to ensure a representative sample of the target population (in this case, adult Americans). Survey managers randomly invite panel members to participate in an upcoming survey or experiment. A set of profiling questions is randomly selected for them to answer and, upon completion, panel members are matched with a random selection of surveys and experiments for which they are likely to qualify. SocialSci provides large, diverse, carefully managed, and externally audited panels in several countries from which survey and experiment samples are drawn. These pools are specifically intended for academic research, and their vetting system tracks participant responses over time and across studies, removing from the pool participants whose demographics inexplicably fluctuate.

In early 2014, I hired SocialSci to administer a survey of my design to 1,000 adult American respondents. SocialSci remunerates enrollment in a panel and participation in surveys so as to attract even hard-to-reach groups within the population (e.g., seniors, low-income earners, ethnic minorities, etc.).<sup>25</sup> For completing my survey, which took around 18 minutes on average, respondents were awarded 50 “points” (about \$0.83). SocialSci participants can accumulate and then redeem points for Amazon gift cards, or they can donate their earnings to scientific organizations such as the Public Library of Science.

Of the 1,000 respondents surveyed, 992 completed the survey within a reasonable timeframe and their responses constitute the primary dataset used in the empirical analyses within this article. The demographic breakdown for the final 992 respondents is shown in Table 2 in Appendix A. Population totals are also shown to provide a sense of the survey’s external validity. The distribution

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<sup>25</sup>As always, there may be some latent variable common to people willing to volunteer for survey participation that makes them different from the broader population.

of household income in my sample is remarkably close to the national distribution. So that the standard errors in my subsequent analyses account for under- and over-recruitment from various sub-populations, I calculate sampling weights using a “raking” weight-calibration process (alternatively known as “iterative proportional fitting” and “sample-balancing”).<sup>26</sup> My final weights are based on five stratification dimensions: gender, education, race, household income, and political party identification. The marginal distributions of each dimension in the U.S. population serve as “control totals,” toward which sample margins converge over the stepwise process.

In the remainder of this section, I detail how translate my proposed explanations of people’s redistributive preferences into measurable variables and testable models, and I present hypotheses thereto pertaining.

### 5.1 Dependent variables: Support for redistribution policies

I use two variables to gauge respondent support for government-led economic redistribution, one broad in its scope, the other comparatively narrow. There are myriad government policies and programs designed to remedy the imbalanced distribution of all manner of resources. Income inequalities lie at the heart of many social and economic imbalances. An individual’s access to education, free time, and political representation are all associated with income. How income is distributed in a population, therefore, has an important influence on economic and social disparities. My first variable, then, deals with government response to income inequality generally: “Do you think that the government should try to reduce income differences between the rich and poor? How strongly do you feel that way?” Responses are combined and coded on a seven-point scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. For ease of exposition, I will refer to values of this dependent variable as  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$ .

As a matter of economic theory, income inequality is unambiguously reduced if people’s incomes are taxed progressively (Lambert 1993), but even the soundest theories are not guaranteed to survive a tortuous political process. That empirical research so uniformly reinforces the link between inequality reduction and progressive income taxation is evidence of “policy-makers and tax designers who are sensitive to redistributive issues” (Lambert 1993, 362).<sup>27</sup> My second vari-

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<sup>26</sup>Specifically, I used STATA 12’s `survwgt rake` command.

<sup>27</sup>Indeed, this empirical finding has been replicated in countries throughout the world, including, for example, OECD states (Sawyer & Wasserman 1976), the United Kingdom (Morris & Preston 1986), Australia (Kakwani



able, therefore, specifically addresses income tax schemes: “Generally speaking, do you think that rich citizens should pay a higher tax rate than citizens who earn an average wage? If so, how much higher?” Responses are combined and coded on a four point scale ranging from “the same” to “much higher”.<sup>28</sup> For ease of exposition, I will refer to values of this dependent variable as  $Y_{prog\_tax}$ .

## 5.2 Control variables: Existing explanations

Alesina and Giuliano (2011) devise a base model on which to build and test various determinants of redistributive preference. Independent variables in this base model—which you can see in isolation as Model A in Appendix C, Table 4—account for the four dominant, existing explanations of redistributive preferences as outlined in Section 3, plus standard demographic controls. I use the independent variables from that base model as the independent control variables in my own analyses. See Alesina and Giuliano (2011) for a full account of how each variable relates to the various explanations of peoples’ redistribution preferences.

## 5.3 Independent variables: Faith that the prevailing economic system is just (i.e., rewards desert).

I use three measures to determine how confident a respondent is that economic desert (as they define it) is rewarded. The first variable, *agency*, builds on the philosophical and empirical correlation between personal responsibility and desert, and on the findings from economists who differentiate between effort and luck. It measures the level of control respondent’s believe people exercise over their economic fates. Respondents are asked, “Which of the following statements comes closest to your general point of view: Whether or not a person gets ahead economically in this country is (i) mostly up to them or (ii) mostly up to circumstances beyond their control? How strongly do you support that point of view?” Responses are combined and coded on a seven-point scale. The higher the value, the more control the respondent believes people have over their economic fates. For ease of exposition, I will refer to values of this independent variable as  $Z_{agency}$ . This

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1986), and India (Gupta & Aggarwal 1982).

<sup>28</sup>When answering this question, respondents were able to choose their answers from a seven-point scale that included regressive tax schemes wherein rich citizens are taxed at rates less than those facing average citizens. Fifteen of the 992 respondents favored a regressive tax scheme, but in the final analysis their responses were included with respondents who favored a flat tax rate and the range of the scale was truncated.

variable is essentially a subset of my other variables in measuring faith that desert is rewarded. While agency is a critical component of economic justice for most people, its absence or presence does not account for the totality of economic justice. Accordingly, I expect the explanatory power of this variable to be the weakest of my three.

My second variable, *justice*, is the broadest measure of a respondent's faith in the reward of economic desert. Respondents are asked, "Generally speaking, do you believe that in the American economic system people get what they deserve? How strongly do you feel that way?" Responses are combined and coded on a seven-point scale. The higher the value, the more control the respondent believes people have over their economic fates. For ease of exposition, I will refer to values of this independent variable as  $Z_{justice}$ .

My third variable is, in truth, three variables—*rich\_deserve*, *average\_deserve*, *poor\_deserve*—that measure whether a respondent thinks different segments of the American population get their economic due. Respondents think rich, average, and poor Americans are not equally deserving of their economic lots. Together, these three measures indicate a respondent's overall assessment of the justness of the American economic system, much like the justice variable. But by separating a respondent's assessment of economic justice as it pertains to rich, poor, and average Americans will allow us to determine if policy preferences are driven by concern for justice as it exists for certain groups more than others.

For *rich\_deserve*, respondents are asked, "Generally, do you think that rich Americans deserve their wealth? How confident are you in your assessment? How deserving/undeserving are they?" For *average\_deserve*, respondents are asked, "Do you think that average Americans generally get what they deserve, economically? How confident are you in your assessment? How deserving/undeserving are they of their economic standing?" And for *poor\_deserve*, respondents are asked, "Generally, do you think that poor Americans deserve their poverty? How confident are you in your assessment? How deserving/undeserving are they?" The first of the three questions for each variable determines the sign of the final value and the two follow-up questions serve as weights, such that each of the deserve variables is coded on a thirteen-point scale with higher values meaning a respondent rates the group as more deserving. See Table 3 in Appendix B for a full review of the possible values of these variables.<sup>29</sup> For ease of exposition, I will refer to values of

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<sup>29</sup>It is possible to conduct the forthcoming analysis using the dichotomous responses alone, or with any combination

these independent variables as  $Z_{rich\_deserve}$ ,  $Z_{average\_deserve}$ ,  $Z_{poor\_deserve}$ .

Figure 2: Density plot of *rich\_deserve*, *average\_deserve*, and *poor\_deserve* variables.

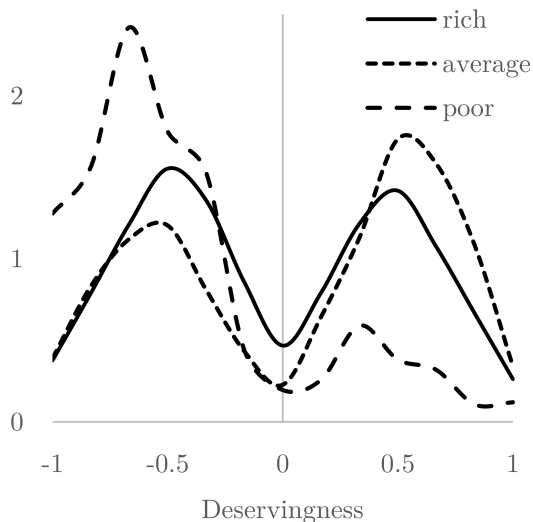


Figure 3: Density plot of *definition* variable.

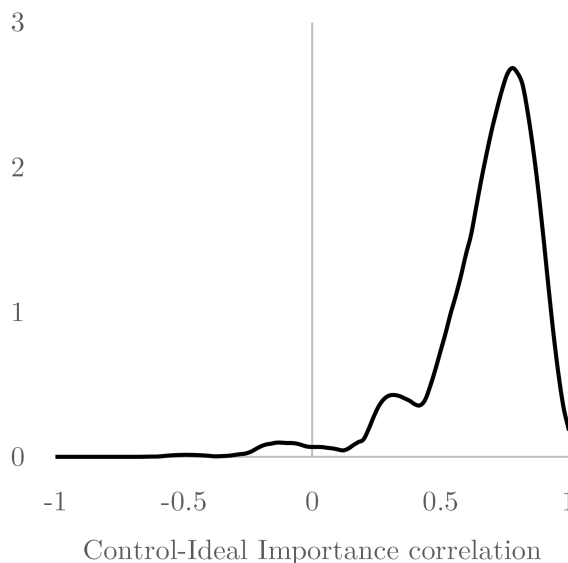


Figure 2 shows the distribution of values for these three variables among survey respondents. A sizable majority of respondents say that poor Americans do not deserve their poverty, implying that they ought to be among the nation’s higher economic echelons. A slight majority of respondents rate the rich as undeserving of their wealth. About as many respondents think that rich Americans ought to be rich as think that rich Americans ought to be among the middling and poor of our nation. A majority of respondents rate average Americans as deserving of their middle status. For those who disagree, I cannot say whether they think average Americans ought to move up or down the socio-economic ladder; I can only say that they do not think average Americans belong where there are, which is an injustice all the same.

I test my theory using separate models for each of the aforementioned independent variables (or collections of variables, as in the case of the *desert* measures) on both dependent variables. I expect that the five independent variables will be statistically significant and negative in sign. The different measures allow multiple tests of my theory, and might reveal otherwise hidden aspects of the relationship I propose between belief in justice and redistributive preferences.

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of the weights. All weighted versions highly correlate with one another (mean  $r = 0.953$ , minimum  $r = 0.874$ ) and did not produce statistically differentiable regression results so I used the full thirteen-point scale shown in Table 3.

#### 5.4 Independent variables: Definition of economic desert

If agency is a critical ingredient of economic desert, then people’s preferred desert bases should be qualities over which we have control, or at least qualities over which we think we have control. Survey respondents saw fifteen factors, each of which might have some bearing on an individual’s economic standing (e.g., health, intelligence, creativity, years of education, social connections, family’s wealth, etc.; see Figure 5 in Appendix B for a full list). They answered two questions about each factor: “How much control do you think people have over this factor?” and “How important should this factor be in determining whether people get ahead or fall behind economically?”<sup>30</sup> Responses to the first question are coded on a seven-point scale and responses to the second question are coded on a five-point scale.

The *definition* variable is a respondent’s correlation coefficient for her responses to these two questions across the fifteen factors. Values approaching 1 indicate that a respondent values agency and personal responsibility—those economic factors over which she thinks we have control are also the economic factors she thinks should influence people’s economic standing. Values approaching  $-1$  indicate the respondent’s ideal desert criteria are factors that are *beyond* our control. Figure 3 shows the distribution of this variable among survey respondents. Americans consistently, but not exclusively, incorporate agency into their definitions of economic desert. For ease of exposition, I will refer to values of this independent variable as  $X$ . I test my theory using both dependent variables, and expect the *definition* variable will be statistically significant and negative in sign.

#### 5.5 Independent variables: Interaction between definition of economic desert and faith in economic justice

In the final piece of my theory, I posit that a respondent’s faith in economic justice ( $Z$ ) will moderate the influence her definition of economic justice ( $X$ ) has on her redistributive preferences ( $Y$ ). Specifically, I hypothesize that an individual’s support for redistribution will decline the more importance she places on personal responsibility, and the marginal negative influence thereof will increase as existing economic circumstances appear more just. Put differently: The marginal effect of  $X$  on  $Y$  will be negative for all values of  $Z$ ; this effect will be weakest when  $Z$  is at its lowest

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<sup>30</sup>For the sake of clarity, this second question was rephrased for respondents thusly: “How important would each factor be to economic standing in your ideal society?”

and will increase in magnitude as  $Z$  increases. Interested readers should see Appendix D.1 for an expanded discussion of my test for an interaction effect.

## 6 Results

Following Alesina and Giuliano (Alesina & Giuliano 2011), I show ordinary least squares (OLS) results for simplicity of interpretation with robust standard errors, and I control for state fixed effects.<sup>31</sup> I obtained statistically and substantively similar results using ordered logit models. To further aid interpretation of regression results, I standardized all variables save *age* and *age*<sup>2</sup> to a  $[0, 1]$  scale.

I present key findings in Table 1. You can compare each model therein with the corresponding interaction models in Table 6, which I have placed in Appendix D. For a holistic understanding of these findings, as well as intriguing albeit tangential findings, I recommend you also peruse Tables 4 and 5 in Appendix C.

### 6.1 Findings: Existing explanations

For the most part, my findings for these controls are expected, as you can see in all results tables. Ideology is always a substantively and statistically significant predictor of redistributive preferences. The positive sign on the *ideology* coefficients indicate that the more liberal a respondent, the most supportive she is of government efforts to reduce the income gap and the more supportive she is of progressively taxing income. Household income is a similarly important predictor of redistributive efforts. As *income* increases,  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$  and  $Y_{prog\_tax}$  reliably decrease. The rich are not keen to part with their wealth.

Other control variables appear to influence one or another dependent variable. Race tends to have a small but statistically significant effect on  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$ , such that racial minorities are slightly more supportive of government redistributive efforts than are whites. *Age* is not a consistently significant determinant, but *age* and its square are occasionally predictive of  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$ , and the positive coefficient on *age*<sup>2</sup> indicates a concave curve. Support for government policy addressing the income gap grows as a respondent ages, and with an increasing marginal effect. Support for

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<sup>31</sup>Alesina and Giuliano actually control for regional fixed effects, but never specify how they define regions.

progressive taxation, on the other hand, is bolstered by a respondent's education. More schooling leads to a greater  $Y_{prog\_tax}$ .

Table 1: Support for government action to reduce the income gap ( $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$ ) and for progressive taxation ( $Y_{prog\_tax}$ ) based on definition of economic justice ( $X$ ) and on perceived economic justice ( $Z$ ).

Variable	$Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$			$Y_{prog\_tax}$		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Definition	-0.382*** (0.148)	-0.498*** (0.126)	0.518*** (0.131)	0.139 (0.140)	0.067 (0.128)	0.044 (0.127)
Agency	-0.215*** (0.051)			-0.133*** (0.053)		
Justice		-0.403*** (0.048)			-0.258*** (0.056)	
Rich deserve			-0.366*** (1.056)			-0.308*** (0.080)
Avg. deserve			-0.126*** (0.047)			-0.050 (0.055)
Poor deserve			-0.277*** (0.067)			-0.132* (0.071)
Ideology	0.502*** (0.052)	0.393*** (0.051)	0.310*** (0.050)	0.565*** (0.048)	0.494*** (0.054)	0.432*** (0.056)
Age	0.011 (0.007)	0.010 (0.007)	0.004 (0.006)	0.008 (0.007)	0.008 (0.007)	0.006 (0.006)
Age <sup>2</sup>	0.000* (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Female	0.025 (0.028)	0.005 (0.026)	0.031 (0.023)	-0.013 (0.027)	-0.026 (0.026)	-0.009 (0.026)
Nonwhite	0.048 (0.032)	0.052* (0.029)	0.050* (0.028)	0.012 (0.012)	0.015 (0.032)	0.022 (0.030)
Married	0.007 (0.032)	-0.008 (0.028)	-0.013 (0.027)	0.044 (0.036)	0.035 (0.034)	0.028 (0.034)
Unemployed	-0.019 (0.046)	-0.015 (0.039)	-0.029 (0.038)	-0.066 (0.056)	-0.064 (0.056)	-0.074 (0.057)
Education	0.020 (0.058)	0.001 (0.054)	0.067 (0.050)	0.104* (0.055)	0.092* (0.056)	0.121** (0.056)
Income	-0.196*** (0.058)	-0.129** (0.053)	-0.122** (0.052)	-0.102 (0.062)	-0.059 (0.058)	-0.051 (0.062)
Constant	0.660*** (0.195)	0.851*** (0.182)	1.147*** (0.170)	0.032 (0.179)	0.155 (0.175)	0.345*** (0.168)
N	963	963	963	963	963	963
R <sup>2</sup>	0.4914	0.5462	0.5897	0.4157	0.4406	0.4673
adj-R <sup>2</sup>	0.4582	0.5165	0.5619	0.3776	0.4041	0.4312

All regressions control for state fixed effects. Robust standard errors given in parentheses. All variables save *age* and *age*<sup>2</sup> standardize [0, 1]. \* significant at 10%; \*\* 5%; \*\*\* 1%

A respondent's gender, marital status, and employment do not have much influence on either dependent variable. This conclusion aligns with previous research save Alesina and Giuliano (2011), who find that women are reliably more generous than men in their redistributive preferences, although the substantive magnitude of this generosity is minimal.

Table 5 displays my models with controls that Alesina and Giuliano (2011) do not include, but which have some explanatory power over  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$  and/or  $Y_{prog\_tax}$ . The effects of our key  $X$  and  $Z$  variables remain more or less unaffected by the inclusion of these additional controls. While not substantively altering the analysis to follow, these new controls are interesting in and of themselves. First, the more generous you ascertain Americans to be in their charitable giving (*charity*), the less you support progressive taxation. The effect is substantively large and uniformly significant. Second, if you believe that the government generally does more to help than hurt people trying to climb the economic ladder (*gov help*) you are more likely to support government action to reduce the income gap and progressive taxation. This effect is sizable and consistently significant, especially for  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$ .<sup>32</sup> Finally, a respondent's optimism regarding her future standard of living (*good life*) has no discernible effect on either dependent variable.

## 6.2 Findings: Faith that the prevailing economic system is just (i.e., rewards desert).

An individual's perception of economic justice is a major determinant of her support for government redistribution efforts. This finding is robust to different measures of our  $Z$  and  $Y$  variables, as you can see in Table 1 (and all other results tables in Appendices C and D), where different models within each table present different measures of our explanatory variable of interest, which is faith that the American economic system delivers to people their economic due.

Model 1 uses *agency* as a measure of the apparent prevalence of economic justice. The more control people seem to exercise over their economic station—the more responsible people are for their economic fates—the more just the American economic system appears, and the less tolerant respondents are of government altering outcomes.  $Z_{agency}$  has a negative and statistically significant influence on both  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$  and  $Y_{prog\_tax}$ , although the magnitude of its effect on  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$  is

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<sup>32</sup>I obtain similar results using a variable that measures whether respondents believe government agencies are generally efficient or inefficient in completion of their duties.

nearly twice as that of its effect on  $Y_{prog\_tax}$ , and in neither model does  $Z_{agency}$  approach the substantive significance of *ideology*. But personal responsibility is only one aspect of the larger concept of economic desert. Although agency may be a necessary condition for some people's understanding of deservingness, it may not be a sufficient condition. And for some people, agency may have little or no bearing on desert's reward. My remaining measures of  $Z$  will make up for this deficit.

Model 2 uses *justice* as a measure of respondent assessment of economic justice. Whereas *agency* tells us the degree to which a critical component of desert appears present to a respondent, my theory is based on perceptions of injustice *whatever* the beholder's definition of economic desert. As predicted  $Z_{justice}$  has a negative and statistically significant influence on both  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$  and  $Y_{prog\_tax}$ . Its influence on  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$  is nearly as strong as *ideology*'s.  $Z_{justice}$  is notably less powerful in determining  $Y_{prog\_tax}$ , although its effect is still prominent and more than twice that of  $Z_{agency}$  from Model 1. The more confident you are that people get their economic due, the more government tampering threatens to undo an already just (or just-ish) resource allocation. Conversely, the more skeptical you are of desert's reward, the more appealing government's promise to correct economic injustice.

Whereas *agency* provides a decidedly narrow look at respondent justice evaluations, *justice* may, in its comparatively broad focus, obscure valuable nuance. With my *deserve* variables in Model 3 we can see if the apparent treatment of different economic sub-populations influences respondent support for redistribution efforts. As predicted  $Z_{rich\_deserve}$ ,  $Z_{average\_deserve}$ , and  $Z_{poor\_deserve}$  have a negative and statistically significant influence on  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$ . Interestingly, only  $Z_{rich\_deserve}$  has a negative and statistically significant influence on  $Y_{prog\_tax}$ .

The story is a subtle one, but in-line with my theory. Group-specific desert assessments vary in the magnitude of their effects on redistributive preferences. When explaining  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$ , the coefficient on  $Z_{rich\_deserve}$  is greater than the coefficient on  $Z_{poor\_deserve}$ , which is greater than the coefficient on  $Z_{average\_deserve}$ . When explaining  $Y_{prog\_tax}$ ,  $Z_{rich\_deserve}$  is more important than  $Z_{poor\_deserve}$ , which may matter but whose influence is statistically questionable, while  $Z_{average\_deserve}$  has no bearing whatsoever. In all tests of the three *deserve* variables, redistributive preferences are foremost effected by perceptions of economic justice as it applies to the rich, the effects of which are stronger than or nearly as strong as that exerted by *ideology*. Whether or



not the poor appear to deserve their poverty has the next largest, and still sizable, effect. The just compensation of average Americans is still less important in determining  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$ , and has potentially no role in determining  $Y_{prog\_tax}$ .

Not only do respondents recognize that the economic system may be more or less just in its treatment of specific groups operating within it, they weigh the treatment of specific groups more than others when formulating their redistributive preferences. This has important policy ramifications, which I discuss in the article's conclusion.

### **6.3 Findings: Definition of economic desert**

In Table 1 and those in the appendix,  $X$  always has a negative and statistically significant influence on  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$ , but it has no discernible effect on  $Y_{prog\_tax}$ . While a respondent's definition of desert does not appear to influence her attitude toward progressive taxation, respondents for whom agency is an important component of desert are less supportive of other government efforts to reduce the income gap. The more central personal responsibility is to an individual's definition of desert, the more government intervention seems to undermine incentives to work for and earn your own payoff. For these respondents, government intervention makes it harder for people to deserve their economic station.

### **6.4 Findings: Interaction between definition of economic desert and faith in economic justice.**

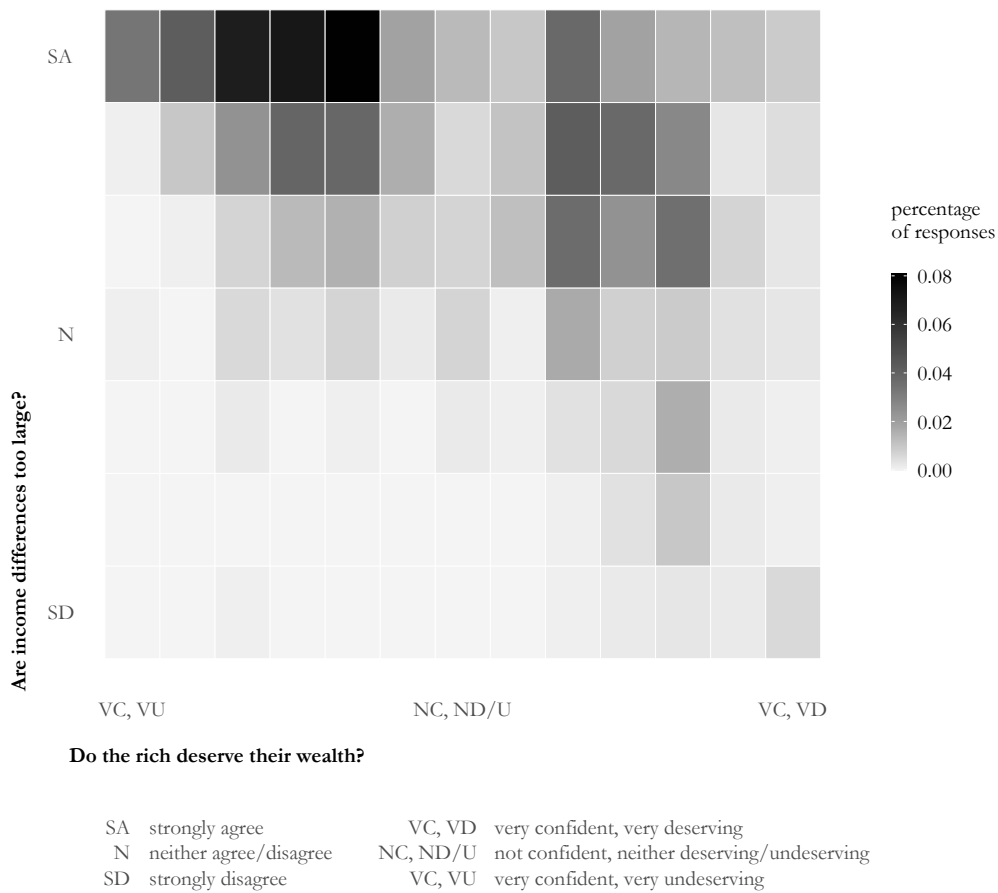
I find meager and inconsistent statistical support for my proposed interaction. In the interest of space, I have moved the discussion of interaction results and related tables and figures to Appendix D.2. While I cannot with confidence speak to the validity of my proposed interaction, this does nothing to undermine my previous findings, which appear robust even when testing for an interaction effect, as you can see in Table 6.

## **7 Conclusions**

American majorities simultaneously despair at economic inequality and refuse to address it. Scholars have puzzled at and argued over this apparently contradictory worldview—the bizarre American

combinations of egalitarian values and worsening class division, of glaring economic disparities and a weak welfare state. How can the self-proclaimed “land of opportunity” so routinely leave so many behind? My answer is simple. People’s policy preferences are not driven by the shape of an economic distribution, but by the apparent justness of (i) the causes that formed it and (ii) the available means of reshaping it. People are reluctant to reallocate a seemingly just (i.e., deserved) distribution. When they do see fit to reallocate, they will avoid reallocation methods that—while correcting the injustice at hand—threaten future injustice (i.e., undermine desert).

Figure 4: Deserved inequality



Regarding the first point: Many Americans cannot shake the belief that people get what they deserve. Even when they are alarmed at economic inequality, people may think it just, as in Figure 4 where nearly 35% of respondents simultaneously believe that income difference are too large *and* that the rich deserve their wealth. These people want a flatter economic distribution but not at the expense of justice. Logically, then, an individual’s assessment of economic justice explains much

of her attitude towards government-sponsored redistribution and progressive taxation. Individuals who believe that people receive their economic due see income disparities as just, the product of morally sound processes and institutions. However unattractive and whatever its implications for economic and democratic functioning, these individuals have no moral grounds on which to alter inequalities, which appear justly derived. Conversely, individuals who believe there exists pervasive economic injustice see virtue in government-sponsored redistribution, hoping to allocate deserved resources to deserving people.

My regressions show that perceptions of the wealthy are especially important in this moral calculation. Individuals confident that the rich deserve their wealth are apt to see redistribution and progressive taxation as unjust, perhaps even punitive. Individuals who consider the rich *un*-deserving of their wealth, however, are driven to redistribute and progressively tax. These individuals cannot be certain that the resources taken from the rich will go to more deserving citizens. Still, these respondents may prefer that excess resources be held by the deserving poor (i.e., those who deserve to be poor) rather than the undeserving rich (i.e., those who do not deserve their wealth). This would constitute an injustice, but perhaps one of a lesser magnitude than the status quo.

Deservingness assessments of all economic classes will work together or at odds. For example, the moral drive to redistribute will be strongest for individuals who think that neither the rich nor poor deserve their economic standings. The rich have no moral claim to their wealth so taking a portion of it does not diminish economic justice, and the poor possess fewer resources than they deserve so giving them more increases economic justice. Moral obligations become muddier when desert assessments of different classes work at odds. For example, you may believe that the poor are undeserving of their poverty and so should be given additional resources. But if you simultaneously believe that the rich deserve their wealth, there is no good source from which to redistribute. Your Robin Hoodian inclinations have been tempered. And then there is the problem with desert assessments of people in the middle range of the economic distribution. It is unclear whether labeling them undeserving of their unexceptional-yet-adequate position means they ought to have more or fewer economic resources.

Regarding the second point: Many American's definitions of economic desert prohibit obvious avenues to combat inequality. The more important personal responsibility is to your definition of

economic desert, the less you support government-led redistribution. Presumably, this is a result of your not wanting to give citizens an incentive to rely on a third party for their economic wellbeing, as doing so would make them less responsible for, and thereby undeserving of, that wellbeing. Interestingly, this effect holds for state remedies to inequality, generally, but does not appear to influence tax preferences, specifically. Moreover, the effect of your definition on redistributive and tax preferences is not moderated by your assessment of justice. The two work together in a linear-additive model, with only meager evidence of interaction.

In summary, it is not enough to know about and be alarmed by inequality. Inequality must be perceived as undeserved to motivate a behavioral and policy response, and those responses will be shaped by our specific definitions of desert. Looking back at Figure 2, nearly half of survey respondents believe the rich deserve their wealth, and sizable portions believe that average and poor Americans are similarly deserving of their economic lots. These individuals will fight redistributive efforts. So will citizens who ascribe a critical place to personal responsibility in their definitions of economic desert, which according to Figure 3 is almost all of them, though to varying degrees.<sup>33</sup> Both groups will oppose redistribution policies because they undo or undermine economic justice.

Justice, therefore, is as much an excuse for resource and power asymmetries as it is motivation to combat them. It is not enough to demand justice. As America enters a new gilded age, we are confronted with a more basic question: What does it mean to *deserve* wealth and poverty? Appreciating how different people answer that question is critical to understanding the origins of myriad social policies and ills.

Doing so will also force clarity among researchers, who are grappling with nuanced but often caricatured and confused concepts like “altruism”, “equality”, “equity”, “fairness”, and “justice”, to name a few. Contrast, for example, my approach to justice as a social institution with that of Just World theorists who have little reason to investigate what, exactly, economic desert means to actual people because the thrust of their program is that people, whatever their definition of desert, will “cling defensively to the illusion that the world is a just place” (Jost et al. 2003, 58). So it will be for many people, but self-deception of this sort is one of many possible relations people have with justice. By treating justice as a social rather than strictly psychological phenomenon, we admit that people may have definite ideas of merit (i.e., desert bases), and that they are rationally

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<sup>33</sup>See Bower-Bir (2020b) for more on the flexible relationship between desert and personal responsibility.

acting on those ideas as a matter of institutional prodding. From there we can do a better job determining whether and where their reasoning vis-à-vis distributional policy is flawed, or if they engage in reasoning at all.

Interpretive, post-positivist policy scholars are dispositionally disposed and methodologically well-equipped to advance our understanding of the meanings citizen and policymakers attach to “deserve” (Dodge et al. 2005). Doing so in concert with empiricist policy scholars will be a boon to democratic governance. That many people—even the most economically vulnerable—believe economic outcomes are merited does seem the product of delusion and/or stupidity, especially as the distribution of economic and political resources becomes so very, undeniably imbalanced. Rather than summarily label as “delusional” or “irrational” the many Americans who find their political, moral, and financial values in conflict, better to find the degree to which this conflict is aided by inaccurate information, untenable assumptions, and social pressures (aka, “delta parameters”). We need to dig deeper to see whether and at what point the delusion or irrationality occurs, and how it interacts with the costs and benefits stemming from self-enforcing “moral” norms and rules.

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## A Demographic breakdown of survey sample

Table 2: Demographic breakdown of survey sample.

	Sample N	Sample %	US pop %	Sample% – US pop%
<i>Gender</i>				
Female	586	0.59	0.51	0.08
Male	406	0.41	0.49	–0.08
	<i>992</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>0.00</i>
<i>Race</i>				
White	701	0.71	0.64	0.07
Black	93	0.09	0.12	–0.03
Latino	52	0.05	0.16	–0.11
Asian	111	0.11	0.05	0.06
Other	35	0.04	0.03	0.01
	<i>992</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>0.00</i>
<i>Education</i>				
High school or less	118	0.12	0.43	–0.31
Associate’s or some college	330	0.33	0.29	0.04
Bachelor’s degree	351	0.35	0.17	0.18
Graduate degree	193	0.19	0.11	0.08
	<i>992</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>0.00</i>
<i>Household income</i>				
<\$25k	192	0.19	0.25	–0.06
\$25k–\$49k	247	0.25	0.25	0.00
\$50k–\$74k	210	0.21	0.18	0.03
\$75k–\$99k	141	0.14	0.12	0.02
\$100k–\$149k	137	0.14	0.12	0.02
\$150k+	65	0.07	0.08	–0.01
	<i>992</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>0.00</i>
<i>Political party</i>				
Republican	68	0.07	0.24	–0.17
Lean Republican	79	0.08	0.16	–0.08
Independent	264	0.27	0.12	0.15
Lean Democrat	284	0.29	0.16	0.13
Democrat	297	0.30	0.32	–0.02
	<i>992</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>0.00</i>

U.S. partisanship estimates from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2012). All other U.S. estimates from the Census Bureau’s 2012 projections. Sample data collected early 2014.

## B Additional information on measurements

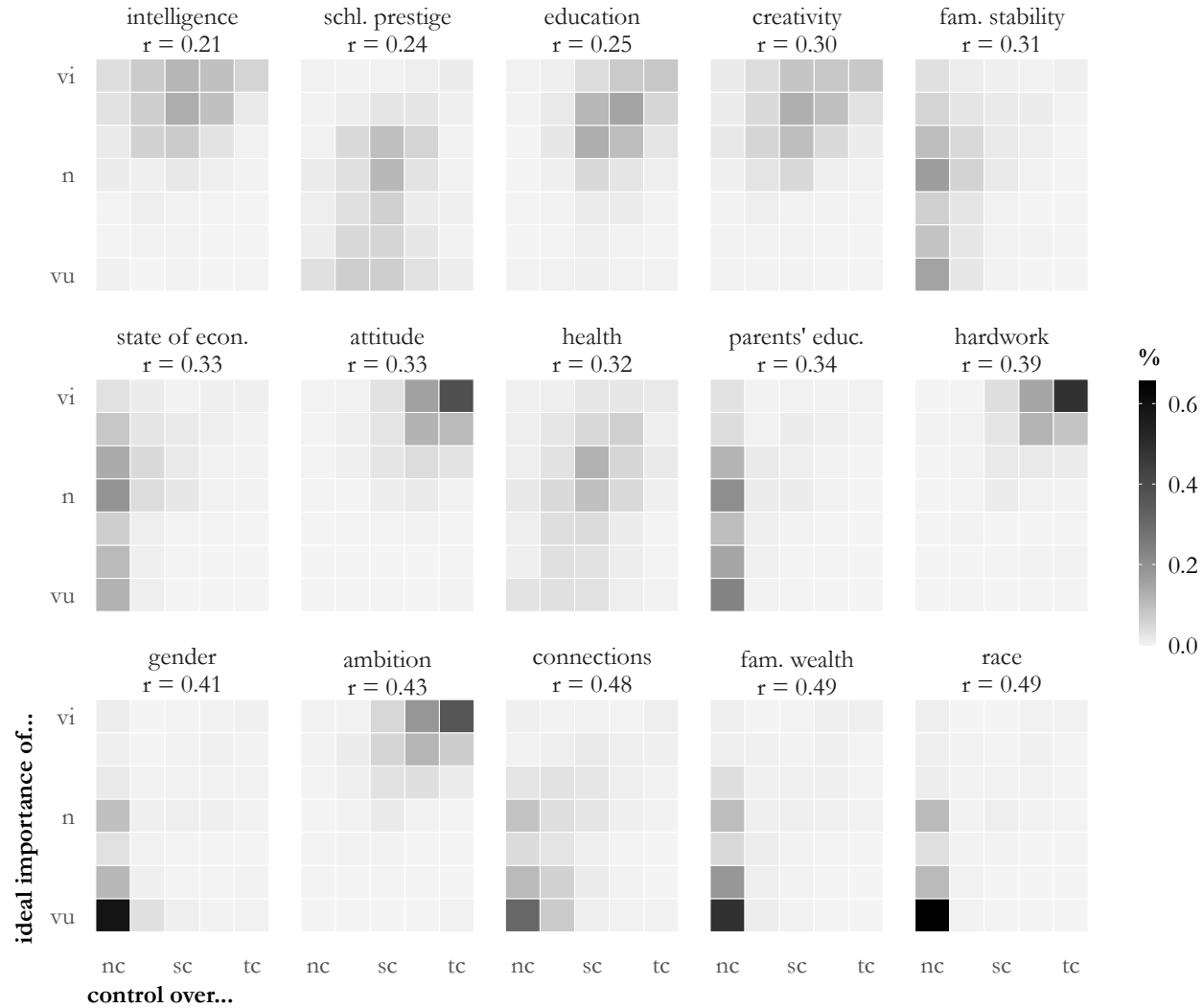
Table 3 shows all the possible values and interpretations of  $Z_{rich\_deserve}$ ,  $Z_{average\_deserve}$ , and  $Z_{poor\_deserve}$ . This measure incorporates the direction, magnitude, and certainty of a respondent’s deservingness evaluations of members of the specified groups (i.e., rich, average, and poor Americans). A 1 means the respondent is “very confident” that members of the specified group are generally “very deserving” of their economic position. A  $-1$  means the respondent is “very confident” that members of the specified group are generally “very undeserving” of their economic position. Intermediate, scores, however, could mean different things. For example, a  $Z_{rich\_deserve}$  score of 0.5 may mean that a respondent is “very confident” the rich are “deserving” of their wealth, or it could mean that the respondent is “somewhat confident” that the rich are “very deserving” of their wealth.

Table 3: Deservingness values and their meanings.

		NU VC			ND VC								
		SU VC	SU C	NU C	ND C	SD C	SD C	SD VC	SD C	SD C	SD VC	SD C	SD VC
Magnitude	VU	VU	VU	VU	U	SU	NU	SD	D	VD	VD	VD	VD
Confidence	VC	C	SC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	SC	C	VC
Value	-1.000	-0.833	-0.667	-0.500	-0.333	-0.167	0.000	0.167	0.333	0.500	0.667	0.833	1.000
	VD/U	Very Deserving/Undeserving							Very Confident		VC		
	D/U	Deserving/Undeserving							Confident		C		
	SD/U	Somewhat Deserving/Undeserving							Somewhat Confident		SC		
	ND/U	Not especially Deserving/Undeserving							Not Confident		NC		

The horizontal axes in Figure 5 show the degree of control survey respondents think people have over the specified factor, and the vertical axes show the ideal importance of that factor to economic standing. The correlation coefficient  $r$  between the two variables is shown above the graph for each of the fifteen factors. These responses are a part of a larger analysis in this paper, but are interesting in themselves. See Bower-Bir (2020b) for a substantive discussion.

Figure 5: Heat maps of perceived control over economic factors versus their ideal importance to economic standing.



vu very un-important      nc no control  
n neither un-/important      sc some control  
vi very important      tc total control

## C Base models and models with additional control variables

Table 4: Support for government action to reduce the income gap ( $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$ ) and for progressive taxation ( $Y_{prog\_tax}$ ) based on definition of economic justice ( $X$ ) and on perceived economic justice ( $Z$ ).

Variable	$Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$					$Y_{prog\_tax}$				
	Model A	Model B	Model D	Model D	Model E	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D	Model E
Definition		-0.469*** (0.143)					0.085 (0.137)			
Agency			-0.221*** (0.050)					-0.129** (0.052)		
Justice				-0.375*** (0.048)					-0.285*** (0.053)	
Rich deserve					-0.338*** (0.055)					-0.336*** (0.078)
Avg. deserve					-0.137*** (0.049)					-0.050 (0.054)
Poor deserve					-0.223*** (0.073)					-0.116* (0.070)
Ideology	0.572*** (0.053)	0.572*** (0.051)	0.506*** (0.054)	0.415*** (0.052)	0.345*** (0.053)	0.589*** (0.044)	0.608*** (0.043)	0.550*** (0.047)	0.470*** (0.052)	0.415*** (0.054)
Age	0.013** (0.006)	0.010 (0.007)	0.014** (0.007)	0.012*** (0.007)	0.007 (0.005)	0.010 (0.007)	0.008 (0.007)	0.011 (0.007)	0.009 (0.007)	0.008 (0.006)
Age <sup>2</sup>	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Female	0.034 (0.029)	0.048* (0.029)	0.009 (0.028)	-0.012 (0.026)	0.009 (0.023)	0.013 (0.028)	0.002 (0.027)	-0.001 (0.028)	-0.022 (0.026)	-0.003 (0.026)
Nonwhite	0.053 (0.033)	0.035 (0.032)	0.065** (0.032)	0.069** (0.031)	0.061** (0.029)	0.008 (0.031)	0.004 (0.032)	0.015 (0.032)	0.020 (0.031)	0.024 (0.029)
Married	-0.014 (0.032)	-0.012 (0.032)	0.007 (0.032)	-0.006 (0.029)	-0.011 (0.028)	0.008 (0.036)	0.32 (0.036)	0.020 (0.036)	0.014 (0.033)	0.007 (0.033)
Unemployed	0.020 (0.049)	0.003 (0.047)	0.004 (0.049)	0.006 (0.043)	-0.005 (0.039)	-0.089 (0.055)	-0.052 (0.057)	-0.098* (0.055)	-0.100* (0.053)	-0.106** (0.053)
Education	-0.002	0.026	-0.009	-0.023	0.026	0.104* (0.055)	0.108* (0.057)	0.100* (0.055)	0.088 (0.053)	0.110** (0.053)

	(0.062)	(0.060)	(0.059)	(0.56)	(0.053)	(0.057)	(0.057)	(0.056)	(0.55)	(0.056)
Income	-0.209***	-0.221***	-0.176***	-0.118**	-0.122**	-0.176***	-0.117*	-0.156***	-0.106*	-0.108*
	(0.060)	(0.061)	(0.058)	(0.054)	(0.053)	(0.061)	(0.062)	(0.060)	(0.056)	(0.058)
Constant	0.135	0.584***	0.295***	0.376***	0.640***	0.065	-0.016	0.158	0.247*	0.416***
	(0.124)	(0.191)	(0.130)	(0.125)	(0.117)	(0.128)	(0.176)	(0.129)	(0.135)	(0.127)
N	992	963	992	992	992	992	963	992	992	992
R <sup>2</sup>	0.4468	0.4687	0.4719	0.5186	0.5576	0.3926	0.4063	0.4017	0.4365	0.4645
adj-R <sup>2</sup>	0.4131	0.4346	0.4391	0.4887	0.5291	0.3556	0.3682	0.3645	0.4015	0.4300

All regressions control for state fixed effects. Robust standard errors given in parentheses.

All variables save *age* and *age*<sup>2</sup> standardize [0, 1]. \* significant at 10%; \*\* 5%; \*\*\* 1%

Table 5: Support for government action to reduce the income gap ( $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$ ) and for progressive taxation ( $Y_{prog\_tax}$ ) based on definition of economic justice ( $X$ ) and on perceived economic justice ( $Z$ ), with additional control variables shown in bold typeface.

Variable	$Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$					$Y_{prog\_tax}$				
	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D	Model E	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D	Model E
Definition		-0.466***	-0.384***	-0.445***	-0.482***		0.082	0.127	0.094	0.063
		(0.136)	(0.141)	(0.117)	(0.129)		(0.135)	(0.139)	(0.129)	(0.132)
Agency			-0.202***					-0.111**		
			(0.052)					(0.052)		
Justice				-0.420***					-0.249***	
				(0.050)					(0.058)	
Rich deserve					-0.370***					-0.289***
					(0.059)					(0.076)
Avg. deserve					-0.132***					-0.055
					(0.047)					(0.055)
Poor deserve					-0.284***					-0.138**
					(0.062)					(0.068)
<b>Good life</b>	-0.053*	-0.018	-0.003	-0.003	0.016	-0.069*	-0.057	-0.049	-0.048	-0.031
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.031)	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.038)	(0.037)
<b>Gov. help</b>	0.159***	0.114**	0.107**	0.167***	0.154***	0.101*	0.085	0.081	0.117**	0.109**
	(0.051)	(0.052)	(0.053)	(0.048)	(0.050)	(0.054)	(0.053)	(0.053)	(0.053)	(0.052)

<b>Charity</b>	-0.133	-0.185**	-0.151*	-0.052	-0.068	-0.183**	-0.234***	-0.215***	-0.155**	-0.153**
	(0.085)	(0.085)	(0.084)	(0.072)	(0.083)	(0.080)	(0.080)	(0.080)	(0.076)	(0.076)
Ideology	0.524***	0.537***	0.477***	0.346***	0.270***	0.548***	0.572***	0.539***	0.459***	0.402***
	(0.053)	(0.052)	(0.055)	(0.051)	(0.049)	(0.048)	(0.047)	(0.050)	(0.057)	(0.056)
Age	0.013**	0.012*	0.013*	0.011	0.006	0.011	0.009	0.010	0.009	0.007
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.006)
Age <sup>2</sup>	0.000**	0.000**	0.000**	0.000	0.000	0.000*	0.000	0.000*	0.000	0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Female	0.024	0.042	0.022	0.000	0.029	0.002	-0.010	-0.021	-0.034	-0.016
	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.026)	(0.023)	(0.029)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.026)
Nonwhite	0.059*	0.042	0.052*	0.055*	0.051*	0.019	0.016	0.021	0.023	0.027
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.031)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.030)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.030)
Married	-0.020	-0.027	-0.009	-0.018	-0.026	0.003	0.023	0.032	0.028	0.019
	(0.030)	(0.030)	(0.031)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.032)	(0.033)
Unemployed	-0.008	-0.020	-0.035	-0.027	-0.039	-0.117**	-0.084	-0.092	-0.088	-0.095
	(0.050)	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.041)	(0.039)	(0.056)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.058)	(0.058)
Education	-0.017	0.008	0.004	-0.018	0.051	0.090	0.091	0.089	0.076	0.107*
	(0.060)	(0.059)	(0.057)	(0.052)	(0.049)	(0.056)	(0.056)	(0.056)	(0.056)	(0.057)
Income	-0.199***	-0.206***	-0.190***	-0.142***	0.136***	-0.151**	-0.082	-0.073	-0.044	0.039
	(0.054)	(0.056)	(0.055)	(0.051)	(0.049)	(0.065)	(0.064)	(0.064)	(0.061)	(0.064)
Constant	0.204	0.606***	0.655***	0.804***	1.093***	0.173	0.077	0.104	0.194	0.368**
	(0.132)	(0.191)	(0.195)	(0.176)	(0.168)	(0.143)	(0.181)	(0.182)	(0.176)	(0.170)
N	992	963	963	992	963	963	963	963	963	963
R <sup>2</sup>	0.4629	0.4809	0.5006	0.5594	0.6020	0.4071	0.4233	0.4297	0.4531	0.4778
adj-R <sup>2</sup>	0.4284	0.4457	0.4662	0.5291	0.5736	0.3689	0.3842	0.3904	0.4154	0.4406

All regressions control for state fixed effects. Robust standard errors given in parentheses.

All variables save *age* and *age*<sup>2</sup> standardize [0, 1]. \* significant at 10%; \*\* 5%; \*\*\* 1%



## D Extended explanation of the proposed interaction

### D.1 Extended explanation: Interaction variables and test

This section of Appendix D picks up from Section 5.5 in the main body of the paper.

Because interaction terms are always symmetrical (Brambor, Clark, & Golder 2006; Kam & Franzese 2007), arguing that  $Z$  moderates  $X$  implies that  $X$ , too, has some conditional influence on  $Z$ . Although my theory does not speak directly to that relationship, neither is it silent on the matter. I can measure the relationship and make certain the results do nothing to undermine my theory (Berry, Golder, & Milton 2012). For example, I have no reason to expect justice assessments will, as a result of their interaction with desert definitions, suddenly have a positive influence on redistributive preferences. Moreover, increasing personal responsibility's importance will only embolden an individual who thinks economic desert rewarded in her opposition to redistribution. Hence, I expect that the marginal effect of  $Z$  on  $Y$  will be negative for all values of  $X$ . This effect will be weakest when  $X$  is at its lowest and will increase in magnitude as  $X$  increases.

I will present results for the three different measures of  $Z$  and the two different versions of  $Y$ . Moreover, it is difficult and sometimes impossible to evaluate conditional hypotheses with the figures typically reported in results tables (Brambor et al. 2006). Consequently, I will evaluate the statistically significant interaction results graphically.

### D.2 Extended explanation: Interaction findings

This section of Appendix D picks up from Section 6.4 in the main body of the paper.

Figures 6a and 6b, which are derived from Models 1 and 2 from the left half of Table 6, offer the strongest support for an  $X|Z$  interaction effect. The marginal effect on redistributive preferences of increasing agency's importance is negative for all but the lowest values of and  $Z_{agency}$  and  $Z_{justice}$ , when it is statistically indistinguishable from zero. And the effect of  $X$  on  $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$  strengthens in magnitude as  $Z_{agency}$  and  $Z_{justice}$  increase. All of this indicates that an individual's assessment of prevailing economic justice tempers the marginal influence her definition of justice has on government redistribution efforts. Note, however, that *definition*, *agency* and *justice* have the wrong sign in these models, although those first two variables do not achieve statistical significance so the sign may not especially matter.

Table 6: Interacting definition of economic justice ( $X$ ) and perceived economic justice ( $Z$ ) to explain support for government reducing inequality ( $Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$ ) and progressive taxes ( $Y_{prog\_tax}$ ).

Variable	$Y_{gov\_fix\_gap}$			$Y_{prog\_tax}$		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Definition	0.852 (0.530)	0.214 (0.184)	0.546** (0.226)	0.903*** (0.241)	0.103 (0.185)	0.244 (0.403)
Agency	2.194*** (0.654)			2.145*** (0.581)		
<i>Def.</i> $\times$ <i>Agency</i>	-2.654*** (0.716)			-2.509*** (0.641)		
Justice		2.200*** (0.675)			-0.124 (0.550)	
<i>Def.</i> $\times$ <i>Justice</i>		-2.861*** (0.731)			-0.148 (0.608)	

Rich deserve			2.514**			0.833
			(1.031)			(0.867)
<i>Def.</i> × <i>Rich</i>			-3.148***			-0.653
			(1.123)			(0.843)
Avg. deserve			0.055			-0.922
			(0.966)			(0.821)
<i>Def.</i> × <i>Avg.</i>			-0.194			-1.300
			(1.049)			(0.958)
Poor deserve			0.189			0.662
			(0.865)			(0.926)
<i>Def.</i> × <i>Poor</i>			-0.544			0.860
			(0.929)			(0.900)
Ideology	0.470***	0.376***	0.280***	0.535***	0.493***	0.432***
	(0.051)	(0.050)	(0.049)	(0.046)	(0.054)	(0.056)
Age	0.010	0.011	0.004	0.007	0.008	0.005
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.006)
Age <sup>2</sup>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Female	0.022	-0.009	0.024	-0.016	-0.027	-0.009
	(0.027)	(0.025)	(0.022)	(0.027)	(0.026)	(0.026)
Nonwhite	0.051*	0.048*	0.042	0.015	0.015	0.019
	(0.031)	(0.027)	(0.026)	(0.030)	(0.032)	(0.030)
Married	0.013	-0.024	-0.019	0.050	0.034	0.027
	(0.036)	(0.027)	(0.026)	(0.035)	(0.034)	(0.034)
Unemployed	-0.008	-0.018	-0.013	-0.056	-0.064	-0.070
	(0.044)	(0.037)	(0.035)	(0.054)	(0.056)	(0.056)
Education	0.024	0.009	0.075	0.109**	0.092*	0.125**
	(0.057)	(0.051)	(0.048)	(0.054)	(0.056)	(0.057)
Income	-0.197***	-0.113***	-0.107**	-0.103	-0.058	-0.047
	(0.057)	(0.051)	(0.049)	(0.062)	(0.058)	(0.062)
Constant	-0.388	0.258	0.289	-0.557**	0.125	0.156
	(0.505)	(0.217)	(0.232)	(0.232)	(0.209)	(0.385)
N	963	963	963	963	963	963
R <sup>2</sup>	0.5076	0.5659	0.6101	0.4313	0.4407	0.4700
adj-R <sup>2</sup>	0.4748	0.5370	0.5824	0.3935	0.4035	0.4322

All regressions control for state fixed effects. Robust standard errors given in parentheses.  
All variables save *age* and *age*<sup>2</sup> standardize [0, 1]. \* significant at 10%; \*\* 5%; \*\*\* 1%

Regardless, the interaction is not supported by Model 3 from the left half of Table 6, wherein *definition*, *rich\_deserve*, and the interaction term between the two all achieve statistical significance, but the first two variables have the wrong sign, as confirmed by Figure 6c. In that figure, you can see that the definition of justice has a positive marginal effect on support for government redistribution at the lowest values of  $Z_{rich\_deserve}$ , and this contingent, marginal effect just manages statistical significance. The interaction is further undone when looking at the right side of Table 6. None of the relevant explanatory variables achieve statistical significance in estimating  $Y_{prog\_tax}$  in Models 2 and

3. In Model 1, *definition*, *agency*, and the interaction term between the two all achieve statistical significance, but the first two variables again have the wrong sign, as confirmed by Figure 6d. As in Figure 6c, Figure 6d shows  $X$  exhibiting a positive marginal influence on  $Y_{prog\_tax}$ , this time at low levels of  $Z_{agency}$ . At no value of  $Z$  should  $X$  have a positive marginal effect, regardless of the specific measure of  $Z$  or  $Y$ . I have no theoretical cause to expect an individual's definition of justice as here measured to have a positive marginal influence on redistributive preferences.

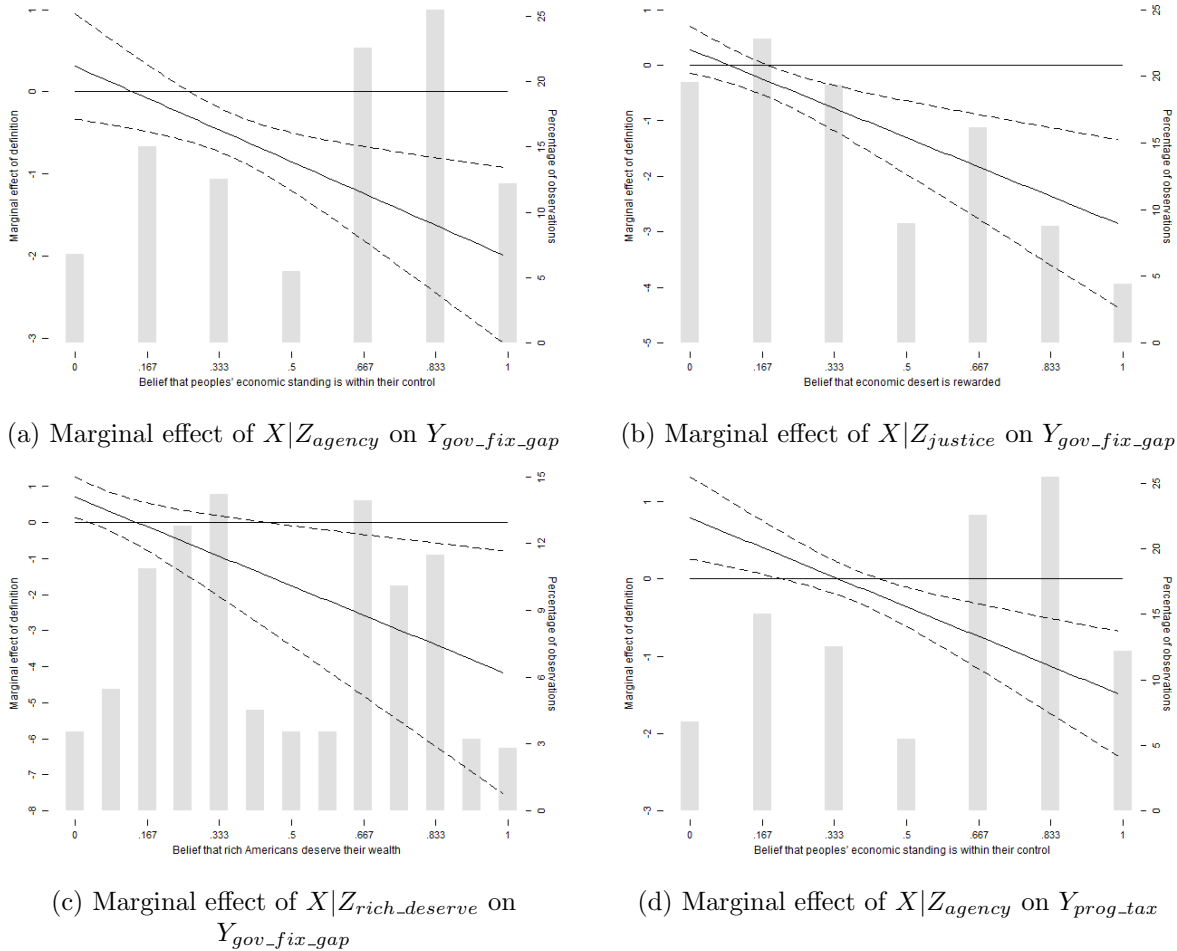


Figure 6: Marginal effect of desert's definition (i.e., importance of agency) on (a-c) support for government action to reduce economic inequality and (d) progressive taxation, contingent on belief that (a, d) peoples' economic standing is within their control, (b) economic desert is rewarded, and (c) rich Americans deserve their wealth.

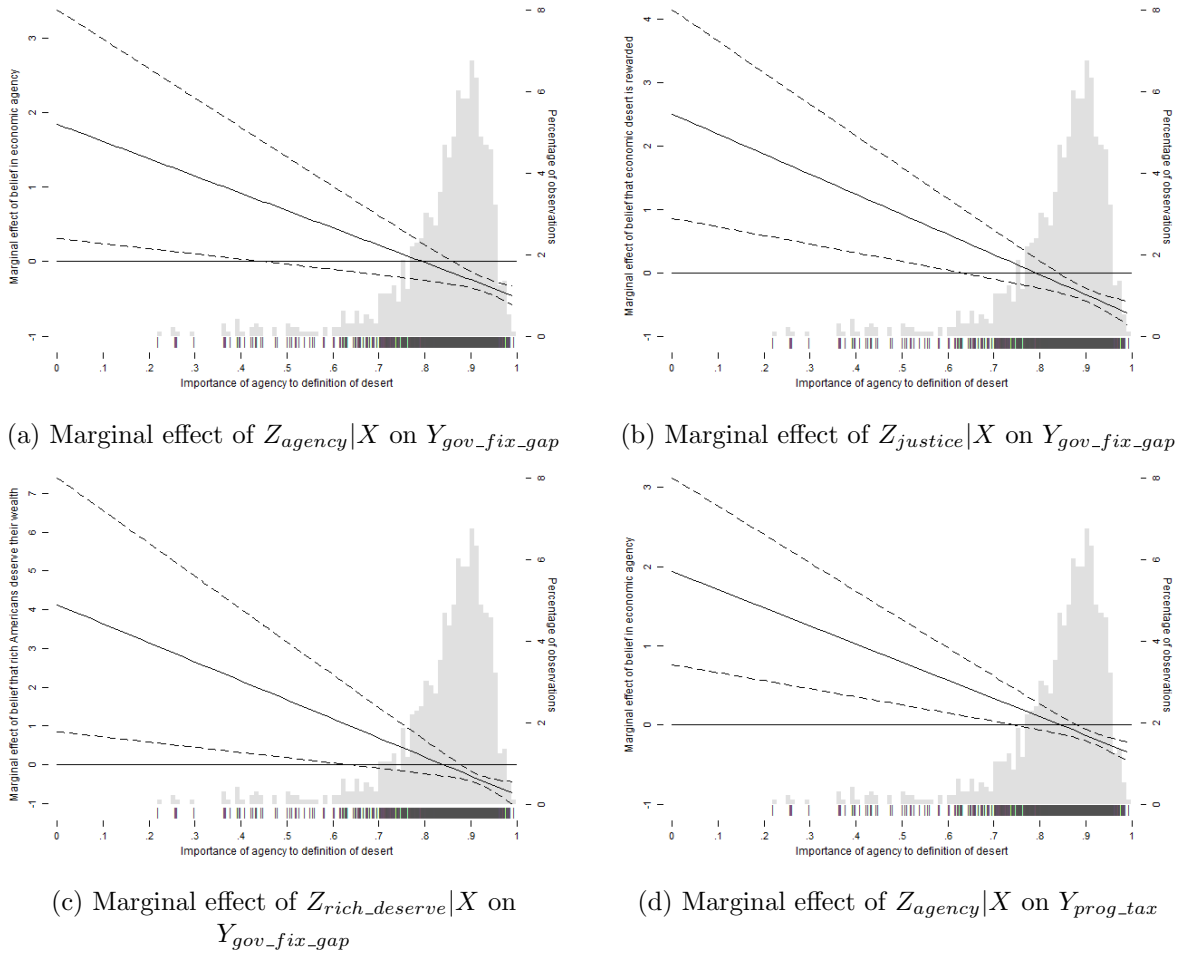


Figure 7: Marginal effect of belief that (a, d) peoples’ economic standing is within their control, (b) economic desert is rewarded, and (c) rich Americans deserve their wealth on support for (a-c) government action to reduce economic inequality and (d) progressive taxation, contingent on desert’s definition (i.e., importance of agency).

Most detrimental to the interaction piece of my theory are Figures 7a–7d, which all work against the symmetrical  $Z|X$  interaction. In all four graphs—which are the respective counterparts to Figures 6a–6d and show the moderating effect of desert’s definition on justice assessments—the marginal effect of  $Z$  on  $Y$  is positive when  $X$  is at its lowest level. Were I to restrict the horizontal axis to only the most common definitions of desert as it relates to personal responsibility, this positive marginal effect would not be so apparent, which lends some credence to my interaction hypothesis.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, I have no theoretical cause to expect an individual’s assessment of existing economic justice to ever have a positive marginal influence on redistributive preferences.

<sup>34</sup>You can determine the most common levels of importance placed in agency in the rug plot along the horizontal axis and in the histogram plotted in relation to the right side vertical axis in Figures 7a–7d.