Experiments Behind the Veil: Structural Influences on Judgments of Social Justice

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In two experiments, participants judged the fairness of different distributions of wealth in hypothetical societies. In the first study, the level of meritocracy in the hypothetical societies and the frame of reference from which participants judged alternative distributions of wealth interacted to influence fairness judgments. As meritocracy increased, all participants became more tolerant of economic inequality, particularly when they judged fairness from a redistribution frame of reference that made salient transfers among socioeconomic classes. Liberal participants, however, placed a greater emphasis on equality than did conservative participants across all conditions. In the second study, reactions to income transfers depended on the efficiency of the transfers and the identity of the groups receiving the benefits, but conservatives placed a greater emphasis in their fairness judgments on tying benefits to workfare requirements, whereas liberals did not distinguish between unconditional welfare transfers and workfare transfers.

Public debate about the proper role of government in maintaining or altering the distribution of wealth often involves arguments about highly charged "matters of fact," such as whether the poor are responsible for their own fate and whether

tying welfare benefits to work requirements (i.e., "workfare") will encourage greater self-sufficiency. At other times, policy debate may simply involve different views of the proper ends government should seek. Variation in attitudes toward economic policies may thus be the result of different beliefs about the causal structure of the world and the ability of the government to alter this structure (e.g., Appelbaum, 2001; Kluegel & Smith, 1981, 1986) or different value orientations (e.g., Rasinski, 1987).

When causal relations and policy effects are difficult to understand or predict, however, as is often the case with matters of public policy, values and preexisting beliefs may interact to determine policy positions (e.g., Herrmann, Tetlock, & Diascro, 2001; Mitchell, Tetlock, Mellers, & Ordóñez, 1993; Skitka, 1999). For instance, Christiansen and Lavine (1997) found that liberals and conservatives held different preexisting beliefs about the causes of need for public assistance and, as a result, made different trade-offs in a mock public aid allocation task, with liberals favoring more inclusive, but also more wasteful, allocation rules than conservatives.

The present study extends the research into how factual and value differences may interact to produce different attitudes about income stratification and governmental redistribution of wealth. In particular, we examine how lay conceptions of social justice shift as a function of political ideology (defined as views about the proper role of government) and changes in certain structural features of the distributive environment. In Experiment 1, we examine how liberals and conservatives make trade-offs between greater economic equality and greater prosperity in a society as a function of the level of meritocracy in the society and the frame of reference from which these trade-offs are made: either as a matter of original distribution of wealth or as a matter of redistribution of existing wealth. In Experiment 2, we examine how ideology and concerns about the inefficiency of government programs interact to affect perceptions of the fairness of welfare and workfare programs for the redistribution of wealth. Before setting out our specific hypotheses and the motivation behind them, a word is in order about the methodological vehicle used to study lay conceptions of justice.

The Hypothetical Societies Impartial-Reasoning Device

In prior research, we developed a hypothetical societies paradigm in which experimental participants judge the justice of different distributions of wealth (see Mitchell et al., 1993). All aspects of the structure of a hypothetical society can be controlled by the experimenter who designs it, including the poverty line and number of persons above or below it, the relative economic standing of socioeconomic classes, the absolute level of prosperity, and the level of meritocracy (i.e., the degree to which individual merit is a factor in determining economic outcomes). This approach enables the experimenter to examine which features of a hypothetical society are most important in the participants' judgments of social justice and how these judgments change as features of the society change.

Thus, we previously found that (1) both liberals and conservatives were willing to accept considerable inequality of wealth in high-meritocracy societies, but with the reservation that distributions allowing persons to fall below the poverty line remained unpopular even in high-meritocracy societies; (2) a majority of liberals and conservatives favored a Rawlsian "maximin" approach (Rawls, 1971) to the distribution of wealth in low- and moderate-meritocracy societies; and (3) the point of maximal separation between liberals and conservatives occurred when the reward structure in the hypothetical society was most ambiguous (i.e., in moderate-meritocracy societies), with liberals tending toward greater equality and conservatives toward greater efficiency in such societies. Scott, Matland, Michelbach, and Bornstein (2001) used a variant of this paradigm to compare the roles of equality, efficiency, merit, and need in people's judgments of distributive justice; they found that each principle proved influential to some extent, but merit played a mediating role only in women's judgments of justice.

As noted, the experimenter can remove or manipulate factual ambiguities that might be important in participants' value trade-offs. For example, we found that participants' factual beliefs about the level of meritocracy in the hypothetical society mediated their value trade-offs (Mitchell et al., 1993). In short, the hypothetical societies paradigm allows experimenters to unconfound the role of factual beliefs from the influence of value orientations in judgments of justice.

Another attractive feature of the paradigm is that researchers can control the influence of material self-interest and social concerns on judgments of justice. Researchers who want to eliminate or minimize the role of self-interest and social influence can ask participants to make anonymous judgments about hypothetical societies, with no material implications for themselves. Alternatively, researchers interested in the role of social influence can ask participants to explain or justify their judgments under various accountability conditions or can manipulate the group identities involved, whereas researchers interested in the influence of material self-interest can alter the method to have participants imagine themselves inside the society and/or ask them to allocate resources within the society (using either hypothetical or real payoffs).

Here, we used the hypothetical societies device to prime "refined" motivations—to use Fishkin's (1992) typology of political thought experiments— because we sought to examine the role of values and factual beliefs in judgments of social justice without the potentially biasing influence of self-interest and ingroup biases (see Bar-Hillel & Yaari, 1993; Frohlich & Oppenheimer, 1997, 2000; Miller, 1992). For example, Messick and Sentis (1983) found that people involved in a distributive exchange saw themselves as acting more fairly than others and rated distributional principles that led to higher payoffs for themselves as more fair. Accordingly, to avoid egocentric and group biases in judgments of justice, we asked participants to make anonymous judgments about hypothetical societies without imagining themselves as members of the societies.

This method is akin to placing participants behind a Rawlsian "veil of ignorance," a reasoning device that seeks to "nullify the effects of specific contin-

gencies which put men at odds and tempt them to exploit social and natural circumstances to their own advantage" (Rawls, 1971, p. 136). Behind Rawls' veil, "no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like" (p. 137). Because we cannot divest participants of the self-knowledge required by a true veil of ignorance, we opt instead to remove this knowledge as an influence on judgments by having participants disinterestedly evaluate hypothetical societies.

Despite their refined nature—indeed, because of their refined nature—judgments about justice in hypothetical societies may be useful guides to justice in real societies in two respects. First, use of the hypothetical societies paradigm allows us to identify areas of agreement and disagreement on topics of economic policy and social justice, and to explain how factual beliefs and value differences combine to produce either consensus or dissension. That is, "structured observation [can] undoubtedly help both in identifying local understandings and in clarifying beliefs" about justice (Frohlich & Oppenheimer, 1997, p. 1). This justification for the hypothetical societies approach emphasizes its ability to provide descriptive and explanatory clarity.

Second, empirical data about laypeople's refined judgments of justice may serve an important checking function on the intuitions of political philosophers and political elites (see Fishkin, 1992; Miller, 1992). Refined empirical data, such as anonymous judgments about hypothetical societies, are the only sort of data that many philosophers are willing to take into account in their theories of justice (see Elster, 1995, for a discussion of the role of empirical data in "hard" versus "soft" normative theories of justice; see also Frohlich & Oppenheimer, 1992, 1997; Miller, 1999). In many normative accounts of the just society, justice is not synonymous with expressions of naked self-interest, nor is it derivable from intuitions afloat in the "viscous sea of self-interest, affect, and imperfect information" (Frohlich & Oppenheimer, 1997, p. 2). Use of the hypothetical societies approach is justified from this perspective because it produces impartial-reasoning data that may have greater persuasive power in ethical and political arguments than data more directly expressive of, or "contaminated" by, self-interest.

Experiment 1: Meritocracy and Frame of Reference

Most experimental research on justice has examined how features of the recipients or allocators determine conceptions of fair distributive rules (e.g., the focus on relative recipient inputs in equity theory) or has examined recipient and observer reactions to different types of distributive and procedural rules (e.g., Scott et al., 2001; see Miller, 1999; Tyler, 2000). Other than the impact of resource scarcity on distributive judgments (e.g., Lane & Messé, 1972; Skitka & Tetlock, 1992), the role of more impersonal, structural features of the distributive environment has received little attention (for a recent exception examining the role of

organizational structure on perceptions of fairness, see Schminke, Cropanzano, & Rupp, 2002). Political, philosophical, and economic theorists, however, tell us that our judgments of social justice should take into account a wide range of structural or situational features, which—if left unstudied—may confound results or greatly limit one's ability to draw inferences from the experimental setting.

Experiment 1 focused on such a feature of the distributive situation, namely the temporal frame of reference from which a judgment of justice is made. We examined whether judgments of justice made as a matter of original distributive justice differ from those made as a matter of "redistributive justice." The primary impetus for this frame-of-reference manipulation is that real-world economic reform invariably requires a redistribution of wealth across the existing socioeconomic classes, whether it takes the form of progressive taxation to fund social welfare programs or tax cuts to "incentivize" workers. Concern about the taking of property for redistribution may be grounds to support or oppose a particular new distribution of wealth (see, e.g., Baron, 1998; Epstein, 1985). By emphasizing the element of redistribution required to achieve greater equality, we may also prime psychological processes related to rights of possession and loss aversion that mitigate against such redistribution (see, e.g., Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1991). In other words, what people would consider just in a Rawlsian "original position" may be very different from what they would consider just in a reordering of this original position, because of possible concerns over intrusion on property rights or the influence of a status quo bias.

In addition, Experiment 1 extends our prior research into the role of the societal reward structure in observers' judgments of justice. By societal reward structure, we mean the degree to which individual merit determines economic outcomes in the society. In our initial use of the hypothetical societies paradigm (Mitchell et al., 1993), we used low and high meritocracy levels in which the relationship between merit and outcome was not perfectly correlated (i.e., in the low-meritocracy condition, merit determined outcomes 10% of the time; in the high-meritocracy condition, merit determined outcomes 90% of the time). Hence, participants could attribute some outcomes to merit even in the low-meritocracy condition and could attribute some outcomes to chance even in the high-meritocracy condition, and these attributions may have affected justice judgments in both conditions. Such a meritocracy manipulation is not the strictest possible test of meritocracy's influence on judgments of social justice, for we did not examine judgments in the complete absence of meritocracy or in the presence of perfect meritocracy. Scott et al. (2001) used a variant of our paradigm that also included this less strict test of meritocracy.

In the current experiment, we presented participants with three hypothetical societies that differed only in their level of meritocracy. In "Society Zero," individual effort and ability play no role in determining socioeconomic status (the no-meritocracy condition). In "Society Half," individual effort and ability are moderate predictors of outcomes, determining socioeconomic status 50% of the

time (the moderate-meritocracy condition). In "Society One Hundred," the relationship between merit and outcome is perfect, meaning that those who choose to work hard always prosper (the perfect-meritocracy condition). In the distribution frame-of-reference condition, participants had to decide for each society how to divide the wealth among classes as an initial matter of formative or constitutional justice; in the redistribution frame-of-reference condition, participants had to decide the fairest way to redistribute wealth among the classes in each society.

By including no-meritocracy and perfect-meritocracy societies, we left participants no factual justification for escape to preferred egalitarian or inegalitarian positions in their judgments of justice. In our prior experiment, participants could justify wealth transfers to the lower classes in the high-meritocracy society by focusing on the 10% of the population who were working hard yet remained poor, or could justify greater wealth for the upper classes in the low-meritocracy society by focusing on the 10% of the population whose wealth was due to their own merit. In the present experiment, participants were squarely confronted with situations in which no one in the no-meritocracy condition had control over his or her fate and everyone in the perfect-meritocracy condition had full control of their fates.

Our study of the meritocracy variable as a potentially important structural influence on justice stems from evidence that laypeople and elites alike view merit-based disparities in outcomes as legitimate. Thus, studies of social justice that omit merit-based concerns likely overlook an important mediator of judgments of justice. Philosophical treatments of distributive justice often assign importance to the concept of deserts (see, e.g., Bénabou, 2000; Nozick, 1974; Roemer, 1995; Sen, 2000; Walzer, 1983; for a breakdown of different conceptions of economic deserts, see Soltan, 1987, chapter 12). Likewise, psychological and sociological research finds a strong link between attributions of personal responsibility for socioeconomic status and support for or opposition to welfare policies (see, e.g., Appelbaum, 2001; Furnham, 1982, 1985; Heaven, 1990; Skitka & Tetlock, 1993). And equity theory posits that proportionality in inputs and outputs is a fundamental norm of fairness (e.g., Adams, 1965; Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973). These bodies of work all indicate that as the connection tightens between individual merit and economic success in a society, inequality of wealth should be seen as more just.

We were also interested in the extent to which America is viewed as a meritocracy by its citizens. Linking participants' beliefs about American society to the hypothetical societies enables us to draw cautious inferences about attitudes toward the distribution of wealth in America from judgments of justice in the hypothetical societies.

Design Overview and Hypotheses

Participants judged the fairness of the same nine distributions of wealth for each hypothetical society: Society Zero (the no-meritocracy society), Society Half

(the moderate-meritocracy society), and Society One Hundred (the perfect-meritocracy society). Each of the nine distributions of wealth that participants evaluated was broken down into two socioeconomic classes (an upper class and a lower class), with mean incomes for a family of four specified for each class. The nine distributions were formed by combining three levels of income equality (low, medium, high) with three levels of overall prosperity (low, medium, high). Table 1 contains the distributions used in Experiment 1.

We crossed the level of equality and prosperity within the distributions because these two values are often considered, from econometric and ideological perspectives, to be at odds in societal income distributions. To achieve greater equality, it may be necessary to enact wealth redistribution policies that reduce incentives for investment and profit-making, and such redistributive measures are often "leaky" or inefficient as a result of the administrative costs of implementing them (see Dahrendorf, 1988; Okun, 1975). Furthermore, equality and prosperity are two values that liberals and conservatives have been found to prioritize differently (e.g., Rohrbaugh, McClelland, & Quinn, 1980), and thus trade-offs between equality and prosperity in the income distributions present a mechanism for testing the role of ideological value differences versus factual beliefs (here with regard to meritocracy) in fairness evaluations.

In these distributions of wealth, we placed all inhabitants at or above the poverty line in each society (defined as the level of income necessary to meet basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and health services) and informed participants of this fact. Although removing poverty line considerations lessens the hypothetical societies' similarity to real societies, we made this choice because in our prior research (Mitchell et al., 1993), participants were very unwilling to allow any persons to fall below the poverty line, regardless of the level of meritocracy in the hypothetical society. Hence, the poverty line apparently serves as an important threshold for value trade-offs in judgments of social justice.

Table 1. Hypothetical Income Distributions for Experiment 1

	Low equality	Medium equality	High equality
	(cell 1)	(cell 2)	(cell 3)
Low	$10,000	$14,000	$18,000
prosperity	$63,000	$59,000	$55,000
	(cell 4)	(cell 5)	(cell 6)
Medium	$13,000	$17,000	$21,000
prosperity	$66,000	$62,000	$58,000
	(cell 7)	(cell 8)	(cell 9)
High	$16,000	$20,000	$24,000
prosperity	$69,000	$65,000	$61,000

Note. Income distributions represent average incomes for families of four in the two socioeconomic classes in the hypothetical societies (i.e., each class represents 50% of the population). Cell 5 served as the preexisting distribution in the redistribution frame-of-reference condition.

To manipulate the frame of reference between participants, we asked half of them simply to evaluate the fairness of the nine possible distributions of wealth for each hypothetical society (the distribution frame-of-reference condition). The other half evaluated the fairness of the same nine distributions, presented as an existing distribution and eight possible redistributions that could be achieved through government action (the redistribution frame-of-reference condition). In the latter condition, the medium equality/medium prosperity distribution (cell 5 in Table 1) served as the existing distribution of wealth, and participants were told that the other eight distributions were formed by income transfers of varying efficiency (e.g., the high equality/medium prosperity redistribution was formed by an efficient transfer of $4,000 from the upper class to the lower class).

Most liberals and conservatives in modern democratic societies are not absolutists or ideologues; they are value pluralists. Value pluralists share many values but place different priorities on them or hold different beliefs about how best to achieve desired ends (see, e.g., Sniderman, Fletcher, Russell, & Tetlock, 1996). By priming different ethically significant situational features, different goals become more salient or defensible, so that judgments of justice have a cybernetic component operating within the bounds of personal values and beliefs (Mitchell et al., 1993). These findings led to the specific hypotheses we sought to test using the current version of the hypothetical societies paradigm.

Thus, we predicted that both liberal and conservative participants would find the level of meritocracy in the societies to be of ethical significance, and that when the relation between merit and outcomes was indisputable, the judgments of justice for liberals and conservatives would converge. In short, we predicted no significant differences between the justice judgments of liberals and conservatives for Societies Zero and One Hundred: In the no-meritocracy society, no legitimate justification exists for income inequality, and so participants should see distributions of greater equality as more just; in the perfect-meritocracy society, however, income inequality will be seen as fair because citizens are receiving their just deserts.

But what should happen in Society Half, where the relation between individual merit and outcomes is ambiguous because there is only a .50 correlation between merit and outcomes? The theoretical and empirical body of work on deserts and equity does not address this question, but we predicted that the ambiguity would be resolved in an ideologically consistent manner: Liberals, who tend to value equality more highly than conservatives, will view meritocracy as lacking and thus will endorse greater equality, whereas conservatives will see sufficient opportunity for advancement to justify inequality and will endorse greater prosperity. In this view, ideology serves as a cognitive filter that assimilates ambiguous evidence in a manner consistent with existing value orientations (see Popkin, 1994). In sum, we predicted that for all participants, an obligation to meritocracy will be sufficiently strong that where meritocracy is clearly lacking (Society Zero) or is clearly present (Society One Hundred), it will overcome personal political

ideology. In contrast, when meritocracy is ambiguous, personal ideology will push liberals and conservatives in opposite directions.

We also predicted that for all participants, the meritocracy manipulation would interact with the frame-of-reference manipulation. As meritocracy in a society increases, redistribution is likely to become less favored because incomes are earned and inequality is deemed legitimate. Under this view, it is "legitimate" possession (not the mere fact of possession) that triggers loss aversion in the social justice context. If this prediction is correct, then the redistribution frame of reference should have its greatest impact in the perfect-meritocracy condition, where inequalities of wealth are most justifiable. That is, in the redistribution frame-of-reference condition in Society One Hundred, the low-equality distributions (cells 1 to 3) should be considered more fair than in any other experimental condition.

Method

Experiment 1 used a 3 (level of meritocracy) × 2 (frame of reference) × 3 (level of equality) × 3 (level of prosperity) mixed factorial design. The frame-of-reference variable was manipulated between participants; the other variables were manipulated within participants. Accordingly, all participants were exposed to the three levels of the meritocracy variable in the form of the three hypothetical society descriptions (see the Appendix) and to the three levels of the equality and prosperity variables in the form of the same nine distributions of income for each society (see Table 1). Participants' evaluations of the respective fairness of the nine distributions of wealth for each society constituted the primary dependent variable.

Participants. The sample consisted of 140 students from the University of California at Berkeley (73 female, 67 male) who received credit in an undergraduate psychology course in exchange for their participation. Participants were run individually in groups of 2 to 15. In fewer than 10 cases, responses were erroneously recorded or missing, and these participants were excluded from analyses for those items.

Materials and procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to the distribution or redistribution frame-of-reference condition, with 70 participants in each group. Before completing the main experimental task, they completed an 18-item political orientation scale (adapted from Costantini & Craik, 1980) and answered questions about political self-identification and general demographics. The political orientation scale, which was used as the primary measure of liberalism/conservatism, asked participants to rate their level of support on a 4-point scale (1, not at all; 4, very much) for various governmental policies. Nine of the policies sought to achieve goals associated with liberal causes (e.g., federal health insurance for all); nine others represented goals associated with conservative causes (e.g., less government regulation of business). Using reverse scoring for conservative policies, such that higher negative scores represent greater support

for those policies, scores on the political orientation scale could range from −27 (maximum support for each conservative policy and no support for any liberal policy) to +27 (maximum support for each liberal policy and no support for any conservative policy).

After completing the background questionnaire, participants read about the "Ideal Societies Assessment Project," which described the fairness evaluation task for participants, and read about the first hypothetical society for which they would provide fairness evaluations (see the Appendix). After they were interviewed by the experimenter to ensure that they understood their task, participants were given the nine possible distributions of wealth for the first hypothetical society. Participants evaluated the fairness of each distribution on an 11-point scale (ranging from very fair to very unfair). Participants then performed the same task for the remaining two societies. Finally, participants answered questions about their strategies or reasons for rating the distributions as they did, and were asked which society (Zero, Half, or One Hundred) they believed to be most similar to American society.

In the distribution frame-of-reference condition, as noted above, participants were simply asked to evaluate nine possible distributions of wealth for each hypothetical society in turn. In the redistribution frame-of-reference condition, participants learned the exact ways in which the eight possible new distributions would differ from the existing distribution (cell 5 in Table 1) so as to make clear their effects among socioeconomic classes. Instructional materials explicitly stated the degree to which the new distribution would alter the level of equality and total wealth, if at all, and gave the absolute and percentage changes in wealth from the old to the new distribution. Participants were informed whether a redistribution was somewhat wasteful (some of the money would make it to the other class), one-to-one (each dollar would make it to the other class), or wealth-enhancing (more money would make it to the recipients than was taken from the donors). This was done to account for the fact that some redistributions resulted in lesser total wealth and some in greater total wealth than the original distribution because of the factorial structure of the nine distributions, which did not allow all redistribution to be one-to-one.

The redistributions of wealth occurred in both directions: from the more to the less wealthy, and vice versa. The existing distribution (cell 5 in Table 1) was included in the distributions for evaluation by explaining to the participants that one possibility was to remain with the status quo and have no redistribution occur.

The order of presentation of hypothetical societies and income distributions was counterbalanced across participants with the use of four presentation orders. As a control for income presentation effects, half of the participants received distributions in which the average income of the top class was presented on the top of the distribution, and half of the participants received distributions in which the average income of the bottom class was on top.

Results

To test our hypothesis that meritocracy and ideology would interact, with liberals and conservatives differing in their fairness evaluations only under conditions of ambiguous meritocracy (i.e., Society Half), we divided our participants into conservatives and liberals using a median split of composite scores on the political orientation scale, resulting in 72 persons being classified as conservative and 68 as liberal. Participant scores ranged from −12 to 19 on the scale, with a median score of 6. Therefore, our participant population was slightly skewed toward the liberal side of the scale. Composite scores on the political orientation scale correlated significantly with scores on a 7-point scale asking participants whether they consider themselves more liberal or more conservative ($r = -.60$, $p < .05$) and with scores on a 7-point scale asking whether participants tend to agree more often with the policies of the Republicans or Democrats ($r = .54$, $p < .05$). (An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests. Reported statistics are significant at this level unless otherwise indicated.)

Contrary to our hypothesis that liberals and conservatives would agree on the ethical significance of meritocracy for Societies Zero and One Hundred but disagree on its ethical significance for Society Half, we found that the fairness ratings of liberals and conservatives differed significantly at each level of meritocracy (i.e., across all three hypothetical societies).[1] In Society Zero, ideology exerted a main effect [$F(1, 138) = 4.85$]: Liberals rated each of the distributions as less fair than did conservatives, but both liberals and conservatives rated the high-equality distributions as most fair, followed by their ratings for the medium-equality distributions. In Society Half, ideology interacted with the equality variable only [$F(2, 276) = 4.27$]: Relative to the ratings of conservatives, liberals rated the high-equality distributions as more fair but rated all other distributions as less fair. Finally, in Society One Hundred, ideology again interacted only with equality [$F(2, 276) = 5.75$], with liberals rating the high-equality distributions as fairer than did conservatives.

Therefore, judgments of justice differed depending on the societal reward structure, but the ethical significance attached to the societal reward structure depended on the political orientation of the observer. Across all levels of meritocracy, liberals and conservatives differed in their fairness evaluations, with liberals viewing more egalitarian distributions as fairer than did conservatives—even in Society One Hundred—but with both ideological groups altering their fairness evaluations as the level of meritocracy changed.

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[1] Preliminary tests for effects of sex and order of presentation of the society descriptions revealed no significant differences for either of these variables.

We next tested our hypothesis that the frame-of-reference manipulation would affect fairness evaluations only when wealth was earned, or, stated alternatively, that participants would not be particularly troubled by the redistribution of wealth in Society Zero, where wealth was unearned. If redistributive concerns depend on the legitimacy of wealth disparities, then the frame-of-reference variable should have exerted a main effect in the perfect-meritocracy condition and perhaps in the moderate-meritocracy condition, where wealth is partially attributable to personal merit.

Consistent with our primary hypothesis, the frame-of-reference manipulation exerted a main effect on fairness ratings for Societies Half and One Hundred [$F(1, 138) = 16.37$ and $F(1, 138) = 29.97$, respectively], but not for Society Zero. However, the frame-of-reference variable interacted significantly with the equality and prosperity variables for each hypothetical society [$F(4, 552) = 9.31$ for Society Zero; $F(4, 552) = 9.49$ for Society Half; $F(4, 552) = 6.64$ for Society One Hundred].

Unlike the meritocracy variable, the frame-of-reference manipulation affected liberals and conservatives in the same way. The judgments of liberals and conservatives did not differ significantly between the frame-of-reference conditions for any of the societies [the test for an interaction between the political orientation and frame-of-reference variables yielded the following F values for each level of the meritocracy variable: for Society Zero, $F(1, 136) = .09$; for Society Half, $F(1, 136) = 1.05$; for Society One Hundred, $F(1, 136) = 0$; all n.s.].

Therefore, we found partial support for the hypothesis that redistributional concerns come most into play for liberals and conservatives when earned incomes are being transferred, but we also observed that the redistribution mindset affected concerns about the appropriate mix of equality and prosperity in all three societies. In other words, the perspective for judging social justice held ethical significance, but this significance differed depending on the meritocracy of the society. As the following descriptive statistics illustrate, fairness evaluations for Societies Half and One Hundred in the redistribution frame-of-reference condition tended to move upward, toward greater unfairness, relative to evaluations in the distribution frame-of-reference condition, but in all three societies the redistribution frame affected the relative weights attached to equality and prosperity.

Tables 2 to 4 present mean fairness ratings by condition. A review of these fairness ratings suggests that participants in the redistribution frame-of-reference condition generally judged distributions of low equality and/or low prosperity to be less fair than did participants in the distribution frame-of-reference condition (i.e., movements from the existing moderate equality/moderate prosperity distribution toward less equality or prosperity, as made salient in the redistribution frame, were considered less fair).

In the redistribution frame-of-reference condition, for Society Zero, all three distributions having greater equality, greater prosperity, or both (i.e., cells 6, 8,

Table 2. Experiment 1: Mean Fairness Ratings for Income Distributions in Society Zero

Distribution frame of reference ($n = 70$)	Low equality	Medium equality	High equality
Low prosperity	9.07 (2.54)	7.04 (2.36)	5.93 (2.83)
Medium prosperity	8.79 (2.19)	6.84 (2.39)	5.13 (2.83)
High prosperity	8.77 (2.26)	6.50 (2.50)	4.94 (2.90)
Redistribution frame of reference ($n = 70$)	Low equality	Medium equality	High equality
Low prosperity	9.69 (2.41)	8.00 (2.72)	5.99 (2.61)
Medium prosperity	9.44 (1.92)	6.84 (2.01)	3.97 (2.54)
High prosperity	8.83 (2.26)	4.36 (2.88)	3.36 (2.90)

Note. Participants rated the fairness of each distribution on an 11-point scale (1, very fair; 11, very unfair). SDs are in parentheses.

Table 3. Experiment 1: Mean Fairness Ratings for Income Distributions in Society Half

Distribution frame of reference ($n = 70$)	Low equality	Medium equality	High equality
Low prosperity	8.67 (2.18)	6.10 (1.83)	5.29 (2.38)
Medium prosperity	7.61 (2.12)	5.21 (2.00)	4.37 (2.18)
High prosperity	7.21 (2.40)	4.64 (2.20)	3.96 (2.40)
Redistribution frame of reference ($n = 70$)	Low equality	Medium equality	High equality
Low prosperity	9.71 (1.80)	7.90 (2.82)	6.81 (2.37)
Medium prosperity	9.06 (1.69)	5.76 (2.57)	5.06 (2.50)
High prosperity	8.20 (2.16)	3.49 (2.14)	3.73 (2.66)

Note. Participants rated the fairness of each distribution on an 11-point scale (1, very fair; 11, very unfair). SDs are in parentheses.

Table 4. Experiment 1: Mean Fairness Ratings for Income Distributions in Society One Hundred

Distribution frame of reference ($n = 70$)	Low equality	Medium equality	High equality
Low prosperity	6.74 (3.04)	5.43 (2.11)	5.20 (2.57)
Medium prosperity	5.84 (2.60)	4.57 (1.98)	4.41 (2.56)
High prosperity	5.26 (2.85)	4.14 (2.13)	4.06 (2.85)
Redistribution frame of reference ($n = 70$)	Low equality	Medium equality	High equality
Low prosperity	9.07 (2.50)	7.67 (2.97)	7.61 (2.60)
Medium prosperity	8.00 (2.75)	4.19 (2.83)	5.89 (3.39)
High prosperity	6.81 (3.06)	3.44 (2.28)	5.01 (3.46)

Note. Participants rated the fairness of each distribution on an 11-point scale (1, very fair; 11, very unfair). SDs are in parentheses.

and 9 vs. cell 5 in Table 1) were judged to be more fair. Thus, transfers of wealth to improve the standing of the bottom class relative to the top class were deemed fair. For Societies One Hundred and Half, where meritocracy was moderate or perfect, participants who were told that moves toward higher equality would noticeably reduce the existing level of prosperity of the top class (cells 3, 6, and 9 vs. cell 5 in Table 1) seemed to view these income transfers to be less fair. In general, the redistribution frame of reference made people more sensitive to the fairness of transfers of wealth that would make all citizens less well off, but we see particular concern about redistributions that would increase the standing of the lower class at the expense of the top class when existing income inequality is due in whole or part to individual merit.

In the distribution frame-of-reference condition, where participants had no a priori reason to give special consideration to any of the distributions, a somewhat different pattern of results holds. Participants generally rated the distributions higher in both equality and prosperity as more fair. Table 2 shows that the high-equality distributions were judged fairer on average than any of the other distributions in Society Zero; thus, increasing equality seems to have been of greatest concern for this society. Tables 3 and 4 show that the strategy for fairness ratings seems to shift toward balancing greater prosperity and greater equality in Societies Half and One Hundred. In each of these societies, where greater justification for inequality existed, participants rated the high prosperity/high equality distribution most fair on average, but they also rated the high prosperity/moderate equality distribution fairer on average than the low prosperity/high equality distribution. Thus, the goal of achieving high equality, which seemed to be the primary concern in the no-meritocracy condition, became less of a concern in the moderate- and perfect-meritocracy conditions.

Participants' self-reports of the factor most important in their fairness evaluations corroborate the notion that equality concerns differed across the experimental conditions. Across all conditions, level of equality was most often listed as the most important concern in fairness evaluations (with 33% of participants naming this factor), but participants in the distribution frame-of-reference condition focused much more often on equality than did participants in the redistribution frame-of-reference condition (27% vs. 5.8% of participants chose level of equality as the most important factor in evaluating all of the distributions). Further, the focus on equality decreased as meritocracy increased: 44% of participants listed level of equality as the most important concern for Society Zero, versus 29.5% for Society Half and 26.6% for Society One Hundred.

Also noteworthy are participants' responses to the question about which of the hypothetical societies was most comparable to American society. These responses revealed that participants overwhelmingly viewed the reward structure in the United States as imperfect and ambiguous: 90% of all participants rated Society Half as most comparable to American society, whereas only 7% chose Society One Hundred and 2% chose Society Zero.

Experiment 2: Characteristics of Wealth Transfer Policies

Whereas Experiment 1 focused on societal background features that may shape fairness evaluations (in particular, meritocracy level and whether the society is establishing or reordering the distribution of wealth), Experiment 2 focused on features of wealth redistribution policies themselves that may affect perceptions of fairness. In this experiment, we specifically examined the impact of (1) level of efficiency of a wealth redistribution program, (2) identity of the recipients of benefits from this program (transfers from the wealthiest class to the poorest class only or to the poorest class and middle class), and (3) participation criteria in the form of a work requirement versus simple class membership (i.e., we compared reactions to a "workfare" program versus a more standard welfare program). We focused on these structural features because, although prominent in economic and political debates, they have received little attention in empirical studies of lay judgments of the fairness of public aid policy.

Economists often emphasize the inefficiency of taxation and welfare policies in bringing about the redistribution of wealth (see Browning & Johnson, 1984; Cook & Pearlman, 1981; Okun, 1975), and politicians often make arguments about governmental waste to support efforts to reduce governmental programs. Some citizens may see such inefficiency or waste as sufficient grounds to oppose redistributions, whereas others may emphasize the greater marginal utility of transferred income to the less wealthy and thus support redistribution despite inefficiencies. The crucial question becomes at what level of (in)efficiency, if any, the first group of persons becomes willing to support redistribution and the second group becomes willing to oppose redistribution. A related question concerns whether there are identifiable groups of persons who are more or less sensitive to redistributive inefficiencies. By varying the efficiency of income transfers in a hypothetical society along a continuum, we can assess where individuals' fairness evaluations shift in terms of efficiency level.

Our second independent variable in this experiment concerned the class of persons who will benefit from wealth transfers. In one experimental condition, we spread any benefits from the redistribution program between the middle and lowest classes; in a second condition, we directed the benefits to only the lowest class. We included this variable to test the importance to participants of directing benefits to the most disadvantaged (as a need-based norm of fairness would direct; see Braybrooke, 1987, for a discussion of the concept of need in normative accounts of justice) versus distributing benefits in such a way as to increase the relative standing of all groups (as an equality-based norm would direct).

Finally, we investigated the effect of characterizing wealth transfers as unconditional welfare payment improvement measures versus characterizing the transfers as part of a workfare program (i.e., as part of a program in which, to receive benefits, the recipients had to be employed). This manipulation tests the role of equity or deserts in the fairness evaluations of governmental policies, a

question that has been little examined within the social-psychological research on equity (see Tyler & Smith, 1998). If equity norms are strong even with respect to governmental public aid policies, then tying redistribution benefits to work requirements should increase the perceived fairness of the redistributions and should bode well as a political matter for advocates of a continued move from welfare to workfare, as occurred on the federal level with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.

Design Overview and Hypotheses

Participants read about a proposed governmental program for Society Half that would involve taxing some groups to give benefits to other, less wealthy groups. The task for participants was to evaluate the fairness of income distributions that resulted from different versions of the redistributive policy. We used only Society Half in this experiment so as to manage the complexity of the experiment and because participants in Experiment 1 found that hypothetical society to be most similar to American society.

We again predicted that each of our variables would exert different effects on fairness evaluations depending on the ideology of the participants, particularly because we placed all judgments in the context of Society Half, where an imperfect relation between individual merit and outcomes exists. In particular, we predicted first that conservative respondents would be more sensitive than liberal respondents to the efficiency and workfare manipulations, on the basis of Christiansen and Lavine's (1997) finding that conservatives in a mock allocation task weighed personal responsibility and efficiency more heavily in their allocation decisions than did liberals (see also Skitka, 1999). That is, conservatives, who are likely to be generally opposed to a restructuring of wealth in Society Half given a reward structure that gives individuals some control over their fates, are likely to see efficient transfers tied to the requirement that recipients must work to get benefits as the least of the evils and rate these transfers as most fair.

Second, we predicted that liberals, who are likely to view Society Half's ambiguous meritocracy structure as keeping a large number of persons impoverished for reasons at least partially beyond their control, would be more concerned about addressing the needs of the poorest class than increasing the standing of the middle class relative to the upper class. Accordingly, liberals should rate the transfers entirely directed to the poorest class to be more fair than transfers directed to both the poorest and middle class. Conservatives' general opposition to the redistribution of wealth was not expected to be moderated by the identity of the beneficiaries.

Method

Experiment 2 used a 5 (level of efficiency) × 2 (recipient of benefits: poor only or poorest and middle classes) × 2 (program type: welfare vs. workfare)

mixed factorial design. The level-of-efficiency variable was tested within participants; the remaining variables were tested between participants. The dependent variable of primary interest in Experiment 2 was again fairness evaluations of the hypothetical society income distributions.

Participants. The sample consisted of 132 participants (81 female, 49 male, 2 unreported), of whom 96 were students from the University of California at Berkeley who received credit in an undergraduate psychology course in exchange for their participation; the other 36 were recruited from the local community and received payments of $2 or $3 for their participation of less than 1 hour. We recruited these non-student participants in an effort to increase the diversity of our sample.

Materials and procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four between-participants experimental conditions (i.e., the four conditions resulting from crossing the two recipient-of-benefits conditions with the two program types, welfare and workfare). Participants completed a questionnaire containing demographic and individual difference measures similar to those used in Experiment 1. We slightly revised our political orientation scale to include 16 items that asked participants to rate on a 7-point scale their level of agreement with various statements about the role of government. The items were scored such that lower composite scores on the scale represented more liberal responses and higher scores represented more conservative responses.

Participants then read a description of the "Ideal Societies Assessment Project" that set out their task and read a description of Society Half, which was the same as that used in Experiment 1 (see the Appendix). They learned about a proposed government program for Society Half that would involve taxing the wealthiest class to invest in a job benefits program to benefit either the poorest class or both the middle and poorest classes, depending on the recipient-of-benefits condition. (To operationalize this recipient-of-benefits variable, we had to expand the number of socioeconomic classes in Society Half from two, as used in Experiment 1, to three: wealthiest, middle, and poorest.) Also, participants in the workfare condition were informed that the program required potential recipients to work in order to receive benefits; participants in the welfare condition simply learned that wealth transfers were being made, without any information regarding conditions on the receipt of benefits.

In addition, participants were told that some versions of the redistributive program were more efficient than others. Indeed, some versions of the program were completely inefficient (meaning none of the money taken from the upper class made it to the lower classes); other versions of the program were extremely efficient and even wealth-generating (meaning that more money made it to the lower classes than was taken from the upper class). Table 5 provides the specific distributions of wealth that would result under the five different versions of the wealth transfer program. These distributions were achieved by applying an efficiency factor or multiplier to a $4,000 tax on the wealthiest class. As Table 5 shows, the total income in each distribution was held constant across the two

Table 5. Hypothetical Income Distributions for Experiment 2

	Wealthiest class	Middle class	Poorest class
Baseline distribution	$100,000	$32,000	$15,000
After transfer to poorest class only			
Multiplier: 0	$96,000	$32,000	$15,000
$^1/_2$	96,000	32,000	17,000
1	96,000	32,000	19,000
2	96,000	32,000	23,000
4	96,000	32,000	31,000
After transfer to middle and poorest classes			
Multiplier: 0	$96,000	$32,000	$15,000
$^1/_2$	96,000	33,000	16,000
1	96,000	34,000	17,000
2	96,000	36,000	19,000
4	96,000	40,000	23,000

Note. Income distributions represent average incomes for families of four in the bottom, middle, and top thirds of the population. The baseline distribution represents the preexisting distribution. Distributions after transfers represent distributions resulting from taxation of $4,000 to the wealthiest class and redistribution of income to the poorest class only or to the middle and poorest classes. Multiplier level represents the efficiency or inefficiency of the $4,000 transfer.

levels of the recipient-of-benefits variable; the distributions at each efficiency level differed only in whether the redistributed income went to the poorest class only or was equally split between the poorest and middle classes.

Ratings of the fairness of the resulting redistributions of wealth constituted our primary dependent variable. Participants first rated the fairness of the existing distribution of wealth in Society Half (the "baseline distribution") and then rated the fairness of the five potential distributions that would result from the redistributive policies under consideration by the government of Society Half. All ratings were made on a 9-point scale, with 1 representing "extremely unfair" and 9 representing "extremely fair." As a control for possible order effects, half of the participants rated the fairness of distributions in order of increasing multiplier level (i.e., in order of least to most efficient transfer) and half rated the distributions in order of decreasing multiplier level.

Results

Independent-samples *t* tests revealed no differences in responses between the paid and unpaid participants. Sex of respondent exerted a main effect on fairness ratings [$F(1, 121) = 8.01$] but interacted with none of the independent

variables.[2] Female and male fairness ratings did not significantly differ for the baseline distribution or the distribution generated by efficiency factor 0, but did significantly differ with respect to the distributions generated by efficiency factor $^1/_2$ [$F(1, 128) = 5.70$], factor 1 [$F(1, 128) = 6.68$], factor 2 [$F(1, 127) = 7.06$], and factor 4 [$F(1, 128) = 8.30$]. Females rated each of these latter four distributions to be fairer than did males (mean ratings of 4.49 vs. 3.72 at efficiency factor level $^1/_2$, 4.92 vs. 4.10 at factor level 1, 5.16 vs. 4.31 at factor level 2, and 5.37 vs. 4.34 at factor level 4).

Order of presentation interacted significantly with efficiency level [$F(4, 492) = 6.57$], with the 0 and $^1/_2$ efficiency distributions being rated as more fair in the increasing order than in the decreasing order. However, this difference did not change the overall pattern of results, and so the remaining results are presented as collapsed across the order-of-presentation factor.

A test for differences between the fairness ratings of conservatives and liberals, using a liberalism/conservatism median split based on composite scores on the political orientation scale,[3] revealed a significant ideology × efficiency × program type interaction [$F(4, 484) = 4.35$]. Specification of participant sex as a covariate did not alter this result. Therefore, we found support for our general hypothesis that persons of different political orientations would be differentially affected by the independent variables.

Separate analyses of the responses of liberal and conservative participants to test our more specific hypotheses revealed that the efficiency variable interacted differently with the program type variable across the two groups, but interacted similarly with the recipient-of-benefits variable across the two ideological groups. First, with respect to the interaction between the efficiency and program type variables, conservatives judged new distributions to be fairer as efficiency increased, but only in the workfare condition [$F(4, 232) = 6.74$]. No such interaction was found with respect to the responses of liberals. Type of program exerted no significant main or interactive effects on liberals' fairness ratings.

Figure 1 illustrates the differences between ideological groups in the effect of the efficiency and workfare manipulations. Notably, conservatives rated only distributions resulting from high-efficiency transfers made under a workfare program to be fairer than the baseline distribution, whereas liberals rated distri-

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[2] We performed analysis of variance and analysis of covariance tests on the independent variables, using participants' ratings of the fairness of the baseline distribution as a covariate. Because the two types of tests yielded the same pattern of results, we report only the statistics yielded by analysis of variance.

[3] Possible composite scores on the political orientation scale ranged from 16 (most liberal) to 112 (most conservative), with a neutral midpoint score of 64. As in Experiment 1, participants' scores on the political orientation scale in Experiment 2 were slightly skewed toward the liberal side, with a median composite score of 61. Roughly equal percentages of student and non-student participants were classified as liberals and conservatives using the median split: for students, 49 liberals and 47 conservatives; for non-students who fully answered the scale questions, 17 liberals and 16 conservatives.
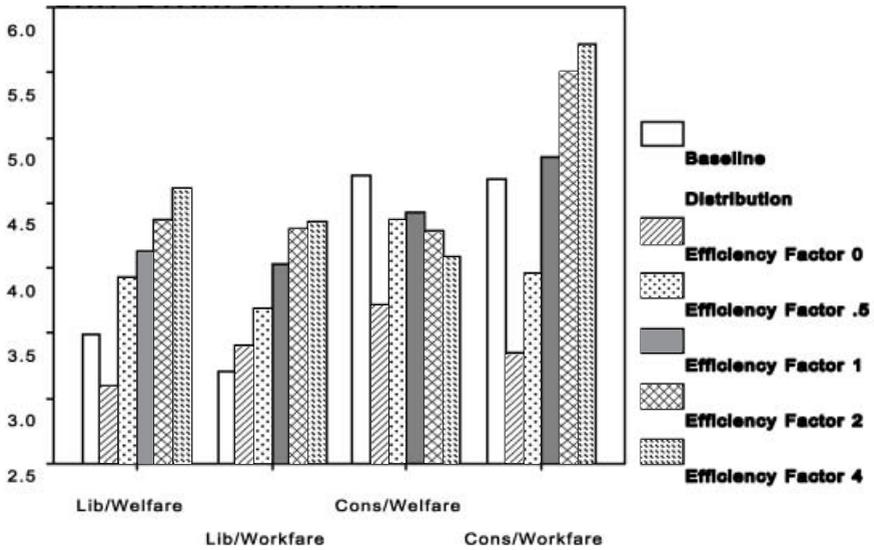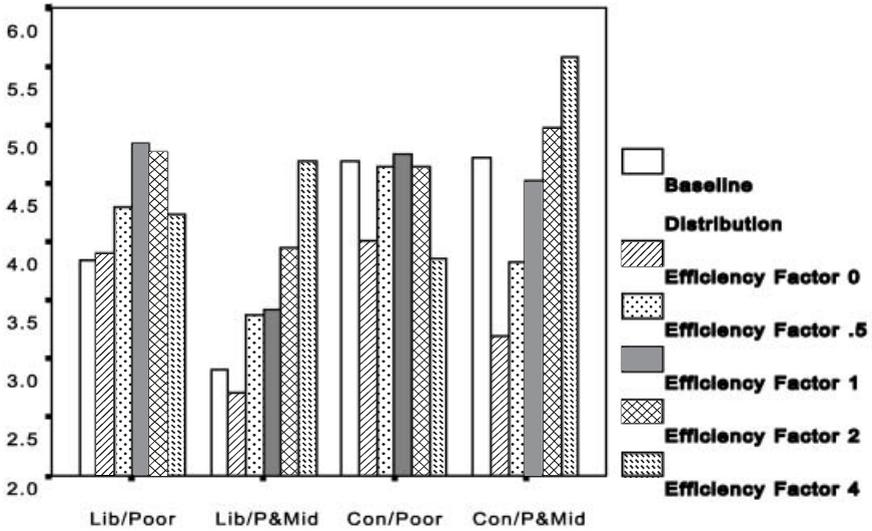
Mean Fairness Ratings

Figure 1. Mean fairness ratings by ideology and program type (Experiment 2). Participants rated
the fairness of each distribution on a 9-point scale (1, extremely unfair; 9, extremely fair).
Note: Participants rated the fairness of each distribution on a 1 to 9 scale, with 1 representing
Extremely Unfair and 9 representing Extremely Fair.

butions resulting from even moderately efficient income transfers to be fairer than
the baseline distribution. Therefore, consistent with our hypothesis, conservatives
generally did not see redistribution as fair unless it was highly efficient and tied
to work requirements.

   Second, and contrary to our hypothesis that only liberals would be concerned
with who receives the benefits of the wealth transfer program, the responses of
both conservatives and liberals showed a sensitivity to the recipient-of-benefits
variable. In particular, this variable interacted with the efficiency variable to affect
judgments of fairness [$F(4, 232) = 9.59$ for conservatives; $F(4, 236) = 8.45$ for
liberals]. And as Figure 2 illustrates, both groups showed a similar trend in their
responses to the combinations of the efficiency and recipient-of-benefits variables.

   With respect to transfers made only to the poorest class, both groups showed
a curvilinear trend, with fairness ratings peaking for transfers of perfect efficiency.
Note that the ultra-efficient transfers to the poorest class only would virtually elim-
inate any disparity between the poorest and middle class (top half of Table 5),
possibly explaining the depressed fairness ratings for these highly efficient
transfers benefiting only the poorest class. In hindsight, we should have predicted

Mean Fairness Ratings

Figure 2. Mean fairness ratings by ideology and recipient of benefits (Experiment 2). Participants rated the fairness of each distribution on a 9-point scale (1, extremely unfair; 9, extremely fair). Note: Participants rated the fairness of each distribution on a 1 to 9 scale, with 1 representing Extremely Unfair and 9 representing Extremely Fair.

that at least conservatives would have been concerned about maintaining some separation between the classes, given the at least partially earned nature of this separation.

With respect to transfers made to the middle class and poorest class, both groups showed a linear trend upward in their fairness ratings as efficiency increased, but liberals on average rated all of the new distributions to be less fair than did conservatives. Also of note is the fact that liberals saw the initial distribution as significantly less fair than conservatives, with average ratings of 3.3 versus 4.7 on a 9-point scale [$t(126) = -4.53$] (mean ratings of the baseline distribution for liberals and conservatives across conditions are shown in Figures 1 and 2). Moreover, liberals viewed most of the redistributions as fairer than the baseline distribution, whereas conservatives viewed the baseline distribution as fairer than most of the redistributions. This difference in evaluations of the baseline distribution likely accounts in part for the different reactions by liberals and conservatives to the different levels and types of wealth transfer formed by the combination of independent variables.

The results of this experiment suggest that conservative respondents used an equity-based evaluation process when judging the fairness of the redistribution

(hence the greater emphasis on the workfare transfers), whereas liberal respondents focused more on bringing the economic standing of the classes closer together, even by means of inefficient or wasteful transfers at times. These results can also be seen as consistent with our hypothesis from Experiment 1 that conservatives and liberals would react differently to the moderate-meritocracy conditions of Society Half, with liberals being more likely to see this society as too random and inequitable and thus more likely to seek greater equality.

Discussion

Our results demonstrate the importance of distinguishing between value and factual influences on judgments of social justice: Although political ideology exerted some significant influences on fairness evaluations, the nature of these effects depended crucially on the factual background prevailing in the hypothetical society at issue (see Tetlock, 1994; Tetlock & Mitchell, 1993). In both experiments, structural features of the distributive setting affected judgments of justice in significant ways.

In Experiment 1, when meritocracy was moderate to high, liberals emphasized equality in their fairness evaluations to a greater extent than did conservatives. When no meritocracy existed (Society Zero), liberals found all possible distributions (none of which substantially closed the income gap between the richest and poorest members of the society) to be less fair than did conservatives. Nonetheless, in that society we saw the same pattern of fairness evaluations expressed by liberals and conservatives, with all respondents favoring greater equality in the distributions of wealth (although liberals' preference for equality was stronger even in this case).

In Experiment 2, conservatives' fairness evaluations were sensitive to the structure of the transfer program, with workfare transfers being deemed fairer than unconditional welfare transfers, but liberals' fairness evaluations were independent of the type of transfer program at issue (see Skitka & Tetlock, 1992). However, both conservatives and liberals distinguished between income transfers directed only at the poorest class versus transfers designed to benefit the poorest and middle classes. When benefits were directed only at the poor, both groups exhibited a ceiling effect on fairness evaluations, and highly efficient transfers that would greatly equalize the poorest and middle class were deemed less fair than moderately efficient transfers that maintained greater economic distance between the lowest and middle classes. Therefore, in Experiment 2, where all fairness evaluations took place in the context of Society Half, both liberals and conservatives seemed sensitive to preserving some degree of economic superiority for those in the middle class, who have arguably propelled themselves out of the poorest class by their own merit.

Overall, we found strong evidence that perceived level of meritocracy in a society and other structural features of the distributive environment exert consid-

erable influence on fairness evaluations and interact in important ways with ideology. Consistent with a view that ideology matters in judgments of social justice, liberals and conservatives did differ in their fairness evaluations, but these differences depended on the context in which fairness evaluations were made.

One important feature of the distributive context that affected liberals and conservatives alike was the frame of reference from which judgments of social justice were made (Experiment 1). Placing participants in a redistributive mindset, where takings from one group for redistribution to another group became salient, seemed to increase sensitivity to the meritocracy level in the hypothetical societies regardless of political orientation. In Societies Half and One Hundred, both liberals and conservatives who evaluated distributions in a redistributive mindset rated the distributions generally to be less fair than did liberals and conservatives who evaluated the same distributions in a distributive mindset. This finding suggests that concerns about divestiture of earned property affected fairness ratings.

However, we also found that the frame-of-reference manipulation affected the relative weight placed on equality versus efficiency in fairness ratings in all three societies, including Society Zero, with distributions resulting in less equality or less prosperity being viewed as less fair when evaluated in the redistributive mindset (in which all eight redistributions represented some loss of wealth or standing for some group). This finding suggests that cognitive processes related to loss aversion or concerns beyond simple protection of earned property also played some role in fairness evaluations from the redistributional perspective. Our study was well designed to test for differences between distributive and redistributive mindsets, but not to examine the psychological factors that may underlie any differences between the mindsets.

Therefore, future studies should seek to better disentangle the cognitive, motivational, and affective processes behind this frame-of-reference effect, but the finding that frame of reference matters empirically raises questions about the advisability of drawing simple inferences from what is deemed just in a new, unordered society to what will be just in an existing, reordered society. For philosophers, the question raised by this finding is whether the different concerns primed by the different mindsets should count in a normative theory of justice. For politicians, who do not have the luxury of excluding variables by theoretical fiat, the question is how best to justify or frame redistributive policy in light of these concerns, if redistribution is to occur.

The overriding impression from both experiments is that people's judgments of fairness reasonably took into account situational information hypothesized to be important by justice theorists and researchers. Experiment 1 revealed that level of meritocracy and frame of reference can exert important effects on fairness evaluations. As the relationship between merit and socioeconomic status increases, for instance, concerns about equality remain high but less central as concerns about prosperity increase. And in Experiment 2, we found that as the efficiency of income transfers increased, the judged fairness of these transfers increased as

well, but only up to the point that the income disparity between the poorest and middle classes was not erased. In other words, maintaining some inequality in light of the equity conditions was judged to be more important than simply endorsing a highly efficient transfer program.

With respect to this latter finding, an interesting future question is whether the spreading of benefits under conditions of no meritocracy and perfect meritocracy would similarly affect fairness ratings. We only examined the recipient-of-benefits variable in Society Half (where meritocracy was moderate), and so we cannot determine how meritocracy would interact with this variable. However, it is likely that people would favor transfers directed solely at the poor under conditions of no meritocracy, so that the lot of the unfortunate and undeserving poor could be most improved, but would express great opposition to transfers aimed only at the poor under conditions of perfect meritocracy.

The importance of better understanding how fairness evaluations depend on the interaction of ideology and beliefs about meritocracy is heightened by our finding that the vast majority of participants viewed the level of meritocracy in America as ambiguous. Ninety percent of the participants in Experiment 1 believed American society most resembled Society Half. If in American society, as in our hypothetical societies, ambiguity increases the likelihood of manifestation of ideological differences, then our findings suggest that ideological conflict is likely in the United States in the realm of societal distributive justice. Participants all along the political spectrum viewed the reward structure of American society in ambiguous terms. In resolving this ambiguity, conservatives seemed more attentive to a wider range of situational factors to help make decisions about the fairness of different distributive policies, whereas liberals seemed more predisposed to favor greater equality regardless of additional situational information. Liberals may well see conditions of moderate meritocracy as leading to an unacceptable degree of random outcomes and thus may end the search for additional situational information, whereas conservatives may see such conditions as opportunities to succeed at least half of the time and thus may be more open to further information in forming their fairness evaluations.

In addition, the importance of the workfare and meritocracy manipulations in these experiments highlights the need to examine more closely the concept of deserts in the social justice context. As Skocpol (1988, 1992) has shown, the notion of deservingness for state assistance contained within American social policy after the Civil War initially limited itself to soldiers and mothers; since then it has contracted and expanded depending on the success of individualist, market-oriented, and anti-statist attacks. Following Skocpol, understanding why certain welfare policies attain the status of political and cultural legitimation depends importantly on lay notions of deservingness, group solidarity, and social compassion (for some recent insights with respect to the role of compassion and empathy in attitudes toward public assistance, see Huddy, Jones, & Chard, 2001; Lane, 2001).

Conclusions

Together our findings strongly suggest that polarity in welfare attitudes results from a confluence of factors, including real-world ambiguity about ethically significant causal relations and other facts, different sensitivities to ethically significant features of the distributive environment (depending on the salience of these features), and value differences. Lay conceptions of social justice range between positions considered liberal and conservative, but the degree of support for the various conceptions of justice shifts as a function of primed situational factors. Therefore, the task of justice researchers should be phrased not as determining what people think is just, but more specifically as determining under what conditions different views of justice prevail across and within individuals (see Frohlich & Oppenheimer, 1997, 2000; Scott et al., 2001; Tetlock, 1986, 1996). In this way, particularly through the use of a flexible methodology such as the hypothetical societies paradigm used here, researchers may disentangle value-based, belief-based, and situation-based determinants to better assess when and why people disagree over what is just and fair.

APPENDIX: Instructions to Participants and Hypothetical Society Descriptions

Ideal Societies Assessment Project

Please read this page and then go on to the next pages. If you have any questions during the experiment, *please ask*. It is important that you read all of the information provided, understand what you have read, and keep the information in mind as you finish the questionnaire. You may refer back to any materials throughout the experiment. *At the end of the experiment you will be asked questions about the information presented.*

We will be asking you to read about hypothetical societies and make judgments about these societies. We are interested in what you think are more or less just distributions of wealth given the information you are told about these imaginary societies. This is a chance for you to tell us what you think is a fair distribution of wealth under various social conditions.

As you read the following materials, imagine that you are an outside observer to the societies described. Your task is *not* to imagine yourself as a member of any specific social class in the societies described; instead, we wish you to consider how the societal conditions described are related to the whole range of classes. We are interested in your ideas about how society as a whole should be organized when your own personal interests are not at stake.

Society Zero

Zero is a self-governing society. The people of Zero come from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. There is a broad variety of unskilled, technical, and professional jobs within Zero. *The poverty line in Zero is $10,000*, meaning that this amount of money will provide basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, and health services to a four-person family.

The distribution of wealth in Zero is totally unrelated to individual effort and ability. That is, *individual effort and ability play no role in socioeconomic status in Zero.* Instead, luck (being in the right place at the right time), the wealth of one's family, and having contacts in "high places" determine how well one will do in this society. Working hard, taking risks, and investing time and effort to acquire skills that other people value do not pay off in Zero *(this applies to persons of all classes).* One also cannot count on individual effort and ability to maintain one's socioeconomic status. Upward *and* downward mobility in Zero are never within an individual's control. *In short, people in Zero cannot predict whether they will get ahead based solely on how hard they work or on how talented they are.* There is no relationship between how well one does and how hard one works in Zero.

Society Half

Half is a self-governing society. The people of Half come from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. There is a broad variety of unskilled, technical, and professional jobs within Half. *The poverty line in Half is $10,000*, meaning that this amount of money will provide basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, and health services to a four-person family.

The distribution of wealth in Half is, to a moderate degree, related to individual effort and ability. That is, *individual effort and ability are moderate predictors of socioeconomic status in Half, determining 50% of financial outcomes; 50% of financial outcomes are due to factors unrelated to individual effort and ability.* Luck (being in the right place at the right time), the wealth of one's family, and having contacts in "high places" determine, half the time, how well one will do in this society. Working hard, taking risks, and investing time and effort to acquire skills that other people value pays off half the time in Half (*this applies to persons of all classes*). Upward *and* downward mobility in Half are determined by individual merit 50% of the time. *In short, people in Half have a moderate chance of getting ahead based solely on their hard work and talent.* Hard work and self-initiative pay off half the time in Half.

Society One Hundred

One Hundred is a self-governing society. The people of One Hundred come from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. There is a broad variety of

unskilled, technical, and professional jobs within One Hundred. *The poverty line in One Hundred is* $*10,000*, meaning that this amount of money will provide basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, and health services to a four-person family.

The distribution of wealth in One Hundred is perfectly related to individual effort and ability. That is, *individual effort and ability are perfect predictors of socioeconomic status in One Hundred, determining 100% of financial outcomes; financial outcomes are never due to factors unrelated to individual effort and ability.* Working hard, taking risks, and investing time and effort to acquire skills that other people value pays off every time in One Hundred (*this applies to persons of all classes*). Luck (being in the right place at the right time), the wealth of one's family, and having contacts in "high places" play *no* role in how well one will do in this society. One also can count on individual effort and ability to maintain one's socioeconomic status. Upward *and* downward mobility in One Hundred are determined by individual merit 100% of the time. *In short, people in One Hundred have an excellent chance of getting ahead based solely on their hard work and talent.* If you want to get ahead in One Hundred you can; hard work and self-initiative always pay off in One Hundred.

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