Subjectivity and the Economic Inequality Conundrum: Considering the American Case

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Abstract: *This research takes as its predicate the contradiction between growing survey evidence that Americans are aware of, and bothered by, increasing economic inequality, on the one hand, and popular support at the ballot box for policies and politicians who exacerbate that inequality, on the other. Polls show lopsided majorities voicing discontent at the fact that the wealthiest 1% of U.S. households now accounts for more than one-fifth of the total annual national income. No matter what distributional metric is utilized, one bottom-line fact is beyond dispute: over the past 30 years, the (very) rich have gotten richer—at rates unprecedented since the Gilded Age—while median household income has remained stagnant since the 1970s and actually fallen since the 2008 financial crisis. While survey data have steadily grown to document the mass public's dissatisfaction with this state of affairs, federal and state electoral outcomes (in 2010 and thereafter), along with fiscal policymaking traceable to such cases of collective choice, reveal a different picture. If majorities of American voters recognize and detest the dimensions of cumulative economic inequality, why does this not translate into perceptible policy-driven behavior at the ballot box? In this research we report a pair of Q studies that, we argue, can contribute to a freshened methodological perspective on this conundrum. When the issue of economic inequality is investigated from an intensive, Q-methodological standpoint that abandons the constricting logic and dictates of the large-sample survey, what we find is a more compelling yet complex and ambivalent understanding of inequality than has heretofore emerged from large-sample surveys seeking to calibrate public sentiment toward economic opportunity, fairness and inequality in contemporary America. A concluding discussion underscores the implications of these findings—and the methodological alteration underpinning them—for "real-world" policymaking and for public opinion research addressing heightened inequality in the American economy.*

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The Inequality Conundrum

Among all the puzzles presently vying for the attention of professional policy-makers and academic students of political economy, none is as vexing as the "inequality conundrum." Loosely translated, this phrase refers to the unsettled state of affairs in economic policy created by the odd coupling over the past three decades of relatively sustained, if not spectacular, growth in the American GDP along with a comparably sustained, arguably spectacular, and definitely simultaneous increase in the nation's overall economic inequality. The objective economic facts are indisputable: whether one is focusing on wealth or income or on trends before or after the onset of the Great Recession in 2008 the verdict is the same. Looking at income growth, the top 1% of households has amassed more than 36% of the gains over the past 30 years. The rich, and in particular the very rich, have gotten a lot richer even as median household income has remained stagnant in real terms since the early 1970s (Barlett & Steele, 2012; Stiglitz, 2012).

There has been no shortage of efforts to identify the culprits behind this trend; in fact, a number of the scholarly investigations to appear in recent years originated under the auspices of the American Political Science Association's Task Force on "American Democracy in an Age of Inequality" (APSA, 2004). And while it would be unfair to conclude from such investigations that the inequality conundrum has been completely resolved, there can be little doubt that this research has contributed to a clearer understanding of the role of politics in fostering the inequality gap in the first place and allowing it to fester in the years since. Worth noting in this regard are three projects that grew out of the APSA's 2004 task force. These volumes form the backdrop for the present research by reconfiguring and focusing more sharply the current crux of the inequality conundrum in a manner that, we argue, is rooted in subjectivity spawned by differential understandings among ordinary citizens toward the objective reality of economic inequality. Not surprisingly perhaps, given the disciplinary affiliation of their authors, all three of these studies emphasize the *politics* of economic inequality.

Winner-Take-All Politics, by Hacker and Pierson (2011) traces the historical roots of the "New Gilded Age." It begins by considering and ultimately dismissing as innocent the "usual suspects" that are invoked by discussions of inequality, namely foreign trade and financial globalization, the changing technology of the workplace, and the acquisition of educational skills confined to the already-wealthy tip of the social- class pyramid. Instead, they identify the guilty party as American politics. Specifically, the onset of the winner-take-all economy is traced to the early triumph of "organizational warfare" by business during the last half of Jimmy Carter's presidency when both houses of Congress were controlled by Democrats. It was then, according to Hacker and Pierson, that an ambitious and well-orchestrated pro-business policy agenda was set for deregulation, decreased progressivity in the tax code, and diminished policy clout by labor via Congressional Democrats. These initial efforts were fortified by future administrations, including that of Bill Clinton, to eventually produce a comprehensive transformation of the policy commitments (and evasions) of the federal government vis-à-vis the business community.

In his contribution to this literature, Larry Bartels (2008) draws upon data extending back to the Truman administration and shows that income inequality has increased substantially during Republican presidencies and decreased slightly under Democratic ones. Moreover, his analysis demonstrates that Democratic administrations have consistently outperformed Republicans in presiding over policies that generate more disposable income for middle-class and working-poor families. If, as Bartels demonstrates, it is true American families generally fare better economically under Democratic presidents, how then are we to explain the electoral success of Republican presidential and congressional candidates? Here, Bartels takes issue with the conventional wisdom that "Reagan Democrats" were persuaded to vote against their economic self-interests due to the influence of social "wedge issues" such as abortion, gay rights, guns and the like (Frank, 2004). When electoral survey data are divided by income into three groups (high, middle, and low), a significant relationship materializes between preference for Republican candidates and social class (as measured by income). That being the case, the fundamental character of the inequality conundrum assumes added mystery: inasmuch as there are more non-affluent than affluent members of the electorate in national elections, one would expect—assuming decent turnout rates across classes—that Democratic candidates would enjoy a persistent mathematical advantage at the polls over their Republican rivals. Yet the most recent (2010) midterm election produced more than a 60-seat pick-up by Republican House candidates along with a wide swath of victories in gubernatorial and state-legislative races. Moreover, these gains remained largely intact in the wake of the 2012 election: to be sure, Obama won by 4% and five million popular votes, and in the aggregate Democratic House candidates received more than a million more votes than Republicans. But congressional redistricting fell prey to substantial and effective gerrymandering and this, coupled with increased concentration in large cities of the Democratic electorate, led to a paltry net increase of only seven seats by Democrats in the House, ensuring their status as a minority party to the Republicans' thirty-two seat advantage at least until the 2014 midterms. The problem, according to Bartels, is not merely the mechanics of gerrymandering in drawing new congressional districts. It also reflects an anomaly in the American electorate's ability to accurately hold accountable a given set of incumbents for the country's economic condition. In a word, the problem is one of *timing*. Republican administrations have been fortunate enough to reap the benefits of economic growth in the months and year immediately preceding a national election. Since Truman, the Democrats have held the White House during periods when the most robust increases in disposable income occurred in the second year of a presidential term rather than the third or fourth. Based on Bartels' account, then, the crucial American swing-voter suffers from a case of historical myopia.

Finally, *Class War?* by Page and Jacobs (2009) differs from the aforementioned volumes by virtue of its focus on matters of *public opinion* toward economic inequality and government efforts to mitigate it. As such, it draws upon scores of surveys, including one designed by the authors themselves, to paint a composite portrait of Americans as simultaneously supportive of free-market capitalism *and* pragmatic use of government policies designed to distribute wealth more equitably. Citing poll after poll, they claim that the evidence is unequivocal: most Americans favor free enterprise *and* government programs to ensure a basic threshold of economic equality and opportunity for all. For example, at every income level and in all partisan categories, majorities support an increase in the minimum wage, greater investment in public education, and wider access to universal health insurance, along with the use of tax dollars to fund these programs.

The American worldview that Page and Jacobs see as supporting these measures they term as "conservative egalitarianism"—a cultural ethos that prizes individualism and self-reliance while supporting the enactment of policies by government to ensure that all Americans are able to pursue these ideals on a level playing field. Here is not the place to comb through the survey data upon which this portrayal of American public opinion about economic inequality is erected. Suffice it to say that the measures for which Page and Jacobs find majority support are framed as fairly broad principles with little or no provision made for the political or value trade-offs encountered as costs when a respondent is faced solely with a presumed benefit of a particular (hypothetical) policy provision. (While it may be true that most Americans would like to see greater access to universal health insurance, in principle, virtually every poll that has yet to be reported on the Affordable Care Act since its passage in 2010 has shown lopsided majorities in opposition to it.) In our view, the problem with the assessment of Page and Jacobs is inherent in the methodology of survey research. Not only is it impossible to neutralize the effect of question-wording or to randomize the influence of respondent "intentionality" in interpreting questions (Brunner, 1977; Williams, 1959), but when policies are framed as attractive principles in an isolated, decontextualized manner as they typically are in a survey format, the meaning of these independent responses—elicited without concern for their effects on other, perhaps equally attractive but practically implicated policy options—is robbed of its "political" and, we would argue, its "operant" character. We now turn to a pair of studies aimed at elucidating this claim and demonstrating a viable methodological alternative.

Study I: Group Identification and Attitudes toward Inequality

In his efforts to understand how Americans think about inequality, Bartels (2008) claims that it is unlikely that the American public reasons about issues like inequality at a very high level of abstraction. Rather,

> [p]olitical scientists have amassed a good deal of evidence suggesting that ordinary citizens engage in rather little abstract reasoning in most realms of politics, relying instead on positive or negative attitudes toward salient social groups to shape their reactions to specific public policies, political candidates, and social conditions. (Bartels, 2008, p. 136)

Bartels suggests that particular "salient social groups" that might provide important clues for citizens in forming their opinions about inequality would include at least those listed in Table 1, such as working-class people, middle-class people, rich people, big business, and illegal immigrants. From Bartels' perspective, determining how the public views these groups is an important step in understanding mass public reasoning about inequality. In addition, as Haidt (2012) has argued, the pattern of one's social-group affiliation reveals a good deal more than heretofore assumed about an individual's overall identity.

To ascertain what the American public thinks about these groups, Bartels follows generally accepted R-methodological protocol. Relying on the National Election Study for 2004, he calculates the average "feelings thermometer" scores given by the American electorate to each of the groups listed in Table 1. These scores were determined by presenting each member of the sample (roughly 1100 persons) with a feelings thermometer with which to give a score to each group ranging from 0 to 100, with 0 indicating the respondent feels "cold" toward the group in question and 100 indicating a "very warm" feeling. The final tabulated score for Bartels' purposes was a sample-wide average-feelings thermometer score for each of the groups. Bartels proceeds to consider these averages as "proxy" measures of the American mass public's general sentiments relative to economic inequality.

The overall ranking of the discreet feeling-thermometer ratings are listed from top to bottom in Table 1, and to Bartels this list indicates that Americans in 2004 felt warmest toward working-class people and felt coldest to illegal immigrants.

Table 1: Bartels' Ranking of Groups

Group	*Average Rating*	*Group*	*Average Rating*
Working-class People	83.2	Environmentalists	65.3
Women	82.2	Conservatives	61
Older People	81.9	The Catholic Church	60.3
The military	79.5	Rich people	59.9
Middle-class people	76.7	Christian fundamentalists	58.5
Young people	73.6	The Democratic Party	57.7
Whites	73.3	Labor unions	57.7
Poor people	73.2	People on welfare	55.9
Men	72.6	Feminists	55.8
Blacks	71.4	Big business	55.7
Southerners	70.1	Liberals	54.6
Business people	69.2	Republican Party	54.2
Catholics	69.0	Muslims	53.4
Hispanic Americans	67.7	Gay men and lesbians	47.7
Asian Americans	67.2	Illegal immigrants	40.6
Jews	66.7		

Source: Adapted from Bartels (2008).

Based on these data, Bartels asks, "[w]hat, if anything, do these 'feeling thermometer' ratings suggest about the politics of inequality?" His response is,

> [t]o the extent that people's political views are colored by their sympathy for economic classes they are, perhaps surprisingly, quite likely to side with "poor people" (with an average rating of 73) over "rich people" with an average rating of 60). . . . Thus, while ordinary Americans may hope, and perhaps even expect, to become rich someday, in the meantime they express rather little warmth for those who have already made it. (Bartels, 2008, p. 136)

Later, when he combines these findings with other data, Bartels concludes, "[i]n so far as the policy preferences of ordinary citizens are colored by their class sympathies, those sympathies are more likely to reinforce broadly egalitarian values than to negate them" (p. 143). The results of this analysis are thus seen as providing empirical support for Bartels' conclusions about the egalitarian nature of American public opinion.

While the Bartels analysis is interesting and appears consistent with the pro-egalitarian meaning he ascribes to the aggregated ranks, it is important to remember that each of these groups is rated by each respondent independently; and as a consequence, the distribution of ranks is based on averages of these independently rated groups. Despite Bartels' contention that these data accurately reflect how the American public feels about these groups relative to one another, not a single respondent among the more than a thousand completing the survey was asked to perform the critical operation Bartels is himself attributes to the entire sample: namely, how each of the respondents felt about these groups relative to one another. Each survey participant responded separately to each group-stimulus, and these individual scores were tallied and averaged across all respondents irrespective of how each individual may feel—from their own internal, subjective perspective—about each of these groups relative to the others. In addition, Bartels' analysis does not allow for the discovery of groups of persons who share similar subjective viewpoints that deviate substantially from the rankings built from sample-wide median scores.

This, of course, is a situation where the application of Q-methodological procedures is clearly indicated. Rather than leaving to the investigator the task of retrospectively attributing meaning anchored on a ranking exercise that was never actually performed by members of the respondent pool, a Q-methodological approach eschews the use of averages altogether and seeks to discover how individuals rank-order the groups themselves, in a self-referent manner, according to the respondent's own personal "feelings thermometer." Specifically, each respondent ranks each of the groups from -4 (those toward whom I feel the "coldest") to +4 (those groups toward which I feel the "warmest") in customary Q-technique fashion. Three factors emerged (see Appendix 1).

Factor I is almost exclusively a group of conservative Republicans who feel warmest about conservatives, working people, evangelicals, the middle class, the military, and the Republican Party. They feel coldest towards liberals, illegal immigrants, gay men and lesbians, the Democratic Party, feminists, and labor unions.

Factor II, on the other hand, consists almost exclusively of female Democrats. Not surprisingly, they feel warmest towards women, middle-class people, schoolteachers, working people, young people, and gay men and lesbians. People on Factor II display more frigid feelings towards big business, the Republican Party, southerners, rich people, bankers, and illegal immigrants.

Factor III represents a second conservative Republican perspective. These people feel warmest towards the Republican Party, conservatives, business people, big business, veterans, and whites. Groups eliciting cold feelings include Muslims, people on welfare, illegal immigrants, evangelicals, labor unions, and environmentalists. The biggest difference between Factor I and Factor III is found in the latter's relative dislike of evangelicals (0, -3), and their warmer feelings for business people (+2, +4), big business (0, +3), and gays and lesbians (-4, +2). At issue, then, in the differences among conservatives is the role of social issues. Factor I is decidedly conservative on such matters, whereas Factor III reflects a more market-based, pro-business orientation while adopting a libertarian stance on social issues.

Focusing on the overall patterns by these three factors, clearly Factor II reflects a more egalitarian perspective. It is difficult to conclude, however, that Factors I and III reflect the type of egalitarianism that Bartels (2008) suggests characterizes the American public at large. In addition, recall that Bartels supports his conclusion on American egalitarianism by noting the higher ranking given to the poor over the rich. A comparison of how these factors feel about the rich and poor is presented in Table 2. As indicated, only Factor II feels more warmly toward the poor than the rich. This pattern is not replicated for Factors I and III. Hence, in contrast to Bartels' contention, these two factors side with the rich over the poor.

Table 2: Bartels Group Q sort Rich vs. Poor

Statements	***Factor I***	***Factor II***	***Factor III***
22. Poor People	0*	+2**	-2*
23. Rich People	+1*	-3**	-1**

**Indicates level of statistical significance *p < .05 **P < .01.*

In sum, the data presented here raise questions about Bartels' methods and, by implication, about the substantive conclusions he reaches. Gathering data in a large survey and taking independent measures of each individual, abstracting those responses, and averaging the selected traits makes it difficult to ascertain the subjective viewpoint of individuals. And, in Bartels' case, it leads to some questionable conclusions. In addition, Bartels' ranking of the groups presented in Table 1 can be examined as if it was a Q sort (Bartels' Q sort), which can then be correlated with the factor scores from the three factors obtained in this study. With this procedure, the Bartels Q sort correlates most strongly (.57, $p < .001$) with Factor I from the current study. Factor I represents a conservative Republican perspective that overall is not in harmony with egalitarian sympathies, particularly when compared to Factor II. Hence focusing on the overall pattern of averaged rankings in the data used by Bartels produces a substantially different perspective on the egalitarian nature of American public opinion. But when the Q-methodological alternative to measuring the extent to which public opinion in the United States as a whole rests on egalitarian foundations is adopted, and the use of survey-wide averages is jettisoned in favor of individually anchored metrics of "group-based affect," the case for a society-wide embrace of egalitarian ideals in the political orientations of Americans generally collapses.

Study II: The Inequality Study—Context, Concourse, and Q-Sample Design

Finding self-referent statements of opinion regarding economic inequality—its prominence as a policy challenge, the roots of its causation, and the most sensible strategies for addressing it—is not difficult in contemporary America. Indeed, in many ways inequality served as the single most important issue in the 2012 presidential campaign between Democratic incumbent Barack Obama and Republican challenger Mitt Romney. Also at issue in the continuing post-election partisan bickering over budget issues are fundamentally different understandings of the nature of economic fairness and, hence, of economic inequality. These differences have produced prodigious volumes of commentary—in op-eds, in a plethora of policy addresses from both sides of the aisle, on talk radio and cable TV shows, and on internet websites, all of which is accessible as an "American Inequality Concourse."

We employed Lakoff's (2009) theory of moral-linguistic framing combined with an axis dedicated to the nature of the subjective claim advanced by each statement to draw a representative Q sample from the sources just mentioned, augmented by the scholarly volumes cited earlier. The result is a 3 x 3 factorial with the horizontal axis consisting of the Lakoff value distinctions: (a) progressive, (b) center or null, and (c) conservative, with the vertical dimension differentiating between (d) outright moral affirmations, (e) criticisms or questions posed by advocates of alternatives, and (f) endorsement of specific policy provisions. With four statements in each cell, the Q sample had 36 items.

Study II Results: Three Faces of Fairness

Twenty-three individuals sorted the statements from –4 (most disagree) to +4 (most agree). Since Q sorts were collected during the summer months of 2012, when university was not in session, the respondents consisted of acquaintances of the researchers. They ranged in age between 19 and 65, and most described themselves as either Republican or Democrat. Self-described moderates from both parties are missing from our P set, although a small number of respondents are found among those who eschew partisan identification with either of the two main parties in favor of the Independent label., though a few preferred to identify themselves as Independents. The sorts were analyzed with PQMethod (Schmolck & Atkinson, 2002, version 2.31) in various ways, before we decided on a three-factor solution arrived at through centroid extraction and judgmental rotation. This solution maximized the loadings of respondents defining a smaller, third factor. The labels for the first two factors are taken from William Ryan's (1981) classic explication of two rival notions of equality as these have evolved in American discourse over the optimum quality and quantity of this value in differing historical contexts. (See Appendix 2 for the factor scores.)

Factor 1: "Fair Shares:" The Intolerable Toll of Inequality

Factor 1 is defined by the Q sorts of eight individuals, one-third of the respondents in this portion of the research. Four of the eight defining variates are men, and four are women. The ages of these respondents range from 19 to 67; all eight describe themselves as liberal Democrats. Though Factor 1 is defined exclusively by individuals sharing the same partisan and ideological label, among the second factor's defining sorts we find the sole remaining liberal Democratic participating in this phase of the research. Finally, even though the respondents in the two phases of this project were distinct, it is fair to say that the first factor in the second installment of this research bears a strong affinity with the second factor in the groups study reported above.

The Factor 1 viewpoint is visibly—even viscerally—disturbed by the degree to which economic inequality has become a defining feature of the macro-economic landscape in contemporary America. Its moral outrage is anchored in a foundational belief captured by statement 19 that "no one should be allowed to slip too far down the economic ladder, especially for reasons beyond his or her control," an egalitarian sentiment that is either neglected or rejected by the other viewpoints. Factor 1 does not buy the idea that individuals alone are solely responsible for their personal success or failure in life and this sets it apart from the subjective embrace of "self-reliant individualism" that permeates, albeit in varied forms, the outlooks registered in the other two factors. Democratic politics, in the view of Factor 1, provides a hopeful yet recently ineffective source of countermeasures to the pitfalls of unregulated markets. Indeed, Factor1 sees the political process in this era as captured and held prisoner to an unfair and unfettered form of capitalism in which the wealthy denizens of Corporate America have prospered well beyond any sense of proportion at the expense of the great majority of citizens. Unfortunately, in the eyes of Factor 1, the past thirty years—beginning with Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980 presidential election—have largely been the story of "a new gilded age" (Bartels, 2008) in which the progressive nature of the federal income tax has steadily (and steeply) eroded. Essentially the same pattern of deterioration applies to federal regulatory policies, erected during the New Deal era, which for decades functioned to curb excessive risk and unhealthy concentration in capital markets, the financial sector and banking industry.

Beyond the corporate conquests in tax policy and financial deregulation, which are credited with causal importance for the 2008 meltdown of the U.S. and global financial markets, Factor 1 is dismayed by the persistence of a political-economic environment in which its policy preferences are systematically demonized and eliminated from serious consideration in the governing process. What for decades were treated as mainstream measures for macro-economic management are now pilloried as beyond-the-pale instruments of "European socialism" (refer item 4) or unmitigated "class warfare." Factor 1 does not contest the "class warfare" rhetoric; however, it does regard Republican policies as responsible for the 30-year war on middle- and working-class families. It is a source of deep frustration to Factor 1 that many of its own policy preferences, once embraced as central to the Keynesian consensus that transcended partisan differences through the mid-1970s, are not well-covered by today's media and, when they are, their treatment feeds a mistaken view that their pursuit is tantamount to a politically motivated desire to inflict punishment on those industrious and intelligent enough to reap the fruits of their labors in an innovation-dependent, free-enterprise economy. As seen particularly in factor scores on the negative side of the ledger, egalitarian values are too often—and too effectively—construed in the public discourse as politically opportunistic, designed as partisan ploys cynically embraced to serve Democratic electoral interests by demonizing economic success, inflating expectations about the power of public policy to redress to growing inequality, while seeking ultimately to enlarge the ranks of voters loyal to Obama and fellow Democrats. That this view becomes grist for the campaign to discredit welfare-state programs as collectively effective only in cultivating dependency on the part of the poor is the final straw in the factor's frustration with what it deems as the unfair reception given its views by mainstream media and by moderate-centrist elements of the public-at-large.

Factor 2: "Fair Play:" The Inevitability and Morality of Inequality

Factor 2 is defined by the loadings of eight Q sorts as well, accounting for another third of the respondents in the second phase of our research. Like Factor 1, half of these defining Q sorts were from men and half were from women. Unlike Factor 1, however, Factor 2's top loaders do not share the same partisan and ideological self-descriptions. To be sure, most are conservative Republicans, a descriptor that accounts for five of the eight respondents. One of the highest loaded sorts on factor 2 is from a self-proclaimed liberal Democrat. Another identifies herself as a moderate Republican and, finally, yet another calls herself a moderate Independent. While such demographic diversity cautions against an effort to link the second factor in this phase of the research with the subjectivity of a particular factor in the Study I, it nonetheless seems fair to say that this is a viewpoint more likely to be shared by participants associated with either the first or third group factor rather than the second one.

It is clear from the factor scores that the idea of fairness embraced by this perspective is fundamentally at odds with a "Fair Shares" understanding. Indeed, the "Fair Play" version it sees as foundational actually requires inequality in economic outcomes as an indispensable element of fairness. For individuals of differing ability and effort to reap the same economic rewards would be tantamount to injustice, and it is this severed link between industriousness and productivity on the one hand and commensurate outcomes, on the other, that Factor 2 finds such great fault with in the thinking of Factor 1. The first sentence in statement number 2 makes the point most succinctly: "The facts of economic inequality do not mean that life is unfair." Granted, the two remaining sentences in this statement stop short of "blaming" poor people for their inability to earn a decent living, but the "softer," more euphemistic endorsement of choice available to all labor-force participants to trade salary or wages for non-pecuniary, psychic benefits in career selection is grounds alone for refusing to indict income inequality as an unqualified symptom of an unjust socio-economic order.

To a degree unseen by other factors, Factor 2 sees the trend toward increasing income inequality as inevitable. The culprits, however, are not to be found in the ascendance in American politics over the past three decades of an unholy alliance between regressive tax policy and a dismembered regulatory regime governing the financial sector since the New Deal. Instead, income inequality is considered a natural concomitant of the inexorable and combined forces of technology and globalization. As suggested by statement 8, it should come as no great surprise that unskilled American workers have endured chronic unemployment as their jobs have been outsourced to countries with wage rates that amount to only a fraction of former labor costs in the pre-globalized market economy. Not only does Factor 2 see the long-term trend toward greater inequality as inevitable, it sees political efforts to curb this trend as ill-considered and counter-productive (refer items 3 and 15). Given a choice between markets or politics as modes of collective choice, Factor 2 is predisposed to favor the former at every turn. Government, even when functioning in a democratic mode, is simply ill-equipped to allocate resources—to pick winners and losers—in a manner that approximates, let alone maximizes, efficiency. Moreover, even in democratic governments, decision-making power is concentrated. Markets, by way of contrast, disperse decision-making authority widely. Instead of vesting power in an inflexible, perennial corps of bureaucrats, power in market economies is decentralized into the decisions of millions of individual consumers. The latter, by this understanding, cast ballots in the form of dollars and, in the process, are responsible for determining what will be produced, in what quantities, and at what price. The market thus responds to consumer demand as producers compete amongst one another on price and quality to garner the "dollar votes" of the millions of individual buyers engaged in making a voluntary exchange for the goods and services they desire with the dollars they are willing and able to pay. In this manner does the market trump politics as the most efficient, and most fair, institutional mechanism for deciding who gets what, when, and how. No matter how well-intended government-sponsored efforts to regulate market mechanisms may be, to make them work more fairly or with greater stability, inevitably ends up, in this factor's view, as making matters worse. At a minimum, markets impede personal responsibility and self-reliance; unrestrained, they foster on the part of the unproductive, non-working segments of society a "culture of dependency" that recycles from one generation to the next rather than shrinking poverty rates and promulgating a culture-wide revival of the work ethic and its corollary ethos of individual self-reliance (Murray, 2012).

Finally, the scores for statements distinguishing Factor 2 at its negative end underscore its belief in the persistent reality of the American Dream. Reports that socio-economic mobility in the United States now trails that of most OECD countries including the United Kingdom notwithstanding, Factor 2 rejects the claim that children of parents with modest means are pretty much locked into a future with few opportunities ("in the land of the plutocrats") for leveraging talent and effort into a meaningful ascent up the socio-economic class ladder. Moreover, this reality is such that it need not rely for its perpetuation on elite propagation of Horatio Alger mythology to counter accumulating evidence that life chances, in general, are now effectively a function of the class status of one's parents.

Factor 3: Deferential Individualists, Critics of Class Envy

The third perspective is constructed solely from the Q sorts of two males, one of whom considers himself a conservative Republican who disapproves of Obama while the other is a self-identified conservative Independent who approves of Obama's performance in office. While factors defined by so few loadings are rarely preserved for close scrutiny in Q studies, the decision to retain the third factor in this analysis assumes that the viewpoint it represents would, with an enlarged P set, be more commonplace than these numbers alone suggest. Moreover, Factor 3 embodies a subjective schematic that is readily interpretable, another reason for incorporating this perspective into our analysis.

Factor 3 in the aggregate has a -0.37 correlation with factor 1, and this alone suggests that the viewpoint it harbors is hardly upset by the harsh vicissitudes of inequality now plaguing the U.S. economy. In fact, from Factor 3's standpoint, those who are perturbed by the problem of increased inequality in the national income distribution are themselves the problem, having fallen victim to their own pessimism. Those not doing as well as they would like are counseled to cheer up and forego the temptations of class envy; instead of lamenting their own material circumstance vis-à-vis others, they should appreciate the fact that while their own slice of the economic pie may not be as large as that of others, the size of the entire economic pie is significantly larger than it was, for example, in the years before cell-phones and cyberspace.

To be sure, Factor 3 sees injustice in the fact that some professions—social workers, teachers, and nurses—are underpaid; however, that reality does not imply the inverse, namely that some professions (or classes) are over-compensated and/or under-taxed. This aversion to "structural" or "systemic" thinking is revealed in scores given to statement 20, and is accompanied by an ethos of individualism taken to its attributional, if not logical, extreme. Rather than an unjust system of "crony capitalism" where economic outcomes are systematically and unfairly influenced by two sets of rules—one for the wealthy and another for the less well-off—the free-market capitalism now operating in the United States still rewards ability, effort, and risk-taking. Hence Factor 3 has little problem with those who succeed (lavishly) in the U.S. economy; indeed, it holds the super-rich in very high esteem. The same deference is not extended to those whose skills, motives and choices combine to account for their lower station in the private economy. Indeed, "losers" in the American economic realm have no one to blame but themselves, and in this respect Factor 3 demonstrates close affinities with Gilens' (2000) account of the dispositional attributions in play when Americans strongly opposed to welfare policies are questioned about what ultimately is responsible for poverty in the first place.

For those disturbed by the depth and breadth of economic inequality now extant in the United States (that is, those on Factor 1) Factor 3 is not shy about counseling a change in heart. In its view, the cure for the subjective downside of class divisions is an attitude adjustment on the part of those suffering the pangs of class envy. In short, Factor 3's advice to its working-class peers is to "grin and bear it." "Don't worry," as the campaign song for George Herbert Walker Bush put it in 1988: "be happy."

Concluding Discussion: Independence, Interference, and Entanglement in Calibrating Opinions on Inequality

The impetus for this research, which we have termed the inequality conundrum, lies at the intersection of objective reality (historic levels of economic inequality) and human subjectivity (differential understandings of the roots of this reality in addition to contrasting views of the most effective policy course to take in addressing it). Recent scholarship has reflected and deepened an appreciation for the importance of politics and public policy vis-à-vis inequality. We now know, for example, that class differences (measured by simple sums of household income) bear a stronger relationship to electoral choice than at any time since the onset of large-sample studies of Americans' voting behavior (Bartels, 2008). We also know that the fortunes of middle-income and working-class voters have fared better, in terms of real disposable income growth and relative tax burdens, under Democratic presidencies than under Republicans. Moreover, based on Bartels' research, we now know that efforts to explain the electoral success of Republican candidates in the face of evidence that their policies harm the economic self-interests of most voters by ascribing the paradox to the power of "wedge issues" (Frank, 2004) are skating on thin empirical ice.

Finally, from careful and comprehensive efforts by survey researchers to plumb the depths of public opinion toward policy measures designed to mitigate or erase altogether escalating inequality—in enhanced progressivity of the federal income tax, for example—some claim to know that Americans generally are consistently more "pro-equality" in their thinking than commonly given credit for. The most forceful statement to this effect is by Page and Jacobs (2009), whose examination of hundreds of survey items over time leads them to conclude that consistent majorities of Americans support policy measures aimed at ensuring that opportunities for economic success are preserved on a level playing field. The same basic message is embraced by Bartels (2008) as well, although (as noted above) he qualifies the claim that majorities of Americans care about economic inequality with critical caveats. For instance, huge majorities supported the Bush tax cuts and Republican efforts to abolish the estate tax despite the fact that such actions were contrary to their own economic self-interests. And more generally, Bartels finds formidable shortfalls in the median voter's ability to track economic-policy "accountability" in a manner that synchronizes abstract commitments to equality-enhancing measures, as chronicled in surveys, with partisan affinities or candidate preference in particular elections. It is to this "problematic" feature of scholarship on the inequality conundrum that the present research is addressed. Simply put, if the portrayals of public opinion toward economic inequality put forward by these scholars were accurate beyond doubt, aggregate election outcomes on the order of what occurred nationally and within state races in 2010 would be highly unlikely given the well-chronicled circumstances of pervasive disparities in income and wealth.

At the methodological crux of this conundrum, we believe, is the principle of complementarity as explicated in the work of quantum theorists (Aczel, 2001; Clegg, 2006; Gilder, 2008). As Brown and Rhoads (2010) have noted, complementarity in physics refers to the fact that the material world at the quantum level displays irresolvable features (wave-like behavior and particle-like behavior) under different conditions of measurement and requires that a complete understanding incorporate both. The wave-particle duality implicates measurement and mathematics: When light passes through a double-slit experimental apparatus, it displays interference effects that are the signal characteristic of waves—i.e., as long as no effort is made to determine through which slit each photon is passing. If, on the other hand, the experiment is set up to trace the route of individual photons—i.e., if we focus on a photon as an individual particle and try to determine whether it went through slit X or slit Y—then interference effects vanish and we change the probability that the particle will arrive at X or Y. What is observed is therefore not simply a feature of external reality, but also depends on how and what we choose to observe (pp. 5–6).

Brown and Rhoads proceed to demonstrate that complementarity is at issue in the political and social sciences no less than in sub-atomic physics. In the course of their analysis, they cite Anastopoulos (2008), who makes the larger point: "The principle of complementarity is related to the fact that we observe physical systems only by interacting with them. The laws of quantum theory make impossible the sharp separation of the atomic system from the device that measures it" (pp. 192–193).

When Bartels (2008) and Page and Jacobs (2009) employ large-sample surveys as "means of interacting with" Americans—to accurately calibrate their views of inequality and egalitarianism—their choice of methodology presumes that scores constructed from the sample's responses are independent for statistical purposes as a precondition for their being averaged. Indeed, great effort is expended to make certain that they maintain their independence. In a formal testing situation where, for example, students are taking the ACT or SAT exam as a prerequisite for college applications, proctors are present to make sure that none of the individuals cheats by copying from another's exam, which would produce contingent scores. Likewise, when Bartels takes the average "feeling thermometer" score of respondents toward Group A, it is assumed that the sample-wide ratings of Group A are independent of (non-contingent upon) the ratings of Group B, C, D, or Z. It is for this reason that items in a survey questionnaire are often administered in random order, a precaution taken precisely because of the need to preserve the independence (non-contingent) character of individual item responses.

When the participants in Study I were asked to rank-order the groups from the data used by Bartels, by way of contrast, an important transformation was introduced into the data matrix under analysis. Whereas for Bartels, respondents were cases and, accordingly, data-points $X_1, \ldots, X_n$ were the scores given as feelings thermometer ratings to each of the N groups, in the Q sorting of the groups along the "cold to warm" continuum, the groups themselves become the cases ($X_1, \ldots, X_n$) and the scores (from −4 to +4) are the values awarded to each group relative to the others by the same Q sorter. These scores are necessarily contingent, as each group is being implicitly compared with all others. Thus, in the Bartels' groups case, $N(N-1)/2$ paired comparisons are made, producing a total N of 561. The important point is that the item scores do not arise as a function of independent judgments, but as the result of a complex process that involves more than even the number of formal comparisons: the groups in the exercise may have nuances and shadings that the Q sorter ponders back and forth, shifting rankings in the course of sorting until the final arrangement is settled upon. A statement (the stimulus equivalent to the groups in Study I), as found in the Q sample in Study II, may be thought to mean A or B (or C, D. . .), and, as in quantum superposition, these different meaning outcomes may remain suspended until one of them eclipses the others (as in the collapse of the wave packet in a typical quantum mechanics experiment).

More than contingent, the statements in Q are entangled as Brown and Rhoads (2010) again have demonstrated. As they point out, a Q sort is a synthesis of a diverse assemblage of stimuli that the Q sorter has molded into a consistency such that item X at +4 must imply the opposite meaning of item Y at −4; i.e., X and Y are entangled in a way that scale scores for respondents X and Y can never be (except in the case of cheating or other form of collaboration) in R methodology. Imagine a situation in R methodology in which X, Y, and all their sample-mates were allowed as a group to discuss all of the Inequality Project items before the survey was administered to any one of them. What could the results then possibly mean? Certainly they would no longer constitute a valid measure of individual attitudes toward egalitarianism. Were X and Y entangled in this way, the entire R-methodological structure would collapse. Q, on the other hand, depends on this entanglement.

An important implication here is that the R-methodological reliance on sample-wide averages can have inadvertent though powerful interference effects on the phenomenon investigators seek to calibrate en route to the separate and over-riding goal of establishing the statistical incidence of the same phenomenon among members of a larger population. Another, albeit related, implication is that no matter how carefully individual survey items are crafted, they can never be rendered immune to the effects of subjective/associational entanglement. This, in fact, is the major message shared by Study I and II above: The ostensibly independent assignment of feelings-thermometer scores to 34 discreet social groups turns out to tap implicitly into an individual respondent's sense of "tribal identity" (Haidt, 2012) as a friendly member of in-groups A, B, and C and as an indifferent or perhaps even hostile "alien" in relation to out-groups D, E, and F. The discovery in Study I of factors disclosing three sets of group-based identity provides powerful evidence on behalf of entanglement and, as such, of the warrantless assumption of independence in the measurement and averaging of feeling-thermometer scores toward a sample of groups across the entire sample of respondents. Similarly, Study II demonstrates that subjective responses to the fact of economic inequality turn on varied yet coherent narratives about the nature of inequality, its locus at the top of the class pyramid or, alternatively, at the bottom among the "deserving" and "undeserving" poverty-stricken elements of the population. And this magnitude of complexity is reached short of adding to the mix any explicit consideration of the most promising manner of mitigating or addressing inequality as a public policy issue—in ways that differ radically in substance while at the same time manifesting subjective coherence as alternative "frames" (Lakoff, 2009) or "associational networks" (Westen, 2007) brought by their adherents to bear in responding to survey items assumed a priori to have equivalent meanings to all. At the very least, we can conclude that such evidence of deep entanglement and complementarity, in turn, raises serious doubts about the practicality of simultaneously capturing with satisfactory accuracy unambiguous attitudinal calibration while generalizing at a level commensurate with "American" public opinion.

If, as some have suggested (Lane, 1962; Hochschild, 1986; Lakoff, 2009), contemporary discourse on economic inequality inevitably rests on a subtext of "individual virtue," in which the three subjective faces of fairness reported above are tied in powerful yet not well-understood ways to alternative (and, presumably, primitive) senses of what it means to be a good person and to pursue a life of moral virtue, such possibilities demand a measure of scholarly attention commensurate with that given by traditional opinion polls to the prevalence, for example, of views favoring or opposing the reintroduction of more progressive tax rates quite independently of how such opinions are entangled with individually-held notions of moral virtue. Indeed, until the depths of such opinions are well-understood, it is not out of the question that the full meaning of the population parameters disclosed by polls seeking to measure attitudes toward inequality may well remain shrouded by a substantial degree of mystification.

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Appendix 1: Factor Scores Bartels Group Q Sort

	Groups	*Factor I*	*Factor II*	*Factor III*
1	Asian American	0	-1	-2
2	Big Business	0	-4	3
3	Business People	2	-2	4
4	Blacks	-1	1	0
5	Catholics	1	0	0
6	Conservatives	4	-2	4
7	Evangelicals	4	-2	-3
8	Environmentalists	-2	2	-3
9	Feminists	-3	1	-1
10	Hispanic Americans	-1	0	-1
11	Gay men and Lesbians	-4	3	2
12	Illegal Immigrants	-4	-3	-4
13	Jews	0	0	1
14	Labor Unions	-3	0	-3
15	Lawyers	-2	1	2
16	Liberals	-4	2	-1
17	Men	2	-2	0
18	Middle Class People	3	4	1
19	Muslims	-2	0	-4
20	Older People	2	0	0

	Groups	*Factor I*	*Factor II*	*Factor III*
21	People on Welfare	−2	−1	−4
22	Poor People	0	2	−2
23	Rich People	1	−3	−1
24	Republican Party	3	−4	4
25	Southerners	0	−4	−2
26	The Military	3	1	2
27	Whites	1	−1	3
28	Women	2	4	2
29	Democratic Party	−3	2	−2
30	Veterans	0	−1	3
31	School Teachers	1	4	1
32	Working People	4	3	1
33	Young People	−1	3	0
34	Bankers	−1	−3	0

Appendix 2: Factor Scores Study II

	Statements	*1*	*2*	*3*
1	Poor kids don't stand a chance in this land of the plutocrats	2	−4	−1
2	The facts of economic inequality do not mean that life is unfair. Not all people feel money is the most important measure of value. Some people focus on family or recreation or service to others as keys to a meaningful life, knowing full well that they won't have huge incomes.	−1	4	0
3	The profit motive creates efficiency in business. Government, lacking a profit motive, is inefficient and wasteful. Plus, government gets in the way of the market via regulation, taxation, unionization, and lawsuits.	−3	4	1
4	Any reasonable objection to the current level of inequality and any plans to claw back some of the ill-gotten gains is demonized as socialist, a word easy to use in a country that doesn't know much about what that means.	4	0	2
5	The problem is not how much the top earners make but the wage levels among the lower income groups coupled with the virtual disappearance of upward mobility among those born into poverty. Neither of those issues is attributable to how much the top guys earn.	0	3	3

	Statements	*1*	*2*	*3*
6	If children of single parents comprise the largest demographic group beneath the poverty threshold, aren't we obligated to ask why unmarried young people without resources are having children they can't support?	−1	0	4
7	The growing gap between the very rich and the rest of Americans undermines confidence in our institutions, and it goes against one of the core ideals of this country: if you work hard and play by the rules, you can succeed and leave a better future for your kids.	3	1	4
8	Growing income inequality stems from technological change and globalization. Both trends dampen income at the lower end, as the lesser skilled are forced to compete with international labor forces paid a fraction of what it takes to maintain a middle class living here.	0	2	−2
9	Some work hard, make sensible choices in life, and make a lot of money; and some don't. Maybe it's not ideal, but efforts to alter reality by utopian schemes don't work, They never have; and they never will.	−3	3	4
10	You may recall the board game Monopoly. Everybody goes broke except for the winner, money stops circulating except up, and the economy dies.	1	−3	−3
11	If escalating inequality is "simply an economic reality," it seems pointless to spend too much energy worrying about how and why it rises.	−3	−3	−1
12	Income inequality is not inherently bad nor all that excessive. But liberals benefit by claiming it's an evil. In return, they get an "army of food stamp voters" at the polls.	−4	0	1
13	The support for pro-wealthy, anti-public policies is predicated on a myth: Better not penalize the rich just in case I become one of them someday.	−1	−4	−2
14	Given the gross disparity between wages here and overseas, it is hard to see how we can get our threatened lower classes through the harsh adjustments necessitated by globalization, and we can only hope the dislocations are temporary.	0	−1	0
15	In any commercial endeavor, there will be top executives, middle executives, supervisors, general workforce and low-end labor. The rate of pay for each is ultimately determined by impersonal market forces, i.e., competition – far better than government-imposed pay rates.	−2	4	2

	Statements	*1*	*2*	*3*
16	We need jobs. We need health care. We're busy trying to survive. Debating economic policy is a lower priority when you're trying to cover an underwater mortgage, put food on the table, pay for gas to get to work, and hope your kids can get through college without crippling debt.	0	-3	-4
17	In big numbers we Americans screamed at having to bailout the banks who turned right back around and awarded millions in BONUSES to the bad actors who brought the crash of 2008. NO ONE listened. We can't be blamed for the fact that Washington acts when ordered by Wall Street not by ordinary voters!	1	-2	-3
18	How would we achieve something like "sufficient equality" of income without abandoning capitalism in favor of socialism? And who's to say what's "sufficient"? I am not sure that Congress is an honest broker capable of making a good decision here.	-1	2	-4
19	No one should be allowed to slip too far down the economic ladder, especially for reasons beyond his or her control.	2	-1	-1
20	The problem is NOT that the wealthy make too much money. The problem is that social workers, nurses and teachers make too little money.	0	0	4
21	In economic life, private property and commercial competition foster centers of financial and organizational strength that help citizens forestall political tyranny.	-1	2	-2
22	It would be one thing if the riches of those at the top were the result of greater contributions to society, but the Great Recession showed otherwise: even bankers who had led the global economy, as well as their own firms, to the brink of ruin, received outsize bonuses.	3	1	-3
23	It is not lack of interest or apathy about the economic inequality in this country that fuels the silence. It is a feeling of total powerlessness and despair. What can any of us who are not power brokers do? How can we combat the feeling that the disparities will continue no matter what the public sentiment may be?	1	-2	-4
24	"Restoring fairness to our tax code" is usually liberal "code" for the government's intention to punish those who've enjoyed economic success due to their initiative and work ethic.	-4	0	3
25	Lax regulation and oversight have allowed reckless and predatory financial practices to drive our economy to the brink of collapse.	3	-1	-3

	Statements	***1***	***2***	***3***
26	Growing inequality is not inevitable. There are market economies that are doing better, both in terms of both GDP growth and rising living standards for most citizens. Some are even reducing inequalities.	1	2	2
27	Inequality is increasing almost everywhere in the industrialized and postindustrial world, even if the increase has been much greater in the United States. To understand a global trend, we need a more universal explanation.	0	0	−1
28	It is an outrage that Warren Buffett pays less on his final dollar than his secretary.	4	1	0
29	Why does everyone keep looking upwards? Everyone should just be happy with where they are.	−2	−4	1
30	America's poor and those in the middle shouldn't complain. While they may be getting a smaller share of the pie than they did in the past, the pie is growing so much, thanks to the contributions of the rich and superrich, that the *size* of their slice is actually larger.	−4	−1	2
31	The evidence flatly contradicts those who favor tax cuts for the rich as the job creators. Indeed, America grew far faster in the decades after World War II, when it was growing together, than it has since 1980, when it began growing apart.	4	−2	−2
32	If things are so bad in this economy, how come corporate profits are at record high levels?	1	−1	−1
33	Many so-called "poverty-stricken" Americans have discovered that it pays better in food stamps and benefits to remain jobless rather than take jobs for low pay and long hours.	−2	2	3
34	No capitalist economy nor genuine democracy can flourish without a strong middle class. The capacity to purchase products gives entrepreneurs incentives to invest and innovate in producing more and better goods. The richest 1% can only consume a tiny fraction of what full employment can produce.	2	3	0
35	The tendency to think of economic outcomes as natural and inevitable is politically significant because it discourages systematic critical scrutiny of their causes and consequences.	2	−2	1
36	Genuine fairness requires considerable inequality in the distribution of rewards in free-market economies; in fact, a fair measure of economic inequality is essential in a system governed by "fair play."	−2	1	0