

Envy of the rich is a (moderately important) reason that people favor reducing income inequality: Envy, self-interest, party politics and inequality in contemporary USA

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Introduction & Overview

Research question

Why do some people evaluate income inequality as too high whereas others do not? Aside from national context, self-interest, and party loyalty, does personality, specifically envy, matter?

Key findings

- Envy has a moderately strong relationship with seeing the current income distribution as too unequal (total effect).
- This persists unchanged after taking family background, demographics, and current social class/stratification position into account.
- It persists when we also control perceived self-interest.
- Part of the effect is indirect via political party preference, but the direct effect of envy remains moderately important even when party is taken into account

Data and methods

- Internet survey using MTurk of the general population
- Descriptive statistics
- Factor analysis for scale construction
- OLS regression analysis.

Theoretical implications:

Support for a multi-disciplinary approach to attitude formation theory emphasizing social-psychological as well as sociological and political roots of public opinion and policy-relevant attitudes.

Data and methods

Data and Methods

- Data are from the International Social Science Survey Round 20, USA 2016-2017,
- N= 2911
- MTurk sample
- Analysis: descriptive, factor analysis, and OLS.

Focal predictor: Envy

4 Envy Questions

- Are you envious of people who...
 - Earn a lot more than you do?
 - Are rich – envy them?
 - Have a vast amount of money?
- Answers: (Scored in equal intervals: 1.00/ .75/ .50/ .25/ 0)
- Definitely envy
 - Envy
 - Maybe
 - Do not envy
 - Definitely do not envy

Answers tightly linked: Alpha reliability of .95

Envy scale: Measurement

Measurement of envy. Correlations, means and standard deviations. USA 2016-2017.

	Items in the scale (Alpha=.95)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Panel A: Inter-item correlations			
(1) Earn a lot more than you do	1.00		
(2) Are rich	.88	1.00	
(3) Have a vast amount of money	.85	.90	1.00
Panel B: Criterion variables			
Age	-.22	-.20	-.21
Male	-.04	-.02	-.04
Church attendance	-.13	-.13	-.15
Education	.01	.00	.00
Occupational status	-.03	-.02	-.02
Family income (ln)	-.06	-.04	-.03
Democratic Party	.12	.09	.09
For a more equal income distribution	.20	.17	.17
Panel C: Means & standard deviations			
Mean (points, 0 through 1)	0.49	0.49	0.51
Standard deviation	0.28	0.29	0.30
Number of cases	2,491	2,486	2,480

[Source] International Social Science Survey Round 20, USA 2016-2017.

Other predictor variables

Measurement of control variables is fairly straightforward and they are many, so I will not detail them here. I am happy to share our draft paper with anybody who is interested.

(write to: MariahEv2@gmail.com)

Response variable: Inequality evaluation

Response variable: ≠ attitudes (items; 5-point)

Differences in income in <country> are too large.

There is too much of a difference between rich and poor in this country.

It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes.

One of the most important aims in this country over the next ten years should be to reduce differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes.

Income and wealth should be redistributed toward ordinary working people.

Response variable: ≠ attitudes measurement 1

Measurement of attitudes toward income inequality and redistribution.
Correlations, means and standard deviations. USA 2016-2017.

	Items in the scale (Alpha=.92)				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Panel A: Inter-item correlations					
(1) Differences too large	1.00				
(2) Differences between rich and poor	.84	1.00			
(3) Government responsibility to reduce	.75	.73	1.00		
(4) Aims for country: reduce differences	.64	.62	.75	1.00	
(5) Redistribute income and wealth	.68	.67	.75	.75	1.00
Panel B: Other variables					
Envy (3 item scale)	.17	.18	.18	.16	.16
Age	-.06	-.06	-.10	-.12	-.09
Male	-.06	-.06	-.03	-.03	-.06
Parents' education	.01	.01	.02	.02	.00
Church attendance	-.01	-.02	-.01	-.03	-.02

Models

From total to direct effect

$$\text{InequalityEvaluation} = f(\text{Envy}) + e_1 \quad [\text{Eq. 1}]$$

$$\text{InequalityEvaluation} = f(\text{Envy}, \text{ParentsEducation}, \text{ParentsOccupation}, \text{Parents\$}, \text{ParentsChurchGo},) + e_2 \quad [\text{Eq. 2}]$$

$$\text{InequalityEvaluation} = f(\text{Eq. 2 variables}, \text{ParentsParty}) + e_3 \quad [\text{Eq.3}]$$

$$\text{InequalityEvaluation} = f(\text{Eq. 3 variables}, \text{Education}, \text{Occupation}, \text{FamilyIncome}) + e_4 \quad [\text{Eq.4}]$$

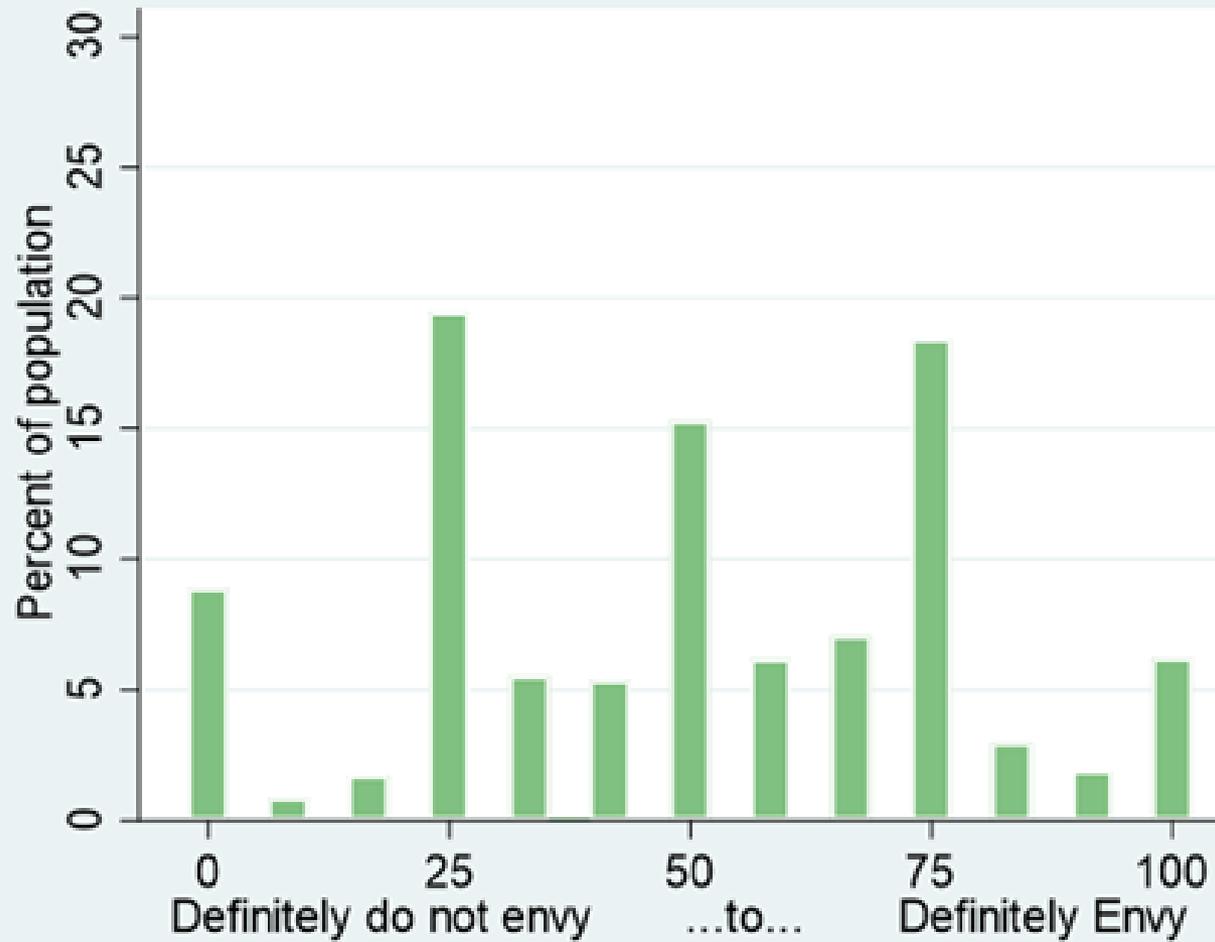
$$\text{InequalityEvaluation} = f(\text{Eq. 4 variables}, \text{PerceivedSelfInterest}) + e_5 \quad [\text{Eq.5}]$$

$$\text{InequalityEvaluation} = f(\text{Eq. 5 variables}, \text{Party}) + e_6 \quad [\text{Eq.6}]$$

Description

Envy the rich?

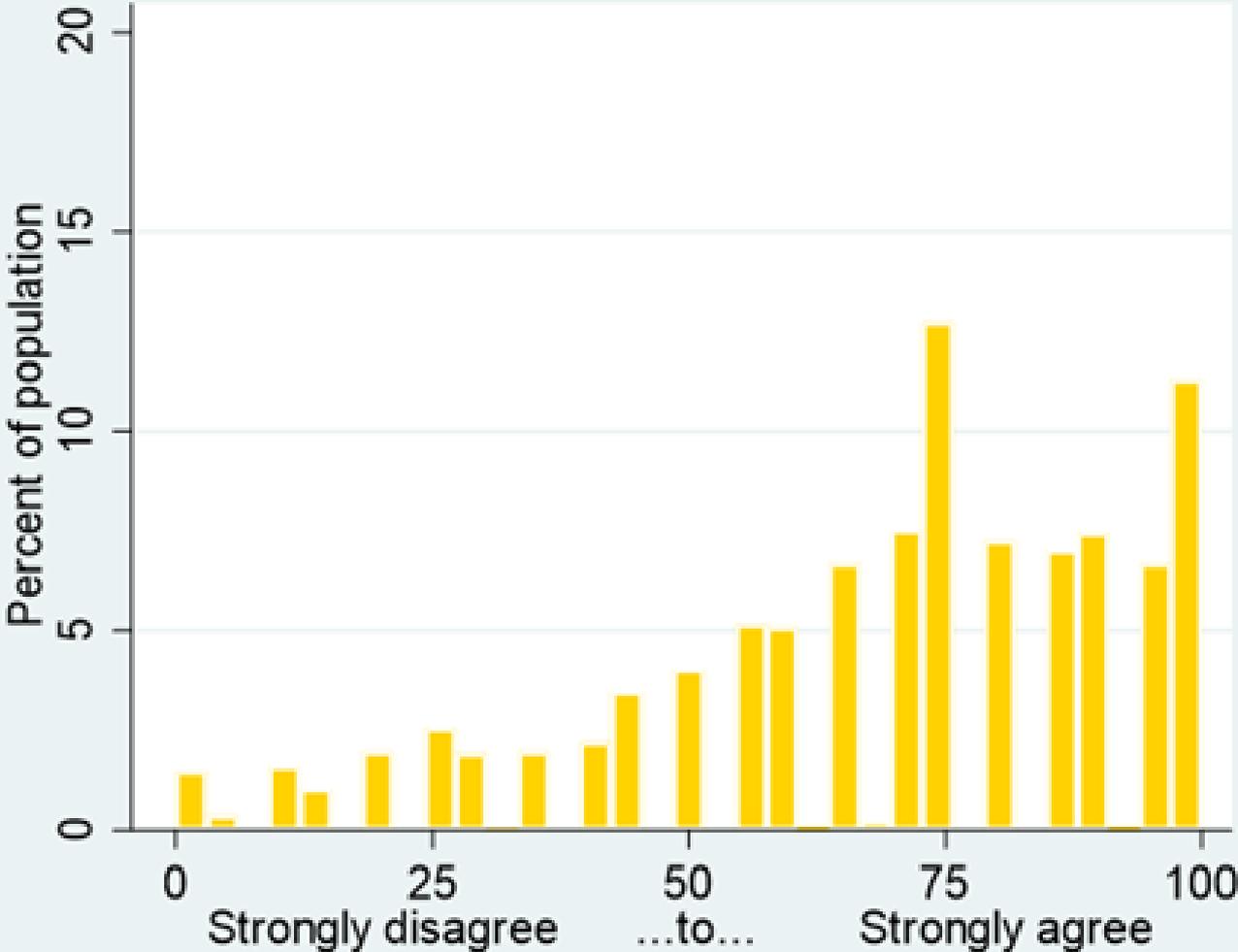
USA 2016-2017



mean=50, standard deviation=28, N=2,492

Income should be more equal

USA 2016-2017



mean=69, standard deviation=25, N=2,496

Analytic results

Influences on attitudes toward reducing income inequality. Total effects in dashed blue outline, assuming the block recursive causal order shown; direct effects in column 6; and indirect effects are the difference between the two. OLS standardized regression coefficients. International Social Science Survey Round 20, USA 2016-2017, first and second preliminary samples. **Significant self-interest (egotropic) considerations in red italic.** Coefficients not significantly different from zero at $p < .05$ are greyed out.

	Favors reducing income inequality					Direct effect (6)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Envy</i>	<i>0.18 ***</i>	<i>0.18 ***</i>	<i>0.18 ***</i>	<i>0.18 ***</i>	<i>0.15 ***</i>	<i>0.11 ***</i>
Age		-0.08 ***	-0.08 ***	-0.07 ***	-0.06 **	-0.01
Male		-0.03	-0.03	-0.04	-0.03	0.00
Parents' education		0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.00
Church going at age 14		0.01	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.01
Parents' occupation		-0.02	-0.01	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02
Parents' subjective rank		-0.05 *	-0.03	-0.03	-0.02	-0.02
Parents' political party			0.21 ***	0.20 ***	0.18 ***	-0.01
Education				0.04	0.03	0.01
Occupational status				0.00	0.02	0.01
<i>Family income (ln)</i>				<i>-0.15 ***</i>	<i>-0.12 ***</i>	<i>-0.08 ***</i>
<i>Expects personal gain from equality</i>					<i>0.23 ***</i>	<i>0.18 ***</i>
Democratic party						0.50 ***
R-squared	0.03	0.05	0.09	0.11	0.16	0.36
Cases	2,492	2,294	2,294	2,144	2,143	2,009

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Conclusion

It's about attitudes and allegiances, not class

Evaluating income inequality as too high or too low is...

- mainly a matter of party politics, especially conformity to a "party line".
- some greed, a third as important as politics
- a fifth as important as politics, is the green monster: the envious would bring down the rich.
- parents or own class matters little: Only prosperity matters at all (effect one-sixth as important as party politics)

Not the “democratic class struggle”

Thus, the struggle over income inequality in the modern US is not the savage 19th century politics of class conflict that set the poor against the prosperous and workers against bosses. It is not really the "democratic class struggle", if it ever was. Instead it is mostly a clash of cultural and "team" commitments – only lightly tethered to socioeconomic location-- that sets Democrats against Republicans, with small doses of naked greed and sheer envy thrown in.

End