

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: MERITOCRACY AND AMERICANS' VIEWS  
ON DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

Richard T. Longoria, Ph.D., 2006

Directed By: Professor James Gimpel  
Department of Government and Politics

The dissertation analyzes Americans' views on distributive justice and asks whether and to what extent Americans support meritocratic ideals. The project finds that Americans are ambivalent in their views towards meritocracy. They believe that intelligence and hard work should be rewarded, but they also support inherited wealth, seniority pay, and the distribution of educational opportunities through the market. This project contributes much to the existing literature on public opinion and meritocracy because it finds that Americans are not as meritocratic as other studies have found. For example, Lipset and others have found that Americans support meritocratic ideals. It has also been shown that Americans believe that the US is a meritocratic society where intelligence and hard work is actually rewarded. Data from the International Social Justice Project, General Social Survey, World Values Survey and many public opinion polls are used in this project and confirm the previous findings.

However, the data also show that Americans are ambivalent when it comes to their support of meritocratic ideals. Americans support the distribution of wealth by heredity, of income by seniority, and believe it is fair for educational opportunities to be distributed via the market where the wealthy can purchase superior opportunities for their children. In short, Americans are not strictly meritocratic in their distributive preferences. They often consider items other than merit to be legitimate reasons for inegalitarian modes of distribution. Hochschild's qualitative study on distributive justice found that Americans are inegalitarian in the economic domain but egalitarian in the political and social domains. Analyzing the data from the data sets listed above more or less confirmed that Hochschild was correct about Americans' attitudes in the economic and political domains. However, Americans are not social egalitarians. The analysis in this dissertation has found that Americans believe it is perfectly just and fair for people to be given greater levels of respect and deference and to have higher social status if their jobs require great amounts of skill or if they make the most of the opportunities they had in life.

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By

Richard T. Longoria

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Advisory Committee:  
Professor James Gimpel, Chair  
Mark Graber  
Frances Lee  
Judith Lichtenberg  
Irwin Morris

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## Preface

This project stems from a long-standing fascination with idea of meritocracy. In theory a meritocratic society is one in which every person is given an equal opportunity succeed and where one's race, gender, social background, personal connections, and other irrelevant characteristics have no effect on one's outcome in life. Instead, only a person's choices, hard work, and abilities determine their place in society. It is an ideal; an ideal that we have not yet achieved in America. Perhaps we wish not to achieve it, but that is a discussion that belongs in the public realm. This project asks questions that will give us a glimpse into public opinion on the issues of meritocracy.

Previous research has found broad public support for the idea that smart hard working people should be rewarded. Why then don't we actually live in a meritocracy? In part this is explained by the finding that most Americans believe that the US is already a meritocracy. That being the case no special effort is required to achieve the ideal. Surveys show that most Americans believe we have already achieved it.

This project finds another explanation for the lack of fervor toward meritocracy. Americans also display a commitment to values that are resolutely unmeritocratic. Support for individual property rights and the institution of inheritance suggests that most Americans believe that it is just for economic wealth to be distributed by heredity instead of merit. It also finds that most Americans may be skeptical of the idea that the US is already a meritocracy. Race, gender, social background, personal connections and other non-merit factors are believed by most

Americans to impact a person's outcome in life. In short, most Americans know that the US has not yet achieved the meritocratic ideal. A commitment to alternative values might then be used to prevent the achievement of the meritocratic ideal. There is evidence to support the claim that most Americans don't believe that the US is a meritocracy and they don't want to live in one either.

The first chapter explains the origins of the term "meritocracy" and describes the characteristic elements of an ideal meritocratic society. It finds that there are two types of critiques of meritocracy. The first critique is matter of distributive justice, it argues that distributing social and economic rewards by merit is unjust for certain specified reasons. The second critique is a political one, it is claimed that a meritocracy is inherently undemocratic. However, meritocracy does have its defenders and responses to the critiques highlight values that Americans are likely to share.

In the social sciences there are two competing views about public opinion. The first view holds that the public is irrational and mercurial in their attitudes, beliefs, and values. The second view holds that the public is rational when certain statistical effects are remedied. The second chapter surveys the literature on opinion formation to provide readers with a better sense of what opinion polls actually mean. It then details the methodology that is used throughout the remainder of the dissertation. Ultimately, public opinion polling is a very useful tool for policy makers and social scientists, but there are limits to the methodology that must be considered when interpreting statistical findings.

Chapter 3 discusses some commonsense, widely held notions of merit and related concepts. It then goes on to detail popular attitudes about the importance of hard work and intelligence. Popular support for meritocracy is then contrasted against some of the “highbrow” academic debates. Despite the public’s support for meritocracy there are beliefs that come into direct conflict with meritocratic norms and ideals. Americans are ready to accept distributive rules other than merit and they display some skepticism about the meritocratic nature of American society.

Value pluralism is an important topic among political theorists. Different types of people have different values. Within the context of meritocracy certain values are of preeminent importance while others conflict with the meritocratic ideal. We would certainly like to know if some groups have more meritocratic than others and chapter 4 seeks to answer this question. Research has found that individual members of advantaged groups have a strong tendency towards the belief that the *status quo* is fair. We should therefore expect that members of disadvantaged groups, African Americans, women, and those from the lower classes, should find the current state of affairs unfair. It should come as no surprise that disagreement over the meritocratic nature of American society breaks along these lines. Advantaged groups tend to view the world as consistent with meritocracy while disadvantaged groups display skepticism about the reality of it.

In the social sciences power is often divided into three types: economic, social, and political. Those who rise to power in each of those domains use different means to affect the behavior of others, but one wonders if the powerful in each of these domains should be selected by merit. One may also wonder if economic, social,

and political elites are actually selected by merit. Chapter 5 explores public attitudes on these questions. It finds that Americans sometimes support and sometimes reject merit as the distributive rule.

Most Americans sometimes accept and sometimes reject meritocratic norms, but what does this mean in specific judgmental contexts? Chapter 6 discusses the case of inheritances and its taxation and finds that Americans flatly reject the meritocratic ethos. It begins with a discussion of the history of inheritance, its taxation, and debates over the justice of it. In terms of public opinion it finds that the distribution of wealth along hereditary lines is accepted in direct contradiction the proposition that everyone should work for their money. There is support for the reduction or elimination of the estate tax that most likely stems from a generalized anti-tax sentiment, unrealistic optimism, and sympathy for small business owners and farmers. However, the estate tax issue is a very low priority for most Americans. This is not surprising given that so few are affected by it. Most Americans would prefer a reduction in the taxes that actually affect them, such as the income or fuel tax, rather than a reduction of the estate tax. When Americans are told that the estate tax pays for social security and education programs, public opinion supports the tax. In this way framing has a significant impact on majority opinion on the issue.

Chapter 7 begins by providing readers with a short history of affirmative action policy in the US, from the 1960's civil rights struggles to the lawsuits over college admissions in 2003. It then gives an overview of debate over the justness of the policy. Most Americans believe that discrimination is not very prevalent; this is the key to understanding differences of opinion about affirmative action. Most whites



view the world as a meritocracy where everyone can succeed, while African Americans are less certain of that prospect. Most African Americans don't support race-based preferences that discriminate against whites, but they do tend to believe that racial preferences are needed to correct injustice and to provide a level playing field for all. The ideal of meritocracy leads some to support and some to oppose affirmative action.

Chapter 8 asks the question, what does all of this mean for democracy? History has taught us that mass behavior can be irrational and violent. For that reason democratic theory has often been defensive about the role that "the people" should play in a democratic polis. The result is an American constitutional system that places a check on the power of the people. In today's world we now have methods to collect and aggregate individual preferences. But can public opinion polls actually serve as a measure of the "will of the people," especially when "the people" seem ignorant, volatile, and contradictory? The rise of value pluralism in political theory poses a new problem for philosophers. While it may be good to allow different values to be expressed, contradictory values produce illogical and irrational preferences. Therefore, relying on "core values" to guide government is extremely problematic. Given the evidence of contradictory attitudes and contradictory values as they relate to the meritocratic ideal, we should be cautious in interpreting, but not dismissive of, public opinion. Still, an element of paternalism in government is one possible way to compensate for the effects of ill-informed opinion among the masses.

Chapter 9 briefly summarizes the findings of the dissertation. Public opinion on questions of meritocracy is contradictory. But this is no reason to ignore or

dismiss public opinion. With an understanding of where the conflict lays educators can ask students the difficult questions and political leaders can prepare for difficult choices.

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# Chapter 1

## The Philosophical Debate on the Justice of Meritocracy

*Star Trek is a meritocracy.*

*Leonard Nimoy*

“Meritocracy” is a term that is becoming increasingly prevalent in public discussions about the ideals and aims of contemporary society. It is often used to refer to an idealized society where discrimination on the basis of race, nationality, gender, age, and other irrelevant characteristics is completely absent and where power, status, and wealth are distributed solely the basis of a person’s ability to perform an assigned task. Gene Roddenberry’s famous television program takes place on a starship where the ranking officers are of different races, nationalities, genders, and even species. But they all share the distinction of being the most talented individuals in their respective roles.

The television program aired in the mid to late 1960’s, a time in America when racial tensions were high and the threat of communism preoccupied American diplomats. For many viewers it offered a picture of a future where people were judged solely on their capacity to perform their jobs well, instead of their race, gender, or national origin. The program featured, among others, a black woman, a Russian, and a white southerner who were working together to explore the universe

for humankind's benefit. Of course, all of this was science fiction. It was an escape from the reality that most Americans were facing at that time.

The term "meritocracy" was created approximately ten years before the famous program aired. It stems from a social satire where social goods and positions are distributed solely on the basis of merit. In *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, Michael Young emphasizes two major theoretical conflicts. The first is distributive and focuses on selection by family and selection by merit (Young 1994, 20). According to the theory inherited position and nepotism are antithetical to distribution by merit. The second is political. Democracy is rule by the people, while meritocracy is rule by the cleverest people (Young 1994, 11). Writing retrospectively as a narrator in the future he finds himself in a situation where democracy no longer seems appropriate. Democracy, he believes, worked when there wasn't equality of opportunity because the clever members of the lower classes could organize and lead their group (Young 1994, 125). In this way the parliament of the past was full of talented people (Young 1994, 125). But once a meritocracy emerged and equal opportunity was achieved there was nothing for the lower classes to complain about; they had every possible opportunity to rise above their station and the labor movement collapsed, in part because it lacked leaders.

A close reading of his satire reveals that a meritocracy is an "ideal type" society. Although one would be hard pressed to find any society that completely fits the meritocratic model, one can compare an existing society to the model and determine to what extent it is meritocratic. One can also list the core values behind the promotion of meritocracy and determine whether these values are held by

contemporary Americans. Do Americans support meritocracy or do they value unmeritocratic distributive schemes? This project seeks to answer this question. But first a review of the normative and philosophical debates concerning the topic is in order.

### *The Means and Ends of Meritocracy*

It is important to consider the significance of various choices when forming our definition of merit because defining merit is often problematic. Nevertheless, there are generally accepted notions of merit having to do with skills and talents (Fullinwider and Lichtenberg 2004, 25). Presumably, the only consideration in making a distributive decision about a particular office is whether the applicant has the necessary abilities or has a greater abundance of those abilities than others. This is a strictly functional conception of merit that defines merit by first considering the purpose of the office (Fullinwider and Lichtenberg 2004, 25). It asks, “How well can we expect this person to do the job at hand?” Innate talent and the propensity to make an honest effort are likely to figure highly in this regard.

It then rewards the person who we expect to perform well. “Roughly speaking, when we say that a person deserves some benefit on the basis of a quality, we are anticipating a future performance in which that quality is displayed.... If a judgment of merit cannot be linked in this way to an anticipated performance, then we do not have desert in its proper meaning” (D. Miller 1999, 137). It is important to keep in mind, however, that this commonsense understanding of merit as “the ability to do the job” does not consider a person’s opportunities for acquiring the skills to do the job.



An often-overlooked theme in Young's book lies at the very foundation of the social theory. There is no meritocracy prior to the establishment of equal opportunity. This should act as a precondition to any discussion of meritocracy. As long as the family and class background have an influence on a person's outcome, the distribution of social goods are not distributed entirely on merit. In its ideal, it is only after these factors are eliminated that the distribution of goods and positions can be based on merit. In short, the correlation between one's social origins and one's outcome in life is zero in a meritocracy. Unfortunately, many people's conception of merit is independent of the opportunities available to others. For these individuals a person can have merit even if society is actively discriminating against a class of persons on non-merit related grounds. Those people may not fully appreciate the ends of a meritocratic society.

If one of the ends of meritocracy is to provide everyone with an equal opportunity, then what exactly do we mean by "equal opportunity"? In an ideal meritocracy we have a society where every individual, regardless of circumstances of birth, can realistically compete with more advantaged members of society and upward social mobility occurs easily for those who are talented and make use of their talents. This is the basis for the meritocrat's definition of equal opportunity. Based on the end that is sought the minimum set of opportunities distributed to all in a meritocracy are very high indeed, but they are not infinite. At first glance the ideal seems to imply that the mentally and physically handicapped should be provided with the resources necessary to make them competitive with those who had better

circumstances of birth. Clearly, this is not what the theory has in mind. But there are those who define equal opportunity in precisely that way.

The most extreme form of equal opportunity only rewards effort relative to the effort expended by others in the same circumstances (Roemer 1998, 15) and requires the elimination of all inherited differences including differences in natural ability (Roemer 1998, 23). In this view equal opportunity can only be achieved at great cost because society would have to compensate those with a lack of natural ability and make them competitive with those who have tremendous natural ability (Roemer 1998, 60-61). In the extreme version even the disadvantaged may be worse off because of a subsequent decline in the quality of social goods produced.

Hypothetically, a few intellectually disadvantaged individuals could be given the resources to train to become surgeons but because the quality of surgery declines for everyone, even the disadvantaged who don't become surgeons, society loses utility overall (Roemer 1998, 105). Young's meritocracy, however, only attempts to eliminate disadvantages due to race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and other "irrelevant" characteristics. Once these particular characteristics of birth are compensated for, inequalities in outcome are justified on the basis of differences in natural ability and effort. It certainly would not entail having less able surgeons because all surgeons would have similar levels of natural ability regardless of their social origins. Meritocracy does not seek to make dumb people smart. It seeks to give smart people without the economic and social resources to succeed the resources to take advantage of their talent and to contribute to society as much as their natural ability allows.

The realistic competitiveness discussed here does not mean that the mentally disabled should be made to compete with the child prodigy, as they would in Roemer's model. It only means that persons of the same innate capacity will not be hampered or assisted by their social origins and will, if they so choose, achieve the same results in society. The only limits on individual achievements in a meritocracy are natural ability, effort, and individual choices. This requires that the minimum level of resource allocations to the disadvantaged be quite great, but not limitless.

Young's idealized meritocracy is a society that strives for other ends as well. It strives to improve efficiency and international competitiveness by maximizing human potential in the country (Young 1994, 4, 21, 85) and to increase upward and downward social mobility (Young 1994, 5, 43, 60). Although not a central part of the theory, improving efficiency and international competitiveness serves as a legitimizing claim for the more important elements. For some, "distributive justice can be realized only to the extent that each person has complete, and equal opportunity to develop fully his or her *potential* for productivity" (Haslett 1997,138). This is because limiting an individual's ability to fully develop their natural talents creates social and economic loss in the form of less able social and economic actors. If Bill Gates' family had been too poor to buy him his first computer and there was no social safety net to provide him with one, then Gates and everyone in society loses out. Our production of human capital operates below maximum efficiency when some members of society are denied the opportunity to acquire skills and training. In effect, we would be producing sub-optimal human resources. The provision of

resources works to improve the chances of upward mobility for smart hard working individuals.

These ends are accomplished through specific means that are carried out through public policy. Civil service exams eliminate nepotism and seniority and choose among applicants through tests that measure merit (Young 1994, 9, 69, 78). The theory, as formulated by Young, also proposes paying clever children allowances so that they will stay in school (Young 1994, 48) and that universities select among applicants through objective examinations that measure merit (Young 1994, 50). In this ideal society the influence of the family is weakened and the role of the school is enhanced (Young 1994, 30) through Goffman like total institutions that substitute kinship so that children don't spend their spare time with their family, which may have a "lower culture" (Young 1994, 59). In theory, boarding schools become the mechanism by which lower class children are socialized into the upper class world they are moving to.

Research shows that wealthy individuals use boarding schools to provide their own children with the cultural capital necessary to succeed. This is done by weakening the family bond and preparing their children for a place among the elite (Cookson & Persell 1985). Meritocratic theory supposes that boarding schools can have a similar effect on disadvantaged youths and in the ideal are used along with the traditional day school. This particular idea, however, is not new to those interested in education. Lipset notes that the Workingmen's Party of the 1820's advocated state financed boarding schools for the common child because class based cultural advantages could not be eliminated without such extraordinary effort (Lipset 1996,

82). Indeed, the notion of remolding the young to fit society's ends is an idea that has been thought about since the classical era.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the theory seeks the elimination of the inheritance of property because it rewards those who may lack merit with unearned wealth (Young 1994, 26). Nepotism, or the assistance of one's own child over the children of others, may be a biological impulse (Bellow 2001, 22), but it is in direct conflict with the meritocratic ideal. Meritocracy is an individual-regarding distributive theory, not a group-regarding theory. Individuals who display superb ability and effort deserve rewards; it is not the groups they belong to that deserve the rewards. Hence it not legitimate in a meritocracy to reward a person's family, ethnic/racial group, city, or nation for the achievements of the individual. Although these groups may benefit from the achievements of a person in their group, they would not be the direct recipients of any reward due to the individual nor would they be entitled to the reward by proxy of the individual.

Characteristics that are inherited from the parent such as race, ethnicity, class, and social status cannot have a bearing on the child's success in a meritocracy. When rewarding a meritorious parent the meritocracy cannot go so far as to destroy meritocracy for future generations. Wealth for the parent, though merited, is not allowed to destroy the very system it sought to establish. It is a system where people are judged and rewarded for having relevant personal characteristics that are independent of characteristics of the parent. The argument that "my ancestors earned it" is not a legitimate reason for a descendent to lay claim on wealth and other advantages. They must compete for rewards based on their own merit just any other

individual must. It is through all these various policies that the meritocratic ideal is turned into a reality. For some it is also the manner in which social justice is attained.

To summarize, a meritocratic society is one that promotes smart hard-working individuals regardless of which social strata they happen to be born in. It is a society where one's race, gender, and social background does not influence their outcome and where every individual, regardless of circumstances of birth, can realistically compete with more advantaged members of society. It is a society where equality of opportunity is a reality and where the restraints on individual success (except for innate capability) are eliminated as far as is possible. The items that are necessary to provide individuals with an equal opportunity to succeed in society are not distributed by merit, but are provided to all on an equal basis. Inherited position and nepotism are eliminated in a meritocratic society.

#### *The Attack on Meritocracy*

Some in academia have a negative view of meritocracy. This stems, in part, from two different conceptions of meritocracy. The first perspective of meritocracy views the idea as (1) a *system of distributive justice* and the second view of meritocracy analyzes the concept as (2) a *political system*. Critics that follow the first school of thought make three distinct claims that, in their view, make meritocracy unjust. The criticisms are (a) that distribution by merit is arbitrary and destructive, (b) that it creates a hereditary caste system, and (c) that it is incompatible with a market based economic system. Those who view meritocracy primarily in political terms sometimes argue that meritocracy is undemocratic.

*I. Distributive Justice*  
*a. Arbitrary and Destructive*

Those who view meritocracy as a system of distributive justice are sometimes critical of the idea because they believe it is arbitrary and destructive. They argue that because the distribution of talent in society is arbitrary and undeserved the distribution of social rewards would be unjust in a meritocracy. Arbitrary distribution precludes any possibility of earning the merit that is to be rewarded. They also believe that a “fair opportunity” can’t be achieved as long as some form of the family exists in society (Rawls 1971, 64). This is because parents can predispose their children to succeed or fail in life. Parents are a part of the environment that affect the abilities that children attain. Therefore truly equalizing children’s environments in an effort to create a system with equal opportunities for all would mean having to eliminate the family.

*b. Hereditary Caste System*

The second criticism is that it would lead to a hereditary caste system that, far from promoting social mobility, actually makes social advancement nearly impossible for the lower orders. This could be the case if wealth and social position are only or primarily distributed by unchangeable genetic characteristics of individuals. If a person’s social environment has little or no effect on abilities and outcomes, then public policy changes would not help disadvantaged individuals advance. According to this view the government could not change the outcomes for individuals unless they engaged in some program of eugenics to change the proportion of certain genes in the population pool. This is, of course, ethically problematic and, at this point, technologically unrealistic. But if true, it would mean that public policy could not

affect the distribution of social rewards and it could not affect individuals' social position.

The argument has been put into the form of a syllogism:

1. If differences in mental abilities are inherited, and
2. If success requires those abilities, and
3. If earnings and prestige depend on success,
4. Then social standing (which reflects earnings and prestige) will be based to some extent on inherited differences among people.

(Herrnstein 1971, 197-8)

Compiling evidence from other studies Herrnstein concludes that 80% of the differences in IQ among individuals is explained by inherited factors and 15% is explained by environmental factors (Herrnstein 1971, 171).

These critics believe in a social phenomenon called assortative mating. They found evidence to suggest that people tend to marry others with similar IQ's. They could not discern whether this was because people with similar IQ's are placed close together in school and occupation and are therefore just more likely to meet each other, or whether it actually matters in the process of mate selection. Either way, they argue, because IQ is largely inherited the consequences are enormous because it could lead to virtual caste system based on intelligence (Herrnstein 1971, 190; Herrnstein and Murray 1994, 110). Young's satire of meritocracy relies on this idea. He believed that eventually discontented meritocrats in his fictional dystopia lead the ignorant masses (they could not organize themselves) to revolt against the upper caste. The inheritability of intelligence would create social instability.

Herrnstein goes on to report some very troubling findings, that if true, make meritocracy even less pleasant.



Right from the start the findings were informative. For example, highly bright boys were easier to locate than highly bright girls. And the disparity increased slightly with age, suggesting that whatever I.Q. is, boys maintain it better than girls.... In addition, the sample contained an excess of western and northern Europeans and Jews, and shortage of Latins, non-Jewish eastern Europeans, and Negroes.

(Herrnstein 1971, 129)

Later, he and another author would present more data “proving” that some racial groups score lower than others on measures of intelligence. Herrnstein and Murray suggest that the mean IQ of whites is 101.5, African-Americans 85, and East Asians 103. Because they believe that these differences cannot be changed, even if differences in environmental factors are eliminated, they conclude, “For many people, there is nothing they can learn that will repay the cost of the teaching” (Herrnstein & Murray 1994, 520). They not only claim that African-Americans are less intelligent than whites, they claim that making expenditures to educate African-Americans is a waste of resources. The implications of this for all disadvantaged groups are devastating because it leads to the type of discrimination that meritocracy seeks to avoid.

### *c. Incompatible with Market*

The third argument made against meritocracy is that it conflicts with the market. There is a perceived tension between market distribution and distribution by merit. These critics believe that markets cannot be used to measure merit. They argue that markets reward those who possess something valuable to their fellows, not necessarily rewarding those who fulfill another’s conception of merit or desert (Hayek 1944,135). Furthermore, the market rewards those who have or perform

services valued by those with the resources to pay for them. In very important respects then market distribution and distribution by merit leads to different results.

This is a complex issue because markets, at present, don't necessarily reward merit, though they may reward some elements of merit. One can imagine an ideal universe where a market rewards merit, but the reality of the situation is that markets may have to be constrained and regulated if distribution by merit is desired. It is perhaps true that the ideal type meritocracy is incompatible with a market system. But interestingly, most supporters of the free market system justify their positions because the market, in *its* ideal type, is supposed to distribute rewards to intelligent hard working individuals.

What is most remarkable about the claims made by market supporters is that the underlying values of freedom, competition, distribution by merit/ability, equal opportunity, and choice, are exactly the values that are at the core of a meritocratic society. They argue that because investing in or financing an individual's education (human capital) is riskier than investing in or financing a building (physical capital)

the capital market tend[s] to restrict the more expensive vocational and professional training to individuals whose parents or benefactors can finance the training required. They make such individuals a "non-competing" group sheltered from competition by the unavailability of the necessary capital to many able individuals. The result is to perpetuate inequalities of wealth and status.

(Friedman 1962, 107)

This outcome conflicts with the values they are committed to. Therefore they suggest that a voucher program, where the government provides a payment that individuals could use to pay for private educational services and where services over and above the amount of the voucher could be purchased by individuals willing to pay more, be

created (Friedman 1962, 89). This “would make capital more widely available and would thereby do much to make equality of opportunity a reality, to diminish inequalities of income and wealth, and to promote the full use of our human resources” (Friedman 1962, 107). Supporters of the market system seem to want exactly what a proponent of meritocracy desires.

## 2. *Political Justice*

The criticism that meritocracy is undemocratic is based on the view that a meritocracy is a political system. Robert Dahl believes that democracy gives power to the masses while meritocracy alienates power from the masses and gives it to an elite few. His view of meritocracy originates from Plato’s guardianship ideal. “By guardianship I mean a regime in which the state is governed by meritorious rulers who consist of a minority of adults, quite likely a very small minority, *and who are not subject to the democratic process*” (Dahl 1989, 57). Those that hold this view are not arguing that experts shouldn’t be used by the government, nor that we shouldn’t have well educated and virtuous legislators, but they do not believe that those who are deemed to be the most able should govern without check.

Dahl is critical of meritocracy because of five interrelated problems. First, it is difficult to decide what is meant by the necessary “skill, wisdom, and virtue” to lead (Dahl 1967, 19). The characteristics that seem so beneficial to have in a leader may be extraordinarily difficult to define. Second, even if we could decide what is meant by these terms there may be no way to create a system that will actually be able to select those who have these characteristics. It could be that the system would be too subjective, or that individuals with malicious intent could game the system and

tain the requisite qualities. Third, even if we could devise a system to select the very people we think are best, this does not ensure that they would have the consent of those they are governing. It could happen that the masses don't want to be ruled by those we deem meritorious (Dahl 1967, 20). Fourth, the idea behind attempting to select a small group to rule over others is based on the proposition that the general public does not have the capacity to govern itself wisely or effectively (Dahl 1989, 65). Perhaps we may believe that the masses are ignorant, inconsistent, or mercurial in their preferences. These critics believe that the average citizen has the capacity to act for their own and others' good.

The fifth and most important problem Dahl raises is that even if we could select and approve of rule by the guardians there is no guarantee that they would remain "skillful, wise, and virtuous" after they are given the authority to rule (Dahl 1967, 20; Dahl 1989, 76). Because he is aware of Lord Acton's aphorism that "absolute power corrupts absolutely" he is suspicious of the ability of even virtuous people to remain that way after they become rulers. "For anyone convinced by these objections to meritocracy, the main alternative in the United States ever since colonial times has always been popular government" (Dahl 1967, 20). It is clear then that some theorists view rule by the meritorious and rule by the people as antagonistic concepts and they believe that the latter is preferred to the former.

#### *Reasons for Optimism*

Although I make no claims about being able to overcome these various objections as they stand, some important considerations should be made about their

limitations given that the values that are at the root of meritocracy seem to be cherished by many Americans.

*1. Distributive Justice*  
*a. Arbitrary and Destructive*

The first argument held that because the distribution of natural assets is based on “fortune” it is “arbitrary from a moral perspective” (Rawls 1971, 64). Therefore, anything derived from this serendipity is excluded from the concept of justice. Since we can’t justify our natural assets, we don’t deserve what they bring us. However those that hold this position are sometimes inclined to take the view to its extremes, “Even the willingness to make an effort, to try, and so to be deserving in the ordinary sense is itself dependent on... social circumstance” (Rawls 1971, 64). From this we would have to conclude that effort is morally arbitrary as well! A person could no longer be deserving of the products of their efforts.

This argument is dangerous for two reasons. First, it belittles people’s autonomy.

This line of argument can succeed in blocking the introduction of a person’s autonomous choices and actions (and their results) only by attributing *everything* noteworthy about the person completely to certain sorts of “external” factors. So denigrating a person’s autonomy and prime responsibility for his actions is a risky line to take for a theory that otherwise wishes to buttress the dignity and self-respect of autonomous beings...  
(Nozick 1974, 214)

If everything is arbitrary a person could no longer be held accountable for their actions because their choices and efforts are considered to be beyond their control. Criminals could not be justifiably penalized because their actions were a result of their environment, not individual volition. Athletes could not deserve trophies

because someone else, like parents or coaches, determined the effort the athlete expended at training. And employees could not request a salary in exchange for choosing to work, since they aren't responsible for wanting to be productive and make an effort. Rawls's critique strikes at the heart of the American creed which values hard work and individual volition. In light of admonitions to reward meritorious actions and similar arguments about recognizing personal choices, the first criticism seems to reject any role for individual choices and actions in distributive decisions.

Additionally, Rawls would have a difficult time defending private property if he truly believed that that which stems from one's own effort can't be deserved. John Locke says about every person that,

The *Labour* of his Body, and the *Work* of his Hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *Labour* with, and joyned to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*.

(Locke 1960, 288)

If our labor, if our effort, is arbitrary, then Rawls cannot justify private property. A person could no longer deserve what they earned for a day's work because their effort was a matter of circumstance.

Of course, Rawls does accept private property and economic markets because it gives citizens a "free choice of careers and occupations" (Rawls 1971, 241). There is a type of theoretical inconsistency in justice as fairness. If we exclude objects from desert because they are arbitrarily distributed, then private property that is acquired from one's own labor and the distribution of goods by markets can't be justified, at least on Lockean grounds. In the end, we would have to make an argument against

the very foundations of western civilization. A person would have to be an extreme radical to say a person doesn't deserve the product of his labor. Not even socialists make that claim.

The claim that talent is arbitrary is also troubling because talent is a term that can be used to describe both acquired abilities and innate abilities. The latter are what I prefer to call capabilities for the sake of distinguishing between the two concepts. Acquired abilities can be gained through the proper training, but innate capabilities are distributed by chance. Only innate capabilities are subject to Rawls' critique. And, until there is a society where science can control the distribution of particular capabilities through genetics, which does not seem like a particularly appealing idea, there is no manner by which to control the innate capabilities of individuals. Acquired abilities are not distributed randomly and are affected by a variety of social and environmental factors. These can be controlled by society either by allowing for differences in training or by equalizing the amount and type training. In this way a good social theorist can discriminate between acquired talents and natural talents and add precision to the confused debate over the role of talent in a meritocracy.

Rawls also claims that "fair opportunity" can't be achieved as long as some form of the family exists (Rawls 1971, 64). There is reason to believe, however, that destroying the family would be detrimental even in a meritocratic society. Also, concerns about the institution of the family are not necessarily a reason to preserve the status quo. When family connections and nepotism create unfair advantages for individuals then it may be legitimate for social action to be taken to compensate for these inequalities. Whether the elimination of inherited wealth is destructive to

families is a philosophical debate that is beyond the scope of this particular project, but it is certainly a point of contention among those interested in social justice.

*b. Hereditary Caste System*

As for claims that a meritocratic system of elite recruitment would lead to a genetically based caste system, many social scientists have found Herrnstein and Murray's methods very problematic (Fischer 1996; Frasure 1995; Howe 1997; Jencks & Bane 1976). The study that Herrnstein and Murray used to measure IQ differences by race was the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT), which was given to 12,000 young people in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). Fischer found that the AFQT did not have a normal distribution in the scores.

About 20 percent of the test takers answered more than 90 percent of the questions correctly. This is the real distribution of scores from the key measure in *The Bell Curve*. There are simple reasons why the AFQT did not yield a bell curve. Our concern here, however, is with the psychometric insistence that there *must* be a bell curve. The other line in figure 2.1, labeled "Transformed," shows the distribution of test takers after Herrnstein and Murray recalculated the scores. It is roughly bell shaped; it is also the source of the title and the jacket design for *The Bell Curve*. How did Herrnstein and Murray get a bell curve from the lopsided distribution of original scores? By a good deal of statistical mashing and stretching. Because they presumed, as psychometricians do, that intelligence must be distributed in a bell curve, they justified transforming the number of questions each test taker correctly answered until they produced the bell curve in the figure.

(Fischer 1996,

32)

Herrnstein and Murray then focus on the top and bottom 5% of the transformed distribution curve to show massive inequalities in intelligence that were, in reality, not so far apart.

Contrary to the thesis that genes determine one's intelligence some psychologists in the field of intelligence testing suggest that IQ is primarily the result



of environmental factors. Unfortunately for Herrnstein and Murray's study, the environmental reasons for low IQ were not controlled for and may account for as much as 80% of the difference in scores (Fischer 1996). The pre-natal diet of the mother has been found to have a strong impact on the child's mental capacity throughout life (Broman, et. al. 1975). The amount of intellectual stimulation that parents can provide a child has the effect of advancing or retarding a child's cognitive development, accounting for a non-genetic passing on of traits. In these situations an environmental factor influences what is perceived to be an innate characteristic.

But even if Herrnstein was correct and intelligence was 80% genetic, the remaining environmental effect could be enormous. There may be "multiplier effects" that could enhance the impact of the environment on individuals. If a small improvement in the environment leads to a small IQ gain and that gain allows one to be in an even more improved environment that leads to even more IQ gains, then, by progression, small environmental differences early in life can have dramatic effects in terms of measured intelligence later on.

For example, a father who loves basketball and who has a son with slightly better than average genes for the relevant physical traits is likely to play basketball with his son at an early age, and they are likely to play together more often than most. The son may become a bit better at basketball than others his age and may frequently be an early pick when teams are chosen in the school yard. This makes him feel good, so he begins to prefer basketball to other sports. The extra practice makes him better still, and the better he gets, the more he enjoys basketball. He is far more likely than most to be singled out for membership on a school or recreational team where he will receive expert coaching. Such a young person is likely to become a very good basketball player—much better than he would be if his only distinction was the minor physical and social advantages posited at the outset.

(Dickens & Flynn 2001)

It has been demonstrated that some individuals display large IQ gains over time, a result that cannot occur if IQ was determined at birth (Flynn 1999).

What is more, genes may affect one's environment:

Imagine a nation that refuses to send children with red hair to school. Under these circumstances, having genes that cause red hair will lower your reading scores. This does not tell us that children with red hair cannot learn to read. It tells only that, in this particular situation, there is a socially imposed relationship between genes and opportunities to learn. In America, the genes that affect skin color have an indirect influence on an individual's opportunities and incentives to learn many skills.

(Jencks & Bane 1976,

332)

Many people who study the subject find that social class background is related to one's performance on IQ tests. Herrnstein and Murray would argue that is because intelligent couples had intelligent children due to transmitting their genes. But Jencks and others would argue that these children were provided with much better environments early in life and for that reason perform better on exams.

Biologists are also interested in this debate and they have not been able to find a genetic basis for intelligence. Jonathan Beckwith, a Harvard microbiologist, says that scientists have not been able to identify the genes (if there are any) that are associated with intelligence (DeParle 1994). Until geneticists are able to find the genes, the idea that intelligence is genetically driven will be suspect. The danger of exploiting and manipulating data for ideological purposes must be taken into account whenever social statistics are given as proof of biological differences.

Given the lack of biological evidence and suspect methodology of those that argue for the predominance of genes, the claims made by those who support the view that environmental factors predominate are, at this time, somewhat stronger.

Therefore, there is very little scientific evidence that distributing social goods by merit would lead to the creation of a super-intelligent upper caste that transmits its prized genes to their offspring and shuts out the lower orders from possible upward social mobility. This is good news for those that believe that smart hard working people, regardless of where they are born, have a chance to succeed in America. Improving the environments of disadvantaged children would probably have an enormous positive effect in their ability to learn and to score better on intelligence and achievement exams.

*c. Incompatible with Market*

The next criticism, that meritocracy and markets are incompatible, may be accurate. However, the values that underlie the market as a distributive mechanism are the same values that lay at the core of meritocracy. What is alarming, however, is that some of the policies proposed by free market advocates would actually take society further away from meritocratic distribution and violate the very values they purport to cherish. The voucher system with privatized schools proposed by Friedman would allow the wealthy to spend more on their children by subsidizing private education. Those without the means would rely only on their voucher and the gap between rich and poor educational attainment would remain, if not get worse. His plan would not make it easier for disadvantaged children to compete with more advantaged children because their choices will still be limited, whereas the choices available to the wealthy will be expanded.

Furthermore, free market advocates defend a person's right to transfer their wealth to their children by saying, "it seems illogical to say that a man is entitled to

what he has produced by personal capacities or to the produce of the wealth he has accumulated, but that he is not entitled to pass any wealth on to his children; to say that a man may use his income for riotous living but may not give it to his heirs” (Friedman 1962, 164). They then speciously compare receiving an inheritance to serendipitously finding “a \$20 bill on the pavement” (Friedman 1962, 165) and make entirely unfounded statements about human genetics.

One influential free market proponent makes a critique that parallels Rawls’ view. Friedman states, “The man who is hard working and thrifty is to be regarded as ‘deserving’; yet these qualities owe much to the genes he was fortunate (or unfortunate?) enough to inherit” (Friedman 1962, 166). This seems to suggest that the hard working do not deserve their reward because this trait is a genetic accident (though he supports markets because they are supposed to reward effort). Here Friedman is following the same individual disregarding line that Rawls pursued. The difference is that while we may accept that social circumstance can have an effect on effort, there is no basis for claiming it is genetically determined. Biologists are only at the very early stages of understanding human genealogy. They have completed mapping the human genome only within the past 2 years and have not identified the purposes of the vast majority of genes. The “effort gene,” if it exists, has not been found.

One should face severe cognitive dissonance if one values competition, is aware that differences in wealth can create a “‘non-competing’ group sheltered from competition,” and yet support an inheritance system that maintains a sheltered non-competing group. Fortunately, not every proponent of the free market is convinced

that inheritances are necessary to maintain a market-based system (Hayek 1944, 113). It is conceivable to have a competitive market-based system without the transmission of wealth along generational lines. Ultimately, more theoretical work will be necessary to reconcile this conflict, if indeed it is possible to be reconciled at all. What can be said is that the values of improving opportunities for the disadvantaged, creating more choices for people, and fostering competition are held in common by both proponents of markets and meritocracy.

## 2. *Political Justice*

Having now addressed many of the distributive concerns, we now shift our focus to the political. A meritocracy, as a political system, need not be undemocratic. Certainly, it would not be a direct democracy where the public votes on laws and policies directly through a ballot because of the public's lack of information and expertise in policy matters, but it could very well be consistent with the system the founders of the American republic envisioned. Ultimately, the idea that meritocracy is undemocratic depends on what one means by democracy.

The founders seemed to have something like a meritocracy in mind. Jefferson believed in the idea of a "natural aristocracy" that could be recruited from all social strata to become America's leaders. It was based on "virtue and talents" and was opposed by the "artificial aristocracy, founded on wealth and birth" (Jefferson 1944, 633). Even patronage, something that is antithetical to meritocracy, had meritocratic ends during the colonial era. At the time patronage was based on a *noblesse oblige* where men of rank and position would sponsor unusually bright or gifted boys and provide them with the resources to learn the sciences or become involved with

politics. Benjamin Franklin is a wonderful example of this upward mobility. In a system that was closed to many, attempts were made to promote those who were gifted with particular talents.

Some are able to reconcile meritocracy with democratic theory by arguing that democracy is a “by-product of a competitive method of leadership recruitment” (Sartori 1987, 152). We cannot escape the reality that all social systems, even democracies, have concentrated power. What makes democracy distinct from other political systems is that democracy should concentrate power in a selective “polyarchy of merit” (Sartori 1987, 169). Under this view of democracy there are elections where the meritorious are selected to rule over society. The people remain sovereign but rule indirectly through those they elect.

Dahl’s critique stems from the conflation of guardianship and meritocracy. It is true that the meritocratic ideal has its roots in Plato’s *Republic*, where a class of guardians would be drawn from all social classes to become the society’s leaders. But we need to keep in mind what the ideal imagined. A meritocracy resembles aristocracy in the classical sense of the term meaning “rule by the best.” What has happened over the centuries, however, is that aristocracy has become associated with hereditary privilege and a rigid class system. Instead of this, a meritocracy promotes worthy individuals regardless of which social strata they happen to be born in. It does not alienate power from the masses because some individuals from the masses become powerful elites. The system remains open to all classes.

Even if one disagrees with the “polyarchy of merit” concept, one should remember to keep the distinction between meritocracy as a socioeconomic idea and

meritocracy as a political system in mind. Currently, political scientists sometimes criticize the entire idea when their actual concern is only with a particular conception of the idea. That is they might criticize meritocracy as a political system without recognizing that meritocracy as a system of distributive justice might still be desired and is not harmed by arguments made against the political concept of meritocracy.

### *Conclusions*

This chapter has presented the origins of the term meritocracy and outlined the major components of an “ideal type” meritocracy. It is a fictional ideal that is utopian for some and dystopian for others. Some of the major criticisms of meritocracy were outlined, as were some rebuttals. The critiques presented in this chapter will help organize the public opinion data that will compose the major part of this dissertation. The four major theoretical conflicts provide a starting point for a review of public opinion on the matter of meritocracy. Is meritocracy consistent with the core values that are behind Americans’ attitudes and policy preferences?

## Chapter 2

### Notes on Methodology: The Uses and Limits of Public Opinion Data

*The proposition that {the people} are the best keeper of their liberties is not true. They are the worst conceivable, they are no keepers at all. They can neither act, judge, think, or will.<sup>1</sup>*

*John Adams*

The lack of trust in the public that has been exhibited throughout the centuries by political influentials in America is based on the belief that the public is ill-informed and mercurial in their attitudes. The general will, if it can exist at all, is not a well-reasoned conviction but a passing response to a fleeting question. For this reason, and others, the public lacks a single decisive voice. They vacillate from one response to another depending on the manner the question is asked or on the ordering of the questions. The masses seem to lack response stability and ideological constraint. They sometimes support and sometimes oppose the same policy and they often vacillate between liberal and conservative views.

As a college instructor, I often ask undergraduates in my political science courses if they believe that “people should work for their money.” The overwhelming majority agree with that proposition as nearly every person in the room raises their hand. I then ask, “Do you think that wealthy people should be allowed to pass on their money to their children?” Again an overwhelming majority believes that wealthy individuals are entitled pass on their wealth to family members. I then

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<sup>1</sup> Adams qtd. in Morone 1990, 33



ask, “So the child of the wealthy person doesn’t have to work for their money, is that right?” Looks of confusion appear, students look at each other and most then begin to retract one or the other statement. One particularly bright student once raised his hand and exclaimed, “If we think that smart hard working people should have more money than others, then we can’t also have a system that gives money to people who haven’t demonstrated that they’re smart or hard working. We can’t have meritocracy *and* inheritances.” Students who were purportedly the beneficiaries of large estates reacted passionately against the implications of that statement. But the point, that most were unaware of the conflict, was made and people had to come to terms with their cognitive dissonance. The students I’ve encountered do not have a sophisticated distributive justice schema that justifies both earned income and inherited wealth. For most, if not all of the students, it may have been the first time in their lives that the two questions were asked consecutively. It’s as though at that moment the clouds part, a ray of sunshine hits them in the face, and a truth is revealed to them. I like to believe that my introduction to political science brings them one step closer to personal enlightenment.

Unfortunately, many Americans never experience this type of educating moment. They remain ignorant and give contradictory, confused, and seemingly haphazard answers to questions. Yet in a democracy, where the people are sovereign, some account of the public’s preferences must be considered so that the government can hold true to the ideal of popular rule. This makes the technology of public opinion polling an integral part of contemporary democratic governance. It is imperative, therefore, that before we explore the public’s responses to questions of

distributive justice that we consider the uses and limits of polling generally and of the methods employed in this project specifically. There is a long-standing debate concerning public rationality among social scientists, this chapter considers the arguments made on both sides of the debate and provides an overview of the methodology used in this project.

*They Don't Know What's Good for Them*

One of the most enduring findings in the public opinion literature is that there is a great deal of inconsistency in people's responses to questions. Converse finds that individuals do not have very stable preferences over time. He shows that the masses have low levels of ideological constraint, often vacillating between liberal and conservative views, and that their positions are unstable or even randomly formulated (Converse 1964). He goes so far as to say that the public's attitudes are actually "non-attitudes" (Converse 1970).

This is in large part due to the public's general inattentiveness to politics. The public, it seems, is ignorant when it comes to basic information about politics. Most Americans are simply not informed about most of the issues most of the time. In studies only 29% of Americans could name their Congressional representative, only 25% could name the two US Senators from their home state (Glynn et. al. 1999, 23), and only 9% could correctly name the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (Barnum 1993, 215). Indeed, "more than two-thirds could not name a single member of the Court" (Barnum 1993, 215 [ft 8]).

The findings presented in Table 1 confirm these conclusions. Very few Americans could recall the name of the Senate Majority Leader, the Speaker of the

Table 1: The Uninformed Public

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Do you happen to know the names of the U.S. (United States) Senators from this state? What are their names?<sup>1</sup>

Named one Senator only	26%
Named both Senators	25%
Couldn't name either	49%

Can you tell me the name of the current Majority Leader of the U.S. (United States) Senate?<sup>2</sup>

Correct answer (Robert Dole, Bob Dole, Dole, Senator Dole)	34%
Incorrect answer	10%
Not sure	56%

Do you happen to know the name of the Representative in Congress from your district? What is your representative's name?<sup>3</sup>

Yes, correct	28%
Yes, incorrect	15%
No	52%
Don't know/No answer	5%

Just off the top of your head, would you happen to know the name of the Speaker of the House of Representatives in Washington?<sup>4</sup>

Dennis Hastert (correct)	6%
Any other response	6%
No opinion	88%

Can you recall the name of the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court?<sup>5</sup>

William Rehnquist (correct)	6%
Other	6%
Don't know	88%

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<sup>1</sup> Survey by Gallup Organization, September 9-September 11, 1988. Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> Survey by Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard University, Washington Post, Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, November 28-December 4, 1995. Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>3</sup> Survey by CBS News/New York Times, October 29-November 1, 1994. Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>4</sup> Survey by Gallup Organization, January 25-January 26, 2000. Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>5</sup> Survey by Radio and Television News Directors Foundation, Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, June 17-July 2, 1996. Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

House of Representatives, the Senators from their state, the Congressperson from their district, or the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Given this lack of awareness of important figures it easy to conclude that Americans do not pay very much attention to political events and issues. With little information and not much thought many respondents would be answering questions in patterns that are as seemingly random as a coin toss.

These data show that citizens know very little about their own representatives. Other studies have concluded that people know next to nothing about the performance of parties or individual office holders (Miller & Stokes 1962). Even those who claim to know an incumbent's stand on issues are very often wrong (Hurley & Hill 1980). This could be because the public is simply too busy to be aware of all that occurs in government (Lippmann 1993, 15; Lippmann 1997, 37). But regardless of the reasons, a lack of information can cause a respondent to answer "incorrectly."

People who are well informed about politics are better able to form opinions consistent with their political predispositions, which means that opinion givers who are ill informed may be mistaken about their needs, wants, and values: they might give opinions that they wouldn't give if they were more knowledgeable about politics.

(Althaus 2003, 148)

The lack of information can even cause an individual to support a party that opposes that person's stated attitudes and policy preferences (Campbell, et. al. 1964, 120).

This would be like an anti-war pacifist voting for a pro-war candidate because he didn't know which candidate was more hawkish. A fully informed public is likely to give different answers to various questions than the poorly informed public that exists.

With regard to foreign aid, most Americans greatly overestimate the amount the US spends. Polls report that Americans believe that the US spends an average of between 18 and 33 percent of its budget on foreign aid, while in reality the figure is only 1 percent. This accounts for surveys that find that 73% of Americans favor a cut in the amount the US spends on foreign aid efforts (Kull & Destler 1999, 123). This anti-foreign aid attitude, however, must face a peculiar challenge. “When Americans are asked to set an appropriate level for U.S. foreign aid spending, they set a level much higher than the actual level.... The median response was 5 percent of the federal budget – five times present spending levels” (Kull & Destler 1999, 125). Because the public lacks relevant information some public opinion polls may report that the public desires cuts in some kinds of spending while other polls report that the public desires increases in spending for the same programs.

However, even when the public does have information, it may be entirely incorrect. The public can have “gross misperceptions” that cause it to respond in a particular manner to questions of public policy (Kull & Destler 1999, 57). Such misperceptions are referred to as “pluralistic ignorance,” the “false consensus effect,” “unrealistic optimism,” and the “third-person effect” (Glynn, et. al. 1999, 192-203). Unrealistic optimism for example, causes people to believe they are better or luckier than most others. One survey found that, “by a three-to-one ratio, more respondents said they were more competent than average” (Kull 1999, 20). Of course it’s absurd for such a large proportion of the general population to actually be above average, so researchers must conclude that respondents are mistaken about their self-perception. This psychological matter may lead individuals to believe they are more meritorious

than comparably situated others, they may exaggerate their own merit and discount the merit of others.

Many people don't even recognize what class they are in. Higher wage blue-collar voters in unions identify as working class, but higher wage blue-collar voters not in unions identify as middle class. This confusion is made worse by cross-pressures. There are highly educated white-collar persons with low wages and less educated blue-collar persons with high wages so that occupation and material well being may give one drastically different political preferences (Campbell, et. al. 1964, 209). These cross-pressures, when combined with very little time devoted to thinking about political matters, can easily lead to the type of response instability that Converse hypothesizes about.

Studying opinion change shows further proof of instability in public opinion. Low information people are the easiest to sway during political or economic crisis (Campbell, et. al. 1964, 284). This is because individuals with high levels of information are usually the most involved in politics and have created a "perceptual screen" to filter out or dismiss information that is contrary to their view (Campbell, et. al. 1964, 75). Of course, all of this occurs through the mass media and other studies have shown that media coverage is particularly influential on those that are least involved in politics (Zaller 1993, 13). Those who are more politically engaged are less influenced by television news coverage because of their greater capacity to screen out contradictory evidence or to recall an opposing consideration when confronted with unfavorable facts. The uninvolved accept and internalize transmitted ideas with less hesitation and are therefore easily manipulated by media coverage.

However, even well informed, politically aware people do not make judgments based on all the information at their disposal; rather they tend to make decisions based on the most recent information they've encountered (Iyengar & Kinder 1987). Table 2 shows that Americans are much better able to recall the names of television stars and characters than the political figures listed in Table 1. This suggests that Americans do acquire and retain information from television, it is simply that they pay less attention to political issues. We can't expect everyone to find politics interesting, but the lack of political information in most Americans' consciousness is a cause for concern among those who believe that public opinion will reflect the general will.

Table 2: Knowledge of Popular Culture

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Do you happen to know the names of any of the four main characters on 'Seinfeld'?  
What are their names?<sup>1</sup>

Named all four	27%
Named three	11%
Named two	7%
Named one	20%
Don't know/Refused	35%

Just off the top of your head, would you happen to know the name of the host of 'The Tonight Show' on TV?<sup>2</sup>

Jay Leno (correct)	59%
David Letterman	14%
Any other response	6%
No opinion	21%

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<sup>1</sup> Survey by Pew Research Center, Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, May 1-May 5, 1998. Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> Survey by Gallup Organization, January 25-January 26, 2000. Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

*Give the Public a Chance, They Are Rational*

On the other side of the coin there are those who believe that public opinion is rational. They believe that the problems outlined above can be remedied. The first solution to the problem of uninformed opinion giving is to do nothing at all. If the uninformed public is answering questions as though they were flipping a coin, then “for” and “against” responses will cancel each other out. Then if the informed public consistently gives one answer over another the majority opinion will reflect the opinions of the most informed respondents. Two problems with this approach are readily apparent. First, if the uninformed public tends to give one answer over another they can effectively “drown out” the opinion of informed respondents. Secondly, since the most informed response givers tend to be better educated, wealthier, middle aged, have professional occupations, are more likely to be Republican, and are more likely to be white, then the responses of the most informed opinion givers are biased toward particular policy preferences that reflect their more elite status (Althaus 2003, 17).

Another approach is to include filter questions that remove uninformed respondents. By asking respondents, “Have you thought about the following issue recently...” or “Do you have an opinion on...” a researcher could remove respondents who are admittedly uninformed or have no opinion. In this way the respondent is not forced to make up an answer to a question he has never before considered. But again, removing many of these “don’t know” respondents may tend to disproportionately remove respondents from lower socio-economic groups.



Among the most innovative methods created is a process dubbed “deliberative polling.” The procedure, developed by James Fishkin, “bring[s] a random sample of ordinary citizens to a central location where they are provided with detailed policy information and an environment in which to discuss the issues” (Althaus 2003, 99). This seems to provide ordinary citizens with precisely what they lack. Once they have the necessary information, their stated opinions are more likely to reflect their “true opinion.” Unfortunately, the procedure does not provide citizens with the “cognitive styles and information processing strategies characteristic of politically knowledgeable people” (Althaus 2003, 100). The procedure also fails to “duplicate the social contexts in which political information is acquired and used to form preferences” (Althaus 2003, 101). The procedure, while it does give people the necessary information to make better decisions, is too artificial and is very different from the usual modes of acquiring information. Besides this, deliberative polling is expensive to implement and does not provide the immediate results that most people are used to from standard opinion polling. Nevertheless, the procedure is a promising advance in many contexts.

Perhaps the most influential method of overcoming response instability is the method created by Page and Shapiro, who aggregate responses to the same question over time. Despite the fact that individuals may give different responses to the same questions in different iterations of the survey, “over a period of time, each individual will have a central tendency of opinion, which might be called the “true” or *long-term preference*, and which can be ascertained by averaging the opinions expressed by the same individual at several different times” (Page & Shapiro 1992, 16). Relying on

the classic “canceling out” argument they state, “simple statistical reasoning indicates that those errors will tend to cancel each other out when the opinions of individuals are aggregated” and “the logic of averaging out random fluctuations in order to find a stable central tendency applies even better to *collective* than to individual opinion” (Page & Shapiro 1992, 20). The process of aggregating public opinion was a statistical breakthrough, but is subject to many of the same critiques cited above. There is evidence to suggest that ill-informed respondents are sometimes “lop-sided” in their responses. That is, “individual-level information effects tend to occur in systematic rather than random directions. Aggregation alone cannot redeem an ill-informed public” (Althaus 2003, 122). Even though there are methodological techniques that can mitigate the effects of an ill-informed public, we have yet to develop a foolproof method for collecting opinions in a manner that yields “enlightened preferences” or the “general will.”

#### *Clues to Opinion Formation*

In responding to survey questions people tend to provide answers from the “top of the head” (Zaller 1993, 33) because most Americans are inattentive to politics and thus not well informed about politics (Lockerbie & Borrelli 1990, 196; Zaller 1993, 18). The instability occurs because some considerations become more salient than others and are more easily recalled when confronted with an unexpected survey question. Similarly, the question and the questions preceding it may raise the saliency of some considerations over others and thus increase the probability of particular responses even though the respondent had no firm position one way or

another (Bishop, et. al. 1978; Lockerbie & Borrelli 1990; Rasinski 1989; Zaller 1993).

For example, in the 1970's Americans were asked if they would be willing to allow Communist reporters in America and only 37% of respondents agreed that they should be admitted into the country. In the same survey a different random sample was first asked if they favored American reporters being allowed in Russia and the number that favored Communist reporters in America jumped to 73%. This was because most Americans favored American reporters in Russia, which then triggered considerations of reciprocity (Zaller 1993, 32). For Zaller, neither response represents a "true preference" (Zaller 1993, 35). Rather, the first example triggered anti-communist sentiment and the second triggered values of freedom of the press and equality. Americans had and have strong feelings for all these considerations, the difference is that some considerations became more salient at the instant of being asked.

Often these considerations lead Americans to both favor and oppose the same policy (Zaller 1993, 59). A person may support a program to "stop the spread of Communism" when asked about foreign policy, but not support "aid to the Contras" if they are concerned about budget deficits and don't know that the Contras are anti-Communist rebels (Lockerbie & Borrelli 1990, 200; Zaller 1993, 83). Similarly, they may support two policies that conflict with each other. Returning momentarily to the topic of genetics, Americans believe that altering human genes is morally wrong and against God's will. They reject the idea of modifying genes to have smarter, stronger, and better-looking children and don't want the government forcing people to change

their genes. But they are willing to accept gene modification to prevent diseases in themselves and in their children. Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the question wording effect.

Table 3: It Is Immoral to Alter Human Genes

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(Now I'd like to ask about something you may not have heard about before--genetic engineering. This is the science of altering genes, which are the building blocks of life for humans, animals and plants. Genetic engineering changes genes to produce particular characteristics in living things.) Some people say genetic engineering is good because it helps us control nature and improve people's lives. Others say it's bad because tampering with nature's balance can produce unexpected side effects. Which comes closer to your view?<sup>1</sup>

Good	32%
Bad	50%
Mixed (vol.)	13%
Don't know	5%

Do you think altering human genes is morally wrong, or don't you feel this way?<sup>2</sup>

Yes, morally wrong	53%
No	39%
Not sure	9%

Do you think altering human genes is against God's will, or don't you feel this way?<sup>3</sup>

Yes, against God's will	58%
No	36%
Not sure	6%

Would you approve or disapprove if parents were offered a way to change their own genes in order to have children who would be smarter, stronger, or better looking?<sup>4</sup>

Approve	20%
Disapprove	76%
Don't know/Refused	5%

Now I'd like to ask about something you may not have heard about before--genetic engineering. This is the science of altering genes, which are the building blocks of life for humans, animals and plants. Genetic engineering changes genes to produce particular characteristics in living things.) Scientists believe that some day it will be possible for parents to have their genes changed in order to make sure that any children they have are smarter, stronger, or better looking. Would you be interested in changing your genes in order to have your children be improved in those ways, or do you think that's going too far?<sup>5</sup>

Interested	11%
Going too far	87%
Don't know	2%

Now some people have suggested that the government should test people to find out if they are carriers, and, if they are, that they should be required to have their genes changed in order to keep the disease from being passed on to future generations.

Would you approve of such mandatory gene changing, or should the decision be left strictly up to the individual involved?<sup>6</sup>

Approve mandatory gene changing	6%
Leave decision up to the individual involved	92%
Not sure	2%

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<sup>1</sup> *Survey by Troika Productions and Lifetime Television, Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, January 17-January 20, 1991.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> *Survey by Time, Cable News Network, Conducted by Yankelovich Partners on December 2, 1993.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>3</sup> *Survey by Time, Cable News Network, Conducted by Yankelovich Partners on December 2, 1993.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>4</sup> *Survey by The Genetics and Public Policy Center at John Hopkins University, Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, October 15-October 29, 2002.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>5</sup> *Survey by Troika Productions and Lifetime Television, Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, January 17-January 20, 1991.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>6</sup> *Survey by Business Week, Conducted by Louis Harris & Associates, November 1-November 4, 1985.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

But they also point to a popular misconception among social scientists. The prominent political scientist Thomas Patterson displayed skepticism in the conclusions that could be drawn from low levels of political information in the mass public. In a lecture at the University of Maryland he argued that politics is about values and that even with very little information the typical uninformed American could rely on their values to guide them when making a political decision (Patterson

2005). However, that view does not consider the fact that Americans may have conflicting values.

Americans are split when asked if it is wrong to use gene modification to limit the risk of “developing certain genetic diseases.” A solid majority (57%) support gene modification for “incurable diseases” and a very strong majority (64%) support it to cure “fatal diseases” even when faced with the “against God’s will” argument. Morality seems to lose when confronted with self-preservation. Or, one could argue, being alive is a more important value. The public also supports the use genetic modification for their children if it will prevent them from acquiring a disease. Although it is immoral to modify human genes, it may also be immoral to allow one’s one child to suffer from a preventable disease. Notice that relying on “core values” doesn’t lead to a stable attitude. This is because values themselves are transitory; they depend on the situation. The question wording has an effect precisely because Americans value incompatible items.

This inconsistency becomes especially problematic when issues of justice and fairness are presented. “People appear as strictly “Rawlsian” in some situations, while they appear as resolutely “anti-Rawlsian” in others. They are in some circumstances Kantian (that is, they tend to follow principles of universal value), while they are rather in other circumstances utilitarian (that is, they tend to follow their interest and hold principles as valid provided they can consider them as serving their interest)” (Boudon 2001, 18). In one situation an individual may believe that X is fair, while in a different situation the same individual will believe that X is unfair. Sometimes an individual will make their decision about the justness of X based on

what he believes is best for society, while in other cases he bases that decision on his own self-interest. It may even be that he will firmly believe that X is good for society and that Y bad for society, but only if X serves his self-interest and Y opposes it.

Max Weber was very much aware of this problem when he wrote about social values. “In his lecture, *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, Weber has used two influential metaphors ‘value polytheism’ and ‘the war between gods.’ They suggest that values can be incompatible with one another, that, in some cases, it is impossible to show that one should choose one value rather than another, that social subjects often cannot justify their axiological choices, that is, explain why they endorse such and such value statements” (Boudon 2001, 30). A person may worship the sun god, or they may worship the rain god. But their decision may depend on the weather. In the end, “different values may be equally legitimate in the eyes of social actors” (Boudon 2001, 4).

Table 4: Altering Genes to Have Healthier Offspring is Acceptable

In general, do you think it's right or wrong to use scientific techniques to try and alter people's genes to limit their risk of developing certain genetic diseases?<sup>1</sup>

Right	46%
Wrong	47%
Don't know/No answer	7%

Suppose you were told after an examination of your genes that you were going to get one of these incurable diseases, would you go ahead with the treatment to have your genes changed or not?<sup>2</sup>

Would go ahead with treatment	57%
Would not	33%
Not sure	10%

Now let me ask you some questions about genetic engineering. Some people are worried about this science, arguing that in changing the basic makeup of people's

cells, it is like playing God. But let me ask you, if it is possible to cure people with fatal diseases by altering their genes, do you feel they ought to be allowed to go ahead with such treatment, or do you think it is going too far?<sup>3</sup>

Ought to be allowed to go ahead	64%
Is going too far	24%
Not sure	12%

Would you approve or disapprove if parents were offered a way to change their own genes in order to prevent their children from having a genetic disease?<sup>4</sup>

Approve	59%
Disapprove	34%
Don't know/Refused	7%

If you had a child with a usually fatal genetic disease, how willing would you be to have the child undergo therapy to have those genes corrected--very willing, somewhat willing, somewhat unwilling, very unwilling?<sup>5</sup>

Very willing	52%
Somewhat willing	36%
Somewhat unwilling	5%
Very unwilling	4%
Not	3%

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<sup>1</sup> Survey by CBS News, December 17-December 19, 1999. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> Survey by Business Week, Conducted by Louis Harris & Associates, November 1-November 4, 1985. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>3</sup> Survey by Business Week, Conducted by Louis Harris & Associates, November 1-November 4, 1985. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>4</sup> Survey by The Genetics and Public Policy Center at John Hopkins University, Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, October 15-October 29, 2002. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>5</sup> Survey by March of Dimes, Conducted by Louis Harris & Associates, April 17-April 30, 1992. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

What becomes clear is that “for the majority of persons on the majority of issues, inconsistencies in their considerations concerning different aspects of a given issue remain unresolved and probably unrecognized” (Zaller 1993, 55). Because of a lack of extensive thought about a matter before them and because they have absorbed



both arguments for and against a policy, people often vacillate in the responses to given questions. As a consequence of not becoming aware of dissonant attitudes,

A person may react angrily to a news report of welfare fraud and then, a few weeks later, become equally distressed over other news reports of impoverished children and homeless families. Thus, people may have one reaction to an issue that would cause them to favor it and another that would cause them to oppose it, but – and here is the heart of the argument – for most people, most of the time, there is no need to reconcile or even to recognize their contradictory reactions to events and issues.

(Zaller 1993, 93)

A person may transition from one value to another depending on their circumstances or most recent experiences. They may value smaller government and the Protestant work ethic and report to oppose welfare programs. Then a few weeks later they may value charity and assistance to the poor, believing it is a moral obligation, and consequently support the same welfare programs they previously opposed. People who value both “smaller government” and “assistance to the poor” may have difficulty with the issue of using government programs to help the poor, sometimes preferring the former and sometimes the latter. Therefore, rather than trying to convince the reader that the poll data presented in this project represents Americans’ true opinions about merit and distributive justice, this project only attempts to offer a glimpse into the conflicts that Americans may face when confronted with different choices. The values that are tapped by particular questions will become apparent and we can understand to what extent Americans are really committed to meritocratic values.

### *Methods and Data*

The methodological models for the project are Hochschild's *Facing Up to the American Dream* and McClosky and Zaller's *The American Ethos*. These two books use public opinion data to test whether specific hypotheses have support. They outline the general public's beliefs and also compare differences between whites and African-Americans and between elites and the mass public. Over 150 surveys have been identified which contain questions that can help us better understand Americans' views on justice, paying special attention to items that are related to merit. These surveys were created and administered by organizations such as Gallup, Roper, Harris, ABC news, ABC news, Fox news, and various universities. Most of the information will be presented from recent surveys, but earlier polls are sometimes used to spot trends in public opinion. In some cases the survey cited is not as recent as one would like, but due to the paucity of some types of questions the most recent information available is employed for analysis. In cases where older surveys are used the questions tend to pertain to values and are therefore less likely to change significantly over time.

In addition to presenting evidence from public opinion polls major empirical surveys such as the American National Election Survey (ANES), International Social Justice Project (ISJP), General Social Survey (GSS), and World Values Survey (WVS) are used. This dissertation relies most heavily on the ISJP. That survey has been used extensively to make comparisons between the surveyed populations of different countries but has not been used for an in-depth analysis of American opinion. The most basic type of analysis, frequencies, is employed throughout the

dissertation to understand the general public's attitudes on questions related to meritocracy. In those cases these surveys can be used in the same manner as public opinion polls.

Chapter four compares differences across various sub-groups of the population. In that chapter cross-tabulation, correlation, and OLS regression analyses are used to identify differences in attitudes among different types of people. Differences by race, income, sex, education, age, and self-identified class (where available) are presented because previous studies have found, or suggested, differences in attitudes along these dimensions. Responses are gathered from forty-eight questions of the ISJP to test hypotheses regarding the explanatory effect of the six control variables listed above.

Cross-tabulations are employed to compare differences between groups. To measure if the differences between groups is significant a simple Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test and Cramer's V is used. Both essentially test the observed results against the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) that the same proportion of each group would give a particular response. Significant results tell us that the observed values are not random.

Correlations were used to look for relationships between the control variables and responses to particular questions. For the race related correlations in the ISJP data the 73 (of 1,414) respondents who were Hispanic, Native American, or Asian were dropped to specifically isolate black/white differences. In the ISJP the variable that measures education was recoded to fit the standard CASMIN levels of education to make cross-national comparisons easier by the ISJP researchers. This has no effect

on the correlations for the US specific sub-sample because each level represents “more” education than the previous one.

The initial correlation analysis was augmented by using multiple regression to find if particular correlations were of decisive explanatory value or if other control variables better explained the results. Because race is not an ordinal variable, binary “dummy” variables were used to measure the effects of being black or white. The variable “self-identified class” consists of 5 values: lower, working, middle, upper middle, and upper class. This poses no problem for the correlation analysis, but does for the multiple regression because the differences between classes are not necessarily equidistant. Therefore 3 dummy variables were created. The lower and working classes were combined into one category and the upper-middle and upper classes were put into another. The middle class then served as a control group for those who identify “below” or “above” them.

The multiple regression becomes tricky because of the recoding of the education measure for ISJP purposes. The CASMIN levels combine vocational training into its scale and is not continuous like a “years of schooling” variable. Therefore, another binary “dummy” variable was created to measure educational effects. Those who completed “tertiary” education were coded as “1” in a category labeled “college”. All other respondents, those with secondary education or less, were coded as “0” in the college variable. This effectively separates college and non-college educated respondents for the purpose of analysis. Although the procedure is not ideal, it does allow us to look for differences between more and less educated respondents. The regression equation used in chapter four is as follows:

$$\text{Response} = \beta_0 + \beta_1\text{black} + \beta_2\text{white} + \beta_3\text{lwclass} + \beta_4\text{umuclass} \\ + \beta_5\text{income} + \beta_6\text{age} + \beta_7\text{sex} + \beta_8\text{college} + u$$

All of the surveys in this project use nationally representative random samples and were obtained either through the Inter-University Consortium of Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan or through the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut.

### *Conclusions*

Americans may not be aware of their own value conflicts when issues of merit are raised. Despite the emergence of a “rational public” literature many scholars still find that the public is ill-informed and inconsistent in their attitudes, beliefs, and values. When Americans express contradictory views it is not because they have a theoretically sophisticated framework that rationally distinguishes the two competing views. Usually it is because Americans are not cognizant of the internal contradiction. They’ve simply never thought about the issue long enough, or in a sufficiently detailed manner, to become aware of the conflict. Nevertheless, we should not hold the American public in too low esteem. With accurate and widely disseminated information Americans may be able to come to terms with their dissonant views. Public opinion may not be able to tell us what the public “really wants” but the methods employed in this project can give us a glimpse at the conflicts that Americans face when confronted questions related to meritocracy.

## Chapter 3

### Popular Ideas about Merit

*The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one – if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you.<sup>2</sup>*

*Bill Clinton*

The American dream that President Clinton has in mind is precisely the ideal of meritocracy. It implies that the only limit to one's success in life is their natural capacities. One's race, sex, national origin, and social background should have no impact on a person's outcome in life. Social theorists have critiqued that idea on various grounds, but it remains an ideal that is a permanent fixture of the American creed. Yet, Americans are sometimes skeptical about the ideal and hold beliefs that are in direct conflict with meritocratic values.

The preliminary evidence in this chapter suggests that Americans are not pure meritocrats, indeed they are often ambivalent on question of merit. Hard work is an essential value and there is a strong belief that hard work *should be* rewarded and that it is necessary in order to be successful. In fact, Americans believe that intelligence and hard work *is actually* rewarded. But they are also willing to use selection criteria other than merit for the distribution of particular social goods. Indeed, the public believes that one's race, social background, and connections matter for success. In an ideal type meritocracy this would not be the case.

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<sup>2</sup> Clinton qtd. in Hochschild 1995, 18

### *Commonsense Ideas About Meritocracy*

The most basic understanding of meritocratic distribution is that the social good to be distributed not be distributed by heredity or any other characteristic unrelated to performance. Those that are the most able to perform the task, or who have demonstrated the highest ability, should receive the reward. Here people argue that the person with the best qualifications should get the reward and the qualifications are limited to the abilities that are necessary for the performance of designated tasks. A person's connections or family ties are not directly related to the ability to perform, therefore the Economist writes, "The United States likes to think of itself as the very embodiment of meritocracy: a country where people are judged on their individual abilities rather than their family connections" (Ever higher society). One's performance, not family connections, is the basis for most people's understanding of merit as a distributive rule.

But merit may also be about having "the right stuff." And the "right stuff" consists of "being talented, having the right attitude, working hard, and having a high moral character" (McNamee & Miller 2004, 21). This commonsense notion harkens back to Jefferson's "virtue and talent" of the natural aristocracy but at its heart it is still about upward mobility and deserving one's outcome in life.

America is seen as the land of opportunity where people get out of the system what they put into it. Ostensibly, the most talented hardest working, and most virtuous get ahead. The lazy, shiftless, and indolent fall behind. You may not be held responsible for where you start out in life, but you are responsible for where you end up. If you are truly meritorious, you will overcome any obstacle and succeed.

(McNamee & Miller 2004, 3)

Given that different notions of “virtue” have prompted philosophers to write volumes on the matter, it is unlikely (and very difficult) to determine just what the public might expect from a “virtuous” leader. Merit, while still complicated, is more straightforward. It’s about one’s performance. And one’s performance is measured by one’s capability and effort.

It is a view that has become popular worldwide and one that is an inspiration to people everywhere. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong holds a view that is nearly identical to arguments made by affirmative action opponents in the US,

We will never compromise on multiracialism and meritocracy.... A person's advancement in Singapore depends on his ability and contributions, not on his family connections, social circle, race or religion. We offer full and equal opportunities to all. If a community has difficulty catching up, we will help it make progress, especially through education and training. But we will not prop it up with special privileges or racial quotas, which do nothing to improve the abilities of the community.

(Singapore Will Never)

Datuk Seri Najib Razak, the Umno deputy president, believes that meritocracy will allow Malaysia to prosper. He said, “We are really hoping that leaders will be chosen on merit” and that, “Consideration must be given to those with knowledge, skills and capabilities and not based on 'whom we know', and definitely not to those who sell contracts and those who can undermine the Malay agenda” (Abdullah). Here we see a slightly more expanded view of merit and one that is also present in the US. The notion that family connections are irrelevant is enlarged to include all types of undue preferences that stem from patronage and favoritism. The distribution of bureaucratic positions that require expertise to people whose only “qualification” is party affiliation or political contributions is not only anathema to meritocracy but also



viewed as poor governance. People, in the US and all over the world, expect that those in government have the skills to perform their jobs effectively.

For the sake of clarity we may wish to call this idea of merit “technical merit.” It is limited to a person’s demonstrated ability or expectations about future performance at given tasks. When selecting an employee by technical merit the employer must choose the person, or among the persons, who have the ability, selecting the employee with the most ability if there is such a candidate. Technical merit is not influenced by the initial set of opportunities available to different individuals. It is a measure of raw ability, regardless of others’ opportunity to acquire the ability. Therefore a person could claim to merit a reward because of her superior abilities, even if other individuals are actively denied any opportunity to develop their own talents and skills.

One need not stretch their imagination too far to conceive of a situation where members of one racial group are actively prohibited from educational opportunities and forced into the lower paid workforce because of inadequate skills. The favored racial group, with a monopoly on important educational resources, receives the training that allows its individual members to acquire the skills to perform tasks that command higher salaries. Because individuals in the favored group possess the necessary skills and talents, while individuals in the disfavored group do not, the individuals in the favored group claim to have more merit than individuals in the disfavored group. Questions of distributive justice are therefore a central element in most discussions of merit.

### *Support for Meritocratic Norms*

Lipset argues that Americans strongly subscribe to the meritocratic ethos. “The American Creed” says Lipset, “subsumes classical liberalism, which strongly distrusts the state and emphasizes competitive meritocracy” (Lipset 1996, 144). Citing a NORC survey he notes that 88% of Americans believe that ambition and hard work are the keys to success. This is opposed to 20% who believed that coming from a wealthy family was critical. Citing a Gallup poll which asks people to choose whether they prefer that historically discriminated against groups be given preferential treatment to make up for past injustices or choosing people simply in the basis of their ability for jobs and college entrance, between 81% and 84% believed that ability should be the determining factor (Lipset 1996, 125).

This hard work element of meritocracy should not be underestimated. Table 5 shows that the vast majority of Americans believe hard work to be an essential value. It is an idea that is intertwined with their vision of the American dream. It is so important that most Americans want their children to learn that hard work will lead to success while in school. An overwhelming percentage believe that hard work is essential or very important for getting ahead, suggesting that most Americans believe that without hard work a person will almost certainly fail. We can begin to see that the popular analog to Young’s “Merit = IQ + Effort” is “Merit = Skills and Hard Work.”

#### Table 5: Hard Work is an Essential Value

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(I'm going to read you a list of American ideals. For each please tell me if it is absolutely essential to you personally, important but not essential, or not that

important. If you haven't really thought about it much, please say so.) How about the ideal that with hard work, people have a chance to move up and prosper?<sup>1</sup>

Absolutely essential	79%
Important but not essential	20%
Not that important	1%
Haven't thought about it much	1%

(How important is each of the following values to you personally, would you say it is very important, somewhat important, not that important, or not important at all?)... Hard work<sup>2</sup>

Very important	83%
Somewhat important	15%
Not that important	1%
Not important at all	1%

(The public schools provide one of the most important ways for teaching our children about the American story. If you were to decide which themes the schools should include, how important would each of the following be in your lesson about America--would it be absolutely essential, very important, somewhat important, somewhat unimportant, very unimportant, or would you definitely leave it out?)... With hard work and perseverance, anyone can succeed in America.<sup>3</sup>

Absolutely essential	36%
Very important	47%
Somewhat important	14%
Somewhat unimportant	2%
Very unimportant	1%
Leave it out (vol.)	1%

(Using a scale of one to ten, where one is not at all important and ten is extremely important, how important is each of the following in contributing to your American Dream?)...Being rewarded for hard for hard work?<sup>4</sup>

Mean rating = 8.5

Please tell me how important you think each of these things is to get ahead in life.... To get ahead in life, do you think hard work is essential, very important, fairly important, not very important, or not at all important?<sup>5</sup>

Essential	40%
Very important	52%
Fairly important	6%
Not very important	1%
Not important at all	1%
Don't know/No answer	1%

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<sup>1</sup> *Survey by Public Agenda Foundation, September 3-September 16, 1998.* Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> *Survey by NBC News, Wall Street Journal, Conducted by Hart and Teeter Research Companies, February 26-March 1, 1998.* Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>3</sup> *Survey by Post-Modernity Project at the University of Virginia, Conducted by Center for Survey Research, University of Virginia, January 27-April 14, 1996.* Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>4</sup> *Survey by Wirthlin Group, August 13-August 16, 1992.* Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>5</sup> *Survey by CBS News, March 20-March 21, 1996.* Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

This ethos seems to be particularly prominent in anglophile countries. In England, “There's a chunk of the British middle class that lives in a warm, comforting bath called ‘meritocracy’. They believe that Britain is already a Land of Hope and Opportunity, where the rich get ahead by working hard” (Hari 2005). Indeed, the old hereditary class system is breaking down and being replaced by an upper class known for individual achievements. The traditional system of hereditary peerage in the House of Lords is being eliminated for non-transferable lifetime appointments based on individual success. With the knighting of Mick Jagger it became clear that the new British aristocracy was premised on talent and personal achievement. It seems that today’s inequalities are often justified on meritocratic grounds. More and more the upper class in Britain is known for their talents instead of their ancestry (Reid 2002, 10).

This common idea of acquiring social rewards and mobility through natural prowess and hard work has been ingrained in the American ethos for centuries and the stories of Horatio Alger were the embodiment our expectations as a nation. In one of Alger's famous children's books Frank Courtney, though born into wealth, was left in poverty after his parents passed away. He made his way to New York where his small sum of cash was stolen and he is left on the brink of destitution. However, a chance encounter and his law abiding and temperate nature brought good fortune. Ultimately, his years of good schooling and his honorable character earned him a place in the home of a wealthy patron. In the end his boyhood fortune is restored (Alger 1974). In another Story, Ragged Dick, a 14-year-old homeless shoeblack, learns to live frugally and save his hard earned money. He uses some of his savings to help another boy and he hires a tutor to teach himself how to read and write. Eventually, Ragged Dick becomes the respectable Richard Hunter and uses his position to help others who face similar hardships (Alger 1962). As children Americans are taught that their country is the "Land of Opportunity" where anyone with the right qualities can succeed.

To this day Americans are fascinated by stories of disadvantaged youths who eventually achieve success. A recent *New York Times* article about the chancellor of New York's public schools, Mr. Klein, describes him as the embodiment of "the postwar meritocracy. His own trajectory -- from boyhood in a Queens housing project as the son of a postal worker with a 10th-grade education to degrees from Columbia University and Harvard Law School -- relied not on inherited wealth, not on family connections, not on a WASP pedigree, but on academic prowess"

(Freedman 2004). While such success is becoming more rare, news stories still proliferate and stir the imaginations ordinary Americans.

Table 6: Hard Work Leads to Success

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(Now let me read you some short statements. Please tell me which statement comes closer to your own view.)... Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard. Hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people. (If First/Second statement, ask:) Is that statement much or somewhat closer to your view?<sup>1</sup>

1st Statement Much closer	52%
1st Statement Somewhat closer	20%
2nd Statement Somewhat closer	11%
2nd Statement closer	14%
Both (vol.)	2%
Neither (vol.)	1%
Don't know/Refused	1%

(I'm going to read you some pairs of statements that will help us understand how you feel about a number of things. As I read each pair, tell me whether the first statement or the second statement comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right.)... Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard. Hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people. (After choice is made, ask:) Do you feel strongly about that, or not?<sup>2</sup>

Strongly--People can get ahead if they work hard	66%
Not strongly--People can get ahead if they work hard	7%
Strongly--Hard work and determination are no guarantee of success	20%
Not strongly--Hard work and determination are no guarantee of success	4%
Neither/Don't know	1%

(I am going to read several reasons why some people get ahead and succeed in life and others do not. Using a one-to-five scale, where '1' means not at all important and '5' means extremely important, please tell me how important it is as a reason for a person's success. You can choose any number form one to five.) How about hard work and initiative?<sup>3</sup>

1--not at all important	1%
2	1%
3	6%
4	17%
5--extremely important	75%
Don't know	<1%

(Now I am going to read you a series of statements that will help us understand how you feel about a number of things. For each statement, please tell me if you completely agree with it, mostly agree with it, mostly disagree with it or completely disagree with it.)...Hard work offers little guarantee of success.<sup>4</sup>

Completely agree	13%
Mostly agree	17%
Mostly disagree	36%
Completely disagree	32%
Don't know	2%

For each of the following statements, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with it.) The statement is persistence and hard work usually lead to success. Do you agree or disagree, or neither? Is that strongly, moderately, or slightly?<sup>5</sup>

Agree strongly	73%
Agree moderately	17%
Agree slightly	3%
Disagree strongly	2%
Disagree moderately	3%
Disagree slightly	1%
Neither (vol.)	2%
Don't know	<1%

Some people say that people get ahead by their own hard work, others say that lucky breaks or help from other people are more important. Which do you think is most important?<sup>6</sup>

Hard work most important	63%
Hard work, luck equally important (vol.)	27%
Luck most important	10%
Don't know	1%

Here are some factors that are sometimes considered important for having high social standing. Please tell me how important each is for success in our society today.<sup>7</sup>

#### Hard work and effort

Very important	70%
Somewhat important	27%
Not very important	4%
Not at all important	<1%
Don't know	<1%

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<sup>1</sup> Survey by Children's Research & Education Institute, Conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research & Public Opinion Strategies, January 8-January 13, 2003. Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> *Survey by Pew Research Center, Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, August 24-September 10, 2000.* Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>3</sup> *Survey by General Motors Corporation, Conducted by Gallup Organization, April 23-May 31, 1998.* Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>4</sup> *Survey by Pew Research Center, Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, July 14-August 5, 2003.* Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>5</sup> *Survey by AARP, Conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide, July 10-July 30, 2000.* Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>6</sup> *Survey by National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, February 6-June 26, 2002.* Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>7</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file].* Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 3%

These stories have become a part of American folklore. So much so that Americans tend to believe that they actually live in a meritocracy (Lipset 1996, 81). Tables 6 and 7 provide evidence of this belief in the Horatio Alger myth. Most Americans adamantly believe that hard work leads to success. Indeed, when they are forced to choose between hard work and luck, most Americans discount luck as a reason for individuals being successful. And, approximately 70% believe that hard work and effort is very important for achieving high social standing in America. Most Americans believe that “what you know” is more important than “who you know” for getting ahead and most agree that people in the US have equal opportunities to get ahead. Certainly, there is a great deal of data that supports Lipset’s claims about the American meritocratic ethos.



Table 7: America is a Meritocracy

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Are you more or less where you should be in your job, given your talents and effort, or has your hard work been overlooked?<sup>1</sup>

More/less where should be	71%
Hard work/talent overlooked	27%
Don't know/refused	2%

Which is more important in getting ahead--who you know, or what you know?<sup>2</sup>

Who you know	39%
What you know	51%
Equal importance (vol.)	9%
Don't know/Refused	1%

In the US people have equal opportunities to get ahead.<sup>3</sup>

Strongly agree	17%
Somewhat agree	49%
Neither agree or disagree	5%
Somewhat disagree	21%
Strongly disagree	8%

People get rewarded for their effort.<sup>4</sup>

Strongly agree	14%
Somewhat agree	57%
Neither agree or disagree	6%
Somewhat disagree	17%
Strongly disagree	6%
Don't know	<1%

People get rewarded for their intelligence and skill.<sup>5</sup>

Strongly agree	17%
Somewhat agree	58%
Neither agree or disagree	5%
Somewhat disagree	15%
Strongly disagree	4%
Don't know	<1%

Here are some factors that are sometimes considered important for having high social standing. Please tell me how important each is for success in our society today.

Ability and talent<sup>6</sup>

Very important	49%
Somewhat important	45%
Not very important	5%
Not at all important	1%
Don't know	<1%

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<sup>1</sup> Survey by Reader's Digest, Conducted by Institute for Social Inquiry/Roper Center, University of Connecticut, August 22-August 29, 1994. Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. Sample consisted of those employed full/part-time.

<sup>2</sup> Survey by Wired, Merrill Lynch, Conducted by Luntz Research Companies during September, 1997. Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>3-6</sup> Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 3%

### *Public Opinion and the Intellectual Debate*

If intelligence and academic prowess, aside from hard work, are also supposed to lead to success, then American's views on intelligence should be discussed in light of the concerns brought up in chapter one. The public, unlike many of those in academia, are not very concerned about the role of genetics in society. Table 8 shows that science and technology, including advances in genetics, are not a top priority. It is simply not an important issue for most Americans and they acknowledge that they know very little about genetic testing and how it affects them.

Table 8: Genetic Issues Are a Low Priority

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I am going to read you a list of some concerns that some people have expressed about aspects of life in America. Please tell me which of these is of greatest concern to you...the weakening of traditional family values, high taxes, high government spending, finding good jobs and economic opportunity, the need for better and safer schools, addressing the problem of income inequality, the need for a cleaner environment, America's competitiveness in the world economy, preserving Medicare and Social Security for the future, emerging new issues around the role of science, technology, and genetics, or crime and violence?<sup>1</sup>

Weakening traditional family values	20%
Preserving Medicare and Social Security	15%
Need for better and safer schools	15%
Crime and violence	14%
Finding good jobs and economic opportunity	7%
High government spending	6%
High taxes	5%
Need for cleaner environment	5%
New issues around the role of science, technology and genetics	4%
Addressing problem of income inequality	3%
America's competitiveness in world economy	3%
Don't know	3%

There has been a lot of talk in the news lately about advances in the use of genetics in medicine. How much would you say you know about the ways in which genetic testing and treatment might affect you and your family--a great deal, quite a bit, just some, very little, or nothing at all?<sup>2</sup>

A great deal	10%
Quite a bit	11%
Just some	28%
Very little	33%
Nothing at all	16%
Not sure	2%

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<sup>1</sup> Survey by Democratic Leadership Council, Conducted by Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates, July 30-August 2, 1998. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> Survey by NBC News, Wall Street Journal, Conducted by Hart and Teeter Research Companies, January 15-January 18, 1994. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

It is important to keep in mind this lack of knowledgeability when interpreting the results of public opinion polls. When it comes to issues related to genetics we should interpret the results more as a “gut reaction” or “sense impression” than a well thought out viewpoint.

Still, when directly asked about the issues that have been a concern for social scientists most Americans are not likely to agree with Herrnstein and Murray. Table 9 suggests that an overwhelming majority of Americans believe that racial differences

are cultural rather than genetic. It also shows that the public is either split or leans slightly toward environmental reasons when asked if genes or the environment have a larger role in determining a person's intelligence. There are doubts that intelligence is genetically determined and this can partly explain why the issue is a low priority. This doubt about the importance of genes in intelligence logically leads to the related attitude that success in life is largely unrelated to genes, instead "learning and experience" make one successful. When your average Americans says that smart hard working people should be successful, they do not imagine that such an idea will lead to a genetically determined caste system. Success is not connected to a person's genes in the minds of most Americans. Most importantly, Americans flatly reject the Rawlsian argument that intelligent people don't deserve more money because being intelligent is a result of good luck. A majority of Americans support the idea that more intelligent people deserve more money.

Table 9: Success, Genes, and Intelligence

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Overall, do you think that racial and ethnic differences are mostly due to culture and family upbringing or mostly due to heredity and genes?<sup>1</sup>

Culture/Upbringing	88%
Heredity/Genes	6%
Both (vol.)	3%
Neither (vol.)	1%
Don't know/Refused	2%

I'm going to read you a list of human behaviors and characteristics. For each one, I'd like you to tell me whether this behavior is completely, mostly, somewhat, or not at all determined by heredity and genes.... Intelligence<sup>2</sup>

Completely	11%
Mostly	39%
Somewhat	40%
Not at all	9%
Don't know/Refused	2%

(Character, personality, success or failure, and many other types of behaviors are thought to be influenced by both the genes you inherited from your parents and what you learn and experience as you grow up. For each of the following, please say whether you think it is more dependent on the genes you inherit or more from what you learn and experience.)... Intelligence<sup>3</sup>

Genes you inherit	45%
Learning and experience	52%
Not sure	4%

(Of course none of us can really foresee what the future will actually be like, but based on the way things are going we can have a feeling as to whether certain things will or will not happen. Here is a list of some different things. Would you read down that list, and for each one tell me whether you think it is likely or not likely to have happened 50 years from now?)... It will be common practice for prospective parents to have genes artificially introduced into the fetuses of their unborn children to achieve desirable characteristics in their children (color of hair or eyes, higher intelligence, etc.)<sup>4</sup>

Likely to have happened	43%
Not likely to have happened	46%
Don't know	12%

(Character, personality, success or failure, and many other types of behaviors are thought to be influenced by both the genes you inherited from your parents and what you learn and experience as you grow up. For each of the following, please say whether you think it is more dependent on the genes you inherit or more from what you learn and experience.)... Success in life<sup>5</sup>

Genes you inherit	8%
Learning and experience	90%
Not sure	3%

(I'm going to read some statements that give reasons why a person's life turns out well or poorly. As I read each one, tell me whether you think it is very important, important, somewhat important, or not at all important for how somebody's life turns out?)... Some people are born with better genes than others.<sup>6</sup>

Very important	9%
Important	28%
Somewhat important	30%
Not at all important	30%
Don't know	3%

It is just luck if some people are more intelligent or skillful than others, so they don't deserve to earn more money.<sup>7</sup>

Strongly agree	3%
Somewhat agree	11%
Neither agree or disagree	6%
Somewhat disagree	29%
Strongly disagree	52%
Don't know	1%

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<sup>1</sup> *Survey by U.S. News & World Report, Bozell Worldwide, Conducted by KRC Communications/Research, February 6-February 9, 1997.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> *Survey by U.S. News & World Report, Bozell Worldwide, Conducted by KRC Communications/Research, February 6-February 9, 1997.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>3</sup> *Survey by Louis Harris & Associates, July 13-July 16, 1995.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>4</sup> *Survey by Roper Organization, June 15-June 22, 1985.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>5</sup> *Survey by Louis Harris & Associates, July 13-July 16, 1995.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>6</sup> *Survey by National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, February 5-April 26, 1993.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>7</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file].* Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 3% Because this question was preceded by several "Is it fair if..." questions in the questionnaire, the best interpretation is that respondents believe it is fair for more intelligent people to earn more. The subject of the question is not about the connection between luck and intelligence, rather it is about the justice of rewarding intelligent people with money.

Both of these findings suggest that most Americans are more supportive of meritocracy than the intellectual critics of it. At least from a "top of the head" response, most Americans don't believe that success or failure is predestined because of one's genes and they tend to believe that it is fair for more intelligent people to earn more than less intelligent people. This support for economic inequality will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

### *Justice is More Than Technical Merit*

Technical merit is conceptually easy, but by itself doesn't foster the creation of a fully meritocratic society. Making decisions on technical merit alone ignores the effects of active discrimination. Fullinwider and Lichtenberg argue that, "if we understand merit in anything like its commonsense meaning – personal skills and talents – it is sometimes perfectly appropriate, and indeed indispensable, for institutions to consider criteria other than merit when making admissions decisions" (Fullinwider and Lichtenberg 2004, 25). These ethicists believe that merit alone hasn't been and should not be the sole criteria for making distributive decisions. In the case of college admissions Fullinwider and Lichtenberg believe that using a person's race is legitimate. Chapter 7 will explore the public's beliefs about affirmative action, but it is important to note here that there may be a variety of situations where merit is not be the best method of distributing a social good.

When choosing how to distribute a life saving organ, the public overwhelmingly chooses on a "first come, first serve" basis. They are also willing to accept a random lottery as a just method of selection. Understandably they are split when "hospital rules" are used as the criteria since the specific rules are left ambiguous. They do not accept the utilitarian procedures of choosing on the basis of one's usefulness to society or by the number of kin; presumably more people would miss a person with a larger family. Importantly, the public overwhelmingly rejects distribution by the market where the person who pays the most receives the organ. This suggests the values related to capitalism are not absolute and that the market has its limits as a method of just distribution.

Table 10: Considerations Other Than Merit

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Recently, medical science has made it possible to save lives by transplanting body parts from donors to patients who need them. But for some body organs there are not enough to go around and some patients die before they can obtain a transplant. When only one organ is available and several patients need it for survival, the organ could be assigned to a patient by one of the following procedures: by auction--the organ is assigned to the patient who can pay the most for it, by first come, first served--the organ is assigned to the patient who has been waiting the longest, by lottery--the organ is assigned to the patient whose name is drawn at random, or by merit--the organ is assigned to the patient who can make the greatest contribution to others and society. Which of these procedures should be used to assign the organ among the patients who need it for survival...auction, first come/first served, lottery, or merit?<sup>1</sup>

Auction	1%
First come/first served	81%
Lottery	6%
Merit	8%
Don't know	4%

Three patients are admitted to a hospital at the same time, all suffering from a form of heart disease requiring surgery. However, the limited resources of the hospital allow only one heart operation each month. All three cases are equally urgent. The patient who is treated first will have a better chance of survival. Now can you tell me what would be your view of each of the following decisions:

The decision about which patient goes first is made by a lottery.<sup>2</sup>

Very just	24%
Somewhat just	34%
Somewhat unjust	15%
Very unjust	27%
Don't know	1%

The decision is made by judging the usefulness of each patient for society at large.<sup>3</sup>

Very just	5%
Somewhat just	25%
Somewhat unjust	28%
Very unjust	42%
Don't know	1%

The decision is made by following the rules of the hospital, whatever they may be.<sup>4</sup>



Very just	16%
Somewhat just	35%
Somewhat unjust	28%
Very unjust	21%
Don't know	3%

The patient goes who can afford to pay the most is treated first.<sup>5</sup>

Very just	1%
Somewhat just	4%
Somewhat unjust	26%
Very unjust	72%
Don't know	<1%

The patient supporting the largest family is treated first.<sup>6</sup>

Very just	6%
Somewhat just	31%
Somewhat unjust	36%
Very unjust	27%
Don't know	1%

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<sup>1</sup> Survey by National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, February 1-May 25, 1996. Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2-6</sup> Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), *International Social Justice Project 1991* [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 3%

We can call the most popular method *justice as queuing* and it is considered the fairest selective tool when distributing places at the grocery store checkout line, entrance onto a bus, or enrollment in a popular course. Therefore even if one supports distribution by merit for some items, there may be reasons not to support it for other items. Americans, like some scholars, might partition goods into different categories with different distributive rules.

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Table 11: Considerations Other Than Merit

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A small firm has an apartment to rent. Three of its employees want the apartment. A selection has to be made. Now, what would be your view of each of the following decisions?

The decision about who gets the apartment is made by a lottery.<sup>1</sup>

Very just	35%
Somewhat just	36%
Somewhat unjust	13%
Very unjust	15%
Don't know	<1%

The decision is made by judging the usefulness of each employee to the firm.<sup>2</sup>

Very just	8%
Somewhat just	34%
Somewhat unjust	31%
Very unjust	27%
Don't know	1%

The decision is left to the three employees themselves, whatever they may decide.<sup>3</sup>

Very just	43%
Somewhat just	37%
Somewhat unjust	12%
Very unjust	9%
Don't know	1%

The employee with the lowest income gets the apartment.<sup>4</sup>

Very just	9%
Somewhat just	29%
Somewhat unjust	40%
Very unjust	22%
Don't know	1%

The employee supporting the largest family gets the apartment.<sup>5</sup>

Very just	10%
Somewhat just	37%
Somewhat unjust	34%
Very unjust	17%
Don't know	1%

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<sup>1-5</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 3%*

Because a life saving organ may be a special case, similar questions may be asked about non-life saving goods. In the case of distributing an apartment the fairest method of distribution among the selected options was to let those who wanted it to decide among themselves. This response highlights a democratic tendency; those that are affected by the decision should make the decision. Like the case of the life saving organ, lottery is also viewed as a just method. The utilitarian response, that the person that is most useful to the firm should get the apartment, is rejected by a small majority. While the second utilitarian response, regarding the size of the employee's family yields mixed results. Presumably the apartment would benefit more people if the family is large, but the public does not seem to have a strong sentiment regarding the justice of this. The choice to give the apartment to the person with the lowest income, to choose based on need, is rejected as unfair by a solid majority. Admittedly, "hard work and intelligence" are not options in the survey question except so far as the firm finds smart hard working employees more useful than average employees. But the questions do highlight considerations other than merit that may be viewed as fair distributive rules.

This hesitation for distributing items on merit alone most likely stems from the meritocratic ideal itself. "Most Americans see nothing wrong with inequality of income so long as it comes with plenty of social mobility" (Ever higher society). When it becomes clear that only wealthy people are acquiring important positions because, it seems, only they have the requisite skills, then we are very far from the meritocratic ideal. Bill Clinton's statement implies, and the meritocratic ideal requires, that social mobility for able and hard working individuals be the norm

regardless of their origins. When the distribution of particular goods by merit makes social mobility more difficult, then distribution of that good by merit should be rejected as part of the meritocratic ideal itself.

As stated in the opening chapter the meritocratic ideal requires that there be social mobility for the industrious. This conception of merit may cause some to support expanding opportunities for potentially industrious people who, through no fault of their own, have no mechanism by which they can move up in the world. They might believe that rewards should be distributed by merit, but opportunities for training (like education) should be equally distributed to all. The propensity to use different distributive rules for different goods does not necessarily contradict the meritocratic ideal. But neither does it necessarily support it. Much will depend on which rules apply to which goods. Here we are simply noting a complexity of thought on the matter, even if not much thought has been put into one's stated preferences.

### *American Realism*

The information available from various surveys also suggests that there is some skepticism about the reality of meritocracy among the American populace. Evidence from table 12 suggests that most Americans believe that “we’ve lost the link” between hard work and success, particularly after being given information about people winning large lawsuit settlements. Americans probably view the acquisition of wealth from lawsuits as “non-work” and therefore contrary to the meritocratic ideal. A majority of Americans are even willing to acknowledge that not everyone may believe that hard work leads to success. In addition, many Americans are not

convinced that everyone gets what they need. This may lead us to conclude that perhaps we should be skeptical about equal opportunity; after all if a person doesn't have what they need they certainly aren't on a level playing field with those who do. A majority of Americans are not ready to dismiss racial or ethnic background as reasons for people being successful and having a high social standing. Finally, an overwhelming majority agrees that one's social background is important for success and that having the right connections is an important factor in attaining wealth. This directly contradicts the Horatio Alger ideal that one's social origins are irrelevant in achieving success.

Although there is evidence to suggest that Americans believe they live in a meritocracy, there is other evidence to suggest that they are skeptical about the reality of it. In short, Americans are faced with contradictory beliefs about what causes one to be successful in America today.

Table 12: Skepticism in Meritocracy

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(I am going to read you a series of statements that describe America today. For each one, please tell me, how much truth there is for each one--a great deal of truth, a fair amount of truth, not very much truth or no truth at all in the statement.)...Our nation is facing a decline in people taking personal responsibility, with too many people relying on government handouts and programs rather than working and being self-sufficient. The money spent on lawsuits has increased to over two hundred billion dollars a year, as people try to blame others and win a windfall in court. We've lost the link between taking responsibility, hard work and success. <sup>1</sup>

A great deal of truth	53%
A fair amount of truth	30%
Not very much truth	14%
No truth at all	2%

(Here are some statements that people have made about why some individuals aren't working as hard as they could. For each one, please tell me whether you strongly agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree, or strongly disagree.)... People simply don't believe that hard work pays off anymore<sup>2</sup>

Strongly agree	28%
Slightly agree	35%
Slightly disagree	22%
Strongly disagree	14%
Not sure/Don't know	1%

[In the US] people get what they need.<sup>3</sup>

Strongly agree	5%
Somewhat agree	35%
Neither agree or disagree	9%
Somewhat disagree	33%
Strongly disagree	17%
Don't know	1%

Here are some factors that are sometimes considered important for having high social standing. Please tell me how important each is for success in our society today.

Social background<sup>4</sup>

Very important	24%
Somewhat important	51%
Not very important	19%
Not at all important	6%
Don't know	<1%

Belonging to a particular ethnic or racial group<sup>5</sup>

Very important	14%
Somewhat important	36%
Not very important	29%
Not at all important	22%
Don't know	1%

How often is each of the following factors a reason for why there are rich people in this country today?

Having the right connections<sup>6</sup>

Very often	32%
Often	43%
Sometimes	22%
Rarely	3%
Never	<1%

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<sup>1</sup> *Survey by Public Interest Project. Methodology: Conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, April 5-April 8, 2004.* Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> *Survey by Public Agenda Foundation during June, 1982 and based on personal interviews with a people employed more than 20 hours/week.* Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>3-6</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993.* Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.

Table 13 indicates that Americans may favor government actions to bring us closer to the meritocratic ideal. Where the link between hard work and success seems to be waning, the public seems to desire a strengthening of the connection.

Table 13: Worried About Self-Reliance

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(I am going to read you a series of statements that describe America today. For each one, please tell me, how important is it that government act to change things--extremely important, somewhat important, not very important or not at all important in the statement.)...Our nation is facing a decline in people taking personal responsibility, with too many people relying on government handouts and programs rather than working and being self-sufficient. The money spent on lawsuits has increased to over two hundred billion dollars a year, as people try to blame others and win a windfall in court. We've lost the link between taking responsibility, hard work and success.<sup>1</sup>

Extremely important	56%
Somewhat important	29%
Not very important	9%
Not at all important	5%
Don't know/Refused	1%

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<sup>1</sup> *Survey by Public Interest Project, Conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, April 5-April 8, 2004.* Retrieved February 22, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

### *Conclusions*

Bill Clinton's statement at the beginning of the chapter effectively summarizes an ideal that is a central tenet of the meritocratic ethos. Most Americans are idealistic and believe that America is the "Land of Opportunity" where smart hard working people should be and are actually rewarded. But they are also willing to apply distributive rules other than merit to particular goods, which by themselves don't violate meritocratic norms. It simply suggests that merit should not be the sole distributive criteria for various goods.

But Americans are also a realistic group of people. Most Americans know that one's race, social background, and connections matter for success. This is a direct violation of the meritocratic ideal. Unfortunately, there is insufficient data to discern whether Americans are cognizant of these contradictory ideas. However, previous research suggests that it is probably quite common for people not to "put 2 and 2 together" especially given the complex nature of the debate over meritocracy. The key item for researchers to understand is that support for the meritocratic ethic is not absolute. The American creed might include items that make it difficult for smart hard working people to succeed solely by their own volition.



## Chapter 4

### Different Americans, Different Ideas About Meritocracy

*Nobody wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren, talent equal to those of the other colors of men, and that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely to the degraded condition of their existence, both in Africa and America.<sup>3</sup>*

*Thomas Jefferson*

In 1791 Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to Benjamin Banneker, an African American inventor, to praise his accomplishments and to inform him that his work would be sent to important scientific and political figures in Europe. Jefferson hoped to dispel the idea that people of African descent lacked the innate capacity to accomplish what whites had achieved in their own scientific endeavors. Two hundred years later claims that African Americans were less intelligent than whites were still being made by seemingly reputable social scientists at Harvard. The response by the academic community mirrored Jefferson's view that unequal environmental conditions had more to do with the observed differences than did genetic explanations.

Americans, however, have different concerns than the social theorists of chapter one. They admit that they know very little about genetics, but unlike some

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<sup>3</sup> Jefferson 1944, 508

social theorists they doubt that intelligence is a primarily genetic trait. And, like Jefferson, most Americans lean towards believing it is a product of one's environment. Most Americans certainly do not believe that success is dependent on one's genes and this virtually eliminates the possibility that Americans are fearful that a hereditary cognitive elite will become the rulers of society. They believe that intelligent people deserve more money than others, thereby implicitly rejecting Rawls' claims that intelligence is a product of one's genetic luck and that therefore it is unfair to reward intelligent people.

In chapter two I pointed out the potential inconsistencies that exist in public opinion and attempted to give an explanation for why contradictory preferences exist. I suggested that among the reasons why an individual or group might both accept and reject the same statement is because of contradictory values. Values are transitory. They depend on the situation and perhaps on one's place in society. This chapter presents evidence that reinforces the suggestion that Americans are ambivalent on questions related to meritocracy. It also focuses on the differences of opinion among different groups of people, particularly differences between African Americans and whites, men and women, and between college and non-college educated respondents.

*Ideas of Merit: Anchored in Group Experiences of Discrimination*

There are many questions that may be answered differently depending on one's group affiliation. Why are some people successful? Because of merit or favoritism? Why do social differences exist? Is it because of differences in effort or because of limited opportunities and economic circumstances? Why are some people rich and others poor? Is it due to dishonesty and loose morals, ability and talent, hard

work, or one's connections? The old adage "Where one stands depends on where one sits" suggests that differences of opinion on these questions will be related to one's social circumstances.

The first place to look for differences is among different racial groups. Because the issue of race has been at the center of political debate in the US since this country's founding, we should expect that different racial and ethnic groups have differing opinions regarding merit and opportunity. They may disagree over the idea that the US offers equal opportunities for everyone or the extent to which racism is a problem. One may reasonably expect that blacks and whites have different opinions about these questions because of their different histories and group interests. African Americans, of course, have faced legal barriers that restricted opportunities for advancement, while whites enjoyed special privileges. Individuals from these two groups "sit" in different places in our society.

A good deal of work has already been conducted on the matter of race and distributive justice. Remember that one major tenet of the meritocratic ethos is the belief that everyone who works hard can reasonably anticipate success. From this it might follow that those who are unsuccessful *ipso facto* lack the Protestant work ethic – they are unmeritorious. Upper-class African-Americans are especially likely to believe, however, that effort has little to do with their success or failure. Instead, they tend believe that ascriptive characteristics have had a strong influence on their place in society. This violates the principles of meritocracy and researchers have found that their belief in the "American Dream" is compromised (Hochschild 1995, 73). Whites, on the other hand, are especially likely to believe that all Americans have an

equal opportunity to become successful (Hochschild 1995, 68). Other researchers dealing with issues of distributive justice have found that those with favorable outcomes are more likely to consider the process and the outcome to be fair (Tyler 1986). Advantaged groups, whites in this case, should be more likely to believe that the system, or *status quo*, is just.

A second place to look for differences among groups is between men and women. Women tend to have lower incomes than men because of the differences in the types of jobs men and women acquire (Tomaskovic-Devey 1995). They also vote differently and have a tendency to identify with different parties. Women tend to favor the Democratic Party while men tend to favor the Republican Party (Norrander 1997). More specifically, the gender gap in voting and party identification is a result of differences in policy attitudes and issue salience. Men and women have different policy preferences and rank different issues as most important to them (Kaufmann & Petrocik 1999). The “gender gap” literature suggests that differences in party identification, vote choice, and policy preferences may be rooted in different values regarding social justice or in different perceptions of the social world. Women, if they believe they are being held back because of their gender, should view meritocracy as more of a myth than a reality.

Education has a powerful effect on most people and level of education is one of the most consistently useful predictors in political science. More highly educated people are more likely to have greater levels of political information and more politically useful skills (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes 1964; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady 1995). Indeed, education is the most important factor in

predicting political participation. The educated are more likely to be recruited into political activity (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady 1995). Greater information allows voters to resist the agenda setting effects of the media (Iyengar & Kinder 1987; Zaller 1992). And, more educated people are more likely to become opinion leaders and thereby change mass opinion in their favor (Berelson, et. al. 1954). For these reasons the beliefs held by those with higher levels of education are critically important in American politics, especially when they differ from the less educated. However, from the standpoint of meritocracy it is unclear what opinion more educated people should have. Because of their success are they more likely to believe that meritocracy is a reality? Or, because of their greater levels of information, are they more likely to believe that race, gender, and social background create barriers to success? It may be that more educated respondents are even more conflicted over issues of meritocracy than less educated ones.

Education and income are closely related to a third variable: social class. But attributing differences in attitudes and values to differences in class identification is difficult because many Americans may not recognize what class they are “really” in (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes 1964). Despite this lack of class-consciousness working class Americans are more likely to split their vote than those in the business class. Republicans, who tend toward the upper class, view themselves as best for everybody, while Democrats, who tend toward the working class, view themselves as pro-labor and view Republicans as favoring the upper class (Berelson, et. al. 1954). Class differences exist in other Western countries and class is likely to make a difference among American’s attitudes and values, even if they don’t view

themselves primarily along class lines. As with the other groups, the advantaged upper class should be more supportive of the *status quo* and believe that meritocracy is a reality.

*Results: A Consensus of Values*

Americans of various types appear to be much more alike than they are different. Although there are some differences of opinion regarding questions of distributive justice, for the most part, those differences are small and Americans show broad consensus. On a variety of items no significant results were found to support the hypotheses that race, income, sex, education, age, and self-identified class influenced one's attitudes.

A majority of Americans (67%) disagree with the statement that there is "no point in arguing about social justice since it is impossible to change things."<sup>4</sup> This suggests there is a fairly high level of political efficacy when it comes to creating a just society. Overwhelming majorities (83%) agree that disadvantaged groups should be given extra help so that they can have equal opportunities in life.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that if more Americans were aware of, or perceived injustice or a lack of opportunities, they would be inclined to act on that perception to remedy the situation. Most Americans want a fair society and believe we have the ability to create one.

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<sup>4</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 3%*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

The issue is that Americans do not perceive injustice or a lack of opportunities to be a widespread problem that limits people's ability to succeed in life. As suggested in chapter two most Americans believe that the US is a meritocracy. A substantial majority of Americans believe that in the US people have equal opportunities to get ahead, that they get rewarded for their effort, and that people get rewarded for their intelligence and skill (Table 7). However, these ideas are not necessarily evidence of gross misperceptions on the part of the public. Most Americans are aware of injustice or are at least conflicted over questions of fairness in the context of meritocracy.

The vast majority (73%) disagree with the statement that a poor person has the same chance for a fair trial as a wealthy person.<sup>6</sup> This means that most Americans are aware of wealth differences and acknowledge that wealth can skew one's ability to act as a citizen on equal terms with others. Yet, there is also the widely held belief that America provides an equal opportunity for all. If we chose to define equal opportunity as the lack of legal/political barriers, then this shows ambivalence on the part of the public. Americans understand that our opportunities for a fair trial depend on one's economic resources, but this seems to have no bearing on their perception of America in general as the land of (equal) opportunity.

Yet, for all the claims about America being a meritocracy a very strong (64%) majority of Americans believe it is fair for those who can afford a better education for their children to provide it.<sup>7</sup> This is a remarkably unmeritocratic response. Distributing education through the market, so that the wealthy acquire better

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

schooling, violates the very core of meritocratic justice. Most Americans believe that the disadvantaged should be given extra help, but they also believe that everyone has already had an equal opportunity. American culture values freedom and the family, therefore it is not surprising that Americans believe that wealthier people should be free to help their own children.

At some level most Americans understand that life is not always fair and they tend to believe that disadvantaged people should be given assistance. However, they also tend to believe that America is already a meritocracy where effort, intelligence, and skill are rewarded. This might make them less inclined to support specific policies to aid the disadvantaged. Instead, they may claim that a smart, hard working person can succeed and that therefore no remedy is needed. Most Americans understand that the wealthy have advantages. But in their view this does not prevent others from also succeeding.

Indeed, most Americans do not feel they have been treated unjustly. A majority of Americans say they've rarely or never experienced injustice because of their sex, social background, age, political beliefs, or because of a lack of money.<sup>8</sup> This suggests a generalized sense of fairness in the socioeconomic system Americans live in. For the most part Americans do not seem to believe that forces beyond their control are holding them back. The Horatio Alger American Dream is alive and well among all groups in America.

The previous chapter asked respondents whether people should be “rewarded” because of their merit. Here we examine the specific reward of money. As it turns out, effort and ability are believed to be important factors in determining one’s

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*



economic status. Sixty-seven percent of Americans believe that hard work is often or very often the reason for why people are rich in America. A near majority believes that lack of effort is very often or often a reason for poverty. Eighty-eight percent believe it is at least sometimes a reason. Over 60% of Americans believe that ability or talent is the reason people are rich. A plurality believes that a lack of ability or talent is sometimes the reason for poverty, but more people say that a lack of ability or talent is very often or often a reason for poverty than say it is rarely or never a reason. This suggests that many Americans believe that the lack of ability is a factor in being poor, but they don't believe it is the whole story.

Table 14: Effort, Ability, and Economic Success

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How often is each of the following factors a reason for why there are rich people in this country today? hard work?<sup>1</sup>

Very often	26%
Often	41%
Sometimes	24%
Rarely	8%
Never	1%

Why are people poor in your country? How often is lack of effort by the poor themselves a reason for why there are poor people today?<sup>2</sup>

Very often	18%
Often	31%
Sometimes	39%
Rarely	12%
Never	1%

How often is each of the following factors a reason for why there are rich people in this country today? ability or talent<sup>3</sup>

Very often	21%
Often	40%
Sometimes	32%
Rarely	7%
Never	1%

Why are people poor in your country? How often is lack of ability or talent a reason for why there are poor people today?<sup>4</sup>

Very often	11%
Often	25%
Sometimes	41%
Rarely	19%
Never	4%

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<sup>1-4</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 3%*

Seventy-five percent of Americans believe that having the right connections is a reason for why people are rich in America. This suggests that most Americans are of a common mind and understand that technical merit alone is not the sole reason why people are successful. Sixty-three percent of Americans believe that having more opportunities to begin with is often or very often a reason why people are rich. This too suggests that Americans understand that effort and ability are not the only factors that contribute to economic success.

Table 15: Connections and Opportunities in Economic Success

How often is each of the following factors a reason for why there are rich people in this country today?

Having the right connections<sup>1</sup>

Very often	32%
Often	43%
Sometimes	22%
Rarely	3%
Never	<1%

More opportunities to begin with<sup>2</sup>

Very often	24%
Often	39%
Sometimes	29%
Rarely	8%
Never	<1%

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<sup>1-2</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 3%*

Most Americans, regardless of the demographic characteristics considered here, are ambivalent on many questions related to meritocracy. They believe that intelligence, skill, and hard work should be actually rewarded. But they also know that non-merit items, such as social connections, family background, and more opportunities to begin with, are reasons for peoples' success. This is not surprising because in some ways America does allow smart hardworking people to succeed, while in other ways opportunities are closed to all but the most advantaged persons.

*Results: Cracks in the Consensus*

We have begun to see that there is widespread consensus on some questions even if the consensus is contradictory from the standpoint of meritocracy. However there are other questions where we begin to see very clear cracks in the consensus. The ISJP data in chapter 3 indicated that Americans are split on whether people get what they need. The public is also split on the question of whether one's sex or one's race is important for high social standing. Approximately 50% believe it is not, approximately 50% believe it is. A very slight majority of Americans believe that luck is important for high social standing, 53% believes it matters. All of this

suggests that there are significant doubts about the reality of meritocracy, even if there is no outright rejection of it.

Table 16: Race, Gender, and Luck Still Matter

Here are some factors that are sometimes considered important for having high social standing. Please tell me how important each is for success in our society today.

Belonging to a particular ethnic or racial group<sup>1</sup>

Very important	14%
Somewhat important	36%
Not very important	29%
Not at all important	22%

One's sex?<sup>2</sup>

Very important	10%
Somewhat important	38%
Not very important	32%
Not at all important	21%

Good luck<sup>3</sup>

Very important	12%
Somewhat important	35%
Not very important	33%
Not at all important	20%

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<sup>1-3</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 3%*

Americans give very different estimations about the percentage of rich and poor people in the country. African Americans, women, and those that identify as lower or working class give higher estimations than whites, men, and middle and upper class identifiers. Those with higher incomes, those that are college educated, and older Americans tend to give lower estimations about the percentage of poor

people in America. Once other variables are held constant we find that being African American, being lower or working class, and being female is significantly related to having higher estimations about the percentage of poor people in the US. We also find that those who are college educated give lower estimations of poverty. Being white has no statistically significant impact on one's perception of poverty; the differences by race are due solely to the fact that African Americans tend to give higher estimates. Also, the differences by class can be attributed to the lower class giving higher estimates, since those that identify as upper and upper-middle class give estimates that are not statistically different than middle class identifiers. This tells us that different groups of Americans perceive the world in very different ways. It also means that if Americans have shared values of fairness, some will perceive an injustice and others will not. For example, if we can all agree that, "We should help

Table 17: Differences in the Estimation of Percentage of Rich and Poor in the US

	Correlation	
	What percentage is poor in your country? <sup>1</sup>	What percentage are rich? <sup>2</sup>
Race (b/w)	.262**	.234**
Class	-.187**	-.194**
Income	-.072*	-.064*
Age	-.067*	.095*
Sex	.271**	.208**
Education	-.279**	-.390**

\*p < .05 \*\* p < .01

<sup>1-2</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.*

the poor,” we might still give different answers to the government’s role in doing this because some perceive poverty to be widespread while others don’t see it all.

Women, African Americans, and older Americans also give higher estimations of the percentage of wealthy people in America. This suggests that these groups may view themselves as economically disadvantaged, they are more likely to look around and categorize someone as “wealthy” when compared to men, whites, and younger people. In this case, however, the differences by race are due to both African Americans giving higher estimations and whites giving lower estimations. Those that are college educated and those with higher incomes give lower estimates, but only education level remained significant once other factors were held constant. Interestingly, because African Americans, women, and lower/working class identifiers also give higher estimations about the percentage of poor, we can infer that they perceive that there are smaller numbers of middle class Americans. Men and those who are college educated are more likely to say there are fewer rich and poor Americans, suggesting they perceive there to be a larger middle class relative to women and the non-college educated. In short, women, African Americans, and those who consider themselves working class are probably more likely to view the world as a conflict between rich and poor, while men and those that are college educated are more likely to see America as having a larger middle class.

Table 18: Differences in the Estimation of Percentage of Rich and Poor in the US

	Multiple Regression	
	What percentage is poor in your country? <sup>1</sup>	What percentage are rich? <sup>2</sup>
Black	.170** (2.40)	.090* (2.31)
White	-.072 (1.95)	-.148** (1.88)
Lower/Working Class	.086** (1.35)	.081** (.997)
Upper Middle/Upper Class	.001 (1.16)	-.032 (1.13)
Income (thousands)	-.060* (.002)	-.042 (.002)
Age	-.045 (.274)	.118** (.259)
Sex	.246** (.868)	.177** (.842)
College	-.165** (1.02)	-.245** (.991)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.179	.192

\*p < .05 \*\* p < .01

<sup>1-2</sup> Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.

### Results by Race

In a meritocracy racial discrimination is totally eliminated and people are rewarded for their effort. And, in many ways whites and African Americans are equally likely to believe that the US is in fact a meritocratic society. Just like the white population, the vast majority of African Americans believe that people are rewarded for their effort. They believe that decisions about who is hired, promoted, or admitted to college should be based strictly on merit rather than race or ethnicity.

Huge majorities of both groups agree that it is important to help the less fortunate. Contrary to expectations, however, there are no significant differences by race on the question of whether one's race is important for high social standing. African Americans are just as divided over this question as whites, some believe race matters and others do not.

In other respects African Americans and whites do show significant differences of opinion. Even though majorities of both groups believe effort is rewarded, once other factors are held constant African Americans are more likely to disagree with the idea that people are rewarded for their effort. Although 68% of whites believe that America provides equal opportunity only 50% of African Americans believe the same. When both groups were asked specifically about African Americans the results were far more disparate. A majority of whites believe that African Americans have about the same opportunities in life as whites, while 74% of African Americans believe they have less opportunity. The two groups disagree about whether the federal government should make sure that jobs are of equal quality, with whites believing it isn't the government's role. Majorities of both whites and African Americans believe that the federal government has the responsibility to make sure that minorities have the same quality of schools, quality of health care, and treatment by the courts and police as whites. The issue is that a plurality or majority of whites believe that African Americans are just as well off as whites when it comes to access to health care, education, and types of jobs, while a plurality of African Americans believe they are a lot worse off than whites when it comes income, access to health care, education, and types of jobs. Most white



respondents admit that African Americans face discrimination and that there are still major problems facing racial minorities, but this does not seem to affect their view that African Americans have about the same opportunities in life as they do themselves.

Table 19: Differences Over Opportunity and Discrimination

			$\chi^2$	Cramer's V
In the US people have equal opportunities to get ahead. <sup>1</sup>				
	Whites	African Americans	53.7**	.098**
Strongly agree	16%	19%		
Somewhat agree	51%	31%		
Neither agree or disagree	5%	4%		
Somewhat disagree	21%	27%		
Strongly disagree	7%	19%		

Do you feel that African Americans have more, less, or about the same opportunities in life as whites have?<sup>2</sup>

	Whites	African Americans	212.4**	.176**
More opportunity	13%	1%		
Less opportunity	27%	74%		
About the same	58%	23%		

Now please tell me how much discrimination there is against each of these groups in our society today. How about African Americans? Would you say there is a lot of discrimination, some, only a little, or none at all?<sup>3</sup>

	Whites	African Americans	133.6**	.125**
A lot of discrimination	20%	48%		
Some	52%	39%		
Only a little	17%	9%		
None at all	8%	2%		

Thinking specifically about African Americans, do you think the average African American is better off, worse off, or just about as well off as the average white person in terms of (READ ITEM)? Is that a lot better/worse off or just a little?

Income<sup>4</sup>

	Whites	African Americans	221.4**	.147**
A lot better off	2%	3%		
A little better off	3%	7%		
A little worse off	39%	30%		
A lot worse off	18%	42%		
Just about as well off	37%	15%		

Access to health care<sup>5</sup>

	Whites	African Americans	135.6**	.126**
A lot better off	6%	4%		
A little better off	5%	4%		
A little worse off	23%	25%		
A lot worse off	12%	36%		
Just about as well off	51%	26%		

Education<sup>6</sup>

	Whites	African Americans	158.2**	.136**
A lot better off	3%	5%		
A little better off	5%	6%		
A little worse off	33%	29%		
A lot worse off	16%	31%		
Just about as well off	42%	26%		

The types of jobs they have<sup>7</sup>

	Whites	African Americans	214.1**	.158**
A lot better off	1%	4%		
A little better off	4%	5%		
A little worse off	33%	26%		
A lot worse off	16%	42%		
Just about as well off	44%	23%		

Which of the following comes closer to your opinion?<sup>8</sup>

	Whites	African Americans	120.8**	.124**
We have overcome the major problems facing racial minorities in this country	34%	9%		
There are still major problems facing racial minorities in this country	63%	88%		

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\*p < .05 \*\* p < .01

<sup>1</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.*

<sup>2-8</sup> *Survey by Washington Post, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard University, March 29-May 20, 2001. Retrieved November 16, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.*

A plurality of African Americans and a majority of whites believe that luck is rarely or never a reason for poverty. In other words, whites are slightly less likely to think that luck matters. As stated earlier a majority of both blacks and whites believe that those who can afford it should obtain a better education for their children. Somewhat surprisingly, however, African Americans are more likely to hold this view than whites.

As one would expect, there is a very strong relationship between one's race and the belief that one has experienced injustice. Unsurprisingly, African Americans are more likely to say that they often or very often experience racial injustice. However, African Americans are somewhat more likely to believe that have also experienced sexual, social, economic, and political injustice than whites. It is

important to keep in mind that those African Americans who perceive that they've experienced injustices do not constitute a majority.

Table 20: Educational Advantages for the Wealthy

$\chi^2$  Cramer's V

It is just that those who can afford it obtain a better education for their children.<sup>1</sup>

	Whites	African Americans	53.5**	.098**
Strongly agree	29%	57%		
Somewhat agree	34%	25%		
Neither agree or disagree	6%	<1%		
Somewhat disagree	17%	10%		
Strongly disagree	14%	7%		

\*p < .05 \*\* p < .01

<sup>1</sup> Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.

A majority of African Americans respond that they have rarely or never been discriminated against on the basis of sex. Nevertheless there is a small relationship between race and believing that one has been discriminated on the basis of sex. African Americans are more likely to believe they have experienced sexual discrimination. This is true for both male and female African Americans. African Americans were more likely than whites to say that they often or very often experienced injustice because of their social background. While 4% of whites often or very often experience this injustice, 22% of African Americans claimed to often or very often experience this type of injustice. Two-percent of whites, but 38% of African Americans say they have experienced injustice because of their race or ethnic background. African Americans are more likely than whites to say that they often or

very often experience injustice because of a lack of money. Twelve percent of whites and 32% of African Americans say they have experienced injustice because of a lack of money.<sup>9</sup>

There is a solid relationship between race and the belief that discrimination is a reason for poverty. Only 33% of whites, but 65% of African Americans believe that discrimination is often or very often a reason for poverty. In addition, 31% of whites but 59% of African Americans believe that lack of equal opportunity a cause of poverty. There is also a difference in the perceived effect of moral fortitude, 41% of whites but 59% of African Americans believe that dishonesty is often or very often a reason for being rich. This suggests that African Americans may have a different definition of equal opportunity. Whites may view equal opportunity in political terms, while African Americans view it economically. It could also be that African Americans also view it politically, but believe that legal restrictions still exist or that current laws have not really eliminated barriers. Whatever the case may be, African Americans and whites do disagree on several issues.

Table 21: Differences in Reasons for Poverty

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$\chi^2$  Cramer's V

Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements that will help us understand how you feel about a number of things. As I read each pair, tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own views — even if neither is exactly right.<sup>1</sup>

Statement #1: Racial discrimination is the main reason why many black people can't get ahead these days

Statement #2: Blacks who can't get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

	Whites	African Americans	166.8**	.119**
#1 strongly	19%	43%		
#1 not strongly	10%	7%		
#2 not strongly	44%	30%		
#2 strongly	13%	5%		
Neither/Both equally	8%	10%		

Why are people poor in your country?

How often is prejudice and discrimination against certain groups a reason for why there are poor people today?<sup>2</sup>

	Whites	African Americans	98.3**	.133**
Very often	9%	30%		
Often	24%	34%		
Sometimes	45%	26%		
Rarely	19%	6%		
Never	2%	3%		

How often is lack of equal opportunity a reason for why there are poor people today?<sup>3</sup>

	Whites	African Americans	70.3**	.113**
Very often	8%	22%		
Often	23%	37%		
Sometimes	42%	30%		
Rarely	24%	10%		
Never	3%	2%		

How often is each of the following factors a reason for why there are rich people in this country today? Dishonesty?<sup>4</sup>

	Whites	African Americans	36.2**	.081**
Very often	16%	30%		
Often	25%	30%		
Sometimes	39%	25%		
Rarely	19%	14%		
Never	<1%	2%		

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\*p < .05 \*\* p < .01

<sup>1</sup>Survey by Pew Research Center and Princeton Survey Research Associates, August 24-September 10, 2000. Retrieved November 17, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.

<sup>2-4</sup>Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies

[producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.

### *Results by Gender*

Given previous research into the matter one might expect that women are likely to have a somewhat different set of values, however, in many ways women's views are not all that different from that of men. Like men, women believe in the existence of meritocracy, but are not as convinced of the reality as men are. This is especially true once other factors are considered. Although a strong majority of women believe that effort is rewarded, they are less likely than men to hold this view. A majority of women still believe that equal opportunities exist, but women are more likely than men to believe that the US does not offer equal opportunities to get ahead. They are also more likely than men to disagree with the statement that intelligence and skill are rewarded. Although a majority of women believe that people are rewarded for their intelligence and skill, they do not hold this position as strongly as men do.

Table 22: Meritocracy for Men and Women

			$\chi^2$	Cramer's V
<b>People get rewarded for their effort.<sup>1</sup></b>				
	Men	Women	21.3**	.124**
Strongly agree	16%	12%		
Somewhat agree	61%	54%		
Neither	5%	7%		
Somewhat disagree	13%	20%		
Strongly disagree	4%	7%		
<b>In the US people have equal opportunities to get ahead.<sup>2</sup></b>				
	Men	Women	21.8**	.125**
Strongly agree	20%	15%		

Somewhat agree	52%	46%
Neither	4%	6%
Somewhat disagree	17%	24%
Strongly disagree	7%	9%

People get rewarded for their intelligence and skill.<sup>3</sup>

	Men	Women	21.3**	.124**
Strongly agree	19%	16%		
Somewhat agree	61%	55%		
Neither	4%	7%		
Somewhat disagree	12%	17%		
Strongly disagree	4%	5%		

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\*p < .05 \*\* p < .01

<sup>1-3</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.*

Women follow the norm and are conflicted about the meritocracy question. Women tend to disagree with the statement that people get what they need. They are also slightly more likely to believe that gender is important for high social standing; this is something that would not be the case in a true meritocracy. Majorities of both men and women agree that sex should not matter in determining a person's level of pay, however, both men and women agree that it does effect the level of pay for at least some.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



Table 23: Skepticism Among the College Educated and Other Groups

	Multiple Regression	
	In the US a poor person has the same chance for a fair trial as a wealthy person does? <sup>1</sup>	In the US people have equal opportunities to get ahead. <sup>2</sup>
Black	.030 (.201)	.130** (.177)
White	.061 (.165)	.051 (.145)
Lower/Working Class	.002 (.087)	.046 (.076)
Upper Middle/Upper Class	-.067* (.099)	-.061* (.088)
Income (thousands)	.000 (.000)	-.011 (.000)
Age	-.073** (.022)	-.108** (.019)
Sex	.005 (.074)	.119** (.065)
College	.064* (.088)	.108** (.078)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.009	.047

There is a moderate association between sex and believing that one has been discriminated against on that basis. As one would expect, women are more likely than men to believe they have been discriminated against on the basis of sex. The effect is particularly strong after other variables have been considered. They are also more likely than men to believe that the economic system is responsible for poverty. Women are more sensitive to various types of social inequalities than man are. But before we conclude there is a war of the sexes in America we should note that a

majority of women still believe that they have rarely or never been discriminated against.<sup>11</sup>

Table 23: Skepticism Among the College Educated and Other Groups (Cont.)

	Multiple Regression		
	Here are some factors that are sometimes considered important for having high social standing. Please tell me how important each is for success in our society today.		
	One's sex <sup>3</sup>	Belonging to a particular ethnic or racial group <sup>4</sup>	It is just that those who can afford it obtain a better education for their children. <sup>5</sup>
Black	-.041 (.137)	-.090* (.145)	-.065 (.208)
White	-.013 (.112)	-.064 (.119)	.090* (.170)
Lower/Working Class	-.026 (.058)	-.003 (.062)	.036 (.090)
Upper Middle/Upper Class	-.012 (.067)	-.009 (.071)	-.027 (.102)
Income (thousands)	-.003 (.000)	-.031 (.000)	.041 (.000)
Age	-.064* (.015)	-.096** (.019)	-.079** (.023)
Sex	-.057* (.050)	-.038 (.053)	.013 (.076)
College	-.113** (.059)	-.134** (.063)	.092** (.091)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.013	.027	.031

\*p < .05 \*\* p < .01

<sup>1-5</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.*

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

### *Results by Self-Identified Class*

We should be careful in interpreting the results of class as an explanatory variable in large part because nearly 60% of Americans do not think of themselves as belonging to a particular social class. Yet when asked, “Suppose you were asked whether you belong to the lower class, working class, middle class, upper middle class, or upper class” less than 1% refused to conceptualize themselves in a class. Although the concept of class is not prominent in the American mind, when pressed Americans are able place themselves in one class or another. Indeed, self-identified class is a useful predictor of responses to questions of distributive justice.

As one might expect those that identify as being upper class are more likely than others to believe the US is a meritocracy. Although there was no initial correlation, further investigation found that when other factors are held constant there is a very small relationship between self-identified class and the belief that the poor have the same chances for a fair trial as the rich. Those that identify in the higher classes are more likely to believe that a poor person has the same chance for a fair trial as a wealthy person. In other words upper class identifiers are more likely to believe the legal system is fair for everyone.

In addition, as one’s self-identified social class increases one is much more likely to believe that the economic system is rarely or never a reason for poverty. As perceived social class increases there is a greater likelihood for one to believe that dishonesty is rarely or never a reason for being rich. Upper class identifiers are more likely than others to think that hard work is often or very often a reason for being rich. Those that identify in the higher classes are also more likely to believe that America

provides an equal opportunity. All of this suggests satisfaction with the *status quo*. Relative to lower class identifiers, upper class identifiers are more likely to view the world as essentially fair.<sup>12</sup>

Those that are lower or working class are more likely to disagree with the statement that people are rewarded for their intelligence and skill. Lower and working class identifiers are somewhat more likely to think that the economic system often or very often allows people to take an unfair advantage. They are also slightly more likely to agree with the statement that there “is no point in arguing about social justice since it is impossible to change things.” This suggests lower levels of political efficacy and more skepticism about the reality meritocracy in America. Compared to upper class identifiers there is a tendency for lower class identifiers to view the system as unfair.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Results by Education*

Those that are better educated are more skeptical about meritocracy. As a person becomes more educated they are more likely to believe that a poor person does not have the same chance for a fair trail as a wealthy person. There is no initial correlation, but when other factors are held constant those that are college educated are more likely to believe that the US does not offer everyone an equal opportunity to succeed. Those that are college educated are more likely to believe that sex and race are important in attaining a high social status.

Those that are better educated are also more likely to disagree with the statement that there “is no point in arguing about social justice since it is impossible

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

to change things,” suggesting a higher sense of political efficacy. The better educated are more likely to disagree with the statement that those who can afford it should obtain a better education for their children, suggesting stronger allegiance to egalitarian and meritocratic norms.

There is no initial correlation, but once other factors are held constant there is a small relationship between one’s level of education and the belief that one has experienced racial injustice. College educated respondents are slightly more likely to believe they have experienced racial injustice. This is consistent with their general skepticism of the importance of merit in succeeding. As a rule the college-educated seem to have greater awareness of other factors that impact their outcome in life.

College educated respondents tend to discount merit as a reason for one’s economic outcome. More highly educated people are more likely to believe that a lack of effort is rarely or never a reason for poverty. They are slightly more likely to believe that having more opportunities to begin with is a reason for being rich. More highly educated respondents are more likely to believe that discrimination is a reason for poverty than less educated respondents. And whereas the general public was split on the issue, college-educated people are much more likely to believe that lack of equal opportunity is a reason for poverty. Compared to the general public the better-educated are less likely believe the poor have earned their place though a shortfall of merit or that the rich have earned it.

#### *Results by Income*

Perhaps because of covariance with class and education level individual income did not prove to be a powerful predictor. Nevertheless, there were some

statistically significant results. There is a negative relationship between income and the belief that race is important for high social standing. Those with higher incomes are more likely to believe that race or ethnicity matters in social standing.

### *Discussion*

Most Americans believe that the US is a meritocracy. They tend to believe that people have equal opportunities to get ahead, that they get rewarded for their effort, and that people get rewarded for their intelligence and skill. Many Americans believe that poverty is a result of a lack of effort, a lack of ability, and a lack of moral fortitude; it is not a matter of luck. The vast majority of Americans understand that wealth can influence a political process in which money should have no bearing on one's ability to succeed, but this does not translate into a denial of the existence of equal opportunity in America. Many believe that not everyone gets what they need and about half believe that race and sex matters for success. Many believe that discrimination and the economic system are responsible for poverty and a majority believes that having the right connections and having more opportunities to begin with is a reason for being rich. This creates an interesting conundrum. If some people don't get what they need, if race and gender still matter for one's social standing, if having the right connections and more opportunities matter for economic success, then it is hard to imagine that meritocracy exists. Based on this, we would expect many more people to reject the idea that equal opportunity is a reality, but this is not the case.

Americans support the family and individual rights, providing a very unmeritocratic response to the question of whether the wealthy should provide

educational advantages to their children. On a variety of measures Americans display great optimism and believe that they can succeed through their skills and hard work. This probably makes it less likely that individuals will make a connection between their belief in the reality of a meritocracy and their knowledge that non-merit criteria still have an effect on how social goods are distributed. The “top of the head” response of a satisfied person is to think that the world is fair. Specifically it means that there is a tendency to believe that smart hard working people should be and are successful. Knowing that non-merit criteria structure the way some things are distributed has no bearing on the widely accepted view that America provides everyone with an equal opportunity.

African Americans, women, and those that are college educated are more skeptical about the reality of meritocracy. Like others, African Americans do not believe luck is what determines success. They are keenly aware of forces that place limits on their success. Even though they believe a person needs to work hard in order to be successful, they don't view discrimination as simply bad luck. African Americans and women are more likely than whites and men to believe that the economic system is responsible for poverty. Majorities of African Americans and women, but only 39% of men and 44% of whites believe that the economic system is responsible for poverty. African Americans and women are more likely to believe that dishonesty is a reason for being rich than whites and men; suggesting that these minority groups are more likely to view the world as unfair.

African Americans are less likely to believe that equal opportunities exist and are more likely to believe they have experienced injustice. But they also hold

unmeritocratic values that work against their group interests. They tend to believe that those with more money should obtain better educations for their children, a peculiar belief given the much lower levels of wealth among African Americans. Most women believe that meritocracy exists, but in lower proportions than men. Their greater likelihood of attributing poverty to the economic system and their lower likelihood of believing it is a result of a lack of effort suggests that they are more skeptical about the reality of meritocracy than men.

Upper and upper-middle class identifiers have a stronger belief in the reality of meritocracy than those that identify in the lower and working class. They are more likely than lower class identifiers to believe that poor people have the same chance for a fair trial. They are less likely to believe that dishonesty is a reason for being rich and they are more likely to believe that hard work is the reason being rich. Lower and working class identifiers are more likely to believe that the economic system causes poverty because it allows some people to take an unfair advantage. They have lower levels of political efficacy and are more likely to believe that intelligence and skill is not rewarded. The upper classes and the lower classes tend to have different perceptions regarding how fair their world is.

A person's level of education, as in previous studies, was the most consistent predictor of all. College-educated respondents doubt the idea of a meritocratic America. They are more likely to claim to have experienced injustice because of their race. They are more likely to believe that the poor do not have the same chance for a fair trial as others. And they are more likely to believe that a lack of ability and a lack of effort are not reasons for poverty. Instead, they are more likely to claim that



poverty is caused by discrimination and a lack of equal opportunity. Like African Americans and women, those that are better educated are more skeptical about the reality of meritocracy.

In a similar vein they are more likely than less well educated respondents to doubt that the wealthy have earned their place through their own merit. They are more likely to believe that people are wealthy because they have more opportunities to begin with and therefore are more likely to doubt that equal opportunity is a reality. Finally, they are more likely to believe that sex and race are important for high social standing. More highly educated respondents are more likely to doubt that meritocracy is a currently existing reality.

Those that are college educated are not only more likely to discount merit as a reason for one's success, they are also more likely to desire change. Better-educated respondents are more likely than others to disagree with the idea that those who are wealthier should purchase better educations for their children. Presumably, this creates an unfair advantage and is therefore an unjust method of using one's resources. Meritocrats would agree.

### *Conclusions*

Overall, differences among various groups of Americans are not widespread. At least when it comes to questions related to the meritocratic ideal. However, disadvantaged groups, African Americans and women, display more skepticism and are more likely to claim to have experienced injustice and discrimination. Better-educated respondents tend to answer questions in a manner that is consistent with a deep skepticism of meritocracy. In their skepticism, the better educated are much

more like African Americans and women than they are like upper and upper-middle class identifiers.

More than 200 years after Thomas Jefferson wrote his letter to Benjamin Banneker Americans remain conflicted over the causes of success. We firmly believe that anyone can succeed if they are talented and work hard. But we also know that items such as race, gender, and social background contribute to one's ability to succeed. Some people hold steadfast their meritocratic beliefs and view the unsuccessful as *ipso facto* lacking in talent or a strong work ethic. Others are more keenly aware of barriers to success and tend to view poor individual outcomes as stemming of these barriers, rather than from any limitations of the individual. As usual, one's views over these important questions seem to depend on one's own place in society. Advantaged groups have a propensity to believe America is a meritocracy, while disadvantaged groups and those that are better educated are more skeptical.

## Chapter 5

### The Role of Merit in the Economic, Social, and Political Domains

*To those of you who received honors, awards,  
and distinctions, I say, well done. And to the C students,  
I say you too can be president of the United States.<sup>14</sup>*

*George W. Bush*

In this statement at Yale's commencement address, the President, who graduated from Yale, was making a mockery of the idea that merit leads to success. When we typically think of merit, we often associate talent with the particular trait of intelligence and academic prowess. George W. Bush was effectively disassociating political power from the narrow skills associated with book learning. The American republic, it seems, is not the Republic of Plato, which is led by philosopher-kings, nor is it living up to the ideals of Jefferson's "natural aristocracy."

We can all recall that student who was referred to as the "teacher's pet"; some of the readers might even have been that student. But for the most part the other students are likely to recall feelings of animosity, hostility, envy, and sometimes wonder at the student who seemed to so easily grasp new concepts and so easily recalled everything that we were told to read the night before. We especially recall being told that that person was the kind of person that was going to be successful. Through brainpower and hard work that person was destined to have a higher status than all of us for the rest of our lives. Did it actually work out that way?

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<sup>14</sup> qtd. in McNamee & Miller 2004, 95

George W. Bush's success is based on an entirely different set of characteristics than those of pure merit. His grandfather was a wealthy financier, US Senator from Connecticut, and Yale graduate. His father was a US Congressman, CIA director, Vice-President, and later President of the United States. His father also graduated from Yale and would come to marry Barbara Pierce Bush. She was the granddaughter of an Ohio Supreme Court Justice and a descendent of Franklin Pierce, the 14<sup>th</sup> president of the United States (McNamee & Miller 2004, 84). George W. Bush's power seems emanate from a political dynasty that is based on hereditary privilege.

This type of hereditary privilege, while entirely contradictory to the principles of meritocracy, is in fact a fairly common occurrence in America and one that is based on a different set of values. Richard J. Daley, the longtime machine boss and mayor of Chicago, was once accused of providing special privileges to his children. His son was awarded a lucrative city contract for insurance services and local reporters viewed this as evidence of corruption and patronage. The mayor, far from denying the charges, stated, "It's a father's duty to help his sons" (Clark 2000, 18). Helping one's child is not a crime; it is a responsibility. And what is more, helping one's offspring is not immoral, it is what makes one an honorable man. In many cities the Mayor's statement would have caused public outrage, but in Chicago the public nodded their heads in approval of their honorable mayor and patriarch.<sup>15</sup> Eventually, they would elect his son, Richard M. Daley, to be mayor and, as

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<sup>15</sup> If one thinks this is a historical fluke, it should be noted that on July 18, 2006 Todd Stroger was selected by party leaders to replace his father, incumbent John Stroger, on the ballot for Cook County Board President after his father suffered a stroke. On November 7, 2006 he was elected despite protestations of nepotism by his challenger.

Chicagoans often joke, the children of the city would come to believe that the Daley clan had the unusual habit of naming their boys “Mayor”. It was simply a fact of life and not one that was cause for concern. Things were exactly as they should be.

This state of affairs would no doubt horrify the founders of the American Republic. Their vision of an ideal nation seems not to have filtered down to the masses. The founders struggled in a revolutionary battle to usurp monarchy and the hereditary transmission of political power. When Thomas Paine vehemently argued for independence in *Common Sense* he said,

To the evil of monarchy we have added that of hereditary succession.... For all men being originally equals, no *one* by *birth* could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others for ever, and though himself might deserve *some* decent degree of honors of his contemporaries, yet his descendants might be far too unworthy to inherit them.

(Paine 1976, 76)

He is claiming that we should properly reward those who we deem meritorious but that this merit cannot be transmitted. Specifically, he goes on to say, “When we are planning for posterity, we ought to remember that virtue is not hereditary” (Paine 1976, 110). If we do not wish to put that statement on par with other “self-evident” truths, we could certainly put it into the category of blatantly obvious to anyone with common sense.

Still, we have a peculiar penchant to accept as legitimate a status claim that is based on aristocratic and feudal notions of desert. As a value we may call it “non-ideological particularism” (Clark 1975, 321). Rather than seeking to apply general rules to particular situations, or what social scientists call “universalism” (Parsons 1937), we evaluate people according to their individual ascriptive traits. Instead of “looking for the best person for the job”, which applies a general rule for selection,

we may believe that “a person deserves special consideration because he is the son of so and so.” Besides our conceptions of desert based on merit, we also draw upon other values irrespective of merit to decide who gets what and who gets treated how.

Privilege based on hereditary claims is a long-standing element of English culture, and though we ostensibly rejected many of those claims, Americans are nevertheless the cultural inheritors of that and other Western values that emanate from our English cultural origins. Students of British history will readily acknowledge that England had “strong class-based cultures, visible from clothing, audible from accent and embodied in mannerisms” (Ambercrombie & Ward, et. al. 2000, 147). While American society did undergo a great transformation during the battle for independence, we still retained many of our cultural traditions. The difference for Americans is that we were forced to justify our exalting of some over others on different grounds than in the past.

#### *Meritocracy in Multiple Domains*

A convenient way of defining political science is to say it is the branch of sociology that deals with power relationships in society. Historically sociologists have divided power into three distinct types. Political power is the ability to control other’s behavior through force, usually through laws and agreements with police or military enforcement. Social power is the ability to control other’s behavior because of one’s status, for example teachers and students or doctors and patients. Economic power is the ability to control other’s behavior through financial incentives, i.e. by paying them to perform certain desired tasks. Each of these three domains of power

consistently reappear in social scientific research and serve as a framework for the study of power in society. No exception will be made here.

Political office, social status, and economic wealth are the distributable “goods” or “rewards” that are the focus of this chapter. I will conjecture that Americans are strong supporters of meritocracy and that it is supported in all three distributional domains. If true, Americans are not committed to political, social, and economic equality. Instead, they only seek the opportunity to become unequal in each of these domains. How does a person become deserving of these goods? What individual characteristics make one worthy or unworthy of these goods? Are there limits to the amount of the good that one can deserve? Are there minimums that everyone must have? Does the public truly desire to distribute such items according to merit? Or, do they in fact favor distribution by criteria other than merit, such as need, seniority, or heredity? Although not all of these questions can be answered given currently available data, many of them have been included in surveys of American public opinion.

Ultimately, the public may be ambivalent regarding questions of merit across the three domains of power. Merit may be defined differently in each domain or may apply to one aspect of the domain but not to another. For example, the public may believe that income should only be distributed by merit but wealth can legitimately be obtained by either merit or inheritance. In this way the selective application of the merit principle can allow Americans to argue that the poor should work for their income, instead of relying on government aid, and also argue that the rich have a right to inherit their wealth and rely on parental financial aid if they so choose. Yet, the

public may oppose the idea that a politician should be able to appoint his son to his office upon retiring, instead insisting on some version of selection by merit. In these cases the public may believe that economic power in the form of wealth can be justly distributed along family lines by heredity, while political power in the form of office can't be justly inherited. This chapter will explore the situations in which Americans believe merit is the best method of distributing the goods mentioned above and the situations in which items other than merit are legitimate.

I will conjecture that Americans are willing to accept distributing political power by merit. This means that there should be certain non-merit items, such as gender and race that should be irrelevant in choosing political leaders. Citrin, Green, and Sears find that a candidate's race, in and of itself, did not influence white voters' decision in the 1982 California Gubernatorial election. However, there is some evidence to suggest that those with strong anti-black attitudes are more likely to vote against any candidate that displays support for minority issues, regardless of the candidate's own race (Citrin, Green, and Sears 87). Voting for or against a candidate because of his position on issues of importance is legitimate in a meritocracy, since agreement with the public's views can be seen as a part of the "job requirement" for an office holder. Voting for or against a candidate solely because of his race or gender is not.

We may also be interested in testing Dahl's criticism that meritocracy is undemocratic. What role should experts play in making government decisions? Meritocracy as a political rather than a distributive concept seeks that expertise play a key role in governing decisions. Most of the debates surrounding meritocracy are of



the distributive justice sort and most of the survey data that is available is also of this kind. However, Dahl makes an exceptionally important point and despite the limited survey data on the question some sense of the public's opinion can still be obtained.

The next realm where meritocracy comes into play is the social domain. Americans ought not to consider it unjust for some people to have greater social status than others do, so long as the status is earned instead of inherited. Americans should recognize differences in social status and not be upset by such differences. Those in high status positions should be viewed as deserving of their place. If meritocracy is supported in the social domain, then Hochschild's supposition that Americans desire social equality can be rejected. She argues that Americans are uneasy about differences in status, particularly with reference to student rankings (Hochschild 1981, 95). If meritocratic norms prevail, Americans would consider it unjust to live a feudal society where status is determined at birth, but not consider differences in status unjust so long they seem to come from hard work and talent. We may not be as socially egalitarian as some would like us to believe.

Finally, in the economic domain, inequality in income and wealth should be supported so long as the inequality is based on merit. Only merit and not ascriptive or heredity characteristics should determine how income and wealth are distributed. In a meritocracy economic power is held by smart hard working people, not the dull and indolent. If Americans support the idea that economic power can legitimately be distributed by non-merit factors, then the argument that Americans support economic meritocracy can be rejected or possibly qualified. We may believe that smart hard working people deserve more money, but also find it fair that some people with

money have not demonstrated themselves to be either smart or hard working because they have a right to wealth that is inherited instead of earned. The specific case of inheritances will be dealt with in the next chapter, but items such as seniority and need are considered here.

Previous studies have found strong support for meritocratic norms in the economic domain. Konow argues that Americans adhere to the “Accountability Principle” that states, “The entitlement varies in direct proportion to the value of the participant’s relevant discretionary variables, ignoring other variables, but does not hold a participant accountable for differences in the values of exogenous variables” (Konow 1996, 19). He shows that subjects in his experiment believe that race and gender should not yield differences in pay (Konow 1996, 25). Instead variables such as effort, which can be controlled by the individual, should be the basis for making allocation decisions.

But exactly how far are we willing to pursue merit in the distribution of economic resources? “Unchecked,” Hochschild argues, “economic values lead to an unmitigated meritocracy” (Hochschild 1981, 68). However, her fears of an “unmitigated meritocracy” may be hyperbolic. Americans are likely to support minimums and limits on differences in income. Alves and Rossi suggest that people set a minimum level of income based on needs, like the number of children one must support and also a maximum beyond which no individual can deserve more income. In the case of income the maximum fair levels were “well below the earning of the affluent” and minimum fair levels were “set higher than poverty-level definitions” (Alves and Rossi 557). If their hypotheses holds true today then Americans may

believe that merit only has a limited range of legitimacy in the allocation of income and wealth.

Alves and Rossi also note that people with high status jobs and those with higher levels of education were believed to be deserving of higher pay, indicating that measures of attainment (used as a proxy for merit) are legitimate reasons for income differentiation. Those who were married or had children were also believed to be deserving of more pay, suggesting that variables related to need are also legitimate differentiators. This suggests that people balance need and merit in making decisions about fairness (Alves and Rossi, 554). If merit is the only legitimate reason to distribute economic goods, then need-based variables would have no effect on one's decision to give one person more money than another, except as far as those goods are used to equalize opportunities.

Americans are reasonable people when they realize that their original "top of the head" responses conflict with each other. When most Americans are confronted with the disjunction between their egalitarian social and political norms and their meritocratic economic norms they repress or deny the existence of a value conflict (Hochschild 1981, 48). McCloskey and Zaller, point to a study in which respondents feeling uncomfortable with their inconsistencies begin to qualify their original statements (McClosky and Zaller, 86), the cognitive dissonance forces them to choose similar norms across domains. This chapter highlights the disjunction Americans may face and will hopefully cause some people to reevaluate their disparate notions of fairness across the domains.

### *Meritocratic Expectations Across the Domains*

Clearly not every aspect of the ideal type meritocracy can be subjected to robust empirical testing. Nevertheless, several tensions do emerge from this literature. If Americans believe strongly in meritocracy, then it should be supported across all three domains of power. Lipset argues that Americans support meritocracy, by which he means an equal opportunity to become unequal. That is, Americans believe in equality of opportunity but not equality of results (Lipset 1996 130, 238). McClosky and Zaller have also found evidence to support this idea (McClosky and Zaller 1984, 82). However, Lipset is primarily interested with the economic domain and only discusses social meritocracy in the context of affirmative action. One wonders if the support of meritocracy extends to the political and social domains as well.

Hochschild gives us a reason to doubt the wholesale acceptance of meritocratic norms by the public. If Hochschild is correct, then Americans may be less willing to accept meritocracy in the other domains. Presumably they would favor equal outcomes, instead of simply equality of opportunity in the political and social domains. Another possibility is that Americans may be internally conflicted over these issues accepting meritocratic norms in one domain while rejecting it in another.

This chapter will attempt to resolve the tension between the ideas presented by Lipset and Hochschild. When addressing political meritocracy I do not mean that Americans wish that some groups be more influential than other groups. Hochschild argues that Americans prefer equality in the political domain and cites as evidence Americans' resentment of the fact that the rich seem to have more political influence

than the poor (Hochschild 1981, 157). Certainly, there are many groups that “have too much power” according to the general public. I am interested in the actual holding of political power, the persons in the politically elected and appointed offices. Non-merit considerations should be irrelevant in the selection of public officials.

The same should be true in the social domain. Americans should value hard work and believe that those with high status positions have earned their place through hard work. Meritocracy is not egalitarian and social inequality should be considered just as long as it is attributable to ability and hard work. Indeed, people with high status should be viewed to have achieved their place through effort and talent, not through luck, social background, having the right connections, gender, or race.

If meritocratic norms hold in the economic domain, inequality in income and wealth should be supported so long as the inequality is based on merit. We would expect that education, hard work, and intelligence are legitimate reasons for deserving a higher income. Items such as gender and race are not legitimate in a meritocracy. If Americans support the idea that economic power can legitimately be distributed by non-merit factors, then Lipset’s argument that Americans support economic meritocracy can be rejected, or at least qualified. For example, it may be that Americans consider seniority and need as legitimate reasons for economic differentiation. If these are accepted as legitimate reasons for higher incomes, then merit may not be the sole justification for economic inequality.

If Hochschild’s fears of an unmitigated meritocracy are true, then public opinion will not favor either minimums based on need or maximums for the sake of equality. If the public supports minimums, but more especially maximum levels of

income, then merit may not be the sole criteria for distributing economic resources. However, our final conclusions related to minimum levels must be qualified because, in a meritocracy, minimum levels are certainly provided and this does not mean one opposes meritocratic distribution. Certainly, a purely need based rationale is unmeritocratic. The size of a person's family should have no bearing on the amount of income they deserve based purely on their effort and ability. The ideal type meritocratic society would provide resources to the children who need the resources to be able to compete, but it would not necessarily do this by providing the parent with unmerited resources.

*The Extent of Meritocratic Values: The Political Domain*

Americans seem to draw on meritocratic norms when they select their public officials. Women have had a difficult time gaining representation in legislatures and executive offices. But this is not due to overt discriminatory beliefs by the American public. Indeed, most Americans believe that a politician's gender is irrelevant. Most Americans say that the fact that a candidate is a woman has no effect on their vote choice. They also do not believe that men make better political leaders than women. Whether this is merely a result of sexist respondents remaining silent with regard to their actual preferences for the sake of conforming to social norms is unknown. Another possibility is that Americans are voting against female candidates because the candidates emphasize peculiar policy preferences. What is certain is that the non-merit characteristic of gender is expressly inconsequential.

When deciding who would best represent the interests of minorities, Americans reject the idea that only members of the same racial or ethnic group as

their constituents can satisfy that need. A majority believes that a political leader's ethnic or racial background doesn't matter. They also reject the idea of racially proportional representation in the Congress. Americans believe that US representatives should be chosen purely on the basis of their ability regardless of the ethnic or racial composition of their constituents. This is entirely in line with the idea that merit, instead of gender or race, should be the decisive factor in choosing our elected officials.

Table 24: Political Power: What Matters and What Doesn't

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If a candidate for public official is a woman, does that make you more, or less likely to vote for that candidate?<sup>1</sup>

More likely	18%
Less likely	10%
No effect	68%
Don't know	3%

On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.<sup>2</sup>

Strongly agree	7%
Agree	27%
Disagree	51%
Strongly disagree	15%

Do you feel that people are best represented in politics by leaders from their own racial or ethnic background, or doesn't the leader's background make very much difference?<sup>3</sup>

Leaders from own background	35%
Leaders background doesn't matter	65%

Some people say that it is only fair that in a society like ours, people holding public office should have roughly the same racial or ethnic background as the population as a whole. So, for example, if 30% of the people were Hispanic, then 30% of the public officials should be Hispanic as well. Others say that in choosing people for public office they should be considered purely on the basis of ability without regard to their ethnic or racial background. Let me ask you about these ideas in several different areas. What about people in Congress? Should they have the same racial or ethnic background as their constituents, or should they be considered purely on the basis of their ability without regard to their racial or ethnic background?<sup>4</sup>

Consider ethnic background 9%  
Ability, not background 91%

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<sup>1</sup> *Survey conducted by Penn & Schoen Associates, August 26-August 30, 1983.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> *Data from the World Values Survey (WVS) 1995, WVS 1981-1984, 1990-1993, and 1995-1997 [Computer file], ICPSR version.* Ann Arbor, MI: Ronald Inglehart, et. al., Institute for Social Research [producer], 1999. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2003. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 3%

<sup>3</sup> *Data from National Opinion Research Center (NORC), The University of Chicago, General Social Survey (GSS) 1991, Cumulative GSS data file 1972-2002 [Computer file].* Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 2%

<sup>4</sup> *Data from National Opinion Research Center (NORC), The University of Chicago, General Social Survey (GSS) 1991, Cumulative GSS data file 1972-2002 [Computer file].* Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 1%

Even though Americans want their public officials to be selected on the basis of merit, Americans do not believe this is how decisions are actually made. Americans believe that most jobs in politics are decided by political considerations instead of merit. They believe that important political leaders attain their position because of who they know instead of through hard work. Indeed, Americans are not convinced that their Congressional representatives work hard. When the public is asked what is the most important problem facing the bureaucracy a plurality believe that too many decisions are based on politics instead of merit. This has been true for some time; Americans believe that Carter's judicial appointments were made because of political considerations instead of on the basis of merit and that Edward Kennedy has attained his position because of his name. Remarkably, however, given George W. Bush's pedigree, Americans believe that our current president's success is due to his ideas and hard work and not his family's connections to money and power.



Table 25: What Leads to Political Success?

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Now I want to read you some things that have been said about politics and politicians. Tell me, for each, whether you tend to agree or disagree. Most jobs in politics are not given on merit.<sup>1</sup>

Agree	63%
Disagree	17%
Not sure	20%

I'm going to read a list of some of the top positions in our society. For each one, would you tell me the reason you think most people reach them--is it because of chance, say the type of family you're born into, who you know, etc., or is it more due to talent, hard work and a strong will on the part of the individuals to reach those positions in spite of chance? Do you think more people get to be important political leaders such as President, state Governor, or U.S. Senator because of who they are and who they know, or more get there because of hard work, talent and strong will?<sup>2</sup>

Who are, who know	60%
Hard work	35%
Don't know	6%

In general, do you think most members of Congress work hard, or not?<sup>3</sup>

Work hard	48%
Don't work hard	47%
Don't know/No answer	5%

Which one or two of the following aspects, if any, would concern you the most about working for the federal government? Decisions being based on politics instead of merit, too much bureaucracy, poor performers not being dismissed, low pay, few opportunities for advancement, not being appreciated or respected by the public, or work that is not interesting.<sup>4</sup>

Note: Adds to more than 100% due to multiple responses

Decisions being based on politics instead of merit	47%
Too much bureaucracy	37%
Poor performers not being dismissed	24%
Low pay	13%
New opportunities for advancement	9%
Not being appreciated or respected by the public	9%
Work that is not interesting	7%
None/other	1%
Not sure	3%

During the (1976 Presidential) campaign, President Carter promised to appoint United States Attorneys and judges strictly on the basis of merit, without regard for political considerations. Do you think he has kept his promise on this or not?<sup>5</sup>

Yes	20%
No	52%
Not sure	28%

Now let me read you some statements that some people have made about Senator Edward Kennedy. For each statement, tell me if you agree or disagree. He has gotten as far as he has because of his name.<sup>6</sup>

Agree	51%
Disagree	43%
Not sure	6%

From what you know about George W. Bush, do you think his success in politics is mainly due to his family's connections to money and power, or his own ideas, hard work, and personal qualities?<sup>7</sup>

His family's connections to money and power	31%
His own ideas, hard work, and personal qualities	52%
Don't know	17%

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<sup>1</sup> Survey conducted by Louis Harris & Associates during September 1971. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> Survey conducted by Roper Organization, January 11-January 25, 1986. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>3</sup> Survey conducted by CBS News/New York Times, October 29-November 1, 1994. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>4</sup> Survey by Council for Excellence in Government, Partnership for Public Service, conducted by Hart and Teeter Research Companies, July 31-August 8, 2001. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>5</sup> Survey conducted by NBC News, February 21-February 22, 1978. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>6</sup> Survey conducted by ABC News/Louis Harris and Associates, December 21-December 26, 1978. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>7</sup> Survey by Newsweek, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, June 10-June 11, 1999. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

The Jeffersonian ideal of a “natural aristocracy” taking the reigns of the American republic isn’t supported by a majority of Americans today. Knowing that there are many decisions in which it is impossible to please everyone, Americans

would like public officials to consult experts in order to do what is best for the country. However, a majority of Americans believe it is a bad idea if experts had direct control over the government. At first it may seem a peculiar idea to have non-experts rule the country, but the key to this view is not that experts be un-influential, rather it is the expectation and preference that the government submit to the public's preferences and to do what is best for the nation. In this sense, the public is strongly in favor of democracy and willing to heed Dahl's concern that a political meritocracy is undemocratic. But they do prefer that our elected officials be sufficiently honest, hard working, and knowledgeable, suggesting that Sartori's "selective polyarchy of merit" is also desired.

Table 26: Role of Experts in Government

Public officials often have to make decisions in which it is impossible to please everyone. Under these circumstances, which do you think they ought to do: try to work out a compromise that gives everyone at least something or do what experts think is best for the country as a whole, even though some people may be satisfied and others hurt by the decision?<sup>1</sup>

Work out a compromise that gives everyone something	37%
Do what experts think is best for country	54%
About equally important	2%
Neither	3%
Don't know	4%

I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad, or very bad way of governing?

Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country<sup>2</sup>

Very good	8%
Fairly good	28%
Fairly bad	29%
Very bad	35%

Having a democratic political system<sup>3</sup>

Very good	55%
Fairly good	36%
Fairly bad	6%
Very bad	3%

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<sup>1</sup> Survey conducted by Market Strategies, May 3-May 5, 1999. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> Data from the World Values Survey (WVS) 1995, WVS 1981-1984, 1990-1993, and 1995-1997 [Computer file], ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: Ronald Inglehart, et. al., Institute for Social Research [producer], 1999. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2003. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 3%

<sup>3</sup> Data from the World Values Survey (WVS) 1995, WVS 1981-1984, 1990-1993, and 1995-1997 [Computer file], ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: Ronald Inglehart, et. al., Institute for Social Research [producer], 1999. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2003. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 2%

### *The Extent of Meritocratic Values: The Social Domain*

Earlier chapters have highlighted the importance of hard work in the American values system. A majority of Americans believe that hard work is an important quality for children to learn at home.<sup>16</sup> Seventy-eight percent believe that it is absolutely essential that local public schools concentrate on teaching the value of hard work.<sup>17</sup> Americans believe that the efficacy of schools is not encumbered by poorly educated parents as long as parents are teaching respect and hard work at home.<sup>18</sup> If these beliefs are true, then the meritocratic ideal of upward social mobility can be effectively obtained through the educational system.

Lipset is correct when he says that Americans believe that the US is a meritocracy. Fully 90% believe that persistence and hard work usually leads to

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<sup>16</sup> World Values Survey 1995, conducted by Gallup Organization during September, 1995. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>17</sup> Survey conducted by Public Agenda Foundation, May 12-May 25, 1995. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>18</sup> Survey conducted by Public Agenda Foundation, December 10-December 20, 1998. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

success.<sup>19</sup> The vast majority of Americans believe that successful doctors, lawyers, architects, artists, and television and radio commentators reach these top positions in society because of their hard work, talent, and strong will; not because of chance, the type of family they are born into, or who they know.<sup>20</sup> Chapter 3 noted that genetic characteristics are not viewed as important factors in success. Star athletes in America have obtained a very high social status because of their abilities and 49% of Americans believe that athletic success is due solely to hard work, only 19% say is solely due to natural ability and 31% say it is due to both equally.<sup>21</sup> All this suggests that Americans are very optimistic about what a hard working person can accomplish in America.

Table 27: Social Status is Attained Through Hard Work

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I'm going to read a list of some of the top positions in our society. For each one, would you tell me the reason you think most people reach them – is it because of chance, say the type of family you're born into, who you know, etc., or is it more due to talent, hard work and a strong will on the part of the individuals to reach those positions in spite of chance? Do you think more people get to be \_\_\_\_\_ because of who they are and who they know, or more get there because of hard work, talent and strong will?

Successful professional people such as doctors, lawyers, architects, etc.<sup>1</sup>

Who are, who know	9%
Hard work	87%

Successful people in the arts<sup>2</sup>

Who are, who know	15%
Hard work	76%

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<sup>19</sup> Survey by AARP, conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide, July 10-July 30, 2000. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>20</sup> Survey conducted by Roper Organization, January 11-January 25, 1986. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>21</sup> Survey by USA Today, NBC News, conducted by Gordon S. Black Corporation, July 29-August 14, 1990. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

Major T.V., radio and newspaper commentators<sup>3</sup>

Who are, who know	26%
Hard work	66%

When an athlete is successful, is it mostly because of natural ability or mostly because of hard work?<sup>4</sup>

Natural ability	19%
Hard work	49%
Both equally	31%

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<sup>1-3</sup> *Survey conducted by Roper Organization, January 11-January 25, 1986.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>4</sup> *Survey by USA Today, NBC News, conducted by Gordon S. Black Corporation, July 29-August 14, 1990.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut

But even if some people are harder working or more talented than others, is it really fair to hold some people in higher regard than others? Wouldn't we prefer to all be equals? The fact is that most Americans agree that it is fair that some people are regarded more highly than others. They believe that differences in social status are justified and that differences in social status are a reflection of what people did with the opportunities they had. This directly contradicts Hochschild's idea that Americans are uneasy with differences in social status and that they are social egalitarians. This may be partly the result of Americans' self-conceptions. Individual Americans tend to place themselves above average when it comes to their own social status. If one views oneself rather highly, then it is unlikely that one would consider higher status to be unjust.

Table 28: Social Inequality is Fair

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Here are different opinions about social differences in this country. Please tell me for each one whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree.

Differences in social standing between people are acceptable because they basically reflect what people made out of the opportunities they had.<sup>1</sup>

Strongly agree	17%
Somewhat agree	57%
Somewhat disagree	21%
Strongly disagree	5%

All in all, I think social differences in this country are justified.<sup>2</sup>

Strongly agree	9%
Somewhat agree	45%
Somewhat disagree	34%
Strongly disagree	12%

It is just that people in some occupations are regarded more highly than people in other ones.<sup>3</sup>

Strongly agree	26%
Somewhat agree	43%
Neither agree or disagree	6%
Somewhat disagree	14%
Strongly disagree	11%

In the US today some people are considered to have a high social standing and some are considered to have a low social standing. Thinking about yourself, where would you place yourself on this scale of social standing?<sup>4</sup>

1 Low social standing	2%
2	1%
3	4%
4	9%
5	32%
6	19%
7	19%
8	10%
9	2%
10 High social standing	2%

<sup>1</sup> *Data from National Opinion Research Center (NORC), The University of Chicago, General Social Survey (GSS) 1984, Cumulative GSS data file 1972-2002 [Computer file].* Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 2%

<sup>2</sup> *Data from National Opinion Research Center (NORC), The University of Chicago, General Social Survey (GSS) 1984, Cumulative GSS data file 1972-2002 [Computer file].* Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 3%

<sup>3</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file].* Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 4%

<sup>4</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file].* Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 5%

However, Americans are ambivalent in terms of how social status is actually achieved. Both merit and non-merit factors are viewed as relevant for the attainment of high social status. More than 94% of Americans believe that ability and talent are important for achieving high social status; 96% believe that effort and hard work are important for social status. A slight majority does not believe that luck is important in the social status one obtains. This evidence suggests that meritocracy is flourishing in the social domain.

If America was truly a meritocracy, then one's social background would have no effect on one's achieved status. In this regard Americans reject the notion of meritocracy. A majority believes that social background is important for having a high social status. An extraordinary 84% believe that having the right connections is critical for attaining high social status. Race and sex, which should have no effect on social status in a meritocracy, are not rejected as factors in the attainment of high social status. Americans are split with regard to whether race and sex are important factors in social status. It appears that non-merit factors are also believed to be



influencing one's place in the social hierarchy. This stands in opposition to notions of a fully meritocratic social structure in the US.

Table 29: Ambivalence in Social Status Attainment

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Here are some factors that are sometimes considered important for having high social standing. Please tell me how important each is for success in our society today.

Ability and talent<sup>1</sup>

Very important	49%
Somewhat important	45%
Not very important	5%
Not at all important	1%

Hard work and effort<sup>2</sup>

Very important	70%
Somewhat important	27%
Not very important	4%
Not at all important	<1%

Good luck<sup>3</sup>

Very important	12%
Somewhat important	35%
Not very important	33%
Not at all important	20%

Social background<sup>4</sup>

Very important	24%
Somewhat important	51%
Not very important	19%
Not at all important	6%

Having the right connections<sup>5</sup>

Very important	39%
Somewhat important	45%
Not very important	11%
Not at all important	5%

One's sex<sup>6</sup>

Very important	10%
Somewhat important	38%
Not very important	32%
Not at all important	21%

Belonging to a particular ethnic or racial group<sup>7</sup>

Very important	14%
Somewhat important	35%
Not very important	29%
Not at all important	22%

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<sup>1-2</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 2%*

<sup>3-7</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 3%*

### *The Extent of Meritocratic Values: The Economic Domain*

Americans support economic inequality and believe that it would be unjust to distribute wealth and income by giving everyone equal shares. Those that work hard are believed to deserve to earn more than those who do not; it is fair for harder working people to have higher incomes. They also believe that individuals have a right to keep what they earn even, if it means some people will be wealthier than others. This support for differences in income rests in part on the public's belief that incentives to make an effort only exist if differences in income are large enough. That is if income differences are too small, it is believed that people will not make

much of an effort. Americans are convinced that people would be unwilling to take on extra responsibilities at work unless they are paid more for it.<sup>22</sup>

This is a good place to emphasize the point from chapter two that there is strong agreement with the statement “it is fair if some people have more money or wealth, but only if there are equal opportunities.” Americans have no problem with the unequal distribution of economic rewards, especially if it motivates effort, but their support is qualified. They believe that present income differences are too large<sup>23</sup> and that wealth should be more evenly distributed.<sup>24</sup> Despite their willingness to believe that differences in income and wealth are justified on the basis of hard work, they also believe that economic inequality is out of hand.

Of people who work more than 10 hours a week, most tend to consider themselves very hard working.<sup>25</sup> Americans also tend to believe that their coworkers are hard working; giving an average score of 7 when asked if the people they work with work “not at all hard (0)” and work “very hard (10)”.<sup>26</sup> However, there is some evidence of “disowning projection” or the belief that others lack a positive attribute

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<sup>22</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.*

<sup>23</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.*

<sup>24</sup> *Survey conducted by Gallup Organization, April 25-April 28, 1996. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.*

<sup>25</sup> *Data from National Opinion Research Center (NORC), The University of Chicago, General Social Survey (GSS) 1998, Cumulative GSS data file 1972-2002 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.*

<sup>26</sup> *Data from National Opinion Research Center (NORC), The University of Chicago, General Social Survey (GSS) 2002, Cumulative GSS data file 1972-2002 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.*

that one claims for oneself. A majority of Americans believe that a major reason for economic downturns is that people place too little value hard work.<sup>27</sup> Even though individual Americans see themselves and those around them working hard, there is a perception that hard work is inadequately valued and that this causes problems for the country.

The data shows that technical merit is not the only thing that should determine a person's level of pay. Americans believe that an individual's level of pay should be determined by the employee's level of education, level of effort, the amount of on the job responsibility, length of service with the employer, and the pleasantness of the working conditions (noisy, dirty, etc.). They believe that items such as the size of the family the employee has to support or the employee's gender should not determine a person's level of pay. This mix of merit and non-merit factors constitutes an active choice. When asked whether pay increases should be given strictly on merit or strictly on length of employment a majority of respondents said "both" should be used. And except for gender, Americans believe that the level of pay is actually determined as it should be.<sup>28</sup> Hard work, planning, intelligence, and ambition rank highly as factors that lead to economic success.

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<sup>27</sup> Survey by *Washington Post*, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard University, conducted by *Washington Post*, July 22-August 2, 1996. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>28</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.*

Table 30: Support for Merit and Non-Merit Factors in Pay

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How much influence should each of the following have in determining an employee's level of pay?

Employee's level of education<sup>1</sup>

A great deal	33%
Some	55%
Not much	9%
None	4%

Employee's individual effort<sup>2</sup>

A great deal	77%
Some	19%
Not much	2%
None	<1%

Responsibility held by the employee on the job<sup>3</sup>

A great deal	75%
Some	24%
Not much	1%
None	<1%

Length of service with the employer<sup>4</sup>

A great deal	48%
Some	45%
Not much	4%
None	2%

Unpleasant working conditions such as dirty, noisy, or strenuous work<sup>5</sup>

A great deal	42%
Some	48%
Not much	7%
None	4%

Size of the family the employee supports<sup>6</sup>

A great deal	17%
Some	27%
Not much	23%
None	33%

Being a man and not a woman<sup>7</sup>

A great deal	6%
Some	10%
Not much	14%
None	71%

There has been a lot of discussion lately about whether salary increases, when offered, should be distributed equally to all employees, or whether employees who perform well during the year deserve merit pay increases which are bigger than the increases given to other employees. Which of these statements comes closest to your point of view on this issue?<sup>8</sup>

All employees should receive the same minimum percentage of salary increase, with additional increases to be determined on the basis of merit – that is, employees who have performed well during the past year would get a larger increase than other employees 52%

All salary increases should be determined on the basis of Merit – that is only employees who have performed well during the past year would receive a salary increase 33%

All employees should receive the same percentage of salary increase regardless of how well they have performed during the past year 12%

Please tell me which two or three of these qualities are the most likely to lead to financial success.<sup>9</sup>

Note: Multiple responses add to more than 100%

Hard work	59%
Careful planning	42%
Ambition	37%
Intelligence	34%
College education	31%
Willingness to take risks	15%
Connections	15%
Luck	14%
Family wealth	12%
Street smarts	5%
Guts	5%
Ruthlessness	2%

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<sup>1-5</sup> Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman,

*University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 2%*

<sup>6-7</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 3%*

<sup>8</sup> *Survey conducted by Roper Organization, May 31-June 7, 1986. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.*

<sup>9</sup> *Survey by Worth Magazine, conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide, November 6-November 13, 1993. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut*

Of course, just because effort and ability are supposed to be rewarded doesn't mean that measuring such items is possible. However, a majority of Americans with jobs that have a supervisor claim that their supervisor can know very easily the quantity of work they perform and the quality of their work. At least in these circumstances Americans believe it is possible for merit to be measured.<sup>29</sup> But there is some confusion about who should decide what constitutes merit in the workplace. A plurality of Americans say that the employer should decide if two jobs are of equal worth and therefore deserving of equal pay. Yet, nearly a quarter of the respondents replied that they didn't know who should decide. Certainly the courts and government regulators are not favored for this purpose.<sup>30</sup>

There has been some debate about using merit pay to improve the public education system. It is believed that rewarding good teachers would attract "the best and the brightest" into the profession. Several polls indicate that a large majority of

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<sup>29</sup> *Data from National Opinion Research Center (NORC), The University of Chicago, General Social Survey (GSS) 1991, Cumulative GSS data file 1972-2002 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.*

<sup>30</sup> *Survey conducted by Cambridge Reports/Research International during October, 1985. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.*

Americans support merit pay for teachers.<sup>31</sup> But a majority of those who favor the policy believe that it would be fairly difficult to decide which teachers would be most deserving of merit pay increases. Still, when asked what factors should qualify a teacher for merit pay a majority of Americans said that administrator's evaluations, advanced degrees such as an MA or Ph.D., and the improvement of students as measured by standardized test scores should constitute merit. A plurality also included evaluations from other teachers in their list of merit factors. The public was split on whether length of teaching experience and students' evaluations should qualify a teacher for merit pay. A majority stated that parents' evaluations should not be considered in merit pay.

Table 31: Merit Pay for Teachers

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Now, let me ask if you agree or disagree with the following statements about teachers and students. There should be a merit pay system for teachers, with a bonus for the better teachers.<sup>1</sup>

Agree	72%
Disagree	22%
Don't know	6%

Do you think teachers' performance could be judged fairly easily to determine who deserves merit pay, or that it would be fairly difficult to determine which teachers were most deserving?<sup>2</sup>

Note: Asked of those who said that merit pay is desirable.

Judged fairly easily	39%
Would be fairly difficult	57%
No opinion	4%

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<sup>31</sup> Survey by Phi Delta Kappa, conducted by Gallup Organization, May 17-May 26, 1985; Survey conducted by Associated Press/Media General, June 7-June 19, 1984; Survey by Merit, conducted by Audits & Surveys, September 6-September 11, 1983; Survey by Newsweek, conducted by Gallup Organization, June 15-June 16, 1983. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.



This card lists possible criteria for giving additional pay to teachers for special merit. As I read off each one by letter, please tell me if you think it should or should not be used to determine which teachers should receive merit pay.

Academic achievement or improvement of students (as measured by standardized tests)<sup>3</sup>

Should be criterion	68%
Should not be criterion	25%
No opinion	7%

Administrators' evaluations<sup>4</sup>

Should be criterion	67%
Should not be criterion	26%
No opinion	7%

An advanced degree such as a master's or Ph.D.<sup>5</sup>

Should be criterion	66%
Should not be criterion	27%
No opinion	7%

Evaluation by other teachers in the system<sup>6</sup>

Should be criterion	48%
Should not be criterion	42%
No opinion	10%

Length of teaching experience<sup>7</sup>

Should be criterion	48%
Should not be criterion	47%
No opinion	5%

Students' evaluations<sup>8</sup>

Should be criterion	45%
Should not be criterion	47%
No opinion	8%

Parents' opinions<sup>9</sup>

Should be criterion	36%
Should not be criterion	55%
No opinion	9%

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<sup>1</sup> *Survey conducted by Associated Press/Media General, June 7-June 19, 1984.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> *Survey by Merit, conducted by Audits & Surveys, September 6-September 11, 1983.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>3-9</sup> *Survey by Phi Delta Kappa, conducted by Gallup Organization, May 18-May 27, 1984.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

A majority of teachers, however, oppose the idea of merit pay. Those that oppose it believe that it is difficult to give fair evaluations and that there is no way to objectively measure merit. If their school were to adopt a merit pay system, teachers say that a committee of teachers or school administrators should decide which teachers get a merit pay increase. The least popular choice is letting parents or students decide. The vast majority of teachers believe that there are some extraordinary teachers who would deserve merit pay, regardless of whether or not they favor policy.<sup>32</sup> Importantly, when Americans are given a choice between favoring merit pay because it rewards excellent teachers and opposing it because it can't be objectively measured, a majority still favor it.<sup>33</sup>

When it comes to high level economic actors Americans are not convinced that those individuals have attained their positions strictly through hard work; family background and social capital are believed to play important roles. A majority of Americans believe that the heads of the country's big labor unions have attained their position because of the type of family they're born into and who they know and not

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<sup>32</sup> *Survey by Phi Delta Kappa, conducted by Gallup Organization, April 30-May 9, 1984.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>33</sup> *Survey conducted by Los Angeles Times, June 26-June 30, 1983.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

Table 32: Why are Economic Leaders Successful?

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I'm going to read a list of some of the top positions in our society. For each one, would you tell me the reason you think most people reach them – is it because of chance, say the type of family you're born into, who you know, etc., or is it more due to talent, hard work and a strong will on the part of the individuals to reach those positions in spite of chance?

Do you think more people get to be heads of the country's big labor unions because of who they are and who they know, or more get there because of hard work, talent and strong will?<sup>1</sup>

Who are, who know	54%
Hard work	36%
Don't know	10%

Do you think more people get to be millionaires because of who they are and who they know, or more get there because of hard work, talent and strong will?<sup>2</sup>

Who are, who know	49%
Hard work	40%
Don't know	10%

Do you think more people get to be heads of the country's largest corporations because of who they are and who they know, or more get there because of hard work, talent and strong will?<sup>3</sup>

Who are, who know	44%
Hard work	48%
Don't know	7%

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<sup>1-3</sup> Survey conducted by Roper Organization, January 11-January 25, 1986. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

because of their talent, hard work, or strong will. A plurality believes the same is true of millionaires. Americans are split with regard to the reasons for why the heads of the county's largest corporations have acquired their position.

Americans tend to be satisfied with their income, job, and standard of living.

At the same time, however, they also claim to be receiving less income than they need and deserve. But they are split on the question of whether there should be transfers from those who have more than they need to those who have less than they need. This is further mitigated by the fact that they view themselves to be in the same

position as others like themselves. A plurality believes that they get paid “about average” when compared to those with similar education, training, and jobs.<sup>34</sup> And a majority believe that they are “more or less where they should be” given their talents and efforts, they don’t believe that their hard work has been overlooked.<sup>35</sup> Even though most people seem to think they need and deserve more money, they don’t feel they are any worse off than their counterparts.

*Americans’ Tempered Views on Meritocratic Distribution*

In the political domain there are many reasons to believe that Americans support a meritocracy. The public has no expressed bias against female candidates, even though women are underrepresented in political office. Nor do Americans believe that race should be a factor in choosing among public officials, instead they believe that public officials should be selected purely on the basis of their ability. Unfortunately, Americans are not convinced that public officials actually acquire their positions through merit. They believe that having the right connections and political considerations dominate the selection process. To the relief of many the surveys also show that the public does not want to be ruled by experts. Dahl’s claim that a political meritocracy takes power out of the hands of the people has some salience among the public. The public desires to be the final arbiter, to serve as a

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<sup>34</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author’s own analysis.*

<sup>35</sup> *Asked of those who were employed at the time of the survey. Survey by Reader's Digest, conducted by Institute for Social Inquiry/Roper Center, University of Connecticut, August 22-August 29, 1994. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.*

check on their representatives, and to have their views heeded in matters of policy. Experts should be consulted but not have the final say in the decision making process.

Unlike in the political domain, Americans believe that hard work does lead to social success. Those with high status occupations are viewed as having earned their place through hard work. Americans are even prone to placing hard work as a more important factor than genetic endowment or “raw talent” in attaining success in one’s particular field. Contrary to what others have found Americans are not social egalitarians, they believe that differences in social status are legitimate. But they are not convinced that merit is the only factor that actually determines social status. While hard work, ability and talent are viewed as important factors in attaining high social status, so is one’s background, connections, race, and gender. With this mix of factors influencing social status attainment Americans should be convinced that America is not a pure meritocracy.

In the economic domain Americans support an unequal distribution of rewards based on merit. They believe that smart hard working people deserve higher pay and Americans tend to view themselves as hard working. A person’s level of education and the amount of responsibility they have on the job are viewed as legitimate reasons for higher pay. Earlier chapters showed that one’s level of intelligence is also viewed as a legitimate criterion for higher income. Items such as gender and the size of the family one has to support are not viewed as proper influences on one’s income, just as they shouldn’t in a meritocracy.

But they are also of the opinion that current levels of economic inequality are out of hand and don’t believe that merit is the only factor that counts when economic

rewards are distributed. America's major economic actors, labor leaders, corporate leaders, and millionaires, are not viewed as having necessarily earned their place through hard work. Social background and their connections are viewed as a major, or at least important, factor in their success. America is not viewed as a pure meritocracy. There are non-merit factors that Americans know have an influence on one's economic outcome.

However, Americans support the use of non-merit factors when making economic allocation claims. They believe that seniority and pleasantness of the working conditions should matter when determining one's level of pay. These are clearly items that are not related to merit. Simply being on the job longer does not *ipso facto* make one more skilled in their job, indeed it may be that some veteran employees may acquire the ability to "scam the system" to complete as little work as possible without the employer's notice. There may also be particular occupations where over time one's ability decreases. For example, in the computer industry skills may become obsolete as programs become more complex or as new software is introduced. Dirty or noisy working conditions are not related to effort, nor are they a measure of one's skill. It appears then that non-merit factors are viewed as legitimate criteria when deciding who should receive economic rewards.

### *Conclusions*

Americans want their political leaders to be selected on the basis of merit. Unfortunately, the public is not convinced that the political system actually operates this way. They believe that having the right connections is important for political success. One wonders if having the right connections is viewed as a measure of a

person's ability to perform their political tasks. Bellow argues that the children of politicians have more ability than the children of non-politicians because they begin life with a ready made group of contacts that are useful for accomplishing political goals (Bellow 2002). In this case being born into the right circumstances gives one the abilities that we would want to place in the merit category. It would certainly explain the lack of hostility against selecting the relatives of former political leaders to serve in public office, but to date has not been tested by empirical studies.

Americans are not social egalitarians; they believe that some people deserve to have a higher status than others. They believe that effort and talent make one deserving of higher status and they believe that those in high status occupations have attained their place through hard work. But they are also aware that non-merit factors such as one's background, connections, race, and gender affect one's status. One wonders therefore if Americans view these types of non-merit influences on social status as fair. Social inequality is considered legitimate, but there is insufficient data to make the specific claim that these non-merit factors are considered fair methods of distributing social status.

The public displays a preference for the use of both merit and non-merit factors when making decisions regarding the allocation of economic resources. They believe that smart hard working people deserve higher pay, but are not convinced that those who have attained a prominent position in our economy have done so strictly through hard work. However, a major question remains with regard to the use of non-merit criteria. Seniority is not a variable related to merit, indeed the theory suggests that seniority is anathema to merit. But Americans might view seniority as a

proxy for experience, they might believe that employees who have performed the same task for several years have acquired skills that make them better able to perform their respective tasks than newer employees. Without knowing the reasons for why length of service is viewed as a reason for higher pay, we may wish to defer our final judgment on that matter.

Overall, there is an interesting mix of results. George W. Bush finds it humorous that merit is not the only characteristic that leads to political success. While most Americans believe that merit should be and is actually rewarded in social and economic domains, they don't believe that merit is the overriding factor in political decisions. Most Americans are also aware of non-merit factors that have an influence on social and economic success. And, sometimes, they also believe that non-merit factors should influence the outcome. If meritocracy is viewed as an ideal, then there is certainly a lack of "ideological constraint" in the mass public.



## Chapter 6

### Meritocracy Revealed: The Case of Inheritance and Its Taxation

*I set out on this ground, which I suppose to be self-evident, that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living; that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it. The portion occupied by any individual ceases to be his when himself ceases to be, and reverts to the society.<sup>36</sup>*

*Thomas Jefferson*

Thomas Jefferson was actively opposed not only to the hereditary distribution of political power but to the hereditary distribution of economic power as well. The sage who set forth our ideas about natural and inalienable rights specifically claimed that there was no natural right to oblige others regarding the use of one's land beyond one's own death. "For if he could... the lands would belong to the dead, and not to the living, which is the reverse of our principle" (Jefferson 1944, 488-9). For Jefferson the notion that the dead have rights violated his sense of justice.

Specifically, Jefferson proposed a plan "by which every fibre would be eradicated of ancient or future aristocracy; and a foundation laid for a government truly republican" (Jefferson 1944, 51). He sought the elimination of the laws of entail, laws that require that accumulated wealth be transmitted to heirs, and the abolition of primogeniture, the principle that the oldest male should receive the bulk of one's inheritance. The plan would prevent the accumulation of wealth in select families and bring an end to "feudal and unnatural distinctions" between children. It

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<sup>36</sup> Jefferson 1944, 488

was a part of his plan for equality that wealth not be transmitted to one's children in perpetuity. In this way each generation would start from scratch, relying only on their own virtues and talents.

On this particular issue Jefferson deviated a great deal from John Locke, the political theorist from which Jefferson borrowed the idea of natural rights. Locke believed that inheritance was a natural right because he believed it was a part of natural law that parents should provide for their children (Locke 1960, 207).

Jefferson, on the other hand, viewed inheritance as a civil right. The distinction is simple, natural rights could not be abridged by the government, but civil rights were granted by the government and could be regulated or even eliminated.

The American courts would come to accept Jefferson's view and interpreted inheritance to be a civil instead of natural right. In the case *Eyre v. Jacob* (1858) the Virginia Supreme Court stated that right to property by descent was properly subject to legislative regulation. The legislature could create, amend, or repeal statutes related to the use of property upon the owner's death. It could even, if it chose, appropriate the property for public use. The US Supreme Court agreed with the Virginia Court and the positivist view of inheritance reigned for the next 130 years (Chester 1998). But a look at American society today reveals that we are a long way away from Jefferson's ideal. Inherited wealth has remained imbedded in American society and one's social and economic origins significantly impacts one's life course.

### *Wealth and Inheritance*

Discussions about wealth and inheritance are far from straightforward. Economists make a distinction between inherited wealth and lifecycle wealth.

Inherited wealth is wealth that is transmitted from one generation to the next, while lifecycle wealth is wealth that is accumulated during one's lifetime. The distinction seems pretty clear but, because the devil is in the details, there is a huge difference of opinion among economists over what percentage of wealth in America belongs in either category.

Estimates range from over 80% to under 20% for inherited wealth in America. The high figure of 80% is calculated by including *inter vivos* gifts, like college expenses, and by adding capitalized interest. Since spending, even exorbitantly, on one's child is not technically a bequest many choose not to count *inter vivos* gifts in inheritance even though such spending adds to differences in opportunities and overall wealth. For most of the population these gifts are rather small and therefore don't play a major role in overall wealth (Pestieau 2003; Wolff 2003). And even though the estate tax increases the reasons to give *inter vivos* gifts, most wealth transfers occur through bequests (Kopczuk & Slemrod 2003, 245). Therefore, *inter vivos* gifts only have small effect on these calculations.

The addition of capitalized interest, however, can create havoc on estimates of inherited wealth. For example, if a person received a \$100 million inheritance at the age of 55 and did nothing except have that money invested in manner that produced 7% annual growth, that person would have over \$250 million twenty years later at the age of 75. Including the capitalized interest gives one a much higher proportion of wealth that stems from inheritance. Excluding it, by claiming that the \$150 million gain is lifecycle wealth decreases the proportion of wealth that is inherited. In the latter case the economist would argue that \$100 million was inherited and an

additional \$150 million has been “earned” since the inheritance. If this person had no other wealth other than what was gained from the inheritance and subsequent interest, it would drop the proportion of wealth that is inherited for that person from 100% to below 40%.

Or, take a second example. Suppose a young college graduate begins his career \$50,000 in debt because of student loans and is paying interest on those loans for the standard 10 years it takes to finish paying them; while a second student has the same expense paid for by his parents. The second has a positive figure of wealth accumulation right from the very beginning and is increasing his wealth at a much faster rate than the first graduate even if their incomes and expenses are identical after graduation. Whether we count this as inherited or lifecycle wealth makes a big difference in the percentage of total wealth that has today been inherited.

Fortunately, other aspects of this debate are more clear-cut.

America is the wealthiest nation on earth and necessity requires that all the wealth must at some point be left behind and passed on to the next generation. The best estimates are that gifts and bequests account for approximately half of the total wealth in America (Munnell & Sundén 2003, 3). But this wealth is in the hands of a relatively small group. The top 1% owns over 38% of the wealth and the top 20% owns over 83% of the total wealth (McNamee & Miller 2004). Only a small proportion of households give or receive bequests in any given year and the vast majority of those are among the highest wealth holders (Menchik & Jianakoplos 1998). Only 20% of Americans ever receive a bequest in their lifetimes and only 2% of estates were large enough to be subject to the estate tax in 1998. In that year an

estate must have been valued at over \$600,000 to be subject to the tax (McNamee & Miller 2004).

These figures might be surprising to many Americans because households are too optimistic about how much they will leave as bequests, most use a significant portion to sustain themselves in old age (Mitchell 2003). Nevertheless, inheritance has a dramatic impact on individuals in society. “Inheritance provides...prestigious cultural capital, economic help at critical junctures in the life course, insulation against downward mobility in the event of personal setbacks, as well as lump-sum estates upon the death of family members” (McNamee & Miller 2004, 193). These three items, cultural capital, assistance in the form of subsidies, and direct economic transfers, are transmitted from one generation to the next and have a significant impact on the child’s life course.

Cultural capital, the skills of social interaction, linguistic styles, aesthetic tastes, and cultural codes of conduct that define one’s social status, are learned early in life. They are transferred to children from parents, other relatives, and acquaintances when the child is learning to socially interact with others. Often these skills can prevent otherwise bright individuals from ascending the social ladder (Miller & McNamee 1998). For example, a child who has experiences with adults at “beer and nachos” gatherings may one day feel the effects of his upbringing if he finds himself at a “wine and cheese” party as an adult. While these types of awkward social situations provide comic relief when portrayed on television and in movies, in reality the subtle norms of engagement act as a real barrier to the uninitiated.

Assistance in the form of subsidies comes in many forms, the most important of which is the provision of educational opportunities. We are told that education is the key to moving up in the world and educational attainment does have an independent effect on economic status (Brittain 1977). But because access to different types and quality of schooling are stratified, the resources of the parents have an important effect on the education a child will receive (Kerckhoff 1993). Upper-class individuals tend to receive the best educations while middle-class individuals receive mediocre educations. This impacts a child's future place in society. Those who inherit large estates also tend to have higher than average levels of human capital and education thereby increasing their lifecycle earnings. This compounds the effect of having wealthy parents. The child receives money directly through bequest, but also earns more money on his own than those who don't receive bequests (De Nardi 1999). This phenomenon reinforces the *status quo* and makes social mobility difficult.

Finally, there is the direct transmission of economic resources in the form of *inter-vivos* gifts and bequests (Miller & McNamee 1998). Intergenerational links are vital in understanding the emergence of large estates that are most often accumulated in multiple generations, especially in the upper tail of the wealth distribution (De Nardi 1999). In modern day America economic status is largely explained by parental economic status. Indeed, most people remain in the same social class in which they were born. Those that do happen to move up or down the SES ladder tend to move a single place, for example from working class to middle class, rather than

taking giant leaps up or down (Brittain 1977; Kerckhoff 1993; McNamee & Miller 2004).

This combination of cultural capital, subsidized education, and direct bequests leads to an ever-expanding gap between the rich and the poor. The wealth held by the top 1% grew dramatically between 1983 and 1998, while living conditions for the average American stagnated (Wolff 2003, 351). “The really big money in America comes not from wages and salaries but from owning property – particularly the kind of property that produces more wealth” (McNamee & Miller 2004, 53-4). Once the wealth is accumulated it can be put into trust funds whereby descendants receive interest income “without digging into the principle fund” (McNamee & Miller 2004, 62). In terms of acquiring wealth the cards are stacked against those who have very little to start with. “Inheritance is as unrelated to effort and ability as is welfare, and it is usually unrelated to absolute need” (Chester 1982, 188). Generation after generation can live off the interest and still get richer without doing anything at all.

Americans love the myth of the self-made man, but the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that wealth ownership is highly stable over long periods. Every year *Forbes* magazine publishes a list of the 400 wealthiest Americans. The majority of the people on that list inherited sums of over \$50 million. Most of the wealthiest people in America were born that way and the same is true for the poorest Americans. According to one estimate “95% of children born to parents in the bottom 6% of wealth holders will end up poor as adults” (McNamee & Miller 2004, 56). Because “the position of each person in the social structure depends upon the position of the family into which he is born” America “is properly classified as a

caste society” (Lasswell 1976, 209). Social mobility is rare in the US; where you start largely determines where you end up.

A common metaphor for the competition to get ahead in life is the footrace.... In this intergenerational relay race, children born to wealthy parents start at or near the finish line, while children born into poverty start behind everyone else. Those who are born close to the finish line do not need any merit to get ahead. They are already ahead. The poorest of the poor, however, need to traverse the entire distance to get to the finish line on the basis of merit alone.... Barring parental disinheritance, there is no realistic scenario in which they [the rich] end up destitute – regardless of the extent of their innate talent or individual motivation. Their future is financially secure. They will grow up having the best of everything and having every opportunity money can buy.... Despite the ideology of meritocracy, the reality in America as elsewhere is inheritance first and merit second.

(McNamee & Miller 2004, 49-51)

In order to put this into perspective a person would have to save, from their wages, nearly \$120,000 every month for 35 years in order to accumulate \$50 million. At the upper end of the wealth distribution, the money does not come from salaries and wages. Inheritance plays a much larger role in our lives than we might like to admit. It is therefore appropriate to ask whether inheritance is fair.

### *The Justice of Inheritance*

In this regard the justification for inheritance has changed as society has changed. As feudalism was replaced by modern liberal society the notion of inheritance as an individual legal right replaced the feudal justifications for inheritance (Chester 1982, 11). Locke’s natural rights argument supporting inheritance quickly lost out to ideas presented by the utilitarians, who rejected the concept of natural rights and strongly favored the taxation of inherited wealth in order to prevent the extraordinary accumulation of property among a small minority (Johnson & Eller 1998). J.S. Mill thought that a person should have the power to



distribute his property by will as he saw fit, but also believed there should be limits on how much a person could acquire by such means. Since such bequests were merely the favor of others and did not require the use of one's own faculties the government had a right to regulate and tax such transfers. He believed that those who wanted more than what they had inherited should have to work for it (Chester 1982, 29). Once the philosophical foundation existed for the rejection of inheritance as a natural right legal theorists like William Blackstone were able to argue that the right to hold property ceases at death. This philosophical milestone occurred a full 20 years before Jefferson made the same claim (Chester 1982, 19). Since then, most of the normative literature has been critical of inheritance.

As socialism became popularized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century arguments against inheritance became especially harsh. One socialist author boldly proclaimed, “[A]s a friend of mankind I am only interested in showing you that the privilege of securing money without earning it is morally wrong and must be destroyed” (Read 1918, xxv). Socialists claimed that there was a battle between laborers and capitalists and that as long as those who inherit wealth continued to do so generation after generation, there would be no way in which those who produce the wealth could acquire it. It was the workers who produced the wealth, but it was the owner's children who were reaping the rewards. For them, this was a fundamental violation of one's natural rights. They turned Locke's natural rights argument on its head and, like Jefferson, claimed that it was an injustice for those that are long dead to have a say in how the yet to be born will live their lives (Read 1918).

The socialists of that era believed that money acquired during one's lifetime should suffer little or no tax, while money acquired through inheritance should be taxed heavily. Specifically, assets acquired from one's father should be taxed at 50% and from one's grandfather, through one's father, at up to 100%. In this way over the course of several generations all inherited wealth would revert to the state and advance the socialist project without violent or abrupt upheaval (Rignano 1924).

Even Adam Smith, the father modern capitalism, was ambivalent with regard to inheritance. He believed it should be taxed if it was found that the well being of the majority could be enhanced by limiting the fortunes of heirs. But he also believed that diminishing large pools of capital would make it more difficult to maintain productive labor (Chester 1982, 21). A capitalist economy needs large pools of capital that can be invested in various pursuits, but it is not absolutely necessary that this capital be owned by a small select group nor that it be transmitted from parent to child. Capitalism does not require the christening of millionaires at birth. In practical terms, as long as Bill Gates' fortune remains invested in Microsoft there is no capitalist requirement that his shares be given to his children or that they should receive dividend income after their father's death. As long as the capital remains invested and there is someone to manage it, it could belong to anyone or everyone without economic catastrophe.

Not all opposition to inheritance comes from egalitarian motives, however. Some comes from the meritocratic ideal that individuals should be rewarded for their hard work. From this perspective emerges the view that inheritances act as an incentive for indolence. "Many conservatives become highly indignant at the

prospect of poor people losing their incentives to work by being given welfare, yet these same conservatives are perfectly content with the prospect of rich people losing their incentives to work by being given large inheritances” (Haslett 1997, 140). It is believed that those who inherit large fortunes simply do not feel the necessity of working. The American conservative therefore finds himself contradicting his own values with regard to the wealthy.

Most of the arguments against limiting inheritances have been practical rather than philosophical or theoretical. The most popular seems to be that the estate tax constitutes double taxation because the accumulated wealth was already taxed when it was income. It is also argued that because of multiple tax avoidance schemes the actual revenue from inheritance taxes is minimal while the costs of these schemes in lawyer and accounting fees is significant. It’s claimed that the administrative costs are especially high because assets must be valued for a “non-market” exchange. Because of these high costs the opponents claim the tax is a waste of resources given that so little is gained by the fisc from the tax (Bracewell-Milnes 2002; Johnson & Eller 1998).

Some economists argue that the tax artificially shortens the time horizons by which investors calculate their decisions, thereby decreasing long-term investments and savings. Additionally, it is claimed that the tax decreases the amount of money available for investment and that it hurts small business owners and farmers who have a large proportion of their equity in non-liquid assets. Finally, some argue that the treasury loses money because, had the money remained saved or invested, it could

have been collected later through a variety of other taxes (Bracewell-Milnes 2002; Johnson & Eller 1998).

Each of these practical considerations have been countered by proponents of the estate tax. The double taxation argument is specious for two reasons. The first is that it is not necessarily true that a decedent's acquired property has ever been taxed. If one's property is in the form of stocks and the stock increases in value, then one doesn't pay a tax until the stock is actually sold. If the stock is not sold within one's lifetime, then the increased value of the stock has never been subject to a tax. If one's property is in the form of government bonds, then one does not pay a tax on the earned interest. Indeed, part of the incentive for purchasing a government bond is the tax-free nature of the revenues from it. In both of these cases a person gets wealthier, but never pays a tax on their newfound wealth ("The Estate Tax").

Of course, if one's wealth comes strictly from wages then paying an estate tax would constitute a double tax. We already noted that most wealth does not come from wages and salaries, but for the small proportion that is simply stating that it's taxed twice does not make it *ipso facto* unjust. Individuals pay an income tax and then pay a sales tax when they buy consumer products or a utility tax when they pay their bills. Americans are told that they should car pool and limit unnecessary driving because it is good for the environment. This is the justification for taxes on the purchase of automobiles, taxes on the purchase of fuel for those automobiles, and fees for licensing and registering those automobiles. Americans are also told that smoking is harmful and costs hospitals lots of money and for those reasons cigarettes are

subject to a sales tax and a tobacco tax. Many things, especially those things that we find socially harmful, are taxed two or three times without similar claims of injustice.

Some opponents of the estate tax argue that the administrative costs of the inheritance tax is high, while the actual revenues from it are low and use this as a justification for eliminating the tax altogether. Unfortunately, research shows that the costs of administering the tax is about 7% of total revenues. That is less than the administrative costs of the income tax (“The Estate Tax”). Of course, if one is concerned about insufficient revenues given the costs, then increasing the tax rate and decreasing the exemption amounts would increase revenues without increasing the administrative costs.

The argument that the inheritance tax artificially decreases the time horizon for a return on investments depends on one’s perspective. How many people make an investment with eye towards collecting their profit at some point beyond their own deaths? I suspect that most investors would like to see a return on their investment while they are still alive. Since death is a natural and unavoidable act, the ability to transfer property to heirs artificially elongates the time horizon for investments. What constitutes “artificial” shortening of a time perspective is clearly subjective.

Eliminating the estate tax would not necessarily lead to increased private savings, as opponents of the tax argue. Some people will choose to spend their inheritance and therefore it can’t be claimed that eliminating the tax automatically increases the money available for investment. It is also factually untrue that the tax significantly harms family owned businesses and farms. “[I]f the current exemption level of \$1.5 million had been in place in 2000, only 300 farm estates and only 223

family-owned businesses nationwide would have owed any estate tax. The number of taxable farm estates drops to 65 nationwide at a \$3.5 million exemption level, the level that takes effect in 2009. The number of taxable family-owned business estates falls to just 94 under the \$3.5 million exemption” (“The Estate Tax”). Of the 65 farms that would be taxable “just 13 would have faced liquidity constraints” (“The Estate Tax”). Only a tiny proportion of millionaire families would face the problem of having to sell off non-liquid assets. This is in part because section 6166 of the 1976 tax bill solved this problem decades ago (Johnson & Eller 1998). Furthermore, the majority of gross estates comes from stocks and bonds, only 19% is in the form of real estate (Kopczuk & Slemrod 2003, 218).

Some arguments against the inheritance tax rest on a very peculiar assumption. Some opponents treat the donor just like any other existing economic actor who makes choices between competing uses. Bracewell-Milnes believes it is “beside the point” to talk about whether the person who receives the bequest is deserving because the donor is the active party (Bracewell-Milnes 2002, 38). “Ultimately,” he argues the donor can choose “between spending and bequest” (Bracewell-Milnes 2002, 38). However, this assumption stands in direct opposition to Jeffersonian justice. It assumes that the property belongs to the dead and that the dead have rights over it. Given Jefferson’s materialism and adherence to natural philosophy he might also point out a related flaw in the assumption. The dead, *ipso facto*, are incapable of making decisions between spending and bequesting. Although it is now cliché to say, “you can’t take it with you” it is clear that the donor has no choice but to leave his property behind. The question at stake is whether the dead

should be allowed to dictate what happens to their property, or even more fundamentally whether they capable of ownership at all.

We could reasonably argue that while alive the now deceased donor preferred keeping the property rather than spending it. This argument rests on the notion that the donor preferred potential over actual use and might be closer to what Bracewell-Milnes actually meant. However, if the donor simply enjoyed saving for the sake of saving, then even a 100% estate tax would have no effect on his lifetime savings to be left behind. And, so long as the person can keep saving while they are alive, they lose no utility from the loss of their savings upon death. In the end, the only way hold firm to Bracewell-Milnes' justification would be to add the question "what would make the dead happy" into our social utility function.

In this debate we begin to see that proponents and opponents of the estate tax disagree on a fundamental question. They disagree on whether the deceased or the heir is the subject of the tax. The opponents argue that the decedent has a right to distribute his money as he sees fit, without government taxation. The proponents argue that the heir does not deserve the wealth because he has not worked for it and that the institution of inheritance itself causes an increase in inequality and low rates of social mobility for the talented and hard working. Many of these arguments about the justness of inheritance and its taxation have been raised every time a change in policy has been proposed.

### *The History of Inheritance Taxation*

The taxation of property upon one's death has existed since ancient times. Both the ancient Egyptians and Romans imposed duties on the transferring of

property due to the death of the property holder (Johnson & Eller 1998). However, the custom of inheritance comes to us more directly from the European feudal tradition (Chester 1982). Between 1600 and 1800 the purpose of bequests was to “maximize the wealth and power of the eldest male head of the lineage” and bequests were “not considered distasteful” (DeLong 2003, 34). Because of shorter life spans and slower rates of economic growth inheritances made up approximately 90% of wealth acquisition before the industrial revolution. Today that figure stands at about 45% (DeLong 2003).

The reason primogeniture became standard practice was twofold. First, fiefdoms were granted only to individuals. It made sense to replace one fief with another by succession from father to eldest son. This would ensure continuity of the feudal hierarchy and maintain social stability. Secondly, the “divided we fall” argument also favored primogeniture. Divided lands were more easily conquered, therefore maintaining the integrity of a large estate was essential for security. Together these two reasons are known as the “feudal-military” rationale for primogeniture. The majority of wealth holdings at that time came from bequests and primogeniture remained in England even after the “feudal-military” rationale no longer applied. The newly rich sought to emulate the norms of the landed aristocracy and maintained primogeniture as a method of enhancing the status of the lineage (DeLong 2003).

However, in 19<sup>th</sup> century America primogeniture was replaced with the idea that wealth should be distributed equally to one’s children. For one, it may have been difficult to get a younger son to work the land if he knows he will inherit none of it,



especially when he can leave to work his own land on the western frontier. We were also entering the Industrial Revolution and with it the idea that upward mobility is a social virtue. Those who have worked for their riches were seen as more deserving and the status claims of inherited wealth declined. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century disapproval of inheritances was symbolized by a permanent estate tax. The repeal of the estate tax could be seen as a new shift in thinking and inheritances may once again be viewed a legitimate means of acquiring wealth (DeLong 2003).

Early forms of the inheritance tax in the US were temporary solutions to financial crises. The first inheritance tax in the US was the Stamp Tax of 1797, which required federal stamps on wills, inventories, letters of administration, and on receipts and discharges from legacies. The tax was imposed to raise funds for the financing of our naval hostilities with France. However, once the hostilities were over in 1802 the tax was repealed. The Civil War again required that the federal government raise revenues and a new inheritance tax was created in 1862. In addition to a document tax on wills, this new tax also included taxes on the property itself and on *inter vivos* gifts. Like future transfer taxes, the 1862 law exempted widows and very small estates. But it too was repealed in 1870 after the Civil War ended and the additional revenues became unnecessary (Johnson & Eller 1998).

The Industrial Revolution saw the amassing of great fortunes and growing concern about economic inequality. Andrew Carnegie, a wealthy industrialist himself, believed that leaving great amounts of wealth to one's children destroyed their will to develop and use their talents and ultimately cost society. He believed that the wealth should be used for the public benefit. This along with the popular idea

that people should work for what they have ultimately led to the modern inheritance tax in 1916. Teddy Roosevelt supported the tax because “he thought that huge inherited fortunes would ruin the character of the republic” (“Ever Higher Society”). Since then most of the changes were relatively minor, for example changes in tax rates or exclusion amounts (Johnson & Eller 1998). The National Tax Association Conference in 1924 argued for light taxes on income from a person’s own effort and heavy taxes on income from inheritances. Their proposed program would not penalize initiative and reduce the passing on of large fortunes across generations (Chester 1982, 71).

In the 1970’s and 80’s several loopholes were closed in the inheritance tax system. The first was the addition of a “generation skipping transfer (GST)” tax. This was an additional tax imposed on transfers made to grandchildren. Since it was possible to avoid paying a generation’s worth of estate taxes by skipping generations, the GST tax eliminated the problem. It was also possible to pay fewer taxes through *inter vivos* gifts, so the gift tax and estate tax were combined into a single system to prevent lost revenue from estate gifts while a person was still alive (Johnson & Eller 1998).

In 1987, however, the US Supreme Court seems to have broken with over a century’s worth of precedent in *Hodel v. Irving*. The Indian Land Consolidation Act of 1983 declared that parcels of land that were too small to be economical could be forfeited to the tribe upon a tribe members death, this would stop the excessive fragmentation of land holdings that had become a problem over the course of several generations. The Court declared that this act was unconstitutional because the right to

pass on property at death was constitutionally protected, but it left the legislature's ability to regulate the transfer of that property intact. The case is therefore ambiguous in terms of its ultimate effect on inheritance jurisprudence, but it may pave the way for a natural rights interpretation of inheritance in the years to come (Chester 1998).

Today, there are still those wealthy Americans who value merit and who place a priority on the value of hard work. Both Bill Gates and Warren Buffet plan on leaving the bulk of their estates to private charities; reserving only small amounts for their heirs. Jamie Johnson, heir of the Johnson & Johnson pharmaceuticals fortune, realizes that he will never have to work for a living. But he is using his resources to finance a career as a documentary filmmaker who focuses on exposing the world of the super rich. His friends, like himself, are inheritors of hundreds of millions, even billions of dollars. Johnson accepts the unmeritocratic nature of his station in life, but has chosen to make it visible to the mass public (Born Rich 2004). These examples are noteworthy precisely because they are the exception to the rule. Like most Americans, most wealthy Americans ignore or reject meritocratic norms when it comes to inheritance.

### *The Estate Tax*

Beginning in the 1990's several House and Senate bills were proposed to eliminate the estate, gift, and GST tax. In addition, Bob Dole vowed to eliminate the estate tax for family businesses and farms during his presidential campaign (Johnson & Eller 1998). George W. Bush made similar promises during his 2000 presidential campaign and the federal estate tax is now scheduled to be phased out as part of President Bush's tax relief plan of 2001. Before the reform the estate tax only applied

to estates valued at over \$1 million. Starting in 2006 it will only apply to estates valued at over \$2 million. Then in 2009 it would only apply to estates valued at \$3.5 million or more. The figures are doubled for couples, i.e. \$7 million exempt in 2009. It would be completely abolished in 2010 only to return to pre-reform levels in 2011. However, there have been several attempts in Congress to make the repeal permanent. The yearly tax-free gift allowed has been increased to \$11,000 with a lifetime exclusion limit of \$1 million.

The estate tax only affects the very rich and at its peak only affected 6% of decedents (Kopczuk & Slemrod 2003). Typically, less than 2% of deaths are required to pay estate taxes in any given year (Johnson & Eller 1998). These taxes only affect the top 1% of estates and most of those pay less than 20% in taxes, even though the maximum tax rate is 50%. This is because of the very high initial exemption levels. The top tax rate itself will decline to 45% by 2009 (“The Estate Tax”). There are also several mechanisms by which one can reduce or eliminate paying the tax. Bequests to spouses and charities are tax-free and deductions are allowed for debts, final expenses, state estate taxes, and legal fees associated with the estate (Kopczuk & Slemrod 2003).

Despite the small numbers of those affected, there would be serious social repercussions if the tax were eliminated. Analysts have predicted that permanent repeal would cost the government over \$1 trillion dollars over the first ten years and that many programs would need to be cut or deficits increased to make up for the lost revenues (“The Estate Tax”). The estate tax also reduces the accumulation of large estates by the wealthy by 10.5%, suggesting the tax is effective at reducing wealth

inequality (Kopczuk & Slemrod 2003, 245). And because charitable contributions are deductible from the taxable estate, the tax has the effect of increasing charitable giving by 12%. Ultimately, reducing or eliminating the estate tax will lead to fewer charitable contributions (Kopczuk & Slemrod 2003, 227).

Economists and policy analysts have often tried to determine people's motivations for leaving a bequest. Motives are important because they may influence bequests given certain policies. For example, if bequests are accidental or if individuals accumulate wealth simply because they get pleasure from holding it, then changes in the estate tax won't make a difference. If, however, the motive is altruistic, then increasing the estate tax may discourage savings for the purpose of bequests (Gale & Potter 2003).

To date, there has been a great deal of speculation regarding the motives people have for leaving bequests. The most common rationale is that individuals accumulate wealth in case of poor health later in life and if any remains upon their death it is left as a bequest (Orzag 2003). Indeed, data from retired Americans shows that those with children and those without decumulate their wealth at the same rate, suggesting there no bequest motive (Hurd 2003). Others argue that bequests are used to influence the behavior of benefactors, compelling certain behaviors and discouraging others (Andreoni 2003). Proponents of "identification theory" believe that people give money to those they identify with especially family and friends, but also charities (Shervish & Havens 2003). Finally, some believe that wealth is an end in itself and that people get pleasure from simply having it. This suggests that bequests are accidental byproducts of self-interested behavior (Diamond 2003).

### *Inheritances and Public Opinion*

Whereas in many areas of distributive preferences we see a substantial but not entirely meritocratic set of values, in the specific case of inheritances and estate taxes Americans are resolutely unmeritocratic. Eighty-four percent of Americans strongly agree with the statement that people are entitled to pass on their wealth to their children. As a question of individual rights Americans seem to directly conflict with the view presented by Jefferson regarding the fairness of inherited economic power. This view also directly conflicts with the ideals of meritocratic justice.

Even in the distribution of inheritances themselves are Americans unmeritocratic. A majority of heads of households believe that all children should receive the same amount. Only 24% believe bequests should be given according to need and 17% according to merit. Additionally, likely voters tend not be convinced by the argument that repealing the estate tax would create a two-tiered society where some people become rich through inherited wealth instead of hard work. Arguing that inheritances cause some people become to become rich through non-work is not a powerful motivator against eliminating the estate tax. When pitting the value of hard work against the rights of decedents, hard work seems to lose out.

Table 33: Inheritances, Merit, and Hard Work

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People are entitled to pass on their wealth to their children.<sup>1</sup>

Strongly agree	84%
Somewhat agree	15%
Neither agree or disagree	<1%
Somewhat disagree	<1%
Strongly disagree	<1%

In planning their estate, should parents give to their children equally, according to their needs, or according to individual merit?<sup>2</sup>

Equally	54%
According to needs	24%
According to individual merit	17%
Not sure	5%

Now, as I said before, Congress is now considering legislation to eliminate the estate tax. Some people are opposed to this legislation. I am going to read you some reasons these people give to oppose this legislation. Please rate each reason on a scale of 0 to 10 with 10 meaning it is an extremely convincing reason to oppose this legislation, 0 meaning it is a totally unconvincing reason to oppose this legislation, and 5 meaning it is neither convincing nor unconvincing. America is founded on the notion of equal opportunity for all. Eliminating the estate tax creates a two-tiered society where some individuals do better than others based on inherited wealth rather than hard work.<sup>3</sup>

Mean = 4.6

0-4 Unconvincing	37%
5 Neither convincing nor unconvincing	28%
6	5%
7	5%
8	5%
9	3%
10-Extremely convincing	13%
Don't know	4%

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<sup>1</sup> *Data from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), International Social Justice Project 1991 [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Duane F. Alwin, David M. Klingel, and Merilynn Dielman, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Program in Socio-Environmental Studies [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Calculations based on the author's own analysis. Margin of Error +/- 2%*

<sup>2</sup> *Survey by Lutheran Brotherhood, conducted by Louis Harris & Associates, July 27-August 8, 1993. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.*

<sup>3</sup> *Survey conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, May 6-May 9, 2002. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.*

Part of what makes deciphering public opinion difficult on the question of the estate tax is the visceral reaction against taxes in general. It seems that simply using the word “tax” creates negative feelings and causes people to oppose anything with the word tax in it. We can be fairly certain that the question, “Would you like the government eliminate the \_\_\_\_\_ tax?” will be answered with a resounding “Yes!”

regardless of what tax we're talking about. We can expect opposition to the estate tax, simply because it is a tax and not because most people are affected by it. Indeed, a majority of voters favor eliminating the inheritance tax and approved of a congressional tax plan that included a cut in the inheritance tax. Even after being told that the estate tax only affects millionaires, a 60% majority of Americans still favored its elimination. Astoundingly, a 43% plurality realize that they will not personally benefit from the repeal of the estate tax and 39% "Don't know enough to say."

Can it be that almost 40% of the population is holding out for the possibility that they may have some yet unknown millionaire relative that is going to pick them for some lump sum payment upon their death? No, most Americans do not expect to receive an inheritance. Fully 60% of non-retired people say that inheritance will not be a source of income for them when they retire and 85% of those that are retired say it is not presently a source of income. Only 8% say they have received a bequest in the past 5 years<sup>37</sup> and only 12% have had or expect to receive a large inheritance.<sup>38</sup> Because most bequests are small, a majority of those who have received a bequest in the past 5 years claim that it had no effect on their savings, suggesting that whatever money was received was immediately spent.<sup>39</sup> The preference for eliminating the estate tax does not come from a belief that one will personally gain a large sum of money from the death of an ancestor.

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<sup>37</sup> Asked of those employed full time. *Survey by Lincoln Financial Group, conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide, January 14-January 19, 1999.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>38</sup> National adult sample. *Survey by NBC News, Wall Street Journal, conducted by Hart and Teeter Research Companies, December 4-December 8, 1997.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>39</sup> Asked of those employed full time. *Survey by Lincoln Financial Group. Methodology: Conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide, January 14-January 19, 1999.*



Table 34: Support for Eliminating the Estate Tax

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Which of the following types of taxes, if any, do you think should be reduced? As I read each one, please tell me if you think it should be reduced or not.<sup>1</sup>

Note: Adds to more than 100% due to multiple responses

The income tax	68%
The inheritance tax or 'death tax'	62%
The higher tax on married couples	72%
The capital gains tax	47%
All taxes in general	60%
None of the above	4%

I'd like your opinion of some programs and proposals being discussed in this country today. Please tell me if you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose each one. Eliminating the inheritance tax.<sup>2</sup>

Note: Registered voters

Strongly favor	43%
Favor	28%
Oppose	15%
Strongly oppose	8%

As you may or may not know, Congress recently passed a tax cut that reduces income tax rates by as much as 7%, cuts the marriage penalty, cuts inheritance taxes, and reduces taxes on what is commonly called capital gains--which are profits made from investments, selling of a home, or other capital items. Do you approve or disapprove of this tax cut?<sup>3</sup>

Strongly approve	39%
Somewhat approve	29%
Somewhat disapprove	14%
Strongly disapprove	17%

I would like to ask you a couple of questions about taxes that are paid on money or assets which are inherited when someone dies. As you may know, federal inheritance taxes currently apply to estates valued at more than \$1 million. A new proposal would eliminate all inheritance taxes on estates over \$1 million as well. Would you favor or oppose that proposal?<sup>4</sup>

Favor	60%
Oppose	35%
No opinion	5%

If such a proposal (that would eliminate all inheritance taxes on estates valued at more than \$1 million) were passed into law, do you think you would or would not personally benefit from such a law in the future, or don't you know enough to say?<sup>5</sup>

Would personally benefit	17%
Would not personally benefit	43%
Don't know enough to say	39%
No opinion	1%

When you retire, how much do you expect to rely on each of the following sources of money? How about money from an inheritance?<sup>6</sup>

Note: Those non-retired

Major source	8%
Minor source	31%
Not at source	60%
No opinion	1%

How much do you rely on each of the following sources of income today? How about money from an inheritance?<sup>7</sup>

Note: Those retired

Major source	3%
Minor source	11%
Not a source	85%
No opinion	1%

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<sup>1</sup> Survey by *Investor's Business Daily*, *Christian Science Monitor*, conducted by TIPP--Techno Metrica Institute of Policy and Politics, February 8-February 12, 2001. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> Survey by Pew Research Center, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, August 24-September 10, 2000. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>3</sup> Survey conducted by Wirthlin Worldwide, August 6-August 9, 1999. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>4-5</sup> Survey by Cable News Network, *USA Today*, conducted by Gallup Organization, June 22-June 25, 2000. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>6-7</sup> Survey conducted by Gallup Organization, April 5-April 8, 2004. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

The question in the preceding paragraph was facetious, of course, but Americans' optimism is entirely unrealistic. The only other conclusion is that they expect to one day be millionaires and therefore believe that they may benefit from the repeal of the estate tax in the future. With some certainty, we can say that 39% of

Americans are not going to become wealthy within the next few decades. To be fair a majority of Americans realize they will not be rich. The reason that many Americans believe they may one day benefit from the estate tax repeal is because slightly over 40% believe there is some likelihood that they will become wealthy.

A Gallup survey, which included a third option to repeal estate taxes only on small business and family farms, found a plurality favoring a repeal of all estate taxes and a minority favoring leaving all estate taxes in place. Most of this difference seems to come from those who otherwise favored leaving the tax in place. This suggests that Americans sympathize with “not really rich” wealth holders. Farmers

Table 35: Explaining Support for Estate Tax Repeal

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How likely is it that you will ever become wealthy, because of your work, investments, inheritance, or good luck?<sup>1</sup>

Very likely	12%
Somewhat likely	29%
Not too likely	31%
Not at all likely	26%
Already wealthy (vol.)	1%

I would like to ask you a couple of questions about taxes that are paid on money or assets which are inherited when someone dies. As you may know, federal inheritance taxes currently apply only to estates valued at more than \$1 million. Which of the following would you prefer to see Congress do this year?<sup>2</sup>

Change the laws to eliminate all inheritance taxes on all estates	39%
Eliminate inheritance taxes on small businesses and family farms but otherwise leave the taxes unchanged	30%
Leave inheritance tax laws unchanged	25%

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<sup>1</sup> *Survey by Newsweek, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, June 24-June 25, 1999.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> *Survey conducted by Gallup Organization, February 19-February 21, 2001.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

and small business owners sometimes face hardships despite having relatively large amounts of invested capital. People who think the estates of the wealthy should be taxed have a specific vision in mind when they decide who should be subject to additional taxes. The combination of strong anti-tax sentiment in general, unrealistic optimism, and sympathy for small business owners and farmers produces a strong majority favoring the repeal of the estate tax when it is mentioned in a vacuum.

After being given a list of 10 reasons to oppose the elimination of the inheritance tax and asked if each of the arguments was convincing, likely voters were asked the standard vacuum type question, “Do you favor or oppose legislation to eliminate the estate tax?” Rather than favoring its elimination, the public was now split.<sup>40</sup> How is that the enthusiasm for tax relief wanes from one survey question to the next? The answer is that each question evokes a different set of considerations. When tax relief is proposed without any countervailing costs of course it will be favored. However, after some thought on the matter support begins to decline. Public opinion regarding the estate tax is malleable and other considerations can sway people who would normally favor the elimination of estate taxes to oppose the change.

When it came to the actual proposed plan that included a tax refund for middle-income families along with the elimination of the estate tax, voters were

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<sup>40</sup> Asked of likely voters. *Survey conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, May 6-May 9, 2002.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

split.<sup>41</sup> There was not strong support for the plan, even though it included tangible benefits for many taxpayers. When cuts in education are placed in tandem with tax benefits for the wealthiest of Americans the support falls to below majority levels. A refund of a few hundred dollars is not enough for most people to jump onto the anti-estate tax bandwagon when important programs and budget deficits are also considered.

The indecisiveness begins to swing toward the other end of the spectrum when people are confronted only with costs to the repeal of the estate tax. A majority of voters say they would be more likely to vote for a Democratic candidate for president if the candidate promised to maintain the estate tax.<sup>42</sup> That result is true when Americans are told that such taxes are used for social security and education and that the tax revenue comes from “unearned income.” While Americans favor tax cuts in general they don’t favor a tax break for millionaires at the expense of favored programs.

This malleability stems in part from the low importance people place on the estate tax, from generally low levels of knowledge about the estate tax, and from distinctions made between work and non-work income. A majority of American investors regarded repealing the estate tax as a low priority. If voters had the ability to choose which taxes they would like to see reduced, a paltry 6% select to have the estate tax reduced. A plurality of Americans favor across the board tax relief.

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<sup>41</sup> *Survey by NBC News, Wall Street Journal, conducted by Hart and Teeter Research Companies, April 29-May 1, 2000.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>42</sup> *Survey by Public Interest Project, conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, October 21-October 26, 2003.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

Income taxes are the preferred tax to reduce and, as in previous instances, a reduction in the estate tax ranks far below assistance with educating the young. Although voters were not convinced by the “children of rich people won’t want to work hard” argument, they did find convincing the argument that it would be better to give tax breaks to the middle class and keep the estate tax in place.

A majority of Americans don’t know if the inheritance tax is too high or too low. Because it is among the items that are not of major importance to most Americans they are not very knowledgeable about it. Indeed, a plurality of voters say that if a congressman voted to eliminate the inheritance tax it would not impact their vote for that candidate. In accordance with the low priority voters place on estate tax relief, they believe that income from work should be taxed at a lower rate than income from non-work items such as dividends, interest, capital gains, and inheritance. Even though Americans believe that all taxes should be reduced, if they had to choose they would prefer to reduce those taxes that actually impact them. They prefer that their own personal income taxes would be reduced, or that they receive tax credits for educational expenses, rather than reducing the taxes on wealthy estate holders.

Table 36: Estate Tax is Low Priority

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Now, I am going to read you a list of issues that the Congress and the President can address in the next session of Congress. For each one, please tell me if you think it should be one of the top priority issues the President and Congress should deal with, a major priority but not top priority, minor priority, or something the Congress should not deal with at all. How about repealing the federal tax on any inheritance?<sup>1</sup>

Note: Asked of investors

Top priority	17%
Major priority, but not top	29%
Minor priority	39%
President & Congress should not deal with it	12%

If there were going to be a tax cut in the next year, which of the following would be your priority for a tax cut?<sup>2</sup>

A tax cut for moderate and low income Americans	36%
A tax cut for all Americans	29%
Eliminating the marriage penalty	17%
A capital gains tax cut on real estate and stock sales	9%
An inheritance and estate tax cut	6%
Combination/Other (vol.)	2%

If there were going to be a tax cut in the next year, which of the following would be your priority for a tax cut?<sup>3</sup>

Tax cut for moderate and low-income Americans	29%
Tax cut for all Americans	31%
Eliminating marriage penalty	15%
Capital gains tax cut	5%
Inheritance and estate tax cut	7%
Combination (vol.)	10%

If the government cuts taxes, which of the following taxes would you like to have cut first?<sup>4</sup>

Gas taxes	20%
Income taxes	42%
Property taxes	19%
Inheritance taxes	16%

The following are some tax cuts that are being considered by President (Bill) Clinton and Congress. Please tell me which one, if any, you would most like to see passed.<sup>5</sup>

Tax credit for college tuition	30%
Tax credit for families with young children	33%
Reduction in capital gains tax on sales of real estate or stock	20%
Reduction in estate or inheritance tax	12%
None of them (vol.)	2%

Congress is now considering legislation to eliminate the estate tax. Some people are opposed to this legislation. I am going to read you some reasons these people give to oppose this legislation. Please rate each reason on a scale of 0 to 10 with 10 meaning it is an extremely convincing reason to oppose this legislation, 0 meaning it is a totally unconvincing reason to oppose this legislation, and 5 meaning it is neither

convincing nor unconvincing. We should cut taxes for the middle class by abolishing the marriage penalty and making college tuition and job training costs tax deductible, rather than giving more tax breaks to multi-millionaires.<sup>6</sup>

Mean = 7.3

0-4 Unconvincing	15%
5 Neither convincing nor unconvincing	12%
6	5%
7	8%
8	13%
9	7%
10 Extremely convincing	38%

Thinking about the federal inheritance tax, do you consider this tax too high, about right, too low, or don't you know enough to say?<sup>7</sup>

Too high	41%
About right	5%
Too low	1%
Don't know enough to say	53%

Would you be more or less likely to support a candidate for Congress who voted to eliminate the estate tax, or would it make no difference in how you vote?<sup>8</sup>

Much more likely	13%
Somewhat more likely	15%
No difference (vol.)	46%
Somewhat less likely	10%
Much less likely	9%

Do you think that income earned from wages and salaries should be taxed at a lower rate, the same rate or a higher rate than income earned from dividends, interest, and capital gains and inheritance?<sup>9</sup>

A lower rate	53%
The same rate	29%
A higher rate	9%

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<sup>1</sup> Survey by UBS, conducted by Gallup Organization, December 1-December 15, 2002. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> Survey conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, May 6-May 9, 2002. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>3</sup> Survey by NBC News, Wall Street Journal, conducted by Hart and Teeter Research Companies, January 13-January 15, 2000. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.



<sup>4</sup> *Survey by Fox News. Methodology, conducted by Opinion Dynamics, July 12-July 13, 2000.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut

<sup>5</sup> *Survey by NBC News, Wall Street Journal, conducted by Hart and Teeter Research Companies, June 19-June 23, 1997.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>6</sup> *Survey conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, May 6-May 9, 2002.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>7</sup> *Survey by Cable News Network, USA Today, conducted by Gallup Organization, January 13-January 16, 2000.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>8</sup> *Survey conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, May 6-May 9, 2002.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>9</sup> *Survey by Public Interests Project, conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, June 17-June 22, 2003.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

Economists have tried a variety of techniques to try to determine the reason why people leave bequests and there is no direct survey data on this subject. We do know that a majority of Americans believe it is important to save enough money to leave an inheritance to their children<sup>43</sup> and that less than a quarter believe they will have nothing to leave<sup>44</sup>, suggesting that there is a real bequest motive that can only be implied by econometrics. However, a majority of Americans don't have a savings plan for the purpose of conferring an inheritance as an explicit investment goal.<sup>45</sup> This suggests that whatever is being left behind better conforms to the accidental model of bequests. Although Americans believe it is important to save enough to provide a bequest, most are not putting aside "untouchable" money for that purpose.

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<sup>43</sup> *Survey by Lincoln Financial Group, conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide, January 14-January 19, 1999.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>44</sup> *Survey by Money Magazine, conducted by Willard & Shullman, October 21-November 29, 1993.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>45</sup> Asked of American investors. *Survey by UBS, conducted by Gallup Organization, May 27-June 16, 1998.* An older survey with a national adult sample found similar results. *Survey by USA Today, conducted by Gordon S. Black Corporation, April 24-April 29, 1987.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

It is not surprising then that most Americans fail to leave a bequest. Those that say they have specifically planned to leave a bequest have no set figure, but a plurality of those that do plan and have a set amount expect to give more than half a million dollars.<sup>46</sup> While most Americans think its good to leave money behind for their children only the very rich have a plan to actually do so and know exactly how much they are going to leave behind.

### *Discussion*

At the founding of the American republic hostility against the hereditary aristocracy extended not only to the political but to the economic realm as well. The injustice of hereditary monarchy was abolished in the new nation and attempts were made to abolish the transmission of wealth along family lines from one generation to the next. Inheritance was deemed a civil instead of a natural right and a foundation was laid for the future taxation of accumulated wealth upon the death of the owner.

Unfortunately, the Jeffersonian ideal was never realized. Wealth has a significant affect on how people live and where people end up in the social hierarchy. Those that are born to wealthy parents are born with easy access to the best opportunities available while those born into poverty must struggle for survival. In the race to succeed some people are born having already won, while others will finish behind regardless of their individual talents or efforts. In America today,

inheritance and meritocracy coexist. Both factors operate in determining who gets what and how much. For the most part, however, meritocracy is superimposed on inheritance rather than the other way around. In other words, whatever effects produced by merit or luck or current life

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<sup>46</sup> Asked of American investors. *Survey by UBS, conducted by Gallup Organization, May 27-June 16, 1998.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

circumstances come *after* whatever effects are produced by the advantages (or disadvantages) of initial class placement at birth.

(McNamee & Miller 2004, 200)

Although inheritance plays a larger role in an individual's life course than their natural ability and hard work, the public has yet to fully accept the implications of that fact.

The arguments supporting inheritance have their roots in feudal Europe and natural law. But for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries these arguments lost to the egalitarian and meritocratic claims against their legitimacy. The estate tax has been a permanent feature of the American tax code for nearly a century and regular efforts were made to close loopholes while at the same time exempting those who were not wealthy. Despite these efforts we have never achieved the meritocratic ideal.

The tax has always been levied only on the wealthiest Americans with the vast majority never being subject to the tax. Recently, however, the claims of this wealthy minority are being considered in the public discourse. The estate tax is being phased out and calls are being made for its permanent repeal by heirs and heiresses that claim they are being treated unjustly. Many have begun to wonder whether this new shift in thinking will re-legitimize inherited wealth as a just method of wealth acquisition.

The public seems to favor the natural rights interpretation that giving an inheritance to one's heirs is a liberty that should not be circumscribed or limited by the government. However, this view may stem in part from unrealistic optimism. Even though most Americans know they will never receive an inheritance, many believe that they may one day be able to leave one behind. The statistics show that

most will fail in their plan to leave a bequest, but when stated in a vacuum most Americans still support the repeal of the estate tax.

If, however, the repeal of the estate tax is considered along with other items, then support for its elimination begins to wane. When they are told that the taxes are used for education and social security and that the tax comes from “unearned income” there is solid support for the tax. Indeed, eliminating the estate tax is a very low priority for most Americans. This is entirely rational since so few are affected by it. Rather than a cut in the estate tax most Americans would rather see a cut in the income tax and other taxes that affect middle class taxpayers.

Interestingly, Americans are not swayed by the argument that the institution of inheritance creates a two-tiered society where some people are born rich without making any effort of their own while others struggle to get by despite working hard. Like in many policy areas the way the issue is framed makes a big difference. Arguments that rely on class inequality or on the undeserved riches of heirs don’t have much saliency. Because Americans believe that the wealthy have a right to do as they wish with their money, there is no public uproar when television exposés present footage of young heirs and heiresses acting foolishly on their father’s yacht or at an exclusive nightclub. Even though most Americans must work in order to pay their bills and survive, there is no strong sense of injustice because the rich “have a right to do so.” Previous chapters have even shown that Americans believe that the rich have a right to purchase better educations for their own children. Therefore framing inheritance in terms of individual rights causes the public to support the

claims made by the wealthy and to not perceive the injustice of limited social opportunities for themselves.

Those who favor the estate tax must find a different way of framing the issue. The public should be reminded that ultimately the only people personally affected by the estate tax are the children of dead millionaires. But, by itself, this will not convince a majority to favor the estate tax. Because a majority of the public tends to favor the tax when they are told that it is used for desired programs, one method could be to highlight the usefulness of the tax in terms of education and other important programs. Additionally, from the time of the Boston Tea Party Americans have despised all taxes, but they especially despised the ones that personally affect them. Therefore, the public might be willing to favor an increase in the estate tax if it were coupled with a decrease in the income tax. Public opinion favors lower taxes on earned income than unearned income, consistent with the meritocratic ethos.

We might also want to think about shifting from an estate tax to an inheritance tax. If the dead have a right to dispose of their property as they see fit, then changing the subject of the tax might prove effective. Instead of taxing the property of a recently deceased person, the tax could be imposed on the living heir. This could be done with stronger limits on *inter vivos* gifts, higher taxes on acquired property, and even limits on the amount that a person could be allowed to receive as a bequest. It is much more difficult for an heir to say they deserve someone else's property than it is for someone to say they have a right to give it away, especially if it is clear they have not worked for it themselves.

Even though much of the wealth held in America is not a result of earned income but comes instead from inherited wealth transfers, we are not likely to see a widespread movement against those who have inherited economic power. A higher tax on the 2% of decedents who are affected by an estate tax can be viewed as acceptable, if the vast majority gains lower taxes for themselves and more spending on programs they deem valuable. Perhaps in this way America could move one-step closer the meritocratic and Jeffersonian ideal.

## Chapter 7

### Meritocracy Revealed: The Case of Affirmative Action

*The contractor will take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin.<sup>47</sup>*

*Lyndon B. Johnson*

Affirmative action is among the most contentious public policies in America. Hundreds of thousands of protesters have taken to the streets and those who have a stake in the policy have filed many lawsuits since the policy's inception. The reason affirmative action evokes such strong emotions is that its proponents and opponents make claims that lie at the very core of the American dream. Both sides argue that we should use merit as the distributive rule when choosing among applicants for schools, jobs, and promotions. Both sides are also willing to ignore meritocratic claims to support policies that benefit their own racial group.

Just as with other items related to meritocracy, Americans are conspicuously ambivalent. Distribution by merit is antithetical to distribution by a hereditary or ascriptive characteristic. We noticed in the chapter on inheritance that hereditary characteristics are not necessarily considered to be a legitimate limitation on the acquisition of wealth. In that case inheriting power is sometimes viewed as just for a variety of reasons. When it comes to affirmative action Americans sometimes accept

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Anderson 2004, p. 60

and sometimes reject meritocratic principles. This is because the arguments for and against affirmative action pit one meritocratic value against another.

Lyndon Johnson was the first person to use the phrase “affirmative action” as part of a federal plan to end discrimination on the basis of race. Executive order 10925, signed by President Kennedy, established the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity (PCEEO), which was to ensure equal opportunities in employment by the government and its contractors. Lyndon Johnson chaired this committee and believed that an active effort would be necessary to overcome the discrimination of the past (Anderson 2004, 60). Later, Johnson would coin the controversial term in executive order 11246 and continue the civil rights legacy of President Kennedy. Since its inception affirmative action has been viewed by some as the best possible solution for America’s racial divide and has been actively resisted by others.

This chapter will examine the history of affirmative action for the purpose of understanding the origins and purposes of the program. America has often deviated from the meritocratic ideal and affirmative action was implemented in an effort to correct the injustice. Conflicts have been taken to the courts and legislatures and demographic changes are likely to make these conflicts more likely in the future. The chapter will then explore some of the major issues of social justice that are often used to justify or vilify affirmative action programs. Both proponents and opponents seek to combat what they perceive as “unfairness.” These two sections will place the public opinion survey data in the proper context. Because affirmative action is so contentious nothing in this chapter would be considered new to those who have



studied the issue. Nevertheless, the affirmative action debate highlights an important tension in the concept of meritocracy. Sometimes it becomes necessary to choose between equal opportunity and race neutral selection procedures when the meritocratic ideal requires both simultaneously.

### *The History of Affirmative Action*

America has a long history of discriminating on the basis of race. At the writing of the Constitution slavery was entrenched and the Bill of Rights did not protect those of African descent. Whites controlled the government, the press, businesses, and all other social organizations that mattered in America. They used that power to actively discriminate against non-whites, including Mexicans, Chinese, Jews, and any non-Anglo. Racial preferences were the norm and those norms favored whites. Non-whites would slowly gain the same rights that whites possessed, but the struggle wasn't easy.

Each time civil rights were extended to new groups America witnessed a backlash aimed at reversing the new policies. Abolishing the slave trade precipitated the Civil War. After the Civil War, when non-whites were given constitutional protections, southern states created their own laws, known as Jim Crow, to maintain the racial hierarchy. Non-governmental organizations, like the Ku Klux Klan, were created to terrorize blacks and prevent them from realizing their newfound freedoms by harassing and sometimes killing them (Fobanjong 2001).

In the 1950's and 60's violence erupted as whites actively opposed court decisions aimed at integrating the public schools. Clashes between state and federal troops and between protesters and police became a regular occurrence. Whites

actively resisted attempts to provide blacks with the same opportunities they had themselves. They defended segregation in political, social, and economic affairs. Whites, especially in the south, fought to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods, out of their schools, and out of their stores. During that era, as in previous times, whites supported the use of race when making distributive decisions. It was the black leaders who were proclaiming that the use of race was unjust, immoral, and a violation their civil rights.

It was in this context that Johnson's affirmative action policy was spawned. Affirmative action would end the use of race when selecting among applicants for federal jobs. "[A]ll the administration seemed to be advocating was racially neutral hiring to end job discrimination" (Anderson 2004, 61). Preferences for white employees would be eliminated and an equal opportunity would be given to all job seekers. The plan did not call for quotas, or for any set percentage of minority employees. The initial proposal to ease racial tensions was weak and easily circumvented. The PCEEO did not apply to federal grants and in 1963 southern states accepted \$37 million of federal moneys to build or refurbish medical facilities that remained segregated by state and local laws (Anderson 2004, 62).

America's largest corporations, many of which had manufacturing facilities in the south, volunteered to sign a "plan for progress" stating they would make an effort to hire and train more minority workers and desegregate their facilities. Although some major corporations complied with their promises in an effort to maintain their lucrative government contracts, many companies ignored their plans for progress and

it became increasingly evident that voluntary desegregation plans were ineffective (Anderson 2004, 65; Ezorsky 1991, 35).

After the assassination of President Kennedy, the newly inaugurated President Johnson proposed his sweeping Civil Rights Act that would desegregate all public facilities. The plan was not limited to government property but would apply to all private enterprises that served the public (Anderson 2004, 74; Klinker 1999, 273). Unfortunately, the historic act was not as effective as many would have liked. Because employers could still make decisions based on seniority, newly hired African Americans would be the first to be laid off during recessions and the least likely to be promoted when opportunities for advancement became available. In addition, the use of tests to make hiring and promotion decisions seemed to embody the meritocratic ethos, but the lower levels of education typical of minorities often prevented them from attaining the same jobs as better-educated whites (Anderson 2004, 83).

The “irony of affirmative action” was that companies who only hired or promoted the most able applicant would necessarily only select whites because the segregated system of schools gave white students better skills (Ezorsky 1991, 16). If a company was to integrate the workplace, it would have to hire African Americans with lower levels of skill and try to train them for their new jobs (Anderson 2004, 97). As the Johnson administration pushed for the hiring of African Americans it began to abandon the colorblind criteria of the Civil Rights Act (Anderson 2004, 99). Integration could not be achieved by simply eliminating “white only” criteria.

As tensions flared and racial violence became commonplace civil rights groups decided to up the ante. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) began to

demand that employers hire a certain percentage of blacks to make up for past racial discrimination (Meier & Rudwick 1973). This immediately caused a white backlash as conservatives in Congress began to argue that a system of quotas would discriminate against whites and that such interference in private business was unconstitutional. President Kennedy believed that some compensation was due, but unlike CORE did not believe that quotas were a good idea (Anderson 2004, 77).

Among the most ardent resisters of integration were America's labor unions. In Philadelphia only about 1% of skilled tradesmen were African American even though they made up 30% of the population in that city. Federal agencies, supported by both Democrats and Republicans, established hiring goals and required a "good faith effort" to end discrimination on the basis of race (Klinker 1999, 294). Because the jobs required little formal education, it seemed like the ideal place for African Americans to gain access to higher paying employment. Of course, the only way to prove that unions were complying with federal regulations was to measure the increase in minority employees. There was no fixed quota, but it was apparent that unions and employers would have to hire and train black workers in order to comply with the law (Anderson 2004, 117).

The backlash against affirmative action was in full swing by 1968. Conflict erupted between white construction crews and black protesters at federal worksites. White trade union members protested and picketed in cities across the US and claimed that quotas and special preferences were unfair (Anderson 2004, 121; Lawrence & Matsuda 1997, 22). Federal agencies declared that hiring goals were not quotas and officials argued that quotas were already in use to keep African Americans

out (Anderson 2004, 118-22). It's illustrative that white resistance to quotas and preferences emerged from groups that opposed integration. They would have preferred a 100% white workforce in their profession and they believed it was unfair for them to be forced to hire and train blacks.

Despite labor union resistance President Nixon and the US Congress would come to adopt the "Philadelphia Plan," requiring US businesses and labor unions to create an affirmative action plan and establish hiring goals to increase the percentage of minorities in the workforce. The plan would lay the foundation for proportional representation in hiring. To comply with affirmative action policies a company or union's labor force would have to be consistent with the ratio of minorities in the locality where they conducted business (Klinker 1999, 294).

The plan was soon challenged in court. It was argued that quotas violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, which made race-based preferences illegal. In *US vs. Montgomery Board of Education* the federal courts defined "quota" as a procedure that "restricts or requires participation of a fixed and inflexible number or ratio of minorities" (Anderson 2004, 126). The Philadelphia Plan did not establish a fixed ratio and was found consistent with Title VII. Moreover, even though companies would be considering race in their decision making, these considerations were consistent with the stated goal of expanding minority employment in occupations were they had been denied equal access. In legal terms, there was a "compelling state interest" in considering race when making employment decisions. Using race was the only way to get resistant organizations to change their discriminatory policies (Anderson 2004, 127).

By 1972, however, Nixon reversed course and began working against the Philadelphia Plan. He began to argue that quotas were unjust and violated the principles of selection by merit. He also began to tout the often-repeated argument that “two wrongs don’t make a right.” The use of quotas to give preferential treatment to minorities was viewed to be as wrong as the previous policy of giving preferential treatment to whites. Therefore, no one should be given special treatment and selection should be based strictly on the skills one possessed (Anderson 2004, 139; Klinker 1999, 296). This seemingly race neutral policy, as noted earlier, favored whites because of their much higher average levels of education.

Similar problems existed at America’s colleges. In the 1950’s many colleges had a 100% white male student body. “At professional schools, deans had quotas, usually admitting only about 5 percent females, which resulted in white males becoming 95% of attorneys, physicians, and professors” (Anderson 2004, 66). Affirmative action plans were adopted at universities to increase the number of female and minority professionals and to increase the percentage of women and minority professors. The most direct stimulus for affirmative action plans at universities were the important federal research grants they received. Unless universities could prove they were hiring more women and minorities they would be ineligible to receive federal monies (Anderson 2004, 143).

Colleges and universities created policies aimed at recruiting more female and minority students in an effort to increase their numbers in the professions. This would, in time, increase the number of available minority lawyers, doctors, and professors. America’s colleges and businesses could then choose from a larger pool

of applicants in order to comply with federal anti-discrimination laws (Anderson 2004, 150). It was clear that the universities would have to take action in order to give members of under-represented groups the qualifications to acquire the jobs that employers needed them for.

It is a truism that the jobs that one can qualify for and one's type and level of education are intimately linked. Those that claim that affirmative action constitutes reverse discrimination sometimes argue that unqualified women and minorities are being given jobs that more qualified individuals should have received. The necessary qualifications are obtained at universities, thereby putting universities on the frontlines of the affirmative action battle. How do we increase the number of qualified minority job seekers without creating a mechanism wherein they are admitted into college and professional schools where they can receive the training that qualifies them for higher level employment?

This is the conundrum that faces the admissions process in America's colleges and graduate schools. The medical school of the University of California at Davis believed it had answered that question by setting aside 16 of 100 spaces for disadvantaged individuals. It became apparent, however, that people who were admitted through that special program had lower test scores and lower grade point averages than those who were admitted under the regular criteria for the other 84 spaces. Allen Bakke was denied admission to the medical school even though he had an above average test score and GPA. Although he could not be admitted among the regular applicants, he outperformed those who were admitted under the special program. The Supreme Court declared in 1978 that these set-aside places and special

rules for minority applicants constituted an illegal quota. But the Court also stated that race could be used as a factor when making admission decisions because it argued that having a diverse student body was a permissible goal of universities. It therefore made set aside programs and quotas illegal, while maintaining that race could be used in the decision making process (Barnum 1993).

Whites, who 20 years earlier were defending the use of special rules that gave them the advantage over minorities, were now fighting against special rules that favored minority applicants. “The irony here seems to be that the same ideological group that now use the Constitution and the Civil Rights Act to challenge affirmative action is the very ideological group that were bitterly opposed to the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment and the 1960’s Civil Rights Act” (Fobanjong 2001,171). For centuries, among the white majority of America, there was no perceived injustice in the use of different rules for different people. With the coming of the Civil Rights Era these special rules had become associated with the most egregious violations of justice that one could imagine. Similarly, those who 20 years earlier were fighting against segregation and special rules for whites were now defending special rules for themselves, arguing it was the only way to increase their numbers in the professions. A cynic would notice that both blacks and whites oppose race-based preferences except when their own group is being preferred. Indeed, “Self-interest would appear to be one of the major predictors of reactions to affirmative action policies”; those who benefit from affirmative action favor it and those who might potentially be hurt by the policy oppose it (Doverspike et. al. 2000,119). Both groups seem to ignore or redefine their own principles of justice in pursuit of their self-interest.



Nevertheless, the white backlash began to have an effect on policy. Ronald Reagan became an outspoken critic of quotas and was able to make several appointments to the Supreme Court. Then in 1989 the Court issued its *Wards Cove* decision that shifted the burden of proof from the employer to the employee in discrimination cases. “From now on it would be easier for a white male to sue for reverse discrimination and more difficult for a woman or minority to win a case” (Anderson 2004, 204). The Congress attempted to reverse the decision by passing a new Civil Rights Act in 1990, but the bill was vetoed by the first President Bush. Although the bill’s subject had to do with designating who bore the burden of proof in discrimination cases, the administration gained support for its position by railing against quotas (Anderson 2004, 206; Klinker 1999, 305). Even though quotas were never advocated by the government and were only used by some private organizations between 1968 and 1978, at which time they became illegal, the use of the word “quota” could be used to stop even modest affirmative action proposals.

A second attempt to shift the burden of proof to the employer resulted in the muddled and self-contradictory Civil Rights Act of 1991. The bill was a compromise between supporters and opponents of affirmative action and was signed into law by the president. The bill confused many and “The Bush administration added to the confusion. The president had vetoed the 1990 act claiming that it would establish quotas and encourage hiring based on race but permitted his Department of Education to continue university scholarship programs that were based on race. He declared his opposition to reverse discrimination at the same time his administration supported set-asides” (Anderson 2004, 213). The bill and the President’s defense of it highlight

the value conflict that many Americans face. We would like to provide minority groups with real plans that will improve their quality of life and counteract the legacy of past discrimination, but at the same time we are reluctant to use any type of racial preference because these types of preferences are associated with an ugly past.

Moderation on the issue is very difficult to maintain. After the passage of the revised bill Louisiana Republicans endorsed the flagrantly racist David Duke for governor. As he and other right-wing fringe groups began their anti-quota crusade, moderates began to avoid bringing up quotas out of fear of being associated with racist white nationalists. Those who oppose affirmative action plans have a great deal of difficulty escaping from the racist origins of their views. Even sincere opponents of particular affirmative action plans must come to grips with the fact that they are on the same side as white supremacists. Theodore Shaw of the NAACP said, "Try as I might, I have never with certainty been able to separate the intellectual and ideological descendants of white supremacy proponents from the good faith affirmative action opponents" (Cokorinos 2003, x). The cycle of African American civil rights gains followed by white backlash "are, today, still identifiably the same" (Fobanjong 2001, 1). Small highly energized groups often have more political voice than their numbers would dictate. Neo-Nazi's and the Ku Klux Klan, still hold the occasional rally in public squares across America and when they attack affirmative action they open the closet door to one of America's hidden skeletons. Because these groups are natural supporters of plans to destroy affirmative action they *ipso facto* make reasoned opposition to affirmative action suspect on racist grounds.

The problem is that white supremacists support the same policies as conservative whites and even overlap in many of their reasons for opposing affirmative action plans. “Many of the same politicians who resisted integration and filibustered against the Voting Rights Act in the 1960’s have eagerly jumped aboard the anti-affirmative action bandwagon of the 1990’s, calling for an end to race-conscious remedies while disseminating malignant racially coded messages with a wink and a nod to old-fashioned racists” (Lawrence & Matsuda 1997, 84). Words like “welfare mother” and “unqualified candidate” provoke images of African Americans and play on white fears of losing their place of dominance in society (Lawrence & Matsuda 1997, 84). What is more, surveys have found that those who rank highly on a scale of “classic racism” (i.e. believing that some races are inferior and accepting harsh stereotypes about other races) are also more likely to oppose affirmative action programs directed at the “inferior” races (Doverspike et. al. 2000,107).

To be sure, most Americans, including most whites, wouldn’t support the overtly racist agendas of white supremacists. However, organizations such as the American Civil Rights Institute, the Center for Equal Opportunity, the Center for Individual Rights, the Federalist Society, and many others have become increasingly more powerful as they lobby, sue, and advertise in a concerted effort to overturn civil rights gains. “The opponents of affirmative action have been able to deftly utilize the civil rights vocabulary formulated to oppose discrimination in order to undermine the moral as well as the legal and constitutional underpinnings of institutional remedies” (Cokorinos 2003,11). While consistently opposing civil rights and affirmative action

their rationale has changed “from the private right to discriminate to an anti-government libertarian veneer of individual rights and white victimization” (Cokorinos 2003,18). Even though their rationale changed over the decades, their goals have not. These well-organized and wealthy groups have been able to shape the debate over affirmative action and in so doing have harnessed white anger against civil rights.

By the mid-1990’s white resentment had hardened. In 1996 54% of Californians supported Proposition 209 ending affirmative action in that state. A majority of African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians opposed Proposition 209, while majorities of white men and women supported it (Anderson 2004, 256). As a result, the number of African American and Hispanic students who were admitted to the University of California schools dropped dramatically (Anderson 2004, 259; Laird 2005, 38). At UC Berkeley, “the number of black students plummeted by more than half.... Hispanic enrollment decreased by 43 percent. Of 3,735 freshman, 126 (3 percent) were black, 269 (7 percent) were Chicano or Latino.... White enrollment rose by 7 percent” (Cokorinos 2003,17). At Berkeley’s Law School the number of African Americans dropped from 20 in 1996 to just 1 in 1997 (Fobanjong 2001, xviii). And at the University of California at Irvine Medical School one African American was admitted. When he chose not to enroll the medical school entering class had no African Americans whatsoever (Laird 2005, 110).

Two years later a similar initiative banned affirmative action in Washington State (Anderson 2004, 261; Cokorinos 2003,18; Laird 2005, 38). The white resistance to affirmative action that was begun by pro-segregation southerners in the

1960's had, by 1997, finally succeeded in curbing the flow of minorities into America's colleges. In the years after the passage of Proposition 209 increasing numbers of African Americans and Hispanics were being kept out of predominantly white colleges in the states where affirmative action was eliminated. This, of course, was the goal of white supremacist segregationists and means that fewer and fewer minorities will be qualified for the better paying jobs that whites have easy access to. But, not all states have eliminated affirmative action and high achieving minorities in those states that have are choosing to attend very prestigious universities elsewhere (Laird 2005, 172). Still, not all of these students can afford to attend college out of state and many attend less prestigious colleges in their home state while the lower achieving students simply join the lower wage labor force.

Those who oppose affirmative action might adamantly deny racist motivations, but as a socio-political phenomenon racism can't be so easily dismissed in the attempt to end affirmative action programs.

The passionate opposition against affirmative action, for example, cannot be simply explained in terms of resentment against departures from the meritocratic system in the award of jobs or of scarce educational opportunities. People lose in the competition for places at universities or for jobs because of nepotism or preferences for veterans, but those clear departures from the ideal of the meritocracy hardly arouse the kind of passion that race- or gender-based preferential treatment does. Thus, in the context of the *Bakke* case, a state medical school's rejection of a more qualified white applicant to make room for a less qualified minority applicant ignited an intense national debate. But that same medical school favored children of friends of high-ranking university officials over more qualified applicants for admission barely provoked any reaction.

(Rosenfeld 1991, 2)

It would be difficult to explain this cultural peculiarity without invoking racism as a possible cause. The children of alumni and major donors are often given preferences,

as are gifted athletes and those who come from distant states. When the wealthy or powerful are given special considerations only a few “radicals” protest the injustice. But when an African American is given a special consideration the protestations of unfairness comes from mainstream middle-class Americans.

The white backlash once again led to the court in the University of Michigan cases of 2003. In *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger* the Supreme Court answered questions about the affirmative action policies of the University of Michigan college and law school. In the mixed decision it found that the college system, which awarded points for being of a particular race, was unconstitutional. The law school system, on the other hand, which used a holistic view and considered many factors in the applicants file without having any set number or percentage of minorities it would admit, passed constitutional scrutiny. Race could still be used to help universities create a diverse student body, but it could not blatantly favor particular racial minorities by giving them points simply for the sake of being a member of a favored group.

Although affirmative action was upheld, the program is much weaker that it was in the past and minorities are finding it increasingly more difficult to succeed despite some victories in the 1960's. They find themselves in a vicious cycle. Because of discrimination of the past they lack many of the social and economic resources of their white countrymen. A lack of economic resources means they cannot afford selective private schools, nor are they able to afford housing in higher income communities where the public schools are funded at much higher levels than in poor communities. As products of under-funded and overcrowded schools they are

less adequately prepared for college and usually don't advance beyond high school, if they finish high school at all. They will therefore never acquire the qualifications that are necessary for them to become higher income professionals. This means that they will not be able to afford to pay for private school tuition for their children or to live in areas with better public schools. In order to qualify for a good paying job, one must first qualify for admittance to a good college. Since they need qualifications to get qualifications, they are trapped in the lowest tiers of society.

Worst of all, the white backlash is likely to intensify in the coming years. Most states have not planned for the surge in demand for higher education that has been predicted by demographers. The number of high school graduates is increasing dramatically and large proportions of them will be applying to college. At one time Berkeley could admit everyone who met the minimum requirements; today that is not the case (Laird 2005, 53). Even schools that were once considered "safety schools" are becoming increasingly selective as their applications increase (Laird 2005, 209).

In addition, many states and school districts have changed their formula for calculating a student's GPA. Honors or Advanced Placement (AP) courses are worth an additional point, so that a "B" in an Honors or AP course is the same as an "A" in a regular course. This means that students' GPA's are now on a 5 point scale.

Because of the honors grade-point policy, most of those students with GPA's of 4.0 and above did not have straight A's, yet a curious thing happens to many students when they hit that 4.0 mark. They – and, more often, their parents – begin to think of themselves as "perfect" and their sense of entitlement expands exponentially.

(Laird 2005, 172)

Because of the increasing competitiveness of most colleges, the average GPA of entering freshman has gone up. Berkeley had 8,500 spaces available for the incoming

class in 1997. It had a total of 27,151 applications, of which 11,924 had GPA's of greater than 4.0. "Even if the campus had admitted only applicants with 4.0s and up for those 8,500 fall spaces – the campus was still going to deny several thousand applicants fall admission who had GPAs of 4.0 and above" (Laird 2005, 115). The number of applicants soared in 1998 because of outreach programs and the campus was forced to deny admission to 6,979 applicants with 4.0 or greater GPA's, including 754 minority applicants (Laird 2005, 125).

There were "many stunned white and Asian American applicants and parents" who thought that the end of affirmative action would make admission easier (Laird 2005, 125). In a process that started several decades ago, more and more students and parents voiced their anger at affirmative action programs. "Almost overnight, one saw and heard fear in the faces and voices of students and their parents. Affluent students began saying – and writing in their application essays – that they were afraid that they wouldn't be able to attain the same standard of living that their parents had enjoyed" (Laird 2005, 67-8). In this climate anything that can potentially reduce the competition for scarce places is likely to be supported.

#### *Discrimination, Affirmative Action, and Public Opinion*

Public opinion regarding discrimination and affirmative action seems to be relatively malleable. During World War II most whites in America believed that blacks were an inferior race, they supported segregation, and did not believe that blacks should have an equal opportunity to seek certain kinds of jobs. In 1944 the National Opinion Research Center asked Americans "Do you think that Negroes/blacks should have as good a chance as white people to get any kind of job,



or do you think white people should have the first chance at any kind of job?” A majority believed that whites should be given preferences over blacks (Fobanjong 2001, 75). By 1963, however, public opinion had shifted dramatically. Images of police dogs, batons, and fire hoses being used to harass civil rights activists were aired on national television as southern whites actively resisted federal laws. The horrors of white brutality caused many whites to change their long-standing beliefs (Anderson 2004, 73).

In 1970 the vast majority of whites believed that African Americans were being discriminated against. By 1977, however, their opinion had changed. Only one-third of whites felt that way; most did not believe that discrimination or racism was holding African Americans back (Lawrence & Matsuda 1997, 46). And by the mid-1990's many whites were beginning to feel victimized by affirmative action (Anderson 2004, 229). The view that African Americans were being treated unfairly was a temporary phenomenon among the white population. It existed in the 1960's and early 70's and then vanished when brutal beatings of blacks were no longer being aired on national television.

Much depends on how the issue is framed and the extent to which whites believe that African Americans are being oppressed or discriminated against. “California exit polls in November 1996 had asked voters whether they supported affirmative action programs ‘designed to help women and minorities get better jobs and education.’ Surprisingly, 54 percent said yes, 46 said no – almost the exact opposite of the vote for Proposition 209. In general, citizens overwhelmingly supported civil rights, a majority supported affirmative action if it was defined as

giving qualified women and minorities a hand up, but they opposed preferences and greatly opposed anything called a quota” (Anderson 2004, 260). Because Proposition 209 was worded as banning “preferential treatment” it was able to gain majority support.

Most Americans believe that they live in a meritocracy and this view affects their position on affirmative action. Most whites do not believe that they have been discriminated against because of affirmative action. And men do not believe that they have suffered any discrimination as a result of affirmative action programs that favor women. As stated in earlier chapters most African Americans do not believe they have been personally discriminated against, but the proportion of African Americans that do believe so is much higher than the proportion of whites that believe the same. Only a minority of women believe that they have not been offered a job, have been passed up for a promotion, or have not been admitted to a school because of discrimination. What is more, the vast majority of Americans report that they have never encountered a woman or African American who got a job or a promotion that they did not deserve, nor have they witnessed any discrimination against women and minorities. Fully three-quarters of Americans do not believe that a well-qualified minority has been hired or promoted at their workplace that would not have been without affirmative action. As for the argument that affirmative action stigmatizes minorities, women and African Americans do not believe that their abilities have been privately questioned by their colleagues at school or work. Even when specifically asked about affirmative action most Americans do not believe that they have suffered from discrimination, nor do they personally know of someone who has.

Overall, most Americans don't believe that racial or sexual discrimination is prevalent in our society.

Table 37: How Have Lives Been Affected?

Have any of the following things happened to you as a result of affirmative action programs favoring minorities?

	All Whites	White Men	White
Women			
Not offered a job that went to a racial minority. <sup>1</sup>	12%	15%	10%
Passed over for a promotion that went to a racial minority. <sup>2</sup>	8%	9%	8%
Not admitted to a school. <sup>3</sup>	2%	4%	1%

Have any of the following things happened to you as a result of affirmative action programs that favor women?

	All Men	White Men	Black
Men			
Not offered a job that went to a woman. <sup>4</sup>	8%	7%	10%
Passed over for a promotion that went to a woman. <sup>5</sup>	7%	6%	11%
Not admitted to a school. <sup>6</sup>	2%	2%	6%

Do you believe that any of the following things have ever happened to you because of racial discrimination?

	All Blacks	Black Men	Black Women
Not offered a job that went to a white. <sup>7</sup>	33%	42%	31%
Passed over for a promotion that went to a white. <sup>8</sup>	31%	42%	28%
Not admitted to a school. <sup>9</sup>	6%	7%	5%

Do you believe that any of the following things have ever happened to you because of discrimination against women?

	All Women	White Women	Black Women
Not offered a job that went to a man. <sup>10</sup>	19%	20%	18%
Passed over for a promotion that went to a man. <sup>11</sup>	13%	13%	13%
Not admitted to a school. <sup>12</sup>	2%	1%	5%

Have you personally ever thought that a woman where you worked got a job or promotion she did not deserve as a result of affirmative action programs?<sup>13</sup>

	All	Men	Women
Yes	19%	20%	19%
No	79%	80%	78%

Have you personally ever thought that a racial minority where you worked got an undeserved job or promotion as a result of affirmative action programs?<sup>14</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Yes	30%	32%	15%
No	69%	66%	85%

Have you personally ever thought that a well-qualified person at your workplace was hired or promoted as a direct result of affirmative action, and probably would not have been hired without affirmative action?<sup>15</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Yes	24%	23%	32%
No	75%	76%	67%

Have you ever thought that because of discrimination, someone at your workplace received a job or promotion rather than a woman or minority who was better qualified?<sup>16</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Yes	21%	20%	36%
No	78%	79%	64%

Have you ever thought your colleagues at work or school privately questioned your abilities or qualifications because of affirmative action?<sup>17</sup>

	White Women	Black Women	Black Men
Yes	8%	19%	28%
No	90%	79%	71%

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<sup>1-17</sup> Survey by USA Today/CNN/Gallup, March 17-19. Stacie, Julie. "Affirmative Action: The Public Reaction" USA Today. March 24, 1995. pp. A3. Margin of error for the total sample +/- 3%. Margin of error for whites is +/-4%. Margin of error for blacks is +/-6%. Margin of error for men is +/-4%. Margin of error for women is +/-4%.

A meritocracy is a society where everyone receives an equal opportunity to succeed, and most Americans strongly believe that opportunities should be made available so that individuals will have a chance to become successful. In line with meritocratic values a majority believes that our society should do whatever is necessary to make sure everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.<sup>48</sup> In this vein most Americans favor policies that "give people a chance to succeed." A small majority believes that some preference should be given to minority applicants in college admissions. A 52% majority of Americans say they would definitely vote against a candidate who damaged or dismantled the Head Start program, which provides resources for early education to children of low-income families. Overwhelming majorities of Americans favor recruitment efforts aimed at minority applicants that encourage them to apply for specific jobs. Large majorities also support job training and special education classes to better prepare minorities for college. In addition, most Americans believe that it is important for colleges to teach

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<sup>48</sup> Multiple surveys confirm this, including: *Survey by Pew Research Center, Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, July 14-August 5, 2003*; *Survey by Pew Research Center, Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, September 28-October 10, 1999*; *Survey by Pew Research Center, Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, November 14-November 18, 1997*; *Survey by Pew Research Center, Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, November 5-November 17, 1997*; *Survey Conducted by Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, November 9-January 9, 1995*. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

students to get along with people from different backgrounds and to prepare minority students to become successful. Overall, most Americans claim to support affirmative action programs. All of these items would lead one to conclude that Americans would support a variety of programs and policies aimed at increasing opportunities for disadvantaged individuals.

Table 38: Providing an Equal Opportunity

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Our society should do what is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.<sup>1</sup>

Completely agree	53%
Mostly agree	38%
Mostly disagree	6%
Completely disagree	2%
Don't know	1%

Some preference should be given in college admissions to minority candidates in order to ensure equal opportunity for a higher education in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

Strongly agree	13%
Agree	40%
Disagree	34%
Strongly disagree	11%
Don't know	2%

Congress may end up making changes to Head Start in 2003. One proposal is to reduce the federal role in Head Start by giving states control has been described as 'damaging' or 'dismantling' the program for low-income, at-risk children. Would you be more or less likely to oppose a politician who was accused of voting in a way that would damage or dismantle the Head Start program?<sup>3</sup>

Definitely support	3%
Might support	8%
Might oppose	32%
Definitely oppose	52%
Don't know	5%

Do you favor or oppose the following?

Companies making special efforts to find qualified minorities and women and then encouraging them to apply for jobs.<sup>4</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Favors	73%	71%	87%
Opposes	24%	12%	12%

Providing job training programs for minorities and women to make them better qualified for jobs.<sup>5</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Favors	82%	80%	94%
Opposes	17%	18%	6%

Providing special education classes for minorities and women to make them better qualified for college.<sup>6</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Favors	75%	73%	90%
Opposes	22%	24%	9%

Do you believe this is an important role for a college to perform?

Teach students to get along with people from different backgrounds.<sup>7</sup>

Strongly agree	55%
Agree	24%
Disagree	16%
Strongly disagree	5%
Don't know	1%

Prepare students from minority groups to become successful.<sup>8</sup>

Strongly agree	47%
Agree	29%
Disagree	17%
Strongly disagree	7%
Don't know	1%

Do you generally favor or oppose affirmative action programs for women and minorities?<sup>9</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Favors	55%	53%	72%
Opposes	34%	36%	21%

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<sup>1</sup> Survey by Pew Research Center, Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, July 14-August 5, 2003. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> Survey by the Chronicle of Higher Education, Survey of Public Opinion on Higher Education conducted February 25 to March 21, 2004. Retrieved June 26, 2006 from Academic Search Premier.

<sup>3</sup> *Survey by Pax World Funds, National Head Start Association, Conducted by Opinion Research Corporation, August 7-August 10, 2003.* Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>4-6</sup> *Survey by USA Today/CNN/Gallup, March 17-19.* Stacie, Julie. "Affirmative Action: The Public Reaction" USA Today. March 24, 1995. pp. A3. Margin of error for the total sample +/- 3%. Margin of error for whites is +/-4%. Margin of error for blacks is +/-6%. Margin of error for men is +/-4%. Margin of error for women is +/-4%.

<sup>7-8</sup> *Survey by the Chronicle of Higher Education, Survey of Public Opinion on Higher Education conducted February 25 to March 21, 2004.* Retrieved June 26, 2006 from Academic Search Premier.

<sup>9</sup> *Survey by USA Today/CNN/Gallup, March 17-19.* Stacie, Julie. "Affirmative Action: The Public Reaction" USA Today. March 24, 1995. pp. A3. Margin of error for the total sample +/- 3%. Margin of error for whites is +/-4%. Margin of error for blacks is +/-6%. Margin of error for men is +/-4%. Margin of error for women is +/-4%.

Still, the very same values of meritocratic justice that lead one to support programs aimed at assisting minorities are sometimes used to oppose them. Except among African Americans there is strong opposition to quotas that force companies to hire or colleges to admit a certain number of minority applicants. The vast majority of Americans believe that race or ethnicity should not be a factor when making decisions about hiring, promoting, or college admissions; instead they believe that such decisions should be based strictly on merit. Of those that believe that hiring, promoting, and college admissions should be based strictly on merit nearly 70% would still hold that view even if it meant that few or no minorities would be hired or admitted to college, suggesting there is a ruthless adherence the meritocratic ethos. By the same proportion Americans reject the argument that race should be factor in college admissions to promote diversity and they favor decisions based strictly on merit. Many proponents of affirmative action might be surprised to learn that this adherence to the merit criterion includes legacies. A majority of Americans oppose admissions preferences for the children of alumni. While there are no noteworthy lawsuits and not much media coverage on the issue of legacy admissions, most Americans are troubled by the practice.



Table 39: Opposition to Quotas and Preferences

Establishing quotas that require businesses to hire a certain number of minorities and women.<sup>1</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Favors	35%	30%	66%
Opposes	63%	68%	31%

Establishing quotas requiring schools to admit a certain number of minorities and women students.<sup>2</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Favors	39%	35%	20%
Opposes	52%	61%	27%

Making a certain number of scholarships at public colleges and universities available only to minorities and women.<sup>3</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Favors	31%	27%	51%
Opposes	67%	71%	45%

In order to give minorities more opportunity, do you believe race or ethnicity should be a factor when deciding who is hired, promoted, or admitted to college, or that hiring, promotions, and college admissions should be based strictly on merit and qualifications other than race or ethnicity?<sup>4</sup>

Race or ethnicity should be a factor	5%
Should be based strictly on merit and qualifications	92%
Don't know	3%

Would you still feel that way (hiring, promotion, and college admissions should be based strictly on merit and qualifications other than race or ethnicity) if it meant minorities were underrepresented in some types of jobs, or that few or no minorities were hired by some companies or admitted to certain colleges?<sup>5</sup>

Note: Asked of those who said should be based solely on merit and qualifications

Yes	69%
No	27%
Don't know/No opinion	4%

Which comes closer to your view about evaluating students for admission into a college or university--applicants should be admitted solely on the basis of merit, even if that results in few minority students being admitted or an applicant's racial and ethnic background should be considered to help promote diversity on college

campuses, even if that means admitting some minority students who otherwise would not be admitted?<sup>6</sup>

Solely on merit	69%
Racial/Ethnic background considered	27%
No opinion	4%

Applicants to a college whose close relatives attended the same college should be given extra consideration for admission.<sup>7</sup>

Strongly agree	4%
Agree	19%
Disagree	56%
Strongly disagree	19%
Don't know	2%

Some people say that because of past discrimination blacks should be given preference in hiring and promotion. Others say that such preference in hiring and promotion of blacks is wrong because it gives blacks advantages they haven't earned. What about your opinion--are you for or against preferential hiring and promotion of blacks?<sup>8</sup>

For	14%
Against	82%
Don't know/refused	4%

Some people say that because of past discrimination, blacks should be given preference in hiring and promotion. Others say that such preference in hiring and promotion of blacks is wrong because it discriminates against whites. What about your opinion--are you for or against preferential hiring and promotion of blacks?<sup>9</sup>

Strongly favors	9%
Favors	6%
Opposes	28%
Strongly opposes	54%

			$\chi^2$	Cramer's V
	Whites	African Americans	183.3**	.263**
Strongly favors	4%	35%		
Favors	6%	10%		
Opposes	28%	28%		
Strongly opposes	62%	28%		

Do you favor or oppose the following?

Favoring a minority who is less qualified than a white applicant when filling a job in a business that has few minority workers.<sup>10</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Favors	13%	11%	22%
Opposes	84%	86%	68%

Favoring a well-qualified minority applicant over an equally qualified white applicant when filling a job in a business that has few minority workers.<sup>11</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Favors	48%	47%	51%
Opposes	44%	45%	42%

Require private businesses to set up specific goals and timetables for hiring women and minorities if there were not government programs that included hiring quotas.<sup>12</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Favors	50%	46%	71%
Opposes	46%	50%	21%

Do you think we need to increase, keep the same or decrease affirmative action programs in this country?<sup>13</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Increase	31%	26%	65%
Keep the Same	26%	26%	26%
Decrease	37%	41%	6%

How likely do you think that each of the following will happen if affirmative action is eliminated.... Hiring decisions will be based on merit only.<sup>14</sup>

Very likely	34%
Somewhat likely	25%
Not very likely	22%
Not likely at all	12%
Not sure	7%

Is affirmative action needed? Do you think schools and businesses would or would not provide blacks and other racial minorities with equal opportunities if the government dropped all affirmative action programs.<sup>15</sup>

	All	Whites	African Americans
Would	46%	48%	27%
Would Not	45%	43%	67%

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\*p < .05 \*\* p < .01

<sup>1-3</sup> Survey by *USA Today/CNN/Gallup, March 17-19*. Stacie, Julie. "Affirmative Action: The Public Reaction" *USA Today*. March 24, 1995. pp. A3. Margin of error for the total sample +/- 3%. Margin of error for whites is +/-4%. Margin of error for blacks is +/-6%. Margin of error for men is +/-4%. Margin of error for women is +/-4%.

<sup>4</sup> Survey by *Washington Post, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard University, Conducted by Washington Post, March 8-April 22, 2001*. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>5</sup> Survey by *Harvard University, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Conducted by Washington Post, July 20-September 28, 1995*. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>6</sup> Survey Conducted by *Gallup Organization, June 12-June 18, 2003*. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>7</sup> Survey by *the Chronicle of Higher Education, Survey of Public Opinion on Higher Education conducted February 25 to March 21, 2004*. Retrieved June 26, 2006 from Academic Search Premier.

<sup>8</sup> Survey Conducted by *Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, November 9-January 9, 1995*. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>9</sup> Survey Conducted by *National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, February 6-June 26, 2002*. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. Calculations based on the author's own analysis.

<sup>10-13</sup> Survey by *USA Today/CNN/Gallup, March 17-19*. Stacie, Julie. "Affirmative Action: The Public Reaction" *USA Today*. March 24, 1995. pp. A3. Margin of error for the total sample +/- 3%. Margin of error for whites is +/-4%. Margin of error for blacks is +/-6%. Margin of error for men is +/-4%. Margin of error for women is +/-4%.

<sup>14</sup> Survey by *Feminist Majority Foundation, Conducted by Peter Y. Harris Research Group, March 16-April 3, 1995*. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>15</sup> Survey by *USA Today/CNN/Gallup, March 17-19*. Stacie, Julie. "Affirmative Action: The Public Reaction" *USA Today*. March 24, 1995. pp. A3. Margin of error for the total sample +/- 3%. Margin of error for whites is +/-4%. Margin of error for blacks is +/-6%. Margin of error for men is +/-4%. Margin of error for women is +/-4%.

An overwhelming majority believes that African Americans should not be given preferences in hiring because they believe it would give them advantages they haven't earned. A majority of both blacks and whites oppose the preferential hiring of African Americans because they believe it discriminates against whites. However, there is a disparity; over one-third of African Americans strongly support racial preferences compared to 4% of whites. A majority of both whites and African Americans oppose the hiring of a less qualified minority applicant over a more qualified white applicant.

When respondents are asked if a preference should be given to a minority applicant when both the white and minority are equally well qualified the results vary. White opinion split while African Americans slightly favor a preference for the minority applicant. A majority of African Americans believe that affirmative action programs need to be increased while a plurality of whites believe that affirmative action programs should be decreased. A plurality of Americans believes that if affirmative action is eliminated hiring decisions will be based strictly on merit and it seems that only African Americans fully convinced that affirmative action needed. The likely reason that a majority doesn't believe that merit would be the only factor influencing hiring decisions once affirmative action is eliminated is the knowledge that social background and personal connections still matter.

#### *Discussion*

The perception that America is a meritocracy is enhanced by most Americans' view that they have not suffered any discrimination as a result of their race or gender. When women and minorities are hired or promoted, most Americans believe that they were qualified for their positions and most have not witnessed discrimination against women and minorities. This suggests that, despite the political rhetoric of undeserving and unqualified minorities taking jobs and places at universities from whites, very few people believe that the undeserving are getting ahead. And although some believe that affirmative action stigmatizes its beneficiaries, the vast majority of women and minorities do not feel that their abilities have been privately questioned by their colleagues. The American worldview is one in which discrimination is not readily perceptible.

There is overt support for affirmative action when it is viewed as a program that provides people with opportunities. Indeed, when the words “to ensure equal opportunity” is stated as the reason for preferences a majority of Americans are willing to support the use of racial preferences. Americans favor programs that provide job training to minorities or that improve their chances of being successful in college. They believe that colleges should teach students to get along with people from different backgrounds and prepare minority students to become successful. This can only be done if colleges are diverse and most Americans, including most whites, support affirmative action programs.

Adherence to the meritocratic norm is found among both African Americans and whites. When an applicant is poorly qualified there is solid support among both African Americans and whites that the more qualified applicant be hired or admitted. African Americans, like whites, don’t favor hiring or admitting a less qualified minority applicant if there is a better-qualified white, suggesting that merit is a more important value than racial partiality. They also tend to oppose the preferential hiring of minorities because, like whites, they believe the policy discriminates against whites. But this position does not stop most African Americans from supporting quotas, suggesting that, in their view, quotas do not force companies and universities to accept unqualified applicants. Indeed, the brief history of quotas tells us that they were used to force segregated institutions to end their discriminatory policies. For an average African American quotas are good because they force racist and segregated institutions to accept qualified minorities. In their view affirmative action combats discrimination and gives minorities real opportunities to succeed.

Although both African Americans and whites believe that the better-qualified applicant should be chosen over the less-qualified applicant, opinions begin to diverge in the event of a tie between two applicants. When white respondents are asked to choose between two equally qualified applicants, where one is white and the other is a minority, they can't decide if there should be a preference. Some think there should be, while others oppose the race-based preference. African Americans slightly favor a race-based preference, but the results are not overwhelmingly strong. Among both groups, when two applicants are equally well qualified, there is much more difficulty in making a decision about who should be chosen.

That evidence suggests that in many ways both African Americans and whites accept meritocratic norms and respond similarly to questions of distributive justice. They even tend to oppose legacy admissions. Yet, chapter 4 highlighted a major difference of opinion between black and white Americans. Whites believed that African Americans had about the same opportunities in life as they had themselves, while African Americans believed they had fewer opportunities than whites. This difference is probably a major reason for the differences in opinion regarding the use of racial preferences in affirmative action. If we all have the same chance to succeed, then affirmative action is helping a group that is perfectly capable of succeeding without any help. If we don't all have the same chance to succeed, and these differences are attributable to racial discrimination, then affirmative action provides the discriminated against group a chance to become successful and to compete on a level playing field.

Both African Americans and whites are hesitant about the use of racial preferences. But while African Americans support quotas, whites strongly reject the practice. African Americans, who are much more likely to believe that they suffer from racial discrimination, tend to believe that affirmative action needs to be expanded. Whites, although they support affirmative action in the context of ensuring equal opportunity, tend to believe that affirmative action programs should be scaled back. The view does not stem from overt racism but from a very real belief among whites that African Americans already have an equal opportunity to succeed.

In this context it is easy for many Americans to blame affirmative action for their personal misfortunes. “Affirmative action becomes an easy scapegoat in a world in which we know but don’t admit that privilege molds the distribution of everything from college admissions to ice cream sundaes” (Lawrence & Matsuda 1997, 98). When faced with the reality that much of what society has to offer is distributed only to those who have the right connections and are born into privilege, we form a psychological barrier. Denial is as a strong defense for battered women as it is for racial and class oppression. Admitting that those with power are taking more than their fair share is difficult to accept. “It requires either enraged action or total degradation” (Lawrence & Matsuda 1997, 101). As a result individuals must either “cling to the myth of merit, or accept that” they “are a perpetual chump” (Lawrence & Matsuda 1997, 101). The danger with admitting that the world is not fair is that we might have to do something about it. And, if you’re white or wealthy, it means you might have to give up some your privilege. For many, this may simply be too much to bear.



It's true that the opinions of whites have tempered dramatically over the years, but they find themselves in a very peculiar circumstance. As a group they tend to support giving minorities more opportunities, but they reject the use of preferences. One explanation is that whites are fearful of losing their privileged position of dominance. Fifty years ago they supported policies aimed at forcibly keeping African Americans out of their institutions. Today they support policies that would reduce the numbers of African Americans in predominantly white institutions. White sentiment towards blacks has shifted from "we don't want you here" to "we don't care if you're here." They have moved from overtly racist and hostile attitudes to a kind of depraved indifference. Indeed, the typical white American seems to be saying "If ending affirmative action would result in a decrease in the numbers of African Americans in college, then I would still like to eliminate it." This would certainly improve the position of whites, as it has in California and Washington State, and in their view make the world a fairer place.

Relatedly, most whites are in denial about having a privileged position. They firmly believe that African Americans have the same chance of succeeding as whites. Most believe that there are very few barriers preventing blacks from succeeding. This may be because most whites still do not encounter African Americans in their everyday lives. And the African Americans that they do encounter are usually of a similar socio-economic class. If a white professional meets a black professional in the workplace and these are the only blacks he ever encounters, then it must seem like racial inequality has been solved. The same would probably be true for poor and working class whites. Because America is segregated economically the racial

minorities we encounter are most likely to be in similar circumstances to ourselves. This would make it very difficult for individual Americans to “see” things from a sociologist’s point of view. For many whites affirmative action is a discriminatory policy that prevents whites from succeeding of their own accord.

Happily, there has been a decline in the overt racism of the 1940’s and 50’s. Many whites even support programs aimed at improving opportunities for minorities. In fact, “The assumption that Americans are no longer racist is central to the argument against race-based affirmative action. Opponents of affirmative action proclaim that we have won the war against bigotry and achieved a society that is essentially free of racial prejudice” (Lawrence & Matsuda 1997, 69). Some have called this the “Big Lie” and if it is believed, then whites can convince themselves that no remedies are necessary (Lawrence & Matsuda 1997,70). “Moreover, if we can believe there is no racism, or that there is very little, those Americans who benefit from white privilege can continue to reap the benefits of that privilege while denying any moral responsibility for the suffering of others” (Lawrence & Matsuda 1997, 74). It easier to pretend that there is no white privilege, than to acknowledge it and get rid of it, especially since so much effort has been expended in preserving it.

Ultimately, both African Americans and whites support meritocratic values. The issue is that they emphasize different ones. African Americans tend to support quotas and preferences because they believe that this will provide everyone with an equal opportunity to succeed. They don’t like preferences, but believe racial preferences are necessary to make sure equal opportunity is achieved. For them, preferences for minorities level the playing field. Whites oppose preferences and

quotas because they believe the practices are unjust, but they also believe that equal opportunity is already a reality. For whites, the playing field is already level and minority preferences tilt the odds against them. Most African Americans believe that preferences are a necessary evil that will help us create a meritocracy. Most whites believe that we already live in a meritocracy and that preferences are just plain evil.

## Chapter 8

### The Consequences for American Democracy

*The public must be put in its place, so that it may exercise its own powers, but no less and perhaps even more, so that each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of the bewildered herd.<sup>49</sup>*

*Walter Lippmann*

Every serious scholar of politics has asked himself, “What is the proper relationship between the government and the governed?” and “To what extent should the masses have an influence on government action?” The answers to these important questions often depend on an antecedent question. “Can we trust the public?” If we can trust the public, we might choose to give the masses a great deal of influence. If we don’t trust the public, we might be better off restricting their power over government.

When it comes to meritocracy Americans display ambivalence. They sometimes accept and sometimes reject meritocratic norms. Many political theorists are fond of the “value pluralism” idea first espoused by Isiah Berlin. There are indeed many good reasons to like value pluralism, but when different competing values can’t co-exist choices must be made about which values are preferred in relation to the others. Sometimes we must choose between liberty and democracy, or between economic rights and equal opportunity for all.

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<sup>49</sup> Lippmann 1993, 145

Viewed from the perspective of the meritocratic ideal, American public opinion is nonsensical. If, after considering the drawbacks, we decide that meritocracy is a goal worth achieving, then certain rights and liberties must be curtailed. If we decide that those rights and liberties are too valuable, then we must accept that meritocracy is an ideal that we wish not to attain.

### *Political Theory and Fear of the Masses*

Political theory can be divided into two competing schools of thought. There are those scholars who support democracy and who believe that sovereignty and decision-making belongs in the hands of the people. We call these scholars “democratic theorists.” Then there are those scholars who hold the public in low esteem and who believe that giving power to the masses is not only dangerous to minorities, but also dangerous to the masses themselves. They would prefer a system of monarchy, oligarchy, aristocracy, dictatorship, or a republic ruled by “philosopher-kings.” We call this group of scholars “elite theorists.” Sometimes theorists attempt to combine elements of both, making trade-offs that they believe will lead to the best results. And, although democracy has the advantage in the western world, these other forms of government still exist and they have their proponents in the west. Because these other theories are generally less popular, it makes sense to explore what they entail.

Schumpeter, for example, denies the existence of a “collective will” and of a “people” with legal standing. He draws on mass psychology and believes that the “rabble,” which he uses interchangeably with “people” and “masses,” have a “reduced sense of reality” and are “primitive,” “infantile,” and prone to irrational

impulses. This crowd psychology is described as having a reduced sense of responsibility along with a “greater sensitiveness to non-logical influences.”

Schumpeter believes that crowds, whether they are a lynch mob, newspaper readers, or a parliament, are easily thrown into a “state of frenzy” which “spurs the animal spirits.” He cites cases where clear majorities of the citizenry of a given community or nation have decided to persecute minority religious groups. When this happens democracy destroys liberty. For Schumpeter, any government that is truly *for* the people cannot be *by* them (Schumpeter 1947).

If Nietzsche believes that democracy will lead to the formation of a group of people analogous to a herd of sheep and Heidegger believes that democracy will lead to the formation of group of individualistic monsters, then Gaetano Mosca would take it a step further and say that democracy will lead to rule by a group of monster sheep. He believed that democratic ideas rouse the base passions and bestial instincts of the ignorant crowd. He argued against the enlargement of the franchise and warned of the terrible consequences of democratization. He perceived the masses to have a herding and fighting instinct, which dangerously combined with a ferocious lust for blood. Instead, Mosca believed “that only the ‘scientific study of social laws’ by men of ‘merit’ and ‘technical ability’ could ensure truly effective government” (Nye; 16).

Vilfredo Pareto made similar claims using rational modeling techniques. From his social Darwinist perspective, he believed that a regular hierarchy of talent naturally develops in social structures. His ‘circulation of elites’ hypothesis argues that elites are drawn from the masses and replace each other with some regularity. He characterized the masses as misfits who lacked character, energy, and intelligence. In

the struggle of survival between the civilized man and the savage, he urged elites to use their own violence against the violence of the crowd (Nye; 20-5).

Reinhold Niebuhr, a Christian theologian, emphasizes the brutal characteristics of all human collectives. He argues that one can not trust the privileged, the proletariat, nations, experts, in short any *group* of actors, to behave in a moral manner. Groups, he says, have a tendency to behave in selfish and anti-social ways and he suggests that both religion and rationality are limited in their capacity to solve social problems. In his view, nationalism combined with religious fervor has caused the most terrible cases of human immorality. And while reason checks these selfish impulses he states, “Men will never be wholly reasonable, and the proportion of reason to impulse becomes increasingly negative when we proceed from the life of individuals to that of social groups, among whom a common mind and purpose is always more or less inchoate and transitory, and who depend on a common impulse to bind them together” (Niebuhr 1995, 35). He further believes that society should strive for justice even if it uses means that do not receive the approbation of moral persons.

These may seem like extreme examples, but even America’s Alexander Hamilton felt this way about “the people.” He asked, “Has it not... invariably been found that momentary passions, and immediate interests, have a more active and imperious control over human conduct than general or remote consideration of policy, utility, or justice?” and “Are not popular assemblies frequently subject to the impulses of rage, resentment, jealousy, avarice, and of other irregular and violent propensities?” (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1961, 56). James Madison, like

Jefferson, envisioned an elite ruler class, “The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common interest of society” (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1961, 350). The common man was simply not good enough to be in control of government.

Indeed no less of a democratic theorist than Alexis de Tocqueville warned that the masses endanger their own liberty, “their passion for equality is ardent, insatiable, eternal and invincible. They want equality in freedom, and if they cannot have that they still want equality in slavery. They will put up with poverty, servitude, and barbarism, but they will not endure aristocracy” thus de Tocqueville warns us of the “Tyranny of the Majority” (de Tocqueville 1969, 250; 506). The various theorists discussed above opposed populist democracy because they were essentially liberal; they feared that the masses would trample on the rights of individuals.

In one way or another these various views of collectives as “inchoate” are an allusion to Condorcet’s Paradox, which is better known today as the problem of transitive voter preferences. Condorcet, a French mathematician during their democratic revolution of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, drew on the utilitarian’s notion of rational action and noted that groups of individual rational actors do not necessarily behave in a rational manner. This simple table demonstrates his theory.

Policy Option	Voter 1	Voter 2	Voter 3
First Choice	A	B	C
Second Choice	B	C	A
Third Choice	C	A	B

Each of the voters has a definite (non-transitive) preference ordering of various state policies designated by the letters A, B, and C. There is a two to one majority that



favors policy A over policy B, a two to one majority that favors policy B over policy C, and a two to one majority that favors policy C over policy A. In this case then we have a group of three perfectly (in the economic sense) rational and reasonable people who when they form a group will develop a form of schizophrenia.

Modern theorists have found that as the number of actors, but especially as the number of choices, increases the likelihood of this phenomenon occurring rises dramatically (Riker 1988, 122). There are of course other methods of reaching a collective decision (or determining a group's preference) other than majority rule. However, none of those methods would be able to solve the "voting paradox" without violating one of four democratic principles set forth by Kenneth Arrow (Arrow 1967). Procedurally then, there is no democratic mechanism for the aggregation of preferences that is immune from "perverse outcomes." This may account for the elite theorist's view that groups are non-rational, unintelligent, and profoundly stupid. If we value democracy, how can we overcome these problems?

#### *A Few Solutions to the Problem of Mass Irrationality*

Arrow points out that one of the ways around this problem of democracy is to have a dictatorship where the policy preference of a single rational individual is always implemented. Although he is not a supporter of dictatorship his theoretical claim is that reducing the number of decision makers improves collective rationality. But suppose we believe that the public should have at least some influence over government policy, what other alternatives are there?

One method is to restrict the franchise. Although it may seem outrageous to propose this today, it was a truism among America's founders that suffrage must be

limited. Early in our history the franchise was limited by race, sex, and property ownership. Later, the American states would impose literacy exams to restrict voting. J.S. Mill regards “it as wholly inadmissible that any person should participate in the suffrage without being able to read, write, and, I will add, perform the common operations of arithmetic” (Mill 1951, 376). But he adds that these basic requirements should be made available to every person. He also believes that “the assembly which votes the taxes... should be elected exclusively by those who pay something towards the taxes imposed” because people are prone to spending other people’s money immoderately (Mill 1951, 378). Most importantly, however, Mill supported “plural suffrage.” He believed that those who were more intelligent, or had superior educations, should have more votes than those who had less (Mill 1951, 386). The actual number of votes each person got was unimportant; as long as those with “mental superiority” received proportionately more. Imagine high school graduates getting one vote, college graduates two votes, those with Master’s degrees having three votes, and those with Doctorates four votes. Presumably, those who are better educated are more likely to pursue the common good rather than their own personal interests, but that is a subject that is beyond the scope of this particular project.

Another method, also adopted by America’s founders, is to limit the power of government. The Constitution would establish bounds that the government could not exceed. Even if the masses found themselves in a state of frenzy with violent impulses, the government would be incapable of action. Dividing power between three separate branches at the federal level and between the federal and state

governments furthered the goal of limiting the power of government. The lack of a unitary government made legislative action slow and cumbersome.

Similarly, public policy could be insulated from the vagaries of the masses through a series of “successive filtrations.” The first filter is to opt for representative government instead of direct democracy. According to Madison this would

refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizenry, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations. Under such a regulation it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for that purpose.

(Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1961, 82)

Unfortunately, the House of Representatives was directly elected by the people and could therefore, in one single election, be overtaken by the wild passions of the masses who could reconstitute the entire House with men who would pander to their temporary impulse.

Therefore, the next filter would add a second chamber to the legislative branch. “The necessity of a senate is not less indicated by the propensity of all single and numerous assemblies to yield to the impulse of sudden and violent passions, and to be seduced by factious leaders into intemperate and pernicious resolutions” (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1961, 379). The Senate would not be elected directly by the people. Rather, each state legislature would select the persons they thought would best represent their state in the federal assembly. Thus senators would be chosen indirectly; citizens would vote for the people who would vote for a senator. In addition, Senate elections would be staggered. Only one-third of the Senate would be up for election in any two-year period. The six-year terms of office with staggered

elections meant that it would take four years to gain a majority in the Senate and six years to fully reconstitute it. By that time any sudden passion should have dissipated and the danger averted. Again, government change would be too slow to be affected by any capricious whims of the masses.

The Senate would also be smaller in number than the House of Representatives. Madison, although he did not have the mathematical proof, understood Riker's addition to the Condorcet paradox. Madison knew that, "the more numerous any assembly may be, of whatever characters composed, the greater is known to be the ascendancy of passion over reason. In the next place, the larger the number, the greater will be the proportion of members of limited information and of weak capacities... the more multitudinous a representative assembly may be rendered, the more it will partake of the infirmities incident to collective meetings of the people" (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1961, 360). For Madison, less people meant better people and more reasoned decision-making. Indeed, "The main reason, perhaps the only real reason, why second chambers exist in all federal systems is to preserve and protect *unequal* representation" (Dahl 2003, 47).

Each of these methods tends to limit the influence the masses can have on government action. The logic is very simple; if we want the best decisions made for our country, we have to start with the best people. Only some, with superior qualities, should be allowed to vote; or their votes should be weighted to give them more influence. These better people will then vote for high quality representatives. But even then additional filters must be added and explicit limits set on the actions they can take. In this way America's leaders are supposed to be "the best of the best

of the best.” For those who fear the public, or for those who believe the masses are ignorant, these types of institutional remedies reduce the harm that “the people” can inflict on themselves or on some minority within them.

### *Value Pluralism*

People have different values and these values are applied selectively to different moral problems. Isaiah Berlin developed this view of the moral world and called it “value pluralism.” “He depicts a world in which fundamental values are plural, conflicting, incommensurable in theory, and uncombinable in practice – a world in which there is no single, univocal summum bonum that can be defined philosophically, let alone imposed politically” (Galston 2002, 30). The values that Americans share are incompatible with each other and cannot be imposed simultaneously without severe contradictions.

This poses a very difficult problem for those who believe that the public will should be of determining influence on government action. If the public continually contradicts itself, how can we decide what the government should or should not be doing? There are those who believe that the problem is the methods that are used to collect public opinion; if we could only develop better methods we could gain a better sense of what the public “really wants.” They believe that public opinion polls ask “stupid” and “simplistic” questions. If only we could ask better questions, the contradictions would disappear and the public would have rational preferences.

Unfortunately, no amount of methodological advance is going to eliminate the problem of value pluralism. According to Althaus, “the primary culprit is not any inherent shortcoming in the methods of survey research. Rather, it is the limited

degree of knowledge held by ordinary citizens about public affairs and the tendency for some kinds of people to be better informed than others” (Althaus 2003, 10). Most people are simply unaware of their contradictory values and preferences. They don’t know enough, or thought about the problems long enough, to understand the consequences of their beliefs.

The selective application of moral principles poses a problem when we fail to understand how several seemingly independent ethical preferences come together to form a moral superstructure. While most people simply make moral claims without realizing they are drawing on different principles, some theorists intentionally use different principles to form judgments about the proper distribution of different social goods. Walzer believes that various types of goods belong to different “spheres” and that different distributive rules apply in the different spheres because of the nature of the good to be distributed. This theory is fraught with errors and contradictions that shed light on some of the more problematic elements of American public opinion. It displays, in a vivid and troublesome fashion, what can happen when we sometimes accept and sometimes ignore meritocratic principles.

Walzer’s theory of distributive justice opposes affirmative action for many of the same reasons that some Americans oppose it. “The difficulty with the remedy proposed is that it would require the denial of equal consideration to white candidates who are neither participants in, nor direct beneficiaries of, racist practices” (Walzer 1983, 152). In common parlance, this is the “My grandfather may have done something wrong but I haven’t and therefore I shouldn’t be punished” argument. We call this an “individual regarding” system of justice. It is proper to punish the

wrongdoer, but improper to punish innocent persons. Simply put, individuals should not be held accountable for the wrong doings of others.

The problem for Walzer, and for white Americans, is that white candidates *are* the direct beneficiaries of racist practices. In 2002, the median net worth of Hispanic households in was \$7,932; of African-American households it was \$5,988. The median wealth of white households was \$88,651 (Kochhar 2004). We cannot deny that in the past persons of color were denied employment opportunities available to whites or were paid a fraction of the salary given to white employees holding the same position. This allowed for an unequal accumulation of economic resources over time. Additionally, the use of legal practices such as restrictive covenants and redlining made it difficult for non-whites to invest their money in profitable ventures. The differences in accumulated wealth today therefore reflect differences in the ability to accumulate wealth in years past. This is a direct result of racist practices.

His theory also holds that “the distribution of the family estate belongs to... the sphere of kinship” (Walzer 1983, 126) and “we have every reason to respect those men and women who give their money away to persons they love” (Walzer 1983, 128). This means that the beneficiaries of a racist practice can then give that money to their, almost always, white offspring. Though the offspring did not participate in the racist practice of the past, and may not directly participate in a racist practice today, they certainly do benefit from racist practices of the past through their receipt of much larger estates and through economic advantages while growing up.

If we shouldn't let others be punished for someone else's wrongdoing, how could we justify allowing the same others to benefit from the same wrongdoing? If

we believe that a son shouldn't be imprisoned for his father's crimes, how can we also believe that the son should keep the money his father stole? The lack of historical perspective in Walzer's statement is troubling, largely because it is probably very common. The theory opposes the unequal consideration of race, just as a meritocracy would, but ignores the gross disparities that give some individuals far more opportunities than other individuals and therefore deviates from meritocratic norms.

Walzer's theory, in meritocratic fashion, desires an egalitarian provision of primary and secondary public education (Walzer 1983, 210), but then says "parents can hire private tutors for their children or send them to private schools" once again deviating from the ideal (Walzer 1983, 102). Students at the most prestigious private schools come from America's wealthiest families and they receive, so far as we can tell, comparably better educations. Given Walzer's concern about the dominance of money into spheres into which it does not legitimately belong, this acceptance of the market in the provision of education seems contradictory. The persons who are most able to purchase these extra tutors and private schooling are those who have higher levels of economic resources and these, by Walzer's own theory of justice, can come from a single dominant racial group. Let's not forget that of the 400 wealthiest people in America 56% are from millionaire families and another 14% are from families in the upper 10% of the income distribution (Domhoff 2002, 57). Wealth, unlike income, is largely inherited and one racial group has a preponderance of this resource. If important opportunities to acquire skills, like educational opportunities, are distributed by the market and there is a strong commitment to market distribution



for that good, then opportunities to acquire skills will be *unequal*. Once we justify market distribution for education, education will not be provided equally. This conflicts with the meritocratic ideal, unless of course we could somehow determine a person's potential before they are born. Since this is beyond our capability it only makes sense that each child should be given as much possibility to acquire important skills than any other child.

Next is Walzer's view about the proper distribution of jobs. "In our culture, however, careers are supposed to be open to talents; and people chosen for an office will want to be assured that they were chosen because they really do possess, to a greater degree than other candidates, the talents that the search committee thinks necessary to the office" (Walzer 1983, 152). This is certainly true and this idea is consistent with the common sense understanding of merit. But the theory does not attempt to limit the very practices that make it difficult for disadvantaged racial groups to develop their talents.

Instead, it claims that it is just to inherit economic resources, it is just to use those resources to purchase specialized training, and it is just if society selects the best trained, best qualified, individuals when distributing jobs. The society that is in line with Walzer's conception of justice is very far from the ideal type meritocracy discussed in chapter one. Remember that in a meritocracy one's social outcome is not affected by one's race. Walzer's system simply reinforces our society's existing inequalities by claiming that they are just. He does not do this explicitly, rather by dividing social goods into different "spheres" and applying different distributive rules to the different spheres he ends up with a system that is unjust from a meritocratic

standpoint. Although Walzer and most Americans would agree that racial discrimination is unjust and would support the elimination of racist practices, they may also believe it is fair for individuals to receive benefits from ancestors who they recognize had unjust advantages.

Compartmentalizing different goods into different spheres can result in an unmeritocratic distribution of social goods. When jobs are to be distributed by merit, but wealth is to be inherited and training opportunities are to be distributed by the market, then the meritocratic ideal cannot be reached. A person under this system may be able to say, “we distributed jobs according to merit and this is fair because the person with the most talent and best skills received the office.” But the society they live in is not meritocratic as long a correlation exists between non-merit criteria and one’s social outcome. This person could adamantly believe that she lives in a meritocracy, but the statement will not be true so long as inheritances and nepotism remain and as long as the opportunities to acquire the skills to succeed are distributed unequally.

We may come to the conclusion that separately each social good Walzer mentions is distributed “fairly.” But when combined into a single system we may conclude that the distribution is “unfair.” The problem with plural values is that no matter which value takes precedence in our system of justice, we will invariably violate another of our important values. The key for Walzer, and for every American, is to begin to think about how our separate decisions come together to form a coherent, or incoherent, whole. Everyone should ask themselves, “When do my

values contradict my other values?” Only in this way can public opinion be made more rational; only in this way can logic prevail.

*We Can't Have It All*

If we would like every child to have the best possible opportunities to achieve their potential, we can't have a society that accepts nepotism. If we believe that every individual should work for what they get, then we cannot allow inheritances. This is a classic collective action problem. Individually, every parent would like to provide the best resources to their children; they want their children to have advantages over other children. If every parent does this and some parents have more resources than others, then some children will have more opportunities to succeed and others will have less. However, there are two questions we have to ask ourselves. Do we like this state of affairs? And, is this best for society?

We might very well decide that the costs are too great and that the family must be preserved. But then we must give up the illusion that we truly desire equal opportunity. If we believe it is just for every parent to provide as much as they can to their children, we must accept that not every child will attain their full potential. Nor can we try to convince ourselves that those who work hard gain the right to spend lavishly on their children. Though the parent may deserve all the rewards he or she receives, the child may not. Just as Thomas Paine argued that virtue is not hereditary, we must learn that merit is not hereditary. Merit is “non-transferable.” In a meritocracy is not legitimate to say, “I deserve the reward because someone else worked for it, or I deserve the job because someone else has the skills.” The moment we accept the hereditary distribution of a good, we reject its distribution by merit.

When Max Weber likens values to gods he alludes to very powerful forces that affect our behavior. He believes,

that so long as life remains immanent and is interpreted in its own terms, it knows only of an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another. Or speaking directly, the ultimately possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion. Thus it is necessary to make a decisive choice.... "Which of the warring gods should we serve? Or should we serve perhaps an entirely different god, and who is he?"

(Gerth and Mills 1946, 152-3)

Most Americans may "worship" opposing "gods;" their behavior and attitudes are dictated by opposing values.

In the final analysis, most Americans may not be aware of their own value conflicts when issues of merit are raised. In particular, their belief in the importance of families and in the fairness or duty to assist one's own child by providing them with resources, including inheritances, may not be viewed as conflicting with their view that every child should have an equal opportunity to succeed. This is not because they have resolved the conflict, but because they are not yet cognizant of the internal contradiction. There are difficult choices that must be made after a full consideration of our duties, of our moral principles, and of the costs and benefits to ourselves and to society. Political leaders and educators can lead the discussion, but each individual must form their own opinion.

But among the issues that must be discussed is the role that government should play. When a government is highly responsive to a group of people who have contradictory preferences, then government policy will be at odds with itself. If a strong majority favors the provision of public goods, and a strong majority also favors

a severe reduction of taxes, then in a democracy the government will tend to have more expenditures than revenues. It will borrow money to satisfy the majority preferences for military defense, for health and sanitation, for retirement benefits, and for other programs of value. In the long run everyone will pay more for the programs we wanted because we didn't want to pay for them. Because we must add interest to the cost of desired programs, we, as a nation, spend more on the programs than if we had just paid for them outright. It is entirely rational for people to want things and to not want to pay for them, but the results are disastrous when an entire people through their government does the same. It goes into debt to pay for government services and under-funds programs thereby causing them to be poorly implemented. We can and do simultaneously complain about excessive costs and under-funding. When we decide to eliminate the estate tax, we are decreasing government revenues and saying, "It doesn't matter if everyone works for their money or not." Americans must make a decision because we can't have it both ways.

*An Alternative View of the Masses*

The critics of direct democracy may be a bit overzealous in their derision of the people. Yet, the people remain largely ignorant and support contradictory policies. What then should we do? According to Althaus, "an appropriate response to information asymmetries is not to attend to paternalistic measures of what the public might want if it knew better, or to consult only the most knowledgeable citizens, but rather to encourage all citizens to discover and act on their interests" (Althaus 2003, 276). Encouraging Americans to learn more about the issues and to come to terms with potentially contradictory preferences is the best course of action.

But what should we do in the meantime and what should we do if the public, despite our best efforts, remains ignorant?

Perhaps we should consider the possibility that groups of people are more akin to children than they are to individual reasonable adults or to violent beasts. Children very often do things that are not good for them simply because they don't know any better. Children often express a desire for candy and loudly complain if they get a stomachache. They have two competing preferences and need help if they are to achieve both. Parents may provide their children with candy, but limit its consumption to avoid the negative consequences of eating it. As a society we often want to get to our travel destinations as quickly as possible, but we don't want to get killed in the process of getting there. Our government has enacted laws setting a speed limit, requiring the use of seatbelts in automobiles, and the use of helmets for motorcycle and bicycle riders. In many cases, people need to be protected from themselves. This would be the case even if the self-harm stems from a democratic process.

William Galston gives a poignant example of this principle.

Consider the following case. While walking through a forest, you come upon two men, one kneeling in a submissive posture, the other pointing a gun at the kneeling man's head and tightening his finger on the trigger. As you rush forward to prevent the tragedy, the kneeling man cries out, "Leave us alone. I gave him permission to shoot me, and you have no right to interfere." I want to suggest that you do have that right, even if no democratically enacted law endorses it. Indeed, I want to go further: You have the right to interfere, even if a democratic law says that you do not. From a pluralist perspective, there are situations (some paternalist, others not) in which the misguided substance of a democratic decision can trump its legitimating form.

(Galston 2002, 86)

Of course, this conclusion is subject to debate. But when democracy fails us because of competing and contradictory majorities, it may be the place of our leaders, through our government, to choose what is best.

Whether we agree with this solution or not, we should not be dismissive of public opinion. The results of surveys provide information about the public's attitudes, beliefs, and values. Even if public opinion seems nonsensical or contradictory we nevertheless gain more information by which to make our judgments. In a democracy the people should have a say in what the government does, but when the people can't make up their minds someone will have to do it for them. For this reason representative democracy is better than direct democracy, even if our representatives are less principled than we would like in an ideal world. The role of the people is to elect the best among them and to remove from office those who hurt the commonwealth. A government that is responsive to its people is a good thing to have, but responsiveness without reason or logic is dangerous. Walter Lippmann was essentially correct: the people have a role to play, but their role must be limited for the good of society.

## Chapter 9

### Conclusions

*The will of the majority is the will of the majority  
and not the will of 'the people.'*<sup>50</sup>

*Joseph A. Schumpeter*

Majority opinion, when analyzed from the perspective of meritocracy, is contradictory. The public sometimes accepts and sometimes rejects meritocratic norms. Most of the public also seems to believe that America is a meritocracy, yet there is evidence that suggests that many Americans are skeptical of this view. Relying on majority opinion does not yield stable results. It seems, then, that public opinion cannot be used to form a rational or logical set of policy initiatives. It is simply too incoherent to be used as a guide for government action.

Political and social theorists have been discussing meritocracy during the last several decades. Most of this literature opposes meritocracy. It is believed that meritocracy is unjust because it would 1) distribute social goods by intelligence and one's intelligence is arbitrarily distributed, 2) create a genetically based caste system where the most intelligent people take control of every position of power, and 3) destroy democracy in favor of rule by the meritorious. Each of these criticisms has faced counterclaims by proponents of meritocracy. For many, meritocracy remains an ideal utopian society. In the words of one supporter of meritocracy, "a society that does not have its best men at the head of its leading institutions is a sociological and

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<sup>50</sup> Schumpeter 1947, 272



moral absurdity” (Bell 1972; 67). These issues of power and justice are at the very core of political science and we can expect the debate to continue for decades to come.

But the debate will never be complete without a discussion of public opinion on the matter. If “the people” are to be sovereign, it is only appropriate the people’s will direct government policy. In this regard majority rule is a basic principle of democracy. But what if we find that there are conflicting majorities? What if majorities favor and oppose the same policy? Relying on “core values” to direct policy will be ineffective if one core value is used to favor a policy while a different core value is used to oppose it. In this case a choice must be made about which core value is more important. Unfortunately, one of the defining characteristics of a core value is that it forms a foundation for our civilization’s way of life. We can’t make liberty, freedom, democracy, equal rights, equal opportunity, or any other core value secondary without compromising our own ideals. We may wish to call this the problem of inexorable hypocrisy.

The project finds that Americans are ambivalent in their views towards meritocracy. Americans are not as meritocratic as other studies have found. They do believe that intelligence and hard work should be rewarded, but they also support inherited wealth, seniority pay, and the distribution of educational opportunities through the market. In short, Americans are not strictly meritocratic in their distributive preferences. They often consider items other than merit to be legitimate reasons for inegalitarian modes of distribution. Having put in place a description of

the ideal type meritocratic society we can see that these latter attitudes and values compromise the meritocratic ones.

The American public does not have the same set of concerns as many social theorists. Unlike Rawls, most Americans believe it is fair for more intelligent people to earn more money. Unlike Herrnstein and Murray, most Americans don't believe that success is genetically determined; it is therefore doubtful that they would be afraid that a genetically based caste system would form. Most Americans do value democracy and wouldn't want experts to make government policy in place of their elected officials. Therefore Dahl's concern may not be a serious threat. Some theorists have tried to blend democratic and meritocratic theory, suggesting that these two visions are complementary rather than antagonistic. While the "highbrow" debate is important, the "lowbrow" understanding of the issues is paramount in any society that is serious about democracy.

One particularly interesting finding of this project calls into question Hochschild's assertion that Americans are egalitarian in the social domain. Although the data presented in this dissertation more or less confirmed that Hochschild was correct about Americans' attitudes in the economic and political domains, it also finds that Americans are not social egalitarians. Most Americans believe it is perfectly just and fair for people to be given greater levels of respect and deference and to have higher social status if their jobs require great amounts of skill or if they make the most of the opportunities they had in life.

Previous studies have also shown that Americans believe that the US is a meritocratic society where intelligence and hard work is actually rewarded. The

majority believes that everyone in America has an equal opportunity to succeed, yet a substantial proportion believes that race, gender, social background, and personal connections make a difference in one's outcome in life. The *vox populi* tells us that America is and is not a meritocracy. There are elements of both in America.

Different groups in America may have different perspectives. But on questions related to meritocracy this project finds only small differences by race, sex, class, income, education level and age. This suggests that Americans generally agree with each other about distributive justice even if their views are contradictory. The few differences that do exist are often differences of variously sized majorities. If 85% of one group and 70% of a different group share an opinion, there is a real statistical difference by group. But overall the group conflict model of society would have little pertinence here.

The low level of "ideological constraint" found in mass opinion is not new. But it does present a recurring problem in the study of government and politics. Exactly how much power should the people have in a democracy? Some theorists have argued that because of the public's ignorance the power that the masses could yield on government should be limited. This was true even of the American founders. Yet, if we value democracy, the people should have an important influence on government policy. Public opinion should not be ignored, even if the results are nonsensical, irrational, and illogical. The public has a role to play, but the populist dream of a direct democracy cannot long withstand the contradictory preferences held by competing majorities. Decisions must be made and our elected leaders must make them.

Still, the public should make an effort at understanding its self-contradictory attitudes, values, and beliefs. Individuals are much more capable of rationality than groups and through education and public discussion individuals can come to grips with the competing values that currently muddle their expressed preferences. Educators can ask students the difficult questions and political leaders can spark a public discussion about the difficult choices that must be made.

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