Dear editors,

Both reviewers acknowledge the substantial improvements made in the manuscript, particularly in clarifying the rationale for focusing on the U.S., refining network terminology, improving the readability of the results, and strengthening the theoretical framing. Reviewer 1 appreciates these revisions but suggests further refinements, specifically highlighting key findings more explicitly in the results section and discussing our results in a comparative perspective.

Reviewer 2 is fully satisfied with the revisions and considers the manuscript ready for publication, noting that the contribution is now clearer, terminology adjustments enhance accessibility for the Network Science audience, and the measurement of anger towards inequality is explicitly addressed.

We greatly appreciate the constructive feedback from both reviewers and have made final refinements to ensure the manuscript is as clear and impactful as possible. The new text is highlighted in yellow in the final text we submit.

Below, we address the two key points raised by Reviewer 1.

1. Results Presentation: While the results section is clearer, some key findings could still be highlighted more explicitly to improve readability and how they connect to network theory. Summarizing core insights at the end of each subsection may help ensure that the main takeaways are evident.

We addressed this valuable comment by adding a brief summary at the end of each subsection in the Results Section, ensuring that key findings are explicitly highlighted and their connections to network theory are clear.

1. Comparative Perspective: While the justification for focusing on the US is now clearer, a brief acknowledgment of how findings might compare with other contexts (even if speculative) could enhance the study’s broader relevance. I understand that inequality is potentially more prevalent and severe than in other OECD countries. However, what I still don’t understand is why belief systems around inequality should be different. This is a major assumption in the paper, which, in my view, should ideally be empirically tested. At the very least, I encourage the authors to address the exceptional status of the US not only regarding the degree of inequality but also with respect to network theory.

To address this insightful comment, we have expanded the discussion on why inequality belief systems may differ across countries, beyond just differences in the severity of inequality. We now explicitly highlight how meritocratic beliefs play a distinct role in the U.S., where they serve as a justification for existing disparities rather than challenging them. Drawing on comparative research, we contrast this pattern with findings from other contexts, such as the Netherlands, where meritocracy is linked to more progressive attitudes toward inequality. We paste the new paragraph below:

“This finding underscores the enduring salience of meritocratic values in the U.S., where such beliefs are deeply ingrained in public attitudes and serve as a key lens for understanding inequality (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; McCall, 2013; Shariff et al., 2016). Notably, this pattern contrasts with findings from other countries, such as the Netherlands, where meritocracy is negatively linked to progressive attitudes toward diversity and heightened perceptions of inequality (Bertero et al., 2024). In highly unequal societies, meritocratic beliefs often function less as an aspiration for fairness and more as a justification for existing disparities (Mijs, 2019). This dynamic helps explain why, despite extreme levels of inequality, the U.S. public remains resistant to redistributive policies, as success is framed primarily through personal responsibility rather than structural privilege (McCall, 2013). Unlike in more egalitarian contexts, where meritocratic ideals can align with progressive views on inequality, in the U.S., they act as a stabilizing force, reinforcing the legitimacy of economic disparities and shaping how fairness and opportunity are perceived. Thus, inequality belief systems are not solely a reflection of economic conditions but are also shaped by cultural narratives that define how success is understood and legitimized.”