

Socioeconomic Status, Network Socioeconomic Diversity, and Market Justice Preferences: Longitudinal Evidence from Chile

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Introduction

Market justice, the principle that rewards in society should reflect individual effort and productivity, has become a dominant perspective in market-oriented societies (Koos & Sachweh, 2019; Lane, 1986). This perspective, emphasizing self-reliance and minimal government intervention, can legitimize economic inequality by framing it as the result of fair competition (Castillo et al., 2024). However, attitudes toward market justice vary significantly, especially in contexts of high inequality and limited social welfare, where access to services like healthcare and education largely depends on individual wealth. Chile provides an illustrative case: despite being one of Latin America's more prosperous nations, it remains highly unequal, with a welfare model heavily reliant on private provision. Understanding how socioeconomic status and network diversity influence attitudes toward market justice in such a setting can offer new insights into the changing views on inequality and market justice.

This paper explores how changes in individual socioeconomic status and the diversity of social networks affect support for market justice principles in Chile. Using longitudinal data from the Chilean Longitudinal Social Survey (ELSOC, 2016–2022), we examine both cross-sectional differences and individual changes over time. We hypothesize that higher socioeconomic status correlates with stronger support for market justice, while greater network diversity—exposing individuals to varied socioeconomic perspectives—reduces it. My goal in this paper is to explore and establish how individual 'socioeconomic experiences' covary with market justice attitudes to shed light on the puzzle of large cross-sectional and small longitudinal correlations between socioeconomic status and such attitudes. Against this backdrop, an open question remains: to what extent do individual changes in network diversity influence changes in support for the market distribution of welfare? This study contributes to the literature by providing evidence from a late-industrialized context, emphasizing how personal networks and socioeconomic mobility shape attitudes toward inequality over time.

Theoretical views on market justice, socioeconomic status, and social networks

Attitudes toward market justice

While redistribution in market societies mainly focuses on the state's capacity to reallocate resources from those in more advantageous positions to those in greater vulnerability, market institutions also play a role in shaping the distribution of economic resources (Koos & Sachweh, 2019; Lindh & McCall, 2020). Hereby, the legitimacy of resource allocation based on market principles has been referred to in the literature as *market justice*. In his seminal work, Lane (1986) defines *market justice* as a distributive principle that mainly focuses on rewards based on "earned deserts," contrasting it with political justice, which prioritizes equality and need. He argues that individuals perceive market outcomes as fair because they reflect personal effort, fostering a sense of self-determination and responsibility (Lane, 1986). These principles advocate for efficiency through competition, minimal government intervention, and voluntary transaction exchange. Additionally, market justice underscores the protection of individual rights, particularly property rights, allowing individuals to control resources and benefit from their labor.

Theoretically, *market justice* attitudes comprise economic beliefs and norms that legitimize inequality based on individual merit and productivity (Kluegel et al., 1999). In this sense, the market acts as a self-regulating arena, coordinating economic exchanges based on supply and demand, where rewards are distributed according to individual contributions and efforts (Kluegel & Smith, 1981). This idea is grounded in the belief that the market promotes procedural fairness, where everyone has equal opportunities to compete, yet the outcomes are determined by individual capabilities (Lane, 1986). Unlike systems based on political justice, which emphasize equality and need, market justice is seen as a process where justice is achieved through the fair competition of free agents (Lane, 1986). This notion of justice stems from the belief that outcomes are deserved, as they reflect personal effort and productivity, fostering a sense of fairness (Svallfors, 2007). However, achieving perceived fairness in market justice depends on maintaining open and responsive systems, where opportunities are accessible to all (Kluegel et al., 1999). Through this lens, inequalities are accepted—even seen as necessary—because they incentivize innovation and productivity, reinforcing societal prosperity by rewarding individual achievements and self-responsibility (Castillo et al., 2013). Thus, market justice values individual responsibility, linking economic rewards to personal contributions rather than redistributive mechanisms.

Research in empirical distributive justice has diversely addressed the study of the justification of economic inequality. In this landscape, it is possible to mention the literature on the justification of wage inequality based on occupations (Jasso, 1978; Kelley & Evans, 1993; Osberg & Smeeding, 2006; Wegener, 1987). Additionally, another part of the literature has underscored how the spheres of the market affect other social domains, such as how it is considered legitimate that the mechanisms that generate inequality in the market are transferred to other areas of society, such as access to social welfare such as education, healthcare, or pensions schemes (Castillo et al., 2024; Lindh, 2015). This suggests that social services are considered legitimate

objects of commodification, ranging from market-driven to mixed or state-led provision, where services can be traded, evaluated, and priced. (Busemeyer & Iversen, 2020).

There have been several ways in which scholars have conceptualized these attitudes. However, what they do have in common is the empirical measure which generally addressed the degree to which people support the statement that *“Is it just or unjust – right or wrong – that people with higher incomes can buy better [welfare service] than people with lower incomes?”*, which has been included in repeated cross-national studies as the International Social Survey Program. For instance, in studies on attitudes towards healthcare, Knesebeck et al. (2016) and Immergut and Schneider (2020) investigated “perceptions of fairness” in access to healthcare, to assess whether citizens find it fair that wealthier individuals receive better healthcare services. Additionally, for education, Lee and Stacey (2023) assessed Australian citizens' support for income-based access to schooling by gauging whether individuals consider it fair that higher-income parents can secure a better education for their children. Similarly, other cross-country comparative studies such as Lindh (2015) and Svallfors (2007) have combined both indicators as a general latent construct. A recent study by Castillo et al. (2024) have scrutinized market justice preferences on the student population in Chile in the domains of education, healthcare, and pensions, as well by employing a latent market justice measure. In this paper, I adopted the latter approach to empirically scrutinize market justice preferences.

Does time matter? The role of (changes in) individual and network socioeconomic status in attitudes towards inequality

Socioeconomic status and attitudes toward inequality

Most of the studies point out that individual socioeconomic position is an important predicting factor of market justice preferences. This has been explained mainly – but not exclusively by self-interested motivations on the expected desirability of market-based distributions over state-based redistribution among the socioeconomically advantaged groups (Lindh & McCall, 2020). Higher-status individuals, with higher educational credentials in better-paying and secure labor market positions, are less likely to challenge market-based distribution, as they justify to a greater extent that access to welfare should be determined by one's ability to pay, compared to those with disadvantaged labor market positions (Svallfors, 2007). Empirically, it has been consistently demonstrated that those in socioeconomically advantaged positions endorse the idea that those with higher incomes should be able to pay more for better social services in the domains of education (J. Lee, 2023), healthcare (Immergut & Schneider, 2020; von dem Knesebeck et al., 2016) and old age pensions (Castillo et al., 2024). Similarly, Lindh (2015) argues that upper-class individuals support market-based social service distribution because they benefit from systems that align with their financial independence, without relying on public support. In contrast, working-class individuals, often dependent on public services, prefer equitable access rather than market-driven systems. Hereby, market-based social insurance and services can be appealing to higher-income individuals as an alternative as they involve no redistribution (Busemeyer & Iversen, 2020). Another argument is that higher-income and educated individuals, who often benefit from market-based distributions, are more likely to view income inequality as fair and merit-based (Kluegel et al., 1999; Svallfors, 2007). Also, higher educational credentials are associated with greater acceptance of

meritocratic ideals and the belief that the market rewards personal achievement (Castillo et al., 2013, 2024) as well as more financial stability given their highly valuable skills in the labor market (Häusermann et al., 2015). In light of this background, the cross-sectional (between-groups) hypothesis that arises from literature is as follows:

H1a: Higher socioeconomic status (income and education) correlates with increased support for market justice.

An important fact is that most of the theoretical approaches in attitudes, including attitudes toward public and private alternatives to social welfare (Lindh & McCall, 2020) and the justification of economic inequality (Janmaat, 2013) have been conceived as theories that aim to explain between-group differences (e.g. income, education) instead of being theories of individual change. It is also true that there are certainly extensions of the self-interest model that have included a dynamic component on preference formation where the consequences of economic prospects and intergenerational mobility on attitudes toward inequality have grasped the possible consequences of *changes* in socioeconomic conditions over time. However, it is essential to note that most theories focus on group-level distinctions rather than on changes at the individual level over time. Indeed, while upward socioeconomic mobility typically results in greater individual well-being, the impact of such intragenerational changes on attitudes toward inequality remains underexplored.

Perspectives such as the prospective upward mobility (POUM) hypothesis posits that support for redistribution among lower-income individuals diminishes if they expect future income gains (Benabou & Ok, 2001). This theory aligns with established income-related hypotheses, such as the "income expectations hypothesis" (Helgason & Rehm, 2023), which together suggest that one's financial outlook can significantly shape political preferences. Thus, while self-interested inspired theories often predict stronger support for redistribution among lower-income groups, optimism about future income can alter this trend. Furthermore, research by Jaime-Castillo and Marqués-Perales (2019) builds on this by highlighting that mobility experiences shape redistributive attitudes through acculturation, socialization, and status maximization processes. This underscores that, beyond self-interest, individuals' experiences of social mobility can lead to nuanced and varied political attitudes. However, Helgason and Rehm (2023) recent analysis using panel data reveals only weak correlations between income changes and shifts in redistributive attitudes, suggesting that other, more complex mechanisms might also be at play. Given this gap, longitudinal evidence hints that as individuals experience rising socioeconomic status, particularly through income, they may demand less redistribution, as they benefit more directly from unequal distributions (Helgason & Rehm, 2023; Langsæther et al., 2022). Yet, findings such as Stegmueller (2013), which indicate that income increases diminish redistributive preferences, are primarily based on data from industrialized welfare states. Thus, there is a need for research beyond these contexts to understand how socioeconomic changes influence political attitudes globally.

H1b: Greater changes in socioeconomic status (income and education) lead to higher support for market justice.

Network structure and attitudes towards economic inequality

Theoretically, a stronger justification of inequality is not solely explained by individual self-interest or normative value-driven explanation (Kulin & Svallfors, 2013; Maldonado et al., 2019). In this regard, the literature has argued that social networks also contribute to attitude formation in different manners. Recently, it has been scrutinized the role of network class profiles – understood as the share of ties toward specific social classes has found that those with higher ties to the upper-middle class hold lower redistributive preferences and connected to working-class positions are associated with higher perceived income inequality (Cobo-Arroyo, 2022) and stronger support for inequality reduction (Lindh & Andersson, 2024). Additionally, other studies have taken a step forward with the single class-profile approach and have shown that being connected *simultaneously* to diverse socioeconomic status positions is associated with more critical views on economic inequality. In particular, socioeconomic diversity in interpersonal networks (*diversity* onwards)—understood as the degree of connectedness to dissimilar socioeconomic positions (e.g., occupations) has been brought into the discussion of how networks contribute to the formation of attitudes toward economic inequality (Otero & Mendoza, 2023). In this sense, networks can shape attitudes and political preferences through social influence implying that individuals adjust their views accordingly based on the diverse information received through their network ties (Lindh et al., 2021). At the same time, dissimilarity within networks refers to cross-cutting social circles that implies to have access to diverse life experiences and broader information to be exposed to (Blau, 1977). In this sense, one argument is network ties act as inferential spaces (Mijs & Roe, 2021), which can leverage the connection between economic inequality and labor market rewards by facilitating cross-class contact and providing information that may foster empathy toward those in economic despair (Sachweh, 2012) or, conversely, legitimize inequality as cross-class contact fades (Vargas Salfate & Stern, 2023).

Empirically, the claim that diversity is associated with more critical views on economic inequality has received empirical support. For instance, Paskov & Weisstanner (2022) found that more diverse networks lead to dis-aligned class-based redistributive preferences, where working-class individuals with parental and partner ties to the upper-middle classes nuance their preferences compared to “pure” working-class connections. By contrast, upper-middle-class individuals with more ties toward the working class are more likely to support redistribution. More straightforwardly, Otero & Mendoza (2023) found that more socioeconomically diverse acquaintance networks are associated with higher perceived inequality, higher economic egalitarianism, and more critical views on the current equality of opportunities and meritocracy. Here I argue that being connected to a diverse range of social positions can significantly broaden exposure to different experiences with market-based inequality. Hereby, individuals with extensive – and possibly cross-cutting social ties are more likely to receive information about labor market processes such as job seeking and wage differences from diverse sources (Contreras et al., 2019; Svallfors, 2006). This can be also linked to the attributed importance of structural or non-meritocratic factors, such as inherited wealth or social connections in the process of getting ahead in life in contexts of rising or (high) economic inequality (McCall et al., 2017). As follows, I expect that network diversity nurtures greater skepticism toward the fairness of market

mechanisms (*market skepticism hypothesis*) in distributing resources as well as the legitimacy of market-based distribution of welfare.

H2a: the greater the changes in the diversity of the network, the less support for market justice

At the same time, the inquiry on how cross-sectional (between) and longitudinal (within) differences in individual socioeconomic status can be associated with market justice attitudes, can be extended to the influence of social networks. However, even when there are differences in market justice preferences between socioeconomic groups, these differences can be nuanced and vary depending on societal circumstances. For instance, preferences for market-based justice may be stronger when there is a greater private provision of social services but may weaken when public services are more widespread. Consequently, as individuals experience greater network diversity over time, they accumulate a range of experiences and learn from new information. This effect may be especially pronounced in highly unequal societies, such as Chile. Therefore, the following hypothesis read as follows:

H2b: the greater the changes in the diversity of the network, the less support market justice

Case of Chile: The financing of social services in Chile

Chile provides a valuable case study for exploring the dynamics between poverty, inequality, and welfare state models (Ferre, 2023). Despite economic growth, it remains one of the most unequal countries in the OECD, with a high Gini index and concentrated wealth among the top deciles (Rodríguez Weber, 2017). Since the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s, Chile's welfare system has leaned heavily on private provision, where services are often privatized and only accessible to those who can afford them (Arrizabalo, 1995). This "crowded-out" welfare model disproportionately benefits higher-income groups, leaving lower-income individuals to rely on limited public options. In 2019, widespread protests highlighted the demand for greater equality and better public services, underscoring a public shift toward a "crowded-in" welfare model, with expanded state involvement (Somma et al., 2021). Chile illustrates how high inequality within a market-based welfare system shapes both public demands and potential policy shifts toward greater social inclusion.

Data, variables, and method

Data

The primary data source is the Chilean Longitudinal Social Survey (ELSOC, 2022) from 2016 to 2022, designed to annually assess how individuals think, feel, and behave regarding social issues related to conflict and cohesion in Chile. Using a probabilistic, stratified, clustered, and multistage sampling design, the survey covers major urban centers (Santiago, Valparaíso, and Concepción) and smaller cities. The first wave included 2,927 participants aged 18 to 75, representing populations in the north and south, covering 77% of Chile's total population and 93% of the urban population, with a response rate of 62.4% (Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies, 2022). After listwise deletion, the analytical sample includes 5,878 observations nested within 2,794 individuals.

Variables

Market justice

The main dependent variable of this study is *market justice preferences*: 'It is fair that people with higher incomes have better pensions than people with lower incomes', 'It is fair that people with higher incomes have access to better education for their children than people with lower incomes', and 'It is fair that people with higher incomes can access better healthcare than people with lower incomes'. These items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Completely disagree) to 5 (Completely agree). In all measures, the correlation between items is close to 0.8. Here, higher values indicate stronger support for market justice principles.

Socio-economic status

Income is measured as equivalent household income, with an inflation adjustment included for each measurement used, followed by a logarithmic transformation. Education, on the other hand, is measured in years of schooling. To obtain this measure, the average years of education were calculated for each educational category included in ELSOC, based on data from the 2017 Chilean Social and Economic Characterization Survey (Encuesta de Caracterización Socioeconómica de Hogares). This provides a consistent measurement of years of education across categories.

Network socioeconomic diversity

In this study, respondents were asked about the socio-economic diversity of their acquaintances in Chile. An acquaintance was defined as someone they could recognize by name and could converse with if encountered in public. The answers are categorized based on occupational status and grouped by the International Socio-Economic Index (ISEI). These categories included higher-status occupations (e.g., doctors, attorneys, university professors), medium-status occupations (e.g.,

accountants, shop assistants, preschool teachers), and lower-status occupations (e.g., waiters, car mechanics, taxi drivers). Respondents were asked to approximate the number of people they knew in each occupational group.

The network diversity index was calculated to capture the socio-economic diversity of respondents' networks. Following recommendations in network analysis literature (Otero & Mendoza, 2023; Sapin et al., 2020), a single dimension was used to represent network diversity, incorporating four indicators: the index of qualitative variation (IQV), cross-class (number of different occupational groups known), standard deviation of ISEI scores, and extensivity (number of different occupations known). Higher values on this index indicate greater socio-economic diversity in respondents' networks. The fit indices for the diversity index measurement model were strong, with a chi-square of 13.03, CFI of 0.99, TLI of 0.99, and RMSEA of 0.02).

Method

I estimated longitudinal multilevel linear models (Singer & Willett, 2009) to examine the extent to which income, education, and network diversity variables predict preferences for market justice over time. I analyzed these data using R and the lme4 package (Bates et al., 2015).

In the context of panel data, within-person effects capture how changes in individual-level variables (e.g., income, education, network diversity) between waves are associated with preferences for market justice. By contrast, between-person effects examine differences between individuals, explaining the association between long-term (or average) values of income, education, and network diversity variables and average levels of market justice preferences.

To capture the within-person effects of these factors, we group-mean-centered these variables, where the group refers to the individual (i.e., observations are nested within respondents). The between-person effects, in turn, are captured through the individual-level average of each variable based on the longitudinal panel data spanning three waves.

Longitudinal results on network diversity and market justice attitudes

The results from the longitudinal multilevel models in Table 1 reveal distinct patterns in market justice preferences when examining both individuals (within) and group-level (between) effects. Starting with time effects, there is a consistent positive shift in market justice preferences over time, with significant increases at both Time 2 and Time 3 across all models. The effects are notably stronger at Time 3, suggesting a growing preference for market justice over the study period.

Examining between-group effects (BE), income demonstrates a positive and significant association with market justice preferences across all models, indicating that individuals in higher-income groups are more likely to support market-based

distribution. In contrast, diversity at the group level shows a negative effect, suggesting that groups with greater diversity tend to have lower market justice preferences. Education, however, shows minimal influence on market justice preferences between groups, as the coefficients are small and not statistically significant.

The within-group effects (WE), which capture individual changes over time, show a different pattern. Here, income exhibits a significant negative relationship with market justice preferences, implying that as individuals experience income growth, their support for market justice decreases. Similarly, within-group diversity has a strong, negative effect, indicating that individuals in more diverse settings are less likely to support market justice over time. Additionally, education also has a small but significant negative impact within groups, suggesting that higher educational attainment at the individual level is associated with reduced market justice preferences.

In summary, the findings highlight that while higher-income groups tend to favor market justice, individual income increases within groups actually reduce support for it. Diversity has a consistently negative impact on market justice preferences at both the individual and group levels.

Table 1: Longitudinal multilevel models for market justice preferences, network diversity and socioeconomic status

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Time 2	1.59*** (0.46)	1.68** (0.46)	2.55*** (0.51)	2.62*** (0.51)
Time 3	9.42*** (0.55)	9.56*** (0.55)	11.48*** (0.75)	11.57*** (0.75)
Diversity (BE)		-5.10 (2.69)		-5.57* (2.69)
Income (BE)		3.27*** (0.63)		3.32*** (0.63)
Education (BE)		0.13 (0.14)		0.12 (0.14)
Diversity (WE)			-9.16*** (1.78)	-9.12*** (1.78)
Income (WE)			-1.99*** (0.52)	-2.00*** (0.52)
Education (WE)			-0.71*** (0.19)	-0.71*** (0.19)
AIC	58852.44	58798.04	58785.50	58744.12
BIC	58885.84	58871.50	58858.96	58850.99
Log Likelihood	-29421.22	-29388.02	-29381.75	-29356.06
Num. obs.	5878	5878	5878	5878
Num. groups: id	2794	2794	2794	2794
Var: id (Intercept)	181.07	172.99	180.34	173.93
Var: Residual	201.54	201.12	198.76	198.44

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05

Discussion (preliminary)

This study provides evidence on the complex relationship between socioeconomic status, network diversity, and attitudes toward market justice in a late-industrialized, high-inequality context. By examining Chile, where the privatized welfare model has created distinct divides in access to social services, we observe that individuals with higher socioeconomic status generally express stronger support for market justice principles, reinforcing the notion that market rewards should be based on individual merit. However, the longitudinal analysis reveals that as individuals' socioeconomic positions improve over time, their support for market justice does not necessarily increase and may even decrease in certain cases. These findings challenge assumptions of stable, self-interested preferences tied to status, indicating that changes in personal circumstances may foster more complex attitudes toward inequality and fairness.

Network diversity also plays a significant role in shaping attitudes, as individuals with more diverse social networks are less likely to endorse market justice principles. Exposure to varied socioeconomic perspectives seems to foster greater skepticism toward the fairness of market-based distributions. This aligns with theories suggesting that cross-class interactions provide individuals with a broader understanding of social inequalities, which can challenge assumptions that the market inherently rewards merit. Notably, the effects of network diversity underscore the influence of social environments on belief systems, suggesting that individuals' attitudes toward inequality are shaped not only by personal status but also by the range of socioeconomic realities they encounter.

These findings hold significant implications. First, they suggest that promoting socioeconomically diverse networks could moderate support for market-based inequality, as exposure to varied perspectives can increase awareness of the structural inequalities that market systems often reinforce. Second, they challenge policymakers to consider the social consequences of privatized welfare models, as high dependence on market solutions may deepen societal divides. Future research should explore the role of network diversity and socioeconomic mobility in other high-inequality contexts, providing a deeper understanding of how social structures shape attitudes toward inequality over time.

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