Ideology of Affluence: Explanations for Inequality and Economic Policy Preferences among Rich Americans

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As economic inequality increases, so does the importance of understanding affluent perspectives on the problem. We examine whether affluent Americans are more likely than others to hold individuals responsible for relative success in life and whether such beliefs are associated with their economic policy attitudes. We conducted a novel survey that over-sampled the top 5% of the US income and wealth distributions. We elicited views about *dispositional* (intelligence, hard work) and *situational* (family, luck) causes of success as well as explanations for why success-linked traits vary (people's choices, environments, genes). Affluent Americans were more likely than others to emphasize dispositional reasons for getting ahead, and the top 1% were unique in emphasizing both choices and genes as causes of those traits. This individualization of economic outcomes was more strongly associated with economic conservatism among the affluent than others, suggesting it may play a role in justifying their greater conservatism.

The United States has entered a "New Gilded Age," experiencing unprecedented economic inequality (Bartels 2016) that far exceeds that of most developed nations (Atkinson, Piketty, and Saez 2011). Scholars increasingly seek to explain this problem, but they are not the only ones. All manner of people routinely offer explanations for why some individuals do better than others economically, ranging from holding individuals responsible for economic outcomes to arguing that the playing field is unequal (Hochschild 1981). While lay causal attributions for economic outcomes often do not reflect scholarly thinking on the subject (Levy, Chiu, and Hong 2006), they enjoy the patina of fact and may influence citizens' attitudes about economic inequality and redistributive policies (Kluegel and Smith 1986).

In this study, we investigate for the first time causal attributions for success and success-linked traits in a large sample of affluent Americans, linking these beliefs to their political attitudes. Given that the affluent appear to play a greater role than others in determining policy outcomes in the United States (see Hacker and Pierson [2010] and Page and Gilens [2017] for an overview), it is important to understand whether they hold unique beliefs about what causes variation in economic outcomes. We worked with YouGov to recruit 450 respondents whose income or wealth placed them within the top 5 percentiles of US households; respondents were targeted to reflect known financial, geographic, and demographic characteristics of this affluent group. In parallel, we conducted an identical survey of a national sample of 450 Americans in the general population. The large sample of the affluent allows us not only to estimate their views with precision and compare them to the general population but also to examine variation within the economic elite. Given the rapid growth in income and wealth at the very top of the economic ladder (Alvaredo et al. 2013) and evidence for disproportionate political influence of the very rich via campaign spending (Hertel-Fernandez, Skocpol, and Sclar 2018), we are particularly interested in whether the views of the top 1% stand out as distinct.

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Drawing on these data, our study makes three contributions. First, we compare affluent Americans' explanations for variation in success in life to explanations offered by the less affluent. There are reasons to believe that the affluent will be more likely than others to favor explanations that "blame" individuals for inequality. Most obviously, such explanations serve affluent interests by suggesting that the economic system is fair (Hofstadter 2006; Kluegel and Smith 1986). This said, the perspectives of the affluent might not differ from those of others, as Americans in general are known to believe the economic system is meritocratic (McClosky and Zaller 1984). This debate has not been settled, partly because the causal attributions of the affluent have not been documented in large samples.

Our second contribution is to connect causal attributions for success to economic policy opinion among the affluent and compare this relationship to that in the general population. The tendency to hold individuals—as opposed to external factors, such as social class—responsible for their relative success in life is associated with lower support for redistribution and social welfare spending (Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote 2001; Kluegel and Smith 1986); however, this relationship has not been examined among the affluent. We expect not only that the affluent will link individual-blaming attributions to economically conservative policy positions but also that this linkage will be stronger than others'.

Our third contribution is to disaggregate causal attributions for inequality into two related, but distinct, components: "first-order" and "second-order."[1] First-order attributions are explanations for differences in observable economic outcomes, usually grouped into two contrasting categories: *dispositional* (such as a person's effort level and intelligence) and *situational* (such as a person's family background and luck). These two factors correspond to rooting responsibility in individuals versus their circumstances. Second-order attributions probe a level deeper, explaining why success-linked traits vary across the population. People are thought to be more or less hard working or intelligent because of their choices in life, socialization, or genetics (Jayaratne et al. 2009). Much of the literature has focused on first-order attributions (see Skitka et al. 2002), but including second-order attributions complicates the study of causal explanations in important ways. For example, a person who believes that the poor do not work hard may think such "laziness" is a choice (increasing blame) or the result of a problematic upbringing (lessening blame). Further, a person might presume such a trait is innate. This roots the trait firmly in the individual, but, at the same time, it suggests that people

are not in control of their actions (Weiner, Osborne, and Rudolph 2011).

In brief, we find that the affluent in our sample were more inclined than others to espouse dispositional first-order attributions (hard work and intelligence). The highly affluent (the top 1%) were also more likely than others to favor internal second-order attributions, that is, to view success-linked characteristics (drive to succeed and IQ) as a product of both individual agency and biological inheritance. We further find that this tendency to individualize inequality was more consistently and strongly associated with economic conservatism among the affluent than the general population.

This unique pattern of beliefs and attitudes suggests that there exists an "ideology of affluence" that may serve to justify current levels of inequality as well as lack of support for redistribution through public policy. Given the predominance of affluent Americans among policy makers (Carnes 2018), and their apparent greater influence over the political process (e.g., Bartels 2016; Gilens 2012; Hertel-Fernandez 2019; Page, Seawright, and Lacombe 2019; Rigby and Wright 2013), these intertwined causal beliefs and economic policy preferences among America's economic elite may act to reinforce economic inequality in society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Causal attributions for economic outcomes

People employ causal attributions to explain a variety of salient human behaviors, characteristics, and social events (Weiner et al. 2011). We focus in this study on causal attributions for individual-level economic outcomes as well as variation in individual traits linked to economic success.[2] Much of the literature on causal attributions contrasts two broad categories: "dispositional" and "situational" (see Skitka et al. 2002). Dispositional attributions emphasize the importance of individual characteristics, usually hard work and skill. Situational attributions highlight the role of contextual circumstances, such as family background or luck.[3] We refer to these commonplace explanations for economic differences as *first-order attributions*. While people tend to accept that both sets of factors contribute to resource differentials, on balance, Americans have been shown to favor dispositional over situational factors (see McCall

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1. We thank Larry Bartels for suggesting these category names.

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2. Note that people's causal attributions often diverge from scientists' conclusions (Levy et al. 2006). We make no effort to evaluate the "correctness" of these beliefs; rather, we are interested in understanding the nature and political implications of belief differences across economic classes.

3. The American public tends to hold somewhat ambiguous views about the role of luck (McCall 2013). Note that these ambiguities should diminish any differences between dispositional and situational attributions we examine below, given that we treat luck as a situational factor.

2013; van Oorschot and Halman 2000; although Feldman and Zaller [1992] suggest more ambivalence). These attributions not only help people understand the world around them, but they are also normatively charged. People are more likely to conclude that economic inequality is fair if it is understood to be the result of a meritocratic process—that is, located "in the person" (dispositional) as opposed to "in society" (contextual; Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Kluegel and Smith 1986).[4]

People's causal inquiry, however, usually does not stop with first-order attributions—people often consider why success-linked characteristics vary across the population. Are some people harder working or smarter because of their choices in life, socialization, or genes (Jayaratne et al. 2009)?[5] While these *second-order attributions* have been studied less in the political behavior literature (for exceptions, see Schneider, Smith, and Hibbing 2018; Suhay and Jayaratne 2013), they provide important nuance. People who think success in life is due to individuals' own traits may also believe that individuals exercise a great deal of control over those traits, further emphasizing an individual responsibility narrative. Alternatively, people may believe that individuals' traits are shaped by socialization, lessening considerably individuals' perceived role in their fate. Finally, the possibility that success-linked characteristics are innate has mixed implications—the source of behavior is located unmistakably within the person but without blame. We say more about this below.

Do the affluent explain inequality differently?

Our first aim is to provide comprehensive evidence on two questions involving the affluent in the contemporary United States: (1) Do the affluent express greater adherence to dispositional first-order attributions than others? (2) Are the affluent more likely than others to trace success-linked characteristics to internal causes—people's choices in life or their genes?[6]

There are several reasons why we might expect the affluent to be more likely than others to favor dispositional over situational first-order attributions, as well as internal over external second-order attributions. A merit-based view of the economy, which highlights the role of individual talent and work ethic in economic outcomes, tends to be reinforced in private schools that cater to the affluent (Khan 2011). In addition, lay theorizing about the world often draws on everyday life experiences (Levy et al. 2006), which differ sharply between economic classes. Given their relative social isolation from those experiencing hardship (Thal 2017), the affluent simply may not observe instances in which people who work hard or are skilled face significant barriers to advancement. This may lead the affluent—more so than others—to emphasize individuals' characteristics (first-order) as well as their choices (second-order) as determinants of inequality (see Day and Fiske 2017; Piketty 1995).

Certain common psychological biases also seem likely to differentiate the affluent from the rest. People often engage in motivated reasoning processes that serve their interests and values (Kunda 1990), gravitating toward causal attributions for economic outcomes that bolster their egos and their claim to resources (Sidanius et al. 2001). This suggests a possible bias among the affluent toward believing their economic status is an outcome of their superior traits (first-order), which are attributable to internal factors (second-order; Huber and Form 1973; Kluegel and Smith 1986).[7] Some prior research suggests that attributional differences between the affluent and the rest may be most pronounced with respect to genetic explanations for success-linked traits (Krause and Keltner 2013). Biological narratives not only suggest that the affluent are innately superior, but they also bolster arguments that a steep economic hierarchy is unavoidable (Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin 1984).

This said, work by other scholars is suggestive of no or little difference between the affluent and the rest in their explanations for inequality. Canonical studies of US political culture argue that Americans in general, regardless of class, are devoted to the core values of hard work and individual agency (McClosky and Zaller 1984; Weber 1958). In interviews with working-class Americans, Hochschild (1981) and Lane (1959) documented considerable acceptance of class hierarchy, rooted in large part in the belief that the American economic system is meritocratic. These findings are in keeping with two well-documented psychological biases that could work to diminish class differences in attributions by bringing lower-status Americans' perspectives into line with the affluent. The "fundamental attribution error"—a tendency to believe that individuals, not context, are

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4. There are other approaches to conceptually grouping beliefs about the sources of success in life. For example, it is common in economics to measure meritocratic beliefs by examining a simple trade-off between hard work and luck (see Cohn et al. 2020).

5. The belief that important characteristics are inherited and unchanging has been more popular among Americans than conventional wisdom suggests (see, e.g., Bartels 2016; McClosky and Zaller 1984).

6. Note that causal attributions are related to, but conceptually distinct from, the topics of other-regardingness and altruism, which have received considerable attention in the literature (e.g., Dimick, Rueda, and Stegmueller 2017; Gilens and Thal 2018). We do not focus on these topics in this article.

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7. Of course, less affluent individuals may also engage in motivated reasoning, emphasizing situational first-order attributions and external second-order attributions as a way of exonerating themselves from blame for their lower economic status.

directly responsible for their behavior and life outcomes—is widespread (Ross 1977). In addition, people have a strong intrinsic motivation to view the world as just (Lerner 1980; Trump 2018), and lower-status individuals may gravitate toward "just world" beliefs as a coping mechanism (Jost, Burgess, and Masso 2001). These arguments imply that we may observe little difference between the affluent and others in their attributions for inequality.

Determining whether the affluent are unique requires a large sample of the wealthy paired with a general population survey. To our knowledge, no scholars studying this topic have collected such data, likely because the affluent are a "hard to reach" and by definition small subpopulation insufficiently represented in most major surveys. A few studies use general population samples to examine the relationship between income and causal attributions for inequality but necessarily can only provide limited insight into the views of those at the top of the economic ladder.[8] These studies have also drawn mixed conclusions. One major (although dated) survey found that as income increases, Americans were more likely to blame individuals for falling behind (Kluegel and Smith 1986). More recent surveys focusing on a smaller set of attributions have found no differences by income (Shostak et al. 2009) and even reversals—relative income being associated with a lesser tendency to individualize economic outcomes (Bartels 2016). However, in a novel experimental study, Krause and Keltner (2013) found that relative class rank—whether measured or manipulated—was consistently associated with "essentialist" (genetic) explanations for socioeconomic inequality.

Connecting causal attributions to policy preferences

The possible distinctiveness of the affluent with regard to how they explain economic inequality is relevant to the study of political attitudes. It is increasingly well established that affluent Americans are on average more economically conservative than others (Bramlett, Gimpel, and Lee 2011; Cohen et al. 2019; Gilens 2012; Mendelberg, McCabe, and Thal 2017; Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013; Page et al. 2019; although Broockman, Ferenstein, and Malhotra [2019] document important heterogeneity in the tech industry), a finding we confirm in our analyses. Could it be that economic conservatism among the affluent is closely associated with a tendency to individualize economic outcomes?

To our knowledge, no published study has connected causal attributions, first- or second-order, to policy attitudes in a large sample of affluent Americans. However, in general

population samples, scholars have established that dispositional attributions tend to be associated with economic conservatism, and situational attributions with economic liberalism (Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Bullock, Williams, and Limbert 2003; Iyengar 1991; Kluegel and Smith 1986). Economic outcomes perceived as stemming from individuals' efforts and characteristics tend to be considered "fair," leaving little justification for societal redress.

We expect to replicate these patterns in our general population sample. Turning to our affluent sample, there are reasons to expect these associations will be stronger. First, the economic policy realm appears to be more salient to the affluent than the general population (see Mendelberg et al. 2017; Page et al. 2019), perhaps because they have a great deal to lose from income and wealth redistribution. This would suggest a stronger and more consistent (i.e., more "constrained") relationship between policy attitudes and attributions (Carmines and Stimson 1982; Converse 1964; Nie and Andersen 1974).[9] Second, among the affluent, there is historical evidence of a close intertwining of economically conservative policy attitudes and the "individualization" of economic outcomes. For example, during the Gilded Age—another era of sharp inequality at the end of the nineteenth century—many wealthy Americans were vocal advocates of Social Darwinism, that is, an opposition to social welfare based on a belief in "survival of the fittest" (Hofstadter 2006). Contemporary qualitative accounts of affluent communities document a similar, if less extreme, linkage between "small government" conservatism and the belief that the US economic system is meritocratic (Freeland 2012; Khan 2011).

Our expectations with respect to likely associations between second-order causal attributions and political attitudes are necessarily more tentative. We could find no recent survey-based studies investigating the connection between Americans' explanations for success-linked traits and their economic policy attitudes specifically. However, theoretically, second-order attributions get to the political heart of the matter most cleanly: at the center of conservative rhetoric is an emphasis not on dispositional causes of inequality but on individual agency and responsibility (Brewer and Stonecash 2015). Thus, we expect that relative economic conservatism in the general population will be associated with the belief that free will underlies individuals' characteristics and relative economic liberalism with the belief that people's social environments

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8. To our knowledge, no scholars have incorporated wealth into their study, as we do.

9. We may also expect a stronger association between political attitudes and attributions among the affluent if they are more politically attentive and knowledgeable than others (Carpini and Keeter 1996). However, we rule out this channel in our analyses in sec. A6.1 (appendix available online).

shape their characteristics. For the same reasons as for first-order attributions, these links may be strongest among the affluent.

As we have suggested, the political implications of second-order genetic attributions are nuanced. If one believes that economic success is innate, the likelihood of achieving equality through government policy may seem dubious (Hofstadter 2006; Lewontin et al. 1984).[10] However, the belief that inequality stems from a "genetic lottery" (see, e.g., Harden 2018) may also engender sympathy (Weiner et al. 2011), prompting support for government assistance (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2018). The handful of studies linking political attitudes to genetic attributions—all with general population samples—have produced mixed results. Some find no political divide with respect to genetic attributions for individual differences (Shostak et al. 2009; Suhay and Jayaratne 2013); others find that genetic attributions are associated with relative liberalism (Schneider et al. 2018).

Given these conclusions, we might expect no association or a positive association between genetic attributions and economic liberalism in our general population sample. But what of the affluent? Prior scholarship in this area is thin, but what exists suggests that affluent individuals may link genetic attributions for economic outcomes to economically conservative policy preferences. In their experimental work, Krause and Keltner (2013) found that increasing perceived class rank bolstered both "essentialist beliefs about class" and conservatism. This finding is consistent with the above-referenced historical work by Hofstadter (2006) on wealthy Americans' commitment to Social Darwinism, which combined a theory of genetic differences between social classes with libertarian policy preferences.

SURVEY DATA

To examine these questions, we analyze data from an original survey of 900 adult Americans conducted in 2017.[11] Our respondents come from YouGov's large, opt-in panel of 1.8 million participants.[12] We drew a general population sample of 450 individuals and then oversampled the economic elite, surveying

another 450 respondents with reported family income above $350,000 or gross financial assets above $2 million.[13] Based on the Federal Reserve's 2016 Survey of Consumer Finances—the most detailed source of financial information on US households—these income and asset thresholds were located at approximately the 97th (income) and 95th (wealth) percentiles of US households.[14] Figure 1 shows the distribution of income and financial assets in our general population sample (left panels) and the affluent sample (right panels).

There exist relatively few quality studies of affluent Americans' politically relevant beliefs and opinions. Given the difficulty of surveying this subpopulation, scholars have taken two approaches. Some have relied on specialized samples, including those from particular geographic regions (Page et al. 2013), specific high-income industries like information technology or finance (Broockman et al. 2019; Cohn, Fehr, and Maréchal 2014), or voluntary organizations (Verba and Orren 1985). Others have used general population surveys, like the General Social Survey (GSS) or the American National Election Studies (ANES); however, because of small numbers of those at the very top of the economic ladder and low thresholds for income "top codes," these studies have focused on a broader definition of economic elite, like the top tercile (Bartels 2016), quintile (Gilens 2005), or decile (Gilens 2012) of the income distribution.[15] Yet, as we show below, there is important variation within the top quintile and even among the top 5% of the income and wealth distribution.

One potential concern about our data relates to the self-reported nature of respondents' income and financial assets. Personal finances are a sensitive topic in survey research, with higher nonresponse rates and greater measurement error (Moore and Welniak 2000). However, our screening procedure, the survey mode, and the panel structure of our data give us confidence that our financial data are trustworthy. See section A2 for details.[16]

A second important concern stems from our reliance on an opt-in panel rather than a probability sample—for both

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10. This is an oversimplification referred to as "genetic determinism" (Dar-Nimrod and Heine 2011).

11. The survey was developed in collaboration with Alain Cohn, Lasse Jessen, and Paul Smeets. Cohn et al. (2020) is a companion paper that experimentally measures respondents' tolerance for inequality and assesses its association with attitudes toward redistribution.

12. YouGov runs the data collection of staple data sources in public opinion research, such as the Cooperative Congressional Election Studies (Ansolabehere and Rivers 2013). Its panel is a well-suited source of data on the affluent because YouGov regularly surveys this group as part of their Affluent Perspective Global Study, which focuses on consumer habits of the wealthy.

13. Gross financial assets include all cash, savings, mutual funds, stocks, bonds, retirement accounts, and other types of investments but do not include real estate assets.

14. Note that our operationalization of "affluence" for the purposes of statistical analysis lowers the income threshold to $250,000, or the 95th percentile.

15. See table A1 (tables A1–A20 are available online) for a detailed comparison of the coverage of the affluent in our survey to major national political surveys (ANES, GSS, and the Cooperative Congressional Election Study).

16. While we have either income or assets data for all members of our sample, we have some missing values for income and wealth, as shown in fig. 1. Patterns of nonresponse for income and wealth are uncorrelated with other sociodemographic variables, however.

Household income

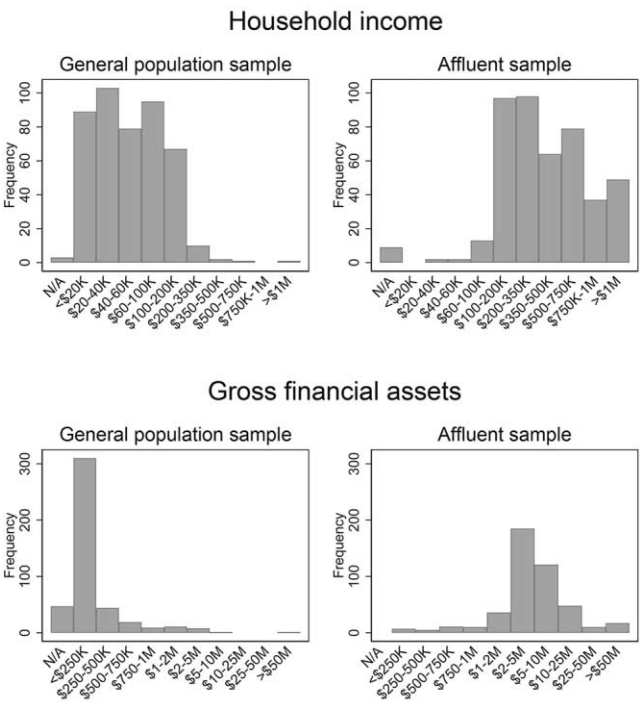

Gross financial assets

Figure 1. Sample breakdowns by income and gross financial assets

our general population and affluent samples. YouGov has a proven track record of drawing samples of Americans from their online panel that are representative of national demographic and political characteristics (Rivers 2007). Table A15 shows that our general population sample is quite balanced on standard sociodemographics relative to the US population. For the affluent, YouGov's large opt-in panel allowed us to survey a meaningfully large number of eligible affluent respondents, while avoiding the prohibitive costs and methodological difficulties of drawing and interviewing a true probability sample of such a hard-to-reach subpopulation (Heffetz and Reeves 2016; Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2011). As described in detail in section A1, together with YouGov, we devised a custom sampling procedure that balanced sample size with diversity.

Section A3 offers detailed evidence that our affluent sample is broadly reflective of affluent Americans. Compared to the affluent population, our sample shows a similar distribution of important financial characteristics—income, financial assets, liabilities, and main source of wealth (fig. A1; figs. A1–A7 are available online); a similar professional breakdown (table A2); geographical diversity, with affluent respondents drawn predominantly from high-income areas across the United States (fig. A2); and distributions of party ID, ideology, and several political attitudes similar to high-income samples in major representative surveys (table A3).

Our affluent sample does exhibit imbalances compared to the population with respect to gender, age, and education (table A15). Although previous research on the political views of the affluent has indicated little heterogeneity across these variables (Page et al. 2013), we address these imbalances in two ways. First, in all our analyses below, we control for age, gender, race, marital and retirement status, education, and religiosity. Second, together with YouGov, we developed custom weights, which we discuss in detail in section A7, where we also show that our key results are qualitatively unchanged when we weight the data. In the main text, however, we focus on the unweighted results, because the weighting worsens the financial and industry representativeness of our affluent sample even while improving the sociodemographic balance.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Our survey included two types of question batteries focused on respondents' causal attributions for economic outcomes. One battery asked respondents about how important different factors are for success in life: working hard, being intelligent, being lucky, and coming from a wealthy family. This battery is intended to measure respondents' first-order causal attributions. A second battery measures second-order causal attributions. It asked respondents to evaluate the extent to which differences among people in success-linked characteristics—drive to succeed and IQ—are due to individuals' choices, innate causes, or environmental factors.[17] To measure respondents' potentially related political attitudes, the survey questioned people about their views toward economic inequality in the United States; the role of government in the provision of jobs, health care, and education; and ideal top income and estate tax rates. All of these questions were drawn from or modeled on items used in well-known surveys, such as the GSS, the ANES, the International Social Survey Programme, the Beliefs about and Understanding of Genetics Project (Jayaratne 2001), Gallup, and the Pew Research Center. Table A18 lists the source for each of the key questions. Question wording for these items is given in section A8.

In addition to these key items, as well as the financial questions (reproduced in sec. A8.2), the questionnaire contained a standard battery of sociodemographic items, partisanship, ideology, and political interest. We also asked questions for additional control variables, such as belief in evolution, trust in the scientific community, and racial prejudice.[18]

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17. Correlations in responses to the first-order and second-order attribution batteries are low, suggesting that the two sets of questions capture distinct views. See table A20 for details.

18. The structure of the full questionnaire is given in sec. A8.6.

RESULTS

Affluence and first-order attributions

We begin by examining the first-order causal attributions for economic outcomes (i.e., attributions for success). First, in keeping with prior work, we confirm that causal attributions that focus on dispositional factors (hard work and intelligence) are more popular in our combined sample than those involving situational factors (family background and luck).[19] On the 1–7 scale (from not important at all to very important), respondents on average rated "hard work" at 6.1 and "being intelligent" at 5.8; "coming from a wealthy family" and "being lucky," by contrast, were rated at 4.6 and 4.3, respectively, significantly lower than both of the dispositional factors (at bootstrapped $p < .01$).

We next examine whether the propensity to endorse dispositional (situational) factors is more (less) pronounced among the affluent. To simplify the presentation of results, we average responses about the importance of hard work and intelligence into a dispositional attribution variable and responses about the importance of family wealth and luck into a situational attribution variable.[20] We also calculate the difference between the dispositional and situational attribution variables to gauge relative beliefs. We model these three attribution scales as a function of respondents' income/wealth, employing four categories: "top 1%" or "highly affluent," "95–99%" or "affluent," "80–95%" or "upper middle class," and the rest ("general population").[21] We fit a linear model and treat the ordinal attribution scales as quasi continuous. In this and all subsequent analyses, we employ dummy variables for the three affluent categories, with the general population being the excluded, baseline category. We control for age, gender, race (white vs. nonwhite), marital and retirement status, education, and religiosity.[22]

In table 1, we focus on the estimates for our key income/wealth categories. Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses, and p-values are in square brackets underneath. (The full tabular results are shown in sec. A5.) The results indicate a strong positive association between relative afflu-

Table 1. Affluence and First-Order Attributions

	Dispositional (1)	Situational (2)	Difference (3)
Highly affluent (top 1%)	.53	−.12	.66
	(.13)	(.20)	(.25)
	[.00]	[.55]	[.01]
Affluent (95%–99%)	.27	−.04	.32
	(.12)	(.17)	(.21)
	[.03]	[.83]	[.13]
Upper middle class (~80%–95%)	.24	−.05	.29
	(.13)	(.17)	(.21)
	[.07]	[.79]	[.16]
General population predicted value	5.86	4.56	1.30
	(.07)	(.09)	(.12)
N	889	890	888

Note. Coefficients are from ordinary least squares regressions. Robust standard errors in parentheses; p-values in brackets. The dependent attribution variables are indicated in column headings and described in the text. All dependent variables are on a 1–7 scale, with higher values indicating greater perceived importance of an attribution. The difference variable (col. 3) is the difference between the dispositional and situational attributions. All models include controls for age, gender, race (white vs. nonwhite), marital and retirement status, education, and religiosity.

ence and attributing success to dispositional factors. While the respondents in the general population (the bottom 80%) viewed these individual characteristics as highly important (with a predicted value of 5.86 on the 1–7 scale), all three affluent groups, and particularly the top 1%, stand out as endorsing these explanations even more strongly. That we see statistically significant differences between the affluent and the rest even with responses generally concentrated at the top of the 1–7 scale is especially telling. The average predicted score for the dispositional attributions among the top 1% is roughly half a standard deviation higher than among the bottom 80% (significant at $p < .01$). The top 1% are distinct even from the rest of the top 5% and the upper middle class (at $p < .01$ relative to the two groups combined).

For the situational factors, by contrast, we observe no on-average differences between the affluent and the rest (col. 2 in table 1).[23] While the point estimates for the affluent

19. In this analysis, we use a weight that balances the sociodemographics against the US population and also shrinks the affluent oversample to its proper share in terms of income/wealth, so that our results here are reflective of the entire US population.

20. The two dispositional attributions (hard work and intelligence) are strongly positively correlated at approximately .4; the two situational attributions (family background and luck) are similarly strongly positively correlated. Both sets of correlations are significant at $p < .001$.

21. We created these groups by combining income and financial assets. See sec. A4 for details.

22. The results for this and all subsequent analyses are very similar when we also control for party ID, political interest, main source of wealth, science beliefs, and racial prejudice. See sec. A6.1.

23. This null result is due to the affluent being more likely than the general population to attribute success to luck but less likely to attribute

Table 2. Affluence and Second-Order Attributions

	Choice (1)	Genes (2)	Environment (3)	Dispositional (First-Order) and Choice (Second-Order) (4)
Highly affluent (top 1%)	.32	.43	.08	.47
	(.17)	(.17)	(.15)	(.12)
	[.05]	[.01]	[.58]	[.00]
Affluent (95%–99%)	.07	−.01	−.02	.18
	(.15)	(.16)	(.13)	(.11)
	[.61]	[.95]	[.86]	[.11]
Upper middle class (~80%–95%)	.17	−.15	−.09	.22
	(.15)	(.16)	(.13)	(.12)
	[.26]	[.34]	[.52]	[.06]
General population predicted value	5.22	4.91	5.58	5.54
	(.08)	(.08)	(.07)	(.06)
N	881	885	887	872

Note. Coefficients are from ordinary least squares regressions. Robust standard errors in parentheses; *p*-values in brackets. The dependent attribution variables are indicated in column headings and described in the text. All dependent variables are on a 1–7 scale, with higher values indicating greater perceived importance of an attribution. The dependent variable in col. 4 is the average of responses to the dispositional first-order attributions (see table 1) and the second-order choice attributions (shown in col. 1). All models include controls for age, gender, race (white vs. nonwhite), marital and retirement status, education, and religiosity.

groups are negative and increasing in magnitude as affluence increases, the differences do not reach traditional thresholds of statistical significance.

In column 3 of table 1, we explicitly examine the extent to which the affluent may favor dispositional factors over situational ones. While the results are noisier than for the dispositional factors alone, the top 1% continue to stand out relative to the bottom 80% (and even relative to the other higher-class groups combined, at *p* = .08).

Affluence and second-order attributions

A second important question is whether the affluent think differently from others about why success-linked individual characteristics—drive to succeed (underpinning hard work) and IQ (underpinning intelligence)—vary across individuals. We ask whether the affluent are more inclined than others to attribute differences in drive and IQ to individual choice or genetic endowment and less likely to attribute them to a person's social environment.

We again model responses to these second-order attributions as a function of income/wealth and the same set of control variables. For parsimony, we average the attributions for drive to succeed and IQ for each of the three causes—choice, genes, and environment (the results for drive and IQ

attributions separately are very similar).[24] The results are shown in table 2.

The top 1% are the only affluent group consistently more inclined than the general population to attribute variation in drive and IQ to both internal causes, particularly to innate causes (the top 1% also differ from the other affluent, at *p* < .01). This said, the affluent are not more dismissive than others of environmental causal explanations. Interestingly, across all income groups, environmental explanations for drive and IQ are more popular than the two internal explanations.[25] These patterns qualify somewhat the emphasis on individualism thought to be dominant in American culture (see also Feldman and Zaller 1992).

Finally, in column 4 of table 2, we show a hybrid analysis. To capture variation in the tendency to hold individuals responsible for their success (or lack thereof), we average together the dispositional (first-order) and choice (second-order) attributions. In relative terms, all of the affluent groups are on average more inclined than the general population to consistently hold individuals responsible for economic outcomes by emphasizing the importance of success-linked traits and believing that individual agency underlies those traits. But,

success to one's family background. See Cohn et al. (2020) for greater attention to Americans' beliefs about luck (vs. hard work).

24. The drive and IQ attributions are correlated at .4, .55, and .4 for choice, genes, and environment, respectively (all correlations are significant at *p* < .001).

25. For example, compare the general population mean of 5.58 (environment) to 5.22 (choice) and 4.91 (genes).

Table 3. Affluence and Political Attitudes

	Inequality (1)	Role of Government (2)	Taxes (3)	Combined (4)
Highly affluent (top 1%)	−1.05	−.48	−1.17	−.85
	(.25)	(.23)	(.24)	(.21)
	[.00]	[.04]	[.00]	[.00]
Affluent (95%–99%)	−.83	−.31	−.95	−.64
	(.21)	(.20)	(.21)	(.18)
	[.00]	[.12]	[.00]	[.00]
Upper middle class (~80%–95%)	−.95	−.59	−.77	−.75
	(.22)	(.21)	(.22)	(.19)
	[.00]	[.00]	[.00]	[.00]
General population predicted value	4.66	4.83	4.00	4.57
	(.11)	(.11)	(.12)	(.10)
N	890	891	871	896

Note. Coefficients are from ordinary least squares regressions. Robust standard errors in parentheses; p-values in brackets. The attitudinal dependent variables are indicated in column headings and described in the text. All dependent variables are on a 1–7 scale, with higher values indicating greater economic liberalism. All models include controls for age, gender, race (white vs. nonwhite), marital and retirement status, education, and religiosity.

once again, the top 1% stand apart from the others (significant at $p < .01$ relative to the general population as well as the other two affluent groups combined).

Individualizing inequality and economic conservatism

The question remains whether variation in causal attributions is politically consequential. We next examine the link between first- and second-order causal attributions and our respondents' attitudes toward various redistributive policies.

We begin by confirming our working assumption that the affluent are on average more economically conservative than others. Columns 1–3 of table 3 compare economic conservatism/liberalism among the affluent and the rest using three short attitudinal scales. To measure respondents' attitudes toward economic inequality (col. 1), we combine answers to two questions: whether differences in income in the United States are perceived as too large and whether incomes should be equalized (range: 1–7). We further explore respondents' views on the role of government (col. 2) in providing public schooling for all children, a job for those in need of one, and adequate health care (range: 1–7). Finally, we assess respondents' tax attitudes (col. 3) by combining two questions on whether the top income and estate tax rates should be higher, lower, or unchanged (original range: 1–5, rescaled to 1–7).[26] For all three

composite variables, lower values indicate greater economic conservatism, and higher values greater liberalism. In column 4 of table 3, we average the three scales into a combined economic conservatism/liberalism scale. As before, we model responses as a function of the income/wealth groups and the same sociodemographic controls.

Relative to the bottom 80%, all three higher-status groups were more economically conservative on all three attitudinal measures (except the 95%–99% group with respect to role of government), as well as the final combined measure.[27] Unlike for causal attributions, where the top 1% clearly stood out from the others, not much separates the three top groups with respect to these political attitudes.

We next examine whether and how these political attitudes are associated with respondents' first- and second-order attributions for socioeconomic inequality. For parsimony, we present the results for the composite economic conservatism/liberalism scale (results for each attitude measure separately are substantively the same). We regress this dependent variable on the dummies for the three top groups (with the bottom 80% as the baseline group), the causal attribution variables, and the interactions between the affluent group

26. Correlations among the constituent variables in each attitudinal scale are as follows: .7 for inequality, between .56 and .71 for the role of government, and .7 for tax attitudes.

27. Note, however, that the bottom 80% were not always supportive of redistribution on average. For example, they did not support increasing the top tax rates, as the predicted value of 4 is equivalent to the "keep the same" category. This is consistent with recent evidence (e.g., Bartels 2016; Scheve and Stasavage 2016).
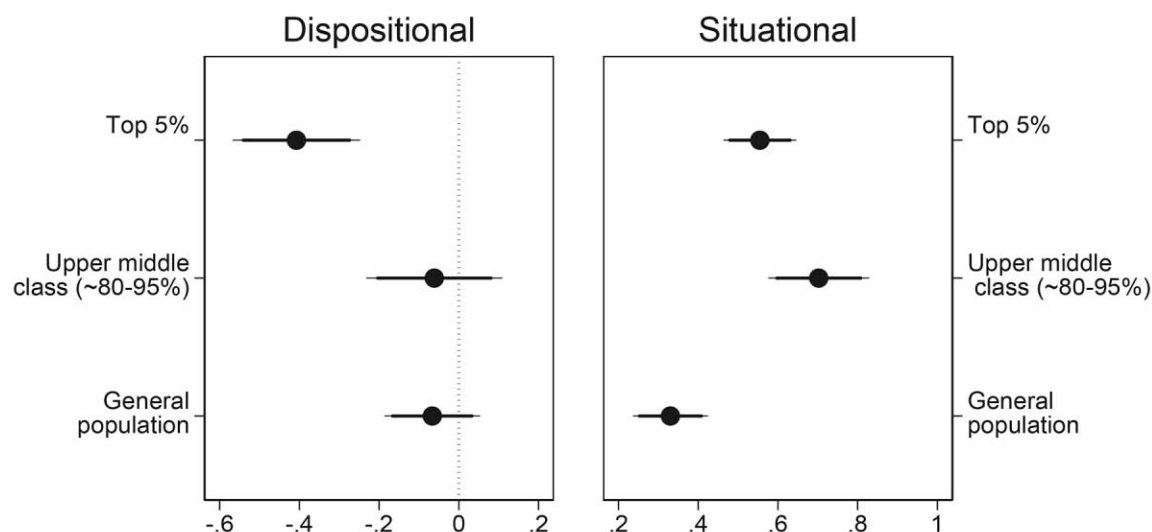
Figure 2. Affluence, first-order attributions, and political attitudes. The dependent variable is the composite conservatism/liberalism scale, as described in the text. The variable is on a 1–7 scale, with higher values indicating greater economic liberalism. The dots in each panel show the association between a one-unit increase (on a 1–7 scale) in the attribution variable and economic liberalism. The thicker caps are the 90% confidence intervals; the thinner caps, the 95% confidence intervals. All estimates are derived from a model that includes controls for age, gender, race (white vs. nonwhite), marital and retirement status, education, and religiosity.

indicators and causal attribution variables.[28] We again control for the same set of sociodemographics.

We begin with the first-order attributions. Figure 2 shows the association between a one-unit increase in a first-order attribution measure (dispositional in the left panel, situational in the right panel) and economic liberalism (range is 1–7). We use the interactive analyses to plot the associations separately for the general population, the upper middle class (80%–95%), and the top 5% (combining the 1% and 95%–99% for presentational clarity and statistical power, as results for the two groups are substantively similar).[29] (The full tabular results for this analysis and that in fig. 3 are shown in sec. A5.)

The left panel of figure 2 shows that there is a negative association between endorsing dispositional attributions and economic liberalism. On average, respondents in the general population and the upper middle class who endorse dispositional attributions are more conservative, but the relationship is weak and statistically insignificant.[30] By contrast, the affluent who more strongly favor dispositional attributions are almost

half a point more conservative (about a quarter of a standard deviation) than those who do not. The difference between those in the top 5% and the rest is pronounced (significant at $p < .01$ relative to both other groups).

The right panel of figure 2 shows a more consistent association (and stronger in absolute terms) across groups between situational attributions and economic liberalism. However, the associations are once again stronger among the affluent (and also in this case for the upper middle class). In other words, both panels show evidence of a more "constrained" relationship between first-order causal attributions and redistributive attitudes among the more affluent groups than among others. Note that these patterns are not explained by differences in political interest correlated with affluence. In section A6.1, we add interactions between attributions and political interest (figs. A4 and A5), and the results remain unchanged.

Next, we examine the associations between the same economic liberalism scale and second-order attributions—explanations for why drive to succeed and IQ are thought to vary across the population. Extant research is less developed with respect to this question and particularly uncertain with respect to the political implications of "innate" explanations for such traits. We model the relationships in the same manner as above: as a function of income/wealth; the choice, genes, and environment attributions; their interaction with income/wealth; and the same set of controls. Figure 3 depicts the results in the

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28. As recently pointed out, interactive analyses may be problematic if the moderating variables—attributions—are unevenly distributed across different income/wealth groups or if more flexibly modeled interactive effects substantially depart from linearity (Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu 2019). We report results from more flexible analyses that avoid these potential problems in sec. A6.2. The results are substantively unchanged.

29. The use of interaction terms in conjunction with relatively small groups lowers our statistical power; thus, we plot both the 95% and the 90% confidence intervals in figs. 2 and 3.

30. These null results for the general population stand in contrast to some previous works (e.g., Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Kluegel and Smith

1986). Prior research may have overstated the consistency of such patterns, or perhaps patterns have shifted in recent years.
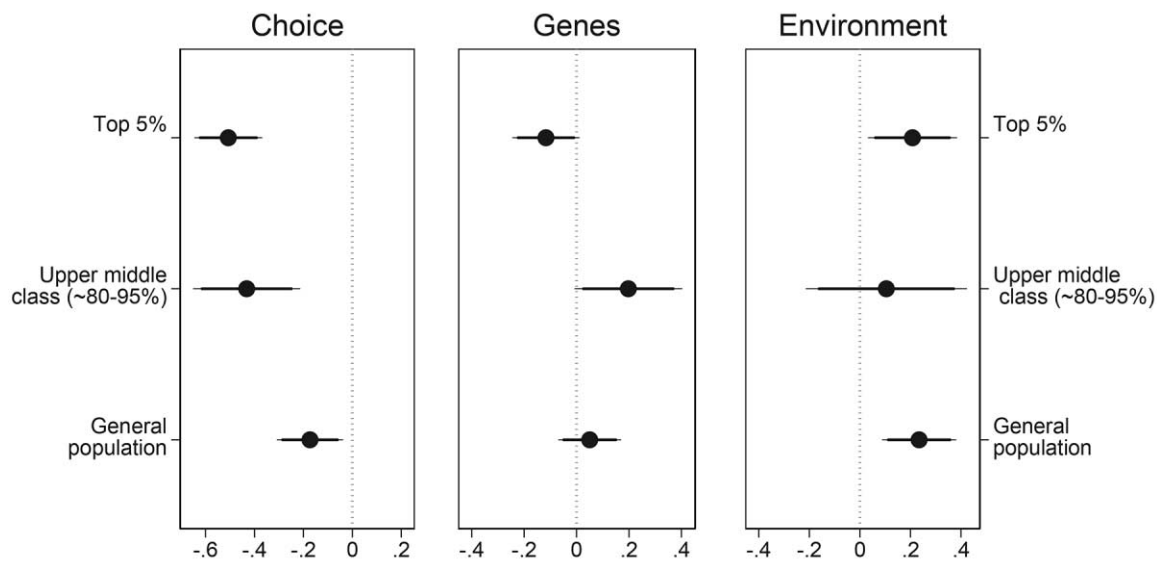
Figure 3. Affluence, second-order attributions, and political attitudes. The dependent variable is the composite conservatism/liberalism scale, as described in the text. The variable is on a 1–7 scale, with higher values indicating greater economic liberalism. The dots in each panel show the association between a one-unit increase (on a 1–7 scale) in the attribution variable and economic liberalism. The thicker caps are the 90% confidence intervals; the thinner caps, the 95% confidence intervals. All estimates are derived from a model that includes controls for age, gender, race (white vs. nonwhite), marital and retirement status, education, and religiosity.

same way as for the first-order attributions. The left panel shows the results for the choice attribution, the middle panel for genes, and the right panel for environment.

The results for the choice (fig. 3, left panel) and environment (fig. 3, right panel) second-order attributions echo somewhat those for the first-order dispositional and situational attributions. A greater emphasis on individual choice in explaining the differences in drive to succeed and IQ is associated with greater economic conservatism, and this relationship is stronger among the affluent as well as the upper middle class. Those who view the environment as a more important cause of the variation in drive to succeed and IQ tend to be more economically liberal. Unlike for the first-order situational attributions, however, this tendency is not more pronounced among the affluent (there is no statistical difference between the top 5% and the other groups).

A notable difference arises with respect to genetic attributions for drive/IQ (the middle panel in fig. 3). The affluent who are more inclined to embrace this second-order attribution are relatively more economically conservative (significant at $p = 0.07$). However, in an opposite pattern, individuals from the other two groups (particularly the upper middle class) who are more disposed toward genetic explanations are somewhat more economically liberal than their counterparts (the top 5% are different from the upper middle class at $p = .01$ and from the general population at $p = .06$).[31] Recall

our earlier discussion about the complex normative connotations of innate explanations for inequality. On the one hand, such attributions reify hierarchy as natural and unavoidable, weighing against attempts to "undo" inequality; on the other hand, they may also evoke compassion for those perceived as being at a natural disadvantage, weighing in favor of governmental aid. The fact that affluent individuals are unique in linking genetic explanations for success-linked traits to economic conservatism suggests that they may favor the former interpretation, whereas less affluent individuals (including the upper middle class) may favor the latter.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We conducted this study to better understand the relationships among affluence, beliefs about the sources of economic inequities, and redistributive attitudes. We investigated two main questions: (1) whether the affluent are more inclined than others to believe that economic outcomes are the product of individual responsibility and natural talent, perhaps in an effort to justify the existing distribution of resources, and (2) whether and to what extent these beliefs are linked to economically conservative attitudes in this group.

We are aware of no prior attempt to answer these questions in a survey of affluent Americans. We thus surveyed a large and diverse sample of individuals belonging to the top 5% of the income and wealth distributions, comparing patterns of beliefs and attitudes within this group to those in a general population sample. We also supplemented more commonly used causal

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31. These differences persist even when we control for any differences in faith in science, views on evolution, or racial prejudice.

attribution items asking respondents to explain observable variation in success across the population (first-order attributions) with questions asking respondents to explain why traits widely perceived as important to success—drive to succeed and intelligence—are also unequally distributed across the population (second-order attributions).

We found, first, that affluent Americans were more likely than others to attribute economic success to individual characteristics (hard work and intelligence). When asked why some people work harder or are smarter, the top 1% were more inclined than others to reinforce this emphasis on individual responsibility by ascribing these traits to individual choice. At the same time, the top 1% were also more likely to view success-linked characteristics as innate.

We also found that the affluent differed from others in how they mapped causal attributions to economic conservatism/liberalism. Among the affluent, the tendency to emphasize individual traits as important for economic success and to root those traits in individual agency or biology was consistently and strongly tied to conservative economic policy preferences. Among those of more modest means, patterns were weaker and less consistent. Of particular note is the fact that the affluent connected innate explanations for drive and IQ to conservative economic attitudes, whereas the general population and the upper middle class tended to connect such explanations to liberal economic attitudes. While it is beyond our purview to trace how this constellation of views influences real-world politics, it seems plausible that it legitimizes and reinforces a class-based hierarchy given the greater political power of affluent Americans, particularly those at the very top of the economic ladder.

These patterns within the affluent and between the affluent and others are potentially consistent with a number of mechanisms, from distinct personal experiences or socialization to psychological biases, such as motivated reasoning. We argue that several patterns are suggestive of motivated reasoning. First, results were strongest and most consistent for the top 1%, the economic group that has reaped the vast majority of the nation's economic gains over the last several decades (Alvaredo et al. 2013). Second, the top 1% emphasized both individual agency and biological inheritance—seemingly contradictory explanations.[32] Third, our data suggest that the affluent may interpret genetic

attributions as justifying economic conservatism, whereas others do not appear to interpret them in this way. However, further research is needed to understand whether our findings are the result of motivated reasoning or some other mechanism.

This study contributes to two important areas of research in the social sciences. We build on a rapidly growing literature on the characteristics, opinions, and behaviors of affluent Americans (e.g., Broockman et al. 2019; Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018; Keister 2014; Mendelberg et al. 2017; Page et al. 2013, 2019; Thal 2017). Prior studies carried out by political scientists have concentrated their attention on the political attitudes of the affluent; our study goes beyond this to examine affluent Americans' beliefs about the underlying causes of inequality and how these beliefs are associated with their economic policy preferences.

We also contribute to a more established literature on the political relevance of causal attributions for economic outcomes (e.g., Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Hochschild 1981; Iyengar 1991; Kluegel and Smith 1986; McCall 2013; Skitka et al. 2002). To our knowledge, we are the first to integrate first- and second-order attributions for economic outcomes in a survey-based study; in doing so, we find that investigating people's beliefs about why success-linked traits vary renders certain claims based on first-order attributions alone—such as the claim that Americans tend to individualize inequality—overly simplistic. More importantly, prior studies of causal attributions have tended not to differentiate among the beliefs held by different economic classes; our findings indicate that resource differentials may in fact shape Americans' understandings of why some people do better than others in life.

This said, we also want to point out that, in certain instances, class did not structure respondents' causal attributions. When asked to consider the importance of situational factors for success (coming from a wealthy family or being lucky) or the impact of people's upbringing and environment on their drive to succeed and IQ, the affluent did not respond differently from others. Further, these various "external" explanations for inequality differed from the "internal" ones in that they were consistently associated with economic liberalism across all economic groups. These patterns represent a silver lining for policy makers and others concerned with economic inequality who are interested in finding politically relevant frames with wide appeal across the economic spectrum. Many Americans up and down the economic ladder appear to be conscious of the fact that people's success in life is in part the product of external forces beyond their control and to link that fact to a need for more egalitarian government policies.

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32. It is plausible that the affluent are innately more gifted and hard working than others and are simply reporting this self-observation. To test this, we investigated whether the popularity of dispositional first-order and choice/genes second-order attributions were stronger for "self-made" (i.e., highly upwardly mobile) as opposed to "second-generation" affluent (i.e., those who inherited their status). We did not find such a pattern.

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