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Can Selecting the Most Qualified Candidate Be Unfair? Learning About Socioeconomic Advantages and Disadvantages Reduces the Perceived Fairness of Meritocracy and Increases Support for Socioeconomic Diversity Initiatives in Organizations

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While the majority of Americans today endorse meritocracy as fair, we suggest that these perceptions can be shaped by whether or not people learn about the presence of socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages in others' lives. Across five studies ($N = 3{,}318$), we find that people are able to attach socioeconomic inequalities in applicants' backgrounds to their evaluation of the fairness of specific merit-based selection processes and outcomes. Learning that one applicant grew up advantaged—while the other grew up disadvantaged—leads both liberals and conservatives to believe that otherwise identical merit-based procedures and outcomes are significantly less fair. Importantly, learning about starting inequalities leads to greater support for policies that promote socioeconomic diversity in organizations.

Public Significance Statement
Socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages early in life can have profound influences on educational achievement, test scores, work experiences, and other qualifications that form the basis of "meritocratic" selection processes. Yet the near-universal support for meritocracy suggests that most people may not give much weight to unequal advantages and disadvantages. In our work, we show that it does not take much for people to update their fairness perceptions of meritocracy and be more supportive of policies that foster social class diversity in organizations.

Keywords: economic inequality, meritocracy, socioeconomic diversity, policy making

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When it comes to selecting a candidate for a job, people tend to agree that the most qualified candidate should be hired. Hiring committees for all types of jobs, across all kinds of organizations generally rely on merit-based selection rules. And people usually accept the results of meritocratic selection processes as fair and legitimate even if they lead to unequal outcomes. This phenomenon is consistent with decades of research on fairness heuristic theory suggesting that people judge the fairness of outcomes primarily through the lens of procedural justice (T. R. Tyler, 1989; T. R. Tyler & Lind, 2002). This fairness heuristic is so strong that researchers have recently pointed to procedural justice as the key for understanding the general public's response to growing socioeconomic disparities (Starmans et al., 2017; T. Tyler, 2011). As inequality has risen over the past several decades, the public has generally not demanded policies to reduce it (Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018). Fairness heuristic theory suggests that, as long as people consider selection processes such as hiring and promotion to be meritocratic and fair, they may continue to accept ever-increasing levels of income inequality.

Yet, in reality, inequality and merit-based decisions are deeply intertwined (e.g., Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages early in life can have profound influences on educational achievement, test scores, work experiences, and more (Corak, 2013; Heckman, 2011; Manduca, 2018; Schneider et al., 2018). As a result, the qualifications that form the basis of "meritocratic" selection processes partially reflect unequal starting points. But, despite the fact

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All materials, data, and code for all studies are made available in the project's Open Science Framework page: https://osf.io/b4a2w/?view_only=bdf3d9fa982147e29cf114ddb0da20d9.
Daniela Goya-Tocchetto served as lead for conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, visualization, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing. Aaron C. Kay served in a supporting role for conceptualization and supervision. Keith Payne served in a supporting role for conceptualization and writing–review and editing.
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that equal opportunity is a prerequisite for a true meritocracy, the near-universal support for the merit principle suggests that most people may not give much weight to the ways that unequal advantages and disadvantages create unequal opportunities.

One explanation, in line with fairness heuristic theory, is that most people do not care much about unequal outcomes, so long as the process is meritocratic (Starmans et al., 2017). While research on fairness heuristic theory has focused on the judicial rather than the economic domain (e.g., examining likelihood of filing claims; Lind et al., 2000), T. Tyler (2011) has emphasized that this theory can play a key role in explaining the tendency to accept economic inequality. After all the central insight from fairness heuristic theory is that it is not how resources end up being distributed but the public evaluation of the procedures via which this distribution occurs that matters for fairness perceptions. Fairness heuristic theory does not by itself provide an account of which procedures are fair to distribute economic resources, but the theory predicts that public understanding of what counts as a fair procedure will determine whether inequality is accepted. Thus, building on this fundamental insight, T. Tyler (2011) argues that the general endorsement of the merit principle leads people to accept economic inequalities that emerge from meritocratic procedures.

Yet other evidence suggests that people may care about both processes and outcomes, but they do not always draw the connection between inequality and meritocracy. For example, surveys suggest that the American public is strongly in favor of meritocratic processes (e.g., Gomez, 2022, Pew Research Center) and also that the majority believes more should be done to help the poor and marginalized groups succeed (e.g., Heimlich, 2007, Pew Research Center). We suspect that when people consider whether a meritocratic process is fair, they rarely consider aspects of the wider context, such as unequal starting points.

In our work, we propose that highlighting the presence of unequal socioeconomic backgrounds can shape fairness perceptions of meritocratic procedures. For instance, while most people believe that meritocratic rules represent the gold standard of fairness in organizations (Castilla & Ranganathan, 2020; McNamee & Miller, 2009), we suggest that the very same meritocratic rules will be judged as less fair when previous socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages are highlighted. That is, we predict that making these inequalities salient will undermine perceptions of equal opportunity and, as a result, decrease fairness perceptions of meritocratic processes and outcomes. We would not expect unequal starting points to undermine belief in the general principle of meritocracy (i.e., the idea that people should be rewarded based on relevant merits, such as qualifications or productivity). Rather, when unequal starting points are highlighted, people may more easily recognize that unequal opportunities undermine the fairness of so-called meritocratic procedures. In this way, past inequalities may shape perceptions of whether merit-based procedures, and the outcomes that result from them are fair.

Importantly, given that socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages can end up shaping the qualifications that form the basis of "meritocratic" selection processes, merit-based hiring and promotion procedures tend to be biased in favor of candidates from higher socioeconomic status (SES; Ingram & Oh, 2020). We suggest that learning about past socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages will lead people not only to update their fairness perceptions but also to be more supportive of policies that promote greater social class diversity in organizations.

Overview of Studies

We tested this idea across five experimental studies ($N = 3{,}318$). In the first two studies, we randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions: no information versus background inequality information. In both conditions, participants read about the same meritocratic selection process either for a hiring (Study 1) or for a promotion case (Study 2). In the no information conditions, participants received no extra information about the hiring or promotion candidates. In the background inequality information conditions, participants also received information about the past socioeconomic disadvantages of one candidate and the past socioeconomic advantages of the other candidate before reading about the meritocratic hiring or promotion cases. The background inequality condition did not include any information related to the hiring or promotion processes themselves—they were only about the people and their history. Thus, in the first two studies, we investigated whether providing information about previous inequality in candidates' socioeconomic backgrounds would affect the perceived fairness of a meritocratic process.

Yet research on inequity frames suggests that people update their perceptions differently when they learn about different facets of inequality. More specifically, this research suggests that people respond differently when they learn about others' advantages versus disadvantages (e.g., Branscombe, 1998; Lowery et al., 2012; Phillips et al., 2022). In the case of racial inequality, focusing on White people having advantages can lead to more defensive responses and decreased support for policies such as affirmative action among White respondents, relative to a focus on Black people having disadvantages (Phillips & Lowery, 2015). In the case of economic inequality, using a disadvantage frame that emphasizes the economic difficulties generally associated with lower SES has been shown to be more effective in fostering support for policies aimed at reducing inequality relative to the use of an advantage frame (Dietze & Craig, 2021). In light of these and similar findings, in Study 3, we investigated whether people updated fairness perceptions differently when they learned only about socioeconomic advantages versus only disadvantages versus both advantages and disadvantages simultaneously.

Importantly, in the first three studies, participants learned about the socioeconomic background of the specific candidates. But, in daily life, people are more likely to learn about socioeconomic disparities in a generalized fashion rather than in terms of particular candidates. So, in Study 4, we provided information about how inequality can shape qualifications in general, rather than for the specific candidates.

Lastly, in Study 5, we explored the downstream consequences of the effect of learning about socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages in terms of support for diversity-oriented policies. When people learned general information about how inequality can shape qualifications, they became more supportive of diversity initiatives focused on promoting socioeconomic diversity in organizations.

Much research has explored perceptions that support for diversity initiatives violates principles of meritocracy. For example, the more people show a preference for the merit principle, the more they oppose diversity programs (Bobocel et al., 1998; Davey et al., 1999). Interestingly, when people who endorse meritocracy notice high levels of discrimination in their organizations, they become less opposed to programs such as affirmative action (Son Hing et al., 2002). That is, they perceive high levels of workplace discrimination as a violation of the merit principle and, as a result, become

motivated to correct for discriminatory bias. Other research shows that belief in meritocracy makes people more likely to deny societal inequality and discrimination (Knowles & Lowery, 2012) and less likely to support policies aimed at reducing inequalities (Garcia et al., 2005; Son Hing et al., 2002). And, even when diversity is explicitly valued in organizations, the endorsement of diversity values can lead to ironic effects by creating an environment of complacency in the face of inequality (Kaiser et al., 2013). That is, the presence of diversity policies can lead racial minorities to be ignored even when they raise valid concerns about discrimination.

In our work, we contribute to this literature not only by focusing on a relatively understudied aspect of diversity (i.e., socioeconomic diversity), but primarily through the use of a distinct approach to understanding why people continue to endorse the merit principle in the face of rising economic inequality. Our approach focuses on how learning about the inequalities that ground justifications for diversity-oriented policies can undermine people's perceptions that everyone had equal opportunity to being with and, in so doing, lead people to perceive meritocratic processes as less fair. Consistent with the robust procedural justice literature and decades of evidence that people perceive meritocratic rules as fair, we observe that people who learned about a merit-based selection process (hiring and promotion) view both the rules of the process and its outcomes as fair and just. Crucially, though, we also observe that the perceived fairness of the very same meritocratic procedure and its outcomes are shaped by reminders of previous inequalities in the lives of the candidates—or even the lives of just people in general. And while participants updated their perceptions more when they learned about either disadvantages and advantages concomitantly, or just disadvantages, learning exclusively about advantages also led to perceptions that meritocracy is significantly less fair relative to a control condition. Thus, perceivers seem to consider unequal starting points when judging the fairness of procedures, as long as the inequality is made as salient as the procedure. These updated fairness perceptions translate into support for policies that promote greater social class diversity in organizations.

The Role of Political Ideology

Much research suggests that liberals and conservatives hold different beliefs when it comes to inequality and preferences for merit-based processes (e.g., Davidai & Ongis, 2019; Kluegel & Smith, 2017). Relative to conservatives, liberals tend to be more concerned about inequality and less supportive of meritocratic practices. Indeed, our results replicate these ideological differences. In most of our studies, conservatives were more likely to believe that meritocratic selection rules and respective outcomes are fair relative to liberals. In light of these findings, we explore the effects of learning about past inequalities across the political–ideological spectrum. Our results suggest that learning about past inequalities makes both liberals and conservatives update the perceived fairness of meritocracy, leading them to evaluate merit-based hiring and promotion processes as significantly less fair and to be more supportive of policies that foster social class diversity in organizations.

Transparency and Openness

Our studies comply with all relevant ethical regulations and were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Duke University. Materials,[1] data, and code for all studies are made available in the project's Open Science Framework (OSF) page.[2] No data were collected after reaching our target samples, and sample sizes were all determined in advance of data collection. All data exclusions (if any) are reported for all studies. For each study, we report a sensitivity analysis of the minimum effect size each of our samples had the power to detect.

Study 1

In this first study, we tested whether learning about past inequalities in job candidates' backgrounds can influence the perceived fairness of a meritocratic hiring process and its outcomes.

Method

Participants

We recruited 300 Amazon Mechanical Turk participants on Cloud Research Panel (including English as a primary language and U.S. residency as panel features) and 302 participants completed the survey. Thirteen participants were excluded from the sample before analyzing the data due to failure to pass attention checks, leaving us with a final sample of 289 participants. All participants were located in the United States (52% female, 48% male, $M_{age} = 39.15$, $SD_{age} = 12.91$). Forty-five percent of participants reported being Democrat, 24% labeled themselves as independent, and 31% reported being Republican. Sensitivity power analyses with linear multiple regression using three predictors and standard criteria $\alpha = .05$ and $\beta = .80$ revealed a minimum effect size that could be detected by our sample equal to $f^2 = 0.03$, critical $F(3, 288) = 2.63$.

Materials and Procedure

We used a between-subjects design in which participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: no information versus background inequality information. In both conditions, participants read about the very same meritocratic hiring process and its outcome (Box 1):

In the background inequality information condition, participants also received information about inequalities in the candidates' past. Because our hypothesis is about the starting advantages and disadvantages that come with SES inequality, participants read about two candidates who both worked hard but who reached different levels of achievement, before reading about the very same hiring process and outcomes. This is what participants learned (Box 2):

Participants then responded to our main dependent variables and standard demographic measures.

[1] Studies 1, 2, and 4 included additional measures that were explored in a separate project. All these measures were included in the surveys only after the measures used in this article (and thus had no influence in our results). We report these extra measures in the projects' OSF page for transparency purposes. Additionally, we are thankful for an anonymous reviewer's suggestion to use some of those measures for exploratory analyses. We have conducted such analyses when possible and reported all results in the Supplemental Information in the online supplemental materials. These analyses include an exploration of main effects of conditions on belief in meritocracy and interaction effects using constructs such as system justification and social dominance orientation.

[2] https://osf.io/b4a2w/?view_only=df3d9fa982147e29cf114ddb0da20d9.

Box 1 Meritocratic Hiring Process and Outcome

"Jim and Tom have both worked hard and graduated college. They have now applied for the same two jobs: one high-paying and one low-paying. Members of the hiring committee for the high-paying job are focused only on getting the most qualified candidate to work for their company. They are going to hire the candidate who has shown higher performance over time. Based on this preference for performance, Jim is the clear choice. Jim has better grades and a lot of extra-curricular activities and internships. Tom, on the other hand, has not done any internships during college and his grades are lower than Jim's grades. So, they offer Jim the high-paying job. Both Jim and Tom get the offer for the low-paying job, but only Tom accepts it given that he was not able to get the better offer."

Measures

Fair Hiring Process

Participants were prompted to think about procedural fairness with the following instructions: "We are now going to ask you a couple of questions about the hiring process for the high-paying job. Think about the hiring process and how fair you think it was and click to answer the next questions." We then measured the perceived fairness of the hiring process using three items ($\alpha = .97$): "The hiring process was fair," "The rules used by the hiring committee were fair," and "The process used by the hiring committee to select the candidate was fair" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree, no midpoint*).

Fair Hiring Outcomes

We prompted participants to think about outcome fairness with the following text: "We are now going to ask you a couple of questions about the outcomes of the job hiring for the high-paying job. Think about the outcomes of the job hiring and how fair you think it was and click to answer the next questions." We measured the perceived fairness of outcomes with three items ($\alpha = .92$): "It was fair that Jim got the high-paying job," "It was fair that Tom did not get the high-paying job," and "The job hiring outcomes for Tom and Jim were fair" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree, no midpoint*).

Box 2 Background Inequality Information

"Jim has always been a very hardworking kid. Jim grew up in a family that always had a lot of money to buy him what he needed and to make sure he always attended the best schools. His parents always made sure to spend time playing with him while he was growing up. When it came time for college, Jim was able to go to the best universities and did not have to worry about working to pay for his degree. So, he had time to study and participate in unpaid extracurricular activities that he knew were important for getting a job when he graduated.

Tom has always been a very hardworking kid too, just like Jim. But Tom grew up in a family that did not have nearly enough money to buy him what he needed and to make sure he attended the best schools. His parents never had time to spend playing with him while he was growing up. When it came time for college, Tom was not able to go to the best universities and had to worry about working to pay for his degree. So, he had to split his time between studying and working to make ends meet and could not afford to participate in unpaid extracurricular activities that he knew were important for getting a job when he graduated."

Equal Opportunity

We measured perceived equality of opportunity in the hiring for the high-paying job with the following item: "I believe that both Jim and Tom had equal opportunity in competing for the high-paying job" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree, no midpoint*).

Political Orientation

We measured political orientation with the following item "How politically liberal or conservative are you?" (1 = *very liberal*, 5 = *very conservative*).

Results

We used regression analysis to investigate the effect of learning about information regarding socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages on fairness perceptions of the hiring process and outcomes—see Figure 1. In the background inequality information condition, participants evaluated both the hiring process ($b = -0.90$, $SE = 0.13$, $t = -6.76$, $p < .001$, 95% confidence interval, CI [−1.16, −0.64]) and its outcomes ($b = -1.21$, $SE = 0.13$, $t = -9.04$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.47, −0.95]) as significantly less fair relative to the no information condition. Regression analysis also showed that participants perceived significantly less equality of opportunity in the background inequality information condition relative to the no information condition ($b = -0.85$, $SE = 0.17$, $t = -5.06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.19, −0.52]). Additionally, mediation analyses showed that belief in equal opportunity partly mediated the effect of learning about socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages on fairness perception of process (indirect effect: $b = -0.28$, $SE = 0.07$, $z = -4.09$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.41, −0.14]) and fairness perception of outcomes (indirect effect: $b = -0.32$, $SE = 0.08$, $z = -4.06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.47, −0.16]). Importantly, the mediator and the dependent variables were assessed cross-sectionally; thus, these results do not provide evidence of causality (Fiedler et al., 2018)—and this is the case across all studies presented in this article.

Political Ideology

We used regression analyses to explore the interaction of condition (from no information to background inequality information) on perceived fairness of the hiring process and its outcomes. As expected, conservatism was associated with greater perceived fairness, but results revealed no significant interaction: fair hiring process ($b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = 0.15$, $p = .880$, 95% CI [−0.20, 0.23]) and fair hiring outcomes ($b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = 0.58$, $p = .565$, 95% CI [−0.15, 0.27])—see Figure 2. Thus, learning about unequal starting points had similar effects for liberals and conservatives.

Study 2

The first study provided evidence that information about past inequality among job candidates can shape the perceived fairness of meritocratic hiring rules and their outcomes. When participants learned that two job candidates held different socioeconomic backgrounds, they judged the very same merit-based hiring rules as less fair than when this information was not provided. In the second study, we replicated this effect using promotion rather than hiring

Figure 1
Means by Condition and Standard Errors (Study 1)

Note. All variables measured on a 6-point scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*.

to test whether this effect generalizes to other types of merit-based processes.

Method

Participants

We recruited 300 Amazon Mechanical Turk participants on Cloud Research Panel (including English as a primary language and U.S. residency as panel features) and 304 participants completed the study. Seventeen participants were excluded from the sample before analyzing the data due to failure to pass attention checks, leaving us with a final sample of 287 participants. All participants were located in the United States (58% female, 42% male, $M_{age} = 38.04$, $SD_{age} = 12.83$). Forty-eight percent of participants reported being Democrat, 24% labeled themselves as independent, and 28% reported being Republican. Sensitivity power analyses with linear multiple regression using three predictors and standard criteria $\alpha = .05$ and $\beta = .80$ revealed a minimum effect size that could be detected by our sample equal to $f^2 = 0.03$, critical $F(3, 300) = 2.63$.

Box 3 Meritocratic Promotion Process and Outcome

"Jim and Tom have both worked hard and graduated college. They now continue to work hard at the same company and have similar jobs. There is a new opportunity for a promotion to a better position at their workplace, with a higher salary and more benefits. Their boss has to decide which one to promote: Jim or Tom. Their boss is focusing only on promoting the most qualified employee. He is going to promote the employee who has shown higher performance over time and readiness for a position with additional responsibilities. Based on these two requirements, Jim is the clear choice. Jim has consistently performed a better job than Tom, showing that he had more experience working and/or interning at similar companies. Additionally, Jim is better at handling responsibilities, which is likely a consequence of how many extra-curricular activities he managed during his university years. Tom, on the other hand, has consistently performed at a lower level than Jim and has also shown a lower ability to handle extra responsibilities. This is probably a consequence of having less work-related experience, given that he has not done any internships or extracurricular activities before joining the company. Their boss decides to promote Jim."

Materials and Procedure

We used the same between-subjects design, randomly assigning participants to one of two conditions: no information versus background inequality information. In both conditions, participants read about the same meritocratic promotion process and its outcomes (Box 3):

In the background inequality information condition, participants received information about the presence of socioeconomic disadvantages in one of the employee's background and socioeconomic advantages in the other employee's background (this information was identical to Study 1) before reading about the same promotion process and its outcome. Participants then responded to our main dependent variables and standard demographic measures.

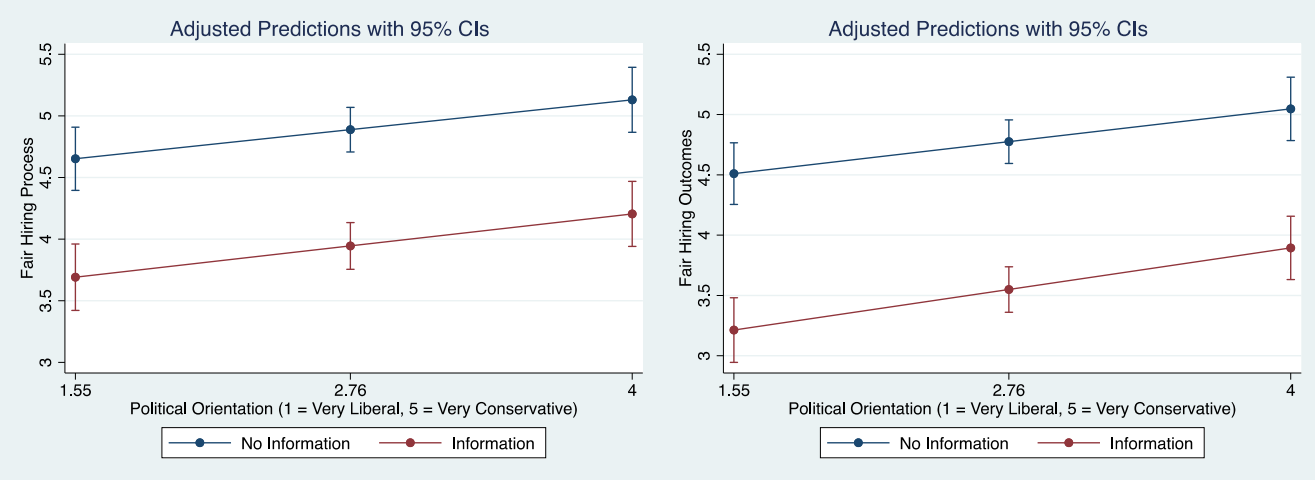
Measures

Fair Promotion Process

To prompt participants to think about procedural fairness, they read "We are now going to ask you a couple of questions about the promotion process. Think about the promotion process and how fair you think it was and click to answer the next questions." We measured the fairness perception of the promotion process with three items ($\alpha = .95$): "The promotion process was fair," "The rules used by their boss to select an employee for the promotion were fair," and

Figure 2

Interactions of Political Orientation by Condition on Perceived Fairness of Hiring Process (Left Panel) and Outcomes (Right Panel; Study 1)



Note. CIs = confidence intervals. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

"The process used by the boss to promote an employee was fair" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree, no midpoint*).

Fair Promotion Outcomes

Participants were prompted to think about outcomes with the following instructions: "We are now going to ask you a couple of questions about the outcomes of the promotion. Think about the outcomes of the promotion and how fair you think it was and click to answer the next questions." We measured the fairness perception of the promotion outcomes with three items ($\alpha = .93$): "It was fair that Jim got the promotion," "It was fair that Tom did not get the promotion," and "The promotion outcomes for Tom and Jim were fair" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree, no midpoint*).

Equal Opportunity

We measured perceived equality of opportunity in this promotion case with the following item: "I believe that both Jim and Tom had equal opportunity in competing for the promotion at their company" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree, no midpoint*).

Political Orientation

We measured political orientation with the same item used in the first study.

Results

We used regression analysis to investigate the effect of learning about past inequalities on the fairness perceptions of the promotion process and outcomes—see Figure 3. In the background inequality information condition, participants evaluated both the promotion process ($b = -0.46$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = -4.48$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−66, −26]) and its outcomes ($b = -0.64$, $SE = 0.12$, $t = -5.30$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.87, −0.40]) as significantly less fair relative to the no information condition. Again, we tested whether belief in equal opportunity mediated this effect. Regression analysis replicated previous results showing that participants perceived significantly less equality of opportunity in the background inequality information condition relative to the no information condition ($b = -0.64$, $SE = 0.16$, $t = -3.92$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.96, −0.32]). Additionally, mediation analyses showed that belief in equal opportunity partly mediated the effect of learning about socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages on fairness perception of the promotion process (indirect effect: $b = -0.18$, $SE = 0.05$, $z = -3.52$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.28, −0.08]) and outcomes (indirect effect: $b = -0.23$, $SE = 0.06$, $z = -3.57$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.36, −0.10]).

Political Ideology

We used regression analyses to explore the interaction of condition (from no information to background inequality information) on perceived fairness of the promotion process and its outcomes. Results revealed no significant interaction: fair promotion process ($b = -0.00$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = -0.04$, $p = .970$, 95% CI [−0.16, 0.16]) and fair promotion outcomes ($b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = 0.84$, $p = .400$,

Figure 3

Means by Condition and Standard Errors (Study 2)

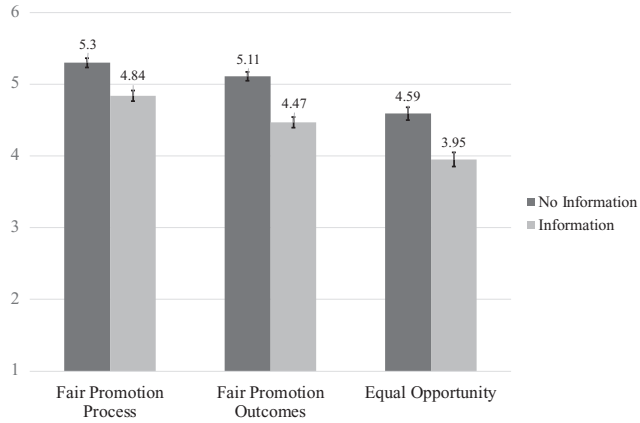
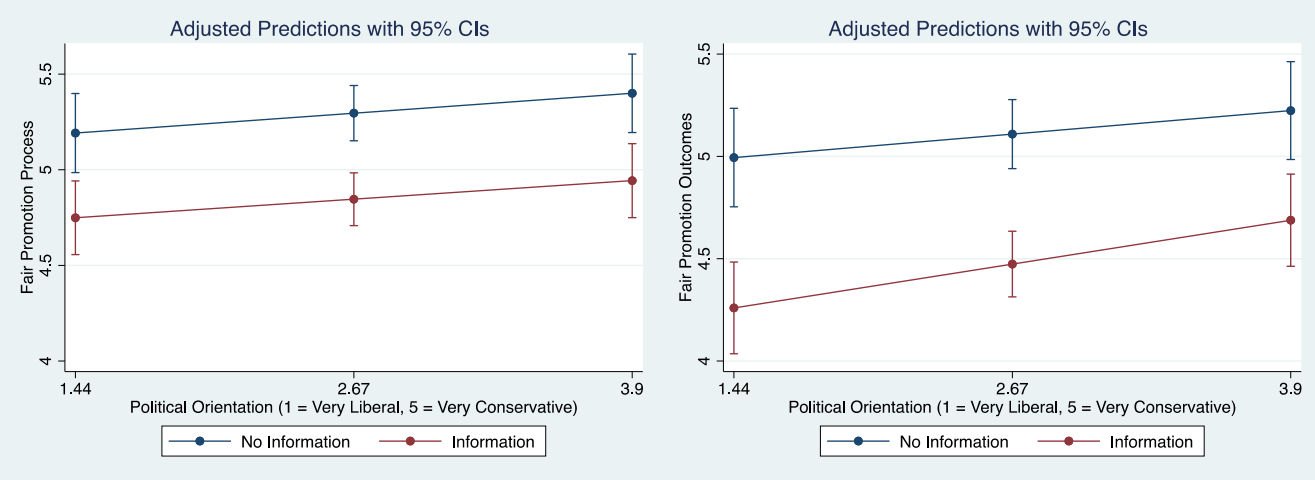


Figure 4

Interactions of Political Orientation by Condition on Perceived Fairness of Promotion Process (Left Panel) and Outcomes (Right Panel; Study 2)



Note. CIs = confidence intervals. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

95% CI [−0.11, 0.27])—see Figure 4. Again, learning about previous inequality had similar effects across the political spectrum.

Study 3

In Studies 1 and 2, we provided evidence that learning about past inequality in candidates' backgrounds can decrease the perceived fairness of meritocratic hiring and promotion processes and respective outcomes. Yet, in both studies, participants learned about past inequality in the form of one candidate having grown up socioeconomically advantaged and the other candidate having grown up socioeconomically disadvantaged. While inequality entails both some people being advantaged and others being disadvantaged, research on inequity frames suggests that learning about these aspects separately (i.e., either learning about advantages or disadvantages) can lead to disparate effects (e.g., Branscombe, 1998; Lowery et al., 2012; Phillips et al., 2022). In the case of racial inequality, focusing on White people having advantages can lead to more defensive responses and decreased support for policies such as affirmative action relative to a focus on Black people having disadvantages (Phillips & Lowery, 2015). Thus, in this study, we explore whether learning about these facets of socioeconomic inequality separately (i.e., advantages or disadvantages) produces different perceptions of the fairness of meritocratic processes and respective outcomes relative to learning about inequality as a whole (preregistration: https://aspredicted.org/L7H_ZZY).

Method

Participants

We recruited 1,200 participants on Prolific and ended up with 1,199 responses (sample restricted to American participants and gender-balanced). Thirty-three participants were excluded from the sample before analyzing the data due to failure to pass a simple attention check, leaving us with a final sample of $N = 1{,}166$ participants. All participants were located in the United States (48% female, 51% male, 1% nonbinary, $M_{age} = 40.38$, $SD_{age} = 14.01$, 74% White, 13% Hispanic, 10% Black or African American, 5% Native American or Pacific Islander, 11% Asian; participants could self-identify as more than one race and/or ethnicity). Forty-five percent of participants reported being Democrat, 18% labeled themselves as independent, and 37% reported being Republican.

Materials and Procedure

Materials and procedure were identical to Study 1 with two additional conditions. We included one condition where participants learned only about one candidate coming from a socioeconomically advantaged background and another condition where participants learned only about the other candidate coning from a socioeconomically disadvantaged background. Thus, this study involved a between-subjects design with a total of four conditions: no information, background inequality information, background advantage information, and background disadvantage information. The former two were a replication of Study 1. In the new background advantage information condition participants read only the part about Jim growing up advantaged and in the new background disadvantage information condition participants read only the part about Tom growing up disadvantaged. In all four conditions, participants read about the same meritocratic hiring case and completed the same dependent variables and standard demographic measures.

Measures

Fair Hiring Process

The perceived fairness of the hiring process was measured with an average composite of the same three items used in the first study (in this sample $\alpha = .97$).

Fair Hiring Outcomes

The perceived fairness of the hiring outcomes was measured with an average composite of the same three items used in the first study (in this sample $\alpha = .93$).

Equal Opportunity

Perceived equality of opportunity was measured with the same item from the first study.

Political Orientation

We measured participants' political orientation with the following item "How politically liberal or conservative are you?" (1 = *very liberal*, 5 = *very conservative*).

Results

Firstly, we used regression analysis to investigate the effect of condition (no information, background inequality information, background advantage information, and background disadvantage information) on the main dependent variables. Relative to the no information condition, learning about inequality in terms of both advantages and disadvantages caused a decrease in fairness perceptions of the meritocratic process ($b = -0.95$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = -10.46$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.13, −0.77]) and its outcomes ($b = -1.20$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = -12.92$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.39, −1.02]), also deflating participants' belief in equality of opportunity ($b = -1.00$, $SE = 0.12$, $t = -8.09$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.24, −0.76]). Thus, we replicated our findings from Study 1. Learning about the two pieces of inequality (advantages or disadvantages) separately also significantly decreased fairness perceptions and belief in equality of opportunity relative to the no information condition. In the advantage information condition, participants perceived the hiring process ($b = -0.43$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = -4.76$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.61, −0.25]) and its outcomes ($b = -0.67$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = -7.24$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.86, −0.49]) as significantly less fair than the no information control, evaluating candidates to have less equality of opportunity ($b = -0.73$, $SE = 0.12$, $t = -5.89$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.97, −0.48]). In the disadvantage information condition, participants also perceived the hiring process ($b = -0.96$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = -10.56$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.14, −0.78]) and its outcomes ($b = -1.11$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = -11.89$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.30, −0.93]) as significantly less fair than the no information control, similarly evaluating the candidates to have less equality of opportunity ($b = -1.05$, $SE = 0.12$, $t = -8.44$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.29, −0.80])—see Figure 5. Interestingly, and in line with previous research on inequity frames, participants adjusted their perceptions significantly more when they learned about either inequality (i.e., both advantages and disadvantages) or "disadvantages only" relative to "advantages only." To this point, there were no significant differences between the inequality information and disadvantage information conditions, but there were significant differences between the inequality information and the advantage information conditions—see the Supplemental Information in the online supplemental materials for additional analyses, including results regarding mediation.

Political Ideology

We used regression analyses to explore the interactions between condition (no information, inequality information, advantage information, and disadvantage information) and participants' political orientation on the perceived fairness of the hiring process and its outcomes. As expected, conservatism was associated with greater perceived fairness. Results revealed no significant interaction between the no information and the advantage information conditions by political orientation on fair hiring process ($b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 0.51$, $p = .608$, 95% CI [−0.10, 0.16]) and fair hiring outcomes ($b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 1.30$, $p = .194$, 95% CI [−0.04, 0.22]); no significant interaction between the no information and the disadvantage information conditions by political orientation on fair hiring process ($b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 0.27$, $p = .787$, 95% CI [−0.11, 0.15]) and fair hiring outcomes ($b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 1.02$, $p = .310$, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.20]); and significant interactions between the no information and the inequality information conditions by political orientation on fair hiring process ($b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 1.95$, $p = .051$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.27]) and fair hiring outcomes ($b = 0.21$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 3.05$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.34]);—see Figure 6 and the Supplemental Information in the online supplemental materials for additional analyses.

Overall, these results show evidence that both liberals and conservatives significantly adjusted their fairness perceptions of an otherwise identical merit-based hiring process and respective outcomes when

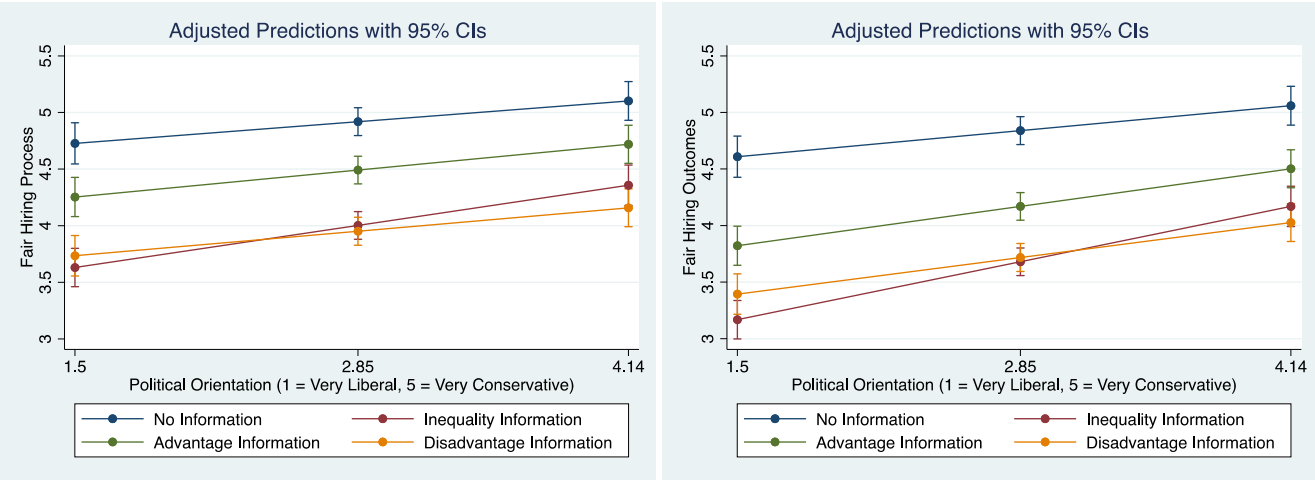
Figure 5

Means by Condition and Standard Errors (Study 3)

Note. All variables measured on a 6-point scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*.

Figure 6

Interactions of Political Orientation by Condition on Perceived Fairness of Hiring Process (Left Panel) and Outcomes (Right Panel; Study 3)



Note. CIs = confidence intervals. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

they learned about inequality (i.e., advantages and disadvantages), only disadvantages, and only advantages. Importantly, while other research shows that learning about advantages in other inequality domains (e.g., race and gender) can lead to defensiveness among conservatives, our results suggest that conservatives can adjust in the same direction as liberals in the context of socioeconomic inequality.

Study 4

In Studies 1–3, participants learned about background socioeconomic information regarding the specific candidates involved in the hiring and promotion cases. In this study, we investigated whether thinking about the effects of unequal starting points in general would suffice to trigger the change in fairness perceptions. This is important because people are much more likely to learn about the effects of economic inequality in a generalized fashion and not in terms of specific job candidates. Hence, this study adds ecological validity to the effect documented in the first couple of studies. This study also provided a replication of the first study with a sample from a different participant pool (Prolific).

Method

Participants

We recruited 600 participants on Prolific and, given that Prolific samples have a strong liberal bias, subsequently added another 250 participants who self-identified as Republican in order to have a more politically balanced sample. Eight hundred and sixteen participants completed the survey, and 25 participants were excluded from the total sample before analyzing the data due to failure to pass attention checks, leaving us with a final sample of $N = 791$ participants. All Prolific participants were located in the United States (51% Female, 49% Male, $M_{age} = 33.88$, $SD_{age} = 12.37$). Forty-one percent of participants reported being Democrat, 22% labeled themselves as independent, and 37% reported being Republican. Sensitivity power analyses with linear multiple regression using four predictors and standard criteria $\alpha = .05$ and $\beta = .80$ revealed a minimum effect size that could be detected by our sample equal to $f^2 = 0.01$, critical $F(4, 816) = 2.38$.

Materials and Procedure

This study was a replication of Study 1 with one additional condition: general inequality information. All procedures were identical to the first study, the only difference being that here participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. The no information and the targeted background inequality information conditions were identical to the first study. In the general inequality information condition, participants learned about how people in general can grow up socioeconomically advantaged or disadvantaged (Box 4):

Box 4 General Inequality Information

"Some people have always been very hardworking kids. In addition, some of these people also happen grow up in families that always have a lot of money to buy them what they need and to make sure that they always attend the best schools. In this type of family, parents always make sure to spend time playing with the kids while they are growing up. When it comes time for college, people who come from these families are usually able to go to the best universities and do not have to worry about working to pay for their degree. So, these people have time to study and participate in unpaid extracurricular activities that they know are important for getting a job when they graduate. Other people have always been very hardworking kids too. But some of these people also happen to grow up in families that do not have nearly enough money to buy them what they need and to make sure that they attend the best schools. In this type of family, parents never have time to spend playing with the kids while they are growing up. When it comes time for college, people who come from these families are usually not able to go to the best universities and have to worry about working to pay for their degree. So, these people have to split their time between studying and working to make ends me and cannot afford to participate in unpaid extracurricular activities that they know are important for getting a job when they graduate."

Importantly, this information was about "people in general," and not about the job candidates in particular.

Measures

Fair Hiring Process

We measured the fairness perception of the hiring process with an average composite of the same three items used in the first study ($\alpha = .94$).

Fair Hiring Outcomes

We measured the fairness perception of the hiring outcomes with an average composite of the same three items used in the first study ($\alpha = .92$).

Equal Opportunity

We measured perceived equality of opportunity in this hiring case with the same item used in the first study.

Political Orientation

We measured political orientation with the same item used in the first two studies.

Results

We tested the effects of the experimental conditions using regression analyses. We replicated the effects documented in the first study, such that in the targeted background inequality information condition, participants evaluated both the hiring process ($b = -0.73$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = -6.83$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.94, −0.52]) and its outcome ($b = -1.00$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = -9.56$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.21, −0.80]) as significantly less fair relative to the no information condition. Comparing the new general inequality information condition with no information yielded similar results such that learning about the advantages and disadvantages of people in general made participants evaluate both the hiring process ($b = -0.65$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = -6.12$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.86, −0.44]) and its outcomes ($b = -0.94$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = -8.94$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.14, −0.73]) as significantly less fair (see Figure 7). There were no significant differences between the targeted and the general inequality information conditions regarding fairness perceptions of process ($p = .47$) and outcomes ($p = .52$).

Regarding the perception of equal opportunity in competing for the high-paying job, regression analysis showed that participants perceived significantly less equality of opportunity in the targeted background inequality information condition relative to the no information condition ($b = -0.77$, $SE = 0.14$, $t = -5.65$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.04, −0.51]). Comparing the new general inequality information with the no information condition yielded similar results ($b = -0.77$, $SE = 0.14$, $t = -5.66$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.04, −0.51]). Again, there was no significant difference between the targeted and the general inequality information conditions ($p = .99$). Given that both manipulations were not significantly different from each other, we collapsed them into one information condition for the mediation analyses. These analyses showed that, once again, a decrease in belief in equal opportunity partly mediated the effect of learning about socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages on fairness perception of process (indirect effect: $b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.04$, $z = -4.93$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.27, −0.12]) and fairness perception of outcomes (indirect effect: $b = -0.25$, $SE = 0.04$, $z = -5.70$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.33, −0.16]).

Political Ideology

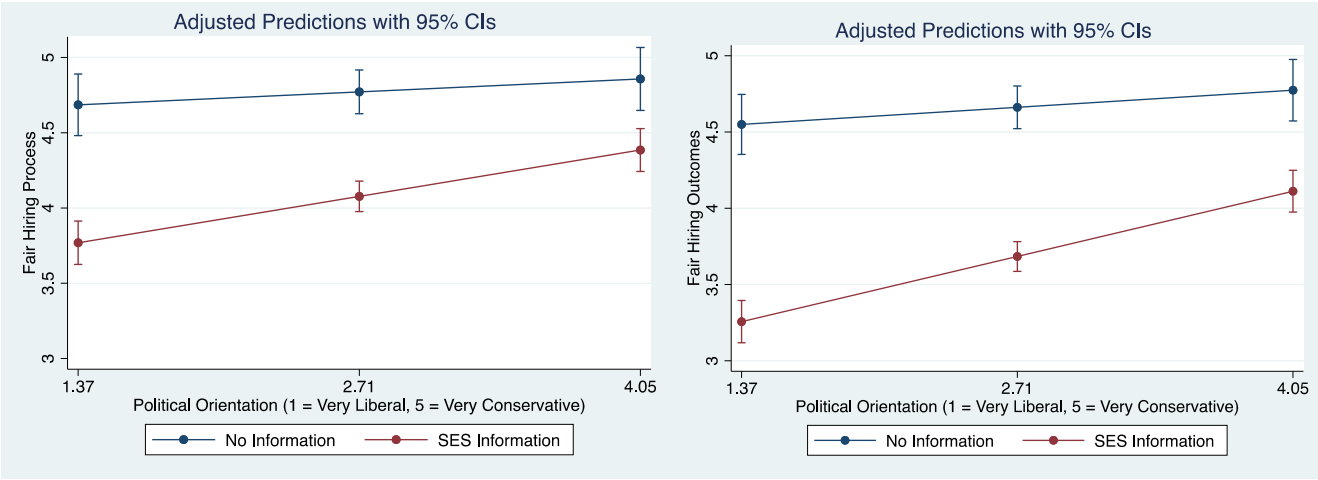
We used regression analyses to explore the interaction of condition (from no information to information) on perceived fairness of the hiring process and its outcomes. In this study, we found significant interactions: fair hiring process ($b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 2.43$, $p < .05$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.30]) and fair hiring outcomes ($b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 3.58$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.36])—see Figure 8. Thus, liberals adjusted relatively more than conservatives. But, crucially, both liberals and conservatives significantly updated their fairness perceptions—see simple slopes analyses in the Supplemental Information in the online supplemental materials.

Figure 7

Means by Condition and Standard Errors (Study 4)

Figure 8

Interactions of Political Orientation by Condition on Perceived Fairness of Hiring Process (Left Panel) and Outcomes (Right Panel; Study 4)



Note. CIs = confidence intervals. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Study 5

The previous studies provided evidence that learning about the presence of socioeconomic inequality in candidates' background can decrease the perceived fairness of otherwise identical merit-based selection processes and respective outcomes. This effect was documented with both hiring and promotion merit-based processes and was replicated with general information about inequality rather than specific information about the particular candidates involved in these particular processes. In this final study, we explore whether learning about socioeconomic inequality can lead to downstream consequences in terms of support for policies that foster socioeconomic diversity in organizations. This study was preregistered at: https://aspredicted.org/HB3_QCY.

Method

Participants

We recruited 800 participants on Prolific (Americans only, gender-balanced sample), and 801 completed the survey. Sixteen participants were excluded from the total sample before analyzing the data due to failure to pass attention checks, leaving us with a final sample of $N = 785$ participants. All prolific participants were located in the United States (48% female, 50% male, 2% nonbinary, $M_{age} = 39.59$, $SD_{age} = 14.41$, 77% White, 7% Hispanic, 9% Black or African American, 1% Native American or Pacific Islander, 10% Asian; participants could self-identify as more than one race and/or ethnicity). Sixty-two percent of participants reported being Democrat, 25% labeled themselves as independent, and 13% reported being Republican.

Materials and Procedure

This study involved two between-subjects conditions that were a replication of the no information and the general inequality information conditions from Study 4, with the exclusion of the "fair hiring outcomes" measure and the addition of a measure that captured support for organizational policies that foster socioeconomic diversity.

Measures

Fair Hiring Process

We measured the fairness perception of the hiring process with an average composite of the same three items used in previous studies ($\alpha = .97$).

Equal Opportunity

We measured perceived equality of opportunity in this hiring case with the same item used in previous studies.

Policy Support

We measured support for organizational policies that promote socioeconomic diversity in organizations with an average composite of the following four items: "Using hiring processes that remove prestigious brand name universities from resumes," "Using hiring processes that remove prestigious brand name companies from resumes," "Making internships less of a requirement for getting hired," and "Putting more weight on job-related experience when evaluating a job candidate" ($\alpha = .72$; 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree, no midpoint*). These items were adapted from policy initiatives described by Gafni (2021).

Political Orientation

We measured political orientation with the same item used in the first two studies.

Results

We used regression analysis to test the effect of the condition on dependent measures. Results revealed a replication of the

effects documented in the third study, such that in the general inequality information condition, participants perceived the hiring process as significantly less fair ($b = -1.03$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = -13.04$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.19, −0.88]) and evaluated the candidates to have significantly less equality of opportunity in competing for the high paying job ($b = -0.90$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = -8.65$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.10, −0.69]). Results also showed a significant effect of condition (from no information to general inequality information) on support for organizational policies that promote social class diversity ($b = 0.37$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 5.30$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.24, 0.51])—see Figure 9. That is, learning about the presence of socioeconomic inequality in people's backgrounds in general led participants to be significantly more supportive of policy initiatives that foster socioeconomic diversity in organizations.

Political Ideology

We used regression analyses to explore the interaction of condition (from no information to general inequality information) on perceived fairness of the hiring process and policy support. Replicating the results from the third study, we found a significant interaction of condition by participants' political orientation on fair hiring process ($b = 0.22$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 3.11$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.35]). But there was no significant interaction predicting *Policy Support* ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 0.24$, $p = .813$, 95% CI [−0.10, 0.13])—see Figure 10 and the Supplemental Information in the online supplemental materials for simple slopes analyses.

General Discussion

The lack of public outrage about rising inequality is aligned with the widespread endorsement of meritocratic ideologies in the West, particularly in the United States (e.g., García-Sánchez et al., 2020). Meritocratic practices that reward people based on their achievements continue to represent the gold standard of organizational fairness (Castilla & Ranganathan, 2020). Unsurprisingly, organizations profess to place merit at the center of decisions about everything from school admissions to hiring and promotions (Longoria, 2009).

Yet, while the majority of Americans today continue to endorse merit-based procedures as fair, our results show that it does not take much to change these perceptions. Our key finding is that people are able to attach past inequalities to their evaluation of current meritocratic practices. In this way, past inequalities end up shaping fairness perceptions of merit-based rules and their respective outcomes. In other words, our studies suggest that learning about the presence of economic disparities in people's backgrounds can affect judgments surrounding the fairness of meritocratic processes.

Moreover, our results suggest that learning about past inequalities can make both liberals and conservatives update the perceived fairness of meritocracy, leading them to evaluate merit-based hiring and promotion processes as significantly less fair and to be more supportive of policies that foster social class diversity in organizations. Importantly, we acknowledge that interactions can be noisy and, as a result, we would like to refrain from overinterpreting the details of these interactions. Yet a consistent pattern in the Ideology × Condition interactions is that, even when these interactions are significant, we still find that both liberals and conservatives are affected by our manipulations. Given the tendency for this type of message to be either ineffective or to even backfire with conservatives, we believe that this finding can help us move toward interventions that work across the political spectrum.

The studies we presented here suggest that decreased perceptions of equal opportunity can help to explain the effect of learning about past inequalities on fairness perceptions of meritocratic processes and outcomes. However, more research is needed to uncover the psychological pathways via which information about past inequality is influencing people's fairness judgments. On the one hand, perhaps learning about past inequalities leads people to update their perceptions of the accuracy of merit-based processes in selecting the

Figure 9

Means by Condition and Standard Errors (Study 5)

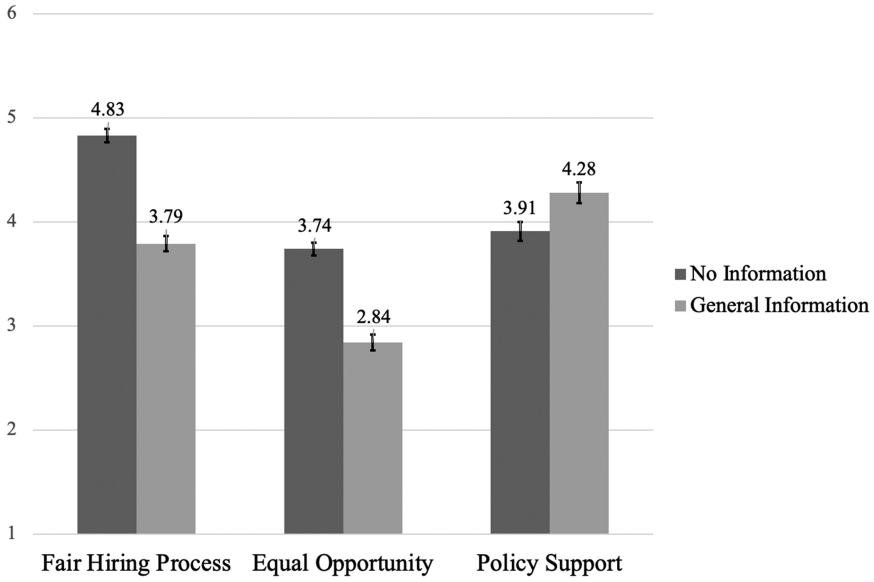
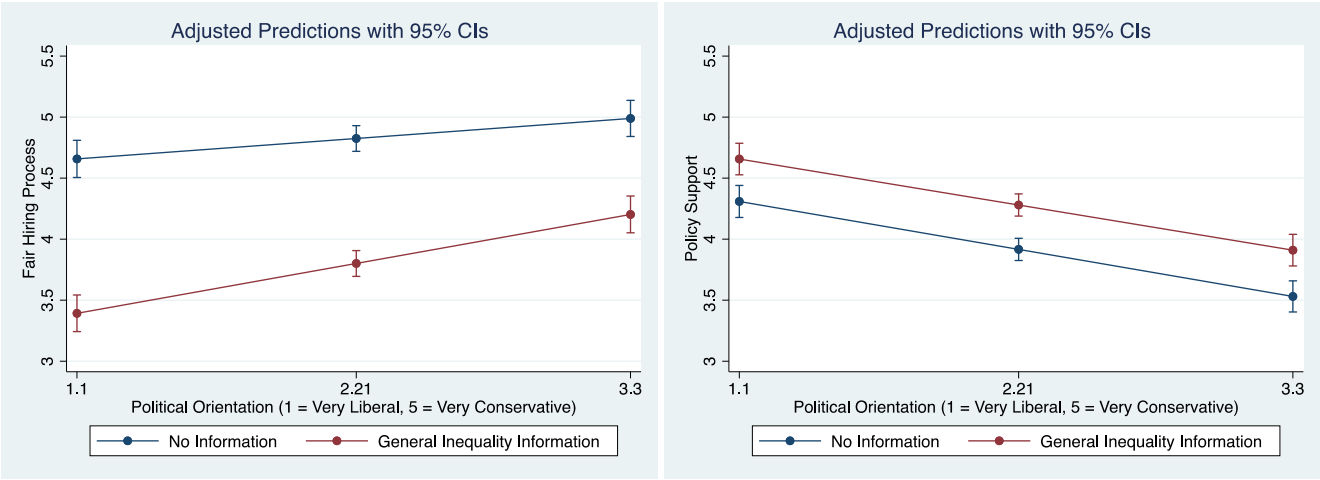


Figure 10

Interactions of Participants' Political Orientation by Condition on Perceived Fairness of Hiring Process (Left Panel) and Policy Support (Right Panel; Study 5)



Note. CIs = confidence intervals. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

"truly" most qualified candidate. That is, participants could believe that, if the less qualified candidate was systematically disadvantaged in the past, then maybe he is actually more competent and more hard-working than the candidate with higher qualifications on paper. Thus, the process would be less fair because it is no longer able to select for merit. On the other hand, people could also be focusing on how unequal opportunities in and of themselves can undermine the fairness of the process. That is, learning about inequalities in candidates' backgrounds can make the process appear less fair as people realize that one candidate may not have had the same education or resources to make it as easy on them to succeed as the other candidate.

It is common in the literature on procedural justice to draw a strong distinction between fair processes and fair outcomes. As our results highlight, unequal outcomes at one point in time (or in one generation) can constrain the opportunities and advantages available at a later time (or to the next generation). To the extent that perceivers understand the iterative nature of outcomes and opportunities, the distinction between fair processes and fair outcomes may become less clear than predicted by the justice literature. Indeed, recent events suggest that the psychology surrounding the fairness of merit-based procedures might be changing. Consider the current dialogue surrounding the validity of using Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scores in college admissions (e.g., Ashok, *The New York Times*, 2021). Making admission decisions based on the SAT seems meritocratic in an immediate sense, as everyone has to take the same test, and the test scores (i.e., a measure of students' merit) guide the selection process via which outcome judgments are made. Indeed, this merit-based rationale underlies the early efforts that Ivy league universities put forward to establish the use of test scores in the first place (Markovits, 2019). The outcomes of merit-based college admissions, however unequal, have been generally accepted as fair given that they stem from processes that have been sanctioned as meritocratic and legitimate. This logic is aligned with the argument put forward by fairness heuristic theory: if a procedure is evaluated as fair, then its outcomes are also evaluated as fair. Yet people have recently started to zoom out from this immediate "fair process to fair outcome" link by considering how previous socioeconomic inequality can disrupt this equation. In the case of SAT scores, considering the ways via which socioeconomic disparities can shape students' performance has led to the development of the SAT adversity score (students' initial scores are adjusted by factors such as neighborhood crime and poverty rates; Belkin, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2019).

Our work suggests that this may not be an isolated case. When information about previous inequalities is made salient, people use this information to significantly adjust their judgments of the fairness of merit-based selection processes more broadly. These updated judgments can have important downstream consequences in terms of policy support. Although a few large corporations have taken the lead on addressing socioeconomic inequities in their workforce (e.g., KPMG's pledge to increase, by 2030, the share of low SES directors and partners in its U.K. branch; Major, 2021), these seem to be the exception rather than the rule, leading some to refer to SES as the "forgotten dimension of diversity" (Ingram & Oh, 2020). Our studies suggest that learning about socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages can lead people to be more supportive of organizational policies that promote greater social class diversity.

Our studies focused on the ways that unequal starting advantages and disadvantages shape perceptions of fairness. There is reason to suspect that not all kinds of inequality would have the same effect. For example, if participants learned that the less qualified candidate had achieved fewer qualifications due to laziness or other internal attributions rather than limited opportunity, we would not expect this form of inequality to change fair process judgments. Moreover, if participants learned simply that one candidate was wealthier than the other, the implications of this inequality for judgments of fairness would likely depend on the attributions participants make about the reasons for their differences in SES (Davidai, 2022). Nonetheless, ample evidence indicates that unequal outcomes in one generation do, in fact, result in unequal opportunities in the next generation (Chetty et al., 2014, 2020). Our studies capture this important dynamic by using the kinds of advantages and disadvantages that have been well studied as mechanisms by which structural and

generational inequalities impact qualifications (e.g., Corak, 2013; Heckman, 2011; Manduca, 2018).

While our studies have focused on inequalities related to socioeconomic factors, we believe that future research could investigate the effectiveness of this type of manipulation in other domains, such as race. It would be fascinating if we could find such robust effects using messages that talk about opportunity gaps tied to structural racism instead of economic inequality (Kendi, 2019; Welner & Carter, 2013). Members of marginalized racial groups tend to experience socioeconomic disadvantages more often than members of privileged racial groups, and the negative consequences of these disadvantages can be even more severe for racial minorities (Kendi, 2019). Yet diversity policies based on race continue to be polarizing. Thus, exploring whether the manipulations developed here can be effective when framed in terms of racial disadvantages and advantages can be an important avenue for future work.

Together, our results suggest that previous inequalities can disrupt the perceived fairness of meritocracy, suggesting that we may need to rethink some of the takeaways from a large body of literature (e.g., fairness heuristic theory) that has been informing policymakers and hirers everywhere for the past decades.

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