

**The Effects of Ethnic and Educational Inequality Contexts on the Relationship between
Prescriptive Meritocracy and Support for Redistribution**

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Abstract

Socioeconomic inequality is a pressing issue in European societies, yet support for redistribution has not increased accordingly. The belief that current society already is meritocratic (descriptive meritocracy) is often cited as a reason for this. By contrast, the belief that society should be meritocratic in principle (prescriptive meritocracy) has been associated with a more liberal belief system and is therefore thought to predict willingness to support redistribution. However, as the limited existing literature on prescriptive meritocracy is ambiguous, this paper aims to clarify its potentially context-specific role in relation to support for redistribution. We randomly assigned 258 European Union citizens to receive information about either educational or ethnic inequalities, investigating how this influenced the relationship between prescriptive meritocracy and support for redistribution. Contrary to our predictions, prescriptive meritocracy did not significantly predict support for redistribution. Furthermore, no significant difference between the conditions could be detected and the type of inequality did not moderate the relationship between prescriptive meritocracy and support for redistribution. The null results were partly attributed to ceiling effects in the data and shortcomings in the operationalisation of prescriptive meritocracy. Overall, this study has made a valuable contribution to the limited research on prescriptive meritocracy by being the first to differentiate between ethnic and educational inequality in this context. Future research should aim to use a more diverse sample and a discrepancy score between descriptive and prescriptive meritocracy beliefs in order to increase the predictive power of redistributive preferences.

Keywords: prescriptive meritocracy, redistributive policies, ethnic inequality, educational inequality, Europe

The Effects of Ethnic and Educational Inequality Contexts on the Relationship between Prescriptive Meritocracy and Support for Redistribution

In light of growing levels of socioeconomic inequality within various European countries (Filauro et al., 2025; Sandel, 2021; McCaughey, 2024), it is surprising that calls for redistribution have not increased accordingly (Ciani et al., 2021). This should be cause for concern, given that redistributive policies are recognized as effective governmental measures for achieving a more equitable society (Avram et al., 2014; Seshadri et al., 2004). One possible explanation for the stagnating demand for redistribution is the growing belief in meritocracy in Western societies (Sandel, 2021; Mijs, 2018, 2019). But why? Meritocracy is based on the premise that everyone has equal opportunities (Sandel, 2021). This means that success in life is thought to be the result of an individual's hard work (Hadden et al., 2025). However, in a society where opportunities are far from equally distributed (Sandel, 2021), believing that the current system is meritocratic can lead to the dangerous perception that existing inequalities are legitimate (Sandel, 2021; Mijs, 2019). This perceived legitimization could contribute to the lack of increase in public demand for redistribution (Kudrnáč et al., 2022).

However, within the broader framework of meritocracy, there is a belief that has been noted by literature as a potential driver for demanding positive societal change (Son Hing et al., 2011). This belief is known as prescriptive meritocracy, and it is based on the idea that the system should ideally be meritocratic (Son Hing et al., 2011). Nevertheless, previous research on prescriptive meritocracy is limited and has yielded ambiguous results regarding the extent to which it predicts demand for positive measures. For example, believing in prescriptive meritocracy only conditionally elicited support for justice-related proposals, depending on whether the measures were perceived as meritocratic (Son Hing et al., 2011). To contribute to a more nuanced understanding of this, the present paper asks the following

question: How does exposure to different types of inequality (ethnic vs. educational) influence the relationship between prescriptive meritocratic beliefs and support for context-specific redistributive policies? In the following sections, I will first summarize the current discourse on descriptive and prescriptive meritocracy. Then I will elaborate on the relationship between prescriptive meritocracy and support for redistributive policies, while also discussing the differential role of ethnic versus educational inequalities in this regard, before proposing my hypotheses.

Differentiating between Descriptive and Prescriptive Meritocracy

Research has identified two types of meritocratic beliefs: descriptive meritocracy, which is the previously noted belief that society currently operates meritocratically, and prescriptive meritocracy, which describes the belief that society in its ideal form should be a meritocracy (Son Hing et al., 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2013; Cargile et al., 2019).

Descriptive meritocracy has been linked to inequality legitimization (Son Hing et al., 2011; Sandel, 2021) as it is associated with system justification, prejudice, and conservative worldviews (Zimmerman et al., 2013; McCoy et al., 2007; Son Hing et al., 2011). In contrast, prescriptive meritocracy shows no such relationship with these constructs (Son Hing et al., 2011). Research suggests that the belief in prescriptive meritocracy is more aligned with justice-enhancing goals such as challenging the current societal structure (Son Hing et al., 2011). Furthermore, it has been described as a potentially oppositional ideological construct in relation to descriptive meritocracy (Zimmerman et al., 2013).

Cargile et al. (2019) have questioned this, noting that prescriptive meritocracy might not be “completely benign” (p.15). In line with this, prescriptive meritocracy has been found to elicit resistance to justice-related measures that contradict the concept of merit-based outcomes (Son Hing et al., 2011; Davey et al., 1999) while also being associated with the denial of white privilege (Knowles et al., 2012). In light of this, the present study aims to

clarify whether prescriptive meritocracy can be viewed as a universal commitment to justice, by evaluating related support for redistribution, or whether this commitment might be conditional and context dependent.

Prescriptive Meritocracy and Support for Redistributive Policies

Previous research has found that perceiving socioeconomic inequality as high, as well as perceiving the current system as non-meritocratic, has led to greater demand for redistribution (Yanai, 2017; Tejero-Peregrina et al., 2025). Consistent with this, Zimmerman et al. (2013) found that people who believed that current societal structures strongly deviated from their meritocratic ideals (prescriptive meritocracy) tended to show more support for redistributive measures. The perception of a deviation between reality and one's ideal suggests an increased awareness of systemic shortcomings which in turn drives more support for redistribution. However, whether prescriptive meritocracy, measured in absence of a corresponding evaluation of the current system, also entails increased awareness of systemic shortcomings remains uncertain. Directly investigating this might be a valuable contribution to the literature on prescriptive meritocracy. After all, prescriptive meritocracy has been found to be related to positive attitudes towards interracial conversations and intergroup trust (Cargile et al., 2019), as well as to negative evaluations of unfair workplace practices (Son Hing et al., 2011). The common thread across these findings is that prescriptive meritocracy seems to play a considerable role in motivating corrective demands in light of injustice. To evaluate whether this also translates to support for redistribution, suggesting that believing in the meritocratic ideal already entails a critical awareness of systemic failures, I hypothesize that prescriptive meritocracy will be positively associated with support for redistributive policies (*H1*). In the following section, I will emphasise the importance of investigating ethnic and educational inequality and explain why differentiating between them in terms of support for redistribution might be valuable.

The Relevance of Ethnic and Educational Inequality

Both ethnic and educational inequalities are significant contributors to socioeconomic disparities in European countries. Being less educated is associated with lower income, lacking public participation and poorer overall well-being (Farquharson et al., 2024; Raghupathi et al., 2020). Similarly, belonging to an ethnic minority is associated with disadvantages in the job and housing markets as well as poorer mental and physical health outcomes (Kofman et al., 2009; Satz et al., 2024; Stopforth et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2015).

It is crucial to note that both types of inequality may stem from structural barriers, rather than individual failure. However, individual achievement might be perceived as more relevant regarding educational inequalities compared to ethnic-based inequalities. Yet, within the education system, discriminatory practices systematically prevent marginalized groups from accessing higher education, while privileged family backgrounds provide unfair advantages (Farquharson et al., 2024; Sandel, 2021). Similarly, systemic racism creates barriers across multiple domains (Kofman et al., 2009; Satz et al., 2024). Despite both ethnic and educational inequalities originating from structural disadvantages, research suggests that investigating public perceptions of inequality, rather than its true extent, is a better predictor of support for redistributive measures (Willis et al., 2022). I will therefore now elaborate on the potentially different perceptions of ethnic and educational inequality and their effect on redistribution.

The Differential Perceptions of Ethnic and Educational Inequality on Support for Redistribution

When people perceive inequalities as resulting from uncontrollable circumstances and attribute their cause to structural factors, they tend to rate the inequalities as more unfair (Almås et al., 2024) and engage in behaviour that restores equity (Vasil et al., 2024). Ethnicity is not something that one can control; it is assigned to a person at birth. Therefore,

unequal treatment based on ethnic membership may be perceived as unfair and prompt equity-driven behaviour. However, despite its structural roots, a low educational status is often perceived as individual failure. As a result, educational inequalities are often perceived to be legitimate (Kuppens et al., 2018; Van Noord et al., 2019). Inequalities attributed to factors within individual control are linked to more tolerable perceptions of these inequalities (Almås et al., 2024). Consistent with this, research reveals harsh judgement toward the less educated, including blaming them for their disadvantaged position and perceiving them more negatively than other low-status groups (Kuppens et al., 2018). This can even escalate to dehumanization and the denial of democratic rights (Sainz et al., 2024). Research has linked the dehumanization of a group to decreased helping behaviour (Andrighetto et al., 2014; Sainz et al., 2020). Consistent with this, I propose that individuals are less inclined to endorse redistributive measures intended to address educational inequality, because education is generally perceived as an attainable goal, and individuals are often blamed for failing to achieve it. By contrast, ethnic inequalities are more likely to be viewed as unjust, which may motivate action to restore justice. Therefore, I predict that ethnic inequalities will elicit greater support for related redistributive policies than educational inequalities (*H2*). To date, no previous research has distinguished between ethnic and educational inequalities in this manner. Such research could provide valuable insight into a more nuanced understanding of how the public perceives different types of inequalities and the implications for support for redistribution.

The Moderating Effect of Ethnic versus Educational Inequality on Prescriptive Meritocracy and Support for Redistribution

Research shows that people who strongly believe in prescriptive meritocracy respond to justice-related proposals in a conditional manner (Son Hing et al., 2011). They only support proposals that align with their meritocratic ideals, regardless of whether these benefit

disadvantaged groups (Son Hing et al., 2011; Davey et al., 1999). Furthermore, Castillo et al. (2019) suggest that prescriptive meritocracy only elicits resistance to inequalities that cannot be explained by merit. In relation to support for redistributive policies, people with prescriptive beliefs may support them if they perceive them as a means of restoring a meritocratic system. They might not support redistributive measures that violate their meritocratic ideal. In line with this, inequality based on ethnicity may be perceived as a violation of the meritocratic ideal, since it cannot be explained by merit (Son Hing et al., 2011). This, in turn, could increase support for redistribution as a means of addressing ethnic inequality. Inequalities based on educational attainment as an achieved status may be considered legitimate and consistent with the concept of meritocracy (Kuppens et al., 2018). Consequently, redistributive policies addressing educational disparities may be considered unnecessary and incompatible with meritocratic principles. Therefore, I predict that prescriptive meritocracy will lead to greater support for redistributive policies that aim to address ethnic inequality (H3a), compared to less support for policies that aim to redress educational inequalities (H3b). However, I acknowledge that individuals with prescriptive meritocratic beliefs may recognize structural shortcomings in the current education system and, to some extent, accept that academic opportunities are not equally accessible to everyone. Therefore, while I predict a weaker relationship in the case of educational inequalities, I still expect it to be positive for both ethnic and education inequalities. By directly comparing these effects, I am testing prescriptive meritocracy in two new contexts. This will inform its potential context-specificity and provide a valuable addition to the ambiguous research on the subject.

Method

Participants and Demographics

Our sample consisted of 258 participants. The eligibility criteria required participants to be citizens of a country in the European Union and to be 18 years or older. The sample included 158 women (61.2%), 92 men (35.7%), five non-binary people (1.9%) and three others (1.3%). Most participants were between the ages of 18-25 (70.5%). 70.5% of participants identified as belonging to the ethnic majority group, while 25.2% identified as belonging to a minority group. In terms of educational attainment, 50.0 % of participants had a university degree and 44.2% reported having completed upper secondary education. A detailed overview of participant demographics is presented in Table B1 in Appendix B. Out of 258 participants, 119 were provided with information about ethnic inequalities, while 139 were assigned to read about educational inequalities.

Procedure

Data collection was completed in April 2025 and based on a checklist developed by the EC-BSS at the University of Groningen. The study was exempt from full ethics and privacy review. Participation was voluntary and no compensation was offered. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling, where the survey was shared with the researchers' social circles. Participants were reached via various social media platforms, such as Instagram and WhatsApp and were encouraged to further share the study with other acquaintances. In the beginning of the survey, participants were asked to give informed consent. All data collection was conducted individually through an online Qualtrics survey, which was presented as part of research on European citizens' social and political beliefs, particularly regarding social inequalities in Europe. All participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions, consisting of a text on either educational or ethnic inequalities. The text on educational inequalities described social differences between more and less educated EU citizens. The text on ethnic inequalities compared EU citizens from ethnic minority groups with EU citizens from ethnic majority groups. In both conditions,

disparities in employment rates, median income and political representation among EU citizens were highlighted. For the full text for each condition view Appendix A. The text was followed by a manipulation check through a text comprehension question. Participants were also asked to complete measures of their general prescriptive meritocratic beliefs and their support for redistributive policies regarding either ethnic or educational inequality depending on the assigned condition. The survey was administered in English and took between 7 and 12 minutes to complete. Further, the survey considered additional variables which are not in the interest of this research paper.

Measures

Experimental Manipulation

Our study involved an experimental manipulation, whereby participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups. One group read a text addressing ethnic inequalities, while the other read a text addressing educational inequalities. To assess whether participants had engaged with the manipulation, a manipulation check was conducted. Participants were asked to select the correct answer from three options that best summarised the provided text. For the ethnic condition, for example, participants could choose from (1) *There are no differences in outcomes between EU-citizens from ethnic majorities and ethnic minorities*, (2) *EU-citizens from ethnic minorities have higher unemployment rates, lower median income, and have less political presentation* and (3) *EU-citizens from ethnic majorities face more difficulties in employment and have lower political representation compared to ethnic minorities*, with the second being the correct answer. A similar phrasing was used in the education condition and can be found in Appendix A.

Prescriptive Meritocracy

Participants completed a six-items measure ($\alpha = .80$) of prescriptive meritocracy adapted to the European context from Zimmerman et al. (2013), with a seven-point response scale

ranging from 1 (*Disagree Strongly*) to 7 (*Agree Strongly*). It measured people's perceptions on how society *should* ideally be. A few example items measuring prescriptive meritocracy were: (1) *People who work hard should achieve success* and (2) *If people work hard, they should get what they want*.

Support for Context-Specific Redistributive Policies

A measure of support for redistributive policies, adapted from Alesina et al. (2018), assessed people's willingness to support measures of redistribution scaled from 1 (*Disagree strongly*) to 7 (*Agree Strongly*). Within the two experimental conditions, similar two-item scales were used and tailored to either inequalities based on ethnicity ($r = .59$) or education ($r = .70$). Example items from these scales were: (1) *The government should reduce inequalities between less educated and higher educated* and (2) *The government should implement policies to improve outcomes for citizens from ethnic minorities, even if it requires raising taxes*.

Descriptive Meritocracy

Descriptive Meritocracy was added post hoc for an additional exploratory analysis which aimed to explore its potential role as a predictor for support for redistributive policies. The corresponding scale was already part of the full survey. Participants completed a six-item measure of descriptive meritocracy ($\alpha = .90$), adapted to the European context from Zimmerman et al. (2013), with a seven-point response scale ranging from 1 (*Disagree Strongly*) to 7 (*Agree Strongly*). It contained statements which aimed to measure to what extent the current society was perceived as meritocratic. A few example items were (1) *European societies are open societies where all individuals do achieve higher status through hard work* and (2) *People who work hard do achieve success*.

Demographics

Demographic information was requested, such as participants' gender, level of education and whether they identified as belonging to the ethnic majority or minority. Furthermore, participants indicated their age and whether they were European citizens. The full questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Assumption Checks

Prior to the main analyses, an assumption check was performed. A scatterplot of the standardised residuals showed that the data approximately met the assumptions of homoscedasticity and linearity, as no curved pattern was found, nor an increasing or decreasing spread (see Figure C1 in Appendix C). Three outliers were identified based on standardised residuals greater than ± 3 (participant IDs: 145, 146 and 252). Excluding these cases from the analyses did not significantly alter the results. Therefore, all cases were retained in the final analysis to maintain sample size. No influential observations were found. A PP-Plot was visually inspected to check for normality of residuals. The plot indicated that the data were not normally distributed (see Figure C2 in Appendix C). However, due to the sufficiently large sample size ($N = 258$), I proceeded with the planned tests as they are known to be robust to violations of normality under the central limit theorem (Agresti, 2024). I assumed no violations of independence, as each participant completed the survey only once and independently of the other participants.

Manipulation Check

Of the 285 eligible participants who completed the survey, 27 were excluded because they failed a manipulation check. Seven participants were excluded from the education condition and 20 participants from the ethnicity condition, leading to a final sample size of

258 participants. A failed manipulation check indicated the lack of attention to the content of the provided texts regarding ethnic and educational inequality.

Descriptive Statistics

Generally, participants scored above the midpoint for both prescriptive meritocracy ($M = 6.39$, $SD = 0.69$) and support for redistributive policies ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.36$) on a seven -point Likert scale (see Table 1 for descriptives and bivariate correlations). Regarding support for redistributive policies split by condition, participants showed slightly more support for redistribution that aimed to redress ethnic inequalities ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.23$) compared to educational inequalities ($M = 5.39$, $SD = 1.45$). However, the difference between the means was not significant, found through an independent sample t-test, $t(255) = 1.28$, $p = .20$. Furthermore, prescriptive meritocracy was not significantly correlated with support for redistributive policies.

Participants scored slightly below the midpoint for descriptive meritocracy ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.34$). Descriptive meritocracy correlated negatively with support for redistributive policies, combined for both conditions ($r = -.47$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, descriptive meritocracy also significantly correlated with support for redistribution regarding ethnic inequalities ($r = -.44$, $p < .001$) and educational inequalities ($r = -.49$, $p < .001$). This indicated that descriptive meritocracy may be associated with less support for redistributive policies.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Pearson's Correlations

		N	M	SD	Prescrip	Descrip	Support for Redistribution		
							Both	Ethnic	Educat
Prescrip		257	6.39	0.69	1	.05	.05	.15	-.04
Descrip		258	3.20	1.34	.05	1	-.47**	-.44**	-.49**
Support for Redistribution	Both	257	5.49	1.36	.05	-.47**	1	-	-
	Ethnic	118	5.61	1.23	.15	-.44**	-	1	-

Educat	139	5.39	1.45	-.04	-.49**	-	-	1
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Note. *M* and *SD* represent mean and standard deviation. *Prescrip* = Prescriptive Meritocracy. *Descrip* = Descriptive Meritocracy, *Ethnic* = Ethnicity Condition, *Educat* = Education Condition. Descriptive Meritocracy was examined in an additional exploratory analysis. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Main Analysis

For hypothesis testing, a moderation analysis using PROCESS Macro was conducted (Hayes, 2022). The regression model, which included prescriptive meritocracy beliefs and the moderator (ethnic versus educational inequality), explained 1.6% of the variance in support for redistributive policies. The model was statistically insignificant, $R^2 = .016$, $F(3,252) = 1.34$, $p = .26$.

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 suggested a positive relationship between prescriptive meritocracy beliefs and support for redistributive policies. The analysis revealed that this main effect was not statistically significant, $b = .57$, $SE = .38$, $p = .13$, 95% CI $[-.17, 1.32]$. Therefore, the first hypothesis (*H1*) could not be supported (see Table B2 in Appendix B for a summary of the moderation analysis).

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 predicted a significant difference between the experimental conditions (ethnic versus educational inequality) regarding participants' support for context-specific redistributive policies. Our analysis showed that people who were assigned to the ethnic inequality condition had a minimally higher mean score for support for redistributive policies ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.23$) compared to those who were assigned to the educational inequality condition ($M = 5.39$, $SD = 1.45$), see Table 1. However, the analysis revealed that this difference was not significant, $b = 1.91$, $SE = 1.60$, $p = .24$, 95% CI $[-1.25, 5.06]$. Hypothesis 2 could therefore not be supported.

Hypotheses 3a and 3b

Hypotheses 3a and 3b predicted a moderating effect of the experimental conditions on the relationship between prescriptive meritocracy and support for redistributive policies. More specifically, we predicted a significantly stronger positive relationship between prescriptive meritocracy beliefs and support for redistribution for people assigned to the ethnic inequality condition (H3a) and a significantly weaker but positive relationship for people assigned to the educational inequality condition (H3b). The moderation analysis showed that the interaction effect between prescriptive meritocracy and the conditions was also insignificant, $b = -.33$, $SE = .25$, $p = .18$, 95% CI $[-.82, .16]$. This leads to the conclusion that the relationship between prescriptive meritocracy and support for redistributive policies may not depend on the type of inequality the policy targets. *H3a* and *H3b* could therefore not be confirmed.

Discussion

The present study investigated the effects of educational and ethnic inequalities on the relationship between prescriptive meritocracy and support for redistribution. Several findings can be noted. Firstly, contrary to my predictions, prescriptive meritocracy was not positively related to support for redistributive policies (*H1*). Secondly, no significant difference could be found when comparing the effect of exposure to ethnic and educational inequalities on context-specific support for redistributive policies (*H2*). Finally, exposure to ethnic compared to educational inequalities did not moderate the relationship between prescriptive meritocratic beliefs and context-related support for redistributive policies (*H3a/H3b*).

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. In general, participants showed high endorsement of the meritocratic ideal, with scores clustering at the upper end of the seven-point scale ($M = 6.39$, $SD = .69$). This distribution of scores indicates that most participants showed slight to strong agreement with statements in favour of prescriptive meritocracy. The high mean and

narrow range of responses, due to a standard deviation of $SD = .69$, pointed towards a ceiling effect in the data. This potentially limited the statistical power to detect a significant effect (McBee, 2010). The homogenous scoring pattern for prescriptive meritocracy could be attributed to a lack of diversity in our sample with most participants being young and highly educated. However, high scores for prescriptive meritocracy have also been found in more diverse samples (Son Hing et al., 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2013), indicating that prescriptive meritocracy is a generally widespread belief in Western societies. Underlining this, Wilson (2003) argued that believing in the ideal of meritocracy might “correspond to a deeply held, non-revisable intuition about justice” (p. 282). That most people endorse meritocracy in its ideal form (Zimmerman et al., 2013) poses a challenge for using prescriptive meritocracy as a predictor and could explain the null results for Hypotheses 1 and 3a/3b.

Another limitation must be noted regarding the sample characteristics. The sample lacked diversity as participants were generally young and mostly highly educated. This means that results cannot be directly generalized to other populations. Also, as the study design included self-report measures, the risk of social-desirable responses must be acknowledged (Paulhus, 2017). While Son Hing et al. (2011) found no evidence that scores on prescriptive meritocracy were affected by social desirability, the same cannot be assumed regarding support for redistribution. It would be crucial to evaluate whether people tend to indicate more support for redistributive policies in questionnaires due to a tendency to answer in socially acceptable ways. This could be valuable for gaining a more accurate understanding of the true levels of support for redistributive policies in the general population, especially in relation to predictions of political behaviour.

Strengths

Despite the absence of significant findings, this study makes a valuable contribution to the literature of prescriptive meritocracy and support for redistribution. Firstly, it sheds

light on the limited ability of prescriptive meritocracy to predict support for redistributive policies. Secondly, to my knowledge, this study is among the first to explicitly differentiate between perceptions of ethnic and educational inequalities when examining support for redistributive measures. Including more context-specificity in the multidimensional literature on support for redistribution might be a valuable way to inform policymakers in a more topic-related and hence, more efficient way. Furthermore, as Kuppens et al. (2018) have noted, educational inequality is generally under-explored compared to other types of inequalities. Including educational inequality as a condition in this research paper addresses the aforementioned gap in the literature.

Theoretical Implications

Generally, this study yields mixed coherence with previous research. The high support for prescriptive meritocracy in the present paper is in line with previous literature which also found that people generally endorse the meritocratic ideal (Son Hing et al., 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2013). However, Zimmerman et al. (2013) note that people show more variation in their descriptive meritocracy beliefs. As prescriptive meritocracy failed as a sole predictor for support for redistribution, a post hoc analysis was conducted to evaluate whether descriptive meritocracy could better predict redistribution preferences. The analysis confirmed Zimmerman et al.'s (2013) claim. The mean for descriptive meritocracy was slightly below the scale midpoint ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.34$), which indicated that most participants' beliefs ranged from moderate disagreement to slight agreement about whether the current society could already be considered meritocratic. Notably, the standard deviation was around twice as high as for prescriptive meritocracy ($SD = 1.34$ versus $SD = .69$), suggesting that participants indeed varied more regarding their evaluation of current society compared to their meritocratic ideal. This translated into a significant negative correlation between descriptive meritocracy and support for redistribution ($r = -.47$, $p < .001$), indicating

that the more people believed the system to already be meritocratic, the less support they showed for redistribution. This finding is in line with Tejero-Peregrina et al. (2025) who underlined the explanatory power of descriptive meritocracy in predicting support for redistribution.

The null results for prescriptive meritocracy as a sole predictor and the significant results for descriptive meritocracy underscore a methodological recommendation noted by Cargile et al. (2019), which entailed examining the difference between prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy when aiming to predict related variables. This discrepancy score entails an intra-individual measure that examines the perceived difference between people's perceptions of the current society and their meritocratic ideal (Son Hing et al., 2011). Cargile et al. (2019) found that using the discrepancy score as a predictor entailed greater explanatory power for related variables than using descriptive meritocracy alone. This approach has also proven fruitful in studies conducted by Zimmerman et al. (2013) and Son Hing et al. (2011), who found that a larger perceived discrepancy corresponded with greater support for redistributive measures. It can therefore be concluded that operationalizing meritocracy beliefs as a discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy is a clear methodological advancement (Cargile et al., 2019).

As previously mentioned, no significant difference could be found in support for redistribution regarding ethnic and educational inequality. However, research conducted by colleagues using the same survey data found that participants showed greater acceptance of educational inequalities than ethnic inequalities (A. Happe, personal communication, May 2025). Interestingly, this differential acceptance did not translate into corresponding differences in support for redistribution, indicating a disconnect between perceptions of socioeconomic inequalities and related policy preferences. One potential explanation could be the following: although people are concerned about inequality, they have different beliefs

about the utility of redistributive policies (Ciani et al., 2021). While people might demand some government action, they often disagree about which exact measure should be taken (Ciani et al., 2021). This means that perceiving inequalities as unfair does not automatically translate into a proportional increase in support for redistributive policies.

A final point to consider is that in the present study, support for redistribution was high regarding both educational and ethnic inequalities. This contrasts with previous research which found that low-educated individuals were evaluated negatively, even being dehumanized (Kuppens et al., 2018; Sainz et al., 2024), which was linked to a lower willingness to help (Andrighetto et al., 2014; Sainz et al., 2020). A potential explanation for this could be prevalent egalitarian beliefs among participants for which the study did not control for. Egalitarianism has been found to be common among people with a left leaning political orientation (Müller et al., 2020) and has been shown to reliably predict support for redistribution (Lin et al., 2024). Adding on to this, previous research has found that especially higher educated females are likely to endorse left-wing ideologies (Furnham et al., 2018) and that women generally were more likely to endorse egalitarian beliefs (Müller et al., 2020). Relating these findings to this study, the present sample consists of more female participants than male participants (61.2 % females versus 35.7% males) and the level of education was generally high. This pattern is potentially caused by the snowball sampling method. In conclusion, the sample demographics likely did not account for the observed ceiling effect in prescriptive meritocracy but probably contributed to the high support for redistributive policies across conditions.

Implications for Future Research

In line with Cargile et al. (2019), Zimmerman et al. (2013) and Son Hing et al. (2011), a clear methodological recommendation that can be derived from this paper is to use

the discrepancy score between prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy when aiming to establish a relationship between meritocracy beliefs and support for redistribution.

Secondly, future research should consider controlling for potential gender effects and egalitarian beliefs while generally aiming for diversity in terms of political orientation and educational attainment to grasp a broader range of belief systems. This would enhance the generalizability of findings across more populations and provide additional insights into the factors that influence support for redistribution beyond meritocracy beliefs.

While no difference could be found between support for redistribution aiming to tackle ethnic versus educational inequality, the general study design could be seen as an initial starting point for future investigations. Separating different socioeconomic inequalities by investigating related belief systems yields potential for more nuanced findings. This might contribute to more efficient, context-specific policymaking. Furthermore, our study can provide policymakers with a practical takeaway: When aiming for support for redistribution, simply framing meritocracy as an ideal for society is often insufficient. Instead, highlighting the shortcomings of the current system may be necessary in order to shift public behaviour towards redistribution.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate whether prescriptive meritocracy would serve as a driving factor for support for redistributive policies and whether this relationship would differ with regard to ethnic and educational inequalities. In the context of this study, prescriptive meritocracy did not function as a significant predictor for support for redistributive policies. Further, contrary to predictions, people showed equally high support for redistributive policies regarding both ethnic and educational inequality. Although the hypotheses were not supported, this study still provides valuable insights into the limitations of prescriptive meritocracy as an isolated predictor of support for redistributive policies. As European

countries continue to struggle with inequality, insights into the mechanisms behind the prevalent belief in meritocracy, the public's redistributive preferences, and the cultural framing of inequalities remain crucial for researchers and policymakers in working towards a more equitable society.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

Prescriptive Meritocracy

The following statements are about how you think society should be and not about how you think it is currently. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with these statements.

[(1) Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neutral, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7) Agree strongly]

1. People who work hard *should* achieve success.
2. If people work hard, they *should* get what they want.
3. With hard work, minorities should be able to climb the ladder of success just as much as the majority.
4. Discrimination *should* not prevent minority groups from getting ahead if they work hard.
5. European societies *should* be open societies where all individuals can achieve higher status through hard work.
6. Advancement in European societies *should* be equally possible for all individuals.

Descriptive Meritocracy

The following statements describe how society is currently. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of them.

[(1) Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neutral, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7) Agree strongly]

1. People who work hard *do* achieve success.
2. If people work hard, they *do* get what they want.
3. With hard work, minorities *are* able to climb the ladder of success just as much as the majority.

4. Discrimination *does not* prevent minority groups from getting ahead if they work hard.
5. European societies *are* open societies where all individuals *do* achieve higher status through hard work.
6. Advancement in European societies *is* equally possible for all individuals.

Ethnicity Condition

Please read the following texts carefully, we will ask you questions that relate to it.

In some European countries, there are large differences in outcomes between EU-citizens from ethnic majority groups and EU-citizens from ethnic minority groups (especially those from non-western ethnic groups). Citizens from ethnic minority groups have higher unemployment rates compared to citizens from ethnic majority. Additionally, citizens from ethnic minority groups have lower median incomes, and they are significantly underrepresented in political institutions (e.g., parliament) compared to their share of the population.

Education Condition

Please read the following texts carefully, we will ask you questions that relate to it.

In some European countries, there are large differences in social and economic outcomes between higher educated (having a higher education degree) and less-educated EU-citizens (not having a higher education degree). Less-educated Citizens have higher unemployment rates compared to higher-educated citizens. Additionally, the less educated have lower median incomes, and they are significantly underrepresented in political institutions (e.g., parliament) compared to their share of the population.

Manipulation/Comprehension check

Ethnicity condition

Which of the following statements best summarizes the information you just read?

- There are no differences in outcomes between EU-citizens from ethnic majorities and ethnic minorities.
- EU-citizens from ethnic minorities have higher unemployment rates, lower median income, and have less political representation.
- EU-citizens from ethnic majorities face more difficulties in employment and have lower political representation compared to ethnic minorities.

Education condition

Which of the following statements best summarizes the information you just read? There is only one correct answer.

- There are no differences in outcomes between EU-citizens with and without higher education degrees.
- EU- citizens without higher education degrees face more difficulties in employment, income, and political representation.
- EU-citizens with higher education degrees have fewer opportunities in employment and political representation than those without.

Support for Inequality Scale

Ethnicity condition

[(1) Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neither agree nor disagree, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7) Agree strongly]

1. The negative consequences of inequality between ethnic minorities and majorities have been largely exaggerated.
2. Inequality between ethnic minorities and majorities is causing many of the problems in European countries.
3. I am very disturbed by the amount of inequality between ethnic minorities and majorities in Europe today.

4. Inequality between ethnic minorities and majorities is not a problem.
5. We need to do everything possible to reduce inequality between ethnic minorities and majorities in European countries today.

Education condition

[(1) Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neither agree nor disagree, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7) Agree strongly]

1. The negative consequences of inequality between the higher and less educated have been largely exaggerated.
2. Inequality between the higher and less educated is causing many of the problems in European countries.
3. I am very disturbed by the amount of inequality between higher and less educated people in Europe today.
4. Inequality between higher and less educated people is not a problem.
5. We need to do everything possible to reduce inequality between higher and less educated people in European countries today.

Perceived Fairness of Inequalities

Ethnicity condition

To what extent do you think that the differences in outcomes between EU-citizens from ethnic majority groups and from non-western immigration background are...

1. Fair *[(1) Very unfair (7) Very fair]*
2. Legitimate *[(1) Very illegitimate, (7) Very legitimate]*
3. Justified *[(1) Very unjustified, (7) Very justified]*

Education condition

To what extent do you think that the differences in social and economic outcomes between higher and less educated EU-citizens are...

1. Fair [(1) Very unfair (7) Very fair]
2. Legitimate [(1) Very illegitimate, (7) Very legitimate]
3. Justified [(1) Very unjustified, (7) Very justified]

Support for Redistributive Policies

Ethnicity condition

[(1) Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neither agree nor disagree, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7) Agree strongly]

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with these two statements

- 1- The government should reduce inequalities between citizens from ethnic minorities and the ethnic majority.
- 2- The government should implement policies to improve outcomes for citizens from ethnic minorities, even if it requires raising taxes.

Education condition

[(1) Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neither agree nor disagree, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7) Agree strongly]

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with these two statements

- 1- The government should reduce inequalities between less educated and higher educated citizens.
- 2- The government should implement policies to improve outcomes for less-educated citizens, even if it requires raising taxes.

Attribution of Responsibility for Disadvantaged Position

Ethnicity condition

[(1) Not at all, (7) Entirely]

1. To what extent are people responsible for being of a certain ethnicity?
2. To what extent are people in control of being of a certain ethnicity?

Education condition

[(1) Not at all, (7) Entirely]

1. To what extent are people responsible for being less or higher educated?
2. To what extent are people in control of their level of education?

Common question for both conditions

Exposure to Systemic Inequalities

Due to discrimination, some people face challenges in finding jobs, accessing good education, healthcare, housing, and being represented in political and leadership positions. Think about your own social network (friends, family, colleagues, or community members) when answering the following question.

[1 = Never; 2 = Very rarely; 3 = Rarely; 4 = Sometimes; 5 = Often; 6 = Very often; 7 = (Almost) always]

Religiosity

[(1) Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neither agree nor disagree, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7) Agree strongly]

1. In my life, I experience the presence of the Divine (i.e., God).
2. My religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life.
3. I try hard to carry my religion over into all other dealings in life.

Political Orientation

In political matters, people talk of left and right. How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking

1. How would you describe your political orientation in general?

Very left wing (1), Center (4), Very right wing (7)

2. How would you describe your political orientation on social issues?

Very left wing (1), Center (4), Very right wing (7)

3. How would you describe your political orientation on economic issues?

Very left wing (1), Center (4), Very right wing (7)

Belief in Need Justice Principle

[(1) Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neither agree nor disagree, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7) Agree strongly]

There are many different views as to what makes a society fair or unfair. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the three statements.

1. A society is fair if it takes care of those who are poor and needy.
2. Society is fair if people taking care of their children or their dependent relatives receive special support and benefits.
3. A society is fair if all people have sufficient nutrition, shelter, clothing as well as access to education and medical care.

Support for General Government Policies on Affirmative Action and Redistributive Policies

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following policies

[(1) Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neither agree nor disagree, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7) Agree strongly]

1. Reserving university admission positions for students from a financially or socioeconomically disadvantaged background.
2. Reserving some employment positions in workplaces for the financially or socioeconomically disadvantaged.
3. Wage subsidies, whereby the government pays employers to *hire* people from disadvantaged groups, to increase their number of jobs.
4. Wage subsidies, whereby the government pays employers to *train* people from disadvantaged groups, to increase their potential earnings.

Demographics

Age

- Less than 18 (1)
- 18-25 years (2)
- 26-35 (3)
- 36-45 (4)
- 46-55 (5)
- 56-65 (6)
- 66 and above (7)

EU Citizenship

Are you a citizen of a country in the European Union?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Gender

Are you...

Female (5)

- Male (6)
- Non-binary / third gender (7)
- Other, please specify (9)

Ethnicity

Are you a member of the ethnic majority in your country in Europe?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- I don't know (3)
- Prefer not to say (4)

Level of Education

1. No qualification. **(1)**
2. Less than an upper secondary diploma. **(2)**
3. Upper secondary diploma or equivalent (general or vocational, e.g., A-level, BTEC, Abitur/ Fachhochschulreife, HAVO, VWO, MBO 2-3-4, matricular examination). **(3)**
4. Short-cycle or vocational tertiary education (e.g., MBO-4 specialist, HBO Associatedegree, Ausbildung, Berufsoberschule, Abendgymnasium, specialist Vocational). **(4)**
5. Bachelor's degree or equivalent (University, Applied Sciences, Polytechnics, Fachhochschule (FH), WO, HBO). **(5)**
6. Master's degree, or equivalent. **(6)**
7. Ph.D. or equivalent. **(7)**
8. Other, please specify. **(8)**

Appendix B

Tables

Table B1

Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

Characteristics	Frequency (<i>n</i> =258)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	92	35.7
Female	158	61.2
Non-binary/third gender	5	1.9
Other	3	1.2
Age		
18-25	182	70.5
26-35	27	10.5
36-45	11	4.3
46-55	21	8.1
56-65	14	5.4
66 and above	3	1.2
Ethnicity		
Member of Ethnic Majority	182	70.5
Member of Ethnic Minority	65	25.2
Missing System	11	4.3
Level of Education		
No qualification	2	0.8
Less than an upper secondary diploma	6	2.3
Upper secondary diploma or equivalent	114	44.2
Short-cycle or vocational tertiary education	4	1.6
Bachelor's degree or equivalent	69	26.7
Master's degree or equivalent	48	18.6
Ph.D. or equivalent	12	4.7
Other	3	1.2

Note. *N* = 258

Table B2

Summary of Moderation Analysis for Effect of Prescriptive Meritocracy on Support for Redistributive Policies and Ethnic and Educational Inequalities

	Coefficient	SE	t	p	LB	UB
Constant	2.17	2.41	.90	.37	-2.58	6.91
Prescript	.57	.38	1.53	.13	-.17	1.32
Condition	1.91	1.60	1.19	.24	-1.25	5.06
Interaction Effect	-.33	.25	-1.34	.18	-.82	.16

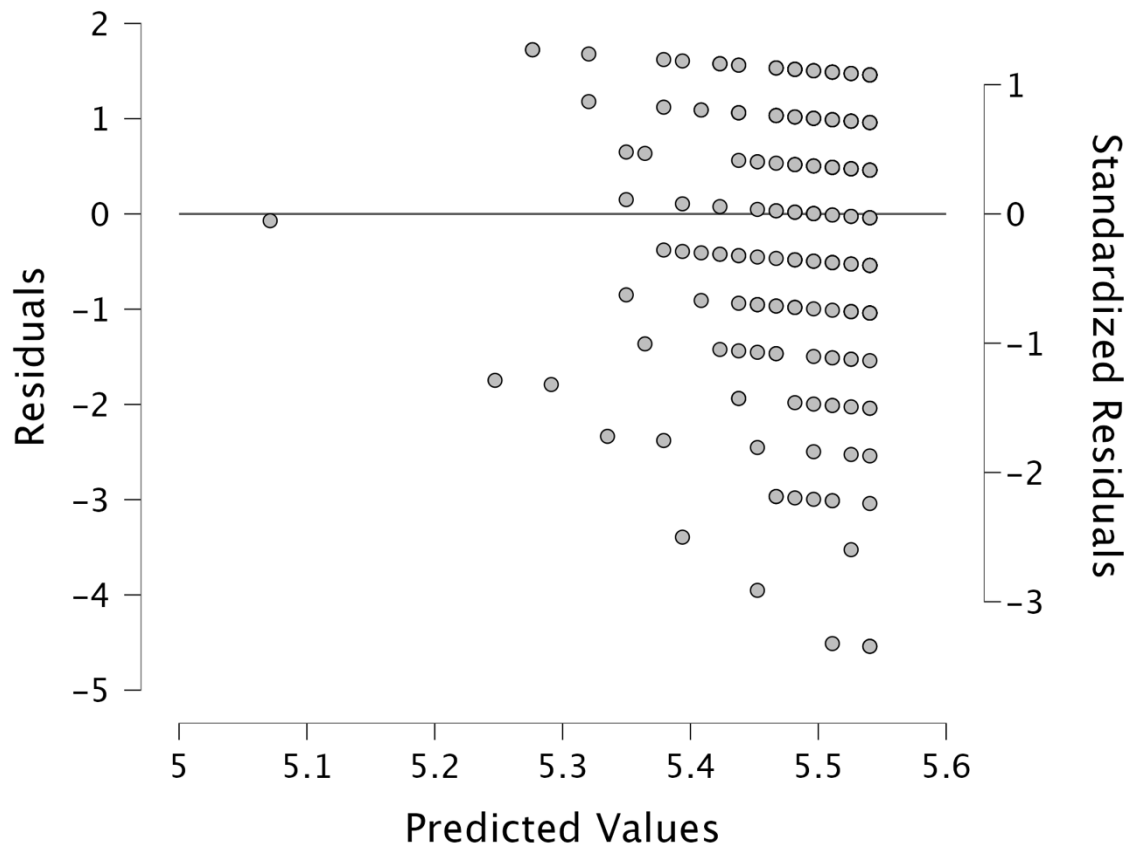
Note. * $p < .05$, Regression not significant, *LB* = Lower Bound, *UB* = Upper Bound

Appendix C

Figures

Figure C1

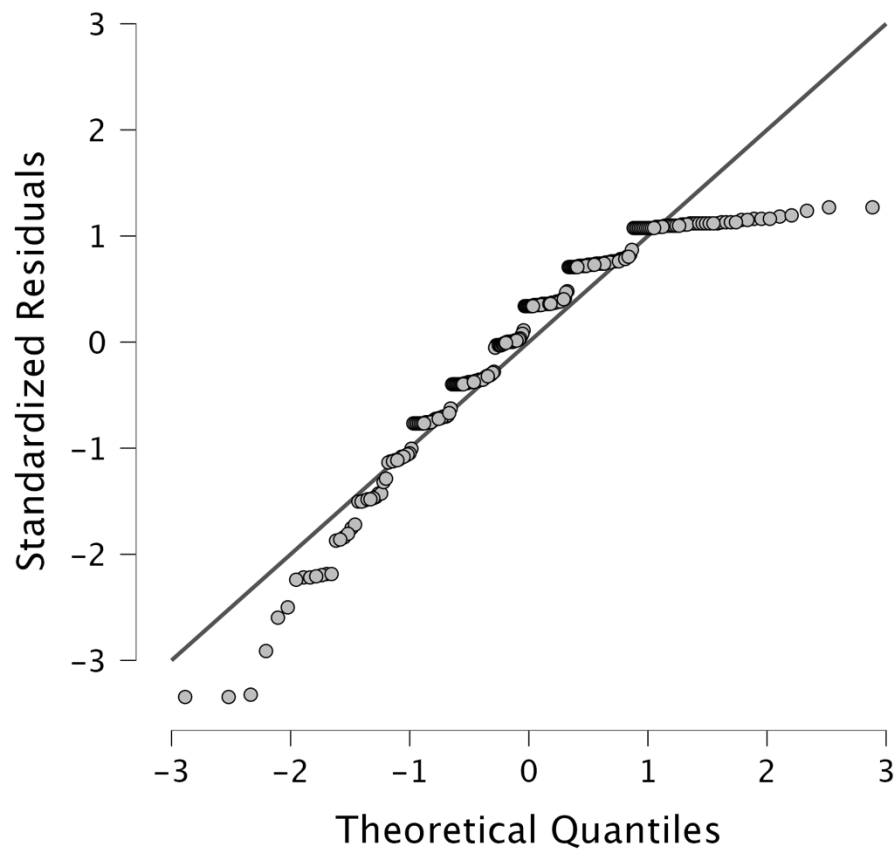
Assessment of Scatterplot for Assumption Check - Homoscedasticity and Linearity



Note: This displays standardized residuals plotted against standardized predicted values. No curved pattern nor spread is shownone can assume that assumptions are approximately met.
 Dependent Variable: *Support for Redistributive Policies (combined conditions)*

Figure C2

Assessment of P-P Plot for Assumption Check – Normality



Note: This P-P Plot of regression of standardized residuals regarding support for redistributive policies (combined conditions) shows a deviation from normality as the data is not following a straight line. This indicates violation of the normality assumption.