

**Understanding Support for Affirmative Action: Investigating the Interaction Effect of  
Political Orientation and Network Inequality Exposure**

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### **Abstract**

Understanding the interplay of contextual, relational, and ideological factors in predicting support for affirmative action (AA) is essential for identifying the drivers of social change, especially in light of rising inequality in the European Union. This study aims to examine how indirect exposure to systemic inequalities in one's social network, referred to as network inequality exposure, interacts with political orientation to shape support for AA. A total of 258 EU citizens were recruited through snowball sampling and surveyed about their socio-political beliefs, with an emphasis on systemic inequalities. Results indicated that political orientation negatively predicted AA support, whereas network inequality exposure alone had a non-significant effect. The interaction between political orientation and network inequality exposure was significant only in the case of center-to-right-leaning individuals, who increased their support for AA when exposed to higher levels of network inequality, highlighting the importance of both ideological orientation and contextual exposure in shaping attitudes toward AA. Limitations, theoretical and practical implications, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* Affirmative Action (AA), General Government Policies, Systemic Inequalities, Network Inequality Exposure, Political Orientation, Left-wing, Right-wing, Social Change, EU Citizens, Socio-political Beliefs

## **Understanding Support for Affirmative Action: Investigating the Interaction Effect of Political Orientation and Network Inequality Exposure**

In recent years, the world has witnessed a rise in political polarization (Universidad Pompeu Fabra, 2024). Across Europe, far-right parties have gained momentum in legislative and federal elections, reviving a political trend that had remained dormant since World War II (“2024 Austrian legislative election,” 2024). Their accession to power highlights increased opposition to diversity and inclusion in the form of nationalism, anti-immigration policies, pro-war sentiments, and bans on diversity celebrations and social justice marches (de Groot, 2025; Mumford, 2025; Zaidi, 2025). As systemic inequalities persist and more conflicts escalate, it is essential to examine how political orientation influences public support for policies aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion, and to identify factors that may shape these ideologically driven attitudes.

The Special Eurobarometer assessing citizens’ support for fairness and inclusion policies revealed that only 50% and 43% of respondents believe that people from disadvantaged groups have sufficient access to educational and workplace opportunities, respectively (European Commission, 2025). The European Commission (2025) emphasized the need for interventions aimed at improving access for disadvantaged members. One such intervention is affirmative action (AA), which represents policies that address the underrepresentation of minorities and other marginalized groups (Son Hing et al., 2002), promote diversity (Dianat et al., 2022), and correct historical discrimination (Harrison et al., 2006). Affirmative action policies (AAPs) are essential since diversity is positively associated with perceptions of social justice and fairness (Choi & Rainey, 2014; Hunt et al., 2020). However, AAPs have not been studied or applied in the context of the EU to the same extent as in the US context (Blommaert & Coenders, 2024), which contributes to a lack of

understanding of the factors influencing their public support in the EU due to the incomparable context and historical causes of discrimination (Heath et al., 2013).

Blommaert and Coenders (2024) undertook a study on public support for AA in Europe and found that it varies significantly based on differences in participants' political orientation, with left-leaning individuals displaying greater support than right-leaning individuals. Another variable that interacts with AA is exposure to systemic inequalities, which has been shown to increase support for AA (Bell et al., 1997; Kravitz et al., 2000). Systemic inequalities refer to discriminatory practices embedded in society that lead to a lack of privileges, wealth, and opportunities for marginalized groups (Solomon et al., 2019).

While research primarily examines individuals' direct exposure to systemic inequalities, it is equally important to consider how social networks shape attitudes toward AA, and how this influence varies with political orientation, a particularly understudied area. A comprehensive understanding of inequality experiences must look not only at its direct effects but also at its broader socio-contextual factors, particularly for those who, while not directly targeted, are nonetheless influenced through a relational tie to those who are. Accordingly, the main research question of this study is: What is the impact of political orientation and indirect exposure to systemic inequalities in one's social network on attitudes toward affirmative action? For the remainder of the paper, indirect exposure to systemic inequalities in one's social network will be referred to as 'network inequality exposure'.

The suggested moderating effect warrants investigation as diversity and inclusion face growing resistance in today's political climate (Gündemir et al., 2024). The results would provide insight into the malleability of political orientation when interacting with contextual and relational factors, such as personally knowing someone who has experienced injustice, to predict support for AA. Moreover, Hoy et al. (2024) highlight that differences in people's support for policies aimed at reducing inequality may stem from entrenched ideological

values or perceptions regarding levels of societal inequality. Building on this, the present study aims to explore whether both political orientation and network inequality exposure influence attitudes toward AA, the extent of this influence, and what their interaction reveals.

## **Variable Background**

### ***Political Orientation***

Political orientation is an important predictor of AA because discrimination and inequalities, which AA seeks to address, often stem from specific political views (Federico & Sidanius, 2024). Left-wing attitudes correlate with liberal perspectives that favor progressive values and support for an egalitarian society (Gilles, 2024). In contrast, right-wing attitudes are linked to conservatism, which has historically resisted allocating rights to minority groups (Starr, 2012) due to a lower tolerance for ambiguity, a heightened dogmatism, and prejudice against stigmatized minorities (Jost et al., 2003a, 2003b). Another factor contributing to this resistance may be the endorsement of descriptive meritocracy — the belief that effort results in achievement in today’s society (Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013) — by right-leaning individuals to a greater degree than by left-leaning individuals (Son Hing et al., 2011). Lastly, right-wing attitudes are associated with Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), defined by a preference for social hierarchies (Pratto et al., 1994). Considering all these factors, this study explores political orientation in terms of the right- and left-wing spectrum as one of its variables. This conceptualization encompasses and connects to other political ideologies, as presented above, thereby predicting a broader range of social and political attitudes than focusing solely on SDO or meritocratic beliefs (Jost et al., 2009).

### ***Affirmative Action (AA)***

Research broadly supports the idea that AA has led to significant improvements in various areas, including the workplace (Ho & Unzueta, 2015), education (Dos Santos et al., 2023; Kerr et al., 2017), and healthcare (Saxby et al., 2023). It has helped decrease ethnic,

racial, and gender-based discrimination (Beaurain & Masclet, 2016; Burstein, 1995; Crosby et al., 2003; Kalev et al., 2006; Taylor-Carter et al., 1995). Additionally, research indicates that AA benefits not only minority group members but also majority group members by improving their perceived learning outcomes and fostering empathy (Haslerig et al., 2013; Lee, 2021). Finally, AA can encourage individuals, regardless of group membership, to question existing social hierarchies and challenge the status quo (Lee, 2021).

Despite its effectiveness, affirmative action has faced a series of controversies throughout its history. Critics have argued that AA is often short-term and fails to bring about lasting societal change (Dianat et al., 2022). A meta-analysis of 78 studies by Greig et al. (2023) found that AA can elicit small to moderate negative reactions in individuals, such as perceptions of unfairness and doubts about merit, which may, in turn, undermine the intended benefits of these policies.

More specifically, a study by Ho and Unzueta (2015) found that antiegalitarians high in SDO supported AAPs more than egalitarians did, contradicting earlier findings by Federico & Sidanius (2002). A closer examination of Ho and Unzueta's (2015) results revealed that this support emerged only when AAPs were perceived to reinforce existing racial hierarchies, specifically, when anti-egalitarians high in SDO perceived the placement of minorities to be at the bottom of the hierarchy of the organization. However, when AAPs were thought to recruit competent minority members, these individuals reverted to opposing such policies. Gutiérrez & Unzueta (2013) report a similar finding, where even minority groups high in SDO supported AAPs only when they were perceived to benefit the dominant group. Taylor-Carter et al. (1995) noted how such outcomes may appear in contexts where AAPs are used more as a strategy to improve a company's image and meet quota goals, rather than to genuinely address systemic inequalities. These effects align with Harrison et al.'s (2006)

meta-analysis, which found that AAPs can unintentionally reinforce existing social categorizations and trigger new or intensified conflicts.

While it is important to recognize that most research suggests that AA does not promote prejudice and may help reduce it (Harper & Reskin, 2005; Kite et al., 2016), the aforementioned findings indicate that such policies can occasionally reinforce the very inequalities they aim to reduce. They show that the interplay between predictors of political views, such as SDO, and contextual factors, such as how AA is believed to function within an organization, significantly influences support among both majority and minority group members. The current study builds on this approach, exploring the broader topic of political orientation along with network inequality exposure as a novel contextual variable in the context of AA.

### **Affirmative Action and Political Orientation**

Research shows that support for AA is partly shaped by political orientation and associated variables (Blommaert & Coenders, 2024; Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Fried et al., 2001; Kravitz et al., 2000; Park, 2009; Pilati & Turgeon, 2019). In two studies, Park (2009) showed that being liberal is associated with support for AA. Fried et al. (2001) and Federico and Sidanius (2002) reported a positive relationship between egalitarianism and support for AA, compared to individualism. Additionally, Federico and Sidanius (2002) and Sidanius et al. (1996) emphasized the association between political conservatism, antiegalitarianism, racism, and SDO, all of which predict opposition to AA. In contrast, only a couple of studies found no evidence of an effect of political orientation on AA attitudes (Aberson, 2021; Turgeon & Habel, 2022). While Aberson (2021) attributed this to multicollinearity masking the effect, Turgeon & Habel (2022) did not mention any limitations.

Given the stronger evidence showing the influence of political orientation and associated variables on support for AA, this study will examine political orientation as a key



predictor. The previously mentioned research contrasted the positive influence of progressive values on support for AA with the tendency of conservative values to oppose it. Building on these findings, the hypothesis of the main effect of political orientation on attitudes toward AA is as follows: Among sample respondents, those with left-wing attitudes will show significantly more support for affirmative action compared to those with right-wing attitudes.

### **Affirmative Action and Network Inequality Exposure**

Studies show that even brief exposure to information about systemic inequalities, by either reading an article or a few sentences about the type of inequality, can significantly influence attitudes, beliefs about opportunities, and policy support (Goya-Tocchetto et al., 2024; Hoy et al, 2024; McCall et al., 2017; Umanzor et al., 2024). Awareness of ongoing discrimination also plays a role in driving support toward AA (Aberson, 2007; Aberson, 2021; Konrad & Janet Spitz, 2003), and so does direct exposure to systemic inequalities (Bell et al., 1997; Kravitz et al., 2000; Umanzor et al., 2024). Conversely, believing that discrimination is not a problem anymore is associated with opposition to AA (Park, 2009). Aberson (2021) found that individuals who recognized the persistence of discrimination were more likely to support ethnic-based affirmative action in college admissions. Therefore, these findings lead to the following hypothesis for the main effect of network inequality exposure on attitudes toward AA: Among sample respondents, those exposed to network inequality will show more support toward affirmative action than those not exposed.

### **Affirmative Action: Political Orientation and Network Inequality Exposure**

Son Hing et al. (2002) examined how meritocratic beliefs predict support for AA and how the relationship is moderated by perceived discrimination in one's workplace. The results showed that strong believers in descriptive meritocracy tend to oppose AA policies, but that the effect decreases when individuals perceive the workplace as discriminatory toward women or minorities. These findings suggest that acknowledging systemic

inequalities can moderate attitudes toward AA, initially driven by meritocratic beliefs. Since descriptive meritocratic beliefs are linked to right-leaning views (Son Hing et al., 2011), as mentioned above, I would expect a similar effect when studying political orientation.

Additionally, Fried et al. (2001) hypothesized that the link between political orientation and support for AA would be stronger for those who had experienced racial discrimination. However, their findings indicated that such experiences made the relationship between political orientation and AA attitudes insignificant. Moreover, a study by Hoy et al. (2024) found that providing participants with information about inequalities reduced the gap between left-wing and right-wing individuals regarding support for redistributive action, positively influencing right-wing individuals' attitudes toward such policies. This finding is essential, as affirmative action is related to redistributive policies (Blumkin et al., 2009).

The current study takes a novel approach by building on prior findings and proposing that not only informational or direct exposure to systemic inequalities but also indirect exposure will significantly increase support for AA. I hypothesize the following: Network inequality exposure will significantly increase support for affirmative action among right-leaning respondents. Conversely, respondents with a left-leaning political orientation will show support toward affirmative action regardless of network inequality exposure.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 18 years old and citizens of a European Union country. The initial sample included 285 participants, of whom 27 were excluded due to failing the manipulation check, resulting in a final sample of 258 participants. Although the experimental conditions related to the manipulation check were not analyzed in this study, excluding these participants was appropriate, as failing the check indicated a lack of attention to the survey.

The final sample consisted of 158 females (61.2%), 92 males (35.7%), 5 non-binary/third-gender individuals (1.9%), and 3 individuals of other genders (1.2%). Age was recorded as a categorical variable ranging from 18 to 65 years and older, with approximately 71% of participants between 18 and 25 years old. The predominant highest education level among the participants was upper secondary diploma or equivalent (44.2%), followed by bachelor's degree (26.7%) and master's degree (18.6%). Additionally, 73.7% of the participants identified as members of the ethnic majority in their EU country (see Table B1 in Appendix B for the complete demographics).

### **Procedure**

Data collection was completed in April 2025. On the basis of a checklist developed by the EC-BSS at the University of Groningen, the study was exempt from full ethics and privacy review. The study was presented as researching the socio-political beliefs of EU citizens, with a focus on social inequalities within the EU. All data was collected individually through a Qualtrics survey, and the participants were recruited via snowball sampling, specifically through the local network of the researchers and through social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp. The participation was voluntary and no compensation was offered. Participants gave informed consent and indicated their data processing preferences.

The survey was completed in English and had a duration of seven to twelve minutes. It required participants to complete measures for network inequality exposure, political orientation, and attitudes toward general government policies on affirmative action and redistributive policies. Additional variables were measured but are not relevant to the study (see Appendix A). Although the survey was part of a larger experimental design, this aspect falls outside of the scope of this paper and did not influence responses on the reported measures.

### **Measures**

### ***Political Orientation***

A political orientation scale (Choma & Haffer, 2009) assessed participants' political orientation regarding the social and economic domain through three items ranging from 1 (*Very left wing*) to 7 (*Very right wing*). The items ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) were: "How would you describe your political orientation in general?"; "How would you describe your political orientation on social issues?"; "How would you describe your political orientation on economic issues?".

### ***Network Inequality Exposure***

Participants were asked to indicate the frequency at which people from their social network were exposed to systemic inequalities by answering the following question, adapted from Rastogi et al. (2024): "Due to discrimination, some people face challenges in finding jobs, accessing good education, healthcare, housing, and in being represented in political and leadership positions. Think about your own social network (friends, family, colleagues, or community members) when answering the following question. How often in the past 12 months have you seen or heard about someone from your social network facing such challenges?" The responses ranged from 1 (*Never*) to 7 (*Almost always*).

### ***General Government Policies on Affirmative Action and Redistributive Policies***

A scale of support for general government policies on affirmative action and redistributive policies (Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017) was measured through four items ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ), with responses ranging from 1 (*Disagree Strongly*) to 7 (*Agree Strongly*). Items for measuring the support for affirmative action were: "Reserving university admission positions for students from a financially or socioeconomically disadvantaged background"; "Reserving some employment positions in workplaces for the financially or socioeconomically disadvantaged" (see Appendix A).

### ***Demographics***

Demographic information was requested, including the participants' gender, age, education level, and whether they identified as belonging to an ethnic majority group. The measures used for the demographic information are listed in Appendix A.

## **Results**

### **Preliminary Analysis**

#### ***Model Assumptions***

The homoscedasticity and linearity assumptions were assessed using the studentized residuals versus the unstandardized predicted values plot (see Figure B1 in Appendix B). The random scatter of points along the line without a systematic pattern indicated that both assumptions were met. Normality of residuals was interpreted using a P-P plot (see Figure B2 in Appendix B). The points closely followed the diagonal line, resulting in a met normality of residuals assumption. No values had a Cook's distance above 1, indicating no influential observations in the sample.

#### ***Variable Descriptives***

The means and standard deviations of the included variables can be found in Table 1, along with the Pearson's correlations among them. The mean of network inequality exposure was moderate ( $M = 3.37$ ;  $SD = 1.52$ ), suggesting that most respondents reported experiencing such exposure at medium frequencies, with responses generally ranging from "*Rarely*" to "*Often*." The relatively low standard deviation suggests that responses were moderately clustered around this range. The average political orientation of the sample leaned slightly left ( $M = 2.71$ ;  $SD = 1.19$ ) with a narrow spread of responses, indicating that most participants held left-leaning views concentrated around the mean. The average support for general government policies was higher than the midpoint ( $M = 5.24$ ;  $SD = 1.35$ ), its low standard deviation suggesting moderate to strong support for affirmative action and redistributive policies across the sample.

**Table 1***Means and Standard Deviations of, and Correlations among Variables Assessed*

	Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1	Network Inequality Exposure	3.37	1.52	–	-.09	.14*
2	Political Orientation	2.71	1.19		–	-.34**
3	General Government Policies	5.24	1.35			–

*Note.*  $N = 254$ , \*\* $p < .001$ ; \* $p < .05$ ;

There was a small, negative, and non-significant correlation between network inequality exposure and political orientation ( $r = -.09$ ,  $p = .14$ ). A small, positive correlation was observed between network inequality exposure and support for general government policies ( $r = .14$ ,  $p = .03$ ), indicating that greater indirect exposure to systemic inequalities in one's social network was weakly associated with support for general government policies on affirmative action and redistributive policies. Political orientation was moderately negatively correlated with support for general government policies ( $r = -.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that individuals with more right-leaning political views were less supportive of general government policies. Additional data regarding the distribution of responses for each variable can be found in Appendix C.

### **Main Analysis**

Although AA and redistributive policies are associated, as mentioned above, they represent distinct constructs (Austen-Smith & Wallerstein, 2006). Austen-Smith and Wallerstein (2006) view AA as an added feature of redistribution and differentiate the two in the following way: “affirmative action is a political decision designed to influence pre-wage labor market allocations; and fiscal redistribution is a political decision designed to influence post-wage allocations of income” (p. 1790). Since the General Government Policies Scale

contains items measuring both constructs, a factor analysis was conducted on its four items to explore whether the AA-related items load on the same factor as those for redistributive policies.

The analysis revealed a single factor with an eigenvalue greater than 1, specifically the first item of the scale, after which the scree plot displayed a clear ‘elbow’ curve (see Figure B3 in Appendix B). All items loaded onto this first factor, accounting for 71.03% of the total variance. The findings were in line with expectations due to the high internal consistency of the scale ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ) and indicated that the two AA-related items required no separate analysis. Therefore, this paper’s data was analyzed with the General Government Policies Scale as the dependent variable, and the results were interpreted in terms of support for AA.

### ***Hypothesis testing***

A moderation analysis using PROCESS macro (Hayes & Little, 2022) examined whether political orientation influenced the relationship between network inequality exposure and attitudes toward affirmative action. The overall model explained 16% of the variance in support for AA ( $F(3,250) = 15.746, R^2 = .16, p < .001$ ). The results showed a negative, significant main effect of political orientation on support for AA ( $b = -.75, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI} [-1.02, -.47]$ ), with right-leaning individuals showing less support for AA than left-leaning individuals. The main effect of network inequality exposure on support for AA was non-significant ( $b = -.17, p = .103, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.38, .04]$ ), indicating that the frequency of indirect exposure to systemic inequalities in participants’ social networks did not influence their support.

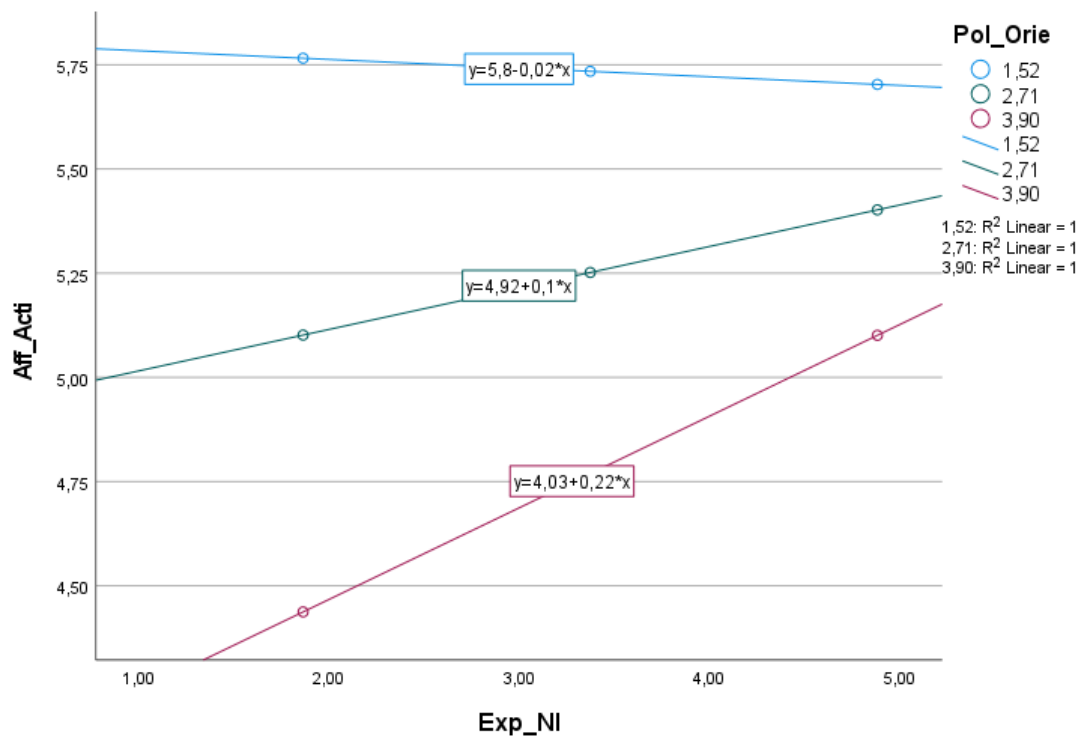
The interaction term between political orientation and network inequality exposure was statistically significant in predicting support for AA ( $b = .10, p = .003, 95\% \text{ CI} [.03, .17]$ ). When examining the conditional effects of network inequality exposure at differing values of

political orientation, there was a significant increase in support for AA only in the case of values one standard deviation above the mean ( $b = .22$ ,  $p = .001$ , 95% CI [.09, .35]).

Therefore, network inequality exposure increased support for AA only for center-to-right-leaning individuals, whereas for moderate to extreme left-leaning attitudes it had a non-significant effect ( $b = -.021$ ,  $p = .752$ , 95% CI [-.15, .11]). Figure 1 below aids the visualization of the moderation effect, where the green line represents the mean of political orientation ( $M = 2.71$ ). The blue line represents values of political orientation one standard deviation below the mean, capturing moderate to extreme left-leaning beliefs. Conversely, the red line indicates values of political orientation one standard deviation above the mean, therefore explaining the shift in attitudes of center-to-right-leaning individuals.

**Figure 1**

*Moderation Analysis for AA (Aff\_Acti), Network Inequality Exposure (Exp\_NI), and Political Orientation (Pol\_Orie)*





## **Discussion**

This research aims to provide insight into how political orientation interacts with indirect exposure to systemic inequalities in one's social network to predict support for affirmative action. The results indicated that political orientation significantly moderated the effect of network inequality exposure on support for AA.

### **Main Effect of Political Orientation on Attitudes toward Affirmative Action**

The current study found that political orientation significantly influenced people's attitudes toward AA. As hypothesized, as political orientation became more left-wing, support for AA increased. This finding adds to the large body of knowledge highlighting that opposition to AA is related to antiegalitarian, conservative, right-leaning ideologies, whereas support for such policies is usually among egalitarian, liberal, and left-leaning individuals (Blommaert & Coenders, 2024; Federico & Sidanius, 2024; Fried et al., 2001; Park, 2009; Pilati & Turgeon, 2019).

### **Main Effect of Network Inequality Exposure on Attitudes toward Affirmative Action**

Surprisingly, indirect exposure to systemic inequalities in one's social network did not significantly influence people's support toward AA. This contradicts prior expectations, as studies have shown that even minimal exposure to or knowledge about inequalities increases support for AA (Aberson, 2007; Aberson, 2021; Konrad & Janet Spitz, 2003; McCall et al., 2017). It was therefore hypothesized that indirect experience, being a level above brief exposure, would lead to increased support for AA. Furthermore, the distribution of exposure responses was not highly skewed, indicating that the sample was normally distributed in terms of the frequency of network inequality exposure. However, these findings support Federico and Sidanius's (2002) argument that evaluations of AA are shaped more by political orientation than by exposure to systemic inequalities. This is evident in the study's significant

main effect of political orientation, while network inequality exposure had no significant impact on shaping attitudes to AA.

The lack of a significant main effect between network inequality exposure and support for AA may be explained by confounding variables. For instance, the study did not examine participants' proximity to those in their social networks who experience systemic inequalities. The level of closeness could have influenced their desire to take action and their level of empathy. Furthermore, the study only focused on the frequency of the indirect exposure, without investigating its severity. However, perhaps the most persuasive argument for why the result was non-significant is the unrepresentative sample: A large proportion of the sample identified as left-wing, which created a ceiling effect on support for AA. Thus, indirect exposure offered little room to further increase their support. Conversely, right-leaning individuals started from a lower baseline of support toward AA, making any increase more measurable, but lacked sufficient power in the study due to the small number of moderate to extreme right-wing participants. Given that the hypothesis of the main effect of network inequality exposure on attitudes toward AA averages the outcomes and assumes a general effect across the sample, the effect was unlikely to be significant with such a strongly left-leaning sample.

### **Interaction Effect of Political Orientation and Network Inequality Exposure on Attitudes toward Affirmative Action**

Lastly, as hypothesized, individuals with a left-wing political orientation supported affirmative action regardless of their level of exposure to systemic inequalities. Conversely, at higher levels of exposure, the negative relationship between a right-wing political orientation and support for such policies weakened. These results contradict the hypothesis by Fried et al. (2001) that left-leaning people would increase their support when indirectly exposed to inequalities. Additionally, the study findings align with the results by Hoy et al.

(2024) and Son Hing et al. (2011), which highlight the positive impact of inequality exposure on attitudes toward AA, now further supported in the context of social networks.

### **Limitations**

While the findings are suggestive, they should be interpreted with caution due to some limitations of the research design and procedure. First, the study used snowball sampling, which resulted in an unrepresentative sample with skewed predictor values for political orientation and support for AA. This method led to a low mean for political orientation ( $M = 2.72$ ), reflecting a predominantly left-leaning sample. Since part of the analysis focused on participants whose political orientation was one standard deviation above the mean, this range likely included centrist individuals rather than strongly right-leaning individuals. As a result, the research primarily reflects left-leaning to moderately right-leaning views, and conclusions cannot be extended to individuals with an extreme right-wing orientation. To address this limitation, future research should aim to replicate the study with a more representative sample with respect to political orientation.

Concerning AA, the majority of the sample was young, highly educated, and represented the majority group in their respective EU countries, characteristics that have been shown to increase AA support (Kravitz et al., 2000; Umanzor et al., 2024). In addition, the sample's gender composition (61.2% women) may also partly explain the high support for AA. Research indicates that women's less privileged societal position drives them to support policies that promote diversity and reduce discrimination in the workplace, whether such policies benefit them or other minority groups (Blommaert & Coenders, 2024; Robinson, 1983). Future research should consider controlling for gender variations in support for AA.

Another unexamined factor influencing the high support for AA is the extent to which participants had previously been directly exposed to AA in educational or workplace settings. Given that AA is less common in the EU than in the US (Blommaert & Coenders, 2024), and

considering that the sample was predominantly young, it is reasonable to assume that direct exposure to AA among participants was limited. This limited exposure may have positively shaped both their perceptions of and levels of support for AA by reducing their ability to accurately assess the impact of such policies on themselves. For example, would participants continue to support AA if they had previously perceived it as harming their own opportunities in the workplace? While research has consistently shown that support for AA tends to increase when individuals perceive a personal benefit or no personal harm (Aberson, 2021; Bobo, 1998; James et al., 2001; Scarborough & Holbrook, 2020; Unzueta et al., 2008), further studies should explore whether support shifts when AA is perceived as having previously harmed the individual. Moreover, in future replications of this study, including a measure of participants' prior direct experience with AA could help produce more accurate results.

Lastly, even if participants had sufficient information and personal experience with AA, it is possible that the consensus in support of such policies happened due to a social desirability bias, the tendency to answer in a favorable manner, reflecting a positive self-view (Paulhus, 2002). Future research could aim to use a scale assessing social desirability in the study, such as the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960).

### **Study implications**

This paper provided a valuable theoretical shift by moving beyond positive intergroup contact, which can sometimes lead to negative outcomes for the minority group (Kite et al., 2016; Saguy & Chernyak-Hai, 2012), to network inequality exposure, which increased center-to-right-leaning participants' support for AA, thereby narrowing the gap in research. Building on the findings by Hoy et al. (2024), this approach showed that support for AA is influenced by both political orientation and beliefs about the ongoing inequality in society. By highlighting the impact of contextual and relational factors, the findings indicate that

political views on AA are not fixed, but can be altered by seeing or hearing about someone from your social network facing systemic inequalities.

In a world where mitigating systemic inequalities is needed but challenging to achieve, these findings offer a hopeful insight: even indirect exposure to systemic inequalities in one's social network can motivate individuals to advocate for minority rights. This is especially important, as the change in attitudes toward AA came primarily from majority group members (73.7%), who are typically less directly affected by such inequalities. One possible reason for this change may be an overlooked factor of the study, such as empathy (Lee, 2021). Therefore, further research could examine the effect of empathy and other inclusionary beliefs on the relationship between majority group members' network inequality exposure and support for AA, as empathy was shown to buffer the effects of perceived threat (El-Yashruti, 2021; Swart et al., 2023).

The current study shows the importance of designing interventions and policies that not only address inequality but also raise awareness of its existence and impact. Since awareness is a prerequisite for action, policy-makers, organizations, universities, schools, and overall communities should consider implementing more dialogue-based programs focused on storytelling. These programs offer low-risk spaces for exchanging histories of discrimination, thus contextual and indirect exposure to systemic inequalities, which may foster understanding and positively shift people's attitudes toward AA. Nevertheless, interventions should also emphasize practical, action-oriented strategies to increase diversity.

Policy-based interventions include regulatory tools, such as equal employment policies (Heath et al., 2013), which are designed to remove barriers for disadvantaged groups by addressing systemic inequalities in the workplace. Moreover, dismantling segregation by promoting more mixed neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces, whether in terms of race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, or socioeconomic status, also falls under policy-based strategies.

In the absence of public policies, organizations could aim for diversity training in the workplace to move past mere knowledge exchange toward the creation of workgroups with members from diverse backgrounds. For these strategies to be effective, institutions should engage in transparency and have a clear commitment to promoting diversity and equality, which can be formalized by signing a diversity charter (European Commission, n.d.; Heath et al., 2013). It is through sustained exposure to diversity in inclusive environments that people come to recognize that difference is not a threat, but rather an opportunity for growth.

### **Conclusion**

The European Union has highlighted the need for initiatives that counter rising trends of anti-diversity and anti-inclusion sentiments in the current far-right-influenced political climate in Europe. Affirmative action policies serve as a key mechanism in this effort, making it essential to understand the factors that drive or hinder public support. Consistent with prior research, this study found that right-leaning individuals are generally less supportive of AA than left-leaning individuals. However, it also showed that network inequality exposure increases support for AA among individuals with center-to-right-leaning political orientations. Despite limitations regarding the research design and procedure, the findings carry relevant implications for policymakers and communities. They underscore that context and political orientation combine to predict attitudes toward policies aimed at decreasing systemic inequalities. Efforts that raise awareness of systemic inequalities coupled with action-oriented strategies may be especially effective in shifting attitudes toward greater support for social justice, even among ideologically resistant individuals. Therefore, the current study contributes to the body of knowledge and offers solutions for improving diversity and inclusion in the current resistant climate.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Survey Questions**

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

#### **Prescriptive Meritocracy Scale**

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. 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 Scale**

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

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. 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. 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 Scale**

#### **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 Scale**

#### **Ethnicity condition**

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**

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 Scale**

#### **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. 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: How often in the past 12 months have you seen or heard about someone from your social network facing such challenges?

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

### **Religiosity Scale**

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 Scale**

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

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

- 1- How would you describe your political orientation in general?
- 2- How would you describe your political orientation on social issues?
- 3- How would you describe your political orientation on economic issues?

### **Belief in Need Justice Principle Scale**

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. 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, 18-25 years, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 66 and above

#### **EU Citizenship**

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

Yes, No

#### **Gender**

Are you...

Male, Female, Non-binary / third gender, Other, please specify

#### **Ethnicity**

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

Yes, No, I don't know, Prefer not to say

#### **Level of Education**

1. No qualification.
2. Less than an upper secondary diploma.
3. Upper secondary diploma or equivalent (general or vocational; e.g., A-level, BTEC, Abitur/ Fachhochschulreife, HAVO, VWO, MBO 2-3-4, matricular examination).

4. Short-cycle or vocational tertiary education (e.g., MBO-4 specialist, HBO  
Associatedegree, Ausbildung, Berufsoberschule, Abendgymnasium, specialist Vocational).
5. Bachelor's degree or equivalent (University, Applied Sciences, Polytechnics,  
Fachhochschule (FH), WO, HBO).
6. Master's degree, or equivalent.
7. Ph.D. or equivalent.
8. Other, please specify.



## Appendix B

### Additional Sample Descriptives and Factor Analysis

**Table B1**

*Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Sample*

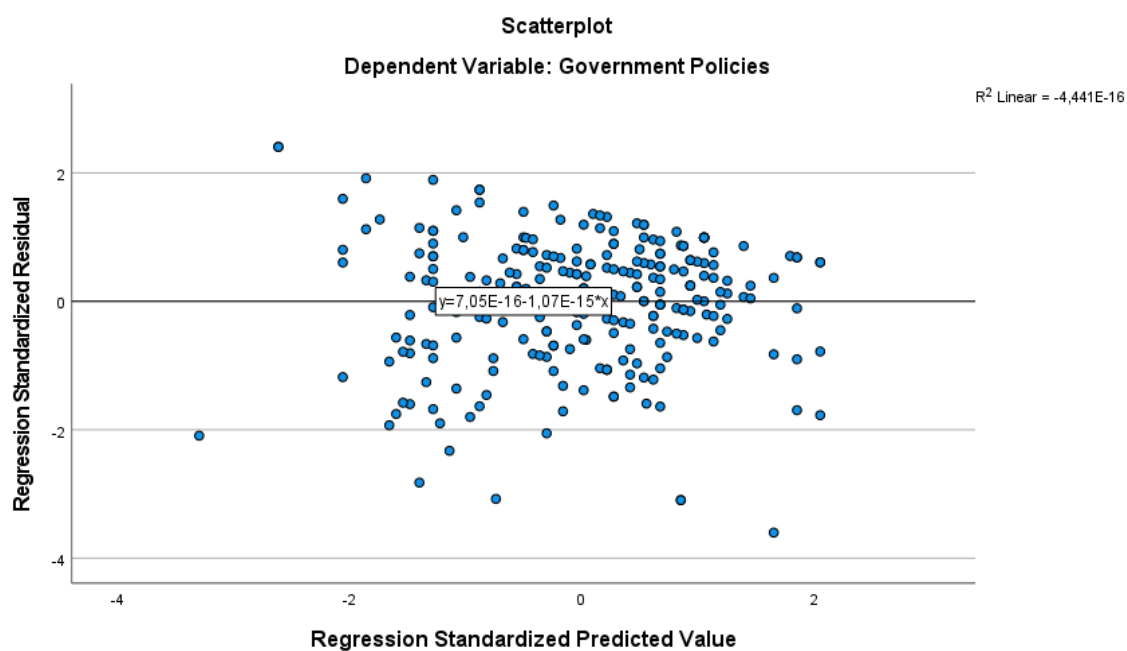
Sample Characteristics	<i>N</i>	%
Gender	258	
Women	158	61.2
Men	92	35.7
Non-binary/third gender	5	1.9
Other	3	1.2
Age	258	
18-25 years	182	70.5
26-35	27	10.5
36-45	11	4.3
46-55	21	8.1
56-65	14	5.4
66 and above	3	1.2
Level of Education	258	
No qualification	2	.8
Less than upper secondary diploma	6	2.3
Upper secondary diploma or equivalent	114	44.2
Short-cycle of 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, please specify	3	1.2

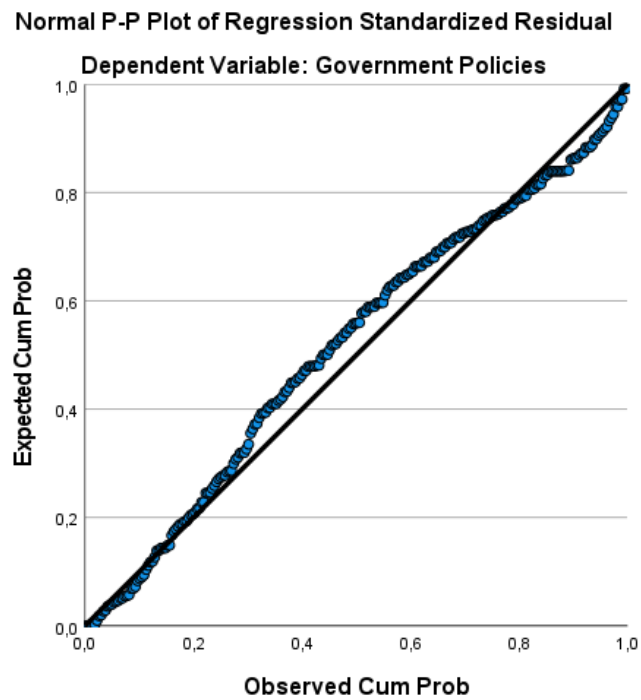
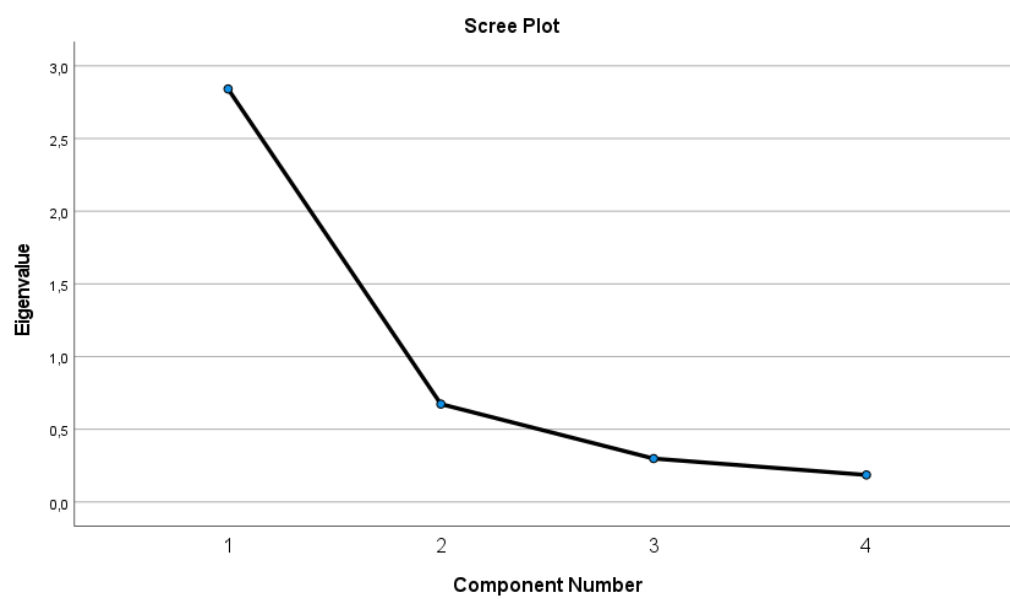
**Table B1***Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Sample*

Sample Characteristics	<i>N</i>	%
Ethnicity [Ethnic majority membership]	247	
Yes	182	73.7
No	65	26.3

**Figure B1**

*Homoscedasticity and Linearity Plot of Studentized Residuals versus the Unstandardized Predicted Values*



**Figure B2***Normality of Residuals P-P Plot***Figure B3***Factor Analysis Scree Plot of General Government Policies Scale Items*

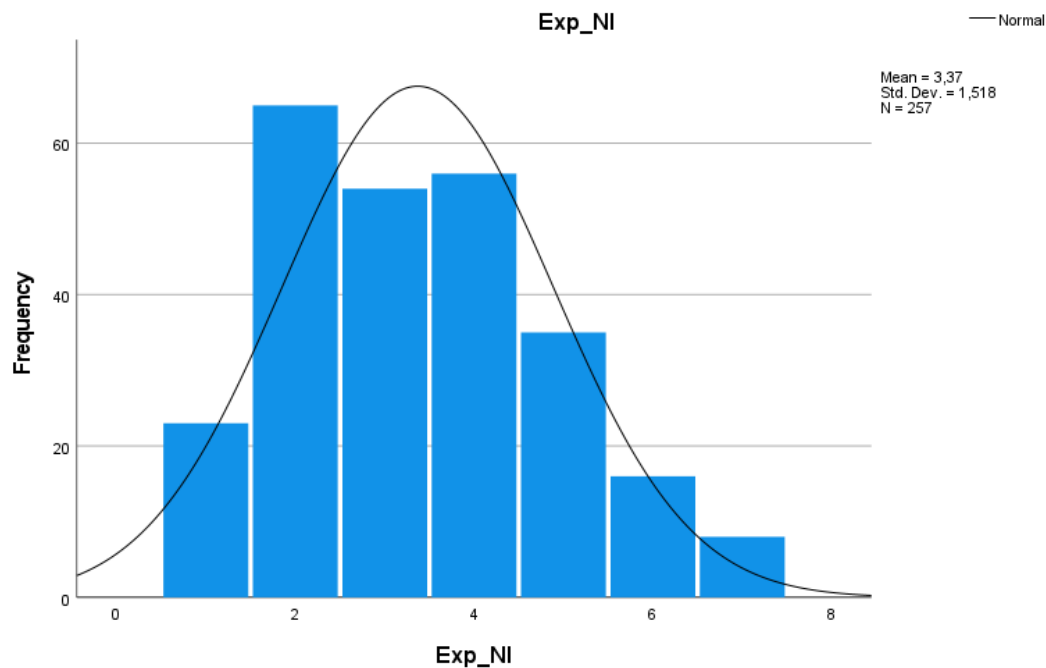
## Appendix C

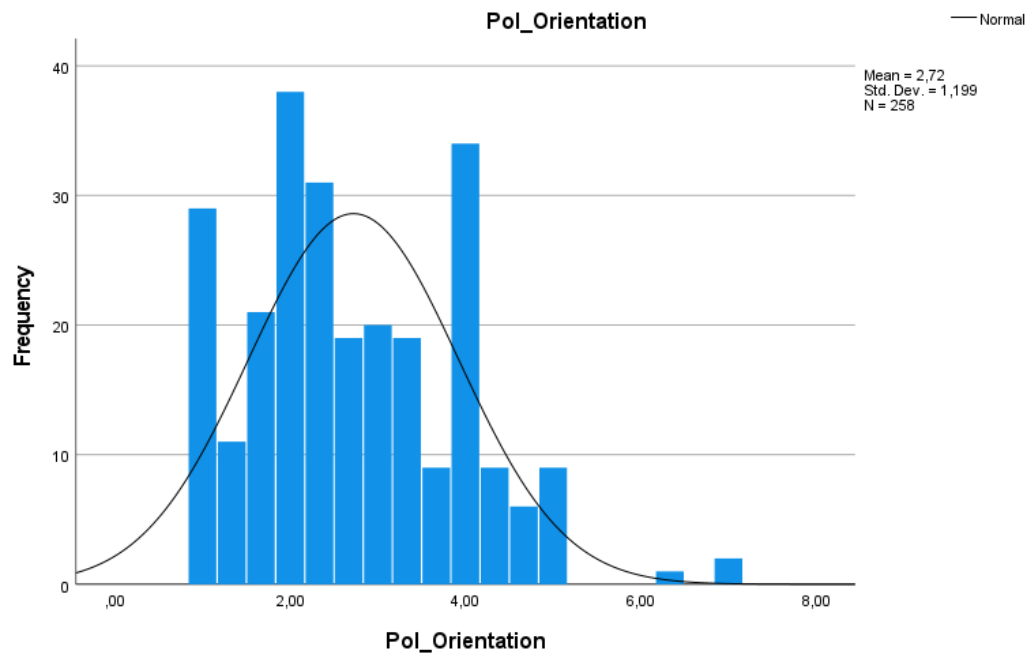
### Data regarding the distribution of responses of the study variables

The distribution of responses for network inequality exposure was relatively symmetrical, suggested by its low positive skew ( $sk = .410$ ) (see figure C1). The other two variables had a moderate degree of skewness that suggested non-normality: a positive skew in the data for political orientation ( $sk = .583$ ) and a negative skew for general government policies ( $sk = -.898$ ) (see figures C2 and C3). Moreover, the distribution of the responses for the network inequality exposure variable appeared to be platykurtic, with a kurtosis statistic of  $\kappa = -.500$ . Conversely, the distribution of general government policies responses is leptokurtic, with a kurtosis statistic of  $\kappa = .521$ . Political orientation had a mesokurtic distribution of responses ( $\kappa = .163$ ).

**Figure C1**

*Distribution of responses for network inequality exposure (Exp\_NI)*



**Figure C2***Distribution of responses for political orientation (Pol\_Orientation)***Figure C3***Distribution of responses for general government policies (Aff\_Action)*