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Perceptions and Perspectives: Testing for associations between Perceptions of Inequality, Autonomy,  
Morality and Support for Redistribution among BSU Students

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
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Bridgewater State University

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**Abstract:**

Despite claims that we exist in an “Age of Acquiescence” (Fraser, 2015) to historically high levels of inequality, Americans across wage, gender, and political leaning all desire a more equal distribution of wealth (Norton & Ariely, 2011). However, this apparent consensus doesn’t necessarily translate into support for redistribution, at least in terms of greater taxation. Rather, according to recent findings by Northwestern University Professor Leslie McCall, Americans prefer instead to address wealth inequality through the expansion of opportunity (McCall, 2011). It may be that as individual perceptions of autonomy and the availability of opportunity increases, support for traditional redistribution decreases, since life outcomes are attributed to individual effort and responsibility as opposed to an un-level playing field (Naito, 2007). In addition, differences in individual moral priorities place certain moral intuitions above others, with liberals placing a greater emphasis on fairness and reciprocity than conservatives, potentially explaining their greater likelihood to support traditional redistribution in addition to opportunity expansion (Graham et al, 2011). This survey attempts to bring these variables into consideration and determine whether and to what degree self-selected measures of autonomy and moral intuition correlate with support for redistribution, whether traditionally conceived or through opportunity expansion.

## Introduction

A term famously coined by Mark Twain more than a century ago has re-emerged to define the current abysmal and growing divide in wealth and income held by the top of the distribution and everyone else: the New Gilded Age. It has been used at least as recently as 2008 political scientist Larry Bartels on the cover of his book *Unequal Democracy; the Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*. But it's also appeared in combination with a new set of terms introduced by the Occupy Movement; the 1% and the 99%. Beginning in the fall of 2011, this new social movement sought to redefine the conversation of inequality in America by emphasizing that the beneficiaries of the growing inequality were only a tiny fraction of the United States' population, according to historian Michael Gould-Wartofsky. In an interview with Salon's Elias Isquith, Warrtofsky claims that the branding of the "99-to-1" percent strategy is one of the movements lasting impressions, as media and researchers alike have rallied around the terms (Isquith, 2015). And yet, four years later, the trends have not seemed to reverse.

So what happened to the passion that seems to have flared out in the Occupy Movement? In other words, what might be responsible for the apparent lack of resistance towards the continuing trend of economic inequality? The notion first came to my attention after watching an episode of Moyers and Company where journalist Bill Moyers interviews author and historian Steve Fraser about his upcoming book *The Age of Acquiescence*. In it he compares the bygone era of robber barons and massive inequities in the ownership of wealth to our own particular era of inequality, only this time without much the characteristic civil revolt. Acquiescence, then, is the particular sentiment where people might be led to begrudgingly accept the status quo rather than work to change it. However, this begs the question: assuming this economic inequality is a problem, then why doesn't the majority of American's join together in calling for more

redistribution, higher taxes on the rich and other programs which might help close the gap? Aside from the occupy protestors, are Americans simply unaware of just how large the divide has grown? Or does the average American not consider economic inequality a problem at all? Finally, how might individual differences in perceived autonomy, opportunity, or moral intuition help explain this apparent acquiescence?

These are the first questions that come to mind when I consider the role that acquiescence might have in shaping beliefs about inequality and redistribution. Acquiescence is a topic that has been addressed in a number of ways, with varying explanations for how and why it comes about. It's also one of two broad sets of hypotheses presented by Northeastern University Professor Benjamin I. Page, which attempt to answer just why Americans can simultaneously express the desire for equality and yet seemingly resist policies designed to get there. These "hypotheses of *acquiescence*" assert that, for whatever reason, Americans just aren't responsive to the historically large and growing levels of economic inequality. This stands in contrast to the second set of hypotheses that deal not with acquiescence on the part of the individual, but of *political inequality*, or the inability of some segments of the population to be adequately represented by the political system (Page, 2009). On their surface, both of these arguments seem possible. However, in an essay written for *The Future of Political Science*, Page notes that "To the extent that authentic beliefs and preferences produce acquiescence to inequality, U.S. politics may be more truly democratic than some observers have inferred from our inegalitarian policies" (2009:102). If Americans, the argument goes, fail to find economic inequality problematic or simply fail to mobilize in response to it, then fault lies not upon the political system itself, but in the attitudes and preferences of its people. However, while it may be that acquiescence indeed is responsible for the appearance of political inequality, coming to this conclusion would require a

completely different methodological approach than what I employ here. Therefore, in order to remain theoretically consistent with the methodological approach of this research, I will primarily assess the arguments made under the acquiescence set of hypotheses in the following literature review.

## **Literature Review**

To begin, this literature review will be divided into five sections, beginning first with how we can conclude that there is a large degree of inequality of wealth and income, and a few ways in which this news is troubling. We will see overall how the gap between the top strata of the income distribution has moved away from the lower strata thus giving rise to the ‘New Gilded Age’. Next, we will review the various acquiescence hypotheses, including suggestions that the public simply may not be aware of inequality, that they might be tolerant of inequality, that they are aware but simply reject redistribution. Finally we’ll look at the role of moral intuition as it manifests itself through political ideology.

### ***Inequality – Defining the Trends***

Firstly, how can we determine that we do indeed live in a time of vast inequalities in the distribution of wealth and income? A great assessment is provided by authors Steven Sweet and Peter Meiksins in *The Changing Contours of Work*. In chapter three of their book, Sweet and Meiksins describe the emergence of economic inequality and its role in the nature of work in what they call the “new economy” (Sweet & Meiksins, 2008). While there are no clear

landmarks distinguishing between this new economy from earlier periods, the authors suggest that beginning around 1970, a few systemic changes were altering the nature of work in America. These changes include but aren't limited to: the offshoring of manufacturing, large numbers on women entering the workforce, and new "flexible" work arrangements that blur the lines between employee and contractor (Sweet & Meiksins, 2008). With these new contours in mind, the authors asked whether or not inequality had risen or fallen during this transition. Their conclusion was that while perhaps not as blatant as the inequality in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, "structural lags" and "enduring failures" have hindered efforts to ameliorate the inequality created in the old economy. In fact, it seemed to be getting worse: census data gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau and presented by Sweet and Meiksins reveal the change in income distribution between five wealth quintiles over a period of about 40 years. For the bottom quintile, the proportion of Americans living at or near the poverty line has remained relatively unchanged since 1970. To contrast only the top fifth of the population and the second highest fifth received any meaningful increase at all. Most of the increase remained with the top 5% threshold of the top fifth, greatly leaping away from the increases seen in any other income bracket (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

Supporting these findings are authors Benjamin I. Page and Lawrence R. Jacobs in their book *Class War: What Americans Really Think about Economic Inequality*. In the first chapter they sought to outline a few prevailing trends detailing the emergence of the vast levels of inequality at present, as well as some factors that might have contributed to these trends. One likely culprit would be the stagnation or decline of wages for most Americans not in the upper echelons of the income distribution. By comparing wages adjusted for inflation to the general rise of worker productivity, or how much work is done per hour worked by the average

employee we should see an associated rise in compensation commensurate with these gains in productivity. However, that's not what one would find by looking at the data. Citing the work of Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Sylvia Allegretto, we know that while worker productivity has soared since the 1970s, rising at a rate of 3.1% between 2000 and 2005, these gains in output simply haven't been reflected in wage compensation. In fact during that same time frame real median wages, which are the earnings at the center of the income distribution, declined by about 3% or roughly 1,600 dollars per family (Mishel, et al. 2005). To contrast, the richest fifth of the income distribution saw their own pay increase 70%. Even more, the iconic "1%" increased their take home pay by a staggering 184%. These differences in pay are reflected in a valuable economic measure called the Gini Coefficient. Working on a range from 0 to 1 (with 0 representing a perfectly even distribution of income and 1 representing the opposite) the Gini coefficient allows us to make comparisons between relative levels of income inequality across nations and across time. Page and Jacobs note that for the US just prior to the 2008 recession, the Gini Coefficient had reached its highest level in 60 years.

Income, however, is only one way we can determine economic inequality. Perhaps even more telling of an indicator is that of wealth. Wealth is determined by subtracting all debts from the value of one's total property and assets. Page and Jacobs, citing a Federal Reserve Board Survey in 2004, explained how that while the richest one percent account for 17% of the nation's total income, they held more than a third of its wealth at roughly 34% (Page & Jacobs, 2009). On the other hand, the vast majority of 90% of Americans accounted for only a slight majority of the nation's income (57.5%). In terms of wealth, the difference was even more staggering: the bottom 90% of Americans only held 29% of the country's wealth (Page & Jacobs, 2009).



### *Acquiescence Hypotheses - Is the Public Aware?*

Now we turn our discussion to an examination of the hypotheses that attempt to explain why Americans might acquiesce to the above statistics. The first of these simply concerns citizen awareness. While the data presented above should provide a convincing case that economic inequality both exists and has been growing, how can we be sure that the general public is even aware of these trends? In their 2011 journal article, *Building a Better America--One Wealth Quintile at a Time*, Michael I. Norton and Dan Ariely, asked respondents both to construct an ideal distribution of wealth between five segments of the population from richest to poorest, and attempt to estimate what the actual distribution really was. According to their results, Americans across ideology, gender, and income all severely underestimated the actual level of wealth inequality, with their ideals being far more egalitarian than even their own estimates, aside from the actual levels. Americans estimated the top fifth of the population held around 60% of the nation's wealth when in fact they hold more than 80% (Norton & Ariely, 2011). Even more generous, Americans gave the last two fifths of the population around 5% each when their actual share of the wealth is 0.2% and 0.1% respectively (Davies, et al., 2009).

So what can we learn from the results produced by Norton and Ariely? It may be that Americans are reluctant to support redistributive policy because they are simply unaware of how staggering the gap in wealth and income has grown as was suggest by their survey results. Another reason suggested by Norton and Ariely was that overly optimistic beliefs about social mobility might instead be putting a damper on the animosity one would expect to arise from these statistics (Norton & Ariely, 2011). Research from abroad supports both of these suggestions. In regards to the first suggestion, researchers Guillermo Cruces, Ricardo Perez-Truglia, and Martin Tetaz found that in estimating their own incomes as compared to the rest of

the population, individuals will rely on the people they often interact with and live among when making these judgements.(Cruces, Truglia, Tetaz, 2013). This amounts to a type of “selection bias” as individuals base their assessment on a limited reference frame. In other words, individuals are much more likely to know and associate with people in a similar economic standing, and thus might incorrectly think the status quo is better or worse than it actually is. In order to determine whether or not this could be the case, the authors conducted a survey of a representative sample of 1100 households in Greater Buenos Aires, Argentina. Respondents were first asked to estimate their own position among the 10 million households in Argentina before answering a few questions about their political views regarding redistribution. In addition, a random experimental treatment was performed on some of the survey respondents where their estimates were corrected by being exposed to the actual distribution before answering survey questions on their views regarding redistribution. The researchers hypothesized that individuals with rich reference groups would underestimate their own rank in the distribution while individuals with poor reference groups would overestimate their rank (Cruces, et al. 2013). They also hypothesized that those exposed to accurate information would view redistribution more favorably overall. The results of the experiment confirmed both hypotheses. Not only did respondents consistently underestimate (or overestimate) depending on their reference groups, but those exposed to the corrected information were significantly more likely to support redistribution, although this applied only to those underestimating their own position (Cruces, et al. 2013). In all, these are good indicators that Americans might similarly engage in selection bias when estimating the economic standing of the rest of the nation. Yet this is only one possible explanation of why people might acquiesce to inequality.

### ***Aware, but Not a Problem***

The above findings are interesting to say the least. They suggest that awareness is an important element in one's overall support for redistribution, with increased awareness of economic inequality leading to increased support for redistribution. But even if this relationship is true, it doesn't exactly explain why lower awareness would mean less support for redistribution. The reason might be due to what Leslie McCall calls the "bootstraps" and "level playing field" opportunity tropes (McCall, 2013), where working hard and taking advantage of available resources mean that everyone has the ability to become successful in life. One proponent of this perspective is author and historian Steve Fraser, who argues in the *Age of Acquiescence* that a number of "fables of freedom" have worked to justify inequality. Among these fables is the "Businessman as Populist Hero," in which Fraser asserts that the figures like Bill Gates or Steve Jobs proved that hard work and ingenuity could in fact elevate the life of an ordinary worker to society's top echelons (Fraser, 2015). To Fraser, Americans' general acquiescence in the face of growing inequality is really a type of historical accident. Our awareness is not primarily at fault, but rather a culture grown accustomed to capitalism and the idea that everyone is capable of success if only they would strive for it. This means that individuals may be led to justify any inequality that does exist as the natural outcome of individual's efforts, regardless of their knowledge of the true extent of inequality.

There is at least some evidence for these notions from sociologist Jun Naito. In "Perceived Freedom and its Sociological Effects: An Inquiry into the Relationship Between Liberalism and Inequality" (2007), Naito sought to understand how individual perceptions of freedom and well-being might be related to support for redistributive policies. Through a survey dataset of 1320 registered voters collected by the University of Tokyo, respondents were asked

about their health, level of income, level of education, and four questions measuring a respondent's "perceived freedom." They were: 1) I usually choose my way of life or lifestyle based on my own will, 2) Those around me generally accept my decisions about my life, 3) The state of our society and government somewhat reflects my wishes and opinions, and 4) I have the means and the necessary information to improve my life personally. Finally, respondents' level of support for redistribution was measured through the question "The government should take responsibility to correct income inequality between rich and poor" with responses ranging from "Strongly Support" to "Do not Support (at all)." Naito found that higher education, health, and income were associated with significantly lower support for redistribution. Naito claimed that "from their point of view, their opposition to an egalitarian policy appears to be justified, because according to the principle of freedom and self-responsibility, poor people should take responsibility for their own poverty in a free and fair society" (Naito, 2007). Therefore, Jun Naito might agree with Fraser in the conclusion that the American people are tolerant of inequality because they believe in the "bootstraps" and "level playing field" opportunity tropes. That is, the American people think that because opportunities are readily available, failure is due to a lack of individual effort, regardless of how unequal society happens to be.

### *Aware & Upset*

It would be difficult to make a convincing case for redistribution if people justified inequality as the natural and proper outcome of a system in which opportunities are abundant. However, Leslie McCall in *The Undeserving Rich* makes the case that researchers often mistakenly infer from respondents' attitudes on redistribution that they do not care about or

tolerate inequality of wealth and income (McCall, 2013). In fact, it's entirely possible that individuals can express contempt at the levels of inequality while simultaneously rejecting traditional forms of redistribution. When inequality is seen as impeding one's ability to work towards success and as creating a playing field that is *not* level, then they could come to reject inequality while still subscribing to the same opportunity tropes. For example, Jun Naito's findings don't necessarily mean that the respondents approve of whatever inequality exists in Japan. Rather, they might simply disagree with the method of addressing the problem, preferring the expansion of opportunity rather than traditional redistribution. As McCall puts it: "this is not because government redistribution does not affect growth and opportunity, but because it is not *associated* with creating growth and opportunity" (2013:9). As a result, while Steve Fraser's assertion of acquiescence may still hold true, it's not necessarily for the reasons he suggested.

Considered in this way, the apparent contradiction between the findings of Jun Naito and Michael Norton and Dan Ariely can be reconciled. McCall's important point also helps to explain Benjamin Page and Lawrence Jacobs findings in *Class War* (2008). Page and Jacobs note that the American public philosophically subscribes to what the authors call "conservative egalitarianism" (Page & Jacobs, 2009). This follows both from our preference for individual opportunity and our overwhelming agreement on the subject of inequality, namely our disapproval of it. Indeed, according to their own survey, a majority of Americans agree that "The money and wealth in this country should be more evenly distributed" and that "Differences in income in America are too large" at 68% and 72% respectively. They hold these views even while a majority of 76% also believes that "it's still possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich" (Page & Jacobs, 2009). Even while Americans tend to think that inequality has grown too large, they haven't necessarily given up on the bootstraps opportunity

trope. Also consistent with McCall's assertion that Americans don't associate redistribution with the expansion of opportunity, Page and Jacobs found that only a slight majority of 56% of Americans believe that "Our government should redistribute wealth by heavy taxes on the rich." To contrast, when a program would explicitly expand opportunity, it receives significantly more approval from the public. For example, 80% of Americans were in favor of increasing their own taxes for "Retraining programs for people whose jobs have been eliminated" (Page & Jacobs, 2009). These findings, coming from their own independent survey, add considerable weight to McCall's assessment of the public's attitude towards inequality, opportunity, and redistribution. Her own findings, taken from the General Social Survey (GSS) and the American National Election Study (ANES) also support her assessment. It would seem, then, that Americans are in fact "conservative egalitarians," holding somewhat contradicting beliefs. While we seemingly acquiesce to inequality, it's because we rather find solutions through means of opportunity expansion, even as these programs might be less effective in reducing inequality.

### ***On the Role of Ideology***

There is one remaining caveat to be explored when considering the host of acquiescence hypotheses namely the role of partisanship or ideology. Consider the results from Page and Jacobs' survey questions "The money and wealth in this country should be more evenly distributed" and that "Differences in income in America are too large" which received strong majorities of 68% and 72% respectively. Republicans answering those same questions only gave slight majorities of 52% and 56% respectively, close to or within the 4% margin of statistical error. And in regards to the question specifically asking about redistribution, which only received

a slight majority of 56% from the public as a whole, Republicans were only 39% in favor of heavy taxes on the rich. It's interesting to note that Leslie McCall also found this relationship among conservatives for perceptions of inequality in her examination of the GSS questions, with conservatives being significantly more likely to approve of current levels than liberals. Although, to be clear, one's identification with the Republican Party does not necessarily mean that he/she is conservative (or Democrat & Liberal), but an on-going trend in the U.S. has been the ideological stratification of the two major parties. According to research conducted by Pew Research Center, "The median Republican is now more conservative than nearly all Democrats (94%), and the median Democrat is more liberal than 92% of Republicans" (Pew Research Center, 2014). This difference in values apparently holds not just for perceptions of inequality and redistribution, but for opportunity as well.

How might differences in partisanship and ideology shape our opinions, with more conservative individuals more likely to be opposed to redistribution and approve of inequality? According to Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian A. Nosek, the reason is due to fundamental differences in our own worldviews. In their 2009 article, they suggest that the difference in opinions stems from differing moral intuitions (Graham, et al. 2009). The reason that liberals and conservatives have such difficulty reconciling their worldviews isn't so much because the other side is crazy, (much as we'd like to think), but because what is considered moral and right to one person can be construed as amoral and wrong to another. In setting out to detail these differences, Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham among others, suggested that there are five fundamental sets of moral intuitions. In *Mapping the Moral Domain* they are defined as "Harm/Care, Fairness/Reciprocity, Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity" (Graham, et al. 2011). They developed a survey questionnaire called the "Moral Foundations

Questionnaire” designed to determine the ideological leaning of the participant (whether liberal or conservative) because of their tendency to favor domains over others. For example, liberals greatly value the morals of care and fairness, while conservatives value these no more than they do the other sets of morals (Graham, et al. 2011). These findings could potentially explain the divergence in Page and Jacobs findings between the general public and republicans in their survey. As a result, the findings that Americans overall prefer opportunity expansion over traditional redistribution could actually be skewed because of conservatives in the sample. In addition, since liberals are more likely to emphasize fairness, then conservatives may just naturally be more likely to acquiesce to inequality for the reasons suggested above.

### ***Research Questions***

Moving on from our brief exploration of potential hypotheses, we now turn to a summary of the general research questions that are gathered from the research above. As Leslie McCall made clear, understanding public views on inequality cannot be adequately inferred from their beliefs about redistribution. In addition, inequality is conceptually distinct from views regarding opportunity, although the two are related (McCall, 2013). But it’s also clear that one’s sense of their own autonomy and well-being, as well as their ideological and partisan leaning could also moderate their views on redistribution. These insights gathered from the literature above inform the following research questions. They are:

- 1) Will more accurate perceptions of inequality be positively associated with support for redistribution?



- 2) Will greater perceptions of individual autonomy be negatively associated with support for redistribution?
- 3) Will liberal ideology be positively associated with support for redistribution while conservative ideology is negatively associated?
- 4) Will greater perceptions of individual opportunity be negatively associated with support for redistribution?

In addition to these four questions, additional relationships may be explored between all other questions that appear in the survey. As the material covered in the survey questionnaire is broad, specific conclusions will be difficult to reach. However, ideally some associations will appear in the data that provide support for the above hypotheses.

### **Methodology**

In order to test the research questions outlined in the literature review, a survey of approximately 200 Bridgewater State University students will be conducted. The survey will be distributed on-line through Qualtrics surveying software. Since respondents will select themselves, this sample will not be representative of the student population and is essentially a convenience sample. Still, the correlations observed should offer some insight into the relationship between moral intuition and perceptions of autonomy with perceptions of inequality, and redistribution. The Survey will be divided into five parts; the autonomy component, the morality component, the inequality/opportunity component, the Redistribution component and finally a set of questions measuring respondents' descriptive characteristics.

First is the inequality component, which sets out to test research question one. It will replicate a portion of the survey conducted by Michael I. Norton and Dan Ariely in *Building a Better America—One Wealth Quintile at a Time* (Norton and Ariely, 2011). Specifically, it will ask participants to construct a wealth distribution between five sections of the US Population and estimate how much, as a percentage of the whole, each group holds. In addition to this exercise, respondents will be asked whether they think wealth inequality has grown, remained the same, or shrunk overall and for their own Home Town. It's hypothesized that more accurate perceptions of the current level of wealth inequality (indicated by those selecting inequality has grown) will correlate with higher support for redistribution. To see if this relationship appears in the data, a crosstab analysis between this question as the independent variable and three measures of support for redistribution will be conducted. These measures will be the dependent variables. The first measure simply asks whether or not the respondent favors or opposes "the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality." The second measure asks if the government should "reduce income differences between rich and poor by raising taxes on the wealthy." Finally, as our third measure, a variable about the minimum wage is used rather than another variable asking specifically about redistribution. It asks whether or not the government should set the minimum wage high enough "so that no family with a full time worker falls below the official poverty line." This will allow a comparison between respondents' preferences between reducing inequality at the input stage, rather than the output stage as suggested by Leslie McCall and are also drawn from the General Social Survey (2013).

Next is the autonomy component, which sets out to test the second research question. This section will ask respondents a range of questions aiming to highlight perceptions autonomy and opportunity. It will follow model the "Overall perceived freedom scale" offered by Jun

Naito, but because he uses data that won't be able to be collected, such as health and income data, other questions designed to measure autonomy have been used instead. These questions were drawn from Tania Burchardt's (2012) effort to create survey items designed to measure autonomy and fortunately are more thorough than Naito's. It's hypothesized that a greater sense of autonomy would be negatively associated with support for redistribution. To test this relationship, a crosstab analysis will be conducted between the autonomy scale question asking the respondent the degree to which they agree or disagree with the statement "overall, I am able to do the things that are important to me" as the independent variable and the three measures of support for redistribution as the dependent variables.

Next, drawing from Graham et al's Moral Foundations Questionnaire, the third research question will be tested. It's hypothesized that those that indicate they are liberal will correlate positively with support for redistribution while those that indicate they are conservative will correlate negatively with support for redistribution. The respondent's self-identification of ideology will be the independent variable while the same three measures of support used in the previous two crosstab analyses will be used as the dependent variables.

Finally, using questions from the Page and Jacobs' Inequality Survey as well as the American National Election Survey, the relationship between opportunity and redistribution will be explored. According to Leslie McCall, Americans don't see traditional redistribution as expanding opportunity (McCall, 2013). It follows that respondents should support redistribution when they believe opportunities are unavailable. Alternatively, if respondents believe that there are still plenty of opportunities available, they should look less favorably on redistribution. For this hypothesis, three different independent variables will be compared in crosstab analyses against only the first measure of support for redistribution (would you favor or oppose the

government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality). The first independent variable is taken from Page and Jacobs' Inequality Survey and asks "Do you think it is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich?" The second and third independent variables are derived from the American National Election Survey. They ask how "much do you agree or disagree with the following: 'We have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country'" and "how much do you agree or disagree with the following: 'One of the big problems in this country is that we don't give everyone an equal chance.'" Together these questions will test the fourth research question. It's hypothesized that greater perceptions of individual opportunity will be negatively associated with support for redistribution (but positively associated with the third independent variable as the wording of the question means the answers would logically be reversed).

\*A full list of survey questions used will be attached in the appendix.

### **Data Analysis**

In total, 118 participants from the Bridgewater State University student population completed the survey (as of November 22, 2015). Many of the relationships correlated in the expected directions, though there were low frequencies in a few of the response categories which could have been driving the results. Furthermore, it's important to note that this was not a representative sample of the student body. It was essentially a convenience sample, drawn mostly from classrooms in the Sociology and Political Science departments, as well as online through the Honors Community and Class of 2016 Facebook pages. As such, it's not possible to demonstrate that the following relationships did not occur simple by chance. Even with these

limitations in mind, it's interesting that all the hypotheses received some support, excluding the second hypothesis concerning individual autonomy. The strongest correlations occurred for the first and third hypothesis, which concerned perceptions that inequality had grown and political ideology, respectively. The weakest correlations were for the fourth hypothesis concerning perceptions of equal opportunity, though the responses were still in the expected direction. This data analysis will begin with a depiction of the groups characteristics followed by some simple descriptive information about how respondents answered some of the questions. Finally, a series of relationships will be explored to determine their strength and whether or not they correlate in the expected directions according to their stated hypotheses.

### ***Respondent Characteristics***

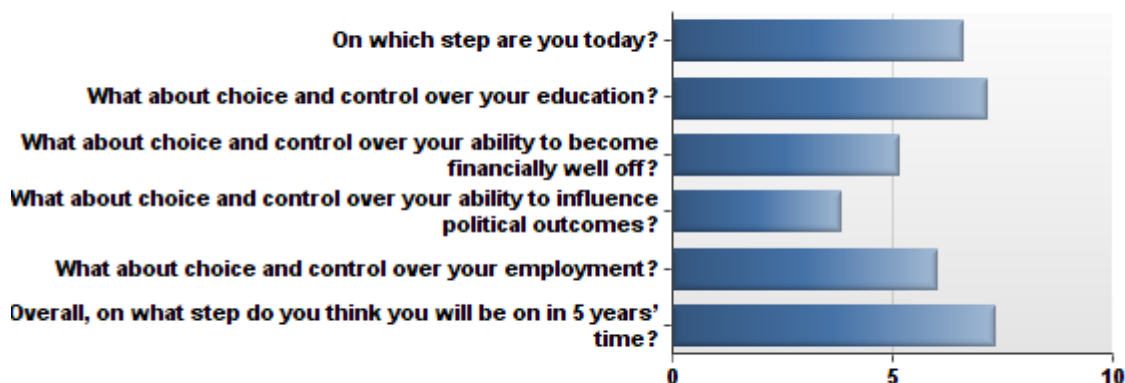
In total, most of the respondents identified as White, with 86 percent of the sample identifying as such. Another 6% described themselves as Black or African American, while only 3% described themselves as Hispanic or Latino. Finally, the remaining 6% claimed they belonged to more than one race/ethnicity. A majority of respondents did not identify with either major party, amounting to 63% of the total. Democrats and Republics are 24% and 13% of the sample respectively. Ideologically, respondents are split evenly between liberals and moderates at 40% and 42% respectively, with only 18% identifying as conservative. Finally, most respondents were young, with only 5 being born before 1990. 42% are freshmen and 32% are seniors, with 22% being both sophomores and juniors.

### ***Descriptive Statistics***

To begin, how did BSU students fair in their assessments of their own freedom of choice and autonomy? The first set of questions attempting to measure this was a series of scale questions asking the respondent to place themselves on an imaginary ten-step ladder, with the highest step (10) meaning complete free choice and control, and the lowest step (0) indicating none at all. Figure 1.1 lists all of these questions.

Overall, respondents averaged a score of 6.5 on the scale when asked “on which step are you today” indicating that BSU students generally perceive a fair degree of autonomy and control in their lives. In regards to education and employment, respondents are fairly close to their overall scores, averaging 6.9 for education, though they are slightly less optimistic about their degree of control for their employment, averaging only 5.9 on the scale. Next, respondents were borderline pessimistic about their ability to become financially well-off and averaged near the center of the scale at 5.09. However, the lowest scale was the respondent’s ability to influence political outcomes. The average here was only 3.8, indicating that overall, respondents have little faith in their influence over politics. Finally, respondents projected themselves to be at

Figure 1.1



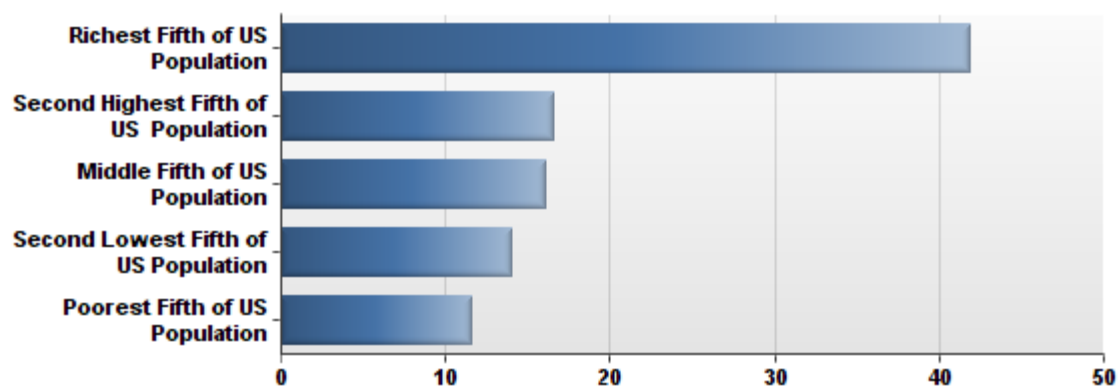
7.25 on the scale in 5 years, indicating that most expect an increase in autonomy and control overtime.

Next, how did BSU students rate of the Morality Scale? As one might expect from a sample with a large group of liberals, many respondents chose options that were associated with liberal responses according to Graham and Haidt's (2011) Moral Foundations Questionnaire. In judging whether something was right or wrong, for example, most described whether or not some people were treated differently than others, suffered emotionally, and cared for the weak and vulnerable as relevant. Somewhat unexpected was that majorities also described whether or not someone showed love for his/her country, showed a lack of respect for authority as well as did something to betray his or her group as relevant when judging whether something was right or wrong. These questions are expected to be rated less importantly by liberals according to Graham and Haidt and more importantly by conservatives. When comparing these findings against respondents own ideological identification, however, conservatives were more likely to select very and extremely relevant than liberals. For example, on question 3 only 11% of liberals selected either very or extremely relevant as opposed to 37% of conservatives.

#	Figure 1.2	Not at All Relevant	Not Very Relevant	Slightly Relevant	Somewhat Relevant	Very Relevant	Extremely Relevant
3	Whether or not someone's action showed love for his or her country	7.38%	27.05%	13.93%	31.97%	13.93%	5.74%
4	Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority	0.79%	10.32%	28.57%	17.46%	30.16%	12.70%
9	Whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group	0.80%	5.60%	13.60%	29.60%	34.40%	16.00%

BSU students also underestimated the degree of wealth inequality in the U.S., consistent with the findings of Norton and Ariely (2011). Although they understood that the richest fifth was far removed from the other segments of the population, the degree of this separation was significantly underestimated. Respondents averaged that over 40 percent of the national wealth was owned by the richest fifth of the population when that figure actually stands above 80%. Respondents also overestimated the relative wealth held by the bottom two fifths of the

Figure 1.3



population assigning 10% and 15% of the wealth respectively. In reality these two segments together barely amount to over 1% of the national wealth. Figure 1.3 details these results. When calculating what amount of wealth each fifth *should* have, the answers were also fairly consistent with the Norton Ariely findings. BSU students on average thought that the top, second, and middle fifth should have roughly equal portions of the total wealth while only the bottom two fifths should have relatively less respectively.



### ***Testing the Hypotheses***

#### Hypothesis 1:

In addressing the first research question, “*Will more accurate perceptions of inequality be positively associated with support for redistribution,*” it was hypothesized that individuals with more accurate perceptions of inequality would correlate positively with support for redistribution. Specifically, those that correctly indicated that inequality had grown would be more likely than those that indicated it had either shrunk or remained the same to favor redistribution according to three measures of support. The first measure simply asks whether or not the respondent favors or opposes “the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality,” the second measure asks if the government should “reduce income differences between rich and poor by raising taxes on the wealthy” and the third measure asks whether or not the government should set the minimum wage high enough “so that no family with a full time worker falls below the official poverty line.”

For the first measure, the results somewhat support the hypothesis. In table H1-1, we see that a large majority of those claiming that inequality has grown (77%) favor or strongly favor the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality. In addition, 50% of those claiming that inequality has stayed the same and 36% of those claiming that inequality has shrunk oppose or strongly oppose the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality. However, an equal number of those saying inequality had shrunk (36%) also favor or strongly favor these measures. While the correlation is mostly in the expected direction for those correctly stating inequality has grown, it’s mixed for those stating it’s shrunk.

Table H1-1: Inequality Perception VS Redistribution		Overall, would you say that inequality has grown, remained the same, or shrunk?				
		Inequality has Grown	Stayed the Same	Inequality has shrunk	Don't Know/Not Sure	Total
Would you favor or oppose the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality?	Strongly Favor	30 42.25%	1 5%	2 18.18%	2 15.38%	35
	Favor	25 35.21%	4 20%	2 18.18%	2 15.38%	33
	Neither	12 16.90%	5 25%	3 27.27%	4 30.77%	24
	Oppose	3 4.23%	5 25%	4 36.36%	3 23.08%	15
	Strongly Oppose	1 1.41%	5 25%	0 0%	2 15.38%	8
	Total	71 100%	20 100%	11 100%	13 100%	115

For the second measure, the hypothesis again finds support. In Table H1-2, we see that a large majority (81%) of those claiming that inequality has grown agree that the government should reduce income differences between rich and poor by raising taxes on the wealthy. In contrast, majorities of those claiming inequality has remained the same, or that inequality has shrunk think the government should not concern itself with reducing income differences between the rich and the poor (60% and 63% respectively). The findings reveal an important difference among those who think inequality has grown as compared to those who did not as far as the role of government in reducing income differences. Specifically, those who do think inequality has grown are more likely to want the government to raise taxes on the wealthy.

Table H1-2: Inequality Perception VS Tax the Rich		Overall, would you say that inequality has grown, remained the same, or shrunk?				
		Inequality has Grown	Stayed the Same	Inequality has shrunk	Don't Know/Not Sure	Total
Should the government reduce income differences between the rich and poor by raising taxes on the wealthy, or should the government not concern itself with reducing differences?	Raise Taxes	46 65.71%	5 25%	2 18.18%	0 0%	53
	Not Concern Itself	11 15.71%	12 60%	7 63.64%	8 61.54%	38
	Don't Know/Not Sure	13 18.57%	3 15%	2 18.18%	5 38.46%	23
	Total	70 100%	20 100%	11 100%	13 100%	114

Finally, for the last measure, we find a fair amount of support for the hypothesis, but less than that of the previous two examples. Table H1-3 shows us that a majority of those that claimed inequality has grown (64%) either favor or strongly favor the government setting the minimum wage high enough so that families with a full time worker do not fall below the poverty line, although this is not a large of a majority as in the prior two examples. In contrast, 45% of those believing inequality has remained the same and 18% of those believing it has shrunk oppose or strongly oppose a new minimum wage standard. Most that believe inequality has shrunk (55%) neither favor nor oppose a minimum wage increased to the level where no family with a full time worker would fall below the poverty line. These results are interesting, suggesting that perceptions of inequality are less correlated with support for a new minimum standard.

Table H1-3: Inequality Perception VS Minimum Wage		Overall, would you say that inequality has grown, remained the same, or shrunk?				
		Inequality has Grown	Stayed the Same	Inequality has shrunk	Don't Know/ Not Sure	Total
Do you favor or oppose having the government set the minimum wage high enough so that no family with a full time worker falls below the official poverty line?	Strongly Favor	31 43.06%	1 5%	0 0%	2 15.38%	34
	Favor	15 20.83%	5 25%	3 27.27%	1 7.69%	24
	Neither	16 22.22%	5 25%	6 54.55%	7 53.85%	34
	Oppose	7 9.72%	6 30%	2 18.18%	3 23.08%	18
	Strongly Oppose	3 4.17%	3 15%	0 0%	0 0%	6
	Total	72 100%	20 100%	11 100%	13 100%	116

Hypothesis 2:

In addressing the second research question, “*Will greater perceptions of individual autonomy be negatively associated with support for redistribution,*” it was hypothesized that a

greater sense of autonomy would be negatively associated with support for redistribution. Specifically, a higher agreement on the autonomy scale question “overall, I am able to do the things that are important to me” would correlate negatively with support for redistribution according to the three measures of support: taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality, reducing income differences between rich and poor by raising taxes on the wealthy, and the government setting the minimum wage high enough “so that no family with a full time worker falls below the official poverty line.”

For the first measure, the results did not support the hypothesis, and there was no clear relationship among the response options. In table H2-1 we see that, contrary to the stated direction of the hypothesis, many of those who strongly agreed (40%) and a majority of those who agreed (58%) that “overall, I am able to do the things that are important to me” also favored or strongly favored the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality. In addition, a large majority of those that disagreed with the statement (83%) also favored or strongly favored the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality.

Table H2-1: Autonomy VS Redistribution		Overall, I am able to do the things that are important to me					
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Would you favor or oppose the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality?	Strongly Favor	4 20%	14 22.95%	8 34.78%	7 58.33%	1 50%	34
	Favor	4 20%	21 34.43%	7 30.43%	3 25%	0 0%	35
	Neither	6 30%	14 22.95%	4 17.39%	2 16.67%	0 0%	26
	Oppose	4 20%	8 13.11%	3 13.04%	0 0%	0 0%	15
	Strongly Oppose	2 10%	4 6.56%	1 4.35%	0 0%	1 50%	8
	Total	20 100%	61 100%	23 100%	12 100%	2 100%	118

For the second measure, again the results did not support the hypothesis. Contrary to the stated direction of the hypothesis, the number of respondents that agreed or strongly agreed to the statement “overall, I am able to do the things that are important to me” was almost evenly split between desiring that taxes on the wealthy be raised and that the government shouldn’t be concerned with reducing income differences between the rich and poor. As shown in Table H2-2, among those that strongly agreed, 35% felt that taxes should be raised on the wealthy while 40% felt the government shouldn’t get involved. Similarly among those that simply agreed 39% felt that taxes should be raised on the wealthy as compared to 37% that didn’t think the government should concern itself. As such, there is no significant relationship between the variables.

Table H2-2: Autonomy VS Tax the Rich		Overall, I am able to do the things that are important to me					
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Should the government reduce income differences between the rich and poor by raising taxes on the wealthy, or should the government not concern itself with reducing differences?	Raise Taxes	7 35%	24 39.34%	14 63.64%	8 66.67%	1 50%	54
	Not Concern Itself	8 40%	21 34.43%	6 27.27%	2 16.67%	1 50%	38
	Don't Know/Not Sure	5 25%	16 26.23%	2 9.09%	2 16.67%	0 0%	25
	Total	20 100%	61 100%	22 100%	12 100%	2 18.18%	117

Finally, for the third measure we again fail to find a relationship and no apparent correlation appears in the results. As in the previous two examples the results are contrary to the stated direction of the hypothesis and fail to achieve any significant differences. As shown in Table H2-3, many respondents (40%) that strongly agree with the statement “overall, I am able

to do the things that are important to me” favor or strongly favor a minimum wage set high enough so that families do not fall below the official poverty line. However, about just as many (35%) oppose or strongly oppose a new minimum wage standard.

Table H2-3: Autonomy VS Minimum wage		Overall, I am able to do the things that are important to me					
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Do you favor or oppose having the government set the minimum wage high enough so that no family with a full time worker falls below the official poverty line?	Strongly Favor	3 15%	14 22.58%	8 34.78%	7 58.33%	1 50%	33
	Favor	5 25%	16 25.81%	3 13.04%	2 16.67%	0 0%	26
	Neither	5 25%	21 33.87%	9 39.13%	1 8.33%	0 0%	36
	Oppose	4 20%	9 14.52%	2 8.70%	2 16.67%	1 50%	18
	Strongly Oppose	3 15%	2 3.23%	1 4.35%	0 0%	0 0%	6
	Total	20 100%	62 100%	23 100%	12 100%	2 100%	119

### Hypothesis 3:

Next, in addressing the third research question, “*Will liberal ideology be positively associated with support for redistribution while conservative ideology is negatively associated,*” it was hypothesized that individuals with a liberal political ideology would correlate positively with favoring redistribution according to the three measures explored, while conservatives would correlate negatively with these measures. Specifically, a liberal should be more likely to desire that the government take measures to reduce income/wealth inequality, reduce income differences between rich and poor by raising taxes on the wealthy, and set the minimum wage high enough “so that no family with a full time worker falls below the official poverty line” while a conservative should be more likely not to desire these things.

For the first measure, the hypothesis receives some support. A large majority of more than 90% of liberals either favors or strongly favors that the government take measures to reduce income/wealth inequality, following the expected direction of the correlation for the hypothesis. Meanwhile, though not a majority, many conservatives (45%) oppose or strongly oppose the government taking measures to reduce income inequality. This may be due to a small frequency of conservatives in the sample. Moderates are roughly evenly split, with 33% neither favoring nor opposing the government taking measures, though more favor (41%) rather than oppose (25%) this. These results are shown in Table H3-1.

Table H3-1: Ideology VS Redistribution		Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a...?			
Would you favor or oppose the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality?		Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Total
	Strongly Favor	23 50%	10 19.23%	2 10%	35
	Favor	17 36.96%	12 23.08%	5 25%	34
	Neither	5 10.87%	17 32.69%	4 20%	26
	Oppose	1 2.17%	8 15.38%	6 30%	15
	Strongly Oppose	0 0%	5 9.62%	3 15%	8
	Total	46 100%	52 100%	20 100%	118

For the second measure, the results again support the hypothesis, this time with a correlation that is much more pronounced. About 77% of liberals indicated that the government should raise taxes on the wealthy in order to reduce income differences between the rich and the poor, opposed to only 14% that didn't think the government should concern itself. To contrast,

this correlation is nearly flipped for conservatives, with 70% indicating that the government should not concern itself with reducing income differences between the rich and the poor and 15% thinking that the government should reduce income differences between the rich and more by raising taxes on the wealthy. For moderates, the results are again split, with 32% thinking the government should raise taxes while 36% don't think the government should concern itself. These results are shown in Table H3-2

Table H3-2: Ideology VS Tax the Rich		Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a...?			
		Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Total
Should the government reduce income differences between the rich and poor by raising taxes on the wealthy, or should the government not concern itself with reducing differences?	Raise Taxes	35 79.09%	16 31.37%	3 15%	54
	Not Concern Itself	6 13.04%	18 35.29%	14 70%	38
	Don't Know/Not Sure	5 10.87%	17 33.33%	3 15%	25
	Total	46 100%	51 100%	20 100%	117

Finally, for the third measure the results show a fair amount of support for the hypothesis, but not as strongly as in the previous two examples. A large majority of 74% of liberals favor or strongly favor the government setting the minimum wage high enough so that no family with a full time worker falls below the poverty line. However, just as many conservatives would agree as would disagree with their liberal counterparts in regards with a new minimum wage standard. Although 30% of conservatives, oppose or strongly oppose that the government set the minimum wage high enough, 30% favor or strongly favor this measure. These results are shown in Table H3-3.



Table H3-3: Ideology VS Minimum Wage		Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a...?			
		Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Total
Do you favor or oppose having the government set the minimum wage high enough so that no family with a full time worker falls below the official poverty line?	Strongly Favor	19 41.30%	12 23.08%	2 10%	33
	Favor	15 32.61%	7 13.46%	4 20%	26
	Neither	9 19.57%	19 36.54%	8 40%	36
	Oppose	2 4.35%	10 19.23%	5 25%	17
	Strongly Oppose	1 2.17%	4 7.69%	1 5%	6
	Total	46 100%	52 100%	20 100%	118

#### Hypothesis 4:

Finally, in addressing the fourth research question, “*Will greater perceptions of individual opportunity be negatively associated with support for redistribution*” it was hypothesized that greater perceptions of individual opportunity would be negatively associated with support for redistribution. However, only the first two independent variables will be negatively associated, as the wording in the third question logically reverses the way respondents should answer. Specifically, those claiming that it is still possible to “start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich” should correlate negatively with support for the government “taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality.” Likewise, those agreeing with the statement that “we have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country” should also correlate negatively with support for the government “taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality.” However, those agreeing with the statement that “one of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance” should be positively correlated with support for the government “taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality.”

For the first independent variable, the results somewhat support the hypothesis. As shown in Table H4-1, majorities of those that think it is hardly or not at all possible to work hard and become rich (78% and 75% respectively) favor or strongly favor the government taking measures to reduce income/wealthy inequality. However, contrary to the stated direction of the hypothesis, many of those who think it's very possible (40%) and a majority of those that think it is somewhat possible (60%) to work hard and become rich still favor or strongly favor the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality. This indicates that even those who have faith in the ability of people to work hard and succeed still favor redistribution.

Table H4-1: Work Hard VS Redistribution		Do you think it's still possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich?					
Would you favor or oppose the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality?		Very Possible	Somewhat Possible	Hardly Possible	Not at all Possible	Don't Know/Not Sure	Total
	Strongly Favor	3 10%	13 27.66%	15 45.45%	3 75%	1 20%	35
	Favor	9 30%	15 31.91%	11 33.33%	0 0%	0 0%	35
	Neither	6 20%	12 25.53%	5 15.15%	0 0%	3 60%	26
	Oppose	8 26.67%	4 8.51%	2 6.06%	0 0%	1 20%	15
	Strongly Oppose	4 13.33%	3 6.38%	0 0%	1 25%	0 0%	8
	Total	30 100%	47 100%	33 100%	4 100%	5 100%	119

For the second independent variable, the results support the hypothesis more than they had in the previous example. As shown in Table H4-2, a majority of those who disagree (58%) and large majority of those who strongly disagree (97%) with the statement “we have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country,” favor or strongly favor the government taking

measures to reduce income/wealth inequality. Similarly, a majority of those that agree with this statement are in opposition of the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality.

Table H4-2: Too Far Pushing Equal Rights VS Redistribution		How much do you agree or disagree with the following? "We have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country."					
Would you favor or oppose the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality?		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
	Strongly Favor	20 60.61%	9 25.71%	5 14.29%	1 7.69%	0 0%	35
	Favor	12 36.36%	11 31.43%	7 20%	4 30.77%	1 33.33%	35
	Neither	1 3.03%	10 28.57%	13 37.14%	1 7.69%	1 33.33%	26
	Oppose	0 0%	4 11.43%	8 22.86%	3 23.08%	0 0%	15
	Strongly Oppose	0 0%	1 2.86%	2 5.71%	4 30.77%	1 33.33%	8
	Total	33 100%	35 100%	35 100%	13 100%	3 100%	119

Finally, for the last independent variable, the results support the hypothesis. A majority of those that disagreed (67%) and everyone that strongly disagreed (100%) with the statement, "One of the big problems in this country is that we *don't* give everyone an equal chance" either opposed or strongly opposed the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality. The reverse is true for those who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. 62% of those that agreed and everyone that strongly agreed (100%) with the statement either favored or strongly favored the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality. These results are shown in Table H4-3.

Table H4-3: Unequal Chances VS Redistribution		How much do you agree or disagree with the following? "One of the big problems in this country is that we don't give everyone an equal chance."					
Would you favor or oppose the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality?		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
	Strongly Favor	0 0%	0 0%	3 13.04%	12 27.91%	20 64.52%	35
	Favor	0 0%	3 20%	6 26.09%	14 32.56%	11 35.48%	34
	Neither	0 0%	2 13.33%	10 43.48%	14 32.56%	0 0%	26
	Oppose	5 83.33%	5 33.33%	2 8.70%	3 6.98%	0 0%	15
	Strongly Oppose	1 16.67%	5 33.33%	2 8.70%	0 0%	0 0%	8
	Total	6 100%	15 100%	23 100%	43 100%	31 100%	118

## Discussion

There is an apparent contradiction that puzzles those who study economic inequality in the United States: individuals, while expressing their dislike over the current level of inequality, seem reluctant to come together in order to reverse the trend. Why this is so has been the subject of much speculation and research. As Benjamin Page outlines in his essay for *The Future of Political Science*, there are two broad sets of hypotheses addressing this phenomenon; hypotheses about acquiescence and hypotheses about political inequality. Either the American public reluctantly accepts the current levels of inequality, or there is some failure in translating our contempt for inequality into the kinds of policies designed to address it. Political Inequality is an altogether different kind of problem, requiring both different theoretical explanations and methodological approaches to solve. At the heart of this research was an attempt to understand

what exactly might be at root in the phenomenon of acquiescence. As such, exploring the various explanations offered became a central goal, at least as a means to model the survey employed here. Would BSU students provide results consistent with some of these explanations? Which would be most compelling?

Tackling the problem of acquiescence is important for a few reasons. First, without understanding the role acquiescence might play, it would be difficult to determine whether political inequality actually exists among the electorate. As Benjamin Page noted in *The Future of Political Science*, “To the extent that authentic beliefs and preferences produce acquiescence to inequality, U.S. politics may be more truly democratic than some observers have inferred from our inegalitarian policies” (2009:102). If indeed it was the attitudes and preferences of the average citizen to tolerate inequality, it would be important to understand why, or what historical factors may have contributed to this understanding. Second, if we wanted to address the problem of inequality, constructing an appropriate narrative to address the problem would require knowledge of the particular reasons people were acquiescence to begin with.

Although this survey wasn’t representative of the BSU student population, and would greatly have benefited from more respondents, the fact that some relationships were able to emerge is encouraging and hopefully might act as an indication that they would also emerge provided the survey had been a representative sample. Of all the potential relationships to explore in the realm of acquiescence, the most interesting dealt with perceptions of inequality, individual autonomy, opportunity, and ideology. The first, perceptions of inequality, follows our first research question: “Will more accurate perceptions of inequality be positively associated with support for redistribution?” It could potentially be that Americans overall (and BSU students in particular) were just unaware of the true extent of inequality. This was one suggestion

put forth by Michael Norton and Dan Ariely (2011) after they found that majorities of Americans were far off in their estimates of the amount of wealth owned by each fifth of the population. Perhaps we tend not to notice because for the most part, we are able to live comfortably and seek out opportunities for our own advancement.

Interestingly enough, however, a majority of the BSU students sampled were not only aware that inequality exists, but also would favor the government taking measures to address it. Even still, consistent with the findings of Norton & Ariely, students did drastically overestimate the amount of wealth held by the bottom and the second to last fifth of the wealth distribution. Together these groups barely account for 1% of the total wealth in the U.S. (Norton and Ariely, 2011). BSU students greatly overstated the amount of wealth held by these groups, assigning 10% and 15% of the wealth respectively. Similarly, while recognizing that the majority of the wealth was owned by the top fifth of the wealth distribution (estimated to be over 42%), this estimate significantly fell short of the actual percentage of wealth that they hold, which is above 80% according to Norton and Ariely. As a result, it would seem that even while acknowledging that there was a large gap, BSU students didn't recognize the extent of this gap. This was explored in our first hypothesis, and the data seemed to support this conclusion. In regards to all three options for redistribution; taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality, reducing income differences between rich and poor by raising taxes on the wealthy, and the government setting the minimum wage high enough "so that no family with a full time worker falls below the official poverty line," responses indicating that inequality had grown were positively correlated with support for redistribution.

Our second research question asked: "Will greater perceptions of individual autonomy be negatively associated with support for redistribution?" To this end, Jun Naito (2007) suggested

that a greater sense of individual autonomy was associated with a decrease in support for redistribution, owing to a greater sense of individual agency in life outcomes. This emphasis on one's own actions meant that an individual would be less likely to see redistribution as fair, since one's lot in life would be seen as a product of his or her own actions. Historian Steve Fraser shared this pessimistic view of human behavior, arguing in *The Age of Acquiescence* that Americans had grown too accustomed to capitalism's tendency to produce inequality. After all, even while there was large and growing levels of inequality, the "fable" that anyone could achieve such Olympian heights persisted to be held by the American people, if only they would put in the effort to get there. However, in contrast to the findings of Jun Naito's 2009 study of Japanese citizens, there was no relationship between the measure of autonomy and the three options indicating support for redistribution. It doesn't seem that individual evaluations of their own autonomy and ability to do the things that are important to them bear any relationship to their judgement of whether or not the government should address income/wealth inequality. Perhaps the difference lies in the samples. It might be that Japanese individuals place more emphasis on individual merits. Still it's comforting to know that among the sample respondents, one's likelihood to support redistribution wasn't correlated with their own sense of autonomy.

Individual ideology, on the other hand, maintained the strongest correlations with support for redistribution. This corresponds to our third research question: "Will liberal ideology be positively associated with support for redistribution while conservative ideology is negatively associated?" It's interesting to note, that even among the survey data gathered by Benjamin Page and Lawrence Jacobs, a noticeably partisan divide emerged among those favoring measures to address inequality. Consider, again, the results from the questions "The money and wealth in this country should be more evenly distributed" and that "Differences in income in America are too

large” which received strong majorities of 68% and 72% respectively. Republicans only gave slight majorities of 52% and 56% respectively. Likewise, in our sample, Conservatives overall were less supportive of taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality, reducing income differences between rich and poor by raising taxes on the wealthy, and the government setting the minimum wage high enough “so that no family with a full time worker falls below the official poverty line.” Liberals, on the other hand, were positively correlated with these measures. Although Graham et al’s research points to differing moral intuitions between liberals and conservatives, it’s unclear which of these five “moral foundations” might be responsible for the different views on inequality by conservatives, or if the difference reflects something else about conservatism in America. Liberals might be inclined to desire economic equality because of their inclination towards the Fairness/Reciprocity domain. Still, future research would definitely do well to flesh out this relationship.

Finally, and for the fourth and final research question we asked: “Will greater perceptions of individual opportunity be negatively associated with support for redistribution?” Leslie McCall offered an alternative view to the acquiescence hypothesis presented by Naito and suggested by Fraser. Namely, McCall makes an important contribution to the discussion of how and why Americans might exhibit acquiescence towards inequality by explaining that although some may be resistant to traditional redistribution, it may not mean that they don’t care about inequality. Rather, it’s “not because government redistribution does not affect growth and opportunity, but because it is not associated with creating growth and opportunity” (2013:9). Consistent with Leslie McCall’s (2013) suggestion, our perception of the extent of available opportunity, whether in our belief in the virtues of hard work, or our belief in equal chance, correlates with support for the government taking measures reduce income/wealth inequality.



To conclude, it's important to note this survey's limitations. It was not representative of the BSU student body and would have greatly benefited from more respondents. Still, considering the relationships that were found might offer some clues into which hypotheses are most important in the study of acquiescence. We found that awareness plays a role, as respondents incorrectly stating that inequality had stayed the same or shrunk being correlated with less support for redistribution. We also found that ideology plays a role, with liberals being correlated with support for redistribution and conservatives being less so, though it's unclear whether or which moral inclinations are responsible for this divergence. Finally, one's views of opportunity also play a role, namely that when one feels opportunities aren't granted to all groups equally, they were more correlated with support for redistribution. These correlations provide clues into the nature of acquiescence and hopefully will be a cause for future research on the subject.

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## **Appendix 1:**

### Complete Survey Questionnaire

#### **Informed Consent:**

You are invited to participate in a research study (IRB # 2016038) about the perceptions of Bridgewater State University (BSU) students on autonomy, morality & economic inequality. This project is being conducted by Lucas A. Fagundes under the supervision of Dr. Colby R. King, Department of Sociology, BSU.

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will take a brief survey of approximately 20 minutes in length, and which involves no risk or discomfort to you as the participant. Your responses to all questions will be confidential to the degree permitted by the technology being used, and will be used for the purpose of an undergraduate research thesis. Your participation is completely voluntary; even if you decide to begin the survey, you may change your mind and stop at any time. If you withdraw early from the survey, your data will be eliminated from the database. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any other concerns about this study, please contact Lucas A. Fagundes, lfagundes@student.bridgew.edu or (508) 813-0498. If you wish to speak with someone other than the researchers, please contact the BSU Institutional Review Board, (508) 531-1242.

If you agree to participate, please click on the link below to continue to the survey. You will have the option to refuse to answer individual questions and may change your mind and leave the study at any time without penalty. However, we'd greatly appreciate that you complete the survey, as the research requires complete survey responses to be useful.

#### **Autonomy Component**

1. (Participants are given a picture of a ladder labelled from 1 to 10 on each step).
  - a. Some people feel that they have completely free choice and control over their lives, while other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Imagine a ten step ladder, where on the bottom step (0 on the slider) stand people who are completely without free choice and control over the way their lives turn out, and on the highest step (10 on the slider) stand those with the most free choice and control.
  - b. On which step are you today? (1-10)
  - c. On what step do you think you will be on in 5 years' time? (1-10)
  - d. What about choice and control over [insert domain]? (1-10)
    - i. Your employment

- ii. Your education
  - iii. Your ability to become financially well-off
  - iv. Your ability to influence political outcomes
2. Here are a list of statements that people have used to describe their lives or how they feel. Please tell me on the following scale how often this describes your life or how you feel? (Responses from: Always or nearly always, often, sometimes, rarely, never or almost never)
- a. Family responsibilities prevent me from doing things that are important to me
  - b. My health prevents me from doing things that are important to me
  - c. Shortage of money prevents me from doing things that are important to me
  - d. Being in debt prevents me from doing things that are important to me
  - e. My job prevents me from doing things that are important to me
  - f. Where I live prevents me from doing things that are important to me
  - g. Discrimination towards me prevents me from doing things that are important to me
  - h. Lack of transport prevents me from doing things that are important to me
  - i. Lack of self-confidence prevents me from doing things that are important to me
  - j. My government prevents me from doing things that are important to me
  - k. Too much school work prevents me from doing the things that are important to me
  - l. Overall, I am able to do the things that are important to me

### **Morality Component**

3. When you decide whether something is right or wrong, to what extent are the following considerations relevant to your thinking? (Responses rate from 0-5 or: not at all relevant, not very relevant, slightly relevant, somewhat relevant, very relevant, extremely relevant)
- a. Whether or not someone suffered emotionally
  - b. Whether or not some people were treated differently than others
  - c. Whether or not someone's action showed love for his or her country
  - d. Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority
  - e. Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency
  - f. Whether or not someone was good at math
  - g. Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable
  - h. Whether or not someone acted unfairly
  - i. Whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group
  - j. Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society
  - k. Whether or not someone did something disgusting
  - l. Whether or not someone was cruel

- m. Whether or not someone was denied his or her rights
  - n. Whether or not someone showed a lack of loyalty
  - o. Whether or not an action caused chaos or disorder
  - p. Whether or not someone acted in a way that God would approve of
4. Please read the following sentences and indicate your agreement or disagreement. [Now: Please read the following sentences and indicate whether you agree or disagree.](Responses rate from 0-5 or: strongly disagree, Moderately disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree, moderately agree, strongly agree)
- a. Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.
  - b. When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly.
  - c. I am proud of my country's history.
  - d. Respect for authority is something all children need to learn.
  - e. People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed.
  - f. It is better to do good than to do bad.
  - g. One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal.
  - h. Justice is the most important requirement for a society.
  - i. People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.
  - j. Men and women each have different roles to play in society.
  - k. I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural.
  - l. It can never be right to kill a human being.
  - m. I think it's morally wrong that rich children inherit a lot of money while poor children inherit nothing.
  - n. It is more important to be a team player than to express oneself.
  - o. If I were a soldier and disagreed with my commanding officer's orders, I would obey anyway because that is my duty.
  - p. Chastity is an important and valuable virtue.
5. Please read the following sentences and indicate your agreement or disagreement. (Responses rate from 0-5 or: strongly disagree, Moderately disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree, moderately agree, strongly agree)
- a. People who are successful in business have a right to enjoy their wealth as they see fit
  - b. Hard work doesn't generally bring success; it's more a matter of luck
  - c. The government interferes far too much in our everyday lives
  - d. Ideally, everyone would end up with roughly the same amount of money
  - e. Most people who don't succeed in life are just plain lazy

- f. A fair society would be one in which everyone's needs were met to the same degree.
- g. Society works best when it lets individuals take responsibility for their own lives without telling them what to do.
- h. Employees who work the hardest should be paid the most
- i. Rich people have a moral obligation to help the poor
- j. As a society, we have a special obligation to help the poorest and most vulnerable groups
- k. A distaste for hard work reflects a weakness of character
- l. It seems like criminals and welfare cheats get all the breaks, while the average citizen picks up the tab
- m. It seems like powerful corporations and businesses get all the breaks, while the average citizen picks up the tab
- n. The government should do more to advance the common good, even if that means limiting the freedom and choices of individuals.

### **Perceptions of Inequality/Opportunity**

6. Each bar below represents 1/5th of the United States' population, with the top bar being the richest fifth, and the bottom bar being the poorest fifth. For this exercise, try and estimate what percent of all wealth in the United States you think each fifth of the population actually has. You'll have to click and drag each bar to the percent of total wealth in the United States you think that group has. (A definition of wealth is provided below.)

\*Remember, your answers will have to add up to 100 - For example, if you clicked and dragged the first bar to 80, then you'll only have 20 points left to divide among the rest of the groups.

- a. "Wealth, also known as net worth, is defined as the total value of everything someone owns minus any debt that he or she owes. A person's net worth includes his or her bank account savings plus the value of other things such as property, stocks, bonds, art, collections, etc., minus the value of things like loans and mortgages."
  - b. (Respondent Selects between five sliders)
7. Of the 5 wealth groups, which would you guess you and your family are a part of?
- a. (Respondent selects between 5 quintiles)



8. Again, each bar below represents 1/5th of the United States' population, with the top bar being the richest fifth, and the bottom bar being the poorest fifth. Now, please tell us what percent of all wealth in the United States you think each fifth of the population should have. You'll have to click and drag each bar to the percent of total wealth in the United States you think each group ideally should have. (A definition of wealth is provided.)
- \*Remember, your answers will have to add up to 100 - For example, if clicked and dragged the first bar to 80, then you'll only have 20 points left to divide among the rest of the groups.
  - "Wealth, also known as net worth, is defined as the total value of everything someone owns minus any debt that he or she owes. A person's net worth includes his or her bank account savings plus the value of other things such as property, stocks, bonds, art, collections, etc., minus the value of things like loans and mortgages."
  - (Respondent Selects between five sliders)
9. Overall, would you say that economic inequality has grown, remained the same, or shrunk?
- grown, remained the same, shrunk, don't know
10. How about in your Home Town? Would you say that economic inequality has grown, remained the same, or shrunk?
- grown, remained the same, shrunk, don't know
11. Do you think it's still possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich?
- Very Possible, somewhat possible, hardly at all possible, not at all possible
12. How much do you agree or disagree with the following? Large income differences are unnecessary for America's prosperity.
- (Responses rate from: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree)
13. How much do you agree or disagree with the following? Large differences in pay are necessary as an incentive for people to work.
- (Responses rate from: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree)

14. How much do you agree or disagree with the following? Our society should do whatever is necessary to make sure everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.
- (Responses rate from: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree)
15. How much do you agree or disagree with the following? If people were treated more equally in this country we would have fewer problems.
- (Responses rate from: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree)
16. How much do you agree or disagree with the following? One of the big problems in this country is that we don't give everyone an equal chance.
- (Responses rate from: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree)
17. How much do you agree or disagree with the following? It is not really that big a problem if some people have more of a chance in life than others.
- (Responses rate from: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree)
18. How much do you agree or disagree with the following? We have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country.
- (Responses rate from: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree)
19. How much do you agree or disagree with the following? This country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are.
- (Responses rate from: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree)
20. How much do you agree or disagree with the following: The rich are rich and the poor are poor mainly due to their own personal choices (as opposed to societal factors like the state of the economy and the availability of jobs).
- (Responses rate from: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree)
21. How much do you agree or disagree with the following: Inequality continues to exist to benefit the rich and powerful.

- a. (Responses rate from: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree)
22. How much do you agree or disagree with the following? Income differences (between the richest and the poorest) are too large.
- a. (Responses rate from: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree)
23. In order to get ahead in life, how important are the following? (from: Essential, Very Important, Fairly Important, Not very Important, Not at all important)
- a. Hard Work
  - b. Having a Good education yourself
  - c. Ambition
  - d. Natural ability
  - e. Knowing the right people
  - f. Having well-educated parents
  - g. Coming from a wealthy family
  - h. A person's race

### **Rate of Support for Redistribution**

24. Would you favor or oppose the government taking measures to reduce income/wealth inequality?
- a. (Responses rate from: strongly favor, favor, neither favor nor oppose, oppose, strongly oppose)
25. For the following options, please tell us if you think the U.S. is spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount of money.
- a. Assistance to the poor
  - b. Welfare
  - c. Education
  - d. Healthcare
  - e. Job-training/re-training programs
  - f. Law Enforcement
  - g. The Environmental Protection Agency
26. As a taxpayer, please tell us whether you favor or oppose your tax dollars being used for each of the following (Responses rate from: strongly favor, favor, neither favor nor oppose, oppose, strongly oppose)
- a. Food stamps
  - b. Defense/military spending

- c. Retraining programs for people whose jobs have been eliminated
  - d. Early childhood education (Kindergarten/Nursery school)
  - e. Economic aid to other nations
  - f. Welfare benefits to children of single teenage mothers
  - g. Public broadcasting and the arts
  - h. Providing healthcare for everyone
  - i. Providing college tuition for everyone
27. Should the government reduce income differences between rich and poor by raising taxes on the wealthy or should the government not concern itself with reducing differences?
- a. Raise Taxes, Not concern itself, don't know/ not sure
28. Do you think that people with high incomes should pay a larger share of their incomes in taxes than those with low incomes, the same share, or a smaller share?
- a. They should pay a much larger share, a larger share, the same share, a smaller share, don't know/ not sure
29. Do you favor or oppose having the government set the minimum wage high enough so that no family with a full time worker falls below the official poverty line?
- a. (Responses rate from: strongly favor, favor, neither favor nor oppose, oppose, strongly oppose)

### **Demographics**

30. What is your sex?
- a. Male, Female
31. What is your race?
- a. White, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, Asian, Middle Eastern, Other/Multiple: [Respondent Writes in]
32. In what YEAR were you born? (Please enter your 4-digit year of birth)
33. Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a...?
- a. Liberal, Moderate, Conservative
34. Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a...?
- a. Strong Democrat, Democrat, Independent, Republican, Strong Republican

35. What year are you in school?
- a. Freshmen, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Graduate
36. What is your academic Major(s)
- a. (Respondent write in)