

Visualizing Belief in Meritocracy, 1930–2010

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Abstract

In this figure I describe the long trend in popular belief in meritocracy across the Western world between 1930 and 2010. Studying trends in attitudes is limited by the paucity of survey data that can be compared across countries and over time. Here, I show how to complement survey waves with cohort-level data. Repeated surveys draw on a representative sample of the population to describe the typical beliefs held by citizens in a given country and period. Leveraging the fact that citizens surveyed in a given year were born in different time-periods allows for a comparison of beliefs across birth cohorts. The latter overlaps with the former, but considerably extends the time period covered by the data. Taken together, the two measures give a “triangulated” longitudinal record of popular belief in meritocracy. I find that in most countries, popular belief in meritocracy is (much) stronger for more recent periods and cohorts.

Keywords

meritocracy, inequality, cohort, trend, visualization

One of the puzzling things about the recent rise in income inequality across the West is the fact that people are not more concerned about the growing divide between the rich and poor. Despite the reality of increasing inequalities, there is no indication of growing popular unrest about inequality, nor do citizens in unequal societies express more concern than those in more egalitarian societies (Kenworthy and McCall 2008; Lübker 2007). A possible answer is that citizens believe that wealth and poverty reflect the fair outcomes of a meritocratic process: that those at the top have merited their success (Mijs 2018). A starting point for evaluating this and other explanations is to know whether people have grown increasingly convinced that theirs is a meritocratic society. Research describes the trend in beliefs about inequality within the United States (McCall 2013) and compares popular beliefs across societies (Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso 2018) but is limited by the paucity of available survey data that can be systematically compared across countries and over time.

To overcome this limitation, I propose an alternative strategy for studying the long trend in popular beliefs about inequality. Representative surveys such as the General Social Survey and the International Social Survey Programme draw on a sample of the population to describe the typical beliefs held by citizens in a given country and period. Leveraging the

fact that respondents surveyed in a given year are born in different time periods allows for a comparison of beliefs across birth cohorts. To do so, I use International Social Survey Programme data on 23 countries in the West, surveyed in 1987–1988, 1992–1993, and 2008–2012. For each survey wave I first plot the approximate percentage of citizens who believe that who gets ahead in society is decided by hard work, a common measure of belief in meritocracy that can be readily compared across countries and time (Alesina et al. 2018; McCall 2013; Mijs 2018). In a second step, I group respondents into 5-year cohorts on the basis of the year in which they reached adulthood (age 18). I plot the average belief in meritocracy for each cohort year, and I estimate locally weighted least squares regressions to describe the trend across cohorts (see Supplementary Material for details).

The “triangulated” longitudinal record suggests that belief in meritocracy today is as strong as it ever was (Figure 1). Beliefs do not vary much across cohorts in 5 of 23 countries

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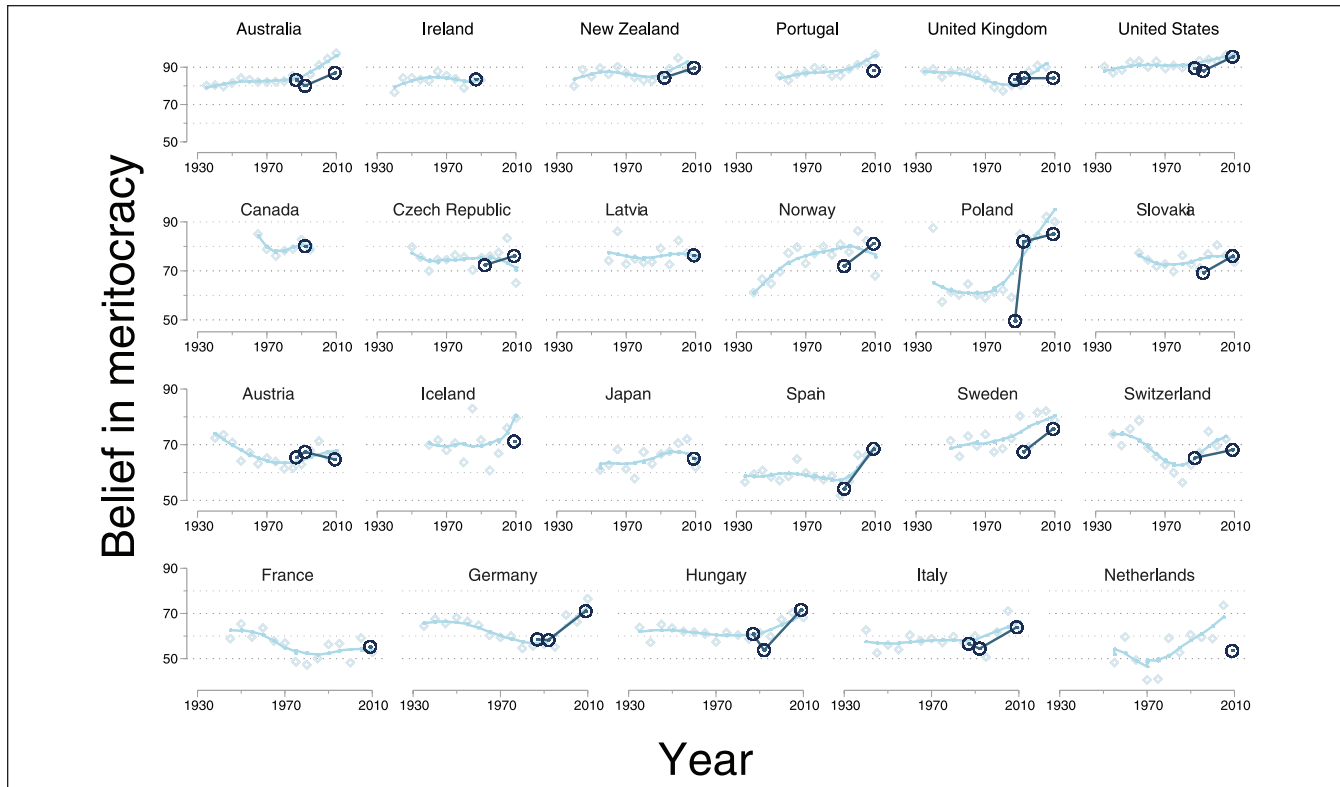


Figure 1. Trend in popular belief in meritocracy across Western societies, 1930–2010.

Note: Indicated on the vertical axis is the approximate percentage of citizens, for each country, period and cohort, who believes that who gets ahead in society is decided by hard work. The navy blue (black) circles indicate popular beliefs as reported in the survey wave corresponding to the year indicated on the horizontal axis. The light blue (grey) lines display popular beliefs for each 5-year cohort as indicated on the horizontal axis, based on locally weighted least-square regressions on cohort-country means (grey diamonds).

Source: International Social Survey Programme 2014.

(Czech Republic, Ireland, Japan, Latvia, and Slovakia). For societies in which beliefs do vary substantially across cohorts, I find three countries (Austria, Canada, and France) where belief in meritocracy is a little weaker for more recent cohorts. In the overwhelming majority of countries (Australia, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland,¹ Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States), the rise of income inequality has been accompanied by a marked strengthening of popular belief in meritocracy.

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Author Biography

Jonathan J. B. Mijs is assistant professorial research fellow at the International Inequalities Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He studies how people explain setbacks and successes in their own lives and those of others and how they come to understand inequality more broadly. His recent work includes a theoretical discussion of how people infer the causes of poverty and wealth, an analysis of the structural roots of talent, and empirical investigations of the determinants of people's changing beliefs about inequality.

¹For graphical reasons, the survey mean value for Poland in 1987–1988 has been capped at 50. The actual value is 38.