University of North Carolina Asheville
Journal of Undergraduate Research
Asheville, NC
Fall 2025

Sociopolitical and Individual Influences on Public Opinion on Meritocracy and Economic Mobility: An Analysis of U.S. Survey Items

Reese G. Huffman

Department of Political Science
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Ashley Moraguez

Abstract

Politics in the United States has become increasingly polarized. Few areas of the political arena better reflect this than discourse on the social welfare state. Are the challenges faced by the working class primarily the result of personal shortcomings or broader systemic inequalities? Are working-class individuals maximizing their bootstraps' famed potential, or does the dominant narrative around bootstraps serve to mask systemic issues? Is the working class working hard, or hardly working? How much support, if any, should they receive? From kitchen tables to classrooms to Congress, divergent viewpoints reveal a profound and widening fissure over welfare retrenchment and, more fundamentally, about the causes of poverty and economic inequality. What explains variation in individual perception of these issues? I theorize that gender affects perception of economic issues, with women being more likely than men to see them as systemic. I further hypothesize that education can attenuate these gender differences. I test my claims using responses from 15,728 participants in the 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS). Responses did not indicate meaningful relationships between gender or education and perceptions of meritocracy or social mobility. Results found that women are slightly more likely than men to view economic outcomes as the result of meritocratic effort, although education increases women's recognition of systemic factors. Political ideology is the

strongest predictor of perceptions overall. Additional investigations of subsets of the sample may uncover evidence of positive relationships that were not explored in my research.

Introduction

A 2019 national survey by the Cato Institute on poverty, wealth, and work found that 50% of Americans polled believed that hard work/grit was the most important factor in determining wealth and success (Ekins 2019). Forty-two percent of people polled attributed poverty to poor life choices, while 29% of respondents accredited poverty to laziness (Ekins 2019). Four years later, in 2023, the United States population stood at 334.9 million people, 36.8 million of whom were living in poverty (United States Census Bureau 2025, Shrider 2024). That year, Social Security lifted nearly 28 million people out of poverty and was the most effective anti-poverty program in the country (United States Committee on the Budget 2024). Now, in 2025, that program is the subject of a national debate, and Americans are staging national protests to decry the firing of thousands of Social Security Administration employees and purported threats to the program's budget. In a way, this represents the ongoing push-and-pull nature that has characterized the approach to the nation's social welfare state. On one side, many work to strengthen the social safety net. On the other side, some actors work to undermine it.

These different approaches reflect a political landscape marked by contrasting perceptions and increasing polarization. While Americans tend to support some forms of government assistance for impoverished people (Howard et al. 2017), they often diverge sharply in their understanding about who is affected by poverty and the causes of economic disparities (Gilens 1999). Some perceive poverty as an individual failing and attribute it to factors such as laziness or poor decision-making (Gilens 1999; Will 1993). In contrast, others view poverty as a systemic issue deeply rooted in historical and structural inequalities that shape economic outcomes (Brown et al. 2016; Chong and Dukhong 2006). It is predictable that these warring views give rise to polarized policy debates. As the United States contends with these debates, and presumably seeks solutions, it becomes increasingly important to understand how individual perception of these issues is shaped. That is the focus of this project.

I argue that gender affects the perception of poverty and economic issues at the individual level, but that this impact can be mitigated by increasing levels of education. In theory, women are more attuned to systemic biases and their inequitable consequences, due to their lived experiences. However, collegiate environments offer opportunities to learn about systemic inequalities, thus attenuating any gaps in the perception of inequalities that exist between men and women. I test these claims using data from the 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey. Interestingly, I do not find support for either of my expectations.

In many ways, my research raises more questions than it answers. Yet, it reveals unexpected insights and pushes the academic debate forward, which has real-world

implications. Data shows positive correlations between high levels of inequality and poorer health outcomes, reduced social mobility, and social unrest (Pickett and Wilkinson 2015). Further, poverty and economic inequality erode social cohesion and should be an affront to principles of fairness, equity, human rights, and human dignity. It is critical that scholars do more work in the area of understanding how individual opinions on these issues are shaped.

In what follows, I review the literature on poverty, perceptions of poverty and economic inequality, and the factors that both reinforce and erode support for the welfare state. Building from this, I then introduce my own theoretical argument. I follow with an explanation of my empirical strategy for testing my claims. I include a discussion of the results and conclude with a note on limitations and recommendations for further research.

Literature Review

There is substantial research on individual attitudes on poverty and economic issues. The literature has found that structural issues and societal factors influence these opinions. Previous research has found that negative stereotypes matter, and the media landscape is particularly influential (Williamson 1974; Gilens 1999). In particular, past and contemporary scholarship argue that negative stereotypes of welfare recipients are perpetuated by the media and lend to broad disdain, not only for economically disadvantaged people, but for any welfare policies that might help support them (Williamson 1974; Gilens 1999). For example, Williamson (1974) found that beliefs about the work ethic and motivations of people living in poverty were influenced by media, and those who subscribed to beliefs that individuals experiencing poverty were lazy or unmotivated showed less support for welfare initiatives.

However, individual features also shape opinions, not just societal forces (Brown et al. 2016; Will 1993). For example, previous research found that religion and religious practices influence perspectives on poverty (Thomson & Froese 2018). Wilson (2008) connected religion to attitudes on poverty, welfare, and wealth distribution. Brown et al. (2016) specifically found that religious beliefs among white evangelical Protestants often lead to increased negative views about low-wealth individuals, poverty, and welfare programs.

Substantial literature has found that race also matters in perceptions of poverty and economic issues. For example, Will (1993) investigated how individuals distinguish between the “deserving poor” and the “undeserving poor.” His research found that the race of people living in poverty, along with their *perceived* work ethic, played a significant role in those distinctions (Will 1993). More recently, scholars increasingly argue that perceptions of poverty cannot simply be ascribed to either societal factors or individual features in isolation (Brown et al. 2016). Indeed, Brown et al. (2016) acknowledge that religion and race provide different filters through which to view poverty and economic issues, but argue that religious and racial affiliation *combine* to impact perspectives on poverty and welfare (Brown et al. 2016). Building from this literature, I contend that both

societal factors and individual features influence attitudes on poverty and economic issues; in particular, I contend that structural and societal factors play out differently for individuals of different genders and educational levels.

Theory

First, I argue that the gender of individuals influences their perceptions of poverty and economic inequality. This influence is fueled by differences in experiences with systemic inequalities. Women face—and have historically faced—various forms of systemic discrimination, including wage gaps, underrepresentation in leadership roles, and barriers to career advancement (Blau and Kahn 2017). Today, the gender wage gap persists, with women earning approximately eighty-three cents for every dollar earned by men (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2025). Further, research indicates that women are also more likely to experience economic instability due to systemic barriers that men do not face, such as caregiving responsibilities that disproportionately fall on women (Lee and Tang 2016). Differences in experiences of economic equity and stability influence gendered perspectives on poverty in profound ways. Because systemic discrimination and barriers lead to distinct experiences of economic hardship (Blau and Kahn 2017), I argue that women tend to view poverty as a structural issue, rather than an individual failing. Because men don't experience these barriers to the same extent, it is harder for them to see the systemic nature.

Relatedly, women often encounter barriers to educational opportunities, particularly in high-paying fields (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2025). As a result, women tend to be overrepresented in social sciences and helping professions; these professions are often undervalued in the labor market (England 2010), which reinforces the gender wage gap, the gender income gap, and economic hardship for women relative to men.

Gendered socialization also significantly influences how men and women perceive poverty and economic hardship (Gilligan 1982). Women are often socialized to be empathetic, care-giving, and community-oriented (Gilligan 1982). Research further suggests that gendered socialization influences moral development and leads women to prioritize care and community welfare; therefore, they are more likely to view economic hardship and poverty as a collective issue (Gilligan 1982). Conversely, men are socialized to be self-reliant and competitive, fostering a belief that economic success is an individual achievement (Kimmel 2008). I theorize that this divergence in socialization processes reinforces gender differences in perceptions of poverty: women are more likely to advocate for systemic change, while men are more likely to place the burden of upward mobility on the individual.

In sum, systemic inequities and socialization compound to influence individual-level opinions. Different experiences based on gender yield vastly different perspectives. Lived experiences dissuade women from ascribing economic hardship to individual failure. Likewise, a system that praises, awards, and centers men for individual effort offers little reason for them to consider factors beyond one's persona. As such, I hypothesize that:

H1: Women are more likely to perceive poverty and economic hardship as structural issues influenced by systemic barriers than are men.

However, I argue that these gender differences can be reduced with higher levels of education. Critical thinking skills are essential for analyzing complex social issues, including poverty and economic inequality (Facione 2011). Higher education, in particular, fosters critical thinking by encouraging students to engage with diverse perspectives and analyze issues from multiple angles (Brookfield 2006). Higher education also requires students to interrogate personal biases and pursue a more nuanced analysis of societal issues (Brookfield 2006). These endeavors can promote awareness and empathy, as well as refine existing interpretations of the causes of structural inequality.

In addition, higher education increases awareness of structural issues related to poverty in particular. Academic courses often delve into systemic issues and tend to examine the impact of policies and institutions on marginalized populations (Brookfield 2006). Increased awareness in conjunction with critical thinking fosters a deeper understanding of injustice and inequality (Brookfield 2006). Through historical analysis, students learn *how* and *why* systemic inequities manifest and persist in contemporary society (Brookfield 2006). This understanding contributes to better-informed perspectives on poverty and economic inequality.

Community engagement, service learning, and internships are also valuable aspects of higher education. They offer real-world experiences that broaden students' understanding of social issues (Eyler and Giles 1999). Exposure to different communities, cultures, and status groups can profoundly influence views on inequality, and these experiences often do just that (Zlotkowski 2005). Particularly, hearing diverse, first-person accounts of others' lived experiences can encourage students to weigh systemic explanations for inequities as opposed to individual causes.

Taken together, higher education cultivates critical thinking skills, increases awareness of structural issues, and offers exposure to diverse perspectives to all students, regardless of their gender. Thus, I hold that among the educated populace, the gender gap in views on poverty and economic inequality collapses, and there will be more consensus around the structural nature of these issues. Given that, I hypothesize that:

H2: Gender differences in views on poverty and hardship will decrease with higher levels of education.

Research Design

I take a quantitative approach to testing my hypotheses. I rely on data from the 2020 Collaborative Multi-Racial Post-Election Survey (CMPS). The CMPS is a national survey administered after each presidential election cycle which asks respondents a variety of questions about their demographics, their experiences, their stances on issues, and their politics. Importantly, the CMPS asks individuals about the metrics of interest for this study,

so the unit of analysis is the individual respondent. Additional benefits of data found in the CMPS include its large sample size, totaling 17,545 respondents, though my analysis focuses on 15,738 due to data availability on the questions of interest.

Moreover, to ensure sufficient representation, the CMPS oversamples racial, ethnic, and other underrepresented groups in the United States. This design feature is critical, given the focus of the study and evidence from prior research that indicates these groups systemically experience and perceive economic issues differently from the general population (Anoll, Davenport, and Lienesch 2024; Chong and Dukhong 2006).

The dependent variable is an individual's views on poverty and economic inequality, particularly whether or not the issue is individualistic or structural. I measure this using two survey questions from the CMPS. Respondents were asked to share the extent to which they agreed with the following two statements: 1) "Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard," and 2) "It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become well-off." I assume respondents who agree with these statements tend to see economic progress and setbacks as more meritocratic (individualistic) in nature, and those who disagree see them as more systemic.

Relative to the hard work variable and the first statement, "Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard," the answer options are: strongly agree, coded as 1; somewhat agree, coded as 2; neither agree nor disagree, coded as 3; somewhat disagree, coded as 4, and strongly disagree, coded as 5. The frequencies of each response in the sample are shown in Table 1.

For the progress variable and the second statement, "It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become well-off," the answer options are: strongly agree, coded as 1; somewhat agree, coded as 2; neither agree nor disagree, coded as 3; somewhat disagree, coded as 4, and strongly disagree, coded as 5. The frequencies for each are shown in Table 2.

For my first hypothesis, the independent variable of interest is the gender of the respondent. Gender is coded as 1 for women and 0 for men. I expect women to be more likely to disagree with the statements for both dependent variables. Included in the sample are 8,867 women and 6,861 men. I excluded 178 respondents who were non-binary or answered "other" for gender because those responses are outside the scope of the theoretical argument. Further, given the small number, it would be challenging to generalize about them.

For my second hypothesis, the main independent variable is the interaction of gender and education. The CMPS asks respondents the highest level of education completed. I recoded that variable so that those with a bachelor's degree or higher are coded as 1s; anyone with less than a bachelor's degree is coded as 0. A total of 7,141 respondents reported completion of a bachelor's degree or higher. A total of 8,587 respondents reported completion of less than a bachelor's degree. I expect that college-educated individuals will

perceive outcomes as tied to systemic barriers, not just hard work and personal effort. Further, I expect that education will have a bigger effect for men.

Table 1: Summary of Responses (Hard Work): "Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard."

Answer Option	*Number of Respondents*
Strongly Agree (coded as 1)	5,055
Somewhat Agree (coded as 2)	5,394
Neither Agree nor Disagree (coded as 3)	3,018
Somewhat Disagree (coded as 4)	1,601
Strongly Disagree (coded as 5)	660
Total	15,728

Table 1 shows respondents' answers to CMPS statement about hard work.

I control for other variables that may confound results of interest. Notably, previous research has documented that different demographics and status groups have varying experiences that impact perspectives on economic issues (Brown et al. 2016; Chong and Dukhong 2006; Gilens 1999), and controls were selected to reflect this. First, I control for race. This control is especially important in the context of my results of interest, since race can affect how individuals perceive systemic inequality due to historical and social contexts (Anoll, Davenport, and Lienesch 2024; Chong and Dukhong 2006; Gilens 1999). The CMPS specifically asks respondents, "What do you consider your race or ethnicity?" The responses have been coded as 0 for white respondents and 1 for non-white respondents.

In the sample, 4,965 respondents identified as white, and 10,763 reported a racial identity or ethnicity as non-white. Because non-white individuals are subject to systemic racial discrimination, I expect that non-white respondents are more likely to disagree with the statement that you can get ahead if you work hard. In addition, I expect non-white respondents are more likely to disagree that it is possible to start out poor, work hard, and become well-off.

Table 2: Summary of Responses (Progress): "It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become well-off."

Answer Option	*Number of Respondents*
Strongly Agree (coded as 1)	5,951
Somewhat Agree (coded as 2)	5,724
Neither Agree nor Disagree (coded as 3)	2,532
Somewhat Disagree (coded as 4)	1.047
Strongly Disagree (coded as 5)	474
Total	15,728

Table 2 shows respondents' answers to CMPS statement about progress.

Second, I control for whether a respondent was born in the United States, as citizenship and immigration status may plausibly influence individual perception of America as a land of equal opportunity for everyone who is willing to work hard (Brady et al. 2025). The CMPS asks respondents if they were born in the United States or another country. The responses have been coded as 1 for U.S.-born and 0 for non-U.S. born. 12,284 respondents reported being U.S.-born, while 3,444 respondents reported being non-U.S. born. Because immigrants and migrants are more likely to subscribe to the idea of the "American dream," I expect that they are more likely to agree that you can work hard and get ahead. I further expect that immigrants are more likely to agree that you can start out poor in the United States, work hard, and become well-off.

Third, I control for political party. Political parties largely diverge in stances on individual independence vs. community care and the government's responsibility to address poverty and inequality (Gilens 1999; Thomson and Froese 2018). The CMPS asks respondents to report political party affiliation. These responses have been coded as 1 for Republican and 0 for any other political party. In the sample, 2,970 respondents reported affiliation with the Republican party, while 12,758 respondents reported affiliation with a different political party or no political affiliation. I expect Republican respondents are more likely to agree that you can work hard and get ahead, and you can start out poor, work hard, and become well-off.

Fourth, I control for whether an individual is a rural or urban resident. This variable accounts for geographic differences in local contexts and economic conditions. Research shows that poverty rates and structural conditions differ across urban and rural areas, in part due to differences in access to resources, services, and job opportunities (USDA-ERS 2024; Weber and Jensen 2004; RPRC Working Paper 04-03). I expect that these place-based differentials may influence individuals' subjective perceptions of poverty, meritocracy, and economic mobility. The CMPS asks respondents if they consider the communities they live to be urban or rural, and these responses have been coded as 0 and 1, respectively. In the sample, 9,640 respondents reported living in an urban area or large suburb of a large city, while 6,088 respondents reported living in a rural area or small town or city. I expect rural respondents are more likely to agree that you can work hard and get ahead. In addition, I expect rural respondents are more likely to agree that it is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become well-off.

Fifth, I control for religion. Previous research demonstrates that religious affiliation and beliefs can shape individual perception of poverty, meritocracy, and economic inequality (Brown et al. 2016; Thomson and Froese 2018; Wilson 2008). Studies indicate that many individuals see inequality as a moral and ethical societal failure, and therefore as systemic (Ekins 2019; Gilens 1999). However, some religious traditions view impoverishment as a morally or spiritually significant state and also emphasize that individuals may transcend poverty through divine favor and personal effort (Thomson and Froese 2018; Wilson 2008). The CMPS asks respondents to report religious affiliation. The "Protestant work ethic" traditionally emphasizes labor as a central factor in individual achievement and success, which may shape individual perception of economic outcomes (Brown et al. 2016; Weber 2002 [1905]). For this reason, I coded this as 1 for Protestant and 0 for all other religious denominations. In the sample, 3,891 respondents reported being Protestant, while 11,837 respondents reported a different religious afflation or no religious affiliation. I expect that Protestant respondents are more likely to agree, rather than more likely to disagree, that you can work hard and get ahead. I further expect that Protestant respondents are more likely to agree, rather than more likely to disagree, that it is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become well-off.

Finally, I control for household income. Household income is a primary determinant of whether and how individuals experience material poverty, economic inequality, and financial security (Shrider 2024; USDA-ERS 2024). Individuals with higher incomes are expected to hold different attitudes compared to those struggling near or below the poverty line (Ekins 2019; Gilens 1999). The CMPS asks, "What was your total household income in 2020 before taxes?" I recoded this as either 0 or 1 to reflect annual household income below $70,000 or annual household income at or above $70,000, respectively. I chose $70,000 as the threshold because the median annual household income in 2020 was just below this amount (U.S. Census Bureau 2021). In the sample, 9,026 respondents reported a yearly income below $70,000, while 6,702 respondents reported a yearly income above $70,000. I expect that respondents with annual household income greater than $70,000 are more likely to agree with both statements. That is, I expect them to agree that not only can hard work move people ahead, but it can propel them from poverty to economic security.

Results

To evaluate my hypotheses, I estimate a series of linear regressions. In the first, the dependent variable is individual responses to the question of whether people can get ahead if they are willing to work hard. Responses are coded on a 5-point scale, in which lower scores indicate strong agreement with the statement, and higher scores indicate strong disagreement. The results are in Table 3.

I was expecting women to be more likely to disagree with the statement, but the results indicate that they are more likely to agree that you can work hard and get ahead. Specifically, women respondents are associated with a decrease of 0.01 on the 5-point scale, all else equal. This means that they are slightly more likely to agree with this statement than men are, which does not support Hypothesis 1. However, 0.010 on a 5-point scale is a very small effect in practice and not a meaningful difference. This suggests that there may not be a real difference between men and women in perception relative to this statement. The effect is also not statistically significant.

My analysis also indicates that a respondent with a college degree is associated with an increase of 0.002 on the 5-point scale. This means that respondents with college degrees are more likely to disagree with the statement. This is consistent with what I expected. However, the effect is not statistically significant and is quite small.

The coefficient on interaction term essentially represents the effect of how much more or less likely an educated woman is to respond a certain way to the question. College-educated women respondents are associated with a 0.174 increase on a 5-point scale, meaning that they are more likely than others to disagree with the hard work statement, in particular. This means that the gender gap actually grows, rather than shrinks, with education, contrary to what I hypothesized. I found very little difference in opinion by gender or education independently, but the biggest effect is for educated women; education seems to matter more for women than men in terms of their opinions on this issue. While the effect isn't necessarily substantially large, it can be meaningful, and it is statistically significant. I expected that college-educated men and college-educated women would be more similar and for education to have a larger impact on the views of men. As such, I do not find support for Hypothesis 2.

The coefficient on race is -0.015. This means that when there is a non-white respondent, there is an associated decrease in the response by 0.015 on the 5-point scale. This datum indicates that non-white respondents are slightly more likely to agree with the statement. While this is a small effect, it is not consistent with my expectations. However, the effect is also not statistically significant. This outcome could reflect a limitation of dichotomous coding for this variable, which collapses all non-white respondents into a single racial category. I strongly suspect that a blunt binary coding schema masks meaningful differences in economic stances across different ethnoracial groups.

The coefficient on whether a respondent is born in the U.S. is 0.240 on the 5-point scale. It reflects a modest effect for this variable and means that U.S.-born respondents are more likely than immigrants to disagree with the statement that people can make it if they are

willing to work hard. This is consistent with my prediction, and the effect is statistically significant. A respondent who identifies as a Republican is associated with a decrease of 0.562 on the 5-point scale. This means that they are more likely to agree with the statement. This is over 0.5 point on the 5-point scale, reflecting a notable and statistically significant effect. This is consistent with my expectations.

Table 3: Hard Work Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Intercept	2.160	0.033	<0.05
Woman	- 0.010	0.024	0.66
Education	0.002	0.028	0.93
Woman*Education	0.174	0.035	<0.05
Non-white	-0.015	0.020	0.45
Born in U.S.	0.240	0.022	<0.05
Republican	-0.562	0.023	<0.05
Rural	-0.003	0.018	0.86
Protestant	-0.113	0.020	<0.05
Income (≥ $70K)	-0.094	0.019	<0.05

The results do not provide support for Hypothesis 1. Gender, race, party, rural, religion, and income all had negative effects. The interaction variable between woman and education had a positive effect. The largest effects are reflected by the political party affiliation (Republican) and born in U.S. variables.

Rural respondents are associated with a 0.003 decrease on the 5-point scale. This means that rural respondents are more likely to agree that people can get ahead by working hard. This is a very small effect and not statistically significant, but it is in the expected direction. The coefficient on Protestant shows that a respondent who identifies as a Protestant is associated with a 0.113 decrease on the 5-point scale. Relative to non-Protestants, this means that Protestant respondents are more likely to believe that people can get ahead via hard work. This is not a large effect, but it is in the expected direction and is statistically significant. Finally, respondents who made $70,000 annually or more are

associated with a 0.094 decrease on the 5-point scale. This means that they are slightly more likely to agree with the statement than disagree. While this is consistent with my expectations, it is not a very large effect, though it is statistically significant.

In the second linear regression, the dependent variable is individual responses to the question of whether it is possible for people to start out poor in the United States and become well-off (progress) by working hard. Responses are coded on a 5-point scale, and again lower scores indicate strong agreement with the statement, while higher scores indicate strong disagreement. The results are in Table 4.

The findings do not support Hypothesis 2. Independently, the woman and education variables had negative effects. The interaction variable between woman and education had a positive effect. Republican, Protestant, and income had negative effects. The rural value had a negligible positive effect. The largest effects are reflected by Republican, Protestant, income, and born in U.S. variables.

The coefficient on gender indicates that women respondents are associated with a 0.007 decrease on the 5-point scale. This means that women respondents are more likely to agree with the statement than are men, though only by a small margin. This is contrary to Hypothesis 1 and is not statistically significant.

The effect on education indicates that, all else equal, people with a college degree are more likely to agree with this statement by 0.092 on the 5-point scale. This is not what I expected. This effect is quite small, but it is now statistically significant. It is also notable that this was a sign change compared to the first regression.

The interaction of gender and education has a positive effect in the second regression as in the previous. The coefficient on interaction term represents that college-educated women are (slightly) more likely to disagree with this statement relative to college-educated men. Specifically, college-educated women are associated with a 0.095 increase on the 5-point scale. Overall, however, the analysis suggests that there is not a substantial difference on the effect of education between men and women, which does not support my expectations as stated in Hypothesis 2. However, the estimated effect is statistically significant.

The first control variable is non-white. In the second regression, the sign has flipped relative to the first regression. Non-white respondents are now 0.075 more likely on a 5-point scale to disagree with the statement. This is consistent with what I expected because of the systemic barriers that non-white people face. Although the effect is small, it is now statistically significant, whereas it was not in the previous model.

The coefficient on whether a respondent is born in the US has a slight decrease in magnitude relative to the first model, but still has a positive effect. Respondents born in the US are 0.122 on the 5-point scale more likely to disagree with the statement than immigrants. This is in-line with expectations and remains statistically significant in the second model. Republican respondents have a negative effect and are associated with a

0.356 decrease on the 5-point scale, relative to non-Republicans. This means that they are more likely to agree with the statement. This is consistent with expectations. This effect has decreased in size relative to the first model, but remains statistically significant and is the variable with the greatest effect.

The coefficient for rural is 0.013 on the 5-point scale. It reflects a negligible positive effect for this variable and means that rural respondents are less likely to agree with this statement. The coefficient has a sign flip relative to the first regression, but the effect is still small and is not statistically significant in either model. Respondents who identify as Protestant are associated with a negative effect and are associated with a 0.198 decrease on the 5-point scale. This is consistent with expectations. The effect is statistically significant. This reflects the second biggest effect of all control variables tested. Respondents who report annual income equal to or above $70,000 have a negative effect

Table 4: Progress Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Intercept	2.065	0.031	<0.05
Woman	- 0.007	0.022	0.77
Education	-0.092	0.026	<0.05
Woman*Education	0.095	0.033	<0.05
Non-white	0.075	0.018	<0.05
Born in U.S.	0.122	0.020	<0.05
Republican	-0.356	0.021	<0.05
Rural	0.013	0.017	0.44
Protestant	-0.198	0.019	<0.05
Income (≥ $70K)	-0.170	0.018	<0.05

The findings do not support Hypothesis 2. Independently, the woman and education variables had negative effects. The interaction variable between woman and education had a positive effect. Republican, Protestant, and income had negative effects. The rural value had a negligible positive effect. The largest effects are reflected by Republican, Protestant, income, and born in U.S. variables.

and are associated with a 0.170 decrease on the 5-point scale. This is in the expected direction. This is a slight increase in effect relative to the first regression and is statistically significant. This reflects the third biggest effect of all control variables tested.

Conclusion

I argued that both societal factors and individual features affect attitudes on poverty and economic inequality. In particular, I claimed that women would be more likely than men to attribute poverty and economic hardship to structural issues, but reasoned that higher levels of education would attenuate this difference.

I expected women to be more likely than men to disagree that you can improve your economic condition through hard work. Instead, I found that women are slightly more likely to agree that you can work hard and advance. However, the effects were quite small. This suggests that there may be no meaningful difference between men and women in perception relative to the positive effect of hard work on economic condition. Consistent with expectations, college education seems to be associated with higher levels of disagreement, but again, the effects are small. Additionally, once the interaction of gender and education is considered, it appears that the gender gap increases with education and that education has a bigger role in changing the perceptions of *women*, in particular; my hypothesis anticipated a bigger effect among *men.* Further, while education seems to sharpen women's awareness of the systemic nature of their experiences, the data implicates that education has a much smaller effect in shaping men's views. This is not consistent with my expectations. As such, I did not find support for either of my hypotheses.

Although contrary to expectations, the results imply gendered dynamics that suggest new directions for empirical research and theory-building in public opinion, as well as new avenues for theorizing social behavior. One implication is that the theoretical framework may not fully account for gendered pathways. A second implication is that social dynamics underlying the influence of education may differ by gender in ways not initially accounted for in this research. Why do greater margins of educated women not recognize structural inequality? Why does education have a marginal effect on shaping men's views on systemic issues? Further research should investigate context-specific dynamics, the gendered pathways through which education operates, and whether similar patterns emerge across different contexts or populations.

One limitation of this study is the nature of the survey statements used to measure the dependent variables. Perhaps neither statement captures the dynamic of interest or all the nuance in what people believe, insofar as neither asks directly whether a respondent sees these issues as systemic or individualistic. By contrast, had the survey specifically asked a respondent, "Do you think poverty is a systemic issue or an individual one?" there might have been different results and increased opportunities to tease out nuance. Scholars in the future could evaluate my arguments using a variety of ways to capture how individuals think about these issues, perhaps via qualitative interviews, use of focus groups, or pulling from different surveys.

A second limitation is that I used a blunt binary schema for the race variable. This aggregated all non-white people into one category. Consequently, my research did not find substantive racial differences. However, research has shown that phenomenon, such as political behavior and perceptions of economic opportunity and racial equity, are shaped by heterogeneous historical experiences, group positions, and policy preferences (Anoll, Davenport, and Lienesch 2024; Chong and Dukhong 2006). Recoding the race variable to distinguish distinct racial or ethnoracial groups would likely disentangle racialized attitudes. Additional research focused on distinct racial groups may find support for differences in perception when looking, for instance, at Black, Latin, or Asian respondents independently.

To that end, one of the implications of this research is that, even when oversampled, underrepresented voices remain diluted by majority voices. My findings are consistent with previous findings that various factors influence an individual's perception of poverty and economic inequality (Will 1993; Brown et al. 2016; Thomson and Froese 2018). However, the effects of most variables in my research failed to reflect substantive significance. Notably, only the interaction of gender (women) and education suggested a meaningful difference.

As such, I suspect my theory could be valid, but only for specific subsets of the population and, in particular, for interaction effects for subsets of the population. I suspect that Black women, in particular, are highly attuned to systemic biases and thus more likely than white women to attribute poverty to structural rather than individual issues. Additional research that avoids collapsing group distinctions could better illuminate connections between groups and variables (e.g. race and gender, religion and political party, age and immigration status, or the intersection of race, parental status, and income). Specifically, qualitative research that builds on this analysis could offer nuanced insights into complex dynamics that influence perceptions of poverty, economic inequality, meritocracy, and economic mobility—something my research did not achieve but is worth exploring.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to and deeply appreciative of Dr. Ashley Moraguez, my faculty mentor. From nurturing the first spark of this idea to helping me shape it across the academic disciplines I love, her mentorship guided this project to completion. I am grateful for her feedback, explanations, discussions, encouragement, patience, and humor. I am indebted to her for her investment in strengthening my understanding of quantitative methods, fostering my development as a scholar, and preparing me well for future interdisciplinary research.

Thank you to Dr. Giovanny Pleites-Hernandez and Dr. Rob Shrode for maintaining open-door office policies and welcoming questions about the CMPS. I would like to extend thanks to the entire Department of Political Science at UNC Asheville, as well as Professor Emeritus Dr. Dwight Mullen, whose work as a community-engaged scholar and activist continues to inspire me. I would like to additionally acknowledge the faculty of the

Department of Sociology and Anthropology for the lectures, coursework, and insights that deepened my understanding of interdisciplinary connections; I would especially like to thank Dr. Megan Underhill, Dr. Carla Hung, and Dr. Blu Buchanan. I am profoundly grateful for all I have gained from courses and conversations with professors and classmates in both disciplines. Thank you to Dr. Elena Adell for checking in during the research process, attending my presentation at the Undergraduate Research Symposium, and sharing wise words and encouragement afterward. I am also grateful to Dr. Samantha Johnson at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College for helping me recognize the importance of undergraduate research, which prepared me to thoughtfully engage with research experiences at UNC Asheville. Thank you to Dr. Rebecca Hale for her feedback and patience; to faculty who reviewed previous drafts and offered feedback; and to former instructors Kristen Schlaefer, Kelly McEnany, and Dr. Robin Howse for their ongoing encouragement.

Last, but never least: I am grateful for and to my daughter, Madi, for her love, encouragement, positivity, political conversations, and "Did you eat today?" texts. Thank you to my mom, for her love and encouragement and for always being willing to press "pause" on a Nollywood film when I call, and to my dad, whose love, encouragement, and memory are never far. I would also like to acknowledge and thank my family, especially my older sisters, and friends for their encouragement and support of my academic goals. I love and appreciate each of you.

References

Anoll, Allison P., Lauren D. Davenport and Rachel Lienesch. 2024. "Racial Context(s) in American Political Behavior." *American Political Science Review*: 1–17. doi: 10.1017/S0003055424000832 (June 17, 2025).

Blau, Francine. D. and Lawrence M. Kahn. 2017. "The Gender Wage Gap: Extent, Trends, and Explanations." *Journal of Economic Literature* 55(3):789-865.

Brady, David, Alexis Bocanegra, Diana Cervantes, Lauren Macy & Nasdira Romero Saravia. 2025. "The Heterogeneities of Immigrant Poverty in the U.S." *Population Research and Policy Review* 44:41.

Brookfield, Stephen D. 2006. *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brown, Ronald E., R. Khari Brown, Davin Phoenix and James S. Jackson. 2016. "Race, Religion, and Anti-Poverty Attitudes." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55(2): 339-359.

Chong, Dennis and Kim Dukhong. 2006. "The Experiences and Effects of Economic Status Among Racial and Ethnic Minorities." *American Political Science Review* 100(3): 335–51.

Ekins, Emily. 2019. "What Americans Think About Poverty, Wealth, and Work." https://www.cato.org/publications/survey-reports/what-americans-think-about-poverty-wealth-work (May 2, 2025).

England, Paula. 2010. "The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled." *Gender and Society* 24(2): 149-166.

Eyler, Janet and Dwight E. Giles Jr. 1999. *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Eyler, Janet, Dwight E. Giles Jr. and John Braxton. 1997. "The Impact of Service-Learning on College Students." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (4)5-15.

Facione, Peter A. 2011. *Critical Thinking: What It Is and Why It Counts*. Millbrae, CA: Measured Reasons LLC.

Gilens, Martin. 1999. *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Anti-Poverty Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gilligan, Carol. 1982. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development.* Harvard University Press.

Howard, Christopher, Amerio Freeman, April Wilson and Eboni Brown. 2017. "The Polls – Trends: Poverty." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 81(3):769-789.Institute for Women's Policy Research. 2024. "Women Earn Less than Men Whether They Work in the Same or Different Occupations: The Gender Wage Gap by Occupation, Race, and Ethnicity 2024." http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep68882 (May 2, 2025).

Kimmel, Michael. 2008. *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. New York: Harper Collins.

Lee, Yeonjung and Fengyan Tang. 2013. "More Caregiving, Less Working: Caregiving Roles and Gender Difference." *Journal of Applied Gerontology* 34(4):465-483.

Pickett, Kate E. and Richard G. Wilkinson. 2015. "Income Inequality and Health: A Causal Review." *Social Science & Medicine* 128:316-326.

Shrider, Emily. 2024. "Poverty in the United States: 2023." https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2024/demo/p60-283.html (May 2, 2025).

Thomson Jr., Robert A. and Paul Froese. 2018. "God, Party, and the Poor: How Politics and Religion Interact to Affect Economic Justice Attitudes." *Sociological Forum* 33(2):334-353.

United States Census Bureau. 2021. "Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2020." https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/income-poverty-health-insurance-coverage.html (May 2, 2025).

United States Census Bureau. 2025. "Quick Facts: United States." https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045223#PST045223 (May 2, 2025).

United States Senate Committee on the Budget. 2024. "Whitehouse Statement at Social Security Hearing." https://www.budget.senate.gov/chairman/newsroom/press/whitehouse-statement-at-social-security-hearing (May 2, 2025).

USDA Economic Research Service. 2024. *Rural America at a Glance: 2024 Edition.* Economic Information Bulletin EIB-282. Washington, DC: USDA-ERS. https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/110351/eib-282.pdf.

Weber, Bruce A., and Leif Jensen. 2004. "Poverty and Place: A Critical Review of Rural Poverty Literature." RPRC Working Paper 04-03. Ames, IA: Rural Poverty Research

Center. PDF available at: https://ageconsearch.umn.edu/record/18913/files/wp040003.pdf.

Weber, Max. 2002 [1905]. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* Translated by Talcott Parsons. New York: Routledge.

Will, Jeffry A. 1993. "The Dimensions of Poverty: Public Perceptions of the Deserving Poor." *Social Science Research* 22(2):197-216.

Williamson, John B. 1974. "Beliefs About the Motivation of the Poor and Attitudes Toward Poverty Policy." *Social Problems* 22(2):211-221.

Wilson, J. Matthew. 2008. "'Blessed are the Poor': American Protestantism and Attitudes Toward Poverty and Welfare." *Southeastern Political Review* 27(3):421-437.