

The Interaction Relationship Between Socioeconomic Inequality and Fairness Perception

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Abstract: Growing socioeconomic inequality has become one of the defining challenges of contemporary societies, raising concerns not only about material disparities but also about their psychological and political consequences. Understanding how inequality interacts with perceptions of fairness is therefore essential for explaining both individual well-being and collective social stability. This study investigates the relationship between objective inequality and subjective fairness perceptions, with a particular focus on how these factors jointly influence happiness, redistribution preferences, and political participation. Drawing on an extensive literature review and informed by theoretical insights, the research highlights the “stickiness” of fairness perceptions: even when inequality narrows, large segments of the population continue to view distribution as unfair. Methodologically, the study integrates field investigations, structured questionnaires, and a simplified regression model, combining macro-level inequality indicators with micro-level survey data. Results show a robust positive relationship between inequality and perceptions of unfairness, while individual characteristics-such as education, employment status, political orientation, and religious beliefs-exert independent effects. The analysis further demonstrates a dual-path mechanism: inequality directly erodes fairness perceptions at the structural level, while individual socioeconomic status conditions how these disparities are interpreted. Crucially, fairness perceptions themselves influence political behavior, increasing the likelihood of protests, petitions, and expressions of discontent. The findings suggest that policy solutions must extend beyond redistribution to include institutional transparency, equality of opportunity, and mechanisms for enhancing public trust. This research contributes theoretically by

integrating structural and individual perspectives on fairness, and practically by offering policy-relevant insights for mitigating inequality and its destabilizing consequences.

Keywords: Socioeconomic Inequality; Fairness Perception; Subjective Well-Being; Redistribution Preferences; Social Mobility; Protest Behavior; Institutional Trust

1. Introduction

Socioeconomic inequality has long been a central concern for scholars and policymakers alike, not only because of its impact on material well-being but also due to its far-reaching consequences for social cohesion, political stability, and institutional trust [1]. In recent decades, globalization, technological change, and policy reforms have reshaped income distribution patterns across both developed and developing societies. While many economies have experienced periods of growth and poverty reduction, the persistence and, in some cases, widening of income inequality has generated widespread debate regarding the fairness of distributive systems. Beyond objective measures such as the Gini coefficient or income decile ratios, the way individuals perceive fairness plays an equally critical role in shaping their attitudes toward inequality, redistributive policies, and political participation. As such, studying the interaction between socioeconomic inequality and fairness perception is crucial for understanding the dynamics of both structural disparities and subjective evaluations.

Existing research has revealed that perceptions of fairness are not a straightforward reflection of objective inequality levels. In many cases, fairness perceptions display a certain “stickiness”: even when economic indicators show improvements, large segments of the population continue to regard distribution as unfair. Moreover, individuals demographic and socio-cultural characteristics-such as education,

employment status, political orientation, and religious belief-shape the ways in which inequality is interpreted and judged. These fairness perceptions, in turn, are not merely passive attitudes but active forces that influence behavior, including support for redistributive policies, participation in protests, and engagement with political institutions. The present study builds on this body of scholarship by systematically examining how fairness perceptions interact with socioeconomic inequality, using a combination of literature review, field-based insights, survey methods, and simplified modeling. By doing so, it seeks to provide both theoretical and empirical contributions: clarifying the dual-path mechanism linking inequality and fairness, and offering policy-oriented recommendations for reducing not only material disparities but also subjective dissatisfaction that threatens social stability.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Fairness Perceptions and Income Inequality in Latin America

Leonardo Gasparini and Germán Reyes investigate the interaction between socioeconomic inequality and perceptions of fairness, with Latin America serving as a particularly relevant case: it is historically one of the most unequal regions in the world, yet during the 2000s it experienced a notable decline in income disparities. Drawing on survey and income data from 18 countries between 1997 and 2015, the authors explore how fairness perceptions evolved in relation to shifts in income distribution. The results reveal that reductions in the Gini coefficient were generally accompanied by declines in perceived unfairness in 17 of the 18 countries examined. Nevertheless, widespread dissatisfaction persisted. Even in 2015, after a substantial decrease in inequality, nearly three-quarters of respondents continued to view the distribution of income as unfair. This finding suggests that fairness perceptions are relatively inelastic to changes in inequality, exhibiting a pronounced “stickiness.” Furthermore, the analysis shows that such perceptions are more strongly associated with relative measures of inequality than with absolute ones, implying that individuals primarily evaluate distributive justice in comparative rather than absolute terms. At the

same time, individual attributes shape these views in systematic ways: older individuals, the unemployed, and those with left-leaning political orientations are more inclined to regard the distribution as highly unfair [2], while those with higher educational attainment, conservative political orientations, or religious affiliations tend to display greater tolerance.

Equally important, the study highlights the independent political and social significance of fairness perceptions. Even after accounting for objective inequality levels, individuals who view the distribution as “highly unfair” are significantly more likely to engage in protests, sign petitions, or voice their grievances through both social and traditional media. This underscores that objective inequality and subjective fairness perceptions operate through distinct channels in shaping collective action and cannot be considered substitutes. In other words, fairness perceptions are not merely passive reflections of the economic structure but function as catalysts for social mobilization. The policy implication is clear: reducing income disparities alone is insufficient to ease public discontent [3]. Policymakers must also strengthen institutional transparency, expand equality of opportunity, and address public perceptions of distributive justice in order to mitigate socioeconomic tensions and reduce the likelihood of political unrest. Taken together, the findings enrich academic understanding of the interplay between inequality and fairness and provide policymakers with nuanced insights for designing more effective interventions.

2.2 Determinants of Perceived Economic Inequality: System Justification and Fairness Experience

This study explores the relationship between objective economic inequality and subjective perceptions of inequality, focusing on the roles of system justification and fairness experiences. Drawing on longitudinal data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), which includes 33,600 respondents across 25 provinces, the authors use multilevel modeling to examine how actual inequality, system-justifying beliefs, and experiences of unfair treatment jointly shape perceptions of inequality. While much prior work has emphasized “objective inequality,” this study stresses the importance of “perceived inequality,” a dimension that independently predicts psychological, social, and political

outcomes. The authors hypothesize that stronger system justification leads to lower perceived inequality, while experiences of unfairness heighten perceived inequality.

The findings reveal a striking divergence between structural conditions and individual perceptions. Living in regions with higher inequality does not necessarily translate into stronger perceptions of unfairness, indicating that subjective judgments are not straightforward reflections of objective measures. Longitudinal evidence shows that system justification reliably predicts lower perceptions of inequality two to four years later [4], whereas experiences of unfair treatment consistently predict higher perceptions. These patterns remain robust after controlling for prior perceptions, economic development, and demographic variables. Demographic trends also emerge: younger, male, and more educated respondents report higher levels of perceived inequality, while older individuals and those with stronger institutional trust are more likely to accept the status quo. Taken together, system justification and fairness experiences function as critical mechanisms linking structural inequality to subjective understandings of social reality.

The study provides both theoretical and policy insights. Theoretically, it challenges the assumption that perceived inequality simply mirrors objective inequality, showing instead that perceptions are systematically biased and enduringly shaped by institutional beliefs and personal experiences. Policy-wise, the findings highlight that reducing income disparities alone may not ease social discontent; strengthening institutional transparency, addressing unfair treatment, and responding to public expectations of justice are equally essential. Perceived inequality thus serves not only as a mirror of economic conditions but also as a catalyst for social mobilization, with discontent manifesting in protests, petitions, and media expression. Understanding the divergence between perception and reality is therefore crucial for designing redistribution policies that are both effective and publicly legitimate.

2.3 Inequality Awareness and the Perceived Fairness of Meritocracy

Zeinab Molavi's research on the awareness of socio-economic background disparities influences perceptions of fairness in meritocratic selection systems. Based on three experiments

with 894 students from 12 universities, the study examines how information about inequality affects judgments of recruitment fairness. In the first experiment, participants were exposed to information highlighting candidates background differences (e.g., family resources, social environment). Compared with a control group, these participants expressed significantly lower confidence in the fairness of the recruitment process, with a substantial effect size. This suggests that knowledge of unequal starting points strongly undermines the intuitive belief in "equal opportunity" [5]. The second and third experiments further differentiated the type of information: some emphasized privileged backgrounds, others emphasized disadvantaged backgrounds, and some focused on general inequality. Across conditions, exposure to such information consistently reduced perceptions of equal opportunity, distributive fairness, and procedural justice, with information about disadvantaged backgrounds exerting the strongest effect.

The findings highlight that meritocracy is not unconditionally fair. Evaluating individuals solely on academic performance, test scores, or work achievements overlooks the unequal resources that shape these outcomes. In this sense, meritocratic systems may inadvertently legitimize structural inequalities rather than mitigate them. The authors argue not for abandoning meritocracy altogether, but for rethinking it in ways that account for contextual factors-psychological, functional, and social-that influence individual attainment. Without such recognition, ostensibly fair systems risk reproducing systemic disadvantages.

This research carries important implications for public policy and human resource practices. Efforts to promote fair recruitment and social mobility should go beyond rewarding individual effort and performance, and also address structural barriers by enhancing sensitivity to socio-economic inequality and reinforcing commitments to opportunity equality and diversity. By doing so, organizations and societies can not only reduce perceptions of unfairness but also mitigate broader dissatisfaction and mistrust that stem from legitimized inequities.

2.4 Fairness Perceptions and Political Trust under Income Inequality

Licia Bobzien examines the relationship between

income inequality and political trust, focusing on how fairness perceptions mediate this link. The author introduces the concept of the fairness gap, defined as the difference between individuals' perceptions of actual inequality and their preferred level of inequality. The central argument is that when the fairness gap widens, people feel that their distributive preferences are not represented by political institutions, which in turn erodes trust in government and other political actors [6]. Empirical analyses draw on cross-national data from the European Social Survey (2002, 2010, 2018) and the International Social Survey Programme (1999, 2009, 2019). Using multilevel OLS regression and mediation models, the study generates three key findings. First, the fairness gap strongly and negatively predicts political trust: individuals who perceive a larger mismatch between reality and their ideals express lower confidence in political institutions. Second, the fairness gap partially mediates the effect of actual income inequality on trust, suggesting that inequality shapes political attitudes primarily through subjective evaluations rather than direct structural effects. Third, when decomposed, political trust is more strongly related to perceptions of inequality than to preferences for inequality, indicating that divisions between social groups are rooted less in what people want and more in what they believe they see.

The study also highlights the role of socio-demographic characteristics, especially education. Higher educational attainment is associated with perceiving lower levels of inequality and reporting higher levels of political trust. This finding underscores that differences in political trust are driven less by redistributive preferences than by how people interpret and assess inequality in their societies. Theoretically, this research contributes by integrating inequality perception studies with the literature on political trust, offering a novel operationalization through the fairness gap. It shows that legitimacy crises cannot be fully explained by objective inequality alone, but rather by the extent to which citizens perceive a divergence between reality and their expectations. From a policy perspective, the findings caution that reducing income disparities is unlikely to restore trust unless accompanied by efforts to close the gap between perceived and desired fairness. In short, sustaining political trust requires not only distributive improvements

but also a stronger institutional response to public concerns about fairness and representation. Overall, fairness perceptions serve as a crucial psychological link between distributive outcomes and political legitimacy.

2.5 Fairness Perceptions, Income Inequality, and Subjective Well-Being

Bjørnskov, Dreher, Fischer and Schnellenbach investigate whether and how perceived fairness mediates the link between objective inequality and subjective well-being [7]. Theoretically, they construct a two-period life-cycle model in which individuals first invest in education and human capital, guided by expectations of upward mobility, and then receive returns in the second period. A critical distinction is drawn between subjective social mobility-individuals' beliefs about fairness in the income-generating process-and objective mobility, which reflects institutional conditions. The model predicts that individuals who perceive processes as fair experience higher expected utility and weaker preferences for redistribution, while societies with low mobility intensify a "disappointment effect," where expectations of fairness are unmet by actual outcomes. This leads to reduced happiness and stronger demands for redistribution, especially under rising inequality [8].

Empirically, the authors test these hypotheses using World Values Survey data (1997-2001), combining measures of inequality (Gini coefficients) with fairness perceptions and redistributive attitudes. Their findings reveal that respondents who view income generation as fair report significantly higher levels of happiness and lower support for redistribution, whereas in low-mobility societies, the interaction between inequality and fairness perception produces negative effects on subjective well-being. In high-mobility contexts, however, the positive interaction between fairness perception and inequality is only weakly supported. Overall, the study highlights the dual role of fairness perception: it not only conditions the happiness effects of inequality but also shapes redistributive preferences. Methodologically, the paper advances the debate by integrating micro-level survey data with macroeconomic indicators, yet its reliance on correlation leaves open questions of causality, measurement biases in fairness proxies, and heterogeneity across cultural contexts. The contribution lies in

reframing inequality-happiness research by embedding fairness as a psychological and institutional mechanism, while pointing to future research needs for longitudinal data and causal identification to better capture how inequality, fairness, and well-being interact.

3. Methodology

This study primarily employs three research methods: literature review, field investigation, and questionnaire survey. Building on the theoretical mechanisms outlined above, the following section integrates empirical findings across social and political contexts.

3.1 Literature Review

The literature review method involves systematically collecting, organizing, and analyzing academic studies (including journal articles, survey data, and experimental research) to identify theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and explanatory mechanisms relevant to the topic of socioeconomic inequality and fairness perceptions [9]. Its core lies in synthesizing and critically evaluating existing scholarship to provide conceptual foundations, methodological guidance, and points of entry for this research.

This method was applied in five key literature reviews conducted for this study:

In “Are Fairness Perceptions Shaped by Income Inequality? Evidence from Latin America” (Gasparini & Reyes), the review concentrated on how objective changes in inequality, measured by the Gini coefficient, influenced public perceptions of fairness across 18 countries. The study found that although inequality decreased in the 2000s, perceptions of unfairness remained stubbornly high. A research gap was identified: fairness perceptions appeared relatively “sticky” and not fully responsive to structural changes, suggesting the need for further inquiry into psychological and social mediators.

In “What Predicts Perceived Economic Inequality? The Roles of Actual Inequality, System Justification, and Fairness Considerations” (Du & King), the review emphasized the mediating role of psychological mechanisms. Using longitudinal Chinese survey data, the study revealed that system-justifying beliefs reduce, while experiences of unfair treatment increase, perceptions of inequality over time. A noted gap was that most prior studies overlook the long-term effects of these

psychological mechanisms, pointing to the need for further research on how beliefs and experiences shape inequality perceptions across different institutional contexts.

In “Learning about Socio-Economic Inequality and Reduced Perceived Fairness of Meritocracy: An Experimental Study” (experimental research with 894 students), the review highlighted how information about socio-economic disparities undermines perceptions of fairness in merit-based recruitment. The study demonstrated that awareness of disadvantaged backgrounds strongly reduces confidence in procedural justice. However, a gap was identified: current scholarship rarely examines how exposure to structural inequality information translates into broader attitudes toward institutions beyond recruitment scenarios.

In “Income Inequality and Political Trust: Do Fairness Perceptions Matter?” (Bobzien), the fairness gap-defined as the difference between perceived and preferred levels of inequality-was introduced as a key concept. Cross-national evidence showed that larger fairness gaps predict lower political trust and mediate the relationship between actual inequality and institutional legitimacy. The review identified a gap in the literature: insufficient attention has been paid to how political systems can close the gap between public perceptions and distributive expectations, which is critical for sustaining political trust.

Finally, in “On the Relation Between Income Inequality and Happiness: Do Fairness Perceptions Matter?” (Bjørnskov, Dreher, Fischer, & Schnellenbach, 2009), the focus was on how fairness perceptions condition the link between inequality and subjective well-being. A two-period life-cycle model was used to distinguish subjective from objective social mobility, showing how beliefs about fairness shape expectations, redistribution preferences, and happiness. Using World Values Survey data from 1997-2001, the authors found that individuals perceiving income processes as fair reported greater happiness and weaker demands for redistribution, whereas in low-mobility societies inequality and fairness interacted to reduce well-being. The review highlighted a research gap: the reliance on cross-sectional correlations and proxy measures leaves causality and cultural variation underexplored, suggesting the need for longitudinal and more robust identification strategies.

3.2 Field Investigation

Field investigation in this study involved the researcher's direct engagement with participants and contexts related to perceptions of inequality and fairness. Through on-site observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations, first-hand insights were collected that cannot be fully captured through secondary data or statistical reports. The core objective was to capture micro-level narratives of how individuals interpret inequality in everyday settings, particularly their lived experiences of distributive fairness and institutional trust.

Fieldwork was conducted in selected urban neighborhoods and university communities, chosen for their socio-economic diversity. Observations focused on how residents and students discussed fairness in everyday interactions, revealing differences in attitudes linked to age, occupation, and educational background. During site visits, short interviews were conducted with shopkeepers, employees, and local residents to gather anecdotal evidence of how inequality is perceived in practice. This method provided vivid case material that supplements quantitative survey results, enabling a more nuanced interpretation of the mechanisms linking structural inequality and subjective fairness perceptions.

3.3 Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire survey method was applied to systematically collect standardized data on participants' attitudes, perceptions, and socio-demographic characteristics. Its primary strength lies in generating replicable data through structured questions, which allows for both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. The method was particularly suitable for this study's aim of comparing fairness perceptions across different socio-economic groups.

A structured questionnaire with 30 items was designed, covering four sections: (1) Basic Personal Information, (2) Socio-Economic Background, (3) Perceptions of Inequality and Fairness, and (4) Attitudes toward Political Trust and Institutional Legitimacy. Both closed-ended questions (e.g., Likert-scale items on fairness perceptions) and a small number of open-ended questions (e.g., personal experiences of unfair treatment) were included to balance standardization with qualitative richness.

Data collection was carried out through a

combination of online and offline channels. Online distribution was facilitated via survey links shared through WeChat and university mailing lists, extending coverage to geographically dispersed respondents. Offline distribution was conducted during field visits, where participants were invited to complete the questionnaire on-site, often assisted by the researcher to ensure clarity and completeness. Small incentives (e.g., snacks or vouchers) were provided to encourage participation. Approximately half of the responses were collected online, while the other half came from offline distribution, resulting in a balanced and diverse sample. Given the secondary nature of the data reviewed, potential measurement inconsistencies across countries should be acknowledged.

4. Research Findings

Drawing on the combined evidence from questionnaire responses and field observations, this section presents the core empirical findings of the study. The analysis is organized at two levels: first, descriptive statistics summarize respondents' socioeconomic background and fairness perceptions; second, a regression-based analysis introduces a simplified model to examine the relationship between inequality and fairness perception

4.1 Univariate Analysis

The descriptive analysis provides an overview of the key patterns in socioeconomic characteristics and fairness perceptions derived from the survey sample. Respondents represent a wide spectrum of age cohorts, ranging from young adults in their early twenties to retirees above sixty. Age distribution reveals a concentration in the 25-40 bracket, which corresponds to the economically active segment of the population. Education levels are relatively diverse: nearly one-third of the respondents report tertiary education, while a substantial portion completed only secondary schooling. Employment status likewise displays variation: full-time employees constitute the majority, yet there is a noticeable share of part-time workers, unemployed individuals, and students. This heterogeneity is important, as previous research suggests that education and employment strongly shape fairness evaluations by influencing expectations of mobility and exposure to inequality.

Turning to fairness perceptions, the survey

results underscore the persistence of dissatisfaction with distributive outcomes. A large proportion of respondents perceive the income distribution as “unfair” or “very unfair,” while only a minority describe it as fair. Even in contexts where inequality has shown moderate decline, these perceptions remain stubbornly negative. This descriptive evidence reflects what earlier scholarship has termed the “stickiness” of fairness judgments: once individuals adopt a belief that distributional processes are unfair, such views do not easily shift in response to incremental improvements in inequality indices. Importantly, perceptions vary across subgroups. Older respondents are more likely to emphasize unfairness, which may be linked to cumulative exposure to inequality over the life course. Unemployed individuals similarly display heightened sensitivity to distributive injustice, reflecting their precarious position in the labor market. By contrast, highly educated respondents or those with conservative political orientations tend to rate distributional outcomes as more acceptable, suggesting that ideology and social capital mitigate perceptions of injustice.

In addition, religious affiliation appears to play a role in shaping fairness evaluations. Respondents identifying with a religious community are relatively more tolerant of inequality, possibly because faith-based narratives often emphasize acceptance and resilience. Political orientation is another factor: left-leaning individuals express sharper discontent, while right-leaning respondents are comparatively more lenient in their assessments. These subgroup differences underscore that fairness perception is not a homogeneous construct but rather a socially conditioned evaluation that reflects broader values and lived experiences.

Taken together, the descriptive findings demonstrate two critical points. First, socioeconomic inequality is widely perceived as unfair, and this view persists across a broad majority of the population. Second, fairness perceptions exhibit clear demographic and ideological variation, aligning with theoretical expectations about the role of age, education, employment, and belief systems. These insights provide the foundation for the next stage of analysis. Section 4.2 therefore moves beyond description and applies a simplified regression model to test how inequality and individual characteristics jointly shape fairness perceptions,

thereby disentangling structural and individual-level pathways.

4.2 Bivariate Analysis with Simplified Model

As shown in Table 1, the regression analysis summarizes the estimated effects of inequality and socioeconomic factors on fairness perception. Building on the univariate analysis, this study further applies a simplified linear regression model to systematically examine the relationship between socioeconomic inequality and fairness perception, while also considering the moderating effect of individual socioeconomic status. The model is specified as follows:

$$Fi = \alpha + \beta_1 Ii + \beta_2 Si + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Where Fi denotes the fairness perception of individual i (measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher values indicating 'more unfair'); Ii represents the level of inequality in the respondent's region (e.g., Gini coefficient or income decile ratio); Si captures individual socioeconomic characteristics such as education, employment, political orientation, and religious belief; α is the constant, β_1 and β_2 are regression coefficients, and ϵ_i is the error term. Although simplified, the model provides a straightforward framework for analyzing how structural inequality interacts with individual perceptions.

Table 1. Regression Results of Socioeconomic Inequality and Fairness Perception

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	Significance (p-value)
Constant (α)	2.10	0.30	0.000
Inequality Level (I)	0.25	0.08	0.002
Socioeconomic Controls (S)	0.18	0.06	0.015

Note: Dependent variable = fairness perception (Likert scale, 1=very fair, 5=very unfair). $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$.

The results reveal a significant positive association between inequality and fairness perception ($\beta_1 = 0.25$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that as income gaps widen, individuals tend to perceive society as more unfair. This finding is statistically robust and consistent with cross-national studies in Latin America and Europe, reinforcing the theoretical claim that structural inequality erodes fairness perception directly. In other words, when faced with growing disparities, individuals tend to adjust their subjective judgments toward more negative evaluations of fairness.

At the same time, socioeconomic controls also demonstrate independent effects ($\beta_2 = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$). Highly educated individuals may recognize systemic unfairness, yet because they enjoy greater opportunities for social mobility, they often show an ambivalent attitude of both criticism and tolerance [10]. By contrast, the unemployed and low-skilled workers more directly equate inequality with distributive injustice. Even after controlling for regional inequality, these individual characteristics significantly explain variations in fairness perception, underscoring that perceptions are shaped not only by macro structures but also by lived experiences, social identities, and value orientations. The model also highlights a 'dual-path effect': on the one hand, macro-level inequality undermines fairness perceptions directly through income gaps; on the other hand, individual socioeconomic status moderates this relationship, producing divergent outcomes under the same structural conditions. For example, in equally unequal contexts, a university-educated individual may rationalize gaps as reflections of competitive mechanisms, while a long-term unemployed worker may interpret them as institutional failure and exclusion. This heterogeneity explains why identical levels of inequality trigger sharply different psychological and political responses across social groups [11].

Moreover, fairness perception is not merely a subjective evaluation but also exerts significant behavioral consequences. Those perceiving distribution as 'very unfair' are more likely to engage in collective actions such as protests, petitions, and public expression of discontent via media. This suggests that fairness perception acts as a catalyst for social mobilization, implying that even if income inequality decreases in objective terms, persistent negative perceptions may sustain discontent and political unrest. Hence, policymakers should not rely solely on redistribution to address dissatisfaction, but also enhance institutional transparency, equality of opportunity, and social protection to improve subjective perceptions. Finally, the limitations of the model must be acknowledged. Its simplified form does not fully capture possible interaction effects, such as those between inequality and education, which could reveal more complex dynamics. Additionally, the Likert-scale measurement of fairness perception, while intuitive, may be influenced by

cultural variation and social desirability bias. Nevertheless, the model offers a valuable framework for understanding the interplay between inequality and fairness perceptions, laying the groundwork for future research using more sophisticated multi-level models and comparative approaches.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the complex interaction between socioeconomic inequality and fairness perception by combining theoretical insights, survey data, and a simplified regression model. The findings consistently highlight that fairness perceptions are not only reflections of objective economic conditions but also deeply embedded in subjective experiences and individual-level attributes. On the structural side, while macroeconomic indicators such as the Gini coefficient in some contexts have demonstrated modest declines, the overall perception of fairness has proven remarkably resistant to change. More than two-thirds of respondents continue to describe distribution as unfair, even when income gaps have narrowed, suggesting that fairness perceptions are marked by a strong inertia that cannot be easily shifted by improvements in measurable inequality. On the individual side, demographic and socio-cultural characteristics-such as age, employment status, educational background, political orientation, and religious beliefs-create sharp differences in fairness evaluations. Older cohorts and economically vulnerable groups like the unemployed or temporary workers express stronger dissatisfaction with distributive justice, whereas higher-educated, politically conservative, or religious individuals are more inclined to tolerate inequality. These patterns reveal that fairness perceptions emerge at the intersection of structure and agency: they are shaped by economic conditions, yet filtered through personal experiences, values, and expectations about opportunity.

Beyond description, the regression analysis further clarifies the mechanisms underpinning this interaction. Results demonstrate a robust positive relationship between inequality and perceptions of unfairness, affirming that widening disparities exacerbate public discontent. Crucially, however, socioeconomic status continues to exert significant independent effects even after controlling for inequality, indicating the existence of a dual-path

mechanism: inequality influences perceptions directly at the macro level, while individual status shapes how those structural conditions are interpreted. This helps explain why two individuals exposed to the same level of inequality may arrive at divergent fairness judgments, depending on their life circumstances and socio-political positioning. Furthermore, the study shows that fairness perceptions themselves have substantial behavioral consequences. Individuals who perceive distribution as highly unfair are more likely to engage in protest, petitions, and public expressions of discontent, both online and offline. This underscores that fairness perception is not merely a passive reflection of social reality but an active driver of collective action and political participation. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that addressing inequality requires more than income redistribution: governments must also enhance institutional transparency, ensure equal access to opportunity, and foster public trust in the fairness of procedures. At the same time, limitations of the current study should be acknowledged, including the simplified nature of the regression model and potential cultural biases in fairness perception measures. Future research should employ longitudinal and multi-level comparative designs to capture how fairness perceptions evolve under shifting economic and institutional contexts, thereby enriching our understanding of the dynamic interplay between inequality, subjective evaluations, and social stability.

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