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The role of meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs in South Africa

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Abstract

Global inequality is rising, with an increasing gap between the top and bottom of society. However, international studies find no objective evidence of a growing public concern for inequality. One of the reasons behind this phenomenon is the growing perception that societal success is driven by meritocratic factors like hard work and less due to non-meritocratic factors like race, sex, and family background. However, these findings, referred to as the paradox of inequality, have not yet been tested in South Africa, the most unequal society in the world. Given the higher levels of inequality in South Africa, this study seeks to explore temporal changes in meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs in South Africa and their leading effects on political attitudes. Using International Social Survey Programme data for 2009 and 2019, we find that while inequality in South Africa has increased, meritocratic beliefs have declined, contradicting the paradox of inequality findings in the West. However, we also find that non-meritocratic factors like sex, race and social connections are perceived as less critical for personal achievement, and factors like bribery and political connections have become more important for South Africans. Observing the impact of changing meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs on political attitudes reveals that meritocratic beliefs, although declining, are positively associated with demand for redistribution, while non-meritocratic beliefs have little influence. Even those who strongly believe in a meritocracy still acknowledge the need for more redistribution and inequality reductions. This also provides evidence that the notion of high inequality that leads to stronger meritocratic beliefs and lower demand for redistribution cannot be applied to all countries, and South Africa should be treated heterogeneously from the West. Primarily since different dynamics and historical events influence the meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs of South Africans.

Keywords: meritocracy, inequality, social perceptions, demand for redistribution

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1. Introduction

Global inequality is on the rise (World Inequality Lab, 2022), and despite this worrying trend, no substantial evidence finds that people have grown increasingly concerned about inequality (Kenworthy and McCall, 2007; McCall, 2013; Kuziemko et al., 2015). Termed by Mijs (2021) as the paradox of inequality, numerous studies have attempted to uncover this consent with rising inequalities and the lack of public concern about the growing gap between the rich and the poor. Some studies find that one's social environment gives rise to inequality consent (Morris et al., 2021), while others find people are just less concerned about inequality levels

because they either move their subjective ruler to what is an acceptable level of inequality (Trump, 2018) or justify rising inequalities with the beliefs in a meritocratic process (Mijs, 2021).

Meritocracy has been pointed out as one of the reasons behind inequality legitimization and has been strongly supported by empirical literature (Mijs, 2021; La Roex et al., 2019; Becker, 2021). Meritocracy can be defined as a system of resource allocation and reward based on individual merit, conceived from talent and effort (Young, 1958). Social psychology and sociology have often pointed to the consequences of beliefs in meritocracy that makes people emphasize effort and talent in personal achievement model over structural factors, also referred to as non-meritocratic factors, like sex, race, parents' education and social networks. This could lead to higher inequality legitimization (Hadjar, 2008; Preminger, 2020; Trump, 2020). Furthermore, meritocratic beliefs have also reinforced the ideal of a moral justification for inequality (Castillo et al., 2021), and others have shown meritocratic beliefs to influence various political attitudes (Becker, 2021). With this in mind, many empirical studies have been dedicated to understanding the process behind meritocratic beliefs (La Roex et al., 2018; Mijs, 2021; Li and Hu, 2021; Morris et al., 2021; Zhai et al., 2023) and its impact on various other political attitudes like redistribution preferences (Fehr and Vollman, 2020; Becker 2021). The literature strongly supports the findings that rising inequalities have led to stronger meritocratic beliefs, which further translates into lower demand for redistribution. However, these findings are mainly based in Western societies or developing countries outside Africa. The African continent still struggles with high poverty levels, low economic growth and extreme inequality (Obeng-Odoom, 2020). However, little is known about the continent's meritocratic beliefs and political attitudes. South Africa, the most unequal country in Africa and the world, presents an interesting case study.

Regarded as the country with the highest level of inequality globally (Sulla et al., 2022), policymakers in South Africa are under immense pressure to reduce inequality and build a more fair and equitable society. With an increasing gap between those on top and bottom of society, a heavy emphasis on transformative and redistribution social policies has not yet had its intended effect on inequality, and the recent external shocks like the recent pandemic, energy crisis, and high inflation have just further entrenched the country into a more unequal society. Furthermore, there have been low levels of social mobility, especially for those on the lower end of society (Schotte et al., 2018). Previous studies show that South Africans have a relatively high tolerance for inequality (Kirsten et al., 2022) and have bias status perceptions (Kirsten et al., 2023), meaning there is a substantial variation between perceptions and reality. However, no study has yet explored the meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs of South Africans. Furthermore, many studies have linked meritocratic beliefs with political attitudes, yet no such link has been assessed in a South African context. Since social unrest events have increased recently (Roberts, 2014), there is a great need to understand inequality perceptions and political attitudes in South Africa, where unsustainable levels of inequality exist.

Using the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) dataset, we explore the dynamics behind meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs and their link with political attitudes about redistribution. We attempt to make several contributions to the existing field. Firstly, we attempt to expand Mijs's (2021) findings about meritocratic beliefs' role in an increasingly unequal society and apply the same hypothesis in an African context. Secondly, South Africa has undergone significant social change since the end of apartheid in 1994. Within groups, inequality has grown significantly, and there has been a high level of income polarisation, eroding the middle class and forcing more people to be either in poverty or vulnerable to poverty. No study has yet assessed how individuals' perceptions of inequality have changed

with this social change. Thirdly, due to extreme levels of inequality, social unrest events have increased in the country. It is, therefore, vital to further understand the drivers behind political attitudes like demand for redistribution. We aim to provide evidence on the relationship between meritocratic beliefs and redistribution preferences over time in a South African context where information on people's perceptions of mobility and personal achievement should provide vital insight for policymakers and economists about elements of inequality usually ignored by objective measures.

2. Literature Review

There is a vast literature on meritocratic beliefs (Reynolds and Xian, 2014; Brunori, 2017; Mijs, 2021; Becker, 2021; Atria et al., 2020; Li and Hu, 2021; Weinberg et al., 2021; Zhai et al., 2023). This is mainly because public perception of meritocracy holds significant explanation powers for inequality legitimization (Mijs, 2021), political attitudes (Atria et al., 2020; Becker, 2021) and voting behaviour (Sibley and Wilson, 2007). For example, as a coping mechanism, strong meritocratic beliefs help individuals avoid confronting high societal inequalities (Lerner, 1980; Jost et al., 2004). This could then translate into their demand for redistribution and the actual level of redistribution achieved. Alesina and Angeletos (2005) showed that there are lower levels of taxes and redistribution policies in societies where the median voter has strong meritocratic beliefs. These findings have been validated by Jimenez-Jimenez et al. (2020), especially in countries with high levels of initial inequality. Since public perceptions of the median voter are important for office-seeking politicians, the views citizens hold about meritocracy and inequality legitimization become vital for the level of redistribution policies that need to be implemented.

Therefore, assessing and understanding the beliefs in meritocracy is vital, especially in countries with high inequality where those at the top and bottom of the economic spectrum could have vastly different views (Reynolds and Xian, 2014). A few studies have assessed meritocratic beliefs in single and multiple-country analyses. A study by Duru-Bellet and Tenret (2012) assessed meritocratic beliefs among 26 countries using the International Social Programme Dataset (ISSP). They found that meritocratic beliefs are influenced by the level of inequality and education system in these sampled countries. The inequality level has significantly contributed to the strength of meritocratic beliefs. A recent Mijs (2021) study assessed the relationship between income inequality and meritocratic beliefs in a host of developed and developing countries. Coining the term paradox of inequality, Mijs (2021) shows that the stronger perceptions of meritocracy justify rising inequality. The higher the level of inequality in the country, the more people would believe success is due to a meritocratic process and less due to non-meritocratic factors like family background and social connections. Similarly, a study by La Roex et al. (2019) assessed the impact of meritocratic beliefs on inequality attitudes in 39 countries. The study finds that meritocratic beliefs positively and significantly influence inequality tolerance. In contrast, Morris et al. (2021) found no support for the relationship between meritocratic beliefs and rising inequality in England. However, they found that the positive relationship between income inequality and meritocracy holds for those at the lower end of the income distribution.

Meritocratic beliefs also tend to influence the political attitudes individuals hold. A study by Becker (2021) finds that non-meritocratic beliefs have remained relatively stable in the United States. Also, finding that non-meritocratic beliefs positively impact demand for redistribution and perceived inequality, while stronger meritocratic beliefs lowers demand for redistribution. These findings are also supported by Fehr and Vollman (2020), who showed that those who achieve success in society perceive a strong meritocratic view of success and demand less redistribution. Furthermore, a study by Corneo and Gruner (2002) assessed the relationship between meritocratic beliefs and redistribution preferences for a set of Western and former

Soviet Union countries and found a robust negative relationship between meritocratic beliefs and demand for redistribution. However, a significant share of the current studies on meritocratic beliefs and redistribution preferences are to the West and countries with extreme levels of inequality have been largely underrepresented in the analysis. A recent Atari et al. (2020) study observed the relationship between meritocratic beliefs and redistribution preferences in Chile, one of the countries with the highest inequalities globally. Using qualitative data, they found that elites have strong beliefs in meritocracy but little demand for redistribution, consistent with the paradox of inequality findings. Our study focuses on South Africa, the country with the highest level of inequality in the world. South Africa presents an interesting case study, where public perceptions are still influenced by the interlinkages between race and class (Roberts, 2014; Kirsten et al., 2023). Furthermore, public perceptions about inequality are vital when inequality and social unrest events have increased (Roberts, 2014; Sulla et al., 2022).

By exploring the dynamics behind meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs and their link with political attitudes in South Africa, we aim to make several contributions to the literature. Firstly, attempt to test the findings of Mijs (2021) that there would be a stronger belief in the meritocratic process behind personal achievement in an increasingly unequal society. Testing this relationship for South Africa should provide vital insight into the impact inequality has on meritocratic beliefs in South Africa compared to Western countries. Secondly, South Africa has undergone significant social change since 1994, yet no study has assessed the temporal changes in meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs in South Africa. We attempt to assess inequality perceptions over time in South Africa and contribute cross-cutting information to the debate about changing meritocracy perceptions. Thirdly South Africa has also undergone recent periods of increased social unrest, driven by certain political attitudes individuals hold in society. We explore the impact of meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs on the demand for redistribution in South Africa.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data

The paper uses the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) Social Inequality and World Bank indicators datasets to measure income inequality and the meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs in South Africa. The ISSP Social Inequality dataset is a multi-country survey that captures a wide range of information about perceived inequality and individuals' perceptions of social inequality, redistribution and fairness. South Africa is included in the 2009 survey and the 2019 ISSP Social Inequality module, making it possible to combine the datasets and indicate redistributive preferences in South Africa. The pooled cross-sectional dataset covers 6041 individual observations from individuals aged 16 years and older. We also use the World Bank Indicator dataset to observe the overall pattern of inequality in South Africa using the Gini index measure.

3.2 Variables

Consistent with the literature (Mijs, 2021; Becker, 2021), the meritocratic and non-meritocratic factors are drawn as a combination of questions relating to what individuals believe is needed for success. These questions provide vital insight into people's views of what is needed to advance in society. Each question represents a different ingredient needed for getting ahead in society and includes questions about meritocratic factors like hard work and non-meritocratic factors like the importance of race, sex, family background, and social connections. A complete list of the questions used can be found in table 1 below. For

regression analysis, the non-meritocratic items were combined using the average between all Likert-style questions. The hard work item represented the meritocratic process.

Table 1: List of meritocratic and non-meritocratic measures

Variable	Question
	<i>Please tick one box for each of these to show how important it is to get ahead in life...</i>
Meritocratic factors	
<i>Hard work</i>	how important is hard work?
Non meritocratic factors	
<i>Family</i>	how important is coming from a wealthy family?
<i>Parents education</i>	how important is having well-educated parents?
<i>Social Connections</i>	how important is knowing the right people?
<i>Political connections</i>	how important is having political connections?
<i>Bribes</i>	how important is giving bribes?
<i>Race</i>	how important is a person's race?
<i>Religion</i>	how important is a person's religion?
<i>Sex</i>	how important is being born a man or a woman?

The papers also analyze the impact of meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs on political attitudes. Political attitudes are measured using the popular demand for redistribution measure (Kuhn, 2019; Choi, 2021). The question in the ISSP survey reads out that it is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes. Respondents are then recorded on a five-point scale from 1 (strongly agree), 2 (agree), 3(neither agree nor disagree), 4(disagree) or 5(strongly disagree). The five-point scale has been reversed for ease of interpretation.

For the regression analysis, a range of control variables was used. According to the literature, these include relevant sociodemographic variables that influence the cognitive process behind forming social perceptions (Brunori, 2017). Firstly, personal characteristics like sex, race, age, location, marital status and religion were also included. Where sex (male; female), location (Urban, rural), marital status (married, not married), and religion (more than once a week attendance/less than once a week) were used as dichotomous variables. Race was classified as a categorical variable, including African, Coloured, Indian/Asian and White.

Furthermore, socioeconomic status variables, like education and personal income, were included, where education was defined as a categorical variable, including those with no education, primary education, secondary education and tertiary education. At the same time, personal income was defined based on an income rank variable in the ISSP survey that takes the value from 1 (no income bracket) to 15 (highest income bracket). Table 2 below shows the descriptive statistics of these measures in the ISSP dataset.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean (2009 sample)	Mean (2019 sample)
Meritocratic beliefs	4.17	4.05
Non-meritocratic beliefs	3.21	3.11
Demand for redistribution	3.79	3.89
Age	37.80	37.68
Sex (% female)	52.57	48.29
African	76.65	78.74
Coloured	9.41	9.07
Indian/Asian	2.95	2.87
White	10.99	9.32
Location (% Urban)	65.00	69.03
Marital status (% married)	35.46	26.78
Religious (% religious)	48.99	25.69
Personal income	6.22	6.20
No schooling	27.22	8.21
Primary education	18.03	11.47
Secondary education	47.39	69.53
Tertiary education	7.36	10.78

Source: Author's calculation based on the 2009 and 2019 ISSP Social Inequality Surveys

3.3 Estimation method

The study uses the Ordered Probit model and standardized effects to assess the impact of meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs on political attitudes in South Africa. The model is expressed as follows:

$$\gamma_i^* = x_i\beta + \varepsilon_i$$

$$y_i = j \text{ if } \alpha_{j-1} < \gamma_i^* \leq \alpha_j$$

Where γ_i^* is the ordinal latent variable, x_i is a vector of explanatory variables, β is the vector of unknown parameters and ε_i is the randomly distributed error term. The number of outcomes is represented by j , and this case sums up to 10. The different cutoff points are shown by α_{j-1} and α_j . For robustness, we also use Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression analysis to confirm the results of the Ordered probit model. The results are consistent with our empirical findings using the ordered probit model.

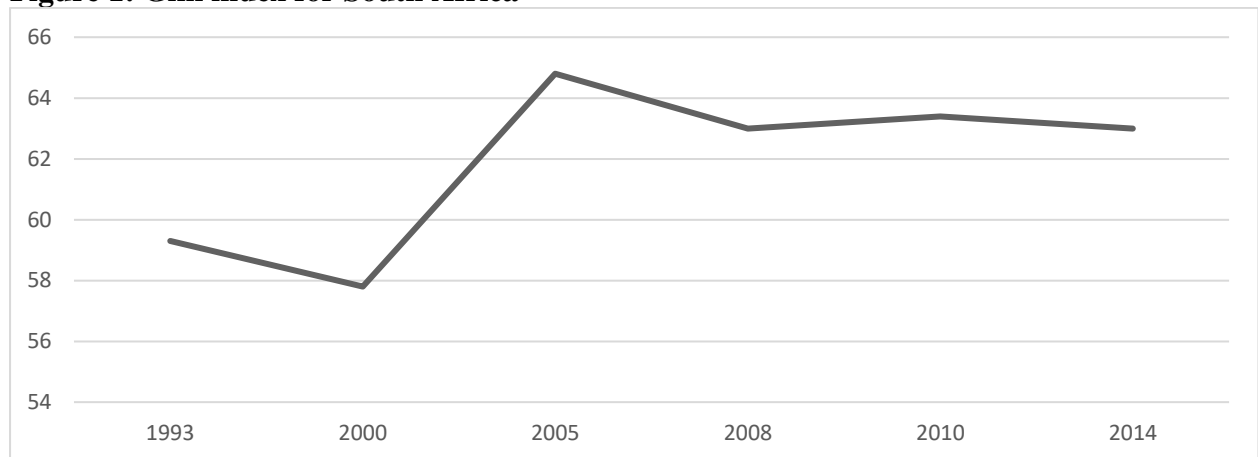
4. Empirical Results

The empirical section consists of three parts. First, we observe the objective inequality patterns in South Africa from 1993 to 2014, setting the scene for analyzing meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs in an increasingly unequal society. Secondly, we focus on the meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs in South Africa, assessing the temporal change of these factors across South Africa and different countries. The third part observes the impact meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs have on political attitudes in South Africa over time.

4.1 Trends behind income inequality in South Africa

Figure 1 below shows the Gini index for South Africa over multiple years. Consistent with the literature (Posel & Rogan, 2019; Kerr & Wittenberg, 2021), figure 1 shows that inequality in South Africa has increased since the end of apartheid. Centrally because those at the top have moved further away from those at the bottom. With a hollowed middle class, the growing middling tendency is difficult to reconcile with rising inequality and income polarization (Bhorat et al., 2019).

Figure 1: Gini index for South Africa



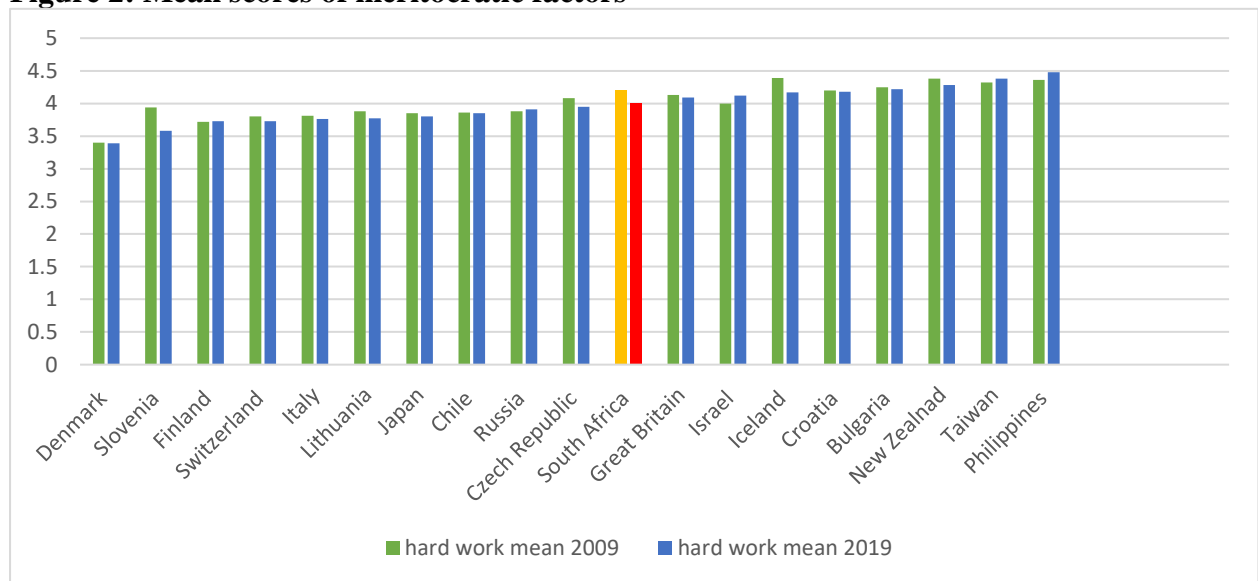
Source: World Bank Indicators

4.2 Trends behind meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs in a South African context

Since inequality in South Africa has increased, it presents a setting similar to Mijs' (2021) of increasing inequality to assess the meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs in South Africa. Figures 2 and 3 below show trends of meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs in South Africa compared to a sample of countries for 2009 and 2019. Figure 2 shows the average hard work score. At first glance, we can see that South Africa, the most unequal society in the world, ranks among the middle regarding beliefs in meritocracy. However, South Africa perceives the meritocratic process more important than other highly unequal societies like Russia and Chile. Secondly, meritocratic beliefs have decreased from 2009 to 2019, meaning South Africans have declined in their perceptions about meritocratic factors driving personal achievement. These findings contradict the paradox of inequality findings by Mijs (2021), where rising inequalities lead to stronger meritocratic belief and shows in a South African context that the beliefs in a meritocratic society have declined in this increasingly unequal society. The relationship between economic growth and inequality could be one of the reasons. Inequality in high-income countries has been mainly led by positive economic growth, this has not been the case for South Africa, where inequality is increasing in a society that suffers from lower economic growth (Mdingi and Ho, 2021), especially in South Africa, where the aftereffects of apartheid and colonialism still linger within the social constructs of the labour market, welfare distribution and spatial distribution.

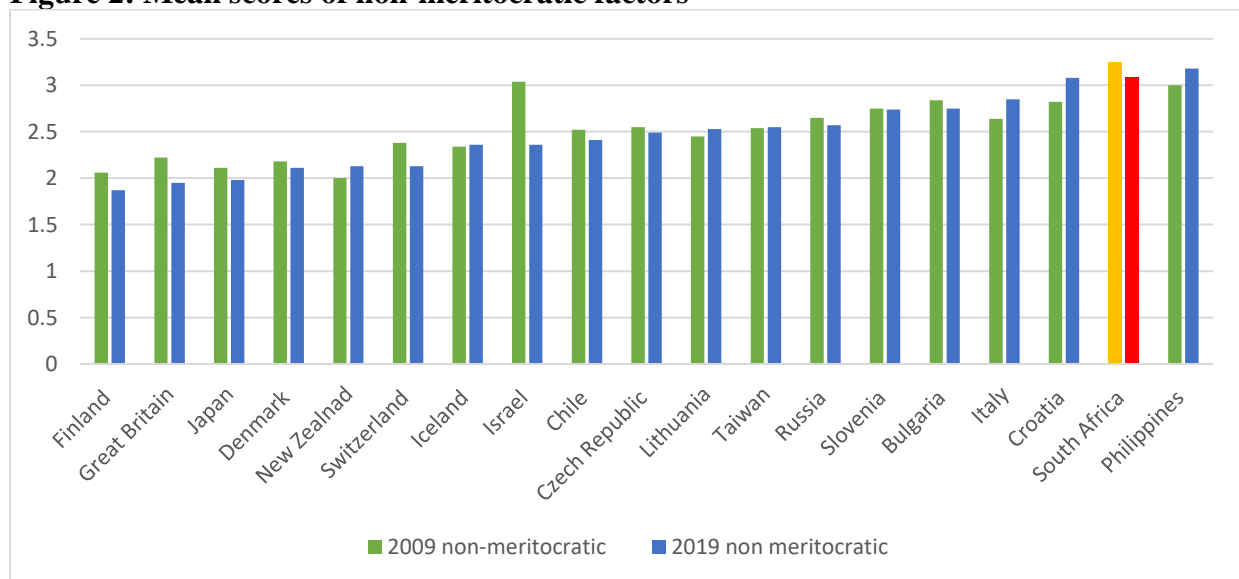
Maybe even more relevant in a South African context is then to observe the changes in non-meritocratic beliefs, including factors like race, sex, parents' education, and social networks driving success. Figure 3 shows the average mean scores of non-meritocratic beliefs for South Africa and some sampled countries. Not surprisingly, South Africa reports a relatively high score that non-meritocratic factors, like race, sex, family background, and social and political connections, drive success. Again, non-growth-led inequality and the lingering effects of historically discriminating regimes have probably led to public support for the importance of non-meritocratic factors in driving personal achievement. However, non-meritocratic beliefs have also decreased from 2009 to 2019, and these results point to a need for further decomposition of non-meritocratic beliefs.

Figure 2: Mean scores of meritocratic factors



Source: Computed by the authors

Figure 2: Mean scores of non-meritocratic factors



Source: Computed by the authors

Table 3 below shows the mean values of the factors relating to meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs for 2009 and 2019. While hard work has decreased, meritocratic beliefs are

still considered the most significant contributor to personal achievement, with a mean score above 4. Changes in non-meritocratic beliefs show that family background, social connections, race, sex, religion, and parents' education have declined. People view these structural inequality factors as less important in the determinants of personal achievement. This possibly points to the government's successful implementation of transformation and redistribution policies to eradicate some of the historically disadvantaged structural issues and reduce the impact personal characteristics like race, sex and family background have on personal success. However, the importance of other non-meritocratic factors like political connections and bribes has increased overtime time, showing that other structural issues related to political connections are becoming increasingly crucial for what individuals feel is needed to get ahead in society. This points to a possible shift in the non-meritocratic beliefs of South Africans from historically disadvantaged factors like race and sex to more political issues like bribery and political connections. These findings make sense in South Africa, where the emergence of state capture and high levels of corruption (Budhram, 2019) have meant South Africans have increased their views about the importance of bribes and political connections to get ahead in life.

These changing non-meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs have also been assessed for different sociodemographic groups, and results are presented in the appendix. The results show that the decline of meritocratic beliefs is higher for Whites, females, rural dwellers and those with high socioeconomic status than other sociodemographic groups. At the same time, the declining beliefs about the role of non-meritocratic factors are strongest among Africans, Coloureds, females and those from low socioeconomic status. Since members in these groups still make up the most vulnerable part of society, it might show that the more vulnerable in South Africa have a strong declining view that success is driven by personal characteristics like race, sex and family background, probably due to the upward mobility of those from previously disadvantaged population groups (Wegner and Pellicer, 2011). However, political connections and bribery have increased as perceived factors driving success, which points to the role corruption and political instability played in people's perceptions of success. Although Whites, individuals with high socioeconomic status, males and urban dwellers have the strongest perceptions about the impact of political attitudes and bribery, almost all sociodemographic groups perceive an increase in the relevance of political connections and bribery in driving personal achievement.

Overall, since these meritocratic and non-meritocratic belief changes could significantly impact how individuals perceive inequality and redistribution, the following section explores the relationship between these beliefs and the demand for redistribution.

Table 3: Mean scores of meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs in South Africa

Item	2009	2019
Non-meritocratic factors		
Family	3.493	3.382
connections	3.729	3.664
race	3.195	2.946
religion	3.527	3.000
sex	3.407	2.970
parents' education	3.785	3.654
political connections	2.694	2.940
bribes	1.820	2.309
Meritocratic factors		
hard work	4.167	4.064

Source: Computed by the authors

4.3 Effect of meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs on political attitudes.

Table 4 reports the effect of meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs on the demand for redistribution for 2009 and 2019. The results show that meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs were generally insignificant in driving demand for redistribution in 2009. However, in 2019 meritocratic beliefs had a positive and significant effect on demand for redistribution. People with stronger meritocratic beliefs demand more redistribution than those who view it as less important. Furthermore, we also assess the standardized effects of the ordered probit regression. We find the impact of meritocratic beliefs has increased (results in the appendix). These findings contradict the literature by Fehr and Vollman (2020) and Becker (2021), who found that higher meritocratic beliefs lead to lower demand for redistribution. Its possibly points to the roots of inequality in South Africa. Inequality is increasing in a society that suffers from low economic growth, where the aftereffects of apartheid and colonialism still linger within the social constructs of the labour market, welfare distribution and spatial distribution. An average South African might believe hard work is essential for success, but the underlying inequality in the country still makes him/her call for more redistribution due to the non-meritocracy still underlined within the inequality structure. These findings support that of Roberts (2014), who showed that regardless of socioeconomic status, South Africans generally view inequality as too high and the need for redistribution.

However, we also find that perceptions about non-meritocratic factors are insignificant in both models. These results might seem irregular but could be due to the used measure of non-meritocracy. Since the non-meritocratic variable is an average mean of the eight items related to non-meritocratic beliefs, there might be some overlapping relations between different non-meritocratic items and demand for redistribution that that drive the insignificance of the mean value. Therefore, we also decompile the non-meritocratic belief measure and further assess each individual's non-meritocratic belief item's impact on demand for redistribution in both years.

Table 4: Ordered probit model predicting demand for redistribution.

VARIABLES	(2009) demand_for_redistribution	(2019) demand_for_redistribution
Non-meritocratic	0.0353 (0.0947)	0.0274 (0.0923)
Meritocratic	0.110 (0.0765)	0.533*** (0.0824)
Coloured	0.257 (0.178)	-0.162 (0.223)
Indian/Asian	-0.0928 (0.233)	-0.834*** (0.291)
White	-0.150 (0.248)	-1.064** (0.414)
Female	-0.0423 (0.137)	0.125 (0.161)
Urban	-0.355** (0.144)	0.608*** (0.177)
Age	-0.00312 (0.00408)	-0.0106 (0.00755)
Primary education	0.00647 (0.192)	-0.345 (0.254)

Secondary education	-0.184 (0.182)	-0.376 (0.279)
Tertiary education	-0.236 (0.297)	0.0938 (0.392)
Married	-0.0672 (0.131)	0.169 (0.182)
Religious	0.00563 (0.126)	-0.366** (0.163)
Personal income	-0.0262 (0.0272)	-0.0320 (0.0283)
Observations	2,090	1,637

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

We decompile the non-meritocratic beliefs by running separate regressions for each non-meritocratic factor. The results are presented in Table 5 below and show the varying non-meritocratic factors that influenced the demand for redistribution in 2009 and 2019. Social connections and parents' education positively and significantly impacted the demand for redistribution in 2009. People with stronger beliefs about the importance of social connections and parents' education to get ahead also had stronger perceptions about redistribution. Surprisingly race was negative and significant, meaning those who perceive race as important also demand less redistribution. Observing the change to the 2019 model shows that religion had a significant but a negative effect on demand for redistribution, while importantly, parents' education remained positive and significant, indicating the vital role generational education plays in perceived personal achievement. Both political connections and bribes are insignificant in the models and could contribute to the non-significance of non-meritocratic beliefs in table 4. Interestingly, although South Africans have stronger perceptions of the importance of political connections and bribery for getting ahead in society, they do not translate to a greater demand for redistribution. This could be explained by the difficulty in which the demand for redistribution is phrased as state-led redistribution and that people who strongly believe in political connections and bribery driving success might not support more state-led redistribution. Furthermore, the construct of the demand for redistribution measure that includes state-led redistribution could be one of the reasons for the mixed findings between non-meritocratic beliefs and demand for redistribution in a South African context.

Table 5: Demand for redistribution and non-meritocratic beliefs relationship

	2009	2019
Family	insignificant	insignificant
Connections	significant (+)	insignificant
Race	significant (-)	insignificant
Religion	insignificant	significant (-)
Sex	insignificant	insignificant
Parents education	Significant (+)	significant (+)
Political connections	insignificant	insignificant
Bribes	insignificant	insignificant

Source: Computed by the authors

5. Discussion

The result of this study provides some vital insight into the meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs in South Africa. Firstly, while inequality in South Africa has increased, meritocratic beliefs have declined from 2009 to 2019. These results contradict the inequality paradox Mijs (2021) reported, in which rising inequality leads to stronger meritocratic beliefs. Meaning the inequality paradox of rising inequality – greater meritocratic beliefs might be true for countries in the West, where inequality is driven mainly by economic growth. Nevertheless, in a South African context where non-growth factors drive inequality, the paradox of inequality breaks down and, in a general sense, gives a sense of normality towards rising inequality and meritocratic factors. However, non-meritocratic beliefs have also declined in a rising unequal society. Our results show that race, sex and family background have declined as perceived contributing factors to personal achievement and possibly point to the government's implementation of transformation and redistribution policies to eradicate the impact personal characteristics like race, sex and family background has on personal success. However, the importance of other non-meritocratic factors like political connections and bribes has increased overtime time, showing that South Africans perceive other structural issues related to corruption and political interference are becoming increasingly crucial for what individuals feel is needed to get ahead in society. In line with the country's state-capture events and high corruption (Budhram, 2019).

We also assessed the relationship between meritocratic beliefs and political attitudes. Although meritocratic beliefs have been declining in South Africa, we find that meritocratic beliefs are positively and significantly related to the demand for redistribution. Again, these findings go against some international findings (Fehr and Vollman, 2020; Becker, 2021), which showed that the increase of meritocracy beliefs negatively influences demand for redistribution. Possibly in a South African context, a stronger belief in meritocracy leads to higher demand for redistribution. These findings could again relate to the nature and history of inequality in South Africa. While rapid economic expansions mostly lead to inequality in high-income countries, in South Africa, inequality is not as much a product of economic growth but rather structural issues. Furthermore, the history of apartheid and the social contract of reducing inequality has made most South Africans aware of the need for redistribution and inequality reductions to still correct past injustices. These findings align with Roberts (2014), who finds that regardless of socioeconomic status and race, there is still a big call among most South Africans that inequality is too high, and more redistribution is required.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we contribute to a recent debate about the relationship between income inequality and meritocratic beliefs by assessing the relationship between inequality, meritocratic beliefs and political attitudes in South Africa, using data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) for 2009 and 2019. We report a negative relationship between inequality and meritocratic beliefs, contradicting Mijs's (2021) findings that rising inequalities lead to stronger meritocratic beliefs. The main reason for the result contradiction possibly relates to the inequality structure in South Africa versus the Western societies. This is mainly because South Africa's inequality is not driven by economic expansion, as in the West. The rising inequality leads to South Africans having lower perceptions of meritocratic beliefs. We also find that South Africans have experienced a declining view of non-meritocratic factors, mainly led by their declining view of the importance of race, sex and family background in the needed ingredients for societal success. However, other non-meritocratic factors have increased, like political connections and bribery, showing a shift in the way South Africans perceive what is needed to get ahead in society and move up the social ladder.

We also assessed the impact of meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs on political attitudes. The results show that meritocratic beliefs have a positive and significant relationship with the demand for redistribution. Findings contradict previous international studies but show that even South Africans with strong meritocratic beliefs understand the need for redistribution in this unstably unequal society. While non-meritocratic beliefs are mainly insignificant in driving demand for redistribution, decompiling the different factors shows that parents' education is intensely significant in driving state-led demand for redistribution. We also reported that political connections and bribes have increased in importance for perceived success but are insignificant in demand for the redistribution model. This could be explained by the perceived role of the government in South Africa; people who strongly believe in political connections and bribery driving success would not support more state-led redistribution.

Overall, while the results contradict some of the international literature, they could point to the structural embeddedness of inequality in South Africa, where even those who strongly believe in a meritocratic society driven by individual effort still acknowledge the need for more redistribution and inequality reductions. This provides evidence that the notion of high inequality that leads to stronger meritocratic beliefs and lower demand for redistribution cannot be applied to all countries, and South Africa should be treated heterogeneously from the West. Primarily since different dynamics and historical events influence the meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs of South Africans.

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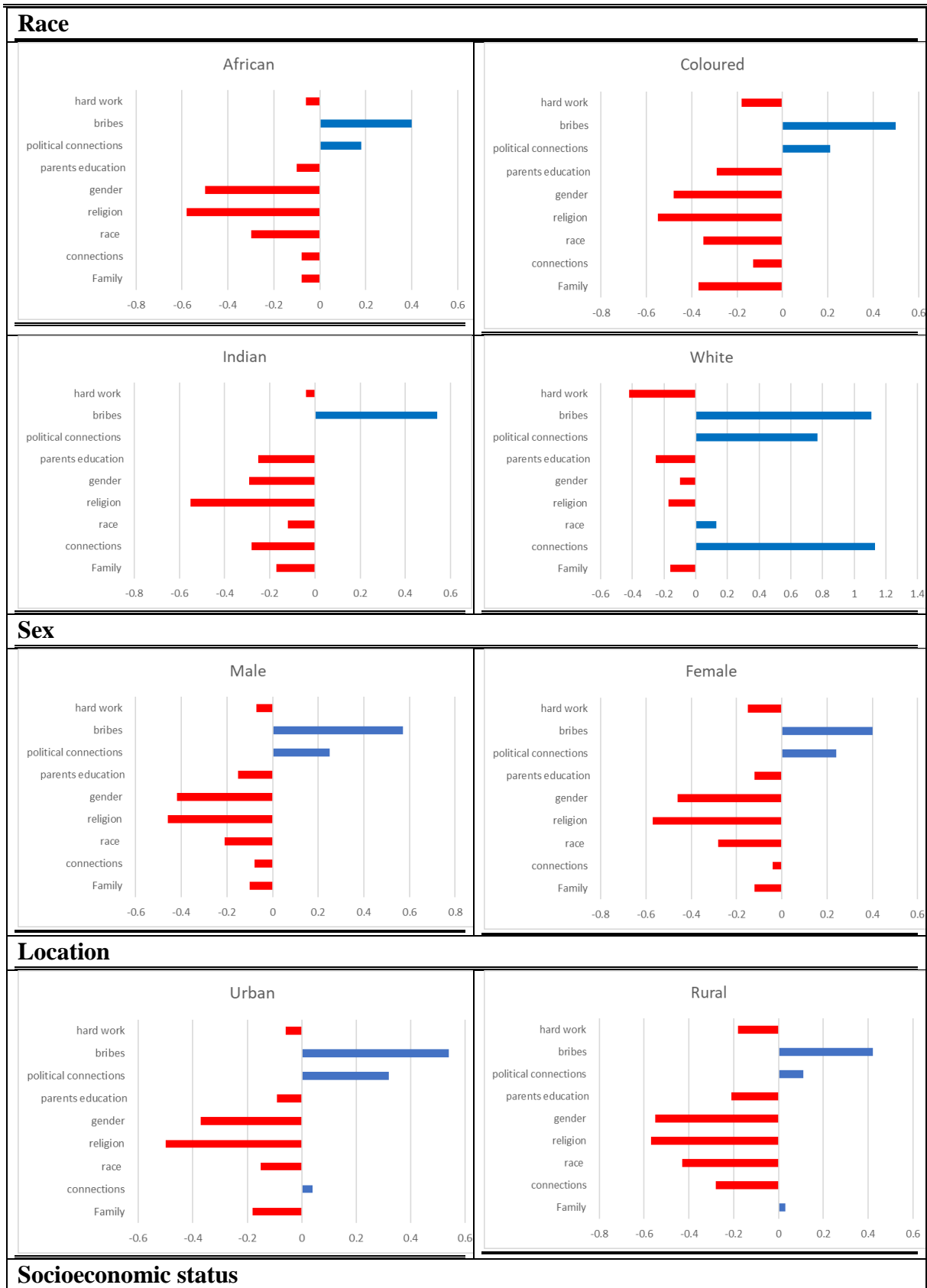
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Appendix

Figure 4: Time-varying Mean score differences of meritocratic and non-meritocratic items



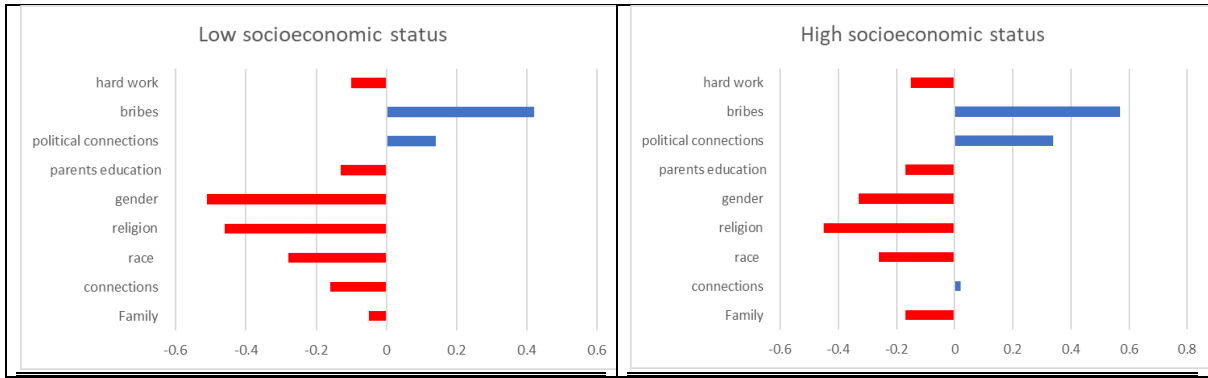
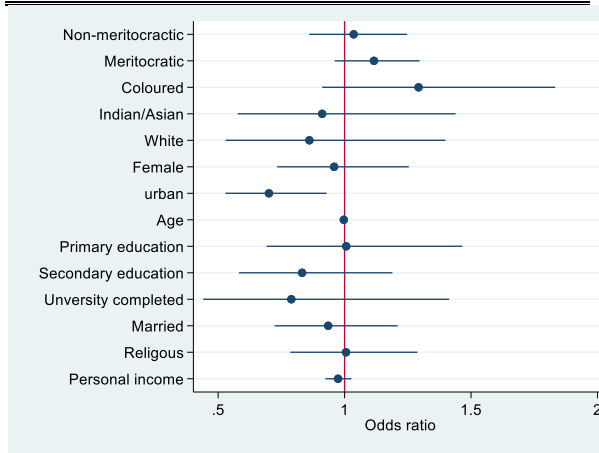
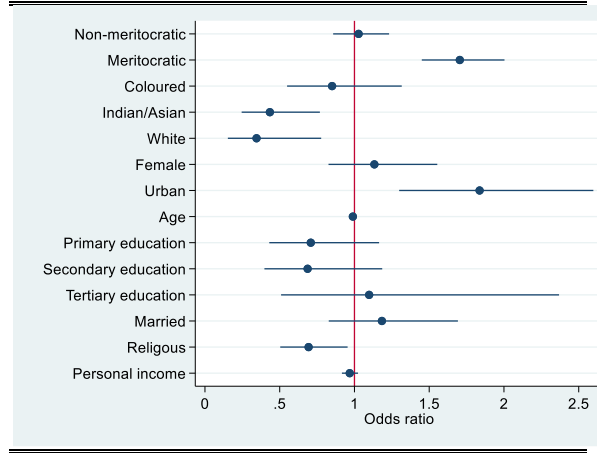


Figure 5: Standardized coefficients

2009



2019



Source: Computed by the authors