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Legitimizing Inequality

The Moral Repertoires of Meritocracy in Four Countries

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Abstract

Do people in different countries understand and frame the principle of meritocracy differently? This question is the starting point for this cross-national analysis of the moral repertoires of meritocracy in four countries: Germany, Norway, Slovenia and the United Kingdom. The authors pursue a mixed methods approach, using data from the European Social Survey 2016 and qualitative data from group discussions. In these discussions, citizens openly talked about issues like inequality and social policy, which allows us to study their understandings and framings of meritocracy. The authors show that the issue of unequal rewards does not only find different levels of support, but also that people – corresponding to the context they live in – have different understandings of which merits should count. The authors identify a ‘market success meritocracy’ in the UK, a work-centred understanding in Germany, a ‘common good meritocracy’ in Norway, and non-salience of this issue in Slovenia.

Keywords

meritocracy – cultural repertoires – democratic forum – inequality

1 Introduction

Meritocracy is considered as one of the core principles of modern post-industrial societies, in which education and skills are fundamental to the allocation of people to social positions and for income differentials (Bell 1972). Though meritocracy in a strict sense – understood as stringent proportionality of individual inputs and rewards – might be an illusion, it is a well-entrenched norm (Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012; Reynolds and Xian 2014). In contrast to the understanding of the word's inventor Michael Young (1958), meritocracy is nowadays widely seen in a positive light, often associated with a fair and equitable system of distribution. No wonder then that it is a recurrent finding of research that peoples' consent to inequality is largely determined by the belief that the income differences in society are “meritocratically deserved” (Cojocaru 2014; Kluegel and Smith 1981; Larsen 2016; Mijis 2019). In this sense, meritocracy can be considered as a core ideology for the legitimization of inequality. Given this centrality, it is important to study the different interpretations of meritocracy and the relation of these interpretations to national and social structural contexts.

The notion of merit is fairly contingent and depends on one's view of society (Arrow, Bowles and Durlauf 2000). The practice of rewarding merit, though being a central legitimizing norm in modern societies, is severely underspecified and context-dependent and may relate to very different types of ‘merits’. What is considered good, productive, worthy or rewardable when thinking about the norm of meritocracy might differ. In this article, we pose the question: How do people in different countries perceive the principle of meritocracy, and what is their underlying understanding of merit? At the conceptual level, we draw on the research on ‘moral economies’ as well as on the ‘cultural repertoires’ and put forward the term ‘moral repertoires’ in order to tap that people in different contexts can draw on different types of understandings and interpretations and may make different claims when it comes to the issue of meritocracy. Rather than finding a universal and fixed normative or judgmental set, we expect to find different interpretations of meritocracy, which are related to national and social structural contexts.

As empirical cases we investigate people's attitudes in four selected countries, namely Germany, Norway, Slovenia and the UK, which are all developed,

European countries, but represent different inequality and welfare regimes. We combine quantitative and qualitative analyses, with quantitative data coming from the European Social Survey (ESS) 2016 (Round 8), and qualitative data stemming from large group discussions among citizens held in the four countries of interest. Quantitatively, we look at support for meritocracy understood as a combination of talent and effort in the four countries and in different social groups. In the qualitative part, we probe deeper into the concept of meritocracy: What kind of efforts and achievements people actually have in mind when referring to a just distribution of rewards and positions on the basis of merit? Our hunch is that we will not find a uniform understanding across different countries of which merits should count. With the qualitative data at hand, we are able to tease out more specifically which types of understandings, arguments and justifications – which we subsume under the label “moral repertoire” – do prevail in different societal contexts when people apply norms of meritocracy.

Our article is organized in four parts. First, we present our conceptual framework of moral repertoires, which draws on the literature on cultural repertoires on the one hand, and on moral economies on the other hand. Then we will introduce the cases, data and methods, in particular the qualitative data which were generated in so-called democratic forums. In the third part, we will present the results of our empirical analysis. On the one hand, we are interested in the overall levels of support for the meritocratic principle of rewarding talent and effort as well as group-specific item responses. On the other hand, we will use the qualitative data from the democratic forums to analyse the cultural repertoires of making sense of meritocracy and link these back to the different country cases. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings.

2 Meritocracy: Understanding Moral Repertoires

By and large, meritocracy refers to a system of stratification where there is a link between ‘merit’, however understood, and the distribution of social positions and resources. Two related features seem to be of prime importance for a meritocracy: impartial competition and equality of opportunity (Talib and Fitzgerald 2015). The meritocracy paradigm is closely linked to the issue of justice, as it provides a strong justification for unequal (i.e. non-egalitarian) distributions and status differentiations. It has been observed that the “merit principle seems to have a firm grounding in popular thinking about justice: it corresponds to the widespread belief that people deserve to enjoy unequal

incomes depending on abilities and how hard they work" (Miller 1999: 178).¹ While Michael Young (1958) considered talent and effort as the main components of meritocracy, stratification researchers place key emphasis on the nexus between family background, educational achievement and income/labour market positioning: In a meritocratic society the association between people's class background and their educational attainment should be weak, whereas the association between people's educational attainment and class position should be strong. This would be the version of an education- and work-based meritocracy (Goldthorpe 2003). Alternatively, meritocracy can also be regarded as a system of rewards for actual inputs (or individual contributions) in a given context, which establishes a proportional relation between efforts and rewards; in addition it may also compensate for prior investment (e.g. in skills) (Offe 1977).

Comparative survey data has shown that in Western societies most people attribute success to meritocratic factors, in particular to hard work (Mijs 2018). Previous research has also demonstrated that the actual societal degree of meritocracy is closely linked to people's support for the principle of meritocracy (Kunovich and Slomczynski 2007). Empirically, it has also been found that the subjectively perceived role of effort in getting ahead in life – a core component of meritocracy – makes people more willing to accept inequalities and restrain redistributive preferences (Piketty 1995; Corneo and Grüner 2002). There is also evidence that higher status groups hold the strongest meritocratic beliefs (Kunovich and Slomczynski 2007). At a more general level, we know that the distributional principles in place have a strong impact on what is considered to be appropriate, just or fair (Kahneman, Knetsch and Richard 1986; Mau 2003; Kelley and Zagorski 2005; Willis et al. 2015).

Much of the research mentioned, however, rests on item-based surveys and thus neglects potential differences in scripts or frames of meritocracy. Qualitative studies on meritocracy focus primarily on specific groups or organisations of contexts, such as university admission or job promotion (for an overview see Chang-Hee and Yong-Beom 2017). There are only few studies at

1 Of course, meritocracy is not uncontested: While the principle of unequal rewards for unequal contributions seems to be initially plausible, the bulk of literature sees meritocracy as a modern myth (Offe 1977; Goldthorpe 2003; Frank 2016). Not only do we face difficulties in measuring inequality (Itscher 2018), it is also unclear how large inequalities should be and what consequences (should) follow from these inequalities (Franzini, Granaglia and Raitano 2016). Moreover, the principle of meritocracy is thwarted by other societal factors such as gender and ethnicity. Finally, meritocracy might be a mechanism behind the wealth of the rich, but it also cements the privileged position of the following generations (Josifidis and Supic 2017).

hand dealing with meritocracy at large. Here it has been suggested that there are dominant national narratives of meritocracy, but that these narratives are variously negotiated and interpreted (e.g. Teo 2019). There are also hints that meritocratic thinking hinges upon people's understanding on individual agency and how failure is attributed, but also how effort and merit are understood (Clycq, Ward Nouwen and Vandenbroucke 2014). A focus group-based study (Neckel, Dröge and Somm 2008) provides an interesting taxonomy of different understandings of merit. Here it was found that people can refer to different aspects, namely: personal traits (such as self-reliance and engagement); 'work' in terms of personal efforts, time and intensity; the overall contribution to society; the product resulting from one's efforts; or rewards allocated by market principles.

Meta-research has shown that the idea of meritocracy is neither univocal nor static, but depends largely on an agreement what merit is and how it can be measured or observed (Chang-Hee and Yong-Beom 2017). Moreover, it has also been pointed out that ideas of meritocracy are not arbitrary, but may vary cross-nationally, cross-culturally and with a given institutional context (ibid; Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012; Park and Liu 2014). This is what drives the interest of our article: How do people view and understand meritocracy, and which merits do they consider as legitimate and "rewardable"? What do people mean when they say that merit should matter and how do they see this principle prevailing (or lacking, or at risk) in society?

Our conceptual frame relies on different research traditions. The first is rooted in cultural sociology, putting forward the concept of a cultural repertoire which highlights that social actors actively engage with a set of elements available to them depending on their social environment. The concept suggests that there are different repertoires of understanding, framing and justifying forms of social order and that this sense-making contributes to the production and reproduction of social inequality (Lamont, Beljean and Clair 2014). The concept has been employed for analysing culture, class, symbolic boundaries and forms of exclusion (Lamont 1992, 2000; Lamont et al. 2016). With regard to inequality and the key role of meritocracy – understood as how individuals should be rewarded and achieve their position – authors have claimed that cultural processes of interpretation and evaluation should matter too (McCall 2014).²

2 The French tradition of the "economy of conventions" makes a related argument by stating that (economic) actors draw on specific socio-cultural frames which provide them a shared interpretation of specific situations of production or distribution (see Lamont and Thévenot 2000 for the link between both paradigms). According to their take, there exists a plurality

Whereas these approaches are interested in the moral grammar and cultural repertoires of evaluation, parts of the contemporary research on moral economies³ looks at attitudes, preferences and patterns of beliefs. The moral economy approach is interested in the minds of the common people, in particular which distributional outcome is seen as fair and which claims one can justifiably make (Thompson 1971, 1991). While much work has been made on traditional societies, the contemporary literature scrutinizes people's attitudes with regard to issues such as inequality, welfare transfers or deservingness (Rothstein 1998; Mau 2003; Sachweh 2012; Koos and Sachweh 2017). In a stylized way one could say that the moral economy approach places stronger emphasis on people's attitudinal stances and differences between different status groups, while the cultural repertoire perspective is more interested in the available types of arguments, understandings and justifications people deploy in a given social context. However, both assume that institutional arrangements matter: For the moral economy approach institutions have a preference- and attitude-forming impact on people's moral stances, whereas cultural repertoires can be understood as tools or scripts people can activate in a given context. Here we deal with specific schemes of evaluation mobilized at the discursive or interactional level (and less with individual attitudinal stances).

In this article, we take inspiration from both, the cultural repertoire and the moral economy writings. By talking about the *moral repertoires of meritocracy*, we assume, first, that there is a moral terminology of "who deserves what" when it comes to distributive issues, second, that moral assumptions guide people's understanding of meritocracy, third, that there is a stock of cultural repertoires available for people's evaluation of distributional processes and, fourth, that these are firmly grounded within the social structure and the institutional context. Our approach suggests that attitudes and types of moral reasoning are neither free-floating nor purely normative, but embedded into cultural scripts and institutional environments. We therefore link macro-social structures with cognitive and evaluative aspects. Given our topical interest, the issue how people view and interpret meritocracy and what merit actually

of "orders of worth" or "types of justification" (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). In contrast to them, we are not interested in constitutive "orders of worth" in different social arenas, but in the specific understanding of the meritocratic norm.

3 The moral economy approach derives from anthropological and social-historical accounts emphasizing that human action is not merely driven by economic interests, but also by moral concerns (Polanyi 1944; Thompson 1971). It often refers to traditional communities or peasant societies where forms of exchange are closely tied to social norms of fairness, but it has also been applied to modern societies, issues of inequality and the welfare state (Mau 2003; Sachweh 2012).

means in different social contexts gains centre stage. The aim of this article is to show not only how the popular principle of meritocracy is understood cross-nationally, but also how the institutional setting people live in and their group-specific position intersect. We propose that cultural repertoires of meritocracy may be country-specific, but that the same type of repertoire may play out differently for different groups.

Our empirical section will address these issues by looking at the overall support for meritocracy first and then tapping into the different understandings of what merit actually is or should be – the moral repertoires.

3 Research Design: Cases, Data, Methods

3.1 Case Selection

As outlined above, we base our study on the assumption that there is a fundamental affinity between dominant institutional arrangements and people's understanding (and problematizing) of meritocracy (Rothstein 1998; Mau 2003; Sachweh 2012). In a way, these institutions equip people with a moral repertoire for reflecting on inequality, so that it seems plausible to expect cross-national differences. Consequently, we seek to grasp the moral repertoires of meritocracy in four countries with diverging socio-economic and institutional setups: UK, Germany, Norway and Slovenia.

The UK is a liberal market economy with highly competitive market arrangements (Hall and Soskice 2001) and a welfare state that emphasizes last-resort safety, choice and individual responsibility (Bonoli 1997). It is guided by the idea that the market provides the best allocation principle; in a flourishing market social wealth is supposed to 'trickle down' from the rich to the poorer sections of the society. The liberal welfare regime rallies the slogan 'Work, not welfare' emphasizing that "people are supposed to earn their living on the labour market, and public welfare programs are supposed to serve only as a residual fall-back" (Goodin 2001: 13).

In Germany, we find a relatively strong link between the education system and labour market positions, and hence also between skill and status (Allmendinger 1989; Shavit and Müller 1998). This status model is also mirrored by the corporatist welfare regime which is firmly based on compulsory social insurance organisations and suggests an understanding of meritocracy where investments in skill, hard work and occupational positions should determine people's rewards and justify inequality – while at the same time excessive inequalities are disliked for the sake of the unifying theme of social cohesion (Esping-Andersen 1990: 60).

Norway is not only a rich country with a comprehensive welfare system, it is also, as its Scandinavian neighbours, a comparatively equal country (Kuhnle 2000). Norway counts as a universal welfare state where eligibility is primarily based in citizenship. Also due to the redistributive capacity of the welfare state, it has largely succeeded in containing inequality. Norway shares with the other countries of the Scandinavian cluster a comparatively strong 'passion for equality'. The acceptance of luck as factor determining people's fate in life is relatively low (Almås, Cappelen and Tungodden 2016).

Finally, Slovenia is a post-socialist country and has been part of Yugoslavia till the beginning of the 1990s. It still bears the legacy of the socialist past with a commitment to socio-economic equality (Kornai 1992). Though achievement and merit were also part of the official doctrine as a contribution to socialist development, they were linked to issues of political loyalty and hardly translated into strong status differentiation. Compared to other post-socialist countries which have experienced skyrocketing inequalities, Slovenia belongs to those countries that managed to keep the inequality level low (Bandelj and Mahutga 2010; Heyns 2005), while the level of government redistribution via taxes and transfers is high (OECD 2015).

When studying moral repertoires of meritocracy in these four countries, we focus on examining people's support for the meritocratic principle and their framings and justifications, which we expect to differ across the different setups.

3.2 *Data*

In line with our twofold research interest – i.e., examining a) support for the meritocratic principle, and b) people's understandings of merit and their justifications of related distributional practices – our methodological approach is based on two kinds of data: quantitative data that enable a representative analysis of country differences in attitudes, and qualitative data that allow us to detect different interpretations of the concept and norm of meritocracy.

For our analysis of the prevalence of meritocratic beliefs, we use data from the European Social Survey 2016 (ESS Round 8). In 2016, the ESS rotating module focused on welfare attitudes, which are of fundamental importance to our study. In more detail, we use respondents' (dis-)agreement with the statement "Large differences in income are acceptable to properly reward differences in talent and efforts". This (dis-)agreement can be expressed on a 5-point scale (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree). The same item was presented to the participants of the democratic forums (see below) in a questionnaire at the beginning of the event, thus allowing a comparison with the opinion patterns in the population. For our descriptive

ESS analysis, we recode this variable into three categories (agree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree). For our multivariate ESS analysis, we use the original 5-point scaled variable with higher values indicating agreement to the statement mentioned above, i.e. stronger inequality-legitimizing meritocratic beliefs.⁴

For our analysis of people's moral repertoires of meritocracy, we use qualitative data from the project "Welfare State Futures: Our Children's Europe" (WelfSOC; for detailed information on the dataset, see appendix). The data were collected in autumn 2015 in so-called democratic forums (DF) in each country. These two-day discussion rounds, which were organized by national research teams with support from research institutes, assembled about 35 citizens in each country to discuss – under light moderation – the future of welfare in their country (partly in plenary sessions, partly in smaller groups). The recruitment strategy (appendix) allows us to differentiate between participants from different social groups. We distinguish between a low status group and a high status group, based on a combined measure of education and income (for details see appendix, Tables A2 and A3). Asking the DF participants to broadly discuss social inequalities and welfare allows us to examine if and how merit and meritocracy were brought up by the participants on their own and in different social contexts without prompting opinions on this topic. The roughly 120 hours of discussions were audio- and video-recorded, transcribed, translated into English and coded for this article using an analytical framework that distinguishes between 'perceptions of meritocracy as a normative principle', 'realization of the principle' and 'constructions of merit', with the possibility of adding further categories and codes inductively.

4 Results: Patterns of Support and Understandings of Meritocracy

4.1 *Patterns of Support for Meritocracy*

The results of our quantitative ESS analysis show pronounced country differences with regard to inequality-legitimizing meritocratic beliefs (see Figure 1): While about 54 percent of British respondents and 52 percent of German respondents state that large differences in income are acceptable to properly

4 In order to deal with missing information in some of our independent variables in the ESS data (mainly income and education), we perform multiple imputation. Our imputation procedure follows Johnson and Young (2011) and results in 100 multiple imputed data sets. These combined multiple imputed data sets are the basis of our quantitative multivariate analysis of the ESS. All quantitative analyses of the ESS are weighted with the post-stratification weight provided by the ESS.

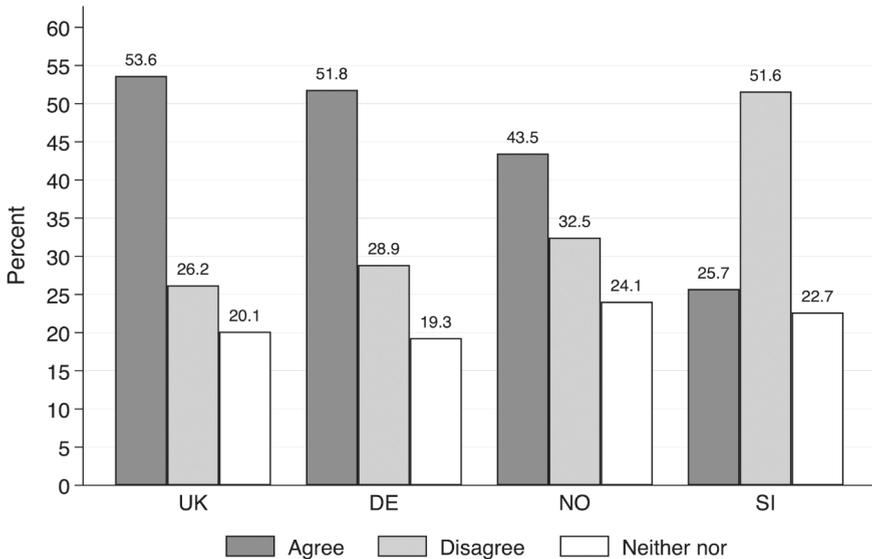


FIGURE 1 Large differences in income are acceptable to reward talents and efforts
ESS 2016, WEIGHTED, OWN CALCULATION

reward talents and efforts, this is true for only about 44 percent of Norwegian respondents and about 26 percent of Slovenian respondents. Additionally, the country differences regarding criticism of meritocratic beliefs are almost a mirror image of the former pattern: a majority of about 52 percent of Slovenian respondents do not think that large differences in income are acceptable to reward talents and efforts, but this opinion is held by only about 33 percent of respondents in Norway, about 29 percent of respondents in Germany and just 26 percent of those in the UK. The share of respondents who do not have a definite view on this topic is very similar in all four countries. It varies between 19 (Germany) and 24 percent (Norway). In sum, we find widespread inequality-legitimizing meritocratic beliefs in the UK and in Germany, while these beliefs are less widespread – but still rather common – in Norway. In this latter country, the difference between the share of those with affirmative and those with critical views on meritocracy is much less pronounced than in the other regions under study. In Slovenia, inequality-legitimizing meritocratic beliefs are relatively rare. Here, a majority holds critical views instead.

In the next step, we focus on differences in meritocratic beliefs between income groups and between educational groups within countries. For this, we estimate country-specific linear regression models.⁵ In these models, a respon-

⁵ We also estimated country-specific ordinal logistic regression models. The results of these models (not shown) do not differ substantially from the results presented below.

dent's (dis-)agreement with the statement "Large differences in income are acceptable to properly reward differences in talent and efforts" is the (5-point scaled) dependent variable with higher values indicating stronger inequality-legitimizing meritocratic beliefs. We are mainly interested in two independent variables, household net income and education. Both variables are grouped in three categories: low, medium and high.⁶ In all models we control for age, gender and employment status (for the operationalization see Table A1 in the appendix).

The results of our regression analysis show significant differences between income groups in all countries under study (see Table 1). After controlling for age, gender, education and employment status, we find that people with a high income hold meritocratic beliefs that are on average 0.43 (UK), 0.31 (Germany), 0.25 (Slovenia) and 0.13 (Norway) scale points stronger than those of people with a low income. In addition, we also find significant (but smaller) differences between those with low and those with medium income. Again, these differences are strongest in the UK (0.19) and weakest in Norway (0.12). We only observe significant differences between educational groups in one country: Norwegians with medium education hold somewhat stronger meritocratic beliefs than Norwegians with other educational levels. Hence, we not only find substantial country differences in support for the meritocratic principle, the level of support also differs within countries according to the respondents' economic position.

These findings are important for gaining an impression of the overall picture of the prevalence of inequality-legitimizing meritocratic beliefs in different countries, and they already point to regime differences – a fact that will be discussed in greater detail below. However, they provide little help in analysing the interpretations and reasoning that people use to make sense of the concepts of meritocracy and merit. For this focus of research, item-based surveys are of limited use and qualitative data is necessary instead. Therefore, in the following subsection, we will turn to the data from the democratic forums. As can be seen in Figure 2, the empirical pattern of support for inequality-legitimizing meritocratic beliefs found among the participants of these democratic forums is very similar to the pattern found in the ESS: the ranking of the countries is identical in both data sources, and also the share of respondents who agree with the statement "Large differences in income are acceptable to properly reward differences in talent and efforts" is very similar in both data sources in almost all countries under study (except Slovenia). Hence, it seems

6 In contrast to our qualitative analysis, we did not use a combined measure of income and education since we have enough cases to estimate the influence of income and education on meritocratic beliefs separately. This provides more detailed quantitative results.

TABLE 1 Influences on inequality-legitimizing meritocratic beliefs (unstandardized coefficients of country-specific linear regressions)

	UK		Germany		Norway		Slovenia	
Household income								
Low income	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)
Medium income	0.19**	(0.011)	0.16**	(0.009)	0.12 ⁺	(0.089)	0.13 ⁺	(0.096)
High income	0.43**	(0.000)	0.31**	(0.000)	0.13 ⁺	(0.090)	0.25**	(0.008)
Education								
Low education	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)
Medium education	0.03	(0.701)	0.02	(0.817)	0.14 ⁺	(0.093)	0.00	(0.981)
High education	-0.09	(0.273)	-0.14	(0.103)	-0.10	(0.270)	0.13	(0.237)
Age								
15-34	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)
35-59	-0.09	(0.217)	0.09	(0.152)	-0.09	(0.222)	-0.30**	(0.000)
60+	-0.06	(0.420)	0.12 ⁺	(0.051)	-0.14 ⁺	(0.057)	-0.25**	(0.003)
Gender								
Male	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)
Female	-0.05	(0.361)	-0.10*	(0.023)	-0.21**	(0.000)	-0.12 ⁺	(0.056)
Employment status								
In paid work	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)	<i>Ref.</i>	(.)
Not in paid work	-0.09	(0.197)	-0.05	(0.356)	0.10	(0.171)	-0.08	(0.317)
Constant	3.26**	(0.000)	3.08**	(0.000)	3.13**	(0.000)	2.83**	(0.000)
Observations	1925		2813		1534		1278	
Adjusted R ²	0.02		0.02		0.02		0.03	

Note: Higher values indicate stronger agreement to the statement "Large differences in income are acceptable to properly reward differences in talent and efforts". Robust standard errors, weighted, with imputations ($m=100$), p -values in parentheses, ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

likely that the kinds of interpretative reasoning found in the qualitative sample to some degree also exist in the quantitative ESS sample and the general population of the countries.

4.2 Moral Repertoires of Framing Meritocracy

4.2.1 United Kingdom (UK)

A highly salient stock of understandings among UK participants was that high earners had done a good job in selling their abilities and efforts on the

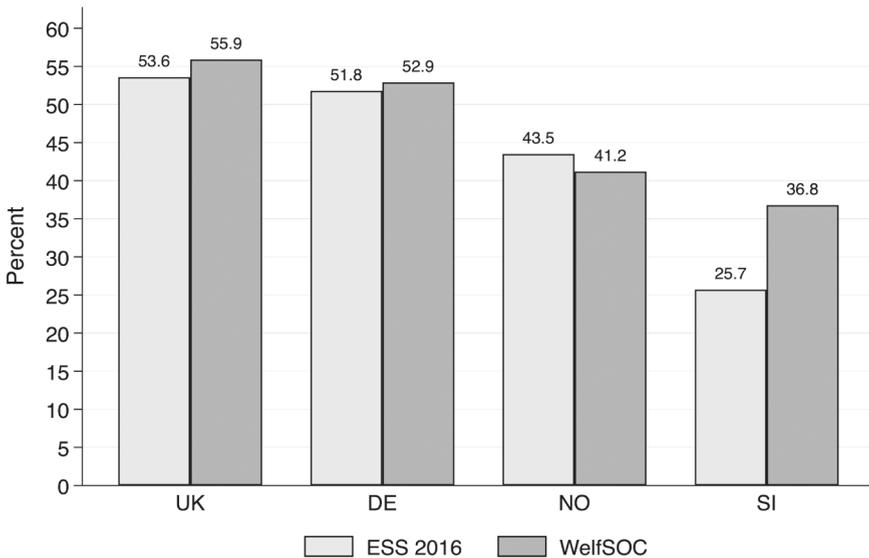


FIGURE 2 Large differences in income are acceptable to reward talents and efforts (share of those who agree or strongly agree)
ESS 2016, WEIGHTED, WELFSOC (PRE-DISCUSSION SURVEY), UNWEIGHTED, OWN CALCULATION

labour market, which is reflected in (even very high) deserved financial rewards. Labour market positions and incomes were consequently understood as indicating individual performance and achievements within a competitive system, and differences in social status and earnings were not only perceived as acceptable but also as reasonable to mirror differences in individual performance. In short, the market was seen as the natural measure to implement the meritocratic principle – and hence those with success at the (job) market were seen as deserving. Other criteria, such as great (physical) effort or the social utility of deeds, only played a very marginal role.

The assumption that *meritocracy equals market success* clearly served as a moral guide for the UK participants: the narrative of status differences as legitimate indicators of different market performance appeared throughout large parts of the discussions. Despite some critical remarks in the direction of football players or bankers, high wages were in general seen as justifiably and fairly reflecting individual success (“if you perform better than the other one, you get more money”). Consequently, debates on income inequalities soon turned away from measures affecting higher income groups and focused particularly on the relationship between lower wages and social benefits. Here, the notion of ‘hard-working’ (but low-earning) individuals was created several times and

positioned against the image of – supposedly lazy – benefit recipients (“I’m going out there working hard and someone is just sitting there not doing anything, earning more than what I’m earning in my wages, that really gets to me, it’s really does get to me”).

All participants seemed to agree that work must pay in the sense that social benefits should be substantially lower than wages, and in the debates they shared a number of salient repertoires to evaluate existing inequalities and distributional processes. Social benefits were not perceived as a means to buffer social risks but as an obstacle to a fair implementation of the meritocratic principle via the market, as they create imbalances between benefit recipients and low earners (“If you’re below a certain income then you get boosted by the government”). Consequently, benefit conditionality and benefit reduction played a crucial role in discussions on policy measures (“It is a shame to know people on benefit getting more than what I earn. Tax them, tax them. [...] Tax their benefit”).

In the discussions, the image of the ‘lazy unemployed’ and criticism of a dis-incentivizing benefit system were particularly stressed by participants who were themselves in a lower social position (“Every time you drive past the Jobcentre [...], they are outside standing with cans of beer at 10 o’clock in the morning”). This might reflect attempts to distance themselves from the ‘inactive’ population. Low earners highlighted their disadvantages compared to benefit recipients, and benefit recipients veiled their circumstances and made a great effort to distance themselves from the ‘lazy unemployed’. One participant with a lower social status described this clash very clearly: “The divide isn’t between the rich and the poor. I think the divide is between the working class and the benefits people. That’s where the divide is.”

The perception of social reality as a divide between the working class and welfare beneficiaries seems to be related to the perceptions of the meritocratic principle within lower social groups, and it is here where we can observe an interesting combination of shared cultural repertoires and diverging usage of these repertoires. The shared baseline for all participants is the narrative of meritocracy as an equivalent of market success. However, in contrast to participants from higher social groups, participants from lower social groups expressed crucial doubts regarding some aspects of the implementation of the meritocratic principle. They do not criticize a lack of opportunities to climb the ladder and receive remuneration for good success on the market, but rather stress the institutional obstacles to a fair reward for hard work in contrast to dis-incentivizing and ‘pampering’ social benefits.

4.2.2 Germany

In contrast to the UK, the German participants did not relate meritocracy to market outcomes and success, but consistently understood it as reflecting individual work effort: deserving is who shows effort and activity. This *work-centred view of meritocracy* served as a clear moral guide, was broadly shared by German DF participants independent of their socio-economic status, political preference, or migration background, and was partly accompanied by a general glorification of work (“work is the elixir of life”).

In line with this work-centred perception of meritocracy, during the debates participants often tried to relate the earnings of occupational groups to their presumed work effort. This shared repertoire served to evaluate inequalities and link them to perceived violations of the meritocratic principle. The overall picture was that some groups – most notably managers, bankers, politicians, high-level officials, and professional sportspersons such as soccer players (“they kick a ball around ... you shouldn’t be able to earn 80 million for doing something like that”) – were deemed as earning too much compared to their individual effort. This common understanding of ‘merit’ in terms of work effort was partly supplemented by other criteria. Most notably, participants occasionally interpreted merit in terms of ‘social utility’, but usually in combination with work effort. This was especially the case for unpaid care, family and household work as well as for educational, medical and nursing occupations.

While the understanding of merit as work effort was shared and broadly supported by all social groups in the German DF, the interpretations of what work effort actually means differed among social groups. For example, DF participants with a higher social status pleaded for differentiation in terms of individual ‘performance’ and ‘achievement’ and supported performance-based pay (“Some people really do their best and do a great job in a position, and others sit there like a rock and do nothing, but at the end of the month, they get the same amount of money. That is a major example of inequality”). By contrast, participants from the low-income group interpreted work effort often in terms of ‘hard work’ and especially highlighted the work efforts in traditional crafts (“I think it’s totally unfair that the baker, who is there from 3 AM and stays until 5 PM [...], they earn very little money [...]. Those who achieve more should get more, but for those who still work hard and make something of themselves, they should be better supported”).

Another difference between participants with higher and lower social status was visible regarding the importance of educational qualifications and certificates. Participants with a higher social status insisted that pay should be

dependent on educational qualifications (“If someone does very simple work and gets less money compared to someone who did a lot to get where he is through study and so on, that person gets more. In that sense, it’s appropriate that this person gets more – it should be more, because he invested more”). In contrast, participants with lower income argued that actual work effort should play a larger role (“Those with poor grades can often do a job just as well as someone who got all A’s in school”).

Across all social groups, and despite their general support for a work-based principle of meritocracy, many DF participants also raised concerns regarding the realization of this principle, especially in two respects. First, almost all participants agreed that economic inequalities had become too large over the past decades (“When I think of Winterkorn, the VW manager who stepped down who earned 16 or 17 million in one year – that is completely out of proportion with the workers who are employed there in the company and manufacture the cars”). The second arena where the meritocratic principle was viewed to be violated by many DF participants was the welfare state. There was a widespread sense of unfairness and injustice regarding social policies in various fields, especially education, healthcare, and old-age pensions. The overarching notion behind this criticism seems to be that due to recent social policy reforms – which had aimed at more individual responsibility for private provision and had introduced basic security benefits in pensions and unemployment protection (Heuer and Mau 2017) – and due to privileges for public servants and several occupational groups, the core principle of conservative-corporatist welfare states that status differences in the labour market should be reflected in social benefit levels had been increasingly eroded. Thus, many DF participants found some social group compared to which they felt they were being unfairly treated by the welfare state (cf. also Heuer, Mau and Zimmermann 2018).

4.2.3 Norway

By and large, the Norwegian participants had ambivalent attitudes towards meritocracy. The idea that individual effort needs to be rewarded financially was generally supported by most participants; however, it became clear in the discussions that these rewards should be kept within certain limits. These concerns have been coined the egalitarian objection to meritocracy, meaning that overall inequality is too large and should be limited (Liu 2017). We also found that people emphasize a social utility perspective, i.e. individual efforts should contribute to society as a whole. Perceived as deserving were thus those who show individual efforts for the common good. Hence, the Norwegian perception of meritocracy followed a ‘*common good*’ logic, while market outcomes

and success played a subordinate role or were even regarded as morally reprehensible.

The debates in the democratic forum rested on the shared understanding that equality is a value in itself and that the state should equalize market-produced inequalities. Although some people defended inequalities as drivers of effort and productivity (“[W]e have to create inequalities in order to have an incitement for people to work”), these statements only referred to moderate inequalities. It was not even necessary for the participants to come to an understanding about how to deal with large inequalities, as these were seen as not being part of Norwegian social reality and culture – and also should not be (“the consensus in Norway isn’t that of super greed and hogging”, “[S]ince the differences are smaller in Norway than many other places, we have to make some adjustments at the top and the bottom, overall, to keep the inequality growth at a minimum”). Hence, the debates were not about high inequalities but rather about the question whether any inequalities at all are positive or negative (“There will always be some differences, but I believe the goal for the future is to minimize or remove the silliest ones”).

This moral assumption on low income inequalities clearly shapes people’s understanding of meritocracy and is also reflected in the frequently voiced demand for ‘equal pay for equal work’. Here it became clear that many DF participants perceived that wages do not reflect individual work efforts. The debates revealed a strongly proportional understanding of merit, where generalized principles should apply and equal achievements should go hand in hand with equal rewards. This is expressed with regard to gender inequalities, but also with regard to wage differences between work in the public and private sectors (“When I brought up equal pay for equal work, I meant to talk about the private versus the public. Regardless of where you do the same job you should earn the same”). At the same time, particular meritocratic mechanisms were favoured, for instance with regard to educational achievements (“It should pay to get an education”) or with regard to individual effort (“Even if one works in the same division and does the same job, you execute it differently, some are slow workers, others are fast, some people don’t show up on time and such. Others are innovative, try to improve things. Shouldn’t they have the carrot to be rewarded a little higher?”).

However, although most participants agreed that educational achievements and individual efforts should be rewarded in some way, they only played a minor role in the debates. In contrast, the repertoire of the ‘common good’ was highlighted several times as a crucial criterion to justify merit or to criticize undeserved advantages (“Those who earn a lot, many of them earn more than they should compared to what they do to contribute”, “[J]obs like nurses,

teachers, police, the ones who offer services that benefit society, can't afford to live in the cities anymore"). The extent to which certain professions contribute to society seemed to be highly relevant for the Norwegian participants, and here the indignation regarding inequalities was particularly pronounced ("Lawyers, brokers, they get these high wages while the majority gets medium to low wages. Groups which the society really needs: Different healthcare workers, teachers in nursery school, primary school. [...] The market forces, so highly regarded, don't work in this case. The people we really need don't get the wage increase you would believe they should have gotten").

4.2.4 Slovenia

Slovenia clearly stood out among the four countries, because the *meritocratic principle* – in any form whatsoever – did not play a role in the discussions: there was not a single reference to the notion that individual earnings do, or should, reflect differences in talent, effort, performance or achievement. In fact, terms such as merit, performance, achievement, output, effort, contribution or talent were not used at all, or, if so, not applied to individuals but to occupational groups or society as a whole – and hence the concept of individual deservingness did not apply. Instead, two other principles were very salient: a strong orientation towards the collective, and a strong preference for equality – which seemed to be viewed as both contributing to the 'common good', but also as a value in itself.

The central role of the collective was illustrated by the fact that not the individual but the state or society were common starting points and main points of reference in the DF discussions. For example, DF participants frequently took a macroeconomic perspective and used arguments from demand-side economics to argue for certain (usually inequality-decreasing) policies such as raising the minimum wage or taxing wealth and luxury items ("More money will be spent, more will be consumed, and everyone will have enough work"). Slovenian DF participants also occasionally equated human society to a human body in which all parts fulfil a certain function for overall wellbeing ("Because we all work together, right. In one state, all of us are one body. And the body needs all the structures. All the structures need to survive, so that our little finger works normally, even the brain. And we all need that as a basis").

This orientation towards the collective turned out as a salient shared moral repertoire that played a crucial role for participants' evaluation of income and wealth distribution. A strong preference for low levels of inequality ("No, I do not agree with this system, I support, let's call it, equal ones") was observable in the Slovenian debates. Yet, while common indicators of income distribution suggest that Slovenia is one of the most equal countries in the OECD world,

the DF participants argued that society is divided “between the rich and those that don’t have anything”, and that “the differences between the rich and the poor are getting bigger and bigger”, with “the middle class [...] vanishing” (“And if we observe it as a metaphor of a body, what would this mean for the body. It’s decay, right? Of the body”). More generally, people seemed to take it for granted that equality is desirable, and thus this served as the common point of reference for economic, social and political considerations.

Undermining (positive) references to the meritocratic principle was not only the absence of any individual ascriptions of merit, but also the shared notion that wealth is the result of questionable, if not outright illegal, practices. DF participants argued that political and economic elites use their power to distribute wealth among themselves, often using corruption or theft (“There’s enough money, it’s just not distributed correctly. Stolen. Let them bring back what they’ve taken out and we’ll all live like in Switzerland, I guarantee”). Accordingly, when DF participants were asked to develop policy priorities regarding inequalities, all groups independently developed more or less the same priorities: raising the minimum wage; taxing wealth and luxury items; and fixing a low wage ratio between the highest and the lowest earners (including fixed shares of groups in between). This also displays a broad distrust of market mechanisms and a high propensity for political planning and regulation.

This negative view of wealth and inequalities was backed up by further shared repertoires, namely references to the former socialist regime, which was deemed more cooperative and more equal (“Basically, at the time, I felt as a member of that team and we were fighting to be successful, because we knew that the differences in wages were not such, everyone contributed something to our work and that’s why the achievements were visible”). According to DF participants, back then workers were seen as a productive part of the collective, not primarily as a cost factor (“Nowadays workers in the production sector are no longer seen as part of the company’s staff and collective, but as a cost, and such thinking should be stopped. One has to work on values, human values and not the value of profit”). Accordingly, DF participants criticized capitalism for destroying human values such as honesty, compassion and respect (“I think that we shouldn’t just let this capitalist selfishness expand indefinitely and destroy everything that can be destroyed, but that we need to go back a bit to those socialist, positive, human values”).

If one tries to find small traces of ‘merit constructions’ in the DF statements, then education and work effort would arguably form the basis for merit. For instance, in debates about the minimum wage, one participant argued that raising the minimum wage for less-educated people would require corresponding wage raises for people in higher income brackets to reflect their higher

education. At another point in the discussion, Slovenians were portrayed as hard-working, yet sheepish towards any rulers (“And I guess we are a nation with very low self-esteem, we consider ourselves to be second-rate people [...]” “But we are hard working.” “We are hard-working, but ...” “Hard-working, but also obedient like sheep, and if one decides to jump off a bridge, others will follow mindlessly”).

5 Discussion

This article started from the idea that what people find appropriate, fair and legitimate is impregnated by the notions prevailing within their society and stabilized by its institutions, and hence differs across institutional contexts. We have used the term moral repertoire to highlight the stock of understandings as well as types of reasoning and justifications people draw on when framing (or criticizing) meritocracy, and argued that these understandings are rooted in the institutional setup of welfare and (re)distribution. Understanding how people view and frame the principle of meritocracy can thus help to make sense of different patterns of (dis)affirmation. Hence, in order to contribute to a better understanding of the notions of meritocracy within and across different institutional contexts, we set out to study the support for the meritocratic principle and which underlying moral repertoires people use when debating inequalities in four different countries with diverging institutional setups: UK, Germany, Norway and Slovenia.

Our analysis of data from the ESS 2016 showed strongest support for the meritocratic principle in the UK, followed by Germany, Norway and Slovenia – a pattern that roughly mirrors the degree of economic inequalities in these countries. Furthermore, in all countries we found that well-off individuals hold stronger meritocratic beliefs than their less affluent counterparts. This difference was most accentuated in the UK and least pronounced in Norway and Slovenia.

Our second empirical focus turned away from the support for the meritocratic principle towards people’s understandings of merit and their justifications – or criticism – of economic inequalities using qualitative data from democratic forums. Here, we found large differences in popular perceptions, interpretations and assessments of meritocracy, especially between – but partly also within – countries: in Britain, we observed a strong belief in the allocative mechanisms of the market; in Germany a dominant understanding of meritocracy was that rewards should reflect individual work effort; in Norway

people referred to the notion of social utility and a 'common good'; and in Slovenia we found that meritocracy was a non-salient issue in the inequality discourse and people focused on collectivism and reducing inequality.

Most interestingly, these findings correspond with the argument that there is a link between institutional setups (that embody certain moral principles) and historical path dependencies, and people's attitudinal stances: the strong market orientation in the UK links to the liberal market economy and the liberal welfare state in this country, the work-centred views in Germany to the status-oriented conservative welfare tradition, the common-good orientation in Norway to an equality-oriented social democratic pattern, and the salience of collectivism in Slovenia to a certain post-socialist tradition. Our analytical and empirical focus did not allow us to examine if and how country-specific institutional setups do actually produce the observed country-specific notions towards meritocracy. Nevertheless, it is particularly noteworthy in this regard that the notion of 'moral repertoires' – combining insights from research on both moral economies and cultural repertoires – proved to be rather useful, because in the discussion people indeed seemed to rely on a common stock of analytical heuristics and normative criteria that did not have to be explained or justified since they formed part of a joint stock of references and assessments – and these seem to be linked to country-specific setups. For instance, in the UK a joint repertoire by the participants was that individual earnings on the market reflect underlying talent or efforts, making even high economic inequalities legitimate, and in Norway participants kept recurring to equality and individual contributions to the common good as a basis for rewards. These repertoires served as a basis for people's evaluation of distributional processes and the role of meritocracy in these processes.

These qualitative findings also help to make sense of the country-specific patterns of (dis)affirmation of meritocracy which were discussed in the first empirical step of this article on the basis of survey data. Here we observed strong support for the meritocracy-item in UK and (slightly weaker) in Germany – a finding that was mirrored by the debates in the two countries. The market-oriented understanding of meritocracy in the UK and the work-related understanding in Germany also link well to the 'mainstream concept' of meritocracy as rewarding talents and efforts as it is also used in the ESS-item, which might also contribute to why we find high levels of support to the item in these countries. This is clearly different for Norway and Slovenia: the dominant Norwegian understanding of meritocracy as a system to reward contributions to the common good in the debates does not link to the wording in the ESS-question and hence fits with the only moderate support in Norway we

found in our quantitative analysis, and the absence of support for the meritocratic principle as such in Slovenia also links well to the low support in the ESS data for the country. In a nutshell, we can hence state that our analyses of the debates support our quantitative findings and help to understand the different answer-patterns in the four countries, as we observed shared repertoires in each country that relate to specific understandings of meritocracy.

However, the existence of shared understandings and commonly deployed moral repertoires within countries does not mean that all participants in the discussion groups had similar attitudinal stances towards meritocracy. In contrast, particularly in Germany and the UK we could observe that participants from different social groups expressed different positions towards and perceptions of meritocracy and its implementation. However – and this is one of the core findings of our analysis – these different perceptions are still rooted in the same shared understandings of merit and related distributive principles. In other words: the country-specific shared images served as a baseline and provided the repertoire on which the participants drew selectively to morally justify their positions.

This selective access to shared repertoires was particularly visible in the German case, where some participants with higher formal education expressed a markedly different position towards the role of education in the context of merit than other participants with lower education – but both groups argued on the basis of the shared concept of work effort. They agreed that invested time and effort should be a crucial factor for determining merit, but the higher-educated group emphasized previously invested time and effort (e.g., during studies), while those with lower education stressed the role of current effort and argued that “Those with poor grades can often do a job just as well as someone who got all A’s in school”. In the UK, a similar pattern of selective application of a joint moral repertoire was observable, as both higher and lower social groups agreed that the market should be the main source of redistribution, but they differed with regard to their sense-making of this market-based perception of merit: While for participants with a higher social status it was easy to argue that higher positions adequately reflect strong individual performance and individual market success, participants with a lower social status clearly struggled to align their market-based understanding of merit with their own position. Consequently, a common pattern of reasoning among them was that the welfare state is an obstacle to a proper implementation of the meritocratic principle, as it creates disincentives and imbalances between benefit recipients and low earners. Table 2 summarizes our findings.

TABLE 2 Summary of empirical results for a) support for the meritocratic principle in the population and b) the moral repertoires of meritocracy and related justifications in democratic forums

	UK	Germany	Norway	Slovenia
Patterns of (dis)affirmation in ESS 2016 to meritocracy-item	Very strong support, strongest among high income groups	Very strong support, strongest among high income groups	Mixed support and criticism, strongest support among high income groups	Low support, strongest among high income groups
Acceptance of meritocratic principle in democratic forum	Very high	High	Mixed	Not salient
Understanding of meritocracy in democratic forum	Market success adequately reflects individual performance	Individual work effort should be reflected in remuneration	Individual work effort and social utility should be reflected in remuneration; equality as a crucial value	Meritocracy as normative principle not relevant (no individual ascriptions); ruled out by equality and collectivism
Perceived realization of meritocracy in democratic forum	Generally well-functioning; welfare system as obstacle to full realization (due to disincentives to work)	Not fully realized: economic inequalities too high; welfare entitlements not properly reflecting individual merit	Rising income inequalities undermine socially beneficial application of meritocracy	Even if meritocracy was desirable, the existing corruption and abuse of power by elites would undermine its realization
Group differences in democratic forum	Lower social groups emphasize institutional barriers of the welfare system to a proper implementation of the meritocratic principle; resulting in divide between working class and welfare recipients	Different interpretations of work effort in higher and lower social groups (achievements vs. hard work), and different views on the preferred role of educational qualifications	Not observed	Not observed
General characterization	Market success meritocracy	Work-centred meritocracy	Common good meritocracy	[Meritocracy not a salient issue]

SOURCE: OWN DATA.

In sum, by combining a quantitative analysis of patterns of support for meritocracy with an exploratory qualitative analysis of patterns of reasoning about meritocracy and constructions of merit, this article offers new insights for research on meritocracy: *First*, we show that moral repertoires for making sense of meritocracy differ markedly across the four countries under study, which points to the need for developing more fine-grained analytical tools to study understandings of merit and framings of meritocracy. *Second*, by employing the concept of moral repertoires we are able to account for the observation that there seems to be a joint stock of understandings of meritocracy, but that different social groups make different uses of this joint stock, related to their position in the inequality and welfare regime. And *third*, we are able to show that not only the construction of merit itself has an impact on assessments of meritocracy, but also perceptions of the realization of meritocracy and its causes, which points to the need to take these perceived realizations of meritocracy into account. The main limitation of our study design – which does not allow us to examine if and how country-specific institutional setups do actually produce the observed distinct constructions of merit and perceptions of meritocracy – is a case in point for spelling out the concept of moral repertoires of meritocracy in more detail in future research. We hence hope that our study offers fruitful insights for scholars working on social inequalities, welfare states, and cultural sociology.

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Appendix: Extended Information on Methods and Data Collection

Operationalization and Summary Statistics of the Quantitative Analysis

TABLE A1 Operationalization and summary statistics of the ESS sample (unweighted, with imputed data)

Original Variable	Recoded Variable	UK %	DE %	NO %	SI %
<i>Meritocratic beliefs</i>	See text	See text	See text	See text	See text
<i>Household net income</i>					
Respondents self-classification to country-specific deciles	Low: 1st to 4th decile	47.4	34.5	43.2	44.9
	Medium: 5th to 7th decile	27.8	31.2	32.5	33.9
	High: 8th and 10th decile	24.9	34.4	24.3	21.2
<i>Highest level of education</i>					
ISCED classification	Low: ISCED I, II	33.5	11.9	18.0	21.7
	Medium: ISCED IIIa, IIIb, IV	38.8	62.4	43.1	59.2
	High: V1, V2	27.7	25.7	38.9	19.1

TABLE A1 Operationalization and summary statistics of the ESS sample (*cont.*)

Original Variable	Recoded Variable	UK %	DE %	NO %	SI %
<i>Age (in years) at the time of the interview</i>					
metric	15-35 years	22.6	26.4	30.3	26.1
	36-59 years	39.9	42.9	42.2	42.5
	60 years or older	37.5	30.7	27.5	31.4
<i>Sex of respondent</i>					
Male	Male	44.5	52.9	53.7	45.8
Female	Female	55.5	47.1	46.3	54.2
<i>Current Employment status</i>					
1 Paid work	In paid work: 1	51.5	53.6	58.6	47.4
2 Education	Not in paid work: 2-7	49.1	46.4	41.4	52.7
3 Unemployed					
4 Permanently sick/ disabled					
5 Retired					
6 Housework					
7 Other					

Data Gathering for the Qualitative Analysis

The data analysed in the article was gathered in the context of the NORFACE-funded project “Welfare State Futures: Our Children’s Europe” (WelfSOC), which used innovative qualitative methods to examine citizens’ attitudes towards the welfare state, particularly their aspirations for the future of the welfare state in their country (blogs.kent.ac.uk/welfsoc). Under the lead of the coordinator Peter Taylor-Gooby (University of Kent), national teams in five European countries (Denmark, Germany, Norway, Slovenia, UK)⁷ conducted large group discussions in each country: so called Deliberative Forums (DF). Based on the agreed structure and in close cooperation with the national research teams, professional research agencies organised the recruitment,

⁷ For the article, four countries representing different political economies and welfare state regimes were included in the analysis (Germany, Norway, Slovenia, UK), whereas the other Scandinavian country (Denmark) was excluded.

organised the events, moderated the discussions and provided audio- and video recording as well as transcripts and English translations of all group discussions.

The DFs took place in November 2015 in Berlin (Germany), Oslo (Norway), Ljubljana (Slovenia) and Birmingham (UK) for two full Saturdays⁸ and were organised by the research agencies IPSOS (Germany), Kantar TNS (Norway), Aragon (Slovenia), and TNS BMRB (UK). In Germany, the DF took place in the facilities of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, in Slovenia in the 'M hotel', in Norway at the Norwegian Institute for Social Research, and in the UK in the 'Campanile Hotel'. The recruitment was organised by the research agencies, using professional recruitment databases. The participants received a financial incentive after the event. Participants had been recruited with the aim to assemble a 'mini-public' roughly representative of the population of the respective countries, with recruitments criteria being based on gender, age, educational qualification, employment status, family status, children in the household, household net income, migration background, and political orientation (see list of participants below). In Germany, 34 people participated in the DF, in Slovenia 37, in Norway 34 (32 on day two), in the UK 34.

The structure of the DF was the same in all countries. When participants arrived at the venue on day 1, they were welcomed and given a survey questionnaire with socio-demographic questions and items from the European Social Survey welfare attitudes module (ESS Round 4, 2008) as well as items from the International Survey Social Programme (ISSP) and by the WelfSOC co-ordination team (e.g. on parental leave). A morning plenary session followed with a brief introduction to the format and the topic, and a brainstorming on associations that participants have when they hear the word 'welfare state', and what they considered relevant for discussion in the DF. Moderators and researchers grouped the topics during a short break and distilled overall topics on which participants could then vote. The five most prominent topics were selected for further discussion on day 1. In Slovenia, these were health, employment, education and early education, elderly care, and values, rights and duties. In Germany, participants had selected the topics inequality and basic social security, labour markets and employment, families, retirement and intergenerational issues, health care, and immigration and refugees. In Norway, the topics included work/employment, education, financing, health as well as environment. In the UK, the five selected themes were immigration, welfare state financing, unemployment, overcrowding/ageing population, lack of/access to education. The selected topics were then discussed in three breakout groups per country (11-14 participants per breakout-group).

In all countries, each of the three breakout groups was formed around a 'core group' consisting of people from a specific socio-demographic group, while the other

⁸ November 7th and 21st in Berlin, October 24th and November 7th in Oslo, November 14th and 28th in Ljubljana, and October 17th and 31st in Birmingham.

participants were allocated to the three breakouts randomly but with an eye towards creating a broad mixture of persons regarding age, gender, educational qualifications etc. The three 'core groups' were: 1) self-employed persons, 2) persons from ethnic minorities, and 3) unemployed persons or persons in precarious employment. During the DF, groups were only referred to by a randomly assigned colour and participants seemed not to be aware of the allocation criteria.

During day 1, the participants discussed in the breakout-groups the five selected topics, with only loose moderation by professional moderators from the research agencies. There were no prompts by moderators regarding inequality or meritocracy (nor any other topic), so moderators only picked up participants' statements. Members of the research teams were present in the rooms but did not intervene. In the afternoon, all participants came back to a plenary session where they exchanged views and discussed the in their group's eyes most important topics.

Between day 1 and day 2, the recruitment agencies sent the participants a document with background information ('expert input') from the research teams. This information was explicitly focussing on five topics that had been selected by all WelfSOC researchers in advance, in order to have the same topics for discussion on day 2 in all five countries. These topics were: work and occupation, inequalities, immigration, gender equality, and intergenerational equality. Day 2 started with a plenary session and an expert presentation by members of the research teams, followed by a Q&A session. Afterwards, participants again gathered in the same breakout-groups and discussed the five topics selected for day 2. The groups were asked to formulate a few policy guidelines for each of the five topics that should be brought to the plenary session at the end of day 2. In this plenary session, the policy guidelines were briefly presented and then participants could vote on them. At the end of day 2, the participants were asked to fill in again the same survey-questionnaire as in the beginning of day 1.

Data Processing

Status Group Assignment in the Qualitative Sample

For the purpose of the analysis in the present article, the participants in the four countries were assigned to two status group (low and high), based on the information on their educational level and income. In a first step, all education and income levels in the four countries were classified as either low, medium or high. Here, also country-specific particularities of the education system and income distribution were taken into account (Table A2). This classification served as a basis for assigning the participants to either the low or the high status group in a second step. Participants with a low income and low or medium education, or a low education and a low or medium income were assigned to the low status group, while participants with either high income or high education (or both high) were assigned to the high status group (Table A3).

TABLE A2 Classification of household's net income and education in the qualitative sample

	Germany		UK		Norway		Slovenia	
	Education	Income	Education	Income	Education	Income	Education	Income
Low	Below A levels	< 2100 €	Lower secondary, primary, or less	Decile 1-4	Lower secondary, primary, or less	Decile 1-4	Below secondary	Decile 1-4
Medium	A levels	2100-4000	Upper secondary	Decile 5-8	Upper secondary	Decile 5-7	Secondary	Decile 5-7
High	University degree	> 4000	Tertiary	Decile 9-10	Tertiary	Decile 8-10	Tertiary	Decile 8-10

TABLE A3 Status groups in the qualitative sample (operationalization and number of cases)

	GER ^[a]	UK	NO	SI
Low status group				
- low income + low education	10	12	11	13
- low income + medium education				
- low education + medium income				
High status group				
- high income + any education	24	22	23	25
- high education + any income				

[a] In Germany, two participants were manually assigned to the low status group based on occupation and qualitative evaluation

Coding Process of Qualitative Data

For the qualitative analysis of citizens' understandings and assessments of meritocracy, a Qualitative Content Analysis on the full material of the DF in the four countries (i.e., transcripts of roughly 120 hours of discussions in both plenary sessions and smaller groups) was conducted that combined deductive/a-priori with inductive categories/codes. The basic analytical framework was derived from the research question, thus distinguishing between three issues: 1) perceptions of meritocracy as a normative principle, 2) realization of this principle, and 3) constructions of merit.

The first two issues are closely related to one another, as they focus on how people assess the principle of meritocracy normatively (i.e. favourable or critical), and what this means for how they judge the practical realization of this principle in their country. The first aspect is directly connected to the statistical analysis of the ESS survey item, and the focus was here on three aspects: a) how people generally judge or evaluate meritocracy (e.g. positively/favourably, negatively/critically) and what reasons they give for their judgments, b) how people understand and judge the link between inequality and meritocracy (e.g. how large inequalities in social positions and income differentials should be in relation to different inputs such as talent or effort), and c) in which social areas (e.g. income, health, politics etc.) people see meritocracy as particularly reasonable or problematic. The second issue was based on the finding from the literature that even if people have a positive notion of meritocracy as a normative principle, they are often sceptical about the realization of this principle, and they offer various reasons for why they see this principle as not being sufficiently realized in their country. For the third issue, a-priori categories were derived from the theoretical and empirical literature on 'constructions of merit', which resulted initially in five domains – work effort, education/qualifications, compensation/pay, social utility, and self-realization – and two basic approaches for the translation of merits into rewards: a) outcome-oriented, i.e. rewards automatically reflect merits; and b) process-oriented, i.e., rewards do not necessarily reflect merits.

With this basic categorical framework, roughly 30% of the material in each of the four countries was coded, and additional codes were created inductively to add new aspects or to specify existing ones. This was done by two persons, who afterwards reviewed their allocating of codes and their creation of new codes in order to create a final coding scheme, which was then applied in a second round of coding to the whole material (also to those parts that had been coded before). For all categories/codes, explicit definitions, anchor examples, and coding rules were specified to increase inter-coder reliability. In a third step, the codes and the underlying text were analysed by the research team via a comparison and contrasting of codes and statements among different countries, status groups and individual participants.

List of DF-Participants

Note: there are minor variations in the data gathered in each country, according to national research practice.

TABLE A4 Participants in Germany

Participant number	Vote for party in next election	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Work status	Household's total net income, all sources	Migration background
P01	SPD	Female	45-54	Tertiary	Unemployed, looking for job	<1400 € (1 + 2 Decile)	No
P02	CDU	Female	35-44	Lower secondary	Unemployed, looking for job	1400-2100 € (3 + 4 Decile)	No
P03	SPD + Grüne	Female	Under 24	Upper secondary	In full-time	<1400 € (1 + 2 Decile)	Yes
P04	Piraten	Female	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	2800-4000 € (7 + 8 Decile)	No
P05	Grüne	Female	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	2100-2800 € (5 + 6 Decile)	Yes
P06	SPD	Female	35-44	Upper secondary	Working part time	2800-4000 € (7 + 8 Decile)	Yes
P07	Linke + Grüne	Female	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	2100-2800 € (5 + 6 Decile)	No
P08	Linke	Female	Under 24	Upper secondary	Working part time	1400-2100 € (3 + 4 Decile)	Yes
P09	SPD	Female	25-34	Tertiary	Unemployed, looking for job	1400-2100 € (3 + 4 Decile)	No
P10	SPD	Female	55-64	Lower secondary	Retired	1400-2100 € (3 + 4 Decile)	No
P11	CDU	Female	65+	Tertiary	Retired	2100-2800 € (5 + 6 Decile)	No
P12	CDU	Female	25-34	Upper secondary	Stay at home to look after family	2100-2800 € (5 + 6 Decile)	No
P13	CDU	Female	25-34	Lower secondary	Working part time	<1400 € (1 + 2 Decile)	Yes
P14	CDU	Female	25-34	Lower secondary	Working full time	4000-5000 € (9 Decile)	No
P15	CDU	Female	45-54	Lower secondary	Stay at home to look after family	2100-2800 € (5 + 6 Decile)	No

TABLE A4 Participants in Germany (*cont.*)

Participant number	Vote for party in next election	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Work status	Household's total net income, all sources	Migration background
P16	CDU	Female	Under 24	Upper secondary	In full-time	2100-2800 € (5 + 6 Decile)	No
P17	SPD	Female	65+	Tertiary	Retired	2800-4000 € (7 + 8 Decile)	No
P18	AfD	Male	45-54	Lower secondary	Permanently sick or disabled	<1400 € (1 + 2 Decile)	No
P19	Linke	Male	25-34	Lower secondary	Working part time	1400-2100 € (3 + 4 Decile)	Yes
P20	SPD	Male	25-34	Tertiary	Working full time	2100-2800 € (5 + 6 Decile)	No
P21	CDU	Male	35-44	Upper secondary	Working full time	2800-4000 € (7 + 8 Decile)	Yes
P22	FDP	Male	Under 24	Upper secondary	Working full time	2100-2800 € (5 + 6 Decile)	Yes
P23	SPD	Male	65+	Lower secondary	Retired	2100-2800 € (5 + 6 Decile)	No
P24	SPD	Male	55-64	Tertiary	Working full time	4000-5000 € (9 Decile)	No
P26	CDU	Male	25-34	Lower secondary	Working full time	4000-5000 € (9 Decile)	No
P27	FDP	Male	65+	Tertiary	Retired	>5000 € (10 Decile)	No
P28	CDU	Male	65+	Lower secondary	Retired	2100-2800 € (5 + 6 Decile)	No
P29	CDU	Male	35-44	Tertiary	Working full time	>5000 € (10 Decile)	No
P30	SPD	Male	25-34	Lower secondary	Working full time	4000-5000 € (9 Decile)	No
P31	SPD	Male	45-54	Lower secondary	Working part time	>5000 € (10 Decile)	No
P32	CDU	Male	65+	Tertiary	Retired	2800-4000 € (7 + 8 Decile)	No

TABLE A4 Participants in Germany (*cont.*)

Participant number	Vote for party in next election	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Work status	Household's total net income, all sources	Migration background
P33	Piraten	Male	45-54	Lower secondary	Working full time	<1400 € (1 + 2 Decile)	No
P34	Grüne	Male	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	2800-4000 € (7 + 8 Decile)	No
P35	CDU	Female	Under 24	Upper secondary	Working part time	>5000 € (10 Decile)	No

TABLE A5 Participants in Norway

Reference	Vote for party in next election	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Work status	Household's total net income, all sources	Ethnic minority
No-01	Labour	Female	Under 24	Tertiary	In full-time	No answer	No
No-02	Labour	Female	25-34	Tertiary	In full-time	M – 4th decile	No
No-03	Conservative Party	Female	25-34	Tertiary	Working full time	No answer	No answer
No-04	Red Party	Female	25-34	Tertiary	Working full time	F – 5th decile	No
No-05	Labour	Female	35-44	Upper secondary	Working full time	C – 3rd decile	Yes
No-06	Labour	Female	35-44	Tertiary	Working part time	C – 3rd decile	Yes
No-07	Conservative Party	Male	Under 24	Tertiary	Working part time	R – 2nd decile	No
No-08	Christian Democrats	Male	25-34	Tertiary	In full-time	M – 4th decile	No
No-09	Conservative Party	Male	25-34	Tertiary	Working full time	H – 10th decile	No
No-10	Liberal Party	Male	25-34	Tertiary	In full-time	S – 6th decile	No
No-11	Conservative Party	Male	25-34	Tertiary	Working full time	P – 8th decile	No

TABLE A5 Participants in Norway (*cont.*)

Reference	Vote for party in next election	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Work status	Household's total net income, all sources	Ethnic minority
No-12	Labour	Female	25-34	Tertiary	Working part time	R – 2nd decile	Yes
No-13	Socialist Left	Female	25-34	Tertiary	In full-time	M – 4th decile	No
No-14	Conservative Party	Female	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	P – 8th decile	No
No-15	Centre Party	Female	35-44	Tertiary	Permanently sick or disabled	R – 2nd decile	No
No-16	Labour	Female	45-54	Tertiary	Working part time	P – 8th decile	No
No-17	Liberal Party	Male	Under 24	Upper secondary	In full-time	J – 1st decile	Yes
No-18	Labour	Male	25-34	Upper secondary	Working full time	R – 2nd decile	Yes
No-19	Conservative Party	Female	35-44	Tertiary	Stay at home to look after house/ family	S – 6th decile	Yes
No-20	Labour	Female	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	H – 10th decile	No
No-21	Conservative Party	Male	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	H – 10th decile	No
No-22	Conservative Party	Male	55-64	Tertiary	Working full time	D – 9th decile	No
No-23	Labour	Male	Under 24	Tertiary	Working full time	P – 8th decile	Yes
No-24	Conservative Party	Male	25-34	Tertiary	In full-time	R – 2nd decile	No
No-25	Progress Party	Male	35-44	Tertiary	Working part time	S – 6th decile	No
No-26	Conservative Party	Female	45-54	Tertiary	Permanently sick or disabled	F – 5th decile	No
No-27	Red Party	Female	35-44	Tertiary	Unemployed, looking for job	C – 3rd decile	No
No-28	Labour	Female	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	H – 10th decile	No

TABLE A5 Participants in Norway (*cont.*)

Reference	Vote for party in next election	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Work status	Household's total net income, all sources	Ethnic minority
No-29	Labour	Female	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	M – 4th decile	No
No-30	Labour	Female	65+	Tertiary	Retired	D – 9th decile	No
No-31	Socialist Left	Female	65+	Tertiary	Retired	S – 6th decile	No
No-32	Labour	Male	55-64	Primary	Permanently sick or disabled	R – 2nd decile	No
No-33	Labour	Male	65+	Tertiary	Retired	K – 7th decile	No
No-34	Conservative Party	Male	65+	Tertiary	Retired	P – 8th decile	No

TABLE A6 Participants in Slovenia

Reference	Political orientation	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Work status	Number of children under 16 in household	Household's total net income, all sources	Ethnic minority
Sl-50	Middle	Male	35-44	Tertiary	Working full time	2	P – 8th decile	No
Sl-51	Middle	Male	25-34	Secondary	Unemployed	0	S – 6th decile	No
Sl-52	I don't care about politics	Male	35-44	Secondary	Unemployed	3 or more	R – 2nd decile	No
Sl-53	Right	Female	55-64	Secondary	Unemployed	No answer	No answer	No
Sl-54	Right	Female	45-54	Secondary	Retired	0	S – 6th decile	No
Sl-55	Left	Male	35-44	Secondary	Working full time	1	P – 8th decile	No
Sl-56	Middle	Male	65+	Secondary	Retired	2	D – 9th decile	No

TABLE A6 Participants in Slovenia (*cont.*)

Reference	Political orientation	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Work status	Number of children under 16 in household	Household's total net income, all sources	Ethnic minority
Sl-57	Middle	Female	35-44	Tertiary	Working full time	0	M – 4th decile	No
Sl-58	Left	Female	45-54	Secondary	Working full time	0	K – 7th decile	No
Sl-59	Middle	Female	25-34	Tertiary	Unemployed	0	R – 2nd decile	No
Sl-60	Left	Female	35-44	Tertiary	Working part time	0	No answer	No
Sl-61	Middle	Female	45-54	Secondary	Working full time	0	C – 3rd decile	No
Sl-62	Middle	Male	35-44	Tertiary	Working full time	2	D – 9th decile	No
Sl-63	Don't know	Female	35-44	Secondary	Working full time	2	K – 7th decile	No
Sl-64	Middle	Male	65+	Secondary	Retired	0	K – 7th decile	Yes
Sl-65	Right	Male	25-34	Tertiary	Working full time	2	K – 7th decile	No
Sl-66	Middle	Female	Under 24	Secondary	In full-time	0	P – 8th decile	No
Sl-67	Right	Male	65+	Tertiary	Retired	0	K – 7th decile	No
Sl-68	Left	Female	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	0	S – 6th decile	No
Sl-69	Middle	Male	35-44	Tertiary	Working full time	2	K – 7th decile	No
Sl-70	Left	Female	25-34	Tertiary	Working full time	0	D – 9th decile	No
Sl-71	Left	Female	35-44	Tertiary	Working full time	0	H – 10th decile	No
Sl-72	Middle	Male	55-64	Secondary	Working full time	0	C – 3rd decile	No

TABLE A6 Participants in Slovenia (*cont.*)

Reference	Political orientation	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Work status	Number of children under 16 in household	Household's total net income, all sources	Ethnic minority
Sl-73	Don't know	Female	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	0	R – 2nd decile	No
Sl-74	Middle	Female	35-44	Tertiary	Working full time	0	H – 10th decile	No
Sl-75	Left	Male	35-44	Tertiary	Working full time	0	D – 9th decile	No
Sl-76	Middle	Male	35-44	Tertiary	Working full time	0	D – 9th decile	No
Sl-77	Middle	Female	35-44	Tertiary	Working part time	3 or more	P – 8th decile	No
Sl-78	Middle	Male	45-54	Secondary	Working full time	3 or more	C – 3rd decile	No
Sl-80	Don't know	Male	65+	Secondary	Retired	0	C – 3rd decile	No
Sl-81	Right	Female	55-64	Secondary	Retired	0	F – 5th decile	No
Sl-82	Middle	Female	35-44	Secondary	Working full time	2	P – 8th decile	No
Sl-83	Middle	Male	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	1	D – 9th decile	No
Sl-84	Left	Female	35-44	Tertiary	Working part time	2	K – 7th decile	No
Sl-85	Right	Male	35-44	Tertiary	Working full time	2	F – 5th decile	No
Sl-86	Left	Female	25-34	Tertiary	Working full time	0	K – 7th decile	No
Sl-87	Middle	Male	45-54	Tertiary	Retired	0	J – 1st decile	No
Sl-88	Left	Female	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	2	P – 8th decile	No

TABLE A7 Participants in the UK

Reference	Vote for party in next election	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Work status	Household's total net income, all sources	Ethnic minority
UK-40	No Answer	Female	25-34	Tertiary	Working full time	M – 4th decile	Yes
UK-41	No Answer	Female	45-54	Upper secondary	Working part time	S – 6th decile	No
UK-42	Labour	Female	25-34	Lower secondary	Stay at home to look after house/ family	R – 2nd decile	Yes
UK-43	Labour	Male	Under 24	Upper secondary	In full-time	K – 7th decile	No
UK-44	Conservative	Female	35-44	Upper secondary	Working part time	D – 9th decile	No
UK-45	Don't Know	Female	65+	Upper secondary	Retired	M – 4th decile	No
UK-46	Don't Know	Male	35-44	Upper secondary	Working full time	M – 4th decile	No
UK-47	Don't Know	Female	65+	Upper secondary	Retired	J – 1st decile	No
UK-48	Labour	Male	45-54	Upper secondary	Permanently sick or disabled	C – 3rd decile	Yes
UK-49	Labour	Female	45-54	Upper secondary	Working part time	J – 1st decile	Yes
UK-51	UKIP	Female	Under 24	Lower secondary	Stay at home to look after house/ family	S – 6th decile	No
UK-60	Don't Know	Male	25-34	Upper secondary	Working full time	J – 1st decile	Yes
UK-61	Lib Dems	Male	25-34	Upper secondary	Working full time	M – 4th decile	Yes
UK-62	Labour	Male	25-34	Tertiary	Working full time	D – 9th decile	Yes
UK-63	Conservative	Female	Under 24	Upper secondary	In full-time	Unassigned	No

TABLE A7 Participants in the UK (*cont.*)

Reference	Vote for party in next election	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Work status	Household's total net income, all sources	Ethnic minority
UK-64	Lib Dems	Male	25-34	Tertiary	Working full time	P – 8th decile	No
UK-65	Don't Know	Female	11	Tertiary	Working full time	P – 8th decile	Yes
UK-66	Labour	Male	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	H – 10th decile	Yes
UK-67	Labour	Male	25-34	Tertiary	Working full time	P – 8th decile	No
UK-68	Labour	Female	35-44	Upper secondary	Working part time	F – 5th decile	Yes
UK-69	Labour	Male	25-34	Tertiary	Working full time	D – 9th decile	No
UK-70	Lib Dems	Male	55-64	Upper secondary	Working full time	D – 9th decile	Yes
UK-71	Don't Know	Female	25-34	Tertiary	Working full time	P – 8th decile	Yes
UK-80	Conservative	Female	45-54	Upper secondary	Working part time	R – 2nd decile	No
UK-81	Don't Know	Female	Under 24	Tertiary	Working full time	D – 9th decile	No
UK-82	Conservative	Female	35-44	Upper secondary	Working full time	H – 10th decile	No
UK-83	Don't Know	Female	45-54	Tertiary	Working part time	S – 6th decile	No
UK-84	Conservative	Male	45-54	Upper secondary	Working full time	P – 8th decile	No
UK-85	Conservative	Male	65+	Lower secondary	Retired	J – 1st decile	No
UK-86	UKIP	Male	25-34	Upper secondary	Working full time	D – 9th decile	No

TABLE A7 Participants in the UK (*cont.*)

Reference	Vote for party in next election	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Work status	Household's total net income, all sources	Ethnic minority
UK-87	Conservative	Female	65+	Tertiary	Retired	S – 6th decile	No
UK-88	Don't Know	Male	25-34	Upper secondary	Working full time	H – 10th decile	Yes
UK-89	Labour	Male	45-54	Tertiary	Working full time	K – 7th decile	No
UK-90	Labour	Female	25-34	Upper secondary	Working full time	F – 5th decile	Yes

Note: lower secondary education = ISCED 2; Upper secondary education = ISCED 3, 4.