

1. Abstract

Drawing on a corpus of mainstream party political manifestos from UK General Elections between 2005 and 2024 (655,528 words), we explored the representations of ‘economic inequality’ and the redistributive mechanisms within the British liberal welfare regime.. We used a mixed-methodological approach. Keyword analyses supported by natural language processing described semantic frequency trends in ‘economic inequality’ and the government mechanisms for ‘redistribution’, comparing results against national-level objective indicators of economic inequality. We also explored the semantics of economic inequality and redistribution qualitatively, focusing on the regular affects and metaphors through which these concepts were understood within society.

Our results suggest that the limited relationship between objective measures of inequality and the semantics of economic inequality likely stems from differences in underlying concepts. Specifically, political communicators focused on ‘equality of opportunity,’ particularly voicing concerns about discrimination and social mobility, rather than on the distribution of wealth and income. Instead of abstract beliefs in the redistribution of income or wealth, we found that the redistributive mechanisms of the welfare state were shaped by beliefs about which groups are valued or devalued in a given society. Additionally, we found that political parties were not ‘neutral’ on issues of economic inequality or redistribution. Rather, there was evidence that the politicisation of these concepts were tied to practices that blamed alternative parties for perceived challenges in achieving the ‘British dream.’ These challenges included the 2007-8 Global Financial Crisis, the 2009 MP Expenses Scandal, and the 2016 ‘Brexit’ vote.

Our research explores the communicative basis for public opinion on economic inequality and redistribution as delineated by political actors. We point out that how economic inequality and redistribution are considered by the public cannot be thought of solely as predicated on abstract knowledge or general motivations. Instead, these issues are, in part, derived from how they are propagated in society by elite political communicators.

2. Introduction

Classic models, such as the ‘median voter’ hypothesis (Meltzer & Richard, 1981), provide frameworks for theorising citizens’ political behaviour towards economic inequality and redistributive solutions in democratic states (Kenworthy & McCall, 2008). In these models, people are considered in generic terms, voting according to their economic self-interest (Ibid). Under conditions of economic inequality, where more individuals stand to benefit from greater redistribution, under the conditions set in the median-voter hypothesis, people would theoretically vote for parties that favour such redistribution (Ibid). Yet, at a national level, we find limited evidence supporting this simplistic model of political behaviour. Indeed, despite substantial evidence showing that economic inequality harms political, societal, and economic spheres (Stiglitz, 2012; Schäfer & Schwander, 2019), scholars continue to ask why high levels of income and wealth inequality do not necessarily lead to greater demands for redistribution (Choi, 2019; Franetovic & Castello, 2022; Haddon & Wu, 2022; Reyes & Gasparini, 2022; Schulz et al., 2022).

The idea that political behaviour is mainly driven by economic self-interest suggests that the gap between economic inequality and the desire for redistribution might be partly explained by people's lack of awareness or intentional ignorance about their true economic standing (Condon & Wichowsky, 2020). From this viewpoint, researchers often highlight how social and psychological factors can distort individuals' perceptions, causing a disconnect between what they believe and their actual circumstances (Jachimowicz et al., 2023). Structural explanations point out that in societies with high levels of inequality, people tend to live in socio-economically segregated communities (Schulz et al., 2022; Willis et al., 2022). This segregation limits their chances to interact with and compare themselves to those who are either more or less affluent (Schulz et al., 2022; Willis et al., 2022). Another possible reason for the gap between objective and subjective measures of inequality could stem from challenges in how perceived inequality is measured, and in particular there would be greater congruence between objective and subjective measures, if there was greater specificity concerning the type or context of inequality. For example, there may be confusion about which type of inequality people focus on, such as income versus wealth, or pre-tax versus post-tax income inequality (Jachimowicz et al., 2023). Similarly, the consideration of public goods like free healthcare and education might also contribute to this disconnect, as they are rarely included in objective measures of inequality, such as the GINI coefficient, yet sustain functions of everyday living in areas such as health, education, housing and safety in welfare states (Douenne, Sund, & Van Der Weele, 2024; Schmidt & Wichardt, 2018).

The formulation of the question as a disconnect between objective and subjective measures of economic inequality should be approached with caution. It remains unverified whether the issue presented in society is truly economic inequality, rather than another social issue. Furthermore, it underestimates the disagreements regarding the nature of economic inequality and the appropriate methods to address it, which are often assumed in appraisal models of social cognition (Gobel & Carvacho, 2024). In semi-structured focus groups on economic inequality in the UK, participants emphasised 'equality of opportunity,' often referencing beliefs in social mobility and discrimination rather than focusing on economic inequality itself, without acknowledging potential conceptual differences (Pereira et al., 2024). Moreover, there was little evidence to suggest that concerns about inequality translated into political demands for redistribution (Pereira et al., 2024). Perspectives varied, with some viewing inequality as "just a fact of life," particularly among older generations, while younger, minority, and Scottish or Welsh participants expressed feelings of disconnect from the political class, citing issues of identity and distance from politicians (Pereira et al., 2024). Indeed, both laypeople and professionals regularly contest the 'fairness' of economic inequality and redistribution (Cavaillé, 2023; Helfer et al., 2024; Almås et al., 2024).

Even within the academic community, there is a lack of consensus on whether economic inequality constitutes a first-order problem. While prominent works like *The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) and *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Piketty, 2014) argue for the harmful effects of economic inequality, significant debate persists among academics and media commentators (Reider & Theine, 2019). Some question whether economic inequality is a fundamental issue or if its negative effects are secondary to those of direct policy interventions in areas such as health and education (Blanchard & Rodrik, 2023; Reider & Theine, 2019; Savage & Vaughan, 2024).

In addition to disagreements over what constitutes the issue of economic inequality in society, recent scholarship points out that these questions are rarely considered in the abstract. Instead, they are often framed in terms of social identity, with individuals comparing their beliefs about themselves to those of perceived as Other or 'not-me', frequently interpreting these comparisons in deeply pejorative terms (Condon & Wichowsky, 2020; Jovchelovitch, 2019). In the British context, focus groups have revealed that evaluations of inequality are typically grounded in personal experiences, such as racial inequality among ethnic minority participants, rather than in abstract economic principles (Pereira et al., 2024). Furthermore, participants rarely hold neutral perspectives on economic inequality; instead, they engage in debates over the extent to which structural forms of discrimination—particularly in areas such as education, housing, and employment—create unfair 'life chances' for themselves and their families (Pereira et al., 2024). Moreover, the discourse surrounding redistribution through social welfare programs is often highly politically charged (Berry, 2022). Studies of media and individual attitudes consistently indicate that people tend to distinguish themselves from stigmatised groups

perceived as unfairly reliant on welfare, particularly in liberal welfare states where stereotypes such as the 'Welfare Queen' or 'Benefits Scrounger' are prevalent (Condon & Wichowsky, 2020; Lundberg & Syltevik, 2024). In addition, perceptions of the 'correct' level of generosity for the welfare state often draw upon housekeeping metaphors, such as 'balancing the books' (Berry, 2022). Support for austerity measures is maintained through images of careful restraint, which is upheld as a normative value by the lay public, thereby sustaining positive identity positions (Berry, 2022).

While it is evident that key shapers of public opinion, such as political elites and the media (Guardino, 2019), play a significant role in shaping everyday thinking on economic inequality, there is a notable gap in understanding the cultural narratives that define what is considered 'right' in one country but not in others (Jovchelovitch, 2019). Research on poverty and welfare stigma suggests that representations of inequality and redistribution are deeply influenced by the distinct cultural and political histories of different countries (Chauhan & Foster, 2013; Jovchelovitch, 2019). Although studies on individual perceptions and beliefs about inequality and redistribution often fail to fully integrate the cultural and political contexts in which these beliefs are formed (Howarth, 2006; Marková, 2007), valuable insights can be drawn from the comparative welfare regime literature (Buhr & Stoy, 2015; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Kudrnáč & Petrúšek, 2022). For example, liberal welfare regimes, characterised by a strong reliance on the market, minimal state intervention, and means-tested benefits, often conceptualise social welfare as a safety net for the most vulnerable (Larsen, 2006). This model emphasises individual responsibility, which frequently leads to concerns about welfare dependency (Larsen, 2006; Laenen, 2020). In contrast, conservative welfare regimes, such as those in Germany and France, emphasise the role of the family and occupationally-based social insurance schemes in maintaining social hierarchies (Larsen, 2006). In these contexts, public opinion generally supports the view that social insurance is a right earned through work contributions, reflecting a broader societal commitment to stability and security (Larsen, 2006). For instance, the expansion of the French welfare state in the late 1960s was framed not in terms of promoting individual responsibility or charity, as is often the case in the contemporary British liberal welfare regime (O'Grady, 2022; Laenen, 2020), but as a right earned through contributions, conferring dignity and security upon society as a whole (Spicker, 2014; Chauhan & Foster, 2013).

However, it is important to avoid assuming that cultural narratives underpinning beliefs about economic inequality and its solutions are either ephemeral or universally agreed upon (Chauhan & Foster, 2013). On the contrary, there is substantial evidence to suggest that these concepts are deeply politicised (Davidai, 2022). For instance, in liberal welfare regimes, like those in the United States and the United Kingdom, where narratives of upward social mobility are prevalent (e.g. the so-called 'american dream') (Hochschild, 2016; McMillan, 2020), expectations about social mobility and inequality differ markedly from those in conservative welfare regimes like France and Germany. In these latter contexts, individuals tend to overestimate the likelihood that children from poor families will remain in poverty and that children from wealthy families will continue to live in affluence (Alesina et al., 2018). Moreover, when the discourse shifts from 'economic inequality' to 'equality of opportunity,' it is predominantly individuals with left-leaning political orientations in France and the UK who advocate for increased government intervention to mitigate disparities in opportunities between children from low-income and high-income families (Alesina et al., 2018). This advocacy often includes support for policies designed to enhance opportunities, such as investments in education and healthcare, as well as for those aimed at equalising outcomes, such as progressive taxation and robust social insurance programs (Alesina et al., 2018).

In summary, scholarship provides evidence of the need to move beyond simplistic models of economic self-interest to explain perceptions of inequality and demands for redistribution. Instead, the evidence suggests that this is a thoroughly 'social' process, where questions of 'who am I' and 'what society should be' are situated within overarching narratives, such as narratives of 'equal opportunity.' In this sense, we can approach economic inequality as a process of socialisation, where how the issue is communicated in society has profound implications for how individuals perceive themselves and the types of political demands they make. Furthermore, these narratives are likely not universal; they may vary between countries in ways that reflect the institutional architecture of the welfare state and the possible ways in which the issue may be politicised.

2.1. Theoretical & Methodological Framework

In this section, we will elaborate on the theoretical and methodological framework that guides this exploratory research program. We will briefly outline how the methods and results presented in this working paper contribute to a broader research agenda. Additionally, we will propose how theories of social representations and communication (Marková, 2023) can be integrated with the comparative welfare regime literature (Esping-Andersen, 1990) to address more specific research questions. This approach is particularly relevant to understanding the processes of socialisation and politicisation that are central to our investigation.

The theoretical and methodological framework underpinning this conference paper should be conceptualised as a component of a broader exploratory multi-arm research program, specifically within the POLINEQUAL research program. This program is dedicated to examining the key processes of politicisation and socialisation concerning economic inequality within Western European welfare states, focusing on three distinct welfare regimes: the liberal regime exemplified by the United Kingdom, the conservative regime represented by France, and the social democratic regime typified by Sweden. Within this framework, individual attitudes, beliefs, and emotions regarding economic inequality and redistribution are not treated as abstract or universally applicable aspects of social cognition. Instead, they are understood as being fundamentally shaped and sustained through socialisation processes embedded within state institutions. We do not assume consensus or stability within these processes, positing instead that concepts of economic inequality are subject to politicisation, where competing ideologies vie over normative visions of what constitutes a just society. Although not addressed in this paper, we also explore the Swedish and French contexts. As well, our research program also employs natural language processing analyses of media coverage and parliamentary speeches in upper national chambers, as well as national public surveys of attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and behaviours concerning economic inequality and its political solutions. An integration of studies within the Polinequal research program aims to determine the dynamics within and between countries concerning perceptions of economic inequality and demands for redistribution.

We draw upon the theory of social representations and communication (Marková, 2023) to analyse the narratives of economic inequality conveyed in elite political communications. This theory, described as an "anthropology of contemporary culture" (Marková, 2012, p. 487), investigates the formation and transformation of meanings, knowledge, beliefs, and actions related to complex social phenomena, such as poverty and inequality, within the realms of communication and culture (Marková, 2012).

A theory of social representations was selected for its capacity to illuminate the dynamic intersubjective processes involved in socialisation and politicisation. This theoretical approach has been effectively applied to related concepts such as poverty and homelessness. While terms like "narrative," "subjectivity," and "sense-making" are widely employed in contemporary social sciences, they are often treated as having a coherent or fixed external nature that serves as a "frame" or "schema" for individual thought (Marková, 2007; 2023). In contrast, the epistemological foundations of a theory of social representations emphasise the dynamic processes of communication through which individuals relate to social issues. The dialogical approach is essential for exploring representations of economic inequality. Scholarship highlights the critical role of social comparison and the significance of the "Other" in the development of self-knowledge concerning economic inequality. This suggests that narratives surrounding economic inequality do more than simply motivate positive forms of social identity; they simultaneously and inseparably prescribe who one should *not* be (Marková, 2007; 2015). For example, narratives associated with the liberal welfare state often reinforce positive social identities centred on productivity, contingent upon perceived contributions to the market economy, while stigmatising those viewed as excessively dependent on welfare (Chauhan & Foster, 2013).

The theory of social representations, with its emphasis on the dynamic nature of communication, fosters an understanding of both contestation and consensus (Rose et al., 1995). This theoretical lens is particularly valuable for analysing how solutions to economic inequality become politicised (Howarth, 2006). In the British context, for example, this approach enables an examination of how the dominant centre-right and left-wing parties—the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, respectively—present divergent ideological

perspectives on the role of the market versus direct state intervention in addressing economic inequality (Jacobs & Hindmoor, 2024). These differences are reflected in their policy preferences, such as the Conservative Party's support for in-work credits as a means to incentivize market participation, contrasted with the Labour Party's advocacy for wealth taxes aimed at redistributing economic resources more directly (Ibid).

Although the French and Swedish results are still in progress and therefore not fully expanded upon in this paper, our exploration and interpretation are guided by a comparative approach. Previous research has underscored the significant role of representations of the "Other" in sustaining motivating self-representations concerning economic inequality (Condon & Wichowsky, 2020). However, less attention has been given to the specific content of these comparisons—what and who is being compared. For instance, within a liberal welfare regime, one might expect narratives that emphasise the preservation of individual opportunity, reflecting a focus on personal responsibility and market participation (Lundberg & Syltevik, 2024). In contrast, within a conservative regime, narratives may be more likely to emphasise the importance of family structures or occupational groups, reflecting a societal focus on traditional hierarchies and social order (Kudrnáč, & Petrůšek, 2023). Similarly, the logic behind who is "Othered" may vary across welfare regimes. In a conservative regime, the unemployed or those engaged in non-traditional forms of work, such as gig economy workers, might be Othered due to their perceived threat to established occupational hierarchies (Kudrnáč, & Petrůšek, 2023). In contrast, in social democratic countries, elites might be more frequently Othered, perceived as opposing the egalitarian ethos that underpins these societies (Lundberg & Syltevik, 2024). Additionally, non-citizens might be viewed as undermining the social contract of the welfare system, given their perceived deviation from the norms of solidarity and mutual obligation that these systems rely on (Lundberg & Syltevik, 2024).

To explore narratives of economic inequality, this paper draws on a corpus of General Election party manifestos from British mainstream parties spanning the years 2005 to 2024. Manifestos likely exhibit agenda-setting characteristics, influence the policy agenda, and provide indications of where political perceptions of public concern for social issues and demand for change intersect with what they perceive as possible solutions the government has the capacity to provide (Borghetto & Belchior, 2020; Belchior et al., 2024).

The selection of general election manifestos for analysis allows for a detailed examination of the narratives surrounding economic inequality and the proposed solutions within a manageable sample size, making it suitable for in-depth qualitative analysis over an extended period. By analysing manifestos across a sufficiently long timeframe, we can identify enduring narratives that persist in political communication regarding economic inequality and the proposed solutions, thereby minimising the risk of being overly influenced by specific societal events or election cycles (e.g., financial crises, global recessions).

To achieve this, we employ a key-word-in-context (KWIC) approach (Onwuegbuzie, & Combs, 2010), focusing on specific key terms related to economic inequality and the mechanisms of the state that have redistributive effects. This method allows us to derive meanings from the contexts in which these terms are used, viewing them not as holding fixed or uncontested meanings, but as open to interpretation based on their usage (Ibid). By examining words within their specific contexts, we can explore whether the communicator is uniquely addressing the distribution of income or wealth when discussing "economics" and "inequality," or if they are instead engaging with related concepts such as fairness, discrimination, social mobility, and prejudice. Additionally, this approach allows us to investigate how these concepts are associated with specific groups, such as the unemployed or the poor.

Our approach is further supported by trend analysis of key terms on economic inequality and redistributive features of the welfare state. While salience transcends mere frequency—for instance, a word might be used infrequently but prominently in titles or bold text—this analysis provides insight into who is addressing the issue, indicating its politicisation. From this perspective, while economic inequality may constitute an objective reality, our analysis sheds light on which parties or groups may be considered authoritative on the issue or how they may incorporate or ignore it as part of their political strategy.

We acknowledge that party manifestos alone may not sufficiently address temporal questions, given the relatively few general elections. Nevertheless, we consider them a sufficient basis for identifying the narratives that sustain socialisation and politicisation processes. To address questions of divergence within parties or their relationships with the media and other communicators (e.g., think tanks), we are currently developing a larger corpus that includes upper chamber political speeches and news articles.

2.2. Summary of contributions.

We contribute three main findings in this paper:

1. **Equality of Opportunity as the Central Concern:** The issue of economic inequality is primarily framed in terms of equality of opportunity, with a strong emphasis on concerns related to discrimination and social mobility, rather than on the distribution of income or wealth.
2. **Normative Representation of Welfare State Functions:** The functions of the welfare state are predominantly represented in normative terms, emphasising the rewarding of social identities associated with labour market participation. This is reflected in a focus on the redistributive functions of the welfare state, which aim to maintain normative values and life course experiences, such as hard-work and family life.
3. **Distance-Blame-Stigma Patterns:** Perceived failures in the opportunity to fully realise the benefits of equality of opportunity are often advanced through common distance-blame-stigma patterns. This involves attributing blame to individuals or groups who are perceived as threatening the opportunity to achieve valued life experiences, such as dignity in retirement.

3. Data Collection

3.1. Corpora Construction:

We collated UK General Election Party Manifestos from mainstream parties between 2005 - 2024. The party manifestos were retrieved in PDF format if available from the Manifesto Project or the Internet Archive which saves historical versions of party websites. National election years for the UK were 2005, 2010, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2024. We included the three largest parties in terms of Members of Parliament elected to the House of Commons: the Conservative and Unionist Party (Conservatives), Labour Party, Scottish National Party (SNP), and Liberal Democrats (LibDems). During this period, Labour and the Conservatives were the two largest parties, while the LibDems and SNP varied between being the third and fourth largest parties. This captured between 94.7% and 97% of the MPs elected to Parliament. At the time of writing, the UK had called a snap election to be held on July 4th, 2024. At the point of writing, the SNP had not produced a party manifesto, and so no data is reported on the SNP in 2024. This resulted in a corpus of 23 manifestos totaling 655,528 words. Manifesto lengths ranged from 6,858 to 35,115 words, with an average of 22,678 words (Appendix 7.1 & 7.2). As manifesto length varied over time, both within and between parties, measures of keyword frequency were normalised by party manifesto length.

Each corpus was retained in its original form as a PDF. This ensured that a multi-modal version was available for subsequent qualitative analysis in MAXQDA 24, including the original layout, images, text sizing, italics, colouring, and bold features. The text from PDFs was extracted using TextEditor and uploaded from a natural language processing environment in Python 3. To enable text analysis, standard preprocessing was applied. This included the removal of standalone numbers (e.g., page numbers, section numbers), elimination of non-alphabetic characters (e.g., punctuation marks, special characters), normalisation of white spaces to ensure consistent spacing between words, and transforming all text to lowercase. English stop-words were removed using standard NLTK packages¹. Effects of pre-processing were manually checked. For each party and each

¹ These stop-words are common words such as 'the,' 'is,' and 'and' that are typically filtered out in text processing to focus on more meaningful terms. By eliminating these words, the analysis can better highlight significant keywords and patterns in the text, providing clearer insights into the data

election year, all text segments were concatenated into a single continuous string, which was then segmented into chunks of exactly 50 words.

3.2. Measures:

3.2.1. Economic Inequality Keywords

Keywords to refer to a concept of economic inequality were informed by McGovern et al., 2023, which traces the development of semantics of economic inequality in the UK and USA between 1990 - 2015. McGovern sets out that the semantics of economic inequality include discussions of economics (salary, wage, compensation, pay) as well as inequality (inequality, distribution, and differentials). As a co-occurrence analysis revealed that the most commonly associated word with inequality was equality, and vice versa, we also included 'equality' as a search term (Appendix 7.3). A full list of search terms is included in the appendix 7.4. This formed the basis of our analysis. We examined as a binary of True/False, whether within a 50-word span the text included both categories of 'economics' and 'inequality'. Frequency tables of 'economic inequality' are contained in raw and normalised form in appendices 7.5 and 7.6 respectively.

3.2.2. Redistribution Keywords

To determine keywords for policy instruments for redistribution we utilised the House of Commons Library pages on welfare and pensions. This information is publicly available at [House of Commons Library](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/topic/social-policy/welfare-pensions/) (<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/topic/social-policy/welfare-pensions/>), which we accessed on 03.06.2024. The data spans from 09.04.1998 to 29.05.2024. To develop a list of search terms, words indicating mechanisms for redistribution were extracted. This list includes various social welfare benefits and support schemes available in the UK, such as allowances, pensions, support payments, grants, and tax credits. These programs cover a wide range of needs, from disability and unemployment support to child and family assistance, ensuring financial aid and essential services for different segments of the population. Search terms were checked against party programs to verify relevance and suggest any supplementary terms. Effort was made to include names in full and acronyms (e.g., JSA = Job Seeker's Allowance) and to be sensitive to linguistic changes in the policy environment, such as one-off names (e.g., Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme) or replacements of benefit names (e.g., the replacement of 'Job Seeker's Allowance' with 'Universal Credit') to be sensitive to the sample as a whole. The full list of terms is available in appendix 7.2. Frequency tables of redistribution are contained in raw and normalised form in appendices 7.7 and 7.8 respectively.

3.2.3. GINI Coefficient

To explore possible relations in semantic trends and an objective measure of inequality we included GINI coefficient scores. The GINI coefficient is a common measure of economic inequality for countries. We represent the GINI coefficient as a percentage ranging from 0 (perfect equality) to 100 (perfect inequality). We have produced a table of GINI Coefficients for financial year end (FYE) 2005 and 2022, including year on year percentage changes (appendices 7.9 & 7.10). An average of GINI coefficients by election period up until 2019, as well as alternative measures of income inequality considered, are contained in the appendices 7.11-7.13². The data on the Gini coefficient of the United Kingdom from 1977 to 2022 was accessed via Statista as an Excel data file. The source of this data is the Office for National Statistics (UK), which conducted the survey during the

² We also considered S80/20, P90/10, and Palma ratios. The S80/20 ratio measures the total income of the richest 20% of the population (top quintile) compared to the total income of the poorest 20% (bottom quintile). Higher values indicate greater inequality. For example, if the S80/20 ratio is 5, the richest 20% earn five times more than the poorest 20%. The P90/10 ratio is the ratio of the income at the 90th percentile to the income at the 10th percentile. Higher values also indicate greater inequality. For example, if the P90/10 ratio is 10, those at the 90th percentile earn ten times more than those at the 10th percentile. The Palma ratio measures the income of the top 10% of the population compared to the income of the bottom 40%. Again, higher values indicate greater inequality. For example, if the Palma ratio is 2, the top 10% earn twice as much as the bottom 40%.

period from 1977 to 2022. This publication, authored by the Office for National Statistics (UK), was released in January 2023. The original source of this data is found in "The effects of taxes and benefits on household income," table 9, identified by ID 872472.

3.2.4. Analytic Strategy

We employed an exploratory convergent mixed-methods research design, simultaneously considering possible interpretations of the data suggested by both the qualitative and quantitative components (Flick, 2018). The qualitative and quantitative analyses were supported by a keyword analysis of 'economic inequality' and 'redistribution,' as outlined in measures 3.2.1 and 3.2.2, respectively. For the quantitative analysis, these keywords were transformed into measures of semantic frequency and normalised by the length of the manifestos from which they were extracted. This approach enabled trend analysis of keywords by party over time. Additionally, we conducted correspondence analysis on keywords across the entire sample to assess the broader associations of terms related to 'equality' and 'inequality.' In parallel, we recontextualized keywords related to economic inequality within party programs and conducted a qualitative analysis. This process involved a detailed examination of segments identified through the keyword search for 'economic inequality' and the mechanisms for 'redistribution.' We applied the principles of thematic analysis, as outlined by Joffe (2011a), progressing through open, axial, and selective coding to identify underlying patterns in the representation of economic inequality and redistribution. Special attention was given to latent forms of representation, including symbolic imagery, affective language, and structural elements of the documents (e.g., headings and subheadings). Research quality was ensured through the transparent presentation of results, including close readings of extended verbatim quotes. Qualitative data analysis was performed using MAXQDA 24. Validity was further reinforced by systematically comparing the semantics of economic inequality and redistribution both within and between parties, and by relating these findings to the quantitative results. Coding concluded upon reaching theoretical saturation, as per Joffe (2011a). As measures of quality in mixed-methods research, we emphasised reflexivity, particularly the capacity to refine and propose new interpretations through the creative integration of qualitative and quantitative research components (Flick, 2018).

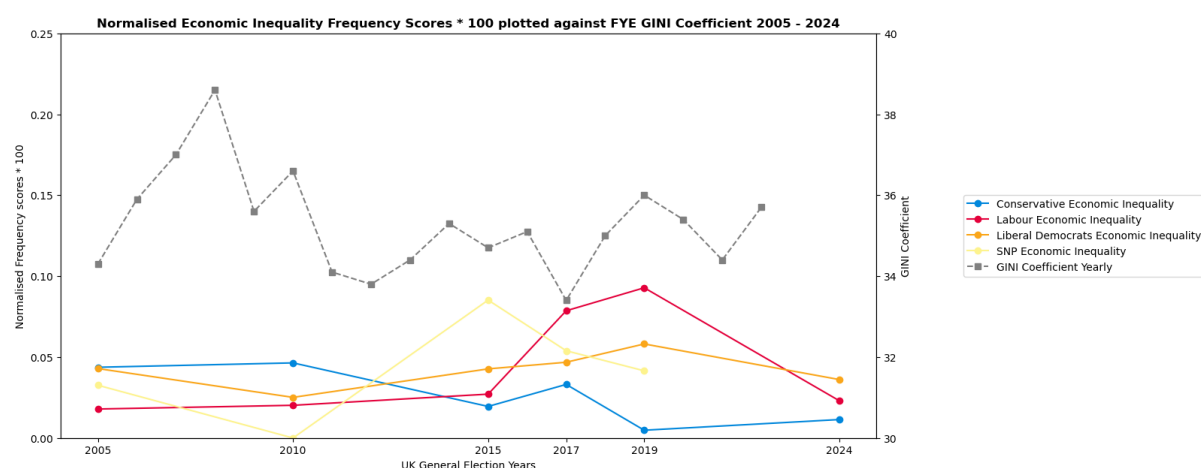
4. Results

4.1. 'Equality of Opportunity' not 'Economic Inequality'

In this first section, we examine how economic inequality is represented within its communicative context. This exploration has implications for whether trends in the salience of economic inequality in political communication align with objective measures of economic inequality. As discussed in the introduction, this concept is fundamental to understanding why 'subjective measures' of economic inequality may diverge from 'objective measures.' For this approach to hold ecological validity, subjective measures should still focus on economic inequality, albeit with potential systematic ideological biases, rather than on qualitatively different social issues. We will explore how a potential disconnect between the frequency of economic inequality in communication and objective measures may stem from ambiguities in what is perceived as the issue in society. Specifically, a qualitative analysis of keywords related to 'economic inequality' highlights an emphasis on individual opportunities for social mobility and freedom from discrimination, rather than a narrow focus on the distribution of wealth or income.

There was little evidence to suggest that trends in the relative frequencies of economic inequality in party programs had discernible relationships with objective measures of economic inequality. Overall, the GINI coefficient exhibited a weak and inconsistent relationship with trends in the semantic frequencies of economic inequality and redistribution mechanisms.

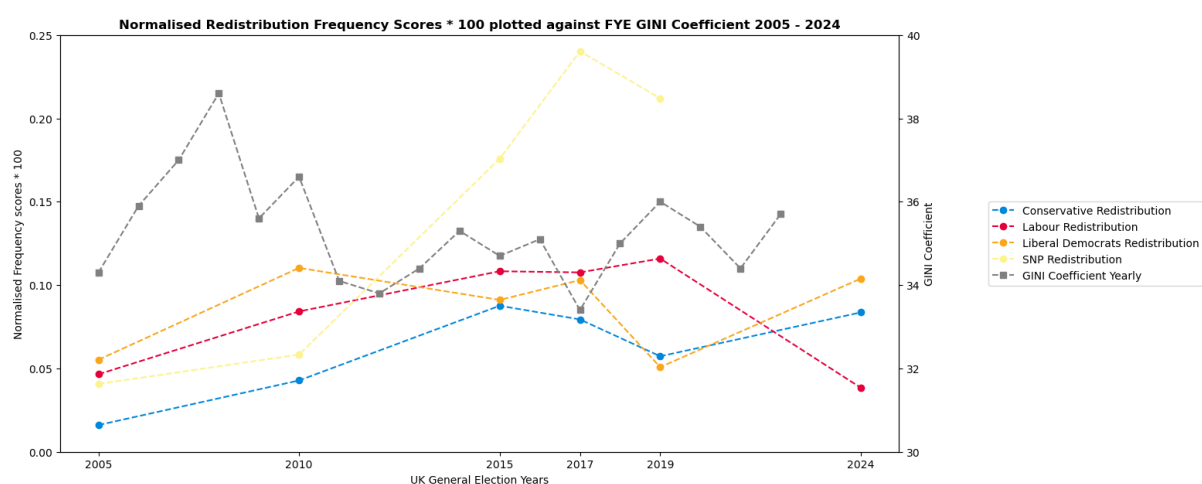
Figure 1: UK 2005 - 2024 Semantic Trends in Economic Inequality Normalised by Manifesto Length Plotted Against FYE GINI Coefficients



In figure 1 above, there is little to suggest that the semantics of economic inequality are aligned with objective trends in economic inequality as measured by the GINI coefficient. No parties showed notable increases in references to economic inequality in the 2010 election compared to 2005, despite the global financial crisis. Interestingly, even when the GINI coefficient decreased between 2015 and 2017, the number of mentions of economic inequality in the Labour Party's discourse notably increased. It should be noted, however, that GINI coefficients returned to pre-crisis levels by the fiscal year ending in 2011, underscoring the challenges of comparing data sets collected at different time points.

In figure 2 below, we also find limited correlations between the semantics of redistribution and trends in GINI coefficients. However, there may be slightly stronger indications of a relationship here compared to the semantics of economic inequality.

Figure 2: UK 2005 - 2024 Semantic Trends in Redistribution Normalised by Manifesto Length Plotted Against FYE GINI Coefficients



We observe an increase in discussions of redistribution in 2010, following the global financial crisis. This trend continued across the political spectrum, reaching a peak in the 2015 general election. Although the GINI coefficient was 0.9 points lower in 2015 compared to 2010 (see Appendix 7.10), the period from 2011 onwards generally saw increases in the GINI coefficient, which remained elevated by historical standards (Szreter, 2021).

However, despite the rapid increases in the GINI coefficient between 2017 and 2019, the relative frequencies of references to redistribution only marginally increased for the Labour Party and actually decreased for all other parties.

It is quite possible that the limited relationship between semantics and the GINI coefficient could constitute a methodological artefact, given the paucity of election cycles and the complications arising from the capacity to supply redistribution separate from demand³. These factors may be better addressed using a more sensitive measure, such as more frequent forms of political communication (e.g., speeches) or public opinion (e.g., media reports). However, our qualitative analysis of keywords suggests that the disconnect between semantic frequency and objective measures may also reflect more fundamental differences between how objective measures are formulated and how ‘economic inequality’ is comprehended in society. Specifically, in political programs, the focus was often on maintaining ‘equality of opportunity’⁴ rather than on the distribution of income per se, as is typically assumed in objective measures like the GINI coefficient.

British cultural narratives on economic inequality were regularly communicated in terms of the conditions for enabling “*fair play*” (Conservative Party Manifesto 2005, p.3), intertwining meritocratic beliefs with concerns for social mobility and discrimination. For example, the Conservatives set out “*fair play*,” in which “*being treated equally is a birthright, and discrimination is wrong. A Conservative Government will govern in the interests of everyone in our society – black or white, young or old, straight or gay, rural or urban, rich or poor*” (Conservative Party Manifesto 2005, p. 3). Similarly, the Labour Party constructs a majority of individuals aligned in the value placed upon work, choice, and self-responsibility: “*We prize the liberty of the individual; but that means protecting the law-abiding majority from the minority who abuse the system*” (Labour Party Manifesto 2005, p. 43).

Whilst, as will be discussed later, political parties regularly blamed other parties for failing to realise this vision for the majority of British citizens, they largely converge on their shared belief of what life should be in Britain. Namely, the belief in setting conditions for individual upward social mobility towards dignity in retirement. This largely shared agreement on promoting equality in opportunity is rendered explicit in its rare rejection. The 2019 Labour party manifesto is an exception in this regard.

“They tell us we shouldn’t care about inequality, because social mobility allows those who work hard to get on. But nobody becomes a billionaire through hard work alone, and as inequality has grown, it has become more entrenched. For Labour, the true measure of fairness is not social mobility but social justice. Implicit in the notion of social mobility is the idea that poverty and inequality are acceptable provided some people can climb the social ladder. Social justice, on the other hand, demands that we end poverty, reduce inequality and create a society in which the conditions for a fulfilling life are available to everyone. (Labour Party Manifesto 2019, p. 64)

Although across the corpus, semantics related to economic inequality, social mobility, and discrimination were used ambiguously, in the quote above, we found that the Labour Party in 2019 explicitly separated social mobility from inequality. Specifically, in 2019, the Labour Party argued that the alignment of social mobility with inequality is false, as it ignores the conditions for accumulation. Moreover, the Labour Party argued that this ‘implicit’ alignment between social mobility, inequality, and poverty is not just incorrect but also

³ We should be mindful of potential differences in supply and demand. Specifically, it is possible that discussions of economic inequality and the redistributive features of the welfare state do not move in parallel due to constraints on the level of generosity that can be offered for redistribution, which may be influenced by changing financial conditions. However, since these frequencies focus solely on semantics rather than on whether the valence is positive or negative, this is less of a concern, as it would capture both promises to increase and decrease the generosity of payments. While it is quite possible that parties might avoid discussing reductions in generosity due to concerns about electability, it is important to remember that the British context is somewhat unique in the popularity of austerity (Berry, 2022). Indeed, policies of austerity held majority popular support until 2015, well after other European countries ended austerity policies (Berry, 2022).

⁴ As noted in the introduction, public thinking on ‘economic inequality’ in the British public was developed primarily in terms of ‘equality of opportunity’ (Pereira et al., 2024).

unacceptable and unfair. Yet, even in this rare case, we can still sense a nascent concern for equality of opportunity through the focus on creating the 'conditions' for a 'fulfilling life.'

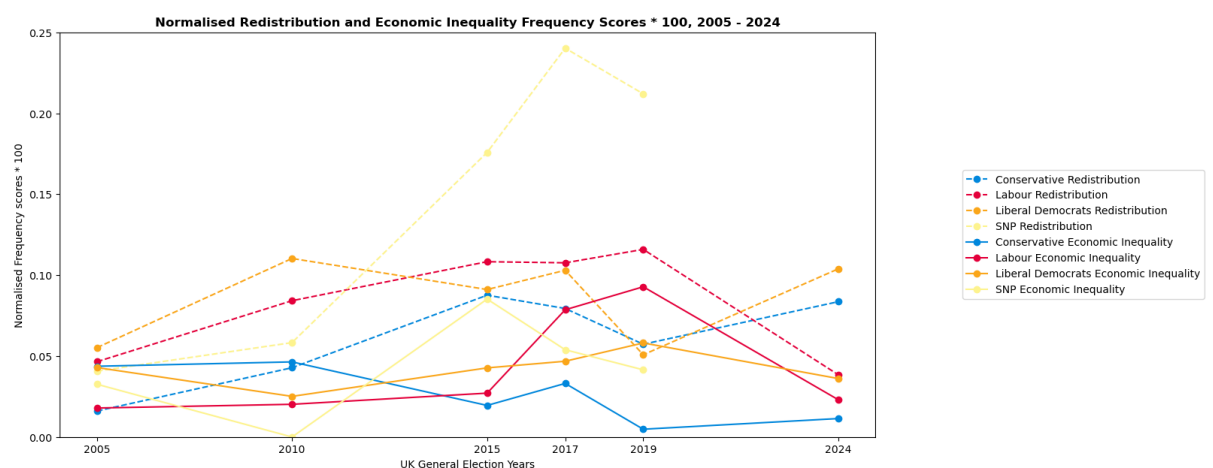
Largely, this aspirational account of life in Britain, including its emphasis on equality of opportunity and freedom from discrimination, remains evident in the current election. Indeed, this moment of critical reflection on what constitutes fairness in 2019, returns to common cultural narratives in 2024, under the new leadership of Keir Starmer. In this election cycle, the Labour Party argues for the need to “*level the playing field*” (Labour Party Manifesto 2024, p.31), harking back to earlier concerns for “*fair play*.” Moreover, the Labour Party's third “*mission*” is to “*[b]reak down barriers to opportunity*” [emphasis original] (Labour Party Manifesto 2024, p. 13). This representation is shared across the political spectrum. The Conservative Party's pledge to “*strengthen communities*” is sub-headed by “*Equality of opportunity*” (Conservative Party Manifesto 2024, p. 59). Similarly, in the Liberal Democrats' 2024 Manifesto, we find the phrase “*birthright*” shared with the Conservative Party's 2005 manifesto, where it is described as “*every individual's ... basic rights and dignity*” (Liberal Democrats, 2024, p.9).

4.2. The British Dream

Scholarship has questioned whether public opinion on the redistributive features of the welfare state are solely evaluated in terms of economic self-interest. Research suggests that what is considered ‘fair’ about these redistributive features may engage identity-related concerns for the Self and Other—that is, how one's desires represent oneself and others in society (Cavaillé, 2023; Condon & Wichowsky, 2020), —shaped by cultural narratives embedded within different welfare regime types. We address this issue in this section. If public opinion were primarily formed through models like the median voter hypothesis, we would likely expect a close connection in language between discussions of economic inequality and mechanisms for redistribution. However, as we will discuss below, the frequencies of references to economic inequality and redistribution rarely moved in parallel, and it was uncommon for both to be discussed together. We interpret this apparent disconnect through qualitative analysis. What might initially seem ‘irrational’ could instead be interpreted as functional within a cultural context (Markovà, 2023). Specifically, our analysis reveals that the broad discussion of equality of opportunity latently demarcates normative visions of the life course in Britain. We will discuss how these narratives are regularly constructed in ways that combine social groups and life stages (e.g., ‘working families,’ ‘dignified pensioners’).

We found weak relations between trends in semantics of economic inequality and redistribution (Figure 3).

Figure 3: UK 2005 - 2024 Semantic Trends in Economic Inequality and Redistribution Normalised by Manifesto Length.



There were points of common trends in economic inequality and redistribution semantic frequencies. From 2017 - 2024, we find the Labour Party and Conservative parties largely moved in parallel on these measures. In addition, between 2010 and 2015, we find semantics of redistribution and economic inequality for the SNP also moved in parallel. Yet, whilst the Labour Party increasingly was concerned with the redistributive features of the state between 2005 - 2015, this is not matched by an increased semantic concern for economic inequality. Similarly, in the wake of the failed 2014 Scottish independence referendum, criticism of generosity of the welfare state became an attack line for the SNP from 2015 onwards, this was not shared in frequency for economic inequality.

Table 1: UK 2005 - 2024 Both Economic Inequality and Redistribution Semantic Frequency

Year	Conservative	Labour	LibDem	SNP
2005	2	1	2	0
2010	1	0	0	0
2015	0	0	0	2
2017	1	0	0	3
2019	0	1	1	1
2024	0	0	2	

In addition, there was little to suggest that mechanisms for redistribution were logically related to concerns for inequality. Specifically, across the political spectrum, it was exceptional for both words related to 'economic inequality' and government policy instruments for redistribution to be found within a 50-word segment of party manifestos (table 1).

A qualitative examination of how the redistributive features of the welfare state and economic inequality are discussed in context reveals a reconsideration of the apparent disconnect between the semantics of economic inequality and the redistributive mechanisms of the welfare state. What becomes salient is that these mechanisms, while having the potential for redistributive effects, are largely represented in terms of how they sustain normative visions of the life course in Britain. This life course is narrated using normative constructions of valued and unvalued groups, with particular emphasis on the centrality of '*working families*' and '*dignified pensioners*' in the so-called '*British dream*' (Conservative Party Manifesto 2005, p.3).

In 2005, the Conservative party launched a manifesto, headed by the title "*the British Dream*" (Conservative Party Manifesto 2005, p.3). This dream emphasises individual opportunities for social mobility and freedom from discrimination, rather than a narrow focus on the distribution of wealth or income specifically.⁵

"For me the heart of politics is all about people – their hopes and aspirations. People want the freedom, security and opportunity to get on in life. They want the freedom to take the important decisions about their families and to keep more of the money they earn. They want the security that goes with owning your home, saving for your retirement, living in a safe neighbourhood. They want the opportunity provided by a good education and a thriving economy". (Conservative Party Manifesto 2005, p. 1)

In this quote, the normative person strives for upward social mobility or to 'get ahead in life.' This is achieved through choices and responsibilities in saving and family, especially through homeownership, contributing to retirement, and promoting safety in one's neighbourhood. The foundations for this are set by a 'good education' combined with a 'thriving economy.'

⁵ Indeed, more generally, words associated with 'equality' and/or 'inequality' spoke to beliefs (e.g., opportunity) about what life (e.g., people, work, family, children) should be in Britain (e.g., nation). (Appendix 7.3)

Representations of the British dream cleaved and valenced valued and devalued social groups, especially, ‘dignified pensioners’ and ‘working families’. For example, in 2005, the Conservative party advances a narrative in which the implementation of Labour policies is failing working families, promising:

“During the next Parliament, we will ensure that all working families who qualify for the working tax credit will receive up to £50 a week for each child under the age of five, irrespective of the type of childcare they choose. We will end Labour’s insistence on endless form-filling and enable families to choose between formal and informal childcare”.
(Conservative Party Manifesto, 2005, p.7)

We find this common critique in the Liberal Democrat manifesto, who blamed the Labour government for: *“Over-complicated tax credits and means-tested benefits”* (Liberal Democratic Party Manifesto 2005, p.9). These criticisms, through their focus on the perceived failures of the welfare state, sustained a belief that the British dream is breaking or even broken. Indeed, the subsequent 2010 election were contested between Labour and the Conservative party in part on how to *“mend our broken society”* (Conservative Party Manifesto 2010, viii). Similarly, the SNP argues that the lack of independence over the Scottish welfare system perpetuates child poverty and *“blights the life-chances of so many young people”* (Scottish National Party Manifesto 2005, p.7).

Across the political spectrum, and continuing into the 2024 election, narratives of an idealised life course continued. For example, the Conservative Party stated: *“A Conservative government will make Britain the most family-friendly country in Europe”* (Conservative Party Manifesto 2010, p. 35). Similarly, the Labour Party claims to have adapted the welfare state to promote families: *“The welfare state simply did not understand working women and families. Today, with family-friendly working and better childcare, it has at last begun to do so”* (Labour Party Manifesto 2010, p. 3). This rhetoric remained remarkably consistent. The Labour Party stated in 2015 and 2017 respectively: *“Older people deserve to live a fulfilling life”* (Labour Party Manifesto 2015, p.49) and *“Dignity for pensioners”* (Labour Party Manifesto 2017, p.54). Similarly, the Conservative party campaigned in 2019 and 2024 respectively as *“ensuring that older people have the security and dignity they deserve”* (Conservative Party Manifesto 2019, p.16), and *“[o]ur plan to cut taxes and protect pensions... Our plan to support families... Our plan to get more people into work and build a fairer welfare system”* (Conservative Party Manifesto 2024, p.1).

Groups represented in terms of normative life course were not considered neutrally or in isolation. Rather, the need to protect the dignity and security of pensioners and families was developed in contrast to the distrust attached to stigmatised groups. Namely, the mechanisms for redistribution were regularly associated with the symbols of protection. For example, using the symbol of the ‘lock’, the Labour Party remains committed to *“keep the triple-lock so that the state pension increases by inflation,”* (Labour Party Manifesto 2024, p.79). This is held in opposition to groups held responsible for a *broken society*” (Conservative Party Manifesto 2010, viii) and the *“scars (of) inequality”* (Liberal Democratic Party Manifesto 2005, p. 2). For example, in the 2010 Conservative party manifesto, the failure of the welfare state was in part blamed on a so-called ‘underclass’ of *“welfare dependants”* (Conservative Party Manifesto, 2010 p. 56), *“ASBOs”*⁶ (Conservative Party Manifesto 2010, p. 56) and *“economic migrants”* (Conservative Party Manifesto, 2010 p. 21). Yet, valued groups were also represented as under threat from a hidden elite. For example, the Conservative party promised to:

“change Britain with a sweeping redistribution of power: from the state to citizens; from the government to Parliament; from Whitehall to communities; from Brussels to Britain; from bureaucracy to democracy. Taking power away from the political elite and handing it to the man and woman in the street” (Conservative Party Manifesto 2010, p.63).

⁶ Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, commonly known as ASBOs, were introduced by Section 1 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and first used in 1999 (Home Office, 2002, p.6). The Home Office in 2002 recognized their value in the broad legal definition as behaviour considered to cause, or likely to cause, harassment, alarm, or distress to one or more people who are not in the same household (Home Office, 2002, p.5). Common examples given include graffiti, abusive and intimidating language, excessive noise, litter, drunken behaviour, and drug dealing—examples which are considered regular occurrences in social housing, schools, and/or social services (Ibid).

In this, the elite is conceptualised in terms of non-elected ‘bureaucracy’, such as the UK civil service (e.g., ‘Whitehall,’ ‘government’) and European Union (EU) (e.g., ‘Brussels’). ‘Democracy,’ in contrast, is characterised by entities that individuals feel should have control, such as ‘parliament,’ ‘communities,’ and ‘Britain’.

4.3. Distance-Blame-Stigma Patterns

In summary, we have identified that the narratives present in British parliamentary programs likely function to sustain beliefs in the ‘British dream.’ These narratives likely exert socialising effects by prescribing who one should aspire to be, or not be, in society. Furthermore, we have demonstrated that, at the level of representation, both the redistributive features of the welfare state and economic inequality do not align with their conceptualization as formulated in objective measures such as the GINI coefficient. Instead, the way economic inequality and the redistributive functions of the state are communicated emphasises their role in promoting the belief that what is fair is the ability to pursue the ‘British dream,’ characterised by equality of opportunity to achieve desired life stages, particularly the ‘working family’ and ‘dignified pensioner.’

We will now more fully address the processes of politicisation. We will demonstrate that when and how the semantics of economic inequality and the redistributive features of the welfare state are discussed, they are often used to blame competing political parties for the ‘broken’ state of this dream, while simultaneously positioning themselves as capable of fixing it. Although the specific content may change based on what is salient at the time (e.g., the financial crash, Brexit), we identify common patterns of distance, blame, and stigma across parties (Joffe, 2011b).

We find that the changing frequency of discussions on economic inequality and the redistributive features of the welfare state likely relates to political strategy and leadership (see figure 3). For example, although overall levels were low, in 2005 and 2010, when the Conservative party contested the election as the main opposition party, we observed the highest semantic frequencies of economic equality, with double the relative frequency of the Labour Party, which was in government at the time. However, this relationship reversed until the Labour Party anticipated entering government in 2024. At the time of the Labour Party manifesto release, the average of polls suggested a Labour lead of 20 points.⁷ Additionally, an examination of changes in the relative frequencies of economic inequality and redistribution semantics within the Labour Party highlights the significance of leadership change. We find that following the leadership transition in the Labour Party in 2015, from Edward Miliband to Jeremy Corbyn, the 2017 and 2019 manifestos showed increased raw and normalised figures in discussions of economic inequality. Moreover, after another leadership change in 2020, from Jeremy Corbyn to Keir Starmer, we observe a sharp decrease in references to economic inequality and redistribution.

When we focus on the semantics in context, we repeatedly find that parties distance themselves from the groups held responsible, often degrading them in representation. The specific content of these representations shifts depending on the communicator (e.g., political party), the group deemed responsible (e.g., political competitor), and the issue of the day. Our previous results suggest that the groups targeted for “Othering” as negatively different and distant from the communicator are varied and often ambiguous. What these groups have in common, though, is that they are perceived as wielding undue influence or power, thereby compromising the interests of groups valued in representation, such as working families and dignified pensioners. This has included comparisons with the “*political elite*” and “*benefit scroungers*” alike (Conservative Party Manifesto 2010, p. 63), who are portrayed as compromising the dignity and security of the ‘*hardworking family*’ or ‘*pensioner*.’

As discussed, the presence of Self-Other comparisons has already been noted in the literature on representations of economic inequality (Cavaillé, 2023). However, our findings indicate that we cannot consider these relationships as functionally separate from the issues that are salient in political communication. For

⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-68079726> (Accessed 14.06.2024)

example, who is "Othered" and what constitutes a positive form of social identity can shift with the political issue of the day. For instance, as relations with the EU became a leading feature of political discourse in the UK following the 2016 EU Referendum, the harms associated with the divisions of inequality were attributed to EU bureaucracy and the legacy of the Labour Government.

"UK Shared Prosperity Fund: The UK Shared Prosperity Fund will be used to bind together the whole of the United Kingdom, tackling inequality and deprivation in each of our four nations. It will replace the overly bureaucratic EU Structural Funds – and not only be better targeted at the UK's specific needs, but at a minimum match the size of those funds in each nation... We are committed to reducing health inequality. We will continue to repair the damage done by Labour's disastrous PFI deals⁸" (Conservative Party Manifesto 2019, p.44).

Conversely, the Liberal Democrats blamed the values sustaining Brexit as the cause for inequality and poverty: *"It's about who we are as a country and the values that drive our choices... Staying in the European Union will secure a £50 billion Remain Bonus, with the economy two per cent larger by 2024-25. We can invest that bonus in our schools, and in tackling in-work poverty and inequality."* (Liberal Democrat Manifesto 2019, p. 7). Both the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democratic Party in 2019, while holding fundamentally different views regarding membership in the EU, represented inequality in terms of harm. They blamed these harms on non-British values, fitting a common distance-blame-stigma pattern.

Attention to Scottish National Party Manifestos further illustrates this distance-blame-stigma pattern. Yet, in this case, the group represented as at risk, along with pensioners and working families, are the 'Scottish people', and the threat is 'Westminster'. For example, in the Scottish National Party (SNP) 2010 Manifesto, the elite, as a grouping foreign to control over local decision-making, are represented as 'London' and 'Westminster.' This space is aligned with both the Conservative and Labour parties as a place that violates the consent of the Scottish people on tax, work, and public service provision:

"Running through this manifesto is the SNP vision of a new future for Scotland, independent, socially just, and economically secure. The real alternative to the discredited Westminster system is a fresh, independent future for our nation... The Labour Party now threatens cuts that will be 'deeper and tougher' than under Margaret Thatcher, and the Tories plan an additional £1 billion cut on Scotland each year by ripping up the current funding deal without the consent of the Scottish Government or Scottish people" (Scottish National Party Manifesto 2010, pp. 5-6).

In contrast to the Conservative party, the in-group whose control has been violated is not British citizens but the 'Scottish people.' Accordingly, the group considered foreign and immoral constitutes 'the Westminster system,' rather than the EU. Indeed, the SNP advocates for its own seat *"at the top table of Europe ... to have an enhanced role within the UK"* (Scottish National Party Manifesto 2010, p. 19). Similarly, in 2015 they stated, *"[d]evolving employment policy would allow us to take progressive action on low pay in order to tackle poverty and inequality ... regardless of the political balance at Westminster"* (Scottish National Party Manifesto 2015, p. 36). Again, in 2017, the represented threat is 'Westminster' and 'Tories': *"A vote for the SNP will strengthen Scotland's hand against further Tory cuts and ensure that progressive policies, like those pursued by the SNP government in Scotland, are firmly on the agenda at Westminster"* (Scottish National Party Manifesto 2017, p.3).

In summary, we have identified a common pattern of distance, blame, and stigma used in the politicisation of perceived issues related to realising the 'British dream,' particularly in sustaining 'equality of

⁸ The Private Finance Initiative (PFI) was a government procurement policy aimed at creating public-private partnerships. It was launched in 1992 and considerably expanded by the Labour government under the leadership of Tony Blair (Hellowell, 2010). A defining feature of PFIs is the use of project finance (using private sector debt and equity underwritten by the public) to deliver services (Hellowell, 2010). Their usage remains controversial, and since 2018, they are no longer used for new infrastructure projects, although they remain a central feature of NHS trust management (Seaton, 2023).

opportunity.' Furthermore, we find that the groups who are denigrated and held responsible, and by extension, those who are deemed valuable and worthy of protection, shift with changes in party leadership and political strategy, as well as with the salient issues of the day.

5. Discussion

In this discussion section, we will relate our findings on narratives of 'equality of opportunity' within the 'British dream' to the social groups they delineate and the valence of their representation. We will also explore how these narratives help explain the limited correlations between the semantics of 'economic inequality,' the redistributive mechanisms of the state, and GINI coefficients, in relation to the literature discussed in the introduction. Finally, we will expand on the implications this research has for the measurement of public opinion on economic inequality and redistribution.

This exploratory research has aimed, in part, to understand the perceived disconnect between objective and subjective measures of economic inequality and how it relates to demands for redistribution. Previous literature suggested that this difference could be understood as systematic biases that limit the recognition of the actual degree of economic inequality in society or one's position within the economic order (Gobel & Carvacho, 2024; Jachimowicz et al., 2023). Our results, however, reveal substantial conceptual issues with this framing. Specifically, even when using the semantics of 'economic inequality,' there was little to suggest that this term referred specifically to the distribution of income or wealth. Nor was it simply a matter of translating economic inequality into domains more immediately experienced in everyday life, such as disparities in the quality of schooling or medical care. Instead, attention to cultural narratives surrounding the 'British dream' reveals a focus on achieving normatively valued life course experiences, such as the dignity and security provided through education, home ownership, family life, and retirement. From this perspective, the lack of a clear relationship between objective measures, such as the GINI coefficient, and subjective measures, such as the salience of economic inequality in communication, is not surprising, as they address qualitatively different conceptualizations.

In this paper, we have also explored questions of motivation in political behaviour. Traditional models, such as the median-voter hypothesis, have narrowly formulated this motivation in terms of economic self-interest (Cavaillé, 2023). However, subsequent scholarship has pointed to the self-protective functions of sustaining positive social identity in comparison to perceived economic Others (Condon & Wichowsky, 2020), as well as normative concerns about what is considered fair (Cavaillé, 2023). As suggested in comparative welfare literature, we find that the redistributive functions of the state are not inherently comprehended in economic terms (Larsen, 2016). Instead, they instil beliefs and emotions related to the Self and delineate social groups that are stigmatised for their perceived incongruence with the welfare regime (e.g., perceived welfare dependents in liberal welfare regimes) (Lundberg & Syltevik, 2024). Our findings support this approach, highlighting that beliefs about who one should be in society and what is considered fair are formulated through comparisons that reproduce valued social groups (e.g., working families, dignified pensioners) in relation to those perceived as Other who are represented as threatening, such as the 'political elite' and 'benefit scroungers.'

Additionally, our data reveal an ecological basis for self-perception and social categorization, fitting a common distance-blame-stigma pattern (Joffe, 2011b). During perceived crises, those who were blamed were often linked to how people desired to see themselves, as articulated in the British dream. For instance, in 2010, the perception of a 'broken' society sustained a belief in dangers posed by 'welfare dependents,' 'ASBOs,' 'economic migrants,' and a bureaucratic elite (Adams & Rainsborough, 2011; Slater, 2014). By 2019, however, the perceived risks shifted to emphasise regional divisions, with blame placed on the values of those supporting either retaining or removing membership in the European Union—by the Conservative Party and Liberal Democratic Party, respectively. Furthermore, for the SNP, the threat to the Scottish people was represented by the Labour and Conservative parties in Westminster. This suggests that what was represented as experienceable and valued was held in opposition to the 'distant' groups blamed for the perceived harms to 'our' society (Marková, 2007).

The illustration of a common distance-blame-stigma pattern (Joffe, 2011b) raises questions about how we interpret subjective measures of perceived inequality. Specifically, it challenges the extent to which people's perceptions of economic distributions can be separated from their beliefs about what their life in society ought to

be like. This has important implications for subjective measures of perceived inequality, which largely assume that people can distinguish between ‘what is’ and ‘what should be.’ For instance, the most widely used measure of perceived inequalities, adopted by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP, 2021), asks participants to select from five diagrammatic representations of ‘types of society’ that vary by the distribution of people in the minority or majority (e.g., a great mass of people at the bottom), and to place themselves on an 11-point scale between the ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ of society (ISSP, 2021).

Derived from this measurement is the repeated finding that people bias their perception of income distribution according to reference groups related to their position in society, often resulting in the perception that they are relatively richer or poorer than they actually are (Marandola & Xu, 2021; Willis et al., 2022). This bias creates an artificial peak in the frequency of those identifying as middle class (Marandola & Xu, 2021). The issue is particularly pronounced when the mid-point is salient, such as identifying as middle class on the social ladder or as an average earner (Marandola & Xu, 2021). This bias is often explained as an information-processing deficit, such as homophily in local social networks, which provides insufficient feedback on the actual composition of society (Knell & Stix, 2020).

However, our research suggests that people are not neutral toward their reference group. Instead, the reference group holds meanings that emphasise the need to distance oneself from a stigmatised ‘poor’ and ‘elite,’ rather than it being solely an issue of information processing. For example, the Conservative Party in 2005 called for a defence of the British dream through a renewed focus on the values of the “forgotten majority” (Conservative Party Manifesto 2005, p.3), a belief shaped by the perceived risks posed by an evolving category of the rich and elite amid changing crises and scandals. From this perspective, identification with the norm of the distribution is more than just a descriptive measurement of quantity; it is a reflection of one’s values. Pursuing ‘dignity’ and ‘security’ according to the norms set out in the “British dream” involves more than simply understanding one’s position in society—it also entails aligning oneself with the values and expectations embedded in that societal ideal.

Through this research we have reconsidered the propositions offered by the median voter hypothesis, and its subsequent revisions, to explain political party positions as set out in UK party manifestos between 2005 and 2024. We found limited evidence that trends in the semantics of economic inequality or redistribution parallel objective trends in economic inequality as measured by the GINI coefficient. We propose that the lack of clear relations between these measures goes beyond individual perceptual biases, as suggested in the political psychology literature. Rather, we found that ‘economic inequality’ and calls for protective features of ‘social security’ were made by political parties in ways that related to cultural narratives enshrined in the ‘British dream’. From this perspective, at points of perceived crisis, the harms associated with economic issues—such as the Global Financial Crisis or EU Membership—were blamed by political groups on an ambiguous grouping of distant ‘elite’ and ‘poor’ groups, as well as other political parties. Namely, they were represented as threatening the ‘dignity’ and ‘security’ one should experience, as set out in the British dream. This entails a possible reconsideration of standard measures of public opinion for measuring perceptions of economic inequality, and instead ask, whether these measurements may instead capture the motivated and cultural practice of representing one’s self in relation to perceived harms.

6. Concluding Remarks

This paper has explored the politicisation of economic inequality and redistribution using a corpus of party manifestos in UK general elections from 2005 to 2024. Our results suggest caution in assuming that ‘economic inequality’ is formulated in the same ways as objective measures, such as the GINI coefficient. Specifically, the way economic inequality is understood in society relates to normative beliefs about what life ought to be, emphasising positive representations of dignity and security for working families and pensioners, in opposition to perceived threats from an underclass and elite. Moreover, these representations are not fixed; they are developed differently by political parties according to their aims and in response to societal issues. Our research offers an alternative view to the general models of human motivation formulated in terms of a median-voter hypothesis and its subsequent revisions. Instead, we propose that what is considered desirable and

in need of protection in the welfare state is driven in part by elite political communications on what is represented as the salient issue in society.

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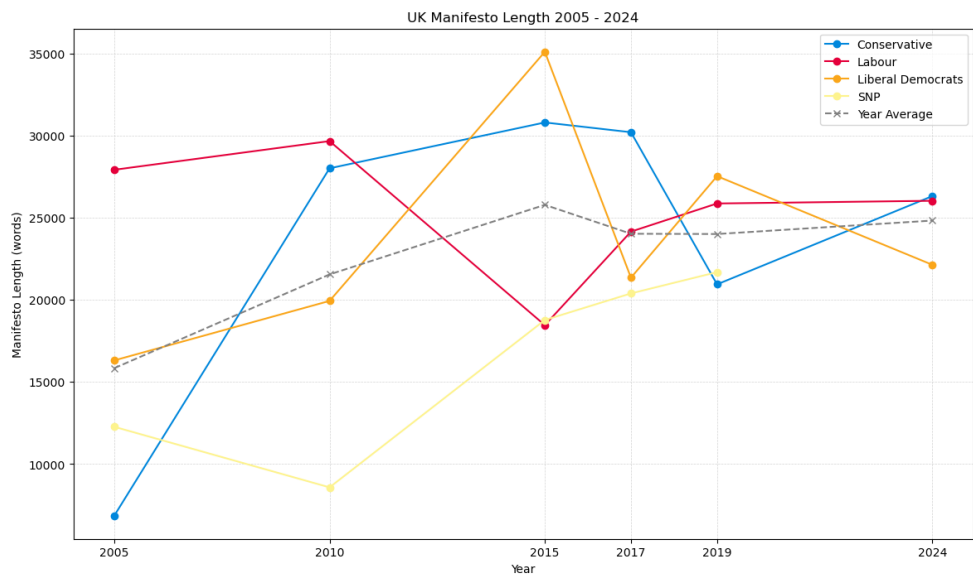
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7. Appendix:

Appendix 7.1: Table of UK Main Party Manifesto Text Lengths in words 2005 - 2024.

Year	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrats	Scottish National Party	Year Average
2005	6858	27929	16317	12272	15844
2010	28018	29676	19940	8583	21554
2015	30811	18466	35115	18776	25792
2017	30217	24161	21355	20397	24032
2019	20950	25876	27541	21693	24015
2024	26324	26040	22141	NA	24835
Party Average	23863	25358	23734	16344	22678

Appendix 7.2 Graph of UK Main Party Manifesto Text Lengths in words 2005 - 2024.



Appendix 7.3: Top-10 Words associated with Inequality & Equality in British Party Manifesto 2005 - 2024

Inequality only	Equality only	Inequality or Equality
equality	inequality	poverty
poverty	poverty	opportunity
government	opportunity	sex
people	sex	people
progressive	people	government
reduce	government	country
social	country	tackling
problems	tackling	work
better	work	marriage
family	marriage	children

Appendix 7.4 Economic Inequality Keywords:

Keywords derived from: McGovern, Patrick; Bauer, Martin and Obradovic, Sandra (2023). In search of a Tawney Moment: income inequality, financial crisis and the mass media in the UK and the USA. *The Sociological Review*, 71(5) pp. 1213–1233.

Category: Economic:

- Wealth
- Income
- Economy
- Salary
- Compensation
- Pay

Category: Inequality

- Inequality
- Equality
- Distribution
- Differential

7.1. Redistribution Keywords:

- Attendance Allowance
- Additional State Pension
- Armed Forces Compensation Scheme
- Bereavement Allowance
- Bereavement Payment
- Bereavement Support Payment
- Budgeting Loan
- Benefit Cap
- Benefit Support for Housing Costs
- Carer's Allowance
- Carer's Credit
- Child Benefit
- Child Funeral Fund
- Child Maintenance
- Child Tax Credits
- Christmas Bonus
- Cold Weather Payment
- Constant Attendance Allowance
- Crisis Loans
- Cost of Living Payments
- Childcare Support for Students
- Carer's Leave
- Council Tax Reduction Schemes
- Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme
- Citizens' Rights Provisions
- Disability Living Allowance
- Disability Benefit Assessments

Discretionary Housing Payments
Domestic Abuse Support
DWP Benefit Sanctions
Employment and Support Allowance
ESA
Early Intervention Policies
Finance Support
Funeral Expenses Payment
Free School Meals Support
Furlough Scheme
Guardians Allowance
Help with Health Costs
Home Responsibilities Protection
Housing Benefit
Housing Benefit Extended Payment
Healthy Start Scheme
High Income Child Benefit Charge
Help with Childcare Costs
Help with Energy Bills
Household Support Fund
Income Support
Independent Living Fund
Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit
Jobseeker's Allowance
JSA
Local Housing Allowance
LHA
Maternity Allowance
Motability
National Insurance Number
No Recourse to Public Funds
Over 80 Pension
Pension Credit
Personal Independence Payment
PIP
Reduced Earnings Allowance
Redundancy Pay
Rent Safety Net
Severe Disablement Allowance
State Pension
Statutory Adoption Pay
Statutory Maternity Pay
Statutory Paternity Pay
Statutory Sick Pay
SSP
Sure Start Maternity Grant
Support for Mortgage Interest
SMI
Support for Single Parent Families
Social Security
Supported Exempt Accommodation
Tax Credits

Test and Trace Support Payments
 Triple-Lock
 Universal Credit
 Universal Basic Income
 Universal Credit Uplift
 Universal Credit Assessment Period and Earned Income
 War Disablement Pension
 War Widow or Widower's Pension
 Widowed Parent's Allowance
 Winter Fuel Payment
 Working Tax Credit
 Work Capability Assessment

Appendix 7.5: UK 2005 - 2024 Economic Inequality Semantic Frequency

Year	Conservative	Labour	LibDem	SNP
2005	3	5	7	4
2010	13	6	5	0
2015	6	5	15	16
2017	10	19	10	11
2019	1	24	16	9
2024	3	6	8	

Appendix 7.6: UK 2005 - 2024 Economic Inequality Semantic Frequency Normalised by Manifesto Length *100

Year	Conservative	Labour	LibDem	SNP
2005	0.0437	0.0179	0.0429	0.0326
2010	0.0464	0.0202	0.0251	0.0
2015	0.0195	0.0271	0.0427	0.0852
2017	0.0331	0.0786	0.0468	0.0539
2019	0.0048	0.0928	0.0581	0.0415
2024	0.0114	0.023	0.0361	

Appendix 7.7: UK 2005 - 2024 Redistribution Semantic Frequency

Year	Conservative	Labour	LibDem	SNP
2005	11	13	9	5
2010	12	25	22	5
2015	27	20	32	33
2017	24	26	22	49
2019	12	30	14	46
2024	22	10	23	

Appendix 7.8 UK 2005 - 2024 Redistribution Semantic Frequency Normalised by Manifesto Length *100

Year	Conservative	Labour	LibDem	SNP
2005	0.01604	0.0465	0.0552	0.0407
2010	0.0428	0.0842	0.1103	0.0583
2015	0.0876	0.1083	0.0911	0.1758
2017	0.0794	0.1076	0.103	0.2402
2019	0.0573	0.1159	0.0508	0.212
2024	0.0836	0.0384	0.1039	

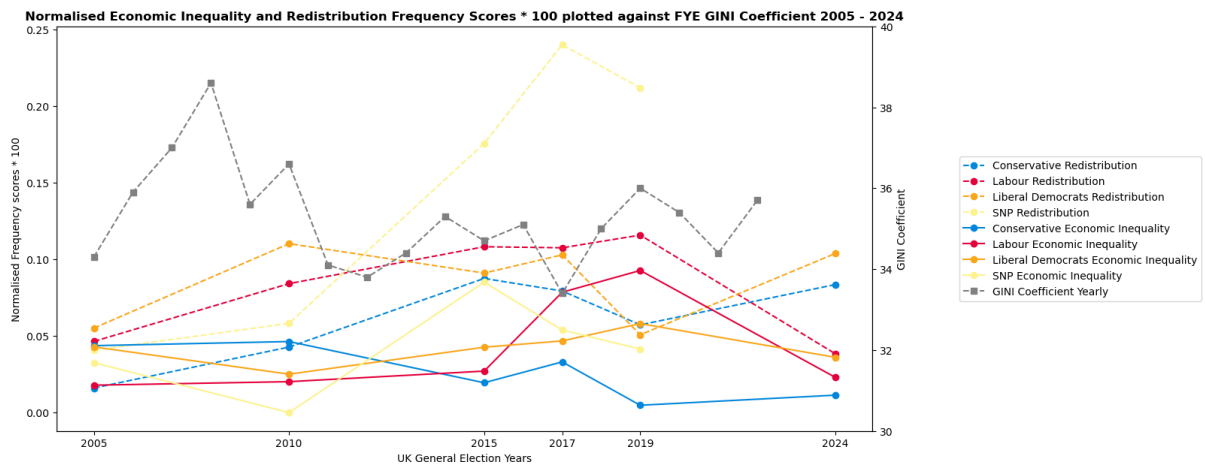
Appendix 7.9: Year-by-Year Changes in GINI Coefficients to two decimal points FYE 2005 - 2022

Year	GINI	Year-on-Year Change (%)
2004/05	34.3	
2005/06	35.9	1.6
2006/07	37.0	1.1
2007/08	38.6	1.6
2008/09	35.6	-3.0
2009/10	36.6	1.0
2010/11	34.1	-2.5
2011/12	33.8	-0.3
2012/13	34.4	0.6
2013/14	35.3	0.9
2014/15	34.7	-0.6
2015/16	35.1	0.4
2016/17	33.4	-1.7
2017/18	35.0	1.6
2018/19	36.0	1.0
2019/20	35.4	-0.6
2020/21	34.4	-1.0
2021/22	35.7	1.3

Appendix 7.10: Changes in average GINI Coefficient Scores by UK General Election periods 2005 - 2019

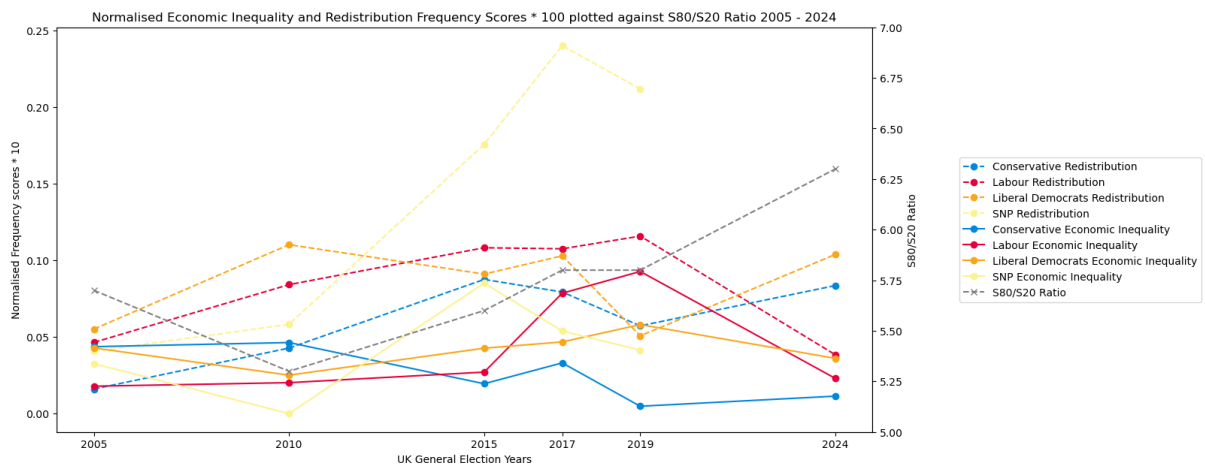
Election Period	Average GINI Over Election Period
2005-2010	36.25
2010-2015	35.85
2015-2017	35.05
2017-2019	35.2

Appendix 7.11: UK 2005 - 2024 Semantic Trends in Economic Inequality and Redistribution Only Normalised by Manifesto Length Plotted Against FYE GINI Coefficients

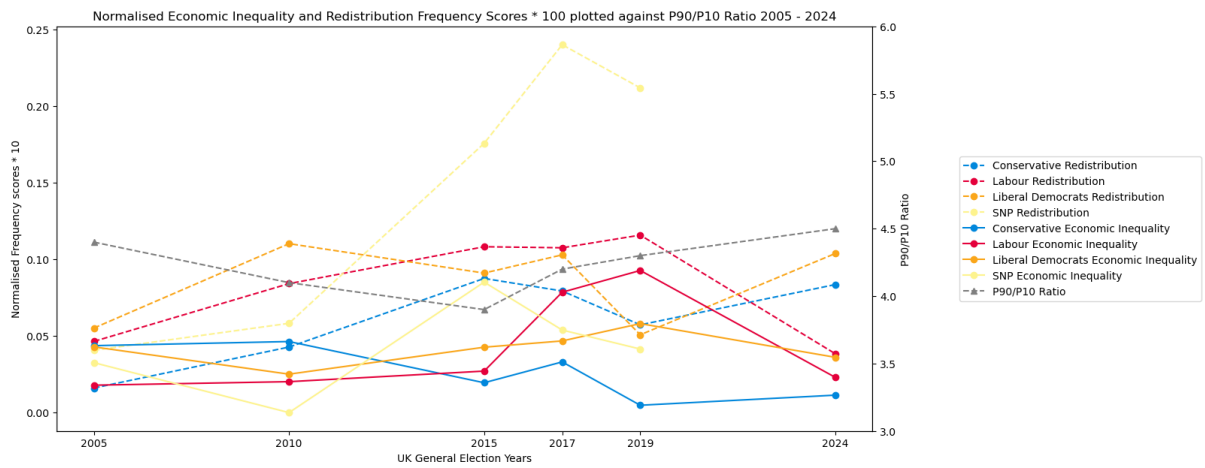


7.1.1. S80/S20

Appendix 7.12: UK 2005 - 2024 Semantic Trends in Economic Inequality and Redistribution Only Normalised by Manifesto Length Plotted Against FYE S80/20 Ratio



Appendix 7.13: UK 2005 - 2024 Semantic Trends in Economic Inequality and Redistribution Only Normalised by Manifesto Length Plotted Against FYE P90/10 Ratio



7.1.2. Palma Ratio

Graph 5: UK 2005 - 2024 Semantic Trends in Economic Inequality and Redistribution Only Normalised by Manifesto Length Plotted Against FYE Palma Ratio

