The Association Between Meritocratic Beliefs and Support for Law Enforcement

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Introduction

❖ Meritocracy is the belief that individual life success is the product of hard work and personal merit, rather than one's inherited economic or social standings (McClosky & Zaller, 1984; Newman, Johnston, & Lown, 2015). This reasoning represents one pathway Americans have taken to explain steady increases in income inequality present since the 1970s (Frank, 2009; Piketty & Saez, 2014)

❖ Theories underlying the structural correlates of crime and socioeconomic disadvantage are another hot topic in current American politics. Researchers have linked factors like one's perceived *social control* with their likelihood of becoming involved in criminal activity, suggesting that some individuals have less situational autonomy than others (Wickes & Hipp, 2018)

❖ Some Americans' low support for law enforcement might be reflective of the recognition of these structural correlates of crime. This is an opinion that meritocratic individuals might take issue with because it suggests the limits of social mobility

❖ While similar predictors have been associated with both presence of meritocratic beliefs and support for law enforcement (e.g., socioeconomic status, income level, neighborhood advantage), there is a substantial gap in the existing literature regarding how these two opinions might interact (Abner, 2022; Mijs, 2021; Newman, Johnston, & Lown, 2015; O'Connor Shelley et al., 2013)

Research Question

❖ Are strong meritocratic beliefs associated with support for law enforcement, controlling for socioeconomic status?

Methods

Sample

❖ Respondents (n=4032) were drawn from the 2021 General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative sample of English-speaking, non-institutionalized adults in the U.S.

Measures

❖ Meritocratic beliefs were assessed using the sum of two questions alluding to relevant aspects of social mobility (i.e., "Is it important to come from a wealthy family?" and "Is hard work important?"). Participants' original responses were dichotomously coded into "yes" (1) and "no" (0) and were summed to create a quantitative variable with scores ranging from 2 (highest degree of meritocratic belief) to 0 (absence of meritocratic belief)

❖ Law enforcement support was measured with the question, "Are we spending too little on law enforcement?" This variable was coded dichotomously to reflect responses of "yes" or "no" (i.e., responses of "yes" indicate financial support for law enforcement)

❖ Socioeconomic status was assessed using self-reports of total family income. Participants' responses were condensed into three income brackets: under $1,000 - $49,999 (lower), $50,000 - $149,999 (middle), and $150,000 - $170,000 or over (upper) (Walrack & Segal, 2023)

Results

Univariate

❖ 39.0% of respondents had a meritocracy score of 2 (strong beliefs), 59.8% of respondents had a meritocracy score of 1 (weaker beliefs), and 1.2% had a meritocracy score of 0 (absent beliefs)

❖ 41.9% of respondents indicated financial support for law enforcement

❖ 39.3% of respondents belonged to the lower-income bracket, 45.7% of respondents belonged to the middle-income bracket, and 14.6% of respondents belonged to the upper

Bivariate

❖ A logistic regression showed that meritocracy scores of 2 (strong beliefs) are significantly different from meritocracy scores of 0 (absent beliefs) in terms of support for law enforcement (O.R. 3.87, C.I. 1.17-17.44) (*see Figure 1 for a coordinating bivariate graph*). Those with meritocracy scores of 2 have an expected odds of law enforcement support that is nearly 4 times higher than those who score a 0 for their meritocracy score

❖ Logistic regression failed to show a significant difference between meritocracy scores of 1 (weaker beliefs) and meritocracy scores of 0 (absent beliefs) (O.R. 1.67, C.I. 0.51-7.56)

❖ A logistic regression plot yielded the predicted probabilities that individuals will support law enforcement based on their meritocracy scores (*see Figure 2*). According to this model, scores of 0 indicate around a 24% chance an individual will support law enforcement, scores of 1 indicate around a 34% chance of support, and scores of 2 indicate around a 54% chance of support

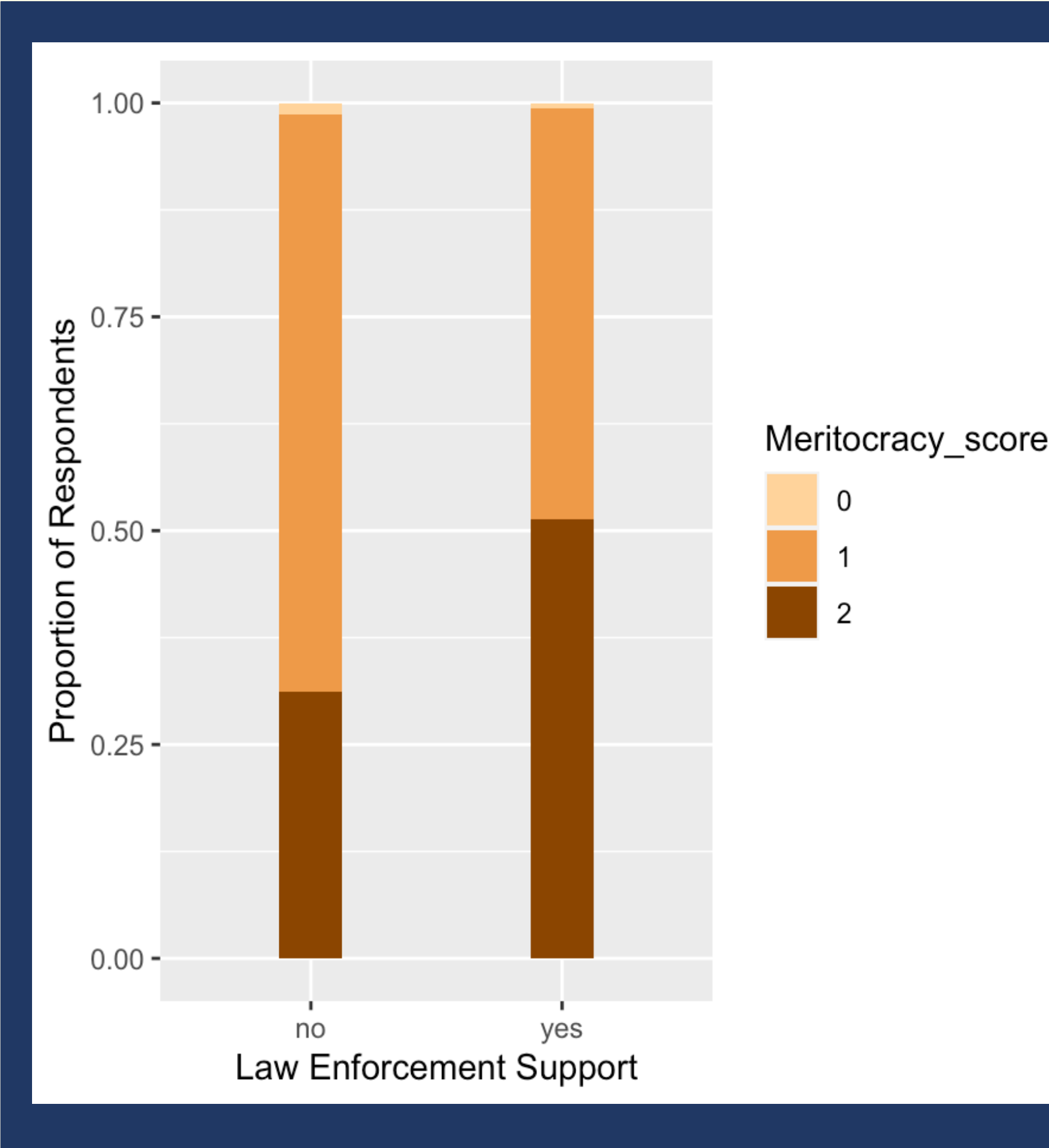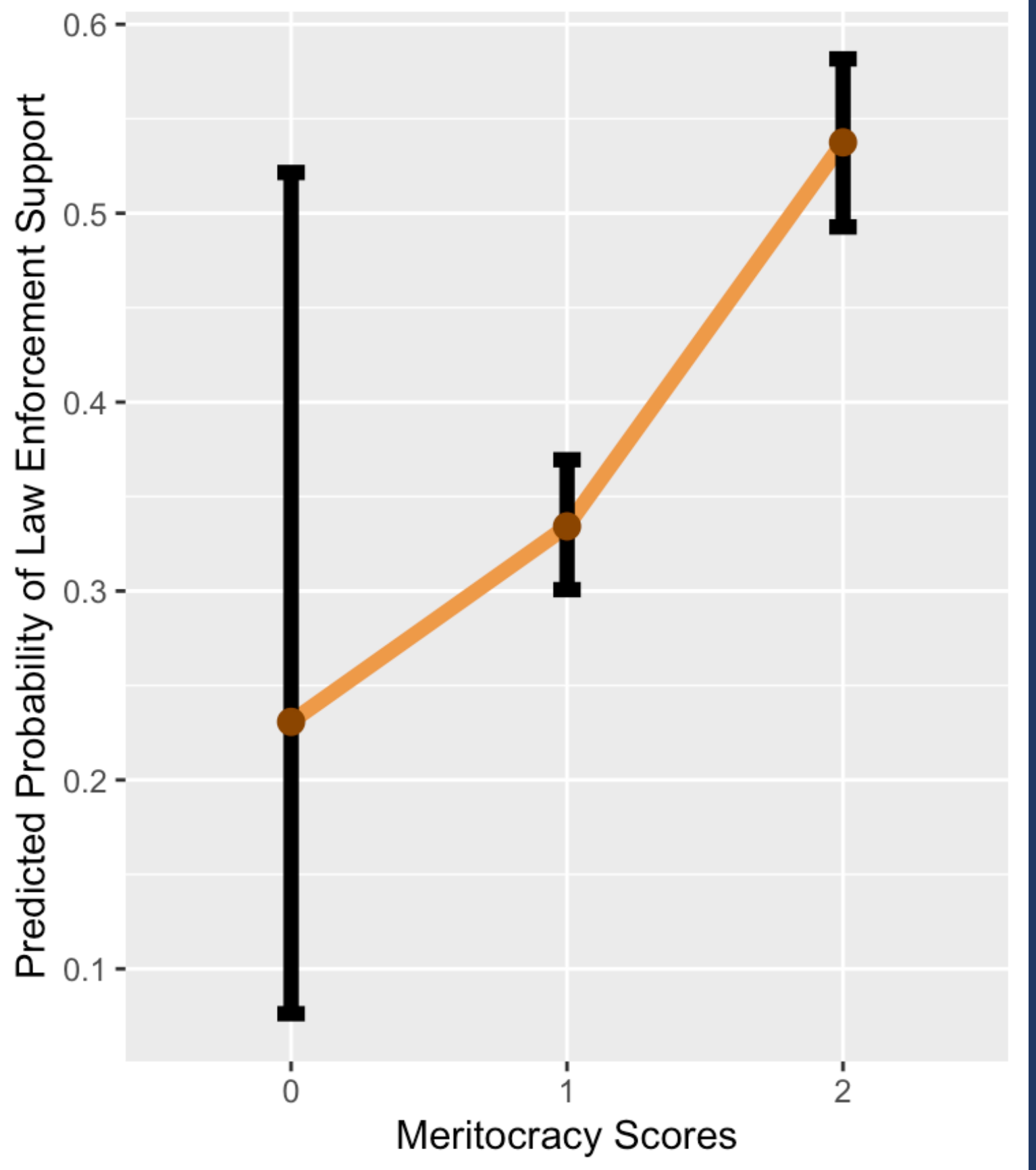**Figure 1. Proportion of Respondents at Each Meritocracy Score based on Law Enforcement Support**

Figure 2. Predicted Probability of Law Enforcement Support based on Meritocracy Scores

Multivariate

❖ After controlling for total family income, strong meritocratic beliefs (scores of 2) were still significantly different from absent beliefs (scores of 0) in terms of law enforcement support (O.R. 5.10, C.I. 1.28-33.87). Those with strong meritocratic beliefs have an expected odds of law enforcement support that is 5.1 times higher than those with low meritocratic beliefs, holding income fixed. So, total family income does not confound the relevant association

❖ All income brackets failed to yield a significant association with law enforcement support – i.e., lower-income (O.R. 1.12, C.I. 0.13-9.71), middle-income (O.R. 1.02, C.I. 0.12-8.86), and upper-income (O.R. 0.63, C.I. 0.07-5.58)

Discussion

❖ Regardless of socioeconomic status (i.e., lower, middle, or upper), individuals with strong meritocratic beliefs were more likely to indicate support for law enforcement

❖ This represents an important subgroup to target with educational interventions regarding the societal limits on social control and individual autonomy in the United States. Additionally, meritocratic beliefs may have a lasting effect on Americans' voting patterns on issues relating to income inequality and policing, so more awareness concerning the lived experiences of disadvantaged populations in the U.S. will only help the cultivation of an informed democracy

❖ Further research is needed to determine the best indicators for law enforcement support (i.e., not just financial support). Continued work could also examine specific dimensions of law enforcement like the police, the courts, and federal service agencies

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