

Representations of Economic Inequality and Redistribution in British Party Manifestos (2005 - 2024)

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Motivation, Economic Inequality, & Redistribution

- **Median-Voter Hypothesis (Meltzer & Richard, 1981):** Majority elects parties supporting redistribution under economic inequality.
- **Expectation:** Redistribution continues until economic inequality is eliminated.
- **UK Case Study:** Large increases in economic inequality; no comparable increase in demands for redistribution.
- **Recent Approaches Consider:**
 - Fairness (Cavallé, 2023)
 - Sustaining positive self-esteem (Condon & Wichowsky, 2020)

Methods: Mixed-Method Trend Analysis of Economic Inequality & Redistribution Keywords.

Data Set (1) UK General Election Party Manifestos (2005 - 2024):

- 23 manifestos, 655,528 total words. Manifesto lengths: 6,858 to 35,115 words (avg. 22,678 words)
- Measures generated:
 - **Economic Inequality Semantics:**
 - Keyword examples: salary, wage, compensation, pay, inequality, distribution, differentials
 - Frequency normalized by manifesto text length
 - **Policy Instruments for Redistribution:**
 - Extracted from House of Commons Library (accessed 03.06.2024)
 - This list includes various social welfare benefits and support schemes available in the UK, such as allowances, pensions, support payments, grants, and tax credits
 - Keyword examples: Universal Credit, Jobseekers Allowance, Housing Benefit

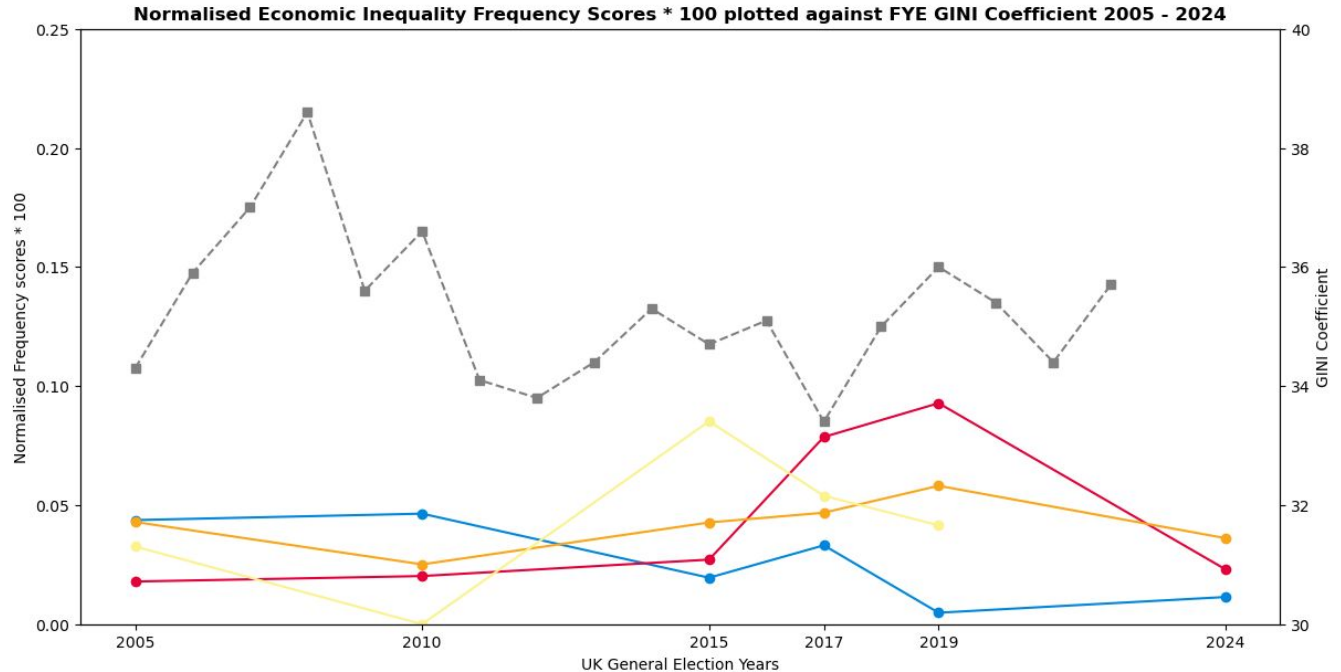
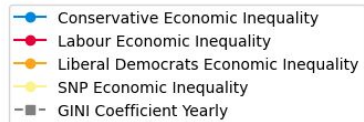
Data Set (2) GINI Coefficient:

- Economic inequality measure: 0% (equality) to 100% (inequality)
- Data for FYE 2005 and 2022 from Statista (ONS UK)

Trend Analysis (1) GINI & Semantics of Economic Inequality

Key Finding:

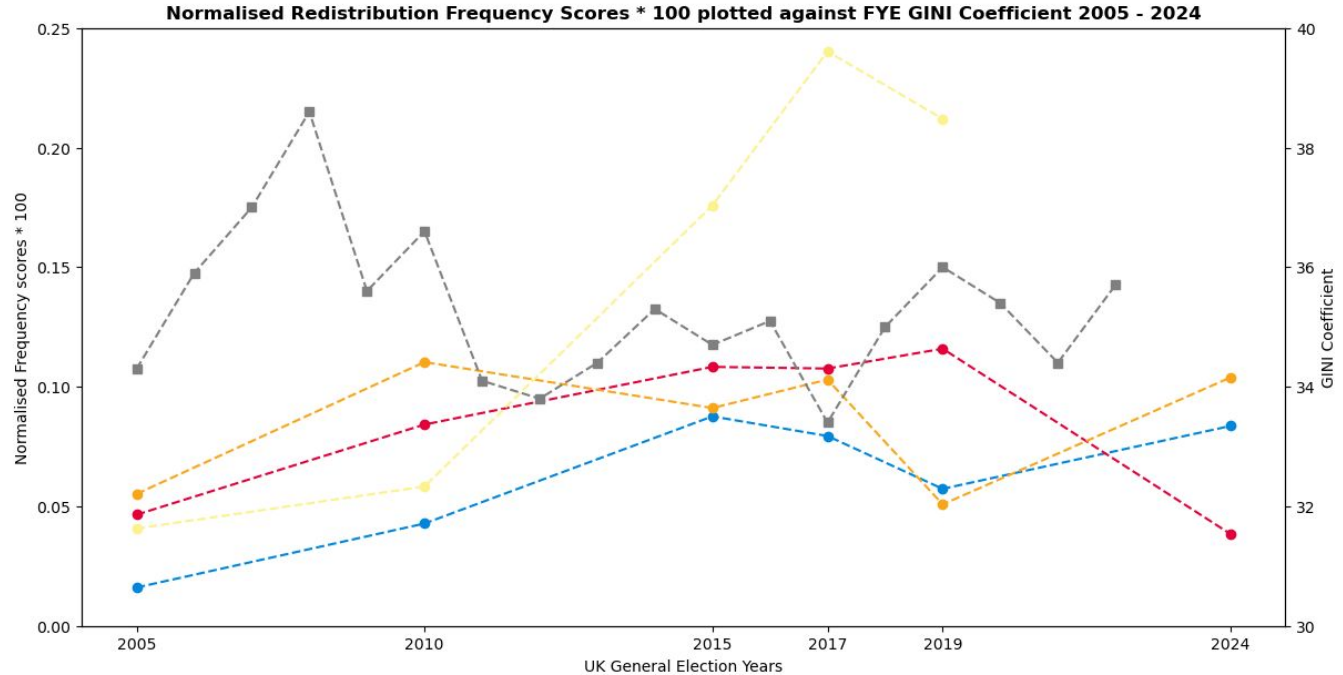
The semantics of economic inequality rarely aligned with objective measures of economic inequality.



Trend Analysis (2) GINI & Semantics of Redistribution

Key Finding:

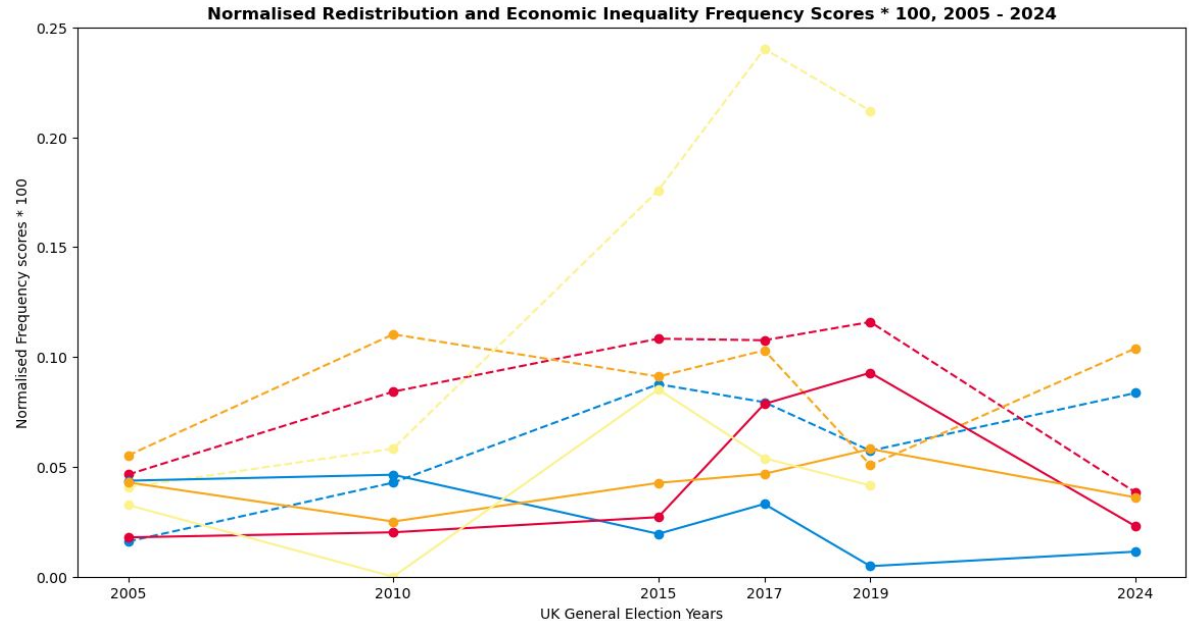
Redistribution was a more frequent topic in political communication than economic inequality, yet it is still not closely related to the GINI index.



Trend Analysis (3) Semantics of Economic Inequality Redistribution

Key Finding:

Discussions of economic inequality and redistribution likely related to party strategy, leadership, and expectations of leadership.



Interim Review:

1. The semantics of economic inequality rarely align with objective measures of economic inequality.
2. After the 2008 financial crisis, the discourse on redistribution became more prominent in political communication than discussions on economic inequality. Yet, semantics of redistribution were not closely related to the GINI index.
3. Discussions of economic inequality and redistribution likely related to party strategy, leadership, and government expectations.

To understand why this may be the case, we will now triangulate the findings with in-depth qualitative examinations of economic inequality and redistribution semantics retrieved from the party manifestos.

‘Economic inequality’ or ‘Inequality of opportunity’

Q) Why might the semantics of economic inequality rarely align with objective measures of economic inequality?

A) Even when ‘economic inequality’ is spoken about it is represented in terms of ‘equality of opportunity’, drawing on beliefs of discrimination and social mobility rather than distribution.

“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... 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).

“Break down barriers to opportunity ... Whoever you are, wherever you come from, Britain should be a country where hard work means you can get on in life.”

(Labour Party Manifesto 2024, p. 13).

Redistribution not Economic Inequality

- Q) Why might the discourse on redistribution be more prominent than discussions on economic inequality?
- A) Norms instilled in the so-called 'British Dream' produce valued and devalued social groups as a regular feature of communication, especially the dignity and security of valued groups.

“so you are able to work while having the security of your own home in which to raise your family. through the triple lock ... we will continue to increase the Basic State Pension by at least 2.5 per cent so you can have the dignity and security you deserve in your old age... We will tackle welfare dependency and the causes of poverty, and fight back against crime... and recognise the need for criminal sanctions like ASBOs”

(Conservative Party Manifesto 2010, p. 3).

“A country where everybody is able to get on in life, to have security at work and at home, to be decently paid for the work they do, and to live their lives with the dignity they deserve... We want to end mass dependence on emergency food parcels, which is a moral scar on our society”

(Labour Party Manifesto 2024, p. 5).

Distance-Blame-Stigma Patterns

Q: How did parties communicate economic inequality and redistribution to advance their political strategy?

A: Utilising common distance-blame-stigma patterns to represent themselves as maintaining 'equality of opportunity' in the 'British Dream'.

“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).

“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)

Conclusions:

- Political communication debated what was beneficial for individuals and society concerning economic inequality and redistribution.
- Political parties used distance-blame-stigma tactics, portraying themselves as uniquely capable of ensuring equal opportunities in the "British dream."
- They emphasized desirable groups, like hard-working families and dignified pensioners, while contrasting them with ambiguous elite and 'under-class' groups.
- Issues of income or wealth redistribution were viewed not neutrally but as integral to people's vision of a normative life course in Britain and its threats.