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Baby Boomers Driving Alone?

The Dynamics of Dissatisfaction with Income Differences (1987–2009)

*Frédéric Gonthier*¹

The social sciences have a long tradition of investigating perceived inequalities and their legitimacy dating back to Runciman's pioneering work on relative deprivation (Runciman 1966). Recently a great deal of attention has been focused on public attitudes toward income inequality. Income inequalities indeed play a prominent role in the public debate on social inequality (Bartels 2008; Cingano 2014; McCall 2013; Piketty 2014). Effects of these inequalities are known to undermine the bases of social cohesion, such as interpersonal trust, trust in institutions or civic participation (Larsen 2013; Rothstein 2011; Zmerli and Hooghe 2013).

One of the key findings obtained from the scholarly literature is that ordinary citizens do not gauge income inequality on an objective basis, by simply relying on economic news and information they receive about the state of their national economy. They also take into account their own financial situation and often make comparisons with the living conditions of significant others. More subjective factors pertaining to social justice may come into play as well, such as political ideology, where individuals place themselves in the social hierarchy, how large they think the gap between top and bottom incomes actually is, how large they consider it should be, etc.

Cross-national research has mostly pointed to attitudinal gaps between countries, thus showing that dissatisfaction with income gaps and support for redistribution are also grounded in national specificities related to work ethics, labor market structure, welfare arrangements, and egalitarian or liberal values. However, very few scholars have thoroughly examined how dissatisfaction with inequality evolves over time. Far from being a fixed process, the way people perceive income inequality may indeed vary as a result of many changes occurring at the country-level and at the individual-level.

This study explores the dynamics of tolerance for income inequality. The ISSP Inequality cumulated dataset offers a unique opportunity to address this issue through the lens of longitudinal analysis. The study tracks who contributes the most to the overall change in attitudes toward income inequality; i.e. whether some subgroups are more reactive than others. A classic question of public opinion research is: Who moves when opinion moves? This is usually intended to address elites' influence over public opinion, i.e. to what extent

1 An extended version of this study, including additional analyses, has been published 2017 in a special issue of the *International Journal of Sociology* 47(1): 26-42.

is change in the general public driven by changes in small minorities of sophisticated and enlightened segments of the population?

Here, three subgroups demand closer scrutiny: The wealthy, the better-educated and the younger generations. The first two of these groups are usually considered as being more responsive to their changing environment. They receive more information, they make more accurate assessments, they more easily connect their opinions with what transpires in the outside world... (Enns and Kellstedt 2008). Thus, it is plausible to expect that the wealthy will contribute to opinion change more than the others. By the same token, income inequalities can be less tolerated due to an increasing influence of the most educated segments of the national populations, presumed to be more sensitive to “post-materialism” and to egalitarian values (Inglehart 1977). Likewise, income inequalities may be more accepted because people become accustomed to them, and also because older cohorts are being replaced by new, more well-educated ones, who are more opposed to income gaps.

This study finds striking evidence of uniform moves among income groups, educational groups and cohorts since the beginning of the 1990s. However, contrary to what could be expected, results show that the generational dynamics are partly driven by the Baby Boomers’ increasing dissatisfaction toward income inequalities. This counterintuitive finding and its substantive implications are discussed.

Who Moves When Public Opinion on Income Inequality Moves?

In cross-national research it is well known that aggregate trends can conceal important variations within countries. It is also well known that economic inequalities can be perceived in very different ways, even by people who live in the same country (Lübker 2004; 2007). This section first investigates whether the wealthy, the most educated and the younger generations are becoming more tolerant toward income differences than the rest of the national populations. Addressing these subgroups and their opinion moves is of critical importance since they are often depicted as “opinion makers”.

Many scholars have found that the have-nots are less likely to update their opinions. Given their low levels of political awareness, they receive a minimum of the economic or political information available (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Converse 1964).² Therefore, they display random or stable survey responses, and are not contributing much to aggregate measures of opinion change (Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002; Stimson 2004). By contrast, the privileged citizens have access to more information on their economic and political environment. Because of this they can respond more quickly and more emphatically. All in all, the wealthiest and the most educated segments of the public should be more reactive to their environment, and exhibit more salient patterns of opinion change than their less privileged counterparts (Gonthier 2016).

2 Since the ISSP cumulated dataset does not document political competence per se, I fall back on education as a reasonable proxy. Education levels indeed relate to political and economic information inasmuch as they reflect an individual’s exposure to information and ability to consider economic and political issues.

A different rationale applies with cohorts and generational change. Inglehart argues that economic security experienced during socialization years could push individuals to adopt long-lasting postmaterialist values, thus giving priority to non-economic issues over economic security and material comfort. Much of this generational dynamic, Inglehart adds, is channeled through rising education levels (Inglehart 1977; 1997). More supportive of egalitarian values than their older counterparts, the younger generations should then be less tolerant toward income differences since income differences jeopardize individual autonomy and expression.³ Therefore, one can expect those born after 1945 to display a stronger rejection of inequality. More importantly to note is that although each cohort's level of tolerance of is expected to remain stable over time (since socialization has a life-long influence), generation renewal should gradually level up dissatisfaction with income inequality.

Since the first ISSP Inequality module in 1987, respondents have been asked to position themselves on a five-point agreement scale, capturing whether they believe that "income differences are too large" in their country. The following figures plot the percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree with this statement in each country and for each ISSP wave.

The analysis begins with income groups. Empirical studies on attitudes toward inequalities and redistribution have repeatedly demonstrated that perceived inequalities are very likely to vary among social classes and incomes groups (Kulin and Svallfors 2013; Svallfors 2006). In order to isolate the wealthy and the underprivileged, a specific variable has been computed, collapsing respondents' personal income into four equal categories for each country and ISSP wave.⁴ Figure 1 captures the evolution of dissatisfaction with income inequalities by country and depending on the two extreme income groups (income ++ for the upper quartile, income - - for the bottom one).⁵

Mean levels of dissatisfaction with inequalities (ranging from 1 to 5) are quite high everywhere, but the gap dividing the wealthy and the underprivileged is far from being identical between countries. It is much more important in rich Western countries (Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Germany, and France) than in Eastern ones (Latvia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic). Social scientists vary in their views on what ultimately drives individual attitudes and behaviors. Following the theory of hedonic rationality, some posit that self-interest is the major predictor of policy preferences: Ordinary citizens endorse opinions which are consistent with their tangible short-term material interests. Others argue that self-interested motivations can be countered by general social values: Symbolic predis-

3 Opposite arguments can be voiced. The young are usually portrayed as malleable and easily influenced by their external environment, and they have been shown to be more liberal (in the European sense) since their views on inequality are mainly shaped by abstract principles inherited from school (such as merit). By contrast, their older counterparts are more aware of inequality, which they have experienced in its various forms (notably at work).

4 Quartiles have been computed for each country and module so as to define specific income cut points with respect to time and space. For caveats when using income variables from the ISSP cumulated dataset, see Brien and Bechert 2014, 6.

5 For the sake of clarity, all income groups are not plotted. But the notion of "parallel publics" holds with higher-middle and lower-middle income groups. The same goes for intermediate educational groups, not displayed in Figure 2.

positions acquired through socialization in early life exert the strongest effect (Sears and Funk 1991; Chong, Citrin and Conley 2001).

Figure 1 provides evidence for both assumptions. Income groups may be divided in rich Western countries because the wealthy and the have-nots stick to their personal interests, with the former “understating” income differences they benefit from, and the latter “emphasizing” income differences they do not benefit from. But income groups may be divided as well because their views on social inequalities are shaped by different justice principles. The wealthy may, for instance, consider that income differences are not too large because they mostly value individual responsibility. And the lowest income groups may conversely assess income differences with stronger preferences for equality and redistribution. The fact that income groups from Eastern countries similarly gauge income differences can be explained just the same way. They may share the same perception of their economic environment as being very unequal; and they may also be united by a common set of values leading them to reject income differences.

Most importantly, Figure 1 reveals that respondents tend to move in the same direction and at the same moment whether they are rich or poor. This hypothesis of uniform patterns among various subgroups has first been formalized in the U.S. context (Page and Shapiro 1992). Recently, Ura and Ellis have observed only marginal differences into how income quartiles respond to economic stimuli, with the wealthy showing a stronger reactivity (2008). Analyzing why the general public becomes less supportive of government expansion, Kelly and Enns also stated that low- and high-income groups respond in the same way to increasing income inequalities (Kelly and Enns 2010). Other studies came to the same conclusion of uniform opinion moves in other liberal regimes (Soroka and Wlezien 2009). Results from the ISSP Inequality modules tend to substantiate this “parallel publics” hypothesis. Even though income groups appear to be fiercely divided on income differences in many countries, their parallel movements give some credence to the idea that individuals respond in similar ways to stimuli coming from their changing environment (Enns and Kellstedt 2008).

With Figure 2, the study turns to educational subgroups. The figure charts opinion moves on income differences for two opposite segments: Respondents with no formal qualification or lowest formal qualification versus those above higher secondary level, with a university degree completed or with graduate studies. With the exception of Chile and the Philippines, the least educated are everywhere more dissatisfied with income differences. However, gaps between educational groups appear to be much smaller than those observed among income groups. Scholars usually consider that education has an ambivalent influence on how inequalities are perceived. On the one hand, people with higher education are more likely to believe in meritocratic ideology and value self-achievement (Andreß and Heien 2001, 348). But on the other hand, education is related to socialization to democratic values and tolerance. Therefore, the most educated are supposed to express stronger preferences for social equality. This balanced effect of education might explain why the most and the least educated segments do not display very different levels of tolerance for income inequalities.

Moreover, contrary to what could be expected, the most and the least educated segments of the public display very uniform variations. This result is also in line with the literature about parallel opinion movement on economic issues. For instance, with data from the

General Social Survey and the National Election Studies, Enns and Kellstedt have described how the least and the most sophisticated strata of American society change their opinions toward the economy in sync (Enns and Kellstedt 2008). Yet, once again, these two groups at opposite ends of the spectrum, the most and the least well-educated, appear to update their opinion in a very uniform way.

Figure 3 sketches the same picture for the various generations. Cohort cut points have been chosen according to accepted sociological categories: Those born in 1945 and before correspond to the “Silent Generation”; if born between 1946 and 1959 then “Baby Boomers”; between 1960 and 1980 called “Generation X” (also called “Gen Xers”); and if born after 1980 known as “Generation Y” (aka “Millennials”) (Howe and Strauss 1992; Strauss and Howe 1997).⁶ Respondents from the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers and Gen Xers exhibit very similar levels of tolerance for income inequalities. This finding is somewhat counterintuitive, since Baby Boomers and Gen Xers were expected to be much more dissatisfied with income inequality than their older counterparts. When it comes to attitudes toward income differences, birth cohort may not be as influential as income and educational background. In some countries (Bulgaria, France, Italy, Latvia, Switzerland or the U.S.), Baby Boomers do indeed display a slightly stronger rejection. Still, in many other countries, baby boomers and Gen Xers do not obviously stand out as the strongest supporters of income equality. They even seem to be outperformed by respondents from the silent generation.

At the country level cohorts tend to move in parallel, which is consistent with the notion that predispositions acquired through early socialization last throughout the life cycle. It confirms that the national context matters much for opinion change, and that it exerts the same influence on all segments of the public. However, one can also observe that Baby Boomers seem to be a little more mobile than other cohorts. This is notably the case in Israel, Japan and Sweden, where they carry an upward trend toward more dissatisfaction with income differences. It is as if the Baby Boomers were more reactive to their external environment. Since mean values provide a crude measurement of subgroup differences, this cohort effect calls for closer scrutiny. More advanced statistical techniques will be applied to addressing this in the next section.

In short, noteworthy here is that all segments of the national populations conform to the global pattern and exhibit the same trend toward more or less dissatisfaction with income inequalities. These findings comply with studies demonstrating that individuals incorporate information about economic changes in similar ways, and update their opinions in unison. Although it has long been argued that the general public is not interested in politics or the economy and lacks the knowledge to develop informed preferences (Converse 1964), results from the ISSP Inequality modules suggest that all citizens pay some attention and respond uniformly – though in varying degrees – to their changing environment.⁷

6 Other cut points are possible. Political generations could prove useful (Sears and Valentino 1997). However, their major downside for cross-national analysis is that political milestones often vary from one country to the other. In Figure 4, the Millennials are not presented since their number is very limited in 1999 (n = 569 for the twenty-seven countries examined).

7 Since ISSP Inequality does not include variables tapping “sociotropic perceptions” (i.e., perceptions arising out of concern for the well-being of national economic life in general), it is laborious to find out to which aspects of their environment individuals respond to or ignore.



Figure 1 Dissatisfaction with income differences by country and depending on income level (mean values, 1987-2009)



Figure 2 Dissatisfaction with income differences by country and depending on educational level (mean values, 1987-2009)

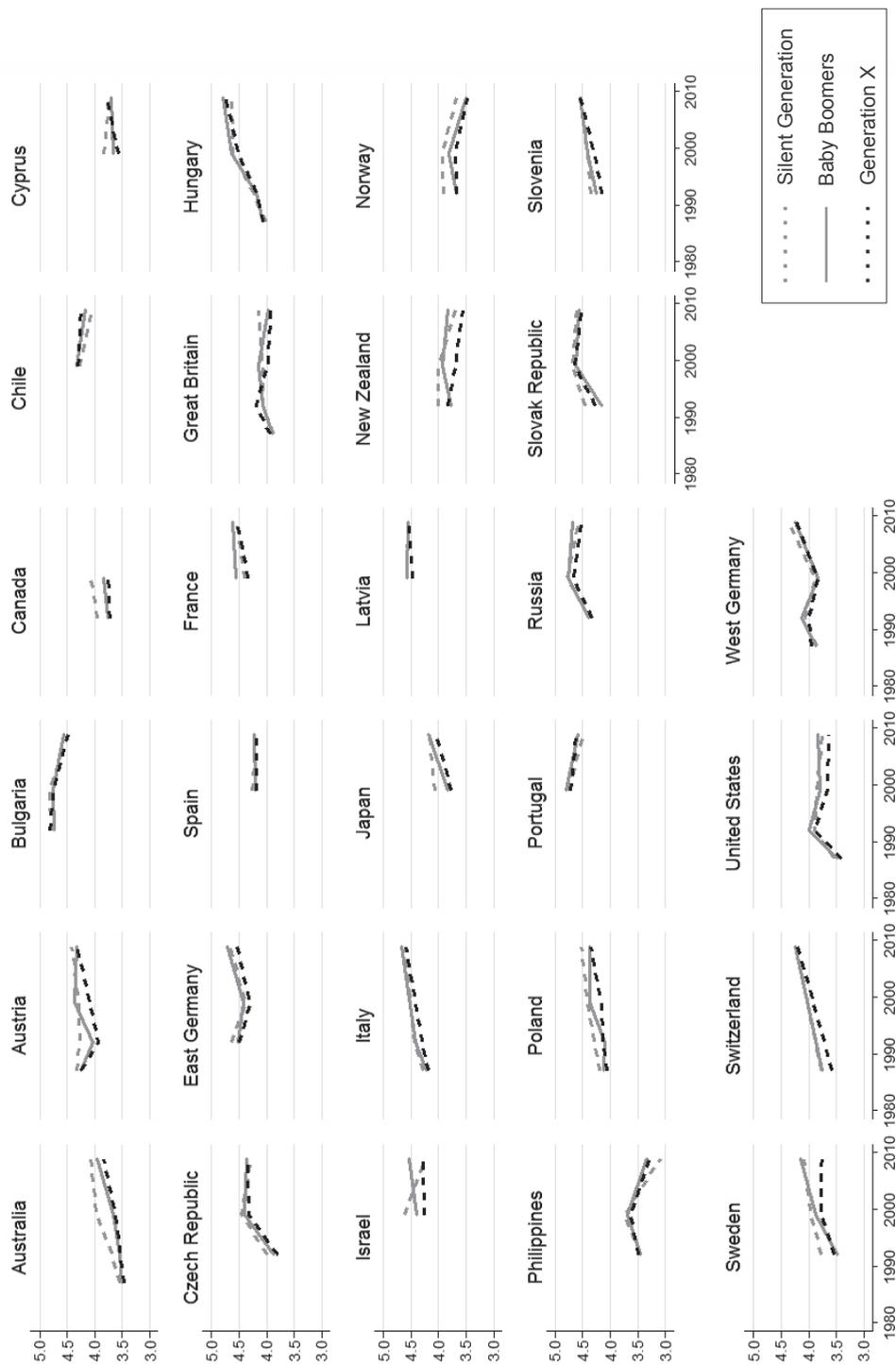


Figure 3 Dissatisfaction with income differences by country and depending on cohorts (mean values, 1987-2009)

How Cohorts Shape the Dynamics of Dissatisfaction with Income Differences

To clarify how characteristics of individuals and countries combine, different multilevel linear models were performed, regressing on dissatisfaction with income differences. The major focus of multilevel modeling is to account for micro-level variations in a dependent variable while controlling for variations in the mean response between different macro-levels of analysis.⁸ In order to disentangle the impact of the ISSP waves and the impact of the countries, a three-level modeling strategy was used, with countries at the upper level ($n=27$), waves crossed by countries at the middle level ($n=78$), and individuals at the bottom level ($n=98,557$ for the first model). This methodological approach has proven appropriate for cross-national analysis with comparative longitudinal survey datasets (Fairbrother 2014). The dependent variable is dissatisfaction with income gap in its initial form of a five-point agreement scale. The larger a coefficient, the more respondents are prone to think that income differences are large.

Table 1 presents models estimating the influence of different individual-level and wave/country-level indicators on dissatisfaction with income differences. Model 1 is a first step showing only the variance explained by the three nested levels. This model with no explanatory variable gauges whether dissatisfaction with income differences is more likely explained by differences within countries, across waves or across countries. The intraclass correlation coefficients indicate that around 11 percent of the variance can be attributed to the country-level, while around 14 percent can be explained by the waves. Most of the variance of the dependent variable comes then from the individual-level. It simply means that dissatisfaction with income differences depends more on differences between individuals than on differences between countries or between ISSP modules. It gives a first hint about the fact that individuals differ much more than countries with regard to their views on income inequality.

Model 2 introduces the variables displayed in previous figures so as to assess their direct effects with all other variables held constant. It confirms many correlations already stated in the literature in support of state redistribution (see e.g. Linos and West 2003; Svallfors 1997). Gender has a significant but modest impact, whereas women are more dissatisfied with income inequalities than men. Tolerance for income inequalities decreases with age but increases with educational level.⁹ Being one year older adds 0.002 point to the propensity for being dissatisfied with income differences; while moving up from one educational level to another reduces this propensity by 0.054. Not surprisingly, income is more influ-

8 Multilevel modeling is particularly appropriate for cases where individuals are clustered within different units. While ordinary least squares regression assumes restrictive hypotheses as to independence of error terms and homoscedasticity, multilevel modeling accounts for both the dependency of observations and the heterogeneity between error terms. On the one hand, it permits a more complex specification of the residuals that are estimated at an individual-level and at an aggregate level. On the other hand, instead of constraining the variance of the residuals to be constant, it lets them vary depending on explanatory variables in order to assess variability between observed groups (see e.g., Snijders and Bosker 2012).

9 Educational level divides across five categories: No formal qualification or lowest formal qualification; above lowest qualification; higher secondary completed; above higher secondary level.

ential than other sociodemographics.¹⁰ Being worse-off (income quartiles - - and income quartile -) increases the probability of rejecting income inequalities by 0.26 and 0.289 points. Here the magnitude of the coefficient represents a 5 percent increase of the five-point scale dependent variable ($0.26/5 \times 100$).

Table 1 Multilevel analysis of dissatisfaction with income differences (1987-2009)

	Model 1 coef. p.value	Model 2 coef. p.value	Model 3 coef. p.value
Women (ref. Men)		.052 ***	.049 ***
Age		.002 ***	.017 ***
Age squared			-.0001 ***
Educational level		-.054 ***	-.054 ***
Income DKNA (ref. Income ++)		.175 ***	.191 ***
Income --		.260 ***	.278 ***
Income -		.289 ***	.298 ***
Income +		.232 ***	.236 ***
Baby Boomers (ref. Silent generation)		.044 ***	-.101 **
Generation X		.010	-.097 *
Generation Y		-.046 *	-.087 *
Silent Generation 1992 (ref. 1987)			-.082 ***
Silent Generation 1999			-.066 ***
Silent Generation 2009			-.031
Baby Boomers 1992 (ref. 1987)			.212 ***
Baby Boomers 1999			.287 ***
Baby Boomers 2009			.226 ***
Gen X 1992 (ref. 1987)			-.020
Gen X 1999			.029
Gen X 2009			.014
Gen Y 2009 (ref. 1999)			.034
Intercept	4.14 ***	3.94 ***	3.53 ***
N individual level)	98,557	97,362	97,362
N (country/wave level)	78	78	78
N (country level)	27	27	27
Country - Intraclass correlation coefficient	.107 **	.104 **	.105 **
Country/wave - Intraclass correlation coefficient	.138 **	.137 **	.126 **

Note: Significance levels *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

10 Income categories have been computed as dummy variables to also introduce in the model those respondents for which income is not documented (Income DKNA). They account for 21% ($n=22,204$) of the cumulated sample.

The results for cohorts are more mixed. Consistent with expectations, Baby Boomers appear more prone to rejecting income inequalities than respondents from the silent generation when other variables are held at their mean. This substantiates the idea that, contrary to the silent generation which experienced the war and grew up fighting for material resources, post-scarcity generations value more equality and improvement of living standards (Inglehart 1997). However, though the coefficient for the Baby Boomers is significant, its magnitude remains very modest (0.044) compared to the effect of income. Contrary to expectations, the cohort effect is far from being linear. Gen Xers are not significantly more dissatisfied with income inequality than their counterparts from the silent generation. And Millennials even seem less dissatisfied than the elderly. Though caution is warranted due to the small sample size of this segment, this result suggests that a less lucky and less privileged cohort such as the Millennials might be more tolerant to income inequalities (Willets 2011). Thus, the major divide in attitudes toward income inequalities may be more between Baby Boomers and younger cohorts than between scarcity- and post-scarcity generations.

To make sense of these differences and to account for the fact that cohort effects may vary over time, another model was estimated introducing a wave-specific variable for each generation.¹¹ The results are striking. Model 3 reveals that most of the dynamic inherent in the cohort effect comes from the Baby Boomers. Compared to being a Baby Boomer in 1987, being a Baby Boomer in 2009 (0.226) in 1999 (0.287) and in 1992 (0.212) increases the likelihood of rejecting income inequalities to the same extent as belonging to a disadvantaged income group (0.278). As for other cohorts, the effects are not as clear cut or as significant. All other variables held at their mean, respondents from Generation X and from Generation Y are not significantly more dissatisfied over time.¹²

Figure 4 provides a more vivid picture of who drives the generational dynamic of tolerance for income differences as it plots the predicted values for the dependent variable of Model 3, conditioning on cohorts and ISSP waves. The median-spline curve substantiates the fact that the upward trend for the Baby Boomers dates from the beginning of the 1990s, as is also shown by Model 3.¹³ Baby boomers clearly stand out in that their slope is not only steeper than the mean slope; it is also steeper than the slope of their older counterparts from the Silent Generation and it is steeper than that of their younger counterparts from Generation X as well. This pattern is robust. It holds when countries are examined

11 To also account for the fact that the effect age has may not be linear for all age groups, age squared has been included in the model. The positive effect of age combined with the negative effect of age squared, indicates that the relation between age and tolerance toward income differences is more a quadratic than a linear relation; i.e., the impact of age on dissatisfaction with income inequality becomes less important as people get older.

12 Finer-grained analyses could be conducted. A similar wave-specific variable for income groups could be included in order to compare their effects with those of cohort groups. Interaction effects could also be computed to disentangle income and cohort, and to account for the fact that Baby Boomers may drive the generational dynamic simply because of their improved living standards. Such analyses are, however, beyond the scope of this study.

13 To make sure that it is not an artefact coming from the different number of countries in ISSP waves, additional analyses were performed using the exact same countries for the last two waves. Results display an identical upward slope for the Baby Boomers.

individually. To put it simply, Baby Boomers tend to become more dissatisfied since 1992 with income inequalities, while respondents from Generation X and the Silent Generation tend to follow the average trend.

This finding suggests that generational renewal will pull down dissatisfaction with income inequality, because of Baby Boomers leaving the scene and being replaced by younger cohorts not as sensitive to income differences. However, additional analyses (not presented here) demonstrate that all cohorts tend to grow less tolerant toward income gaps from the age of thirty years onwards. Thus, even though generational renewal will fuel tolerance for inequality, younger cohorts will still become more dissatisfied with income differences as they get older.

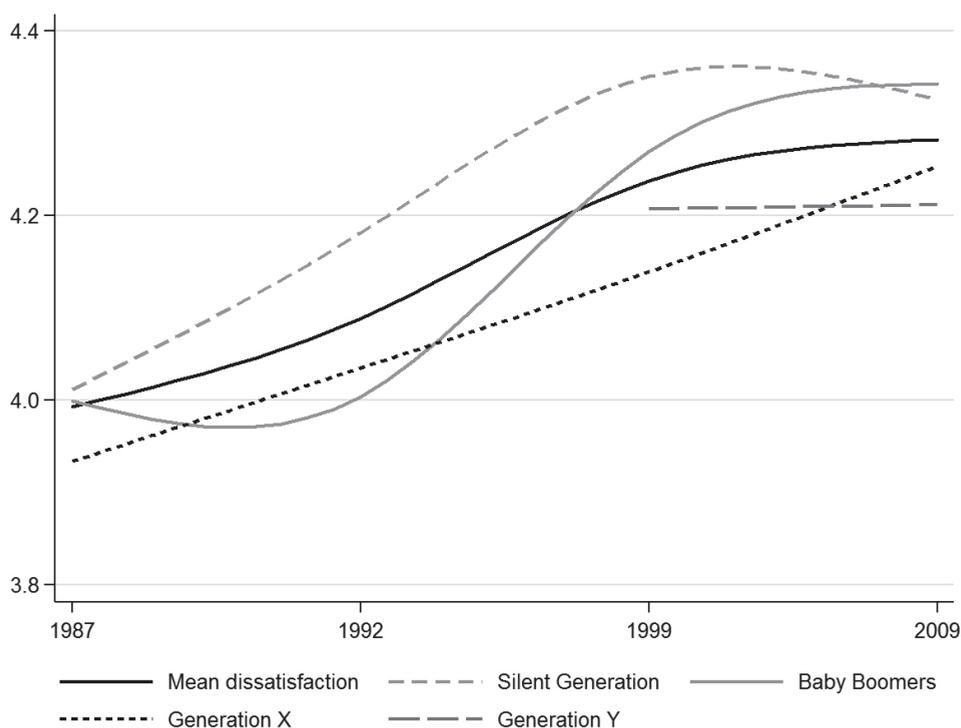


Figure 4 Predicted dissatisfaction with income differences by wave, depending on cohort (Model 3)

Conclusion: Baby Boomers Driving Alone?

Attitudes toward income inequalities have been garnering increased attention from cross-national research. Most scholars address the issue of opinion change by focusing on aggregate trends at the national-level. Using comparable data from twenty-seven countries and at four different time-points, this article first showed that changes in tolerance for income differences are not connected with changes in actual income differences. In line with prior research, this suggests that individuals mainly respond to how they perceive changes in income inequalities. A complementary perspective was then adopted, disentangling aggregate trends to examine changes among opinion groups. Whereas one could have expected the wealthy and the most educated to be more responsive, they tend to move in tandem with their less privileged counterparts. Put differently, all segments of the public seem to react evenly to economic and political stimuli they receive from their outside environment. Yet, since the ISSP cumulated dataset does not document respondents' views on changes in inequality, it is difficult to dig further into what individuals are responding to when they grow more or less dissatisfied with income differences.

There are also parallel movements among cohorts over time, indicating that contextual messages can account for attitudinal change even when individuals have been socialized in different circumstances. However, in sharp contrast with the literature predicting that post-scarcity generations will be less tolerant toward income inequality, it can be shown that this is only the case for Baby Boomers. Respondents from both Generation X and the Millennials are not more dissatisfied with income differences than respondents from the Silent Generation. Surprisingly, compared to their younger counterparts, Baby Boomers are those most opposed to income differences, even tending to become more opposed to income differences than other cohorts since the early 1990s. All in all, Baby Boomers seem to be driving the generational dynamics of dissatisfaction with income inequality.

Two explanations can be put forward. The first stresses the influence of the environment on attitudes toward inequality. The 1980s are known to be a liberal turn (in the European sense) for both economy and politics in many countries (see e.g. Schmidt and Thatcher 2013). One can presume that Gen Xers and Millennials are more tolerant toward income inequalities since they have entered working life or been socialized in a more liberal context than Baby Boomers. Still, this line of argument leaves one aspect of the generational puzzle unaccounted for: How can Gen Xers and Millennials be that influenced by the economic and political climate, since many of them have been raised by Baby Boomers socialized in a less liberal context?

An additional explanation relates to generational conflicts and to age-group competition for social resources. It is often said that Baby Boomers have come to possess a monopoly on economic and social wealth, notably in continental European welfare states (Chauvel 2010; Chauvel and Schröder 2014). They enter retirement age with more disposable income and more generous pensions than any previous cohorts, leaving future cohorts facing increasing social risks and no real hope of living standards improving throughout their adult lives. Generational resentment may well influence how Gen Xers and Millennials value income equality. It may, for instance, increase their urge for financial recognition, and mitigate their will to level out income differences.

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