Abstract

In this paper we provide a methodology to test for the existence of equality of opportunity in a given distribution and for ranking distributions according to equality of opportunity. Moreover, we provide some empirical applications of these new evaluation tools: in the first exercise, we evaluate the income distributions of South and North of Italy on the basis of different definitions of equality of opportunity. Then, we repeat the exercise using the graduation marks of Italian students.

1 Motivation

Equality of opportunity (EOp) has gained a central role in public discussions about social justice in western liberal societies. Indeed, this idea has been defended by a number of scholars in recent years, both in the area of political philosophy and normative economics (see Arneson 1989, Barry 1991, Cohen 1989, Dworkin 1981a,b, Rawls 1971, Roemer 1993), and is the leading idea of most political platforms in several western countries.

According to the opportunity egalitarian view, the principle of justice does not require equality of individuals' final achievements; once the means or opportunities to reach a valuable outcome have been equally split among citizens, which particular opportunity, from those open to her, the individual chooses, is a matter of individual choice and is outside the scope of justice. The EOp view combines features of libertarianism and egalitarianism. From the former it borrows the requirement that public policies should be neutral with respect to private goals that motivate individuals in their lives. But, out of egalitarian inspiration, it seeks a genuine equality in conditions that are beyond the