

# Want to Influence Support for Redistributive Tax Policies? Choose Your Words Carefully

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Income inequality has become a major topic of discussion over the last year and yet consensus on what (if anything) should be done about it seems elusive. New research published in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), suggests that a simple manipulation of language might be able to influence support for policies aimed at addressing income inequality.

Income inequality can be described in two ways: as the rich making more than the poor, or as the poor making less than the rich. The two descriptions convey identical information, but research has shown that the way in which inequalities are framed influences what we think other people ought to have.

Researchers Rosalind Chow and Jeff Galak of the Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon University hypothesized that framing inequality in terms of the rich making more than the poor would highlight how wealthy the rich are and would increase people's willingness to take this wealth away from them. Why? Chow and Galak thought that framing inequality this way might make people more uncertain about whether the wealthy are rich because of internal attributes (e.g., being hard-working) or because of external advantages (e.g., receiving inherited wealth). They hypothesized that this effect would be especially noticeable among conservatives, who are less likely to support redistributive tax policies in the first place.

The researchers recruited 79 U.S. adults to participate in an online survey about "people's views on income inequality in the United States." Participants in the rich-have-more condition were told that the top 5 percentile of wage earners make, on average, \$111,000 more than the median wage earner (those in the 50th percentile). Participants in the poor-have-less condition were told that the median wage earner makes, on average, \$111,000 less than the top 5 percentile. Participants in a control condition were not given any information about income inequality.

Next, the participants were asked to indicate their beliefs about why the rich are wealthy and why the poor are in poverty by completing a variety of internal- and external-attribution measures.

Participants then indicated their level of support for two redistributive tax policies: one that would create a new tax bracket for people with incomes over \$1 million and one that would create a new tax bracket for people with incomes over \$5 million.

Finally, participants indicated their level of political conservatism and reported their household income.

Conservatism was negatively associated with support for redistributive policies among participants in the control condition, confirming previous findings. This was also true for participants who were told that the poor make less than the rich. In these two groups, more conservative participants showed less support for redistributive tax policies.

But participants who were told that the rich make more than the poor didn't show a negative association between conservatism and policy support. These findings suggest that the rich-have-more frame may have reduced conservatives' opposition to raising taxes on the rich.

Further analyses revealed that the results could, at least in part, be explained by participants' attributions for the success of the wealthy. Conservatives in the control and poor-have-less conditions were less likely to attribute the success of the wealthy to external sources. On the other hand, conservatives who were told that the rich make more than the poor were just as likely to attribute the success of the wealthy to external factors as they were to attribute it to internal factors.

These findings suggest, as the researchers hypothesized, that the rich-have-more frame makes conservatives more likely to question whether the wealthy are responsible for their own success.

Chow and Galak believe that this research has important implications for both researchers and policymakers.

"These findings suggest one simple approach that can influence how individuals think about and respond to income inequality: Change the language used to describe it."