

High Wealth Inequality Linked With Greater Support for Populist Leaders

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People who live or think they live in a more economically unequal society may be more supportive of a strong, even autocratic leader, a large-scale international study shows.

Scientists from 30 universities across the globe collected data from residents in 28 countries with varying gaps in income between the poor and the wealthy. [Their findings appear in Psychological Science.](#)

“The results suggest that the growth in support for populist leaders who are happy to abandon democratic principles to achieve particular outcomes may partly be due to increasing levels of economic inequality,” said Jolanda Jetten, a psychological scientist at the University of Queensland in Australia and an author on the report.

Led by Stefanie Sprong of Trinity College Dublin, the collaborators conducted a series of surveys and experiments. In these studies, the researchers examine the effects of economic inequality on people’s wish for a strong leader, and investigate whether this link can be explained by perceptions of anomie—the perceived breakdown in social fabric in society.

In the first phase of their research, they combined objective data on economic inequality from the World Bank with a survey among more than 6,000 students at 30 universities worldwide. In the survey, they not only asked the participants questions designed to assess their perceptions of a wealth gap, but also their perceptions of anomie and their thoughts about the need for strong leadership to surmount societal difficulties.

In analyzing the data, the researchers found evidence that people in countries with high levels of economic inequality, both real and felt, were more supportive of a strong leader. But only *perceived* inequality appeared to have any relationship with a sense of societal and governmental corrosion.

In the second phase, the researchers extended the way they measured the participants' wish for a strong leader. They examined how much participants would accept a leader who was not only strong, but also willing to forego democratic values and break rules to correct societal problems. They surveyed 515 Australian adults ages 19 to 80 about their perceptions of national inequality, anomie, and the wish for a strong leader. They used the same measures and control as in the first study, although participants were also asked to rate their support for a more authoritarian, less democratic leader.

Again, people with higher perceptions of inequality and anomie showed a greater wish for a fierce leader.

"This strengthens our reasoning that economic inequality perceptions enhance the feeling that society is breaking down ... fueling a desire for a leader who will restore order (by whatever means necessary)," the authors conclude.

In a final set of experiments, the scientists set out to find causal evidence for the link between economic inequality and the wish for a strong leader. They recruited Australian college students and an online sample of U.S. residents to imagine themselves as middle-income consumers in a fictional society called Bimboola. The participants were randomly assigned to conditions in which the wealth gap in the society was either wide or moderate.

Participants were then asked to fill out the measures of anomie and leader preferences. Those assigned to the high income-inequality condition not only perceived a wider wealth gap in Bimboola compared to those assigned to the low inequality condition, but also felt higher levels of anomie and expressed more support for a strong leader.

"Our research shows that economic inequality is not only associated with increased criminality, poor mental and physical health, and lower levels of generalized trust," Jetten says, "but that it may also affect social behavior and political attitudes."

The researchers caution that their findings don't confirm an automatic link between inequality and the appeal of populist parties and radical leaders. They suggest future studies should investigate possible differences between countries, particularly in the context of historical factors.

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