

Inequality and Attitudes

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Jolanda Jetten

Psychological scientists Jolanda Jetten of University of Queensland, Australia, and Stefanie Sprong of Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, are studying how concerns about wealth inequality can affect support for strong and sometimes autocratic leadership.

You were both coauthors on a large international study looking at the link between wealth inequality and political attitudes. What prompted your research?

In recent years, research on the effects of economic inequality has gained ground. We were interested in the impact of economic inequality on citizens' sociopolitical attitudes — a topic that has received much less attention in the literature but is clearly of interest in the current politically turbulent landscape. We explored whether two current developments — rising levels of inequality and a seemingly growing call for strong leaders — might be connected.

What did you find?

Our research showed that, in both correlational and causal ways, subjective and objective inequality were associated with support for strong leaders who may be willing to abandon democratic principles to achieve particular outcomes. This is an important finding, and it underscores the notion that increasing inequality (and particularly perceptions of inequality) may have more far-reaching consequences than

had been recognized.



Stefanie Sprong

What most surprised you about your findings?

We found support for these findings across 28 countries that vary in the extent to which they have stable democracies and/or populist leaders. We think it is fascinating that perceptions of inequality seem so influential in driving support for strong leaders and that this desire even extends to leaders who are willing to break the rules. We find evidence that this is because higher levels of economic inequality enhance the perception that society is breaking down (i.e., enhanced anomie perceptions) and that a strong leader is needed to restore order (even when that leader is willing to challenge democratic values to achieve this goal).

What's next in your research?

We believe that behavioral scientists, and social psychologists in particular, can make powerful contributions to our understanding of the effects of inequality. We are working on several projects in this area. For example, members of our team are looking at whether perceptions of historical and cultural continuity in a country are related to support for populist leaders. Findings show that the more people feel that the past and the present are connected, the more they support populist leaders, presumably because such leaders are seen to protect collective continuity. Another line of research we're leading provides evidence that economic inequality enhances the belief in conspiracy theories.

Reference

Sprong, S., Jetten, J., Wang, Z., Peters, K., Mols, F., Verkuyten, M., . . . Wohl, M. J. A. (2019). "Our country needs a strong leader right now": Economic inequality enhances the wish for a strong leader. *Psychological Science*, 30, 1625–1637. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0956797619875472>