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How Media Frames of Economic Inequality Affect Political and Social Attitudes

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Introductory Considerations

Since the exhaustion of the neoliberal Zeitgeist, initially facilitated by the demise of the Soviet Union and the relatedly accelerated worldwide trends of market liberalization, yet phased out with the outbreak of the economic and financial crisis in 2008, an ever growing number of empirical studies alerts us about economic inequality's breadth of negative repercussions for democratic societies (e.g., Wilkinson, Pickett 2009).

Although patterns in Europe are still rather mixed, economic inequality appears to be associated with less social cohesion, lower voter turnout, higher crime rates or unemployment.

Whether higher economic inequality leads to more demands for redistribution by disadvantaged groups, however, has been the contested subject of a multitude of studies. In line with Solt's empirically founded proposition (2008), the **relative power theory** provides arguments as to why more economic inequality may not be associated with more demands for redistribution.

While economic inequality reduces political participation of all citizens, irrespective of their socioeconomic background, it has a more depressive effect on the less well-off as it concentrates power among the wealthy and thus favours

- the 'haves' to prevail in open conflicts of redistribution
- the 'haves' to preclude related issues from the political agenda
- the internalization of 'the values, beliefs, or rules of the game of the powerful as a further adaptive response [or] as a means of escaping the subjective sense of powerlessness if not its objective condition' (Solt, 2008, 49) by poorer citizens.

In this line of argument, a particular research focus should be directed at whether and how economic inequality is represented in the media and how these representations may affect citizens' social and political attitudes.

Numerous prominent U.S. studies have already demonstrated the news media's derogatory representations of welfare recipients (Gilens 1999), the relative absence of economic inequality issues on the media agenda despite the presence of high levels of income inequality (McCall 2013) or the effects of different inequality frames on political preferences (Guardino 2019).

A European comparative project analyses the framing effects of economic inequality and redistribution in the news media by using **Critical Discourse Analysis and social semiotics** (Grisold, Preston, 2020). A very recent American study also demonstrates the relevance of **entertainment programmes** (e.g., America's Got Talent) to foster beliefs in economic mobility (Kim, 2022).

Larsen's (2013) study advances this field of research by introducing a comparative component. Arguing that welfare regimes differ systematically in the prevalence of norms of distributive justice (equity, equality, need) that they induce in society, he demonstrates that media representations of poverty in liberal welfare regimes (UK, U.S.) differ from those in socio-democratic ones (Denmark, Sweden) and affect social trust.

Framing Experiment

My framing survey experiment of the effects of economic inequality on social and political attitudes builds upon these previous findings and is the first corner stone of my comparative research project POLINEQUAL which investigates commonalities and differences of political and media representations (politicisation) of economic inequality in three 'ideal-type' welfare regimes with different levels of income inequality: France, Sweden, the UK.

More specifically, this comparative research project focuses on the prevalence of different norms of distributive justice and how their frames affect citizens' social and political attitudes.

To investigate shortcuts citizens use to form opinions about inequality in their society/country we have just finalized online focus group discussions.

Experimental Data

The data (n=2,138) stems from a French representative panel survey (ELIPSS) and was collected at the end of 2018/beginning of 2019 at the height of the Yellow Vests' movement.

The total number of respondents is randomly assigned to seven groups, including one control group with no treatment.

The framing experiment consists of presenting one of three original articles to the panelists either with or without image. The source of the article (Le Monde, Le Figaro, La Voix du Nord) is visible on top of the article (see original articles in the appendix).

Before the treatment, panelists are asked about their preferred daily newspaper, allowing to test for the effect of source credibility. After the treatment, panelists respond to questions regarding fairness perceptions of economic inequality, redistributive preferences and social and political trust.

The selected articles tap the effects of representation of **factual knowledge** about poverty in France compared to Europe as well as '**need**' either in terms of '**undeserving**' refugee welfare beneficiaries or of an individual story of **non-take up** of welfare allowances.

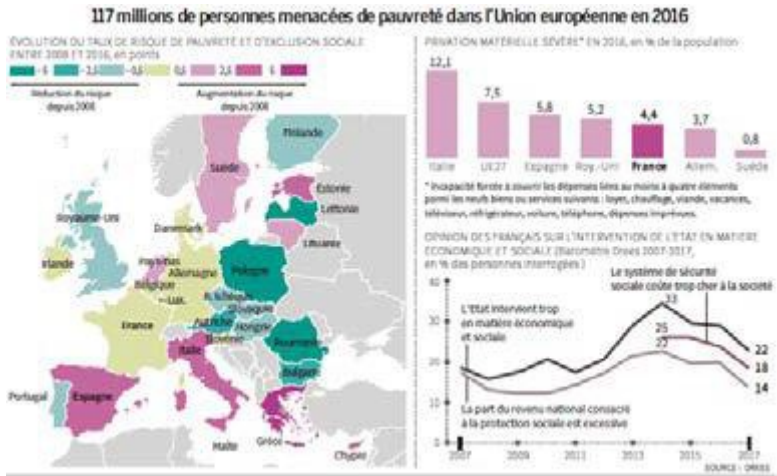
The two 'need' articles are accompanied by two images that are assumed to elicit either negative (anti-migrant) emotions or positive emotions of empathy. The 'factual' article is accompanied by an explanatory graph.



Image of ,undeserving' refugee welfare beneficiaries article, Le Figaro



Image of ,non-takeup' article, La Voix du Nord



Graph of ,factual knowledge' article, Le Monde

	Distributive Fairness (High=Fair)		Preferences for Redistribution	
	B	Beta	B	Beta
Constant	1,34		4,21	
Sex (0=male)	0,04	0,04	-0,07	-0,05**
Age in years	0,00	-0,01	0,04	0,17***
Level of education	0,01	0,03	0,00	0,00
Financial situation of household in next 12 months	0,17	0,25***	-0,09	-0,12***
Negative article without image	-0,05	-0,03	-0,11	-0,05
Negative article with image	0,09	0,05*	-0,06	-0,03
Factual article without image	0,16	0,10***	-0,11	-0,06
Factual article with image	0,28	0,17***	-0,09	-0,05
Positive article without image	0,12	0,07**	-0,04	-0,02
Positive article with image	0,10	0,06**	0,00	0,00
Adj. R		9.5		4.2
N		2,009		2,002

	Social Trust		Political Trust	
	B	Beta	B	Beta
Constant	2,23		0,40	
Sex (0=male)	-0,10	-0,02	0,08	0,02
Age in years	0,11	0,16***	0,11	0,19***
Level of education	0,23	0,16***	0,12	0,10***
Financial situation of household in next 12 months	0,31	0,13***	0,72	0,36***
Negative article without image	-0,44	-0,07**	-0,18	-0,04
Negative article with image	-0,48	-0,08***	-0,02	0,00
Factual article without image	-0,18	-0,03	0,05	0,01
Factual article with image	-0,48	-0,08***	0,28	0,06*
Positive article without image	-0,34	-0,06*	0,02	0,00
Positive article with image	-0,02	0,00	0,09	0,02
Adj. R	7,3		19,1	
N	2,018		2,018	

	Impartial Institutions		Representative Institutions	
	B	Beta	B	Beta
Constant	1,80		-0,30	
Sex (0=male)	0,03	0,01	0,09	0,03
Age in years	0,11	0,17***	0,10	0,18***
Level of education	0,11	0,07***	0,13	0,10***
Financial situation of household in next 12 months	0,83	0,35***	0,66	0,31***
Negative article without image	-0,41	-0,07**	-0,07	-0,01
Negative article with image	-0,21	-0,03	0,06	0,01
Factual article without image	0,01	0,00	0,08	0,02
Factual article with image	0,20	0,04	0,32	0,06**
Positive article without image	0,04	0,01	0,01	0,00
Positive article with image	0,13	0,02*	0,07	0,01
Adj. R	17,6		15,3	
N	2,018		2,018	

Additional Media Effects

- Independent effects of readership of Le Monde, Libération and La Croix
- Several independent ,source credibility‘ effects of Le Monde readership

Interpretations/Conclusions

- We detect framing effects for five out of six tested dependent variables (exception ,redistributive preferences').
- Yet these effects are **not alike** across DVs
- Factual comparative knowledge is conducive to political trust and/or trust in representative institutions
- Framing ,undeserving' poor refugees, by contrast, diminishes trust in impartial institutions while evoking empathy is conducive to this type of trust
- No clear-cut effects of the display of images could be detected
- Nearly all article treatments inhibit social trust while they simultaneously strengthen the assessment that the distribution of income is fair in France— this is the most inconclusive result

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