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It's time to face up to power in the debate about wealth inequality

*How should we frame the problem of wealth inequality? The most effective framing, write **Michael Vaughan**, **Sarah Kerr** and **Annalena Oppel**, centres on the "unfair influence" wielded by those at the top. But might this focus have the undesired effect of deepening people's sense of fatalism about the future of democracy?*

We recently published a report with Joseph Rowntree Foundation looking at three different ways to talk about the problem of wealth inequality. We were particularly interested in whether these "frames" could shift people's views about whether wealth inequality was unfair, and increase support for redistributive measures.

The three frames that we tested were as follows:

The Unfair Influence frame: while most people work hard and play by the rules, the wealthiest write the rules to suit themselves. They profit from using their networks – and then end up paying less tax than ordinary people.

The Anti-meritocracy frame: the increasing power of wealth over hard work is creating an uneven playing field, especially for young people. Whereas most people make money from working, the wealthiest people don't have to work at all – money does all the work for them.

The Hoarding frame: some people choose to hoard their wealth, accumulating more than they could ever need. And when wealth is hoarded it hurts all of us – it starves our economy and harms our democracy.

Our key finding: the most effective framing of wealth inequality focuses on the problem of Unfair Influence. That is, it places the emphasis on how those at the top get to write the rules to suit themselves. This includes buying political power and designing an unfair economic system where billionaires end up paying an average effective tax rate of 0.3% tax on their fortunes.

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Specifically, we tested the effects of our frames on attitudes to wealth inequality and redistribution. While all three frames shifted people's views about wealth in various ways, the Unfair Influence frame was the *only* one to increase support for redistribution, such as higher taxes on the rich.

We also tested the effects of our frames on three more general political attitudes: trust in politicians; satisfaction with democracy; and whether people feel like they can influence politics. The Unfair Influence frame was the only frame which produced statistically significant effects on the first two: it decreased trust in politicians and satisfaction with democracy. Importantly, however, it did not have a significant effect on respondents' sense of agency.

In that sense, Unfair Influence emerged as a clear "winner" from our empirical work on framing. Yet at this point, we want to own up to a nagging concern. Democracy around the world currently faces very real dangers: according to the 2025 V-DEM Democracy Report, the world has fewer democracies than autocracies for the first time in over 20 years. Given this, might focussing on the Unfair Influence frame add fuel to the fire? That is, if we set out a narrative where the richest are writing the rules to suit themselves, might this only serve to deepen people's sense of fatalism regarding the future of democracy?

In this post we want to probe some of these concerns. Overall, we believe that talking about the problems of extreme wealth and power together *can* be a powerful way to defend democracy – and reject fatalism…

Three reasons to talk more about the problems of extreme wealth and power

1. The problem of extreme wealth buying power already exists – not talking about it might make fatalism even worse

From the focus groups that we ran, there was a strong sense that inequality is too high. But there was an equally strong feeling that the political system is unlikely to do anything about it. The barriers to acting were often understood as a direct result of the influence of money on politics.

Given this, we think that *more people – especially politicians – talking about this as a problem that needs addressing* might actually give people hope that change is possible.

2. Stories which simplify how society works can empower people to form political views and take action

Saying that "the wealthiest people write the rules to suit themselves" is a generalisation and a simplification, which academics are admittedly usually squeamish about.

But we would also say: valuing the kind of truth that these schematising narratives provide is important not only for engaging people in politics but also for imagining alternate futures (both of which are fundamentally democratic questions). And by vacating the field, we run the risk that alternative (e.g. racist, authoritarian) narratives fill the void.

3. Emotions matter, and if we are concerned about fatalism we shouldn't be afraid of feeling angry

We've become used to seeing a set of things that are often associated with *anger* as threats to democracy, such as populism and polarization. With fatalism, however, our colleague Lukas Slothuus argues that *despair* and *resignation*, rather than anger, are more likely to be the emotions at play. It therefore could be that pessimistic, rearguard campaigns in defence of the status quo against "populism" and "polarisation" prove to be largely ineffective, as they only bolster fatalistic beliefs. Perhaps more effective would be channelling the *outrage* that already exists against the people responsible for designing the system – immiserating for so many – to their own benefit.

Lessons for defending democracy

One upshot that we take from all of this is that *defending democracy does not mean defending the status quo*. We should be careful about the trap where it becomes the job of citizens to protect trust in politicians or satisfaction with democracy in general. In fact, dissatisfaction with democracy is often a precursor to political participation, which most people see as a good thing.

What if defending democracy in this current conjuncture means naming (and pointing to) the urgent problems located at the nexus between wealth inequality and power?

When we talk about "facing up to power", we mean it in two senses. Yes, the frame in our report focuses on the question of the disproportionate influence of the wealthiest in society: power as a kind of threat. This is a reality that needs facing up to, and helping people to more easily model how power operates in complex societies is important if we are to overcome widespread impulses towards disengagement and resignation.

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But we also need, more positively, to face up to *our own* power: the power that is held collectively by members of a democratic public to properly name something as a problem – and a problem worth being addressed. This power is what has motivated our whole research project: the idea that how we talk about social problems can make a difference in mobilising support for change.

When we first found that the Unfair Influence frame was the most effective way to shift people's attitudes to wealth inequality and redistribution, we wondered whether this could further strain democratic politics by decreasing people's trust and satisfaction in the system. But in reality, the prospects for democratic politics look altogether bleaker if we are too fearful to talk about power, and in doing so exercise our own. In our view, then, talking more about the problems caused by extreme concentrations of wealth and power is what's urgently needed in the current political moment.

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