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The Metric is the Message? How Inequality Metrics Shape Perceptions and Preferences for Redistribution

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How Inequality Metrics Shape Perceptions and Preferences for Redistribution*

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Abstract

Inequality statistics highlight specific aspects of economic reality. Economists traditionally rely on technical indices such as the Gini coefficient, valued for their formal properties. More recently, scholars have emphasized measures like the income share of the Top 10%, which more directly evoke political conflict. We investigate whether inequality metrics shape public perceptions and support for redistribution, and how they are used in the media. In an online experiment ($N = 1,246$) among the general public, we show that "political" measures reduce acceptance of inequality relative to the Gini coefficient, which itself has a desensitizing effect on fairness and emotional ratings. The behavioral effect of switching from the Gini to the Top 10% share is quantitatively similar to switching 0.12-0.17 Gini points, e.g. from an equal society like the Netherlands to much more unequal Argentina. Academic experts and policy makers are less susceptible, but not immune to the metric effect, and predict a strong behavioral effect on the general public. Finally, we show that left-wing media are more likely to report top-share metrics and less likely to report the Gini coefficient than right-wing media, likely amplifying political divisions. Our findings show that inequality statistics do not merely describe economic reality, but shape normative assessments of the income distribution.

JEL codes: D63, C91, P16
Keywords: Inequality, measurement, preferences for redistribution

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1 Introduction

Inequality statistics highlight specific aspects of economic reality. For instance, the Gini coefficient captures the average distance between the income of all pairs of individuals. Due to its appealing technical properties, it has been a central feature of official inequality statistics since the 1970s. However, the French economist Piketty criticizes the Gini coefficient for providing a "simplistic, overly optimistic and difficult-to-interpret picture of what is really going on" (Piketty, 2014, p.259). Instead, his work emphasizes the share of income accruing to the top 10% (or top 1%), a measure that highlights differences across economic classes and carries more explicit political overtones. Indeed, Piketty et al. (2022, p.256) argue that "the primary goal of inequality analysis should be to illuminate the public debate on economic justice."

This raises important questions about the relationship between inequality measurement and political outcomes. To illustrate, consider that the US (2024, pre-tax) income distribution can be described both by a Gini coefficient of 0.59, or by a top 10% income share of 46%.[1] While these statistics reflect the same distribution, they may have very different effects on people's concern for inequality and for their policy preferences. If so, the increasing prominence of top-share language, in political movements or academia (Kleven, 2018), may both reflect *and* amplify concerns for inequality. To the extent that they affect the public, statistical measures may even be tools of political communication, used to activate or suppress concern over inequality and contribute to polarization on this topic.

In this paper, we provide an empirical assessment of these claims. First, we ask how much the choice of metric actually matters: does communication in terms of top or bottom shares energize the public compared to more technical measures? More specifically, we measure how inequality metrics affect subjective views of the income distribution, assessments of its fairness, and support for more egalitarian policies. Second, are these effects shared and predicted by experts, which would allow their strategic use in communication? And finally, does the use of metrics vary across the political spectrum, with more top-share language in left-wing compared to right-wing media?

To answer the first question, we conduct an online experiment using 1,246 American subjects on the online platform Prolific.com. Participants view (pre-tax) income distributions of various countries, both real and imagined, and state subjective perceptions of inequality and fairness. They also report an incentivized measure of inequality acceptance, acting as "spectators" who can tax and transfer money among "workers" who are paid proportionally

[1] These numbers are based on wid.world (top 10% share) and ourworldindata.org.

to the displayed income distribution. Our treatments vary the inequality measure that is shown alongside the income distribution: In a between-subject design participants see either no metric, the Gini index, the Top 10% income share, the Bottom 40% income share, or the Palma ratio (the Top 10% share divided by the bottom 40% share). We refer to the latter three metrics, which commonly appear in both academic and popular literature on inequality, as "political metrics", since they highlight allocations to specific groups.

We find that the metric used to communicate inequality has a significant influence on all outcome variables. Conditional on the income distribution, political metrics increase subjective perceptions of inequality, decrease fairness ratings, and increase redistribution choices. The effects are substantial: moving from the Gini to the Top 10% share increases chosen tax rates by 3.5 percentage points, which, in our experiment, has the same effect as a 0.12-0.17 point rise in the Gini coefficient of the underlying distribution. In more concrete terms, the change in metric has the same approximate effect on subject's willingness to redistribute as switching income distributions from (rather equal) The Netherlands to (rather unequal) Argentina. In addition, we find that the Gini coefficient depresses emotional responses and decreases subjective perceptions of inequality relative to providing no inequality metric at all.

In a second experiment, we target academics and policy makers working on inequality and public policy and test if the results replicate. We find that metrics affect their perception of inequality, though not their fairness assessments or tax choices, showing that experts are less affected, but not immune from the effects of metrics. Experts also predict a treatment effect of metrics among our main sample, which they overestimate by a factor of three. The (over)anticipation of the metric effect shows that there is a potential for strategic use in communication.

In the final part of our paper, we analyze the use of top-share metrics and the Gini coefficient in the media along the political spectrum. We conduct keyword searches in 39 prominent newspapers in eight Western countries. We find that compared to right-wing outlets, left-wing outlets are more likely to report top-shares and less likely to report the Gini coefficient when talking about economic inequality. Combined with the experimental results, this implies that media are likely to exacerbate the divide in partisan concerns about inequality between left and right.

Overall, our results demonstrate that when it comes to communicating inequality, "the metric is the message": Metrics frame the underlying reality in a way that strongly affects the public's reaction, often more so than the underlying distribution. The Gini coefficient, favored by statisticians and economists for its technical properties, is not neutral in this regard, as it dampens responses to inequality. One implication is that the asymmetric use of metrics

across the ideological spectrum, a result we document in this paper, is likely to contribute to political polarization. Another implication is that policy makers cannot avoid affecting the public's response by their choice of metric. We hope that the results presented in our paper allow them to reflect on these choices, and make recipients more aware of their impact.

Our paper contributes to the literature in two ways. First, to our knowledge, the behavioral effects of political inequality metrics have not been studied before. In a contemporaneous paper, Bellani and Bledow (2025) investigate the difference between two political metrics, highlighting the top and bottom 10% of the income distribution. Second, we contribute to a literature on preferences for redistribution. Previous literature has shown large heterogeneity in such preferences that is not well explained by the actual income distributions, but rather driven by subjective perceptions (Kuziemko et al., 2015; Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018; Mengel and Weidenholzer, 2023). The results in this paper help explain the sources of heterogeneity in such perceptions by documenting the importance of language and framing over the actual income distribution.

2 Experimental Design

The paper uses data from two different data collections with different experimental designs and respondents. The first experiment (Laypeople experiment) examines how different inequality metrics affect the general public, both in terms of their perceptions and preferences. The second experiment (Expert experiment) tests whether similar effects exist for experts, and whether they can predict the effects of different inequality metrics on lay people. Both studies were pre-registered.[2] Here, we explain the design of the Laypeople experiment. The Expert experiment, which is styled after the Laypeople experiment, is explained in section 4. Appendix B reports the full instructions.

The experiment was conducted on Prolific. Each participant received £3 for taking part, and the average completion time was 21 minutes and 40 seconds. The survey used a between-subject design with five treatment arms: four pertaining to a different inequality metric and one control condition. The four metrics are the Gini coefficient, the Palma ratio, the income share of the top 10%, and the income share of the bottom 40% of the population. The experiment consists of three blocks.

[2]Both experiments were preregistered on AsPredicted. The preregistration of the laypeople experiment can be found at `https://aspredicted.org/yq22qw.pdf`, while the Expert experiment is found at `https://aspredicted.org/bt55rz.pdf`

Block 1: Education. We first educate participants on how to read the income distributions provided in the experiment by showing examples alongside explanations. These cover a general explanation of an income distribution; an illustration of an equal and an unequal income distribution; and the income distributions of a rich and a poor country. Participants answer comprehension questions before proceeding. If a question is answered incorrectly, participants are shown the correct answer and asked the same question again. This part of the educational block is identical across treatments, and is designed to ensure that participants can form an impression of inequality from the displayed income distribution alone, keeping background information constant across conditions.

We then introduce the general setup of the main experiment. Participants are told what they will be asked to do and, importantly, that their tax rate decisions can have real consequences for real people (see below). This part of the block also includes comprehension questions to confirm that participants understand that their tax decisions are not hypothetical and grasp their redistributional effects. The final part of the block varies by treatment. Depending on the condition, participants receive an explanation of their assigned metric and a comprehension question confirming that they understand its direction (i.e., that higher/lower values imply greater/lesser inequality). Participants in the control condition do not go through this final part.

Block 2: Judgments and decisions. Participants are presented with six countries: two fictitious and four real — the US, South Africa, the Netherlands, and India. Each country appears on a separate page, and participants answer the same three questions for each. The real countries are presented in randomized order, except that the two fictitious countries always appear first. The hypothetical countries differ substantially in their level of inequality (Gini coefficients of 0.08 and 0.83, respectively), which serves to familiarize participants with a wide range of inequality levels. Table B.1 in Appendix B gives a full overview of how all countries compare across all inequality metrics used.

For each country, participants view the full income distribution. Treatment conditions differ only in which inequality metric appears in the top corner of the figure, if any. In the control condition, only the income distribution is shown; in the treatment conditions, the relevant metric appears alongside it (see Figure B.2 in Appendix B). After viewing the income distribution, participants rate how unequal they perceive the country to be (0 = very equal, 10 = very unequal), how fair they find the income distribution (0 = very unfair, 10 = very fair), and set a tax rate (0–100).

Tax rate decisions are incentivized using a spectator design inspired by Durante et al.

(2014), in which one participant's decision is randomly selected for implementation. In the educational block, participants were told that 10 workers would be recruited from the randomly selected country and paid according to their relative performance on a task, with the highest performer receiving £100. Their initial earnings reflect the country's pre-government tax-and-transfers income distribution. A 0% tax rate leaves this distribution unchanged, while a 100% tax equalizes earnings regardless of performance. Participants set whatever tax rate they find appropriate, knowing that revenues are redistributed equally among all workers. They use a slider from 0% (labeled 'no redistribution') to 100% (labeled 'full equality'), with no preset starting value.[3]

In the metric treatment conditions, the main block concludes with one additional question. Participants are shown a new income distribution accompanied by their assigned metric, and asked to estimate the value of that metric after a 50% tax rate is imposed with revenues distributed equally among citizens. This tests their understanding of how a tax rate affects inequality as measured by their assigned metric.

Block 3: Post-experimental questionnaire. Participants reported their background characteristics. Participants indicate the extent to which they felt a number of emotions (sadness, happiness, anger, and surprise) when viewing the income distributions on an 8-point scale. Participants then reported their political views and answered a subset of questions on attitudes towards redistribution, rating their agreement with the following statements on a 5-point scale: "Inequality is an important issue which should not be ignored"; "The government should aim to reduce economic differences between the rich and the poor"; "Economic success is mainly due to hard work and not luck"; and "It is important to ensure a good standard of living for everyone". Finally, we measured numeracy using the Schwartz Numeracy Scale (Schwartz et al., 1997), along with two additional questions more directly related to inequality.

3 Results

In line with our preregistration, we will focus on comparing the responses to political and non-political metrics. The political metric indicates one of three metrics: Top 10%, Bottom 40% or Palma ratio. The non-political are the control condition and the Gini coefficients. In

[3]The random draw selected the US, determining a pre-tax income distribution for workers ranging from £1.4 to £100. The randomly selected participant chose to apply a 20% tax to workers' payments. We recruited 10 workers from the US via Prolific to perform a slider task (moving as many sliders as possible to 50 within two minutes). Workers received £1 as a fixed fee and from £5.12 to £84 as after-tax performance bonuses. The median study length was 4 minutes and 13 seconds, and the average bonus was £20.

addition, we present results split by each individual metric.

In Table A.1 in the appendix, we provide a balance table for our covariates, across political and non-political metrics. The table shows that the sample is balanced across treatments (joint F-test: $F(22, 1217) = 1.288$, $p = 0.168$). Across the five individual conditions, covariates are largely balanced (Table A.2). We observe imbalance in the number of correct answers to the Schwartz questions ($p = 0.020$), which we control for in our main specifications as a robustness check, and marginally significant imbalance in student status ($p = 0.065$). With eleven covariates tested across five treatment groups, one or two nominally significant p-values are expected by chance.

3.1 Impact of Metrics

Figure 1 shows the mean values of the three outcome variables–fairness ratings, perceived inequality, and implemented tax rate– for each treatment group with 95% confidence intervals. While Panel A provides mean values for the political and non-political treatments, Panel B shows the mean values for each treatment condition separately. The corresponding regression results are presented in Panel A and Panel B of Table 1. All the models reported in Table 1 include country fixed effects, and even columns also include a set of control variables. Comparing political and non-political metrics (Panel A), we find that participants who were given one of the political metrics consider the income distribution to be less fair (β = -0.333, p $<$ 0.01) and more unequal (β = 0.407, p $<$ 0.01), and prefer higher taxes (β = 3.232, p$<$ 0.01). These results support our preregistered hypotheses. Additionally, Table A.3 in the Appendix provides evidence of the external validity of the implemented tax rate. The table shows that the degree to which one agrees with the statement that governments should aim to reduce inequalities between the rich and the poor, is strongly associated with implementing higher tax rates in our experiment ($\beta = 6.159$, $p < 0.001$).

Figure 1: Mean values of outcomes by treatment group.

Panel A Panel B

Note. Outcomes by treatment condition. Gini denotes the Gini coefficient. Top 10 and Bottom 40 represent income shares (in percent) of the top 10% and bottom 40% of the population, respectively. Palma refers to the Palma ratio, which gives the ratio of the income share of the top 10% to that of the bottom 40%. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level.

When we analyze results separately by each treatment group (Panel B of Table 1), we use the control condition as reference category as they receive no metric information. We find that the effect is most consistent for the Gini and Top 10% share. The Gini coefficient leads participants to perceive the distribution as more fair and more equal relative to the control group. Information about the top 10% share of total income leads to lower fairness, higher perceived inequality, and higher preferred tax rates. By contrast, the Palma ratio is insignificant across all specifications. For the Bottom 40% metric there is a significant treatment effect only for inequality perceptions (and marginally significant for the tax rate). These results show that the biggest contrast obtains between the Gini coefficient and the Top 10% share, arguably the most used metrics in the literature on inequality.

Table 1: Impact of Inequality Metrics on Public Opinion

	Fairness		Inequality		Tax rate	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Panel A: Political Metric						
Political metric	-0.333***	-0.321***	0.407***	0.380***	3.232***	3.066***
	(0.087)	(0.082)	(0.081)	(0.078)	(1.434)	(1.362)
Num.Obs.	7476	7392	7476	7392	7476	7392
Num.Clusters	1246	1240	1246	1240	1246	1240
R2	0.223	0.256	0.252	0.270	0.053	0.120
Panel B: All treatments						
Gini	0.357***	0.280**	-0.454***	-0.350***	-0.551	0.778
	(0.128)	(0.121)	(0.121)	(0.119)	(2.202)	(2.088)
Top	-0.297**	-0.310**	0.259**	0.258**	4.087*	4.284**
	(0.135)	(0.128)	(0.119)	(0.116)	(2.270)	(2.173)
Bottom	-0.169	-0.208	0.417***	0.475***	3.536	3.835*
	(0.142)	(0.136)	(0.129)	(0.126)	(2.290)	(2.147)
Palma	0.012	-0.026	-0.154	-0.111	1.156	2.309
	(0.125)	(0.118)	(0.122)	(0.119)	(2.193)	(2.090)
Num.Obs.	7476	7392	7476	7392	7476	7392
Num.Clusters	1246	1240	1246	1240	1246	1240
R2	0.225	0.261	0.258	0.280	0.054	0.137
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

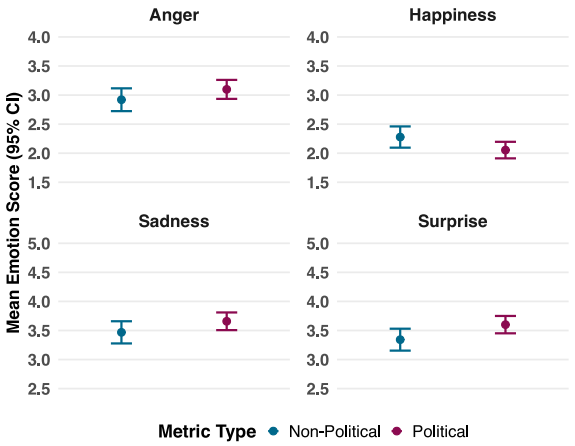
Notes: Standard errors clustered at the respondent level in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Gini denotes the Gini coefficient. Top and Bottom represent income shares (in percent) of the top 10% and bottom 40% of the population, respectively. Palma refers to the Palma ratio, which gives the ratio of the income share of the top 10% to that of the bottom 40%. Control variables include age, sex, level of understanding the distributions, conservativeness, support for redistribution, numeracy (number of correct answers to Schwarz and inequality questions), as well as the level of agreement with the following statement: 'Economic success is mainly due to hard work and not luck'.

3.2 Mediation Effect of Emotions

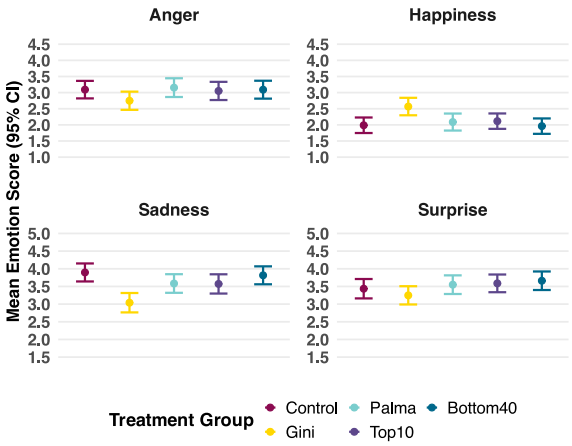
At the end of the survey, all participants indicated how angry, sad, happy, and surprised they were while observing the income distributions/metrics. Since each participant reported their emotions only once, we correlate emotions with aggregated measures for the outcome variables. Below, we answer the question of whether people who, on average, perceived the distribution as less fair and more unequal, or who chose higher tax rates, experienced more negative emotions in response to the metric presented to them.

Figure 2, Panel A, shows the mean values for each emotion by treatment group. Political metrics show somewhat more negative emotional responses than non-political metrics: participants report less happiness and more surprise. Regression results displayed in Appendix Table A.4, Panel A, confirm this observation statistically. Figure 2, Panel B, splits these results by individual metric. The Gini coefficient stands out, leading to less sadness and higher happiness ratings than the other conditions. Regressions reported in Appendix Table A.4 Panel B, confirm these results for sadness and happiness with $p < 0.01$, whereas the reduction in anger and surprise are marginally significant and not significant respectively.

Figure 2: Emotions by treatment group. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.



Panel A



Panel B

Note. The figure provides an overview of how the different treatment conditions are correlated with emotional responses. Gini denotes the Gini coefficient. Top 10 and Bottom 40 represent income shares (in percent) of the top 10% and bottom 40% of the population, respectively. Palma refers to the Palma ratio, which gives the ratio of the income share of the top 10% to that of the bottom 40%. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

To investigate whether these emotions help explain the impact of a given metric, we follow the mediation approach in Preacher and Hayes (2008) — for details see Appendix A.2. As

reported in Table A.6 in Appendix A.2, we find that emotions mediate the effect of the political metric on perceived fairness with marginal statistical significance, with no statistical significance for inequality perception or tax rate preferences. When we split by individual metric, we find statistically significant results for the Gini coefficient relative to the control. In line with the visual evidence, the 95% confidence interval for the mediation effect excludes zero for all three outcome variables. Overall, these results show that the effects of metrics are partially mediated by emotional responses. In particular, the Gini suppresses emotional responses compared to the control condition.

3.3 Interactions with the Degree of Inequality

So far, we have looked at how metrics affect the responses aggregated over countries. However, metrics may also make the public more responsive to differences in inequality between countries. Figure 3 shows the chosen tax rates for political and non-political metrics, for individual countries ranked by Gini coefficient from most equal (Hyp2) to most unequal (Hyp1). While we confirm the level effect found above, with the political metrics leading to higher preferred tax rates, for individual countries the difference is statistically significant only for the US and South Africa. Since our participants are from the U.S., this country may be more salient to them. South Africa is the country with the most extreme Gini coefficient, supporting the hypothesis that the metric has a greater impact in the context of (extremely) high inequality. However, there is no difference for the most unequal country (Hyp1), which may indicate that framing effects do not apply to hypothetical countries.

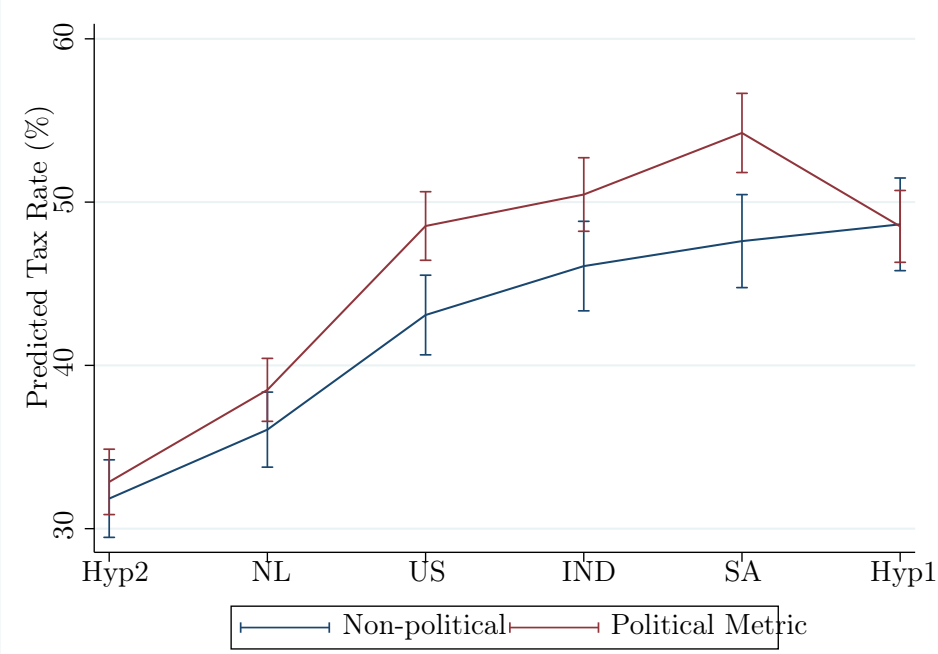


Figure 3: Tax Rates by Country and Metric Type

Note. The figure provides an overview of how the effect of Political metric interacts with actual level of inequality. The countries are ordered based on Gini coefficient, from the most equal to the most unequal. NL stands for Netherlands, US for USA, IND for India, and SA for South Africa. The countries Hyp2 and Hyp1 are fictitious countries. Error bars mark the 95% confidence intervals.

At least for the real countries, the graph for political metrics appears to increase more steeply in actual inequality. To evaluate this difference statistically, we report regressions where we interact political metrics with a dummy for high inequality (0 for The Netherlands and hypothetical country 2, 1 for other countries). The results are reported in Appendix Table A.7. First, we confirm that high inequality depresses fairness ratings, and increases perceived inequality and tax rates, as one would expect. This effect also holds for the control group, which saw no metrics and only graphs of income distributions, indicating that the participants understand and interpret these distributions correctly (see Table A.8 in the Appendix). For all outcome variables, the interaction effect between Political metrics and Inequality is not significant at conventional levels.

In Panel B of Appendix Table A.7, we also report the interactions for individual metrics. We find that the Top 10% share and the Palma ratio amplify the effect of inequality for tax rates and perceived inequality, while the Gini and the Bottom 40% share show the opposite effects for fairness ratings. These analyses are not preregistered and should be considered explorative. We conclude that there is little evidence that political metrics can amplify the

reaction to inequality.

3.4 Comprehension and Numeracy

The survey included several questions designed to assess participants' understanding of the metric and tax policy, which we used to evaluate the effects of understanding or "numeracy" of different measures. First, in the educational block, we verified in a simple binary response question whether the respondents understood how an increase in that metric relates to inequality. Only five out of 1,246 people made a mistake.

Second, after the judgments and decisions were made, we asked participants in the treatment groups a more detailed and complex question. We showed the subjects again a (pre-tax) income distribution and asked: "Suppose the authorities now impose a tax rate of 50% on the income of citizens in this country, where the revenues are distributed equally to all citizens (just like the worker tax before). What do you think will be the «metric» of the new income distribution after this 50% tax plus transfer policy is implemented?" Here, almost a third of the participants chose the incorrect direction of change in the metric after applying the tax and transfer policy. As a robustness check, we ran regressions with interaction terms between Political metric and this comprehension question.[4] We do not observe a consistent effect of misunderstanding the tax question, either on the level of the outcome variables or on the effect of political metric (the interaction).

Third, at the end of the experiment, we elicited three questions from the Schwartz numeracy measure (Schwartz et al., 1997), and two questions assessing general understanding of inequality, which we combined into a single "Numeracy" index. In Appendix Table A.12, we present the results of regressions with interaction terms between Treatment and Numeracy. While we find that numeracy is associated with higher levels of inequality perceptions, we did not find an interaction with the treatment.

Finally, note that the additional complexity of the Gini coefficient or Palma ratio could lead to a "center bias", whereby people are closer to the middle of the scale. However, this does not explain the data patterns: for instance, the response under the Gini coefficient is closest to the scale midpoint for the fairness ratings, but furthest away for the tax rate.

We conclude that there is no evidence that our treatment effects are driven by heterogeneity in numeracy.

[4]We exclude the control group from the analysis, as we did not elicit this question. Table A.11 in the Appendix presents the results, with the Gini coefficient used as the reference group.

3.5 Effect size and external validity

How economically meaningful are the effects of metrics? While it is hard to translate our effects directly into real-world outcomes, we can benchmark the effect of changing inequality metric against the effect of changing the underlying income distribution. That is, we can ask how much actual inequality needs to change to match the treatment effect of reporting metric on our outcome.

A direct way to construct such a benchmark in our data is to compare changes between countries to changes between metrics. For instance, Appendix Table A.9 shows that in the Gini treatment, the difference in chosen tax rates between the U.S. and South Africa is 6.1 percentage points (42.7 vs. 48.8). This change is roughly equivalent to switching from the Gini index to the Top 10% share, (keeping the U.S. income distribution constant), which produces a 6.0 percentage point increase (42.7 vs. 48.7). Since South Africa and the U.S. are 21 Gini points apart (0.42 vs, 0.63 for post-tax Gini, which makes South Africa the most unequal country in the world by this metric), this example shows that the metrics can have a large impact.[5]

By assuming some regularity conditions on the effect of metrics we can make more general statements. For instance, we can impose a linear effect of inequality (as measured by e.g. the Gini coefficient) on the chosen tax rate. When we estimate this relation by OLS we find that an increase in the Gini by one unit changes the chosen tax rate by 20-28 percent, depending on whether we look at the Control or the Gini condition (see Appendix Table A.10). We can compare this effect to the overall treatment effect of moving from, say, the Gini coefficient to the Top 10% share, which is 3.5 percentage points (4.3-0.8, see Table 1, column 6). This suggests that the effect of switching between these two metrics is equivalent to an increase in 0.12-0.17 Gini points.[6] This is similar to going to a relatively egalitarian country like The Netherlands or Norway (with pre-tax Gini coefficients of 0.42 and 0.41 respectively) to medium inequality country like Senegal or Argentina (with pre-tax Gini coefficient of 0.56 and 0.57 respectively).[7] These examples show that compared to the actual dispersion of the income distribution, reporting metrics play a major role.

External validity. When it comes to external validity, one concern is that our tax measure is somewhat artificial. In particular, taxes in our experiment are applied to an income distribution of "workers" in an online experiment, who are cleanly and transparantly ranked

[5] See e.g. `https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_income_inequality`.

[6] If we take the inequality impact from the Control condition, we find $3.5/20.5 = 0.17$, while if we take the inequality impact in the Gini condition we find $3.5/28 = 0.125$.

[7] Based on 2024 pre-tax distributions and reported on ourworldindata.org.

on effort. In reality, income distributions comprise many people, whose income is an unclear function of many variables. While it is hard to reproduce such conditions in a short experiment, we can relate our tax measure to agreement with the statement in the final questionnaire "Governments should aim to reduce inequalities between the rich and pool", scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). As documented in Table A.3, we find a strong and highly statistically significant relationship, where a one-point shift on the 5-point redistribution scale translates into a 6 percentage point higher tax rate. This shows that our tax variable captures attitudes towards redistribution. Durante et al. (2014) provide further validation for a very similar experimental tax measure.

4 Expert Experiment

A natural question is whether the effects documented so far are specific to a lay audience, or whether they extend to those who work professionally in public economics and inequality research. On one hand, experts may be familiar with all standard metrics and understand their relationships and the relationship to the underlying distribution, which might insulate them from framing effects. On the other hand, even sophisticated readers may respond to political salience, regardless of their technical knowledge.

Another important question is how well experts anticipate the behavioral effects of metrics on others. Accurate perceptions would suggest that experts are aware of the framing power of their measurement choices even if their own normative judgments remain stable. Systematic over- or underestimation, by contrast, would indicate a form of miscalibration with implications for how inequality is communicated to the public. Our second experiment aims to address both these questions.

4.1 Experimental design, experts

We invited experts to complete the survey via their professional email.[8] As an incentive, we offered the chance of winning $500 for a charity of their choice. Because experts are scarce and we wanted to have enough statistical power, we only conducted two between-subject

[8]Our list includes those who published in the top 10 journals under JEL code H (Public Economics) in 2024–2025 (American Economic Review, American Economic Journal: Economic Policy, Journal of Political Economy, Review of Economic Studies, Econometrica, Quarterly Journal of Economics, Economic Journal, Journal of Public Economics, International Tax and Public Finance, The Journal of Economic Inequality) and those affiliated with academic or research institutions (e.g. ZEW, DIW Berlin, UNU-WIDER, ROCKWOOL, and other research institutes and universities), as well as staff members of several central banks (Bank of Norway, Bank of England, Bank of the Netherlands).

treatments. We focused on the Gini coefficient and income share of the Top 10% of earners, which are the two most-used inequality metrics in the literature. We preregistered a sample size of 250 for each treatment, and sent out invitations in batches until we exceeded the desired sample size. Between October 2025 and March 2026, we sent 2,574 invitations and obtained 255 responses, for a response rate of 10%.[9]

Participants first completed a slimmed-down version of the educational block of the Laypeople experiment. Experts are shown the graphs used to illustrate income distributions and informed that all distributions are pre-tax, this time without detailed explanations. The remainder of the block explains the incentivization scheme for the tax rate decisions, and a brief explanation of the assigned inequality metric, in the same way as for laypeople.

The main survey block is identical to that of the Laypeople experiment. Participants are presented with the same real and fictitious countries, with the fictitious countries appearing in a fixed order and the real countries in a randomized order. For each country, they complete the same questions as laypeople on inequality perception, fairness and tax rates.

Next, experts predict the average implemented tax rate for the US under each treatment condition of the Laypeople experiment. They are first informed that the first experiment was conducted with 1,246 Americans from the general population. Experts are shown all five treatment conditions from the first experiment and asked to predict the average implemented tax rate for the US under each, together with a description of what participants in that condition saw and a brief explanation of the relevant metric. For example, when predicting the average tax rate in the Palma ratio condition, experts are told: "Participants saw the U.S. income distribution, and were informed that the Palma ratio (the income share of the top 10% of earners divided by that of the bottom 40%) equals 5.51 for the US."

We incentivized experts' guesses as follows. Before making their guesses, experts select a preferred charity from a provided list of ten options. We then told experts that one randomly selected participant would have a chance to win a $500 donation to their chosen charity. In case they were randomly selected for a donation, the probability of the donation depends on accuracy of the guesses in the next part, using an incentive compatible randomized quadratic scoring rule.[10] The final part of the survey collects background information: i) whether their primary professional role is policy work, academic research, both, or neither; ii) gender identity; iii) age; and iv) political views.

[9]The expert survey was preregistered at AsPredicted #261,563

[10]In theory, this scoring rule is incentive compatible (i.e. truth-telling maximizes expected utility) under any degree of risk aversion (Schlag et al., 2013; Hossain and Okui, 2013). Following Danz et al. (2022), we do not give a full explanation of the scoring rule, but link to instructions on a separate webpage.

4.2 Metrics and Experts' Opinions

We test the effect of metrics by comparing the three main outcome variables in the Gini vs. Top 10% treatments. Figure 4 shows the results visually, while Table A.13 in the Appendix presents the regression results. The pattern partially mirrors what we find for the general public: Experts assigned the Gini coefficient perceive income distributions as significantly less unequal than those assigned the Top 10% share ($\beta = -0.51$, $p < 0.01$), and this result survives controls for political views and demographics. However, unlike lay participants, experts show no significant difference in fairness assessments or chosen tax rates across the two conditions.

Figure 4: Mean values of outcomes by treatment group (expert sample). Experts opinion in different treatment conditions. Gini denotes the Gini coefficient. Top 10 represents income share (in percent) of the top 10% of the population. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level.

One interpretation of these results is that while experts' inequality judgments are indeed affected, experts feel that they need more information in order to judge whether an outcome was fair, or which tax rate was optimal. Indeed, in the comment section, several experts argued that the provided information was insufficient to make these decisions.[11]

4.3 Experts' Predictions vs. Reality

Figure 5 compares experts' mean predictions to the true average tax rates observed in the Laypeople experiment for the U.S. income distribution. Three findings stand out. First, experts correctly anticipate the direction of the metric effect: They predict that political metrics

[11] One expert emailed us to ask why we did not provide labor supply elasticities and a description of the welfare function, which (s)he would need to compute the optimal tax rate.

(Top 10%, Bottom 40%, and Palma ratio) will elicit higher tax rates than the Gini or the control condition. Second, experts substantially overestimate the magnitude of these effects. Taking the contrast between the Gini and the Top 10% conditions as the key comparison, experts predict a difference approximately three times larger than what we observe. Third, experts do not correctly predict the effect of the Gini relative to the control. While reporting the Gini coefficient slightly depressed tax rates among laypeople, experts predict a significant increase.

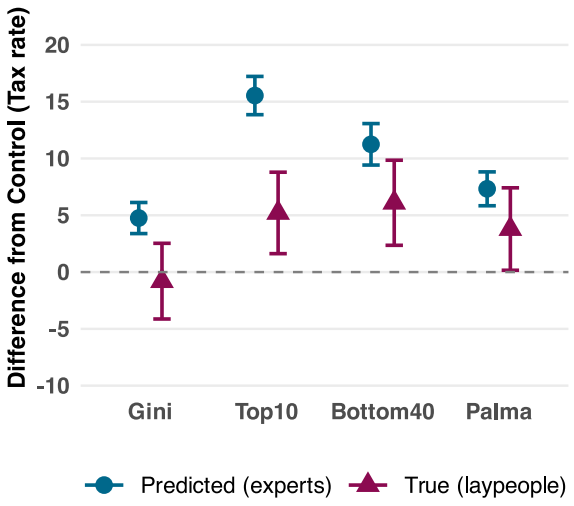


Figure 5: Mean values of true metric effects and those predicted by experts for the U.S. income distribution. Gini denotes the Gini coefficient. Top 10 and Bottom 40 represent income shares (in percent) of the top 10% and bottom 40% of the population, respectively. Palma refers to the Palma ratio, which gives the ratio of the income share of the top 10% to that of the bottom 40%. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. As each expert made 5 predictions, standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.

In summary, experts correctly understand that political metrics lead the public to perceive inequality more acutely and demand greater redistribution – their directional intuitions are well-calibrated. But they appear to believe that this framing power is far stronger than it actually is. This miscalibration matters: if experts choose political metrics partly because they believe those metrics will be more persuasive, they may be doing so on the basis of an inflated view of rhetorical power.

5 Metrics in the Media

So far, we have focused on experimental subjects. A natural extension is to ask whether the choice of inequality framing manifests itself in real-world communication: do news outlets that lean politically left preferentially reach for top-share language, while right-leaning outlets rely more on the Gini? If they do, this may both reflect and amplify partisan polarization in thinking about inequality. To investigate this, we provide an analysis of 39 media outlets in eight countries, using the Nexis Uni database.

5.1 Method

For our investigation, we use Nexis Uni, a repository of newspaper articles. We searched nationally distributed general-interest newspapers and news weeklies for their use of top-share metrics and Gini coefficient. We correlate the resulting article counts with a measure of political leaning on a scale from -0.5 to $+0.5$, based on the political polarization score in Fletcher et al. (2020). These scores are based on the self-reported ideology of the outlet's readership, see Appendix C.3 for more details.

We focus on outlets in eight Western countries: United States, United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Spain, and Australia. We include all outlets that satisfy the following criteria: a) they are indexed in Nexis Uni, b) return more than 10 hits on our search terms (see below), and c) their ideological position is reported in Fletcher et al. (2020). We exclude non-newspaper media (television, digital-only opinion magazines). This results in a sample of 39 mostly prominent national-circulation outlets including some financial papers (*Financial Times*, *Handelsblatt*, *Expansión*, *Australian Financial Review*) and news weeklies (*Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit*, *Le Point*).

Dependent variable and regression. For each outlet we ran a search on the keyword "inequality", combined with "Gini" or "top 10% income share" (or "top 1% income share") in the outlet's primary language (see Appendix C.2 for full search terms and coverage notes). Appendix Table C.4 reports the full article count corresponding to each search. On the basis of this count we construct the following outcome variable for each outlet i

$$y_i = log\left[\frac{\#\text{ top-share}_i + 0.5}{\#\text{ Gini}_i}\right]. \tag{1}$$

Thus, y_i measures the ratio between top-share and Gini hits in outlet i. We apply a logarithmic scale due to the censored and right-skewed nature of the data, and apply a continuity correction of 0.5 to avoid log(0) for outlets with zero top-share hits. A value above zero

indicates that top-share language is more prevalent than Gini language; a value below zero indicates the reverse.

We test this relationship using an OLS model with country fixed effects (using the US as base):

$$\log\Big[\frac{\text{top-share}_i + 0.5}{\text{Gini}_i}\Big] = \alpha + \beta\,\text{score}_i + \sum_c \gamma_c\,\mathbf{1}[c_i = c] + \delta\,\text{founded}_i + \varepsilon_i \tag{2}$$

where $\text{score}_i \in [-0.5, +0.5]$ is outlet i's political leaning score. Country fixed effects γ_c absorb between-country differences in reporting norms and Nexis coverage depth. Since the top share results have become more popular only in the last two decades, we also control for the year the outlet was first published ("founded").[12] Further methodological details are in Appendix C.

5.2 Results

Figure 6 plots the log ratio against audience leaning score for all 39 outlets. Points are color-coded by country, and the size of the circle is proportional to total article count. The solid line shows the within-country slope implied by the country fixed-effects (FE) model, drawn through the grand mean. The correlation is consistent with the hypothesis: more right-leaning outlets report relatively fewer top-share results. Interestingly, there also appears to be strong between-country heterogeneity, with Dutch and French outlets showing high top-share scores and German outlets relying mostly on the Gini. This justifies the inclusion of country fixed effects in the regression. While our analysis is not powered for statistical tests in individual countries, it is noteworthy that the OLS slope is negative in 7 out of 8 countries.[13]

Table 2 contains regression results for three different model specifications: OLS, OLS with fixed effects (see above) and weighted OLS with fixed effects, with weights determined by the total number of articles found in each outlet. The picture is consistent across models: The quantitative estimates indicate that a 0.1-point rightward shift on the audience leaning scale is associated with a $1 - e^{-0.366} \approx 31\%$ reduction in the top-share/Gini ratio. Across the observed range of the scale (-0.25 to $+0.20$, a span of 0.45), the most right-leaning outlet uses top-share language only about one-fifth as frequently relative to Gini as the most left-leaning outlet, all else equal. Note that the OLS model (column 1) is less precisely estimated with a lower R^2, since it does not take into account the cross-country heterogeneity.

[12] Newer outlets may have adopted top-share language and if newer outlets also tend to be more left-leaning, this would bias estimates away from zero. However, we find that the founding year is essentially uncorrelated with audience leaning score across the sample (Spearman $\rho = -0.091$, $p = 0.58$), but we nevertheless control for it in the regression.

[13] The sole exception is the U.S., where however, we only have two outlets (*USA Today* and the *New York Times*), which are both left leaning, so the slope is rather uninformative.

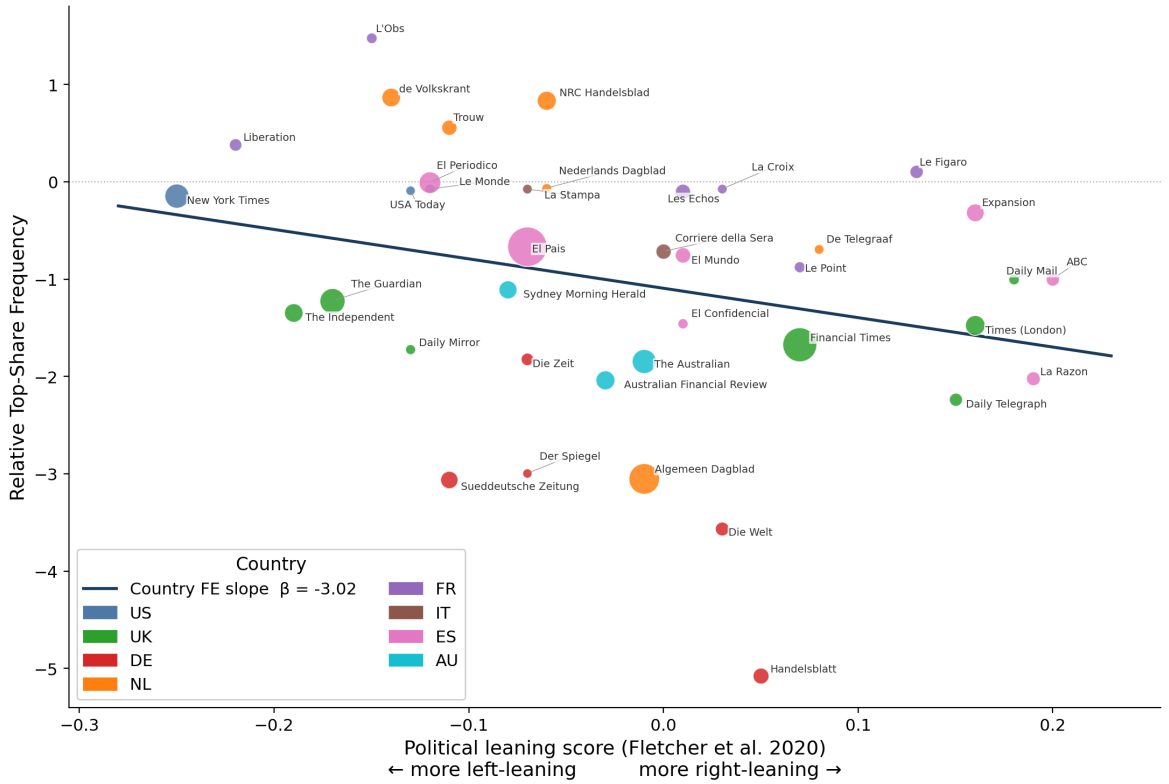


Figure 6: **Nexis Uni: metric-choice log ratio by political leaning.** Vertical axis: log[(top-share+ 0.5)/Gini]. Zero (dotted horizontal) indicates parity; positive values indicate relatively more top-share coverage. Bubble size $\propto$ total article count. Solid line: within-country (FE) slope drawn through the sample mean (founding year variable is excluded from Equation (2)). Color denotes country (see legend). $N = 39$.

5.3 Interpretation

The Nexis Uni results are consistent with the experimental findings and allow at least three different interpretations.

Editorial activism. The reading most closely related to our experiments, especially the Expert experiment, is that left-leaning editorial desks consciously choose top-share framings in order to influence their audience in a desired ideological direction.

Source selection. Alternatively, left-leaning outlets may systematically cite researchers working in the top-shares tradition, since this is closer to their ideological leaning. One indication for this effect is the relatively high top-share fraction in French outlets, which is home to prominent academics and research outfits publishing in the top-share tradition, e.g. the World Inequality Report.

Table 2: Political leaning and metric-choice log ratio.

	(1) OLS	(2) Fixed effects (FE)	(3) WLS + FE
Political leaning	-3.419^{*}	-3.665^{***}	-4.020^{***}
	(1.790)	(1.283)	(1.388)
Country fixed effects	–	✓	✓
Weighted	–	–	✓
N	39	39	39
R^2	0.104	0.729	0.665

Dependent variable: log[(top-share + 0.5)/Gini]. WLS weights (column 3): $\sqrt{\text{total count}}$. Country FE with reference category US. All specifications control for calendar year of outlet's first publication (range 1821–2001). Political leaning score: Fletcher, Cornia & Nielsen (2020); deviation of outlet audience's mean left–right self-placement from country mean (scale −0.5 to +0.5; observed range −0.25 to +0.20; negative = more left-leaning audience). $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.10$ (two-tailed, normal approximation).

Audience demand. A third reading of the pattern is that it reflects reader identity and expectation: outlets cater to audiences whose cognitive schema map onto particular inequality measures. In this case the causal arrow runs partly from audience to outlet.

These interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and our data cannot distinguish between them. Regardless of the interpretation, the result implies that through their use of inequality metrics, the media amplify cleavages between left and right in their perception of inequality.

6 Conclusion

We compare the behavioral impact of various inequality metrics, contrasting the Gini coefficient with more "political" metrics that capture income shares going to particular groups in society. We find that metrics have an impact on subjectively perceived inequality, fairness ratings, and willingness to redistribute. Part of these effects can be attributed to differential emotions, in particular the impact of the Gini coefficient, which suppresses emotional reactions. We also find that domain expertise does not fully neutralize framing effects: like laypeople, experts assigned the Gini perceive income distributions as significantly less unequal than those assigned the Top 10% share. Unlike lay participants, however, their normative judgments (fairness assessments and tax choices) remain unaffected.

The effects of inequality metrics are large when benchmarked against the effect of the actual income distribution. While it is hard to extrapolate to other contexts, there is a

compelling reason why such effects may be even larger in the real world: in the experiment, all subjects have access to the full income distribution of each country. It seems reasonable to assume that this additional information dampens the impact of metrics, as participants may pay attention to aspects of the distribution that are not salient from the metric. In addition, all subjects in our experiment have received an educational training on how to interpret such distributions. Since newspaper articles or statistical reports typically report only metrics and no distributions, their reports may trigger stronger reactions than those in our experiment.

Our results show that the "metric is the message", as the communication format about inequality matters at least as much as the actual income distribution. Statistical inequality metrics do not just reflect an objective reality, but in fact exert a powerful influence on normative views and policy measures. Technically sophisticated measures like the Gini coefficient are not "neutral" in this regard. Given the public's response, choosing how to report on inequality is itself a normative act. Since experts are able to predict (and indeed overestimate) the impact of metrics, their communications may take on a strategic element. Seen in this light, the results of the media analysis are particularly important: the fact that left leaning media are more likely to report top shares will encourage concern about inequality among their audiences. The reverse is true for right-wing audiences, so the use of metrics contributes to existing cleavages.

Further research can clarify the exact mechanisms at play. Our estimates capture the combined effect of several features: the income region that a statistic makes salient, the scale of the number it reports, its complexity, and its political connotations. This bundling is deliberate in order to mirror actual policy communication, but it leaves open why the metric matters. Disentangling these channels will require new experiments, e.g. expressing the Gini on a 0–100 scale or the top share as a fraction to separate scale from content, equating displayed magnitudes, or holding a statistic's value fixed while varying its framing. We hope that such a research agenda can lead to a more balanced and informed communication about the topic of inequality.

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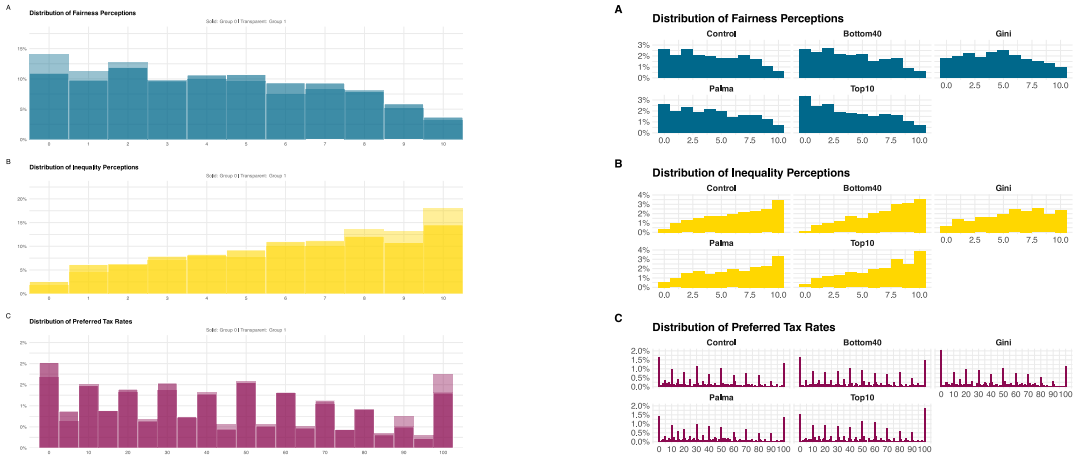
Online Appendix

Appendix Table of contents:

A Appendix A: Supplementary analysis

A.1 Descriptive statistics



(a) (b)

Figure A.1: Distributions of economic outcomes by treatment group

Table A.1: Covariate balance by Political Metric Group

Variable	Level	Political Metric 0 (n=500)	Political Metric 1 (n=746)	*p*	SMD
Continuous variables (mean (SD))					
Age		37.06 (12.27)	38.48 (13.02)	0.054	0.112
Level of agreement with the statement: 'Economic success is mainly due to hard work and not luck'.		3.44 (1.32)	3.45 (1.30)	0.869	0.009
Support for redistribution		4.40 (0.74)	4.40 (0.79)	0.863	0.010
Number of correct answers to Schwarz questions		2.21 (0.96)	2.33 (0.90)	0.029	0.126
Number of correct answers to questions about inequality		1.87 (0.37)	1.86 (0.39)	0.759	0.018
Conservative		3.81 (1.63)	3.71 (1.71)	0.277	0.063
Categorical variables (%)					
Education	1	53 (10.6)	72 (9.7)	0.772	0.042
	2	204 (40.8)	298 (39.9)		
	3	243 (48.6)	376 (50.4)		
Ethnicity	Asian	17 (3.4)	36 (4.8)	0.378	0.136
	Black	134 (26.8)	195 (26.1)		
	Mixed	11 (2.2)	28 (3.8)		
	Other	13 (2.6)	15 (2.0)		
	White	320 (64.0)	460 (61.7)		
	Missing	5 (1.0)	12 (1.6)		
Sex	Female	255 (51.0)	366 (49.1)	0.795	0.039
	Male	242 (48.4)	375 (50.3)		
	Missing	3 (0.6)	5 (0.7)		
Student status	0	313 (62.6)	469 (62.9)	0.080	0.130
	1	87 (17.4)	100 (13.4)		
	Missing	100 (20.0)	177 (23.7)		
Employment	Full-Time	205 (41.0)	334 (44.8)	0.394	0.131
	Other	13 (2.6)	22 (2.9)		
	Part-Time	139 (27.8)	168 (22.5)		
	Unemployed	25 (5.0)	44 (5.9)		
	Unpaid	18 (3.6)	31 (4.2)		
	Missing	100 (20.0)	147 (19.7)		

Note: p-values represent *t*-tests results for continuous variables and χ^2 tests results for categorical variables, p-values are unadjusted for multiple comparisons. SMD states for standardized mean difference. Education reflects how well participants understood the explanations provided in the Education section: 3 for those who answered all questions correctly on the first attempt; 2 for those who answered correctly on the second attempt; 1 — to those who did not answer at least one question correctly even on the second attempt. Gini denotes the Gini coefficient. Top 10 and Bottom 40 represent income shares (in percent) of the top 10% and bottom 40% of the population, respectively. Palma refers to the Palma ratio, which gives the ratio of the income share of the top 10% to that of the bottom 40%.

Table A.2: Covariate balance by Treatment Group

Variable	Level	Treatment Group					p	SMD
		Control (n=250)	Gini (n=250)	Top10 (n=252)	Bottom40 (n=254)	Palma (n=240)		
Continuous variables (mean (SD))								
Age		37.43 (12.28)	36.70 (12.26)	38.64 (13.18)	38.20 (12.54)	38.62 (13.38)	0.363	0.080
Level of agreement with the statement: 'Economic success is mainly due to hard work and not luck'.		3.38 (1.31)	3.51 (1.32)	3.45 (1.34)	3.44 (1.23)	3.47 (1.34)	0.855	0.044
Support for redistribution		4.44 (0.68)	4.35 (0.80)	4.46 (0.77)	4.39 (0.76)	4.37 (0.83)	0.459	0.074
Number of correct answers to Schwarz questions		2.27 (0.97)	2.16 (0.96)	2.43 (0.81)	2.25 (0.99)	2.31 (0.88)	0.020	0.135
Number of correct answers to questions about inequality		1.90 (0.34)	1.84 (0.39)	1.90 (0.36)	1.83 (0.42)	1.86 (0.38)	0.089	0.110
Conservative		3.72 (1.71)	3.91 (1.55)	3.58 (1.72)	3.83 (1.67)	3.71 (1.74)	0.220	0.094
Categorical variables (%)								
Education	1	22 (8.8)	31 (12.4)	29 (11.5)	26 (10.2)	17 (7.1)	0.377	0.127
	2	99 (39.6)	105 (42.0)	89 (35.3)	104 (40.9)	105 (43.8)		
	3	129 (51.6)	114 (45.6)	134 (53.2)	124 (48.8)	118 (49.2)		
Ethnicity	Asian	4 (1.6)	13 (5.2)	12 (4.8)	11 (4.3)	13 (5.4)	0.224	0.218
	Black	72 (28.8)	62 (24.8)	61 (24.2)	66 (26.0)	68 (28.3)		
	Mixed	4 (1.6)	7 (2.8)	8 (3.2)	12 (4.7)	8 (3.3)		
	Other	2 (0.8)	11 (4.4)	4 (1.6)	7 (2.8)	4 (1.7)		
	White	164 (65.6)	156 (62.4)	162 (64.3)	153 (60.2)	145 (60.4)		
	Missing	4 (1.6)	1 (0.4)	5 (2.0)	5 (2.0)	2 (0.8)		
Sex	Female	127 (50.8)	128 (51.2)	123 (48.8)	126 (49.6)	117 (48.8)	0.614	0.107
	Male	123 (49.2)	119 (47.6)	126 (50.0)	128 (50.4)	121 (50.4)		
	Missing	0 (0.0)	3 (1.2)	3 (1.2)	0 (0.0)	2 (0.8)		
Student status	0	158 (63.2)	155 (62.0)	159 (63.1)	164 (64.6)	146 (60.8)	0.065	0.154
	1	38 (15.2)	49 (19.6)	29 (11.5)	27 (10.6)	44 (18.3)		
	Missing	54 (21.6)	46 (18.4)	64 (25.4)	63 (24.8)	50 (20.8)		
Employment	Full-Time	90 (36.0)	115 (46.0)	117 (46.4)	110 (43.3)	107 (44.6)	0.157	0.221
	Other	2 (0.8)	11 (4.4)	9 (3.6)	5 (2.0)	8 (3.3)		
	Part-Time	74 (29.6)	65 (26.0)	55 (21.8)	61 (24.0)	52 (21.7)		
	Unemployed	13 (5.2)	12 (4.8)	11 (4.4)	13 (5.1)	20 (8.3)		
	Unpaid	10 (4.0)	8 (3.2)	10 (4.0)	11 (4.3)	10 (4.2)		
	Missing	61 (24.4)	39 (15.6)	50 (19.8)	54 (21.3)	43 (17.9)		

Note: p-values represent one-way ANOVA (F-tests) for continuous variables and χ^2 tests results for categorical variables, p-values are unadjusted for multiple comparisons. SMD states for standardized mean difference. Education reflects how well participants understood the explanations provided in the Education section: 3 for those who answered all questions correctly on the first attempt; 2 for those who answered correctly on the second attempt; 1 — to those who did not answer at least one question correctly even on the second attempt. Gini denotes the Gini coefficient. Top 10 and Bottom 40 represent income shares (in percent) of the top 10% and bottom 40% of the population, respectively. Palma refers to the Palma ratio, which gives the ratio of the income share of the top 10% to that of the bottom 40%.

Table A.3: Correlation tax rate and redistribution attitudes.

	(1) Average tax rate
Government redistribute	6.159***
	(0.692)
Constant	17.675***
	(3.058)
Observations	1259
R-squared	0.004

Note: The table provides the regression estimate from an OLS regression where the dependent variable 'Average tax rate' is the average tax rate implemented by the respondent over all six decisions (countries) in the experiment, and the independent variable 'Government redistribute' is defined as a variable taking values from 1–5, where 5 is 'strongly agree' and 1 is 'strongly disagree' to the statement 'Governments should aim to reduce inequalities between the rich and the poor'. Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

A.2 Mediation effect of Emotions

We examine a model with multiple mediators (Fig. A.2) and follow the approach of Preacher and Hayes (Preacher and Hayes, 2008) to analyze how emotions mediate the relationship between public opinion and inequality measures.

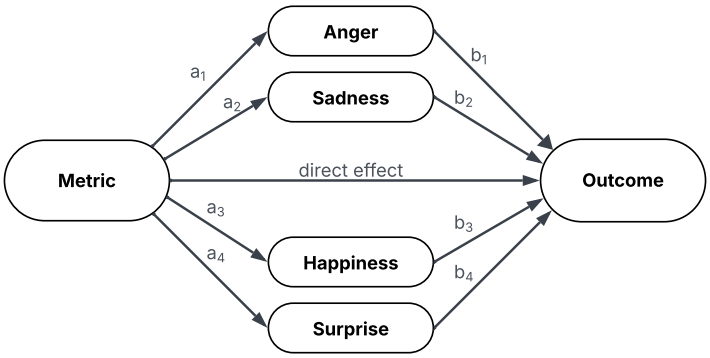


Figure A.2: Multiple Mediator Model

Note. The figure provides an overview of the mediation mechanism.

The indirect effect of inequality indicators on public opinion through emotions can be estimated using a two-stage regression. In the first stage, we estimate the correlation between emotions and various inequality indicators, or coefficients $a_1 ... a_4$. In

the second stage, we calculate the correlation between emotions and public opinion outcomes, which are represented by coefficients $b_1 ... b_4$. Then, the total indirect effect is the sum of the products of the coefficients from the first and second stages: $a_1 \times b_1 + a_2 \times b_2 + a_3 \times b_3 + a_4 \times b_4$. Hence, the direct effect is equal to the total effect minus the indirect effect.

To test whether the effect is significant, bootstrap confidence intervals are constructed, which allows us to avoid any assumptions about the distribution of the products. As suggested by Preacher & Hayes (Preacher and Hayes, 2008), we use bias-corrected bootstrap with 10,000 iterations for more stable confidence intervals.

The results of the regressions for both stages are presented in Tables A.4 and A.5. The calculated confidence intervals are presented in Table A.6. Since the indirect effect and total effect can operate in opposite directions, and the proportion of the mediated effect is not always interpretable, we do not report it.

Table A.4: Stage 1 Regressions: The Link Between Emotions and Metrics

	Sadness	Happiness	Anger	Surprise
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A: Political Metric				
Political metric	0.190	-0.224*	0.178	0.259**
	(0.124)	(0.117)	(0.131)	(0.122)
Num.Obs.	1246	1246	1246	1246
R^2	0.002	0.003	0.001	0.004
R^2 Adj.	0.001	0.002	0.001	0.003
Panel B: All treatments				
Gini	-0.856***	0.580***	-0.344*	-0.188
	(0.190)	(0.181)	(0.202)	(0.189)
Top	-0.325*	0.127	-0.040	0.151
	(0.190)	(0.180)	(0.202)	(0.188)
Bottom	-0.081	-0.027	-0.001	0.225
	(0.189)	(0.180)	(0.201)	(0.188)
Palma	-0.313	0.100	0.062	0.114
	(0.192)	(0.182)	(0.204)	(0.191)
Num.Obs.	1246	1246	1246	1246
R^2	0.020	0.012	0.004	0.005
R^2 Adj.	0.016	0.009	0.001	0.001

Notes: Outcome variables were aggregated before the analysis. Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Gini denotes the Gini coefficient. Top and Bottom represent income shares (in percent) of the top 10% and bottom 40% of the population, respectively. Palma refers to the Palma ratio, which gives the ratio of the income share of the top 10% to that of the bottom 40%.

Table A.5: Stage 2 Regressions: The Link Between Emotions and Public Opinion

	Fairness		Inequality		Tax rate	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Panel A: Political Metric						
Political metric	-0.333***	-0.271***	0.407***	0.371***	3.232**	3.119**
	(0.088)	(0.083)	(0.081)	(0.080)	(1.440)	(1.422)
Sadness		-0.054*		0.081***		1.462***
		(0.028)		(0.027)		(0.476)
Happiness		0.195***		-0.074***		0.789**
		(0.022)		(0.021)		(0.377)
Anger		-0.053**		0.031		1.148**
		(0.026)		(0.025)		(0.451)
Surprise		0.006		-0.005		-0.742**
		(0.021)		(0.020)		(0.350)
Num.Obs.	1246	1246	1246	1246	1246	1246
R^2	0.011	0.126	0.020	0.069	0.004	0.039
R^2 Adj.	0.011	0.122	0.019	0.065	0.003	0.035
Panel B: All treatments						
Gini	0.357***	0.185	-0.454***	-0.344***	-0.551	0.499
	(0.136)	(0.130)	(0.124)	(0.123)	(2.229)	(2.219)
Top	-0.297**	-0.341***	0.259**	0.292**	4.087*	4.620**
	(0.136)	(0.128)	(0.124)	(0.122)	(2.225)	(2.194)
Bottom	-0.169	-0.170	0.417***	0.423***	3.536	3.846*
	(0.135)	(0.128)	(0.124)	(0.121)	(2.221)	(2.186)
Palma	0.012	-0.020	-0.154	-0.128	1.156	1.546
	(0.137)	(0.130)	(0.125)	(0.123)	(2.252)	(2.222)
Sadness		-0.049*		0.066**		1.457***
		(0.028)		(0.027)		(0.480)
Happiness		0.194***		-0.069***		0.787**
		(0.022)		(0.021)		(0.378)
Anger		-0.057**		0.042*		1.161**
		(0.026)		(0.025)		(0.452)
Surprise		0.007		-0.007		-0.747**
		(0.020)		(0.019)		(0.350)
Num.Obs.	1246	1246	1246	1246	1246	1246
R^2	0.021	0.131	0.047	0.091	0.006	0.041
R^2 Adj.	0.018	0.126	0.044	0.085	0.002	0.035

Note: Outcome variables were aggregated before the analysis. Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Gini denotes the Gini coefficient. Top and Bottom represent income shares (in percent) of the top 10% and bottom 40% of the population, respectively. Palma refers to the Palma ratio, which gives the ratio of the income share of the top 10% to that of the bottom 40%.

Table A.6: Mediation Analysis of Emotions

Treatment	Outcome	Indirect effect [95% CI]	Total effect	Direct effect
Panel A: Political Metric				
Political metric	Fairness	-0.062° [−0.125, −0.001]	-0.333^{***}	-0.271^{***}
	Inequality	0.036 [−0.001, 0.078]	0.407^{***}	0.371^{***}
	Tax rate	0.113 [−0.515, 0.746]	3.232^{***}	3.119^{***}
Panel B: Individual Treatments				
Gini	Fairness	0.173° [0.075, 0.282]	0.357^{***}	0.184
	Inequality	-0.110° [−0.184, −0.048]	-0.454^{***}	-0.344^{***}
	Tax rate	-1.050° [−2.261, −0.017]	−0.551	0.499
Top	Fairness	0.044 [−0.042, 0.138]	-0.297^{**}	-0.341^{***}
	Inequality	−0.033 [−0.093, 0.020]	0.259^{**}	0.292^{**}
	Tax rate	−0.533 [−1.510, 0.327]	4.087^{*}	4.620^{**}
Bottom	Fairness	0.000 [−0.088, 0.092]	−0.169	−0.169
	Inequality	−0.005 [−0.060, 0.048]	0.417^{***}	0.422^{***}
	Tax rate	−0.310 [−1.225, 0.524]	3.536	3.846^{*}
Palma	Fairness	0.032 [−0.062, 0.127]	0.012	−0.020
	Inequality	−0.026 [−0.084, 0.031]	−0.154	−0.128
	Tax rate	−0.390 [−1.387, 0.514]	1.156	1.546

Note: Outcome variables are aggregated before the analysis. Bootstrap confidence intervals clustered at the respondent level. $^{\circ}$ indicates 95% CI excludes zero for indirect effects. Total effects are taken from Table 1 (columns 1, 3, 5). Direct effect = total effect − indirect effect. Top and Bottom represent income shares (in percent) of the top 10% and bottom 40% of the population, respectively. Palma refers to the Palma ratio, which gives the ratio of the income share of the top 10% to that of the bottom 40%.

A.3 Moderation effect of the Level of Inequality

Table A.7: Impact of Inequality Metrics on Public Opinion: Moderation by High Level of Inequality

	Fairness		Inequality		Tax rate	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Panel A: Political Metric						
Political metric	-0.227**	-0.236**	0.282**	0.266**	1.671	1.449
	(0.108)	(0.113)	(0.113)	(0.118)	(1.488)	(1.445)
High Inequality	-2.693***	-2.714***	2.801***	2.817***	12.487***	12.385***
	(0.125)	(0.125)	(0.128)	(0.128)	(1.062)	(1.069)
Political metric × High Inequality	-0.159	-0.128	0.188	0.171	2.342*	2.424*
	(0.159)	(0.160)	(0.162)	(0.163)	(1.379)	(1.390)
Num.Obs.	7476	7392	7476	7392	7476	7392
Num.Clusters	1246	1240	1246	1240	1246	1240
R^2	0.202	0.235	0.229	0.247	0.048	0.116
R^2 Adj.	0.202	0.234	0.229	0.246	0.048	0.114
Panel B: All treatments						
Gini	-0.058	-0.133	-0.736***	-0.677***	-2.568	-1.338
	(0.169)	(0.176)	(0.177)	(0.184)	(2.183)	(2.209)
Top	-0.087	-0.102	-0.250	-0.272	-0.043	-0.425
	(0.163)	(0.169)	(0.172)	(0.178)	(2.288)	(2.307)
Bottom	-0.703***	-0.759***	0.733***	0.769***	3.691	4.166*
	(0.160)	(0.164)	(0.168)	(0.170)	(2.258)	(2.218)
Palma	0.040	-0.030	-0.781***	-0.740***	-2.659	-1.521
	(0.162)	(0.169)	(0.169)	(0.176)	(2.217)	(2.238)
High Inequality	-3.004***	-3.004***	2.590***	2.590***	10.975***	10.975***
	(0.164)	(0.164)	(0.183)	(0.184)	(1.488)	(1.489)
Gini × High Inequality	0.623**	0.587**	0.423*	0.458*	3.025	2.856
	(0.249)	(0.249)	(0.255)	(0.255)	(2.121)	(2.136)
Top × High Inequality	-0.315	-0.319	0.764***	0.777***	6.196***	6.317***
	(0.233)	(0.234)	(0.253)	(0.255)	(2.145)	(2.160)
Bottom × High Inequality	0.801***	0.795***	-0.474**	-0.464**	-0.233	-0.202
	(0.218)	(0.219)	(0.235)	(0.236)	(1.965)	(1.976)
Palma × High Inequality	-0.043	-0.003	0.941***	0.911***	5.723**	5.514**
	(0.254)	(0.254)	(0.257)	(0.258)	(2.260)	(2.268)
Num.Obs.	7476	7392	7476	7392	7476	7392
Num.Clusters	1246	1240	1246	1240	1246	1240
R^2	0.209	0.241	0.243	0.260	0.051	0.118
R^2 Adj.	0.208	0.239	0.242	0.258	0.050	0.116
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

Note: Standard errors clustered at the respondent level in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Gini denotes the Gini coefficient. Top and Bottom represent income shares (in percent) of the top 10% and bottom 40% of the population, respectively. Palma refers to the Palma ratio, which gives the ratio of the income share of the top 10% to that of the bottom 40%. Control variables include age, sex, level of understanding the distributions, conservativeness, support for redistribution, numeracy (number of correct answers to Schwarz and inequality questions), as well as the level of agreement with the following statement: 'Economic success is mainly due to hard work and not luck'.

Table A.8: Impact of High Inequality on Public Opinion for the Control Group

	Fair		Unequal		Tax rate	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
High Inequality	−3.004***	−3.004***	2.590***	2.590***	10.975***	10.975***
	(0.164)	(0.164)	(0.184)	(0.184)	(1.490)	(1.494)
(Intercept)	6.168***	7.572***	4.554***	2.650***	35.228***	20.458
	(0.114)	(0.826)	(0.127)	(0.851)	(1.595)	(14.819)
Num.Obs.	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500
Num.Clusters	250	250	250	250	250	250
R2	0.234	0.266	0.177	0.199	0.028	0.137
R2 Adj.	0.233	0.261	0.176	0.194	0.028	0.131
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

Note: Standard errors clustered at the respondent level in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Control variables include age, sex, level of understanding the distributions, conservativeness, support for redistribution, numeracy (number of correct answers to Schwarz and inequality questions), as well as the level of agreement with the following statement: 'Economic success is mainly due to hard work and not luck'.

A.4 Benchmarking the effect size

Table A.9: Mean Tax Rates by Country and Treatment

Country	Gini	Control	Palma	Bottom	Top	**Country Mean**
Hypothetical 2	29.7	34.0	29.8	36.4	31.9	**32.4**
	(1.71)	(1.72)	(1.74)	(1.77)	(1.79)	**(0.78)**
Netherlands	35.6	36.5	35.4	41.4	38.4	**37.5**
	(1.58)	(1.75)	(1.64)	(1.74)	(1.72)	**(0.76)**
United States	42.7	43.5	47.3	49.6	48.7	**46.4**
	(1.70)	(1.83)	(1.85)	(1.91)	(1.83)	**(0.82)**
India	45.5	46.9	49.2	50.0	52.3	**48.8**
	(1.93)	(2.03)	(1.97)	(2.03)	(1.98)	**(0.89)**
South Africa	48.8	46.8	54.1	52.9	55.7	**51.7**
	(2.03)	(2.08)	(2.17)	(2.17)	(2.11)	**(0.95)**
Hypothetical 1	49.6	47.6	46.4	46.1	52.7	**48.5**
	(2.05)	(2.05)	(1.98)	(1.91)	(1.94)	**(0.89)**
Group Mean	**42.0**	**42.5**	**43.7**	**46.1**	**46.6**	**44.2**
	(1.52)	**(1.60)**	**(1.51)**	**(1.64)**	**(1.62)**	**(0.71)**

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Top and Bottom represent income shares (in percent) of the top 10% and bottom 40% of the population, respectively. Palma refers to the Palma ratio, which gives the ratio of the income share of the top 10% to that of the bottom 40%.

Table A.10: Benchmarking exercise

	(1) Tax rate	(2) Tax rate
Gini coefficient	20.511***	28.123***
	(2.750)	(2.892)
Constant	31.451***	26.778***
	(1.815)	(1.769)
Observations	1512	1524
R-squared	0.027	0.053

Note: The table provides OLS estimates of the relationship between the pre-tax Gini coefficient of the respective country and the implemented tax rate (0–100). Column (1) provides the estimates in the Control condition, i.e., where participants were only provided with the underlying pre-tax income distribution, while Column (2) provides the estimates in the Gini-treatment condition, i.e., where respondents were provided with the Gini metric. Robust standard errors clustered on the level of the individual are reported in parentheses.* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

A.5 Level of Numeracy

Table A.11: Effects of Political Metrics on Public Opinion: Robustness Check with Tax Comprehension Question

	Fairness		Inequality		Tax rate	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Political metric	−0.479***	−0.468***	0.664***	0.629***	4.333**	4.117**
	(0.127)	(0.124)	(0.113)	(0.111)	(2.097)	(2.002)
Misunderstanding Tax	0.369*	0.115	−0.232	−0.027	−1.062	2.619
	(0.191)	(0.184)	(0.190)	(0.191)	(3.248)	(3.253)
Political metric × Misunderstanding Tax	0.011	0.068	−0.191	−0.220	−3.378	−4.481
	(0.232)	(0.220)	(0.225)	(0.223)	(3.869)	(3.787)
Num.Obs.	5976	5892	5976	5892	5976	5892
Num.Clusters	996	982	996	982	996	982
R2	0.221	0.252	0.273	0.289	0.062	0.121
R2 Adj.	0.219	0.250	0.272	0.287	0.060	0.118
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

Notes: Control group is excluded from the analysis. Gini is used as reference group. Standard errors clustered at the respondent level in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Gini denotes the Gini coefficient. Top and Bottom represent income shares (in percent) of the top 10% and bottom 40% of the population, respectively. Palma refers to the Palma ratio, which gives the ratio of the income share of the top 10% to that of the bottom 40%. Control variables include age, sex, level of understanding the distributions, conservativeness, support for redistribution, numeracy (number of correct answers to Schwarz and inequality questions), as well as the level of agreement with the following statement: 'Economic success is mainly due to hard work and not luck'.

Table A.12: Impact of Inequality Metrics on Public Opinion: Moderation by the Level of Numeracy

	Fairness		Inequality		Tax rate	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Political metric	−0.331***	−0.395***	0.399***	0.449***	3.024**	3.708*
	(0.087)	(0.126)	(0.081)	(0.123)	(1.425)	(2.204)
Numeracy	−0.089	−0.164	0.213***	0.273**	5.707***	6.526***
	(0.086)	(0.129)	(0.080)	(0.122)	(1.406)	(2.172)
Political metric × Numeracy		0.126		−0.099		−1.370
		(0.173)		(0.161)		(2.849)
Num. Obs.	7440	7440	7440	7440	7440	7440
Num. Clusters	1240	1240	1240	1240	1240	1240
R^2	0.224	0.224	0.254	0.254	0.061	0.061
R^2 Adj.	0.223	0.223	0.253	0.253	0.060	0.060
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: Standard errors clustered at the respondent level in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

A.6 Expert Survey

Table A.13: Impact of Inequality Metrics on Experts' Opinion

	Fairness		Inequality		Tax rate	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Gini	0.024	0.046	-0.503^{***}	-0.500^{***}	-0.072	-0.245
	(0.149)	(0.148)	(0.094)	(0.095)	(2.244)	(2.155)
Num.Obs.	1528	1438	1530	1440	1530	1440
Num.Clusters	255	240	255	240	255	240
R2	0.405	0.420	0.749	0.756	0.281	0.343
R2 Adj.	0.402	0.416	0.748	0.755	0.278	0.339
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

Notes: Standard errors clustered at the respondent level in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Gini denotes the Gini coefficient. Top represents income share (in percent) of the top 10% of the population. Control variables include age, sex, and conservativeness.

B Appendix B: Experimental Instructions

B.1 Instructions, Experiment 1 (general public)

Screen 1: To show you are paying attention, please check this box before continuing [I'm not a robot]

Screen 2: Please enter your Prolific ID: [Open text box]

Screen 3: Welcome!

This study is conducted by researchers from the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands and concerns attitudes towards economic inequality.

If you consent to participating, you will be asked to answer survey questions and even get to make decisions that may have real-life consequences. The survey should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. About 1250 participants will take part in this study.

For completing this survey, you will receive £3.

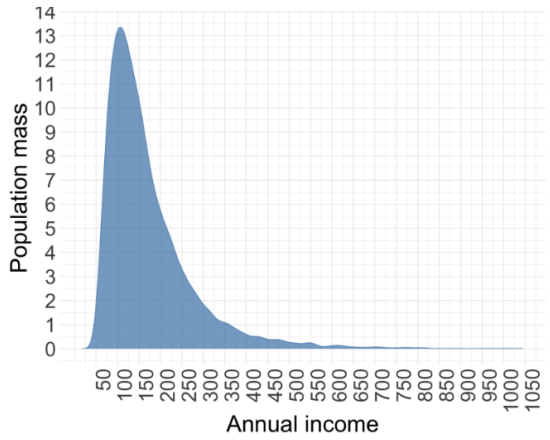
Your responses will remain completely anonymous. That means that your personal identity will not be linked to your answers. The University of Amsterdam will receive only de-identified responses, ensuring your privacy. Any published reports will present findings without identifying individual participants.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate or exit the survey at any time by closing your browser. Once data has been submitted, it cannot be removed due to the anonymous nature of the responses.

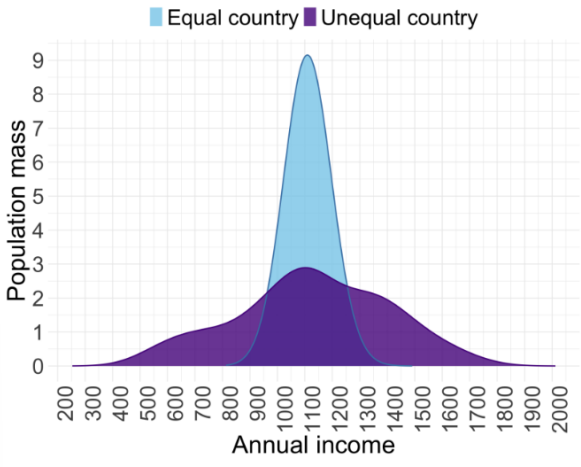
- I consent to participate
- I do not consent [If this option is checked, the survey automatically ends]

Educational block: Screen 4: Before we start, we would like to provide you with some information

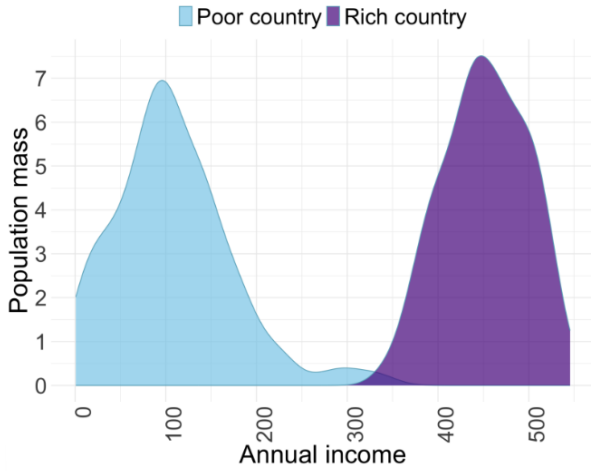
Below you can find an example of an **income distribution**: For the population of a country (represented by the blue area) the income distribution shows the mass of people who earn a given income level. Most people in this country earn an annual income close to 100, and a smaller set of richer people earn 500 or more.



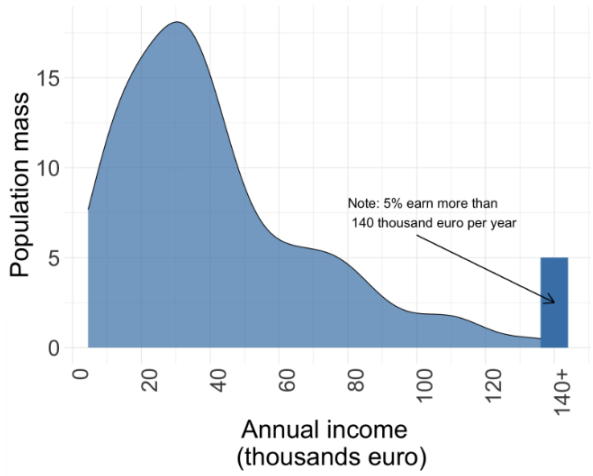
Let's understand these graphs a bit better. Below you see two new income distributions. The **blue** income distribution represents a rather **equal** country, where incomes are not too far apart, while the **purple** distribution represents a more **unequal** country with more variation in income.



Below, you again see two new income distributions. The **blue** distribution shows a **poorer** country (most people earn between 0 and 200), while the **purple** distribution shows a **richer** country (most people earn between 400 and 500)

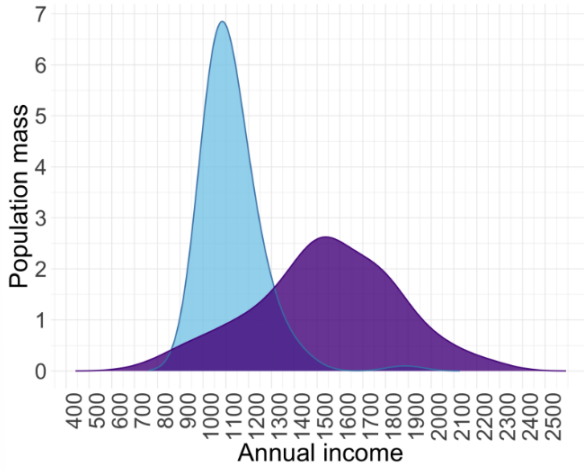


Here you may see income distribution of some imaginary country. Please note that the bar at the end indicates the share of the population with an annual income **above 140 thousand euro**. In other words, here, 5% of the population earns more than 140 thousand euro.



Screen 5:

To make sure you have understood, please answer the following questions.



1. According to the figure above, which distribution represents the more unequal income distribution?

- The blue distribution
- The purple distribution
- Cannot be determined from the chart

If mistaken, the error message appears: You chose the wrong answer. Look at the distribution again. Please note that purple distribution has more variation in incomes, which means that it is more unequal. [Same figure as in the initial question is shown, the same question asked, with the same alternatives.]

Screen 6:

2. According to the figure above, which distribution represents the poorer population?

- The blue distribution
- The purple distribution
- Cannot be determined from the chart

If mistaken, the error message appears: You chose the wrong answer. Look at the distributions again. Please note that purple distribution is located to the left which means that income values are lower, so this population is poorer.

[Same figure as in the initial question is shown, the same question asked, with the same alternatives.]

Screen 7:

Let's get started!

Next you will be presented with 6 different countries, both real and fictitious. For each country, you will be shown the income distribution, alongside information about the level of income inequality. All incomes are calculated before government taxes and transfers.

For each country we will ask about your perception of these distributions. Beside this, you will make a choice that can affect the payment of real people from that country.

How does this work?

1. We will invite 10 people (called "workers") to complete a task. Their actual payments are based on the income distribution of their country, and they will be paid according to their relative performance on the task. The highest performer is assigned £100. The lesser performers are assigned lower amounts, which are proportional to the income distribution in their respective country. Thus, the more unequal the income distribution, the higher the inequality between different performers.

2. You can reduce payment inequality among the workers, just like many governments do. Specifically, you can choose to tax a share of every worker's earnings. The collected tax money will be divided equally among all workers. Thus, higher taxes lead to more equal payments between workers (i.e. a 0% tax keeps the

original income distribution, while a 100% tax means all workers earn the same amount).

3. For each country's income distribution, we ask you to choose the tax rate you find appropriate, i.e. the share of the workers' incomes that should be taxed and redistributed among all workers.

4. After the study, we will randomly select one country and implement the tax rate of one participant. The tax rate chosen by this participant will then decide the actual pay of the real workers from that country. Thus, you should choose your tax rate as if it determines the workers' incomes, as this may well be the case.

To make sure you have understood, please answer the following questions:

The tax rates we ask you to select for a specific country:

A) Are just hypothetical.

B) Can determine the payment of actual people from that retrospective country.

If mistaken, the following error message appears: You chose the wrong answer. Please note that **your decisions can affect the payment of real people** who will be invited to complete the task. [The same question is then asked with the same alternatives.]

Screen 8:

If you choose to implement a tax rate of 0:

A) None of the workers get paid.

B) The payment of the workers are proportional to the income distribution of their respective country.

C) All of the workers get paid the same amount.

If mistaken, the following error message appears: You chose the wrong answer. Please note that tax rate of 0 means that the workers are paid according to the income distribution of their respective country. [The same question is then asked with the same alternatives.]

Screen 9:

This piece of information is conditional on the inequality metric treatment:

Gini treatment: One final piece of information:

For all the income distributions you will be presented with, we will report the Gini coefficient.

The Gini coefficient is a measure of inequality, that takes values from 0 to 1. In a situation of perfect equality (everybody has the same income) it takes a value of 0. Higher values reflect more inequality. A value of 1 indicates perfect inequality, where one person receives all the income, and everyone else receives nothing.

Just to make sure you got it.

Higher values of the Gini coefficient imply...

A) less inequality

B) more inequality

C) neither

If mistaken, the following error message appears:

You chose the wrong answer. Look at the concept again. Please note that

Higher values of the Gini coefficient indicate more inequality in a society. This means income is distributed less evenly, with a larger share going to a smaller portion of the population.

[The same question is then asked with the same alternatives.]

Top 10% treatment:

One final piece of information:

For all the income distributions you will be presented with, we will report the Top 10% share.

The top 10% income share is a measure of inequality that shows what percentage of total income is earned by the richest 10% of the population. In a situation of perfect equality (where everyone has the same income), the top 10% would earn exactly 10% of the total income. Higher values reflect more inequality, as they indicate that a larger share of income is consentrated among the top 10%.

[same comprehension question and error message as for the Gini treatment, except adapted to the inequality metric of the respective treatment condition.]

Bottom 40% treatment:

One final piece of information:

For all the income distributions you will be presented with, we will report the Bottom 40% share.

The bottom 40% income share is a measure that shows what percentage of total income is earned by the poorest 40% of the population. In a situation of perfect equality (where everyone earns the same), the bottom 40% would receive exactly 40% of the total income. Lower values indicate more inequality, as they reflect that the bottom 40% is receiving a smaller share of the total income.

[same comprehension question and error message as for the Gini treatment, except adapted to the inequality metric of the respective treatment condition.]

Palma ratio treatment:

One final piece of information:

For all the income distributions you will be presented with, we will report the Palma ratio.

The Palma ratio is a measure of inequality that compares the income share of the richest 10% of the population to that of the poorest 40%. A value of 1 means that the richest 10% earn the same amount as the poorest 40%. Higher values indicate more inequality, as they reflect a larger share of income consentrated among the top 10% relative to the bottom 40%.

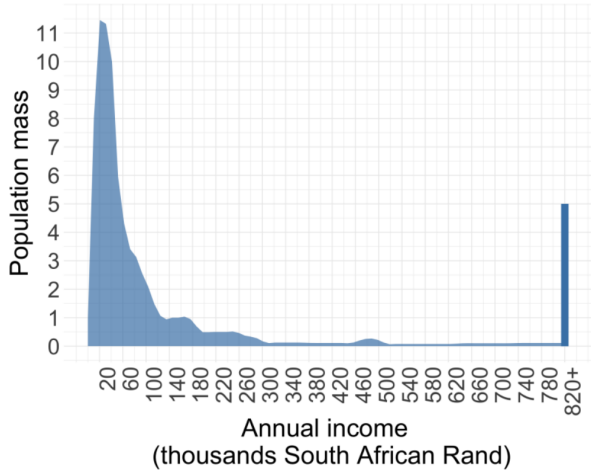
[same comprehension question and error message as for the Gini treatment, except adapted to the inequality metric of the respective treatment condition.]

Main block: [In the main part of the experiment, participants make the same three decisions for 6 different countries. The order of the hypothetical countries are fixed (first Hypothetical country 1, and thereafter Hypothetical country 2), while the order of the real countries (the Netherlands, US, South Africa, and India) is randomized. Each country, along with the three decisions, is presented on a separate screen. Below we will show the setup for each country-screen, illustrated by the US in the Control condition. Figure B.2 illustrates how the different inequality metric treatments were implemented (illustrated for South Africa), and Table B.1 shows the different values for each of the inequality metrics used for each of the 6 countries, and Figure B.1 shows all the income distributions of the different countries, which are fixed across treatment conditions.]

Screen 10/11/12/13/14/15:

South Africa

How income is distributed in South Africa:



On a scale from 0–10, how unequal do you think income is distributed in South Africa?

- 0 means very equal
- 10 means very unequal

[Answers on a slider from 0 to 10 where the end-points are marked with "Very equal" (0) and "Very unequal" (10).]

On a scale from 0 to 10, how fairly do you think income is distributed in South Africa?

- 0 means very unfair
- 10 means very fair

[Answers on a slider from 0 to 10 where the end-points are marked with "Very unfair" (0) and "Very fair" (10).]

If this country is chosen, the initial inequality among workers from South Africa is determined by this income distribution. **You can now select a tax rate (%) that you believe should be applied to the incomes of these real workers.** Recall that all taxes collected will be equally divided among all workers, meaning that a higher tax rate implies a more equal payment to the workers.

Please select your preferred tax rate (%):

[Answers on a slider from 0–100 where the endpoints are labeled "No redistribution" (0) and "Full equality" (100).]

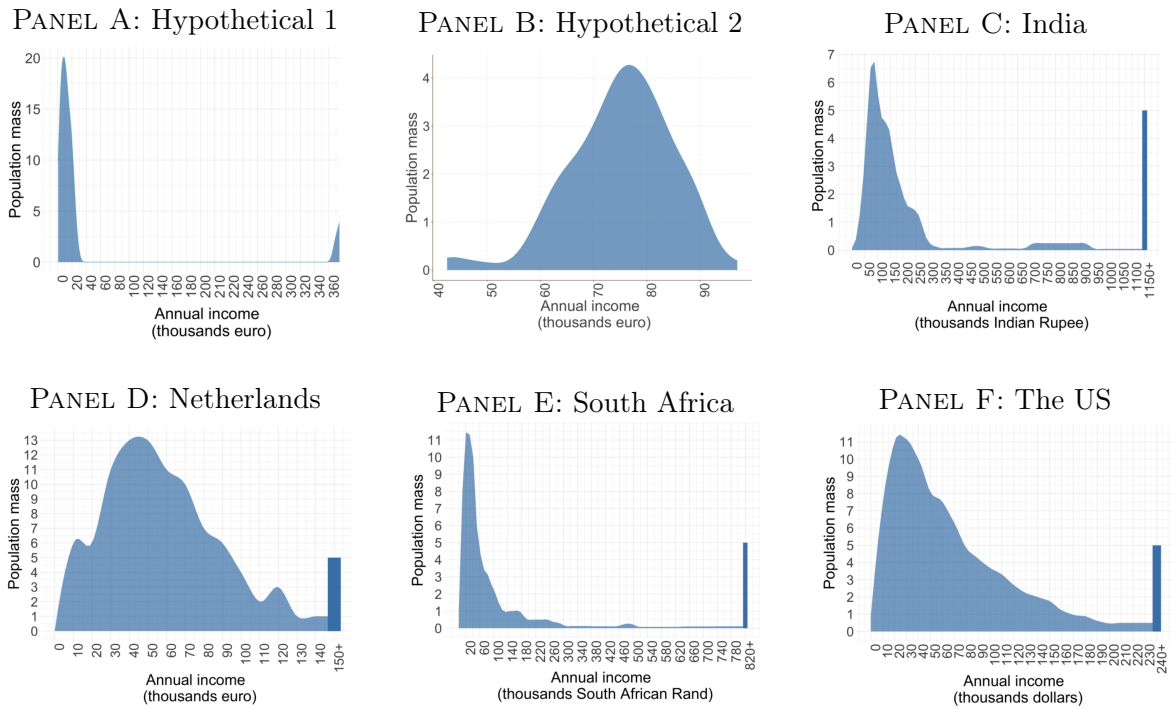


Figure B.1: Illustration of income distributions

Note. The figure provides an overview of how the different income distributions looked for each of the six different countries. The income distributions were identical across treatment conditions.

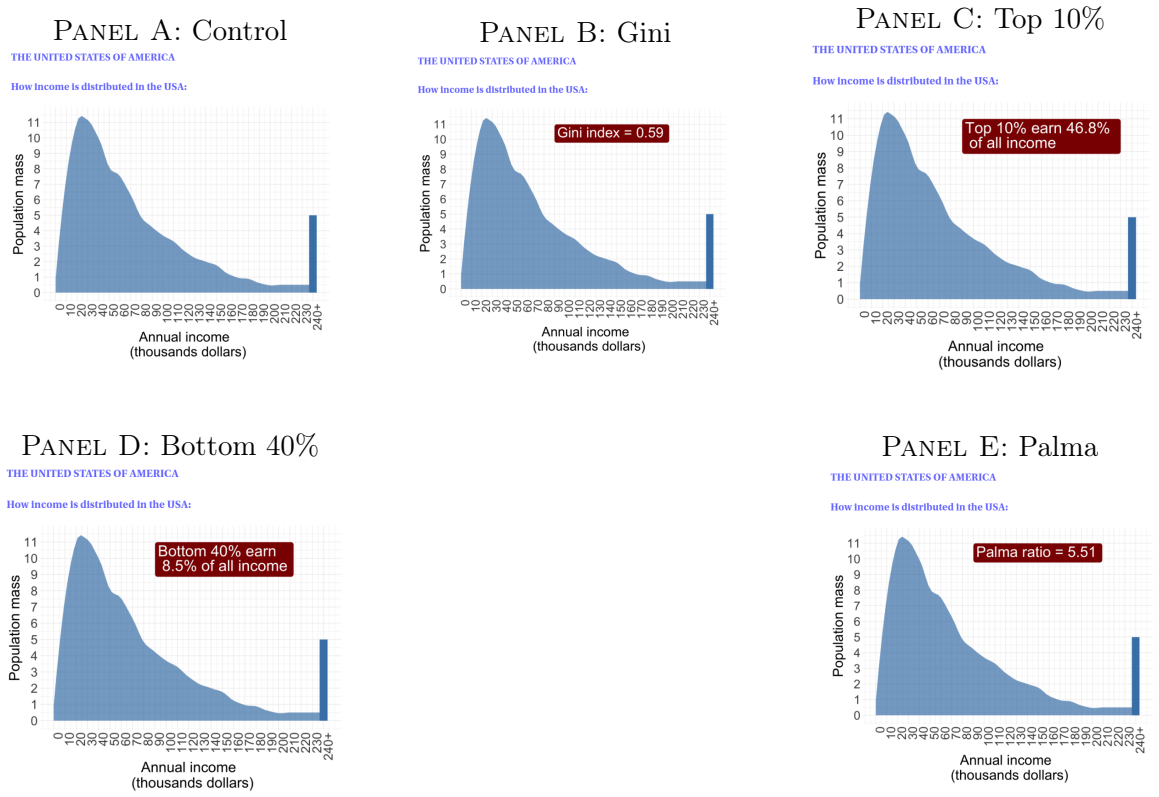


Figure B.2: Illustration of treatment implementations

Note. The figure provides an overview of how the different treatment conditions were implemented, here illustrated by the example of the US. Each panel refers to one of the five between-subject treatment conditions. For an overview of the specific values of each inequality metric used for each of six countries, see Table B.1

Table B.1: Inequality metrics by each country

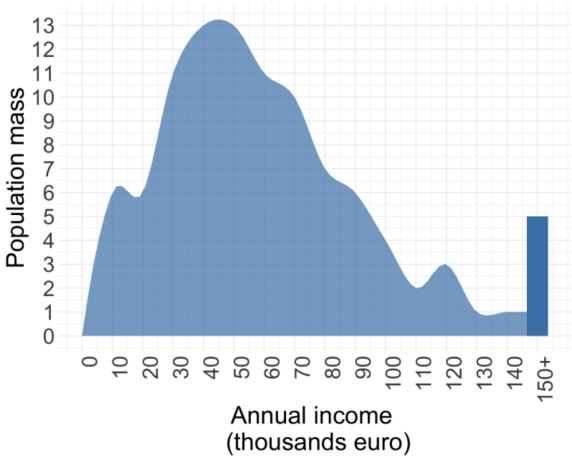
	Hyp2	Netherlands	US	India	South-Africa	Hyp1
Gini	0.08	0.39	0.59	0.61	0.74	0.83
Top 10	12	28.5	46.8	57.7	65.1	56
Bottom 40	35	16.4	8.5	10.9	4.1	19
Palma	0.34	1.74	5.51	5.29	15.88	2.93

Note. The table provides an overview over the specific values of each of the inequality metrics used for each country. Gini denotes the Gini coefficient. Top 10 and Bottom 40 represent income shares (in percent) of the top 10% and bottom 40% of the population, respectively. Palma refers to the Palma ratio, which gives the ratio of the income share of the top 10% to that of the bottom 40%. The countries Hyp2 and Hyp1 are fictitious countries.

Screen 16: [This screen differs for each of the different inequality metric treatments in the following way (but they all use the same income distribution as shown in the instructions Gini Treatment):]

Gini Treatment:

Consider a country with the following income distribution, which has a Gini coefficient of 0.39.



Suppose the authorities now impose a tax rate of 50% on the income of citizens of this country, where the revenues are distributed equally to all citizens (just like the worker tax before). What do you think will be the Gini coefficient of the new income distribution, after this 50% tax plus transfer policy is implemented?

[Slider from 0–0.78]

Top 10% Treatment:

Consider a country with the following income distribution, where the top 10% earns 28.5% of the total income in the country.

[Same income distribution as for Gini Treatment]

Suppose the authorities now impose a tax rate of 50% on the income of citizens of this country, where the revenues are distributed equally to all citizens (just like the worker tax before). What do you think will be the share of the top 10% for the new income distribution, after this 50% tax plus transfer policy is implemented?

[Slider from 0–57]

Bottom 40% Treatment: Consider a country with the following income distribution, where the bottom 40% earns 16.4% of the total income in the country.

[Same income distribution as for Gini Treatment]

Suppose the authorities now impose a tax rate of 50% on the income of citizens of this country, where the revenues are distributed equally to all citizens (just like the worker tax before). What do you think will be the share of bottom 40% for the new income distribution, after this 50% tax plus transfer policy is implemented?

[Slider from 0–33]

Palma ratio Treatment: Consider a country with the following income distribution, which has a Palma ratio of 1.74.

[Same income distribution as for Gini Treatment]

Suppose the authorities now impose a tax rate of 50% on the income of citizens of this country, where the revenues are distributed equally to all citizens (just like the worker tax before). What do you think will be the Palma ratio of the new income distribution, after this 50% tax plus transfer policy is implemented?

[Slider from 0–3.5]

Screen 17: [Attention check]

The fruit test you are about to take part in is very simple. When asked to choose a fruit, you must select 'Banana'. This is an attention check.

Based on the text you read above, what fruit have you been asked to enter?

- Apple
- Banana
- Grape
- Pear

Screen 18:

Think about the income distributions you just saw. Please indicate how strongly you experienced each of the following emotions in response to those distributions.

- I felt sad
- I felt happy
- I felt angry

- I felt surprised

[Answer for each emotional state using a slider from 0–7 where endpoints are marked "Not at all" (0) and "Extremely" (7).]

Screen 19:

How would you describe your political views?

- Very Liberal / liberal / Moderate / Conservative / Very Conservative / Other (please specify) [Combined with an open text box]

Screen 20:

To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements? [For statements, respondents answered on a 5-point scale: Strongly agree/ somewhat disagree/ Neither agree nor disagree/ somewhat agree/ strongly agree]

- Inequality is an important issue which should not be ignored.
- The government should aim to reduce economic differences between the rich and the poor.
- Economic success is mainly due to hard work and not luck.
- It is important to ensure a good standard of living for everyone.

Numeracy, Schwartz:

Screen 21: Please complete the following tasks without the use of a calculator. You may use scratch paper for calculations.

1. Imagine that we flip a fair coin 1,000 times. What is your best guess about how many times the coin would come up heads in 1,000 flips? [Open number box]
2. In the BIG BUCKS LOTTERY, the chance of winning a $ 10 prize is 1%. What is your best guess about how many people would win a $10 prize if 1,000 people each buy a single ticket? [Open number box]
3. In ACME PUBLISHING SWEEPSTAKES, the chance of winning a car is 1 in 1,000. What percent of tickets win a car? [Open number box]

Numeracy, Inequality:

Screen 22:

If the richest 20% of people receive 60% of all income, what share of income is left for the remaining 80% of the population?

1. 40%
2. 20%
3. 80%
4. Cannot be determined.

Which of the following best reflects a society with high inequality?

- Everyone earns roughly the same income.
- A small group earns a very large share of income, while most earn little.
- Income differences are random.
- Cannot be determined.

Screen 23:

Thank you for taking part in this study. Please click the button below to be redirected back to Prolific and register your participation.

B.2 Instructions, Experiment 2 (Experts)

Screen 1: To show you are paying attention, please check this box before continuing.

Checkbox with I'm not a robot

Screen 2: Welcome!

This study is conducted by researchers from the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands and concerns attitudes towards economic inequality. By participating in the survey, you have a chance of earning $500 for a charity of your choice!

If you consent to participating, you will be asked to answer survey questions and even get to make decisions that may have real-life consequences. The survey should take approximately 5-7 minutes to complete.

Your responses will remain completely anonymous. That means that your personal identity will not be linked to your answers. The University of Amsterdam will receive only de-identified responses, ensuring your privacy. Any published reports will present findings without identifying individual participants.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate or exit the survey at any time by closing your browser. Once data has been submitted, it cannot be removed due to the anonymous nature of the responses.

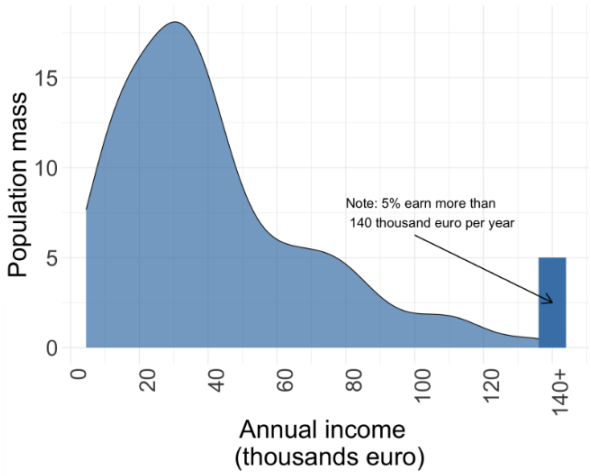
- I consent to participate
- I do not consent [If this option is checked, the survey automatically ends]

Screen 3: Thank you for choosing to participate!

This survey is about perceptions of income inequality. We will show you some income distributions of various countries, and ask you some questions about them. Before starting, we will now give you some guidance on the information presented in this survey.

First, we will use graphs of income distributions like the one below.

The graph shows how (pre-tax) income is distributed among the population of a specific country. Please note that the bar at the end represents the share of the population with the top 5% of earnings – in this example, people with an annual income above 140 thousand euros. In other words, here, 5% of the population earns more than 140 thousand euros.



Next you will be presented with six different countries, some real and some fictitious. For each country, you will be shown the income distribution, alongside information about the level of income inequality. All incomes are calculated before government taxes and transfers.

For each country we will ask about your perception of these distributions. Besides this, you will make a choice that can affect the payment of real people from that country.

How does this work?

1. We will invite 10 people (hereby; workers) to complete a task. Their initial payments are based on the income distribution of their country. (If the country is fictitious, the workers will be from the US.) The workers will be paid according to their relative performance on the task. The highest worker is assigned £100. The lower workers are assigned lower payments, which are proportional to the income distribution in their respective country. (If the country is fictitious, the workers will be from the US.) Thus, the more unequal the income distribution, the higher the inequality between the workers.

2. You can reduce payment inequality among the workers, just like many governments do. Specifically, you can choose to tax a share of every worker's payments. The collected tax money will be divided equally among all workers. Thus, higher taxes lead to more equal payments between workers (i.e. a 0% tax keeps the original income distribution, while a 100% tax means all workers are paid the same amount).

3. For each country's income distribution, we ask you to choose the tax rate you find appropriate, i.e. the share of the workers' payments that should be taxed and redistributed among all workers.

4. After the study, we will randomly select one country and implement the tax rate of one participant in the survey. The tax rate chosen by this participant will then decide the actual pay of the real workers from that country. Thus, you should choose your tax rate as if it determines the workers' payments, as this may well be the case.

To make sure you have understood, please answer the following question.
The tax rates we ask you to select for a specific country:

A) Are just hypothetical.

B) Can determine the payment of actual people from that respective country.

If mistaken, the following error message appears: You chose the wrong answer. **Please note that your decisions can affect the payment of real people** who will be invited to complete the task. [The same question is then asked with the same alternatives.]

Screen 4: [This screen depend on the treatment condition the expert is randomized into, which is either the Gini Treatment or the Top 10% Treatment]

iff Gini Treatment: One final piece of information:

For all the income distributions you will be presented with, we will report the Gini coefficient.

The Gini coefficient is a measure of inequality, that takes values from 0 to 1. In a situation of perfect equality (everybody has the same income) it takes a value of 0. Higher values reflect more inequality. A value of 1 indicates perfect inequality, where one person receives all the income, and everyone else receives nothing.

iff Top 10% Treatment: One final piece of information:

For all the income distributions you will be presented with, we will report the Top 10% share.

The top 10% income share is a measure of inequality that shows what percentage of total income is earned by the richest 10% of the population. In a situation of perfect equality (where everyone has the same income), the top 10% would earn exactly 10%

of the total income. Higher values reflect more inequality, as they indicate that a larger share of income is consentrated among the top 10%.

Screen 5–10: The main block: [The main block of the experiment follows the identical setup as for Experiment 1 with the general public, albeit restricted to the following subset of treatment conditions: Gini Treatment and Top 10% Treatment. Please see the main block of Section B.1 for the instructions used, and Table B.1 for the values used for the metrics for each country, Figure B.1 for all the income distributions used for each country, and Panel B and Panel C of Figure B.2 for a view of how the Gini Treatment and Top 10% Treatment are implemented, respectively.]

Screen 11: Can you predict the average implemented tax rate?

We also asked similar questions to a sample of 1246 Americans from the general population in several experimental conditions. In this final part of the survey, you will be **asked to predict the average tax rate that participants chose for the U.S. income distribution when presented with different inequality measures.**

To reward accuracy, we link predictions to a charitable donation on behalf of one randomly chosen individual. Specifically, the more accurate your predictions, the higher the probability that we make a $500 donation to a charity of your choice. (See here for details of how we calculate this probability based on your predictions.) Note that our laboratory and funding mandate does not allow us to deceive participants, so we will fully adhere to this donation protocol.

Please indicate your favorite charity by clicking one of the options below: [Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)/ UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund)/ The Red Cross, The World Food Programme (WFP)/ Habitat for Humanity/ CancerCare/ Friends of Animals/ Global Fund for Women/ Brain & Behavior Research Foundation (BBRF)/ Amnesty International/ Prefer not to make a donation.]

The previous participants from the general U.S. population were divided into five groups of about 250 individuals in each group. **Each group varied in terms of the exact information about inequality.** That is, all participants were shown the U.S. income distribution, but the groups differed in the which inequality measure was used to communicate the level of income inequality for that same distribution. Like you, these participants were also asked to select their preferred tax rate for each country, one of which would determine the payment of real workers.

Please estimate the **average tax rate (%) chosen** by the participants facing each of the following inequality measures. [For each of the conditions listed below, experts

made their predictions on a slider taking values from 0-100%.]

- Participants saw the U.S. income distribution, and no inequality metric.
- Participants saw the U.S. income distribution, and were informed that the income share of the top 10% of earners equals 46.8% of total US income.
- Participants saw the U.S. income distribution, and were informed that the income share of the bottom 40% of earners equals 8.5% of total US income.
- Participants saw the U.S. income distribution, and were informed that the Gini coefficient (an inequality measure between 0 and 1) equals 0.59 for the US.
- Participants saw the U.S. income distribution, and were informed that the Palma ratio (the income share of the top 10% of earners divided by that of the bottom 40%), equals 5.51 for the US.

Screen 12: Almost done! Just a few demographic questions.
Which of the following best reflects your current professional involvement?

- Primarily policy work
- Primarily academic work
- Actively involved in both academic and policy work
- Neither

What is your gender identity?
Male/ Female/ Non-binary/third gender /Prefer not to say
What is your age? [Open number box]
How would you describe your political views?

Screen 13: If you want to be contacted about the outcome of the charity lottery, please leave your email here. Your email will not be used for other ends, and will be deleted after the donation has been made. Also feel free to enter other comments on the survey. [Open text box]

C Appendix C: Media analysis

C.1 Database access

Nexis Uni was accessed via the University of Amsterdam library proxy (`advance-lexis-com.proxy.uba.uva.nl`) using the Advanced Search ("Power Search") interface. No date restriction was applied; all searches retrieve from all available dates. Searches were conducted between April and June 2026. The key operator for outlet-level filtering is `PUBLICATION("Outlet Name")`, which restricts results to articles published by the named outlet. This operator is case-insensitive and must match the outlet's canonical Nexis publication name exactly (see Table C.1 for the names used).

C.2 Search queries

For each outlet, two queries were run: a *Gini query* and a *top-share query*. Language-specific versions were used to match the outlet's primary reporting language. Queries are reproduced verbatim below; `[PUBLICATION]` should be replaced by the outlet's Nexis publication name from Table C.1.

English outlets (US and UK):

Gini: `"Gini" AND "inequality" AND PUBLICATION("[PUBLICATION]")`

Top-share:

```
("top 10%" OR "top 1%" OR "top 10 percent" OR "top 1 percent")
AND ("income share" OR "share of income")
AND "inequality"
AND PUBLICATION("[PUBLICATION]")
```

German outlets:

Gini: `"Gini" AND "Ungleichheit" AND PUBLICATION("[PUBLICATION]")`

Top-share:

```
("obersten 10 Prozent" OR "oberen 10 Prozent"
 OR "obersten 1 Prozent" OR "oberen 1 Prozent"
 OR "reichsten 10 Prozent" OR "reichsten 1 Prozent")
AND "Einkommen" AND "Ungleichheit"
AND PUBLICATION("[PUBLICATION]")
```

Dutch outlets:

Gini: `"Gini" AND "ongelijkheid" AND PUBLICATION("[PUBLICATION]")`

Top-share:

```
("rijkste 10 procent" OR "rijkste 1 procent"
 OR "top 10 procent" OR "top 1 procent"
 OR "hoogste 10 procent")
AND "inkomen" AND "ongelijkheid"
AND PUBLICATION("[PUBLICATION]")
```

French outlets:

Gini: `"Gini" AND "inégalité" AND PUBLICATION("[PUBLICATION]")`

Top-share:

```
("1% les plus riches" OR "10% les plus riches"
 OR "top 1%" OR "top 10%")
AND "revenus" AND "inégalité"
AND PUBLICATION("[PUBLICATION]")
```

Note: `PUBLICATION("Le Monde")` may also return *Le Monde Diplomatique* articles.

Italian outlets:

Gini: `"Gini" AND "disuguaglianza" AND PUBLICATION("[PUBLICATION]")`

Top-share:

```
("1% più ricco" OR "10% più ricco"
 OR "top 1%" OR "top 10%")
AND "reddito" AND "disuguaglianza"
AND PUBLICATION("[PUBLICATION]")
```

Note: of the Italian outlets in Fletcher et al. (2020), only *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa* are indexed in Nexis Uni.

Spanish outlets:

Gini: `"Gini" AND "desigualdad" AND PUBLICATION("[PUBLICATION]")`

Top-share:

```
("1% más rico" OR "10% más rico"
 OR "top 1%" OR "top 10%")
AND "ingresos" AND "desigualdad"
AND PUBLICATION("[PUBLICATION]")
```

Note: *eldiario.es* is not indexed in Nexis Uni (returns 0 results); it is excluded from the Nexis sample.

C.3 Audience leaning scores

The independent variable is the audience leaning scores from Fletcher, Cornia & Nielsen (2020). These measure the deviation of each outlet's audience mean left–right self-placement from the country mean, derived from the 2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report (YouGov, approximately 70,000 respondents across 36 countries). Respondents placed themselves on a five-point scale coded -0.5 (left) to $+0.5$ (right); the outlet score is the audience mean minus the national mean, so negative values indicate a more left-leaning audience than the national average. The observed range in our sample is -0.25 (*New York Times*) to $+0.20$ (*ABC*, Spain). The sample is restricted to outlets for which Fletcher et al. (2020) scores are available *and* which have substantial indexation in Nexis Uni, *and* return more than 10 hits overall in our search queries.

C.4 Outlet list and raw counts

Table C.1 lists all $N = 39$ outlets in the final dataset, with their Fletcher et al. (2020) audience leaning scores, raw article counts, log ratios, and country.

Spelling inconsistency in UK top-share queries. British newspapers use "per cent" (two words) rather than the American "percent." The top-share queries used American spelling, which likely under-counts top-share articles in UK outlets. Re-querying *The Guardian* with "per cent" yields approximately five times as many results; the *Times* count with "per cent" appears to over-match due to the shorter phrase length. For internal consistency the current analysis retains the American-spelling counts for all UK outlets, but this introduces a systematic downward bias in UK top-share counts. Future work should standardize spelling or run both variants and take the maximum.

Table C.1: Nexis Uni outlets, raw counts, and log ratios ($N = 39$).

Outlet	Country	Fletcher	Gini	Top	Total	$\log\left[\frac{T+0.5}{G}\right]$
New York Times	US	−0.25	117	101	218	−0.15
USA Today	US	−0.13	6	5	11	−0.18
The Guardian	UK	−0.17	185	54	239	−1.22
Financial Times	UK	+0.07	385	72	457	−1.67
Times (London)	UK	+0.16	111	25	136	−1.49
The Independent	UK	−0.19	94	24	118	−1.34
Daily Telegraph	UK	+0.15	42	4	46	−2.34
Daily Mail	UK	+0.18	15	5	20	−1.10
Daily Mirror	UK	−0.13	14	2	16	−1.72
Die Zeit	DE	−0.07	34	5	39	−1.82
Der Spiegel	DE	−0.07	10	0	10	−3.00
Die Welt	DE	+0.03	53	1	54	−3.57
Süddeutsche Ztg	DE	−0.11	96	4	100	−3.18
Handelsblatt	DE	+0.05	80	0	80	−5.08
de Volkskrant	NL	−0.14	35	83	118	+0.87
Trouw	NL	−0.11	26	45	71	+0.56
NRC Handelsblad	NL	−0.06	38	87	125	+0.83
De Telegraaf	NL	+0.08	9	4	13	−0.77
Algemeen Dagblad	NL	−0.01	349	16	365	−3.05
Nederlands Dagblad	NL	−0.06	8	7	15	−0.06
Le Monde	FR	−0.12	7	6	13	−0.07
Libération	FR	−0.22	16	23	39	+0.38
Le Figaro	FR	+0.13	23	25	48	+0.10
Le Point	FR	+0.07	18	7	25	−0.88
Les Echos	FR	+0.01	37	33	70	−0.10
La Croix	FR	+0.03	7	6	13	−0.07
L'Obs	FR	−0.15	4	17	21	+1.48
Corriere d. Sera	IT	0.00	48	23	71	−0.73
La Stampa	IT	−0.07	7	6	13	−0.07
El País	ES	−0.07	411	211	622	−0.66
El Mundo	ES	+0.01	50	23	73	−0.76
ABC	ES	+0.20	34	12	46	−1.00
La Razón	ES	+0.19	49	6	55	−2.02
El Confidencial	ES	+0.01	15	3	18	−1.46
Expansión	ES	+0.16	61	44	105	−0.32
El Periódico	ES	−0.12	85	84	169	−0.01
The Australian	AU	−0.01	186	29	215	−1.84
Sydney Morning Herald	AU	−0.08	83	27	110	−1.11
Australian Financial Rev.	AU	−0.03	111	14	125	−2.03

Fletcher: raw audience leaning score (Fletcher et al. 2020); negative = more left-leaning audience than country average.
Counts: Nexis Uni Power Search.

D Preregistration

The pre-registration for the laypeople survey was submitted on 3 June 2025 and is publicly accessible on AsPrediced via the following link: `https://aspredicted.org/yq22qw.pdf`

The pre-registration for the expert survey was submitted on 2 December 2025 and is publicly accessible on AsPredicted via the following link: `https://aspredicted.org/bt55rz.pdf`

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM
Economics & Business

Economics and Business Ethics Committee (EBEC)

Amsterdam Business School
Plantage Muidergracht 12
1018 TV Amsterdam
The Netherlands
T +31(0)20 525 76 51
www.abs.uva.nl

Date	**Our reference**	
20-05-2025	EB-14793	
Contact	**Telephone**	**E-mail**
Economics and Business Ethics Committee	+31 (0) 20 525 76 51	ebec@uva.nl
Subject		
EBEC approval		

Dear Oda Sund,

The EBEC has evaluated your research proposal and has concluded that it is consistent with the UvA EB ethics regulations.

It has therefore decided to approve the research project. Your project and approval number is: EB-14793.

The information about your project and this approval can be retrieved at https://rms.uva.nl/browse/EB-14793.

Sincerely,

Prof. dr. V.S. Maas
Chair EBEC