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The News We Choose: Unfair Inequality and the Growing Success of Populist News

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Introduction

Selling news is a tough business. Gone are the days when a few television channels and newspapers provided information for the masses. Today, a large number of content providers fight for the attention of the public: To stay afloat, news outlets need to generate content that readers will choose to consume. But what news do citizens choose to consume? Research reports that people opt for (and share within their networks) content that affirms their own identity, that portrays their group(s) in positive ways – and ‘the other’ in less flattering ways – and that generates emotions (in particular, outrage; see Klein 2020; Berry and Sobieraj 2013; Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021; Rathje, Van Bavel and Van Der Linden 2021). It is therefore unsurprising that recent years have seen a surge in a style of news reporting that ticks all of those boxes: Populist news. (see Aalberg et al., 2016; Hameleers and Vliegenthart, 2020).

While populist news reporting has been on the rise, a second phenomenon has gained momentum in Western democracies: a substantial increase in economic and social inequality. We ask: are these two phenomena, increasing inequality and a growing fascination for populist news, linked? Are individuals in unequal societies with low levels of social mobility more easily charmed by populist media narratives? This paper suggests that the answer to both these questions is ‘yes’. The idea is simple. Rising levels of inequality can give citizens a reason to believe that the political and economic system is unfair. If the rich get richer, and everyone else does not individuals will come to perceive the system as rigged. And if, at the same time, social mobility is low individual will come to perceive that hard work does

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no pay off anymore (see e.g. Hochschild, 2016). In such a scenario, we argue, people will become more susceptible to populist media content because that type of content will voice the frustration they feel.

Research on the politics of inequality already reports that inequality goes hand in hand with political alienation, dissatisfaction with democracy, and increased support for populist parties (see, among others, Engler and Weisstanner 2021; Fenzl 2018; Gallego 2016; Schafer *et al.* Forthcoming; Solt 2015, 2008; Traber *et al.* 2021; Protzer 2019, Protzer and Summerville 2022). Yet these studies often fail to show why people abandon established forms of political participation and mainstream, moderate parties. By proposing that perceptions of unfair inequality can affect self-exposure to populist news, we offer a novel mechanism that could help explain the results of this growing body of observational literature on political behavior. If we are right to argue that unfair inequality pushes people to consume populist media the findings mentioned above are a no-brainer. It is because of the news they choose that citizens in unequal societies get angry, stop engaging, and start supporting populist parties.

To test the effect of inequality on self-exposure to populist news we fielded an online survey experiment in two countries with comparatively high levels of inequality: Italy (n=3511) and the United Kingdom (n=3545). We showed respondents (real) information about inequality in their country and then asked them to choose which article they would prefer to read within a selection of (real) titles. Our results show that our Italian participants were more likely to opt for anti-elite, populist headlines after reading about increasing inequality. They also reported lower levels of trust in a mainstream newspaper that is often associated with the economic elite (Il Sole 24 Ore). These results confirm our expectations: inequality pushed people in the arms of populist media. Interestingly, these results did not replicate in the UK, where our estimates were, yes, following the expected direction but were significantly weaker. At the same time, we also found that UK respondents showed substantially higher levels of system justification and were less likely to report frustration with their financial and social opportunities. In other words, UK respondents felt the (unequal) economic system as less unfair. We, then, proceeded with an analysis of observational data about perceptions on social mobility and living standards for our UK sample. This additional analysis showed that – even in the UK – respondents who perceived their financial situation as worse when compared to that of their parents’, or that perceived that social mobility is decreasing, are also more likely to fall for anti-elite, populist narratives. We, therefore, concluded that inequality pushes citizens to consume more populist content but that this relationship strongly depends on a perception of inequality as unfair – a result in line with previous research (see e.g. Ahrens, 2022; Protzer and Summerville, 2022)

Self-Exposure to Populist News

Scholarly interest in self-exposure to news took off in the 1990s. Back then, most research focused on self-exposure to cable news networks in the United States. One of the early findings was that better access to political news did not lead to a better informed public. After all, as Prior (2005) highlighted, many television channels were non-political, and who would watch the news if they could also watch sports or entertainment? Moreover, even when viewers did opt for political content, they preferred content they could easily agree with. Since the internet has gone mainstream the choice of news – and, thereby, the competition among news providers – has exploded. But people haven't changed. Research from the digital age shows that self-exposure to print news, internet websites, and radio stations is similar to self-exposure to television (Stroud, 2008). Media outlets have done their bit to attract and retain viewers: news providers have found ways to make political content more entertaining ¹; they are increasingly tailoring their content to their audience (e.g., Billings and Eastman, 2003) ²; and they have started to capitalise on the fact that people choose and share stories that elicit strong emotions, in particular, outrage (Bracciale, Andretta and Martella, 2021; Mudde, 2004). And so, modern-day news outlets have started to craft content with an eye to it going 'viral' ³

Populist news outlets have perfected these techniques to win the battle for viewers' attention. In terms of numbers, it has paid off. The past few decades have seen a trend toward populist news reporting (see Aalberg et al., 2016; Hameleers and Vliegenthart, 2020), famously labelled by Cas Mudde as the 'populist zeitgeist' (Mudde, 2004). To this day, we lack a universally accepted definition of populism. Scholars have referred to it as a 'style of rhetoric' or 'discourse', as 'policies', an 'ideology', or all of the above (Inglehart, Norris and School, 2016; Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012). For the purposes of this study we follow Guriev's 2020 definition, which is, in turn, based on Cas Mudde's (2004, 2007) and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2017): "Populism is a 'thin-centered ideology' that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous, antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite'" (Guriev 2020, p.6). As both of those groups are seen as homogenous

¹a prominent example is presenting elections like horse races (Iyengar, Norpoth and Hahn, 2004, among others)

²For outlets presenting political news, this meant becoming more and more partisan (Peters, 2010) and, often, more and more hostility toward other news providers who are presented as biased and unreliable (Taber and Lodge, 2006).

³Anecdotal evidence from the website BuzzFeed suggests that the first ingredient for 'viral' news is 'identity content' (Klein, 2020). Readers are more likely to click on (and to share) content that speaks to groups they identify. The clearer the in and out-groups are defined (and the more negatively the out-group is portrayed) the better the chances of getting readers to share the story on social media (Rathje, Van Bavel and Van Der Linden, 2021).

there is 'no room for pluralism, protection of minorities, or diversity of opinions'" And as the elites are seen as corrupt bypassing their tools, like checks and balances, is seen as legitimate (ibid). Following this broad definition we see populist news as any news that have an anti-pluralist or an anti-elitist slant, for instance, pitting readers against minorities or elites.

We know from a large body of literature that that the news we choose affect the opinions we hold (see Lippmann, 1921; Zaller, 1992). For instance, research in the UK has shown that citizens follow news outlets in their appraisals of candidates: if news outlets switch from endorsing one candidate to endorsing another readers follow suit (Ladd and Lenz (2009) and Reeves, McKee and Stuckler (2016)). Abstinance has a similar effect: If readers stop reading a newspaper they stop being influenced by the politics of that newspaper Foos and Bischof (2022). Research in the US found that reading Democratic-leaning newspapers (in this case, the Washington Post or the Washington Times) increased support for the Democrats Gerber, Karlan and Bergan (2009). In contrast, watching Fox News increased support for the Republicans (Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017; Hopkins and Ladd, 2012; Schroeder and Stone, 2015; DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007). Link C in figure 2 illustrates this finding: self-exposure to populist news leads to, or strengthens, populist views. But how do we choose our news? And how does the environment we are in affect the news we choose? There are many factors that lead a person to choose one news outlet over another. We focus on an unconventional one: perceptions of unfair inequality.

Perceptions of unfair inequality

The effect of inequality on political behaviour is a hotly debated topic among political economists (Meltzer and Richard, 1981; Romer, 1975). The dust is still settling on the debate over the lack of empirical evidence for Meltzer and Richard's model: contrary to their expectations, there is no evidence that rising inequality compels voters in democracies to vote for left-wing parties that will then redistribute wealth (Engler and Weisstanner, 2021; Trump, 2021; Traber et al., 2021; Rueda and Stegmueller, 2016). Inequality persists, and, in many democracies, is on the rise. And even though it does not fuel support for redistribution it does affect political behaviour in other ways. For instance, it discourages electoral participation, at least among low-income or working-class voters (Solt, 2008, 2010; Galbraith and Hale, 2008; Heath, 2018; Franko, Kelly and Witko, 2016; Schafer et al., Forthcoming). High levels of inequality are also associated with lower levels of trust and less pro-social behaviour (at least among low-income voters; see Gallego 2016), and with more participation in non-violent protests (again, among non-wealthy individuals, see Solt 2015). Most notably, for our purposes, there is convincing evidence that unfair inequality is associated with higher levels of

support for populist parties (Protzer, 2019). Protzer and Summerville (2022) conducted the most comprehensive study so far. Drawing on data from a number of countries the authors found that inequality alone was not sufficient to predict the success of populist parties. It was only in countries, or at times where inequality was unfair, or accompanied by low levels of social mobility – a violation of basic norms of fairness – that populist parties thrived.

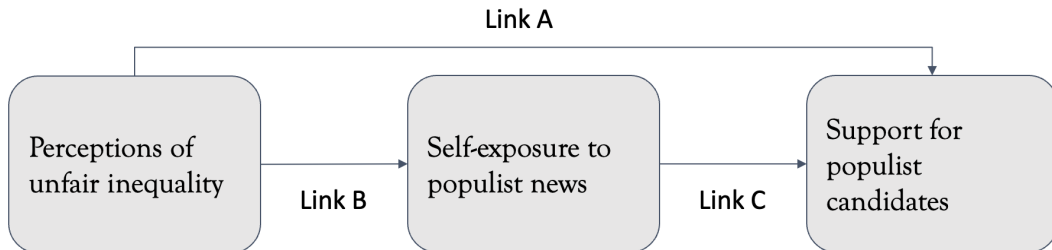
The proposition that perceptions of unfairness leads individuals to support anti-pluralist (or extremist) politics dates back to the early days of the discipline of political science. Back in the 1960s, Seymour Martin Lipset and Daniel Bell noted that political extremism appealed 'to the disgruntled and psychologically homeless, to the personal failures, the socially isolated, the economically insecure, the uneducated, unsophisticated, and the authoritarian persons' (see Inglehart, Norris and School, 2016, p. 10). Since then, a number of scholars have found a link between feeling 'disgruntled', in its various forms, and voting for populist politicians. For instance, in the United States, Cramer (2012) and Hochschild (2016) diagnosed a widespread perception of not getting one's fair share among supporters of Donald Trump (see Mutz, 2018, too). In the UK, Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017) and Sobolewska and Ford (2020) found similar feelings among Brexit voters (see also Hoggett, Wilkinson and Beedell, 2013).⁴ Beyond these specific cases, Gidron and Hall (2017) found correlational evidence that lower levels of subjective social status were associated with support for right-wing populist parties in twenty developed democracies.

But how do people move from feeling that they are not getting their fair share to voting for populist parties? We suggest that the media plays a role—and this role explains why individuals react to growing inequality as the literature before us has shown. In his study of populism and the 'politics of resentment', Cohen (2019) notes that 'populist political entrepreneurs excel in fomenting social antagonisms by framing shifts in the forms of social pluralism in ways that foster deep political polarization, generalized distrust and a politics of resentment against 'elites', 'the establishment, the oligarchy, and 'outsiders'.' In other words, populist media coverage in unequal societies taps into feelings of unfairness and direct the resentment toward out-groups of their choosing.

⁴Arlie Hochschild (2016) captures the emotions she encountered in Rural Wisconsin in a 'deep story' of working hard but not getting ahead—while undeserving others are "cutting in line ahead of you". This echoes the comments Hoggett, Wilkinson and Beedell (2013) heard in their focus groups in white working class communities in the UK just before the 2010 General Election. In both cases, voters expressed a deep sense of unfairness, be it in terms of power (individuals feeling they deserved more of a say), respect (individuals feeling that people like them were not, or no longer treated respectfully) or economics (individuals feeling that they deserved a better income, or better access to higher-paid jobs). Meanwhile, individuals thought, other groups were given unfair precedence.

Toward a Theory of the Effect of Inequality on Media Consumption and Political Behaviour

Figure 1: Theoretical Model



The diagram in Figure 1 illustrates the causal mechanism we envision. It combines two well explored macro-level links (inequality and political behaviour (link A), and populist news and political behaviour (link C) with a less explored micro-level link: the link between inequality and self-exposure to populist news (link B, which we test in this study). We hypothesize that resentment about one’s own economic situation draws citizens toward populist news. The rationale is simple: If a person feels that, no matter how hard they work, they are unable to climb the social ladder they will be drawn to news that voice this frustration, find someone to blame it on, or vow to fix it. If a person feels cheated by the system a headline like “Axe the filthy rich elite” may sound more appealing than a headline like “Five facts about inequality in the UK”.

Our first hypothesis, then, is that priming people to think about an increasingly unequal society with low levels of social mobility will attract them to populist news.⁵

H₁: Exposure to information about unfair inequality increases the likelihood of self-exposure to populist media.

In addition to reading (or watching) populist news we expect individuals who feel resentful about rising levels of unfair inequality to also trust these news. Here, we draw on a large body of research in the tradition of Motivated Reasoning (e.g. Kunda 1990, Lodge and Taber 2013; Kahan 2017) that found that people tend to trust information that is in line with their prior beliefs. If a person wants to hear that they deserve to be better off, we argue, they will also trust any news that portray their in-group in a positive way, and any out-groups in a negative way.

⁵Note that this hypothesis does not apply to the small minority of people who feel that they benefit from inequality, or are part of the ‘rising elite’.

H₂: Exposure to information about unfair inequality increases trust in populist media.

An integral part of our model is the perception of unfairness. We do not expect 'fair' inequality – that is, different outcomes that are based on differences in input – to have the same effect on self-exposure to populist news. Here, we draw on findings from Protzer and Summerville (2022) who authored the most comprehensive study of the effect of inequality on the success of populist parties in Western Democracies to date. Protzer and Summerville advance the idea that humans do not mind unequal outcomes as long as they are based on equal opportunity. Most people agree that effort should be rewarded, so if one person puts in more effort than another person then it is generally accepted that they ought to get a higher reward. But, the authors argue, people's tolerance of inequality withers when they feel that "opportunity is not equal, that economic rewards do not match contributions, and that the much-cherished rules of meritocracy are broken." And if, Protzer and Summerville hypothesize, people feel that "the rules of society are unfairly rigged" they are drawn to populist parties. That is precisely the feeling of resentment, or status threat that political scientists and sociologists have linked with the success of populist politicians like Donald Trump (Mutz, 2018), or Scott Walker (Cramer, 2016) in the US (see also Hochschild (2016) and Kaufmann (2018), or the Brexit campaign in the UK (see Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017) and Sobolewska and Ford (2020).

Our model builds on Protzer and Summerville's causal mechanism but adds what we believe is a missing link: we theorize that populist news consumption mediates the connection between the two phenomena they linked, i.e. perceptions of unfairness and support for populist parties. Protzer and Summerville argued that people who feel that "the rules of society are unfairly rigged" are more likely to vote for populist candidates. We argue that they are first drawn to media that portrays society as divided into 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elites' (see Mudde (2004). Following suit, and voting for the candidates those media outlets support is the logical second step. The distinction between fair and unfair inequality is as crucial to our model as it is to theirs. Protzer and Summerville argue that inequality alone is not sufficient to attract voters to populist parties. Similarly, we argue that inequality alone is not sufficient to attract voters to populist news content. It is the perception of unfairness that makes simple scapegoating populist news sound appealing. To account for the difference between inequality and unfair inequality we use two information treatments – a 'plain' inequality treatment that simply informs about rising inequality and an 'unfair' inequality treatment that includes an extra paragraph about the working poor, designed to manipulate perceptions of low social mobility (Protzer and Summerville's proxy for unfairness). Due to non-deception policies we did not add a third, 'fair' inequality treatment, i.e. one that would attribute rising inequality to rising levels of productivity

among the rich, but not the poor. We hypothesize that exposure to the 'unfair inequality' treatment (which includes an extra paragraph about low social mobility) will lead more respondents to click on a populist headline than exposure to the 'plain' inequality treatment.

H₃: The effect of information about inequality on self-exposure to (and trust in) populist headlines is moderated by information about unfairness (low social mobility).

Survey and Experimental Design

To investigate how perceptions of inequality affect the information individuals choose to consume we partnered with the external marketing company Bilendi to field a randomized survey experiment in Italy and the UK. As both countries are highly unequal we were able to present respondents with real data to manipulate perceptions of inequality. Respondents were recruited online from Bilendi's pool of respondents. We used quotas for gender, age, and region to ensure a representative sample in each country. Our survey was in the field from 21 Jan to 25 Feb 2022. In the UK, 3545 respondents completed the survey and passed the attention check; in Italy, 3511 completed the survey and passed the attention check.

⁶ The median respondent took just below seven minutes to complete the survey in both countries.

In **stage 1** of the survey, we collected some basic demographic information (gender, age, geographic area of residency). We also asked about respondents' political interests, left-right placement, and, to capture populist predispositions, their opinions on how many political issues should be voted on in a referendum. For a crude measure of authoritarianism we selected one of the classic child rearing scale questions (Feldman and Stenner, 1997): the trade-off between curiosity and good manners which, we suspect, is least likely to be influenced by partisanship in both countries.

In **stage 2**, we primed some respondents to think about **inequality**.⁷ One treatment group received information about rising inequality in their country. Another treatment group received information about rising inequality and the rising number of the 'working poor' in their country. The aim here was to elicit a sense of unfairness. Building on findings

⁶Those failing the attention check were screened out by our marketing company. Note that we did not force respondents to answer any questions. That means that sample size across the different dependent variables are not constant.

⁷Our design rests on two assumptions: First, we assume that most individuals who are exposed to information about inequality will not identify with the richest but with those with middling or lower incomes. Second, we assume that comparing themselves with the richest will prompt sentiments of discomfort and resentment. These assumptions may not be met everywhere, or for everyone. At the same time, a violation of these assumptions would only deflate our treatment effects. In other words, we can expect that violations to our design assumptions lead to more conservative estimates of our manipulation effects.

from (Protzer and Summerville, 2022) we distinguish between simple inequality and 'unfair' inequality. The authors found that inequality affected support for extremist parties – but only in countries where social mobility was low. At an individual level, we suspect that people will only feel drawn to populist media if they feel that inequality is 'unfair', that they could not get ahead even if they tried. Our control group skipped the inequality information stage and proceeded directly to the outcome variables.⁸

In **stage 3** all respondents saw our **outcome measures**. To test H1 we showed respondents four headlines on the topic of inequality and asked which they would click on first if they had to make a snap judgment. In each country, one headline was drawn from a factual, politically neutral article about inequality; the remaining three were drawn from opinion pieces. Two of the opinion pieces signalled populist content (anti-elite and xenophobic); one signalled pro-elite views. In the UK, the politically neutral headline was drawn from The BBC.⁹ For Italy, the neutral headline was retrieved from Il Sole 24 Ore¹⁰ The anti-elite headlines were drawn from articles in left-leaning tabloids, The Mirror in the UK, and Il Fatto Quotidiano in Italy¹¹. The xenophobic headlines were drawn from articles from right-leaning tabloids, The Sun in the UK, and Il Giornale in Italy¹². Finally, the pro-elite headlines were

⁸Acknowledging that inequality statistics rarely go uncommented we also explored the effect of exposure to (real) anti-elite, extremist statements about inequality. Those statements did not affect our outcome variables and are not a focus of this study. We pooled the data for those who had seen these statements and those who had not.

⁹The UK headline was “Five facts about inequality in the UK. The gap between how much people earn in London and the rest of the country has narrowed since the early 2000s, says the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS).”

¹⁰The original headline was “Di cosa parliamo, esattamente, quando parliamo di diseguaglianza? L’ultima relazione annuale della Bis (la Banca dei regolamenti internazionali) di Basilea dedica un intero capitolo a uno dei temi più ricorrenti del nostro dibattito pubblico: la diseguaglianza.” which translates into *What exactly are we talking about when we talk about inequality? The latest annual report of the Basel-based BIS (Bank for International Settlements) devotes an entire chapter to one of the most recurrent topics of our public debate: inequality.*

¹¹The UK headline was “Axe the filthy rich elite. All voters are supposed to be equal but some are more equal than others as long as we permit a toxic few to wave fat cheque books.”. The Italian headline was “Cari ricchi, la lotta di classe ormai l’avete stravinta voi: Cari ricchi, il mondo sta finendo o è già finito non per colpa dell’uomo in generale, ma per colpa vostra. Ora avete abilmente nascosto le vostre colpe al punto che i poveri votano per voi.” which translates into *Dear rich people, you have already won the class struggle: Dear rich people, the world is ending or has already ended not because of mankind in general, but because of you. Now you have cleverly hidden your faults to the point that the poor vote for you.*

¹²The UK headline was “Yes, there is racism; but inequality harms people of every colour. If you are sick of race commissions, this is exactly why you should care about this one.” And the Italian headline was “Nove clandestini su dieci restano in Italia. E rimpatri e ricollocamenti non sono che un bluff che grava sulle tasche degli italiani.” which translates to *Nine out of ten illegal immigrants remain in Italy. And repatriations and relocations are nothing but a bluff that weighs on the pockets of Italians.*

drawn from *Quarz* in the UK and *Il Giornale* in Italy¹³. The headlines were shown in a random order. They were all written in the same font and style: the actual headlines were written in bold, and followed by one-sentence subheading. Respondents could only read the headlines, not the full articles.

To test H2 we then asked about trust. We showed respondents each headline in turn and asked how much, based on the sole headlines they had just read, they would trust the information in the respective article. Respondents indicated their answer on a five-point scale ranging from 'not at all trustworthy' to 'absolutely trustworthy'. Next, we asked a few additional questions to get a more nuanced picture of how far the effect of perceptions of inequality might go. These included a measure of trust in media outlets that are generally seen as politically neutral (the BBC/*Il Sole 24 Ore*) and outlets that are generally recognised as more politically positioned and, sometimes, populist.¹⁴ Next, we asked a few questions to measure perceptions of inequality. First, we asked how their own generation compared with their parents' generation in terms of their financial situation and in terms of opportunities to move up the social ladder. Second, we asked how the area they lived in compared with other areas in the country in terms of inequality, and in terms of poverty. These questions served as manipulation checks. We waited to ask them after the dependent variables because we wanted to measure respondents' immediate reaction to the information treatments.¹⁵

Finally, in **stage 4**, we asked a few more demographic questions, as well as a three-item battery of questions designed to measure system justification¹⁶; one question on whether they felt resentment towards the rich; a question on their education level; and a question on their income before taxes.

¹³The UK headline was "Inequality can be a good thing. It's hard to look out and see others that are more fortunate. But it's also an incentive to succeed." The Italian headline was "Elogio della disuguaglianza che ci fa ricchi Il guru del web Paul Graham: "Aumenta col progresso, ma non è un male" which translates to *Eulogy of inequality that makes us rich Web guru Paul Graham: "It increases with progress, but it's not a bad thing."*

¹⁴In the UK these were: *The Daily Mail* and *The Mirror*. In Italy, respondents were asked about *Il Giornale*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, and *La Verità*. *The Daily Mirror* and *Il Giornale* were chosen to express views closer to right-wing positions; *The Mirror* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano* for left-wing ones. *La Verità* is a novel newspaper, created in 2017 under the editorial direction of Maurizio Belpietro who had previously worked for the right-wing publication *Libero*. Particularly starting from the outbreak of the pandemic, *La Verità* often espoused anti-scientific positions.

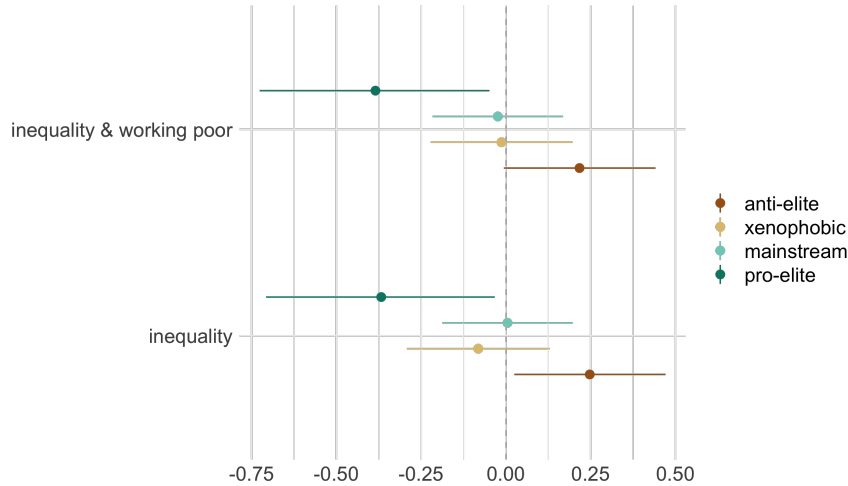
¹⁵Note that these questions also served as a treatment for a third treatment group which is not the focus of the present study. These respondents answered these four questions about their perceptions of inequality and of social mobility in their own local area in stage 2, instead of the information treatment. We designed this last treatment to investigate how the observation of inequality in every day life correlated with media selection and other political attitudes).

¹⁶The three items were: (1) [Italy/The UK] is the best country in the world to live in; (2) Society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve; and (3) Most policies serve the greater good

Results

Does priming inequality raise interest in populist news content?

Figure 2: Italy – Choice of Headlines



Notes. Coefficient estimates with 95% confidence intervals. The baseline category is the control group who did not see any information on inequality. The estimates are based on four separate logit models. In each model, the dependent variable is a dummy that equals 1 when a respondent chose the respective article, and 0 when they chose one of the other three articles. No controls are included in these regressions. $N=2610$.

We begin our analyses by looking at the effect of the information treatments on news selection. For ease of interpretation we report simple logistic regression models in the main body of this paper. Multinomial logistic regression models show similar results and are reported in the appendix. Figures 2 and 3 show how reading about inequality affected interest in the four articles in Italy and the UK, respectively. Both graphs show coefficient estimates from four separate logistic regression models, one for each headline respondents were presented with. In each model, the dependent variable takes on a value of 1 if the respective headline was chosen, or 0 otherwise. The baseline category is the control group, that is, respondents who had not received any information on inequality.

In Italy (see figure 2), exposure to information about inequality increased interest in the headline expressing an anti-elite narrative, and decreased interest in the one expressing a pro-elite narrative of inequality. These results were robust to estimation with Seemingly Unrelated Regressions. Overall, then, our data confirms H_1 : priming 'unfair' inequality had

a positive effect on self-exposure to populist – at least left-wing populist – news content.

Curiously, the 'plain' inequality treatment had the exact same effect. This is not what we expected. If, as we theorised, perceptions of unfairness moderate the effect of inequality on news selection then the 'unfair' inequality treatment should get more people interested in the anti-elite headline than the 'plain' inequality treatment. Why did it not? Our post-treatment questionnaire provides a powerful explanation: across all treatment conditions, a large majority of our Italian respondents thought that the political system in their country was unfair. 64 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that 'Most policies serve the greater good'. 66 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that 'Society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve.' These numbers were equally high among the two treatment groups (as well as the control group), suggesting that respondents in both treatment assumed that the rising levels of inequality in Italy were, indeed, unfair. In other words, our Italian respondents who read about rising levels of inequality in their country did not need to be reminded that it was unfair. They already knew. ¹⁷

Another aspect of our findings is noteworthy: The treatment effects were limited to anti-elite (or left-wing populist) news content. Exposure to information about inequality (plain or unfair) did not increase interest in the xenophobic headline. With hindsight, we can think of two reasons why it did not. First, and most obviously, it is possible that knowledge of inequality simply does not make people more susceptible to xenophobic news content. The sense of unfairness that one feels knowing that the rich are getting richer through little effort of their own while the poor are not making much headway despite hard work may already direct resentment toward the rich. A second reason is equally plausible: the xenophobic headline may have attracted less attention because it was the only one that was not about inequality. We suspect that respondents who had just seen some upsetting statistics about inequality were curious to read more about that topic. ¹⁸ Future research is needed to

¹⁷Given the fact that Italians across the board thought the system was unfair we probably would have needed a stronger prime to test whether stronger perceptions of unfairness led to more interest in populist news than average perceptions of unfairness. The paragraph we added to the 'unfair' treatment was a relatively subtle reminder of unfairness, as it was focused on the working poor rather than explicitly stating that the system is unfair.

¹⁸Because we worked with real, and recent headlines we were somewhat restricted in our research design. We did not find any suitable articles about inequality in right-wing populist tabloids in Italy. That is why we chose a headline that sounded xenophobic but did not address inequality.

explore the effect of inequality on interest in right-wing populist headlines.¹⁹

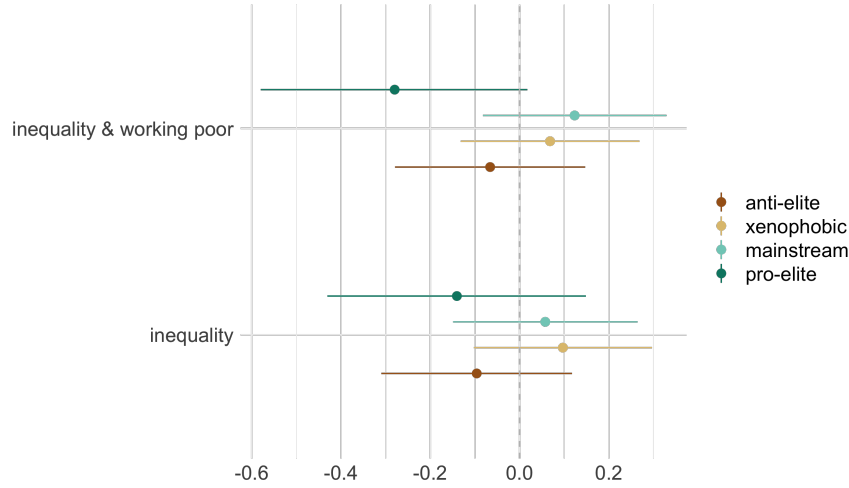
Evidence from the UK was less conclusive. As shown by the insignificant coefficients in Figure 3, neither one of the inequality treatments had a significant effect on interest in populist media. Our data shows some indication that those who had read about inequality (in particular when it included the paragraph about the working poor) showed a little less interest in the pro-elite headline. However, the effect was short of statistical significance. We found no effect on interest in the anti-elite headline. In other words, the results from Italy did not replicate in the UK. We explore reasons in a next section but note one potentially meaningful difference already: The English version of the anti-elite headline sounded much more extreme than the Italian version. The Italian version translates as 'Dear rich people, you have more than won the class struggle'. The British version read "Axe the filthy rich elite". It is possible that the language sounded just a bit too extreme to respondents who had just read about inequality in the UK – in particular because the survey was fielded at a time when the UK was recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, and entering the cost of living crisis will falling real incomes.

Does priming inequality raise trust in populist news content?

Next, we investigate the effect of the information treatments on trust in populist headlines and newspapers. Again, we begin with Italy. Figure 4 shows how priming inequality affected trust in the four articles (of which respondents only saw the headlines). Neither one of the treatments had a significant effect on trust in any of the headlines. Note, though, that the direction of the coefficients went in the expected direction: positive for the anti-elite and the xenophobic headlines; negative for the anti-elite headline, see figure 4. Figure 5 shows how priming unfair inequality affected trust in four prominent Italian news outlets. Here, we found a significant effect on the mainstream / pro-business newspaper, *Il Sole 24 Ore*. It did not, however, affect trust in the left-wing populist newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, the right-wing / anti-establishment newspaper *La Verità*, or the right-wing newspaper *Il Giornale*. Again, results for the plain inequality treatment were similar, with the notable exception that the coefficient for trust in the mainstream newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*, though negative, was just short of statistical significance. In short, priming Italians to think about inequality

¹⁹A third possibility is that learning about inequality affects liberals and conservatives in a different way. It may push liberals toward left-wing populist content and conservatives toward right-wing populist content. To test this possibility we examined the effect of exposure to information about inequality among a subset of right-wing respondents, i.e. respondents who placed themselves between 7 and 10 on a left-right scale from 0-left to 10-right. Yet even these respondents were not drawn to the xenophobic headline. Quite the contrary: We found a negative coefficient in both the Italian and the British sample. This suggests that prompting right-wing people to think about inequality reduced interest in the xenophobic headline, as compared with the other headlines.

Figure 3: UK – Choice of Headlines



Notes. Coefficient estimates with 95% confidence intervals (Baseline category: Control group (no information on inequality)). The estimates are based on four separate logit models. In each model, the dependent variable is a dummy that equals 1 when a respondent chose the respective article, and 0 when they chose one of the other three articles. No controls are included in these regressions. $N=2626$.

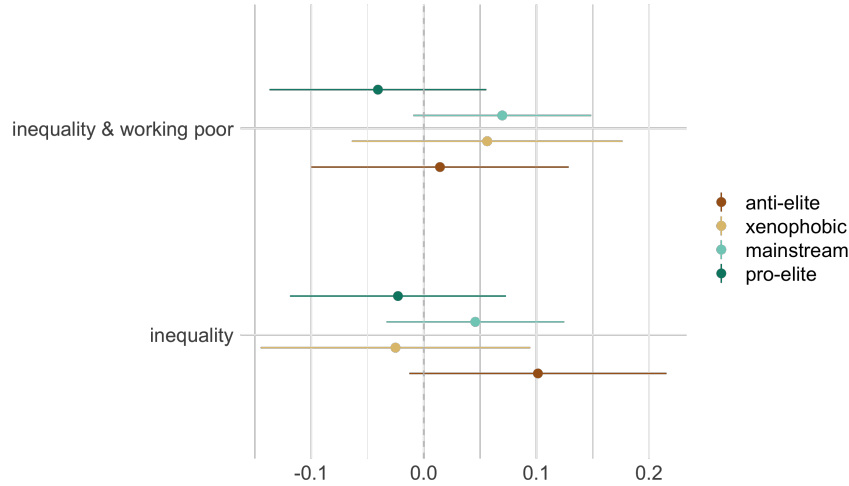
did not make them trust populist news more, it made them trust mainstream/business-friendly media less.

Again, results for the UK are less conclusive. Figure 6 shows how priming inequality affected trust in the four headlines. Just like in Italy, none of the effects reached significance, but, as expected, the direction of the pro-elite headline was negative. Figure 7 shows how priming inequality affected affected trust in actual newspapers. We found no consistent effect on trust in the left-wing populist tabloid 'The Daily Mirror' or the right-wing populist tabloid 'The Daily Mail'. When it comes to the pro-elite outlet, 'The Economist', our data shows something unexpected: exposure to the 'plain' inequality treatment had an almost significant *positive* effect.

Exploring Country Differences

Our data paints a nuanced picture of how informing people about inequality shapes media choices in a northern and a southern European country. Our Italian respondents became more interested in news that sounded like they propagated populist, anti-elite views, and less interested in news that sounded like they propagated pro-elite views. Additionally, in

Figure 4: Italy – Trust in Headlines



Notes. Coefficient estimates with 95% confidence intervals. Baseline: Control group. The estimates are based on four separate OLS regressions. In each model, the dependent variable ranged from 1 (not at all trustworthy) to 5 (absolutely trustworthy). No controls were included in these models. $N(\text{anti-elite})=1867$, $N(\text{xenophobic})=1929$, $N(\text{mainstream})=2600$, $N(\text{pro-elite})=1855$.

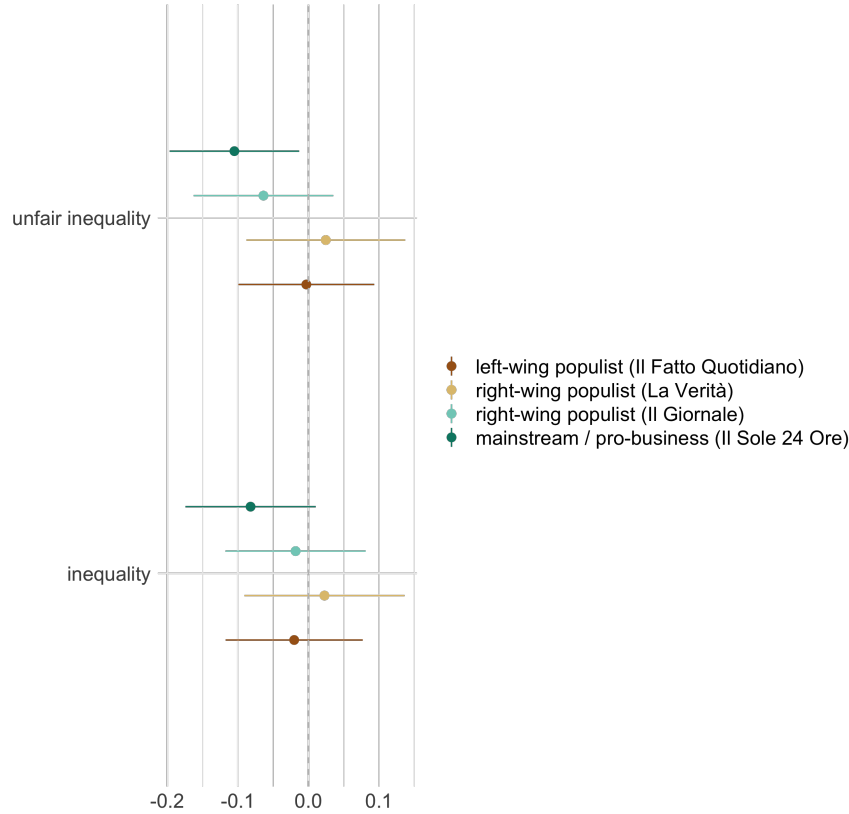
Italy, priming inequality had a statistically significant effect on trust in one media outlet: It curbed trust in the mainstream, pro-business newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*.

Our UK data shows a slightly different picture. Our British respondents did *not* become more interested in news that sounded like they propagated left-wing populist (or anti-elite) views. Similar to our Italian sample we found some indication that British respondents may have become less interested in pro-elite news content, however, the coefficients were below statistical significance. There is some suggestive evidence that they also trusted the anti-elite headline less but this coefficient, too, did not reach statistical significance. We similarly found no significant effect on trust in newspapers.

In this section we discuss possible reasons for this difference. The most obvious reason – the fact that we used different headlines in the two countries is unlikely because the two headlines were similar in content and in tone ²⁰. A second reason is that our British and Italian respondents may have had different expectations and, therefore, different reactions to the information treatments. According to our model, the causal link between inequality and news selection goes through perceptions of unfairness. We, therefore, argue that the weaker

²⁰The Italian version began with: "Dear rich people, you have already won the class struggle..." The UK version began with: "Axe the filthy rich elite..."

Figure 5: Italy – Trust in Newspapers

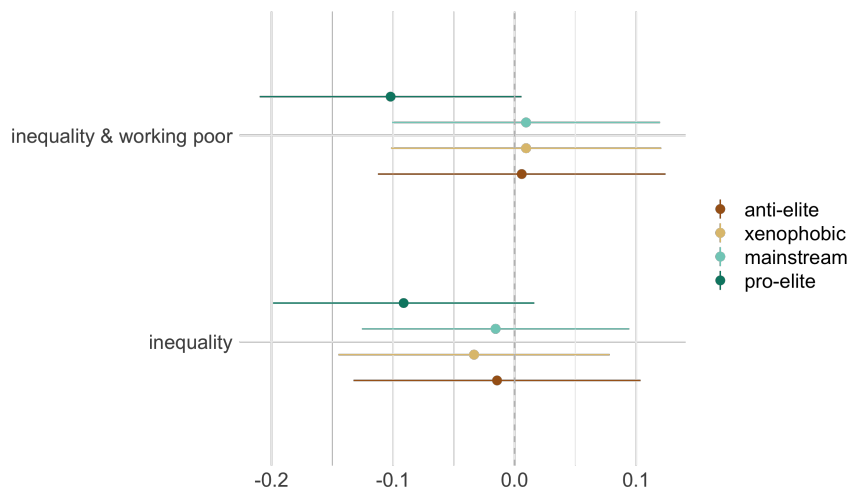


Notes. Coefficient estimates with 95% confidence intervals. Baseline: Control group. The estimates are based on four separate OLS regression models. In each model, the dependent variable ranged from 1 (not at all trustworthy) to 5 (absolutely trustworthy) No controls were included in these models. Sample size varied depending on the outlets: $N=2396$ for *Il Fatto Quotidiano*; $N=2066$ for *La Verità*; $N=2376$ for *Il Giornale*; $N=2392$ for *Il Sole 24 Ore*.

UK effects may rise from differences in system justification and in perceptions around the fairness of existing inequality. ²¹ Figure 8 shows participants' reactions to the statement

²¹We asked the system justification questions after exposure to the information treatments so as to replicate a study by Trump (2018) in a different country. Trump found no evidence that exposure to information about inequality affected system justification in the USA. Our study confirmed her results for both the UK and Italy. We found no significant difference between system average levels of justification among those who had read about inequality and those who had not. The fact that system justification is so stable also means that we are safe to assume that it moderated the effect of the information treatments.

Figure 6: Trust in Headlines – UK



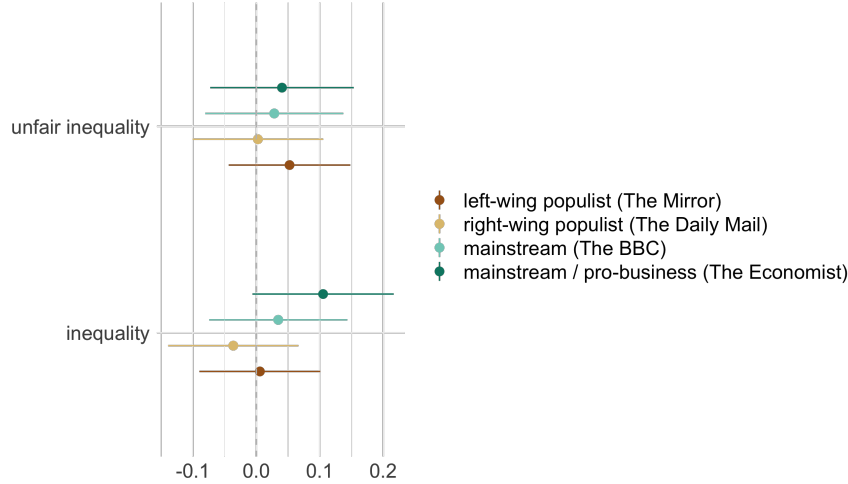
Notes. Coefficient estimates with 95% confidence intervals. Baseline: Control group. The estimates are based on four separate OLS regressions. In each model, the dependent variable ranged from 1 (not at all trustworthy) to 5 (absolutely trustworthy). No controls were included in these models. $N(\text{anti-elite})=2040$, $N(\text{xenophobic})=2048$, $N(\text{mainstream})=2056$, $N(\text{pro-elite})=2030$.

that 'society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve'.²² The difference is striking: Among our Italian sample, less than a tenth (9 per cent) agreed, while two thirds (66 per cent) disagreed. In contrast, among our British respondents, about a fifth (18 per cent agreed) agreed and half disagreed. In Italy, the most common answer was 'tend to disagree'; in the UK, it was 'neither agree nor disagree'. In other words, our UK respondents scored much higher on 'system justification' than our Italian respondents.

The fact that most Italians think the political system they live in is unfair has important implications for the way they are likely to have interpreted the information treatment: our Italian respondents (or at least those who were low in system justification beliefs) are unlikely to have thought that the reason the rich were getting richer was because they were working harder. Instead, we suspect that they *assumed* that inequality was unfair, regardless of whether or not the article mentioned unfairness (or, in this case, the plight of the working poor.) Our UK respondents were much higher in system justification. UK respondents also were more likely to report that social mobility for their generation, compared to that for

²²We also measured two further and highly correlated system justification items: one asking whether the respondent's country is the best country to live in; and one whether policies are, on average, aimed at the greater good. In both additional items results were similar. This item was however more immediately related to the topics of inequality and social mobility.

Figure 7: Trust in Newspapers – UK.



Notes. Coefficient estimates with 95% confidence intervals. Baseline: Control group. The estimates are based on four separate OLS regression models. In each model, the dependent variable ranged from 1 (not at all trustworthy) to 5 (absolutely trustworthy). No controls were included in these models. Sample size varied depending on the outlets: $N=2367$ for The Mirror; $N=2386$ for The Daily Mail; $N=2480$ for the BBC; $N=1689$ for The Economist.

their parents' generation, had not drastically reduced – again, unlike our Italian respondents as Figure 9 displays. This might imply that system justification – or perceptions of higher social mobility – may act as a moderator for the effect of inequality on self-exposure to populist media.

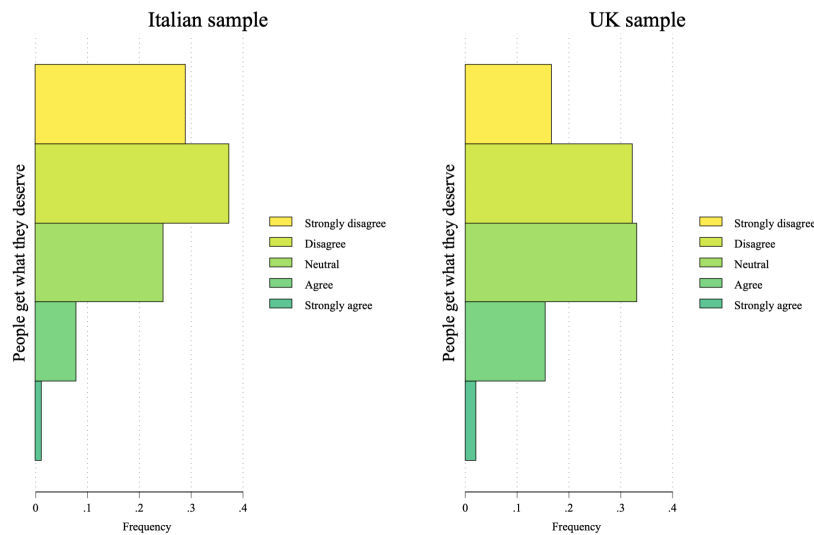
To additionally investigate this conclusion, we looked at the relationship between the observational data on perceptions about inequality and their correlation with the choice of each headline. Table 1 shows that those that perceive their financial situation to be worse than the one of their parents, or that social mobility has decreased compared to that of their parents' generation, are also more likely to pick an anti-elite headline (respectively, Model 1 and Model 5) and less likely to pick a pro-elite one (Models 4 and 8). And feelings of unfairness do not increase the odds to consume moderate, mainstream titles (see Models 2 and 6). These results, ultimately in line with our Hypothesis 3 and with recent findings in the literature (see Ahrens, 2022), support our conclusion about the important role of system justification: Inequality will only affect the consumption of populist media when it is perceived as unfair.

Variables	(1) Anti-elite	(2) Moderate	(3) Xenophobic	(4) Pro-elite	(5) Anti-elite	(6) Moderate	(7) Xenophobic	(8) Pro-elite
Perceived financial situation is worse	0.0414*** (0.00543)	0.00396 (0.00569)	-0.0252*** (0.00580)	-0.0184*** (0.00407)				
Perceived social mobility is worse					0.0463*** (0.00605)	-0.00263 (0.00635)	-0.0214*** (0.00647)	-0.0204*** (0.00452)
Constant	0.346*** (0.0136)	0.302*** (0.0142)	0.263*** (0.0145)	0.0825*** (0.0101)	0.360*** (0.0151)	0.289*** (0.0159)	0.269*** (0.0161)	0.0760*** (0.0113)
Observations	3,536	3,536	3,536	3,536	3,520	3,520	3,520	3,520
R-squared	0.016	0.000	0.005	0.006	0.016	0.000	0.003	0.006

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 1: The Table reports coefficient estimates for OLS regression models, with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variables are dichotomous: they equal 1 when the respondent picked the respective headline, or 0 otherwise.

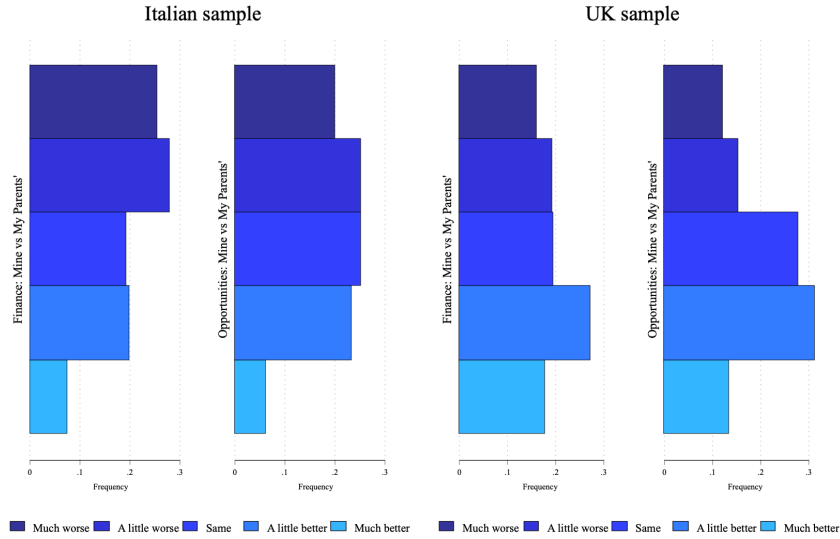
Figure 8: System Justification Item: Respondents Choices.



Concluding Remarks

Contemporary democracies have been characterized by two phenomena: rising inequality and a spread of populist narratives (in both politics and our media landscape). This study provides a first empirical analysis of a possible link between these two phenomena. We argued that inequality could make people more susceptible to populist media narratives because it increases a perception of unfairness. People seeing that their hard-work does not allow them to climb the social ladder could be more attracted by media content that espouse anti-elite views, generates outrage, and employs a more extreme language.

Figure 9: Perceived Social Mobility.



To investigate this relationship we designed an online survey experiment, which was fielded in Italy and the UK in February 2022. In Italy, exposure to information about unfair inequality did nudge respondents toward headlines that were critical of elites and away from articles that were supportive of them. Furthermore, it reduced trust in traditional newspapers that can be associated with the economic and business establishment. These findings did not replicate in the UK. At a first look, results seemed to be in the expected direction but too weak to achieve significance. However, an analysis of perceptions data revealed that system justification was much higher in our UK sample, and that UK respondents were less likely to have perceived a decrease in social mobility – or a steep worsening of their financial situation. When we took these sentiments into account, we were able to find that also in the UK, the perception of unfair economic conditions was associated with an increased interest for anti-elite, populist media. We, therefore, concluded that perceptions of unfairness are a fundamental moderator for the effect of inequality on self-exposure to different types of media content – a result in line with recent findings of the literature on the politics of inequality.

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