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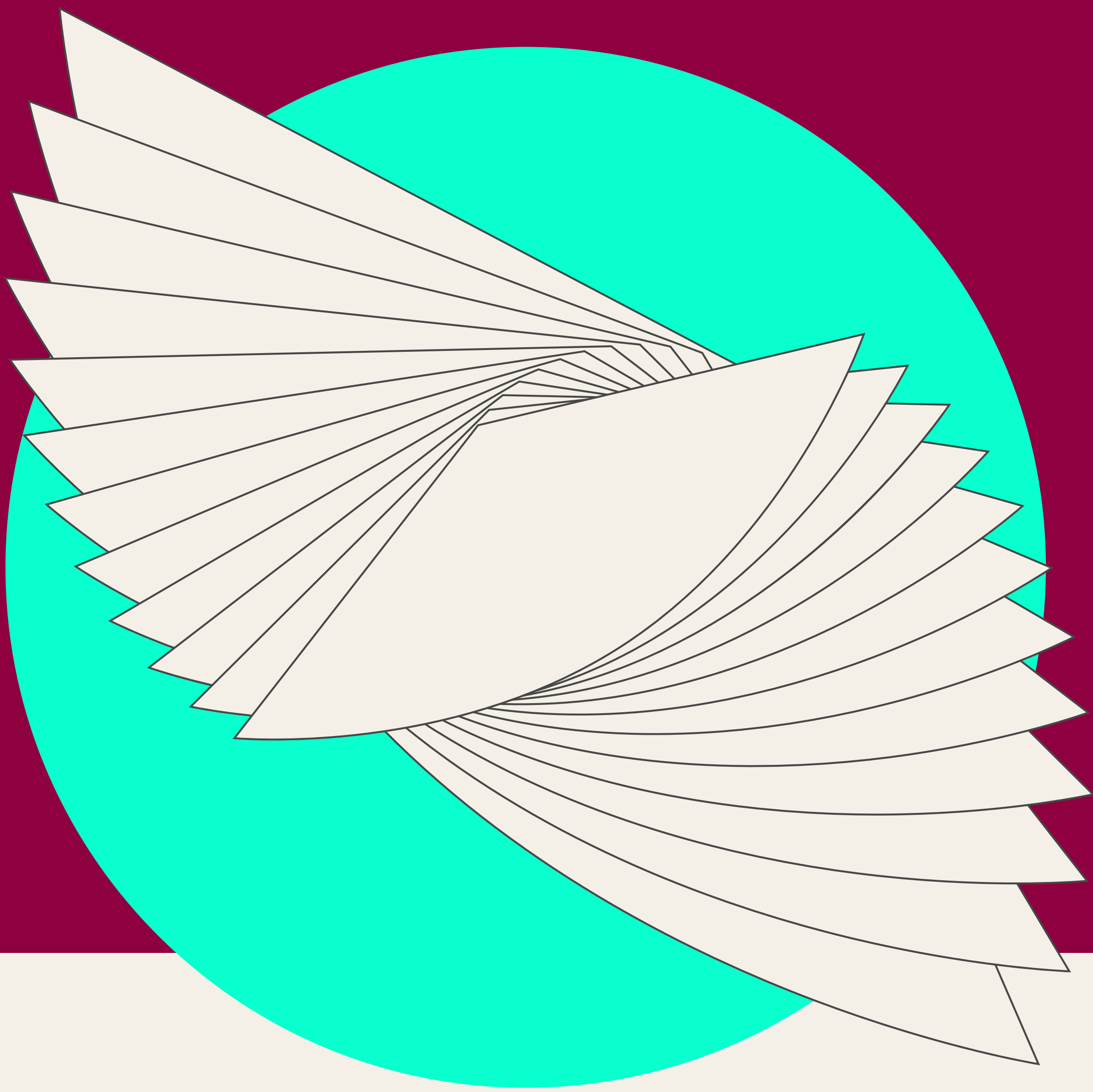

A literature review

What is known about effects of visual and textual framing on public understanding of, and engagement with, wealth inequality?

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Introduction

Introduction to the review and limitations

This document comprises a systematic review of peer-reviewed research published since 2008, and selected campaign literature. The review underpins a report – Changing the narrative on wealth inequality.

The systematic review was structured thematically to answer the following 4 questions:

1. How is the problem of wealth inequality communicated?
2. What do we know about the effects of textual and visual frames on public perceptions of wealth inequality?
3. How does the public understand wealth inequality?
4. What are the barriers to wealth inequality gaining public and political salience?

We identified key characteristics, trends, intersections and relationships given salience by the academic literature and by campaigning organisations.

The review referenced, built on and learnt from 2 recent reviews that looked at the intersection of economic inequality and communication: Vaughan et al. (forthcoming) and Grisold and Thiene (2017). It also benefitted from access to a draft of the report Why Wealth Inequality Matters (Savage et al., forthcoming) from the LSE's International Inequalities Institute.

There are 5 limitations to which we would like to draw the reader's attention.

First, although the **descriptive** literature on wealth inequality is relatively abundant, the literature on the **framing** of wealth inequality specifically is not. It is typically subsumed into the wider 'economic inequality'. We have taken this wider definition as the parameter for sourcing literature for this review as it includes wealth-specific work, work that includes wealth and income, and more generic 'economic inequality'. We use the term wealth inequality unless economic inequality is more appropriate (that is, it is the explicit term used by the author).

Second, our corpus displays the significant heterogeneity typical of reviews in relatively new fields of literature (echoing observations in Vaughan et al., forthcoming): a proliferation of studies, but very few testing the same relationship (in the same context) and often presenting potentially divergent findings. For example, Casarra et al. (2022) found increasing awareness of inequality to be linked to increased support for taxation, while Prabhakar (2017) found that providing more information decreases support (in Rowlingson, Sood and Hu, 2020). This means that many of the results are ‘novel’ and would need to be replicated before being considered definitive.

Third, there are terminology issues which although unacknowledged within the texts, betray significant intercultural difference, where a term has a meaning in one culture that is starkly different to its meaning in another. A good example here is the ‘middle class’, which although often used without explanation, clearly not only refers to different demographics in 3 of the key case study sites explored in our corpus (Germany, the US and the UK), but also has strong and distinct histories deeply related to national identities and long-term political economic narratives. This needs to be considered in attempting to transfer findings between cultures and contexts, as noted below.

Fourth, and relatedly, we cite work from many different countries. As part of our relevance criteria, we made a conscious decision to move beyond a focus solely on work that looked at the UK. We added a relevance question that asked whether findings ‘could help to inform practice in the UK’. As such, this drew in work from, for example, countries in South America that looks at the effects of locality where the findings might help us understand more about locality effects in the UK. Although we have proactively selected a corpus to review here that is international, we have sought to provide an account in Changing the narrative on wealth inequality that is UK-specific, and which could form the basis of further work exploring how international practice may help to inform UK practice.

Finally, our review did not explicitly look at the extent to which people care about inequality **in relation to** other concerns, or at the relative media salience of concerns. Future work might review the literature on, for example, the relative salience of economic inequality compared to racial inequality, or in relation to other policy issues such as climate change.

The review is thematic, with each question addressed in turn. The review is in 2 sections. **Section 1: Framing and communicating**, addresses questions 1 and 2, and **Section 2: Perceiving, understanding and reacting**, addresses questions 3 and 4.

Theoretical background

The work reviewed here sits at the intersection of several different and interlocking sets of literature.

Data-based analysis of wealth distribution and accumulation

Because wealth is a 'stock' that is composed of differing elements (for example, assets tied up in housing, pensions, or savings and financial investments), it has historically been more difficult to measure than income. However, in the past decades economists have made major advances through using administrative data sources alongside surveys. This is leading to a transformation of how inequality is understood. Savage (2021) argues there has been a scholarly shift in focus in the 21st century away from poverty and debates about its definition or measurement, towards inequality. This has led to growing interest in the different amounts of income and wealth held by different population deciles, especially those at the top of the distribution. This has had the effect of drawing attention upwards towards the 1%, and the remarkable contraction of wealth within and between its sub-fractions. New national-level analysis has been made possible by the initiation of longitudinal national data on wealth and assets: the UK-specific ONS Wealth and Assets Survey (WAS); and global insights from the World Inequality Lab (WIL), which uses taxation data. This new analysis allows scholars to situate the UK amongst its wealthy global peers and permits a much more refined and comprehensive assessment of the nature of wealth inequality, which is the foundation for engagement by communications and media scholars.

Literature on framing and the political economy of the media

The framing literature finds a very real conundrum in wealth inequality. An increasing (although still relatively scant) amount of scholarship seeks to apply the tools and insights from strategic communications to the (economic) 'inequality paradox' – that is, the question of why increasing inequality does not appear to be driving higher public support for redistribution. The literature from the field of communications studies that forms part of our corpus considers the nature of and role of media and political frames in shaping public perception, generating social concern and converting that concern into determination to act/support action by others. Much of the literature on framing in the wealth inequality space focuses on the differential impact on understanding and preference formation of advantage and disadvantage frames. In short, does it matter if wealth inequality is described as people who are rich having more than those who are poor, or those who are poor having less than those who are rich?

The literature on the political economy of the media largely looks at questions of ownership (Schifferes and Knowles, 2022; Kuskoff et al., 2023) and the impact of the concentration of media ownership on framing and influence; the reduction of space for news and long-form content; and the increasing homogeneity of frames. The specific body of work from this area that is included in our corpus aims to understand how this political economy of the media shapes public understanding of and engagement with (and, relatedly level of concern about) forms of wealth inequality.

Literature on preference formation

Our corpus includes literature from psychology, political science and behavioural economics on how people form opinions about wealth inequality, and whether this leads to a concern to address this. Much of the literature comes from an experimental tradition in which diverse ‘treatments’ are applied to observe how people’s preferences may be shaped differently. This is particularly useful in the context of wealth inequality, where the perception of the legitimacy of a particular level or type of wealth inequality may have an effect on whether a ‘concern’ converts into a desire to see some form of redistribution. Much literature deals with a range of what are referred to as ‘system-justifying beliefs’ such as ‘belief in a just world’ (BJW), meritocracy and equality of opportunity. These beliefs, along with other prior beliefs and commitments to specific political ideologies, are a key mechanism through which people develop preferences. They work alongside and mediate new information received through the media or through other social interaction. Much of the work cited in this review – across these interlocking areas – articulates the barriers that prevent accurate perceptions of inequality (as opposed to subjective ‘perceived’ inequality), and the conversion of concern into political preference for change. This is variously articulated as being related to prior beliefs about how the ‘system’ (that is, the political economy) works, and whether the inequalities that arise during its working are legitimate or illegitimate, fair or unfair.

As explained above, the geographic scope of experimental or empirical works we have included extends beyond other rich democracies (where the application to the UK context is more evident), to contexts where the authors feel that insights from either the method or the results might be relevant. However, care still needs to be taken when making cross-cultural inferences or comparisons – as most of the authors doing so in our corpus acknowledge – not to ignore the effects of cultural specificity.

Summary

The key findings detailed in this report are summarised below.

1. How is the problem of wealth inequality framed in the media and by campaigning organisations?

1.1 Studies suggest that the amount of media coverage of economic inequality has increased somewhat over time, in particular since the financial crisis of 2007/8.
1.2 Economic and financial journalism tends to neglect non-elite voices and problems.
1.3 Wealth inequality is communicated differently in right- and left-wing press, but on both sides there is a tendency to focus on individual rather than structural causes. Coverage tends to be reformist rather than radical.
1.4 Wealth inequality can be communicated in the media through advantage or disadvantage frames, which give relative salience in each case to the privileged group (those who are wealthy) or the unprivileged group (those who are poor).
1.5 Frames that define wealth inequality as a problem to be solved can be displaced by alternate frames that focus either on less structurally 'threatening' forms of inequality (for example, health inequality), or frames that emphasise solutions (for example, taxation).
1.6 Those who are rich are frequently legitimised in the media but their role in determining the rules that protect their wealth is less well covered. Those who are poor are often judged less generously, and their agency in determining their own economic outcomes tends to be emphasised at the expense of structural causes.
1.7 Those who are rich are sometimes the target of anti-elitist critique – particularly when they are perceived not to be playing by the same rules as everyone else.
1.8 Wealth inequality is often understood visually, whether through data visualisation, heuristic metaphors, or reference points in everyday life. Yet the distinct role of the visual in the effects of framing is not yet well represented in academic literature.

2. What do we know about the effects of textual and visual frames on public perceptions of wealth inequality? (pp.16–22)

2.1 Frames affect perceptions of the scale of inequality, but more fundamentally they guide the public towards a specific understanding of what the problem and solution might be.

2.2 Frames affect whether or how individuals legitimise or seek remedy for inequality.

2.3 Frames are particularly important in contested policy areas such as wealth taxation.

2.4 Advantage frames (those who are rich have more than those who are poor) and disadvantage frames (those who are poor have less than those who are rich) each have a distinct effect on how people judge and seek remedy for inequality.

2.5 Advantage frames can produce threat responses amongst members of privileged groups, which may reduce rather than increase support for redistribution.

2.6 There are ways to use advantage frames to increase opposition to high levels of wealth inequality by targeting the specific forms of wealth/ wealth ownership that the public feels are illegitimate.

2.7 Prevailing frames can make people feel fatalistic.

2.8 Popular protest has the potential to challenge dominant narratives and expand frames.

Section 1: Framing and communicating

1. How is the problem of wealth inequality framed in the media and by campaigning organisations?

This question is related to, but distinct from question 3, which is 'How does the public understand wealth inequality?' Sometimes the way things are communicated is the same as the way things are understood. Hebden et al. (2020), for example, look at the 'economy as container' metaphor that pervades both media representations of the economy and structures public understandings. However, we have attempted to make this distinction clear in order to account for (under question 4) non-framing-related processes that shape public understanding, and the gap observed (for example, in NEON 2018) between accounts of the economy favoured by strategic communicators, and prevailing understandings of the economy held by the public.

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1.1 Studies suggest that the amount of media coverage of economic inequality has increased somewhat over time, in particular since the financial crisis of 2007/8

Grisold and Thiene's (2017) systematic overview of the existing empirical studies on the media coverage of inequality suggested that news media coverage of inequality has increased 'somewhat' over recent times. Schroeder and Vietze (2015) analysed long-term media coverage of 3 major German newspapers between 1946 and 2015 and found an increase in the coverage of inequality; Petring (2016) undertook a similar analysis (also in Germany) between 1987 to 2011 and found that all papers' coverage of inequality increased in line with the Gini co-efficient (see Grisold and Thiene, 2017, p.4273). The literature broadly suggests that as economic inequality has increased, so has the media engagement with it, 'somewhat'. McGovern et al. (2023) analysed coverage of income inequality in UK and US newspapers and reached similar conclusions: there was some increase in coverage of inequality after the 2008 crisis, although salience did not reach the level of 'scandalising public outcry'.

On the other hand, Lugo-Ocando and Lawson (2022) found that the salience of inequality specifically as an explanation for poverty had **not** increased meaningfully since the 2008 crisis, and Thomas (2017) found that poverty and income inequality were actually **less** salient in 2014 than 2007 in UK television news. These conflicting findings should underline the impact of specific measurement decisions on conclusions about the salience of economic inequality coverage, particularly regarding which kind of economic inequality and in which type of media.

1.2 Economic and financial journalism tends to neglect non-elite voices and problems

Rieder and Silke (2020) found that 'economic and financial journalism tends to be elite focused, especially around sourcing, and assumptive towards neoliberal economic theories, and continues to have a short memory when it comes to economic crises' (p.105). This can be observed in the backlash to critiques of economic inequality, as shown in Rieder and Theine's (2019) study of the media discourse around the work of Thomas Piketty, which demonstrated the various strategies used by news media organisations to delegitimise Piketty's research. Grisold and Silke (2020) summarised these reactions in different categories: attempts to undermine the validity of the original research, minimising the significance of inequality as a problem by situating it as necessary for growth and innovation, and emphasising the unintended negative consequences of policy solutions like wealth taxes.

Some of the effects of the media hegemony identified by Grisold and Thiene (2017) in communicating the problem of inequality relate to the dominance of particular voices (business, wealth elites, politicians, academics) and the silencing of others (poorer people, employee groups, unions). They show, for example, that the voices of employers' groups and political parties are overrepresented in comparison to those of employees and disadvantaged groups. This dominance of elite or business voices contributes to the broader pro-market focus and an over-emphasis on business news and detailed stock market information. The effect is a neglect of non-elite problems. Grisold and Thiene cite Kollmeyer (2004) and Schiffrin (2015), who suggested that this demonstrates that journalists can 'share the standpoint of economic elites on corporate interests and the economic social order' (Grisold and Thiene, 2017).

Rieder et al. (2020) examined the distribution of sources in media coverage of economic inequality (on both left and right) in light of Piketty (2014). They observed the 'overwhelming importance of economists' (including academic and other economists) to these media articles, who made up on average 39% of sources. The second most cited sources were other media or blogs, followed by politicians and international organisations (for example, the IMF). There was almost no representation from unions, employees or workers' organisations. Gavin (2007) identified the key problems of economic reporting as being 'insufficient reporting, source bias, neoliberal ideological assumptions, the reification of the market, the separation of the economic and political spheres, and a general bias in reporting differing groups such as unions, employers, and politicians (see also Glasgow University Media Group, 1976; 1980), alongside an absence of class' (in Rieder and Silke, 2020, p.96). Baker and Murphy (2020) showed that the prevailing frame in which constraints on government spending are described and justified (that is, a tax and spend economy) presents 'programmed facets of the economy as "natural"', namely the idea that the government has to raise tax in order to spend. This dominance of elite voices and problems, and a tendency to situate economic stories within 'orthodox economics' frames, is closely linked to the next point – the tendency not to challenge 'grand narratives' that maintain the status quo.

1.3 Wealth inequality is communicated differently in right- and left-wing press, but on both sides there is a tendency to focus on individual rather than structural causes. Coverage tends to be reformist rather than radical

Overall, cross-national data tends to support the claim that coverage of inequality varies based on the political leaning of the media involved. Baumann and Majeed (2020) found that in the US context, 'the NYT [left wing] frames economic inequality more often as a structural problem than the Wall Street Journal [right wing], which tends to frame it as a result of individual life choices' (p.16). Bank (2017) similarly found in the German quality press that the conservative Frankfurter Allgemeiner Zeitung is more sceptical of inequality and redistributive policy measures than the centre-left Suddeutsche Zeitung. Hawkins and Lugo-Ocandao (2017) identified a left/right distinction in the UK: 84% of articles they analysed in UK newspapers which talked about economic inequality were in the left-wing press. Finally, Grisold and Theine (2020b) confirmed that this pattern holds up cross-nationally through their study of the response to Piketty's research, which was covered more sympathetically by centre-left papers in the UK, Ireland, Germany and Austria.

Despite these differences, the literature observes a tendency across all media (right and left) to leave the terms of the debate unchallenged. Robertson (2010) found, for example, that business and financial news coverage tended to be framed around pro-market explanations with little questioning of the 'overarching economic philosophy of free-market capitalism' (in Grisold and Thiene, 2017, p.4270). This is corroborated by Vaughan et al. (forthcoming), who reported an overarching tendency towards reformism over radicalism. This process of 'leaving unchallenged' extends across all levels of framing (Baker and Murphy, 2020) and, to differing degrees, across the left- and right-wing media. This is sometimes because certain frames have been made to appear so natural that they are effectively de-politicised. Rieder and Silke (2020) found that news coverage of key economic issues to be 'largely presented through a "market-oriented frame"', reflecting the fact that 'core assumptions of neoliberal economic theories, such as market self-regulation' permeate news, politics and opinion sections of the press and the business sections. This tendency to leave the terms of the debate in place can lead to a lack of pluralism. Rieder and Silke (2020), for example, observed a 'manifest absence of economic pluralism in policy discussion, and of journalistic knowledge of heterodox economic theories and ideas', which they suggest constitutes 'markers of a flawed and far from complete or "pluralistic" mediated public sphere when it comes to economic affairs' (p.101). In the UK, McGovern (2020) found that 'no new and radical inequality-related frames have entered the UK media discourse in the last decades', and Smith Ochoa (2020) found that 'even those who expressed concern about inequality usually proclaimed that it could be addressed with established policy measures' (in Vaughan et al., forthcoming).

Arrese (2018) observed a tendency in the coverage of austerity across the EU press for a 'logic of elite to elite communication' which foregrounds the views of political, business and financial institutions and delimits possible alternative frames for understanding the economy (in Rieder and Silke, 2020, p.103). Bennet (2011) referred to this as a 'journalism bubble', defined as 'an incautious embrace of prevailing wisdom or argument, a tendency to discount dissent, and perhaps a measure of at least subconscious, institutional self-interest in certain outcomes, such as a "better" story' (in Rieder and Silke, 2020). Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001) identified this as a form of 'neo-liberal newspeak' that serves to 'de-politicise what they define as extreme neoliberal economic theories which effectively closed off perspectives from competing genres of economic journalism' (in Rieder and Silke, 2020, p.97).

Thomas (2017) found an example of this 'closing off' of perspectives in some UK TV coverage of the so-called Barclays 'shareholder revolt' in 2009. He described how a 'conflict' lens used by the BBC, ITV and Sky (in different ways and to different degrees) served to foreclose discussion about the 'wider logics of capitalism', which he found were 'generally ignored' (p.108). Vaughan and Kerr's (forthcoming) exploration of the visual element of media and campaigning frames of wealth inequality found prevailing media visual representations of wealth and the wealthy to be consciously removed from or distanced from processes of inequality-making, avoiding images that referred outwards to Beckert's (2022) 'institutions and processes of wealth-making', and instead resolutely centring **objects** that reify capital, such as yachts, luxury cars or apartments.

Two articles that analysed the media engagement with Piketty's Capital (2014) also attest to the retrenchment towards forms of coverage that do not destabilise grand narratives. Rieder et al. (2020) found that the press was much more engaged with and supportive of the **descriptive analytics** of Piketty (that is, his description of the long-run patterns of distribution) than with his policy proposals, which implicated current practices, ideologies and individuals. Grabner et al. (2020) found that despite being a key issue raised by Piketty, the failure of wages to keep pace with productivity since the 1980s was not addressed in the media coverage at all (p.150), re-affirming the tendency to avoid facets of inequality that have structural policy implications.

Grisold and Thiene (2017) concluded their review by suggesting that 'Mass media play an important role in mediating economic events, trends, and stories, but this research suggests that they are certainly not neutral with respect to the shaping of preferences concerning public policies intended to alter inequality' (p.4278). Question 3 (below) will look at how these tendencies materially shape the formation of preferences.

1.4 Wealth inequality is communicated in the media through advantage or disadvantage frames, which give relative salience in each case to the privileged group (those who are wealthy) or the unprivileged group (those who are poor)

Inequality frames are 'linguistic differences in descriptions of inequality that focus on either relative disadvantage (disadvantage frames) or relative advantage (advantage frames)' (Dover, 2022, p.747). All inequalities can be described using either and both. A growing literature shows that the choice of frame has 'important implications for how we perceive, conceptualise, and seek to resolve inequalities' (ibid.).

Advantage frames tend to predominate when talking about wealth inequality. Jun et al. (2022) analysed a corpus of 18,349 newspaper articles in the US and found that wealth inequality is largely communicated in the media through advantage frames (that is, presented as a question of those who are rich having more than those who are poor, not those who are poor having less than those who are rich). Jun et al. note that this is distinct from racial and gender inequality, which tend to be communicated using **disadvantage** frames. Their article links this to wealth equality being seen as legitimate, and race and gender inequality being seen as illegitimate.

We have deferred a fuller conversation of the use of frames to question 2 below. Here we simply note that advantage and disadvantage frames are key parts of 'how' economic inequality is communicated by the media. Because they are strongly linked to public perceptions of the legitimacy or otherwise of specific inequalities, the selection of one or the other has material effects on the shaping of public opinion around questions of redistribution. We would also like to note here a much longer history of scholarship on representations of poverty, and a much longer media tradition of using images of poverty that is not an explicit part of this review.

1.5 Frames that define wealth inequality as a problem to be solved can be displaced by alternate frames that focus either on less structurally 'threatening' forms of inequality (for example, health inequality), or frames that emphasise solutions (for example, taxation)

Conversations about wealth and legitimacy tend to be mediated in **campaigning** through discussions about wealth tax or inheritance tax (Hebden and Palmer, 2020; Hebden et al. 2020). Weakliem and Biggert (2013) argued that opinions about these taxes are 'a useful way to evaluate opinions about redistribution away from the rich as [they fall] on only a small number of people' (p.69). The **research** literature also tends to mediate explorations of opinions about wealth inequality by examining opinions about wealth taxes, which are assumed to be a useful indicator of whether or not people feel inequality is illegitimate (and therefore should be reduced) or legitimate (and should be left as it is).

Some literature notes the effects of displacing broader questions of resource inequality onto narrow (or alternative) policy areas. This literature describes instances where the narrative around economic inequality has been guided onto terrain that i) seeks to reduce the risk to the status quo by focusing on downstream effects of upstream inequality-making processes (Lynch, 2020), or ii) funnels wider issues around economic resource equity into narrow questions of taxation (Prabhakar, 2023). Lynch (2020) looked at the displacement of questions of economic and social inequality onto a discourse of health inequality in the late 1990s and 2000s in the UK, France and Finland. New centre-left governments who did not want to engage with old Marxian discourses around redistribution could instead use health as an alternative domain for 'solving' questions of inequality. In so doing, they were able to leverage policy levers that did not utter taboo words (such as 'redistribution'), but at the same time were doomed to fail because of their refusal to consider upstream economic determinants of downstream health outcomes.

Prabhakar (2023) looked at the Treasury's rejection of the 2020 Wealth Tax Commission proposals for a one-off wealth tax. The tax had been presented by the commission representatives as a means of raising revenue to compensate for Covid-19 expenditure. This ultimately meant that once the case for efficiency was dismissed by the Treasury (on the basis that addressing the national debt was not urgent and economic growth should be prioritised instead) the argument for the tax per se was lost. Prabhakar suggests that making a stronger case for the tax as **a moral response to wealth inequality** would have been more effective.

1.6 Those who are rich are frequently legitimised in the media but their role in determining the rules that protect their wealth is less well covered. Those who are poor are often judged less generously, and their agency in determining their own economic outcomes tends to be emphasised at the expense of structural causes

Grabner et al. (2020) found that the rich were mostly referred to in the media in abstract terms – as the 'richest 10%', 'the rich', 'super-rich people', 'extraordinary rich' and 'billionaires' – or in class terms – money aristocracy, ruling elite, plutocrats, tycoons, dynasties, oligarchs. Their active role in determining laws and regulations that enable their wealth to grow and endure was ‘a significant silence in all but a very few of the relevant articles’, suggesting an endemic failure to interconnect the political and economic spheres (Grabner et al., 2020, p.161–7). Grisold and Preston’s (2020) multi-country study of media coverage around Piketty’s research concurs. It found that the rich are largely represented as the passive beneficiaries of inequality (rather than agents creating it); when represented as taking an active role they are more frequently represented as supporting poorer citizens, for example by ‘creating wealth’. This is closely articulated to pessimism about the capacity of the state to solve complex problems, and ‘entrepreneurialism’ as the means to achieve growth.

Serafini and Macguire (2019) also identified the tendency in media discourse to distance the wealthy from their role in shaping the processes that sustain them. They observe that representations of the super-rich can ‘individualise and naturalise inequality’ in a way that constitutes ‘discursive misdirection’ in which the structural processes that reproduce advantage are obscured (p.5). This echoes Jaworski and Thurlow (2017), who have described how the individualising of wealth helps to legitimate the structural processes that underpin extreme concentrations of wealth. Media portrayals of the super-rich present them as extraordinary or exceptional and deflect attention from the privilege of the many other less publicly visible, highly affluent people. Vaughan and Kerr (forthcoming) looked at the tendency for media organisations to use images of wealth that are uncritical, and that represent wealth as (physically) distanced from processes of accumulation and/or its (negative) effects.

Kendall’s (2011, 2016) work on framing in US news and TV entertainment identified 4 distinct positive frames around the wealthy: ‘(1) the consensus frame: the wealthy are like everyone else; (2) the admiration frame: the wealthy are generous and caring people; (3) the emulation frame: the wealthy personify the American Dream; and (4) the price-tag frame: the wealthy believe in the gospel of materialism’. Littler (2019) used an extended analysis of 2 images of Donald Trump and Nigel Farage to reveal how media narratives and imagery helped to reconcile excessive and flamboyant wealth with the concept of merit, thereby calling on cultural codes that help to legitimise inequality through a version of Kendall’s ‘consensus frame’ (Kendall, 2011). Littler introduces the 2 men as examples of ‘normcore plutocrats’ – ultra-wealthy individuals who ‘attempt to maintain and increase their power and wealth by performing ordinariness’ (Littler 2018 in Littler 2019, p.16), a media trope which helps to elide ‘the inequalities that narratives of meritocracy obscure’ (Littler 2019, p.26) by activating the idea of ‘everyone having the opportunity to make it, if only they try hard enough’ (ibid.). Kuskoff et al. (2023) described how the media participates in the legitimisation of wealth and the wealthy through positive frames for anti-poverty philanthropy lead by wealthy donors (p.158), a version of Kendall's (2011) 'admiration' frame.

Media processes of legitimising wealth and the wealthy sometimes focus on the sources of wealth. Drawing on a unique sample of 899 press articles from 8 different media outlets in Germany published between 2014 and 2018, Waitkus and Wallaschek (2022) found a 'generous' media debate in relation to wealth and the wealthy. The frames they identified revealed that sources of wealth (inheritance, investment, entrepreneurship) were used 'to highlight business owners' deep economic relevance to the German economy'. They found that the moral evaluation of personal conduct was less present in the media in relation to wealthy business owners, 'and, when it is present, is rarely negative'.

The framing of the poor tends to be less generous. Rose and Baumgartner (2013) drew a distinction between **thematic frames** which highlight social trends, and **episodic frames**, which highlight individuals and their behaviours (in Epp and Jennings, 2020, p.634, emphasis ours). The literature points to the dominance of episodic framing for issues relating to poverty and the poor, which tends to focus on individual behaviours. Episodic frames (notably produced through narratives of individual struggle/hardship) tend to shift responsibility to the individual. Their use has been shown to evoke less generous attitudes toward welfare and those who are poor (Iyengar, 1990; 1994 in Epp and Jennings, 2020, p.634). Harkins and Lugo-Ocando (2016) provided an example of the use of this type of episodic framing through a close reading and content analysis of 3,431 news articles in broadsheets and tabloids published in the UK between 1984 and 2014. They found re-engagement with a version of classical Malthusianism, which foregrounds individual responsibility and the inherent degenerate tendencies of poor people if not encouraged to show self-discipline and restraint. They found that its use by the media as a frame went hand in hand with the sidelining of discussions of poverty as being caused by inequality. The authors argue that the media concentrates on 'manifestations of poverty as a way of displacing inequality from the news agenda and public debates' (p.4).

Grisold and Thiene (2020) described a body of critical scholarly literature dealing with issues related to inequality which focuses on media representations of poverty and the poor. They observed a preponderance of frames that present poverty as an individual problem rather than as a societal issue rooted in economic and political inequality. The literature they cite includes Limbert and Bullock (2009), who observed that the media coverage of welfare cuts presents them as successful policies that reduce dependency on government support. Schifferes and Knowles' recent book, The Media and Inequality (2022), includes reflection from Peter Golding on how negative portrayals of poverty have endured in the popular UK press over the past 40 years. By contrast, Toolan's work (2018, Toolan et al., 2022) on inequality in the British press highlights changes over that 40-year time period, but emphasises a drift towards more individualistic causes and solutions of poverty and inequality.

Edmiston (2018) recognised a version of this contrastive paradigm in the UK and New Zealand in coverage of inequality that problematises the behaviours and orientations of those experiencing deprivation, whilst lauding the character of the relatively affluent (Edmiston, 2017 in Edmiston, 2018, p.984).

1.7 Those who are rich are sometimes the target of anti-elitist critique – particularly when they are perceived not to be playing by the same rules as everyone else

Although wealth is often portrayed positively, as shown in section 1.6, the literature also provides examples of negative portrayals of some forms of wealth and some behaviours of the wealthy. Kendall's work (2011, 2016), for example, identified 2 occasional frames that negatively portray the rich in the US: '(1) the sour-grapes frame: the wealthy are unhappy and dysfunctional; and (2) the bad-apple frame: some wealthy people are scoundrels and downright criminals'. Serafini and Macguire (2019) observed the media use of (negative) 'get rich quick' frames. Jaworski and Thurlow (2017) noted an entertainment media focus on making the rich the target of anti-elitist critique, rather than the systems that sustain them. They identify 2 media stances towards the super-rich – the 'celebratory stance' (dealt with in section 1.5) and the 'derisive stance' (p.282), which they explore through an engagement with reality TV. Here, excessive consumption behaviours are derided as 'disgusting' and 'pathological' (p.282), with particular scorn reserved for perceived 'new money' (ibid., p.283). Jaworski and Thurlow reflected that the pathologising of individual wealthy people locates the problem at this level, 'rather than in systems', leading to a 'full decontextualized, de-historicised account of the Super-Rich…' (ibid., p.284).

Some research has identified the use of examples of excess to indicate a lifestyle distanced from 'ordinary' people. Grabner et al. (2020) noted that although coverage of the rich is quantitatively small, it is 'rich in examples of vivid description and glossy pictorality' with unusual spending behaviours used to indicate lifestyles removed from those of ordinary people and 'conveying the message that they are lavish while others are badly lacking consumption possibilities' (p.162). Bramall (2023) focused in particular on the way that media discourse around tax avoidance has repositioned the wealthy in the years following the 2008 financial crisis: anger about tax avoidance has served in some ways to articulate grievances with the functioning of the neoliberal capitalist order, particularly through a focus on wealthy elites. This is exemplified by Thomas's (2018) analysis of the TV coverage of the Barclay's shareholder revolt. He described a BBC News report in which, 'Surrounded by bottles of champagne, Robert Peston describes a "big buck bonus culture" within the banking sector, connoting excess and affluence' (p.107). However, Bramall also notes, in line with the observations made in section 1.2 about the reformist tendency of coverage of inequality, that this repositioning of the wealthy has so far 'not supported the consolidation of diverse grievances against the current economic system into a general political demand' (2023).

1.8 Wealth inequality is often understood visually, whether through data visualisation, heuristic metaphors, or reference points in everyday life. Yet the distinct role of the visual in the effects of framing is not yet well represented in academic literature.

There is limited literature specifically on the role of images in framing wealth inequality. Rieder and Silke (2020) applied social semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis to media discourse formation on the economy. Critically, they noted that 'discourses are formed and shaped by texts, written, oral, **or visual**' (p.92, emphasis ours). Recognising images as texts that participate in the production of discourses highlights their key role in '… discussing and encoding different perspectives and of taking stances for and against discourses' (ibid.).

It is striking, then, that our corpus did not capture many articles that focused on the role of visuals in the media framing of wealth inequality using either experimental methods or in theoretical work. Savage (2021) recognised the importance of visuals – whether these be sparklines, descriptions of a 'field', or fine art – in capturing and communicating the spatial and/or temporal complexity of wealth inequality. Kerr (forthcoming) explored the 'field of visibility' of wealth inequality in official Job Centre Plus images, through the work of a range of critical photographers, and through a consideration of the economic segregation of urban spaces, as a way of drawing attention to the government effects of what we see and the spaces in which things are seen. The significance of the visual component of framing inequality is underscored in 1 experimental study by Hughes (2015), who compared differently scaled graphs of income-shares time series data to show that different visual presentation of the same underlying data could result in a 40% decrease in support for intervention among conservative respondents. Several articles looked at the importance of the spatial (and by implication, visual) locality in the formation of perceptions and preferences related to inequality (for example, Minkoff and Lyons, 2019; García-Castro et al., 2020).

Vaughan and Kerr (forthcoming) combined a visual content analysis of campaigning and media images related to wealth inequality, with a social semiotics analysis of 2 sets of images from a new corpus. They identified a paucity of **critical** visual content in media and campaigning organisations' work on wealth inequality, with stock images of wealth and luxury often used to illustrate such critical media content. They showed that news media tend to visualise wealth inequality using images that emphasise wealth, whereas civil society organisations tend to use contrast images (that is, those that contrast poverty with wealth). Thomas (2017) looked at the interplay of image and spoken word in TV broadcasts focusing on wealth, describing the imagery as 'highly salient for viewers' (Gilens, 1996 in Thomas, 2017) to the extent that it can even 'take precedence over the story itself' (Robinson et al., 2009, p.15, in Thomas, 2017, p.107). As part of their exploration of the mediatisation of the super-rich, and in particular, their analysis of the 'celebratory stance' of the media (as opposed to the 'derisive stance' which they contrast it to), Jaworski and Thurlow (2017) noted that the relationship between images and text in online newspaper articles about the super-rich 'make no link, or only very tenuous links, between their content and the accompanying photograph' (p.280–81). They also noted the use of stock photographs, and the tendency for them to function as 'single-item lists of what it takes to be super-rich', describing them as 'a surface-level, iconization of Super-Richness which erases both the Super-Rich themselves as it does the causes and effects of the extreme wealth gap' (ibid.).

Metaphors that evoke images can be effective in developing complex systems thinking. Irvin (2019) looked at the use of words to evoke images (p.434). Thibodeau et al. (2016) explored the potential role of highly visual systematic metaphors (for example, the economy as a failing organ), which not only 'evoke images' in the way alluded to by Irvin above, but also induce 'systems-thinking and [influence] reasoning … in terms of complex causal relations' (p.225). This is the kind of system-thinking (that is, shifting public understanding from the 'economy as a simple container', to the economy as a complex and interconnected system for meeting people's needs and delivering good lives) that NEON et al. saw as necessary for building consensus for change (2018, p.37). Thibodeau (2016) showed that the use of systemic metaphors helps promote this sort of reasoning by highlighting the dynamic causal structure of complex systems, as opposed to metaphors that highlight the relatively superficial features of systems (that is, a distinction between metaphors that emphasise the complexity of target domains and metaphors that simplify them).

Two articles in our corpus used visual tools in experiments. One study (Kraus et al., 2022) found them to be comparatively more effective than other (non-visual) tools used in the same work. Kraus et al. (2022) used images in framing experiments: a pictograph treatment asked respondents to compare a mountain of gold coins held by White families to the amount held by Black families that would approximate contemporary levels of wealth inequality (p.8). They attribute the success of this treatment in part to the fact that 'methods that reduce computation can increase accuracy' (p.9). Out of 10 different treatments, the pictograph representation of Black–White wealth in gold coins produced the most accurate estimates of racial wealth inequality, which the authors speculatively attributed to the pictograph making the concept of wealth more concrete, and allowing respondents to report their intuitive understanding of the current state of racial economic equality. Summers et al. (2022) asked participants in deliberative focus groups to represent all of the income in the UK in a given year using 100 Lego bricks and 10 silhouette figures, which participants were told represent all people in the UK, arranged from lowest to highest income group. Participants worked together to divide the bricks among the figures to reflect what they collectively believed the distribution of income looked like (p.284).

Overall, we find the role of visual components of wealth inequality frames is under-represented in our sample. There is arguably insufficient focused scholarly work to underpin an evidence base for new directions in visual strategic communications in the service of social change work, or to evaluate the work that images are currently doing for social change work.

2. What do we know about the effects of textual and visual frames on public perceptions of wealth inequality?

This question is concerned with the effect of frames on the perception of economic inequality, and in determining support for redistribution. We note that the set of literature that uses experimental methods to test the effects of different frames makes up a significant part of our corpus. However, the empirical testing of frames is only 1 part of a much wider literature that explores how social problems are conceived of, conceptualised and engaged with.

Not all of this literature originates in the social sciences or uses experimental methods (for example, from philosophy, see Robeyns 2019; 2024), and some does not use the language of framing. We have tried to represent this richness in our synthesis, but we nonetheless note the dominance of empirical work that originates in the social sciences.

2.1 Frames affect perceptions of the scale of inequality, but more

fundamentally they guide the public towards a specific understanding of what the problem and solution might be.

2.2 Frames affect whether or how individuals legitimise or seek remedy for inequality.

2.3 Frames are particularly important in contested policy areas such as wealth taxation.

2.4 Advantage frames (those who are rich have more than those who are poor) and disadvantage frames (those who are poor have less than those who are rich) each has a distinct effect on how people judge and seek remedy for inequality.

2.5 Advantage frames can produce threat responses amongst members of privileged groups, which may reduce rather than increase support for redistribution.

2.6 There are ways to use advantage frames to increase opposition to high levels of wealth inequality by targeting the specific forms of wealth/ wealth ownership that the public feels are illegitimate.

2.7 Prevailing frames can make people feel fatalistic.

2.8 Popular protest has the potential to challenge dominant narratives and expand frames.

2.1 Frames affect perceptions of the scale of inequality, but more fundamentally they guide the public towards a specific understanding of what the problem and solution might be.

The National Centre for Social Research (NCSR) (2020) argued that ‘shifts in perceptions of their scale, nature and acceptability seem to reflect changes in their portrayal by politicians and the media, rather than necessarily always following trends in official figures’ (Bennett, 2023, p.10). Bennett concludes that this suggests framing is ‘at least one important part of the mix of influences on public attitudes’ (ibid.).

Frames can serve to naturalise certain policy responses (for example, austerity) and make others (for example, wealth tax) ‘unintelligible’. Berry (2018) looked at the impact of economic news coverage on public support for austerity measures and found that the coverage was successful in leading people to see ‘the crisis and deficit as a problem of increased public spending rather than the recession itself’ and, consequently, ‘cuts to public spending as unavoidable’ (in Rieder and Silke, 2020, p.103). Rieder and Silke (2020) cited several other studies that explore the way in which the media in the UK and Ireland actively participated in producing a narrative that legitimated harsh public policy austerity responses because of ‘unpalatable economic realities and the need for civic discipline’ (Irish Times, editorial, 18 November 2008 in Mercille, 2013) (p.102).

Party sponsors of frames are increasingly influential. Slothus and de Vreese (2010) showed that people 'react more strongly towards the party **sponsor** on a partisan conflict issue' (of which wealth taxation is one), and that 'opinion among the more politically aware is driven more by the partisan **source** than by substantive frame **content**, whereas the opposite is evident among the less aware' (p.631, emphasis ours). This means that in the field of wealth inequality, the content and the source are important, for different reasons and different constituencies. However, both help to 'define the terms of political choice' (Sniderman, 2000 in Slothus and de Vreese, 2010, p.631). This finding is corroborated by more recent work by Yen and Zampelli (2022), again in the US, which showed that party policy positions are increasingly defining in shaping public opinion.

2.2 Frames affect whether or how individuals legitimise or seek remedy for inequality.

Epp and Jennings (2020) found that rising inequality has 'coincided with a dramatic shift in the language used to discuss poverty' (p.631), through an observable move away from social failure frames and towards personal failures frames. Personal failure frames are shown to make people less supportive of welfare. The authors found a 'robust statistical relationship between the prevalence of personal-failure frames and public attitudes about welfare spending' (ibid., p.642).

Considering the federal estate tax in the US, Birney et al. (2008) found that 'when the issue [which they define as of 'low salience'] was framed as a matter of fairness, there was support for repeal. When it was framed as a matter of priorities, there was support for reform, not repeal'. This suggests that frames can shift opinion not simply between 2 poles (legitimate/illegitimate), but also towards more nuanced conclusions (legitimate if …). Beckert (2022) found that there is public support for wealth taxes, but that 'results are often dependent on the framing of the survey questions' (Bastani and Waldenstrom, 2021; Fisman et al., 2020).

The choice of frame can influence how individuals seek to remedy inequality (Dover 2022). Lowery et al. (2009) found that when individuals learn about an inequality framed in terms of a disadvantage (that is, some people having less than others), they 'tend to believe the advantaged party is being given "fair" treatment while the disadvantaged party is being given unfair poor treatment'. When individuals learn about the same inequality within an advantage frame, they tend to believe the disadvantaged party is being given 'fair' treatment, while the advantaged party is being given unfair favourable treatment (in Dover, 2022, pp.748–9). This suggests that inequality frames 'can influence **how** individuals will seek to remedy inequality'

(emphasis ours).
Disadvantage frames encourage people to propose remedies that help the disadvantaged group; advantage frames encourage people to propose remedies that harm the advantaged group (Dover, 2022, p.749). Dietze and Craig (2021) found that participants in experiments were more responsive to disadvantage-reducing rather than advantage-reducing frames, and Dallinger (2021) found that framing a wealth tax for companies as risking jobs and investments rather than as reducing national debt, reduced support.

García-Sánchez et al. (2020) suggested that framing support for redistribution in particular ways ‘might trigger different socio-psychological mechanisms that motivate people to endorse (or reject) economic redistribution’ (p.130). Overall, the literature tends to confirm Kuziemko et al.’s (2015) conclusions that ‘views on an inheritance tax [often used as a proxy indicator of support for wealth inequality] may be sensitive to framing and information’ (p.8), and that they are responsive to prior beliefs. Prabhakar (2009) concluded that, for the UK, the way that debates are set up or framed in relation to inheritance tax ‘might impact upon public attitudes’. He observed as a minimum that the act of allowing people to consider the merits of different taxes opened up new space for public debates (p.241).

Frames that individualise wealth can increase support for redistribution. Robeyns et al. (2021) found that when extreme wealth was described in the abstract, there was less support for government intervention than when it was presented in the context of an individual (for example, Jeff Bezos). They found that over two-thirds of respondents (69%) agreed that if the government had to choose between cutting services on the most vulnerable people in society and increasing taxes on the income of the rich and super-rich, they should choose a tax increase. Only 12% strongly disagreed or disagreed. Robeyns et al.’s hypothesis – that citizens ‘may be unwilling to support policies that limit a person’s wealth **if it is unclear what society would gain**’ (ibid., p.129, emphasis ours) – is a useful insight for campaigning strategists.

Positive frames can have negative effects in the presence of prior negative beliefs. Fatemi et al. (2008) found a counter-intuitive effect of positive frames for an estate tax in the US in the presence of negative prior beliefs about it. The research found that a positive frame for a tax that a person has an existing negative attitude about is likely to make her even less supportive of it. There is also evidence to suggest that it is possible to tap into support for wealth tax if existing negative beliefs are not activated during deliberative activity: Fisman et al. (2020) found, for example, that despite plenty of evidence showing that large majorities of Americans are opposed to the estate tax, experimental results in which participants were asked to review distribution data and then agree on combined income and wealth tax rates demonstrated 'robust support for taxes on inheritance'. On average, participants preferred a 0.8% tax rate on saved wealth, a 3% tax rate on inherited wealth, and a 13–15% tax on income. These results suggest that there is support for taxes on wealth, but that frames are instrumental in compounding opposition or building support.

Jun et al. (2022) found that '"chronic use" of a disadvantage frame for race and gender inequality reinforces the perception that these inequalities are driven by processes of animus towards racial minority individuals and women, as opposed to processes of advantage, privilege, favouritism and help towards White individuals and men' (pp.7-8). This contrasts with the more prevalent use of the advantage frame to describe wealth inequality, which is more likely to create the impression that 'wealth inequality is driven … by processes that boost wealthy individuals than by processes that block the advancement and deteriorate the standing of the poor' (p.8). Jun et al.'s conclusion is that both frames are faulty and that intergroup inequality is caused by both advantaging and disadvantaging processes (p.8).

2.3 Frames are particularly important in contested policy areas such as wealth taxation.

Baker and Murphy (2020) similarly described a prevailing 'orthodox economics' narrative of the economy as an 'interplay of natural forces', rather than as a system that is 'programmed'.

The framing of wealth inequality is particularly important because we do not **perceive** the full range of wealth inequality in our day-to-day lives, so we need to be **informed** about it. This process of informing involves the 'selective' mobilisation of information (Grisold and Thiene, 2017). Because the public does not necessarily expect the government to play a role in achieving economic equality, particularly in countries with strong system-justifying beliefs, the role of the frame in establishing what kind of problem wealth inequality is, is pivotal (García-Sánchez et al. 2020).

A significant body of literature in this part of the thematic review relates to how debates about taxation (whether to reform or repeal) have been framed in political and media discourse. Frames, and particularly politically partisan 'party frames' (Slothus and de Vreese, 2010), are particularly active in contested policy areas like wealth taxation where they are mobilised in the battle to define the terms of the debate and to swing public opinion towards or away from reform. Bell and Entman (2011), for example, looked at the media representation of tax cuts during the Bush administrations 2001–03. They found that two-thirds of media coverage on the tax reform framed potential beneficiaries in undefined ‘collectivistic’ terms as ‘all Americans’, and that the cuts were presented as boosting growth. Almost no attention was paid to the detrimental impact on the federal budget.

Bell and Entman’s finding was echoed in the German context by Graber et al. (2020), who found that a particularly dominant frame foregrounded the potentially negative economic consequences for the national economy of a wealth tax. Similarly, Limbert and Bullock’s (2009) discourse analysis of the coverage of tax cuts in 5 major newspapers in the US found that the cuts were presented as important contributions to economic wellbeing, and that individuals who may be subject to the tax were portrayed as people who had worked hard for their money and deserved to keep it.

The literature showed how special interest groups with media influence can shape frames to deliver specific beneficial outcomes. Emmenegger and Marx (2019) looked at how 3 national German-speaking newspapers in Switzerland framed the issue of inheritance taxation ahead of a direct single issue national vote. They found that business lobby and interest groups worked with media and politicians to establish a frame that equated inheritance taxation with a threat to economic stability, **which affects everyone** (echoing the previously cited study from Bell and Entman, 2011). This gained a higher weighting in forming opinions than the desire for equality.

Kneafsey and Regan (2022) describe a similar role for the media in framing attitudes towards corporate tax avoidance in Ireland. Here, invocations of national economic interest could be used to displace fairness and morality considerations (in this case the impact of aggressive tax competition on EU neighbours).

Dammerer et al.’s study (2023) of the Austrian media’s coverage of wealth tax debates from 2005 to 2020 showed that the majority of commentary articles were negative (69%) rather than positive (22%), driven by a coalition of authors from conservative political parties, economic and academic experts, and business lobby groups.

A content analysis of media by Hilmar and Sachweh (2022) examined the debate between parties in Germany around the abolition in 1997 and potential reinstatement of the net personal wealth tax. It found that consistency in framing is highly effective. Politicians and sympathetic media on the right and left mobilised different frames. The right used a metaphor of the ‘economy as an organism whose life force is capital’, making the case that reducing the flow of capital endangers all of society. The left talked about a wealth tax benefitting specific groups (rather than society as a whole). Hilmar and Sachweh found that the right’s position was ultimately more effective because it was more consistent, and because its core messaging was made relevant to all members of society. This result repeats that of Graetz and Shapiro (2005), who found that in the US, defenders of the estate tax had no consistent narrative to counter conservative attacks on inheritance tax (in Prabhakar, 2009, p.231).

2.4 Advantage frames (those who are rich have more than those who are poor) and disadvantage frames (those who are poor have less than those who are rich) each have a distinct effect on how people judge and seek remedy for inequality.

In section 1.4 we introduced the idea of positive and negative frames as key mechanisms for communicating inequality. A significant body of work explores their respective effects on public perceptions of the legitimacy of specific inequalities.

Bruckmüller et al. (2017) found that advantage frames reduce support for redistribution by legitimating high levels of wealth inequality. When the same difference was framed as either an advantaged group having more or as a disadvantaged group having less, participants in experimental conditions perceived bigger differences as less legitimate when the differences were framed as the disadvantaged group having less. However, 'When the same difference was framed as the advantaged group having more, how much better off the advantaged group appeared to be did not influence legitimacy ratings' (Bruckmüller et al., 2017, p.776).

Bruckmüller et al. also found that if the focus is on those who are rich while evaluating inequality (the advantage frame), 'it matters less how much more than others they have – because even if the differences are substantial, one mostly thinks of something positive (for example, wealth), which in and of itself is not problematic, and hence, not necessarily illegitimate' (p.768). The positive focus on the rich made positive aspects of inequality salient (that is, how well the rich were doing). Advantage frames legitimate high levels of inequality (Bruckmüller et al., 2017), and they predominate in the US media (Jun et al., 2022).

Other research has found that advantage frames can also **increase** support for redistribution. Findings from an influential small-scale (N=79) online panel survey undertaken by Chow and Galek (2012) evaluated the effect of inequality frames on support for redistributive taxation policies in the US. It found that conservatives' opposition to raising taxes on the rich reduced when differences were framed as those who are rich making more than those who are poor (p.1468). When the same difference was framed as poorer people making less than richer people (or when no information was given to respondents about inequality), the more conservative participants were, the higher their opposition to raising taxes.

These divergent findings illustrate the issue raised in our introduction to this review: a proliferation of studies that ask the question in different ways, and which test for complex and diverse variables, are unlikely to produce data that is repeatable or transferable. They are useful, however, to illustrate the range of variables that intersect as the public evaluates and reasons about inequality, and they provide evidence that how groups are positioned relative to one another shapes their views.

2.5 Advantage frames can produce threat responses amongst members of privileged groups, which may reduce rather than increase support for redistribution.

Dover (2022) found that inequality frames can influence how those belonging to the group that is advantaged or disadvantaged by a form of inequality feel about themselves and their group (p.747). She found that members of privileged groups are less likely to use advantage frames when they are describing an illegitimate inequality than when they are describing a legitimate inequality (p.758). This is because an advantage frame makes the inequality more 'self-relevant' to the privileged group, whereas disadvantage frames 'deflect the threat'. In experimental conditions, Dover found that the privilege status, **not** something related to a specific identity (being male, being White), was the key variable.

Edmiston (2018) also addressed the way privileged groups respond to potential threats to the legitimacy of their status. He found that lived experience of relative deprivation was associated with a richer sociological imagination that was more readily used to make sense of intergroup relations. By contrast, he found that lived experience of affluence was associated with a less rich sociological imagination, with richer people less likely to perceive or acknowledge '"the interplay of individuals and society" in the structuration of outcome, agency, and opportunity' (Mills, 1959, p.3 in Edmiston, 2018, p.985).

This finding has implications for how the advantaged and disadvantaged groups in relations of inequality are articulated in strategic communications, and the kinds of messaging they are likely to respond to.

2.6 There are ways to use advantage frames to increase opposition to high levels of wealth inequality by targeting the specific forms of wealth/wealth ownership that the public feels are illegitimate.

Qualified public support for even high levels of wealth inequality and the extremely wealthy is a key finding in Davis et al. (2020) and Hebden and Palmer (2020) and Hebden et al. (2020). However, if wealth is felt to be illegitimate, or the wealthy are not felt to be demonstrating prosocial behaviours, then the situation changes.

Hansen (2023) provided a useful theoretical framework for considering these issues through the notion of 'co-operation'. She made the case for public opinion about redistribution as having 2 dimensions: giving to those who are poor, and taking from those who are rich. In experiments with Danish and US citizens, she found that attitudes about taking from those who are rich are mainly driven by perceptions of their prosociality – that is, whether they are greedy or generous, **not** the degree of effort/work they put in to acquire their wealth. This contrasts with public opinion about giving to those who are poor that is **mainly** driven by perceptions of effort. Hansen described this an 'effort asymmetry in public opinion about redistribution: citizens are less concerned about the efforts of the rich than about the efforts of the poor' (p.228).

Hansen's results suggest that the force of the meritocratic narrative in legitimising wealth could be blunted in the presence of non-cooperation. They show 'that the perception that the rich are prosocial increases opposition to taxing them and that this effect is stronger than the effect of the perception that the rich make an effort' (p.220). Conversely, perceptions that the rich are not prosocial decreases opposition to taxing them.

Hansen also found that 'while compassion shapes attitudes about giving to the poor, the emotions of admiration and envy shape attitudes about taking from the rich' (p.217), with admiration for the wealthy reducing opposition to inequality and increasing opposition to taxing the rich (p.218). These findings suggest that framing extreme wealth as an (unfair) outcome of non-cooperation (even if the wealth owners are hard working) might stimulate reformist or radical responses rather than system-justifying ones because, 'People in cooperative systems … face a problem with noncooperators, who do not expend any effort to contribute to the collective' (p.219).

Tax avoidance and evasion constitute examples of Hansen's (2023) 'non-cooperative' behaviour, which can stimulate public aversion. Perret (2020) found that high-profile data leaks (for example, the Panama papers; the Pandora papers) have made the injustice of tax avoidance and evasion more present. This has stimulated concern with, if not determination to act against, wealth inequality. NEON (2018) and Hebden and Palmer (2020) also documented a strong aversion to tax evasion and avoidance and see this as a significant tax justice or 'Fairness' campaigning opportunity.

Activating aversion to non-cooperation is only possible if people are aware that it is taking place. This can be difficult in cases of non-cooperation by the very wealthy, which can be hard to see. Condon and Wichowksy (2020) found that ‘people who make social comparisons between themselves and someone who is socioeconomically advantaged perceive their own status as lower, assess their own socioeconomic status more accurately, and become more supportive of social welfare spending’ (p.151). However, they also noted that this form of comparison is currently hampered by ‘structural factors that keep rising upper-tail inequality socially invisible’ (ibid.). This causes them to make a case for a scholarly shift in focus to make upper-tail inequality more visible. They also hypothesise that social insecurity produced by growing inequality could deter Americans from making the upward comparisons that might otherwise induce support for government-led redistribution (p.158). This adds to the literature on the dynamic created as inequality grows but opposition to it does not (p.149).

2.7 Prevailing frames can make people feel fatalistic.

Survey data from a UK sample presented in NEON et al. (2018) suggested that the current ways of framing the economy can make people feel fatalistic about it. This sense of fatalism can tend to increase acceptance of current levels of inequality, as people feel powerless to change what they can see as a ‘rigged’ system.

Work on the broader media framing of the economy like that of Rieder and Silke (2020), which found that reportage is ‘largely presented through a “market oriented frame”’ (p.98), or on the macro framing of the role of government in the economy like that of Baker and Murphy (2020), has confirmed this sense of the economy as somehow beyond the control of individuals or collective citizenry. This sense of fatalism is one of the biggest barriers to increasing support for either tax justice or wider economic justice identified by NEON et al. (2018) and Hebden et al. (2020).

In both cases, the public’s tendency to see economic problems as produced by ‘nefarious individuals’ rather than ‘the result of broken institutions and social structures’, and to understand the system as ‘stacked in favour of the very wealthy’ (Hebden et al., 2020, p.6), leads to recommendations which focus on shifting perceptions of the economy away from this closed, rigged system, to one that was designed and can be fixed (or was programmed and can be re-programmed).

2.8 Popular protest has the potential to challenge dominant narratives and expand frames.

Several articles have looked at the influence of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement on how economic inequality was framed and communicated in the media in the early 2000s. To some extent, OWS followed a kind of 'issue-attention cycle' in which initial media enthusiasm transitioned into a focus on conflicts with police, followed by diminishing attention as the intractable underlying problems remained unsolved. Nevertheless, Baumann and Majeed (2020) showed that OWS increased the salience of inequality 'beyond the movement's hot phase' (p.17), and Gaby and Caren (2016) showed that US news media paid more attention to inequality and related issues such as the middle class and the minimum wage in the wake of OWS (p.17, both cited in Vaughan et al., forthcoming).

Bennett et al. (2018) offered a slightly different analysis, emphasising that 'inequality' was less central to the core protesters' demands than the media narrative which consolidated around it, suggesting that 'inequality' could now be a relatively mainstream concept that may end up moderating more concrete or radical movement demands. The fact that few other popular movements are represented in our corpus speaks to OWS being the last significant high-water mark of mass popular protest over wealth inequality.

Section 2: Perceiving, understanding and reacting

3. How does the public perceive and understand wealth inequality?

In line with the observations of the first 2 sections, this section starts much further upstream than understandings of inequality per se (although we do end up there), to focus on how people understand their place in the world relative to peers, and how they understand concepts like the economy and wealth. This is because conceptual cognitive gaps that are arguably in part responsible for the significant gap in perception and understanding between activists and scholars on the one hand, and 'the public' on the other (NEON et al., 2018), start significantly upstream from the concept of inequality. The literature we discuss here addresses broader questions of how different variables (political and ideological views, localities, prior beliefs) are brought to bear and what their respective roles are in forming opinions about inequality. This is key to understanding how framing works as a component in a much richer field of influences.

3.1 Understanding of the economy by members of the public is frequently intuitive and 'thin'.
3.2 Public estimations of levels of economic inequality tend to be inaccurate.
3.3 The public does not demonstrate unconditional support for wealth **equality** and is often strongly supportive of some degree of wealth **inequality**.
3.4 Concern about wealth inequality is higher than support for redistribution – particularly specific redistribution measures.
3.5 People make sense of the world using local references, which are generally more homogenous (and therefore more equal) than national distributions.
3.6 Information matters, particularly in increasing the salience of inequality as a problem, but narratives are also effective, particularly in supporting moral reasoning linked to redistribution preferences.
3.7 The public tends to be more accepting of inequalities they perceive as legitimate or fair – including wealth inequality – and perceptions of legitimacy and fairness can be shaped by prior beliefs, socioeconomic status and political/ideological views.
3.8 Acceptance of inequality is partly related to how people explain

economic outcomes, with internal (individual) explanations leading to higher tolerance for inequality and external (structural) factors leading to the reverse.

3.9 Increased inequality does not straightforwardly increase opposition to inequality.

3.1 Understanding of the economy by members of the public is frequently intuitive and 'thin'.

NEON et al. (2018), Davis et al. (2020), Hebden and Palmer (2020), Hebden et al. (2020) and Rowlingson et al. (2020) all found public understanding of how the economy works to be low in the UK.

Polling and focus groups undertaken as part of the research for NEON et al. (2018) found public understanding of the economy to be intuitive (that is, the system is rigged) and 'thin' (that is, the public does not understand the specific actions taken by powerful elites that perpetuate the broken system). They identified a range of prior beliefs and intuitions held by people in the UK about the economy. Key among these is a view of the economy as being solely about money – a 'national container', rather than a complex and interconnected 'system for meeting people's needs and delivering good lives'.

Tetlow et al. (2020) suggested that this low level of public understanding is compounded by the nature of the election cycle, which encourages competing parties to produce 'fundamentally damaging narratives' that obfuscate the reality of trade-offs between taxation and spend. They cited a former Treasury special advisor's evidence to the Treasury Select Committee inquiry on effective tax policy: 'In most democracies, tax policy is set by the few for the many and serious policy is held among the few. The many are not equipped by the education systems to participate effectively'. The authors concluded that 'Widespread ignorance of the tax system is a major barrier to tax reform' (p.15).

Glennerster's (2012) analysis of the decision-making processes leading up to the abandonment of a wealth tax by the Labour Government in the 1970s highlighted the importance of informed public debate in the development of progressive taxation proposals. He suggested that 'If any new move to tax wealth is to be successful, it will only be so if the public, many of whom are now holders of modest wealth, are convinced that its unequal distribution is "a problem"' (p.246). This is rendered problematic by the low levels of public economic literacy described above. Rowlingson et al. (2020) found that despite taxation being a complex area with initial low levels of public understanding, members of the focus groups who participated in their study 'were very enthusiastic and interested about discussing tax policy', leading them to suggest ‘further public education, debate and deliberative research’ as a means of enabling ‘more informed debate about taxation’ (p.29).

3.2 Public estimations of levels of wealth inequality tend to be inaccurate.

Norton et al. (2014), Bruckmüller et al. (2017), Davidai (2018), Taylor-Gooby (2013) and Kraus et al. (2021) all found that economic (variously, wealth and income) inequality is underestimated by the public.

Norton et al. (2014) found that (in experimental conditions in Australia) people significantly underestimated the degree of wealth inequality as a result of overestimating the wealth of the poorest quintile by a factor of more than 7, and underestimating the wealth of the top quintile by more than a fifth. Bruckmüller et al. (2017) observed a general tendency to underestimate the true extent of inequality and note that this ‘often goes hand in hand with attempts to legitimise these differences’ (p.766). Davidai (2018) also found that the public underestimates economic inequality, and wealth inequality in particular. Kraus et al. (2021) looked specifically at estimations of racial wealth inequality and found that in 10 separate framing experiments, members of the public overestimated equality between Black and White wealth holders by between 35 and 60% (although they were able to improve accuracy by offering participants money for more accurate estimations). Taylor-Gooby (2013) analysed British Social Attitudes data and found that in the UK, ‘Most people are unaware of the scale of inequality or the speed of change’ (p.34).

3.3 The public does not demonstrate unconditional support for wealth equality and is often strongly supportive of some degree of wealth inequality.

There is no shared public understanding of wealth, what it means to be wealthy or at what point a person might be considered to have too much.

Hebden and Palmer (2020) found that some members of focus groups pointed to owning millions of pounds and living a luxurious lifestyle. However, others saw being wealthy as having a basic level of financial security and being able to live a comfortable and full life. Hecht et al. (2022b) explored ‘security’ as a dimension of wealth. Participants in deliberative focus groups talked about richness richly – going beyond economic resources to consider issues of freedom, power and security: ‘The rich were those who were secure’ (p.2).

These relatively modest understandings of what constitutes being wealthy become important in gauging public support for taxing wealth, as a tax against **this kind** of wealth is often felt to be less legitimate (Hebden and

Palmer 2020). ‘Ordinary’ wealth (Hecht et al., 2022a) was often understood to be aspirational and associated with positive feelings of security, success and comfort. It was seen as representing potential for the future, as ‘taking responsibility for oneself and one’s family’, and a form of ‘private insurance against risk’ (p.1). People ‘want to do well and provide a better life for their families’ (Hebden and Palmer 2020, p.6).

People ‘identify with the wealthy as their imagined (or aspirational) future selves’. They are ‘simultaneously aware of potential benefits to society as well as harms’ (Davis et al., 2020, p.54). Even high levels of wealth can be publicly legitimised: Rodems and Pfeffer (2021) suggested that ‘in unequal contexts where insecurity is widespread, vast accumulations of wealth may be seen as necessary – a private safety net – and therefore normatively justified’ (in Hecht et al., 2022b, p.2).

Hebden et al. (2020) found that concern about economic inequality is tempered by a tolerance of very high wealth and a dislike of messaging that vilifies it. Despite strong public opposition to tax avoidance and evasion by the very wealthy, there is not the same opposition to the accumulation of assets per se. Indeed, both Hebden et al. (2020) and Batty and Flint (2012) found that 'public views of those claiming [social] benefits are more negative than views of wealthy people exploiting loopholes or evading tax’ (Hebden et al., 2020, p.7) or ‘affluent individuals or groups who are perceived to have ‘worked hard’ in legitimate employment’ (Batty and Flint, 2012, p.13).

Support for wealth can vary based on perceptions of deservingness. The public tend to see the wealth of the top 10% as ‘a deserved reward for effort made’ (Skilling and McLay, 2015, p.161) and the wealthy as hard-working, largely deserving of their success’ (Hebden and Palmer 2020, p.6).

Support for wealth can vary based on its source. Some sources of wealth and some kinds of wealthy people are considered more legitimate than others. Davis et al. (2020) found that ‘reservations about higher living standards were influenced by views about how people had come by their money’ (Davis et al., 2020, p.5). Rowlingson et al. (2020) and Sachweh and Eicher (2020) found that people were more supportive of taxes on forms of wealth that might be considered ‘unearned’ (for example, financial investments and investment properties), compared with savings or pensions, which were perceived to have been acquired through hard work and merit.

A survey by the Fairness Foundation (2023) revealed that the public views different kinds of wealth elites differently, depending on the source of their wealth and the degree to which luck was perceived to dominate over merit. There were net approval ratings for the entrepreneur, for example, who is perceived to have earned their wealth fairly, and for the landlord. Waitkus and Wallaschek (2022) also found strong public support for **not** taxing wealth earned through entrepreneurship.

Support for wealth can also vary based on the perceptions of the character of the wealth-holder. Sachweh (2012) found that the wealthy were more likely to 'be viewed as undeserving if they are 'seen as lacking in 'character', exemplified for instance in conspicuous consumption, irresponsible spending or an excessive valuation of money' (p.439).

Davis et al. (2020) found that attributions of wealth are influenced by whether people think the rich spend their money charitably. People are more likely to see charitable wealthy people as having worked hard for their money, and non-charitable rich people who spend lavishly as wealthy as a result of luck and connections. 'Thus, how wealthy people spend their money shapes how they are believed to have made it in the first place' (ibid.). Davis et al. also found that whether or not rich people spend their money in ways which contribute to society (for example, by creating jobs) shaped whether people supported redistribution (p.5). Hansen (2023) finds that perceptions of the rich as greedy are associated with increased demands for redistribution.

Hecht et al. (2022a) suggested that if support for progressive taxation is to gain traction with the public, there is a need to 'work within [these] existing perceptions of wealth inequality' (p.9). Davis et al. (2020) similarly suggested that if policy-makers are to be responsive to this complex set of beliefs, they 'may do better to think in terms of narratives of how riches are acquired and spent, and how people with greater resources are encouraged to behave and contribute to society, rather than starting from the premise that there is a consensus among the general public about how much is too much' (p.5).

3.4 Concern about wealth inequality is higher than support for redistribution – particularly specific redistribution measures.

Agreeing on a point at which members of a particular society are either rich or very rich, being concerned that the gap between these 2 groups and 'the rest' is high, and then supporting action to mitigate these high levels of inequality – these are 3 distinct steps in a process which do not necessarily follow one from the other. Many more people are concerned about inequality than support forms of redistribution.

Robeyns et al. (2021) distinguished between evaluative claims (evaluative in that 'members of a society can agree on the approximate location of a line between the rich and those who have much more needed to live a fully flourishing life' (p.115)) and normative claims (those that demand that 'institutional (including fiscal) measures should be taken to move in the direction of a situation where no-one lives above the riches line' (ibid.)). Using a representative sample of the Dutch population, they found that it was possible to establish a riches line empirically. Nearly all Dutch people draw a line between a family that is rich and a family that is extremely rich, and they identified a monetary level of between 1 and 3 million euros.

Davis et al. (2020) conducted a similar experiment (but using a qualitative deliberative method rather than a quantitative survey method) to see whether the London public could form consensus around what constituted a riches line, and what the different living standards were between a minimum socially acceptable level as defined by the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) up to a category labelled as super-rich:

A. MIS.
B. Surviving comfortably.
C. The (securely) comfortable.
D. The wealthy.
E. The super-rich.

The public identified the riches line as being between C and D. Participants largely endorsed affluence as a 'reasonable aspiration, and important for avoiding the precarity and unpredictability of current times, with fears expressed around job, housing and healthcare security' (p.5).

Neither Davis et al. (2020) nor Robeyns et al. (2020) found that an agreed riches line implied that the respondents believed that such a line should also be taken as a norm or ideal (Robeyns, 2020, p.125). People in both experiments tended not to perceive extreme wealth as a problem in and of itself, and in Robeyns' case they largely objected to the idea of government enforcement of limits to wealth and income (ibid., p.115).

Prabhakar (2009) experimented with 2 frames for the inheritance tax and found concern 'about the desirability of pursuing equality', which was criticised in several groups as 'verging on communism' (p.236). He found this response to resonate with 'evidence that suggests that although much of the public supports government pursuing policies that are redistributive in **effect**, they reject making redistribution an explicit goal of policy' (Sefton, 2005 in Prabhakar, 2009, p.237, emphasis ours). Stantcheva (2021) revealed a similar gap in US data between the recognition of high levels of inequality and support for moves to reduce it. For example, she found that 92% of Democrats think that wealth and income should be more evenly distributed, but 49% continue to support tax-free transmission of wealth.

Support for redistribution is lower when there is low trust in government. This finding is robust across several different studies.

Weakleim and Biggert (2013) found that 3 factors were consistently most important in limiting support for redistribution, namely:

1. Underestimations of incomes at the top.
2. Support for the principle of earning high incomes an incentive for economic growth, and belief in the role of rich people in providing jobs and investment.
3. Low faith in government to change the distribution of income.

They concluded that ‘even if people’s ideal distribution of wealth and income is relatively egalitarian, cynicism about government action makes it difficult to mobilise people in support of concrete measures to realise that idea’ (p.91).

Kuziemko et al. (2015) explored the impact of trust in government on policy preferences around redistribution and found that while it is easy to increase concern about inequality, it is much harder to change policy preferences, especially when there is low trust in government. In experimental testing, they found trust in government to have a ‘statistically significant relationship to low levels of support for government interventions’. Hence, although people can express high levels of concern, low trust in government mitigates against them seeing the government as the appropriate body to ameliorate those concerns. This is corroborated in Stantcheva (2021), who also found that trusting the government is strongly correlated with support for the estate tax (p.2358).

3.5 People make sense of the world using local references, which are generally more homogenous (and therefore more equal) than national distributions.

Hecht et al. (2022a) developed what they call a ‘sociological phenomenological’ perspective on wealth, ‘which is concerned with how features of the world “disclose themselves” to people in their daily lives’ (p.3). This understanding of perceptions of wealth being ‘mediated through … one’s lived experience’ foregrounds the importance of how wealth is experienced and understood by people. This focus on locality-based perceptions and experiences is evident in several recent studies.

People use their locality and views to understand (perceive) and evaluate (develop preferences around) inequality. As Condon and Wichowsky (2020) observed, humans are social thinkers, and they ‘make sense of relational phenomenon through a process of social comparison’. This thinking is ‘influenced by residential patterns, workplace interactions, and racial context’, which means that when forms of segregation occur (whether geographic, economic, racial or social), this can ‘obstruct the social perception of inequality’ (p.151).

This is indicative of literature that distinguishes between objective inequality and perceived inequality, focusing on the defining impact of the latter in judgements about the scale and meaning of inequality. Condon and Wichowksy suggested that if people experience high inequality in their daily lives, they tend to be critical of inequality and more supportive of redistribution. Minkoff and Lyons (2017) found that localised income diversity informs people’s understanding of income inequality. They found that the less income-diverse a local neighbourhood is, the less likely people are to perceive inequality, and therefore the less likely they are to want to take action to address it. Son Hing et al. (2019) found that socially homogenous networks lead to an underestimation of existing wealth inequalities (in Beckert, 2022, p.244). And Edmiston (2018) found that exposure to structural inequality increased systemic explanations of it.

García-Castro et al. (2020) found that because social circles are not representative of society, you get a ‘systematic perceptual bias’ (p.2) whereby ‘information extracted from closer social relations is generalised to the whole of society’ (ibid.). In developing a new theory (Perception of Economic Inequality in Everyday Life (PEIEL)), they showed that ‘focusing people’s attention on the consequences of economic inequality in their daily lives leads people to tolerate less inequality’ (p.7). They make the case that PEIEL is ‘composed with what is immediately visible and salient in the environment’ (p.9).

In a UK context, Batty and Flint (2012) also found that people understand economic inequality locally and use these local experiences to structure social comparison ‘based on subjective assessments of the self and others’ (p.4). They found that because individuals tend ‘to compare themselves with similar others’, the extent to which wider relative deprivation is perceived is limited (ibid.).

García-Sánchez (2018) argued that because perceptions of inequality are made with reference to immediate social environments and people tend to move in increasingly homogeneous circles (p.2), the likelihood of people ‘making better political decisions to tackle this problem [of inequality]’ will be enhanced if work is done to help people to build connections between ‘their immediate situation [and] broader social, political, and economic factors’ (p.10). His article brings in a rich range of factors that shape how people understand inequality – ‘individual repertoires, socio-psychological processes and contextual issues' – which are missed when simply asking questions about how economic resources are distributed.

García-Sánchez's argument is echoed in both Hecht et al.'s (2022a) development of a phenomenological account of wealth as being shaped by lived experience, and the deliberative focus group work by Summers et al. (2022), Davis et al. (2020) and Hebden and Palmer (2020). Summers et al. (2022), for example, demonstrated how people's understandings of wealth and income inequality develops through social interaction. Using deliberative focus groups, the authors explored how different types of social environments and information shaped people's understandings of economic inequality.

Trump (2020) found that the observability and/or availability of accurate information relating to inequalities affects how individuals perceive **and make judgements about** inequality. These ultimately shape which inequalities are perceived as unfair (and in need of redress). Trump found that, for example, the fact that national level inequality is difficult to perceive contributes to a persistent underestimation of its scale.

Sands and de Kadt (2020) undertook an observational and survey-based study in low-income neighbourhoods in South Africa. In their field experiment, they 'showed that encounters with real-world symbols of wealth (luxury cars) in low-income neighbourhoods cause individuals to increase their support for a tax on wealthy individuals, after accounting for a placebo effect' (p.259). This led them to the broader conclusion that responses to inequality are conditioned by economic segregation: 'Differential exposure to disparities may shape the political preferences of individuals in genuine and lasting ways'. The global trend for people who are less wealthy to live and work in different places than wealthier individuals, may hence 'lead to the existence of vicious cycles in which demand for policies that ameliorate economic inequality is suppressed by the distorted views that are generated by local context' (p.260).

A previous study by Sands (2017) had shown that exposure to inequality in a real-world context **discourages** affluent citizens from actively supporting redistributive policies (p.667). The findings suggested that the visible presence of poverty in a place of affluence decreases support for policies aimed at its alleviation. Overall, Sands and de Kadt concluded that 'Globally, people who are less wealthy tend to live and work in different places than wealthier individuals. This may lead to the existence of vicious cycles in which demand for policies that ameliorate economic inequality is suppressed by the distorted views that are generated by local context' (Sands and de Kadt, 2020, p.260).

3.6 Information matters, particularly in increasing the salience of inequality as a problem, but narratives are also effective, particularly in supporting moral reasoning linked to redistribution preferences.

Findings on the relative weighting of information/data (as opposed to narratives) in shaping perceptions of and judgements about inequality, are highly divergent. Writing in 2005, Rowlingson and McKay suggested that providing people with more information (in their context, about the inheritance tax) might help change their opinions about it. Prabhakar (2009) found that "scientific' arguments that rely on the provision of statistics are unlikely to win public support for inheritance tax' while 'narratives or stories can appeal to moral decision-making and so have greater probability in shaping attitudes to inheritance tax' (p.240). Stantcheva's (2021) findings suggested that factual information on the current tax system could help to address misperceptions of the current system that play a role in creating support for the status quo (p.2361). She ultimately concluded, however, that reasoning, rather than information on its own, 'may matter much more in shaping policy views' (p.2366).

Information is not always successful at mitigating strong prior beliefs or converting concern into commitment or intention to act. Callaghan et al. (2021) contrasted the effects of 3 treatments: one a single-person narrative, one data and one combining both. They found the data interventions more effective in shifting how people talk about racial wealth inequality and that these perceptions persisted at the 18-month mark (p.5). They observed that accurate information 'often directly contradicts narratives of racial progress' (p.2).

In contexts like these, accurate data does not always trigger persuasion. It can often trigger fear and stereotypes. This links to Fatemi et al. (2008) observation that negative prior attitudes are strengthened rather than challenged by positive framing.

Kuziemko et al. (2015) found that information changes the levels of concern but not necessarily policy preferences. They observed that information only modestly increases support for heavier taxation of the rich apart from with regard specifically to the estate tax, where even a small amount of information dramatically increased support for reform (p.128). Trump (2020) also found that accurate numeric information about inequality does not reliably change attitudes to it.

Irvin (2019) is a disciplinary outlier in our sample, coming from the field of cognitive linguistics and neuropsychology. She observed that 'facts matter but are not enough to persuade. Storytelling – either in combination with facts or in places of facts – is a powerful tool' (p.433). Looking at the role of micronarratives in discourse on taxation and inequality in the US, she identified processes of persuasion and influence, and specific rhetorical tools – 'ideographs' (from Miller 2012), which describe 'a connotative and symbolic unit of material in the construction of an overall policy narrative'; and 'condensation symbols' (from McBeth et al., 2007), which describes language that reduces a policy issue to a simple, memorable form (p.435).

3.7 The public tends to be more accepting of inequalities they perceive as legitimate or fair – including wealth inequality – and perceptions of legitimacy and fairness can be shaped by prior beliefs, socioeconomic status and political/ideological views.

A significant part of our corpus engaged with the ideas of legitimacy and fairness in shaping evaluations of inequality. The literature reviewed in section 3.3 above found strong tendencies amongst the UK public for wealth to be legitimised when it was assessed as being necessary for security, a source of comfort and protection against risk, or earned through work (Hebden et al., 2020; Hebden and Palmer 2020; Hecht et al., 2022a; Davis et al., 2020). Broadly, the literature has found that if people perceive an inequality to be illegitimate, they are more likely to want to take action against it.

Jun et al. (2022) found that wealth inequality is perceived to be an 'achieved' characteristic and therefore legitimate (that is, people can move in and out of the state of being wealthy), whereas race and gender inequality are perceived to be 'ascribed' characteristics (with no means of moving in or out of them) and therefore illegitimate.

Trump (2017) showed that the more legitimate economic differences are perceived to be, the less likely it is that individuals will call for redistribution (p.932). She formulated and provided empirical evidence for what she called the 'adjustment hypothesis', the effects of which are that people living in highly unequal economic situations are no more likely than people living in economically equal situations to perceive economic differences as illegitimate or to call for redistribution, because they adjust their views of what is legitimate in response to increased inequality.

Bruckmüller et al. (2017) found that the perceived magnitude of differences in economic outcomes, and the way those differences are described, are key to whether economic inequality is appraised as legitimate or illegitimate. They further noted that 'perceived legitimacy is a strong predictor for how inclined individuals are to take action against inequality' (p.766).

The work on legitimacy is closely linked to work on fairness. Trump (2020) found that inequality is seen as fair when people believe it to be the result of fair process, meaning that people ‘may support substantial inequalities of outcomes as fair’ (p.1).

Some work suggests that high degrees of wealth inequality can cause people to view it as illegitimate. Sachweh (2012) used interview data from inhabitants of Bremen, Germany to reconstruct the ‘moral economy of inequality’, revealing ‘shared understandings of what constitutes a fair and desirable distribution of societal benefits and burdens’ (p.420). He found that people took issue only when inequality arising from ‘fair’ procedures involves the separation of people’s life worlds (p.430). He cited work which corroborates this finding in France (Dubet, 2009).

McCall (2013) focused mainly on income inequality yet mobilised the concept of the ‘undeserving rich’ to emphasise that it is not inequality itself but rather **unfair** inequality that violates widely held norms among the public. For McCall this includes, for example, times when the public is suffering economic hardship while richer people are not. This can violate general norms of fairness, be seen as improperly rewarding those who are rich for incompetent stewardship of the economy and reinforces anxieties about future social mobility.

Political beliefs and affiliation can mediate how relevant issues of fairness are. Hoyt et al. (2018) found that liberals are motivated to act on wealth inequality after exposure to distributional injustice data alone. On the other hand, conservatives need distributive plus procedural data: they need to know that the system of allocation was unfair before they are motivated to act. Hoyt et al. suggest that understanding the differential impacts of advantage and disadvantage frames ‘aids the understanding of when messages advocating for social change will be met with system-justification process and when they will be met with motivation to change the status quo’ (pp.17–18).

Fatemi et al. (2008) found that negative prior attitudes can cause positive framing to misfire. In exploring the effect of frames in debates about estate tax in the US, they found that ‘Taxpayer responses to attitudes on estate taxes are influenced by the framing of the attitudinal statements but this effect is moderated by prior attitude’.

These results proved the ‘resistance’ theory hypothesis: although most people felt negatively about the tax as a means of raising revenue, **when it was framed positively, they were more likely to make negative judgements than when it was framed negatively**. Further, negative responses to the positive frames were ‘significant predictors of behavioural intention to vote against keeping the estate tax. Conversely, when the attributes were framed negatively, the association between attitude and behavioural intention were not significant’ (p.118).

The results in Fatemi et al. (2008) show that the failure of framing strategies to take prior beliefs like this into account can contribute to a positive frame producing a negative response. García-Sánchez et al. (2020) extended this discussion to describe how progressive framing in countries with high levels of belief in meritocracy can trigger resistance to government moves to address inequality. They concluded that ideologies influence the relationship between perceived inequality and attitudes towards redistribution, and that support for redistribution varies by how the policy is framed (p.111).

Prior beliefs can also act at the level of perception. In the US, Stantcheva (2021) found starkly different prior beliefs on issues of social fairness between Republicans and Democrats to a degree that Alesina et al. (2020) described as constituting a ‘polarisation of **reality**’ at the level of perception of facts (in Stantcheva, 2021, pp.2332–3). For example, 85% of Democrats agreed that wealth is distributed unfairly compared to 36% of Republicans, and 92% of Democrats agreed that wealth and money should be more evenly distributed in the US compared to 42% of Republicans.

The literature exhibits divergent findings on the relationships between socioeconomic status and perceptions of legitimacy. Davidai (2022), writing about the US, found that people’s socioeconomic status affects how they think about wealth and poverty in a variety of ways. For example, ‘wealthier individuals amplify the role of personal merit in their success and downplay structural privileges that they benefit from; economic self-interest shapes wealthier people’s views of meritocracy’. By contrast, he finds that individuals from lower economic backgrounds ‘make more external attributions of wealth and poverty’ (p.43). They see disparities as ‘more to do with political influence, inherited wealth, and society’s economic structure than with ‘ambition, ability and talent, hard work, effort and money management skills’ (p.44).

Edmiston (2018) finds that ‘the rich and the poor differ in terms of how they make sense of structural inequality and their own material position’ (p.984). Bernardo (2021), writing about the Philippines, found that ‘the higher an individual’s relative socioeconomic position, the more likely it is that wealth inequality is perceived as fair and legitimate’ (p.400). By contrast, those who perceive themselves to be deprived are less likely to view inequality as fair and more likely to report intolerance of it.

Cramer and Kauffman (2011) found that ‘higher levels of economic inequality increase public disapproval of the distribution of wealth' (p.1220). However, while they found a ‘statistically and substantively significant’ increase in the likelihood of middle-class dissatisfaction between a Gini of 50 and 62’ (ibid.), amongst those who report their needs are not being met, there is no such conditional effect, with this group ‘no more likely to object to the distribution at high levels of inequality than at low levels (ibid., p.1221). Further, they found that high inequality does modify the attitudes of the poor but in the opposite direction: ‘the poor become significantly less dissatisfied as the Gini increases from 42–49 [so the more unequal things get, the poor get more satisfied] and significantly more willing to accept distribution at very high levels’ (p.1221).

Some literature has found that views differ by sex and race (Birney et al., 2008) or by culture (Davidai, 2022). Epp and Jennings (2020) found that nationality is important not only in terms of differences in perception and judgements, but also in the way that it frames functions. In countries that have a higher baseline sympathy towards welfare, the personal failure frame might be less convincing, as the “baseline” sympathy towards welfare amongst residents in European states is higher (p.649).

3.8 Acceptance of inequality is partly related to how people explain economic outcomes, with internal (individual) explanations leading to higher tolerance for inequality and external (structural) factors leading to the reverse.

Davidai (2022) found that people who attribute poverty to external factors tend to feel the government is responsible for addressing it, while people who attribute it internally find cause in lack of effort and are less supportive of government interventions (p.43). He found that if people attribute economic outcomes externally, they are more likely to express concern and demonstrate a willingness to address them. On the other hand, ‘system-justification reduces external attributions of economic outcomes’ (p.43) with concomitant effects on who is perceived to be at fault, and what the remedy should be (p.45). Rodríguez-Bailón et al. (2017) found a link between the belief in ‘dispositional poverty’ (that is, poverty as an outcome of personal failure) and opposition to governmental and non-governmental activities that reduce inequality (pp.100 and 110).

There is some evidence to suggest that exposure to inequality increases structural explanations of it. Affluent individuals who have a **limited** exposure to the structural constraints and barriers that detrimentally affect material wellbeing or agency can demonstrate lower levels of support for redistribution (Edmiston, 2018, p.986). Edmiston found that more affluent people tend to attribute both poorer **and** richer people’s outcomes individually and to downplay the effects of structural causes. This makes the inequality legitimate on the basis that if the poorer people had worked harder or made better decisions, they could be richer. Affluent participants in his study were less likely to advance explanations of inequality that account for 'the interplay of individuals and society, of biography and history of self and world' (Mills, 1959 in Edmiston, 2018, p.991).

3.9 Increased inequality does not straightforwardly increase opposition to inequality.

Tolerance for or opposition to inequality can mean different things: i) does someone think inequality in general is too high/a problem?; or ii) what specific level of inequality do people think is fair/acceptable? Opposition in terms of i) can 'increase' (that is, the Hirneis (2023) finding that UK respondents see the wealth gap as 'too high') at the same time as opposition in terms of ii) actually decreases through the **adjustment hypothesis** (that is, the Trump 2017 findings).

Recent research (Hirneis, 2023) has found that a majority of the public in the UK sees the wealth gap as too high. Several articles in our corpus explore the phenomenon of high levels of acceptance of inequality in contexts of high and rising levels of inequality.

Hecht et al. (2022b) is indicative in asking why rising top incomes and wealth have **not** been accompanied by growing popular concern (p.1). Mijs (2021) attributed this phenomenon to the fact that 'actors in more unequal societies attribute their own economic fate more to themselves, thus lowering demand for redistribution. They believe that their own and other actors' social positions are meritocratically deserved' (p.245). This explains why merit is such a potent barrier to more realistic perceptions of inequality. Batty and Flint (2012) looked at 'apparent quiescence' of the poor to inequality, and Beckert (2022) looked at the 'surprising complacency of the general public with regard to institutional designs and practices that allow for the long-term perpetuation of high-end wealth' (p.243).

Skilling and McLay (2015) even found that concern can **fall** as inequality rises. Using survey data in New Zealand they found that 'while inequality has remained at historically high levels … public concern about the level of inequality has fallen. Between 1992 and 2009 agreement with the proposition that income differences in NZ are too large fell from 73% to 63%'. Specifically, they reported that support for the government taxing 'rich people' more and redistributing wealth and income to ordinary people fell from 48% in 1990 to 26% in 2005 (p.155). Taylor-Gooby (2013) made a similar observation about the UK, noting increasing inequality against a backdrop of increasingly low support for redistribution and increasing stigmatisation of those who are poor (p.31).

Epp and Jennings (2020) found that inequality affected public attitudes in the 1990s–2000s (as inequality rose), such that attitudes converged amongst richer and poorer populations, shifting from a social failure to a personal failure frame. The authors see this as proof that those who would benefit from more welfare often counter-intuitively support moves to restrict it. Their results show that frames have a greater impact on lower-income than higher-income Americans (nationality and socioeconomic status are important here) as there is an absence of baseline sympathy towards welfare. This means that pervasive personal failure frames make people at the bottom less supportive of welfare in line with people further up the economic spectrum. Cramer and Kauffman (2011) also found that poorer people's tolerance for inequality increases as inequality increases.

Trump (2017) undertook experiments in the US and found that the public reacts to inequality with adapted expectations not increased demands for redistribution. When income differences are perceived to be high, the public thinks larger income inequalities are legitimate (this is the 'adjustment hypothesis' referred to in section 3.7). Trump looked at factors affecting whether income differences are perceived as legitimate or illegitimate.
A survey experiment with US subjects showed that the motivation to legitimate one's social system is 'at least partly responsible' for producing the phenomenon whereby higher levels of perceived income inequality are met with more support for high levels of income inequality rather than popular dissatisfaction.

4. What are the barriers to wealth inequality gaining public and political salience?

Most of the literature reviewed explicitly or implicitly describes barriers to the problem of economic inequality gaining salience alongside its key empirical or theoretical focus. The apparent difficulty of making wealth inequality into a social problem which politicians feel compelled to address is a key concern for campaigning groups. The stakes are high:

> "If we want to reduce societal inequality, it is important to discuss the narratives that people endorse and work on creating new repertoires that challenge widespread system justifying beliefs, while at the same time meeting underlying psychological needs as meaning, order, or stability. Research on the legitimacy of economic inequality is not just an ideological issue, but a way to understand how our perceptions and beliefs can shape the world that we live in."
>
> (García-Sánchez et al., 2019, p.998)

This final section explores a range of barriers that currently prevent economic inequality from gaining salience and traction:

- Barriers relating to public opinion.
- Barriers relating to media organisations and their agendas/coverage.
- Barriers relating to political elites and institutions.

The bleed between the last 2 categories in particular is noted.

Barriers relating to public opinion:

4.1 System-justifying beliefs increase support for the status quo, but they also provide security and fulfil relational needs.

4.2 System-justifying beliefs are particularly popular with privileged group members, who experience threat 'when considering their position in an inequitable system', which can result in defensive responses.

Barriers relating to media organisations and their agendas/coverage:

4.3 The political economy of the media constrains public debate about wealth inequality while facilitating the disproportionate influence of businesses and economic and political elites.

Barriers relating to political elites and institutions:

4.4 The super-rich have a disproportionate influence on political institutions and decision-making.

4.5 Diverse institutions (law, the family, the media) and institutionalised beliefs (racism, sexism) operate diffusely to safeguard wealth ownership.

Barriers relating to public opinion:

4.1 System-justifying beliefs increase support for the status quo, but they also provide security and fulfil relational needs.

System-justification tends to decrease support for redistribution as it legitimates the 'fairness' of the current system. A large body of literature explores the role that a range of system-justifying beliefs play on increasing or decreasing the political salience of inequality. System-justification theory says that when people feel powerless to change adverse circumstances, they attempt to justify those circumstances in order to avoid coming to terms with an unjust reality (Epp and Jennings, 2020, p.630; Trump, 2017). Kraus and Tan (2015), for example, found that people are motivated to believe in economic mobility in order to see their social status as just (in Davidai, 2018, p.139). Given the potency of such beliefs, García-Sánchez et al. (2019) suggest that 'counteracting system-justifying beliefs may be a first step towards attenuating – and perhaps breaking down – the vicious cycle'.

Rodríguez-Bailón et al. (2017) is indicative of a significant body of literature that finds that 'people who hold system-justifying beliefs tend to oppose redistribution' (p.110), and, more fundamentally, that 'ideology about the social structure and its causes can also influence the way individuals **perceive** social reality' (ibid., emphasis ours).

Trump (2020) reviewed existing opinion research to show that when individuals have access to the same factual information, those who are more inclined to defend the status quo perceive less inequality (p.3). She concluded that in all (across the studies she reviews), 'the system justification motivation increases the probability that specific instances of inequality will be interpreted as consistent with allocation rules that justify inequality' (p.5). In general, system-justifying beliefs tend to act as 'moderators in the relationship between perceived inequality and ideal inequality' (García-Sánchez et al., 2019).

Kiatpongsan and Norton (2014) find that 'people in lots of different countries desire a distribution of wealth that is more equal than they perceive it to be' (in Bruckmüller et al., 2017, p.676). At the same time, large differences in outcome are legitimised variously through explanations that rich people worked hard for their success and/or poor people are not working hard enough (ibid.).

System-justification operates at all levels. García-Sánchez et al. (2022) explore the role of an overarching ‘belief in a just world’ (BJW). BJW constitutes ‘a motivation to perceive the world as fair in which people get what they deserve’ (p.382). BJW empirical studies have demonstrated that ‘there is a motivation to perceive rewards as deserved, which means a motivation to associate good outcomes with peoples’ good deeds, and bad outcomes with peoples’ bad deeds’. Empirical evidence shows that ‘BJW is associated with negative attitudes to relatively disadvantaged people and positive attitudes towards relatively privileged people’ (p.383).

Meritocracy and equality of opportunity are 2 of the most commonly cited system-justifying beliefs in our corpus. García-Sánchez et al. (2020) undertook experimental work that supported their hypothesis that ‘endorsing beliefs that justify inequality undermines support for redistribution … meritocracy and equality of opportunities beliefs moderated the association between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution’ (p.128). They found that if people believe in meritocracy, they are more likely to see ideal inequality as being closer to existing levels of inequality than if they do not believe in meritocracy. He also found that ‘perceptions of economic inequality correlated positively with support for the role of government to reduce inequality … only amongst those who rejected the ideas that hard work leads to success and that there are equal opportunities to get ahead in life’ (p.128). Bernardo (2021) found similarly that ‘beliefs suggesting that the economic system is fair, that social mobility is possible and that wealth inequality emerged through just processes’ make people more accepting of wealth inequality (p.399).

Using data from a 2009 Social Survey Programme of 29 countries, Roex et al. (2019) found that ‘differences in tolerance towards inequality between higher and lower social positions was stronger in countries that had overall strong meritocracy beliefs’. They described the ‘high social position individuals of strong meritocracy societies as the “meritocratic winners” who will be most accepting and tolerant of the economic inequalities in their society’ (p.59). Rodríguez-Bailón et al. (2017) found that social class can work in tandem with economic system justification such that ‘feeling higher class and justifying the economic system increase the perception that the actual resource distribution is fair, and this in turn reduces the extent to which people see their society as unequal’ (pp.99–100). In survey responses amongst UK residents in Hebden et al. (2020b), belief in meritocracy was among the factors found to constitute a barrier to wealth tax gaining traction.

A further system-justifying ‘mind-set’ is explored in a US context by Savani and Rattan (2012), who proposed that the concept of ‘choice’ ‘activates the belief that life outcomes stem from personal agency, not societal factors, and thereby leads people to justify wealth inequality' (p.796). Their findings suggested that 'framing policies in terms of choice … might lead people to oppose policies that are in line with their ultimate ideals' (p.802).

Sachweh (2012) found that although meritocracy exerted strong legitimating power within the economic sphere, there was a point beyond which inequality became so extreme that this power stopped: "Merit' legitimizes disparities in economic well-being only up to a point, at which inequality becomes so extreme that it is seen to segregate lifeworlds, thereby polarizing society and threatening social integration' (p.438).

Davidai (2018) also suggested that high economic inequality 'may weaken the belief in economic mobility. As the gap grows, the external forces that lead some people to be wealthier and others poorer become more salient' (Davidai, 2018, p.139). People might then become more likely to attribute both wealth and poverty to external factors. This seems highly optimistic in light of subsequent research and the development of the 'adjustment hypothesis' (Trump 2017). However, the research does seem to suggest that perceived **unjust** or **unfair** advantage and disadvantage in contexts of ongoing high inequality might threaten BJW.

It is important to include here a finding about the **positive** social effects of system-justifying beliefs made by García-Sánchez et al. (2019). This is that 'adherence to societal beliefs that justify inequality can fulfil epistemic and relational needs by providing a coherent and shared narrative that explains the world and which maximises the relationship between what is and what ought to be' (pp.997–8). As such, system-justifying beliefs fulfil crucial positive social functions; approaching them simply as barriers which must be overcome might risk harm.

4.2 System-justifying beliefs are particularly popular with privileged group members, who experience threat 'when considering their position in an inequitable system', which can result in defensive responses.

Conservatives and higher socioeconomic groups are more likely to believe in meritocracy. Hoyt et al. (2018) started with a review of political ideology literature that shows that liberals tend to question systems, and conservatives tend to justify them. As a result, conservatives are more likely to perceive the current system as fair. They find a distinct difference amongst liberals and conservatives, with the former 'simply requir[ing] data on distributions to motivate activism' and the latter 'need[ing] to know that the system of economic forces that led to the distributions (what the authors call procedural injustice) is unfair'. Hoyt et al.'s article is motivated by the aim of finding out what types of wealth inequality messaging are most effective ‘for blunting system-justification and instead encouraging social change’ (p.3). Edmiston (2018) finds that richer people tend to downplay structural factors and to base policy preferences on their lack of empathy (a result of their lack of understanding/experience of) for deprivation. Roex et al. (2019) found that people with a higher social position are more tolerant of current income inequality than individuals with a lower social position. They concluded that ‘the meritocratic “winners” … are the strongest supporters of their society’s income inequality’ (p.59).

Members of privileged groups can act defensively if confronted with proof that they are winners in an unfair system. Dover (2022) looked at inequality more broadly as something that pertains between advantaged (or privileged) and disadvantaged groups. The barriers to engaging with inequality that she identified include high levels of defensiveness triggered by threat responses experienced by advantaged groups when discussing inequalities from which they benefit. She found that ‘thinking about inequities [that is, unfair inequalities] … can be aversive’ (p.747) to privileged groups because they draw attention to their privileged positions in an inequitable system.

Specifically, such inequities undermine claims to personal deservingness ‘in a system that allocates markers of merit unfairly’. In so doing they call into question the morality of the privileged group. More fundamentally, inequities threaten the stability or legitimacy of the very system that maintains group-based privileges. This can lead privileged individuals to ‘seek to avoid the experience of privilege threats through strategic inequality framing’ (Dover, 2022, p.748).

In contrast, Scully et al. (2018) suggested that being confronted with proof that they are winners in an unfair system can also motivate members of economically privileged groups to acknowledge their part in sustaining in illegitimate inequality and to undertake what she calls ‘privilege work’ – advocating for more economic equality from a position of power and audibility.

These findings have clear implications for campaigning groups, and to a degree help to explain why privileged groups work so hard to maintain the status quo and to avoid opening up discursive spaces (in the media, in political and public discourse) in which the legitimacy of the existing system can be called into question. We explore this in more detail in the report - Ideas for narrative change funders and organisations who wish to increase the salience of wealth inequality.

Barriers relating to media organisations and their agendas/coverage:

4.3 The political economy of the media constrains public debate about wealth inequality while facilitating the disproportionate influence of businesses and economic and political elites.

A significant body of work on the political economy of the media explores the impact of concentrated media ownership, and the imbrications of political power and mediatisation on the communication of economic inequality. For example, Neimanns (2023) used survey data from 18 European countries to show that support for redistribution is lower in countries where media ownership is more concentrated, and Guardino (2019) suggested that the overall positive coverage of neoliberal policies is itself an outcome of commercial pressure and corporate influence. Grisold and Thiene (2017) described how the concentration of media power in fewer and fewer hands contributes to the production of 'a form of universal consensus that constitutes … hegemony' (p.4278).

A report for the Institute for Government (IfG) by Tetlow et al. (2020) explored the effects of diversification and fragmentation. The authors described how the rise of multiple media outlets, a speeded-up news cycle and the mainstream media's loss of monopoly means that anyone can now post their news. The effect is that it is now more difficult to have 'a single national conversation' (Gordon Brown in Tetlow et al., 2020, p.21). Further, while they limit the possibility for informed critical debate, these new features of the mediascape have made it easier to mobilise opposition to a policy, often through hastily convened cause groups (ibid.).

Bell and Entman (2011) show how media coverage is disproportionately driven by the attitudes of those in higher socioeconomic groups. Epp and Jennings (2020) find that these groups tend to be less supportive of safety nets. Their argument is that, given this disproportionate influence, 'If those at the top feel that they have more to lose from redistribution as inequality intensifies, then it is plausible that media coverage is picking up on these shifting sentiments and amplifying them' (Epp and Jennings, 2020, p.631). This finding chimes with the observations made in section 1.2 on the 'flavour' of the media coverage of economic inequality at times of rising inequality (for example, Petring, 2016 in Grisold and Thiene, 2017).

Epp and Jennings describe how media coverage is sensitive 'to the attitudes of political elites through indexing [a process] where journalists … frame the structure of policy debate in the press to mimic the language and content of the debate among elites' (ibid., p.632). Vaughan et al. (forthcoming) noted that many articles in their corpus 'allude to the influence of wealthy individuals on the media agenda' (p.17). Kantola and Vesa (2022), for example, revealed how the top 0.1% in Finland 'used backstage advocacy strategies while trying to avoid publicity and **were overall confident in their power to influence the discourse**' (emphasis ours).

Kuskoff et al. (2023) explored the media framing of charitable responses to people living in poverty in Australia, in a context in which 98% of the media is owned by 3 companies. They established the media as having the influence and power to set the terms of debate in ways that obscure or sideline challenges to the status quo. The 'relative hegemony' of messaging – a virtue of this concentration of ownership – is reflected in content which links a celebration of charity and (wealthy) philanthropists with 'a broader shift away from the politics of redistribution typified in the third way politics of the late 1990s and early 2000s' (p.161).

Barriers related to political elites and institutions:

4.4 The super-rich have disproportionate influence on political institutions and decision-making.

Beckert (2022) described the disproportionate influence of the super-rich on political decisions and on public opinion by means of their sway over the political process through lobbying, social networks, campaign financing and charitable giving (p.243). He described how wealthy people can rely on 'a set of institutions, mechanisms, and practices that increase chances for successful reproduction of their wealth' (p.238).

Robeyns (2017) described the democratic risks posed by the bleed of economic power into political and media power. This study described the mutually reinforcing effects of concentrated ownership of different forms of capital (social, cultural, economic) and provided evidence of the influence of economic elites on shaping how inequality is framed and debated. Because framing involves both diagnostic and prognostic elements, this ability to 'make salient' through high-level influence extends from problem formulation to the allocation of responsibility and blame, and the prioritising of certain legislative and policy responses.

Emmenegger and Marx (2019) looked at how business lobby and interest groups in Switzerland worked with media and politicians as part of debates around the abolition of the individual net wealth tax to establish a frame that equated inheritance taxation with a threat to economic stability, which affects everyone. This frame gained a higher weighting in opinion formation than a widely expressed desire for equality. Tetlow et al. (2020) also observe that in the UK, 'special interest groups can be very effective at influencing tax policy, skewing the tax system towards their interests and away from policies that might have broad-based gains for the wider population' (p.14).

Beckert (2022) noted that this capital can be used to exercise 'influence over tax policies and other policy fields important to the reproduction of wealth' to the degree that 'regulations can be amended in ways advantageous to the preservation and expansion of high-end wealth' (p.243). This substantiates findings in Harrington (2016), whose ethnography of wealth managers showed the pervasive and potent influence of private tax advisors representing the views of the wealthy in government (see also Kerr, forthcoming).

Gilens (2012) explored the relationship between affluence and influence, and found that the views of higher income respondents were more strongly correlated with government policy than those of lower-income respondents. The strength of this relationship (between preferences and policy outcomes) increased with each step up the income ladder and at an increasing rate. When citizens disagree about preferred policies, specifically when the preferences of the rich diverge from those of the poor, 'government policy bears absolutely no relationship to the degree of support or opposition among the poor' (p.81).

Savage et al. (forthcoming) described a range of financial mechanisms used to exert political influence, from campaign donations (there is no limit on donations to political parties, which grew 247% between 2001 and 2019 (Draca et al., 2022)) to lobbying. But they also described a host of 'more clandestine' forms of giving that 'contain the possibility not only of preferential treatment but also trust-undermining scandals (such as the various 'cash for questions', 'cash for honours' or 'cash for access' media events in recent British political history)'.

The influence of money on politics compounds the public sense that the system is 'rigged'. This sense is effected not only through the purchase of influence in the forms mentioned above, but also by the progressive 'thinning out' of working class (or 'non-elite') voices from political life. Bukoldi et al. (2023) showed the disappearance of people with an adult experience of working class life from UK Labour (shadow) cabinets since 1945 (in Savage et al., forthcoming but see also comments at section 1.2 above).

4.5 Diverse institutions (law, the family, the media) and institutionalised beliefs (racism, sexism) operate diffusely to safeguard and pattern wealth and wealth ownership.

Institutions – including law, politics and land ownership (Beckert, 2022; Pistor, 2020; Glennerster, 2012); family and gender (Bessière and Gollac, 2023; Himmelweit, 2023); politics (Gilens, 2012); the media (Schifferes and Knowles, 2022); and business (Waitkus and Wallaschek, 2022) – and institutionalised beliefs including gender, 'race' and class-based prejudices, operate individually and together to sustain the economic status quo.

Pistor (2020) described how legal 'code' has enabled the production of capital (capital = asset + legal code), protected its inter-generational transfer and in so doing enabled the increasing concentration of dynastic fortunes. On politics, Formisano (2017) linked low support for redistribution with the social status of the members of parliament (Formisano, 2017 in Beckert, 2022, p.244, but see also Alexiadou, 2021 on the socioeconomic status of cabinet ministers in EU countries): richer people legislate while poorer people are governed. Harrington (2016) describes how tax advisors to the wealthy advise Parliament on tax law in the UK.

On special (and landed) interests, Glennerster (2012) showed how the actions of the Civil Service and vested interests (farmers, country-house owners, the city) against the proposed wealth tax in the early 1970s served to hamper the issue of a wealth tax getting on to the political agenda. On business, Emmenegger and Marx (2019) describe how in the context of a direct vote on estate tax in Switzerland, the structural power exerted by business and wealth elites constrained how wealth and wealth inequality were understood. In partnership with media and political actors, these groups were able to make and then transmute strategic frames that created anxiety amongst the public of a potential negative effect of inheritance taxation on their own livelihood. This ultimately swung the vote away from abolition.

A corollary of the power and dominance of rich interests operating through these various institutions is that there is less space for other voices. 'Poor' voices in particular – in social and fiscal policy-making, in media discourse on inequality and in scholarly research design – are muted in comparison, or ineffectively heard (Kerr, 2023, although she notes that in some policy contexts, the voices we need to hear **more** from are those of the wealthy).

The balance of interests flowing through these institutions is important because, as Edmiston (2018) noted, the tendency for richer people to downplay structural factors and to base policy preferences on their lack of empathy (a result of their lack of understanding/experience of) for deprivation can shape the policy landscape in ways which reproduce inequalities.

To conclude, we want to draw particular attention to the institution of the family. This is particularly pertinent because of the many and varied ways in which ‘Individuals from affluent families use intergenerational wealth in various ways to secure and reproduce advantages through purchasing private education’ (Henseke et al., 2021), through the exploitation of social networks to secure high status occupations for children and through access to valuable work experience (Cullinane and Montactue, 2018) (both in Savage et al., forthcoming).

Parental wealth advantages children in wealthy families. But more profoundly, processes of inheritance safeguard and pattern wealth ownership between generations, and thus create enduring inequality. Clark and Cummings (2014) found a persisting association between an individual’s own wealth stocks over 5 generations in the UK (in Savage et al., forthcoming, p.9).

Piketty (2014) identified inheritance as the principal mechanism for wealth accumulation in the global elite, identifying its resurgence in the 1980s. Acknowledging the pivotal role of inheritance in making inequality durable, a significant body of literature engages with the role of family and kinship processes. Beckert (2022) describes how ‘The transfer of social and cultural capital’ is ‘significantly bound to socialisation processes in the family, making the family a crucial institution in the reproduction of wealth’ (p.240).

Top wealth families ‘transfer social contacts, knowledge, and norms associated with the management of great wealth’ (ibid.). They also transfer gendered patterns of ownership that suppress the equalising of wealth holdings between men and women (Bessière and Gollac, 2023). And the legal system – especially legacy rules relating to heterosexual marriage and the relative tax statuses of husbands and wives – ensures that women continue to hold less wealth than men (Himmelweit, 2023; WBG, 2023).

Families help economic capital to endure, but they also transmit and reproduce regressive gender norms that contribute to high wealth ownership remaining predominantly male. Glucksberg (2017), for example, explored that although women control less than 12% of global wealth, ‘in the key processes of transfer and reproduction of wealth, and of the humans able to manage and grow that wealth, women’s work is clearly central’ (p.17).

Sklair and Glucksberg have been at the heart of the critical ethnographic work on elites, and in particular on elite families. Sklair’s (2018) critical ethnography of wealth elites in Brazil explored how ‘family business and business family’ work to ‘ensure the reproduction of capital and status’ in part through the narratives they build and communicate **about themselves**, which centre a ‘historical commitment to social responsibility’ whilst failing to engage with the ‘historical reproduction of inequalities’ by family firms (p.39).

Meanwhile, Sklair and Glucksberg (2021) explored how philanthropy is used to ‘style wealthy families as custodians of both private capital and the common good’ in a way which seeks to reconcile poverty alleviation with inheritance processes. Their article revealed the ‘family as project’ – how philanthropy is used to grow the human capital (in the form of strong family bonds and relationships and shared commitment to the ‘values’ of the family and interest in its fortune) that is necessary to pass wealth on (p.326).

Through 30 interviews with actors in Brazil’s emerging impact investing market, Sklair (2023) revealed in addition to philanthropy a trend to use impact investing to help legitimise wealth accumulation amongst elites that provided ‘a framework for the continuation of [family] business as usual under the guise of business radically-designed’ (p.1). Impact investing creates a narrative for family wealth that aligns the continuity of family fortunes with wider social and economic good, ultimately ‘promis[ing] radical change but delivering only on maintaining the status quo’ (p.16).

Appendix 1: Scope conditions, database construction and review process

Method of corpus construction and analysis

We conducted a systematic review of literature published on the framing of wealth inequality and its effects on support for government intervention or other forms of social change; on public understanding of wealth inequality; and on the barriers to wealth inequality gaining public and/or political salience and traction.

Inclusion criteria

Our 4 inclusion criteria were:

1. Publication in English.

2. Publication since 2008 (a date we selected to capture the proliferation of literature written both since the financial crash, and the work subsequently stimulated by Piketty (2014)).

3. Publication type: i) scholarly articles, books, book chapters; ii) reports from campaigning organisations that explicitly focus on framing.[2]

4. Relevance: literature must deal substantially[3] with text or visual framing and wealth inequality **or** text or visual framing and some of the 'fractions' of wealth inequality[4] (housing; pensions; financial wealth) **or** text or visual framing and economic inequality. Where the literature is empirical, the location of the case study should be in a country where findings might be assumed to be relevant (if not directly transferrable) to the UK context.

Collection process – known sources

We collected an initial database of relevant literature based on known sources, and stored it in the Zotero library under the collection 'Known references'. This comprised:

a. Literature that we know/cite.
b. Literature reviewed in Grisold and Theine, 2017 and 2020 and in Vaughan et al. (forthcoming).

Collection process – systematic search

We collected potentially relevant but unknown sources using Scopus and the following search terms:

> **TITLE-ABS-KEY ("wealth inequality" OR "economic inequality" AND {discourse} OR {narrative} OR {framing}**
> **Test for visual by**
> **TITLE-ABS-KEY ("wealth inequality" OR "economic inequality" AND visual but NOT {discourse} OR {narrative} OR {framing}.**
> **AND PUBYEAR > 2008**

We used Scopus and not Google Scholar for our first search because we wanted the first tranche of returns to be solely peer-reviewed academic literature. The other part of the review (campaigning literature) focuses on a different kind of publication type that is more appropriate for us to retrieve using a purposive sampling approach.

Where possible, relevance was determined by reviewing the title and abstract; if there was ambiguity, we scanned the content in the body of the text to see how the search terms occur.

All references were then saved individually in a shared Zotero database, to enable subsequent review.

Borderline cases were assigned by Reviewer 1 (Kerr) with the tag 'To discuss', and then reviewed by Reviewer 2 (Vaughan) before a final decision was made to include/exclude.

A first systematic search of Scopus for academic articles that specifically looked at the framing of **wealth** inequality (as opposed to forms of economic inequality including wealth) yielded only 14 titles. We took a decision to include titles that substantively dealt with economic inequality where it was clear that this extended beyond simply income inequality.

Snowball sampling

We then loaded selected references (the 14 original articles retrieved using the narrow wealth inequality search term) in the Zotero collection into ResearchRabbit.ai to generate a further network of related references and review for relevance as per the inclusion criteria listed above.

We added any new relevant references to the existing Zotero collection, tagging borderline cases as above for group discussion and using the existing relevance criteria.

Review, critically assess and synthesise literature

We then mapped the body of literature thematically against our 4 review questions, undertaking inductive coding of sub-themes that emerged during the process. In addition to the inductive coding, we also mapped data including: where published, which fields, year, geographical scope of study; research methods used; theoretical approach used in the study.

What type of analysis was missed/sidelined/neglected? The initial search returned a sample too small to synthesise. Most framing literature focuses on economic inequality generally, or income inequality specifically. We agreed to **exclude** work solely on poverty; to **include** studies on billionaires, and millionaires where there was a framing angle; and to **include** work on redistribution policies.

After further exclusions during the review phase (based on the relevance criteria), and further additions based on retrieving new references from articles that were part of our initial sample, our final corpus comprised **126 individual items** in a combination of academic journal articles, book chapters or books, and reports from campaigning organisations.

Review

We reviewed the literature thematically against our 4 questions. To ensure that both reviewers were consistent in their approach, we selected 3 articles that were read by both reviewers, and we compared notes. We then divided the literature based on the expertise of the reviewers and undertook a round of inductive coding to identify sub-themes. These sub-themes constitute the sub-headings in the review, and in the document **Ideas for narrative change funders and organisations who wish to increase the salience of wealth inequality.**

Limitations

There were significant limitations to our selection of works to include. First, we restricted our corpus to work in English; second, we used search terms that may have missed work that did not explicitly talk about framing but was still engaging with questions of how a social problem is produced and communicated.

Search documentation narrative

Action	Resolution/notes
Scopus search using 'Wealth Inequality' AND 'Framing' OR 'narrative' between 2008 and present (search saved in SK's Elsevier account) returns 150 titles	Check whether the sample contains the titles we would expect it to. Select 6 titles to use as a 'test'
MV supplied 6 titles that should have been returned: Bell, C.V. and Entman, R.M. (2011) The media's role in America's exceptional politics of inequality: Framing the Bush tax cuts of 2001 and 2003 Emmenegger, P. and Marx, P. (2019) The politics of inequality as organised spectacle: Why the Swiss do not want to tax the rich Epp, D.A. and Jennings, J.T. (2021) Inequality, media frames, and public support for welfare Guardino, M. (2019) Framing inequality: News media, public opinion, and the neoliberal turn in U.S. public policy Kendall, D.E. (2011) Framing class media representations of wealth and poverty in America Waitkus, N. and Wallaschek, S. (2022) Legitimate wealth? How wealthy business owners are portrayed in the press	Return contains Bell and Entman (2011), Kendall (2011) Return does not contain Emmenegger and Marx (2019), Epp and Jennings (2021), Guardino (2019), Waitkus and Wallaschek (2022)
SK looked at the abstracts and titles of the 4 that were not returned. This revealed that: Emmenegger used 'frame' not 'framing' and there was no reference to narrative or framing in the title or abstract; Epp and Jennings used 'frames'; Waitkus and Wallaschek use 'frames'. Emmenegger and Marx, and Epp and Jennings use the language of preferences, preference formation, political preferences. It is not clear why Guardino is not included.	Expand the search to include 'frame', 'frames', 'preference', 'preferences'

Search 2: We redid the search with the expanded search terms to see if Guardino was pulled in; checked whether the other titles were also pulled in.	Of the 6 test titles above, the new search pulled in Kendall but not Bell and Entman; Emmenegger and Marx; Epp and Jennings; Guardino; Waitkus and Wallaschek.
Search 3: ‘wealth Inequality’ AND ‘framing’ OR ‘frame’ OR ‘frames’ OR ‘political preferences’ OR ‘narrative’. 14 results	This returned a much narrower set of titles (14) but the focus was improved. SK then cross-referenced with Google Scholar.
SK went through MV’s list from Vaughan et al. (forthcoming) and imported relevant titles to the main library. SK then exported the full library and went through the following process manually, line by line. SK deleted titles which were obviously not relevant and put remaining titles into 2 categories: 1) include 2) to discuss. SK went through the ‘to discuss’ column and looked at the abstracts in detail, before refining those that needed discussing with MV. MV reviewed and made a decision. Further exclusions were made as the review progressed, if on detailed reading the article did not fully match the relevance criteria.	

Test approach		
Search 1	‘Wealth Inequality’ AND ‘Framing’ OR ‘narrative’ between 2008 and present (search saved in SK’s Elsevier account) returns 150 titles	2 of 6
Search 2	‘Wealth Inequality’ AND ‘Framing’ OR ‘frame’ or ‘frames’ or ‘narrative’ between 2008 and present.	1 of 6
Search 3	‘Wealth inequality’ AND ‘framing’ or ‘frame’ or ‘frames’ or ‘political preferences’ or ‘narrative’ between 2008 and present.	1 of 6
Search 4	‘Economic inequality’ AND ‘frames’ OR ‘frames’ OR ‘framing’ AND ‘media’	14 returns; 4 of 6
Search 5	‘Wealth inequality’ AND ‘framing’ OR ‘frame’ OR ‘frames’ AND ‘media’	Saved in Google Scholar 22 September 2023 in Zotero.
Search 6	Web of Science (repeating the searches above in a second database and cross-referencing results against existing Zotero db.)	11 October 2023
Dual review	MV to review borderline cases and annotate. Collective decisions to be made on inclusions and exclusions.	Monday 16 October. Sample agreed (126 core items; 20 ‘context’ items that will not form part of the systematic review but which might be drawn on as part of description of context for final report)

Appendix 2: Bibliography of reviewed

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Notes

[1]This is an example of the cultural specificity we cautioned about in our introduction. Our literature seems to suggest that the middle-sized family business has a much stronger cultural resonance (and therefore possibly, stronger public perception of legitimacy) in Germany than in the UK

[2]We were interested in work **on** framing by these organisations, **not** evidence of the frames they use. We did not include work solely on poverty frames.

[3]By 'substantially' we mean that this topic was part of the research question, methods, data or key findings (for publication type (i)) and that it was part of the title or executive summary of relevant publications for publication type (ii). A peripheral mention of our key words in the 'further research agendas' or the 'literature review' sections was not sufficient for inclusion. We did not undertake additional primary research in these areas.

[4]Wealth is defined as comprising 'private pension assets; financial assets; other business assets; physical assets; property assets, net of all formal and informal liabilities' (Advani et al., 2021, p.403). Wealth inequality is defined in an overarching way using aggregate household level data on the sum of the asset types above, net of debt. We are focused on wealth inequality as an umbrella term. We assumed that this search term would pull in work on these individual asset types or would discuss them as an aggregate.