

**“Our Country Needs a Strong Leader Right Now”:**

**Economic Inequality Enhances the Wish for a Strong Leader**

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## **Abstract**

Societal inequality has been found to harm the mental and physical health of its members and undermine overall social cohesion. We examine the extent to which inequality is associated with a wish for a strong leader. We tested this hypothesis in a cross-national study involving 28 countries from 5 continents (Study 1,  $N=6112$ ), an Australian community sample (Study 2,  $N=515$ ) and two experiments (Study 3a,  $N=96$ ; Study 3b,  $N=296$ ). We found correlational (Studies 1 and 2) and experimental (Studies 3a&b) evidence for our prediction that higher inequality enhances the wish for a strong leader. We also found that this relationship is mediated by perceptions of anomie, except in the case of objective inequality in Study 1. This suggests that societal inequality enhances the perception that society is breaking down (anomie), and that a strong leader is needed to restore order (even when this leader is willing to challenge democratic values).

Word count: 150

**KEYWORDS:** economic inequality, subjective and objective inequality, anomie, leadership, authoritarianism, populism

“Our Country Needs a Strong Leader Right Now”:

Economic Inequality Enhances the Wish for a Strong Leader

I reached the conclusion that no party, but a single man could save Germany. This opinion was shared by others, for when the cornerstone of a monument was laid in my home town, the following lines were inscribed on it: “Descendants who read these words, know ye that we eagerly await the coming of the man whose strong hand may restore order” (Abel, 1938/1986, p.151)

The above quote captures the reflections of a Nazi high school teacher in the 1930s. Witnessing the economic chaos during the Weimar republic strengthened his belief that what Germany needed was a leader—Hitler—who would be strong, and therefore able to restore order (Abel, 1938/1986). Even though we now know that this particular leader’s rise to power marked the start of one of the darkest periods in human history, there is evidence that the call for strong leaders—defined here as someone who aims to overcome difficulties a group or society is facing by any means necessary (including non-democratic means)—is also ardent in current times. For example, in a recent survey, Ipsos (2018) asked respondents residing in 25 socio-economically diverse countries to what extent they agreed that ‘To fix [our country], we need a strong leader willing to break the rules’. Fifty-two percent of respondents agreed with the statement to at least some degree and only 21% of respondents disagreed.

In explaining Hitler’s rise to power, theorists pointed to the economic instability in the Weimar Republic in the years preceding the Nazi regime—instability that was primarily caused by hyperinflation, poverty resulting from repayment costs following WWI, and weak government (Abel, 1938; Arendt, 1951). Even though the specific forms of economic

instability that characterized pre-WWII Germany may not be a concern most Western societies encounter today, they do face another threat in the form of rising economic inequality. Economic inequality contributes to economic instability and may trigger economic recessions (Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2012).

In the current research, we tested the idea that economic inequality is associated with the wish for a strong leader. We also explore a potential mechanism for this relation. Specifically, we predicted that inequality fuels people's perception that society is breaking down—captured by the sociological concept of anomie (Durkheim, 1897/1987; Messner & Rosenfeld, 2001; Teymoori, Bastian, & Jetten, 2016); a circumstance people will perceive as best arrested by strong leadership.

### **Economic Inequality, Anomie and the Wish for a Strong Leader**

Although it is well-established that when economic inequality increases in a society there is an associated depression in trust, cooperation, and social cohesion (e.g., Elgar, 2010; Gustavsson & Jordahl, 2008; Van de Werfhorst & Salverda, 2012), a paucity of empirical attention has been paid to the impact of economic inequality on citizens' socio-political attitudes. However, there are reasons to expect that people's political beliefs and preferences may also be affected by economic inequality (Jetten et al., 2017). For instance, initial evidence suggests that higher levels of economic inequality are related to lower political participation (Mueller & Stratmann, 2003; Solt, 2008), lower support for democracy (Andersen, 2012) and greater endorsement of authoritarian values (Solt, 2012). Furthermore, sociologists have suggested that economic inequality (Burgoon, van Noort, Rooduijn & Underhill, 2018) and cultural alienation (e.g., Inglehart & Norris, 2016) may have contributed to the rising appeal of populist parties and radical leaders.

In this paper, we tested one possibility implied by this work and examined whether there is a positive association between levels of economic inequality and the wish for a strong

leader (H1). We also examined a potential mechanism underlying this relation and propose that perceptions of anomie are affected by inequality, and in turn, affect the wish for a strong leader. A familiar concept in sociology is that of anomie—a state of society characterized by social dysfunction and chaos in which society provides little moral guidance to its citizens (Durkheim, 1897/1987). Consistent with Durkheim’s reasoning, we propose that high levels of economic inequality may trigger feelings of anomie. Subsequently, the more people perceive there to be a breakdown of the social order, the more they should prefer a strong leader who ‘takes charge and make things right’ (H2). In line with this hypothesis, Haslam and Reicher (2007) showed that leaders and groups who are seen to provide a viable alternative to the status quo become more attractive in contexts in which people have lost faith in the system. Submitting oneself to strong authorities may be a way to deal with feelings of insecurity and anxiety that result from societal dysfunction (Scheepers, Felling, & Peters, 1990). We assessed these heretofore untested hypotheses empirically across three studies using a triangulation of research methods.

### **Study 1**

In a first study, we assessed whether there is support for our hypothesized mediation model across 28 countries. We measured inequality in two ways: objectively, using the Gini coefficient, and subjectively, among respondents of these 28 countries. We did this because subjective perceptions of inequality may explain variance in outcomes over and above that accounted for by objective indicators (see Van de Werfhorst & Salverda, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). We, therefore, tested our hypotheses around the wish for a strong leader (H1) as mediated by anomie perceptions (H2) for both inequality measures.

## Method

**Participants.** The data collection process started in January 2014 and ended in February 2015.<sup>1</sup> Participants were recruited through 30 universities in North America (Canada, and the US [one data set from Tennessee and one from Northern California]), South America (Chile, Brazil), Europe (Netherlands, UK, Spain, Italy, Germany [one dataset from former East Germany and one from former West Germany], France, Denmark, Finland, Switzerland, Belgium, Portugal, Poland, Hungary, Latvia), Asia (China, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, India, Pakistan), the Middle East (Iran), Africa (South Africa), and Oceania (Australia). The original version of the questionnaire, which was in English, was translated into the respective native languages of the countries. If necessary, either a back-translation or panel method was used for the translation of the survey. The participants completed the survey via an online platform or on a hard copy. We aimed to recruit at least a 150 participants per country. In some cases, this was not feasible (e.g., end of semester which made it impossible to recruit the required number of participants) and data collection had to be stopped prematurely. This was the case in the UK ( $N = 74$ ), Malaysia ( $N = 112$ ) and California ( $N = 141$ ).

A total of 6112 undergraduate university students completed the questionnaire. The mean age of the participants was 22.53 ( $SD = 6.35$ ) and 67% of the sample was female. Descriptive statistics of the whole sample are presented in Table 1. Country-level descriptive statistics can be found in the Supplementary Materials.

**Measures. *Economic inequality.*** We included two indicators of inequality in our analyses. First, the *GINI coefficient* was taken from the UN Human Development Report 2014 whereby a higher score (between 0 and 1) indicates greater levels of inequality. The

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<sup>1</sup> This study is part of a larger data set. As part of the validation of the anomie scale, the relation between anomie and objective inequality is also examined and reported in Teymoori, Jetten et al., 2016 (Studies 3a,b).



GINI coefficients in this dataset ranged from .27 to .63. Second, we measured *subjective perceptions of inequality* (*subjective inequality* for short). Participants were presented with a table of five rows showing five wealth categories: “very poor”, “poor”, “average in wealth”, “wealthy”, and “very wealthy”. They were asked to “think of 100 citizens in their country and asked how many of these 100 people would be classified into the different wealth categories. Participants estimated the number of people in each wealth category and wrote the number in a box at the end of each row, with the five estimates adding up to 100 people. The perceived inequality index was calculated in the same way as the calculation of the GINI coefficient and scores could range from 0 to 1 (see Supplementary Materials). In our sample, the perceived inequality index ranged from .00 to .38, with higher scores indicating that participants perceived higher levels of inequality in their country.

**Anomie.** Recently, Teymoori, Bastian and Jetten (2016) have brought the concept of anomie under a social psychological spotlight. Adopting Durkheim’s (1897/1987) conceptualization, they define anomie as an individual’s perception that society is breaking down, reflecting both a perceived breakdown of social fabric and a perceived breakdown of government in society. More specifically, Teymoori et al. (2016) argued that anomie is a collectively shared perception within society and will arise when (a) people feel others cannot be trusted and do not follow moral principles, and when (b) leaders or governments are perceived to be ineffective and illegitimate.

The two dimensions of anomie (i.e., breakdown in social fabric and breakdown in government) were measured using the 12-item scale developed by Teymoori and colleagues (2016). Six of the items assessed the perceived breakdown in social fabric. Two examples of such items are: “In [country] today, everyone thinks of him/herself and does not help others in need” and “In [country] today, people think that there are no clear moral standards to follow”. The other six items measured the perceived breakdown of government/leadership:

e.g., “In [country] today, the government laws and policies are effective” and “In [country] today, the government is legitimate” (both items were reverse coded). All items were measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Thus, a higher score indicated a stronger perception of anomie. The reliability of the 12-item scale was good ( $\alpha=.82$ ).

***Wish for a strong leader.*** Our key dependent variable was measured with three items whereby participants were asked to indicate their agreement with statements about the country’s leadership: “Our country needs a strong leader right now”, “We need strong leadership in order to make this society survive”, and “We need strong leadership in order to overcome societies’ difficulties”. Participants indicated to what extent they agreed with the statements on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). A higher score denoted a stronger wish for a strong leader ( $\alpha=.92$ ).

***Political orientation, gender, wealth of the country, state of democracy and homicide rates.*** In our analyses, we controlled for a number of variables that might covary in meaningful ways with our key variables. First, we controlled for political orientation because individuals on the right end of the political spectrum have been found to value authorities more (Altemeyer, 1998) and therefore would be more likely to wish for a strong leader. *Political orientation* was measured using two items adapted from the European Social Survey, whereby participants were asked to place their views on social and economic issues on a left-wing/right-wing scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly left*) to 7 (*Strongly right*). The correlation between the two items assessing political orientation was moderately high and significant ( $r=.60, p<.001$ ) and the items were averaged.

We also controlled for gender (female = 0, male = 1) and wealth of the country as indexed by the country’s *Gross Domestic Product (GDP)* at purchasing power per capita (the 2014 value). This measure assesses the total value produced in a country in a given year per

citizen after equalizing the differences in price levels. Scores were measured in US dollars and divided by 10,000. Hence, values ranged from 4.80 to 83.80, with higher scores indicating higher levels of national wealth.

Furthermore, we controlled for the *state of democracy* in every country using the Democracy Index 2014 compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit. Based on 60 indicators divided into five categories (i.e., electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, functioning of government, political participation, and political culture), the index assesses the level of democracy on a scale from 1 (*Authoritarian*) to 10 (*Fully democratic*). Scores in our sample ranged from 1.98 to 9.11.

Finally, we included the *homicide rate* of each country as a proxy for the level of violence because higher levels of inequality may be related to higher levels of violence (Hsieh & Pugh, 1993; Whitworth, 2012) and to an increased perception that society is breaking down. Data on homicide rates per 100,000 were obtained from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime for the year 2014. For Malaysia, no data was available for the year 2014. Therefore, we included the homicide rate of 2013 for this country. The sample's homicide rates per 100,000 ranged from 0.26 to 32.65.

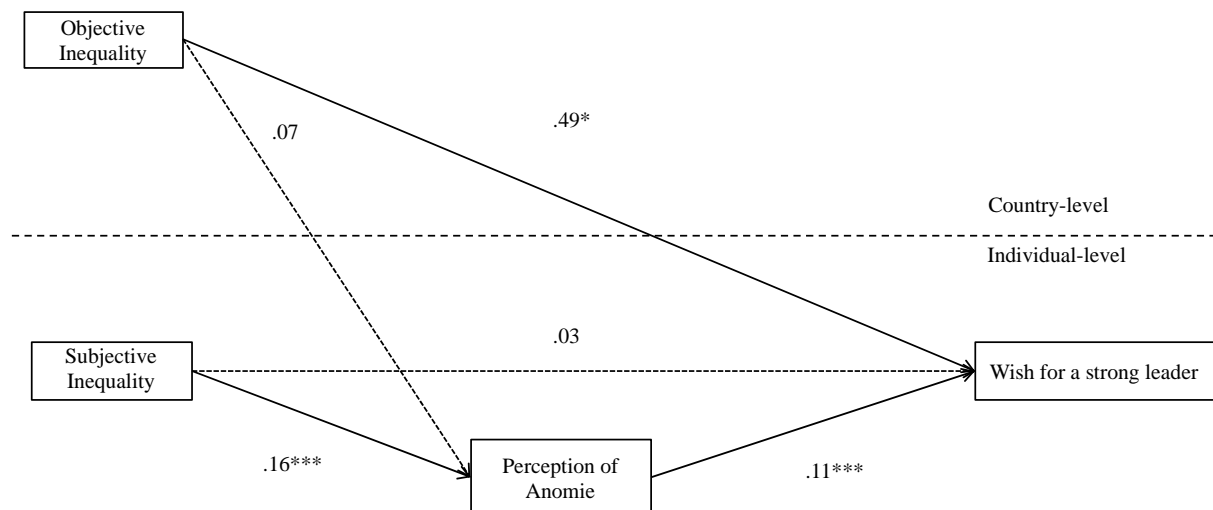
**Method of Analysis.** Because the data were collected in different countries, it is important to take the nested structure of the data into account. We estimated the multilevel models in MPLUS Version 7.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). The only variables with relatively large numbers of missing cases were subjective inequality, political orientation and gender: 367 (6%), 281 (4.6%) and 286 (4.6%), respectively. In the case of political orientation and gender, this was mainly due to the fact that these questions were not included in Pakistan. For all other included variables, the number of missing values did not constitute more than 0.02% of the sample. The missing cases were dealt with by MPLUS using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) assuming that missing values were missing at random (Muthén

& Muthén, 2012). Two samples were collected in Germany (East and West) and the USA (Tennessee and California), and these were included as separate countries.

## Results

**Descriptive results.** Despite significant variation across countries (see Supplementary Materials), the overall levels of participants' wish for a strong leader and anomie were relatively high (see Table 1) and both mean scores were above the midpoint of the scale.

In line with previous findings, although there was a positive and significant correlation between the objective and subjective indicators of inequality, this association only accounted for around 12 percent of their respective variances. Consistent with our expectations, both inequality measures had significant positive correlations with the wish for a strong leader as well as anomie. Anomie, in turn, was significantly positively correlated with the wish for a strong leader.



*Figure 1.* Final model representing the relation between objective inequality, subjective inequality and the wish for a strong leader mediated by perceptions of anomie, Study 1. See Table 2 for further statistical detail.

*Note.* Standardized coefficients presented. \*.  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Multilevel analyses.** We performed the multilevel analyses in two steps. In a first step, we compared the null model to the intercept-only model. A significant part of the variance in the wish for a strong leader ( $ICC = .27$ ) and anomie ( $ICC = .25$ ) was found to be between countries. In a second step, we added the predictors to the model using a stepwise approach (see Supplementary Materials). The model that included all individual and country level predictors provided the best fit to the data; we interpret the model coefficients below.

Both objective and subjective economic inequality predicted the wish for a strong leader (see Table 2 and Figure 1). In relation to the objective inequality measure, this suggests that there is greater baseline support for strong leaders in more unequal countries. Interestingly, subjective economic inequality was significantly positively associated with the wish for a strong leader, even after controlling for objective levels of economic inequality. Furthermore, although there was no evidence that anomie mediated the impact of objective inequality on the wish for a strong leader, anomie did mediate the effect of subjective economic inequality on the wish for a strong leader. While both objective and subjective inequality were associated with a greater wish for a strong leader, only higher subjective economic inequality was associated with higher levels of anomie.

As a robustness check, we re-ran the mediational analysis separately for the social breakdown ( $\alpha=.77$ ) and government ( $\alpha=.82$ ) anomie dimensions. Results were largely identical to those reported above: Subjective (but not objective) economic inequality was significantly positively associated with both anomie dimensions, and both anomie dimensions were positively and significantly related to the wish for a strong leader. Interestingly, however, although subjective inequality had a similarly strong effect on both anomie dimensions, the effect of the perceived breakdown in social fabric on the wish for a strong leader was significantly stronger than the effect of perceived breakdown in government,  $\Delta b = 0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p = .008$ . This suggests that particularly the perceived breakdown of social

fabric plays an important role in explaining the relation between perceived inequality and the wish for a strong leader (see Table 4, Supplementary Materials).

As another robustness check, we re-ran the mediation analysis on the individual level adding the different countries as controls in the form of dummies. This means that country-differences were accounted for providing more confidence that unobservable differences between countries were not driving the observed associations (see Table 6 and Figure 2, Supplementary Materials).

Table 1

*Means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations for main variables, Study 1*

	<i>Range</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Wish for a strong leader	1-7	5.25	1.52								
2. Objective inequality	.27-.63	.38	.09	.30***							
3. Subjective inequality	0-.38	.21	.06	.28***	.35***						
4. Anomie	1-7	4.32	.88	.23***	.21***	.33***					
5. Political orientation (right-wing)	1-7	3.79	1.23	.20***	.05**	-.01	.08***				
6. GDP	4.80-83.80	34.38	18.80	-.33***	-.37***	-.48***	-.36***	-.07***			
7. Democracy index	1.98-9.11	7.61	1.53	-.17***	-.21***	-.25***	-.20***	-.08***	.45***		
8. Gender (male)	0/1	.33	-	-.10***	-.07***	-.05***	.02	.03*	.06***	-.02	
9. Homicide rate	.26-32.65	4.44	9.04	.22***	.82**	.33***	.22***	-.01	-.40***	-.02	-.06***

*Note.* \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 2

*Final Multilevel model predicting anomie and a wish for a strong leader, unstandardized coefficients presented, Study 1*

	Anomie perceptions			Wish for a strong leader		
	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>
Intercept	4.67	[3.78, 5.62]	<.001	3.41	[1.44, 5.38]	.001
Individual level						
Anomie				0.19	[0.15, 0.23]	<.001
Subjective inequality						
Total	2.05	[1.66, 2.44]	<.001	0.96	[0.30, 1.62]	.004
Direct				0.57	[-0.09, 1.23]	.088
Subjective inequality → Anomie				0.38	[0.27, 0.50]	<.001
Political orientation (right-wing)	-0.08	[-0.09, -0.06]	<.001	0.17	[0.14, 0.20]	<.001
Gender (male)	0.02	[-0.03, 0.06]	.431	-0.17	[-0.24, -0.10]	<.001
Country level						
Objective inequality						
Total	0.34	[-1.60, 2.28]	.728	4.30	[0.28, 8.32]	.036
Direct				4.20	[0.20, 8.10]	.039
Objective Inequality → Anomie				0.15	[-0.72, 1.01]	.740
GDP	-0.01	[-0.02, -0.01]	.001	-0.02	[-0.03, 0.00]	.041
Democracy Index	-0.03	[-0.10, 0.05]	.471	-0.02	[-0.14, 0.18]	.829
Homicide Rate	0.01	[-0.02, 0.03]	.673	-0.02	[-0.06, 0.03]	.452
Variance components						
Individual level	0.56	[0.54, 0.58]	<.001	1.55	[1.50, 1.61]	<.001
Country level	0.08	[0.04, 0.12]	<.001	0.35	[0.17, 0.53]	<.001
Fit statistics						
Log Likelihood (parameters)	-22468.07 (28)					
AIC	44992.14					
Explained variance						
Individual level	.04			.04		
Country level	.46			.32		





## Discussion

Study 1 showed that both objective and subjective inequality were positively associated with the wish for a strong leader. Even though objective indicators of inequality and subjective perceptions may not always be aligned (e.g., Chambers, Swan, & Heesacker, 2014; Norton & Ariely, 2011), we found that they both predicted the outcomes of interest. We also found evidence for an effect of subjective inequality on the wish for a strong leader via perceptions of anomie, indicating that the effect of subjective economic inequality on the wish for a strong leader may partly be explained by a feeling that society is breaking down.

In this first large-scale study, we included a rather general measure of wishing for a strong leader which did not explicitly measure support for a leader using non-democratic means. Therefore, in our second study, we extended this measure by trying to capture the extent to which participants would be in favor of a strong leader who is willing to forego democratic values, break the rules or change the status quo to achieve desired outcomes.

## Study 2

### Method

**Participants.** As part of a larger survey, 515 Australian citizens were asked about their subjective perceptions of inequality in Australia, their perceptions of anomie and their wish for a strong leader. Data were collected online via Qualtrics Panels LLC in 2017. The age of the sample ranged from age 19 to 80 ( $M = 43.47$ ,  $SD = 16.41$ ), and included 263 women and 252 men. The sample size was determined by financial considerations: Qualtrics charged AU\$11.50 per participant and our budget allowed for 500 participants.

### Measures

**Economic inequality.** We measured *perceived inequality* in the same way as in Study 1. In this sample, the perceived inequality index was on average .20 and ranged from .00 to

.36, with higher scores indicating that the participant perceived higher levels of inequality in Australia.

***Anomie and wish for a strong leader.*** *Anomie* was again measured using the 12-item scale ( $\alpha=.80$ ) developed by Teymoori and colleagues (2016). *Wish for a strong leader* was measured with the same three items as used in Study 1 and we added four items that assessed more explicitly support for a leader who is willing to be more authoritarian and less democratic. The additional items were prefaced as “Australia needs a strong leader” followed by “who is willing to challenge democratic values and practices”, “who is willing to break the rules”, “who wants to change the status quo” and “who keeps tight control over the country’s decisions and activities.” Participants indicated to what extent they agreed with the statements on a 7-point scale and a higher score denoted a stronger wish for a strong leader ( $\alpha=.89$ ).

***Political orientation, gender, age, education and income.*** We also measured political orientation (two items on a scale ranging from “left wing” to “right wing” and from “very liberal” to “very conservative”,  $r = .57, p<.001$ ), gender, age, education and personal annual income and controlled for these in our analyses.

## **Results**

**Descriptive results.** As in Study 1, levels of anomie and wish for a strong leader were relatively high (Table 3). As predicted, the key variables positively correlated with each other: Higher levels of subjective inequality perceptions were associated with a greater wish for a strong leader. Both measures also positively correlated with perceived anomie. Noteworthy too, subjective inequality perceptions were also positively correlated with both dimensions of anomie separately (with breakdown of social fabric,  $r = .17, p<.001$ , and with breakdown of government,  $r = .27, p<.001$ ). Furthermore, both breakdown of social fabric

and breakdown in government were positively related to the wish for a strong leader ( $r = .23$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $r = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively).

**Mediation model.** We then examined whether anomie mediated the relation between subjective inequality and the wish for strong leadership. Mediation analyses were performed using the Process macro for SPSS (Model 4), with bootstrapping for 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence interval (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). We found a significant indirect effect of subjective inequality via perceptions of anomie on the wish for strong leadership; *indirect effect* = 1.37 (0.32), 95% CI = [.81, 2.02]. The direct effect remained significant, *direct effect* = 1.52 (0.72), 95% CI = [.11, 2.93] (see Figure 2).

Table 3  
Partial correlations, Means and Standard Deviations (SD), Study 2

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Subjective inequality	.20	.07	1		
2. Anomie	4.43	.82	.27***	1	
3. Wish for a strong leader	5.32	1.10	.18***	.33***	1

Note. Partial correlation analyses controlled for gender, political orientation, age, education and personal annual income.

\*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

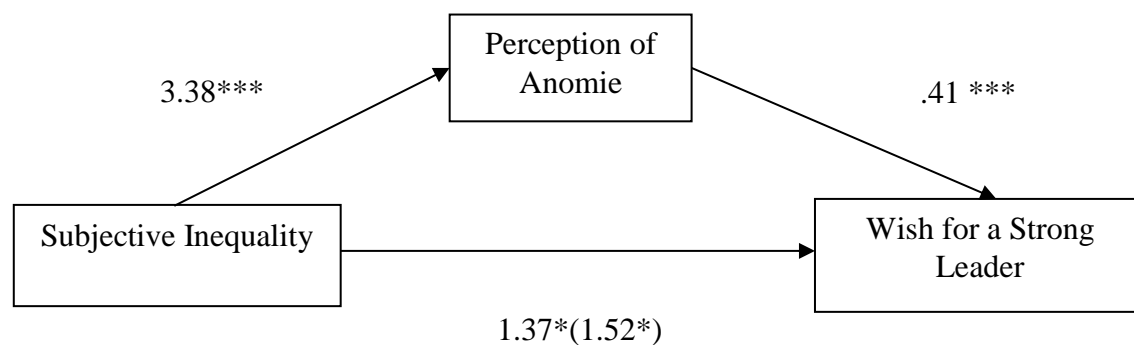


Figure 2. Indirect effect of economic inequality on wish for a strong leader mediated by the perception of anomie, Study 2.

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Discussion

Study 2 provided additional support for our hypothesized mediation model using a community sample of Australians. Akin to Study 1, subjective inequality perceptions (calculated in the same way as the Gini coefficient is computed) were positively associated with the wish for a strong leader. Our expanded measure of wishing for a strong leader provides us with greater confidence that perceived inequality not only enhances wanting a strong leader, but this desire extends to a leader who is prepared to break rules or use undemocratic means to achieve their goals. We also again found that anomie perceptions mediated this relation. This strengthens our reasoning that economic inequality perceptions enhance the feeling that society is breaking down (in terms of its social fabric and government), fueling a desire for a leader who will restore order (by whatever means necessary).

## Studies 3a and 3b

Studies 1 and 2 supported our predictions but are limited in the sense that they are cross-sectional. We then conducted two experimental studies—Study 3a using an undergraduate student sample and Study 3b using a US online user sample—where we manipulated economic inequality. This design allowed us to assess whether high inequality causes a greater wish for a strong leader.

## Method

**Participants.** The sample of Study 3a consisted of 96 Australian undergraduate students who participated in return for course credits (63 women,  $M_{age} = 21.11$ ,  $SD = 6.03$ ). The study was conducted at the end of the academic year and we finished data collection when the number of undergraduate students signing up to take part in the study dropped markedly. To contend with the possibility that the initial study was under-powered, we then conducted Study 3b with a sample of 296 US residents recruited from Amazon's Mechanical

Turk (161 women,  $M_{age} = 41.53$ ,  $SD = 11.11$ ). The size of the sample of Study 3b was calculated such that it provided a 90% chance of detecting an effect half the size of that obtained in Study 3a (i.e.,  $d = 0.39$ ,  $\alpha = .05$ ,  $1 - \beta > .90$ ; see Camerer et al, 2018). Study 3b was pre-registered on osf (<https://tinyurl.com/yyhkaesn>). The procedure and measures in Study 3a and 3b were identical.

**Manipulation of inequality.** The experiment was conducted online. After participants granted their consent to participate, they were asked to imagine that they were going to live in a fictitious society called Bimboola (Jetten, Mols, & Postmes, 2015, Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, in press, see Supplementary Materials for details). Participants learned that Bimboola consisted of three income groups and all participants were informed to think of themselves as belonging to the middle-income group which earned 40,000 Bimbolean Coins (BC) per month. Participants were then randomly assigned to the high or low inequality condition. In the high inequality condition, the wealthiest group was presented as very wealthy (77,000 BC) and the poor group as very poor (3,000 BC). In the low inequality condition, the income differences between the three income groups in Bimboola society were less pronounced (i.e., the wealthy group earned 50,000 BC and the poor group earned 30,000 BC). To improve the realism of the procedure, participants were asked to imagine they lived in Bimboola and, to get their life started, they were invited to pursue the essentials in life such as a house, mode of transport and holiday. Participants could only choose items that the middle-income group could afford and the houses, cars and holidays that they could choose from were identical in the low and high inequality conditions. However, the items that the poorest and the wealthiest group in Bimboola could afford differed across the conditions. Although the houses, cars and holidays open to the wealthiest group in Bimboola were only slightly more luxurious than those of the middle-group in the low inequality condition, the items that the wealthiest group could purchase in the high

inequality condition were much more luxurious and extravagant (large mansions, top of the range sports cars and expensive holidays). Likewise, although the items that people from the poorest group could purchase in the low inequality condition were only slightly less luxurious than those of the middle-group, the items they could afford in the high inequality condition were of much poorer quality, including substandard houses and old and damaged motorbikes; they did not have the means to go on a holiday.

**Measures.** To check whether participants perceived the objective economic inequality manipulation as intended, they were asked to respond to the questions: “To what extent is Bimboola’s economic distribution unequal?” ( $1 = \text{Not unequal at all}$ ,  $7 = \text{Very unequal}$ ) and “To what extent is Bimboolean society equal?” ( $1 = \text{Not equal at all}$ ,  $7 = \text{Very equal}$ ). The latter item was reverse coded after which the two items were averaged with higher scores indicating higher inequality perceptions ( $r = .49$ ,  $p < .001$  in Study 3a,  $r = .91$ ,  $p < .001$  in Study 3b). We also checked whether participants correctly recalled which group they were assigned to with the item “which income level have you been assigned to”?

Anomie was again measured with the 12-item scale from Teymoori et al. (2016,  $\alpha = .91$  and  $.96$ ) and the wish for a strong leader was measured using the seven items described in Study 2 ( $\alpha = .85$  and  $.93$ ). These items were adapted slightly to be relevant to the Bimboolean context, asking about their experience of anomie and wish for a strong leader in Bimboola. A number of other measures were included in this study (e.g., belief in conspiracy theories, perceived indispensability of the own income group, collective angst) which are part of another program of research and will not be reported here.

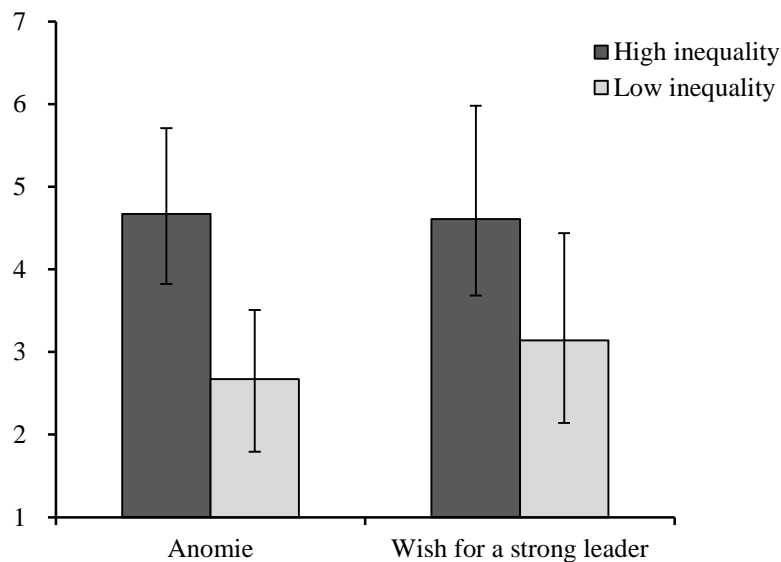
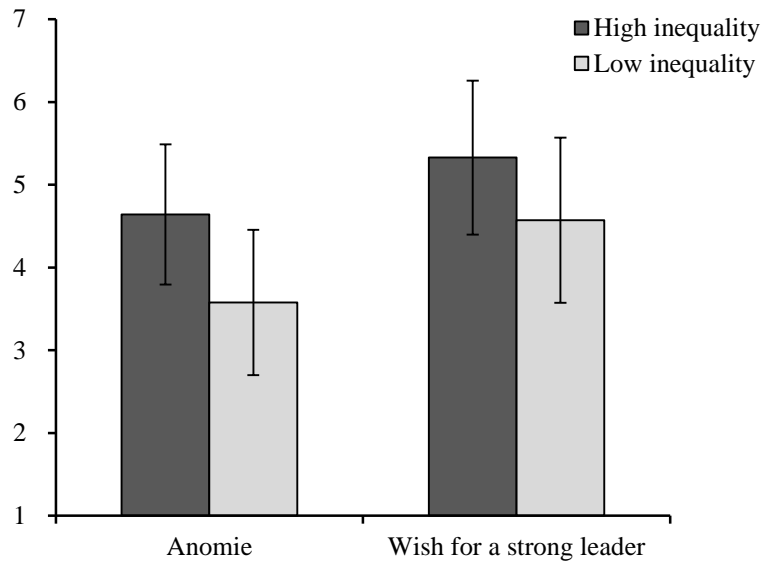
## Results

**Manipulation check.** All participants answered correctly that they were assigned to the middle-income group. In addition, independent samples  $t$ -test on the economic inequality

check showed that the manipulation worked as intended: Those assigned to the high objective economic inequality condition perceived higher levels of inequality in Bimboola than those in the low objective economic inequality condition in both Study 3a,  $M = 5.61$ ,  $SD = 1.18$  versus  $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ,  $t(94) = 7.62$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [1.35, 2.29],  $d = 1.56$ , and Study 3b,  $M = 6.42$ ,  $SD = 0.90$  versus  $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ,  $t(294) = 30.26$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [3.17, 3.62],  $d = 3.52$ .

**Anomie perceptions and wish for a strong leader.** Independent samples  $t$ -test on the anomie perceptions showed a significant effect for inequality: Participants in the high economic inequality condition perceived higher levels of anomie than those in the low economic inequality condition in both Study 3a,  $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = 0.85$  versus  $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ,  $t(94) = 6.03$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [0.71, 1.41],  $d = 1.23$ , and Study 3b,  $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 1.04$  versus  $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ,  $t(294) = 18.14$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [1.78, 2.21],  $d = 2.12$ . Moreover, those in the high economic inequality condition reported a stronger wish for a strong leader than those in the low economic inequality condition in both Study 3a,  $M = 5.28$ ,  $SD = .97$  versus  $M = 4.49$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ,  $t(94) = 3.90$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [0.39, 1.19],  $d = 0.80$ , and Study 3b,  $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = 1.37$  versus  $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ,  $t(294) = 9.50$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [1.17, 1.78],  $d = 1.10$  (see Figure 3).





*Figure 3.* The effect of economic inequality on anomie perceptions and wish for a strong leader, Study 3a (*Upper*) and 3b (*Lower*)

*Note.* Error bars represent standard deviations.

**Mediational analysis.** We examined whether anomie mediated the relation between manipulated levels of inequality and the wish for strong leadership using the analytic approach described in Study 2. We found a significant indirect effect of the inequality manipulation (coded as 0 = Low, 1 = High) via perceptions of anomie on the wish for strong leadership in both Study 3a, *indirect effect* = 0.55 (0.15), 95% CI [.29, .88] and the direct

effect was no longer significant, *direct effect* = .24 (0.19), 95% CI [-.14, .62], and Study 3b, *indirect effect* = 1.05 (0.18), 95% CI [0.69, 1.42], and the direct effect was no longer significant, direct effect = 0.42 (0.22), 95% CI [-0.01, 0.85] (see Figure 4).

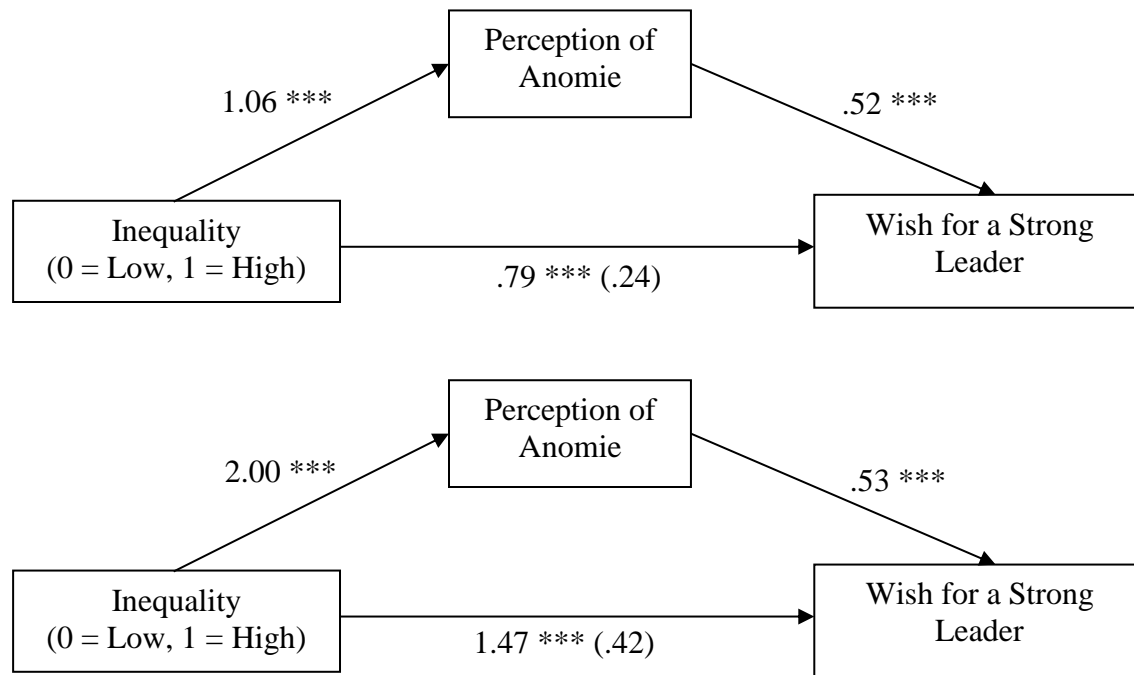


Figure 4. Indirect effect of economic inequality on the wish for a strong leader mediated by the perception of anomie, Study 3a (*Upper*) and 3b (*Lower*).

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Discussion

These two studies provide experimental evidence that high (compared to low) inequality causally increases participants' wish for a strong leader. Moreover, increased anomie perceptions help to explain this relation; Inequality also causally enhanced perceptions of anomie and these increased anomie perceptions, in turn, were related to the wish for a strong leader.

## General Discussion

The topic of economic inequality has not just captured the eye of academics, but of the general public and politicians alike. This is not surprising because economic inequality has pernicious effects on a range of outcomes: it is associated with increased criminality, poor mental and physical health, and lower levels of generalized trust (see Van de Werfhorst & Salverda, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Yet, much remains unknown about the effects economic inequality has on social behavior and political attitudes (see Jetten et al., 2017). The current studies add to existing research by showing that perceived economic inequality also enhances individuals' wish for a strong leader. Using both correlational (Studies 1 and 2) and experimental (Study 3a&b) designs, we showed that economic inequality is positively associated with a wish for a strong leader who is willing to use undemocratic means to achieve outcomes (Studies 2 and 3a&b).

By investigating the mediating role of anomie, we were able to provide an initial explanation for why inequality is positively related to a wish for a strong leader: perceptions of economic inequality (Studies 1 and 2) as well as objective economic inequality (Studies 3a &b) enhances the perception that society is breaking down and an enhanced sense of anomie is associated with a greater wish for a strong leader who can take firm action and stop the (moral) erosion of society. This finding underscores the idea that inequality does not only have pernicious effects on the health and well-being of people, but may also affect their perception of the health of society. In turn, this is consequential for the type of leader they feel their society needs in order to overcome its difficulties.

### **Implications, limitations and directions for future research**

Although the current research yielded novel results that help explain the conditions under which a society will desire a strong leader, some limitations of this research should be noted—limitations that point to promising avenues for future research. First, even though we believe our findings help to explain the resurgence of populism in many Western countries, it

is also clear that we only examined a limited set of characteristics that define populist leaders (e.g., their willingness to break rules to achieve desired outcomes). In this research, we focused on economic inequality, but note that the historical origins of inequality and other forms of inequality (e.g., educational inequality) may affect outcomes in unique ways. In addition, inequality may also affect other features that characterize populist leaders (such as their endorsement of anti-immigrant policies or their aversion of globalization) as well as actual voting behavior. These questions are fruitful avenues for future research. To strengthen the case for mediation, future research should also manipulate anomie perceptions and explore its moderating power in the inequality-wish for a strong leader relation.

Second, it may be tempting for some readers to place the current findings in the contemporary turbulent political landscape, and specifically associate the rising levels of economic inequality with the success of populist leaders. Results are suggestive of these two trends being related: The apparent growth in support for strong leaders worldwide may partly be due to increasing levels of economic inequality. More specifically, these results suggest that the successes of the radical right (e.g., Mols & Jetten, 2017; Mudde, 2013) may partly be explained by the levels of economic inequality, because economic inequality (subjective perceptions and at times objective inequality, Studies 3a&b) may evoke perceptions of societal dysfunction (i.e., anomie). However, it is also clear that there is no automatic link between inequality and the appeal of populist parties and radical leaders (Mols & Jetten, 2016; Mudde, 2013). Future research should investigate possible differences between countries, and focus on the explaining role of broader structural and historical factors that may trigger the collective wish for a strong leader.

## **Conclusion**

Our research showed that both subjective and objective inequality are associated with a stronger wish for a strong leader. This underlines the idea that analyzing socio-political

behavior and attitudes through a social psychological lens is a fruitful exercise. It also underscores the notion that inequality (and in particular the perceptions of the levels of inequality in a society) may have more far-reaching consequences than have hitherto been recognized.

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