

Economic Inequality in the German Quality Press: Framing Concerns About Inequality and Redistribution

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The article analyzes the German public debate on economic inequality, as represented in two series on inequality in the business and finance sections of the two leading national quality newspapers, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) and *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ). In a qualitative content analysis of 62 newspaper articles published in 2016, it assesses (1) the specific focus of articles relating to inequality, (2) the extent to which they consider economic inequality to be a relevant problem, (3) the extent to which they describe redistributive policy as necessary, and (4) the manner in which they discuss conceptual ambiguities and data problems. As an overarching result, the analysis identifies diverging patterns of framing, showing that evaluations of concerns about economic inequality and redistributive policies crucially depend on the thematic context. The analysis also finds that FAZ is less affirmative of concerns about inequality and more often opposed to redistributive policy than is SZ.

Keywords: economic inequality, inequality concerns, redistributive policy, qualitative content analysis, framing

Economic inequality² has become a major theme within both the social sciences and wider public debates. Inequality of incomes and wealth has substantially risen in most developed countries over the past decades (Brandolini & Smeeding, 2012; Piketty, 2014). A number of recent publications, prominently among them Thomas Piketty's (2014) landmark publication *Capital in the 21st Century*, have drawn renewed attention to the issue. International institutions such as the IMF and OECD have published research on the question of rising inequality and its (macro)economic repercussions (Dabla-Norris, Kochhar, Suphaphiphat, Ricka, & Tsounta, 2015; OECD, 2015). Even the World Economic Forum in Davos, traditionally committed to deregulation and economic liberalization, put the issue on the top of its agenda (World Economic Forum, 2014).

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² Throughout the article—unless specified otherwise—I interpret economic inequality as the inequality of control over resources in terms of both income and wealth.

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However, while international institutions and researchers have increasingly voiced concern about rising inequality of wealth and incomes, the treatment of economic inequality in the media has been more ambiguous, especially in Germany. While Thomas Piketty's 700-page bestseller on inequality was received almost enthusiastically in the English-speaking world, its reception in Germany was much more reserved and even hostile (Bank, 2015; Schinke, 2015). More generally and beyond Germany, some observers have voiced concern about "inequality denial" in public debates on inequality (Krugman, 2014). Similar concerns have been raised about the German print media (Arlt & Storz, 2013). Some actors, it seems, do not think that concerns about inequality should be taken seriously, or in any case decline that there is any need for redistributive policies.

On the other hand, recent studies have shown that, overall, coverage of inequality in German print media has been steadily increasing. Based on a quantitative content analysis, Schröder and Vietze (2015) argue that the German newspaper coverage of social inequality, poverty, and social justice since 1946 was responsive to the material developments of income inequality, with an overall trend of rising coverage of inequality. They do not, however, analyze how the media discusses the issue. Yet how inequality is framed matters enormously for the argumentative space in which distributional policy approaches are discussed.

Petring (2016) argues on the basis of text mining methods that newspaper discourses on inequality and social justice have become increasingly divergent. Using co-occurrence analysis comparing patterns between the periods 1959–79 and 1992–2011, he finds that "two worlds of justice journalism" have emerged, with a shift in justice evaluations toward a "neoliberal paradigm" in the center-right newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), while reporting in the center-left and left newspapers *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) and *Die Tageszeitung* (taz) has remained unchanged. However, regarding reporting on material inequality rather than social justice, Petring (2016, p. 390) remarks no such paradigm shift.

Although these studies are based on large corpora with long sample periods and thus help to shed light on general patterns and long-term trends, they do not discuss how economic inequality is evaluated in individual articles.³ Though Petring voices optimism concerning the future development of text-mining methods (Petring, 2016, p. 392), so far, the only option available to us if we want to understand the specific framing of economic inequality in print journalism is qualitative analysis based on a close reading of texts. In this spirit, Volkmann (2006) finds in a qualitative content analysis of 179 articles from two newspapers—FAZ (center-right) and *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR) (social-liberal)—in 1970

³ The reception of Piketty's book in the German quality press, as recounted by Schinke (2015) and Bank (2015), marks a case where coverage of an inequality theme is abundant in quantitative terms, while in qualitative terms its general tendency is one sided if not defamatory toward Piketty. Absurdly, one of the most hostile newspapers, center-right FAZ, reported under the headline "German Media Like Thomas Piketty" (Bernau, 2014), that Piketty was the third most quoted economist in Germany in the first semester of 2014—falsely implying that frequency of quotation was an indicator of sympathy (unless we are willing to interpret the "like" in the headline as "liking to quote" rather than "liking, full stop," in which case the remaining ambiguity was still misleading).

and 2000 that newspapers were marked by distinct “semantics of legitimation” of inequality, representing the respective mindsets of their readership at these two points in time. She argues that newspapers did not serve as mediators in one unified public discourse. In Bank (2016), I develop a typology of justification patterns of income inequality on the basis of a qualitative content analysis of 132 articles from various German newspapers on the issue of executive pay. However, both analyses focus on the specific strand of justification patterns within the more general field of economic inequality.

It turns out that there is a gap between a distant-reading analysis of general trends concerning inequality and microanalyses that focus on rather narrow questions of economic inequality. Also, most of the aforementioned studies analyze inequality in conjunction with social justice and they look at evolving patterns over time.

The aim of this article is to put the treatment of economic inequality itself center stage, regardless of whether it is discussed as a topic of social justice or, say, one of macroeconomic instability. Furthermore, although the thematic scope is wider (economic inequality, as such), the methodic focus is more close-up than that of quantitative large corpus analyses. I seek to identify elements of framing that determine the way in which the issue is presented in the respective publications. To that end, the analysis exploits two inequality series, one in each of the two leading national quality newspapers, FAZ and SZ. The analysis is based on a qualitative content analysis with a mixed deductive/inductive approach. The next section discusses the specific research questions in more detail. The Data and Methods section describes the selection of data and the applied methods, followed by the section Empirical Findings, and then a short conclusion.

Research Questions

The general interest of this article is to explore the way economic inequality has recently been framed in the German broadsheet media, an objective I pursue by analyzing its treatment in two leading quality newspapers. The overall guiding research question is as follows:

RQ1: What is the framing of economic inequality in the explored data?

As further expounded in the Data and Methods section, I pursue the aim of capturing the framing of economic inequality by analyzing the various specific focuses, evaluations, and definitions provided concerning economic inequality. I regard all these as elements of framing that, together, constitute specific patterns of framing. These elements of framing are captured with the help of the following four research questions:

RQ2a: What specific thematic focuses do editors choose when dealing with the general theme of economic inequality?

RQ2b: Is economic inequality presented as an issue of social or political concern, or are such concerns rejected or relativized?

RQ2c: Are redistributive policies endorsed or not? How are such policies defined?

RQ2d: Which specific conceptions of economic inequality are employed, and how far are complexities concerning inequality data mentioned?

Building on this basic analysis of framing, I will also discuss differences between the two newspapers I analyze in terms of their overall series design, focus, and composition. My comparative research question is:

RQ3: In what ways does the composition of series—in terms of RQ1–RQ2d—differ between the two analyzed newspapers?

In the next section, I describe the choice of data and methods applied to answer these research questions. Special attention is given to the design of codes and to the concept of framing.

Data and Methods

The following empirical analysis is based on data from the business and finance sections of the two leading national quality newspapers in Germany, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) and *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ). These two have the highest circulation among national quality newspapers, with 397,033 and 306,779 copies sold in 2014, respectively (ALM, 2015, p. 201). They can be regarded as leading newspapers among quality media outlets, being most frequently read by other journalists and most frequently quoted by other newspapers (Jandura & Brosius, 2011, pp. 195–196). While the FAZ can be regarded as a conservative newspaper, marked by a tradition of economic liberalism in its business and finance section (Kutzner, 2014), the SZ is a more center-left newspaper (Eilders, 2004). Like other qualitative content analyses (e.g., Kantner, 2014), the analysis is restricted to these two leading quality papers. This choice is based on two reasons: The first is pragmatic and reflects the aim to limit the amount of data to a manageable size for a qualitative content analysis. Secondly, the choice is based on the assumption that, as leading quality papers, being heavily relied on by producers of other media content, they play a constitutive role in the early formation and framing of economic policy debates in the wider media.⁴

Both newspapers, FAZ and SZ, published a series on the issue of economic inequality in their business and finance sections in 2016. This offered me the unique opportunity to methodologically “delegate” the process of article selection to the newspaper editors—and to make the result of their editorial choices an explicit part of the analysis. It is important to note the statistical implications of analyzing complete series. Instead of being sample articles, the articles I analyze actually constitute the entirety of the “population” (i.e., the respective series) under study. This eliminates concerns about selection bias and small sample size on the article level of analysis. Note that the data were treated as one corpus representing “inequality series in the two leading quality papers” in the more general parts of the

⁴ Obviously, substantiating this assumption would make for a research program on its own—an issue I return to in the concluding section.

analysis, while in the comparative parts, the two series each constituted one corpus on their own, which could then be legitimately compared despite the unequal number of articles (see Table 1). Obviously, concerns about representativeness remain valid on the levels of journal selection and time period as well as with respect to the question if the series are representative of the treatment of economic inequality in the two papers more generally. I return to these questions in the concluding section.

The SZ series was part of a special format in that newspaper called “Die Recherche” (“The Investigation”), in which readers could vote on a topic of concern that would be investigated over a couple of months and then be published in a series of articles (Ebitch, 2013). In September 2016, SZ published “Die Recherche” on the issue of inequality.⁵ It consisted of 20 articles, of which six were published in the business and finance section of the print newspaper. Two short additional video clips have been added to the online dossier, but were not included in this analysis. In its announcement of the series in June, the editor wrote that, among others, the series would ask questions such as, “Are we better off than previous generations?” “Are we, outside the executive floors [*Teppichetagen*], not that well off?” “Are the poor getting ever poorer, and the rich ever richer?” and “What can be done against this?” (Ebitch, 2016).⁶

The FAZ series differed in that it has been an ongoing series since March 2016—still being continued at the time of carrying out this analysis. Like the SZ case, it has been published in the business and finance sections of both the traditional daily FAZ as well as its weekly Sunday offspring, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* (FAS). Additional articles have been published online, but were excluded to keep the sample size manageable. There were 42 print articles between the beginning of March and the end of September 2016 that were all included in the analysis.⁷ In the opening editorial to the series, editors wrote that the issue of inequality was “complicated” and that those “who howl with the zeitgeist, according to which the gap between poor and rich was ever widening, and thus the world getting ever more unjust, have understood little, but are getting a lot of attention” (para. 1). The series was meant to discuss “normative issues as well as questions of statistics,” and to invite “prominent guest authors” to “present controversial views.” The aim was “to instigate a serious debate on inequality and justice” (“Arm und Reich,” 2016, para. 2). It is apparent that while the FAZ proclaimed aiming for plurality and rigor, the editorial introduction to the series had a clear normative stance and criticized parts of the inequality debate. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of sources.

⁵ In the readers’ voting, the question for investigation was termed “Ever Richer, Ever Poorer—How Can Germany Come Back Together,” Ebitch (2016). On its series website, the headline is “Inequality in Germany” (http://www.sueddeutsche.de/thema/Ungleichheit_in_Deutschland).

⁶ Translations into English by the author.

⁷ Given the period of seven months and the number of more than 40 articles, it seems justified to examine the series before it is officially terminated. Note that in August 2016, a subseries on urban inequality including nine articles has been published as part of the general series.

Table 1. Sources.

Sources	No. of articles	Percentage
FAZ/FAS	42	68
FAZ	22	35
FAS	20	32
SZ/Süddeutsche.de	20	32
SZ	6	10
Süddeutsche.de	14	23
Total	62	100

With both series being published in 2016, the analysis captures only a specific time period. Also, it is restricted to the realm of the business and finance sections, where the series were located in the newspapers (although not all authors belong to these sections). Yet, as these series were published in exceptional formats, it is plausible to assume that editors have sought to ensure the series' relevance beyond daily current affairs. Still, it should be clear that, ultimately, the series reflect choices made in 2016 and thus do not speak for a longer time horizon.

As pointed out in the previous section and especially in RQ1, the overall aim of the analysis was to identify framing patterns. *Framing* is a term much used in content analysis, but in many cases, it is not clearly defined, and it is employed in a variety of methodological approaches (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). According to Entman (1993):

Framing essentially involves *selection* and *salience*. To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described. (p. 52, emphasis in original)

Research on framing can focus on a wide range of aspects of political communication, especially with a focus on media effects, treating framing either as an explanatory variable or as dependent variable. Furthermore, framing research may as much focus on the production of frames as it may look at their audience (Scheufele 1999). Note that although this research is motivated by the assumption that framing in leading quality papers plays an important role in the formation of economic policy debates, the approach of this analysis is merely explorative, analyzing framing in media outcomes.

Two major methodological concerns arise regarding the analysis of framing, especially in qualitative content analyses (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). A first worry concerns reliability (and thus replicability). How can we ensure that coding is not biased by the mindset and specific previous knowledge of the researcher? A second worry concerns validity, as extraction of codes should not only be transparent and derived according to clear criteria, but codes should also measure what they are supposed to measure. The first worry concerns mainly "hermeneutic" and "manual holistic" approaches, as Matthes

and Kohring (2008) call them. The second worry tends to be a concern in more automated, computer-based procedures that presumably mitigate against the first methodological concern.

This analysis applied a manual, close-reading approach—so the main methodological worry was about reliability of the coding of framing. To avoid biased coding, two measures were taken. First, I have provided clear definitions of the codes used in the analysis. Second, rather than coding framing as such, the concept of framing was split into its several elements, thus reducing room for interpretation. Entman (1993) calls these framing elements “problem definition,” “causal interpretation,” “moral evaluation,” and “treatment recommendation,” which then in variously combined manifestations constitute specific patterns of framing. Hence, rather than directly identifying certain framings of the debate, the content analysis coded a number of clearly defined aspects as elements of framing (see subsections below). It sought to analyze patterns of these framing elements in a second interpretive step only by drawing conclusions from the empirical analysis about the overall framing of the inequality debate. This is similar to the approach Matthes and Kohring (2008) suggest to deal with the aforementioned methodological concerns, though their unit of analysis is restricted to the article level rather than extending to the level of text segments.

Coding took place on two levels of analysis: article level and text-segment level. Whereas on article level, unique codes were assigned in each coding category, text segments were coded whenever applicable, with double coding and overlaps being possible. An intermediary level between main article codes and segment level codes assessed articles with at least one segment code in the respective category (see Figure 8 in the Empirical Findings section). Coding on different levels allowed for a necessary degree of fine-tuning of the assessment while allowing for an overall interpretive judgment with respect to each article.

Four main groups of codes were applied in a mixed deductive/inductive approach, supported by a software package for qualitative data analysis.

Inequality Focus

First, inequality focus (IF) was coded inductively, tackling RQ2a. Codes assessed the specific thematic area articles about economic inequality deal with. Every article was assigned one overarching thematic code, whereas within each article, segments could be coded with several different inequality focuses. As these codes were being created during the coding process, they will be discussed in the Empirical Findings section.

Inequality Concerns

Second, a centerpiece of the analysis—as pointed at by RQ2b—consisted in the investigation of what I call “inequality concerns” (IC). These concerns were coded with predefined codes. Inequality concerns were defined as evaluations according to which economic inequality is too large (for whatever specific reason). The analysis thus identified whether a piece of data (text segment or article) affirmed these concerns or dissented from them. Dissent could either mean that concerns were rejected outright or that the worry about inequality was at least relativized. Accordingly, codes were applied in binary terms,

either “affirmative” (AFF) of inequality concerns, or “dissenting” (DISS), which means they deny or relativize the concerns that are being referred to. Two additional codes captured cases where the evaluation was unclear or neutral (IC-U/N), or, on article level, where coding evaluations of inequality concerns was not applicable (IC-NA).⁸

Besides coding the evaluation of inequality concerns, codes assessed in what terms economic inequality was discussed in the respective segment or article. Throughout the analysis, economic inequality was pragmatically defined as income and wealth inequality, acknowledging that these are distinct yet interrelated categories.⁹ To keep the number of codes small while accounting for the different facets of economic inequality, the analysis applied four codes: A first code (IC1) identified inequality concerns in terms of income, including both household incomes and wage incomes. A second code (IC2) coded economic inequality in terms of wealth. A third code (IC3) was designed to identify cases where one of the above dimensions was discussed at the exclusion of the other. A fourth code (IC4) captured cases where economic inequality was not specified and was understood more broadly as individual control over economic resources, which of course would in some way be determined by both income and wealth.

Note that various considerations can give rise to concerns about inequality (e.g., the worry about the state of democracy, the endorsement of a certain theory of justice, or the expectation that it negatively affects the economy or social cohesion, to name a few). Codes about thematic focus helped capture this dimension, although it has not been explicitly coded.

Redistributive Policy

Third, codes assessed the definition and evaluation of redistributive policy (RP). This was an important additional aspect to include in the analysis, because it allowed me to reach beyond the problem analysis and general normative evaluation (as captured by the IC evaluations codes), and to also cover the realm of treatment recommendations. One might well agree on what the problem is, but disagree on the solutions.

Defining redistributive policy is a challenging task. In a sense, almost all policy areas can be regarded as areas of distributive policy, both in their immediate fiscally redistributive effects as well as qua institutional and economic supply-side effects on distribution. A policy to improve public education may be expected to have effects on the distribution of household incomes just as much as a rise of the top

⁸ On article level, codes were obligatory; on segment level, only relevant segments were coded so that by definition this fourth category was obsolete.

⁹ Economic inequality is often defined in terms of income inequality, though Sen (1997) rightly points out that this is scarcely a satisfactory definition. The philosophic debate about the welfare dimensions of economic inequality and questions of “capability” raised by Sen aside, Piketty (2014) has shown at length that the inequality of incomes and wealth are interrelated in various ways, with incomes consisting of various distinct dimensions, most notably the difference between inequality of household incomes and wages.

income tax rate.¹⁰ To operationalize RQ2c, asking about the evaluation of policy recommendations, I used a simplified binary understanding of economic liberalism as opposed to interventionist or redistributive economic policy approaches.¹¹

Economic liberalism was understood as a position rejecting state interventions in market processes aimed at changing the distribution of incomes or wealth in society. In pure form, this view praises competitive markets and price signals unharmed by state distortions as the best means to achieve an efficient allocation of resources (Hayek, 1969), while it typically rejects "end-result" principles of justice as a guide to distributive policy (Nozick, 1974). In contrast, redistributive policy consists in measures toward more progressive taxation, expansions of the welfare state, reforms of the institutional setting aimed at strengthening the bargaining position of trade unions in wage negotiations, or in a reregulation of international trade and investment flows.¹²

Codes assessed whether redistributive policy recommendations were endorsed (END) or rejected (REJ). Note that this binary distinction does not mean policy recommendations were considered to be pure forms at either end of the continuum sketched above. Rather, it assessed whether the favored economic policy change was directed toward the redistributive end or the economic-liberal end of the spectrum. As with evaluations of inequality concerns, additional codes were used for cases where the evaluation of redistributive policy was unclear or neutral (RP-U/N), or, on article level, where it was not applicable (RP-NA).

Besides coding how redistributive policies were evaluated, I also coded what specific redistributive policy was being discussed, among them raising taxes on high incomes and wealth (including yet untaxed wealth in tax havens) (RP1), subsidizing those at the lower end of the distribution (RP2), providing progressively financed public services (RP3), and reforming institutional settings to enhance redistributive forces in the political economy arena (RP4). Where one or more of RP1 through RP4 were specified but not uniformly endorsed, this was included as a special case (RP5). Where not specified, it was assumed that "redistribution" mainly meant RP1 through RP4, but that it was embedded in a more general view favoring redistributive state interventions in the economy (RP6).

Inequality Concepts and Data

The discussion of economic inequality often hinges on the presentation of data and their underlying conceptualization, even where it is made clear whether it is income or wealth data that is being

¹⁰ Note that in both cases the policy may change market and net incomes: As Piketty (2014, p. 505) points out, top income tax rates have historically played an important role in flattening the distribution of market incomes. Likewise, educational policy will most likely not only change the distribution of market incomes by affecting the supply of qualified labor, but it may well affect the distribution of fiscal burdens in complex ways, too.

¹¹ This dichotomy is employed as one key dimension for economic policy preferences, for example, in Kitschelt (1995) and in Beramendi, Häusermann, Kitschelt, and Kriesi (2015).

¹² For proponents of one or several of these measures, see, for example, Atkinson (2015), Piketty (2014), and Stiglitz (2012).

looked at. For example, income inequality trends among households in Germany appear in a completely different light depending on the base year used. Whereas the Gini coefficient of household inequality has not increased since 2005, it has risen substantially since the 1980s and 1990s. On the other hand, a more complete picture of the recent stagnation of inequality may emerge when presenting this development against the backdrop of the business cycle and currently low levels of unemployment (Grabka, Goebel, & Schupp, 2012, p. 7). Some have argued that the rise of household inequality has recently been interrupted by the fall of capital incomes—which disproportionately go to top earning households—during the global financial crisis (Schmid, Peichl, & Drechsel-Grau, 2015). Looking at wages rather than household incomes also makes the rise of inequality appear more drastic, especially when looking at life incomes where the inequality has sharply increased across generations, even within the relatively homogenous group of full-time employed men with stable employment biographies (Bönke & Lüthen, 2014). A code (AMB) was used when at least one of these ambiguities is acknowledged, when inequality data is presented.

Additionally, the issue of data sources adds further complexity. Most inequality data circulating in the public debate rely on survey data, which are well known to underestimate inequality, especially at the top of the distribution. For this reason, modern inequality research uses, where possible, administrative tax data and national accounting (Piketty, 2014, pp. 16–20). However, in Germany, relying in this kind of data is a problem due to the suspension of the wealth tax since 1997 and due to anonymous taxation of capital income since 2009 (Behringer, Theobald, & van Treeck, 2014). On top of that, a sustained accumulation of retained earnings in the corporate sector might further hide a rise in top incomes in Germany in the last decade, also referred to as the “corporate veil” (Behringer et al., 2014). Articles or segments that refer to such problems of incomplete data were coded accordingly (INC). As with codes for inequality concerns, additional codes assessed whether we were dealing with data concerning income inequality (ID1), wealth inequality (ID2), or economic inequality broadly understood (ID3).

Additional Codes

In addition to the content-related codes presented above, I assessed furthermore whether articles were written by internal or external authors, or were interviews. Also, codes for article style captured analytical/fact-reporting versus protagonist-oriented/reportage styles of articles (with a residual category for “other”).

The system of codes is presented in Figure 1. Recalling Entman’s (1993) definition of framing, we can now see what elements of framing the codes capture: The dimension of inequality focus can be regarded as the dimension of problem definition. Additionally, inequality data codes capture either aspects of problem definition or causal attribution. The codes for inequality concerns identify normative evaluations of our issue of interest, whereas redistributive policy deals with treatment recommendations.

<i>Dimension</i>	Inequality Focus	Inequality Concern	Redistributive Policy	Inequality Data / Concepts
<i>Definition</i>	Inductive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IC1 (income) • IC2 (wealth) • IC3 (IC1 and not IC2 or IC2 and not IC1) • IC4 (broad econ. Inequality) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RP1 (raising progressive taxes) • RP2 (subsidies at bottom) • RP3 (extending public services) • RP4 (reforming institutional setting) • RP5 (RP1-4 diverging +/-) • RP6 (unspecified redistribution, against economic liberalism) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ID1 (income) • ID2 (wealth) • ID3 (unclear / general)
<i>Evaluation</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AFF (affirmative) • DISS (dissenting) • IC U/N (unclear/neutral) • IC NA (not applicable) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • END (endorsed) • REJ (rejected) • RP U/N (unclear/neutral) • RP NA (not applicable) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AMB (ambiguity) • INC (incomplete data)
<i>Framing Dimension (Entman, 1993)</i>	Problem definition	Moral evaluation	Treatment recommendation	Problem definition / causal attribution

Figure 1. Code system: Elements of framing in inequality debates.

Empirical Findings

The empirical analysis of 62 articles from the two inequality series in the newspapers FAZ and SZ has yielded a total of 1,752 codings for segments and articles. Of these, 310 were codes on article level.

Most of the articles were written by internal journalists—that is, regular (hired or freelancer) authors of the newspapers. The SZ series did not include any guest authors, whereas in the FAZ series almost a fourth of the articles was written by external authors. A majority of articles were written in analytical or fact-reporting style in the FAZ newspaper, while the smaller SZ series consisted of more protagonist-oriented articles and reportages than analytical or fact-reporting articles (see Table 2).

Table 2. Author Type and Article Style.

	No. of articles (All)	Percentage	No. of articles (FAZ)	Percentage (FAZ)	No. of articles (SZ)	Percentage (SZ)
Author type						
Internal	48	77.4	29	69.0	19	95.0
External	10	16.1	10	23.8	0	0
Interview	4	6.5	3	7.1	1	5.0
Total	62		42		20	
Article style						
Analytical/fact- reporting	38	61.3	33	78.6	5	25.0
Protagonist- oriented/reportage	14	22.6	5	11.9	9	45.0
Other	10	16.1	4	9.5	6	30.0
Total	62		42		20	

Note: Percentages are rounded off and thus the exact sum of 100% will not be shown.

Inequality Focus

Codes for inequality focus were obtained inductively during coding. Thirty codes were created, of which 26 appeared in at least four articles (or more than 5% of articles) and of which 22 were coded on article level (i.e., they constituted the main focus of the respective article). Figure 2 presents the frequencies of all inequality focus codes ordered by number of documents for which the respective code constituted the main focus.

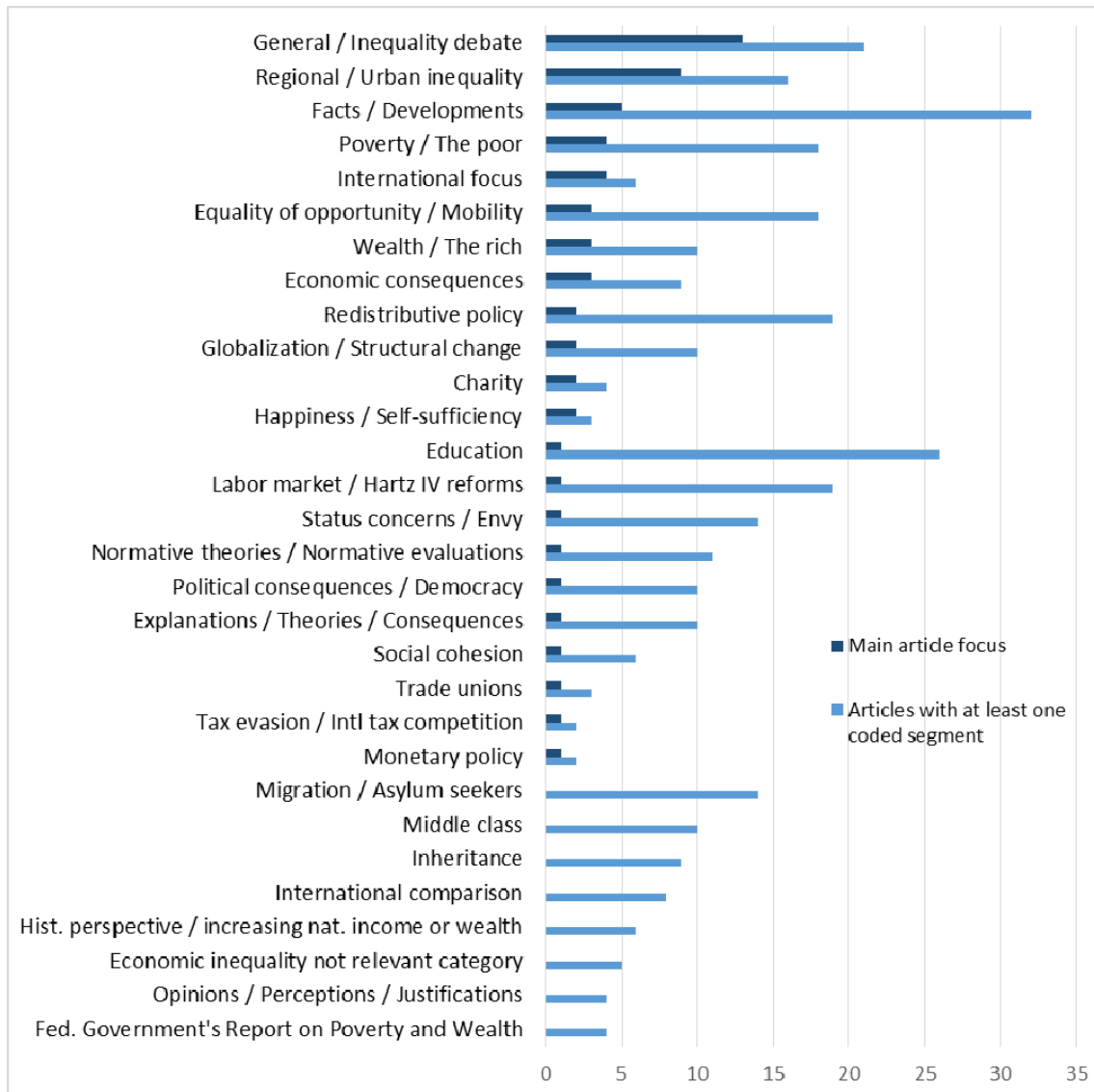


Figure 2. Frequency of thematic codes. Number of articles (1) for main article focus and (2) with at least one coded segment.

It is not surprising that the most frequent main focus code is about general questions or the inequality debate as such (13 articles). These comprised general introductory articles as well as articles

discussing the German inequality debate. Regional/urban inequality was subject to a special series within the inequality series of the FAZ. Five articles dealt explicitly with the discussion of facts and developments of inequality. Four articles reported on inequality in other countries (“international focus”). Poverty or being poor was the subject of four articles, and wealth and being rich was subject of three articles. Three articles discussed questions of equality of opportunity and social mobility. Another three articles discussed economic consequences of inequality. Note that the small number of articles (one or two) for all other inequality themes does not render them irrelevant, as they reflect editorial choices of what further topics should be included in the series—for example, an article on the distributional consequences of monetary policy in the FAZ or an article on the role of trade unions for inequality in the SZ.

In terms of coded segments, “facts/developments” appeared in the largest number of articles (about half of all), which is hardly surprising given the important empirical dimension of inequality. A number of themes emerged in many articles, but did not in themselves constitute main focus issues. These are, among others, the topical issue of migration and asylum seekers, which was regularly mentioned as an additionally complicating factor for understanding inequality or even an additional political challenge for dealing with inequality. The middle class was also a theme often referred to, just like inheritance and the inheritance tax.

When comparing the composition of the series in both newspapers, some striking differences emerged (see Figure 3). Note that the body of FAZ articles consisted of twice as many articles as the SZ series. It would not surprise then if FAZ had covered more specific issues than SZ, or had twice as many articles on any one specific issue.¹³ It is, however, interesting to note that some issues were covered in SZ but not in FAZ, which indicates clear differences in focus. SZ had a couple of rather apolitical articles on “happiness/self-sufficiency” (put bluntly: “don’t worry about inequality, just be happy”) and on “charity” (“donate rather than solve inequality politically”). But it also focused on the important (and more political) role of the labor market and trade unions, which FAZ did only indirectly by covering globalization and structural change in relation to inequality. More generally, FAZ had more “analytical” articles explicitly discussing studies on the economic consequences of inequality or on facts and recent developments. This is mirrored in the article style code reported in Table 2. The fact that FAZ had four articles with international focus can be attributed both to the larger size of the series and to the explicit focus of the SZ series on inequality in Germany.

¹³ Note that regional/urban inequality is so strongly represented in FAZ due to the special series within the series.

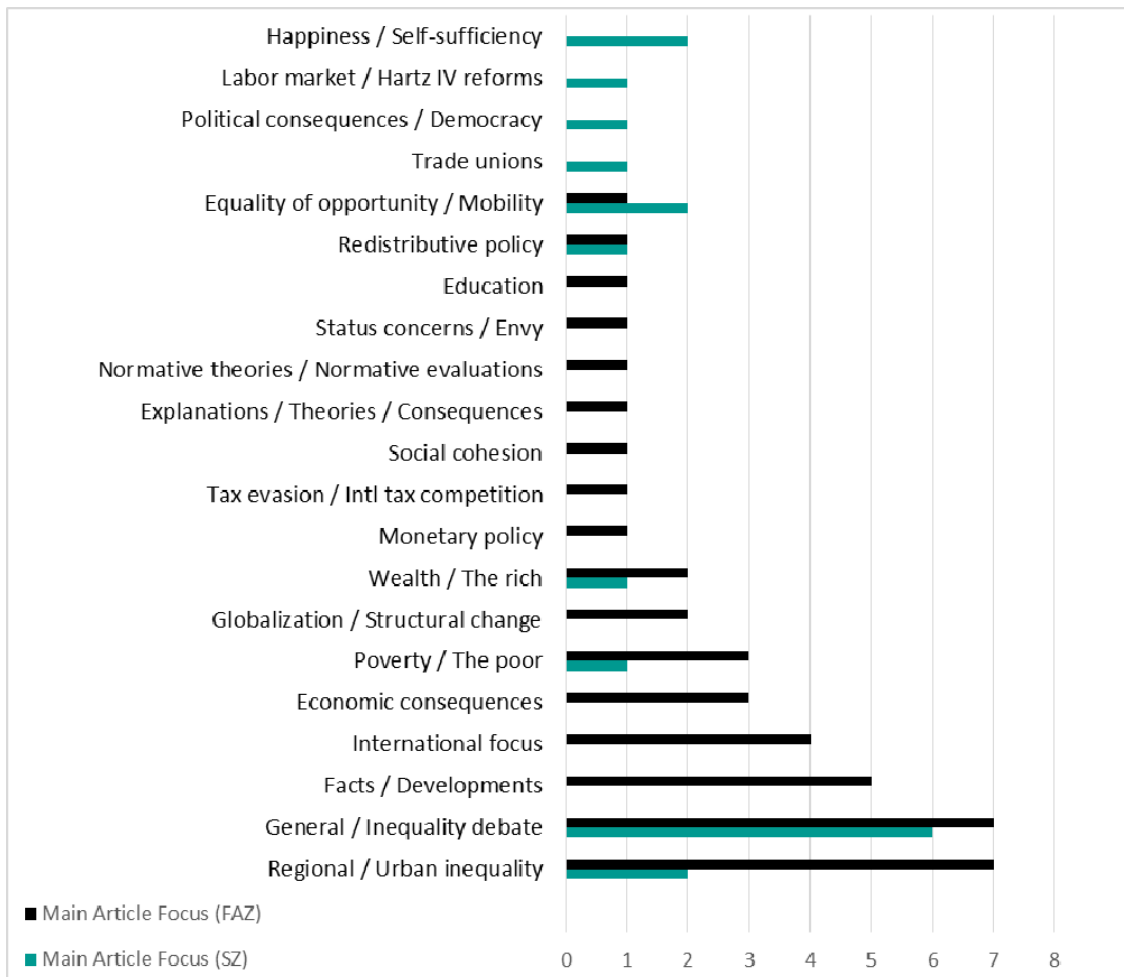


Figure 3. Differences in main inequality focus between FAZ and SZ series.

Inequality Concerns

Turning to the evaluations of inequality concerns (IC), it is interesting to note that overall, there were more articles presenting economic inequality as a problem (21) than articles dissenting from inequality concerns (14), even in the FAZ newspaper, which introduced its series as critical of discourses seen to be “dramatizing” inequality (see Data and Methods section and Figure 4). At first glance, then, it may seem as if FAZ provided a fairly balanced evaluation of inequality concerns, whereas SZ overly problematizes inequality. However, it is important to note that no objective middle point exists from which one could measure deviations. If one’s position is, for example, that economic inequality (or one of its facets) is a massive problem, SZ may look fairly balanced whereas FAZ then appeared strongly distorted toward the “dissenting” side. Also note that when excluding the subseries on urban inequality, a majority of articles by internal authors were IC dissenting.

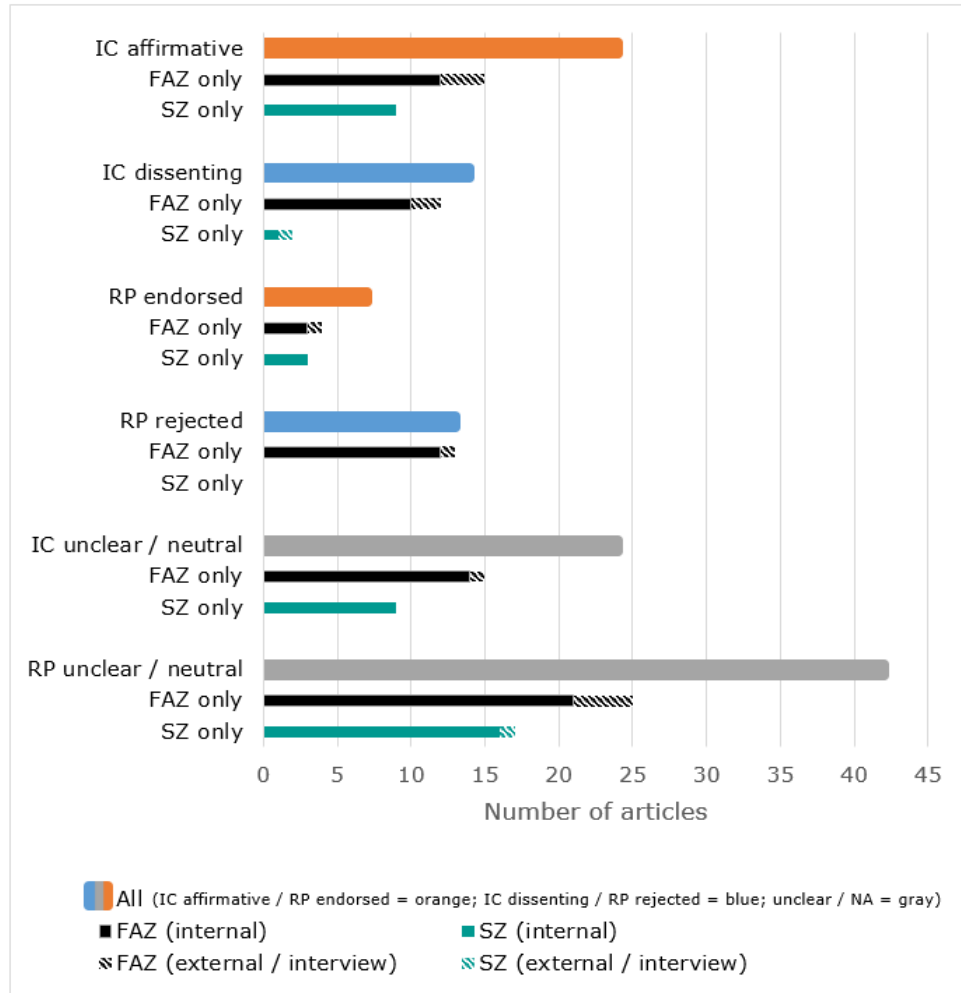


Figure 4. Inequality concerns and redistributive policy: Evaluations on article level.

As concerns data and conceptual problems such as ambiguity in data or incomplete data, this was mentioned in only 21 of the 62 articles, with 20 articles mentioning ambiguity issues and eight articles mentioning incomplete data issues. Yet it is worth noting that among these 21 articles, such problems were mentioned more frequently in dissenting articles. This is contrary to the overall pattern discussed (see Figure 4), which suggests that dissenting IC evaluations are often framed with data problems (see Figure 5).

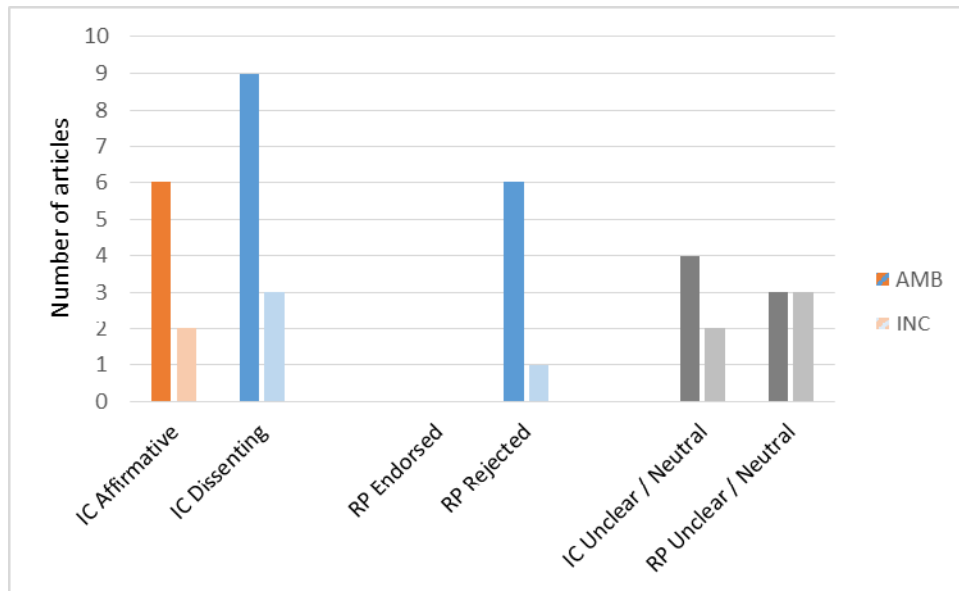


Figure 5. Inequality concerns and redistributive policy: Evaluation of articles addressing data/conceptual ambiguities (AMB) or data incompleteness (INC).

On segment level, there were 74 affirmative text segments in 33 articles versus 49 dissenting text segments in 15 articles. There is an overlap of six articles, which contained both affirmative and dissenting text segments. Concerning the facets of economic inequality (codes IC1–IC4), most of the coded IC segments were best described in terms of broad economic inequality (IC4). Of the affirmative (dissenting) text segments, only seven (nine) explicitly dealt with income inequality (IC1) and only five (eight) referred explicitly to wealth inequality (IC2). Thus, we may say that dissenting text segments were slightly more precise in terms of the aspect of economic inequality they were referring to. Overall, however, economic inequality was typically discussed in more general terms. Note that—given how difficult it is to disentangle one dimension of economic inequality from another—this does not need to be a bad thing.

Redistributive Policy

Redistributive policy (RP) evaluations were less frequent than were IC evaluations, which should not surprise, as the series theme was economic inequality, of which policy approaches are only a subtopic. On article level, around half of the articles did not contain RP evaluations. But among the 30 articles that did, 13 rejected RP in interventionist terms whereas seven favored it (see Figure 4). Thus, contrary to the IC evaluations where a majority of articles is affirmative of IC, in terms of policy approaches, economic liberalism prevails. We should note, though, that this only holds for the FAZ newspapers; the SZ newspaper—though it only had six of 20 RP relevant articles (against 24 of 42 in the FAZ)—was rather supportive of RP. If we accept to generalize on the basis of the small number of relevant articles published in the SZ, our findings would seem to confirm those of Petring (2016).

Looking at conceptual or data problems codes, we find a similar picture as in the IC analysis (see Figure 5), though due to the smaller number of relevant articles, we have a larger share of the NA (not applicable) category. While none of the articles supportive of RP mentions data issues, at least the ambiguity issue featured prominently in almost half of the articles rejecting RP.

On segment level, there were 25 endorsing text segments in 11 articles against 39 rejecting text segments in 15 articles (with an overlap of three articles, which contained both kinds of evaluation). Concerning the RP1–RP6 codes capturing specific aspects of RP, the result was slightly different to the IC specifications (see Figure 6). Overall, most RP evaluations (like IC evaluations) were presented in general terms rather than in terms of RP1–RP5. However, among the RP endorsing text segments, more segments specified RP in terms of RP1–RP3 than appearing in general terms (RP6), contrary to rejecting segments. Thus, where RP is endorsed, it is more clearly specified than where it is rejected.¹⁴

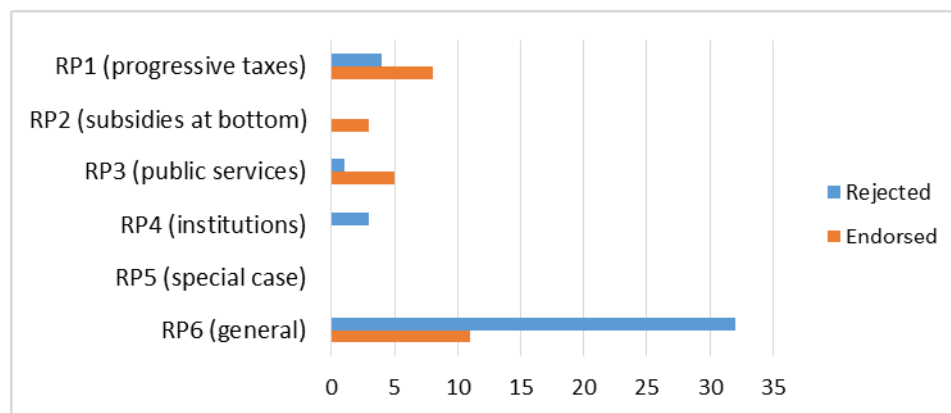


Figure 6. Redistributive policy: Distribution of specification for endorsing (END) and rejecting (REJ) segments.

Patterns of Framing

Having discussed the codings of inequality focus (problem definition), inequality concerns (normative evaluations), redistributive policy (treatment recommendation), and inequality data (problem definition/causal attribution), we are now in a position to look more closely at specific patterns of the described elements of framing. Some patterns have already emerged from the comparison of codings between the two newspapers, from the description of ID codes among IC evaluations as well as from the description of RP specifications.

¹⁴ Note that the code RP5 was not used once, which suggests that RP1–RP4, at least in the data at hand, are not used in explicitly exclusive ways, lending support to the coherence of the general notion of RP6.

One further question concerns the relationship between IC and RP evaluations. When looking at co-occurrences of IC and RP evaluations on article level (which are few, given the relatively small corpus), the most frequent co-occurrences are those of affirmative and endorsing, as well as dissenting and rejecting articles (see Figure 7). It comes as no surprise that RP is endorsed only where inequality is seen as a problem, and that it is frequently rejected where it is not seen as a problem. Three articles were affirmative of IC, but did reject RP. The exact same pattern holds on segment level, with a larger number of cases obviously.

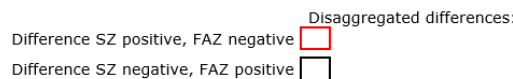
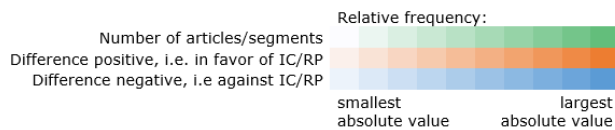
	IC AFF	IC DISS	IC U/N	IC NA	SUM
RP END	6	0	0	1	7
RP REJ	3	6	3	1	13
RP U/N	1	3	4	2	10
RP NA	14	5	7	6	32
SUM	24	14	14	10	62

Figure 7. Co-occurrence of IC and RP evaluations (article level).

A more nuanced view on patterns of framing can be obtained by looking at the different evaluations of IC and RP for different inequality focuses. Figure 8 presents these findings. It shows the cases of IC/RP evaluations (orange for affirmative/endorsing in columns 1–6 and blue for dissenting/rejecting in columns 7–12) on three levels of analysis for each inequality focus theme. The main focus (MF) level shows the number of articles with the respective IC/RP evaluations on article level for the respective main focus (columns 1, 4, 7, 10). The article level (AL) shows the number of articles with at least one segment evaluation of IC/RP for the respective thematic segment (2, 5, 8, 11). Segment level (SL) shows the number of segments with respective IC/RP evaluations for the respective thematic segment (3, 6, 9, 12). The “differences” columns (13–18) calculate the respective differences for each IC and RP level of evaluations. If values are positive, a net number of articles or segments are affirmative or endorsing (orange), while negative values are obtained for net dissenting/rejecting articles/segments (blue). The inequality focuses are ordered by IC differences first on MF level, second on AL level, and third on SL level. We can see that the differences across levels are mostly consistent.¹⁵ Additionally, I have assessed in a disaggregated analysis where thematic differences in evaluations again differ between FAZ and SZ. Red and black frames mark the cases with opposite signs across the two sources (see Figure 8).

¹⁵ Only for “economic consequences” and “facts and developments” have we reversed signs between the MF level and one or both other levels.

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IC = Inequality concerns, RP = Redistributive policy
 MF = Main focus (# of articles with respective IC/RP evaluation for respective main focus)
 AL = Article level (# of articles with at least one segment evaluation of IC/RP for respective thematic segment)
 SL = Segment level (# of segments with respective IC/RP evaluation for respective thematic segment)

Figure 8. Frequency and differences between IC/RP evaluations per inequality focus.

First of all, it becomes apparent that there are clear differences across thematic focuses. While, for example, the issues of urban inequality, poverty, globalization, or equality of opportunity are more affirmative of IC, themes such as wealth, the general inequality debate or happiness and self-sufficiency are rather dissenting. But by comparing the three IC differences columns with RP differences columns, we can also see where RP is rejected while IC are affirmed. Thus, while in the cases of urban inequality, poverty, or trade unions redistributive policy stances are mostly supported, with regard to the issues of globalization, equality of opportunity/mobility or education, RP is rejected.

FAZ and SZ diverge on various issues. In almost all cases, the FAZ adopts a dissenting/rejecting stance. The most striking case is redistributive policy where in almost all columns, the signs of differences are opposed to each other, with SZ content being rather affirmative of IC and endorsing of RP. Similarly, as far as general economic inequality or the inequality debate are concerned, the SZ has a penchant for the affirmative side of IC on all three levels of analysis. For wealth/the rich and middle class, SZ mostly endorses RP in segments on article and segment levels, while FAZ rejects it. Only with respect to the theme of envy/status concerns, the FAZ diverges toward the affirmative side in segments on article and segment levels.

Conclusion

The analysis explored the framing of economic inequality in two series in the leading quality newspapers in Germany. It found that a wide range of issues are covered under the headline of economic inequality, with several differences in focus, style, and article type between the two newspapers. Overall, inequality was presented as an issue of social or political concern in a majority of articles and coded text segments, although in the FAZ newspaper a much larger share of articles relativized or dissented with these concerns. Interventionist redistributive policy was mostly endorsed in SZ, while FAZ authors in a majority of cases favored economic liberalism. Where it was rejected, policy was defined less specifically, while endorsing cases were accompanied by more specific notions of progressive taxation and extension of public services or subsidies at the bottom of the distribution. Inequality concerns were typically framed broadly in terms of income or wealth and were most often discussed as general economic inequality, though they were slightly more often specific about where coded pieces of data were dissenting with these concerns. Conceptual ambiguity and data problems were more often mentioned in articles dissenting with inequality concerns and rejecting interventionist redistributive policy.

Concerns about inequality most often went along with support for redistributive policy, while dissent with these concerns co-occurred with a rejection of redistributive policy. In a few cases, inequality concerns were shared, while redistributive policy was rejected. As concerns thematic focuses, some clear patterns emerged, with several issues more closely related to the affirmative side of inequality concerns while others more often appeared on the dissenting side. For a number of issues, these patterns again diverged between the two newspapers, with the FAZ leaning clearly toward the side of questioning or relativizing concerns about inequality and rejecting interventionist redistributive policy.

It seems striking and somewhat paradoxical that the issue of economic inequality was made the subject of a series in both papers, but that concerns about inequality were then, especially in the FAZ

newspaper, so often dismissed or relativized (not to mention the overall hostility toward policy measures recommended by leading scholars of inequality research as appropriate countermeasures to inequality). Yet, recalling the editorial to the FAZ series described, which is plainly critical of inequality concerns, this should hardly be surprising. Against this backdrop, the FAZ series is surprisingly plural. Note, however, that the pattern of evaluations of inequality concerns is reversed when removing external authors and the subseries on urban inequality.

It should also be noted that a less tangible, but arguably more effective form of framing took place on a more subtle level. This does not show up in the formal analysis, but was captured in memos created during coding. I remarked strong rhetoric devices, such as unusually judgmental language or strong symbolic or metaphoric language, which were much more present in evaluations directed against inequality concerns and redistributive policy. Likewise, I encountered many cases where inequality concerns were implicitly relativized (e.g., through international comparisons, a historical perspective, or by reference to other problems). Yet these mechanisms were typically not explicit enough to justify coding as "dissenting" with inequality concerns. Language in headlines might also constitute a dimension of framing not formally covered in the analysis. It remains an open task to examine these more subtle framing mechanisms with the appropriate methods guaranteeing reliability and validity.

Coding has shown that differences in evaluations exist across the thematic range. Yet it remains to be explored what specific argumentative patterns explain these differences. For example, does the issue of "regional/urban inequality" bring up more affirmative evaluations of economic inequality and endorsements of redistributive policy because it is a restricted policy area with smaller "risk" of demands for general redistribution as, say, "general/inequality debate" articles, which turned out much more dissenting of inequality concerns and directed against redistributive policy? Is equality of opportunity (pattern: concerns shared, redistributive policy rejected) an issue where concerns about inequality can more easily be redirected at political demands, such as improving access to education and other rather noninterventionist policy measures? Are conceptual and data ambiguities mentioned more often in dissenting articles because this position is more nuanced, or is nuance a means to dismiss the problem? As concerns these questions, more narrow and thoroughgoing qualitative approaches, looking at specific argumentative patterns, might get us closer to an understanding of these complex ideological underpinnings.

It is important to acknowledge that the analysis extends only to the articles and editorial choices made for the specific time period in 2016 and for the specific inequality series being explored. As pointed out, it seems plausible to assume that editorial decisions reflect choices reaching beyond daily reporting, both in terms of relevance beyond daily politics as well as thematic range. A more fundamental problem concerning representativeness is the focus on the quality press. It remains yet to be studied how far these leading quality papers influence the wider media, and how far the media more generally can account for the formation of economic policy discourses. Exploring this would certainly require examining the interplay between actors in the media, think tanks and the public relations industry, and the scientific community. More generally, while this study is merely explorative, further research on inequality debates should seek to link these findings to an analysis of framing as strategic communication by interest groups to assess the constraints and opportunities for policies directed at tackling inequality.

This article has helped generate and narrow down these questions for future research. What is more, it adds to the existing research on inequality in the German print media with its intermediate focus: Previous research is either more narrowly focused on specific questions of social justice rather than economic inequality in general, or it is distant reading and hence not capturing much of the framing of general inequality. This article has shown that the increasing salience of the issue of economic inequality does by no means imply that concerns about inequality, let alone policies proposed by leading inequality scholars, are inevitably shared and supported by virtue of being put on the agenda. On the contrary, a significant part of the reporting has turned out to be directed at relativizing inequality concerns and questioning redistributive policy.

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