

Support for democracy linked to income inequality

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A Michigan State University study suggests that rising income inequality pits political winners and losers against each other. And this conflict over economic interests can undermine citizens' satisfaction with democracy and lead to instability. Credit: Michigan State University

Voter satisfaction with democracy may have less to do with who actually wins an election and more to do with income inequality, or the gap

between rich and poor, indicates a new study by Michigan State University political scientists.

Eric Chang and Sung Min Han studied presidential and parliamentary elections in 43 countries, including the United States, and found that rising income inequality widens the gap in [satisfaction](#) with [democracy](#) between electoral winners and losers. The findings will be published in the December issue of the journal *Electoral Studies*.

"This study suggests that the degree of income inequality is the real driver behind electoral winners and losers' satisfaction with democracy," said Chang, associate professor of political science. "Elections matter much more for both the rich and poor when income inequality is high."

Income inequality in the United States has risen dramatically in recent decades, driven largely by the very rich getting richer. The share of income owned by the top 10 percent of the wealthiest households increased from 32 percent in 1970 to 47 percent in 2014, according to the Census Bureau.

President-elect Donald Trump has promised to revive small-town America - a pledge that most experts believe must involve tackling the [income gap](#).

Past research found that voters who support winning parties are more satisfied with democracy than those who vote for the losers. In this winner-loser gap theory, the difference in [satisfaction levels](#) is smaller in consensus democracies where the losing party can still affect policy outcomes, suggesting an institutional effect.

But the MSU study is one of the first to argue that the effects of [economic inequality](#) are more critical to satisfaction with democracy than the institutional effects of political systems.

That's because both the upper and lower income classes are affected by how politicians address increasing income inequality. As the disparity between rich and poor grows, the poor intensify their demand for the redistribution of wealth. The rich, meanwhile, become more anxious about the possibility of losing income.

"Our findings suggest that rising [income inequality](#) pits political winners and losers against each other," Chang said. "And this conflict over economic interests can undermine citizens' satisfaction with democracy and lead to instability."

Provided by Michigan State University

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