

Balancing Prosperity and Fairness: Economic Disparities Through the Lens of the Polarities of Democracy

Marjorie Calixte Hallworth, Ph.D.*

Independent Researcher, United States. Email: Marjorie.Hallworth@waldenu.edu*

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ABSTRACT

Economic disparities remain one of the most persistent challenges confronting democratic societies. Policy debates frequently frame economic inequality as a problem requiring a singular solution, typically prioritizing either economic growth or redistributive justice. Such approaches often overlook the structural tensions embedded within democratic governance. Drawing on Benet's Polarities of Democracy framework, this article examines economic inequality through the analytical lens of polarity management. It conceptualizes prosperity and fairness as interdependent values within democratic economic systems rather than mutually exclusive policy choices. The analysis argues that democratic leadership must continuously manage the dynamic relationship between economic growth and distributive equity to sustain institutional legitimacy and social stability. Through theoretical analysis and comparative examples from the United States and other democratic systems, the study demonstrates that effective democratic governance depends on balancing these competing but complementary values. Insights from governance challenges in Haiti's education system further illustrate how structural imbalances between economic capacity and equitable opportunity can reinforce inequality. By extending the analytical application of the Polarities of Democracy framework to economic governance, this article proposes the prosperity–fairness dynamic as a key polarity shaping democratic responses to economic inequality. This perspective contributes to scholarly discussions on inequality, democratic legitimacy, and leadership in complex institutional environments.

Keywords: Economic Inequality; Polarities of Democracy; Democratic Governance; Polarity Management; Democratic Legitimacy; Prosperity–Fairness Polarity; Institutional Trust; Income Inequality; Public Policy; Social Mobility; Leadership and Social Change; Sustainable Development.

1. Introduction

Economic inequality has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges confronting democratic societies in the twenty-first century. Across both developed and developing economies, disparities in income, wealth, and access to opportunity have intensified debates about the sustainability of democratic institutions and economic systems (Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2012). In many democratic countries, widening economic disparities have raised concerns regarding social mobility, political representation, and public trust in governance.

Public policy discussions frequently frame economic inequality as a contest between two competing priorities. One perspective emphasizes economic growth, entrepreneurship, and innovation as the primary drivers of prosperity. Advocates of this perspective argue that strong markets, technological progress, and investment create opportunities that benefit society broadly. In contrast, another perspective stresses the importance of redistribution, social welfare policies, and government intervention to ensure fairness and reduce inequality.

Although both perspectives highlight important dimensions of economic governance, framing inequality as a binary choice oversimplifies the complexity of democratic systems. Democratic societies must simultaneously pursue economic growth while ensuring that opportunities and benefits are distributed in ways perceived as legitimate and equitable. The Polarities of Democracy framework, developed by Benet (2012), provides a valuable lens for understanding such tensions. Rather than viewing competing values as problems requiring permanent solutions, polarity thinking conceptualizes them as interdependent dynamics that must be managed continuously. Democratic systems depend on balancing competing values that are both necessary and potentially conflicting.

Applying this framework to economic governance suggests that prosperity and fairness represent a fundamental polarity within democratic systems. Prosperity emphasizes economic dynamism, innovation, and wealth creation, while fairness emphasizes distributive justice, social mobility, and equitable opportunity. Understanding how democratic institutions manage this tension is essential for sustaining both economic vitality and democratic legitimacy.

1.1 Study Objectives

This study explores how democratic societies manage tensions between economic prosperity and distributive fairness. Specifically, the article seeks to:

- 1) Apply Benet's Polarities of Democracy framework to conceptualize prosperity and fairness as a polarity requiring continuous management.
- 2) Extend the Polarities of Democracy framework by introducing the prosperity–fairness polarity as a key dimension of democratic economic governance.
- 3) Analyze how imbalances between economic growth and distributive equity influence democratic legitimacy and institutional trust.
- 4) Compare policy approaches across democratic systems, including the United States and Nordic countries, to identify lessons for managing economic disparities.
- 5) Integrate insights from governance challenges in Haiti's education system to illustrate how structural inequalities can emerge when prosperity and fairness become misaligned within institutional systems.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between economic systems and democratic governance has long been a central concern within political economy and democratic theory. Scholars have examined how disparities in income and wealth shape economic development, social mobility, and political stability. Classical economic perspectives emphasized the capacity of markets to generate prosperity, yet modern research increasingly highlights the structural consequences of unequal economic outcomes (Atkinson, 2015; Piketty, 2014).

Over the past several decades, income and wealth disparities have widened across many advanced economies. Recent analyses also indicate that inequality continues to shape economic performance and social cohesion across developed economies, with policy responses increasingly emphasizing inclusive growth strategies (OECD, 2025). Piketty (2014) argues that structural dynamics within capitalist economies tend to concentrate wealth unless counterbalanced by public policy interventions. Similarly, Stiglitz (2012) contends that excessive inequality can undermine both economic efficiency and democratic legitimacy by limiting opportunities for social mobility and concentrating economic power.

Scholars have also explored how inequality influences democratic participation and political representation. Gilens and Page (2014) demonstrate that policy outcomes in the United States often reflect the preferences of economic elites more strongly than those of average citizens. Bartels (2008) similarly argues that economic inequality can

distort democratic representation by amplifying the political influence of wealthy actors. Institutional economists emphasize the role of governance structures in shaping economic outcomes. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue that inclusive political and economic institutions are essential for sustaining prosperity and democratic stability. When institutions concentrate power among elites, economic inequality may increase while democratic legitimacy declines.

Within leadership and public administration scholarship, the Polarities of Democracy framework provides an important theoretical lens for understanding governance tensions. Benet (2012) argues that democratic systems depend on balancing fundamental polarities such as freedom and authority, justice and due process, diversity and equality, participation and representation, and human rights and communal obligations. These polarities represent pairs of interdependent values that must be managed continuously rather than resolved permanently.

Recent scholarship has begun applying polarity thinking to leadership and governance challenges in complex institutional environments. Calixte-Hallworth (2025), for example, applied the Polarities of Democracy framework to leadership and social change, demonstrating that democratic leaders must navigate competing values to sustain institutional effectiveness and guide institutional transformation in complex governance settings. These studies highlight the relevance of polarity management as an analytical tool for understanding tensions within democratic systems.

Despite this growing body of work, relatively limited attention has been given to how polarity thinking can be applied to economic governance and inequality debates. Much of the existing literature on economic inequality focuses primarily on redistributive policies, institutional design, or market dynamics, while fewer studies examine inequality through the lens of democratic value tensions. As a result, the relationship between economic growth and distributive equity remains largely framed as a policy trade-off rather than as a structural tension embedded within democratic systems.

This article addresses that gap by examining economic inequality through the analytical lens of the Polarities of Democracy framework. While Benet's framework primarily examines tensions embedded within democratic political institutions—such as freedom and authority, justice and due process, diversity and equality, participation and representation, and human rights and communal obligations—economic systems within democratic societies also reflect comparable tensions that shape governance outcomes.

This study therefore, extends the analytical application of the Polarities of Democracy framework by conceptualizing prosperity and fairness as interdependent values within democratic economic governance. By framing economic inequality as a polarity that must be continuously managed rather than solved through a single policy approach, the article offers a new perspective for understanding how economic disparities influence democratic legitimacy, institutional trust, and long-term social stability.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual research design grounded in the Polarities of Democracy framework. The research is interpretive in nature and focuses on theoretical analysis rather than empirical hypothesis testing. This

approach is appropriate for examining complex governance challenges, such as economic inequality, where competing values must be understood as dynamic and interdependent rather than as isolated variables.

The methodological approach is structured around three complementary analytical strategies.

First, the study employs conceptual analysis to examine the theoretical relationship between economic prosperity and distributive fairness. Drawing on polarity management theory, the analysis explores how these values function as interdependent poles within democratic governance systems. This stage establishes the conceptual foundation for understanding economic inequality as a structural tension rather than a policy problem requiring a singular solution.

Second, the study utilizes comparative analysis to assess how different democratic systems manage the relationship between economic growth and distributive equity. Examples from the United States and Nordic democracies are examined to illustrate varying institutional approaches to balancing prosperity and fairness. This comparative perspective provides insight into how governance structures shape economic outcomes and influence levels of inequality, social mobility, and institutional trust.

Third, the study incorporates a contextual case application by integrating insights from governance challenges in Haiti's public education system. This case is used to illustrate how imbalances between economic capacity and equitable access to opportunity can reinforce structural inequality within institutional systems. The case application provides a real-world context that complements the theoretical and comparative analyses.

By integrating conceptual, comparative, and contextual approaches, this methodology enables a comprehensive examination of economic inequality as a governance polarity. This multi-dimensional framework strengthens the analytical contribution of the study and supports its broader objective of extending the application of polarity thinking to economic governance and public policy analysis.

4. Result and Discussion

The preceding literature review highlighted how economic inequality has been widely studied within political economy, democratic theory, and institutional governance. However, much of the existing research treats the relationship between economic growth and distributive fairness as a policy trade-off rather than as a structural tension embedded within democratic systems. Applying the Polarities of Democracy framework offers an alternative analytical perspective by viewing these dynamics as interdependent values that must be continuously managed rather than resolved.

This study, therefore, examines economic inequality through the lens of polarity management, conceptualizing prosperity and fairness as a polarity shaping democratic economic governance. Within this framework, prosperity represents economic growth, productivity, and wealth creation, while fairness reflects distributive justice, social mobility, and equitable access to opportunity. Both values provide essential benefits to democratic societies, yet both also produce risks when overemphasized.

The following analysis explores how this prosperity–fairness polarity operates within democratic systems. It first situates the discussion within the broader Polarities of Democracy framework and then examines the benefits and

risks associated with prioritizing either prosperity or fairness. The section concludes by drawing lessons from comparative democratic experiences and governance challenges in Haiti's education system.

4.1. The Polarities of Democracy Framework

The Polarities of Democracy framework developed by Benet (2012) provides a conceptual model for understanding tensions inherent within democratic governance. Rather than viewing competing values as problems that can be resolved through a single policy decision, polarity thinking recognizes that democratic systems must continuously balance values that are both necessary and potentially conflicting. According to Benet, democratic governance is sustained through the dynamic management of several core polarities, including the five pairs mentioned in the literature review.

Each polarity consists of two interdependent values that both contribute important benefits to democratic systems but may also produce negative consequences when either pole becomes dominant. For example, excessive emphasis on authority may undermine individual freedoms, while excessive emphasis on freedom may weaken institutional stability and social order. The challenge for democratic governance is therefore not to eliminate these tensions but to manage them effectively over time. Applying this framework to economic governance suggests that prosperity and fairness represent a comparable polarity embedded within democratic economic systems. Prosperity emphasizes economic growth, productivity, and wealth creation, while fairness emphasizes distributive justice, equitable opportunity, and protections for vulnerable populations. Both values are essential for democratic legitimacy. Economic prosperity generates the resources necessary for development and innovation, while fairness ensures that the benefits of economic systems are perceived as legitimate and inclusive.

Understanding economic inequality through the lens of polarity management, therefore, shifts the focus from choosing between growth and redistribution toward examining how democratic institutions can sustain a productive balance between these values.

Within polarity theory, each pole generates both positive outcomes and potential risks when it becomes dominant. When prosperity is emphasized, societies may benefit from innovation, productivity growth, and expanded economic opportunities. However, excessive emphasis on prosperity without corresponding attention to distributive equity may lead to widening income disparities, concentration of wealth, and declining social mobility. Conversely, when fairness is emphasized, societies may strengthen social cohesion, expand access to opportunity, and reinforce institutional legitimacy. Yet excessive focus on redistributive fairness without sufficient attention to economic incentives may discourage investment, limit entrepreneurial activity, and constrain economic growth. Effective democratic governance, thus, requires managing the dynamic relationship between these two values in ways that preserve the advantages of both while mitigating their potential downsides. The following subsections examine the benefits and risks associated with each pole of the prosperity–fairness polarity.

4.2. Prosperity as a Democratic Value

Economic prosperity plays a critical role in sustaining democratic societies. Market economies foster innovation, technological advancement, and productivity growth, all of which contribute to rising standards of living.

Economic expansion also generates employment opportunities and provides governments with fiscal resources necessary to invest in infrastructure, education, and social services (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Historically, periods of strong economic growth have often coincided with expanding middle-class prosperity. In the United States, for example, the decades following World War II were characterized by rapid economic growth and broad improvements in living standards. Rising wages, expanding educational opportunities, and increased access to housing contributed to the development of a large and relatively stable middle class.

Economic prosperity also supports democratic legitimacy by reinforcing perceptions that economic systems provide opportunities for advancement. When individuals believe that economic systems allow them to improve their living conditions through education, work, and entrepreneurship, they are more likely to view democratic institutions as legitimate and responsive.

However, prosperity alone does not guarantee equitable outcomes. Market-driven systems may produce uneven distributions of income and wealth, particularly when economic gains are concentrated among specific sectors or groups. As a result, prosperity must be balanced with policies that promote fairness and equal opportunity.

4.3. Risks of Overemphasizing Prosperity

When economic growth is pursued without sufficient attention to distributive equity, disparities in income and wealth may increase significantly. Research has documented growing concentration of wealth among high-income households in many advanced economies (Piketty, 2014; Saez & Zucman, 2019). In the United States, for example, the top one percent of earners controls a disproportionate share of national wealth, while wages for many middle- and lower-income workers have stagnated over recent decades. These disparities can limit social mobility and create perceptions that economic systems primarily benefit economic elites.

Excessive emphasis on prosperity may also produce broader political consequences. When large segments of society perceive that economic systems operate unfairly, trust in democratic institutions may decline. Scholars have linked rising inequality to declining voter participation, increasing political polarization, and growing dissatisfaction with democratic governance (Stiglitz, 2012). These outcomes illustrate the potential downside of prioritizing economic growth without attention to fairness. While prosperity generates wealth and innovation, failure to address inequality may undermine the legitimacy of democratic systems.

4.4. Fairness as a Democratic Value

Fairness represents the normative commitment to ensuring that economic systems provide equitable opportunities for all members of society. Democratic governments often pursue fairness through policies designed to reduce poverty, promote social mobility, and expand access to essential services such as education and healthcare.

The concept of fairness is closely linked to broader theories of social justice and human development. Sen (1999) argues that development should be understood not only in terms of economic growth but also in terms of expanding individuals' capabilities and opportunities to participate fully in society. From this perspective, fairness involves creating conditions that enable individuals to pursue meaningful economic and social opportunities.

Countries in Northern Europe provide notable examples of societies that attempt to balance economic efficiency with social equity. Nations such as Sweden, Denmark, and Norway maintain competitive market economies while supporting robust welfare systems, universal healthcare, and extensive public education. These policies have contributed to relatively low levels of income inequality and high levels of social trust (Rothstein, 2011). Fairness, hence, plays an important role in sustaining democratic legitimacy. When citizens perceive that institutions operate fairly and provide equal opportunities, they are more likely to trust democratic governance and participate actively in civic life.

4.5. Risks of Overemphasizing Fairness

While fairness promotes social cohesion and equity, excessive emphasis on redistribution without adequate attention to economic incentives may generate unintended economic consequences. Economic systems require incentives for investment, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Policies that significantly discourage these activities may reduce economic dynamism and limit long-term growth. For example, excessive regulatory burdens, high taxation without productive investment, or rigid labor markets may discourage private sector investment and slow economic expansion. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue that sustainable prosperity depends on inclusive institutions that both encourage economic participation and maintain incentives for innovation. In some cases, policies intended to promote fairness may inadvertently create bureaucratic inefficiencies or fiscal pressures on governments. Maintaining extensive welfare systems requires substantial public resources, which must ultimately be supported by a productive economy.

These challenges illustrate why democratic governance must balance fairness with economic vitality. While fairness promotes legitimacy and social stability, economic incentives remain essential for sustaining prosperity.

4.6. Global Lessons for Democratic Governance

Comparative experiences across democratic systems illustrate different approaches to managing the prosperity–fairness polarity. In the United States, economic policy has historically emphasized market-driven growth, entrepreneurship, and technological innovation. This approach has contributed to significant economic expansion but has also generated ongoing debates about rising inequality and declining social mobility (Stiglitz, 2012).

In contrast, Nordic democracies have adopted institutional frameworks designed to balance economic competitiveness with strong social protections. Countries such as Sweden and Denmark maintain high levels of productivity while supporting extensive welfare systems and universal public services. Research suggests that these policies contribute to relatively low inequality and high levels of social trust (Rothstein, 2011).

Emerging democracies also face similar tensions. Recent global assessments further highlight that persistent inequality remains a central development challenge, particularly in emerging and low-income democracies, where structural constraints continue to limit inclusive growth and equitable access to opportunity (World Bank, 2026). Countries such as Brazil and India have experienced substantial economic growth while continuing to confront disparities. These comparative examples reinforce the central insight of the Polarities of Democracy framework: democratic stability depends not on choosing between prosperity and fairness but on managing the relationship between them effectively.

4.7. Application to Haiti's Educational Governance

Governance challenges in Haiti provide a particularly important example of how imbalances between prosperity and fairness can affect institutional development. Research on Haiti's public education system has identified structural barriers that limit equitable access to quality education, particularly in rural areas (Calixte-Hallworth, 2023).

Limited economic resources constrain the government's ability to invest in educational infrastructure, teacher training, and learning materials. Many rural schools operate with inadequate facilities and limited instructional resources, creating disparities in educational outcomes across regions. At the same time, unequal access to education reinforces broader patterns of economic inequality. Students who lack access to quality education face significant barriers to employment opportunities and economic mobility.

These dynamics illustrate how the prosperity–fairness polarity can manifest in educational governance. Strengthening economic capacity while expanding equitable access to education may help create more sustainable development pathways for Haiti and other developing democracies.

5. Conclusion and Future Recommendations

Economic disparities remain among the most significant and persistent challenges confronting democratic societies. As income and wealth disparities continue to widen across many countries, policymakers and scholars increasingly recognize that these inequalities are not solely economic issues but also governance challenges that affect democratic legitimacy, political stability, and social cohesion. Traditional policy debates often frame inequality as a choice between prioritizing economic growth or promoting redistributive fairness. However, this binary framing overlooks the complex dynamics that shape democratic economic systems.

This article has argued that the Polarities of Democracy framework provides a valuable lens for understanding economic disparities. By conceptualizing prosperity and fairness as interdependent values rather than competing policy goals, polarity thinking highlights the need for democratic institutions to manage tensions between economic dynamism and distributive equity. Prosperity generates innovation, productivity, and economic opportunity, while fairness supports social mobility, institutional trust, and democratic legitimacy. Both values are essential for sustaining stable democratic systems, yet both also carry potential risks when pursued in isolation.

The analysis presented in this article suggests that democratic governance requires institutions capable of promoting economic growth while ensuring equitable access to opportunity. Comparative experiences across democratic systems illustrate different approaches to managing this balance. Nordic democracies, for example, have developed institutional frameworks that combine competitive market economies with robust social welfare systems. In contrast, other democratic systems continue to grapple with rising inequality and declining public trust in institutions. These examples reinforce the importance of designing policies that address both economic efficiency and social equity.

Insights from Haiti's educational governance further illustrate how imbalances between prosperity and fairness can reinforce structural inequalities. Limited economic capacity constrains investment in educational infrastructure and

public services, while unequal access to education perpetuates disparities in economic opportunity. Addressing such challenges requires policies that simultaneously strengthen economic capacity and expand equitable access to education and social mobility.

From a policy perspective, democratic governments should pursue strategies that promote inclusive economic growth. Investments in education, workforce development, and infrastructure can expand economic opportunities while strengthening long-term productivity. Policies that support entrepreneurship, innovation, and economic participation should be complemented by measures designed to reduce structural barriers that limit social mobility. Strengthening transparency, institutional accountability, and equitable access to public services may also help reinforce public trust in democratic governance.

Ultimately, sustaining democratic resilience requires institutions capable of managing the dynamic relationship between prosperity and fairness. Rather than viewing economic inequality as a problem that can be solved through a single policy intervention, democratic leaders must recognize it as an ongoing governance challenge that requires the continuous balancing of competing but interdependent values. By applying polarity thinking to economic governance, policymakers and scholars may develop more nuanced strategies for addressing economic disparities while preserving the economic vitality and democratic legitimacy upon which stable societies depend.

5.1. Future Recommendations

- 1) Develop adaptive governance models that integrate polarity thinking into economic policy design.
- 2) Strengthen redistributive mechanisms while maintaining incentives for innovation and investment.
- 3) Expand access to education and workforce development to enhance social mobility.
- 4) Promote institutional transparency and accountability to build public trust.
- 5) Encourage interdisciplinary research on economic inequality and democratic governance.
- 6) Apply the Polarities of Democracy framework to emerging and developing democracies.

6. Future Research and Practice Directions

Future research should continue to explore the application of polarity thinking to economic governance and public policy design. Empirical studies examining how democratic institutions manage tensions between prosperity and fairness would provide valuable insights into the dynamics of inequality and democratic resilience. Quantitative and mixed-method approaches could further strengthen understanding of how policy choices influence both economic outcomes and institutional trust.

Additional research is needed to examine how polarity frameworks apply to development challenges in emerging and low-income democracies, particularly in areas such as education, healthcare, and economic opportunity. Comparative studies across regions could provide a deeper understanding of how institutional structures influence the balance between economic growth and distributive equity. From a practical perspective, policymakers and institutional leaders may benefit from integrating polarity thinking into decision-making processes. Applying this

framework can help leaders move beyond binary policy debates and develop strategies that sustain both economic dynamism and social equity over time.

Understanding how democratic societies balance economic prosperity with distributive fairness will remain critical for sustaining democratic legitimacy in an increasingly complex global environment.

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The author declares that he/she consented to the publication of this study.

Authors' contributions

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