

When do we die in the long-run? The relative survival of politicians over the 20th Century.

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Abstract

As Thomas Piketty has demonstrated, compiling pragmatic measures of income distribution (e.g. top income approach) over long periods of time, and across many countries, provides valuable insights on the long-term evolution of income inequalities. To date there are no comparable statistics available for evaluating the evolution of income-related health inequalities. The aim of our study is to develop a new approach to the measurement of long-run health inequalities, by comparing the relative and absolute survival rates of those in top income groups with the general populations they represent. To operationalize, we focused on a large cohort of politicians, as they are generally high income earners, and there are databases in many countries that contain the information required to estimate their survival (i.e. date of birth/death and date they attained office). We estimated relative and absolute survival differences by matching each politician by year at risk, age at risk and sex to the life table of the country the individual represented. We examined cross country trends in health inequalities and compare them with trends in income inequalities. Our initial results were drawn from a subset of six countries drawn from a database we have compiled on 106,092 politicians from 12 developed countries (Australia, Austria, Canada, Netherlands, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States), which in some cases contains data dating back more than three centuries. We will conclude with a discussion of limitations and propose an agenda for future research.