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Can We Ever Be Truly Equal?

And do we even want to be?



Leigh Huggins Oct 11, 2018 · 8 min read ★





We've had so many iterations and definitions of "equality" over the years, it's no surprise to me that we're still dealing with a ruling majority of old, white, God fear-mongering men. Movements have come and gone, laws have been created, court cases have been won, and yet The United States (and subsequently the world) still suffers from massive inequality. This may come as a shocker, but I don't believe we can ever be *truly* equal, nor do I think we actually want to be. In dealing with equality, we're primarily discussing two things — equal access to opportunity and equal treatment under the law. I propose that equal treatment is not, in fact, what we're aiming for. We actually need more of a different two things — increased focus on equity, or "need based" equality, and legal and social accountability when that promise of equity is threatened.

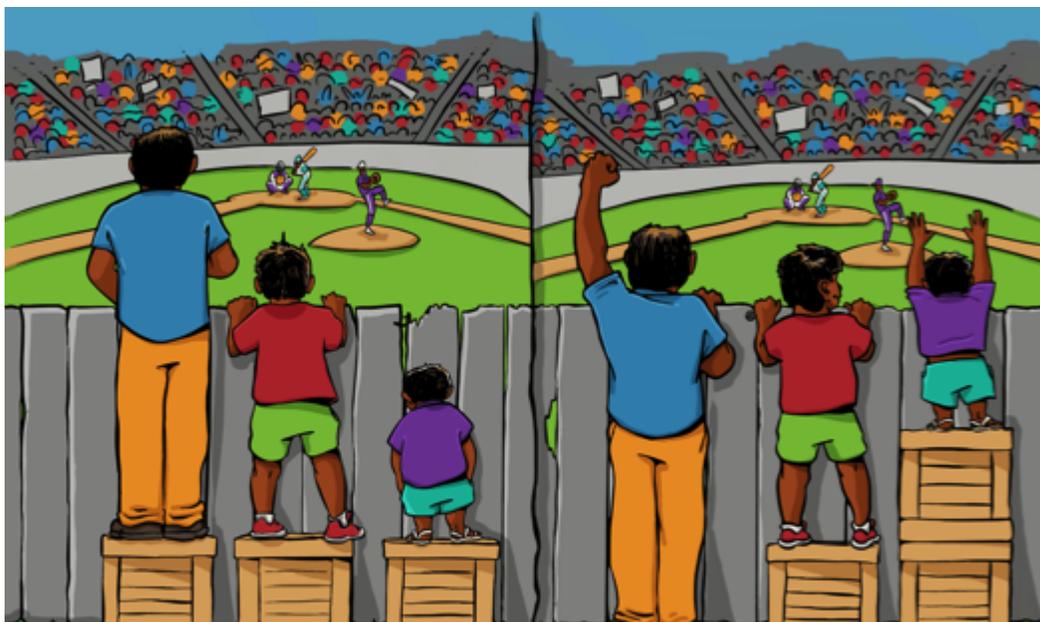
What's wrong with being equal?

My dictionary defines "equality" as "the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, and opportunities." A similar idea of sameness permeates the majority of definitions I've come across. Sameness of rights and available opportunities, sameness of treatment under the law, and, if not sameness, balance, in economic earnings and status. These fights for uniformity have been most commonly represented by the Civil Rights Movement, Feminism, LGBTQ rights, and in political ideological movements like Communism and Socialism. This is the problem I have with the way we've been defining equality: we assume that upon receiving equal treatment, all of these previously marginalized or disadvantaged groups will suddenly inherit the privileges that were previously reserved for the ruling majority, and take advantage of them, accordingly. We've developed legislation to promote, and theoretically, ensure, a level of equality, but the implementation of this legislative progress always seems several steps behind the values it represents. Inequality still runs rampant in the United States, most exemplified by the widespread targeted incarceration of black men — the red-lining of residential districts that traps the impoverished in poverty — the health-care system systemically prejudiced against any person with a disability or pre-existing condition — the lack of representation for women in powerful positions — and the rampant, typically religiously-justified campaigns of hate against queer, trans, and gender-fluid individuals.



Ideologically, and Fundamentally, Well, Not.

Women have the reproductive organs necessary to bear children, men do not. We all have different genetic makeups, we all think differently, we all have different preferences in terms of who we're able to partner with, what we can eat, and what we believe. We have different physical and intellectual abilities, we have different outward appearances, and we all have different needs. Period. Yes, there are those basic human needs of food, shelter, community, and meaning/purpose that we all inherently crave. But unless we decided to endow men with child-bearing responsibility, genetically modify everyone to appear similar, and weed out/breed out anyone that did not meet certain requirements for cognition or health, we would never reach true equality. Good news, right? What I just described sounds like a really bad, scary sci-fi novel that I would never want to live in. If your initial reaction is, "that's *definitely* not how I've been thinking about equality!" Fair. What I'm getting at here is that previous, and even current systems and legislation have promoted equality by prohibiting discrimination, or dictating consequences for actions that infringe upon the equal rights those laws guarantee. Both of these assumptions are based on the idea that what everyone really needs is to not be denied opportunities or access based on what they look like, what their sexual orientation is, or what their level of household income is. Again, equal opportunity is all fine and dandy, if you assume that all we need is the same access to the same opportunities. The problem is, we don't.





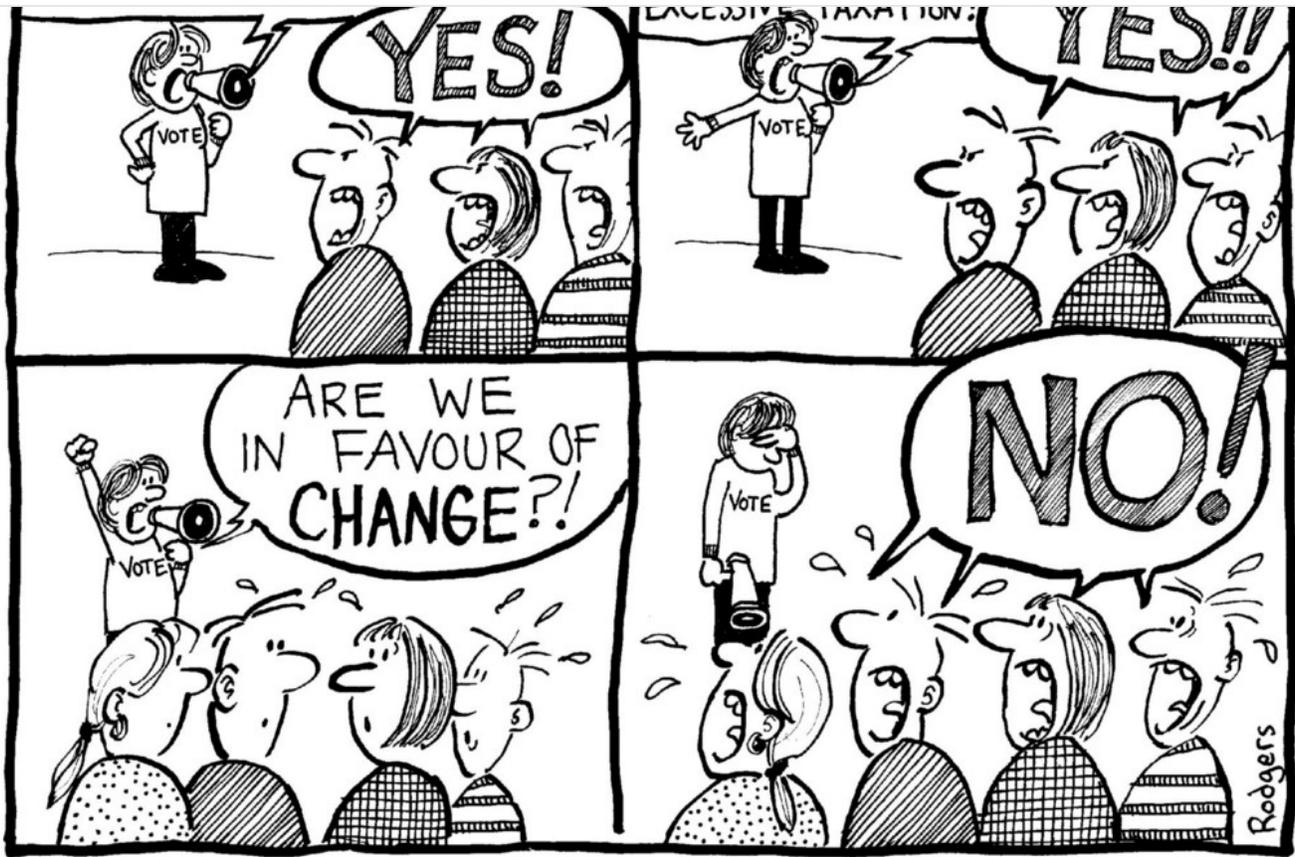
Interaction Institute for Social Change | Artist: Angus Maguire.

Equity vs. Equality:

There is a stark difference between giving everybody the same thing, and giving every individual what they need to feel equally valued. For example, a government could decree equal healthcare for all, while still discriminating against people with health concerns that require different care than the majority. Even if women have access to the same job opportunities that men do, if they're not guaranteed paid maternity leave, or they can't afford childcare, their access to that opportunity is automatically jeopardized. A more equitable system would include provisions for people with disabilities or pre-existing conditions that wouldn't increase the cost or hardship in accessing the care they need in order to survive. It may also focus primarily on the symptoms of the issue, rather than the problem itself, and consider all perspectives before taking action or enacting legislation. This is not a new idea. Equity has been widely discussed and implemented by social justice non-profits, educational organizations, and racial-equality movements such as the [Interaction Institute for Social Change](#), the [Race Matters Institute](#), the [Learning Policy Institute](#), and [Equity Matters](#).

What prevents us from practicing equity?

First, we need to recognize that implementing equitable treatment would require massive changes in how social, governmental, economic, and business spheres are currently operating. Are you particular fond of change or diving headlong into the unknown — or do you avoid it all costs? Who can blame you, change is scary! What you don't know can definitely hurt you. We have no idea what consequences a truly equitable society would reap on those who've currently been reaping the benefits of an unequal one. For those that have been comfortably sitting in privilege, discussing any of these (frankly necessary) changes would be absolutely terrifying. So what is the cure for this paralyzing fear? Curiosity, and empathy. When we start asking questions, getting curious, and actually listening to the answers we receive, we're collecting data that makes the impending change a lot less scary.



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By Glenn Rogers

Secondly, we need to reassess how we've been addressing accountability at a social and governmental level. Prohibition of workplace discrimination and sexual harassment is only effective if we have systems in place for safely reporting incidents and/or practices. These systems cannot favor the wellbeing of the accused or associated parties over the accuser. For example, although workplace harassment policies have greatly increased over the past 30 years, most companies will rely on their HR departments to vet claims. In most cases, this system unjustly favors the interests of the company over the equitable treatment of the victim. Harassment or discrimination claims must be vetted by an impartial party, and companies must be legally obligated to follow their rulings. Furthermore, consequences for both parties need to include empathetic and rehabilitative options. We've seen what a system that prioritizes imprisonment and capital punishment over rehabilitation breeds. We must focus more firmly on prevention and education over symptomatic treatment. In the case of sexual harassment and rape culture, this needs to come in the form of national sex education programming that



We have fallen into the trap of a balanced government; where a moderate, conservative leaning middle has sacrificed needed change for the sake of authoritarian-like peace-keeping.

Accountability, coupled with transparency, also needs to be increased with our governmental ruling bodies. We have fallen into the trap of a balanced government; where a moderate, conservative leaning middle has sacrificed needed change for the sake of authoritarian-like peace-keeping. There are legal systems in place to ensure one party doesn't gain unfair advantages over the other, as represented by our three branches of government. However, without representation that mirrors the represented, the interests of few will always find a way to override the interests of the many. We must tip the balance, and ensure there is room for diversity in opinion and power within our governing bodies. In short, we need young, ethnically, sexually, and experientially diverse women and men to run for local and national offices. We also need massive media platforms (such as Facebook) to be held accountable for how they choose to vet and spread information, and how they dole out consequences to team members or users who violate their content agreements.





Philadelphia Pride Flag, by Tierney Design

Lastly, we must become more inclusive in how we define our movements. Feminism has been skewered in the past for failing to represent female-identifying people, as well as women with disabilities and women of color. Similarly, rape culture prevention that fails to include provisions for sex workers completely misses the mark. Equality as it currently stands seems like this massive block we are all slowly chipping away at. The models I've presented consistently isolate what *type* of equality we're focusing on — prompting us to decide between gender equality, sexual equality, racial and ethnic equality, ability equality, or economic and social equality. What if we didn't have to choose? I firmly believe we can create legislation that is unbiased, all-inclusive, and focused on the needs of every individual over the uniformity of the many.

What can you do to help?

Great question! Start by talking to your friends. Ask them about how they're working towards equitable treatment. Ask about their experiences with discrimination and harassment. Listen. Ask more questions. I can bet there are local organizations, Meetups even, that focus on social justice. Do some research and consider volunteering your time. If you're able, donate some tax-deductible money to a non-profit organization that's fighting for what you believe in. See if you can volunteer for them. Join online communities and forums that are talking about the issues you care about. I know it can be painful, but please, continue to try and listen. No matter what you're being accused of, no matter how much you're being called to task for your privilege, no matter what judgements or biases you may have about who's talking to you — try to listen to them. Finally, start to find your own voice. Write about what you're feeling and experiencing. If you feel called to do so, join marches, protest, and make your voice heard. Lastly, and most importantly, vote. Your vote is the single most important tool you have in deciding who is making decisions for you. Get mail-in ballots, educate yourself on whose running

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are already fighting for what you believe in. You just have to get out and look for them.

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