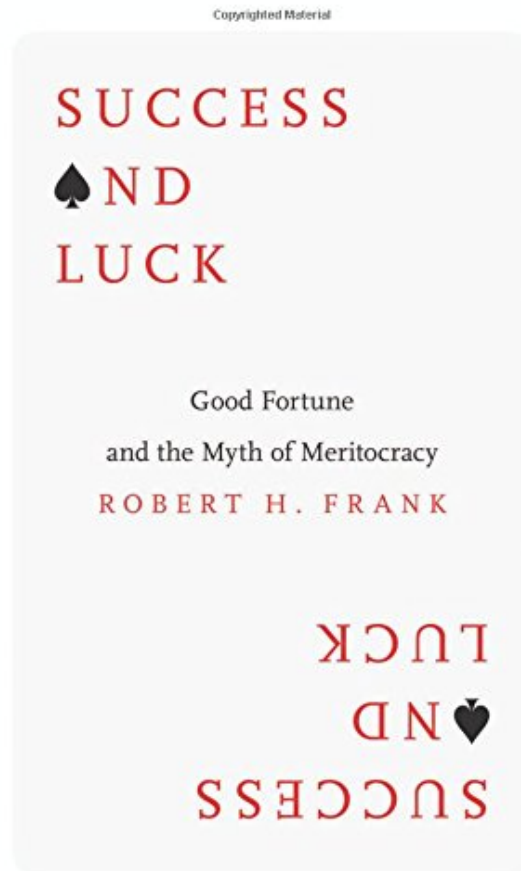


SUCCESS AND LUCK: GOOD FORTUNE AND THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY BY ROBERT H. FRANK



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From New York Times bestselling author and economics columnist Robert Frank, a compelling book that explains why the rich underestimate the importance of luck in their success, why that hurts everyone, and what we can do about it

How important is luck in economic success? No question more reliably divides conservatives from liberals. As conservatives correctly observe, people who amass great fortunes are almost always talented and hardworking. But liberals are also correct to note that countless others have those same qualities yet never earn much. In recent years, social scientists have discovered that chance plays a much larger role in important life outcomes than most people imagine. In *Success and Luck*, bestselling author and New York Times economics columnist Robert Frank explores the surprising implications of those findings to show why the rich underestimate the importance of luck in success--and why that hurts everyone, even the wealthy.

Frank describes how, in a world increasingly dominated by winner-take-all markets, chance opportunities and trivial initial advantages often translate into much larger ones--and enormous income differences--over time; how false beliefs about luck persist, despite compelling evidence against them; and how myths about personal success and luck shape individual and political choices in harmful ways.

But, Frank argues, we could decrease the inequality driven by sheer luck by adopting simple, unintrusive policies that would free up trillions of dollars each year--more than enough to fix our crumbling infrastructure, expand healthcare coverage, fight global warming, and reduce poverty, all without requiring painful sacrifices from anyone. If this sounds implausible, you'll be surprised to discover that the solution requires only a few, noncontroversial steps.

Compellingly readable, *Success and Luck* shows how a more accurate understanding of the role of chance in life could lead to better, richer, and fairer economies and societies.

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Most helpful customer reviews

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Thought-provoking discussion.

By David J. Aldous

In ancient times, philosophers started to ponder to what extent success depends on individual ability and effort, rather than fate or divine intervention. Nowadays we mostly categorize these external factors as chance or luck. Over the last 150 years in the U.S., the "Land of Opportunity" individualistic philosophy has emphasized the ability side. Academics take a more nuanced view, expressed well in an earlier book *Dance with Chance: Making Luck Work for You* (slightly edited).

"Hard work, determination, education and experience count for a great deal as regards success. But the data available suggests that luck is almost entirely responsible for which hard working, determined, educated and experienced people make it in life."

Most accounts of this issue, such as *Outliers: The Story of Success* rely on stories. This book also has plenty of stories in which chance events led to success that seems unlikely without those events. But it is the first nontechnical book I've read that actually accompanies its stories with some account of "the data available". Part of this involves the "winner take all" parts of the current economy, where rewards accrue to only a few individuals. Part involves laboratory psychological experiments involving game-like settings where individuals are asked to make choices. And there are a few "toy model" mathematical simulations.

I can confidently recommend this book as the best single treatment of its topic. Having said that, I do have a few quibbles.

- (a) The lab experiments involve short-term decision with negligible real-world consequences to the participants, so it's not clear how they apply outside the lab,
- (b) He notes that, after a point, acquisition of more wealth does not lead to more happiness. So it's odd to use the word "success" to mean acquisition of wealth.
- (c) He proposes a progressive consumption tax, to reduce spending by the wealthy on positional goods (illustrated by expensive weddings and McMansions). But he makes no attempt to quantify the amount this would raise as taxes or reduce extravagance.
- (d) His mathematical models, combining "ability and effort" on one side with "pure luck" on the other side, miss a key point, which is the choice to undertake risky activity. When we look at the most successful people in a field, what we see is not just "ability plus luck", but it's "ability plus choice to take risks plus luck".

11 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

INTERESTING READ--BUT "LUCK" AND "SUCCESS" ARE NEVER DEFINED OR MEASURED

By bill greene

The basic premise of this book is that successful people do not appreciate how lucky they have been and therefore they consume too much themselves and resist "public investments" that could help those less

fortunate. The author suggests that the resulting income inequality could be reduced “by adopting simple unintrusive policies that would free up trillions of dollars each year--more than enough to fix our crumbling infrastructure, expand health care coverage, fight global warming, and reduce poverty, all without requiring painful sacrifices from anyone.”

I did not give the book five stars because the author does not live up to his promises: to show how understanding the role of luck would reduce inequality and that a simple policy could painlessly solve our budgetary problems. However, Frank provides some interesting examples of major creative events that can be traced to unusual chance circumstances, including a few I first read about in Malcolm Gladwell’s books--the Outliers and The Tipping Point.

Most of the book is devoted to showing how important luck is in our lives, that most successful people benefitted from a lot of luck, and if they recognized that they would be more humble and charitable to those less successful. However, Frank blames no one, and criticizes no one. He just believes that successful people should be humble and more empathetic. However, he creates a straw horse by stating that successful people attribute their success “almost entirely” to hard work and talent, and believe that their success did not depend “to any significant extent on luck.” Thus he implies that they deny luck had anything to do with their success and he himself makes no attempt to measure the amount of luck involved. Clearly, if it played a small part, the respondents were correct saying it was not a “significant” factor. Most successful people I know will admit to having had some good luck along the way. Furthermore, Frank states that success is not attainable without a lot of talent and hard work so all his efforts to elevate the role of luck appear of slight importance. And the alleged connection between luck and inequality never became evident?

The book’s theme lacks real clarity, in part, because the term “luck” is not clearly defined. The author writes that successful Americans were lucky to be born in the freest and richest nation in the world, to affluent parents, in enabling communities, with the best inherited genes, nourished by the best schools, hired by the best companies, and eventually promoted to wealth and prestige. Now almost all those lucky breaks are granted to most Americans; probably well over half the population; and for them, only the effort to do well at school and find a good job are needed to succeed. It is widely known that being born into a stable middle or upper class family in America is the best predictor of success—because those children are shaped by superior communities, families, genetics, and an enabling culture to do well in life. What they make of it depends on their exercise of free will, self-improvement, emotional restraint, and hard work. Their good luck is conferred at birth, relatively equally to all of them. If “public investment” were to reduce inequality it should be aimed at the growing number of children being raised in broken homes, often illegitimate, amidst violence and abuse, with only a negative cultural exposure to stunt their growth to maturity—but that “bad luck” or its amelioration is not addressed by the author.

I discovered half way through the book that the “simple policies” to save trillions of dollars that were promised in the beginning of the book was simply a call to replace the current income tax with a graduated consumption tax. This is a repeat of his arguments in *The Darwin Economy* that consumers spend too much frivolously and government should redirect spending patterns for the common good. The author’s theory is that taxing consumption would reduce “wasteful” spending by the wealthy and that they could then comfortably pay more taxes at progressively higher rates. Because there would be a deduction from taxable income equal to amounts “saved,” the tax would also theoretically motivate everyone to spend less and save more. There was no mention anywhere to reduce government spending. The emphasis was to reduce the peoples’ spending so they could save more and pay more taxes. Certainly, any change to the existing IRS Code is worth consideration, but if we want to limit wasteful spending perhaps the author should examine the government's checkbooks first?

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Out of Luck

By Scuba Diver

It takes the author all of 2 sentences to start this book with a political bias, which is a pity because the subject matter is really interesting. "Success and Luck" continues the recent genre of churning out a promising book based on a superb review in the Wall Street Journal. Is anyone else tired of paying \$20 for a 200-250 hardcover "essay" whose bulk is merely citations or anecdotes of other works? Can academia get even more intellectually lazy? The most frustrating part of this book is that the meaningful subject matter is politicized. Rather than framing the context in terms of "Liberals believe in luck, and Conservatives don't," readers would have been much better served with some quality analysis of luck. Luck in birth origin. Luck in demographics. Last name. Religion. Community. Zip code. Education. Gender. Hair Color. There are so many variables that influence "outcomes," which is really what the author wants to discuss, but never fully gets around to it. If you want a better discussion of chance, luck, and meritocracy leading ultimately to outcomes, check out "Chaos Monkeys." There are approximately 12 pages in "Success and Luck" that are superb, the rest is an academic's diatribe against the perceived evils of the tax code and the rich (who are only Conservatives of course) that don't believe in luck. But those 12 pages are good.

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"The most skillful writer in economics has now written an amazing book on luck. Robert Frank brilliantly explains why luck is playing an increasingly important role in the world's outcomes, why it is hard for all of us to realize it, and why there is a simple fix to the vast inequalities caused by sheer luck--a solution that will make all of our lives better. You will feel very lucky to have read it."--Nicholas Epley, author of Mindwise: Why We Misunderstand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want

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About the Author

Robert H. Frank is the H. J. Louis Professor of Management and Professor of Economics at Cornell University's Johnson School of Management. He has been an Economic View columnist for the New York Times for more than a decade and his books include *The Winner-Take-All Society* (with Philip J. Cook), *The Economic Naturalist*, *The Darwin Economy* (Princeton), and *Principles of Economics* (with Ben S. Bernanke). He lives in Ithaca, New York.

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