**Explaining Public Support for Government Redistribution in the Developed World:**

**The Gap between Subjective Perceptions and Objective Benefits**

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**Abstract**

**Explaining Public Support for Government Redistribution in the Developed World:**

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The aim of this paper is to explore the sources of public support for government redistribution. The standard approach, the median voter theorem, predicts that support for redistribution will be positively related to the extent to which income groups gain from progressive taxes and public social transfers. However, cross-national empirical work has often found that this relationship is not very strong. Why do income groups not offer stronger support for policies that objectively benefit them? One variable that is rarely examined is the degree to which low and middle income groups systematically misperceive (and often underestimate) their benefit from government redistribution. The proposed paper will measure the gap between support for redistribution and benefits actually received in a cross-national analysis of 12 developed countries. Specifically, quintile-level data on public support for redistribution will be calculated from election surveys available from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). Next, income surveys for similar points in time from the Luxembourg Income Study will be used to calculate each quintile group’s actual gain or loss from government redistribution by way of direct taxes and public social transfers. The gap between subjective perceptions of and objective benefits from redistribution will then be related to variation in public support for government redistribution both at the country level and the level of individual income groups. The analysis will be conducted both for redistribution as a whole and for a number of individual modes of redistributive government policy, with a special emphasis on the distinction between means-tested, comprehensive and social insurance benefits.

Over the last few decades a great deal of attention has been devoted to exploring the sources of public support for—and opposition to—government redistribution by way of taxes and social transfers. A starting point for most explanations has been the median voter theorem, which posits that as inequality increases more voters will gain from government redistribution of market income and thus support it.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, while there is evidence that median voter dynamics are broadly operative, the relationship between pre-government inequality and government redistribution is not very strong. This is evident in **figure 1**, whichrelates the Gini index of pre-government income inequality to the reduction of the pre-government Gini as a result of taxes and social transfers. As can be seen, the relationship, while positive, is quite weak.

Why do income groups not offer stronger support for policies that objectively benefit them? After all, one of the core functions of political contestation in democracies is to influence the distribution of society’s resources. One would expect that if more participants gain from redistribution this would lead to more political support for progressive taxes and generous public social transfers which would in turn lead to greater redistribution.

One variable that is rarely examined in this context is the degree to which income groups systematically misperceive their benefit from government redistribution. In examining this “perception gap,” the paper will begin by measuring public support for government efforts to reduce market income inequality in 12 developed countries, using data from election surveys available from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). Respondents’ evaluations of the desirability of government redistribution will then be compared to actual net gains from redistribution by way of direct taxes and public social transfers, using data from the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS). Importantly, the paper will operate not only at the country level but also at the level, the focus of nearly all previous work on the topic, but also at the level of individual income groups within countries, which have rarely been considered in cross-national research. Yet there is reason to expect that income groups, which vary considerably both within and across countries in their tangible gains and losses from redistribution, will also vary in their subjective perceptions of redistribution—and possibly their misperceptions as well. Finally, the paper will conclude with an analysis of attitudes toward individual modes of redistribution, assessing the possibility that public perceptions of redistribution are more favorable to universal or social insurance programs, which include a large share of the population, than to means-tested programs which are limited to the poor.

**Government inequality reduction: Perceptions and reality**

As has been indicated, studies of public attitudes toward government inequality reduction often start with the median voter theorem, which essentially assumes that members of the public will both have an accurate understanding of their gains or losses from taxes and social transfers and act on that understanding. However, a large body of empirical work has found that subjective perceptions are at least as important as objective reality in explaining political inputs. For example, Mettler and Koch (2012) found that many beneficiaries of government redistribution are not even aware that they use certain government services and that only programs that are well-known and visible have the support of the public (see also, Williamson et al., 2011: 32-33) Similarly, with respect to taxes, there is a longstanding tradition arguing that public perceptions of tax burdens are distorted by “fiscal illusion,” the notion that the public is more aware of visible direct taxes, such as income or property taxes, than of less visible indirect taxes, such as sales and value added taxes (Wilensky, 2002: 380; Kato (2003: 7-8; Mahler and Jesuit, 2018).

Public misperception of gains from government redistribution programs can have an important effect on their political support. As Porumbescu et al. (2017) have shown, the less aware people are of government redistributive programs, the less likely they are to support them. Similarly, Englehardt and Wagener (2014) have found that public preferences for redistributive programs are based as much on people’s awareness of programs as on their tangible gains from them. As a result of this systematic misperception, public sector redistribution programs are often undervalued compared to the concrete benefits they provide (Parameswaran, 2013).

Beyond this, many scholars have argued that public perceptions of government inequality reduction are influenced by the type of redistribution. In particular, support for redistribution is stronger when beneficiaries of programs are considered “deserving,” that is, their need is considered legitimate because it arose from circumstances beyond their control (Williamson et al., 2011). Attitudes toward redistribution are also likely to be more favorable when benefits are widespread, making it easier for people to identify with other beneficiaries even if they themselves do not benefit. Finally, some scholars have argued that the size and type of the existing welfare regime matters: the more redistributive a country is, the more familiar and comfortable the public will be with redistribution (Jaeger, 2006).

As has been indicated, one dimension that that has rarely been explored in the large literature on public attitudes toward government inequality reduction is how attitudes vary across income groups. The vast majority of the studies cited above have operated at the national level, and the few that have not have focused on subjective social class or occupation. As has been indicated, a key contribution of this paper is that it compares subjective attitudes towards government redistribution with the objective reality of benefits received not only at the country level but also at the level of income quintiles. It is our hope that using a more detailed level of analysis will offer a valuable new dimension to our understanding of public support for redistributive programs.

**Data**

As has been indicated, **t**he two main variables employed in this paper are public attitudes toward government redistribution and the concrete gains and losses of income groups as a result of direct taxes and public social benefit programs. As to public attitudes towards redistribution, the source of our data is Module 4 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), from which we have collected data on elections between 2011 and 2015 in 12 countries: Australia, Austria, Canada, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. The question assessing respondents’ support for government redistribution is the following: “Please say to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels.” Possible answers include: “strongly agree”, “somewhat agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” or “strongly disagree.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In addition, respondents were asked to evaluate five individual policy areas that are widely considered redistributive, either directly or indirectly. These include health care, education, unemployment compensation, old-age pensions, and “welfare” (means-tested) benefits. Respondents were asked the following question: “Please say whether there should be more or less public expenditure in each of the following areas. Remember if you say ‘more’ it could require a tax increase, and if you say ‘less’ it could require a reduction in those services.” Respondents could choose to say that public expenditure in a particular area should be “much more than now,” “somewhat more than now,” “the same as now,” “somewhat less than now,” or “much less than now.”

In breaking down surveys by quintile, we have used the CSES variable “income,” which measures respondents’ disposable (post-tax and –transfer) household income. In the survey, respondents were shown five income ranges corresponding to the distribution of household income in their country and were asked to choose the one that corresponded to their household’s income.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As to data on government inequality reduction, our source is the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS), which harmonizes authoritative national income surveys in a number of countries. The starting point in calculating government redistribution is to measure the distribution of pre-tax and -transfer income. The most important source of private sector income is earnings, which are comprised of wages, salaries and income from self-employment, including (as much as possible) non-cash compensation. To this figure are added capital income such as interest and dividends; rental income; royalties; “voluntary individual” pensions received by private and public sector employees; and private transfers such as merit-based educational payments, payments from non-profit institutions, and inter-household transfers like alimony and child support.

In measuring the extent of inequality reduction by way of social transfers, it is necessary to add public social benefits to market income. The main such transfers are employment-related retirement, disability and survivors pensions; child and family allowances; unemployment compensation; sickness, maternity and work injury pay; and means-tested social assistance of various kinds. Finally, the main direct taxes in the developed world, income taxes and social insurance contributions, are deducted from post-transfer income. [[4]](#footnote-4)

At the national level, government redistribution is measured as the reduction of the Gini index of pre-government income as a result of direct taxes and public social benefits.[[5]](#footnote-5) At the level of individual income quintiles, net government redistribution is measured as the change in an income quintile’s share of total national income as a result of direct taxes and social transfers. For example, in the United States, the lowest income quintile, QI, received 1.09 percent of the income received by all five income groups from market sources. After adding public social transfers and deducting direct taxes (for this group, mostly the former) its share of the income received by all five quintiles had risen to 5.84 percent. The relative net change in this group’s income as a result of government redistribution was thus 4.75/5.84 = 0.81, meaning that 81 percent of this group’s income share was the result of government redistribution. Of course, for higher quintiles, net government redistribution is almost always negative, although to varying degrees. For example the pre-government income share of QV, the highest income quintile in the US fell by 19 percent after direct taxes and social transfers (in this case mostly the former) had been taken into account. Redistribution in other countries has been calculated in a similar way.

**Analysis**

A useful starting point in reporting the results of this study is to consider average national support for government redistribution. The results for our 12 countries are reported in **table 1**. As can be seen, the strongest support for government efforts to redistribute income is found in Germany, followed by Finland, Sweden and Austria. As might be expected, the weakest support is found in liberal democracies Australia, Ireland, Canada and, by a large margin, the United States, which measures almost a full point below the 12-country mean.

Next, we consider how much market income inequality has actually been reduced by way of direct taxes and public social transfers. As can be seen in **table 2**, the relative reduction in the pre-government Gini index is greatest in Sweden, Finland, Ireland and Norway, followed closely by Germany and Austria. The smallest relative reduction in the Gini index is again found in liberal democracies, Canada, Australia and the United States, along with a continental European country, Switzerland.[[6]](#footnote-6)

How are these variables related? **Figure 2** offers a scattergram that relates actual government redistribution by way of taxes and public social transfers to support for redistribution as expressed in CSES election surveys. As can be seen, these variables are positively related—it would be surprising if they were not. But the relationship is not nearly as strong as one would expect: the R2 of a regression relating actual redistribution to support for redistribution is only .404, indicating that some 60 percent of variation across countries in support for redistribution is the product of something other than tangible inequality reduction by the state.

In which countries is the gap between subjective perceptions of the desirability of government redistribution and actual gains from redistribution greatest? One way of examining this gap systematically is to calculate residuals from the equation relating actual and perceived benefits from government redistribution described above. Since this component of cross-national variation in attitudes toward government redistribution is not associated with variation in concrete benefits, we will call it “misperception” of the gains from government redistribution. Specifically, these residuals represent the number of points on our five-point scale of support for redistribution above or below what would be expected if the only operative variable was concrete benefits from redistribution—that is, if the median voter theorem’s assumption of rationality was fully in effect.

**Table 3** lists these regression residuals in order of size. As can be seen, the highest residuals are found in Germany and Switzerland. Support for redistribution in these countries is a good deal higher than one would predict given their actual level of redistribution: in Germany, high levels of actual government redistribution are associated with even higher levels of support, while in Switzerland below average levels of redistribution are associated with slightly above average levels of support. In a number of other countries, there is a positive, but smaller difference between actual redistribution and subjective support for redistribution; these include Finland, Austria and Australia. Finally, in several countries subjective support for government redistribution is considerably lower than would be expected given objective levels of government redistribution. This is particularly true of the United States and Ireland; these countries accomplish very different levels of actual redistribution, but in each case public attitudes are considerably less favorable toward redistribution than actual level of redistribution would suggest.

Now that we have considered national-level averages, the next step is to move to the level of income quintiles within counties. As has been indicated, it is plausible to expect that national averages will conceal significant cross-quintile differences. Figures for support for government redistribution in each quintile in each country are presented in **table 4**. To start, as can be seen, support for redistribution generally declines steadily as one moves up the income scale. This is especially true of countries with low average support for redistribution; in the United States, for example, support for redistribution falls almost an entire point from the lowest income quintile, QI (3.01), to the highest, QV (2.17). Much the same is true in Australia, Switzerland and (with higher average support) Iceland. In other countries, particularly those on the high end in average support, the decline is less dramatic: in Austria, Germany and Ireland, for example, it is less than half a point across all five quintiles.

What of actual quintile gains from redistribution, measured as described earlier? As can be seen in **table 5**, income groups’ gains from government redistribution invariably decline as one moves up the income scale. That said, countries vary a good deal in the degree to which government redistribution benefits low income groups and costs high income groups. For example, for QI (the lowest) in the United States and Canada, the relative values on our government redistribution measures are .81 and .84 respectively—high, but a good deal lower than in other counties. (An even lower value is in evidence in Iceland, but it must be remembered that the pre-government share of Iceland’s lowest income quintile is considerably higher than in other countries.) At the other end of the spectrum, members of QV, the highest income quintile, in all cases experience net loss of income share as a result of government redistribution. However, the size of this loss ranges from lows of 15, 19 and 21 percent below the pre-government share in Switzerland, the United States and Australia to highs of 47, 37, 36 and 35 percent below pre-government share in Ireland, Sweden, Finland and Germany respectively.

One variable of interest at this point is the extent to which support for redistribution varies across the five income quintiles in a given country. One way of comparing the degree of polarization in attitudes toward redistribution across income quintiles is to construct a Gini index. While Gini indexes are usually used to measure income inequality (as was done earlier in this paper), they can summarize any distribution, including that of attitudes across income groups. **Table 6** lists countries by the degree of polarization across income quintiles in their attitudes toward government redistribution. (A higher Gini indicates greater polarization.) As can be seen, public opinion on redistribution is most polarized in the United States, followed by Ireland, Iceland and Australia. It is least polarized in Canada, Finland and Germany, whose Ginis are substantially below the mean for all countries.

Are the average level of support for government redistribution in a country and the degree to which support is polarized by income related? **Figure 3** depicts this relationship graphically. As can be seen, it is clearly the case that when average support for redistribution is low it is much more polarized by income group than when it is high; indeed the R2 of an equation linking the two is .71, quite strong for a cross-national analysis of this sort. As can be seen, Germany and Finland have both high average support for redistribution and low income polarization in that support, while Ireland and the United States have both low average levels of support and high polarization. On the other hand, the relationship is not perfect. For example, Canada, Australia and Ireland all have similar average levels of support for redistribution but in Canada polarization is below average, in Australia about average and in Ireland above average.

The next matter to be considered at the quintile level is the difference between subjective support for government redistribution and objective improvement in pre-government income as a result of direct taxes and public social transfers. Parallel to our national-level analysis, it is possible to measure misperception of this sort by constructing a regression in which support for government redistribution in an income quintile is the dependent variable and the objective improvement or decline in that quintile’s income share as a result of government redistribution is the independent variable. The residuals from such an equation indicate how many points on the 5-point support-for-redistribution scale an income quintile in a given country is above or below what would be predicted given its objective situation.

**Table 7** shows this “misperception” variable at the level of income quintiles within countries. It is useful to begin with the lowest income quintile, QI. As can be seen, in many countries the difference between subjective evaluations of government redistribution and actual redistribution are modest. For example, in Sweden, Finland and Norway, redistribution toward this group is relatively high, and support for redistribution is also relatively high: in Sweden and Finland it is slightly more positive and in Norway slightly more negative than the objective situation would suggest. Similarly, in Australia and Canada redistribution toward the lowest income group is in the lower part of the spectrum for all 12 countries, and subjective support is also relatively low—although in both cases slightly higher than predicted.

In other countries the gap between actual redistribution and support for redistribution is much greater. On the positive side, a case that stands out is Germany, where support for redistribution by members of the lowest income quintile is almost half a point higher than the (relatively high) level of redistribution would suggest. A similar, if less dramatic, case is that of Switzerland, where the (relatively modest, in this case) level of redistribution is associated with a considerably higher (0.30 points on the support scale) level of support.

Negative divergences are even more dramatic than positive ones. The largest of all is the case of the United States, where the relatively low level of inequality reduction for the lowest income quintile is accompanied by an even lower level of support—which, as was shown earlier, is the lowest value for QI of any country by a large margin. Also relatively low is the case of QI in Ireland: in this case, government redistribution toward the lowest income quintile is above average for our 12 countries but subjective support is much lower.

As can be further seen in **table 7**, similar patterns are in evidence for other quintiles. One example is Quintile V, the highest. The top income quintile in Germany, which experiences an above average decline in its income share as a result of government redistribution, nonetheless supports redistribution more strongly than the highest quintile in any other country (although not as strongly as lower quintiles in Germany). There is also a modest positive perception gap in Finland and Switzerland.

On the other hand, QV’s support for government redistribution is considerably lower in several countries than the net change in its income share (in this case negative) would suggest. Again, this is especially true in the United States, with the largest negative value of any country. But there are also fairly large gaps for this group in Ireland and smaller ones in a few other countries.

To this point, our analysis has focused on public attitudes toward government redistribution in general. This is certainly of interest, since redistribution is for most people a coherent concept, both aggregated at the national level and broken down by income group. However, to move the analysis forward it is useful to disaggregate redistribution as a general concept into several broadly defined program types, with the expectation that public attitudes toward these programs might vary both across countries and across income groups within countries.

As stated earlier, an especially useful distinction is between comprehensive or social insurance programs, which cover all or nearly all of a country’s population, and means-tested programs and unemployment compensation which are limited to those with low income or who are without jobs. It has been argued that one of the variables associated with public attitudes toward redistribution is whether program recipients are “deserving.” “Deservingness” in this context may in part be a product of whether programs are limited to the poor or unemployed, offering fewer referent points to the bulk of the population and eliciting resentment that tax resources are being spent on a small share of the population. Universal or social insurance programs, on the other hand, are less likely to be stigmatized, since respondents can more readily seem themselves, or people like them, as recipients.

For example, programs with benefits that target smaller groups, such as means-tested food assistance programs in the United States are often viewed less favorably than program areas that cover a larger swath of the population (Sanders, 1988). Similarly, a study of German social benefits found that social spending cuts were more popular among programs that only benefited a small portion of the population, such as immigrants (Roller, 2007), while a study of Denmark found that immediate self-interest was not a driving force behind attitudes towards various redistribution questions, but that these were instead most affected by overarching concerns about worthiness (Anderson, 1993).

The Module 4 CSES surveys we have used permit us to examine these questions by considering five program types which are broadly redistributive. Three of these are either comprehensive or social insurance programs; these include expenditures for health, education and public pensions. The other two programs benefit smaller parts of the population. This is particularly true of “welfare” expenditure, a category which, while non-specific as to exactly which programs are included, convey that they are means-tested. It is also arguably true of unemployment compensation, whose benefits are less widely distributed and which, moreover, may (rightly or wrongly) convey undeservedness.

As has been indicated, the CSES question about each of these program types is the same: “Please say whether there should be more or less public expenditure in each of the following areas. Remember if you say ‘more’ it could require a tax increase, and if you say ‘less’ it could require a reduction in those services.” Respondents may then choose to say that public expenditure in a particular area should be “much more than now,” “somewhat more than now,” “the same as now,” “somewhat less than now,” or “much less than now.”

It is useful to begin by briefly examining the overall popularity of these programs across all 12 countries. Here the distinction between comprehensive or social insurance programs and those with fewer beneficiaries is very clear. The most popular programs are education (a mean of 3.84 on a 5-ponit scale), health (3.78) and pensions (3.70). The average score for unemployment compensation (3.10) and welfare (3.14) are much lower.

Countries, of course, vary around these means. It is perhaps most useful to compare education, the most popular program, with welfare, the one that arguably most associated with “undeservedness.” **Tables 8 and 9** list countries in order of their values on these program types. As can be seen, scores on education are quite similar across our countries. One thing that has not been seen so far is that the United States is near the top, not the bottom, of this listing. This may reflect the fact that the United States was not only a pioneer in in providing universal public education to its citizens but is also closely associated with an emphasis on social mobility rather than inequality per se (Page and Jacobs, 2009).

Rankings are very different for “welfare”; the listing here more closely resembles earlier tables in showing lower ratings for liberal economies (except Canada) and higher ones for some Nordic and continental European countries. While welfare programs are less popular than universal or social insurance programs in general, they are especially unpopular in countries whose citizens are more skeptical of redistributive programs as a whole.

As with government redistribution in general, it is now useful to move to the quintile level. Full statistics for all five redistributive modes are reported in **table 10**. Without examining every quintile in every country, one question of particular interest is how polarized support is for various modes of redistribution across income quintiles. As before, one way of summarizing polarization across income quintiles in a country is to construct a Gini index; the higher the value, the greater the polarization. As can be seen in **table 11**, in which Ginis have been calculated from the full data in **table 10**, it is definitely the case that public attitudes are more polarized in the areas of unemployment compensation and, especially, welfare, than for health, education or pensions: the Ginis for the former average .028 and .032 respectively, a good deal higher than for the latter, which average only .013. In looking at individual countries, it is clear that public opinion toward welfare is especially polarized in Australia (.053) and the United States (.054), both liberal democracies in the Esping-Andersen sense. Attitude polarization in the United States, on the high end for other modes, is at the mean for all 12 countries in the area of education, once again reflective of the special place of education in that country’s historical experience and its emphasis on social mobility in the alleviation of income inequality.

**Conclusion**

As has been indicated, the intention of this paper has been to make a modest contribution to the large literature on public attitudes toward government redistribution in the developed world. The paper extends previous work in two major ways. First, it seeks to connect two large-scale empirical efforts that have been largely conducted in isolation. One is work on public attitudes toward income inequality and the role of government in alleviating it, which vary considerably across countries of the developed world. Most of this work has drawn upon harmonized public opinion surveys in different countries, such as those available from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems.[[7]](#footnote-7) This literature has made major contributions toward our understanding of the rational and less-than-rational motivations of the public in this area. Particularly important for our purposes is the role of perceived self-interest in attitude formation.

The second literature, which has developed largely in isolation from the first, is work on actual government redistribution by way of direct taxes and social transfer. Much of this work has, like ours, drawn upon the household-level micro-data available from the Luxembourg Income Study, which has harmonized the large and authoritative income surveys that are conducted in every developed countries so that they can be compared cross-nationally.

While these literatures have developed largely in isolation from one another, we believe each can inform the other: the study of subjective attitudes toward government redistribution can be enriched by being better grounded in objective reality, while the study of the objective reality of government redistribution can be similarly enriched being more attentive to the context of subjective attitudes that help to produce redistributive policies in the real world.

The other contribution of our paper is that we conduct analysis not only at the level of countries but also at the level of income quintiles within countries. In the literature on public attitudes toward redistribution such an approach is, as we have unmentioned, uncommon—particularly when income groups have been defined in a precise and cross-nationally comparable way. Quintile-level analysis is more common in the literature on government redistribution drawing upon the Luxembourg Income Study is much more common, but this work has rarely if ever been related to subjective attitudes for at the level of individual income groups.

As is obvious, this project has been mainly a data-collecting enterprise. In this it is largely descriptive and offers an unusually strong emphasis on measurement. We hope that by introducing data that have rarely, if ever, been examined in this way we can improve our understanding of a topic that is of great and increasing importance in a world that has simultaneously experienced ever greater levels of income inequality and ever greater pressure on the ability and willingness of government to alleviate it.

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| Table 1. Average National Support for Government Redistribution | |
| Germany | 4.14 |
| Finland | 4.01 |
| Sweden | 3.79 |
| Austria | 3.78 |
| Switzerland | 3.73 |
| UK | 3.52 |
| Norway | 3.47 |
| Iceland | 3.47 |
| Australia | 3.36 |
| Ireland | 3.26 |
| Canada | 3.26 |
| USA | 2.58 |
| Mean | 3.53 |

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| --- | --- |
| Table 2. Government Redistribution by Country | |
| Sweden | 0.49 | |
| Finland | 0.48 | |
| Ireland | 0.48 | |
| Norway | 0.46 | |
| Germany | 0.44 | |
| Austria | 0.41 | |
| UK | 0.39 | |
| Iceland | 0.38 | |
| Canada | 0.34 | |
| Switzerland | 0.32 | |
| Australia | 0.31 | |
| USA | 0.26 | |
| Mean | 0.40 | |

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| |  |  | | --- | --- | | Table 3. Misperceptions of the Benefits of Government Inequality Reduction | | | Germany | 0.45 | | Switzerland | 0.45 | | Finland | 0.19 | | Austria | 0.19 | | Australia | 0.12 | | UK | 0.02 | | Iceland | 0.00 | | Canada | -0.06 | | Sweden | -0.06 | | Norway | -0.27 | | USA | -0.48 | | Ireland | -0.55 | |  |  | |

This table lists the residuals of a regression in which y=support for government redistribution and x=reduction of the Gini index of income inequality as a result of government redistribution

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| Table 4. Support for Government Redistribution by Income Quintile | | | | | |
| Country | Quintile 1  (lowest) | Quintile 2 | Quintile 3 | Quintile 4 | Quintile 5 (highest) |
| Australia | 3.75 | 3.47 | 3.35 | 3.25 | 2.87 |
| Austria | 3.78 | 3.84 | 4.03 | 3.80 | 3.31 |
| Canada | 3.66 | 3.42 | 3.34 | 3.10 | 3.02 |
| Finland | 3.93 | 4.27 | 4.26 | 4.09 | 3.62 |
| Germany | 4.37 | 4.46 | 4.12 | 4.16 | 3.94 |
| Iceland | 3.78 | 3.62 | 3.61 | 3.53 | 2.83 |
| Ireland | 3.35 | 3.36 | 3.24 | 3.15 | 3.21 |
| Norway | 3.75 | 3.66 | 3.57 | 3.37 | 2.98 |
| Sweden | 4.06 | 4.02 | 3.82 | 3.67 | 3.38 |
| Switzerland | 4.09 | 3.92 | 3.80 | 3.59 | 3.06 |
| UK | 4.00 | 3.81 | 3.53 | 3.30 | 3.16 |
| USA | 3.01 | 2.94 | 2.75 | 2.46 | 2.17 |
| Mean | 3.79 | 3.73 | 3.62 | 3.46 | 3.13 |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 5. Government redistribution by Income quintile | | | | | |
| Country | Quintile 1  (lowest) | Quintile 2 | Quintile 3 | Quintile 4 | Quintile 5 (highest) |
| Australia | 0.91 | 0.31 | 0.01 | -0.11 | -0.20 |
| Austria | 0.96 | 0.46 | 0.05 | -0.15 | -0.34 |
| Canada | 0.84 | 0.35 | 0.05 | -0.11 | -0.24 |
| Finland | 0.97 | 0.49 | 0.04 | -0.19 | -0.36 |
| Germany | 0.97 | 0.58 | 0.07 | -0.18 | -0.35 |
| Iceland | 0.71 | 0.22 | 0.00 | -0.12 | -0.22 |
| Ireland | 0.97 | 0.70 | 0.22 | -0.15 | -0.47 |
| Norway | 0.91 | 0.36 | 0.02 | -0.14 | -0.32 |
| Sweden | 0.94 | 0.45 | 0.01 | -0.18 | -0.37 |
| Switzerland | 0.75 | 0.13 | -0.02 | -0.09 | -0.15 |
| UK | 0.97 | 0.56 | 0.07 | -0.16 | -0.29 |
| USA | 0.81 | 0.31 | 0.09 | -0.05 | -0.19 |
| Mean | 3.79 | 3.73 | 3.62 | 3.46 | 3.13 |

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| --- | --- |
| Table 6. Polarization of Support for Government Redistribution | |
|  | Gini index of variation across quintiles |
| USA | 0.279 |
| Ireland | 0.264 |
| Iceland | 0.245 |
| Australia | 0.216 |
| Norway | 0.215 |
| UK | 0.206 |
| Switzerland | 0.195 |
| Austria | 0.187 |
| Sweden | 0.180 |
| Canada | 0.171 |
| Finland | 0.139 |
| Germany | 0.119 |
| Mean | 0.201 |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 7. Misperceptions of the Benefits of Government Inequality Reduction by Income Quintile | | | | | |
| Country | Quintile I  (lowest) | Quintile II | Quintile III | Quintile IV | Quintile V  (highest) |
| Australia | -0.10 | -0.23 | -0.42 | -0.02 | -0.02 |
| Austria | -0.11 | 0.03 | 0.37 | 0.19 | -0.01 |
| Canada | -0.13 | -0.31 | -0.32 | -0.14 | 0.00 |
| Finland | 0.03 | 0.43 | 0.58 | 0.14 | 0.23 |
| Germany | 0.47 | 0.55 | 0.49 | 0.28 | 0.57 |
| Iceland | 0.11 | -0.01 | -0.18 | 0.12 | -0.13 |
| Ireland | -0.56 | -0.64 | -0.01 | -0.52 | -0.51 |
| Norway | -0.10 | -0.08 | -0.18 | -0.20 | -0.28 |
| Sweden | 0.18 | 0.21 | 0.07 | -0.20 | -0.04 |
| Switzerland | 0.38 | 0.36 | -0.04 | 0.52 | 0.31 |
| UK | 0.10 | -0.08 | -0.08 | -0.45 | -0.03 |
| USA | -0.75 | -0.76 | -0.83 | -0.32 | -0.71 |
| Mean | -0.04 | -0.04 | -0.05 | -0.05 | -0.05 |

**Table 8. AVERAGE NATIONAL SUPPORT FOR EDUCATIONAL EXPENDITURES**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |
| Germany | 4.05 |
| Norway | 4.03 |
| Austria | 3.96 |
| USA | 3.96 |
| Ireland | 3.94 |
| Australia | 3.91 |
| UK | 3.78 |
| Sweden | 3.75 |
| Canada | 3.72 |
| Switzerland | 3.67 |
| Iceland | 3.64 |
| Finland  MEAN | 3.63  3.84 |

**Table 9. AVERAGE NATIONAL SUPPORT FOR WELFARE EXPENDITURES**

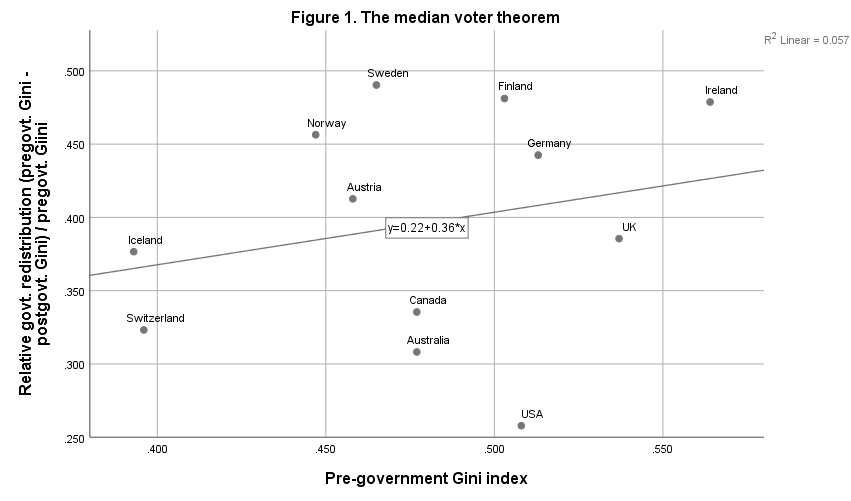
|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |
| Iceland | 3.69 |
| Germany | 3.51 |
| Austria | 3.35 |
| Sweden | 3.27 |
| Canada | 3.14 |
| Switzerland | 3.09 |
| Finland | 3.08 |
| Norway | 3.05 |
| Australia | 3.00 |
| USA | 2.73 |
| UK | 2.66 |
| mean | 3.14 |

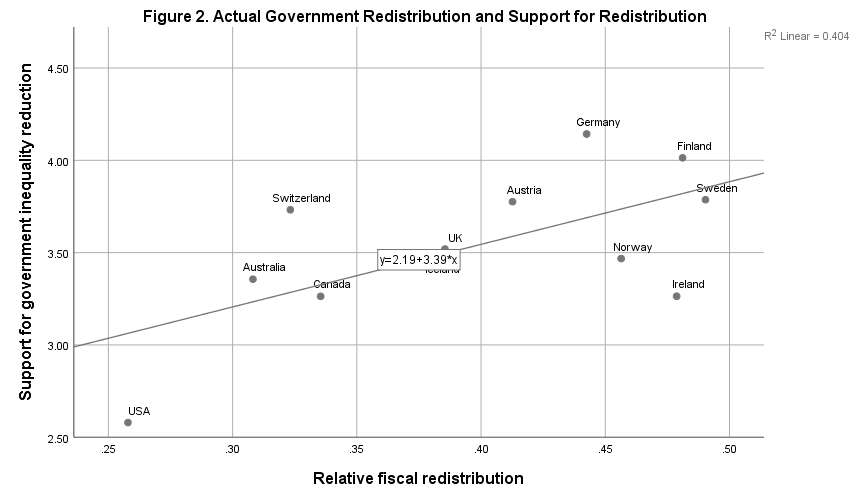
**Table 10. PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR MORE SPENDING IN VARIOUS POLICY AREAS BY INCOME QUINTILE**

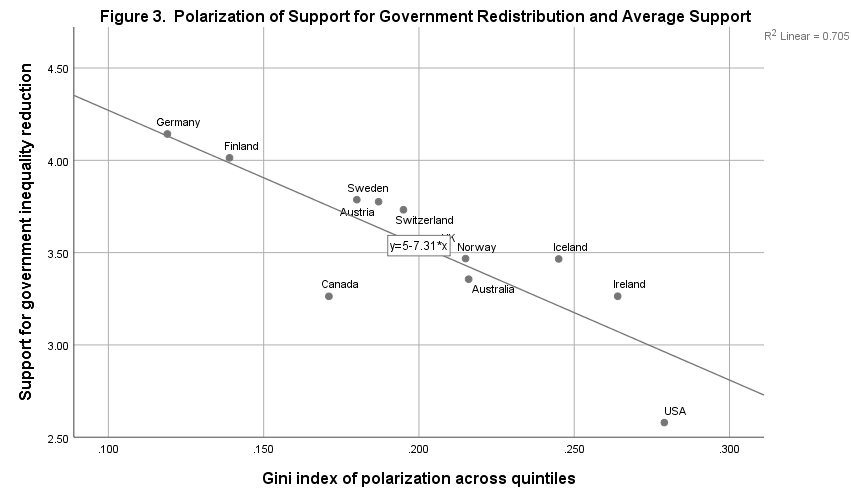
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Income Quintile | Health | Education | Unemployment compensation | Pensions | Welfare |
| Australia | Lowest | 4.15 | 3.92 | 3.24 | 4.06 | 3.48 |
|  | Second | 4.05 | 3.82 | 2.99 | 3.93 | 3.15 |
|  | Third | 4.05 | 3.89 | 2.81 | 3.82 | 2.93 |
|  | Fourth | 4.12 | 3.97 | 2.71 | 3.81 | 2.78 |
|  | Highest | 3.98 | 3.95 | 2.62 | 3.66 | 2.67 |
| Austria | Lowest | 3.54 | 3.82 | 2.90 | 3.61 | 3.60 |
|  | Second | 3.64 | 3.81 | 3.01 | 3.67 | 3.36 |
|  | Third | 3.50 | 3.97 | 2.95 | 3.56 | 3.39 |
|  | Fourth | 3.67 | 4.09 | 2.90 | 3.46 | 3.26 |
|  | Highest | 3.48 | 4.12 | 2.86 | 3.46 | 3.12 |
| Canada | Lowest | 3.92 | 3.70 | 3.38 | 3.90 | 3.47 |
|  | Second | 3.85 | 3.70 | 3.06 | 3.66 | 3.22 |
|  | Third | 3.81 | 3.71 | 3.00 | 3.71 | 3.00 |
|  | Fourth | 3.85 | 3.75 | 3.06 | 3.61 | 3.00 |
|  | Highest | 3.77 | 3.75 | 2.91 | 3.53 | 3.03 |
| Finland | Lowest | 3.77 | 3.66 | 3.52 | 3.70 | 3.23 |
|  | Second | 3.87 | 3.67 | 3.68 | 3.94 | 3.31 |
|  | Third | 3.81 | 3.68 | 3.58 | 3.84 | 3.12 |
|  | Fourth | 3.72 | 3.58 | 3.38 | 3.68 | 2.97 |
|  | Highest | 3.44 | 3.58 | 3.28 | 3.51 | 2.75 |
| Germany | Lowest | 3.90 | 3.97 | 3.55 | 4.08 | 3.79 |
|  | Second | 3.84 | 4.02 | 3.20 | 3.99 | 3.51 |
|  | Third | 3.77 | 4.04 | 3.12 | 3.82 | 3.44 |
|  | Fourth | 3.69 | 4.07 | 3.23 | 3.84 | 3.47 |
|  | Highest | 3.50 | 4.17 | 3.18 | 3.76 | 3.35 |
| Iceland | Lowest | 4.20 | 3.69 | 3.13 | 4.00 | 3.77 |
|  | Second | 4.21 | 3.68 | 3.15 | 4.01 | 3.76 |
|  | Third | 4.15 | 3.67 | 3.06 | 4.03 | 3.76 |
|  | Fourth | 4.20 | 3.68 | 2.96 | 4.00 | 3.70 |
|  | Highest | 4.07 | 3.47 | 2.74 | 3.81 | 3.45 |
| Ireland | Lowest | 4.10 | 3.94 | 3.76 | 3.68 |  |
|  | Second | 4.01 | 3.89 | 3.60 | 3.46 |  |
|  | Third | 3.87 | 3.83 | 3.20 | 3.40 |  |
|  | Fourth | 3.97 | 4.05 | 2.98 | 3.31 |  |
|  | Highest | 3.79 | 3.98 | 2.94 | 3.16 |  |
| Norway | Lowest | 4.15 | 4.04 | 3.21 | 3.76 | 3.28 |
|  | Second | 4.06 | 3.97 | 3.12 | 3.68 | 3.15 |
|  | Third | 4.04 | 4.04 | 3.03 | 3.62 | 3.07 |
|  | Fourth | 4.06 | 4.00 | 3.00 | 3.56 | 3.05 |
|  | Highest | 3.81 | 4.12 | 2.81 | 3.39 | 2.70 |
| Sweden | Lowest | 3.81 | 3.65 | 3.43 | 4.02 | 3.41 |
|  | Second | 3.88 | 3.69 | 3.52 | 3.99 | 3.35 |
|  | Third | 3.71 | 3.68 | 3.49 | 3.92 | 3.17 |
|  | Fourth | 3.72 | 3.84 | 3.48 | 3.85 | 3.17 |
|  | Highest | 3.70 | 3.91 | 3.29 | 3.67 | 3.27 |
| Switzerland | Lowest | 3.28 | 3.47 | 3.15 | 3.51 | 3.23 |
|  | Second | 3.16 | 3.62 | 3.10 | 3.39 | 3.10 |
|  | Third | 3.13 | 3.70 | 3.15 | 3.31 | 3.13 |
|  | Fourth | 3.10 | 3.75 | 3.01 | 3.27 | 3.06 |
|  | Highest | 3.02 | 3.81 | 2.97 | 3.21 | 2.93 |
| UK | Lowest | 4.19 | 3.83 | 3.01 | 4.18 | 3.24 |
|  | Second | 4.13 | 3.84 | 2.60 | 3.98 | 2.81 |
|  | Third | 3.92 | 3.77 | 2.46 | 3.82 | 2.53 |
|  | Fourth | 4.00 | 3.78 | 2.36 | 3.70 | 2.46 |
|  | Highest | 3.80 | 3.69 | 2.23 | 3.50 | 2.26 |
| usa | Lowest | 3.35 | 3.94 | 3.34 | 3.65 | 3.11 |
|  | Second | 3.44 | 4.02 | 3.28 | 3.71 | 2.95 |
|  | Third | 3.47 | 4.02 | 3.23 | 3.70 | 2.67 |
|  | Fourth | 3.36 | 3.99 | 3.02 | 3.63 | 2.50 |
|  | Highest | 3.08 | 3.82 | 2.79 | 3.35 | 2.41 |

**Table 11. POLIRIZATION OF PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR VARIOUS PROGRAM MODES**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Health | Educ. | Unemp. | Pensions | | Welfare |
| **AUSTRALIA** | .007 | .007 | .042 | .018 | | .053 |
| **AUSTRIA** | .011 | .018 | .009 | .012 | | .026 |
| **CANADA** | .007 | .003 | .025 | .018 | | .030 |
| **FINLAND** | .020 | .005 | .023 | .021 | | .035 |
| **GERMANY** | .019 | .008 | .021 | .021 | | .021 |
| **UK** | .020 | .007 | .056 | .034 | | .069 |
| **ICELAND** | .006 | .009 | .026 | .009 | | .014 |
| **IRELAND** | .015 | .010 | .054 | .027 | | .020 |
| **NORWAY** | .014 | .006 | .024 | .019 | | .032 |
| **SWEDEN** | .009 | .014 | .011 | .017 | | .016 |
| **SWITZERLAND** | .015 | .017 | .012 | .017 | | .017 |
| **USA** | .020 | .009 | .034 | .017 | | .054 |
| **MEAN** | .013 | .009 | .028 | .019 | .032 | |







**Appendix: Years of CSES and LIS surveys**

**Country CSES LIS**

Australia 2013 2010

Austria 2013 2004

Canada 2011 2010

Finland 2015 2010

Germany 2013 2010

Iceland 2013 2010

Ireland 2011 2010

Norway 2013 2010

Sweden 2014 2005

Switzerland 2011 2004

UK 2015 2013

USA 2012 2013

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1. The classic statement of the median voter theorem is Meltzer and Richard (1981). For more recent discussions see Iversen and Soskice (2006) and Lupu and Pontusson (2011).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Responses run from 1 to 5. The direction of the original scale has been reversed so that stronger support is represented by a higher value. Some respondents refused to answer or said they did not know; their responses are coded as missing.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In most cases quintiles were based on annual income, but in a few cases monthly income was used. Several of the original surveys measured deciles, but these were converted by the CSES to quintiles. Because data for some respondents was missing, the number of valid responses in each quintile varied slightly.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Households reporting zero pre-government income (that is, all of their income is from transfers) are included, but those reporting zero disposable income are dropped, on the assumption that they must have at least some income from unreported sources. More details on household size equivalization, top and bottom coding, second order effects, etc., are offered in Mahler and Jesuit (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In measuring country-level inequality we have employed the Gini index, which ranges from 0 (all households receive the same income) to 1 (one household receives all income). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is, of course, consistent with the “varieties of capitalism” breakdown of Esping-Andersen (1990) and the vast literature it has inspired. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Another major source of data on public opinion toward government redistribution is the International Social Survey Program, which has conducted four major surveys on income inequality—but, unfortunately, none since 2009 (although one is underway). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)