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# Unequal views of inequality: Cross-national support for redistribution 1985–2011<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This research examines public views on government responsibility to reduce income inequality, support for redistribution. While individual-level correlates of support for redistribution are relatively well understood, many questions remain at the country-level. Therefore, I examine how country-level characteristics affect aggregate support for redistribution. I test explanations of aggregate support using a unique dataset combining 18 waves of the International Social Survey Programme and European Social Survey. Results from mixed-effects logistic regression and fixed-effects linear regression models show two primary and contrasting effects. States that reduce inequality through bundles of tax and transfer policies are rewarded with more supportive publics. In contrast, economic development has a seemingly equivalent and dampening effect on public support. Importantly, the effect of economic development grows at higher levels of development, potentially overwhelming the amplifying effect of state redistribution. My results therefore suggest a fundamental challenge to proponents of egalitarian politics.

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## 1. Introduction

The contemporary growth of income inequality in many rich countries has been described as *the* central social process of the modern era (Alderson and Nielsen, 2002; Atkinson, 2008; McCall, 2013; OECD, 2011; Piketty and Saez, 2003), as changes in the distributional shape of economic rewards fundamentally alter life chances, interpersonal relationships, health outcomes, trust, and political behavior, to name a few examples (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). It is therefore unsurprising that scholars have begun to reexamine the causes and consequences of inequality, with focus often on market forces and changes in population demographic compositions (Autor et al., 2008). Yet income inequality is fundamentally connected to politics as well (Bradley et al., 2003; Brady, 2009; Brady and Sosnaud, 2010; Hacker and Pierson, 2011; Volscho and Kelly, 2012). Scholars of stratification and political sociology note that explanations of inequality are incomplete without consideration of the inputs of political actors, state institutions, power relations, and policy (Brady, 2009; Brady and Sosnaud, 2010; Lenski, 1984).

The current research focuses on one such political dimension—public preferences for government action to reduce income inequality, or support for redistribution (henceforth SFR)—and is motivated by the following question: why do some publics support state action against income inequality more than others? Answers to this question develop the recent theoretical and

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empirical reintegration of public opinion into political sociology as a bridge linking social policy and market forces (Arts and Gelissen, 2001; Brooks and Manza, 2007, 2013; Blekesaune, 2007; Jacobs and Skocpol, 2007; Jaeger, 2013; Lupu and Pontusson, 2011; Manza and Brooks, 2012; Mau and Burkhardt, 2009; McCall, 2013; Stegmueller et al., 2012; Svallfors, 2013a,b). While much previous work by sociologists and political scientists examines the operations and consequences of political institutions and their bureaucracies (Immergut, 1998; Evans et al., 1999; Swank, 2002), or else the influence of small and powerful political elites or social movements (Domhoff, 2006; Gilens, 2012), what publics think about important policy issues, and why they do so, remains a crucial facet of politics in democratic societies.

While the individual-level correlates of SFR are well understood (Brooks and Manza, 2007; Jaeger, 2006b; Rehm, 2011; Svallfors, 1997), a number of questions remain at the country-level (Blekesaune and Quadagno, 2003; Jaeger, 2013). Although previous research has made great strides in establishing and analyzing country-level theories of SFR, scholarly understanding faces limitations due to small samples of countries included in analysis, short time frames, or both. Country effects from multilevel models have high risk of bias in small samples (Stegmueller, 2013), while the analysis of a small number of time points risks grounding results in potentially unrepresentative trends and cannot detect any temporal variability in effect size or direction.

I conceptualize country-level characteristics as bundles of priming mechanisms broadly shared by a citizenry whose effects, although operating at the individual level, are detectable at the country-level (Aaroe and Petersen, 2014; Brooks and Manza, 2013). Country characteristics represent systems of economic, social, and political opportunities and constraints which influence normative and path dependent views held by individuals (Brooks and Manza, 2007; Huber and Stephens, 2001). However, country characteristics provide only a conditional, probabilistic effect on the latent propensity for political attitudes for any single individual. Country effects should be detectable on the margins when analyzing population samples, even if these effects do not clearly shift a particular individual's political attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I assess how country characteristics influence aggregate, country-level SFR. Data come from over 500,000 respondents housed in 39 countries spanning a 27 year period, totaling 366 country-years. These data allow for a rigorous and expanded adjudication of theories relating aggregate SFR to country-level characteristics. Results from multilevel mixed-effects logistic regression and fixed effects linear regression models point to two primary, and contrasting, country effects. Publics are positively responsive to the bundle of policies and regulations which reduce income inequality. In contrast, economic development has a dampening effect on SFR. Importantly, state redistribution affects the probability of support similarly across levels of redistribution, whereas the effect of economic development has become particularly pronounced at high levels of development. This contrast suggests the growth of a fundamental challenge to egalitarian politics of the welfare state, as dampening effect of economic development could potentially outpace the amplifying effect of state redistribution.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Support for redistribution (SFR)

SFR refers to attitudes concerning the government's responsibility to reduce income inequality. SFR focuses on a crucial mediator of market processes: government intervention into the allocation of monetary resources. Comparative research demonstrates the abilities of states to attenuate deleterious effects of market forces (Bradley et al., 2003; Brady, 2009; Brady and Sosnaud, 2010; Esping-Andersen, 1990). Examples include changing inequality levels after taxes and transfers (Garfinkel et al., 2010; Gornick and Milanovic, 2015; Kenworthy, 2004), providing insurance programs that reduce dependence on employment (Gangl, 2004), buffering exposure to unemployment during economic shocks (Chauvel and Schroeder, 2014), and reducing the count and depth of poverty through social welfare spending (Bradley et al., 2003; Brady, 2005).

The potential of state policies to alter market outcomes has generated competitive politics surrounding such issues (Brady and Sosnaud, 2010; Huber and Stephens, 2001; Korpi, 2003). Political factions routinely turn to the state for protective rents to buffer market forces, with goals ranging from broad and egalitarian protection of middle class workers, which would decrease inequality (Brady, 2009; Huber and Stephens, 2001), to targeted protection of business profits, potentially exacerbating it (Brady and Leicht, 2008).

In democratic societies, public opinion is one such arena of competitive politics affecting policy outcomes (Brooks and Manza, 2007; Brady and Sosnaud, 2010; Campbell, 2005). Political sociologists and political scientists have reincorporated public attitudes into analyses of policy variability (Brooks and Manza, 2013; Burstein, 2014; Gilens, 2012). Some find that publics influence state policies based on their political demands (Brooks and Manza, 2007; Lupu and Pontusson, 2011). Others question the causal effect of public opinion on policy outcomes (Burstein, 2014; Gilens, 2012). Yet given the expectation of public involvement having some effect on government affairs based on the ideals of a democratic society (Brooks and Manza, 2013), this disconnect would itself be of scholarly interest. In total, scholars agree on the importance of understanding public views towards protective state policies.

Relatedly, SFR is central to a bundle of public opinion survey items on government spending, policy, and intervention referred to as welfare attitudes, the focus of much comparative work by political sociologists and political scientists (Brooks

<sup>1</sup> This research is agnostic on the qualitative histories of countries and individuals, as the empirical focus is restricted to aggregate measures of public opinion.

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