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Socioeconomic status, perceived inequality of opportunity, and attitudes toward redistribution[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that an individual's socioeconomic status (SES) is negatively associated with attitudes toward redistributive policies. The objective of this study is to examine whether the relationship between an individual's subjective SES and his or her attitudes toward redistribution is contingent upon perceptions of inequality of opportunity. A series of multilevel analyses was performed using data from 28 countries from the 2009 International Social Survey Program (ISSP). Results revealed that the relationship between individual SES and attitudes toward redistribution was weaker among individuals who more strongly believed that success lies beyond the control of individuals. Shared perceptions of inequality of opportunity at the country level were also significant. The relationship between SES and attitudes toward redistribution was weaker in countries with higher levels of public perceptions of inequality of opportunity. In conclusion, people commensurately support redistribution policies (even contrary to their own self-interest) as they recognize the significance of inequality of opportunity. The greater the support among people for redistribution against their self-interest, the weaker the social cleavage in attitudes toward redistribution across different SES strata, and the higher the overall level of support for redistribution in society.

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1. Introduction

Increasing levels of economic inequality are observable in many industrialized countries. Data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show that the ratio of the average income of the richest 10% to the poorest 10% was 9.6 in 2012, up from 9.2 in 2007 (OECD, 2015). Government policies on income redistribution can mitigate growing economic inequality. Empirical studies have reported that taxes and social transfers play an important role in cushioning the increase of economic inequality (OECD, 2014b). A controversial question, however, is the extent to which a state should be actively involved in redistributing income to reduce economic inequality. In democratic societies, public sup-

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port for government income redistribution influences the development of redistributive policies.

Many scholars seek to understand attitudes toward redistributive policies. Previous research consistently suggests that an individual's socioeconomic status (SES) is associated with his/her attitudes toward government redistribution. Specifically, individuals with lower SES tend to more strongly support state redistribution than those with higher SES (Cook & Barrett, 1992; Corneo & Grüner, 2002; Edlund, 1999; Linos & West, 2003; Pittau, Massari, & Zelli, 2012; Svallfors, 1997). Although a negative relationship between SES and support for redistribution is generally accepted, the strength of this relationship can vary across societies. A strong relationship between SES and attitudes toward redistribution indicates that the differences in attitudes between low- and high-SES groups are large and prominent. The larger is the discrepancy in attitudes toward redistribution between different socioeconomic groups, the more difficult it is for societies to reach a consensus on redistributive social policies. Differences in attitudes toward redistribution across different social groups can be conceptualized as *social cleavage in attitudes toward redistribution*. Support for redistribution varies systematically across societies or nations (Andreß & Heien, 2001; Jakobsen, 2011; Svallfors, 1997). How social cleavage in attitudes toward redistribution varies across societies and what explains the variation, however, remain unclear.

An individual's attitude toward redistribution is a psychological status intricately associated with SES and social context. It is reasonable to assume that an individual's SES and social context might interact with each other to explain his/her attitudes toward redistribution. Previous studies reveal that social contextual factors such as institutional features of welfare policies (Beramendi & Rehm, 2016; Svallfors, 1997); macro-economic factors such as unemployment, economic development, and economic inequality (Blekesaune, 2007); and culture (Luttmer & Singhal, 2011) are significant factors in public attitudes toward welfare policies. However, the potential effects of perceived inequality on social cleavage in welfare attitudes across different socioeconomic groups have received little attention. In this study, we assume that the association between an individual's SES and his or her attitudes toward redistribution, which reflects social cleavage in support of redistribution between different SES groups, is contingent upon social context, such as the level of inequality in the society. Inequality can be broadly conceptualized in terms of two different aspects: inequality of outcome and inequality of opportunity for advancement. Perceived inequality of outcome is an individual's perceptions of how society distributes economic properties, while perceived inequality of opportunities is an individual's perceptions of the differences between how the system should work and how the system actually works (Kim, Huh, Choi, & Lee, 2018). This study mainly focuses on perceived inequality of opportunity as a factor explaining the relationship between an individual's SES and his/her support for redistribution. Using data from the 2009 International Social Survey Program (ISSP) Social Inequality IV, we empirically examined the relationship between SES and attitudes toward redistribution and explored how the relationship varies depending

on perceived inequality of opportunity at individual and country levels. The analysis revealed that perceptions of inequality of opportunity at individual and country levels significantly moderate the relationship between SES and attitudes toward redistribution.

2. Background

2.1. SES and attitudes toward redistribution

Scholars have attempted to understand why some individuals support redistributive policies to a greater extent than others. One influential line of reasoning focuses on economic self-interest. According to the economic self-interest model of social policy preferences, individuals who expect economic gain from reduction in economic inequality are expected to support government redistribution. The economic self-interest model is based on rational choice theory, which suggests that human action is fundamentally rational in general and, following the consideration of likely costs and benefits, is motivated by self-interest (Scott, 1999). This view describes expected benefits as motivation for the support of redistribution and explains that the actual and potential beneficiaries of redistributive policies are likely to be the most supportive of these policies. Corneo and Grüner (2002) analyzed cross-national data from the 1992 ISSP and reported that economic motivation was a significant factor in individual preferences for governmental redistribution. Eger (2010) also highlighted the importance of economic interest in explaining people's support for welfare expenditures in Sweden. These findings suggest that people with lower SES are more likely to be beneficiaries of redistributive policies and to support generous social policies than are those with higher SES. Consistent with this line of thinking, based on the assumptions of the theory of rational choice, Meltzer and Richard (1981) proposed that higher economic inequality leads to greater redistribution by shaping the preferences of median voters. According to this view, individuals who expect economic benefits from the reduction of economic inequality—typically those in lower SES strata—are more likely to support income redistributive policies (Corneo & Grüner, 2002).

The negative relationship between individual SES and support for redistribution is explained by other social theoretical perspectives as well. According to the power resource perspective, class-based struggle over social provision is central to the development of social policies (Korpi, 1989). Individuals, as class-based actors, demonstrate different levels of support for social policies depending on class position. People who are relatively weak in terms of economic resources tend to have greater interest in the use of political resources to reduce unequal distribution than people with more market resources (Korpi, 1989). Therefore, the relative power of the lower class is the fundamental basis for the development of generous social policies (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi, 1985, 1989). Class and SES are not synonymous; however, the power resource approach implies that low SES groups will more strongly support government redistribution than other SES groups, and that the support of low SES groups

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