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Collective religiosity and the gender gap in attitudes towards economic redistribution in 86 countries, 1990–2008



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ABSTRACT

What is the relationship between gender and the demand for redistribution? Because, on average, women face more economic deprivation than men, in many countries women favor redistribution more than men. However, this is not the case in a number of other countries, where women do not support redistribution more than men. To explain this cross-national paradox, we stress the role of collective religiosity. In many religions, theological principles both militate against public policies designed to redistribute income, and also promote traditionally gendered patterns of work and family involvement. Hence, we hypothesize that, in those countries where religion remains influential either through closer church-state ties or an intensely religious population, men and women should differ less in their attitudes towards redistribution. Drawing upon the World Values Survey, we estimate three-level regression models that test our religiosity-based approach and two alternative explanations in 86 countries and 175 country-years. The results are consistent with our hypothesis. Moreover, in further support of our theoretical approach, societal religiosity undermines pro-redistribution preferences more among women than men. Our findings suggest that collective religiosity matters more to the gender gap in redistributive attitudes than traditional political and labor force factors.

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1. Introduction

Recent scholarship on attitudes toward economic redistribution has revealed a link between gender and redistributive attitudes. In studies where many countries are pooled in the analysis, women support redistribution more than men (Dallinger, 2010; Finseraas, 2009; Stegmüller et al., 2012). At the same time, however, studies of single countries indicate that the size of the gender gap varies cross-nationally, with substantial pro-redistribution gender gaps in some countries but only negligible gaps in others (Linos and West, 2003; Svallfors, 1997). In part because scholars, historically, have prioritized individual-level factors in explaining economic and political gender gaps, little attention has been paid to cross-national variation in the gender gap in redistributive attitudes. As Rehm (2007, 54) writes, “that there are systematic attitudinal

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differences between the two *genders* [in pro-redistribution attitudes] is a very consistent and poorly understood phenomenon” (for similar views, see Svallfors, 2007).

The existence of substantial, cross-national variation in the pro-redistribution gender gap constitutes an important puzzle. In practical terms, this gap has potentially important implications for socioeconomic policy-making, especially in light of women’s rising rates of political participation (Norris, 2002; Paxton et al., 2007). But the gap also raises important theoretical questions. Across the globe, women tend to have fewer economic resources than men, which should predispose the average woman, all things being equal, to favor redistributive policies more than the average man (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). This is indeed the case in a number of countries, and is consistent with studies finding greater support for welfare states among women (Blekesaune and Quadagno, 2003; Gingrich and Ansell, 2012; Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989). Yet we know that, in other countries, gender does not structure the demand for redistribution (e.g. Jæger, 2006a; Linos and West, 2003). This cross-national variation is therefore unexpected, and creates a unique opportunity to investigate how cultural, economic, and institutional conditions mediate between women’s economic disadvantage and gender differences in policy preferences.

In this article, we address this puzzle by examining support for economic redistribution among men and women in 86 countries between 1990 and 2008. To maximize the generalizability of the results, we analyze the World Values Survey (WVS), which offers the broadest geographical scope of all comparative survey programs. The WVS further enables us to examine both developed and developing countries, overcoming limitations of previous studies that examine only developed countries. We use three-level linear models that include 175 country-year surveys, representing 87% of the world population. By conducting the first systematic examination of the extent and causes of gender differences in support for redistribution across a broad sample of countries, we fill the existing void in the literature on political attitudes, and develop a novel argument that opens new directions for future research on gender and political attitudes.

Although the existing literature on the gender gap in redistribution attitudes is limited, the related literature on the gender gap in voting (e.g., Giger, 2009; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2006) suggests two possible explanations for cross-national variations in the pro-redistribution gender gap: one that emphasizes the role of female labor force participation, and another that highlights women’s involvement in politics. We test these explanations against a novel alternative: collective religiosity. To a greater or lesser extent, most major religions prescribe distinct roles for men and women and promote theologies that discourage state-based economic redistribution as a matter of public policy. Therefore, in nation-states where religion is strongly influential – either institutionally, through close church-state ties (i.e., institutional religiosity), or socially, as a highly salient moral community (i.e., societal religiosity) –, we should observe smaller pro-redistribution gender gaps, as women refrain from demanding more redistribution. Results show that the level of societal religiosity is the strongest determinant of gender differences in the support for economic redistribution. Countries with higher than average religious orientations display significantly smaller pro-redistribution divides between men and women.

2. Theoretical background

This section develops our main argument linking collective religiosity and the gender gap in pro-redistribution attitudes. We first review how gender structures differences in political attitudes. We then review a set of factors, drawn from the literature on the gender gap in voting, which might explain the gender gap in redistributive attitudes. Finally, we turn to the literature on religion and redistributive attitudes, and present a set of alternative hypotheses based on the causal mechanisms identified in that literature.

2.1. Gender and political cleavages

Since the late 1980s, gender differences in political behavior have become an important focus of social scientific research. This interest is most clearly visible in a wave of studies investigating gender differences in voting patterns, especially in preferences for leftwing parties (Edlund and Pande, 2002; Giger, 2009; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2006; Manza and Brooks, 1998). In contrast, gender gap research on policy preferences – especially economic redistribution – has been more limited and focused on very few countries (Jelen et al., 1994; Norrander and Wilcox, 2008; Svallfors, 1997). This represents a substantial lacuna in the literature, because there are indeed compelling structural reasons why women and men should differ in their demand for redistribution.

It is well known that a structural, economic inequality exists between men and women. In the more than 120 countries considered in the *Global Gender Gap Report 2012*, the average woman earns lower wages and less income than the average man (Hausmann et al., 2012). Women also generally accumulate less wealth than men, in large part because they are overrepresented in the informal economy and less prestigious occupations (see also Gregory, 2009). Hence, like other economically disadvantaged groups, women on average should benefit more from economic redistribution, and should therefore generally have more pro-redistributive attitudes than men (Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989).

Consistent with this expectation, many analyses that pool many countries do indeed reveal a stronger redistributive demand among women than men. Utilizing different cross-national datasets, this research indicates a consistent and significant “modern” gender gap in the support for reducing income inequalities, with women favoring redistribution more than men (Dallinger, 2010; Finseraas, 2009; Jæger, 2006b; Rehm, 2009; Stegmueller et al., 2012). For instance, in a recent study considering 52 different countries, Dion and Birchfield (2010) show that women support redistribution significantly more than men.

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