Policy brief

What do people value in equality?

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Dec. 2025

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October 26, 2025

Summary

Despite growing inequality in income, wealth, and opportunities within countries, demand for redistribution is stagnant. Puzzlingly, this is also the case for individuals at the bottom of the income distribution. This begs the question of what the general public values in equality, and which sources of inequality are tolerated. In this essay, we address this question by reviewing the empirical literature on preferences for redistribution.

1. It is well-established that people under-estimate the extent of income inequality. Nevertheless, experiments in which respondents are informed about the real magnitude of inequality have limited effects in changing their demand for redistribution.

2. It has been argued that people are not against redistribution *per se*, but rather distrust national governments in doing the job. While it has been demonstrated that informing people of the real extent of inequality reduces trust in government, the reverse does not hold: regaining trust in government does not lead to increased demand for redistribution.

3. The Prospect of Upward Mobility hypothesis holds that poor people expecting to become rich in the future may refrain from demanding high redistribution. However, the empirical evidence is mixed on this hypothesis.

4. The Trickle-Down hypothesis holds that low-income people may refrain from demanding high taxation on the rich, thinking that the economic activities by the rich will, in the end, benefit them. A novel experimental test of this hypothesis, however, finds limited support for this hypothesis.

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5. Many people support the idea that individual merit is important for redistribution. If poor people are perceived as being undeserving, then little redistribution is justified. A novel experimental study finds that, indeed, the effort of the poor is the most relevant determinant of redistribution for *both* the poor and the rich. In general, the patterns of demand for redistribution by rich and poor respondents are surprisingly similar.

6. Most respondents are Opportunity Meritocrats and demand redistribution of initial opportunities (38.7%), followed by Libertarians who demand no redistribution (35.2%). The remaining Egalitarians, who demand redistribution of final outcomes, constitute a smaller yet substantial share (25.6%).

7. Finally, racial antagonism matters empirically. It is relevant insofar as rich ethnic majorities decide to restrict redistribution not to benefit poor ethnic minorities.

Since the empirical literature still suffers from important knowledge gaps and overwhelmingly focuses on the US and Western countries, it would be imprudent to draw general conclusions from this survey. Nevertheless, the extant evidence suggests that the "puzzle" of stagnant demand for redistribution may be—at least partly—accounted for in terms of (a) a focus on the merit of the poor as a significant determinant for redistribution, which holds for both the rich and the poor; (b) a general preference for redistribution of initial opportunities rather than final outcomes, although the share of libertarians and egalitarians remains large; (c) racial antagonism.
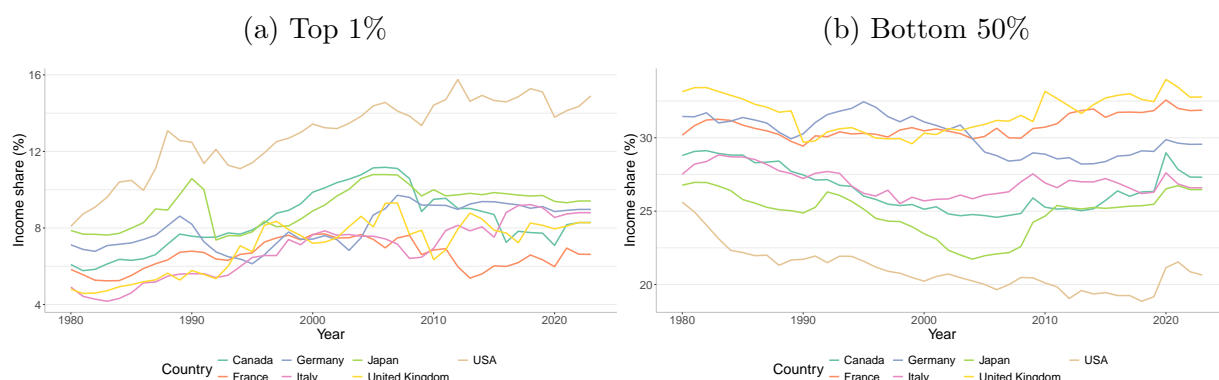
We draw some policy implications from this analysis.

1 Long-term trends in inequality

It is well-established that, since the '80s many Western economies have experienced a U-turn in within-country economic inequality. While economic inequality tended to fall since the end of WWII, the trend reversed around the '80s (Chancel et al., 2022). Countries that have transitioned from communist rule, such as Russia, or that have embraced forms of state-managed capitalism, such as China, also experienced a rapid increase in inequality. Klasen et al. (2018) note that while the trend of rising income inequality was particularly pronounced in the 1980-2000 spell - with 69% (23%) of the 105 countries for which we have data experiencing rising (falling) inequality - this trend slowed down in the 2001-2010 decade - with 41% (47%) of the countries experiencing rising (falling) inequality.

The US is one of the countries where the increase in income inequality has been largest. Since the 1980s, the post-tax income share of the top 1% earners rose from 8% in 1980 to 14.9% in 2023 (Figure 1a), while the share of the bottom 50% fell from 25.6% in 1980 to 20.7% (Figure 1b). Countries that used tax and transfer policies to counter this trend managed to contain the rise in inequality. For instance, the top 1% income share in France rose marginally from 5.8% in 1980 to 6.6% in 2023.

Figure 1: Evolution of the pre-tax income share of the top 1% (Panel a) and bottom 50% (Panel b) of the income distribution for G7 countries
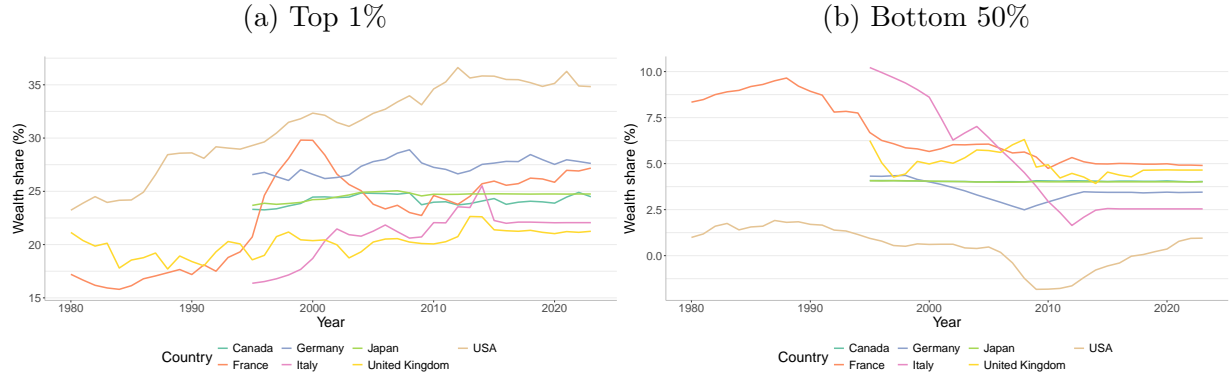

(a) Top 1%   (b) Bottom 50%

Source: World Inequality Database.

The rise in inequality appears starker if we look at wealth, rather than income, inequality. The wealth share accruing to the top 1% of the distribution increased from 23% in 1980 to 35% in 2023, and from 17% to 27% in France over the same period (Figure 2a). The rising trend in wealth inequality is poised to be passed down to future generations in what has been termed the "great wealth transfer" (Gale et al., 2024), with potentially severe consequences for intergenerational equality of opportunity.[1]

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[1]According to Gale et al. (2024), the ratio of aggregate bequeathable wealth to GDP in the US rose from 256% in 1997 to 424% in 2021. See https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-should-we-tax-the-great-wealth-transfer/

Figure 2: Evolution of the wealth share of the top 1% (Panel a) and bottom 50% (Panel b) of the income distribution for G7 countries

(a) Top 1%   (b) Bottom 50%
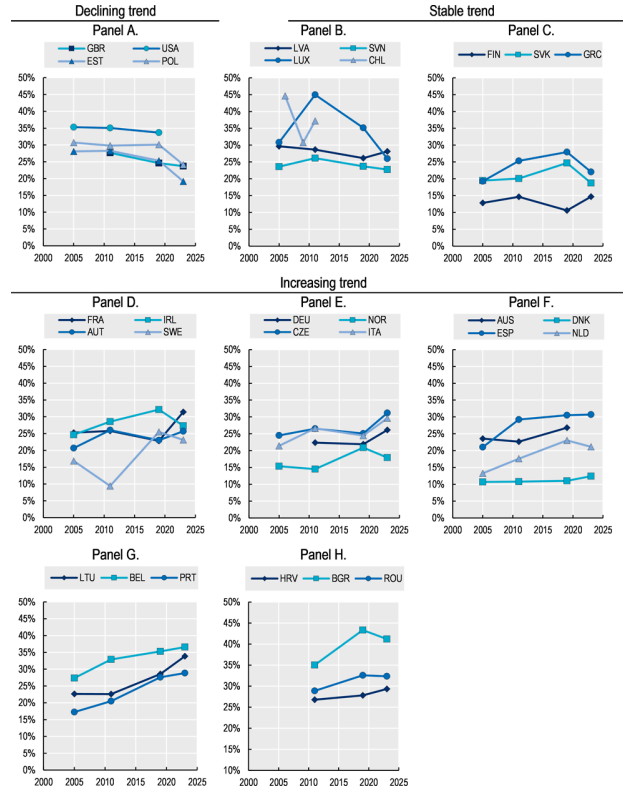

Source: World Inequality Database.

In a sample of OECD countries, an overall increase in inequality of opportunities can be detected over the past two decades (OECD, 2025). This result emerges using a measure of inequality of opportunity that separates disparities caused by circumstances beyond an individual's control from those resulting from personal effort. This approach is rooted in the theory of "luck egalitarianism" which argues that only inequalities due to circumstances beyond one's control should be compensated (Roemer, 1998; Fleurbaey, 2008; Roemer and Trannoy, 2015).[2] Inherited circumstances, such as gender, country of birth, and parental socio-economic background, account for almost 30% of total inequality in market income on average across OECD countries, with country-level estimates ranging from about 10% to 40%. In those countries where relative inequality of opportunity rose, the median increase was 7 percentage points—more than double the typical reduction seen in countries where it declined (Figure 3).

2 The puzzle of stagnant demand for redistribution

In the face of rising inequality, the standard prediction of rational choice macroeconomic models is that demand for redistribution should rise (Meltzer and Richard, 1981). Some of the most robust results in behavioral economics lead to the same implication. Fehr and Schmidt (1999) posit a preference for both disadvantageous and advantageous inequality - that is, a person earning below, or above, the mean income, respectively, is willing to spend some money to reduce overall inequality. Studies in neurosciences confirm the existence of

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[2]The first step to build this measure of inequality of opportunity is to identify relevant circumstances beyond one's control. These include variables like gender, country of birth, parents' education and occupation, parental presence during childhood, homeownership status, and the degree of urbanization in the area of residence. Next, homogeneous groups are created by applying machine learning techniques to divide the population according to these circumstances. A hypothetical income distribution is then constructed, reflecting only the differences attributable to circumstances beyond one's control and excluding individual effort. Finally, a measure of Inequality of Opportunity (IOp) is calculated: absolute IOp is measured using the Gini coefficient of this counterfactual distribution, while relative IOp is the ratio of absolute IOp to the total observed inequality in economic outcomes.

Figure 3: Trends in equality of opportunity

brain circuitry that are activated to respond to situations of inequality (Tricomi et al., 2010). Children also seem to react negatively to inequality from an early age (Fehr et al., 2008).

It is then rather surprising that, quite to the contrary, the top marginal tax rates have declined and overall redistribution through taxes and transfers has weakened in the majority of the developed countries (Piketty et al., 2014a; OECD, 2019; Tax Policy Center, 2023). Most importantly, this trend is not due to policy-makers acting against the citizens' will. Many studies consistently find that, even if survey respondents declare to be growingly more *concerned* about inequality, they do not *support* more redistribution (Kenworthy and McCall, 2008; Ashok et al., 2015; Roth and Wohlfart, 2018; Stantcheva, 2024). This evidence pertains to Western countries such as the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, Italy, Germany, Norway, and Sweden. An estimation of the desired income and wealth tax by Fisman et al. (2020) in the US reveals a low appetite for redistribution. The fact that, in the words of Shapiro (2002), "the poor don't soak the rich" remains a puzzle in need of explanation.

3   (Mis)perception of inequality

A possible answer to the "puzzle" is that individuals misperceive inequality to the extent that they do not change their demand for redistribution even in the face of rising inequality. Several studies in different countries find that low-income (high-income) people systematically overstimate (understimate) their relative position in the income distribution, often placing themselves closer to the middle than they actually are (middle income bias) (Cruces

et al., 2013; Karadja et al., 2017; Fehr et al., 2022). Other studies show that individuals often underestimate the extent of both income and wealth inequality in society (Norton and Ariely, 2011; Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018; Osberg and Smeeding, 2006; Eriksson and Simpson, 2012; Niehues, 2014).

Misperception also occurs with respect to inequality of opportunities. Davidai and Gilovich (2015) and Alesina et al. (2018) show that US Americans are over-optimistic about social mobility with respect to the actual probability of transition from low-income to high-income brackets. Conversely, Europeans seem excessively pessimistic in this respect (Alesina et al., 2018). Moreover, both studies find that poorer individuals, *ceteris paribus*, overestimate the extent of economic mobility across income brackets than richer individuals.

A substantial body of experimental evidence suggests that correcting misperceptions does not significantly change demand for redistribution. In the so-called information provision experiments, a randomly selected treatment group is exposed to accurate information about income inequality levels, social mobility, or relative income position, while the control group is not. This design allows researchers to examine how information affects both perceptions and redistribution preferences. The typical result of these studies is that, while individuals correctly update their perceptions, their change in demand for redistribution is either null or small and limited to some social groups (Hoy and Mager, 2021; Karadja et al., 2017; Alesina et al., 2018; Stantcheva, 2021; Bublitz, 2022; Lergetporer et al., 2021). Even if methodological issues could partly affect these results, the evidence does not support the idea that correcting people's misperceptions would radically change demand for redistribution.

4   Trust in government

Another possible solution to the "puzzle" is that, while individuals are genuinely willing to demand more redistribution in the face of rising inequality, they mistrust governments as vehicles for redistribution. Using cross-sectional data, Hetherington (2005) showed a positive correlation between trust in the national government and support for spending on welfare programs, which, arguably, have a inequality-decreasing effect.

To assess the direction of causality, Kuziemko et al. (2015) develop a survey experiment in which they inform U.S. respondents about the real level of economic inequality, which is generally under-estimated by respondents. They find that releasing this information reduces trust in government. Many respondents appear to blame the government for allowing inequality to reach too high levels, likely interpreting it as a sign of "elite capture". Indeed, in their sample, over 89% agree that "politicians in Washington work to enrich themselves and their largest campaign contributors". To more directly test the causal role of trust, the authors conducted a follow-up experiment where they used primes to reduce trust (through, *e.g.*, questions about political lobbying or the Wall Street bailout). These primes significantly reduced both trust in government and support for redistribution. Interestingly, support for the minimum wage remained unaffected, perhaps because it is perceived as a market-based

rather than a government intervention. Also, respondents showed greater preference for private charity as a way to reduce inequality.

The above analysis entails that observing higher than expected levels of inequality, people (further) lose trust in their government. Some studies investigated whether the reverse also holds, finding, however, a negative conclusion. In three survey experiments in the U.S., Peyton (2020) found that inducing even large increases in trust in government has no significant impact on support for redistribution. Devine (2024) confirmed this result in four survey experiments in the UK and 19 years of panel data from Switzerland. Hence, it does not seem to be the case that regaining trust in government would entail higher demand for redistribution. A related argument motivating opposition to government redistribution is the so-called "leaky bucket" argument, which posits that redistribution is subject to heavy efficiency losses due the administrative costs implicit in redistribution. Nevertheless, the available evidence does not seem to support the view that individuals are concerned with such efficiency costs (Durante et al., 2014; Almås et al., 2025).

One may of course wonder whether the same negative result would hold with natural changes in trust rather with experimentally manipulated ones. Nevertheless, on the basis of the available evidence, the view that regaining trust in government would automatically lead to increased demand for redistribution is not supported.
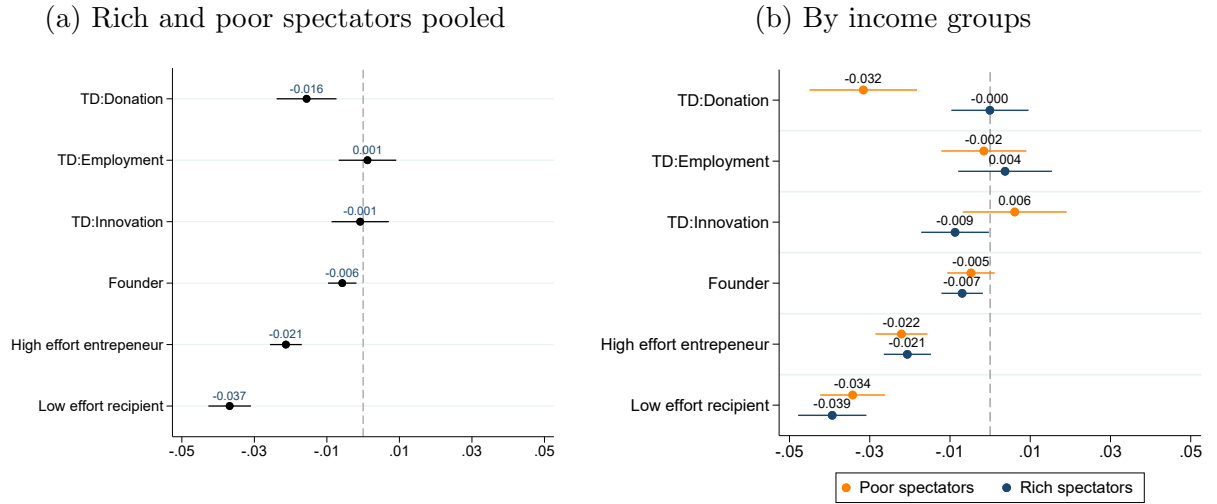
5   Trickle-down economics

Another possible explanation of the "puzzle" has to do with so-called Trickle-Down (TD) economics. The main idea behind TD is that an increase in the incomes of the rich, for example through tax cuts, will benefit the rest of society and the poor in particular (Stiglitz, 2016). The reason is that the rich will use the additional income from the tax cuts to expand economic activities, with positive multiplier effects on all strata of society. TD has been at the center of political discourse for decades in Western countries and was the primary justification used by politicians for tax cuts, since Ronald Reagan's tax cuts in 1981 to Trump's current policies.

Despite the widespread use of TD in the political debate, evidence of its influence on the demand for redistribution is scarce. Stantcheva (2021) estimated that 31% of US Americans believe in the TD. Those who believe in TD also have less strong preferences for tax progressivity and redistribution than others, although with a moderately low effect size. However, an information experiment in which participants were randomly exposed to a video showing the distortionary costs of increasing taxation on economic activities did not significantly change their demand for redistribution relative to the baseline. In another information experiment, Hope et al. (2023) provided participants with evidence of the weak relationship between top-income tax rates and economic growth. The information provided increased respondents' support for raising taxes on the rich.

Brunetti et al. (2025) develop a conjoint experiment involving US residents from the

bottom and the top 20% of the US income distribution. Participants are asked to make re-distributive decisions between a real-life entrepreneur whose income is higher than $100,000 and a real-life low-income earner with an income lower than $10,000. They consider three channels whereby TD can exert its effects, namely, (a) giving jobs to a large number of employees, (b) donating large amounts of money to charity, (c) producing technological innovations. These attributes are largely irrelevant in affecting redistributive choices, with the only exception of the entrepreneur's philanthropic activities (Figure 4), which significantly reduce poor spectators' redistribution, without altering the rich spectators' decisions. This result can seemingly be explained by the belief that philanthropic donations are beneficial to the economy, rather than by a desire to reward the moral standing of the donor.

Figure 4: Estimated coefficients for relative weight of various characteristics of rich and poor US residents on experimental redistributive choices

(a) Rich and poor spectators pooled

(b) By income groups

Notes: Coefficients from a Tobit regression with 95% confidence intervals in which the dependent variable is the percentage of the entrepreneurs' money transferred to recipients. *TD:Donation* is a dummy = 1 if the entrepreneur donated more than $3,600 in the last 12 months. *TD:Employment* equals 1 if the entrepreneur's firm has over 1,000 employees. *TD:Innovation* equals 1 if the entrepreneur's firm obtained over 180 patents. *Founder* is a dummy = 1 if the entrepreneur founded the firm they own. *High effort entrepreneur* equals 1 if the entrepreneur works more than 10 hours daily. *Low effort recipient* equals 1 if the recipient works less than 6 hours daily. Controls include age, gender, region of residence, education level, political ideology, a dummy for the order the tables were presented, and a treatment dummy. Standard errors clustered at the individual level.

6 The Prospect Of Upward Mobility hypothesis

Another explanation of why people do not demand more redistribution is the prospect of the upward mobility (POUM) hypothesis (Benabou and Ok, 2001). This theory posits that low income earners will oppose redistribution if they expect their future income to increase above the mean. Theoretically, this hypothesis requires (a) that people believe that current policies will persist in the future; (b) that individuals are not too risk-averse, - otherwise they would use redistribution as an insurance device; (c) that individuals poorer than the average are optimistic enough to become richer than average - or for their children to become

richer, assuming they value their children's welfare.

Several studies have tested the general claim that poor people expecting to earn above the mean demand significantly less redistribution than others. This is done in surveys where support for redistribution is regressed on individuals' expected future income while controlling for many socio-economic factors. The empirical evidence is mixed. While some earlier studies found some evidence for this hypothesis (Ravallion and Lokshin, 2000; Checchi and Filippin, 2004; Cojocaru, 2014), others did not find any support (Laméris et al., 2020; Lois and Petkanopoulou, 2023; Moore et al., 2025). In an experimental setting, Grimalda et al. (2023) found support for the POUM in university student samples in the US, Italy, Germany, and Norway, with no significant difference across countries. Alesina et al. (2018) found that exposing people to videos displaying pessimistic information about social mobility impacts the preferences for redistribution only of left-wing participants. However, it is not entirely clear what psychological trait has been affected by this treatment.

In summary, while the POUM hypothesis offers an appealing way to account for low levels of redistribution using rational choice theory, it relies on stringent theoretical assumptions and the empirical evidence in support is not unambiguous.

7   Reward of merit

Numerous studies show that individuals are not motivated solely by self-interest (Henrich et al., 2001) or by outcome-oriented social preferences (Fehr and Schmidt, 1999; Bolton and Ockenfels, 2000), but also by procedural fairness (Karni and Safra, 2002; Bolton et al., 2005; Trautmann, 2009; Krawczyk, 2011). Individuals whose earnings are due to luck rather than hard work are generally deemed less deserving of their wealth, which reduces acceptance of inequality (Konow, 2003; Durante et al., 2014; Almås et al., 2020; Andre, 2024). Beliefs about opportunities for economic mobility and individual responsibility in determining the economic outcomes of both the rich and the poor are considered a crucial determinant of the demand for redistribution (Gilens, 1999; Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; McCall, 2013; Atkinson, 2015, 2016; Kim, 2021). Indeed, it has been observed that countries where people believe that social mobility is high, thus making the "playing field" more level, also show greater tolerance for inequality (Corneo and Grüner, 2002; Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005; Alesina et al., 2018). Similarly, the stronger the belief that the rich deserve their larger share of income and that the poor are responsible for their condition, the lower the support for the welfare state and redistribution (Petersen et al. (2011); Aarøe and Petersen (2014); Brown-Iannuzzi et al. (2017); see also Hauser et al. (2021)).
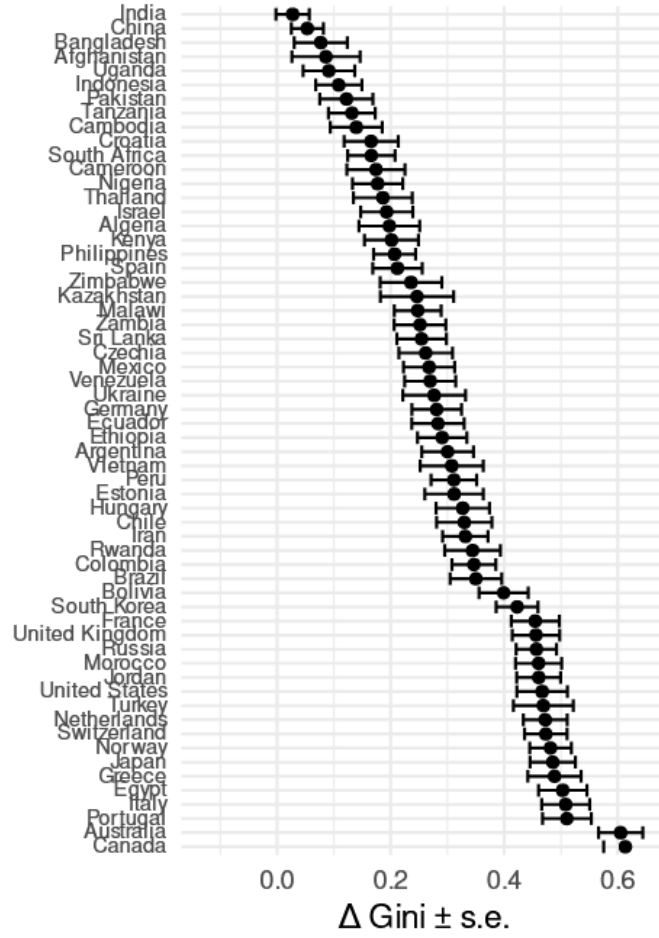
In addition to surveying the relevance of TD, Brunetti et al. (2025) also study the impact of effort by the poor and the rich in their conjoint analysis. The attribute with the highest effect on redistribution decisions is the individual effort by the poor - measured through their daily working hours - followed by the working hours of the rich (Figure 4). Whether the rich entrepreneur founded their firm or inherited it - another aspect of individual merit - is also

relevant, albeit at lower levels. This result holds true for both high income and low income participants. This result suggests that the desire to reward merit is a significant factor in explaining people's preferences for redistribution, even when considering the opposite ends of the income distribution.

With 65,000 respondents from 60 countries, Almås et al. (2025) offer a comprehensive mapping of propensity to reward merit worldwide. Respondents are asked to redistribute money from a person being assigned the equivalent of $5 to one being assigned nothing because of differences in relative merit in a tournament or differences in luck in a random draw. Even if reward of merit seems to be relevant in most countries, relevant cross-country differences emerge. Difference in redistribution in luck vs. merit treatments range from 0.6 in Canada to nearly 0 in India (Figure 5). Such differences seem to be connected with macroeconomic factors, such as GDP. The authors note that "people in Western countries are more likely to be meritocrats but believe less in the relative importance of merit." The overall tolerance for inequality seems highly different across countries, as it ranges from around 0.3 in the desired Gini index in *e.g.*, Canada and Brazil to around 0.7 in China (Figure 6).
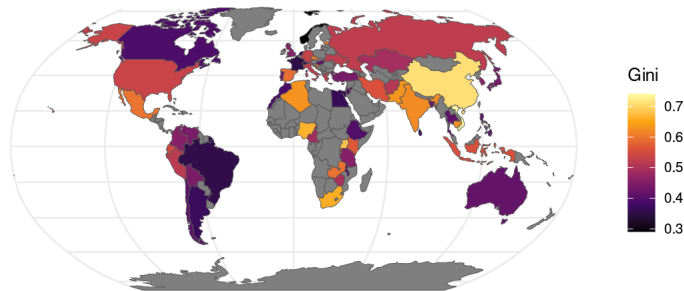
Figure 5: Estimated relative weight of reward of merit vis-a-vis luck

Source: Almås et al. (2025). The figure shows the estimated treatment effects on implemented inequality (Δ Gini) by country for the manipulation Merit versus Luck. For each country, the treatment effects are estimated using a country specific ordinary least squares regression that controls for background characteristics and applies population weights, with Luck as the base treatment.

Figure 6: Estimated tolerance of inequality estimated in experiment by Almås et al. (2025)

Source: Almås et al. (2025). The map shows average implemented inequality (Gini), pooled across treatments, for each country. Countries not included in the study are shaded gray. Figure A.1 reports the corresponding map by treatment.

Finally, Andre (2024) demonstrates that preferences for rewarding merit are "shallow", as they do not take into account that lower effort by disadvantaged people may be due to exceedingly low returns from effort, in turn caused by the impossibility to invest in human capital due to unfavorable circumstances.
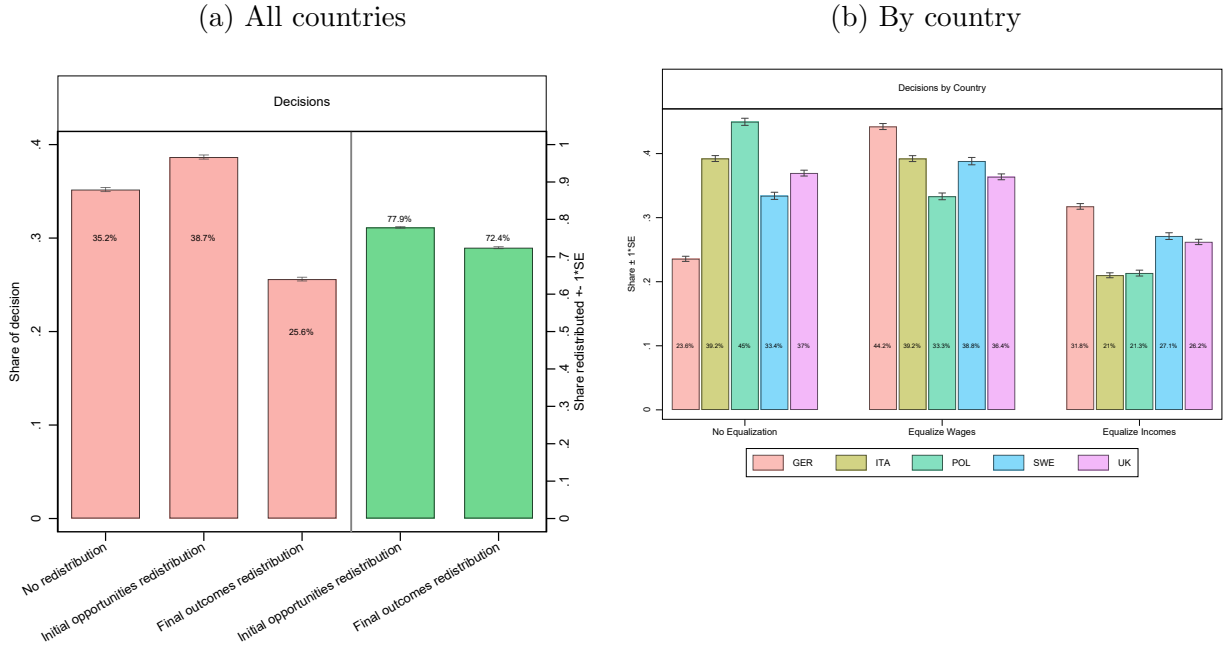
8 Equality of opportunity

Another possibility is that poorer individuals do not demand more redistribution because they care less about equalizing final outcomes than about ensuring equal initial opportunities. Ethically, disparities arising from circumstances are often judged unfair, while those stemming from effort are deemed acceptable (Ramos and Van de gaer, 2016; Cappelen et al., 2020). If people believe the process is fair - that success mainly reflects effort rather than luck - they are more willing to tolerate large disparities in income or wealth (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005; Alesina and Angeletos, 2005). In this view, political support for redistribution depends more on perceived procedural fairness than on the actual extent of inequality. If individuals, especially those with lower incomes, believe they already live in a society with high social mobility and fair chances, they may not view stronger redistribution as necessary, even in the face of widening inequality. Yet, intergenerational mobility studies reveal that real-world opportunities vary sharply across places and often fall far short of the meritocratic ideal (Corak, 2013; Chetty et al., 2014).

This brings us to the distinction between three competing fairness ideals proposed by Almås et al. (2020): libertarianism, meritocracy, and egalitarianism. A libertarian accepts any outcome if it results from voluntary exchange. An egalitarian seeks to equalize final outcomes, regardless of effort. A meritocrat accepts differences in outcomes only when they result from individual effort and choice, not from luck. For a meritocrat, equality of opportunity is paramount: the playing field should be level, after which performance should determine results.

To disentangle these preferences, Grimalda and Pipke (2025) conduct an online experiment where impartial spectators from five European countries - UK, Germany, Sweden, Italy, and Poland, one for each of the welfare state models envisaged by Esping-Andersen (1990) and subsequent studies - decided how to redistribute earnings between two workers whose initial inequality in wages was determined purely by luck. Spectators can leave wages unequal as they were (libertarianism), or reduce wage inequality before work begins (equality of opportunity), or reduce inequality in final incomes after work is completed (equality of outcomes). Respondents have first to choose one of the three domains of possible redistribution (initial opportunity vs. final outcomes vs. inaction) and then decide how much redistribution to implement.

Figure 7: Estimation of redistribution "types"

(a) All countries   (b) By country

Source: Grimalda and Pipke (2025). **Note**: Panel (a): Frequencies of respondents opting (a) not to redistribute, (b) to redistribute initial opportunities; (c) to redistribute final outcomes (pink bars); Frequencies of overall redistribution if redistribution of opportunities or outcomes is chosen (green bars). Error bars show ±1 SE. **Note**: Panel (b): Country breakdown of shares of libertarians (no redistribution), redistribution of initial opportunities, and redistribution of final outcomes.

The distribution of preferences is starkly polarized: 35.2% reject any redistribution, 38.7% favor equality of opportunity (equalizing wages before work), and 25.6% prefer equality of outcomes (equalizing final incomes). Conditional on opting for redistribution, respondents choose aggressive rates: on average they close 77.9% of the initial-opportunity gap and 72.4% of the final-income gap (Figure 7, panel (a)). Cross-country differences are sizable: the share classified as "libertarian" ranges from 23.6% in Germany to 45.0% in Poland (Figure 7, panel (b)).

These results confirm the view that, overall, people seem to have a stronger preference for inequality of opportunity than outcomes. However, the proportion of people valuing the latter remains substantial, as is the share of people who demand no redistribution at all. Therefore, this type of preferences undoubtedly has a role in explaining the "puzzle".

9   Racial antagonism

Another explanation that has attracted considerable attention has to do with racial/ethnic antagonism. If racial divides go hand-in-hand with income divides, a likely situation is that the rich racial majority will be reluctant to redistribute, knowing that redistribution will benefit the racial minority (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004). The evidence supporting the claim that redistribution is lower in more racially/ethnically fragmented areas is extensive (Luttmer, 2001; Alesina et al., 2021, 2023). This outcome is partly due to what Roemer et al. (2007)

call the "policy bundle effect". Since the programs that political parties present are multi-dimensional (*e.g.,* income redistribution and immigration policies), and voters can only vote for one party, a possible outcome is that the median voter will vote for righ-twing parties if racial antagonism weighs more than income maximization in their preferences (see also (Kuziemko and Washington, 2018), for consistent results). Roemer et al. (2007) estimate that, if it were not for racial antagonism, redistribution in the US would be as high as in Norway. A prediction by Alesina and Glaeser (2004) is that, as European societies become more multi-ethnic, the welfare state will shrink (see also Burgoon 2014). Schütt et al. (2023) show that an ingroup bias in redistributive preferences can also lower individual productivity. Recent research extends this perspective by highlighting the role of misperceptions on immigrants in shaping redistributive preferences (Bruni et al., 2025; Martinangeli and Windsteiger, 2023; Magni, 2021). Studies show that individuals systematically misperceive the extent of poverty of natives and immigrants, and these misperceptions strongly affect support for redistribution. Providing accurate information about the native–immigrant composition of poverty reduces support for policies aimed at excluding immigrants from the welfare state, suggesting that correcting certain types of misperceptions can mitigate some of the effects of in-group bias.

10   What do we value in equality?

A well-known pioneering article by Ronald Dworkin (2018) titled "What is equality?" made the point that, even recognizing that a large number of people think that equality is a value worth defending, it is not clear which domain of inequality is truly relevant among various versions of equality of welfare and equality of resources. The empirical literature reviewed above is now able to offer some insights into what sources of inequality people are willing to tolerate.

On the basis of the evidence presented above, it appears that people are willing to uphold equality of opportunity more than equality of outcomes and are willing to tolerate inequalities due to perceived merit - especially the lack of merit of the poor. The actions undertaken by the rich, even though that may "trickle-down" to benefit the poor, appear irrelevant. Racial antagonism is also relevant. In one of the few studies attempting to compare the actual relevance of the various theories accounting for demand for redistribution, Bonnet et al. (2024) implement standardized non-incentivized hypothetical choices of income redistribution in nationally representative samples of Germany, Italy, Japan, Slovenia, the UK, and the US. They find that equality of opportunity is the strongest predictor of demand for redistribution. Trust in government is the second factor, but with an opposite sign to what would be expected. The perception of immigrants as a threat to society is the third factor that significantly reduces preferences for redistribution. Other factors, such as the POUM, self-interest, social capital, and measures of pro-sociality, play lesser roles. Clearly, the country sample is small and the authors uncover significant cross-country heterogeneity,

but it is significant that equality of opportunity and racial antagonism emerge as the two main factors associated with higher demand for redistribution.

On the basis of this review, we believe that the following insights may be drawn:

- Even if some factors are more relevant than others in accounting for demand for redistribution, the general picture is one of great heterogeneity, both between and within countries. It is emblematic that libertarians (making up 35% of the sample in the estimate by Grimalda and Pipke (2025) and egalitarians (amounting to 26%) demand opposite policies when it comes to redistribution. Meritocracy seems to be much more common in Western countries than in others. The first and fundamental thing to recognize is that, even if some factors are more relevant than others, people may value completely different redistributive principles. We believe that some effort should be made to help people from one side of the redistribution spectrum to understand the motivations and the principles embraced by people from the other side. Under majority rule, it is inevitable that a relevant portion of the political spectrum will experience the implementation of policies very different from their desired ones. The acceptance that others' preferences become dominant is, undoubtedly, a core principle of democracies.

- Taking at face value individual preferences, we should pay greater attention in measuring the effort by the poor than that by the rich, and we should be very careful in assessing immigrants' contribution to the recipient economy. The fact that, even for low-income people, the merit by fellow low-income people is more important than the merit and activities of the rich, is surprising and inevitably should prompt us asking the extent to which we should second this type of morally controversial preferences. The danger that releasing information on the poor's hours of work could feed into an anti-povery narrative is concrete. On the other hand, releasing this type of data may have the effect of correcting broadly wrong misperceptions and stereotypical beliefs, such as those surrounding so-called "welfare queens". It also has to be said that, more than dray data and statistics, people seem to be moved by stories of people with strong emotional engagement. More generally, the philosophical literature on well-being and social welfare has highlighted the inconsistencies of upholding a utilitarian view of social welfare that only takes into account subjective preferences. That is, the reason why many relevant approaches to measuring social welfare, or social progress, rely on "objective" measures of well-being, such as life expectancy or years of education. We believe that, by showing what people "really" value in equality, our review may offer important insights into the dynamics between objective and subjective well-being in shaping policies.

- We believe that our review identifies areas in which distributing information may help the public gaining a more balanced view of reality. Recent contributions by *e.g.*, Alesina et al. (2020) discuss the growing polarization of perceptions and preferences in

society, where groups are increasingly divided over issues, often along political, social, or economic lines. Even if the effort of correcting misperceptions does not seem to substantially alter individual preferences for redistribution, this does not mean that this effort should not be undertaken. For instance, people on average systematically over-estimate the percentage of immigrants in the population and their cultural distance from natives. Distributing correct information on these aspects appear essential for a thriving democracy. Moreover, studies suggest that certain types of information, such as clarifying that natives are not as economically disadvantaged as they perceive (Bruni et al., 2025) or demonstrating how natives benefit from immigration (e.g., through pensions) (Boeri et al., 2024), can influence attitudes towards migrants and change preferences regarding welfare access. This indicates that improving knowledge about these issues may help reduce misconceptions and foster more balanced attitudes towards redistribution. Such results echo a recent study by Marino et al. (2023), which not only underscores the importance of carefully framing and targeting informational interventions to correct misperceptions and shape public opinion on redistribution, but also warns that information campaigns that are not well-designed or fail to consider potential negative effects can inadvertently solidify ideological divides.

- In the face of rising inequality, economists have proposed various taxation and redistribution mechanisms to counteract these trends, including a wealth tax (Saez and Zucman, 2019; Piketty, 2020), inheritance taxes (Farhi and Werning, 2010; Piketty et al., 2014b), and, more broadly, taxes on inefficient economic rents such as land rents (Stiglitz, 2015; Schwerhoff et al., 2020; Brunetti et al., 2024). Our literature review suggests that policies that improve starting conditions likely command broader support than others. Framing redistribution as an investment in opportunity, *e.g.,* better schools, early childhood programs, non-discriminatory labor markets, limits on inherited privilege, can make it politically easier to sustain such policies. Increasing taxes on the rich may not be politically feasible, unless these policies are framed as policies to improve opportunities and reward individual merit.

A final caveat is in order. As in every empirical analysis, it would be wrong to take the indications offered in this essay as uncontroversial. In spite of a rising interest in the determinants of demand for redistribution, several gaps remain. Moreover, most of the evidence is concentrated in the US and, secondarily, Europe. Incidentally, this is also the case for psychology studies, where Joe Henrich demonstrates the unique cultural and attitudinal traits held by "WEIRD" people - where WEIRD stands for Western Educated Industrialised Rich Democracies. His strong warning against generalizing from these countries to the rest of the world also applies to the present review. However, it is encouraging that, in some areas, the results of empirical studies are converging. Nonetheless, every study has a margin of statistical error and only accumulating evidence can remove the acceptance of false positives.

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