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What explains preferences for redistribution? Evidence from an international survey☆

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ABSTRACT

Income redistribution differs widely across countries. Several theories have been developed to account for such differences. However, we know little about their relative importance. This paper fills this gap, contrasting the main theories of preferences for redistribution in a unified empirical framework. We implement standardized hypothetical choices of income redistribution in nationally representative samples of Germany, Italy, Japan, Slovenia, the UK, and the US. We find that the beliefs in fair opportunities for upward mobility are the strongest predictor of demand for redistribution. Surprisingly, higher trust in government correlates with a lower demand. The perception of immigrants as a threat to society also significantly reduces preferences for redistribution, whereas other factors, such as self-interest, social capital, and incentivized measures of pro-sociality, play lesser roles. We uncover significant cross-country heterogeneity; for instance, beliefs in fair opportunities strongly influence redistribution preferences in the US, UK, and Germany, but are less impactful elsewhere. Our findings reveal limited variability in how theoretical factors relate to redistribution preferences across socio-demographic groups, with notable exceptions. Attitudes towards immigrants have a stronger influence on redistribution preferences among non-right-wing respondents in the US and Germany. Contrary to previous research, beliefs in fair opportunities show no significant differences by political orientation, indicating a widely accepted, ideologically neutral view of fairness.

1. Introduction

Redistribution is a defining feature of modern welfare states. Developed countries, including the United States and European democracies, redistribute large portions of their GDP via taxes, transfers, and public goods. Yet, considerable differences exist across countries. Among OECD countries, taxes and transfers reduce market income inequality significantly, though the extent varies widely. For instance, the reduction reaches 37 % in Finland and Ireland, while it is only 2 % in Mexico and 5 % in Chile. The United States

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achieves a reduction of 22.5 %, slightly below the OECD average of 24.6 % (OECD, 2023).

In democracies, government policies are expected to reflect citizens' demands for redistribution, expressed through voting (Persson and Tabellini, 2000). Several theories have been proposed to explain preferences for redistribution and have received empirical support both nationally and internationally. Such theories are typically evaluated in isolation from one another, so that our knowledge of their relative importance is scant. This paper seeks to fill this gap. We draw on Trustlab, a novel survey covering six large OECD countries, which deploys a standardized measure of demand for redistribution drawn from Alesina et al. (2018). We use 16 different indicators to test six different theoretical domains. We find that beliefs about fairness of economic mobility are the strongest predictor of demand for redistribution, although considerable variation across countries exists.

The interest in the reasons why income redistribution differs across countries, particularly between the US and Europe, has risen considerably across social sciences (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In their ground-breaking work, Alesina and Glaeser (2004) argued that cultural and political factors mattered more than purely economic ones to explain differences in social spending and government size between the US and Europe. They focused on racial animosity and beliefs in social mobility as the key factors to explain these differences. According to the first account (Gilens, 2009), if racial struggle exists between groups, a country's ethnic majority may decide to block redistribution when this ends up benefiting ethnic minorities, which is the case if the latter are disproportionately represented in below-average income brackets. The second account is based on the idea that individuals want to reward more deserving individuals (Konow, 2000). Therefore, if people believe that hard-working individuals can climb up the economic ladder, they will think that individuals are ultimately responsible for their economic condition, thus reducing demand for redistribution. Alesina et al. (2001) noted that both racial animosity and beliefs that social mobility is high are more widespread in the US than Europe. Alesina and Glaeser (2004) argued that racial animosity can explain about half of the difference in redistribution between the US and Europe, with beliefs in social mobility also being relevant.

Corneo and Grüner (2002) analyzed components of demand for redistribution covering both Western economies and those in transition from communist rule. They confirmed the relevance of beliefs in social mobility to explain demand for redistribution and pinpointed the importance of what they called the social rivalry effect, namely, the preference to reduce redistribution if this reduces the quality of social relationships. Alesina and Giuliano (2011, AG henceforth) provided a unified theoretical framework that accommodated several different theories to explain preferences for redistribution. In their model, a self-interested component, according to which individuals demand the level of redistribution to maximize their post-tax income (Meltzer and Richard, 1981), is juxtaposed to a social preferences component, which includes a wide array of motivations that go beyond self-interest.

One of the problems of this literature is that survey-based measures of preference for redistribution suffer from considerable identification problems because they confound this construct with the actual level of inequality in a country and the specific role of government in reducing inequalities. For instance, the World Values Survey asks respondents whether they agree more with the statement "People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves" or "The government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for." This question conflates meritocratic beliefs – such as the idea that individuals are responsible for their own circumstances – with preferences for government intervention.[1] Aware of these problems, Alesina et al. (2018) developed a cleaner measure of preference for redistribution, which elicits individual preferences for a tax schedule constrained by a fixed budget limit for four economic brackets – the richest 1 % in the income distribution, those between the top 1 % and the top 10 %, those between the median income and the top 10 %, and those below the median income. This measure has several advantages on survey measures. Its abstract nature makes it directly comparable at the international level. Furthermore, the imposition of a budget objective in this measure demands respondents to express their preferences for redistribution under the same type of constraints that policy-makers face in real life. This represents a key innovation over previous measurements of preferences for redistribution. In two separate papers (Alesina et al., 2018; 2023), they used this measure to investigate the relevance of beliefs of social mobility and aversion to immigration, confirming their relevance. However, the question of their relative weight went unanswered.

Recently, some experimental studies have also measured preferences for redistribution in an international context. Experimental measures have the double advantage of being subject to a budget constraint and of determining monetary payoffs for stakeholders. In particular, Almås et al. (2020) focused on the US and Norway and found significant differences in social preferences, with US respondents being more libertarian and less egalitarian than their Norwegian counterparts. The number of countries involved in experimental studies is, however, limited.

The second problem in the extant literature is that the number of factors that are simultaneously analyzed is low. As a result, a large array of factors that have been seen as relevant for redistribution have not been included in the above studies. For instance, AG, relying on World Value Survey data, showed the relevance in an international context of self-interest, measured through the respondent's current income level, individual characteristics (including the individual's religious denomination), the experience of past negative shocks (proxied by divorce), beliefs about other people's fairness and individual responsibility for economic achievement.[2] While the

[1] Similarly, questions explicitly addressing income redistribution, such as "The government should reduce income differences" from the International Social Survey Programme, rarely impose budget constraints. As a result, these items blend preferences for the overall size of government with preferences for the progressivity of redistribution.

[2] Another factor they considered, namely, macroeconomic volatility when young, turned out to be insignificant in the international setting. This variable is not included in Trustlab.

set of factors they analyze in the US is broader,[3] existing international datasets have severe limitations in the number of theories they can cover. Furthermore, the factors that are included in the analysis of existing studies are typically analyzed in isolation from each other. While individual demographic characteristics are typically included in every econometric analysis, other factors are considered one by one.[4] Given that theoretical factors are often correlated with each other, this approach prevents the researcher from capturing the net effect of each theory on the dependent variable.

Trustlab, an online survey conducted with representative samples from the US, Germany, the UK, Italy, Slovenia, and Japan, enables us to include all the factors considered by AG in their international setting, further adding the set of theoretical domains reviewed below. We provide a more comprehensive overview of these domains in the next section. First, the basic rational choice model to determine income redistribution (Meltzer and Richard, 1981) has been extended to incorporate expected future income prospects, as proposed by the Prospect of Upward Mobility (POUM) hypothesis (Benabou and Ok, 2001), and individual risk aversion (Varian, 1980; Sinn, 1995). According to the POUM hypothesis, individuals expecting themselves or their offspring to earn more in the future, may demand low redistribution if they expect tax rates to be sticky. Likewise, risk-averse individuals may think of redistribution as an insurance device, thus demanding redistribution even when they earn above the mean income level.

Second, the set of personal and direct social connections that people have with others, referred to as social capital (Putnam, 2000), can also affect redistribution demand. People relying on a larger network of social connections can receive help from others in case of need. Social capital can act as a "private" insurance that might crowd out the demand for government redistribution (Algan, Cahuc, and Sangnier, 2016).

Third, trust in public institutions also affects demand for redistribution, although the evidence is mixed on the sign of the relationship (Kuziemko et al., 2015; Peyton, 2020). People having little trust in the government may consider redistribution too wasteful, thus decreasing their demand for redistribution. On the other hand, if one perceives the political apparatus as corrupt and inefficient, the case for rectifying inequality through redistribution becomes more compelling (Alesina and Angeletos, 2005a). Trustlab provides a large set of indicators of trust in government, thus allowing a thorough investigation of this channel.

Fourth, "social preferences", which in a broad sense means having concerns for others rather than just for the self, are increasingly seen as relevant in many economic domains and in preferences for redistribution in particular (Fong et al., 2005; Algan et al., 2016). The set of social preferences is much broader than what is normally investigated in the literature, and it encompasses reciprocity, attitudes toward cooperation, and altruism. Trustlab offers monetarily incentivized indicators of a wide range of "pro-social" preferences, including cooperation, reciprocity, altruism, and trustworthiness, thus enabling us to conduct an in-depth analysis of these aspects.

Failure to include the full range of beliefs and attitudes identified in the literature as relevant to redistribution preferences is a significant omission, as certain beliefs, for instance those related to the degree to which merit is rewarded and equal opportunity is granted, may be strongly correlated with social preferences. In addition to the standardized measure of preferences for redistribution, Trustlab offers a set of 16 different indicators that enables us to address all the theoretical contributions reviewed above (see Table 1). Even if, in some cases, our indicators are imperfect proxies of the underlying theoretical construct, and even if some theoretical accounts are not measurable within Trustlab, we believe that our approach offers the first systematic attempt to test the relative strength of the above theories internationally within a unified empirical framework. We perform a "horse race" analysis, which enables us to quantify the effect of a theory net of the effect of the others.

Our analysis points to beliefs in the availability of opportunity for upward mobility as the strongest predictor of demand for redistribution. The stronger the belief that anyone working hard can climb up the economic ladder, the lower the demand for redistribution. Trust in government comes second as a single predictor in terms of importance. Individuals who trust their government are *less* inclined to demand higher redistribution through taxes. Most other dimensions exhibit roughly equal importance. Self-interest plays a role as current income is a significant predictor of redistribution when entering the analysis on its own. However, it loses significance when the expectation of greater financial security – a proxy for the POUM hypothesis – and risk aversion enter the model. Stronger social capital, measured by indicators of social connectedness and the significance attributed to religion, correlates with a lower demand for redistribution. People who are more prosocial in terms of trust in others, reciprocity, and cooperation demand more redistribution. Beliefs regarding immigrants' cultural integration exhibit relatively lower importance in explaining preferences for redistribution. Measures of pro-sociality correlate with redistribution preferences and appear largely independent of other factors. We also find that while some theoretical factors have similar effects across countries, others vary significantly. Beliefs in fair opportunities for upward economic mobility is the variable whose effect varies the most across countries. It is a strongly significant predictor of demand for redistribution in the US, Germany, and the UK but has hardly any predictive power in other countries in the sample.

[3] The set of theories investigated by AG in their US national sample includes: (a) individual characteristics, including religion affiliation and cultural traits (the latter limitedly to the immigrant sample); (b) past negative shocks including long-term unemployment; (c) past macroeconomic volatility; (d) fairness; and (e) beliefs in social mobility; (f) past social mobility, proxied by the increase of educational achievement between respondents and their father, consistent with Piketty (1995). Although past mobility may be correlated with expected future mobility, they lack a proxy for the POUM hypothesis (see below). Even in the US national analysis, AG do not perform any "horse-race" regressions but rather test the relevance of a theory in isolation from one another. Moreover, even in the US sample they do not include some theoretical factors covered in our paper, such as aversion to immigration (although they obtain a strong effect for race), trust in government, risk aversion, and social capital.

[4] This is particularly the case for AG. Alesina et al. (2001) include multiple factors as joint covariates in their regression, but, in the absence of a direct measure of preferences for redistribution, they use political orientation as a very rough proxy. Corneo and Gruner (2002) include both factors in their analysis, but lack several of the actors we consider – although we lack a measure to capture their social rivalry effect.

Table 1
Theoretical predictions.

Dimension	Factor	Theory	References	Prediction	Test in Trustlab: Variable and expected sign
Self-interest: Income and risk aversion	Own current income	Meltzer-Richard	Meltzer and Richard (1981)	Income below average -> More redistribution	Equivalized household income –
	Expected income	POUM	Benabou and Ok (2001)	Expected upward mobility -> Less redistribution	Financial security –
	Risk aversion	Public insurance	Varian (1980)	Higher risk aversion -> more demand for insurance -> more redistribution	Risk aversion +
Beliefs in fairness of economic mobility	Perceived social mobility	Meritocratic beliefs	Fong (2001), Alesina and Glaeser (2004)	Stronger beliefs in fair opportunities to get ahead -> Less redistribution	Beliefs in fair opportunities to get ahead in life –
Inter-racial/ethnic attitudes	Beliefs and preferences about people from other racial groups or immigrants	Ethnic fractionalization	Alesina and Stantcheva (2020)	More immigrants or ethnic fractionalization -> less altruistic preference from natives and/or across groups	Immigrants are not a cultural threat +
Social capital	Social connectedness	Supply of private insurance		More connection with other people -> less reliance on the welfare state -> less demand for redistribution	Expect. Trustworthiness of others – Connected with neighborhood – Frequency of meetings with friends –
	Religiosity	Private insurance	Stegmueller et al. (2011)	Higher integration in religious communities -> less dependence on the state -> less redistribution	Importance of religion –
	Religiosity	Religious cleavages	Stegmueller et al. (2011)	Religious identity Catholic and Protestant -> conflict church state -> less redistribution	Importance of religion –
Trust in government	General trust in government	Trust and effectiveness of policies	Kuziemko et al. (2015)	Higher trust in the government -> stronger perceived effect of policies -> more demand for redistribution	Trust in government +
	Government competence (responsiveness – will act upon a complaint on quality of service – reliability – will provide in case of a natural disaster)	Trust and effectiveness of policies	Kuziemko et al. (2015)	Higher trust in the government -> stronger perceived effect of policies -> more demand for redistribution	Government reliability +
		Satisfaction with current services		More satisfaction -> less demand for redistribution	Government responsiveness – Government reliability –
	Government openness (considers people's views)	Compensatory theory	Scheve and Stasavage (2016)	Differential treatment by the state -> demand of compensation through progressive taxation	Government openness –
	Government fairness (treats minorities fairly)	Compensatory theory	Scheve and Stasavage (2016)	Differential treatment by the state -> demand of compensation through progressive taxation	Government fairness –

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Dimension	Factor	Theory	References	Prediction	Test in Trustlab: Variable and expected sign
	Government integrity	Expected fairness of benefits	Algan et al. (2016)	Lower corruption -> public benefits are rightly targeted -> more support/demand for redistribution	Government integrity: Low petty corruption +
		Perceived fairness	Alesina and Angeletos (2005b)	Lower corruption -> more meritocracy -> less demand for redistribution	Gov. Integrity: Low petty corruption – Gov. Integrity: No revolving doors – Gov. Integrity: No high-level corruption –
Pro-sociality	Civic-mindedness (Trust in others, cooperation, expected trustworthiness)	More civic-minded people are more willing to redistribute.	Algan et al. (2016)	Higher pro-sociality -> more redistribution	Amount Sent in Trust Game + Contribution in Cooperation Game + Expected trustworthiness in Trust Game +
	Generalized reciprocity	People who have stronger reciprocity attitudes are more inclined to support the welfare state.	Fong et al. (2005)	Higher propensity to reciprocate -> more redistribution	Reciprocity (Slope of the conditional cooperation line derived from cooperation game) +
	Altruism	Higher altruism leads to stronger concern for the poor's needs.	Konow (2003); Rueda (2018), Ghiglino et al. (2021)		Altruism (Amount Sent in Dictator Game) +

Similarly, beliefs about immigrants are significant in the US, Japan, and Germany, but not in the other three countries.

Our heterogeneity analysis generally fails to find significant variation across demographic and attitudinal factors. In particular, contrary to Alesina et al. (2018), we find no significant variation in beliefs about fair opportunity or most other theoretical determinants across political orientation. This finding aligns with theories suggesting that 'fairness' in the context of economic opportunity for mobility may be a broadly accepted concept that transcends narrow political ideologies (Rawls, 1971; Cohen, 1989; Fleurbaey, 1995; Roemer, 1998).

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the key determinants of demand for redistribution. Section 3 describes the data. Section 4 provides econometric results relating the different determinants with demand for redistribution. Section 5 concludes.

2. Literature overview

In this section, we review the key theoretical domains proposed to explain preferences for redistribution and briefly highlight empirical studies testing these mechanisms. The variables used to capture these mechanisms in our analysis are detailed in Table 1 and Section 3.

The standard economic models of public choice suggest that individuals support redistributive policies if they anticipate being net beneficiaries and oppose them if they do not. According to the seminal macroeconomic model determining the amount of redistribution in a country (Meltzer and Richard, 1981), individuals with above-average incomes oppose redistribution, while those with below-average incomes favor the highest possible redistribution rate to maximize their incomes. Consequently, demand for redistribution is expected to decline as personal income increases, a pattern commonly observed in empirical research.[5] From a cross-country perspective, the model predicts that average demand for progressive taxation should increase with inequality because the median voter falls further behind average income when the income distribution becomes more skewed. However, this prediction is often at odds with reality (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Kenworthy and McCall, 2008; Dallinger, 2010; Velev and Schmidt-Catran, 2024).

Subsequent literature has expanded the concept of self-interest. It has highlighted the role played by individuals' risk aversion. Redistribution can function as an insurance mechanism against income shocks, leading more risk-averse individuals to demand greater redistribution (Varian, 1980; Sinn, 1995). Empirical research has confirmed this mechanism. Early studies relied on crude proxies for risk preferences, such as self-employment or experiences of economic hardship (Alesina and Giuliano, 2011; Guillaud, 2013). More recent research has directly measured individual risk preferences to examine their relationship with redistribution demand. Gärtner, Mollerstrom, and Seim (2017) documented a strong positive correlation between risk aversion and redistribution demand, which is robust to controlling for current and past income, net wealth, and demographic characteristics. Assandri et al. (2018) found that risk aversion increases demand for redistribution when reward of effort is uncertain. Buser et al. (2020) showed that risk aversion partially explains the gender gap in redistribution demand, although differences in overconfidence have a stronger effect.

Moreover, Benabou and Ok (2001) argued that, in addition to current income, individuals take into account their Prospect of Upward Mobility (POUM). People with stronger confidence in their future economic prospects should expect fewer gains from redistribution and, therefore, demand less of it (see also Rueda and Stegmueller, 2019). The empirical support for the POUM hypothesis is extensive. Constructing objective transition probabilities for the prospect of upward mobility across different economic brackets in the US, Alesina and La Ferrara (2005) demonstrated that prospects of upward economic mobility significantly reduce support for redistribution. Agranov and Palfrey (2020) tested experimentally an extended version of the Meltzer and Richard (1981) two-period model, finding that high levels of income mobility, combined with tax policy stickiness, led to lower equilibrium tax rates and reduced redistribution.[6]

While the POUM hypothesis focuses on social mobility from an individual self-interested perspective, a second theoretical domain looks at the beliefs in the overall fairness of economic mobility for the whole society (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Bénabou and Tirole, 2006). Empirical evidence shows that perceptions of the economic system's fairness and the deservedness of welfare recipients critically influence the demand for redistribution. When individuals believe that society operates on meritocratic principles – where economic success is attributed to factors within one's control, such as hard work, ability, and talent, rather than luck, birth, or family connections – the demand for redistribution decreases (Corneo, 2001; Fong, 2001; Alesina and Giuliano, 2011; Mijs, 2021). Such beliefs may originate from personal experiences or intergenerational transmission of family values (Piketty, 1995), serve as motivational ideologies (Bénabou and Tirole, 2006), result from historical indoctrination (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln, 2007), stem from assumptions about the moral qualities of the rich (Almås et al., 2022; Hansen, 2023), or be grounded in

[5] Most empirical research consider individual income, either in absolute terms (e.g., Alesina et al., 2001; Luttmer, 2001; Fong, 2001; Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005; AG, 2011) or relative to others as a driver for demand for redistribution (e.g., Corneo, 2001; Corneo and Grüner, 2002; Isaksson and Lindskog, 2009; Guillaud, 2013; Karadja, Mollerstrom, and Seim, 2017; Rueda, 2018). Some studies further capture material self-interest by including proxies for socio-economic status (e.g., Jaime-Castillo and Sáez-Lozano, 2014; Keely and Tan, 2008). These analyses usually find that richer individuals exhibit a lower demand for redistribution compared to poorer individuals.

[6] Similarly, Ravallion and Lokshin (2000) show that individuals expecting their income to decline in the next year exhibit higher support for government-led redistribution, and *vice versa*. Cojocaru (2014) also finds support for the POUM among European individuals with low risk aversion, consistent with the theory. Experimental evidence also supports the POUM hypothesis. Grimalda et al. (2023) finds similar and significant effect sizes for the POUM in experiments involving university students in the US, Italy, Germany, and Norway. Checchi and Filippin (2004) also provide evidence supporting the POUM hypothesis experimentally.

system-justification mechanisms (Trump, 2018). Consistent with such ideas, Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso (2018) demonstrate that perceptions of intergenerational mobility influence redistribution preferences across five Western countries. However, recent studies by Schwarz and Warum (2024) and Fehr, Müller, and Preuss (2024) do not conclusively confirm these results. While they replicate the first-stage effect of information on perceptions of intergenerational mobility, they find no robust corresponding impact on redistribution preferences in Austrian and German samples, respectively.

Experimental research has helped investigate the psychological mechanisms underpinning the evidence that people desire to reward individual deservingness (Cappelen et al., 2007, 2013; Almås et al., 2020). Extensive empirical evidence demonstrates that tolerance of inequality is higher when it is caused by individual merit rather than luck. This is the case both when self-interest is at stake and when it is not (e.g., Konow, 2000; Fong, 2001). Several studies have investigated how preferences for redistribution change under uncertainty about whether income differences are driven by luck or effort (Bhattacharya and Mollerstrom, 2022; Cappelen et al., 2023; Preuss, Reyes, Somerville, and Wu, 2024). Preuss et al. (2024) show that individuals are more accepting of inequality when outcomes result from a mix of effort and luck – termed "lucky opportunities" – than when outcomes are purely luck-based. Similarly, Cappelen et al. (2023) demonstrate that even a slight possibility that income differences are merit-based significantly increases tolerance for inequality. In contrast, Cappelen, Mollerstrom, Reme, and Tungodden (2022) highlight that uncertainty about whether inequalities stem from luck or performance induces an "egalitarian pull." This behavior is argued to reflect a meritocratic concern to avoid the substantial error of failing to reward high-performing but unlucky individuals. Andre (2025) finds that individuals often disregard unequal opportunities when rewarding effort, opting not to redistribute income from an advantaged worker. This behavior is partly driven by uncertainty about potential outcomes under equal opportunity and partly by the belief that rewarding effort is fair, even in the context of unequal opportunities. Almås et al. (2020) find that both redistributive preferences and beliefs about the reason behind real-life inequality matter for reported policy attitudes towards government redistribution and that the two factors are uncorrelated. They further show that concerns for efficiency are not as relevant as fairness considerations in shaping preferences for redistribution.[7]

A third theoretical account we consider regards racial and ethnic hostility between groups (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Lee and Roemer, 2006; Gilens, 2009). The key idea is that people from the racial and ethnic majority may decide to “shrink” the size of the welfare state if they realize that the beneficiaries of redistribution are mainly adversary racial or ethnic groups. According to this hypothesis, the larger racial and ethnic fractionalization in the US in comparison to Europe is a major factor in accounting for differences in demand for redistribution. Empirical evidence supports these ideas. Tabellini (2020) finds that early 20th-century U.S. cities with a higher share of Jewish and Catholic immigrants reduced tax rates and public spending significantly more than more homogeneous Protestant communities. Similarly, Dahlberg et al. (2012) show that a Swedish program dispersing refugees across municipalities led to a decline in support for redistribution.

Racial or ethnic antagonism may be based on a pure “taste” for discrimination or may rest on an (often factually incorrect) belief that people from other groups are not as hard-working as people from their group (Becker, 1971; Cetre et al., 2024). Beliefs’ heterogeneity might help explain differences in opinions between individuals living in the same country. Evidence from the US suggests the generosity of White people depends on whether they suspect Black people being overrepresented among transfer recipients (Luttmer, 2001; Fong and Luttmer, 2011). Economic considerations about immigrants may also matter (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005). Immigration may be perceived as a threat that may overburden the welfare state, resulting in weaker preferences for redistribution. Alternatively, natives may fear increased labor market competition leading to stronger demand for redistribution, ceteris paribus (Finseraas, 2008; Senik, Stichnoth, and Van der Straeten, 2008; Burgoon, Koster and van Egmond, 2012; Alesina et al., 2021a, 2021b). In a survey experiment, Alesina, Miano, and Stantcheva (2023) find that respondents, on average, hold exaggeratedly negative views about immigrants’ reliance on the welfare state.

The fourth theoretical domain we include concerns social capital (Putnam, 2000; Anderson et al., 2004; Bellemare and Kröger, 2007). While the notion of social capital is not devoid of ambiguities (Sobel, 2002), we conceptualize social capital as the set of personal and direct social connections that people have with others. It can be argued that people with more social connections can expect they will receive help from others in case of need. This supply of “private” insurance might crowd out the demand for government redistribution. In particular, people who are part of a religious community may be thought of as having access to an extensive network of support. Religious individuals may thus rely on charity and community assistance to cope with poverty and therefore oppose a government-led intervention (Clark and Lelkes, 2005; Stegmueller, 2013). This negative relationship between religiosity and demand for redistribution might, however, also be driven by a cultural factor induced by the historical opposition between church and state (Stegmueller et al., 2011).

The fifth theoretical domain we consider pertains to trust in public institutions. Evidence from the United States suggests that low and decreasing trust in government hinders support for redistributive policies (Hetherington, 2006; Rudolph and Evans, 2005; Macdonald, 2019). In an experiment, Kuziemko et al. (2015) find that respondents who were primed to doubt the integrity of government officials demand less redistribution. In a survey, Stantcheva (2021) finds that trust in government correlates positively with

[7] Grimalda et al. (2023) find higher tolerance of inequality in the US and Italy than in Norway and Germany. These differences are driven by the extent to which below-median earners (in the experiment) demand redistribution or allow above-median earners to retain their higher-assigned earnings. That the preferences by low-income earners determine the overall redistribution policy in a country also emerges in Maréchal et al. (2025). Rey-Biel, Sheremeta, and Uler (2018) show that while Spaniards and US Americans do not differ in their demand for redistribution when the origin of inequality is known, US Americans attribute inequality to a lack of effort significantly more than Spaniards. Nevertheless, this divergence in beliefs does not translate into differences in demand for redistribution.

preferences for redistribution and that a substantial portion of the difference in demand for redistribution by Republicans and Democrats can be explained by the former's lower trust in government. However, we can also find opposite or inconclusive evidence. Di Tella, Dubra, and Lagomarsino (2021) find that experimentally decreasing trust in the government leads to an increase in the preferred tax rate on the top 1 %. Peyton (2020) finds that having respondents to read an article praising public officials' integrity did not change their support for redistribution. Likewise, Svallfors (1999) and Edlund (2006) provide evidence from Sweden and Norway suggesting that those who report less trust in government do not demand lower redistribution, perhaps because widespread support for the welfare state exists in both countries.

The reason underlying these contrasting results may be that trust in government is multi-faceted and depends on a broad variety of factors, such as responsiveness, reliability, openness, fairness, and integrity (OECD, 2017; Murtin et al., 2018). These factors vary extensively across countries (OECD/Korea Development Institute, 2018; OECD, 2021a) and can influence redistribution demand differently. Kuziemko et al. (2015) argue that people who do not believe that government policies are effective might not support expanding redistributive policies. Stantcheva (2021) indeed finds that providing people with information about the effectiveness of redistributive tax policies increases their support for them. A stronger belief in government reliability should, therefore, increase demand for redistribution. However, people might demand less redistribution if they are satisfied with the current level of government responsiveness and reliability, or vice versa. For example, Edlund (2006) suggests that, in Sweden, people who distrust the welfare state are concerned about the limited resources dedicated to it, and therefore, they actually back increased social spending. Furthermore, those who are, or feel, treated unfairly by other policies might demand more progressive taxation as compensation (Scheve and Stasavage, 2016). Conversely, those who find the government open and fair might demand less redistributive taxation. Beliefs in integrity at the lower tiers of the government might spur demand for redistribution. In fact, civic-minded citizens support a larger welfare state and stronger redistribution if they believe that petty corruption is low so that money waste is limited and benefits effectively go to those who need them most (Algan et al., 2016). Beliefs in integrity at the upper echelons of the state, for example, related to revolving door practices or corruption linked with big businesses, might instead be negatively related to the demand for redistribution. When people perceive less top-tier corruption, they are more likely to believe that income distribution is fair or meritocratic, so there is no need for redistribution (Alesina and Angeletos, 2005b). Trustlab includes a broad array of items inquiring about respondents' satisfaction with several of government characteristics, thus enabling us to investigate in-depth these matters.

Finally, the sixth theoretical domain refers to what we can call, in general terms, pro-sociality. Both Fong et al. (2005) and Algan et al. (2016) argue that civic-minded people are more likely to favor a larger welfare state if they believe that others are trustworthy and not likely to cheat. In a nutshell, people who have contributed to helping others in the past gain the entitlement to be helped by others in the future. This hypothesis entails that trust in others, propensity to cooperate, and beliefs of trustworthiness may be positively associated with preferences for redistribution. This implies that dispositions to reciprocate others' actions should be positively associated with redistribution (see also Cohn, Fehr, and Goette, 2015). Relatedly, pure altruism, i.e., the propensity to help others without expecting anything in return, is another component of pro-sociality that can be expected to be positively correlated with redistribution, especially when the recipient of help is considered needy and deserving (Konow, 2003; Rueda, 2018; Ghiglino et al., 2021; Dimick et al., 2017; Nicklisch and Paetzel, 2020). Fehr, Epper, and Senn (2024) show that these factors explain preferences for redistribution beyond self-interest and other beliefs. They measure social preferences in Switzerland using a series of dictator games and a clustering algorithm that identifies three groups: a group of inequality-averse individuals, another that is concerned about social welfare, and a third composed of selfish individuals. They find that these preferences shape stated support for actual redistributive policies being discussed in Switzerland at the time of the survey. The effect of social preferences does not change once beliefs about equal opportunity and other determinants of redistribution are included in the regression. This denotes a tendency to act in the interests of others rather than in the interests of the self. Even in this case, Trustlab offers a number of different measures of pro-sociality, which we will include in our analyses.

An important caveat concerns the role of individual "misperceptions" of the extent and patterns of inequality, its determinants, and the redistributive impact of different policies. Extensive empirical evidence points to individual perception of inequality often not matching reality (Alesina, Miano, and Stantcheva, 2020).[8] Some studies find evidence of significant underestimation of inequality (e.g. Osberg and Smeeding, 2006; Norton and Ariely, 2011; Kiatpongsan and Norton, 2014; Kraus et al., 2019), especially toward people at the top end of the income distribution (Szaszi et al., 2024), while others show support for overestimation of inequality (e.g., Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018; Chambers et al., 2014). This misperception is potentially important, because demand for redistribution has been shown to depend on perceived rather than actual inequality (Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018).

Another kind of misperceptions concerns the belief about one's own rank in the income distribution. In the seminal work by Cruces et al. (2013), Argentinean respondents tended to think of themselves as more "middle class" than what they were. That is, poor (rich) people tended to overestimate (underestimate) the number of people who were poorer than themselves, with an overall marginal tendency to *under*estimate one's own rank across the whole population. While this general tendency has been confirmed in other

[8] The gap between perceptions and reality could be partly explained by the fact that people from the general public use specific, possibly incorrect, heuristics in answering numerical questions, which are later compared with official statistics. Answers to numerical questions depend heavily on framing (Eriksson and Simpson, 2012; Swan et al., 2017) and people might use different concepts or make assumptions that differ from those of statisticians (OECD, 2021b).

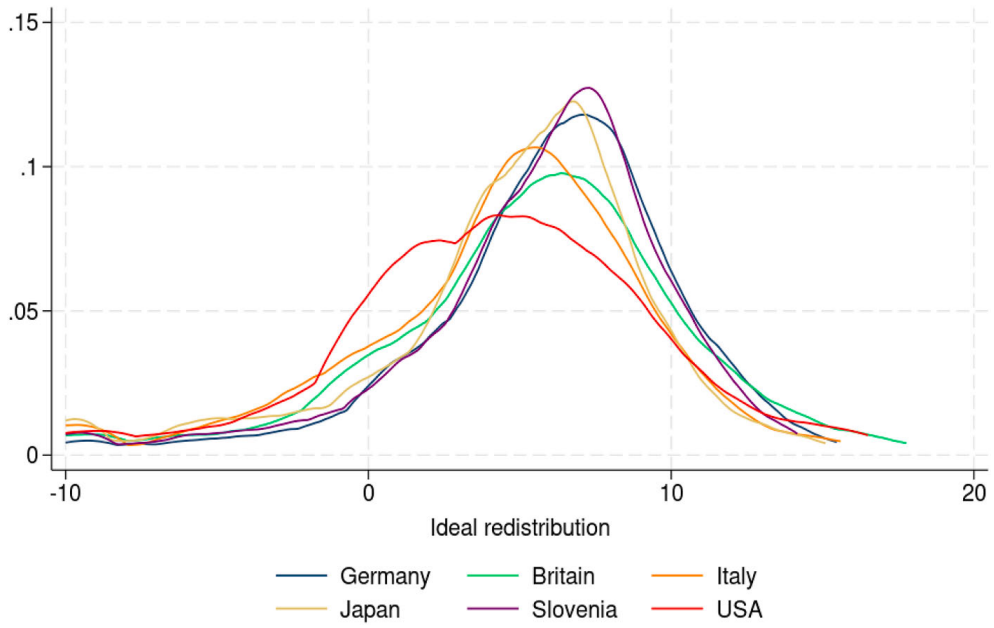

Fig. 1. The density of ideal redistribution by country.
Note: Kernel density distributions using Epanechnikov kernel and Silverman's rule of thumb for the bandwidth

studies, clear country effects emerge (Bublitz, 2022), suggesting that the spread of the distribution is likely an important mediator in the extent of mis-estimation. For instance, as many as 86 % of a Swedish sample underestimate their ranking (Karadja et al., 2017). This misperception is also evident with respect to the global distribution of incomes, as Fehr, Mollerstrom, and Perez-Truglia (2022) find a significant underestimation of one's position in the world's income distribution.

Other important misperceptions concern the extent of social mobility and the share of immigrants present in one's own country. Again, country – and cultural - effects are important, as US Americans (Europeans) significantly over-estimate (under-estimate) economic upward mobility (Alesina et al., 2018). Perceptions are more homogenous across countries with respect to the immigration share, but perceptions tend to be grossly misaligned with reality (Alesina et al., 2023).

Not only are individual perceptions possibly biased on average, but also the variability of opinions can vary widely, especially across political cleavages. People substantially disagree about key facts, such as whether inequality has been increasing over the past decades or the extent to which the current tax system is progressive. Borrowing from Alesina, Miano, and Stantcheva (2020), this may lead to a "polarization of reality," where individuals on different sides of the political spectrum perceive inequality and the functioning of policies in fundamentally different ways. In Section 5, we discuss the robustness of our results to these misperceptions.

In Table 1, we summarize the different determinants affecting preferences for redistribution that we analyze in this paper, indicating the variables used to test for such mechanisms.

3. Data and descriptive statistics

3.1. Trustlab

The data come from the OECD's Trustlab project (Murtin et al., 2018). Trustlab is an international initiative to study the determinants of trust and social preferences from a cross-country perspective. The dataset contains more than 1000 respondents per country chosen to be nationally representative of the population in terms of age, gender, and income. Data collection took place online between November 2016 and February 2020.[9] Our analysis is restricted to the six countries that included the question on preferred income tax schedule: Germany, Italy, Japan, Slovenia, the UK, and the US. From the raw sample, we only dropped 25 observations for Germany, for which two experimental variables (cooperation and reciprocity) were not elicited.

Participants first complete a series of economic experiments and implicit association tests (questionnaire and instructions can be found in supplementary material; see also Murtin et al. (2018) for a more detailed presentation). These two modules are followed by a

[9] Data collection for the first wave of the Trustlab began in France in November 2016, followed by South Korea in January 2017. However, these countries did not include the question on tax preferences required for our analysis. the second wave includes data from Slovenia (23 March – 19 April 2017), the US (2 June – 9 July 2017), Germany (11 July – 11 August 2017) and Italy (11 October – 6 November 2017). In addition, a boost sample of minorities in Germany was collected from 26 June – 6 July 2018. The UK data were collected from 15 June – 14 July 2018, and the Japanese survey ran from 15 January – 19 February 2020.

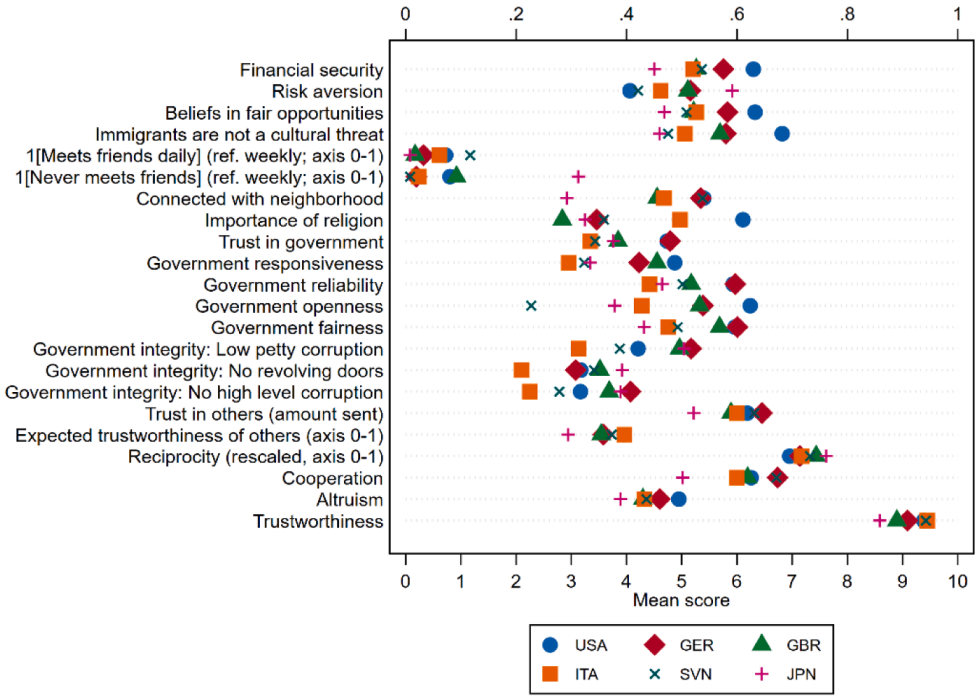

Fig. 2. Country averages for key variables.
Note: Mean answer score per country. All variables are on a 10-point Likert scales, except for 1[meets friends daily], 1[never meets friend], which are binary variables, so the average is a share, expected trustworthiness, which is a share, reciprocity, which has been rescaled for this picture on a 0–1 range as (var-min)/(max-min).

survey aimed at measuring participants demographic, attitudinal, and personal characteristics. Table A.1 in the Online Appendix provides the exact wording for each question and the scale of the answers.

3.2. *Demand for redistribution*

We derive our measure of demand for redistribution from a hypothetical task originally developed by Alesina et al. (2018). In this task, participants indicate how they would distribute the tax burden among specific income groups in their country to sustain current public spending. The question is designed to determine the preferred average tax rate for each income group. Following the categorization proposed by Piketty (2014), the four groups are the top 1 %, the next 9 %, the next 40 %, and the bottom 50 % of the income distribution. Respondents choose tax rates by moving four sliders – corresponding to the four income groups – on the screen. A fifth slider, placed below the others, moves simultaneously and turns green when the respondent's choice raises enough revenue. To ensure economically meaningful answers while keeping the size of the government fixed, tax rates are restricted to generate a budget for the government between 97 % and 103 % of the revenue implied by a proportional (flat) tax rate of 25 %. Revenues are calculated based on an OECD-average income distribution from the OECD Income Distribution Database.[10] Thus, tax rates are measuring preferred progressivity instead of being confounded by concerns about the absolute size of the government.

Using answers to this task, we derive an *ideal redistribution* measure for each participant based on the widely used Reynolds-Smolensky index[11] to measure tax progressivity. Such a measure equals the difference between the actual market income Gini for the respondent's country and the Gini index that would result in applying the income tax schedule selected by the respondent (see the Online Appendix, Section A.1, for more details). The variable has a long tail on the left. To avoid such values having a strong influence on the estimates, we censor the left tail at -10, which affects 1.5 % of the observations.

Fig. 1 shows the distribution of *Ideal Redistribution* by country. Negative (positive) values on the x-axis indicate regressive (progressive) redistribution, in which taxation transfers resources from the poor to the rich (from the rich to the poor). Values around zero indicate proportional, with no net transfer across groups. The mean of the distribution is highest in Germany (6 percentagare points) and lowest in the United States (4.3). The other countries span between the two extremes (Slovenia 5.6; United Kingdom 5.5; Japan 4.7; Italy 4.4). However, the variation within countries is much larger than between countries. Even if most people implement a progressive tax system, which reduces inequality in market income, in all countries, a group of respondents implements a regressive

[10] https://www.oecd.org/social/income-distribution-database.htm
[11] This index assumes no re-ranking of individuals between the pre- and post-tax distribution. Under this assumption, the index equals the difference between the Gini for gross (pre-tax, post-benefit) income and the Gini for after-tax income. Intuitively, it captures how much the tax-benefit system reduces inequality.

system (the negative values for ideal redistribution).[12] The distribution is particularly polarized in the United States, where a larger group of respondents than in other countries demands proportional or mildly regressive taxation.[13]

3.3. Key variables affecting preferences for redistribution

The exact wording for the variables described below is in Online Appendix Table A.1. Most are measured on 0–10 Likert scales.

Financial security. - We use respondents' expectations about their household's financial situation in the next year as a proxy for the POUM hypothesis (see, for instance, Ravallion and Lokshin, 2000). Surely, one year is too short a horizon for the mechanism behind the POUM hypothesis to manifest its effects. We believe we are, therefore, capturing a lower bound of the effect. On average, financial security is highest in the US and lowest in Japan (Fig. 2).

Risk aversion. - We use answers to the general question about the participant's propensity to take risks taken from Dohmen et al. (2011). Such a survey measure was found to be consistent with experimental measures of risk aversion and consistently predict risky behavior in real life. Average risk aversion follows the opposite pattern to financial security, being the lowest in the US and the highest in Japan.

Beliefs in fair opportunities. - Beliefs in fair opportunities - specifically, the perceived availability of chances for upward mobility - are assessed using a survey item that elicits whether respondents feel 'there is not much opportunity to get ahead today for the average person' or believe that 'anyone who works hard can climb up the ladder,' indicating 'plenty of opportunity'." Such beliefs are strongest in the US, closely followed by Germany. Both countries show similar mean scores, a result which is in contrast with the so-called "American exceptionalism" hypothesis (Lipset, 1996) and with the general US-Europe divide assumed in the comparative literature on preferences for redistribution (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Dallinger, 2010). In contrast, respondents from Japan are the most skeptical about opportunities to climb up the social ladder through hard work. Respondents from Italy, the UK, and Slovenia are located between these two extremes, somewhat closer to Japan than to the US and Germany.

Inter-racial/ethnic attitudes. - We focus on a question asking whether society's culture is undermined or enriched by immigrants. We interpret this question as a measure of general preferences for ethnic diversity.[14] We observe a positive correlation between a country's ethnic and racial diversity and the tendency to hold positive views about immigrants in the sample. Respondents from the US hold the most positive views about immigrants concerning their integration and their effect on the culture. At the other end of the spectrum, respondents from more ethnically homogenous Japan and Slovenia have the most negative views about immigrants. Germans and UK respondents are somewhat more favorable toward immigrants than Italians.

Trust in government. - Trust in government is measured through a general question asking respondents how much they trust the government. On average, respondents in all countries express distrust, with Germans and U.S. residents reporting the highest levels of trust and Italians and Slovenians the lowest.

Additional questions capture specific dimensions of trust in government, including responsiveness to complaints about poor public services, reliability during natural disasters, openness to public opinion before decision-making, fairness in treating minority groups, and perceptions of corruption among officials. The latter is further broken down into three items: the propensity of government employees to accept bribes, the prevalence of "revolving door" practices, and the corruptibility of members of Parliament. Cross-country averages for these factors are generally consistent with overall trust in government, though some deviations are observed.

Social capital. - We assess participants' social connectedness through the frequency of their contact with friends and their sense of connection to their neighborhood. Additionally, we measure attachment to a religious community as a form of social capital by asking participants about the importance of religion in their lives.

Pro-sociality. - We use the monetarily incentivized measures of pro-sociality taken from the experimental module of Trustlab. Several of our measures come from the so-called trust game (Berg et al., 1995), the workhorse to study trust in experimental economics. In this game, two participants are given an initial sum of 10 tokens, whose value was 1 USD in the US and an equivalent sum in other countries. Participant A can transfer all, a part, or nothing from their initial endowment to Participant B. Such an amount is multiplied by 3 and assigned to Participant B. Participant B is then asked which proportion of their endowment (now equal to 10 tokens plus 3 times the amount given by Participant A) they return to Participant A. The Nash equilibrium with rational payoff-maximizing players is the least socially efficient allocation, in which Participant A sends nothing to Participant B and Participant B transfers nothing to Participant A. Nevertheless, only a minority of individuals actually play this strategy (Johnson and Mislin, 2011). We measure

[12] Online Appendix Table A.13 supports our interpretation that regressive preferences reflect genuine views rather than error: such respondents report significantly higher financial security, lower risk aversion, and are more likely to identify with centrist or right-wing political positions compared to those with progressive preferences. As shown in Online Appendix Table A.10, excluding respondents with regressive tax preferences leaves our results largely unchanged, except that the coefficient for top-quintile income becomes statistically significant, while the effect of attitudes toward immigrants and prosociality loses significance.

[13] The stronger dispersion in the United States is confirmed by looking at the coefficient of variation, which is 1.19, followed by Italy (1.11), Japan (1.00), the United Kingdom (0.92), Slovenia (0.79) and Germany (0.71).

[14] The questionnaire also includes a related question that asks whether the respondent believes that immigrants are integrated. This question has a more complicated interpretation which is not related to the theoretical predictions related to attitudes towards diversity. One may be in favour of immigrants' integration but believe that immigrants are not actually integrated into society and think that redistribution might help them integrate. Indeed, when the answer to this question is included in the regression together with the other, its coefficient is negative (more perceived integration is associated with lower redistribution).

Table 2
The role of self-interest. Changes in the dependent variable associated with 1 standard deviation change in each variable (or with the switch from the reference category for dummy variables).

	(1)	(2)
	Ideal redistribution (percentage points)	
1[5th quintile household income] (ref. 1st quintile)	-0.60***	-0.26
	(0.18)	(0.19)
Financial security		-0.58***
		(0.06)
Risk aversion		0.37***
		(0.06)
Basic socio-demographics	Yes	Yes
Country dummies	Yes	Yes
Observations	7954	7493
R2	0.03	0.05

Note: OLS regression. Robust standard errors in parenthesis. All the explanatory variables (except for dummies) are standardized. Basic socio-demographic controls include dummy variables for: four quintiles of equivalent household disposable income (calculated using the square root of household size), with the first quintile serving as the reference category; respondent's upward educational mobility with respect to parents; age group (18–34; 35–49; ref. 50+); female; education (less than secondary; tertiary; ref. secondary); employment status (unemployed; inactive; ref. employed); country native; size of municipality (town; city; ref: rural). Statistical significance is indicated as follows: *** for $p < 0.01$, ** for $p < 0.05$, and * for $p < 0.1$.

Table 3
The role of beliefs in opportunities, ethnic attitudes, and social capital. Changes in the dependent variable associated with 1 standard deviation change in each variable (or with the switch from the reference category for dummy variables).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Ideal redistribution (percentage points)			
Beliefs in fair opportunities for upward mobility	-0.80***			-0.70***
	(0.06)			(0.07)
Immigrants are not a cultural threat.		0.08		0.24***
		(0.06)		(0.06)
1[Meets friends daily] (ref. weekly)			-0.56**	-0.59**
			(0.27)	(0.27)
1[Never meets friends] (ref. weekly)			0.11	0.22
			(0.20)	(0.22)
Connected with neighborhood			-0.48***	-0.32***
			(0.06)	(0.07)
Importance of religion			-0.34***	-0.27***
			(0.06)	(0.06)
Basic socio-demographics (including income)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	7620	7325	7587	7325
R2	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.07

Note: OLS regression. Robust standard errors in parenthesis. All the explanatory variables (but dummies) are standardized. Statistical significance is indicated as follows: *** for $p < 0.01$, ** for $p < 0.05$, and * for $p < 0.1$.

interpersonal trust through the amount sent by Participant A to Participant B. *Expected trustworthiness* is the share a participant expects to be sent back from Participant B relative to a fixed amount sent (5 tokens). *Trustworthiness* is the amount sent back (averaged for each possible value sent by Participant A).

We measure *cooperation* through the contribution to the public good in the game devised by Gächter and Fehr (1999). Four participants are given an initial endowment of 10 currency units and may contribute it to a "joint project." The amount contributed by each player is then multiplied by 1.6 and split equally among participants. This makes contributing beneficial for the group but detrimental to the individual's payoff.

Reciprocity is measured through a conditional version of the public goods game. Players are asked how much they would contribute, given each possible average contribution of the three other participants. Reciprocity is the slope of the regression of the amounts contributed by each player on the amounts contributed by other players.

Altruism is derived from a standard "Dictator game" (Kahneman et al., 1986), in which Participant A sends a part of their endowment to Participant B without any further action by B.

4. Empirical analysis

The analysis relates ideal redistribution to the different sets of factors:

$$Idealredist_i = \beta_0 + SELFINT_i'\beta_{SELFINT} + \beta_{EQOPP}EQOPP_i + \beta_{IMM}ATTIMM_i + \beta_{SOCCAP}SOCCAP_i'$$

Table 4
The role of trust in government. Changes in the dependent variable associated with one standard deviation change in each variable (or with the switch from the reference category for dummy variables).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Ideal redistribution (percentage points)				
Trust in government	-0.67***		-0.36***		
	(0.06)		(0.08)		
Government responsiveness		-0.62***	-0.54***	-0.63***	-0.61***
		(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Government reliability		-0.15*	-0.04	-0.18**	-0.13*
		(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Government openness		-0.20**	-0.17*	-0.21**	-0.18*
		(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Government fairness		-0.06	-0.00		
		(0.08)	(0.08)		
Government integrity: Low petty corruption		0.34***	0.31***	0.30***	
		(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.07)	
Government integrity: No revolving doors		-0.27***	-0.28***	-0.33***	
		(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.07)	
Government integrity: No high-level corruption		-0.09	-0.04		
		(0.11)	(0.11)		
Selection				Best Subset	LASSO
Basic socio-demographic (including income)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	7820	6270	6248	6270	6270
R2	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.08

Note: OLS regression. Robust standard errors in parenthesis. All the explanatory variables (except dummies) are standardized. Satisfaction with government is the average across seven dimensions (education, health, transport, welfare, security, culture, environment), ignoring missing values (unless all dimensions are missing). The "Best Subset Selection" uses the version implemented by Lindsey and Sheather (2014), based on the leaps-and-bounds algorithm by Furnival and Wilson (1974) (see Becker et al., 2017, for an application). The "LASSO selection" uses the data-driven penalization method, allowing for heteroscedasticity proposed by Belloni et al. (2013) and implemented by Ahrens et al. (2019). For both selection methods, the control variables (basic socio-demographics and country dummies) were not subject to selection (partialled out for the Lasso). Statistical significance is indicated as follows: *** for $p < 0.01$, ** for $p < 0.05$, and * for $p < 0.1$.

$$+TRUSTGOV_i'\beta_{TRUSTGOV} + PROSOCIALITY_i'\beta_{SOCPREF} + X_i'\beta_X + C_i'\beta_c + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where *SELFINT, EQOPP, ATTIMM* and *TRUSTGOV* are vectors of variables referring to the different dimensions, i.e. the extended self-interest model (own income, financial security and risk aversion), beliefs in fair opportunities for upward mobility, attitudes towards immigrants, social capital, trust in government and pro-sociality factors while *i* indexes respondents. Controls for basic demographic variables X and country dummies C are also included in all regressions.

We start by introducing the different components separately to provide a detailed discussion of each dimension (Sections 4.1–4.4). We then implement a 'horse-race' regression (Section 4.5) where all factors are included to appraise which factor is most relevant. Finally, we analyze which sets of variables contribute the most to explaining the overall variance in demand for redistribution, and we study the heterogeneity across countries and across demographic characteristics and political preferences.

While our empirical strategy is correlational and does not permit strong causal inference - due to potential omitted variable bias or reverse causality - our contribution lies in systematically integrating and comparing key determinants of redistribution preferences that have been emphasized in theoretical models and supported by prior causal evidence (e.g., Cappelen et al., 2013; Kuziemko et al., 2015; Alesina et al., 2023). By examining these drivers collectively rather than in isolation, we provide insights into their relative importance in shaping observed preferences. A related issue is that, given the observational nature of the data, beliefs and attitudes may be subject to measurement error. Any inference about mediation–or lack thereof–should therefore be interpreted with caution, as such measurement concerns can bias estimates and complicate efforts to disentangle the roles of different drivers.

All main variables (apart from *X* and dummies) are standardized in the overall sample. Therefore, their coefficient can be interpreted as the percentage point change in ideal redistribution associated with a 1-standard deviation change in the variable.

Tables A.2-A.3 in the Online Appendix report descriptive statistics in the final sample. In what follows, we exclude observations where the dependent variable is missing or that have missing values for any of the variables included in that specific regression. This implies that sample size changes across specifications depending on which variables are included. Given the long list of variables being considered, excluding observations with a missing value in any of the variables can lead to a small sample. Section A.4 of the Online Appendix reports results using an imputation method that preserves the same sample size in every regression.

4.1. Revisiting the median-voter and POUM hypotheses

As expected, the richest individuals are less supportive of redistribution than the poorest. Those in the top quintile of the income distribution demand 0.53 percentage points less redistribution than those in the bottom quintile ($p = 0.004$), equivalent to 11 % of the

sample average outcome (4.98) (Table 2, column 1).

However, future financial prospects and risk aversion have a greater influence than current income. When these factors are included in the regression, the effect of current income becomes small and statistically insignificant (Table 2, column 2). A one-standard-deviation increase in expected financial security is associated with a 0.58 percentage point lower demand for redistribution ($p < 0.001$), or 12 % of the sample mean. Similarly, a one-standard-deviation increase in risk aversion corresponds to a 0.37 percentage point higher demand for redistribution ($p < 0.001$), or 7 % of the sample mean. These findings align with the POUM hypothesis and the insurance motive in shaping preferences for redistribution.

4.2. Beliefs in fair opportunities, ethnic relations, and social capital

Beliefs in fair opportunities are strongly associated with redistributive preferences (Table 3, column 1), consistent with existing evidence. A one-standard-deviation increase in confidence in fair opportunities to succeed is linked to a 0.8 percentage point lower desired redistribution ($p < 0.001$), approximately 16 % of the sample mean outcome.

Group-related concerns also play a role. When other societal beliefs are not accounted for, the belief that immigrants do not pose a cultural threat appears uncorrelated with redistribution preferences (Table 3, column 2). However, this result is biased by the fact that individuals in our sample who perceive immigrants as culturally non-threatening are also more likely to believe in fair opportunities. When controlling for beliefs in fair opportunities (Table 3, column 4), the coefficient for the belief that immigrants are not a cultural threat becomes positive and statistically significant (0.24, $p < 0.001$, 5 % of the sample mean). This finding supports the hypothesis that individuals are more inclined to redistribute within their perceived in-group and may oppose redistribution if it is perceived to benefit culturally distant groups.

Individuals with stronger social connections to neighbors and friends tend to demand less redistribution (Table 3, columns 3 and 4), suggesting that confidence in receiving private support reduces reliance on redistribution through taxation. Similarly, those who place greater importance on religion–and are thus more likely to belong to a religious community–also prefer lower levels of redistribution. This result may reflect a cultural dynamic tied to the historical opposition between church and state (Stegmueller et al., 2011), which makes religious individuals less supportive of state intervention. However, this cultural explanation cannot be fully disentangled with the available data.

4.3. Trust in government

We find that higher trust in government is negatively associated with demand for redistribution (Table 4, column 1). A one-standard-deviation increase in trust in government corresponds to a 0.68 percentage point lower demand for redistribution ($p < 0.001$), equivalent to 14 % of the sample average.

This result contrasts with parts of the literature, particularly evidence from the United States (Kuziemko et al., 2015; Macdonald, 2019). However, general trust in government reflects various dimensions – responsiveness, reliability, openness, fairness, and integrity (OECD, 2017; Murtin et al., 2018) – that may relate differently to preferences for redistribution. Moreover, the relevance and impact of these dimensions vary across countries (OECD/Korea Development Institute, 2018; OECD, 2021a).

When we break down trust in government into its possible components, stronger beliefs in government responsiveness and reliability are negatively associated with demand for redistribution (Table 4, column 2). This suggests that individuals who are more satisfied with government performance tend to demand less redistribution, which is consistent with findings such as those of Edlund (2006) for Sweden. Similarly, those who perceive the government as more open to public input also demand less redistribution. This aligns with the compensatory argument, which holds that individuals advocate for progressive taxation as a response to perceived favoritism toward certain groups, such as the wealthy (Scheve and Stasavage, 2016). In contrast, beliefs in government fairness appear unrelated to ideal levels of redistribution.

Respondents who perceive low levels of corruption in lower-tier government are more supportive of redistribution. This supports the argument by Algan, Cahuc, and Sangnier (2016) that individuals who believe there is less cheating within the welfare system are more likely to endorse it. In contrast, perceptions of low corruption at higher levels of government are associated with reduced demand for redistribution. This aligns with the model in Alesina and Angeletos (2005a), which suggests that widespread corruption fosters perceptions of unfairness, increasing support for taxing the wealthy and redistributing income. When all determinants are included alongside general trust in government (Table 4, column 3), the negative effect of general trust on redistribution persists but is reduced by nearly half.

The large number of covariates in these regressions may raise concerns. To address this, we apply two regularization methods to select a subset of key determinants of government redistribution. The “Best Subset Selection” method (Table 4, column 4) identifies the best model by minimizing the residual sum of squares (RSS) for each possible number of regressors, then selecting the optimal model based on Akaike’s Information Criterion (AIC). The “LASSO selection” (Table 4, column 5) estimates the model using only regressors with non-zero coefficients as determined by the LASSO algorithm (see table footnote). In both methods, control variables such as socio-demographics and country dummies were excluded from the selection process.

The best subset selection confirms the main results, retaining only the determinants of trust in public institutions with substantial

Table 5
The role of pro-sociality. Changes in the dependent variable associated with 1 standard deviation change in each variable (or with the switch from the reference category for dummy variables).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	Ideal redistribution (percentage points)						
Trust in others	0.06						0.17***
	(0.06)						(0.06)
Expected trustworthiness of others (expected return as a share of the available sum)		-0.37***					-0.36***
		(0.06)					(0.07)
Reciprocity			0.32***				0.29***
			(0.06)				(0.06)
Cooperation				0.05			0.14**
				(0.06)			(0.06)
Altruism					-0.26***		-0.27***
					(0.06)		(0.07)
Trustworthiness						-0.10	0.03
						(0.06)	(0.07)
Basic socio-demographics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	7954	7954	7954	7954	7954	7954	7954
R2	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.04

Note: OLS regression. Robust standard errors in parenthesis. All the explanatory variables (but dummies) are standardized. Statistical significance is indicated as follows: *** for $p < 0.01$, ** for $p < 0.05$, and * for $p < 0.1$.

and statistically significant coefficients. The LASSO approach, however, excludes government integrity variables. Overall, these findings underscore the importance of specific determinants, particularly those related to government responsiveness, reliability, and openness.

4.4. *Pro-sociality*

Redistributive preferences are also shaped by an individual's propensity to act in the interest of others, measured in Trustlab through experimental indicators of pro-sociality. These components are generally expected to positively correlate with demand for greater tax progressivity (Table 2). While our analysis emphasizes results from models including all components together (Table 5, column 7), we also report regressions where each factor is considered independently.

The coefficient on trust in others – captured by the amount sent in the first stage of the Trust Game – is positive, aligning with the hypothesis that trusting individuals are more supportive of redistribution. In contrast, the coefficient on expected trustworthiness – the share participants expect to receive back – is negative (Table 5, column 3). This result challenges the idea that civic-minded individuals favor state intervention when they perceive others as trustworthy (Algan et al., 2016).

A possible explanation is that expected trustworthiness reflects beliefs about private social insurance. Individuals who expect greater reciprocity from others may feel privately insured against income shocks, reducing their demand for state-led redistribution. Notably, the negative coefficient on expected trustworthiness (-0.36, or 7 % of the sample mean outcome; $p < 0.001$) is more than double the positive coefficient on trust in others (0.17, or 3 % of the sample mean outcome; $p = 0.009$).

The positive and relatively strong coefficient on reciprocity (0.28, or 6 % of the sample mean; $p < 0.001$) aligns with theoretical expectations (Fong et al., 2005). Similarly, cooperation is positively associated with demand for redistribution, though its coefficient is smaller (0.14, or 3 % of the sample mean; $p = 0.031$).

A seemingly surprising finding is that pure altruism is negatively associated with ideal redistribution (-0.27, or 6 % of the sample mean; $p < 0.001$). This result is robust, holding even when other variables are excluded (Table 5, column 5). It aligns with recent evidence from Fehr et al. (2024), who, using Bayesian methods to analyze preferences for redistribution in a representative Swiss sample, identify three groups: selfish individuals, inequality-averse individuals (people willing to spend money to increase the poor's income or decrease the rich's income), and those with altruistic concerns focused exclusively on the worst off. This third group, accounting for about one-third of the population, is willing to spend money to improve the welfare of the poorest but unwilling to reduce the income of the rich. In terms of the Fehr and Schmidt (1999) utility function, this group exhibits aversion to disadvantageous inequality but indifference to advantageous inequality. In other words, they oppose the very principle of taking money from the rich to give to the poor.

These preferences align with Charness and Rabin's (2002) model, which suggests that individuals' utility depends on their own income, the total income of the group, and the income of the group's worst-off member. They are also consistent with other-regarding CES preferences, which incorporate an equity-efficiency trade-off as modeled by Fisman et al. (2007, 2015).[15] In additional results, we also checked whether this result is driven by more affluent people but adding financial security to the regression and interacting it with

[15] Fehr, Epper, and Senn (2024) point out that they find group classification of similar size in Denmark, thus suggesting the robustness of this analysis.

Table 6
Factors associated with redistribution preferences. Changes in the dependent variable associated with 1 standard deviation change in each variable (or with the switch from the reference category for dummy variable).

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
		Ideal redistribution (percentage points)				
Income, expected financial security, and risk aversion	1[5th quintile household income] (ref. 1st quintile)	-0.19	-0.20	-0.18	-0.15	-0.13
		(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.20)
	Financial security	-0.22***	-0.22***	-0.20***	-0.22***	-0.19***
		(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
	Risk aversion	0.18***	0.18***	0.18***	0.19***	0.17***
		(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Beliefs in fair opportunities	Beliefs in fair opportunities for upward mobility	-0.51***	-0.51***	-0.50***	-0.51***	-0.45***
		(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Ethnic attitudes	Immigrants are not a cultural threat	0.29***	0.29***		0.29***	0.19***
		(0.06)	(0.06)		(0.06)	(0.07)
Social capital	1[Meets friends daily] (ref. weekly)	-0.44	-0.43			-0.38
		(0.28)	(0.28)			(0.28)
	1[Never meet friends] (ref. weekly)	0.14				0.19
		(0.22)				(0.22)
	Connected with neighborhood	-0.16**	-0.17**	-0.17**		-0.13*
		(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)		(0.07)
	Importance of religion	-0.15**	-0.15**	-0.18***		-0.06
		(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)		(0.06)
	1st PCA component (social capital)				-0.25***	
					(0.06)	
Trust in government	Trust in government	-0.34***	-0.34***	-0.30***	-0.36***	-0.30***
		(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Pro-sociality	Trust in others	0.17**	0.20***			0.15**
		(0.07)	(0.06)			(0.07)
	Expected trustworthiness of others (expected return as a share of the available sum)	-0.27***	-0.25***	-0.25***		-0.24***
		(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)		(0.07)
	Reciprocity	0.16***	0.17***	0.19***		0.14**
		(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)		(0.06)
	Cooperation	0.09				0.08
		(0.07)				(0.07)
	Altruism	-0.18**	-0.16**			-0.17**
		(0.07)	(0.07)			(0.07)
	Trustworthiness	0.02				0.01
		(0.07)				(0.07)
	1st PCA component (pro-sociality)				-0.06	
					(0.04)	
	2nd PCA component (pro-sociality)				0.26***	
					(0.06)	
Political attitudes	Centre (ref. Left)					-0.43***
						(0.15)
	Right					-1.34***
						(0.17)
	Prefer not to declare political affiliation					-0.42**
						(0.21)
Selection		None	Best subset	LASSO	None	None
Basic socio-demographics		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country dummies		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations		6727	6727	6727	6727	6727
R2		0.08	0.08	0.08	0.08	0.09

Note: OLS regression. Robust standard errors in parentheses. All the explanatory variables (but dummies) are standardized. Statistical significance is indicated as follows: *** for $p < 0.01$, ** for $p < 0.05$, and * for $p < 0.1$.

altruism. The results indicate that higher financial security amplifies the negative marginal effect of altruism, increasing from -0.13 at the 10th percentile of financial security to -0.30 at the 90th percentile. This suggests that the observed effect is indeed driven by individuals at the upper end of the income distribution.

The coefficient on trustworthiness is negative, though small and not statistically significant. This result contrasts with Algan et al. (2016), who find that less civic-minded individuals tend to favor expanding the welfare state. The discrepancy may stem from differences in the outcome measure: our analysis focuses on the degree of redistribution, conditional on the size of government, rather than the overall size of government.

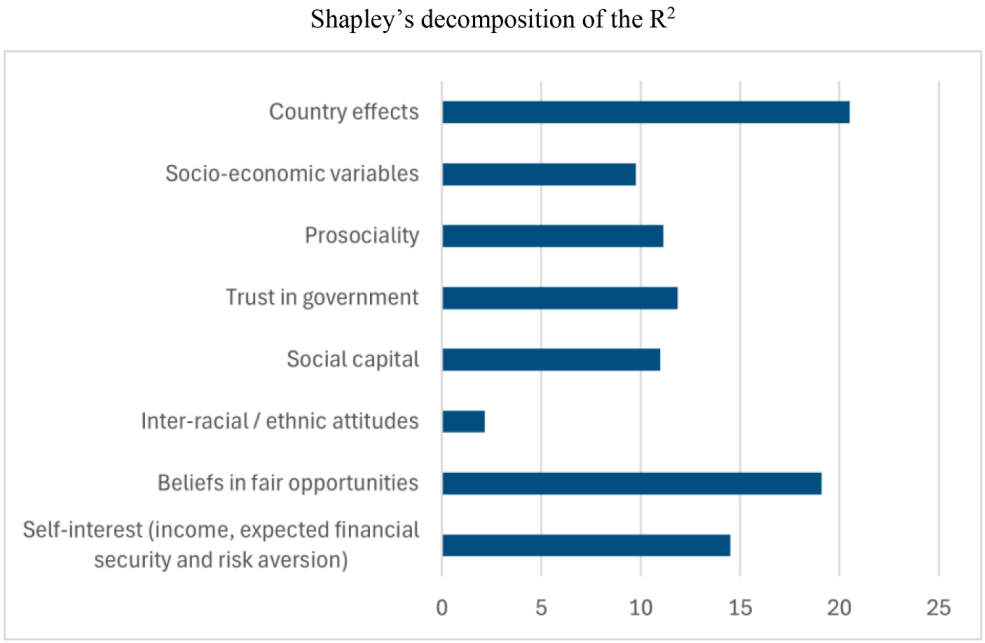

Fig. 3. Contribution of different components to explaining the overall variance. Shapley's decomposition of the R^2. Note: The decomposition is performed on the regression in Table 6, column 1.

4.5. *What factors matter the most?*

We include indicators for all theoretical factors analyzed in the previous sections in a 'horse-race' regression (Table 6, column 1), which enables us to find out the contribution of each theoretical factor, keeping all others constant. We only comment on factors that are statistically significant at the 5 % level.[16] The factor that proves to be the strongest predictor of demand for redistribution is beliefs in fair opportunities, as a one standard deviation (SD) increase in this factor is associated with a 0.51 percentage points reduction in redistribution demand (Table 6, column 1). When this factor entered alone in the regression, its coefficient was 0.80 (Table 3, column 1). Therefore, about 36 % of the association between beliefs in fair opportunities and redistribution demand is explained away by the correlation between beliefs in fair opportunities and other theoretical factors. The second most relevant factor is general trust in government, for which a one SD increase is associated with a 0.34 percentage points reduction in redistribution demand – against a coefficient of 0.68 when trust in government entered the regression alone (Table 4, column 1).[17] This means that 50 % of the effect of trust in government is mediated by other theoretical factors. The third most sizable factor is attitudes towards immigrants. A one SD increase in the belief that immigrants are not a cultural threat to the country is associated with a 0.29 percentage points increase in redistribution demand. It is noteworthy that the coefficient for attitudes toward immigrants increases threefold in comparison with the regression in which it entered the regression alone (Table 3, column 2). Therefore, only when controlling for other factors do attitudes toward immigrants turn out as a sizable and significant predictor of demand for redistribution, confirming what is already found in Section 4.2.

Other theoretical factors have a lower coefficient than the three analyzed above, most of them remaining statistically significant. This suggests that each of the factors being considered has some predictive power that is independent of other factors. In particular, both financial security – proxying the POUM hypothesis - and risk aversion are significant at $p < 0.01$ with a sizable coefficient – between 0.18 and 0.22. Among the social capital indicators, being connected with neighbors and the importance of religion are significant at $p < 0.05$, and their coefficients are 0.16 and 0.15, respectively. Among the pro-sociality indicators, expected trustworthiness stands out as the strongest predictor, with a coefficient equalling 0.27 and $p < 0.01$ significance. Trust in others, Reciprocity, Cooperation, and Altruism are also significant at $p < 0.05$. It is noteworthy that Altruism keeps its negative sign.

Qualitatively similar results are obtained using an alternative measure of demand for redistribution, namely the difference between the preferred tax rate on the top 1 % and bottom 50 % income (Table A.5 in the Online Appendix).

Model selection conducted using Best Subset Selection (Table 6, column 2) or LASSO (Table 6, column 3) leads to similar conclusions about the importance of the various factors. In both cases, beliefs in fair opportunities and general trust in government are the most sizable factors, with coefficient size being virtually unaltered. Notably, attitudes toward immigrants drop out in the LASSO

[16] In particular, the variable [Meet friends daily] has a rather large coefficient - i.e., 0.45 - but also a much larger standard error than other variables, so that it is statistically insignificant at conventional levels. Therefore, we do not consider this variable in our analysis.

[17] Introducing different determinants of trust in public institution, rather than the general trust in government variable, also confirms previous results, with the strongest association being the negative one with government responsiveness (Table A.4 in the Online Appendix).

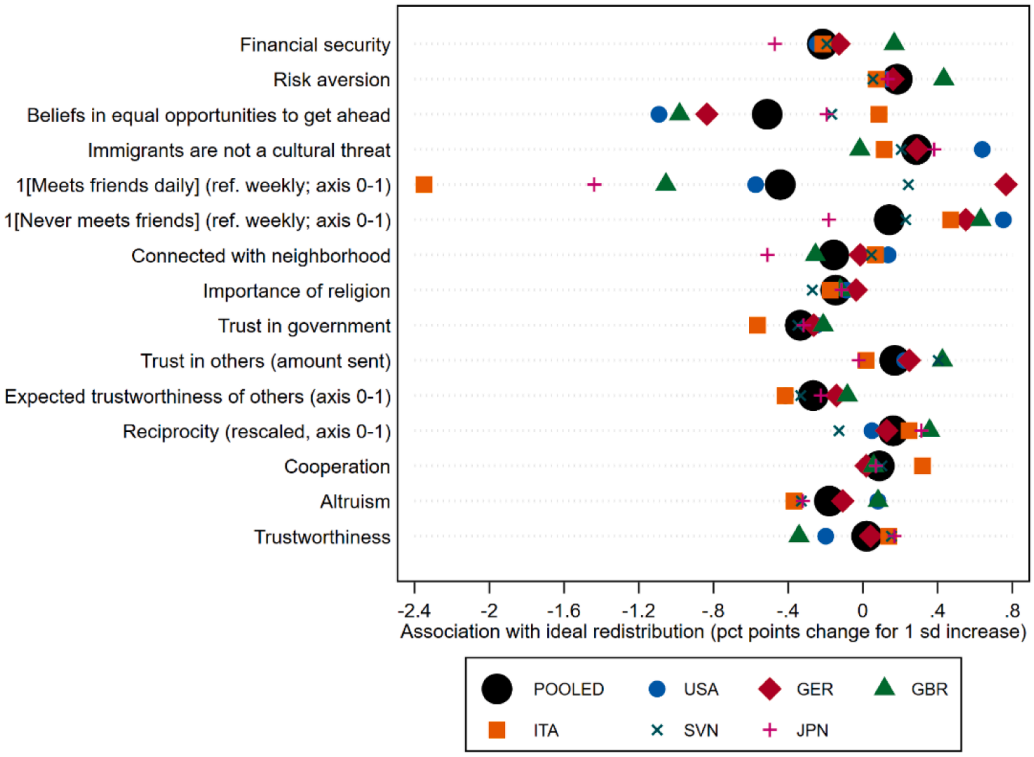

Fig. 4. Differences across countries in the association with ideal redistribution. Note: Results are derived from Appendix Table A.6.

regression, presumably because its coefficient is low and insignificant when entering the regression alone (see Table 3). Trust in others and Altruism also drop out of the LASSO regression.

An alternative way to reduce the dimensionality is to employ Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to summarize the two dimensions that include the most variables, namely “social capital” and “pro-sociality.” We choose to use only the first factor for Social capital, given that most variables included in this dimension have a similar sign and interpretation; the chosen factor correlates positively with having more frequent contact and giving more importance to religion. Instead, we choose to use two factors for pro-sociality, considering that trust in others and reciprocity are related to more redistribution, while the opposite holds for altruism and expected trustworthiness in others. The first factor correlates positively and with similar coefficients with all pro-social variables apart from reciprocity, while the second factor is mostly positively correlated with trust in others, reciprocity, and cooperation, uncorrelated with altruism and trustworthiness, and negatively correlated with expected trustworthiness. Results (column 4) confirm that higher social capital reduces demand for redistribution. For pro-sociality, the first factor has a small and not statistically significant negative coefficient – in line with the fact that it is a combination of different traits with different signs – while the second confirms the positive association with traits related to trust in others and reciprocity.

The statistical significance of our main results in Table 6, column 1, is also robust when considering multiple hypothesis testing (see Tables A.11 and A.12, Appendix). A conservative Bonferroni-Holm correction would divide p-values by the number of hypotheses being tested, in this case, 16. The main results would remain statistically significant at conventional levels. The two dimensions for which none of the coefficients would be statistically significant under the Bonferroni-Holm correction would be "social capital" and "pro-sociality." However, the principal components (column 4) for both dimensions would remain statistically significant even with the correction.

One may argue that such theoretical factors are relevant only in as much as they depend on individual political preferences, arguably a major determinant of preferences for redistribution. The fourth model in Table 6, then, controls for political orientation - originally measured on a 1–10 Likert scale in which the individual is asked to locate their political preference on a scale where one means Left and 10 means Right. We introduce dummies capturing political orientation to the right of the spectrum (8 to 10 in the original scale), center (4 to 7 in the scale), and left (residual category). We also introduce a dummy for those declining to express their political orientation. Coefficients for the key variables analyzed above decline only slightly but maintain their statistical significance. The exception is the importance of religion, whose coefficient decreases and is no longer statistically significant (Table 6, column 4).

We also perform a Shapley value decomposition of the explained variance (Fig. 3). This analysis identifies the contribution of a theoretical factor aggregating over the various indicators we used. It is not affected by some indicators having only one component while others have multiples. The substantial importance of the beliefs in fair opportunities in explaining variation in demand for redistribution is confirmed by looking at this decomposition. Slightly less than 1/5 of the total explained variation can be attributed to this factor alone. Self-interest motives (expected financial situation and risk aversion) contribute to approximately 15 % of the total explained variation. Trust in government, social capital, and pro-sociality explain each a bit more than 10 %. The large contribution of

country dummies indicates that large cross-country differences remain explained by other country-related factors. On the contrary, the variable capturing beliefs about immigrants explains only a small share of the variance. Despite having a similar coefficient as other variables, its own coefficient becomes sizable only once other factors are included in the regression, and therefore, it contributes to explaining only a small part of the overall variation.[18]

4.6. Cross-country differences in factor relevance

In an exploratory analysis, we examine the extent to which different theories apply consistently across countries, replicating our main econometric model for each country individually (Fig. 4 and Appendix, Table A.6). We test the null hypothesis that the coefficients for specific theoretical drivers are equal across country pairs (Appendix, Table A.7).

Several factors – Risk Aversion, Importance of Religion, Trust in Government, Expected Trustworthiness of Others, and Cooperation – show consistent coefficients across countries (Fig. 4), with small, statistically insignificant differences in all pairwise comparisons (Appendix, Table A.7, panels b, h, i, k, m).

Nonetheless, substantial cross-country differences emerge for other variables. We observe the largest disparities for beliefs in fair opportunities, where the difference in coefficients between the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom on the one hand, and Italy, Japan, and Slovenia on the other, is strongly significant across all nine pairwise comparisons. Specifically, this variable is a strongly significant predictor of demand for redistribution in each of the former three countries but not in any of the latter.

One tentative explanation for this divergence lies in the varying cultural emphasis on meritocratic ideals and differences in long- versus short-term orientations among these societies (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). According to Hofstede et al., long-term orientation characterizes societies where wide disparities in economic and social conditions are considered undesirable. In contrast, short-term orientation aligns with meritocracy and differentiation based on abilities. The United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom, exhibiting rather short-term orientation, traditionally uphold the belief that hard work leads to success, likely making perceptions of equal opportunities more influential in shaping attitudes toward redistribution (Alesina and Angeletos, 2005b; Hofstede et al., 2010). In contrast, Japan, which scores highest worldwide on long-term orientation, may place less emphasis on individual achievement, potentially reducing the predictive power of beliefs about equal opportunities.

Furthermore, differences in actual social mobility and institutional effectiveness in ensuring equal opportunities may contribute to these variations. For instance, Italy and Slovenia score below the OECD average in private returns to education, whereas the United States tops this ranking, and Germany ranks above average, similar to Israel and France (OECD, 2021c). In countries where systemic barriers restrict social mobility, beliefs in fair opportunities may have less impact on preferences for redistribution due to the disillusionment caused by persistent inequalities in initial opportunities, which also hinder economic growth (Checchi and Peragine, 2010).

Similarly, the coefficient for perceived immigrant threat is strongly significant in the United States, significant at the 5 % level in Japan, and weakly significant in Germany, but not significant in the other three countries. This suggests that a lower perceived threat from immigrants is associated with stronger preferences for redistribution, particularly in the United States. Accordingly, the coefficient for the U.S. is significantly higher than those for the United Kingdom, Italy, and Slovenia, and the coefficients for the U.K. and Japan are also weakly significantly different.

One potential explanation for these cross-country differences lies in the varying salience of immigration issues and societal perceptions of immigrants. In the United States, immigration has long been a contentious and polarizing issue, further intensified in 2017 by the Trump administration's announcement to restrict migration to protect U.S. workers (Alesina, Miano, and Stantcheva, 2023; Abramowitz and McCoy, 2019). In Germany, a similar dynamic may stem from public sentiment following the 2015 refugee influx, which occurred just two years before the survey. This event, enabled by Germany's relatively open asylum policies – particularly compared to the stricter immigration stances of other European Trustlab countries – likely amplified concerns over control and integration (Krastev, 2020).

In Japan, where immigration has historically been minimal due to its highly homogeneous society, debates over immigration policies have become increasingly prominent. A major policy shift in 2018 reclassified workers previously deemed unskilled as skilled, allowing their entry – a development that coincided with the period shortly before the Trustlab survey (Oishi, 2021). Although Japan's immigrant population remains small compared to the U.S. and Germany, this policy shift may explain the strong influence of immigration-related views on preferences for redistribution.

Overall, these findings suggest that certain factors may influence preferences for redistribution more in some countries than in others, potentially due to differences in societal and institutional contexts or perhaps influenced by contemporary events around the time of the survey that shift the salience of certain issues. However, these explanations are speculative and not exhaustive, highlighting the need for further investigation.[19]

[18] A standard Pratt's R2 decomposition gives a similar result.

[19] Also, some other factors exhibit significant cross-country differences. For instance, Connection with Neighbors is strongly significant only in Japan, with significant coefficient differences between Japan and the United States, Germany, and Slovenia; similar patterns emerge for other variables. Overall, each factor predicts demand for redistribution in a limited number of countries: variables like beliefs in fair opportunities, Trust in Government, and Immigrant Threat are significant in three countries; Trust in Others, Expected Trustworthiness, and Reciprocity in two; and Financial Security, Risk Aversion, Meeting with Friends, Connection with Neighbors, and Cooperation in one. Other variables do not significantly predict redistribution in any country.

4.7. Heterogeneity analysis

As a further exploratory approach, we analyze the heterogeneity in the relationship between key theoretical drivers and redistribution preferences, employing interaction terms to reveal the nuanced effects of specific socio-demographic variables. Full details are available in Online Appendix Section A.2, while the main results are summarized here.

Overall, most theoretical determinants of preferences for redistribution exhibit relatively consistent effects across different heterogeneity categories. One notable exception is perceptions about immigrants. Among non-right-wing respondents, favorable views of immigrants strongly correlate with support for redistribution. However, this relationship becomes statistically insignificant for right-wing individuals, highlighting a significant ideological divergence. This gap aligns with established literature on political orientation and redistributive attitudes. Conservative ideology often emphasizes values such as cultural cohesion, resistance to change, and endorsement of inequality (Jost et al., 2003; Haidt and Graham, 2007; Jost, 2017). For right-wing individuals, positive views on immigration are inconsistent with these principles and, therefore, do not significantly influence preferences for redistribution. In contrast, progressive politics often intertwine ideals of multiculturalism and economic equality, amplifying the link between favorable immigration attitudes and redistribution preferences among non-right-wing respondents (Fukuyama, 2018). The observed difference may also be understood through the concept of universalism, defined as the breadth of one's moral circle, extending from close social networks to broader outgroups. Enke et al. (2022a) show that the gap between the more universalist left wing and the less universalist right wing is narrower in local redistribution contexts than in broader, nationwide scenarios. Interpreting attitudes toward immigrants as a proxy for universalism, our findings similarly suggest that its influence on preferences for nationwide redistribution varies across political extremes.

Finally, the analysis reveals no ideological divide in how beliefs about equality of opportunity influence redistribution preferences, suggesting that this ideal serves as a cross-cutting principle of fairness. Across countries, the association between these beliefs and redistributive attitudes shows no substantial difference between right-wing and non-right-wing respondents. This consistency implies that equality of opportunity is a widely accepted fairness metric, shaping attitudes toward redistribution across ideological and national contexts.

5. Discussion

Experiments are normally evaluated in terms of internal and external validity. Our study fulfills internal validity criteria through uniform application of identical methods in all participating countries. Each participant encountered the same online platform and instructions (translated by fluent researchers or professional translators), consistent sample recruitment procedures, and an identical survey layout (Murtin et al., 2018). The resulting comparability across countries is enhanced further by incorporating a visually salient budget constraint into the dependent variable. This design avoids the shortcoming of many surveys, which merely ask if governments should "do more" without mentioning any costs (Alesina et al., 2018).

A potential drawback arises from our reliance on hypothetical choices. Unlike the incentivized measures of pro-sociality in the Trustlab, our measure of redistribution preferences – tax rates assigned to various income groups – does not include monetary incentives or self-interest. Economic research often emphasizes that such incentives strengthen reliability by reflecting actual preferences (Cox and Sadiraj, 2019) and warns against trusting answers to hypothetical scenarios (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2001). Indeed, distributing real funds might produce more precise responses. However, there is a growing trend toward survey-based methods in large-scale cross-country studies (Falk et al., 2018; Cappelen et al., 2025).[20] Most relevant to our study, we are not aware of evidence suggesting that the absence of monetary incentives systematically influences redistributive choices made by an impartial spectator. Furthermore, specifying tax rates for several income brackets likely increases salience relative to redistributing between only two individuals. The absence of self-interest might be advantageous in highlighting cross-country differences, as it prevents personal gain from overshadowing other-regarding motivations (Almås et al., 2020). In fact, what is emerging as the paradigm in experimental economics to study preferences for redistribution (Almås et al., 2020) involves "spectator" decisions (as in our present setting) in which participants are asked to redistribute (real) sums of money between two other "stakeholders." Arguably, if self-interest mattered in the experimental choice, it would act to increase the transfer to the self, thus obscuring other-regarding motivations. Since self-interest clearly drives decisions in the same way across countries, what really matters in explaining cross-country differences is the specific nature of other-regarding preferences. By focusing on choices that are by construction, not self-regarding, we can better appreciate cross-country differences in behavior. Admittedly, people from different countries may have different attitudes toward selfishness. That is, we may observe more selfish behavior in some countries rather than others (Grimalda et al., 2023). Therefore, it would be

[20] These approaches are regularly validated through smaller-scale incentivized experiments. Enke et al. (2022b) show that hypothetical and incentivized questions on moral universalism, altruism, and trust correlate strongly over time. Falk et al. (2023) introduce survey modules from the Global Preferences Survey (Falk et al., 2018) that predict behavior in incentivized experiments, while Dohmen et al. (2011) and Vischer et al. (2013) similarly link survey measures to actual choices under monetary stakes. Extensive research comparing hypothetical and incentivized decisions (Kühberger et al., 2002; Lagorio and Madden, 2005; Schunk and Betsch, 2006; Rabin and Weizsäcker, 2009; Bryan and Jowett, 2010; Von Gaudecker and van Soest, 2011; Abdellaoui and Kemel, 2014; Noussair et al., 2014; Kemel and Travers, 2016; Romano et al., 2017) suggests no systematic differences in behavior, confirmed by a meta-analysis of cooperation games (Balliet et al., 2014) and by Pulford et al. (2018), who report minimal effect of varying stake sizes. Yet, some studies find that larger stakes affect decisions in ultimatum games (Slonim and Roth, 1998; Cameron, 1999; Andersen et al., 2011), and Lönnqvist et al. (2011) show that incentives induce more internally consistent risk choices.

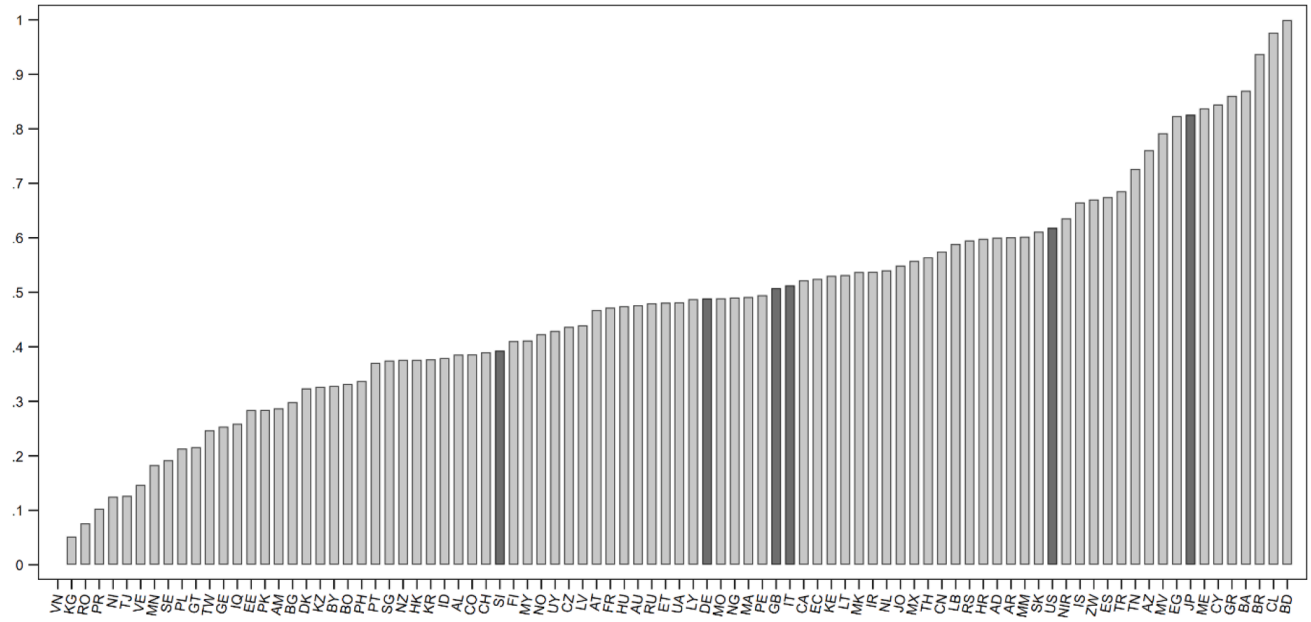

Fig. 5. Preferences for redistribution in the WVS, by country.
Note: The figure displays average country scores for an index measuring preferences for redistribution, derived from two questions in the joint European Values Survey/World Values Survey conducted across 90 countries between 2017 and 2022. Countries included in the Trustlab are highlighted with darker bars.

advisable that future studies assessing the impact of self-regarding motivations in cross-country comparisons of redistributive preferences complement the present study.

We acknowledge that our survey waves were fielded at different times across countries, and that contemporaneous political dynamics could introduce confounds in cross-country comparisons. To further assess the robustness of our results, we include additional checks controlling for respondents' political loyalty to the incumbent government and the number of days until the next general election (see Appendix Table A.10). These controls leave our core estimates largely unchanged. Finally, although some relevant political events occurred during - or just outside - the fieldwork periods, they seem mostly unrelated to redistribution.[21]

A potential caveat of our empirical approach is that correlations among predictors can affect coefficient estimates in saturated OLS models. A review of the pairwise correlations (see Appendix Fig. 8) reveals that the tightest clusters arise within theoretical domains - most notably across the trust-in-government items - where correlations are sizable. By contrast, correlations across domains are generally modest. This pattern is reflected in the horse-race regression (Table 6). When all domains enter jointly, the coefficients on core variables shrink relative to single-domain models - by about one-third for beliefs in fair opportunities (relative to Table 3) and about 50 % for general trust in government (see Table 4) - indicating that part of their explanatory power is shared. Conversely, the coefficient for immigration attitudes becomes larger and statistically significant only once other domains are included, consistent with masking in simpler specifications.

From the background of these diagnostics, we complemented OLS with estimators suited for high-dimensional, correlated data (Best Subset and LASSO selection), which penalize model complexity to identify a parsimonious predictor set (Hastie, Tibshirani, and Friedman, 2009). As shown in Table 6, these methods leave the substantive ranking of key predictors largely unchanged, with coefficients for principal variables remaining stable across OLS, Best Subset, and LASSO. To address collinearity within multi-item domains, we also collapsed prosociality variables using Principal Component Analysis yielding consistent results (see Table 6). Finally, the Shapley decomposition, collinearity-agnostic by construction, confirms the central role of fair-opportunity beliefs. Together, these checks suggest that multicollinearity does not drive our findings, though coefficients in the full model should be interpreted as robust partial associations, not structural causal effects.

A key concern regarding external validity is that the Trustlab countries do not represent the full global spectrum of economic

[21] In Slovenia, same-sex civil partnerships were approved in April 2017, during data collection. In the U.S., the Supreme Court partially reinstated the travel ban on 26 June 2017, at the end of our American wave. In Germany, the G20 summit took place on 7–8 July 2017, just before our fieldwork began on 11 July. These may have temporarily heightened immigration salience, aligning with the stronger effects of immigration variables observed in these countries. In Italy, the Veneto autonomy referendum (22 October) and the Sicilian regional election (5 November) - both concerning subnational governance - coincided with the final weeks of fieldwork. In the U.K., the Brexit Secretary resigned on 8 July 2018, during the last days of the survey, although the referendum itself occurred two years earlier. Japan's wave (15 January–19 February 2020) overlapped with the Diamond Princess quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic, which began on 3 February. As most of these events appear unrelated to redistribution or occurred outside the main fieldwork periods - and given that excluding Japan does not alter the results (Appendix Table A.10) - we are reasonably confident that temporal heterogeneity does not materially bias our cross-country comparisons.

development and cultural diversity. Their inclusion followed the OECD's open call for institutions willing to cover data collection costs and adhere to methodological standards, rather than any systematic global selection process. Nevertheless, the project covered diverse welfare state regimes, following Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology and subsequent refinement. The UK and US exemplify liberal Anglo-Saxon models, Germany represents the conservative corporatist system, Italy adds a Southern European Mediterranean variant (Ferrera, 1996), Slovenia reflects a post-socialist welfare model in Central Eastern Europe, and Japan illustrates an East Asian "productivist" regime (Holliday, 2000). These six countries together contribute about 40 % of global GDP, highlighting the economic relevance of our sample. While it is skewed toward high-income countries, those are precisely where redistribution policies are most pronounced (Causa and Hermansen, 2018), whereas such policies are rather limited, though relatively important, in low-income countries (Abdullah et al., 2015; Anderson et al., 2017; Lustig, 2017). In terms of cultural heterogeneity, including Japan and Slovenia ensures that our sample is not confined to "WEIRD" countries (Henrich et al., 2010). It spans four of the eight cultural regions proposed by Inglehart and Welzel (2005): Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Europe, Catholic Europe, and Confucian.

To gauge global variation in redistributive attitudes, we used European Values Survey/World Values Survey data from 2017 to 2022, focusing on two commonly used questions (Alesina and Giuliano, 2011; Haggard et al., 2013). The first question asked the degree to which the participant agreed – on a 10-point Likert scale - with the statement that "Individuals should take more responsibility for providing for themselves" versus "The state should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for." The second question asked participants to state whether "Incomes should be made more equal" versus "There should be greater incentives for individual effort," again using a 10-point Likert scale. These items are commonly employed in analyzing attitudes toward redistribution (Alesina and Giuliano, 2011; Haggard et al., 2013). We computed the first principal component, rescaled it to a zero-to-one range by adding the minimum value observed in Vietnam and subsequently dividing it by the maximum value found in Bangladesh. We found that 51 out of 90 surveyed countries (56.7 %) fall within the Trustlab sample's span. Within this scale, Slovenia exhibits the lowest demand for redistribution, Japan the highest, and the other four countries lie between these extremes. Furthermore, a survey study run in China, the US, and Germany with nationally representative samples finds that demand for redistribution in China is overall close to that in Germany, although Chinese fairness views are more aligned to those held in the US (Almås et al., 2025; see also He et al., 2019 for similar conclusions). Fig. 5

As reviewed in Section 2, extensive evidence suggests that individuals often misperceive the extent of inequality in their country (and also in the world), their rank in the income distribution, as well as the extent of social mobility and immigrants share. One may wonder how these biases affect our framework and conclusions. Since it has been established that demand for redistribution depends on individual perceptions of inequality, rather than actual inequality (Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018), and since our measurement of attitudes toward inequality depends on subjective, rather than objective, beliefs or attitudes about inequality, we believe that our theoretical framework remains valid. In other words, since we have a subjective measurement of both our dependent and the independent variables, and since real-life demand for redistribution is driven by perceived inequality rather than actual inequality, we believe that our approach is externally valid in taking our experimental measurement to represent real-life demand for redistribution.

It is more difficult to evaluate how our conclusions would change should individuals receive information on the actual level of these relevant factors. We can formulate some conjectures examining results from so-called information experiments (see Ciani et al., 2021, for a meta-analysis), which study how individuals respond to receiving the correct magnitude of the above variables, and from studies that correlate the evolution of perceptions with changes in demand for redistribution (OECD, 2021b). The basic insight from these studies is that an increase in perceived inequality raises *concerns* about economic disparities but has a weaker impact on the *demand* for redistributive policies. Even if this effect is relatively small, it is noticeable that people receiving information that their income rank is higher (lower) than what they thought tend to decrease (respectively, increase) their demand for redistribution (Cruces et al., 2013; Karadja et al., 2017). This result suggests that, even if unveiling one's actual rank in the income distribution would not, in first approximation,[22] alter the overall demand for redistribution, it may increase polarization (Alesina, Miano, and Stantcheva, 2020). Moreover, demand for redistribution is roughly similar in the national and world context after people are informed of their position in the world income distribution (Fehr et al., 2022).

A similar conclusion holds for experiments revealing correct information about intergenerational mobility (Alesina et al., 2018). Revealing correct information about the true shares and origins of immigrants is ineffective in changing demand for redistribution (Alesina et al., 2023). If anything, priming people to think about immigrants has the effect of significantly reduce their support for redistribution. It must be added that people tend to react more to emotionally laden stories of, for instance, hard-working immigrants than to factually correct numerical information. Moreover, Stantcheva (2021) shows that educational video treatments explaining the redistributive effects of policies can substantially shift self-reported preferences for redistribution, with effect sizes equivalent to nearly one-quarter of the partisan gap between Democrats and Republicans. Similarly, Balietti, Getoor, Goldstein, and Watts (2021) find that engaging in dialogue about political issues, such as wealth redistribution, can reduce polarization, particularly when individuals feel a sense of closeness to their discussion partner (also see Hoy et al., 2024).

The tentative conclusion we draw from this overview is that misperceptions are not likely to affect our theoretical framework and our results. Revealing information to correct misperceptions is likely to have relatively small effects in the aggregate, although it may move demand for redistribution by the rich and the poor in opposite directions, thus increasing polarization. This result, however, crucially depends on how information is conveyed, as stories of individual cases or about the functioning of the economy seem to shift

[22] Nevertheless, the basic insight by Maréchal et al. (2025) is that the best predictor of a country's level of redistribution is the preference by people at the very bottom of income distribution, something that also emerges in Grimalda et al. (2023). If this is the case, then, revealing the real extent of inequality may significantly increase demand for redistribution.

opinions more than numerical information.

Finally, one might question whether preferences for redistribution measured between 2017 and 2018 for all countries except Japan (where the Trustlab survey was conducted in 2020) remain stable over time, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, extensive research has shown that preferences for redistribution are quite stable over time, even in the face of rising income inequality since the 1980s and significant societal shifts such as the Soviet Union breakdown, 9/11, and wars (Kenworthy and McCall, 2008; Weisstanner, 2023; Milanovic, 2024).[23] As for the effect of COVID-19, Cappelen et al. (2021) found an overall insignificant effect of COVID-19-related priming on preferences for redistribution in a large-scale sample of the US population. This also emerges when comparing the first and second US waves of Trustlab, the latter of which was conducted in 2020 (Grimalda et al., 2023). We find no significant effect for the wave in which the survey was conducted ($p = 0.677$) in a regression with the preferred tax rate difference between the top 1 % and the bottom 50 % as the dependent variable and demographic characteristics as controls.

6. Conclusions

This paper offers new cross-country evidence on determinants of redistributive preferences, exploiting the unique features of the Trustlab survey. We examine how expected economic conditions, risk aversion, beliefs about equality of opportunity, immigration, trust in others, and trust in government jointly shape preferred tax-based redistribution levels – separating redistribution from preferences over government size. A core finding is that faith in a functioning meritocracy, captured by the belief that hard work leads to economic success, is the single strongest predictor of lower demand for redistribution. This aligns with past experimental (Konow, 2000; Cappelen et al., 2013; Almås et al., 2020) and survey evidence (Fong, 2001; Alesina and Giuliano, 2011) showing that people care not only about inequality per se but also about the process generating it (Cappelen, Falch, and Tungodden, 2020).

However, the concept of meritocracy, often used as a justification for high inequality, has faced recent criticism. Critics argue that while talent and hard work are important, chance events and circumstances significantly impact outcomes. By overstating the role of personal merit, society overlooks external factors contributing to success, potentially leading to unjust policies and a lack of empathy (Frank, 2016). Moreover, it has been suggested that meritocracy perpetuates inequality by creating a new educational aristocracy, where elite institutions reinforce social stratification (Markovits, 2019).

Additionally, the belief that one's success is solely due to personal effort fosters a sense of superiority among the advantaged and undermines social cohesion, fueling populist sentiments and resentment toward elites among the less fortunate (Sandel, 2020). Furthermore, the unequal distribution of opportunities to develop one's talents in contemporary societies (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, and Saez, 2014) is incompatible with the ideal of a true meritocracy, where everyone has an equal chance to cultivate their abilities (Sandel, 2021). Additionally, since talents are often innate and beyond personal control, prevailing meritocratic ideals may not fully align with the standards of equality of opportunity (Fleurbaey, 2008; Roemer and Trannoy, 2015; Wooldridge, 2021).

Despite these critiques, our results suggest that belief in a functioning meritocracy – as implied by the wording of our question – is strongly predictive of redistributive preferences. Furthermore, recent experiments, primarily in the United States, show that people tend to disregard random factors, such as innate abilities or characteristics beyond personal control, when making redistribution choices. Such findings suggest an acceptance of even an "imperfect" meritocracy that is incompatible with equality of opportunity standards (Bhattacharya and Mollerstrom, 2022; Andre, 2025; Preuss, Reyes, Somerville, and Wu, 2024).

Trust in government is the second strongest single predictor, although contrary to part of the previous literature, we find that the higher the trust in government, the lower the demand for redistribution. Negative attitudes towards immigrants has a negative coefficient, consistently with the presence of in-group altruism. The different components that make up the dimensions of self-interest (current income, financial security, and risk aversion) and social capital (the individual's personal connectedness with others) matter less, although each dimension is important when all components are considered together. Among prosocial factors, trust in others and reciprocity are the strongest factors with a positive association. Expected trustworthiness has a negative coefficient, which can be reconciled with the idea of private insurance but not with theories based on individual expectations of civic mindedness. Altruism also has a negative coefficient, a result which can be accounted for by individuals being averse to disadvantageous inequality but indifferent to advantageous inequality.

Lastly, cross-country differences are substantial. Beliefs about fair opportunities for upward mobility strongly predict redistribution preferences in the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom, but matter less in Italy, Japan, and Slovenia. Beliefs about immigrant integration are strongly relevant in the United States but (much) less so in other countries. The heterogeneity analysis across dimensions of political orientation provides two key insights. First, certain factors influencing demand for redistribution are specific to political ideology, while others are broadly applicable. For instance, attitudes toward immigrants significantly shape redistribution preferences primarily among non-right-wing respondents, particularly in the US and Germany. A similar directional trend is observed in other countries, though it does not achieve statistical significance when comparing political camps. In contrast, beliefs in fair opportunities show no notable differences across political lines, suggesting that (meritocratic) fairness ideals in the studied countries may be ideologically neutral. This finding partially contrasts with previous literature, such as Alesina et al. (2018). Second, while theoretical drivers of redistribution preferences vary across political orientations, these variations are generally less pronounced than the differences in explanatory power observed across countries.

Our findings carry important policy implications for designing sustainable redistribution systems in democracies, where public

[23] The cross-country evidence reported by the OECD (2021b) indicates that although concerns about inequality have grown over the past decades in line with the actual widening of income disparities, the demand for redistribution has only increased slightly.

support is critical (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004). The first lesson is that, in all countries, the desired level of redistribution seems to be considerably higher than the actual one (see Fig. 1 and Table A.2). This confirms the findings of previous literature (Osberg and Smeeding, 2006; Norton and Ariely, 2011; Durante et al., 2014; OECD, 2021b). The fact that this result is obtained through an elicitation mechanism in which the government budget is binding confirms the validity of previous results. In principle, this significant deviation between preferences and reality should lead to welfare losses (Alesina and Giuliano, 2011). Regardless of the amount and means of redistribution a government intends to implement; our analysis of the factors associated with demand for redistribution remains relevant for policy. The fact that people who are less content with equality of opportunity demand more redistribution indicates an important trade-off that the government may want to exploit to either reduce inequality or reduce the demand for redistribution. In particular, interventions that enhance perceptions of fair opportunity - such as expanding access to education and social mobility programs, will, based on our results, engender lower demand for redistribution and thus, presumably, higher social welfare. Likewise, strengthening trust in government through transparent and efficient service delivery may also temper redistribution demands, particularly in low-trust settings, consistent with evidence that institutional credibility shapes welfare preferences (Kuziemko et al., 2015).

Our findings can also be integrated with the growing literature on misperceptions and political polarization to identify domains in which misperceptions are particularly detrimental to social welfare. The finding that Europeans tend to hold pessimistic views about the possibility of upward social mobility (Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso, 2018) clearly reverberates in a demand for redistribution that remains unmet. Correcting this misperception should reduce demand for redistribution and thus increase social welfare. Conversely, correcting misperceptions in countries characterized by overoptimism about upward mobility, such as the US, should lead to a rise in demand for redistribution. Relatedly, correcting widespread misperceptions about the size and cultural distance from the native population of immigrants (Alesina, Miano, and Stantcheva, 2023) will likely have the consequence of further increasing demand for redistribution.

Our finding of extensive cross-country heterogeneity is also policy relevant. Ultimately, it calls for country-specific tailored strategies. In contexts that are more sensitive to meritocracy, such as the US and the UK, promoting equal opportunity may be most effective in satisfying citizens' demands. In countries like Japan or Italy, policies that enhance financial security, such as targeted social programs and economic reforms, and build trust in the government, may yield a greater impact. Ultimately, sustainable redistribution requires not only reallocating resources but also shaping the beliefs and institutional trust that sustain social cohesion and long-term stability.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.euroecorev.2025.105150.

Data availability

The Trustlab data can be requested by researchers interested in replicating the analysis by sending an e-mail to the OECD Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity.

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