
UNEQUAL DEMOCRACIES

Working paper n°16

April, 2020

Introducing the Inequality and Politics Survey: Preliminary Findings

Jonas Pontusson, Nathalie Giger,
Jan Rosset and Davy-Kim Lascombes



ABSTRACT:

Inequality and Politics is an online survey that was carried out in thirteen West European countries and the United States in 2019. The dataset includes representative samples of at least 2000 respondents per country. The survey probes citizens' perceptions of economic and political inequalities and their attitudes towards "inequality-correcting policies." This manuscript explains the theoretical motivations behind the survey, describes the dataset and presents some preliminary findings pertaining to five themes: perceptions of economic inequality, normative evaluations of inequality, explanations that respondents give for inequalities, perceptions of political inequality and redistributive policy preferences. Our findings shed new light on the political effects of economic inequality in a comparative perspective.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The survey itself and work on this paper have been funded by the European Research Council (Advanced Grant No. 741538, with Jonas Pontusson as PI) and the Swiss National Science Foundation (Grant No. 100017_178980, with Nathalie Giger as PI). We wish to thank Macarena Ares, Paul Marx and David Rueda and all the members of the Unequal Democracies research team for critical comments and constructive pertaining to all aspects of survey design. Special thanks to Konstantin Käppner for generating the inequality data presented in Table 1.

“Inequality and Politics” is a public opinion survey that we designed and implemented in thirteen West European countries plus the United States in 2019. In this paper, we will set out the motivations behind our survey, describe the data generated by the survey and present some preliminary findings. We want to advertise the research that we are doing, but also let other researchers know about the opportunities that the Inequality and Politics Survey provides.¹

The paper is organized as follows. We begin, in the first section, by explaining how our survey speaks to current debates among scholars working on the politics of inequality and redistribution. The second section briefly describes technical aspects of survey design and implementation as well as the data generated by the Inequality and Politics Survey and the third section presents some descriptive data on levels of income inequality and recent trends in income inequality in the fourteen countries included in our survey. Against this background, we then proceed to present preliminary findings pertaining to a number of topics of general interest. First, we will briefly address the question of how accurately survey respondents perceive inequality in their country. Secondly, we will present some findings about normative evaluations of inequality. Crudely put, we are interested in ascertaining the extent to which respondents consider perceived inequalities as unfair. Thirdly, we will begin to probe what our survey can tell us about people’s explanations of inequality, focusing on the extent to which respondents attribute responsibility for (rising) inequality to governments or corporate actors, as distinct from impersonal structural forces, such as technological change and globalization. Closely related to this question, we will also present some findings on perceptions of political inequality. Do citizens perceive the unequal responsiveness documented by recent studies? Finally, we will revisit the question of preferences for redistributive policy, illustrating how questions in our survey allow us to go beyond current literature by taking into account the salience of inequality as a societal problem and unpacking the concept of “support for redistribution.”

With regard to each of these topics, we will present descriptive data pertaining to variation across countries as well as variation across survey respondents sorted into income deciles. To be clear, our descriptive analyses only touch on associations between responses to different survey questions and there is no ambition whatsoever to test causal hypotheses in this paper. It should also be noted at the outset that our presentation of preliminary findings is quite selective. Not only does our survey include questions soliciting standard socio-demographic information about respondents as well as questions about their political participation and ideological orientation, but it also includes a considerable number of questions about attitudes to inequality and policy preferences that we will leave aside for the purposes of this paper.

¹ The dataset and full documentation will be made publically available through FORSbase (<https://forsbase.unil.ch/>) before the end of 2020.

1. Theoretical motivations

The theoretical motivations behind the design of our survey derive from debates in the literature on the political consequences of rising income inequality in liberal democracies and, more specifically, the literature on preferences for redistribution. Considered as a collective enterprise, the many empirical studies of preferences for redistribution that have been produced over the last decade or so represent an ongoing effort to address the limitations of rational choice models of demand for redistribution, as exemplified by Meltzer and Richard (1981). The Meltzer-Richard model formalizes two broadly shared intuitions: first, that middle-income voters stand to gain more from redistribution when total income is more concentrated at the top of the income distribution; and, second, that electoral competition ensures that government policy caters to the wishes of middle-income voters. Taken together, these two propositions imply that redistribution rises with inequality. As commonly noted, however, cross-national comparison does not bear out this prediction: quite the contrary, tax-transfers systems tend to be less redistributive in countries with more unequal distributions of income before taxes and transfers. Also, rising top income shares in the 1990s and 2000s do not seem to have led governments in OECD countries to compensate low- and middle-income households by increasing redistributive spending or shifting the tax burden onto the rich. In most countries, the redistributive effect of taxes and transfers actually declined in this period (Pontusson and Weisstanner 2018).

Recent literature raises four distinct sets of issues that call into question the adequacy of rational choice models of how inequality shapes individual preferences for redistribution. To begin with, a prominent strand of recent literature calls into question the informational requirements of such models. The government response to rising income inequality predicted by the Meltzer-Richard model depends crucially on individuals in the middle of the income distribution having a reasonably clear and accurate understanding of how their income compares to the mean income (before taxes and transfers). As argued by Gimpelson and Treisman (2018), among others, perceptions of inequality mediate the impact of changes in inequality on citizens' policy preferences. There are good reasons to suppose that people's perceptions of income inequality as well as their own place in the income distribution are quite inaccurate, maybe even distorted in some systematic fashion. While a number of single country studies indicate that citizens commonly underestimate the degree of inequality in their country (Norton and Ariely 2011, Page and Goldstein 2016, Engelhart and Wegener 2016, Karadja *et al* 2017, Boudreau and MacKenzie 2018), there are also studies that find the opposite (Eriksson and Simpson 2012, Chambers *et al* 2014). As cross-national evidence on perceptions of inequality has so far been scarce (but see Giger and Lascombes 2019), our data shed new light on these questions.

Secondly, we know from existing literature that some individuals are more averse to inequality than others and that normative evaluations also vary across countries and across types—or perceived sources—of inequality (see Alesina and Angeletos 2005, Alesina *et al.* 2012, Osberg and Smeeding 2006, Alesina and Giuliano 2009, Durante *et al.* 2014, Esarey *et al.* 2011, Fong, 2001, and Fong and Luttmer 2011). In general, and especially in the US, income differences that are perceived as linked to talent or effort are considered to be more legitimate than income differences due to luck or privilege (Tyler 2011, Becker 2019). As

several studies show, normative evaluations inform preferences for redistribution. In our view, a more interesting question, yet to be systematically investigated on a cross-national basis, is how normative evaluations condition citizens' responses to objective and perceived changes in inequality. We have sought to break new ground in this broad domain by designing a survey module with questions about procedural fairness and fairness principles as well as normative evaluations of distributive outcomes.

A third set of issues, less prominently featured in existing literature on preferences for redistribution, concerns how people understand (or explain) perceived changes in inequality. People may well perceive an increase in inequality and consider it to be "bad," but also think that it is an inevitable consequence of technological change or globalization. It is not obvious that such individuals will vote for parties that promise to redistribute income. A related question pertains to whether citizens attribute blame for inequality to political actors or corporate elites. As the literature on blame attribution (e.g., Rudolph 2006, Tilley and Hobolt 2011, and Malhotra and Kuo 2008) this is bound to influence behavioral responses to (perceived) changes in inequality.

Fourthly and closely related to the last point, there is the question of the salience of inequality for political behavior. An important limitation of the Meltzer-Richard model is, of course, that it conceives of the level of redistribution as the only issue at stake in electoral politics. It is hardly far-fetched to suppose that some voters who stand to gain from redistribution might be "distracted" (and might have become increasingly "distracted") by cultural issues (e.g. Lee and Roemer 2006, De La O and Rodden 2008, Kurella and Rosset 2018, Rosset and Kurella 2020).

As we will explain in what follows, our survey includes questions designed to capture the salience that respondents assign to income inequality as a societal problem as well as their perceptions and normative evaluations of income inequality. It also includes questions that probe how respondents explain income differences and perceived changes in inequality. An important and distinctive feature of our survey is that many of our questions ask specifically about high-end and low-end inequality. (By "high-end inequality," we mean the difference between the richest decile and the median and by "low-end inequality," we mean the difference between the median and the poorest decile of the income distribution). Following Lupu and Pontusson (2011), our survey has been designed to allow for analyses of how these different forms of income inequality affect political attitudes and behavior.

Yet another *problématique* that has also informed the design of our survey has to do with the meaning and measurement "support for redistribution." Many studies of preferences for redistribution rely on answers to the general question about support for redistribution asked by the European Social Survey (ESS) and the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) as the dependent variable (e.g., Finseraas 2009, Kulin and Svallfors 2013, Rueda and Stegmueller 2016). In all OECD countries, large majorities of respondents either agree or strongly agree with the statement that "the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels" and support for redistribution, measured in this manner, has been very stable over the time period covered by ISSP and ESS surveys (see, e.g., Kenworthy and McCall 2008, Gonthier 2017). The wording of the ESS/ISSP question is undoubtedly vague and arguably biased in favor of support for redistribution. It is at least plausible that more specific questions about policy choices with distributive implications would more effectively capture the effects of objective or perceived changes in inequality on citizens' policy preferences. Related to this, it is arguably important to distinguish between redistribution that primarily benefits low-income households and redistribution that

proportionately benefits middle-income as well as low-income households (cf. Cavallé and Trump 2014). To enable inquiries along these lines, our survey replicates a number of policy questions that were fielded as part of the welfare-state module of the European Social Survey of 2008.

Finally, we have drawn inspiration from the growing literature on unequal responsiveness or income bias in democratic representation pioneered by Bartels (2008) and Gilens (2012).² From the point of view of this literature, the main problem with the Meltzer-Richard model is not its assumptions about how inequality affects what citizens want, but rather its assumptions about how parties and governments respond to what citizens want. The comparative study of policy responsiveness requires matching survey data with data on policy outcomes and our survey cannot, by itself, add much to this research agenda. However, we have sought to contribute to the growing comparative literature on this topic by fielding a number of questions designed to capture respondents' perceptions and explanations of political inequality in their country. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time that these questions have been fielded in a cross-national survey.

A feature of the Inequality and Politics Survey that will not be discussed in this paper deserves to be briefly mentioned before we proceed. Informed by previous work by Mosimann and Pontusson (2017, 2020) and by Rennwald and Pontusson (2020), the survey includes a module dedicated to trade-union membership. It is commonplace in analyses of preferences for redistribution to include trade-union membership as a control variable and studies that include this variable consistently find that union members are more supportive of redistribution than other survey respondents. As Mosimann and Pontusson (2017, 2020) argue, there are strong reasons to suppose that the trade-union membership effect varies depending on the kinds of unions to which individuals belong as well as the duration and nature of their involvement in union activities. Our survey includes questions designed to allow for more in-depth analysis of the heterogeneity union membership effects.

2. Survey description

The Inequality and Politics Survey fielded by IPSOS on behalf of two research projects at the University of Geneva: "Unequal Democracies," directed by Jonas Pontusson with funding from the European Research Council (Advanced Grant No. 741538) and "Inequality in the Mind," directed by Nathalie Giger with funding from the Swiss National Science Foundations (Grant No. 100017_178980). In complementary ways, the two projects seek to understand how inequality affects the political attitudes and behavior of the citizens and political elites through comparative analysis of liberal democracies in Western Europe.³

² Recent studies show that unequal responsiveness is not a uniquely American phenomenon: see Elsässer, Hense and Schäfer (2018) on Germany, Persson and Gilljam (2018) on Sweden, and Schakel (2019) on the Netherlands.

³ For further information, see <https://unequaldemocracies.unige.ch/en/home/> and <https://www.unige.ch/inequalityinthemind/welcome/>.

The survey was fielded in the following fourteen countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States. We included the United States in the survey because of the importance of the American case and cross-Atlantic comparisons in the literatures with which we seek to engage (see, e.g., Alesina and Glaeser 2004, Osberg and Smeeding 2006). Among West European countries, we selected countries to ensure that the survey would include at least two cases representing each of the three or four “regime types” identified by the comparative welfare-state literature (Esping-Andersen 1990, Ferrera 1996) and to maximize cross-national variation with respect to the structure of inequality as well as the level of inequality and recent inequality trajectories (see section 3).

IPSOS implemented the survey using a self-administered online questionnaire, with all residents aged between 16 and 75 as the target population in each country. The fieldwork took place between June and September 2019 and lasted about six weeks in each country. To obtain nationally representative samples, survey respondents were recruited based on quotas for regions of residence, gender, five age groups, levels of education (university degree or not) and income quintiles. While income quintiles were based data used by European Social Survey of 2016, quotas for region, gender, age, and level of education were set based on 2013 Eurostat figures. Similar to the ESS, our questionnaire also asked respondents to place the disposable income of their household in country-specific income bands, allowing us to monitor quotas for income and to assign survey respondents to income deciles.⁴

The number of completed interviews per country ranged between 2001 and 2067, with the median duration of completion per country ranging between 16 and 19 minutes. Except for the variables required for monitoring the quotas, respondents had the opportunity not to answer questions by moving to the next question or in some cases by choosing “prefer not to say” or “don’t know” response categories. As the share of item non-response was very low and in order to simplify presentation, we report results for those respondents who gave an answer to a given item in what follows. Additional samples of union members were interviewed in Germany, Sweden and the UK in order to reach at least 2000 union members in each of these countries, but respondents from these additional samples are not included in the analyses presented below.

Several quality checks were implemented by IPSOS. These checks served to make sure that respondents are real and unique and also to identify bias in respondents’ answers, notably bias associated with satisficing. Replicating questions from well-established international surveys, we are also able to compare answers of our survey with those of previous surveys. As a first test

⁴ The original data collected includes 20 income categories per country. The bounds of the categories were set in such a way that by merging several of these categories it is possible to create country specific income quintiles and/or deciles corresponding to the official statistics. Note also minor deviations from the hard quotas were allowed in order to allow the fieldwork to advance swiftly. With two exceptions, the data presented here have been weighted to correct for the discrepancies between set quotas and numbers of completed questionnaires. The two exceptions are as follows: for lack of official statistics, we have not implemented quotas or weights for education in the UK and for income in the US.

along these lines, we show in the Appendix that answers to the general ESS/ISSP question about support for redistribution, aggregated to the country level, are very similar in our survey and in the European Social Surveys of 2016 and 2018.

3. Inequality patterns in survey countries

Some background information about income inequality in the fourteen countries included in our survey is in order before we look at survey results. Based on most recent available micro data from EU Statistics on Income and Living Standards and the Luxembourg Income Study, Table 1 provides estimates for three different measures of income inequality in 2016-17: the Gini coefficient, the ratio of income in the 90th percentile to the income in the 50th percentile and the ratio of income in the 50th percentile to income in the 10th percentile. Table 3 in turn reports on changes in each of these measures from the early to 2000s until the most recent observations. It is important to note that these estimates refer to the distribution of disposable household income (adjusted for household size in conventional fashion), i.e., they take into account the redistributive effects of taxes and transfer payments. We focus on disposable income inequality or, in other words, “post-fisc inequality” because we are interested in how people perceive inequality and what they think about it. While formal models of redistributive politics commonly suppose that citizens know something about the pre-fisc distribution of income, it is disposable income inequality that people experience in their daily lives and read about it newspapers.⁵

In Table 1, the countries are listed from the most unequal to the least unequal based on Gini coefficients, measuring the overall distribution of income. For the ratio measures, pertaining to the upper half and the lower half of the income distribution, country rankings are indicated in parentheses. By all three measures of inequality, the United States stands out as the most unequal of our fourteen countries. Also, it is noteworthy that Italy, Spain and Portugal rank near the top on all three measures. Among the other ten countries, country rankings vary depending on the particular measure of inequality that we consider. Belgium and Sweden are the most equal countries overall and also as the two countries with the most compressed 90-50 ratios, but quite a few other countries, most notably France and the Netherlands, have more compressed 50-10 ratios than either Belgium or Sweden.

Summarizing trends over the 10-15 years prior to our survey, Table 2 reports on absolute as well as percentage changes in Gini coefficients, 90-50 ratios and 50-10 ratios. The countries are here listed from the biggest absolute increase in the Gini coefficient to the biggest absolute decline in the Gini coefficient. For changes in 90-50 and 50-10 ratios, country rankings are again provided in parentheses. The first thing to be noted is that

⁵ Commonly measured before taxes, top income shares (1% or 0.1%) might be an exception in that their rise has been widely publicized in many countries. For all countries included in our survey, data on top income shares are available at <https://wid.world/fr/accueil/>. In quite a few countries, top income shares fell sharply in the wake of the financial crisis of 2007-8 and subsequently recovered or stabilized at lower levels.

rising inequality has not been a uniform trend for disposable income since the mid-2000s. The Gini coefficient increased by more than 4% in six countries, increased by about 2% in another two countries, held more or less steady in three countries, and declined by more than 4% in three countries. Similarly, 90-50 and 50-10 ratios either held steady or declined in at least half of the countries included in our survey.

Table 1: Disposable household income inequality in 2017

	Gini coefficient	90-50 ratio	50-10 ratio
USA	.382 (1)	2.20 (1)	2.61 (1)
Italy	.329 (2)	1.95 (6)	2.31 (3)
Spain	.329 (2)	2.02 (4)	2.35 (2)
UK	.326 (4)	2.10 (2)	1.99 (7)
Portugal	.321 (5)	2.04 (3)	2.07 (4)
Ireland	.307 (6)	1.97 (5)	1.94 (9)
Switzerland	.296 (7)	1.88 (7)	1.93 (11)
Germany	.294 (8)	1.83 (8)	2.05 (6)
Denmark	.278 (9)	1.71 (12)	1.87 (12)
France	.277 (10)	1.77 (10)	1.82 (14)
Netherlands	.274 (11)	1.73 (11)	1.85 (13)
Austria	.272 (12)	1.79 (9)	1.94 (9)
Sweden	.270 (13)	1.66 (13)	2.07 (4)
Belgium	.259 (14)	1.66 (13)	1.98 (8)

Note: Figures for Ireland and the US are based on data for 2016 rather than 2017.

Table 2: Changes in disposable household inequality since the early 2000s

	reference year	Gini coefficient		90-50 ratio		50-10 ratio	
		abs change	% change	Abs change	% change	abs change	% change
Denmark	2003	.039 (1)	16.3	.12 (2)	7.6	.13 (4)	7.5
Sweden	2003	.038 (2)	16.4	.09 (4)	5.7	.31 (1)	17.6
Germany	2004	.033 (3)	6.4	.11 (3)	6.4	.23 (2)	12.6
Spain	2005	.019 (4)	6.1	.08 (5)	4.1	.06 (7)	2.6
USA	2004	.015 (5)	4.1	.15 (1)	7.3	-.01 (9)	-0.4
Netherlands	2004	.012 (6)	4.6	.00 (9)	0.0	.13 (4)	7.6
Italy	2006	.011 (7)	3.5	-.01 (10)	-0.5	.17 (3)	7.9
Austria	2004	.007 (8)	2.6	.01 (7)	0.6	.12 (6)	6.6
France	2004	-.002 (9)	-0.7	-.05 (12)	-2.8	-.03 (11)	-1.6
Switzerland	2006	-.002 (9)	-0.7	-.02 (11)	-1.1	-.02 (10)	-1.0
Belgium	2003	-.003 (11)	-1.2	-.06 (13)	-3.5	.01 (8)	0.5
UK	2005	-.014 (12)	-4.1	.01 (7)	0.5	-.18 (13)	-8.3
Ireland	2003	-.014 (12)	-4.4	.05 (6)	2.6	-.27 (14)	-12.2
Portugal	2006	-.049 (14)	-4.9	-.40 (14)	-16.4	-.11 (12)	-5.1

Along with Spain, Denmark, Sweden and Germany stand out in Table 2 as the countries that have experienced the most rapid growth of disposable income inequality since the early 2000s. This holds not only for change measured relative to initial levels, but also for change measured in absolute terms. And it holds more or less consistently across the three measures of inequality. The US is the country in which the 90-50 ratio increased the most, but the 50-10 ratio actually declined in the US over the same period, leaving the US in fifth place as far as rising overall inequality is concerned. At the egalitarian end of the spectrum, Portugal stands out as an exceptional case in which the 90-50 ratio and the 50-10 ratio both declined substantially. While we observe significant reductions in the 90-50 ratio for France, Switzerland and Belgium, we observe even more significant reductions in the 50-10 for Ireland and the UK.

4. Perceptions of economic inequality

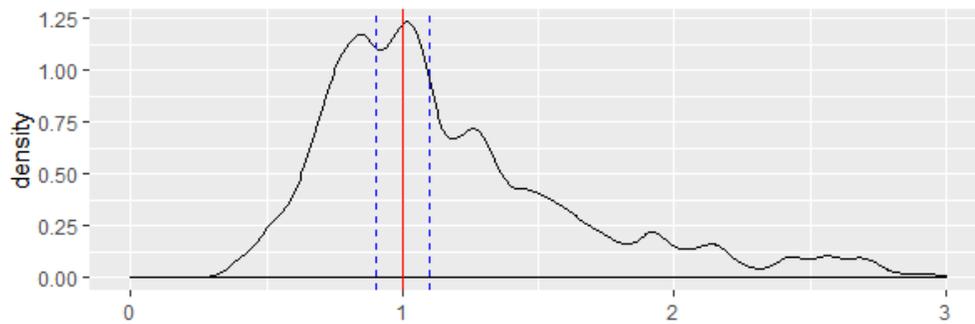
Turning to the survey results, let us begin by looking at how citizens' perceptions of inequality and how well these perceptions match with the objective reality. Alongside questions about overall inequality, we asked respondents to give us their estimates of the income of a household at the bottom of the income distribution (10th percentile), a household in the middle of the distribution (50th percentile) and a household at the top (90th percentile) in their country's currency. Based on this question, we have calculated perceived 90-50 and 50-10 ratios that can be compared with the actual (objective) 90-50 and 50-10 ratios reported in Table 1 above. Dividing perceived ratios by actual ratios in turn gives us a measure of the accuracy of respondents' estimates that equals 1 if perceived ratios are identical to actual ratios and takes on values greater than 1 when respondents overestimate decile ratios and, conversely, less than 1 when they underestimate these ratios. Figure 1 shows the results of this exercise for our full sample of respondents from fourteen countries.

Not surprisingly, Figure 1 (overleaf) shows that people have a hard time correctly estimating inequality in their country. If we accept an error margin of 10% (indicated by the vertical lines in Figure 1), we would say that roughly 20% of the population gets it right but there are vast errors at the margins of the distribution. Perhaps more importantly, Figure 1 illustrates that over-estimation and under-estimation are both quite common. Overall, there is a tendency to overestimate income differences and this tendency is more pronounced for the 90-50 ratio than the 50-10 ratio. Plausibly, the latter finding reflects growing public attention to top income shares in recent years.⁶

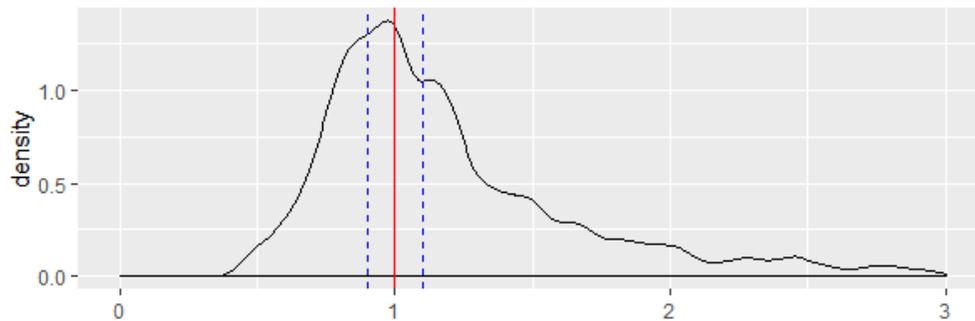
⁶ According to ISSP data, perceived top-end income inequality increased markedly in Australia, Germany and the US from 1999 to 2009 (Giger and Lascombes 2019).

Figure 1: Distribution of errors in the perception of income inequality

(A). 50-10 ratios



(B). 90-50 ratios:

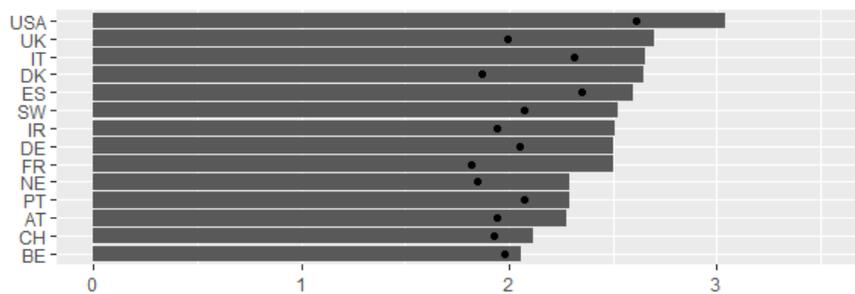


Note: the lines signify an error margin of 10%

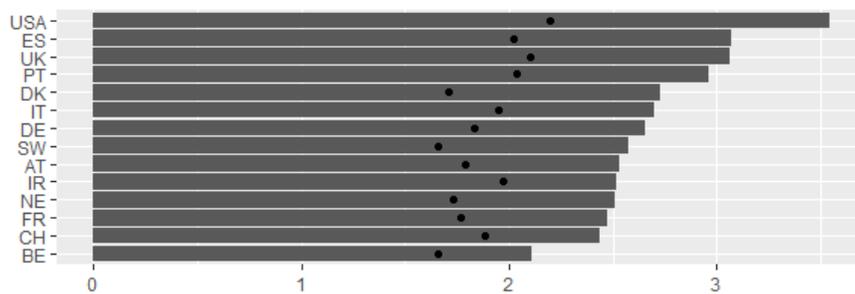
For each of the fourteen countries included in our survey, Figure 2 (next page) in turn shows the average estimate of 90-50 and 50-10 ratios as well as actual 90-50 and 50-10 ratios (from Table 1). Two observations can be made based on this figure: first, people in all countries overestimate low-end inequality as well as top-end inequality, but especially top-end inequality; and, second, cross-national variation in actual inequality is more compressed than cross-national variation in perceived inequality. We nonetheless observe a fairly consistent correlation between actual and perceived 90-50 ratios across countries (with Ireland and Denmark as clear outliers). It is noteworthy that the three countries with the biggest 50-10 ratios—the US, Italy and Spain—figure among the five countries with the largest perceived 50-10 ratios.

Figure 2: Perceptions of inequality by country

(A). 50-10 ratios



(B). 90-50 ratios:



Note: Dots in the bars designate actual percentile ratios (as reported in Table 1).

Finally, on this topic, Figure 3 (next page) shows the average error in inequality estimates, for 90-50 as well as 50-10 ratio, for all respondents sorted by income decile (i.e., the respondent’s place in the disposable household income distribution). Again, we see that low-end inequality estimates are consistently more accurate than high-end inequality estimates. In addition, a curious U-shaped pattern emerges in this figure: individuals near the bottom or the top of the income distribution appear to be more inaccurate in their estimates of inequality.

Our survey also probes for perceptions of inequalities of opportunity, focusing on educational opportunities. Specifically, respondents were how they think that the educational opportunities of children from affluent families compare to those of children from poor families, with five responses categories on offer: (1) “much better,” (2) “better,” (3) “about the same,” (4) “worse” and (5) “much worse.” We also asked respondents for their assessment of how educational opportunities have evolved during the last 20 years, with ranging from (1) “have become much more unequal” to (5) “have become much less unequal.” Pooling data from all countries included in the survey, Figure 4 (next page) shows the distribution of answers to these two questions. While there is broad consensus that family background matters for educational opportunities, the majority of the respondents believes that inequality of opportunities have stayed the same or changed relatively little and the respondents who think that inequality of opportunities has decreased outnumber those who think that it has increased.

Figure 3: Average error in perception of inequality by income decile

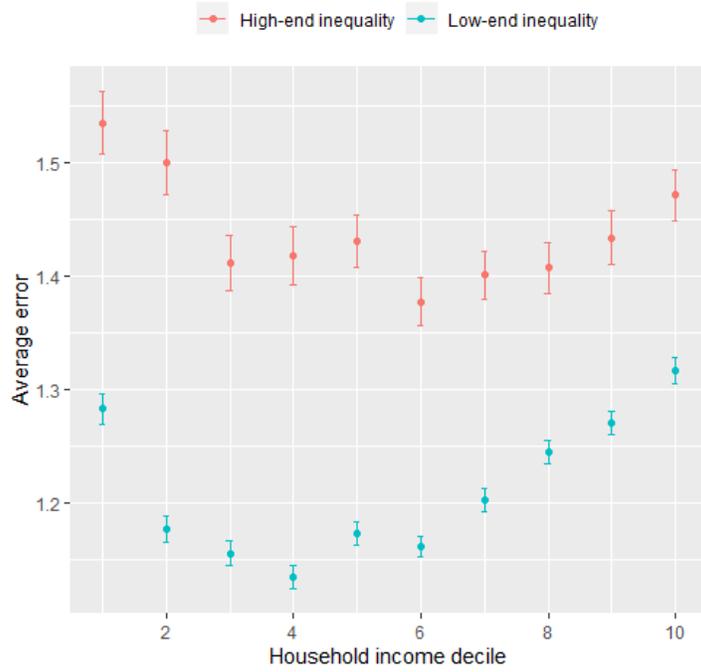
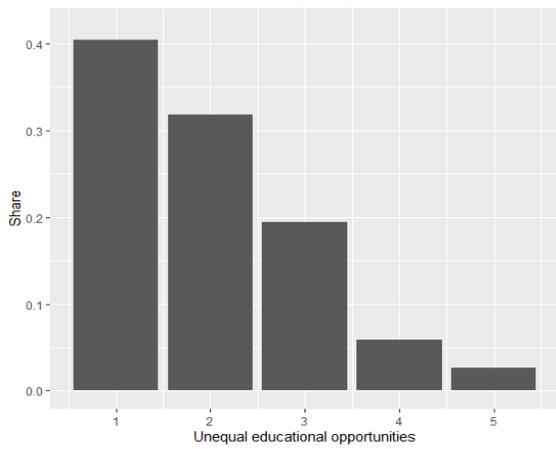


Figure 4: Distribution of responses to questions about inequality of educational opportunity and its evolution over the last 20 years.

(A). level



(B). evolution

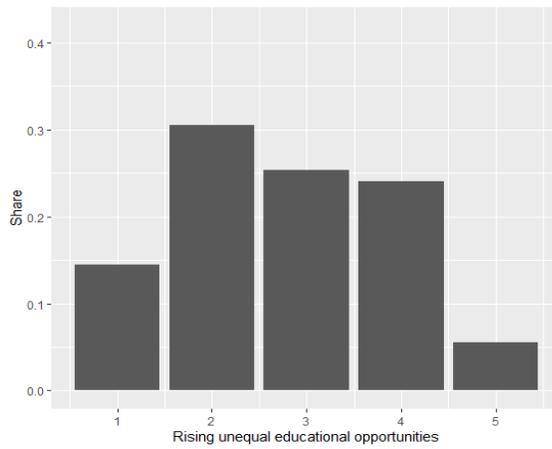
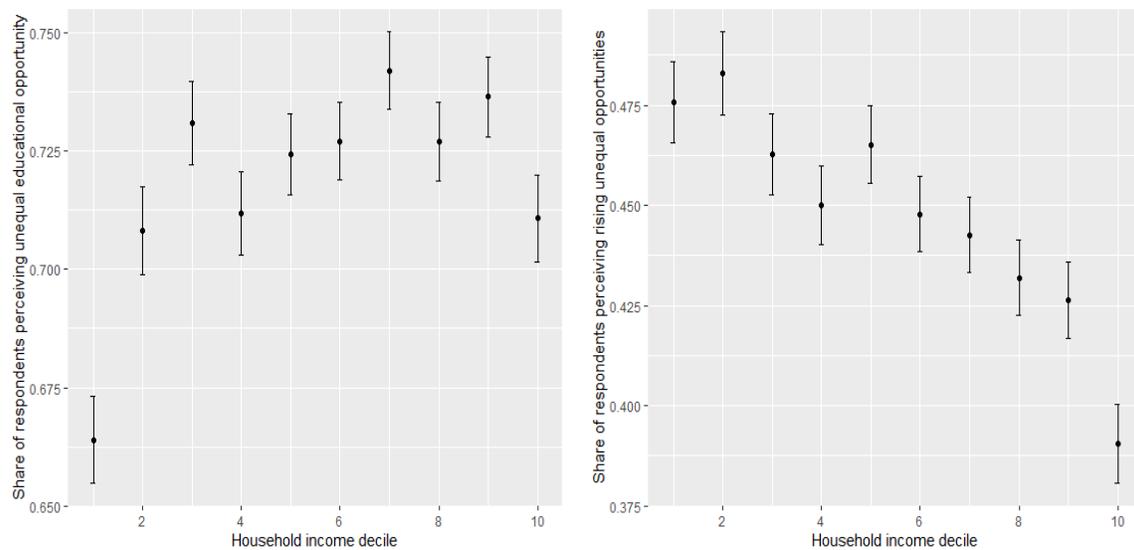


Figure 5 in turn shows how perceptions of educational opportunities vary by relative income. Interestingly, the income effect is different for the two items. The poorest respondents are less likely to think that children from affluent families have more educational opportunities. At the same time, individuals at the top of the distribution are more likely to believe that inequalities in educational opportunities have not changed or have decreased during the last twenty years while the poor are more likely to think that they have widened.

Figure 5: Shares of respondents who perceive (a) inequality of educational opportunity and (b) growth in inequality of unequal opportunity household income decile

(a). inequality of opportunity

(b). inequality of opportunity growth



Note: The original response categories have been recoded such that 0=3+4+5 and 1=1+2.

System justification theory (Jost 1994, Trump 2018) posits that people have a cognitive motivation to believe to live in a just world and tend to preserve the belief that existing social arrangements are fair, justifiable, necessary or inevitable. Consistent with this perspective, the differences in the perception between rich and poor shown in the left-hand panel of Figure 5 might perhaps be explained by the greater need of the poor to justify the status quo as otherwise they would suffer from cognitive dissonance. On the other hand, the fact that high-income respondents perceive a more positive evolution over time (right-hand panel) suggest that self-interest also plays some role in perceptions of opportunities.

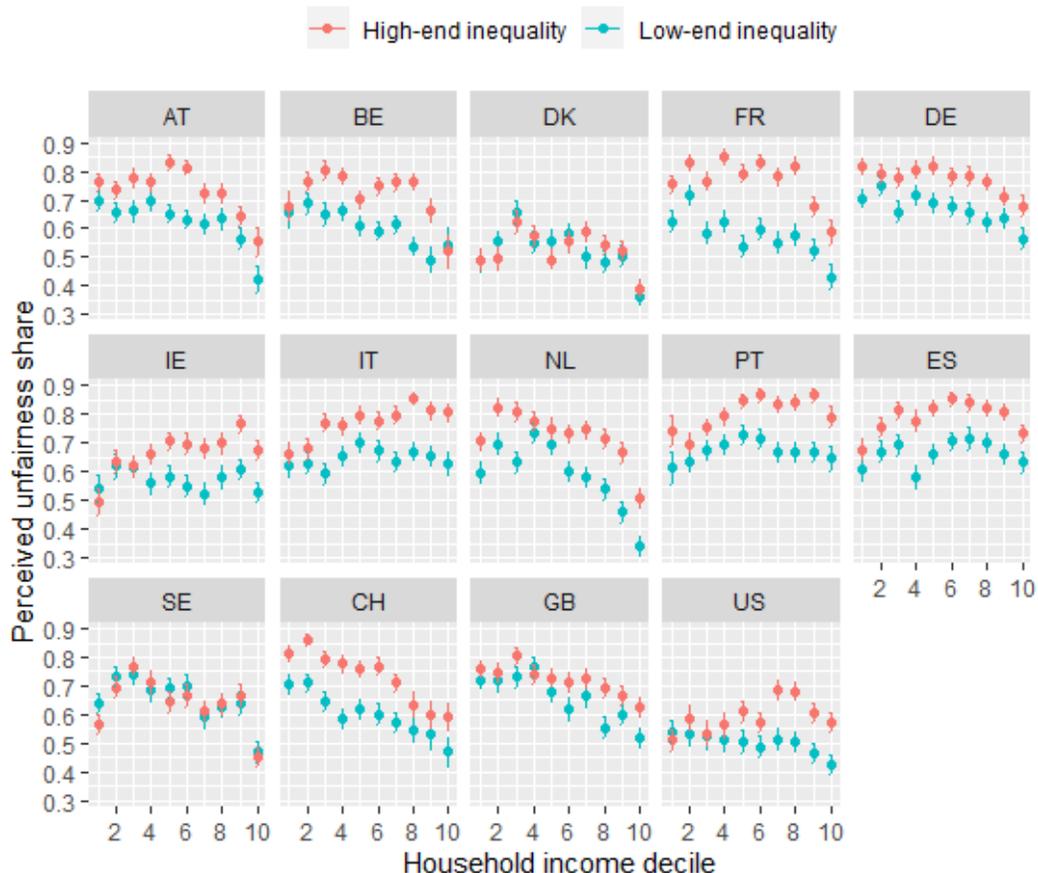
These preliminary findings invite questions about how people form perceptions about inequality of educational opportunity as well as income inequality and, in particular, the question of why some people perceive inequality more accurately than others. The latter question is an intriguing one, but we should not exaggerate its significance: perceptions of

inequality are likely to matter for political attitudes and behavior whether or not they are accurate. Also, we ought to keep in mind that an increase in objective inequality may have political implications even if it is not accurately perceived. When economic growth is sluggish, increased inequality translates into declining living standards for low-income households. Even if they do not perceive the rise in inequality, low-income individuals surely perceive the deterioration of their material circumstances.

5. Normative evaluations of inequality

Our survey seeks to disentangle normative evaluations of high-end and low-end inequalities. To do so, we asked respondents to evaluate the fairness of current income differences between households at the top and in the middle of the income distribution and then between household in the middle and at the bottom of the distribution. In both cases, the possible answer categories were as follows: (1) “very unfairly small,” (2) “unfairly small,” (3) “fair,” (4) “unfairly large,” and (5) “very unfairly large.” With respondents sorted by income deciles as well as countries, Figure 5 reports on the share of respondents who chose either (4) or (5) as their answer to the two questions.

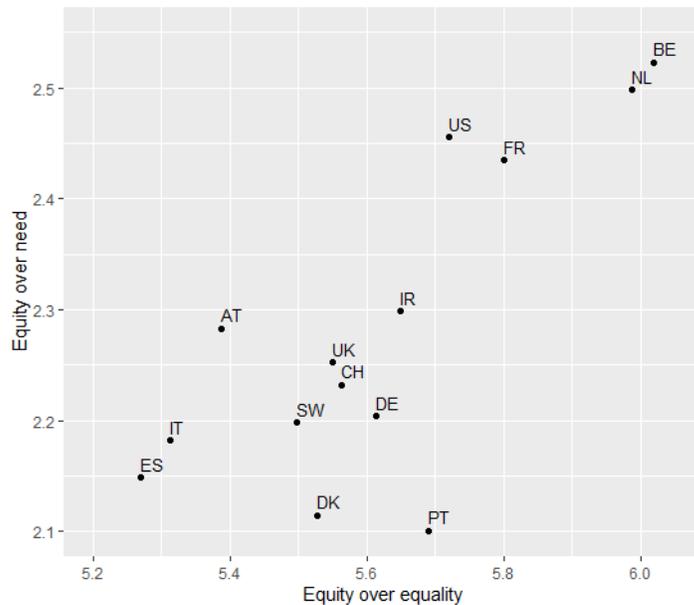
Figure 5: Share of respondents who consider high-end and low-end inequalities as unfairly high by income decile



To summarize Figure 5, the majority of respondents in all countries consider both high-end and low-end income inequalities to be unfairly large and most respondents, regardless of their own position in the income distribution, consider high-end inequalities to be more unfair than low-end inequalities. Danish and Swedish respondents, along with the poor respondents in Anglo-Saxon countries, are the only ones who consider high-end and low-end inequality as equally unfair. Overall, Danes and Americans consider the distribution of income in their countries to be more fair than citizens of the other twelve countries. Needless to say perhaps, Danes are evaluating a distribution that is, objectively speaking, much more compressed than the distribution that Americans are evaluating. Citizens of Italy and Spain, the two countries with levels of high-end and low-end inequality that are similar to those of the US (see Table 1), evaluate these inequalities much more negatively than Americans. France stands out as a special case that combines highly negative evaluations of inequality with relatively modest inequalities.

Addressing the distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes, the module on normative evaluations of inequality in our survey also sought to gauge public support for three distinct “social justice principles” (Konow 2001): the equality principle, the equity principle and the needs principle. To simplify, the *equality principle* defines a distribution as just when everybody receives the same resources or rewards. In line with meritocratic thinking, the *equity principle* defines a distribution as just if rewards are allocated according to individuals’ efforts and investments. Finally, the *needs principle* defines a distribution as just when resources are allocated according to people’s needs. We fielded two questions designed to tap into support for the needs principle relative to the equity principle and support for the equality principle relative to the equity principle. The first question asked respondents to indicate the extent of their disagreement or agreement with the statement that “a society is fair when it takes care of those who are poor and in need regardless of what they give back to society,” with response categories ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (5) “strongly agree.” The second question asked respondents to place their view of a “fair society” on a scale from 0 to 10, where zero means that there are no income differences as rewards for individual efforts and 10 means that such differences are large. Figure 4 (next page) maps answers to these two questions by country in a two-dimensional space with higher values corresponding to preferences for the equity principle over the equality principle (on the x-axis) and over the needs principle (on the y-axis). Overall, we find that most respondents favor the needs principle over the equity principle but prefer the equity principle over the equality principle. While many authors suggest that Americans are more meritocratic and Europeans more egalitarian, the US does not stand out as a special case in this graph. In our survey, Belgian and Dutch respondents turn out to be more supportive of the equity principle than American respondents.

Figure 7: Social justice principles by country



Note: Answers to the question about needs have been inverted such that 1 stands for "strongly agree" and 5 stands for "strongly disagree."

The results shown here invite further discussion of how and when these different normative beliefs about inequality can be politically mobilized as well as the formation and stability of such beliefs. Deeply rooted in political culture and/or psychology, adherence to one or another justice principle is unlikely to change rapidly in response to objective conditions.

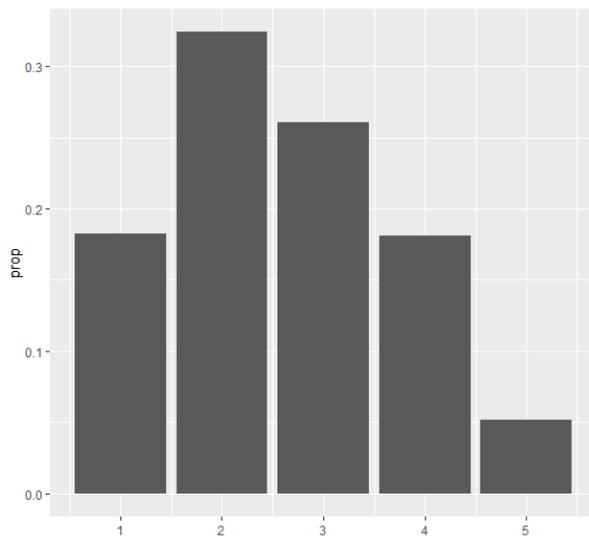
6. Economic justifications and political responsibility

How citizens respond to rising inequality surely depends, in part, on whether or not they accurately perceive objective developments as well as their normative evaluations of what they perceive. It seems very plausible to suppose that the political consequences of rising inequality also depend on citizens' understanding of the reasons for this phenomenon and whether or not they consider inequality to be an essentially economic or political phenomenon.

A first set of considerations concerns people's perceptions of how inequality relates to economic growth or technological change. If citizens perceive a trade-off between equality and economic growth, they might become more willing to accept inequality even if they do

not perceive it as fair from a normative point of view. To assess support for the trade-off idea, our survey asked respondents to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with the proposition that “large income differences generate more economic growth and better economic conditions for the poor and the middle classes.” The question provided respondents with five response categories: (1) “strongly disagree,” (2) “disagree,” (3) “neither agree nor disagree,” (4) “agree” and (5) “strongly agree.” Figure 8 displays the distribution of responses for the entire sample. Just about 50% respondents either disagree or strongly disagree with the proposition that inequality benefits everyone by stimulating economic growth while less than 25% agree or strongly agree with this proposition. In short, our results point to a striking lack of support for the core idea of “trickle-down economics” for all countries and all income deciles.

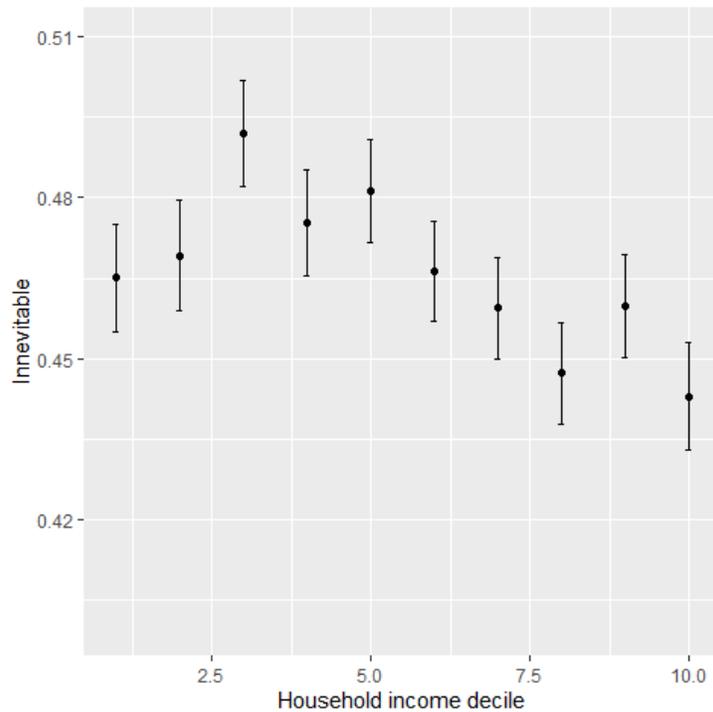
Figure 8: Share of respondents who think that inequality promotes economic growth



In a similar vein, our survey sought to assess the extent to which the idea of inequality as a consequence of technological change resonates in public opinion. To the extent that technological change is perceived as something positive, and perhaps as an essential ingredient of economic growth, this too might be framed as a trade-off, but the wording of our survey question instead emphasizes the fatalism commonly associated with arguments about technological change as a driver behind rising inequality. Quite simply, we asked about the extent of the agreement or disagreement with the statement that “technological change makes rising inequality inevitable”, again offering response categories ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (5) “strongly agree,” with “neither agree nor disagree” as the middle option (3). With 46.7% of all respondents choosing the fourth or fifth option, our survey suggests that West European publics are more likely to think of inequality as linked to technological change than to economic growth. Figure 9 reports on the share of

respondents agreeing with the statement that technological change is a source of rising inequality by income deciles. The differences between income groups are not terribly large, but the overall pattern seems to suggest that “technological fatalism” is most pronounced in the segment of the income distribution where semi-skilled workers are well represented.

Figure 9: Share of respondents agreeing that technological change makes inequality inevitable



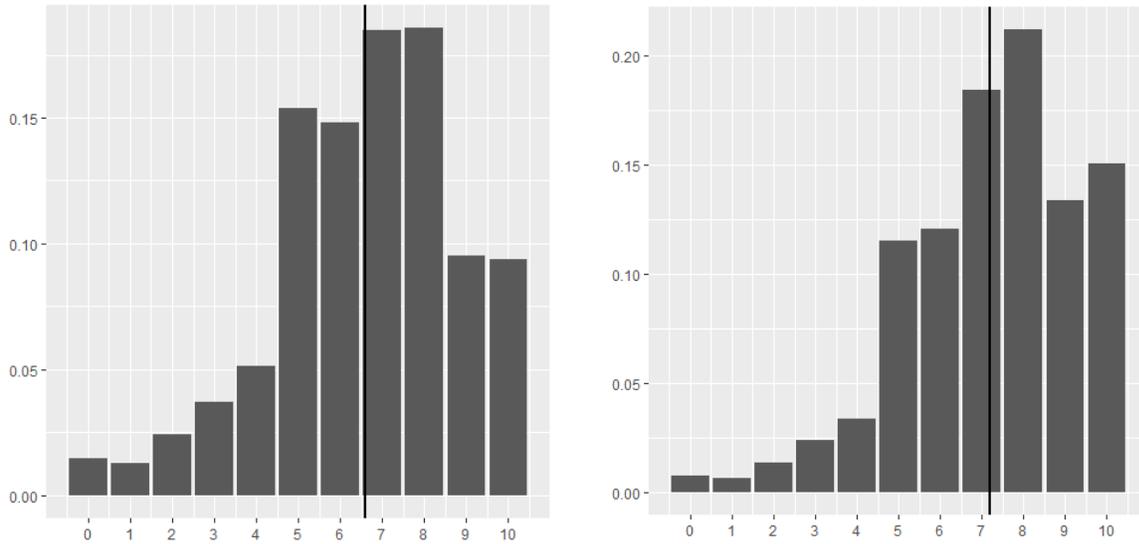
Probing the attribution of responsibility (or blame) for inequality, we asked respondents about three institutions or actors: (1) national governments, (2) the European Union and (3) big companies. For each other these, respondents were asked to assign responsibility on a scale from zero for “no responsibility” to 10 for “full responsibility.” Pooling all respondents, Figure 10 summarizes the attribution of responsibility to big companies and national governments. On average, our respondents assign slightly more responsibility for inequality to national governments (mean=7.2) than to big companies (mean=6.6).⁷ While technological fatalism appears to be quite widespread, it is also the case that West European publics think of governments as deeply implicated in the rise of income inequality.

⁷ The distribution of responses is very similar across income deciles.

Figure 10: Distribution of responsibility attributions to big companies (left) and national governments (right)

(A). big companies

(B). national governments



The vertical line indicates the mean value of these two items

It remains to be seen how attribution of blame to different actors go together. Do some individuals see both governments and corporate elites as responsible and if so, what does that mean for their support for redistribution and their political behavior? In general, it seems worthwhile to investigate how citizens combine these justifications for inequality and whether political-institutional context—for example, the generosity of the welfare state—plays a role in this respect.

7. Political inequality

Turning the topic of political inequality, our survey seeks to shed light on two questions. Do citizens perceive government policy to be unequally responsive to the wishes of the rich? And, to the extent that they do perceive such a bias in responsiveness, how do they understand the reasons for this phenomenon? Specifically, we asked respondents to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with the following five statements: (1) “public policies generally reflect the preferences of the majority of citizens;” (2) “public policies generally reflect my own preferences;” (3) “rich citizens have more influence over

public policies than other citizens;" and (4) "corporations and interest groups influence public policies."⁸ For each statement, respondents were presented with five response categories, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5), with "neither agree nor disagree" as the middle position (3). Given the novelty of these questions, there are no benchmarks from previous research that we might use to assess our results, but comparisons between items, countries and income groups allow for at least some tentative conclusions.⁹

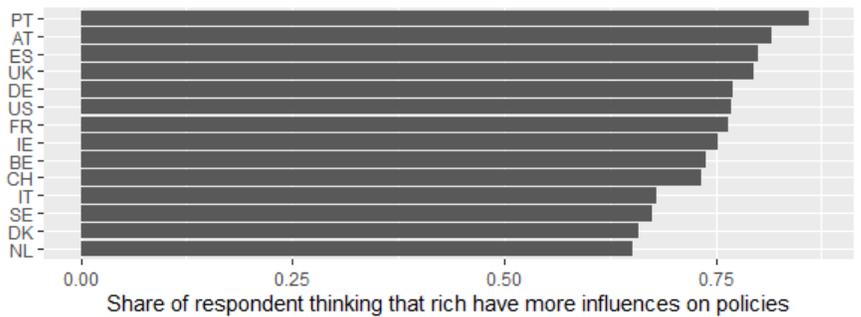
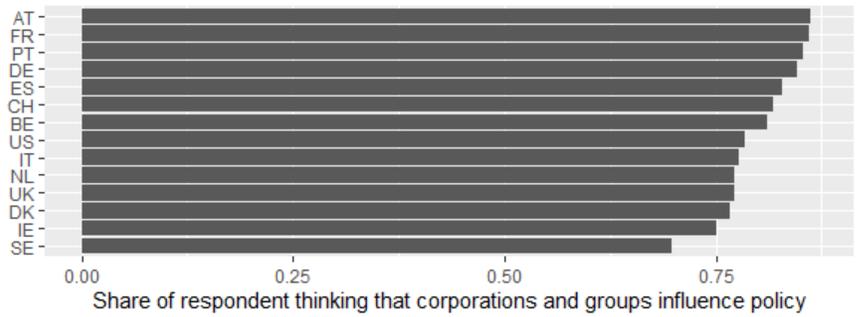
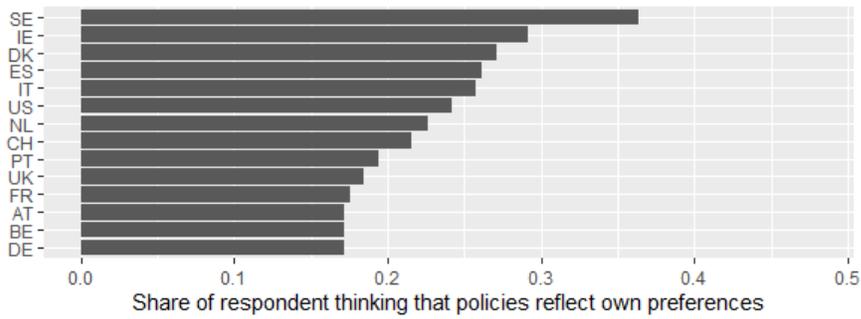
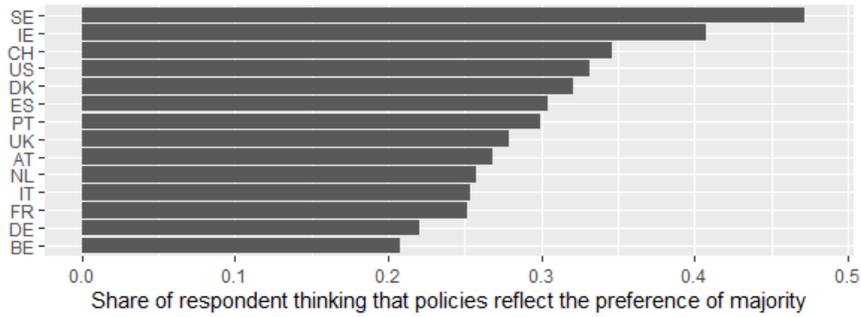
For each of the fourteen countries included in the survey, Figure 11 (next page) summarizes responses to the aforementioned survey items by reporting the percentage of respondents that said they either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement in question. To begin with, it is noteworthy that public opinion is generally skeptical of the realization of one of the key premises of democratic rule, namely that policies reflect what the majority of citizens want. This turns out to be a minority view in everyone of the fourteen countries included in our survey. There is, however, a great deal of variation between countries. Only one fifth of Belgians believe that public policies reflect the preferences of the majority whereas that share is more than one third in Switzerland, Ireland and Sweden. The skepticism about democracy is even more pronounced when we look at the share of individuals stating that policies reflect their own preferences. The shares range between 17% in Germany, Belgium and Austria and 36% in Sweden.

The results for the questions that measure democratic responsiveness and egocentric responsiveness stand in stark contrast with citizens' evaluations of the political influence of the rich and corporate interests. In all countries, large majorities agree with the statement that rich citizens have more influence on public policy than other citizens and with the statement that corporations and interest groups greatly influence public policies. While there is again some cross-national variation in responses to this question, the broadly shared perception of "pro-rich politics" resonates with comparative research showing income biases in political representation across a wide range of liberal democracies. Regardless of whether or not perceptions of unequal responsiveness match objective indicators, such perceptions would appear to be an important factor behind various (divergent) manifestations of democratic discontent in recent years.

⁸ We also presented respondents with the statement that "international (political and economic) constraints prevent politicians from doing what citizens want." We leave this item aside for reasons of space.

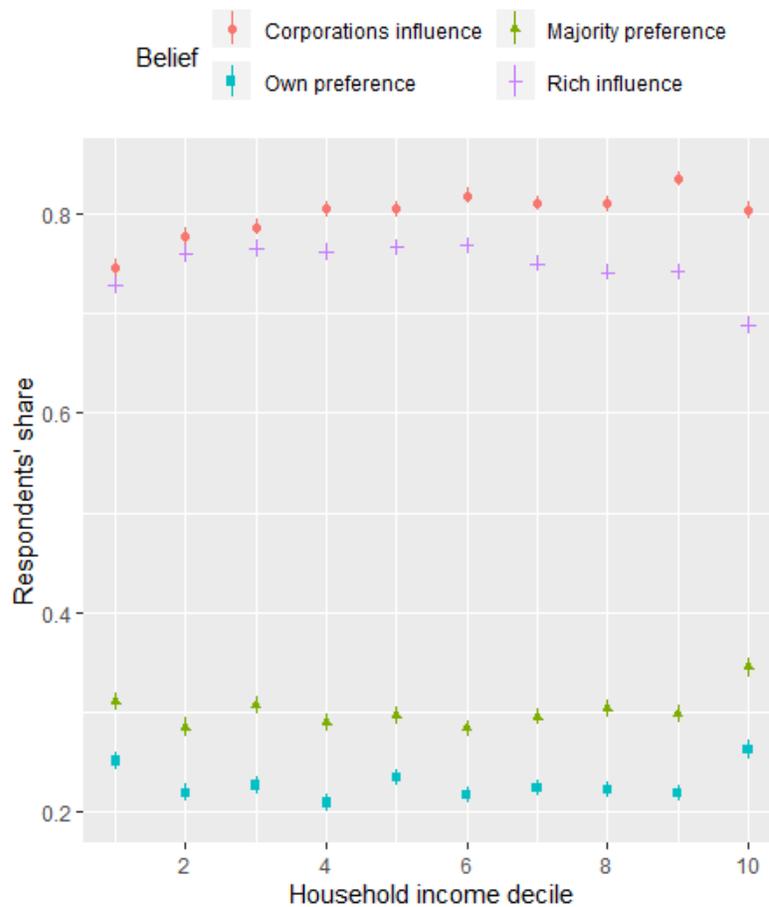
⁹ We do know from previous research that responsiveness is perceived as a normatively desirable goal in the general public (see, e.g., Bowler 2017).

Figure 11: Share of respondents agreeing with statements regarding responsiveness by country



Pooling respondents from all fourteen countries, Figure 12 in turn summarizes perceptions of political inequality by income deciles. It is striking that perceptions of responsiveness vary only moderately by income. Regarding the perception of democratic responsiveness (policies reflect the preferences of the majority), egocentric responsiveness (policies reflect the preferences of the respondent) and economically rooted unequal representation (rich have more influence on policy), there is virtually no difference of perception among the first nine deciles of the income distribution. Only respondents in the top income decile exhibit a clearly distinct outlook, with a distinctly smaller share of “disenchanted democrats.” Even among the respondents in the tenth decile, however, the share of respondents who think that policies reflect the preferences of the majority of citizens is only about half of the share of respondents agreeing with the statement that the rich have more influence over public policy.

Figure 12: Share of respondents agreeing with statements regarding responsiveness by income group



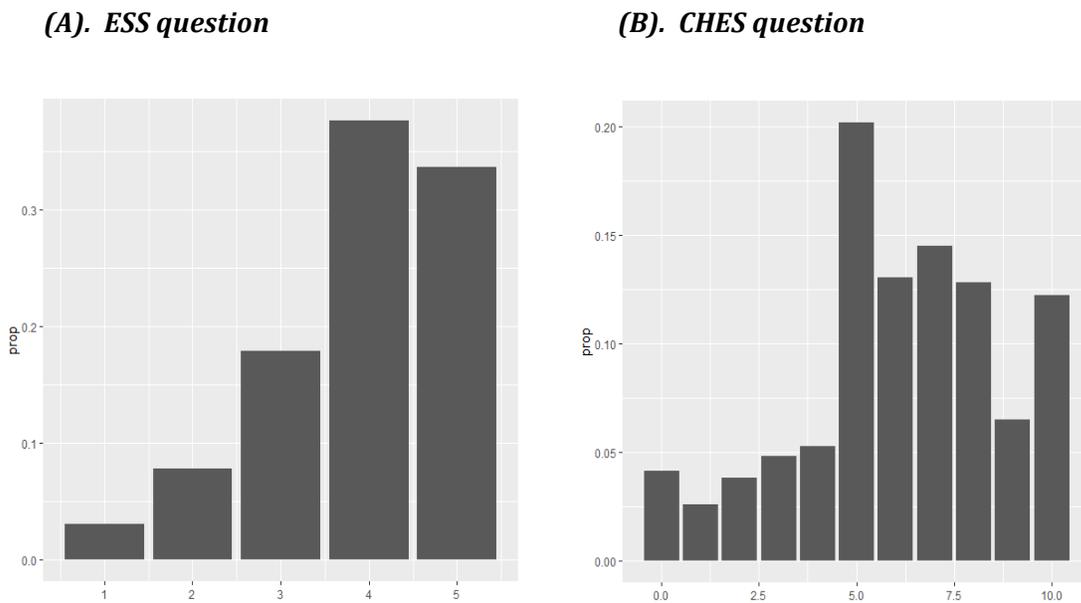
In sum, our survey yields a somber picture of how citizens see the current state of democracy. Citizens perceive their own preferences as well those of the majority as being poorly represented relative to the rich and to corporate interests. The behaviors associated with such by perceptions of unequal responsiveness remain to be explored. For the time being, it is noteworthy that the lower income bands, commonly seen as particularly disadvantaged in the responsiveness literature, do not seem to have more negative views of democratic representation than the middle-income group.

8. Preferences for redistributive policies

Our survey replicates the standard ESS/ISSP question that has commonly been used as a measure of support for redistribution for purposes of comparative analysis. In addition, we asked a second question designed to tap into general support for redistribution, modeled on a question that appears in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (<https://www.chesdata.eu/>). Asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they disagree or agree with the statement that “the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels,” the standard ESS/ISSP question presents five response options: (1) “strongly agree,” (2) “agree,” (3) “neither agree nor disagree,” (4) “disagree,” and (5) “strongly disagree.” The CHES-inspired question in turn asks respondents to indicate their position on redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor on a scale from zero (“fully opposed”) to 10 (“fully in favour”). We included this question in order to be able to match public opinion with CHES estimates of party positions more directly, but also to see how responses based on more fine-grained options compare to responses based on the ESS response format. From the latter point of view, it is perhaps unfortunate that one question is framed in terms of income differences while the other question is framed in terms of wealth, but it seems safe to assume, we think, that most respondents do not distinguish between these two dimensions of inequality. Put differently, individuals who support redistribution of income are likely to support redistribution of wealth as well.

Pooling data from the fourteen countries included in our survey, Figure 13 shows the distribution of responses to the two questions about support for redistribution. As with ESS data, we find that the vast majority of respondents agree with the proposition that government should take measure to reduce differences in income levels and strong supporters of redistribution are almost as numerous as supporters. With the 11-point scale of the CHES question, supporters of redistribution outnumber opponents of redistribution by a wide margin, but 20% of respondents position themselves right at the middle of scale (5) and nearly as many respondents position themselves in the middle three response categories as in the top 4 categories (roughly 40% and 45% respectively).

Figure 13: Distribution of responses to questions about support for redistribution

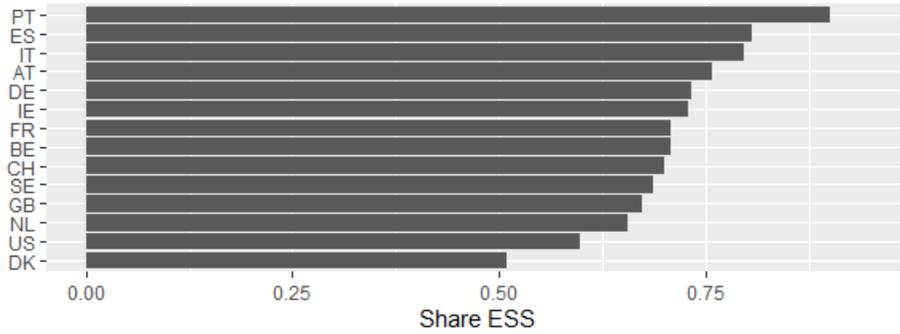


For each country, Figure 14 (next page) in turn reports on the percentage of respondents choosing a response above the middle response to both questions (i.e., above 3 for the ESS question and above 5 for the CHES question). In both versions of this graph, the Southern European countries—Portugal, Spain and Italy—stand out as the countries with the highest support for redistribution while Denmark and the US are distinguished by relatively low levels of support. By and large, the two questions yield similar country rankings, but levels of support for redistribution are consistently lower and cross-country variation is more compressed with the CHES question.

Our survey also inquired about the salience of economic inequality as a societal problem. We asked respondents to tell us how important a number of different topics were to them. In addition to “economic inequality,” the list of topics presented to respondents included “crime and terrorism,” “unemployment,” “public debt,” “immigration,” “public services” and “environment.” Respondents were asked to rate each topic on a five-point scales ranging from “not important at all” to “extremely important,” but they were not asked to rank topics by their importance (i.e., respondents could consider all seven topics to be “extremely important”). Pooling all fourteen countries, Table 3 (next page) cross-tabulates responses to the salience question and the CHES version of the question about support for redistribution. Not surprisingly, we find that responses to these two questions are correlated at the individual level: individuals for whom inequality is an important topic are consistently more likely to support redistribution than individuals for whom inequality is not an important topic. At the same time, Table 3 clearly indicates that the category “redistribution supporters” includes a sizeable number of individuals for whom inequality is not a very important societal problem.

Figure 14: Percentage of respondents choosing a response above the middle option

(A). ESS question:



(B). CHES question:

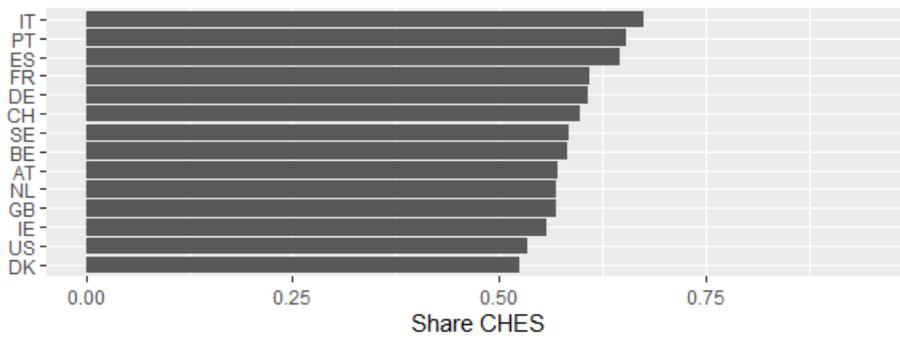
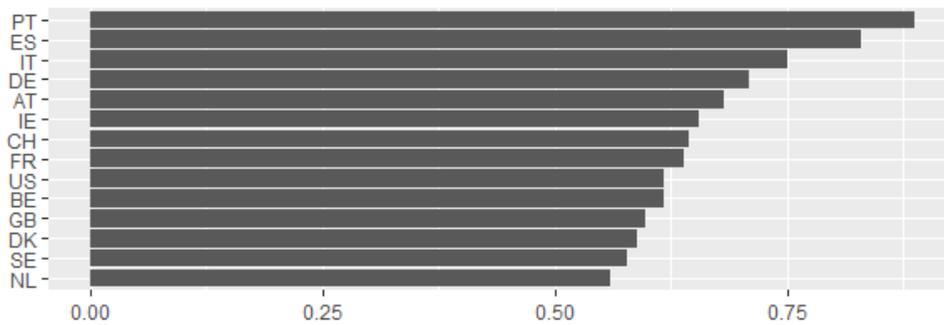


Table 3: Cross-tabulation of salience of inequality and position on redistribution

position on redistribution (CHES)	salience of inequality:	
	very important (4-5)	not very important (1-3)
support (7-10)	37.1%	9.1%
middle (4-6)	23.7%	14.7%
opposed (0-3)	6.8%	8.6%

As shown in Figure 15, the share of respondents who consider the topic of inequality to be very important or extremely important ranges between roughly 55% in the Netherlands and more than 90% in Portugal. Along with Portugal, Spain and Italy stand out with respect to the salience of inequality as a societal problem as well as support for redistribution, but the cross-national association between these variables does not appear to be very tight if we set these three countries aside. According to our survey, Sweden and the Netherlands are the countries in which citizens are, on average, least concerned about economic inequality.

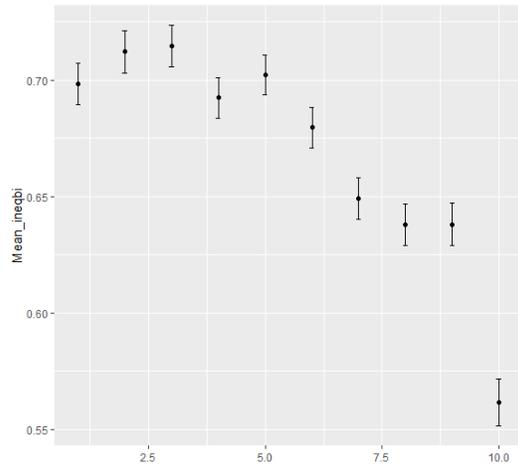
Figure 15: Percentage of respondents who consider economic inequality to be a very important or extremely important topic



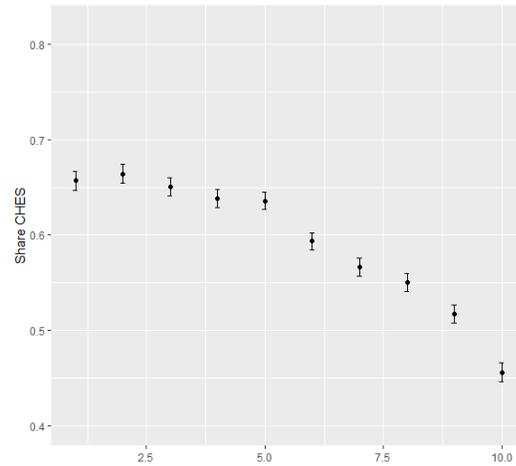
With respondents sorted by relative household income, Figure 16 (next page) in turn reports our estimates of the percentage of respondents who consider inequality to be a very important topic and percentage of respondents who placed themselves above middle position in response to the CHES version of the question about support for redistribution. On average, respondents from the top income decile are uniquely oblivious to inequality as a problem and uniquely unsupportive of redistribution, but we also find significant differences between, on the one hand, respondents from the bottom five deciles and, on the other hand, respondents from the sixth through the ninth decile. These findings would seem to suggest that the effect of relative income is not entirely linear and that categorical distinctions between “working class,” “middle class” and “upper class” matter.

Figure 16: Salience of inequality as a topic and support for redistribution by income decile

(A). salience of inequality



(B). support for redistribution (CHES)



Note: the graphs show to the percentage of respondents choosing a response above the middle category.

While we did not explicitly ask respondents to rank topics by importance, we might gauge the relative importance that citizens assign to inequality as a societal problem by comparing average salience scores for different topics. For each of our fourteen countries, Table 4 presents these scores and also, in the final column, the place of inequality in country-specific rankings of topics from highest to lowest salience scores.¹⁰ The crucial take-away is as follows: While more than 50% of respondents in all countries (and income deciles) consider economic inequality to be an important topic, they invariably consider other topics to be more important. Judging by mean scores in response to our salience question, inequality only figures among the three most important topics in one country—Germany. Inequality ranks fourth in five countries and fifth or sixth in the remaining eight countries. Crime and terrorism as well as the environment are everywhere considered to be more important topics than economic inequality and the quality of public services is considered to be a more important topic in all countries but Germany and Switzerland. Strikingly, public debt is the one topic that inequality consistently outranks. Our survey serves as a reminder that inequality and redistribution are not necessarily the core issues in electoral politics.

¹⁰ For present purposes, we ignore the question of whether the differences between salience scores are statistically significant. If two topics have the same score, they are both assigned the higher of the two ranks that they occupy.

Table 4: Average salience scores by country and topic

	inequality	crime & terrorism	unemployment	public debt	immigration	public services	environment	inequality rank
AT	3.85	4.13	3.93	3.59	3.85	4	4.31	6
BE	3.79	4.07	3.73	3.52	3.76	3.86	3.91	4
DK	3.64	4.02	3.74	3.44	3.73	4.08	4.07	6
FR	3.86	4.07	3.93	3.54	3.69	3.92	4.16	5
DE	3.93	4.16	3.76	3.51	3.83	3.91	4.21	3
IR	3.86	4.2	3.92	3.68	3.59	4.2	4.19	5
IT	4.08	4.23	4.45	4.08	3.93	4.12	4.33	5
NE	3.64	4.01	3.61	3.12	3.52	3.81	3.78	4
PT	4.35	4.44	4.44	4.11	3.81	4.31	4.48	4
ES	4.22	4.28	4.45	4.04	3.91	4.35	4.28	5
SE	3.65	4.14	3.79	3.26	3.74	4.04	3.92	6
CH	3.81	3.99	3.85	3.39	3.74	3.75	4.17	4
UK	3.73	4.09	3.64	3.39	3.51	4.11	4.04	4
US	3.76	4.13	3.81	3.75	3.82	3.93	4.06	6

For reasons indicated above, our survey also sought to unpack the concept of “support for redistribution” by asking a series of questions about specific policies with distributive implications. A short presentation of answers to the questions we asked about public pensions and unemployment compensation must suffice for the illustrative purposes of this paper. Replicating questions that were fielded in the “social welfare module” of the European Social Survey of 2008, we first asked respondents about their views of government responsibility in these two domains. Specifically, respondents were asked whether they thought that it should be the responsibility of governments “to ensure a reasonable standard of living” for the old and for the unemployed, allowing responses to vary on an eleven-point scale ranging from “not governments’ responsibility at all” (=0) to “entirely governments’ responsibility” (=10). While this question is framed in terms of government responsibility, it is commonly be interpreted as a question about the (average) generosity of income transfers to the old and the unemployed. A second pair of questions—again replicating ESS 2008—asked respondents to choose between three alternative “benefits principles” or, in other words, alternative ways of distributing public pensions and unemployment benefits: (1) benefits proportional to one’s income before retirement or unemployment; (2) a lump-sum benefit for everyone; and (3) a larger sum for people with low incomes.¹¹ To the extent that the third option implies means-testing to

¹¹ For unemployment benefits, the precise wording of the three options is as follows: (1) “higher earners who become unemployed temporarily should get more in benefit,” (2) “high and low earners should get the same amount of benefit,” and (3) “lower earners who become unemployed temporarily should get more in benefit.”

target low-income individuals, the three options broadly correspond to the three “welfare regimes” identified by Esping-Andersen (1990).

As suggested by the comparative welfare-state scholars (notably Korpi and Palme 1998), support for generous public benefits and support for different principles of distributing benefits might be conceived as nested, but partly independent policy preferences. Pooling respondents from the fourteen countries included in our survey, and compressing the scale of responses to the question about government responsibility, Table 5 summarizes the joint distribution of responses to the two questions for each policy domain. Consistent with our expectations based on existing literature, the results confirm that public opinions is more favorable to generous public provisions for the elderly than for the unemployed and that greater support for generous pension benefits is associated with support for the proportionality principle. Yet the broad support for redistributive benefits principles and, in particular, for the lump-sum principle is surely the most striking feature of the results presented in Table 5. Supporters of lump-sum unemployment benefits constitute a clear majority of our survey respondents and supporters of the lump-sum principle outnumber supporters of the proportionality principle even in the domain of pension policy.

Table 5: Two-dimensional support for public benefits to the elderly and the unemployed

(A). Pensions:

government responsibility	benefits principle		
	proportionality	lump sum	low-income targeting
high (7-10)	25.6%	41.9%	16.5%
middle (4-6)	5.2%	6.0%	2.7%
low (0-3)	0.8%	0.8%	0.4%

(B). Unemployment:

government responsibility	benefits principle		
	proportionality	lump sum	low-income targeting
high (7-10)	10.7%	34.9%	13.9%
middle (4-6)	8.6%	19.2%	4.9%
low (0-3)	2.8%	4.4%	0.8%

For unemployment benefits, Table 6 in turn compares the joint distribution of responses to the two questions in ESS 2008 and in our (2019) survey. As Austria, Italy and the US were not part of ESS 2008, the analysis presented in this table is restricted to eleven countries. Averaging across these countries, we observe a marked shift in favor of government

responsibility to ensure a reasonable standard of living for the unemployed since the financial crisis of 2007-08. While 53.5% of ESS 2008 respondents placed themselves at 7 or above on the government responsibility item, 60.1% of our respondents did so. Even more strikingly, we observe a sharp decline in support for the proportionality principle in favor of the lump-sum principle and, to a lesser extent, in favor of low-income targeting as well.¹² Crucially for our purposes, these shifts in public policy preferences over the last decade are much sharper than what we observe when we look at responses to the standard ESS question about support for redistribution (see Appendix).

Table 6: Two-dimensional support for public benefits to the unemployed, 2008 and 2019 (11 countries)

(A). 2008:

government responsibility	benefits principle		
	proportionality	lump sum	low-income targeting
high (7-10)	19.9%	27.6%	6.0%
middle (4-6)	14.1%	21.5%	3.9%
low (0-3)	2.7%	3.7%	0.6%

(B). 2019:

government responsibility	benefits principle		
	proportionality	lump sum	low-income targeting
high (7-10)	11.0%	35.4%	13.7%
middle (4-6)	8.7%	19.4%	4.9%
low (0-3)	2.3%	4.0%	0.7%

Note: 2008 figures from the European Social Survey. Both tables based on pooling data for Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK.

Table 6 invites a series of questions. How have the general trends captured in this table played out in different countries? And to what extent do these trends hide divergent trajectories of different categories of citizens, defined by income, occupation or perhaps partisanship? And, finally, to what extent has growing support for generous and more

¹² For pension policy preferences, there has not been any noticeable increase in public support for generous public benefits (already very high), but we observe a similar decline in support for the proportionality principle.

egalitarian unemployment compensation had effects on policy decisions in this domain? These are some of the questions that we intend to address in future papers drawing, in part, on data from the Inequality and Politics Survey.

9. Final thoughts

The findings presented above are preliminary not only in the sense that they are entirely descriptive, but also in the sense of describing people and their attitudes at very high levels of aggregation. Even so, these findings testify to the complexities involved in understanding citizens' perceptions and attitudes towards inequality and redistribution. While large majorities of West European publics consider current levels of income inequality to be unfair, they also consider inequality to be a more or less inevitable consequence of technological change. And while large majorities support the idea that governments should redistribute from the rich to (all or some) other citizens, a more differentiated picture emerges when we look at public support for specific policies with redistributive implications.

Going forward, we plan to use data from the Inequality and Politics Survey to explore how perceptions, norms and policy preferences relate to each other and, in particular, how perceptions and norms mediate between objective conditions and policy preferences. We want to understand better how the characteristics of individuals (such as income, education, occupation, gender and union membership) and national contexts influence political attitudes. We also want to understand how perceptions of political as well as economic inequality influence political participation and vote choice. Moving to individual-level analysis should serve clarify some of the questions raised by the preliminary findings presented in this paper, but it will undoubtedly introduce new complexities as well.

APPENDIX:

SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION IN THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL SURVEY

By country, the table below reports the share of respondents in European Social Surveys of 2008, 2016 and 2018 that either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that should take measures to reduce income differences along with the corresponding figures from our survey. The final column shows changes from ESS 2008 to our survey. The correlation between estimates based on ESS 2018 and our survey is .873 ($p=.002$) while the correlation between estimates based on ESS 2016 and our survey is .938 ($p=.000$).

	ESS 2008	ESS 2016	ESS 2018	Ineq&Pol 2019	change from 2008 to 2019
AT		0.77	0.79	0.76	
BE	0.70	0.72	0.72	0.71	+.01
DK	0.42			0.51	+.09
FR	0.78	0.75	0.79	0.71	-.07
DE	0.64	0.71	0.73	0.73	+.07
IE	0.73	0.72	0.72	0.73	0.00
IT		0.80	0.85	0.80	
NL	0.55	0.60	0.62	0.66	+.11
PT	0.90	0.88		0.90	0.00
ES	0.80	0.84		0.81	+.01
SE	0.64	0.64		0.69	+.05
CH	0.67	0.65	0.63	0.70	+.03
UK	0.58	0.65	0.66	0.67	+.09
USA				0.60	
average	0.67	0.73	0.72	0.71	+.04

REFERENCES

- Alesina, Alberto and George-Marios Angeletos. 2005. "Fairness and redistribution: Us vs. Europe." *American Economic Review*, 95:913-35.
- Alesina, Alberto and Edward Glaeser. 2004. *Fighting Poverty in the US and Europe: A World of Difference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Alesina, Alberto and Paola Giuliano. 2009. "Preferences for redistribution". Report, National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Alesina, Alberto, Guido Cozzi and Noemi Mantovan. 2012. The evolution of ideology, fairness and redistribution. *The Economic Journal*, 122(565), 1244-1261.
- Bartels, Larry. 2017. *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Becker, Becker. 2019. "Mind the Income Gaps? Experimental Evidence of Information's Lasting Effect on Redistributive Preferences." *Social Justice Research*, 1-58.
- Bowler, Shaun. 2017 "Trustees, delegates, and responsiveness in comparative perspective." *Comparative Political Studies* 50(6): 766-793.
- Cavaillé, Charlotte and Kris-Stella Trump. 2014. "The Two Facets of Social Policy Preferences." *Journal of Politics* 77(1): 146-160.
- Chambers, John; Lawton Swan and Martin Heesacker. 2014. "Better Off Than We Know." *Psychological Science* 25: 613-18.
- De La O, Ana and Jonathan Rodden. 2008. "Does religion distract the poor? Income and issue voting around the world." *Comparative Political Studies* 41.(4-5): 437-476.
- Durante, R., Putterman, L., & Van der Weele, J. 2014. "Preferences for redistribution and perception of fairness: An experimental study". *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 12(4), 1059-1086.
- Elsässer, Lea; Svenja Hense and Armin Schäfer. 2018. "Government of the People, by the Elite, for the Rich: Unequal Responsiveness in an Unlikely Case." Discussion Paper 18/5, Max-Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Bonn.
- Engelhardt, Carina and Andreas Wagener. 2018. "What Do Germans Think and Know About Income Inequality? A Survey Experiment." *Socio-Economic Review* 16: 743-67.
- Eriksson, Kimmo and Brent Simpson. 2012. "What Do Americans Know About Inequality? It Depends on How You Ask Them." *Judgment and Decision Making* 7: 741-745.
- Esarey, Justin, Tim Salmon and Charles Barrilleaux. 2012. "Social insurance and income redistribution in a laboratory experiment". *Political Research Quarterly*, 65(3), 685-698.

- Esping-Andersen, Gøsta. 1990. *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ferrara, Maurizio. 1996. "The 'Southern Model' of Welfare in Social Europe." *Journal of European Social Policy* 6(1): 17-37.
- Finnseras, Henning. 2009. "Income Inequality and Demand for Redistribution: A Multilevel Analysis of European Public Opinion." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 32(1): 94-119.
- Fong, Christina 2001. "Social preferences, self-interest, and the demand for redistribution." *Journal of Public economics*, 82(2), 225-246.
- Fong, Christina and Erzo FP Luttmer. 2011. « Do fairness and race matter in generosity? Evidence from a nationally representative charity experiment." *Journal of Public Economics*, 95(5-6), 372-394.
- Giger, Nathalie and Davy-Kim Lascombes. 2019. "Growing Income Inequality, Growing Legitimacy: A Longitudinal Approach to Perceptions of Inequality." *Unequal Democracies Working Paper no. 11*, University of Geneva, <https://unequaldemocracies.unige.ch/en/outputs/>.
- Gilens, Martin. 2012. *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gimpelson, Vladimir and Daniel Treisman. 2018. "Misperceiving Inequality." *Economics & Politics* 30: 27-54.
- Gonthier, Frederic. 2017. "Parallel Publics? Support for Income Redistribution in Times of Economic Crisis." *European Journal of Political Research* 56: 91-114.
- Jost, John T. and Mahzarin R. Banaji. 1994. "The role of stereotyping in system justification and the production of false consciousness." *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 33(1):1-27.
- Karadja, Mounir; Johanna Mollerstrom and David Seim. 2017. "Richer (and Holier) Than Thou? The Effect of Relative Income Improvements on Demand for Redistribution." *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 99 (2): 201-212.
- Kenworthy, Labe and Leslie McCall. 2008. "Inequality, Public Opinion and Redistribution." *Socio-Economic Review* 6(1): 35-68.
- Konow, James. 2001. "Fair and square: the four sides of distributive justice." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 46(2), 137-164.
- Korpi, Walter and Joakim Palme. 1998. "The Paradox of Redistribution and Strategies of Equality." *American Sociological Review* 63(5): 661-687.
- Kulin, Staffan and Stefan Svallfors. 2013. "Class, Values and Attitudes Towards Redistribution: A European Comparison." *European Sociological Review* 29(2): 155-167.

- Kurella, Anna-Sophie, and Jan Rosset. 2018 "The rise of cultural issues as an opportunity for the Right? Insights from the 2015 Swiss election." *Swiss Political Science Review* 24(4): 381-399.
- Lee, Woojin, and John Roemer. 2006. "Racism and redistribution in the United States: A solution to the problem of American exceptionalism." *Journal of Public Economics* 90(6-7): 1027-1052.
- Lupu, Noam and Jonas Pontusson. 2011. "The Structure of Inequality and the Politics of Redistribution" *American Political Science Review* 105(2): 316-336.
- Meltzer, Allan and Scott Richard. 1981. "A Rational Theory of the Size of Government." *Journal of Political Economy* 89(5): 914-927.
- Malhotra, Neil and Alexander Kuo. 2008. "Attributing Blame: The Public's Response to Hurricane Katrina." *The Journal of Politics* 70: 120-35.
- Mosimann, Nadja and Jonas Pontusson. 2017. "Solidaristic Unionism and Support for Redistribution in Contemporary Europe," *World Politics* 69(3): 448-492.
- Mosimann, Nadja and Jonas Pontusson. 2020. "Heterogeneity of the Trade Union Membership Effect on Support for Redistribution in Western Europe." *Unequal Democracies Working Paper* no. 12, University of Geneva.
- Norton, Michael and Dan Ariely. 2011. "Building a Better America—One Wealth Quintile at a Time." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6: 9-12.
- Osberg, Lars and Timothy Smeeding. 2006. "'fair' inequality? attitudes toward pay differentials: The united states in comparative perspective." *American Sociological Review*, 71(3):450-473.
- Page, Lionel and Daniel Goldstein. 2016. "Subjective Beliefs About the Income Distribution and Preferences for Redistribution." *Social Choice and Welfare* 47: 25-61.
- Persson, Mikael and Mikael Gilljam. 2018. "Who Got What They Wanted? The Opinion-Policy Link in Sweden, 1956-2014." Unpublished paper, Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg.
- Pontusson, Jonas and David Weisstanner. 2018. "Macroeconomic Conditions, Inequality Shocks and the Politics of Redistribution, 1990-2013," *Journal of European Public Policy* 25(1): 31-58.
- Rennwald, Line and Jonas Pontusson. 2020. "Paper Stones Revisited: Class Voting, Unionization and the Electoral Decline of the Mainstream Left." *Perspectives on Politics*, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592720000067>.
- Rosset, Jan, and Anna-Sophie Kurella. 2020. "Elections as a source of political inequality. party supply and spatial voting in Europe." *Unequal Democracies Working Paper* no. 13, University of Geneva.
- Rudolph, Thomas. 2006. "Triangulating Political Responsibility: The Motivated Formation of Responsibility Judgments." *Political Psychology* 27: 99-122.

- Rueda, David and Daniel Stegmueller. 2016. "The Externalities of Inequality: Fear of Crime and Preferences for Redistribution in Western Europe." *American Journal of Political Science*, 60, 2(March 2016): 472-489.
- Schakel, Wouter. 2019. "Unequal Responsiveness in the Netherlands." *Socio-Economic Review*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwz018>.
- Tilley, James and Sara B Hobolt. 2011. "Is the Government to Blame? An Experimental Test of How Partisanship Shapes Perceptions of Performance and Responsibility." *The Journal of Politics* 73: 316-30.
- Trump, Kris-Stella and Ariel White. 2018. "Does inequality beget inequality? experimental tests of the prediction that inequality increases system justification motivation." *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, 5(3):206-216.
- Tyler, Tom. 2011. "Procedural justice shapes evaluations of income inequality: Commentary on Norton and Ariely (2011)." *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6(1), 15-16.