Mobilizing Against Inequality: How Protests Shape Preferences for Redistribution

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Abstract

What is the effect of protests on preferences for redistribution? Although the role of political narratives in the inequality-redistribution link has been emphasized extensively, there is scarce empirical evidence connecting political mobilization with preferences for redistribution. Experimental evidence, however, reveals that factors such as perceptions or moral evaluations around inequality can affect people's redistributive demands. The present paper connects this experimental evidence to real-world political settings, theorizing that massive mobilizations can affect people's preferences for redistribution by shaping their fairness evaluations or perceptions of inequality. To test this hypothesis, the article provides evidence on the relationship between protest events and redistributive demands for a pool of Western European countries. Furthermore, the study focuses on four specific protests to enhance contextual understanding and address causal inference issues, implementing an 'unexpected event during survey design' methodology to study the effect of several protests: anti-austerity waves in 2011 in Portugal and Spain and the French Gilets Jaunes in 2018 and their spillover effects in Belgium. The results suggest that protests can increase redistributive demands, likely due to magnified grievances and changing beliefs towards economic fairness and egalitarianism, providing new insights into inequality and mobilization research.

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Introduction

Long-standing debates around the responses to inequality have painted a pessimistic picture: while inequality increases, public opinion seems to remain static (Scheve and Stasavage, 2016), thus contradicting the predictions of classic rational choice models (Meltzer and Richard, 1981). A consensus in the literature revolves around a 'Robin Hood paradox,' by which more unequal countries redistribute less, and the population tends to legitimize the levels of inequality and even view society as meritocratic (Mijs, 2019). Increasing inequality, it follows, can incentivize people to accept higher levels of inequality, based on system justification theories (Trump, 2018). Institutional, historical, and sociological theories support these views, simultaneously emphasizing the immutability of redistributive demands (Cavaillé and Trump, 2015; O'Grady, 2019). These frameworks leave little room for the agency of political actors such as protesters, positing that the development of inequality and the public (in)tolerance towards inequality are stable over time and only depend on institutional factors (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Martin and Chevalier, 2021).

However, such views contrast with public opinion trends in several countries over recent decades, missing the potential 'activating' role of protest mobilization. For example, support for redistribution in Spain increased from 79% to 86% between 2008 and 2015, and in France from 70% to 80% between 2014 and 2018[1], coinciding with heightened protest mobilization. These numbers are much larger for countries in the global South. The implementation of neoliberal policies in the '90s strongly correlates with large increases in redistributive demands, e.g., from 21% to 45% in Argentina and from 30% to 59% in Chile over the period 1990-2002[2]. Moreover, the revolution in Egypt in 2011 was accompanied by an increase of 37% in redistributive demands from 2008 to 2013 (El Rafhi and Volle, 2020). Although trends in the U.S. show that public opinion on inequality has remained relatively static (Bartels, 2016), this long-run focus may obscure the potential that mass mobilizations can have on redistributive demands in the short-term and beyond the U.S.

Despite significant changes in several countries, we still know very little about how redistributive preferences evolve in actual political contexts, such as during mass citizen mobilization. The literature's emphasis on the stability of public opinion towards inequality captures long-term trends but offers little insight into the processes underlying different responses to growing inequality. The cases highlighted above underscore the importance of country-specific political developments, where political agendas and mobilization significantly influence public opinion. This perspective aligns with previous research linking voting participation and policy responsiveness to inequality (Pontusson and Rueda, 2010). However, the direction of causality remains unclear: does mobilization lead to increased redistributive demands, or vice versa, or do the two phenomena reinforce each other?

Contrary to the emphasis on stable preferences for redistribution, extensive experimental evidence highlights the 'elasticity' of such preferences (Cruces et al., 2013). In these models,

[1] European Social Survey. Percentages show the share of people agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement 'Government should reduce differences in income levels'

[2] World Values Survey. Percentages show the share of people answering one to four in a 1-10 scale with 1 as 'Incomes should be made more equal' and 10 as 'We need larger income differences as incentives'

the accuracy of the classical rational choice model increases substantially when perceptions of inequality, rather than actual inequality levels, are prioritized (Choi, 2019; Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018). For instance, providing information about different aspects of inequality increases individuals' preferences for redistribution (Ciani et al., 2021), especially when this information includes moral arguments, such as deservingness or social mobility evaluations (A. Alesina et al., 2018; Trump, 2020). Overall, the cross-country and experimental evidence suggests that objective inequality levels alone are insufficient to change redistributive demands and policies. Instead, available information, combined with moral, contextual, or sociotropic evaluations of inequality, plays a crucial role. Following this reasoning, an open question in political sociology is whether large mobilizations against inequality might counteract increasing acceptance of inequality (Condon and Wichowsky, 2020b, p. 21; Trump, 2018, p. 3).

Despite these insights, the role of protests in shaping public opinion towards inequality is scarcely theorized and empirically tested in actual political contexts and events. This gap contrasts with the literature on social movements, which suggests that shifts in political narratives, fostered by protest and mobilization, play a key role in setting the political agenda (Gaby and Caren, 2016; Wasow, 2020). Thus, survey experimental evidence and the social movements literature indicate that economic protests may be a key factor translating increasing inequalities into redistributive demands. Similar to how economic crises only lead people to update political views in conjunction with political crises (Kriesi et al., 2020), economic hardship might not automatically lead to updating redistributive demands but does so through social contestation. This view highlights the role of sociotropic evaluations in shaping public opinion (Alt et al., 2022), emphasizing the importance of studying redistributive demands in actual political contexts.

The present paper brings these perspectives together by examining mobilization in action: Do protests focused on economic issues affect public redistributive demands? I argue that, despite the stability of such preferences, successful protests can directly impact public redistributive demands through four interrelated mechanisms. First, mobilizations, especially large ones, can facilitate the widespread adoption of protesters' policy positions via identification with the protesters. Second, mobilizations can signal the broader public about social inequality and economic hardship, prompting individuals to reassess their self-positioning on the social scale and subsequently update their redistributive demands. Third, protests focused on economic issues can undermine the legitimacy of inequality, increasing egalitarian beliefs and eroding meritocratic principles. Finally, large protests can facilitate blame attribution to elites by contesting hegemonic discourses that individualize the causes of poverty and inequality, thereby affecting individuals' views on inequality.

To test the effects of protests on redistributive demands, I provide two sets of evidence. First, I show that mobilization around economic issues is strongly related to public redistributive demands in Western European countries. Moreover, to address concerns regarding causality and provide better insight into protest contexts, I implement an 'Unexpected Event During Survey Design' (Muñoz et al., 2020), examining four substantive cases: Geração a Rasca in Portugal, 15-M in Spain, Yellow Vests in France, and its spillover effects in Belgium. These examples represent most-likely cases of exogenous influence of protest on public opinion,

with large and successful grassroots-led mobilizations organized without the participation of main unions or political parties, where the wider population remained largely unaware of the mobilizations' potential before their onset. Thus, these mobilizations offer the opportunity to approximate the causal effects of the protests on the general population. Finally, I provide supporting evidence on the potential mechanisms explaining these effects.

Literature review

The existent literature has provided limited attention to the specific question of whether protests are able to influence public opinion towards inequality. A chasm between long-run aggregate perspectives on political change and experimental evidence on preferences for redistribution illustrates this gap in the literature. The first set of studies has put forward the argument that protest movements were unable to shape mass public opinion on economic issues after the Great Recession period in the US (Bartels, 2016) and Europe (Bermeo and Bartels, 2014). In these long-run narratives, mobilizations are only one part of the political process, showing little or no clear effect in the political trajectories, especially in the US (Bartels, 2016).

At the same time, the protest literature has evidenced the ability of protest events to influence a myriad of outcomes also in the long-run, such as political agendas, public opinion (Mazumder, 2018; Wasow, 2020), voting (Bischof and Kurer, 2023; Lagios et al., 2022), or legislation (Bernardi et al., 2021). Issues such as the Civil Right or Black Lives Matter movements greatly impacted public opinion (Mazumder, 2018; Reny and Newman, 2021; Wasow, 2020) and the political trajectories of parties (Mazumder, 2018; McAdam and Kloos, 2014). Women's marches (Larreboure and Gonz, 2021) or anti far-right protests (Lagios et al., 2022) also seemed to impact electoral behaviour, favouring historically underrepresented groups or reducing the vote share of far-right parties.

Despite a large research body providing evidence over the long-run effects of mobilizations around racial or gender issues, there is a substantial overlook over how protests may shape public opinion on inequality. Probably, this is due to the fewer instances in recent decades where mobilization has resulted in sustained reductions in inequality levels. At least two reasons may explain why protests over economic inequality might be less likely to produce long-run political change. First, many examples in the social movements literature involve instances where social movements run parallel to, or produce, more inclusive political institutions and coalitions, generating long-run effects. This is less the case regarding contemporaneous economic inequality, where elites remain invariably opposed through channels such as ideological and media framing (Bansak et al., 2021; Epp and Jennings, 2020) or institutional control (Acemoglu et al., 2015; Anderson and Beramendi, 2012). Second, patterns of increasing inequality also undermine the resources of lower classes to participate in politics, potentially leading to a stalemate in long-term responses to inequality. Thus, long-run perspectives may not be very informative about the potential effects of economic protests on public redistributive demands.

In contrast to these macro approaches, a vast experimental literature points to the 'elasticity'

of redistributive demands (Ciani et al., 2021; Cruces et al., 2013; Margalit, 2013). Often relying on psychological micro-foundations, this literature explains the mechanisms by which people think about redistribution, aiming to understand the micro foundations behind the puzzle of increasing inequality without increasing public support towards redistribution. A common observation is that perceptions of inequality are more important than actual inequality levels in predicting aggregate preferences for redistribution (Choi, 2019; Condon and Wichowsky, 2020a). For instance, providing information about individuals' position in the income scale leads individuals to demand more redistribution (Cruces et al., 2013) or more progressive taxes (Cansunar, 2021; Fernández-Albertos and Kuo, 2018).

A similar body of research remains skeptical about treatments based on objective information on inequality, arguing that people are mainly motivated to perceive the economic system as fair (Trump, 2018). In several survey experiments, Trump (2018) shows that merely providing information on existing economic inequality does not translate into redistributive demands, as individuals adjust their views towards inequality based on the new information for system justification motives. Following this reasoning, various experiments show that people change their views when treatments about inequality include information highlighting moral implications that are widely perceived as 'wrong.' For instance, providing information about actual social mobility levels (A. Alesina et al., 2018; Trump, 2020), the potential externalities of inequality (Lobeck and Støstad, 2022), and the (non)-prosociality of wealthy individuals (Hansen, 2022) positively influences preferences for redistribution. Most importantly, exposing people to narratives that portray the system as unfair leads to higher redistributive demands (Culpepper et al., 2024). These experimental evidence highlights the potential for protests to shape people's redistributive demands, as protests often incorporate moral and anti-system narratives. Although recent literature has started to test some of these expectations in real-life events (Dunaiski and Tukiainen, 2023; Ouali, 2020), most of the outlined experimental evidence remains isolated, lacking external validity.

Thus, these different emphases between macro approaches and survey experiments lead to very different expectations regarding the role of protests on public redistributive demands. Studies focusing on long-term political developments are not informative about the micro dynamics of protest mobilization over economic issues, as political and economic elites will likely be able to take over the agenda in the long-run, especially in democracies with relatively high political stability. On the other hand, survey experiments, while offering high quality causal evidence, lack external validity. Within and beyond these approaches, the protest literature offers good reasons to think that protests focused on economic issues may as well shape redistributive demands, at least in the short-run.

Despite the apparent link between protest mobilization and public opinion towards redistribution, there is little theory and empirical evidence connecting them. In this regard, cross-sectional studies informed by resource models of political participation (Brady et al., 1995) show that higher voting turnout levels increase redistribution (Pontusson and Rueda, 2010) and that higher mobilization levels increase the political efficacy and participation of lower classes (Kurer et al., 2019). These pieces of evidence suggest that large mobilizations can foster the political participation of broader sections of the population, affecting their behaviors and preferences. However, and with the notable exception of El Rafhi and Volle

(2020), the literature only offers insights over the different dynamics of inequality rather than on the independent effect of protest mobilization on redistributive demands. Existing research does not provide explicit theorization on the relationship between protests and public opinion on redistribution, limiting our understanding on the role of mobilization on public preferences towards inequality. The next section addresses such link, building theoretical expectations on the potential effects of protest on redistributive demands.

Theory: Economic Protests lead to Society-Wide Redistributive Demands

The literature on preferences for redistribution provides extensive evidence on how and when preferences may change, often from laboratory and field experiments (Trump, 2020). Within these studies, a key framework distinguishes how lower and middle-upper classes reason about inequality and redistribution (Cavaillé and Trump, 2015). Especially regarding protest events with potential distributional consequences, such differentiation seems critical to understand the potential impact of protests on preferences for redistribution. For this reason, I build theoretically relying on the 'redistribution from' and 'redistribution to' framework proposed by Cavaillé and Trump (2015), which emphasizes that lower classes form their preferences for redistribution through material concerns, while middle-upper classes rely on other-regarding preferences.

Given the aforementioned differentiation, I argue that mobilizations may impact differently lower and middle-upper classes. For the former group, protests can impact perceptions of economic self-interest and blame attribution among lower economic strata. As lower classes face more difficulties to engage in political participation, protests make such participation more accessible (Kurer et al., 2019), shaping their grievances and redistributive preferences. For the middle-upper classes, protests can potentially impact other-regarding evaluations based on the perceived fairness of outcomes, affecting their 'preferences for redistribution to' (Cavaillé and Trump, 2015).

Mobilizing lower classes: 'Redistribution from'

The evidence indicates that individuals often overestimate their position within income rankings, a pattern attributed to reliance on informational cues from their local environment rather than objective, country-level indicators (Franko and Livingston, 2020). However, when provided with accurate information about their actual position on the national income scale, those who had overestimated their status tend to advocate for more redistribution (Cruces et al., 2013) or support progressive taxation (Cansunar, 2021; Fernández-Albertos and Kuo, 2018).

Protests may play a significant role in affecting individuals' identities and self-categorizations concerning income ranking and status. Individuals might reassess their income ranking upon identifying with protest participants (Polletta and Jasper, 2001), thereby updating their economic evaluations in response to the economic grievances expressed by fellow demonstrators.

Although such updates may lead to upward social comparisons, potentially decreasing individuals' political efficacy and reducing redistributive demands (Condon and Wichowsky, 2020a), protests can counteract these potential negative effects. Furthermore, protests often heighten the visibility of economic issues (Gaby and Caren, 2016), prompting individuals to reconsider their positions on redistributive policies. According to both the median voter theorem (Downs, 1957) and classical political economy models (Meltzer and Richard, 1981), increased emphasis on economic issues should lead the majority of people to adjust their redistributive demands upward.

In combination with the classic rational choice perspective, a second argument underlines the role of emotions and dispositional reasoning toward elites, offering insights into the role of grievances on redistributive demands. Often, economic and political elites blame the general population for their economic outcomes, emphasizing individuals' agency for wider economic hardship. In the aftermath of the Great Recession, many political elites across Europe evidenced these discourses, even during the implementation of harsh austerity measures. For instance, the then Prime Minister of Finance of Ireland blamed the Irish people in 2010 for the banking crisis: "We decided as a people, collectively, to have this property boom (Kerrigan, 2012, p. 104)." In Spain, Rajoy, as the leader of the conservative party, declared in 2010 that "we have lived beyond our –economic- possibilities" (Servimedia, 2010), a vision corroborated by the centre-left Minister of Development in 2011 José Blanco (El Economista, 2011). These discourses arguably legitimized spending cuts, justified austerity policies (Bansak et al., 2021) and demobilized the population.

Countering this logic, experimental evidence shows that randomly exposing individuals to anti-elite statements increases their 'pocketbook' anger (Marx, 2020), arguably influenced by a shift in blame attribution to elites. Similarly, depicting rich people as selfish as opposed to generous or prosocial increases peoples' redistributive demands (Hansen, 2022). In line with this evidence, the release of the Panama papers, unveiling tax heavens and arguably shaping perceptions of rich people as 'greedy', increased public preferences for redistribution (Ouali, 2020). Thus, protests can play a similar role signaling the audience by externalizing blame and redirecting it to political elites, facilitating individuals' recognition of their economic struggles and consequently affecting their redistributive demands. By holding economic elites accountable for the economic outcomes, protests can foster demands among the lower classes to 'redistribute from'.

Legitimizing lower classes: 'Redistribution to'

An alternative rationale puts forward the possible implications of an economic protest among the middle and upper classes. Middle and upper classes face a contradiction between short-run economic self-interest and other-regarding preferences when forming their preferences for redistribution (Armingeon and Weisstanner, 2022). Although self-interest would lead middle-upper classes to prefer low levels of redistribution, a large body of research shows that other-regarding preferences can be influential in shaping people's redistributive demands by pointing out the fairness of economic outcomes (A. Alesina et al., 2018). Research shows that increased concerns about income inequality can impact beliefs around 'equality of op-

portunities' (McCall et al., 2017; Trump, 2020), thus increasing redistributive demands also among middle-upper classes.

Mirroring these experimental findings, protests can foster discussion around inequality and poverty (Gaby and Caren, 2016), influencing upper classes' identification with lower classes (Mo and Conn, 2018). Thus, protests can impact the fairness perceptions and sympathy towards lower classes, increasing redistributive demands among this social strata.

A second, more pragmatic argument raises the potential impact on middle/upper classes by emphasizing the inequality externalities (Lobeck and Støstad, 2022). Providing novel experimental evidence, Lobeck shows (2022) that an emphasis on the externalities generated by inequality fosters concerns towards such inequality and increases demands for redistribution. In this sense, protests can raise a pragmatic argument in favour of redistribution by pointing out specific externalities derived from income inequality, such as poverty, potentially impacting middle and upper classes preferences.

In sum, protests can affect redistributive demands among lower and middle-upper classes via alternative channels. Firstly, an increasing public discussion around inequality might in turn increase the grievances and demands for redistribution of lower classes by fostering a self-interested rationalization of economic outcomes and by externalizing blame on political elites. Secondly, protests might foster redistributive demands among middle and upper classes due to increased concerns about the (un)fairness of economic outcomes and the externalities derived from such inequalities. Thus, the arguments presented above lead to the following hypothesis:

H1: Protests incorporating economic demands increase public preferences for redistribution.

The next sections provide two distinctive sets of empirical evidence to test the hypothesis. Study 1 shows a consistent pattern between a pool of -economic- protest events and redistributive demands in a set of Western European countries. Study 2 digs deeper into four specific protest events, delineating their context and discussing issues of causality to a greater extent.

Study 1: Pooled Evidence on the Link between Protests and Redistributive Demands

This section provides pooled evidence on the link between economic protests and redistributive demands, using survey data from the European Social Survey (ESS) across several Western European countries and protest data from the PolDem database (Hanspeter Kriesi et al., 2020). The models exploit temporal variation by matching individual survey responses with protest dates, based on interview and protest timings. Two patterns emerge: first, people demand more redistribution during periods of heightened economic protests (long-term, between survey waves); second, respondents prefer more redistribution following significant protest events (short-term, within survey waves).

The PolDem database registers over 30,000 protest events between 2000 and 2015, detailing key protest characteristics such as the number of participants, the strength of the mobi-

lization, and the protest issue. Using these characteristics, I select protests classified as exceptionally strong and focused on economic issues, linking them to the survey data using the ESS interview dates. With these data, I model the relationship between protest levels and average redistributive demands over time (Models 1 and 2 in Table 1), and the potential effect of protests occurring within survey collection periods (Models 3 and 4). Appendix 12 provides the equations for each model and details the empirical strategies. In summary, all models report changes in redistributive demands within countries over time (indicated by country-fixed effects), while Models 3 and 4 report changes within country-wave periods (indicated by country and wave-fixed effects).

Table 1 show that large mobilizations (Model 1) and higher participation levels (Model 2) close to survey waves correspond with higher redistributive demands. In substantive terms, a big protest event -as codified by the PolDem database (Model 1) within the survey dates increases redistributive preferences by 0.05 points. Similarly, an increase of 1% of the population in these protest events increases redistributive demands by 0.01 points.

Table 1: Protests and preferences for redistribution

	Dependent variable:			
	Preferences for Redistribution			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Big protest event	0.054***			
	(0.008)			
Max participants (in percentage)		0.009***		
		(0.001)		
After protest (ref: before)			0.064***	0.143***
			(0.011)	(0.025)
Country FE	X	X	X	X
Individual controls	X	X	X	X
Wave FE			X	X
Trends control				X
Observations	134,511	134,511	134,511	134,511
R^2	0.101	0.101	0.101	0.101
Note:	+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001			

However, it may well be that the relationship is confounded by factors such as economic crises between survey waves. To account for this, Models 3 and 4 dig further into this relationship and observe changes happening within the survey waves (i.e., including country and wave fixed effects) in coincidence with protest events registered by PolDem. These models show that, on average, respondents prefer more redistribution after a protest event that focuses on economic issues. Such a relationship holds for average levels (Model 3) and if controlling for time trends (Model 4).

While causal identification issues arise without further analysis of specific protests, these patterns suggest that, first, redistributive demands are closely related to the timing of protest events, and second, that this relationship holds for protests focused on economic issues, but not for other types of protests. To address the first issue, and in addition to the time-trend control included in Model 4, I conduct a simulation that assigns random (fake) protest dates for each country and survey wave. Figure 1 shows that the size of the original estimates in Models 3 and 4 deviate by more than five and nine standard deviations, respectively, from the mean estimate of the random simulations. This suggests that the exact timing of the protest events identified by PolDem is strongly related to an increase in redistributive demands.

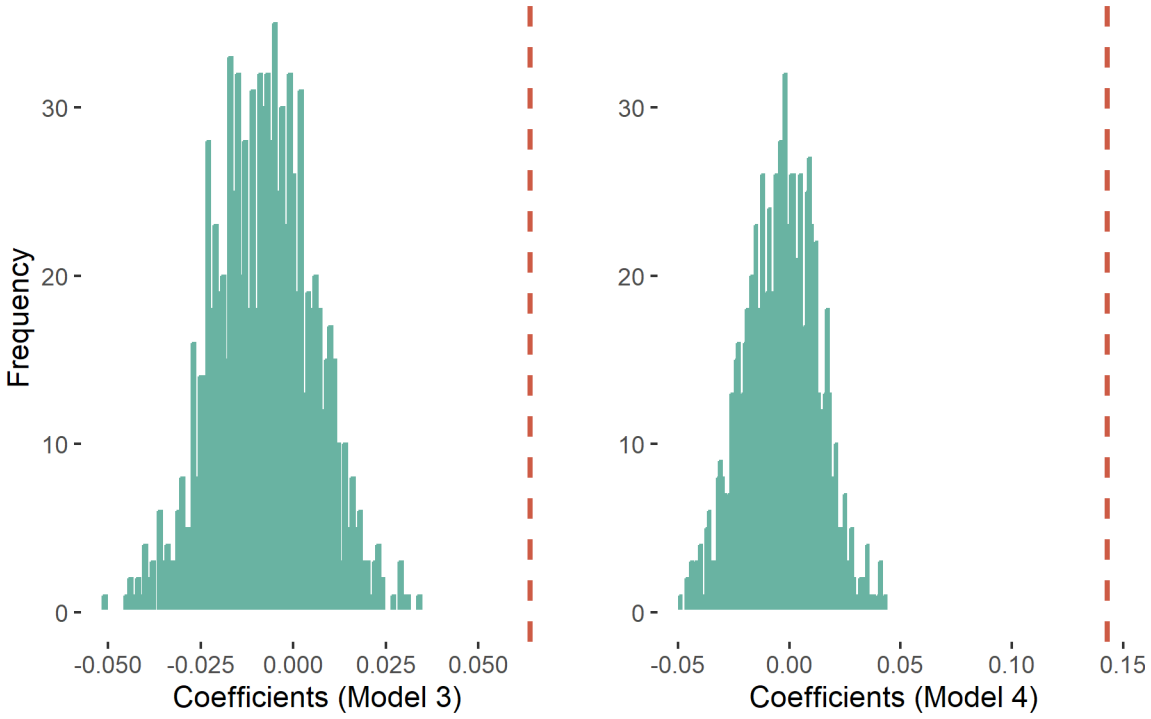

Figure 1: Simulation with random dates selection. Green histogram shows the coefficients results using random dates, for Models 3 and 4, respectively. Red dashed vertical lines shows the coefficients from protest event dates in Model 3 and Model 4

Secondly, as argued before, only economic protests impact redistributive demands, not protests on other issues. To test this assumption, I rerun the analyses using major protest events focused on different topics, such as conservative and culturally liberal issues, as categorized by the PolDem database. The results (Appendix 12) show that these two sets of protests do not influence redistributive demands, which increases confidence in the patterns described above.

These analyses present suggestive evidence of a potential link between economic protests and redistributive demands based on a pool of protest events. However, the lack of contextual

information, which is fundamental to understanding the implications of social movements, impedes a proper understanding and prevents a plausible formulation of causal claims. Importantly, these events were often organized by unions or supported by political parties, potentially producing an endogenous relationship between the timing of the protests and public opinion mood. Therefore, the following section presents a set of four protest events, discussing key scope conditions and their influence on public opinion.

Study 2: Case Studies

The selection of the specific social movements follows a most-likely approach with two criteria: first, the availability of survey data for the period in which the mobilization occurs, and second, its unexpectedness and disruptiveness, facilitating their ability to set the agenda and influence public opinion. The second criterion follows previous theorization, by which social movements have a larger impact if they can break with the 'business-as-usual political developments (McAdam et al., 2001). Large, unprecedented mobilizations are by definition unexpected, leading people to update their views about what is legitimate and most importantly about what other people think (Kuran, 1991). Thus, the common denominator across the selected mobilizations is the use of disruptive tactics and new action repertoires (McAdam et al., 2001), with large levels of participation garnering substantial attention in the media. Moreover, the mobilizations under study present coordinated participants in big numbers and saw considerable diversity among the protesters, factors that arguably affect the potential of protests to influence public opinion (Tilly, 1993; Wouters and Walgrave, 2017). All the selected mobilizations focused, with varying degrees, on economic issues and demands on the general political process.

I study four mobilizations in four countries: Portugal's Geração à Rasca in March 2011; the 15th May 2011 mobilization in Spain; and the Gilets Jaunes mobilization in France and Belgium in 2018. This combination allows for the observation of the same outcome in different institutional settings and mobilization waves between Southern and Western European countries. While considering valuable heterogeneity across cases, there are also many theoretical similarities. First, the selected cases represent large, meaningful events incorporating legitimacy concerns to their economic demands. Second, although leftist participants represent a majority in most cases, these social movements actively denied left-right labeling (Aslanidis, 2016; Guerra et al., 2019), usually rejecting the media, political elites, or unions and other social organizations. They were organized through social media without the knowledge of traditional social organizations, reflecting primarily bottom-up mobilizations unexpected by the general public. Thirdly, their heterogeneous social base (Peterson et al., 2015), with a renewed focus on class and economic equality (Tejerina et al., 2013), highlights the transformative power of such mobilizations. Finally, they took place in moments of political crisis, characterized by low approval rates for the incumbents and widespread political disaffection, facilitating the update of preferences beyond partisanship cues. I now turn to a more detailed discussion of each specific case in order to expand the aforementioned theoretical assumptions.

Portugal's Geração à Rasca – 12th March 2011

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, Portugal was one of the first countries where an anti-austerity mobilization took place. The Geraçao à Rasca or 'Desperate generation' mobilization gathered a massive participation and was the most important mobilization since the revolution in 1974. While the protest was followed by the resignation of a left-wing cabinet and the electoral success of the right-wing candidate in June 2011, its objective and message were deeper. Following the government deal with the IMF by the centre-left Socialist Party, the protest focused its central claims on the 'precariat' and living conditions (Accornero, 2017). Moreover, the incorporation of legitimacy concerns affected various levels of political trust among Portuguese people (Valentim, 2021), going beyond a mere anti-government protest.

The mobilization started a wave of contention in Portugal, which previously had not witnessed significantly large mobilizations (Valentim, 2021), allowing to isolate the protests' effects. Research has shown that this protest was quite disruptive compared to previous mobilizations (Accornero and Ramos Pinto, 2015), and it was disconnected from unions or other social organizations (Valentim, 2021, p. 3). Moreover, was organized through social media in a bottom-up fashion, as documented by web search trends for the keywords' Geração à Rasca' (Valentim, 2021, p. 14) (see also Appendix 7). Finally, the mass media reported the protests following online social media, validating the intuition that the general public was unaware of the protest.

Indignados in Spain, 15-M 2011

The 15-M in Spain resembles the Portuguese mobilization, being part of an increasingly contentious activity led by Occupy and anti-austerity protests, especially prominent in Southern Europe (Gessler et al., 2020). Mirroring the Portuguese trajectory, the 15-M mobilization took place under the government of the main centre-left party, PSOE, which initiated austerity policies early in 2010. The 15-M movement hugely impacted Spanish politics, and led to a reconfiguration of the party system (Orriols and Cordero, 2016; Romanos, 2021). The protest has been recognized as a symbol of other long-term effects in Spanish politics (Orriols and Cordero, 2016; Rodon and Hierro, 2016), with the appearance of the new leftist party Podemos in 2014.

The protest was highly innovative, with camping sites in the main squares of numerous cities. The 15-M mobilization began a wave of protests lasting until 2015, accompanied by a variety of large rallies. The mobilization combined democratic and economic demands and raised economic issues onto the agenda (Labio and Pineda, 2016), with the participation of the middle classes in the protests signaling the unmet economic expectations of the population. A social media group called "Democracia Real Ya" (Real Democracy Now) initiated the event while unions, parties and prominent social actors were not involved, thus the protest took a straightforward bottom-up approach. Appendix 7 shows that the Google search trends do not capture keywords linked to the protest until 15th May, while searches for other words such as "crisis" do not vary.

Yellow Vests in France

The Yellow Vest movement in 2018-2019 is considered the most important mobilization in France since May 1968. Triggered by the announcement of a new fuel tax policy, its influence on French politics has been huge, fostering debates on broader democratic demands (Devellennes, 2021), as well as on specific economic policies (Guerra et al., 2019). Among its observable successes, it forced President Macron to reverse some of his tax reforms and propose a 'grand national debate' months after the beginning of the protest. The mobilization was incredibly disruptive, gathering unprecedented national and international media attention (Shultziner and Kornblit, 2020) and the sympathy of politicians abroad (Stampa, 2019). A heterogeneous social composition and its massive, sustained throughout months, participation summarizes its impact (Tucat, 2019). Moreover, the total disconnection with existing unions or parties and its anti-establishment rethoric, rejecting Left-Right labelling, largely resembles previous Occupy Movements such as 15-M (Yagci, 2017). Regardless of such institutional support, the demands focused on social justice and economic policies gathered the support of many non-participants (Elabe, 2019).

The protest was organized on Saturdays every week, beginning on 17th November 2018. As proof of its success, by the first week of December, the government had to reverse some of the previously proposed policies, proposing a substantial rise in the minimum salary or advancing a 'Grand National Debate' with the intention to address the grievances raised. Thus, months after, the Yellow Vests reframed the political situation in a new direction. Although the online mobilization was taking place before the protests, its 'offline' size was largely unexpected since it was organized mainly through social media (Tucat, 2019). Appendix 7 shows that keywords linked to the Yellow Vests movement do not appear in Google searches until two days before the first protest, highlighting the unawareness by the general public.

Yellow Vests in Belgium

The French Yellow Vests resonated heavily in Belgium, where protests spread on the basis of similar demands: reducing the taxation of basic-needs products, including fuel (Dufresne et al., 2019, p. 49; Stroobants, 2018). The protests, tactically cutting off the fuel supply to gas stations, were highly disruptive and set the agenda for weeks (Dufresne et al., 2019, p. 50). Unions and other formal organizations were disconnected from the movement, as the leader of the main union Marie Hélène Ska (CSC) explained: "The Gilets Jaunes are the outcome of unresponsiveness towards the union's demands" (Dufresne et al., 2019, p. 51). The demonstrations, demanding the government's resignation, impulse a platform for the 2019 Belgian elections. As in France, Google searches peaked after the protests (Appendix 7), starting to take place gradually after 17th November.

Data and Methodology

To observe the effects of social movements on redistributive demands, I implement an "unexpected event during survey" design (Muñoz et al., 2020), coupling the survey timing with the protest events, using European Social Survey (ESS) data. The survey's and protest timing are described in the Appendix 6. Except for Portugal, all countries have a substantial number of observations before and after their respective protest events, allowing the observation of effects over relatively long periods. I implement the following two specifications, aiming to capture the effect of the protest events on redistributive demands observing average changes (Eq. 1), while controlling for time trends (Eq. 2):

$$Eq.1 : y_{i,r} = \alpha + \beta T_{i,r} + \delta T_{i,r} + \gamma' X_i + \mu_r + \epsilon_i$$

$$Eq.2 : y_{i,r} = \alpha + \beta T_{i,r} + \delta (T_{i,r} + Z_{i,r}) + \gamma' X_i + \mu_r + \epsilon_i$$

The dependent variable 'y' measures individuals' answers to the following statement: "Government should reduce differences in income levels," with responses ranging from 1 (Disagree strongly) to 5 (Agree strongly). For every case, the treatment variable 'T' takes the value one (1) if the respondent i is surveyed after the protest event and zero (0) otherwise. Moreover, since the purpose is to capture the effect around specific events, the models should control pre and post-trends (Muñoz et al., 2020), mainly to avoid capturing the effect from a public opinion trend potentially taking place before the mobilizations. For that purpose, I include a separate model specification that interacts with the day count 'Z' on the protest treatment 'T' (Eq. 2). The trend is captured by counting the days since the protest event, ranging from -50 to 50 depending on whether the respondent was surveyed before or after the protest. Thus, the main analyses run multiple regressions, varying the number of interview dates before and after the protest events.

To avoid estimation bias from imbalances in the data I include several sociodemographic controls 'X' , focusing on those mentioned as more influential in the literature on preferences for redistribution. I include education level, age, and gender as people with lower education levels, older people, and women prefer more redistribution in Europe (Finseraas, 2009). Other sociodemographic factors unrelated to the protest events that can affect preferences for redistribution are controlled for, such as residence description, trade union membership, and employment status. In addition, I include declared vote, focusing on the L-R economic dimension. As the number of countries analyzed presents many parties, I create a three-category variable to control party identification. Thus, I categorize individuals as having voted for a leftist party, centrist/abstentionist, or right-wing party (see Appendix 8). I also categorically control for income and occupation, recodifying missing responses as "other" to avoid losing a substantial number of observations.

Finally, I include region fixed effects μ, as previous studies have shown substantial imbalances related to the survey timing and regional composition of respondents (Giani and Méon, 2021). Since the database contains respondents from a variety of countries and regions with different baseline redistributive demands, I include region-fixed effects to control for heterogeneities

derived from different baseline levels. Simultaneously, some countries included in the analysis have more observations than others in the 'non-treated or 'treated' group due to the different paces in which the surveys were conducted, as shown in Appendix 6. Therefore, the region fixed effects prevent biases derived from the different regional compositions in the treatment and control groups.

Table 2 shows the summary statistics for the dependent variable and controls, subset by people surveyed before and after fifteen days from the protest. The control variables do not show statistically significant differences, as shown in Appendix 2. Moreover, Appendix 2 expands this analysis by looking at the imbalances for 1 to 40 days before and after the protests, showing minimal imbalances in the data for up to -/+ 30 days.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics (-/+ 15 days)

	Before protests			After protests		
	N	Mean	Std.Dev.	N	Mean	Std.Dev.
PrefRed	914	3.97	0.97	1032	4.11	0.88
Residence	923	0.41	0.49	1048	0.44	0.50
Gender	925	0.54	0.50	1048	0.54	0.50
Education years	908	12.26	4.93	1028	12.40	5.07
Voted Left	804	0.30	0.46	910	0.27	0.44
Age	925	49.98	19.19	1047	49.34	18.60
Income	713	5.19	2.81	863	5.27	2.84
Member Union	924	0.13	0.33	1047	0.12	0.32
Unemployed	923	0.36	0.48	1046	0.35	0.48

Another bias could be derived from changes in respondents' availability/reachability, as the mobilizations under study have large participation numbers. However, as Appendix 1 shows, reachability does not significantly change around the mobilizations. The increase occurs gradually, with similar levels before/after 15 days and without a visible change around the protests. Moreover, the mobilizations do not seem to affect non-response. There is no change in missing responses on the dependent variable around the cutoff point, neither of success for the first contact with the respondent (see Appendix 1). Moreover, to control for potential systematic differences between non-respondents before and after the protests, additional analyses in the appendix 2 shows no substantial differences regarding qualitative observations (of non-respondents) collected by the interviewers.

Results

Figure 2 shows the main effects of varying bandwidths before and after the protest with robust standard errors clustered by region. After the mobilizations, preferences for redistribution are between 0.20 and 0.10 higher on a 1-5 scale. The effect is substantial: equivalent to an increase of 5 to 10 percentage points in respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with redistribution (see Appendix 4 for this alternative specification). The grey spikes support the findings by controling for trends before the onset of protest events, measuring the 'gap'

in public redistributive demands around the protest event. Although the effects tend to decrease over time, the results in the long term cannot be directly attributed to a single protest due to other events or continued protests, the importance of most of the studied protests suggests that they served as a trigger to persistent public opinion change. The results by country (see Appendix 3), with larger standard errors, show consistent results in narrow bandwidths (-/+ 15 days) across all the cases, suggesting longer-term and stronger effects for the French and Belgian cases.

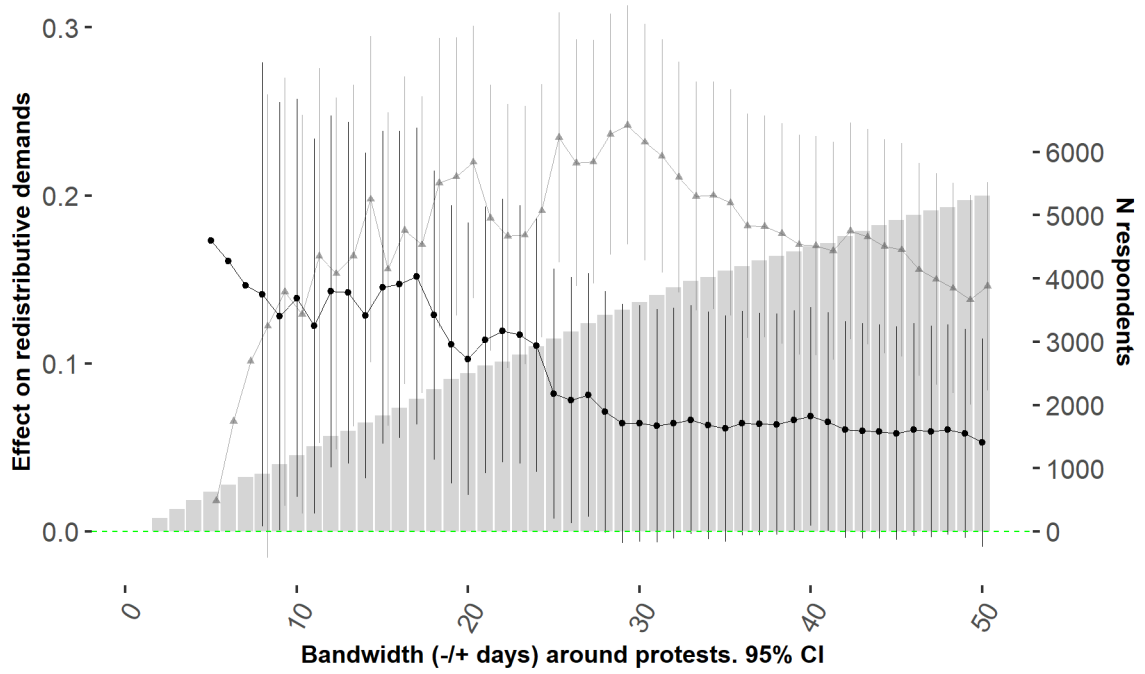

Figure 2: Main result. Change in preferences for redistribution before/after 0-50 days of the protests events. Grey spikes show estimate with interaction term, black dots average difference.

Although the changes observed fifteen or twenty days after the protest event can be arguably attributed to the protest events, the effect observed after is challenging to disentangle, given the variety of cases and the number of political events following the first protests. From other-related events such as elections, highly salient news, or government responsiveness towards the protests' demands, the political environment under which individuals would update their preferences for redistribution is harder to grasp. Many subsequent events can impact the agenda-setting, e.g., the Spanish municipal elections taking place one week after. However, in the Spanish case, the protests and campsites lasted longer than three weeks, and they were mainly directed at the central government, indicating that the regional elections did not demobilize participants. Similarly, after the first two weeks of protests in France, a series of events could have also affected public opinion on redistribution. Forced by massive protest participation and the public support enjoyed by the Gilets jaunes, Macron and Prime

Minister Édouard Philippe conceded some policies in response to the protests, arguably affecting preferences for redistribution and grievances downwards. At the same time, violence in the third week of protests and a terrorist attack in December may have influenced the salience and framing around the French demonstrations. However, protests continued every Saturday for months in significant numbers, reflecting unsolved grievances and potential long-run effects on public opinion. Thus, the results in Figure 2 for 50 days before/after reflect compounding effects related to the political dynamics and events after the protest. Since all the protests were large, unprecedented mobilizations, the political agendas were heavily influenced by such protest events even after weeks.

Placebo and alternative strategies

One crucial concern in event designs is the potential relationship between the running variable and potential heterogeneities that depend on the survey timing. As the ESS does not randomize the dates in which people are interviewed from the representative sample, those at the end of the survey can have different characteristics from those interviewed at the beginning of the fieldwork. For instance, people responding at the end of the survey may be systematically different, as the survey design may prioritize reaching some areas, thus influencing the outcome variable. Although these concerns should be mostly mitigated by the region fixed-effects and the controls included, I ran three placebo tests aiming to address potential biases. First, I rerun the analyses for 1-60 days' bandwidths using the ESS surveys from the previous wave (5th for Portugal and Spain, 8th wave for France and Belgium) using the median date cutoff point to maximize statistical power. Second, I conduct the analyses by using all the other countries in the 9th wave, excluding France and Belgium. Appendix 5 shows that the estimates are inconsistent and small. Moreover, the analyses are always non-significant. Finally, I ran several regressions in the control group of the original sample. As observed in Appendix 5, changing the bandwidth from +-30 to +-5 days in the control group (ranging from day -60 to the first day of the protests) shows inconsistent results. The condition interacting the treatment with the running variable (grey spikes) takes small positive and negative values, indicating inconsistent variation and smaller coefficients in the previous two months.

Additionally, I balance the control and treatment groups using matching techniques on a larger number of covariates, reported in the Appendix 4. The matched samples lead to almost identical results. To reduce concerns about the existence of unobserved confounders, I conduct two sensitivity analyses following Cinelli and Hazet framework (2020), showing that potential unobserved variables correlated with the treatment and the outcome should explain more than five times what (observable) education or income explain (see Appendix 4).

Finally, the analyses by country are provided in Appendix 3. For short-time spans the results are similar for all countries, while after 20-30 days preferences for redistribution remain higher in France and Belgium, mirroring the continued mobilization in these cases.

Heterogeneous results: non-participants and working class

Following the theoretical section, I divided the results by class and political participation to contrast the 'redistribution from' or 'redistribution to' theories. I identify two main subpopulation groups that should update their redistributive demands following the 'redistribution from' logic: working classes and politically disengaged groups. Working class individuals are those that fall into the categories of 'skilled' and 'unskilled' workers from the five categories by Oesch (2006), and non-participants are those responding negatively to having participated in a demonstration in the last 12 months.

Figure 3 illustrates the analyses by subsets, showing that the mobilizations resonated more among working class individuals who typically do not participate in politics. Thus, the protest events aligned the redistributive preferences among those more materially interested in it, improving the predictions of rational choice models (Meltzer and Richard, 1981) and favoring the 'redistribution from' perspective.

In addition the heterogeneous results are in line with resource models of political participation (Brady et al., 1995), by which those with less resources to participate respond stronger to protest mobilizations (Kurer et al., 2019). Simultaneously, the results support the conceptual division between protesters and the general public, understanding protesters as 'actors on a stage' (McAdam et al., 2001) that can raise public awareness of an otherwise resourceless and disengaged mass public.

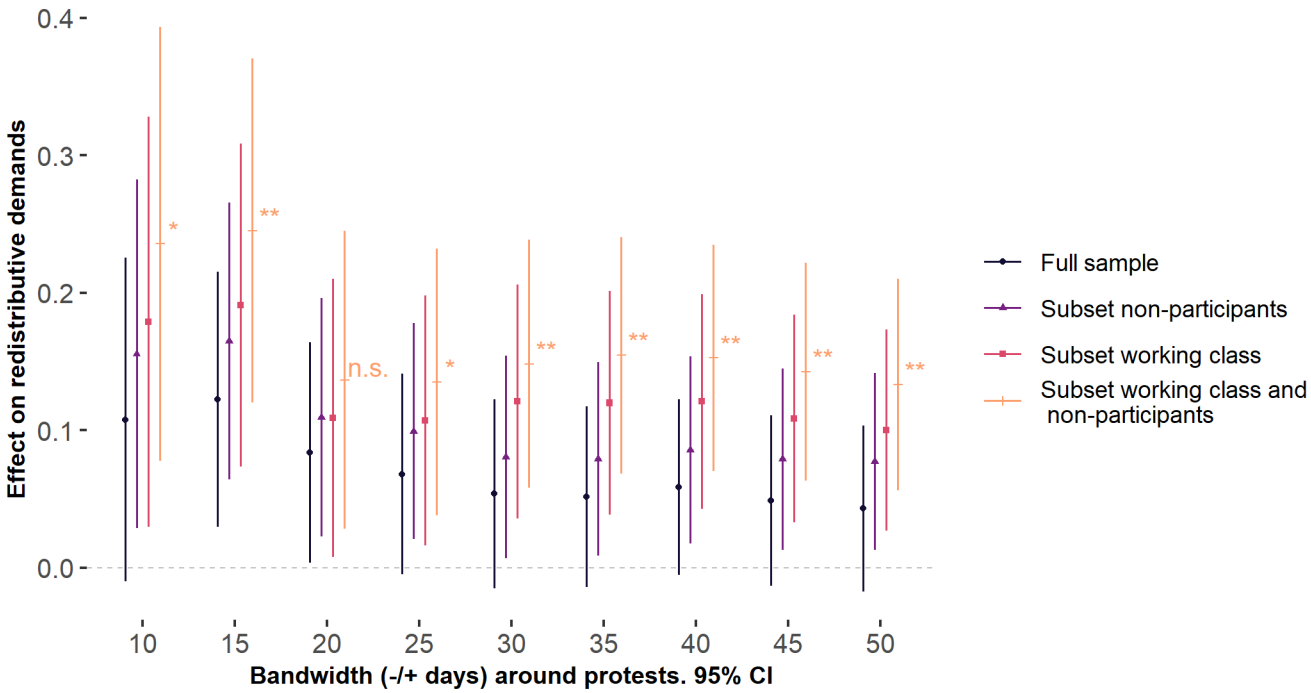

Figure 3: Heterogeneous results. Change in preferences for redistribution before/after 0-50 days of the protests events

Mechanisms and alternative outcomes

This section, relying on a battery of questions only asked in the 9th wave of the ESS (i.e., concerning French and Belgian protests), investigates the potential mechanisms driving the effects. These indicators include deservingness, egalitarian beliefs, and fairness views. Questions on fairness are further divided into general perceptions of wealth differences, perceptions of fairness for the top 10% incomes (under 4900€ in France, 5900€ in Belgium), and for bottom 10% incomes (under 1600€ in France and 2000€ in Belgium). Thus, higher scores represent whether respondents perceive incomes above a certain threshold (top 10% national percentile) as unfairly high, and bottom incomes (below 10% national percentile) as unfairly low.

The results, reported in Figure 4 suggest changes in some core beliefs and fairness perceptions. Respondents perceived bottom 10% incomes as more unfairly low after the protests, although general views on the fairness of wealth distribution remained unchanged. Simultaneously, egalitarian beliefs seem to increase after the protests, with less robust results over time (see Appendix 10). Finally, the fairness perceptions on top 10% incomes remain unchanged after the protest events. In sum, the combined results could explain a general increase in egalitarian beliefs and perceived unfairness of low incomes, leading people to update their preferences for redistribution. These results, in combination with the heterogeneous results for working classes and non-participants, seem to favor the view that these protests mobilized lower-class individuals, fostering grievances around the economic hardship of the less well-off. Such view resonates with the four mobilizations of the case study analyses, which incorporated a strong focus on the standards of living, potentially driving people's opinion about lower incomes and politicizing lower classes. On the other hand, the protests do not seem to shift people's opinion about 10% incomes, potentially because the amounts indicated in the survey are not as large as people would expect. Thus, the survey item might not be capturing what people think of 'rich' people.

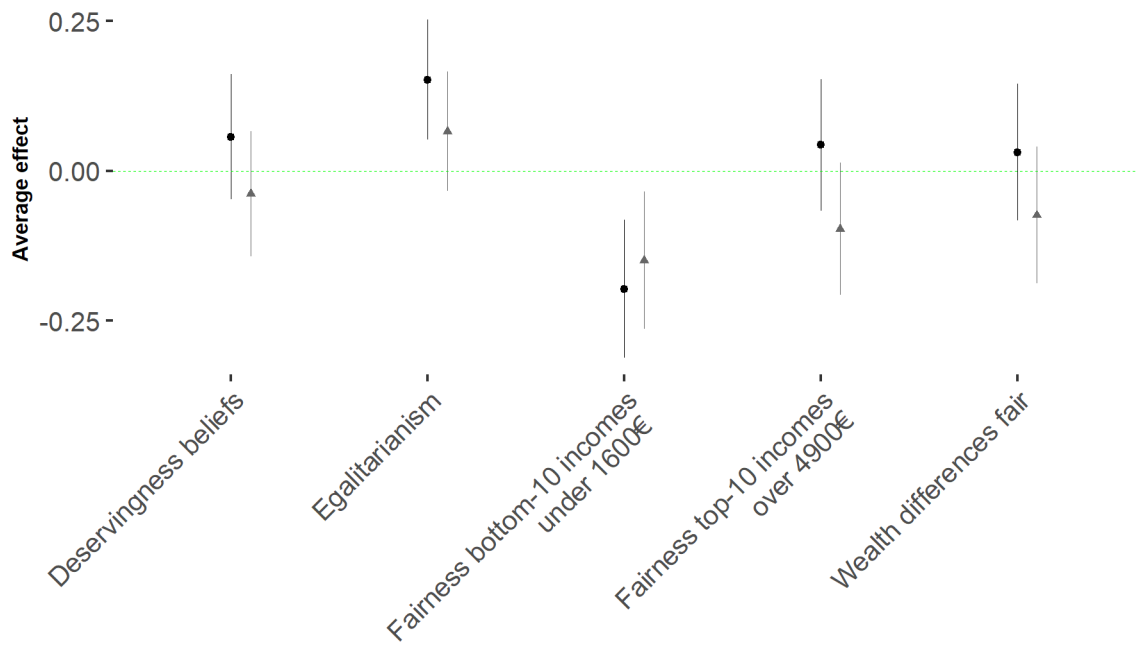

Figure 4: Difference in attitudes before/after 20 days, standardized items. Sample only includes France and Belgium. 95% CI

Discussion

The present study improves our understanding of how redistribution preferences are formed and evolve, providing evidence and building theoretical expectations on whether large economic protests influence public opinion on redistribution. With more robust results for non-participants and working classes in the second study, the effects highlight a 'politicization of inequality' perspective under which protests can directly influence public opinion through activating redistributive grievances among non-participants and lower classes. In this way, protests have the potential to revert self-reinforcing dynamics between inequality and political participation that heighten the legitimization of inequality (Mijs, 2019).

The results of the second study also reveal a potential mechanism through which protests have influenced changes in party systems and populist voting in European countries (Bremer et al., 2020). These large-scale mobilizations, typically not associated with traditional leftist organizations or unions, seek broader structural change beyond specific policies or incumbents. Under these contexts, the demands of the protesters pressure mainstream parties while these protests increased the attention given in the media to issues related to inequality (Valentim, 2021; Yagci, 2017). Thus, these large-scale protests have re-politicized the economy and potentially catalyzed changes in the party system by indicating emerging political spaces (Gessler et al., 2020; H. Kriesi et al., 2012). Moreover, since support for populist

parties is closely linked to issues of redistribution (Abou-Chadi and Hix, 2021; Albanese et al., 2022), and economic grievances are a crucial factor in understanding the popularity of radical right-wing parties (Fetzer, 2019; Hübscher et al., 2021), the role of protests in shaping redistributive demands is essential in comprehending these changes.

Lastly, and in combination with previous literature, the present study provides insights into the self-reinforcing nature of mobilization processes: protests are not only explained by grievances (Grasso and Giugni, 2019; Justino and Martorano, 2019) but can also amplify them, evidencing the observation that protests tend to come in 'waves' (Kriesi et al., 2020). This argument, in line with a 'networks of grievances' perspective (Colombo and Dinas, 2021), supports the idea that social contestation can legitimize anti-systemic attitudes and behaviour (Puga and Moya, 2022), amplifying the political effects of economic crises. As shown in the analyses of the second study , the protests intensified grievances concerning the economy and different political institutions.

Three main shortcomings should be considered. Firstly, the present study deals with short-run effects of economic protests on public opinion, without considering the factors that may or may not lead to sustained public opinion change or policies to tackle inequality. These issues are left aside for further research. At the same time, the present study shows one necessary condition for sustained change: short-term changes in public opinion towards redistributive policy. Such observation is important because macro studies that focus in the long-run may delineate the difficulties that protest movements face to curve economic policies, while are not well-suited to understand the potential -if other conditions are met- of large economic protests. Since many countries have witnessed such changes in the last decades, e.g., Spain, Egypt, or South American countries, the field should give more attention to the 'outcome potential', rather than the 'outcome realization', of such large protest events.

Secondly, the present paper does not address the possibility of 'welfare chauvinistic' redistributive demands. Especially for the French Gilet Jaunes, the protests might have influenced the 'inclusiveness scope' (Harell et al., 2022) when people think about redistributive and welfare policies. Field surveys show the heterogeneous social base of the Gilets Jaunes, emphasizing that many participants declared to have voted for far-right parties (Elabe, 2019). Similarly, the spread of the Gilet Jaunes movement to Canada shows its capability to defend right-wing agendas (Cecco, 2018). As previous Occupy movements and recent mobilizations linked to covid-19 have shown, the protest arena is decreasingly dominated by traditional left-wing actors. Thus, these phenomena deserve closer attention in protest and social movement research, also in relation to economic inequality.

Thirdly, the threats to causal identification are larger in event studies than in other research designs (Muñoz et al., 2020). When studying the effects on public opinion for extended periods, the 'unexpected event during survey design' cannot provide a plausible causal identification (Muñoz et al., 2020, p. 204). However, the high salience of the events with the results for observations after only ten days gives confidence in the short-run effects caused by the protest events while suggesting a long-run compound effect on public opinion.

In sum, the present study offers theoretical arguments and evidence on how protests can affect public opinion on redistribution and economic inequality, a phenomenon rarely studied in mobilization research. In contrast to previous accounts emphasizing the stability of

preferences for redistribution, the present study provides evidence of actual political settings where such preferences change. Moreover, the study indicates that contemporaneous populist and Occupy movements can affect the traditional axis of political competition. This has significant consequences: if contemporary protests can affect redistributive demands, they have the potential to shape the dynamics of inequality through different channels, as they are one key component in determining voting behaviour (Abou-Chadi and Hix, 2021). In an era of increasing mobilization (Jenkins and Kwak, 2022; Meyer and Tarrow, 1998), normalization of protest and high political disaffection in western European countries, incorporating protests into the analyses of inequality seems a necessary avenue for research.

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