

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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