Furtherly Explaining the Formation of

**Preference for Redistribution Policy**

**in Social and Economic Context:**

**–––– Empirical Evidence from**

**Cross-National Perspective**

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I. Introduction

and Review of Literature

Over the past few decades, income inequality has increased dramatically in most the modern capitalist societies (Alderson and Doran 2013). It has aroused economists’ and sociologists’ debate over which focused on the relationship between attitudes toward inequality and welfare policy. (Iverson 2005; Kenworthy and McCall 2008). However, exploration of the determining factor of individual’s preference for income redistribution has its necessity and implications. Understanding how individuals form their preference can guide administration to implement a redistribution policy which is able to fulfill the demands of most citizens and reduce the possibility of societal conflict.

***Economic Self-Interest Theory***

One of the landmarks in this field of study is an influenced theoretical model, first proposed by Meltzer and Richard (1981), suggests that higher income inequality will lead to higher level of popular support for redistribution. One crucial priori assumption for the theory is that economic self-interest is a major factor which shapes attitude regarding redistribution. In other words, whether an individual support for a political regime is determined by how much benefits he can enjoy from such a policy. Under the above presumption, higher wage earners are supposed to oppose redistribution while the lowers tend to support such a policy. Vast majority of literatures have proved the effectiveness for this theory in analyzing trend within a single country over time. Based upon Meltzer-Richard’s model, Andersen and Curtis (2013) find empirical evidence for the inequality’s positive influence on preference for social welfare program with Canadian time-series data. Similar trends were confirmed using European multi-national data by Finseraas (2009).

However, there is limited empirical utility to analyze the relationship in a cross-national setting. Lubker (2007) demonstrated that it is hard to identify an association between inequality and support for redistributive policy between countries, without taking social justice norms in each society into account. Kenworthy and McCall (2008) assessed patterns in inequality and public opinion regarding redistribution and failed to reach a conclusion that is consistent with Meltzer-Richard’s hypothesis.

***Redistribution Support across Nations***

Due to restricted explaining power of Meltzer-Richard’s model can provide in cross country setting, Dion and Birchfield (2010) challenged the economic self-interest assumption and reconsidering the role of cultural, historical and political context played in redistribution support. He modeled the cross-national difference in effect of income on redistributive preference by including variables which measure economic development and level of income inequality for the whole country. Anderson and Yaish (2017) also made a similar empirical practice in assessing social class mobility and desired income distribution.

Our study utilizes the above two documents as the cornerstones and investigates the relationship between individual’s economic condition and preferences toward redistribution policy in social and economic context across nations. We will examine the role of individual-level economic self-interest and national-level context played in determining the support for redistributive policy and analyze how societal and economic context of a nation shape the political preference in cross-national perspective. Our general aims for this study lead to a series of specific hypothesis:

H1. Consistent with self-interest hypothesis, individual-level income is inversely correlated to individual-level preference for redistribution.

H2. Economic growth also shapes individuals’ support for redistribution. A higher growth rate weakens preference for income redistribution.

H3. A higher current level of redistribution by government reduces support for further redistribution.

For specific goal demonstrates above, we replicate approach proposed by Dion and Birchfield (2010) to test H1. Incorporating the effect of growth and current wealth redistributive level in shaping individual’s preference is one of the innovations of our research to make a progress to our basic empirical model.

**II. Methodology**

We estimate the relationship between individual’s economic condition and redistribution preference control for national contextual variables by our basic model specified below:

***Basic Specification:***

Variables with subscripts of i represent individual-level variables, while subscripts with n represent national-level variables.

Because we are also interested in how contextual factor affect the economic self-interest incentive in determining policy preference, we add interactions between income and country-level predictors. Our specification with interactive effect is constructed as follows:

***Interactive Effect Specification:***

and denotes a set of demographic and country level control variables, respectively, as defined in our basic model.

We run a binary probit model on our specifications since we aim to investigate how people’s attitude regrading redistribution when facing a dualistic choice. The average marginal effect and marginal effect at a representative value Estimations are adopted as our strategy in conducting a quantitative analysis about likelihood of choice.

III. Data and Variables

***Data Source***

We utilize both cross-sectional individual level and national level data for our analysis. For the individual component, we use survey data from the fifth wave about social inequality of International Social Survey Program (ISSP) collected in 2009. The data is used for a vast range of studies about public opinion and political attitude. In its 2009 waves, the program surveyed respondents who came from over 40 countries in Asia, North and Latin America, Europe, Oceania and Africa, with different levels of economic development, culture and political systems. This allows us to explain the variations in the formation of preference for redistribution policy in a global perspective.

For national-level data, we use data that measuring inequality from the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (SWIID) 2009. Economic index such as GDP per capita and growth rate are retrieved from World Bank Database. We merge national-level data into our main ISSP dataset for analysis.

Sample used in our study are screened and meet the following eligibility criteria:

(i) Respondents whose key demographic information are not missing and are over 18 years old or are legal to vote in their home country.

(ii) Respondents who report a family income or education year during the survey. A proportion of people who reported annual family income as 0 and missing education information are excluded. When ISSP asked about family income, it clarified that family income should include pension, family allowance and investment income, so we believe that this criterion does not exclude people who are retired or depends on social welfare for a living.

(iii) Respondents who answer the survey questions about opinion for income inequality and whether support government redistribution policy or not.

(iv) Respondents who are from countries whose Gini coefficient and other income inequality measurement are not available in SWIID database.

The analytical sample contains 41384 individual level observations and 40 national level socio-economic index.

***Dependent Variable***

The ISSP provide several questions that is broadly related to attitude toward redistribution. In our analysis, we use individual’s response to the statement: “It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes.” Respondents chose for extent of agreement on this problem from level 1 to level 5, which is four options for strongly/moderately agree or disagree with and one for neither agree nor disagree. We believe that the wording of this question is fairly appropriate to represent the preference for redistribution policies. Because it directly asked about the redistribution policy, without judging the status quo of inequality and whether earnings of a certain class of income deserve it.

The responses to this question are recoded as a multi-level variable, scale from 0 to 4, and also coded as a binary choice variable, 1 is for “pro-redistribution” and 0 is for “anti-redistribution”. Note that expression for neither agree nor disagree is coded as anti-redistribution, as we believe that redistribution of wealth is a positive action to alter an existing political system, neutrality should not be recognized as a preference for distribution.

***Individual-Level Independent Predictor***

The main independent variable is the family income level. We use annual family income instead of individual’s income since it tied more closely to an individual’s life-wellbeing and satisfaction toward present wealth distribution. ISSP generates income variables in local currency for each nation separately. We standardize the measures of income based on every single country and unify those measures to one aggregate variable. In other words, each observation of family income indicates the relative position in its country’s income distribution, making income level is comparative cross-nationally. Adopting method suggested by Finseraas (2009), we proxy income by education year as well in our analysis. ISSP did not record year of education for respondents’ who are still at school, thus, we set their education year equivalent to years they spent to attain their current highest academic degree.

We divide occupations into four categories to measure social class: (a) professionals, (b) managers, (c) routine non-manual workers such as clerks and low-paying occupations), and (d) working class (occupation with manual labour, including skilled labour). We applied the same social class classification to both the respondent’s class and to their father’s class (if the respondent is 14 years old). ISSP data include the International Labor Organization's (1990) International Standard Classification of Occupations for both respondents and their fathers’ occupations； Therefore, our data processing work has been further simplified.

We classify the occupations of both parents and present their social class by categorizing these occupations. meanwhile, the parent with a larger social class (corresponding to his/her occupation) will represent the social class of the family. To capture the effects of intergenerational social mobility, we created a dummy variable for intergenerational class up moving, which will be coded as 1 if respondent’s class is higher than father’s social father, and 0 otherwise.

***Individual-Level Control Variables***

In the regressions, we control for multiple demographic characteristics, including age, gender, marital status, unemployment, union membership and religion. Except for age, all other variables have a binary-category, “1” is assigned to yes/have and “0” for no.

***Nation-Level Independent Variable***

To assessing the role of national socio-economic context played in formation of preference for redistribution, we use four data index measuring economic and inequality situation. (i) GDP per capita in international dollar and converted by purchase power parity This data is derived from the average of GDP per capita for the past five years starting at 2009. (ii) per capita annual growth rate of GDP. The data is generated by averaging five years growth rate. (iii) post tax, post transfer Gini coefficient. The data provided in original dataset in SWIID is not from direct calculation based on real world economic data but instead by using a specific model. It contains 100 times of the estimate of Gini coefficient, and we take the mean of the 100 estimates. (iv) The estimated relative redistribution is the percentage reduction in market income inequality caused by taxes and transfers in SWIID. We apply this variable as a level of strength of current redistribution. The higher relative redistribution means that government put more effort in reducing income gap. By those above strategy, we can ensure the contextual data is comparable across countries.

***Individual-Level Control Variables***

Considering societal context played in formation of support for redistribution, we construct two variables: former communist and region. We code countries that were once ruled by the Communist Party or have socialism as their main ideology as "1". Regions are divided by geographic continents.

*Summary Statistics*

(sorry, tried for many times but failed something wrong with my stata to output a result for summary statistics)

表格

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IV. Result and Discussion

**Table 2 Probit Estimate for Basic Specification**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | **(1)** | | **(2)** | | **(3)** | |
| **Independent Variables** | | **Pro-redistribution** | | **Pro-redistribution** | | **Pro-redistribution** | |
| ***Individual-Level Variables*** | |  | |  | |  | |
| Family income | | -.16\*\*\* | |  | | -.139\*\*\* | |
|  | | (.008) | |  | | (.008) | |
| Education | |  | | -.03\*\*\* | | -.019\*\*\* | |
|  | |  | | (.002) | | (.002) | |
| Male | | .121\*\*\* | | .136\*\*\* | | .116\*\*\* | |
|  | | (.016) | | (.014) | | (.016) | |
| Married | | .042\*\*\* | | -.036\*\* | | .032\* | |
|  | | (.016) | | (.014) | | (.017) | |
| Unemployed | | .059\* | | .129\*\*\* | | .067\*\* | |
|  | | (.032) | | (.028) | | (.033) | |
| Religion | | -.009 | | .008 | | -.023 | |
|  | | (.019) | | (.017) | | (.02) | |
| Class up-mover | | -.085\*\*\* | | -.069\*\*\* | | -.063\*\*\* | |
|  | | (.017) | | (.014) | | (.017) | |
| ***National Level Variables*** | |  | |  | |  | |
| Growth per capita | | -.028\*\*\* | | -.037\*\*\* | | -.037\*\*\* | |
|  | | (.006) | | (.005) | | (.006) | |
| GDP per capita | | -.0143011\*\*\* | | -.0184686\*\*\* | | -.0131757\*\*\* | |
|  | | (.0017257) | | (.0015209) | | (.001764) | |
| Income inequality | | 4.166\*\*\* | | 2.594\*\*\* | | 4.068\*\*\* | |
|  | | (.296) | | (.251) | | (.302) | |
| Current redistribution | | -.006\*\*\* | | -.005\*\*\* | | -.006\*\*\* | |
|  | | (.001) | | (.001) | | (.001) | |
| Former communist | | .092\*\* | | .025 | | .131\*\*\* | |
|  | | (.042) | | (.037) | | (.044) | |
| ***Region Dummies*** | |  | |  | |  | |
| Europe & Central Asia | | .83\*\*\* | | .592\*\*\* | | .808\*\*\* | |
|  | | (.031) | | (.024) | | (.032) | |
| Latin America & Caribbean | | -.339\*\*\* | | -.484\*\*\* | | -.337\*\*\* | |
|  | | (.044) | | (.039) | | (.045) | |
| Middle East & North Africa | | .418\*\*\* | | .339\*\*\* | | .432\*\*\* | |
|  | | (.055) | | (.047) | | (.055) | |
| South Africa | | -1.151\*\*\* | | -1.059\*\*\* | | -1.164\*\*\* | |
|  | | (.083) | | (.073) | | (.085) | |
| North America | | -.537\*\*\* | | -.534\*\*\* | | -.544\*\*\* | |
|  | | (.058) | | (.052) | | (.059) | |
|  | |  | |  | |  | |
|  | |  | |  | |  | |
| Constants | | -.673\*\*\* | | .532\*\*\* | | -.416\*\*\* | |
|  | | (.137) | | (.115) | | (.143) | |
| Observations | | 34034 | | 43514 | | 32801 | |
| Pseudo R2 | | .099 | | .087 | | .104 | |
| Correctly Classified | | 76.16% | | 75.37% | | 76.11% | |
| *Standard errors are in parentheses* | | | | | | | |
| *\*\*\* p<.01, \*\* p<.05, \* p<.1* | | | | | | | |
| **Table 3 Average Marginal Effects Estimation** | | | | | | | |
|  | (1) | | (2) | | (3) | |
| **VARIABLES** | **Pro-redistribution** | | **Pro-redistribution** | | **Pro-redistribution** | |
|  |  | |  | |  | |
| Family income | -0.0461\*\*\* | |  | | -0.0399\*\*\* | |
|  | (0.00215) | |  | | (0.00233) | |
| Education |  | | -0.00879\*\*\* | | -0.00544\*\*\* | |
|  |  | | (0.000497) | | (0.000592) | |
| Class up-mover | -0.0246\*\*\* | | -0.0205\*\*\* | | -0.0182\*\*\* | |
|  | (0.00485) | | (0.00430) | | (0.00496) | |
| Growth per capita | -0.00818\*\*\* | | -0.0107\*\*\* | | -0.0106\*\*\* | |
|  | (0.00170) | | (0.00148) | | (0.00174) | |
| GDP per capita | -.0041251\*\*\* | | -.0054303\*\*\* | | -.0037851\*\*\* | |
|  | (.0004965) | | (.0004453) | | (.0005057) | |
| Income inequality | 1.202\*\*\* | | 0.763\*\*\* | | 1.169\*\*\* | |
|  | (0.0849) | | (0.0735) | | (0.0863) | |
| Current Redistribution | -0.00165\*\*\* | | -0.00159\*\*\* | | -0.00160\*\*\* | |
|  | (0.000244) | | (0.000204) | | (0.000246) | |
| Former communist | 0.0265\*\* | | 0.00749 | | 0.0376\*\*\* | |
|  | (0.0122) | | (0.0109) | | (0.0125) | |
|  |  | |  | |  | |
| Observations | 34,034 | | 43,514 | | 32,801 | |

*Standard errors in parentheses*

*\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1*

***Baseline Result***

We conduct our empirical analysis for the basic specification as describe in the methodology section. Table 2 presents our results on binary probit model. Since estimation coefficient by probit can only suggest a trend, we calculate the average marginal effect (AME) in Table 3 for all samples to facilitate in reaching a quantitative conclusion.

In both tables, columns 1 and 2 utilize standardized household income and years of education, respectively, and include both measures in column 3. Estimations indicate that after controlling for demographic and contextual variables, income is still inversely correlated to preference for a redistribution policy significantly at 1% level. Evidence from AME estimation demonstrates that holding all other variables constants, having a household annual income one standardization higher than country’s mean income will significantly decrease likelihood for support income redistribution by approximately 4.61%, which means high-wage earners are more opposed to an egalitarian policy, and economic self-interest incentive are still driven factor in determining formation for this political preference. Our hypothesis 1 is failed to be reject in cross-national setting as well. Moreover, being a “intergenerational upward mover” in social class will support income egalitarianism less. One possible interpretation for this phenomenon is that people who have achieved a inter-generational class leap tend to believe that their own efforts and abilities have allowed them to achieve a leap, while people living at a lower class lack these characteristics. Such people should not be rewarded by the redistribution (Lipset and Bendix 1959).

For variables regarding to socio-economic context, we confirmed a finding about negative association between economic development (GDP per capita) and favor of redistribution. Dion and Birchfield (2010). The newly added variable measuring economic growth based on the model of Dion and Birchfield (2010) shows a negative correlation with the redistribution policy in our three regressions significantly at 1% level. One extra percentage of per capita GDP growth rate can lessen people's probability of choice to redistribution by 1.06 %. This outcome generally provide evidence for our hypothesis 2. A better growth prospect discourages people’s demand for redistribution policies as a way to improve their living standards. The intensity of the existing wealth redistribution has also reduced people's desire for it. A 1% increase in this intensity will significantly reduce the probability of support for redistribution by 0.16%, which implies that people will combine the existing welfare level to shape their own tendencies. This can be seen as a confirm for our hypothesis 3. Additionally, a strong positive trend of post- transfer Gini coefficient toward preference is observed.

***Interactive Effect Result***

A more detailed and complete model to explain policy preferences should include the interaction between individual economic conditions and macro-level context. We can naturally infer that the impact of the grand social and economic background is not homogeneous for each individual. For example, high-income groups, as the actual beneficiaries of inequality, rarely think that overall social income inequality is A very serious problem. But the people at the bottom usually suffer a lot from unfair income distribution.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| **VARIABLES** | **Pro-redistributive** | **Pro-redistributive** | **Pro-redistributive** |
|  |  |  |  |
| Family income | -0.105\* | -0.139\*\*\* | -0.107\* |
|  | (0.0611) | (0.00822) | (0.0605) |
| Education | -0.0187\*\*\* | -0.0185 | -0.0179\*\*\* |
|  | (0.00208) | (0.0182) | (0.00209) |
| Male | 0.116\*\*\* | 0.119\*\*\* | 0.116\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0160) | (0.0160) | (0.0160) |
| Married | 0.0453\*\*\* | 0.0339\*\* | 0.0423\*\* |
|  | (0.0169) | (0.0168) | (0.0169) |
| Unemployed | 0.0638\* | 0.0615\* | 0.0636\* |
|  | (0.0328) | (0.0326) | (0.0328) |
| Religion | -0.0277 | -0.0291 | -0.00318 |
|  | (0.0199) | (0.0199) | (0.0203) |
| Class up-mover | -0.0637\*\*\* | -0.0618\*\*\* | -0.0677\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0171) | (0.0171) | (0.0171) |
| Growth per capita | -0.0373\*\*\* | -0.0367\*\*\* | 0.812\*\*\* |
|  | (0.00608) | (0.0122) | (0.123) |
| GDP per capita | -0.0133\*\*\* | -0.0266\*\*\* | -0.00749\*\*\* |
|  | (0.00177) | (0.00394) | (0.00194) |
| Income inequality | 4.081\*\*\* | 3.933\*\*\* | 8.890\*\*\* |
|  | (0.302) | (0.456) | (0.759) |
| Current redistribution | -0.00523\*\*\* | 0.00789\*\*\* | 0.00946\*\*\* |
|  | (0.000857) | (0.00278) | (0.00215) |
| Former communist | 0.131\*\*\* | 0.0950\*\* | 0.333\*\*\* |
|  | (0.0436) | (0.0441) | (0.0519) |
| Income × Growth per capita | 0.0114\*\*\* |  | 0.0120\*\*\* |
|  | (0.00376) |  | (0.00378) |
| Income × GDP per capita | 0.000820 |  | 0.000940 |
|  | (0.000942) |  | (0.000944) |
| Income × Inequality | -0.00610 |  | -0.0106 |
|  | (0.104) |  | (0.103) |
| Income × Current Redistribution | -0.00313\*\*\* |  | -0.00322\*\*\* |
|  | (0.000724) |  | (0.000718) |
| Education × Growth per capita |  | 0.000413 |  |
|  |  | (0.000952) |  |
| Education × GDP per capita |  | 0.00100\*\*\* |  |
|  |  | (0.000274) |  |
| Education × Inequality |  | 0.00642 |  |
|  |  | (0.0284) |  |
| Education × Current Redistribution |  | -0.00110\*\*\* |  |
|  |  | (0.000218) |  |
| Inequality × Growth |  |  | -1.993\*\*\* |
|  |  |  | (0.289) |
| Current Redistribution × Growth |  |  | -0.00824\*\*\* |
|  |  |  | (0.00112) |
| Constant | -0.434\*\*\* | -0.361 | -2.640\*\*\* |
|  | (0.143) | (0.262) | (0.341) |
| Observations | 32,801 | 32,801 | 32,801 |
| Correctly Classified | 76.27% | 76.18% | 76.38% |

**Table 4 Probit Estimation with interactive effect**

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

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Figure 4

AME of Grow Rate and strength of current redistribution

Figure 3

AME of Growth Rate and income quality

Figure 2

AME of Family income

and current level of redistribution

Figure 1

AME of Family income

and growth rate per capita

Result for our probit regression’s estimate is presented in table 4. In the first and the second columns, we interact family income level or years of education with each of predictors for macro-level contextual variables. We are also wondering how economic growth change the effects of other contextual variables. Thus, we add interactions between economic growth and Gini coefficient and existing level of redistribution. Since statistical software does not allow us to computer for average marginal effect for continuous interactions, we adopt an alternative approach that calculates marginal effect at a representative value (MER), which allows us to obtain the marginal effect of a ‘main’ variable given a certain value of a ‘interacted’ variable. We then take the representative value in MER as each integer value in the range of the minimum to maximum of the ‘interacted’ variable and repeat the MER estimation based on each single integer value to attain the overall marginal effect of the ‘main’ variable. Figure 1 and 2 demonstrates the MER estimate of a main variable: family income and assess how its partial effect varies with the ‘interacted’ variable specified as value on x axis. Figure 3 and 4 analyzes average margin effect of growth rate as the ‘main’ variable.

Significant relationship is found on Income × Growth per capita and Income × Current Redistribution term in our first specification. First it indicates that a more rapidly growth cause people with a certain household income level to be less likely to against a redistribution policy. From figure 1, we can see that when annual GDP growth rate is at a negative lower level, closed to -2%, for each extra standard deviation of an individual’s salary higher than the sample country’s average, his probability of choosing to support income redistribution will be reduced by 5%, holding all else constants. However, if the growth rate stays about at a level 7.5%, the probability of support for each higher unit will be reduced to 3%. When a high growth rate can be expected, the influence of people's economic self-interest incentive in the formation of policy preferences is lessened, that is, they are more generous toward transfer payments.

In Figure 2, the intensity of the existing redistribution system is negatively correlated with people's tendency to become economically self-interest in determining whether support redistribution or not. When the existing redistribution index is -20% (this means that the Gini coefficient of actual disposable income is 20% higher than the Gini coefficient of pre-tax income, such as an extreme situation that may be caused by a regressive tax system), even high-income earners will tend to redistribute the policy, an extra 1 standard deviation of wages will also lead to the demand for redistribution. But when the redistribution system becomes stronger, people will become more economically self-interested.

The Gini coefficient at the national level has an important influence on the marginal effect of economic growth on support for redistributive policy. When the Gini coefficient is approximately below 0.3, a higher economic growth rate makes people happy to accept income redistribution policies, because the marginal effect of the growth rate is a value greater than 0, which is not consistent with our findings in the basic part. When the Gini coefficient is greater than 0.3, the higher economic growth rate makes people tend to oppose redistribution.

Conclusion

This paper investigates how individual’s economic condition is related to preference for redistribution policy by testing upon three hypotheses regarding individual income level and macro level national context. All three hypotheses are confirmed and fit in a cross-national data. We find evidence suggesting that economic self-interest is a universal factor in formation of attitude toward income redistribution. However， we believe that economic self-interest, that is, a negative correlation between personal income and the probability of supporting redistribution policies is applicable when analyzing cross-nationally, but historical, economic and social factors will affect this relationship in varying degrees. This article also proves that economic growth is also an important factor in shaping social bias. The high growth rate of the economy has generally suppressed people's desire for redistribution policies, but at the same time, if the current country’s income is relatively even, higher economic growth will also motivate preference for redistribution. The test of the strength of existing redistribution tells us that people will largely make policy judgments based on the current state of society. People in an economy that has historically used the redistribution system will naturally support redistribution.

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