



De Gustibus non est Taxandum: Heterogeneity in preferences and optimal redistribution[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The prominent but unproven intuition that preference heterogeneity reduces redistribution in a standard optimal tax model is shown to hold under the plausible condition that the distribution of preferences for consumption relative to leisure rises, in terms of first-order stochastic dominance, with income. Given familiar functional form assumptions on utility and the distributions of ability and preferences, a simple statistic for the effect of preference heterogeneity on marginal tax rates is derived. Numerical simulations and suggestive empirical evidence demonstrate the link between this potentially measurable statistic and the quantitative implications of preference heterogeneity for policy.

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1. Introduction

In the early years of modern optimal tax research, theorists assumed that all individuals have the same preferences over consumption and leisure. James A. Mirrlees's (1971) second simplifying assumption was that "Differences in tastes...are ignored. These raise rather different kinds of problems, and it is natural to assume them away." This simplification freed Mirrlees to assume that the only way in which people differ is in their ability to earn income.¹ His powerful approach—along with his assumption of preference homogeneity—now dominates theoretical work on tax design.

Preference heterogeneity of this form, however, appears to be an evident feature of reality. Kahneman (2011) reports that such preference differences are widespread among young adults and correlate with

outcomes later in life. Data shown in this paper from the World Values Survey reveal that respondents report a wide range of views toward the value of material possessions. More anecdotally, people choose a wide range of consumption-leisure bundles, even conditional on apparent budget constraints.

Heterogeneous preferences for consumption relative to leisure can be included in a standard Mirrleesian model without any impact on the results if society's normative attitude toward those preferences is the same as that toward income-earning abilities. In fact, in that case the distinction between preferences and ability is merely semantic, as they are also observationally equivalent. That is, an individual may earn a low income, and respond to taxes the way he does, either because he has low ability or because he has a weak relative preference for consumption.

In contrast, if society does not view these preferences as normatively equivalent to abilities, preference heterogeneity has implications for optimal taxation, and these implications are the focus of our paper. We analyze the impact of society adopting the normative view that individuals are to be, in the influential terminology of Fleurbaey and Maniquet (2004), compensated for having low abilities but held responsible for their preferences.² In that case, society's preferred unconstrained policy could range from, for example, full equalization of outcomes (if income differences are entirely due to ability) to no redistribution (if income differences are entirely due to preferences).

Results characterizing the effects of this form of preference heterogeneity on optimal tax policy in a general setting have proven elusive,

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¹ Mirrlees was not the first to adopt this simplification. Arthur Pigou (1928) wrote, in a classic text: "Of course, in so far as tastes and temperaments differ, allowance ought, in strictness, to be made for this fact...But, since it is impossible in practice to take account of variations between different people's capacity for enjoyment, this consideration must be ignored, and the assumption made, for want of a better, that temperamentally all taxpayers are alike."

² Other ways in which individuals vary may merit partial compensation. We limit our focus to the form of preference heterogeneity most clearly distinct from income-earning ability. See Kaplow (2008) for a discussion of other specific cases.

despite an early demonstration of its potential importance by Agnar Sandmo (1993).³ This lack of results has left us without a clear understanding of the conditions under which the prominent but unproven intuition that heterogeneity in preferences lowers optimal redistribution holds and, when it does hold, how large the effects are. For example, despite the arguments made by prominent critics of redistribution,⁴ in principle adding preference heterogeneity to the model may increase optimal redistribution. Intuitively, if preferences for consumption relative to leisure are lower among those with high incomes, attributing income variation to ability alone will understate the income-earning abilities of high earners and imply an optimal extent of redistribution that is too small.

In this paper, we derive two novel results that clarify how the presence of preference heterogeneity affects the optimal extent of income redistribution. In both cases, we show that there is a transparent formal mechanism through which we can model the effects of preference heterogeneity: namely that it changes the pattern of welfare weights the social planner assigns along the income distribution. One interpretation of our results, therefore, is that they make explicit the way in which preference heterogeneity has often implicitly entered debates over optimal redistribution. Throughout, we refer to the conventional case in which all income heterogeneity is treated as due to ability differences or, equivalently, to differences in characteristics with the same normative implications as ability, as the “homogeneous preferences” case.

Our first contribution is to derive a straightforward condition under which heterogeneity in preferences lowers optimal redistribution: if the distribution of the relative preference for consumption over leisure rises with income (in terms of first-order stochastic dominance), then optimal marginal tax rates are lower at all incomes and the net transfer to the lowest earner is smaller than in the homogeneous preferences case. Using the standard optimal tax model, we show this result analytically for the case of quasilinear utility studied in Diamond (1998) and isoelastic welfare weights that decrease with ability. We also show, through numerical simulations, that the result holds for more general functional forms of utility and social welfare. In other words, we describe a formal mechanism through which preference heterogeneity may reduce the optimal extent of redistribution in a standard optimal tax framework.

Second, we derive a simple statistic for quantifying the effect of heterogeneity in preferences on optimal marginal tax rates and redistribution. In rough terms, that statistic corresponds to the share of income variation that is due to differences in preferences. If we assume certain familiar functional forms for the distributions of ability and preferences, that statistic summarizes the implications of preference heterogeneity for marginal tax rates, but it also can be used more broadly as an intuitive guide to the role of preferences. We demonstrate the link between

this statistic and the quantitative implications of preference heterogeneity for optimal policy using numerical simulations calibrated to the U.S. economy. We also use survey data on self-perceptions related to these preferences to estimate empirically the variation in this statistic across OECD countries and show suggestive evidence that existing policy variation appears to be consistent with our theoretical findings. Our findings suggest that this simple statistic may be a fruitful target for future empirical work.

We obtain our novel analytical results by combining two recent innovations in the literature with a third innovation of our own. First, in a setting with a continuum of agents and standard utility functions, Choné and Laroque (2010) show how heterogeneity in the opportunity cost of work can justify negative marginal tax rates at low incomes.⁵ They achieve this important finding in part by collapsing multiple dimensions of heterogeneity into a single composite characteristic that determines behavior.⁶ We focus on a form of preferences—i.e., for consumption relative to leisure—that has the same effects on behavior as ability and therefore allows us, like Choné and Laroque, to obtain an analytically tractable model in which individuals differ in multiple ways.⁷ Related, our formal approach has much in common with theirs. Second, we adopt the moral reasoning behind the “second fairness requirement” in the prominent work of Fleurbaey and Maniquet (2006), which states that “the *laissez-faire* (this is, the absence of redistribution) should be the social optimum in the hypothetical case when all agents have equal earning abilities” even if they have different preferences.⁸ In other words, we adopt the normative perspective that preferences over consumption and leisure do not justify redistribution by themselves. Though specific, this interpretation follows if preferences are thought of as tastes as opposed to, for example, needs (see Kaplow, 2008 for a discussion). Third, and crucially, we introduce the technique of studying how optimal policy changes when a given distribution of income is attributed to more than one source of heterogeneity, rather than how optimal policy changes when ability is augmented with additional sources of heterogeneity that change the distribution of income. This shift makes possible our progress over prior results. It has the additional virtue of formulating the problem in a way resembling that faced by policymakers, who must decide the appropriate extent of redistribution in the face of an observable income distribution.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents a standard optimal tax model that explicitly incorporates preference heterogeneity and derives our result on its implications for redistribution. Section 3 describes a simple summary statistic for quantifying the effect of preference heterogeneity on optimal policy and applies it in both calibrated numerical simulations and suggestive empirical evidence. Section 4 concludes, while proofs and numerical simulations demonstrating the robustness of our findings to the functional forms of utility and social welfare are collected in the online Appendix.

2. Optimal income taxation with heterogeneous preferences

Our first novel analytic result is to derive a condition under which the presence of preference heterogeneity reduces the optimal extent

³ Mirrlees (1976, 1986) addressed the general case but obtained inconclusive results. Some prior work adopts specialized settings, such as Sandmo's (1993) insightful analysis with only preference (not ability) heterogeneity; Boadway et al.'s (2002) results with two preference types, two ability levels, and quasilinear utility; Blomquist and Christiansen's (2008) findings when high-skill individuals vary in tastes for leisure; and Fleurbaey and Maniquet's (2006) analysis with a specific normative approach. Other work has focused on numerical simulations, such as Tarkiainen and Tuomala (2007) or Judd and Su (2006), who explain the computational complexities associated with multiple dimensions of heterogeneity. Two other recent papers focus on related but somewhat different questions. Kocherlakota and Phelan (2009) focus on the policy implications of uncertainty over the relationship between individuals' preferences and another, welfare-relevant, dimension of heterogeneity such as wealth. They argue that such uncertainty causes a planner using a maximin objective to avoid redistributive policy that is optimal when no such uncertainty is present. Beaudry et al. (2009) indirectly address preference differences by including in their optimal tax analysis differences in productivity of market and non-market labor effort. They show that the optimal redistributive policy makes transfers to the poor conditional on work.

⁴ See Robert Nozick (1974), “Why should we treat the man whose happiness requires certain material goods or services differently from the man whose preferences and desires make such goods unnecessary for his happiness?” Or, Milton Friedman (1962), “Given individuals whom we are prepared to regard as alike in ability and initial resources, if some have a greater taste for leisure and others for marketable goods, inequality of return through the market is necessary to achieve equality of total return or equality of treatment.”

⁵ Katherine Cuff (2000) provides an earlier, related analysis of the case for negative marginal tax rates.

⁶ This technique is similar to that used by Brett and Weymark (2003). Rothschild and Scheuer (2013) use a different method to avoid the technical problems with multi-dimensional income-earning ability.

⁷ This technique cannot help with all dimensions of heterogeneity, such as time discounting as in Golosov et al. (2013) or Diamond and Spinnewijn (2011).

⁸ Fleurbaey and Maniquet (2006) impose informational constraints on the social planner which rule out conventional utilitarian social welfare functions and which, in combination with particular fairness requirements on allocations, imply the use of a maximin social welfare function. They conclude that the optimal income tax should maximize the subsidies to the working poor: that is, it should be quite redistributive to those with low ability but who exert labor effort. Our analysis can be seen as a complement to theirs, studying the same type of preference heterogeneity in a setting closer to the more conventional Mirrleesian approach.

of redistribution. First we present a simple weighted utilitarian version of the standard Vickrey (1945) or Mirrlees (1971) model of optimal income taxation with generalized type-specific “welfare weights,” and we demonstrate a relationship between the structure of those weights and optimal redistribution. We then modify that model to allow heterogeneity in type to be attributed to observationally equivalent but (possibly) normatively distinct differences in income-earning ability and preferences for consumption relative to leisure. We impose a normative requirement–preference neutrality–on the relationship between welfare weights and preferences, and we show how preference-neutral welfare weights are determined endogenously from the joint distribution of ability and preferences. Finally, we show the conditions under which the presence of preference heterogeneity results in less (or more) redistribution at the optimum.

2.1. A standard model with homogeneous preferences

Individuals have utility of consumption c and labor effort ℓ given by $u(c, \ell) = c - \ell^{1+1/\varepsilon}$ where ε is the constant elasticity of labor supply. As in Mirrlees (1971), they are indexed by unobservable ability $n \geq 0$, equal to their (assumed exogenous) marginal product of labor effort, so that gross income y is equal to $n\ell$. Thus we can write utility as a function of consumption, earnings, and type:

$$U(c, y, n) = c - (y/n)^{1+1/\varepsilon}. \quad (1)$$

Ability is distributed according to $F(n)$ with assumed density $f(n)$, and a planner selects the allocation $\{c(n), y(n)\}$ to maximize a weighted sum of utilities, solving

$$\max_{\{c(n), y(n)\}} \int_0^\infty g(n) U(c(n), y(n), n) f(n) dn, \quad (2)$$

where $g(n) > 0$ denotes the “welfare weight” for type n (sometimes called the Pareto weight) assumed to be continuous and decreasing in n but otherwise left exogenous until the next subsection.⁹ The maximization in Eq. (2) is subject to a resource constraint,

$$\int_0^\infty (y(n) - c(n)) f(n) dn \geq 0, \quad (3)$$

and incentive compatibility (IC) constraints

$$U(c(n), y(n), n) \geq U(c(m), y(m), n), \quad \forall m, n.$$

In this setup, an allocation $\{c(n), y(n)\}$ may be implemented by specifying a corresponding income tax function $T(y) = y - c$, in which case the IC constraints can be written as follows:

$$y(n) = \operatorname{argmax}_y \{y - T(y) - (y/n)^{1+1/\varepsilon}\}, \quad \forall n \quad (4)$$

As in Diamond (1998), we represent these IC constraints with the first-order conditions for each type's choice of y .¹⁰

$$1 - T'(y(n)) - (1 + 1/\varepsilon) \left(\frac{y(n)}{n} \right)^{1/\varepsilon} = 0, \quad \forall n.$$

⁹ This setup is similar to the structure in Diamond (1998), in which the planner maximizes $\int_0^\infty \Psi(U(c(n), y(n), n)) f(n) dn$, for concave $\Psi(\cdot)$, in that any concave $\Psi(\cdot)$ can be used to construct type-specific welfare weights with $g(n) = \Psi'(U(c(n), y(n), n))$ at the optimal allocation. These weights will then give rise to the same second-best optimal allocation as $\Psi(\cdot)$ in our setting. See Werning (2007) and Salanié (2011) for related analyses.

¹⁰ This assumption is equivalent to assuming that, at the optimum, $T(y)$ is differentiable and $y'(n) > 0$, the latter of which ensures that the individual's choice is globally optimal (note that the Spence–Mirrlees single crossing condition is ensured by the functional form of $U(c, y, n)$, see Salanié, 2011). We abstract from the technical complications that might arise by allowing bunching (i.e., multiple types earning the same income).

In this case, the optimal tax function is characterized by the following first-order condition (Diamond, 1998).

$$\frac{T'(y(n))}{1 - T'(y(n))} = \frac{1 + 1/\varepsilon}{nf(n)} (G(n) - F(n)), \quad \forall n, \quad (5)$$

where

$$G(n) = \frac{\int_{m=0}^n g(m) f(m) dm}{\int_{m=0}^\infty g(m) f(m) dm} \quad (6)$$

is the “cumulative welfare weight” at n , normalized so that $G(0) = 0$ and $\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} G(n) = 1$.

2.2. A relationship between welfare weights and optimal redistribution

We are interested in the relationship between welfare weights and the shape of the optimal tax function $T(y(n))$. Here it is useful to establish a partial ranking of tax functions based on their “redistributivity”. Loosely, a tax is considered redistributive when it transfers resources from higher earners, for whom $T(y(n)) > 0$, to lower earners via a lump sum grant $-T(y(0)) > 0$. Formally, we will employ the following definition:

Definition 1. The income tax function $T(y(n))$ is “less redistributive” than $\hat{T}(\hat{y}(n))$ if it imposes weakly lower marginal income tax rates on all types (i.e., $T'(y(n)) \leq \hat{T}'(\hat{y}(n))$ for all n) and provides a strictly smaller lump sum grant, $-T(y(0)) < -\hat{T}(\hat{y}(0))$.

It is worth noting that this is a rather demanding definition which leaves many pairs of tax functions unranked in terms of redistributivity. For example, under this definition a function $T(y(n))$ that decreases the lump sum grant and most marginal tax rates but increases a subset of marginal tax rates relative to $\hat{T}(\hat{y}(n))$ would not qualify as less redistributive. The strictness of this definition helps us to avoid ambiguity in our results on the extent of optimal redistribution.

Using this definition, we obtain the following relationship between cumulative welfare weights and optimal redistribution.

Lemma 1. Consider income tax functions $T(y(n))$ and $\hat{T}(\hat{y}(n))$ that solve the planner's problem in Eqs. (2), (3), and (4) given welfare weights $g(n)$ and $\hat{g}(n)$ that are everywhere continuous, positive, and decreasing in n . If the corresponding cumulative welfare weights $G(n)$ and $\hat{G}(n)$ defined in Eq. (6) satisfy $G(n) < \hat{G}(n)$ for all $n > 0$, then $T(y(n))$ is less redistributive than $\hat{T}(\hat{y}(n))$.

As this lemma suggests, the shape of the welfare weights $g(n)$ will be key to our results. We now turn to the characterization of that shape when preferences are heterogeneous.

2.3. Welfare weights in the presence of heterogeneous preferences

We begin by introducing a modification to the model above. Individuals are now characterized by a two-dimensional type, (w, θ) , where $w \geq 0$ is an individual's unobservable ability (their marginal product of labor effort) so that $y = w\ell$, while $\theta > 0$ is an unobservable preference parameter scaling the disutility that an individual experiences from exerting labor effort relative to the utility the individual experiences from consumption. We assume θ is scaled so that the population average of θ is equal to one. Whereas utility of consumption and labor effort, $u(c, \ell)$, was homogeneous in the previous section, it now depends on the preference parameter: $u(c, \ell, \theta) = c - (\ell/\theta)^{1+1/\varepsilon}$. We can also write individual utility analogously to Eq. (1) as follows:

$$U(c, y, w, \theta) = c - \left(\frac{y}{w\theta} \right)^{1+1/\varepsilon}. \quad (7)$$

The structure of Eq. (7) demonstrates that agents with different pairs of types face the same maximization problem. Specifically, an individual of type (w', θ') behaves exactly like another individual of type $(w'', \theta'') \neq (w', \theta')$ if $w'\theta' = w''\theta''$.

The product $w\theta$ is thus sufficient to determine individual labor supply behavior—we will call this product the individual's “unified type”. Because it is impossible to distinguish between individuals of the same unified type, policy must treat them identically. Thus the planner's choice space is the set of allocations $\{c(w\theta), y(w\theta)\}$.

We again assume that the planner seeks to maximize a weighted sum of utilities, and we denote the welfare weights $b(w, \theta)$ to reflect their possible dependence on both ability and preferences. Letting $H(w, \theta)$ denote the joint distribution of ability and preferences, with density $h(w, \theta)$, the planner's objective in this modified problem is

$$\max_{\{c(w\theta), y(w\theta)\}} \int_{\theta=0}^{\infty} \int_{w=0}^{\infty} b(w, \theta) U(c(w\theta), y(w\theta), w, \theta) h(w, \theta) dw d\theta. \quad (8)$$

This maximization is subject to the resource constraint

$$\int_{\theta=0}^{\infty} \int_{w=0}^{\infty} (y(w\theta) - c(w\theta)) h(w, \theta) dw d\theta \geq 0, \quad (9)$$

and IC constraints, written in terms of the tax function $T(y(w\theta)) = y(w\theta) - c(w\theta)$,

$$y(w\theta) = \arg\max_y \left\{ y - T(y) - \left(\frac{y}{w\theta} \right)^{1+1/\varepsilon} \right\}, \quad \forall w, \theta. \quad (10)$$

Our key normative assumption is a condition on $b(w, \theta)$, which can be stated as follows.

Definition 2. Welfare weights are “preference neutral” if they are independent of preferences, that is if $b(w, \theta) = b(w, \theta')$ for all θ and θ' , so we define $b(w) \equiv b(w, \theta)$ for all θ .

This condition, motivated by the ethical considerations axiomatized in Fleurbaey and Maniquet (2006), amounts to assuming that income differences arising from differences in budget constraints merit redistribution, whereas those arising from differences in preferences do not.¹¹ Under preference neutrality, the objective in Eq. (8) can be written

$$\max_{\{c(w\theta), y(w\theta)\}} \int_{\theta=0}^{\infty} \int_{w=0}^{\infty} b(w) U(c(w\theta), y(w\theta), w, \theta) h(w, \theta) dw d\theta. \quad (11)$$

Let n denote unified type, so that $n = w\theta$. Then, we can employ a change of variables, using $\tilde{H}(\theta, n)$ to denote the joint distribution of preferences and unified type, with density

$$\tilde{h}(\theta, n) = h(n/\theta, \theta) \frac{1}{\theta}. \quad (12)$$

The term $1/\theta$ is the absolute value of the determinant of the Jacobian $\partial(n/\theta, \theta)/\partial(\theta, n)$. Let $f(n) = \int_0^{\infty} \tilde{h}(\theta, n) d\theta$ denote the density of unified types arising from a given joint distribution $H(w, \theta)$. Then substitution shows that the resource constraint (Eq. (9)) and the IC constraints (Eq. (10)) are equivalent to Eqs. (3) and (4) from the previous section.

Moreover, the preference neutral planner's objective (11) can be written

$$\begin{aligned} & \max_{\{c(n), y(n)\}} \int_{n=0}^{\infty} \int_{\theta=0}^{\infty} b(n/\theta) U(c(n), y(n), n) \tilde{h}(\theta, n) d\theta dn = \\ & \max_{\{c(n), y(n)\}} \int_{n=0}^{\infty} \left(\frac{\int_{\theta=0}^{\infty} b(n/\theta) \tilde{h}(\theta, n) d\theta}{f(n)} \right) U(c(n), y(n), n) f(n) dn, \\ & \text{or simply} \\ & \max_{\{c(n), y(n)\}} \int_{n=0}^{\infty} \bar{b}(n) U(c(n), y(n), n) f(n) dn, \end{aligned} \quad (13)$$

where $\bar{b}(n)$ is the mean welfare weight on individuals of unified type n under the distribution $H(w, \theta)$:

$$\bar{b}(n) = \frac{\int_{\theta=0}^{\infty} b(n/\theta) \tilde{h}(\theta, n) d\theta}{f(n)}. \quad (14)$$

Note that the objective (Eq. (13)) is equivalent to Eq. (2), with $\bar{b}(n)$ replacing $g(n)$.

In principle, the distribution $H(w, \theta)$ could be such that $\bar{b}(n)$ would be increasing in n , even if $b(w)$ decreases in w . Such a situation would merit not only a reduction in redistributivity but in fact a reversal, i.e., redistribution to higher earners, and would require income and ability to be negatively correlated. We will set aside the technical complexities associated with this possibility and assume that $\bar{b}'(n) < 0$, the conventional case where the planner wishes to redistribute from rich to poor.

Assuming that $H(w, \theta)$ gives rise to a distribution of unified types $F(n)$ which satisfies the standard regularity assumptions as in Section 2.1 (discussed in footnote 10), the optimal tax function in this model with two dimensional heterogeneity satisfies the familiar condition (Eq. (5)), with cumulative welfare weights now given by

$$G(n) = \frac{\int_{m=0}^n \bar{b}(m) f(m) dm}{\int_{m=0}^{\infty} \bar{b}(m) f(m) dm}. \quad (15)$$

The solution to the planner's problem in this modified setup provides a deconstruction of the welfare weights $g(n)$ while being formally equivalent to the model of the previous section. That is, it allows us to distinguish between two possible sources of disagreement about the optimal extent of redistribution—the weights $b(w)$, and the joint distribution $H(w, \theta)$ —that together produce the policy-relevant weights $g(n)$. In the next section we explore the implications of disagreements about the second of these sources as a simple way to capture the effects of preference heterogeneity on optimal policy.

2.4. Preference neutrality and optimal redistribution

We can now prove our first novel analytic result using the expressions from previous subsections. It may facilitate intuition to imagine two hypothetical planners. Those two planners agree on the distribution of unified types $F(n)$, the principle of preference neutrality, and the appropriate ability-dependent welfare weights $b(w)$, which take an isoelastic form:

$$b(w) = w^{-\eta}, \quad (16)$$

for positive constant η . But, these two planners have differing positive beliefs about the joint distribution of ability and preferences, $H(w, \theta)$. In particular, one planner knows the true distribution $H(w, \theta)$, while the other incorrectly believes $H(w, \theta)$ is degenerate along the θ

¹¹ This definition of preference neutrality is specific to the case in which the social marginal value of any individual's consumption depends only on the welfare weights. More generally, preference neutrality requires that individual utility functions be scaled so that the social marginal value of consumption is independent of preferences. For examples of such an approach, see the working paper version of this paper, Lockwood and Weinzierl (2012).

dimension, with $\theta = 1$ for all individuals. We use carats to denote the latter planner's incorrect beliefs. This disagreement results in different policy relevant welfare weights $g(n)$ and $\hat{g}(n)$, and thus different preferred tax functions $T(y(n))$ and $\hat{T}(\hat{y}(n))$. Specifically, we can show the following proposition.

Proposition 1. Assume utility is quasilinear as in (1) and welfare weights $b(w)$ are isoelastic as in Eq. (16). Consider the income tax function $T(y(n))$ that solves the planner's problem in Eqs. (13), (3), and (4) given $H(w, \theta)$. Consider also the income tax function $\hat{T}(\hat{y}(n))$ that solves the same planner's problem but assuming homogeneous preferences, that is $\theta = 1$ for all n . If the conditional distribution $\tilde{H}(\theta|n)$ first-order stochastically dominates $\tilde{H}(\theta|m)$ whenever $n > m$, then $T(y(n))$ is less redistributive than $\hat{T}(\hat{y}(n))$. Moreover, if $\tilde{H}(\theta|n)$ is first-order stochastically dominated by $\tilde{H}(\theta|m)$ whenever $n > m$, then $T(y(n))$ is more redistributive than $\hat{T}(\hat{y}(n))$.

In other words, this proposition establishes that the policies chosen by these two planners differ in a specific way whenever higher-income individuals have stronger preferences, roughly speaking “on average,” for consumption relative to leisure than do lower-income individuals. In that case, a planner who believes that preference heterogeneity is responsible in part for the observed income distribution will select a less redistributive tax schedule than a planner who believes that the observed income distribution is entirely due to differences in ability, even though these two planners endorse the same preference-neutral social welfare weights. The key difference between these planners, then, is in their beliefs on the relative importance of ability and preferences in determining observed incomes.

Given certain tractable functional forms for utility and social welfare, Proposition 1 establishes conditions under which preference heterogeneity reduces or increases the optimal extent of redistribution. These analytical results help us better understand the qualitative effect of preference heterogeneity on redistribution. In the next section we look for a similarly simple guide to the size of this effect.

3. A simple statistic for the quantitative effects of preference heterogeneity on redistribution

In this section, we introduce an intuitive summary statistic for the quantitative effects of preference heterogeneity on redistribution. Assuming certain functional forms for welfare weights, individual utility, and the distributions of ability and preferences, we show that this statistic is in fact sufficient to characterize the effects of preference heterogeneity on marginal tax rates. More generally, we show that this statistic can be used in both calibrated numerical simulations of optimal policy in the United States and examinations of empirical evidence on existing policies and preference heterogeneity in OECD countries.

The statistic of interest is

$$\beta = \frac{\text{cov}(\ln \theta, \ln n)}{\text{var}(\ln n)}, \quad (17)$$

the coefficient on the best linear predictor of log preference conditional on log unified type. In other words, β captures the expected increase in preferences for an increase in unified type.

It is possible to provide a more formal characterization of the role of β given certain simplifying assumptions about the economy. In particular, we assume that the distributions of ability and preferences are jointly lognormal, so that the distribution of unified types n is also lognormal.¹² We can then show that marginal tax rates depend on the

distribution of θ only through the statistic β , as in the following proposition:

Proposition 2. Suppose the welfare weights $b(w)$ are isoelastic as in Eq. (16), individual utility is quasilinear as in Eq. (1), and $\ln w$ and $\ln \theta$ are jointly normally distributed so that the distribution $f(n)$ of unified type n is lognormal with $\sigma_N^2 = \text{Var}[\ln(n)]$. Then, optimal marginal tax rates $T'(y(n))$ satisfy:

$$\frac{T'(y(n))}{1 - T'(y(n))} = \frac{1 + 1/\varepsilon}{nf(n)} \left(\int_0^n \exp(\eta(1-\beta)\sigma_N^2) f(m) dm - \int_0^n f(m) dm \right). \quad (18)$$

As with the first proposition, the mechanism behind Proposition 2 is that β affects the shape of the welfare weights $g(n)$, which in turn determine the first integral in Eq. (18). In particular, that integral decreases with β , with extreme cases providing especially clear results. In the case where $\theta = 1$ for all individuals, $\beta = 0$ and the first integral in Eq. (18) can be shown to equal $\int_m^n \partial b(m) f(m) dm / \int_m^\infty \partial b(m) f(m) dm$ where $b(m)$ satisfies Eq. (16), so the integral equals $G(n)$ from the conventional homogeneous preferences case. At the opposite extreme, if ability is homogeneous and all behavioral heterogeneity is due to preferences, $\beta = 1$ and the first integral in Eq. (18) equals $\int_0^n f(m) dm$, so optimal tax rates are uniformly zero.

3.1. Numerical simulations of optimal policy

We now use calibrated numerical simulations to illustrate the potential quantitative effects of preference heterogeneity on optimal policy and the use of the statistic β in measuring them.

Our calibration strategy is to match the income distribution chosen by individuals as modeled in Section 2, taking U.S. tax policy as given, to the empirical income distribution in the United States, and thus infer a distribution of unified types $F(n)$. We use a baseline labor supply elasticity value of $\varepsilon = 0.33$, the preferred estimate in Chetty (2012), accounting for optimization frictions.

To calibrate the ability distribution, we assume that unified types n are drawn from a lognormal distribution with parameters μ_N and σ_N^2 , and we select these parameters so that resulting income distribution approximates the empirical distribution in the U.S. in 2011.¹³ The resulting parameter estimates, when incomes are reported in units of \$10,000, are $\mu_N = 1.65$ and $\sigma_N^2 = 0.65$. Our conceptual results are not sensitive to these values, but having a realistic calibration makes the magnitudes of our results easier to interpret.

The optimal policy naturally depends on the planner's welfare weights. We assume they take the isoelastic form in Eq. (16) where the planner's inequality aversion is measured by η . We use a baseline value of $\eta = 1$. We then vary β as defined in Eq. (17) to see how optimal policy diverges from that which assumes no preference heterogeneity. Fig. 1 plots marginal tax rates from Eq. (18) for four values for β , ranging from 0 (the conventional, homogeneous preferences case) to 0.75, which loosely corresponds to three fourths of income variation deriving from preferences. The extreme case of $\beta = 1$, in which all income variation is due to preferences and taxes are optimally zero, is omitted.

These results expand quantitatively on the qualitative result in Proposition 1. Under this baseline specification, for example, if $\beta = 0.25$ (so that roughly one fourth of income heterogeneity is due to preferences) the optimal marginal tax rate falls by 5.6 percentage points for individuals earning \$50,000, and by 2.5 percentage points on those

¹² Though evidence (see Saez, 2001) shows that the upper tail of the income distribution is better described as a Pareto distribution, lognormality has long been used in the optimal tax literature to describe most of the income distribution (see Tuomala, 1990) below the top tail.

¹³ Specifically, we select the parameters which minimize the sum of squared differences between incomes at percentiles 20, 40, 60, 80, and 90 under the simulated distribution and the actual income distribution in the U.S. in 2011, as reported by the Tax Policy Center. For our computational expediency, we perform these simulations assuming flat taxes, as in Saez, 2001, with a marginal tax rate of 30%.

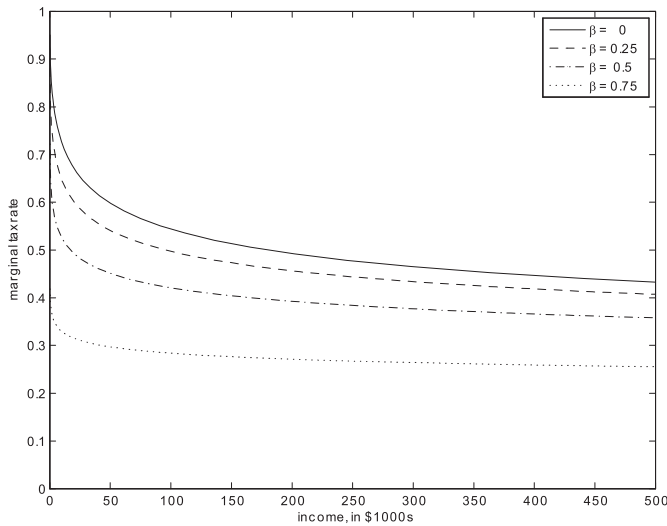


Fig. 1. Optimal marginal tax rate schedules for four values of β .

earning \$500,000. This represents a substantial change in redistributive policy—the net transfer to individuals at the 10th percentile of the income distribution falls by \$2181 annually to \$27,536; net taxes levied on those at the 99th percentile decrease by \$9649 to \$134,601.

The analytic proof of Proposition 1 imposed two requirements: an absence of income effects, and Pareto weights which are isoelastic in unified type n . In the online appendix, we relax both assumptions and find that the inverse relationship between β and marginal tax rates still holds. Simulations are performed using Eq. (18) in the baseline case, and numerically using the Knitro nonlinear optimization package (see Byrd et al., 2006).

These simulations demonstrate that using β provides a straightforward way in which to modify a numerical version of the standard optimal tax model to determine the potential quantitative implications of preference heterogeneity. In addition, β may be a feasible empirical target, especially (as we now show) if somewhat unconventional sources of evidence such as surveys are brought to bear.

3.2. Suggestive empirical patterns

To demonstrate the empirical potential of our results, and to show how the population statistic β may be used, we now provide suggestive evidence that preference heterogeneity may be related to real-world policy across modern developed countries in the way that our analytical results suggest. We emphasize that these results are admittedly far from conclusive and are vulnerable to a variety of criticisms. Our hope is that they stimulate further data gathering and empirical work that can more reliably test for the implications of the theory in existing policy.

Our cross-sectional¹⁴ international data on preference heterogeneity and β comes from the World Values Survey, whose international coverage of attitudes toward such topics is unmatched. The World Values Survey asked the following question of respondents in a set of countries between 2005 and 2007: “Now I will briefly describe some people. Using this card, would you please indicate for each description whether that person is very much like you, like you, somewhat like you, not like you, or not at all like you? ...It is important to this person to be rich; to have a lot of money and expensive things.” We will use the answers to the question

to measure preferences θ .¹⁵ This question is well-posed for our purposes, as it attempts to have the respondent reflect on his or her underlying preferences rather than how he or she feels in the status quo, i.e., “on the margin.” Key for our purposes, the World Values Survey also asks respondents to report their place in the income distribution (it asks which of ten “steps” the respondent’s household income falls into). Since income increases monotonically with unified type, we use these reported values as a measure of unified type n . It is possible to calculate the covariance of these data within each country, giving us all of the components required to calculate β .¹⁶

We relate these values of β to a standard measure of redistribution, the difference between the Gini coefficients on primary (pre-tax and pre-transfer) income and disposable (post-tax and post-transfer) income, as calculated in Wang and Caminada (2011) based on data from the Luxembourg Income Study.¹⁷ We are able to calculate both β and this measure of redistribution for 13 countries with PPP-adjusted GDP per capita greater than \$25,000 in 2005 U.S. dollars, a simple threshold that helps to control for the wide range of institutional variables that likely affect the scale of redistribution. Fig. 2 shows the results visually.

A mild but noticeable negative relationship between redistribution and β is apparent in Fig. 2, consistent with the theory developed above. That is, countries in which preference heterogeneity plays a larger role in explaining income variation appear to have less redistributive policies. The point estimate of the coefficient on β is negative and marginally significant (it is -2.19 with a standard error of 1.27); it is also the slope of the best-fit line shown in the figure. Though this evidence is far from definitive, this relationship is robust to controlling for the log of GDP per capita and the extent of inequality as measured by the pre-tax Gini coefficient. It also holds if we scale the difference in Gini coefficients by the starting level of inequality in each country. Of course, any results with such a limited sample are merely suggestive of a relationship that, given the potential feasibility of measuring the statistic β , may reward greater study.

To be clear, this relationship may very well reflect interdependence rather than unidirectional causality and be consistent with the theoretical results developed above. For example, it may be that residents of countries with less redistributive policies tend to evolve toward having less similar preferences. Related, it may be of interest to note that the pattern in Fig. 2 is consistent with the well-known results of Alesina and Angeletos (2005), who find that countries in which effort is perceived to be more important than luck in determining economic success have less redistributive policies. In the terminology of this paper, larger β implies that preferences play a larger role in determining income relative to ability—that is, the source of heterogeneity not deserving of redistribution is relatively more important.

4. Conclusion

Taste differences have played at most an implicit role in most modern optimal tax research, but they are readily apparent in the real world and have long been a staple of broader debates over taxation. We focus on making their role in the theory explicit. Specifically, we derive the implications of heterogeneity in preferences for consumption relative

¹⁵ To be precise, we interpret these answers as indicating values of $\ln(\theta^{1+1/\epsilon})$, where $\theta^{1+1/\epsilon}$ is the observationally-equivalent preference factor that can be applied to either the subutility of consumption or the disutility of labor effort, as in the utility function (1) used throughout this paper, to capture relative preferences for consumption and leisure. We therefore scale the responses to convert them to values of θ with an expected value of one, to match the assumption in Section 2.3, and then take the logarithms of those θ values, before calculating β . Very similar results are obtained if we use simply the reported levels of θ , instead.

¹⁶ Uncertainty over how respondents interpreted the scale of choices for the WVS question on preferences makes the absolute levels of β calculated in this subsection less meaningful than their relative levels across countries.

¹⁷ Japan is the one exception, as it does not participate in the LIS. We rely on Tachibanaki (2005), who reports primary and disposable income Gini coefficients based on Japan’s Ministry of Welfare and Labor’s Income Redistribution Survey in his Table 1.1.

¹⁴ Panel analysis would be desirable, but the survey data we use to measure preferences is available over at most a ten-year horizon. We believe that this is too narrow a window over which to expect either meaningful changes in preference variation or a response to any such changes in policy, so we leave the analysis of panel data for future research.

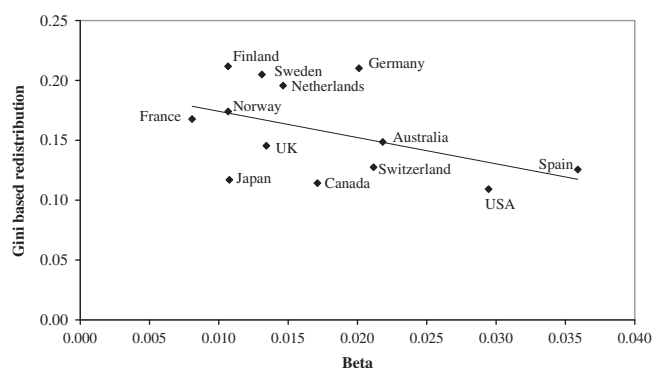


Fig. 2. Redistribution and β in 13 OECD countries.

to leisure that are observationally equivalent but not normatively equivalent (in that society does not wish to redistribute income based on these preferences) to income-earning abilities. We show two novel results on how this heterogeneity affects the optimal extent of redistribution. In both cases, we isolate a transparent formal mechanism through which we can model the operation of preference heterogeneity, namely changing the pattern of welfare weights the social planner assigns along the income distribution. First, we show that long-standing intuitions about this form of preference heterogeneity reducing optimal redistribution are incomplete but correct given a straightforward condition on how preferences relate to income. Second, we describe a simple summary statistic for measuring this effect, providing a potentially empirically-relevant way to gauge the quantitative implications of preference heterogeneity for redistribution.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2015.01.002>.

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