Public support for income redistribution and welfare policies in Ireland

Introduction

This report is based on a research project that investigated public support for income redistribution and welfare policies in Ireland. The main questions that guided the research were the following: - Has the support for income redistribution changed over time?
- What are the main attitudes and beliefs in relation to welfare policies?
- What individual and contextual factors are associated with support for redistribution and

Key points

- Over time, there is an overall stable support for government's role in reducing differences in income levels (Figure 1) and for wealth redistribution (Figure 2).
- ESS respondents from lower social classes and in worse financial situation are more likely to agree that the government should reduce differences in income levels (Table 2).
- From 2008 to 2016, there was a significant reduction on the average agreement that social benefits pplace too great strain on economy (Figure 13)
- Respondents in worse financial situation (subjective self-reported) tend to disagree more with the perspective that social benefits are disincentives for work, economy and social cooperation (Table 3)
- There is a trajectory of increasing support for redistribution across skilled and unskilled workers since round 8 (2016). However, for lower-grade service class and small business owners, there seems to be a break in this trajectory captured in the latest wave (Figure 9)

Methods

Data sources

- **European Elections Studies**: The research examined public opinion data from Voter Surveys conducted immediately after the European elections. Data from the latest three surveys (2014, 2019, 2024) were analysed here. These surveys are part of the European Elections Studies (EES), which also features political elite surveys, media studies, and the Euromanifestos project that codes Party Manifestos. Before 1994, the voter survey questions 3 part of the Eurobarometer surveys. Since the 1999 elections, EES surveys have been conducted independently of the Eurobarometer. The main response variable used in this project is based on a question related to wealth redistribution. The interviewer manual does not contain any additional instruction in relation to this question, so respondents provided their answers according to their understanding of the following wording:

> **i** Question wording
>
> [...] We would like to ask you to position yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where '0' means that you "fully agree with the statement at the top" and '10' means that you "fully agree with the statement at the bottom". [...]
> **Redistribution of wealth**
> **0** - You fully favour redistribution from the rich to the poor in Ireland
> **10** You fully oppose redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor in Ireland

The original scale of this variable was inverted for this analysis. So, in the results presented here, higher values indicate more in favour of redistribution.

Here are relevant variables from the latest three waves that were also included in the analysis.

- Country of birth
- Age
- Gender
- Educational attainment
- **European Social Survey**: The main data source for this project is the European Social Survey (ESS). Most of the analysis is based on a core question that was asked across all 11 rounds since 2002. In addition, we also explore several questions from the module on welfare attitudes that

was fielded in 2008 and 2016. The main response variable used in this project is based on a question regarding the role of the government in reducing income inequalities that was administered across all 11 rounds. The interviewer manual does not contain any additional instruction in relation to this question, so respondents provided their answers according to their understanding of the following wording:

> **i** Question wording
>
> Using this card, please say to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. **The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels**
> 1 Agree strongly
> 2 Agree
> 3 Neither agree nor disagree
> 4 Disagree
> 5 Disagree strongly

The original scale of this variable was inverted for this analysis. So, in the results presented here, higher values denote stronger agreement with government reducing income differences.

Some recent studies have raised concerns in relation to the reliability of this question as a measurement of support for redistribution. Margalit and Raviv (2024) argues that reduction in income differences is too abstract and respondents in general do not link it to redistributive measures. Similarly, it has been suggested that this question only captures a diffuse inclination to equality and that is why responses are inconsistent with voting preferences across countries Dallinger (2022). However, Breznau et al. (2025) argue that the absence of a relationship between this measurement and other expected correlates (voting preferences / support for concrete policies) is due to the ommission of views on government (trust and perceptions of corruption) as a moderating variable.

Here are relevant variables from the latest three waves that were also included in the analysis.

- Placement on left right scale
- Citizen of country
- Born in country
- Gender
- Year of birth
- Highest level of education

- Feeling about household's income nowadays

In addition, based on the class scheme developed by Oesch (2006), a "social class" variable was constructed based on occupational variables and following Tawfik and Oesch (2020) script.

Public support for income redistribution

Over time

The average level of support for income redistribution in Ireland is similar to the ones observed in other European countries. However, the average support varies substantially over time. The Figure 1 below shows the mean values for 'Government should reduce income differences' by round. Overall there is a stable agreement (mean = 3.8). Rounds 5-7 (2010-2014) as well as 10-11(2022-2024) show a slightly higher agreement compared to other rounds and the European average.

Figure 1: Mean values for 'Government should reduce income differences' by round

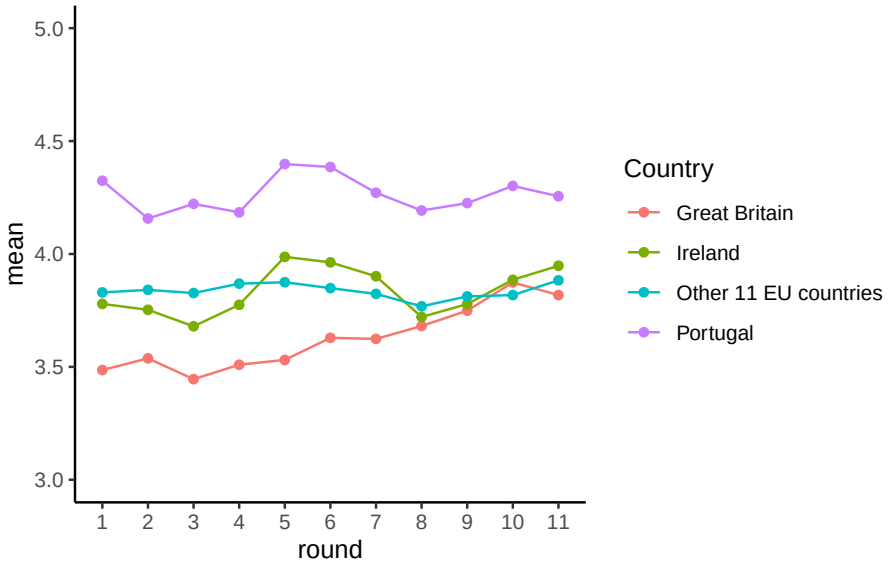
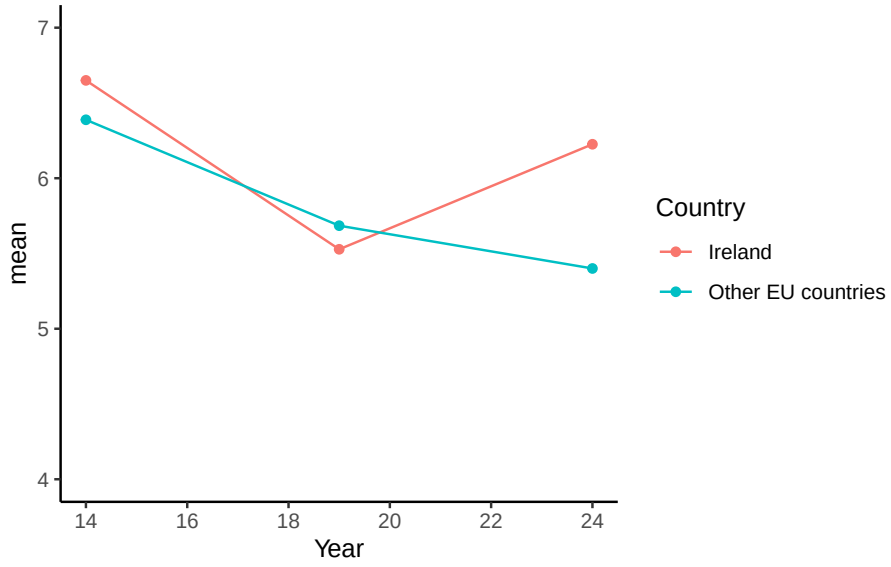


Figure 2 shows the density of responses for the scale on support for redistribution of wealth. The mean values are similar for 2014, 2019 and 2024. However, the distribution seems is less skewed in 2024 compared to 2014.

Table 1: Mean values by gender and study in 2024

Gender	ESS	VS
Male	4.0	6.3
Female	3.9	6.1

Figure 2: Density plot for 'in favour of redistribution of wealth' by survey year



Gender

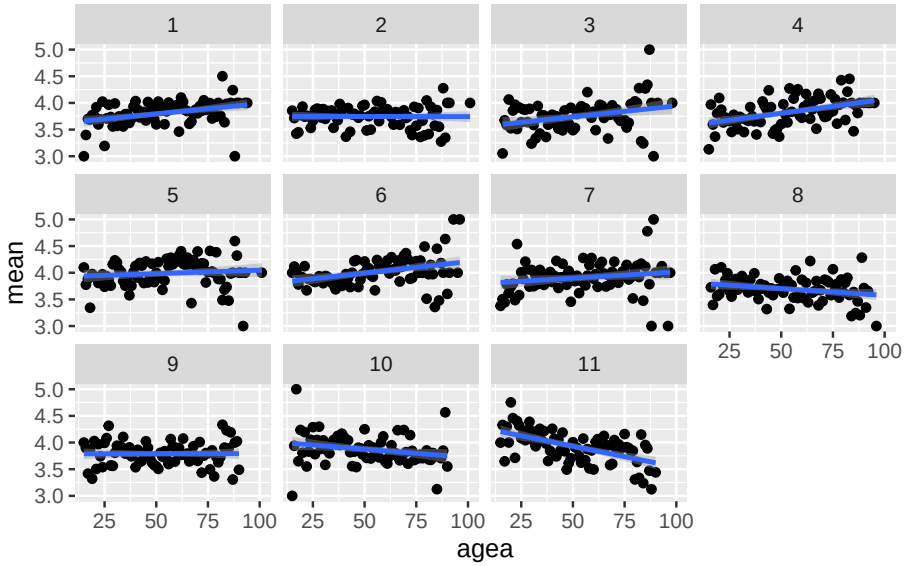
The Table 1 shows the mean values for the main response variable in each study in 2024 by gender.

Age

The relationship between age and the response variable seems to change across rounds. As shown in Figure 3, early rounds suggest that older respondents support more the government reducing income differences, whereas the latest round (11) and round 8 seem to indicate the opposite.

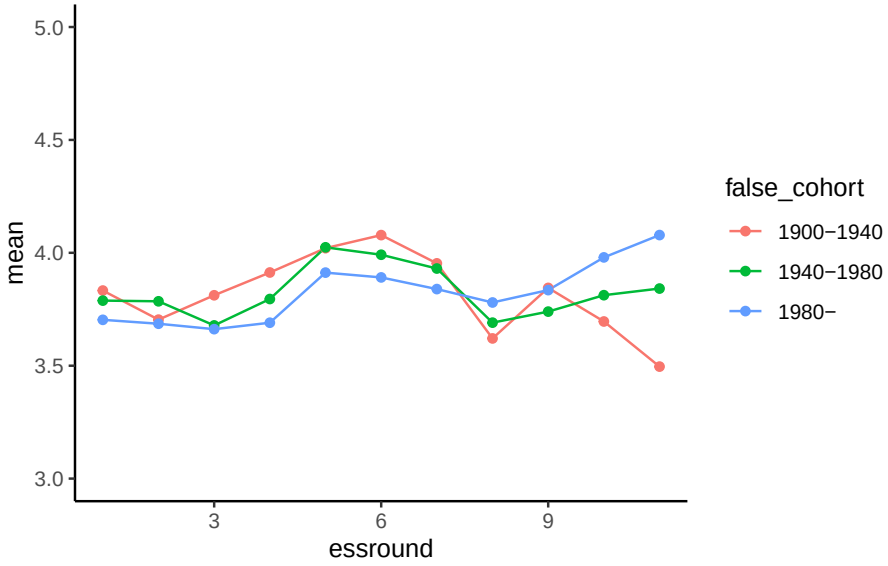
ESS

Figure 3: Scatter plot for 'Government should reduce income differences' by age and round



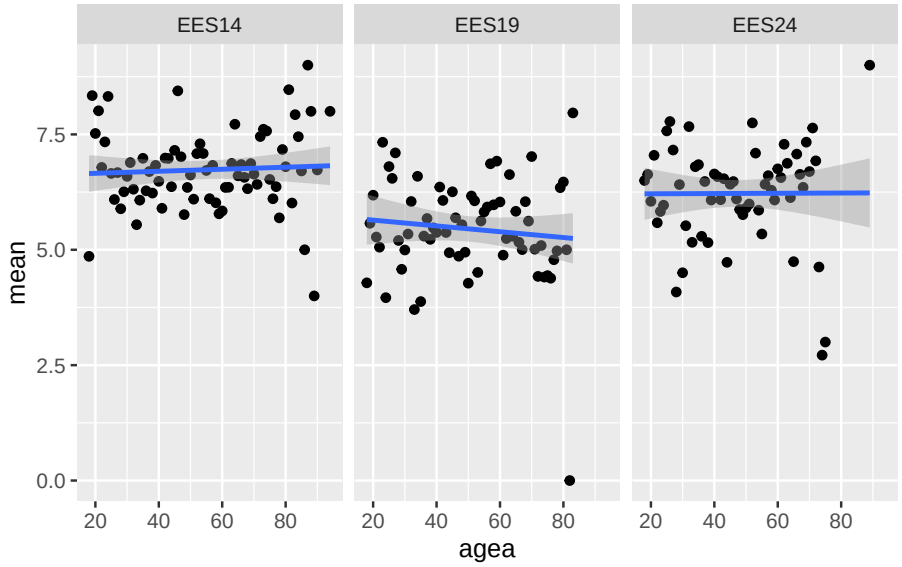
ESS

Figure 4: Mean values for 'Government should reduce income differences' by false cohort and round



VS

Figure 5: Scatter plot for 'wealth redistribution' by age and study

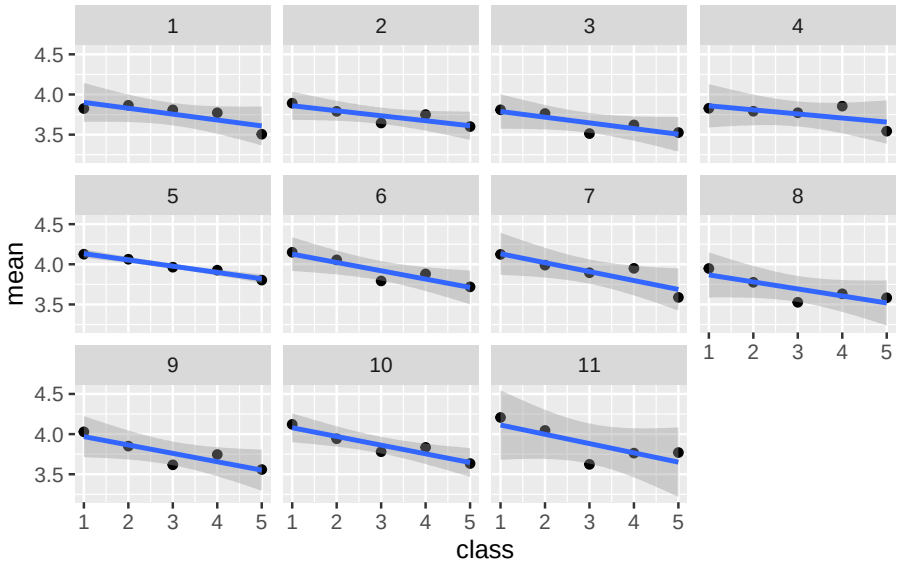


Social class

Figure 6 suggests a negative relationship between social class and the main ESS response variable. The higher the social class, the lower the support for the government to reduce income differences.

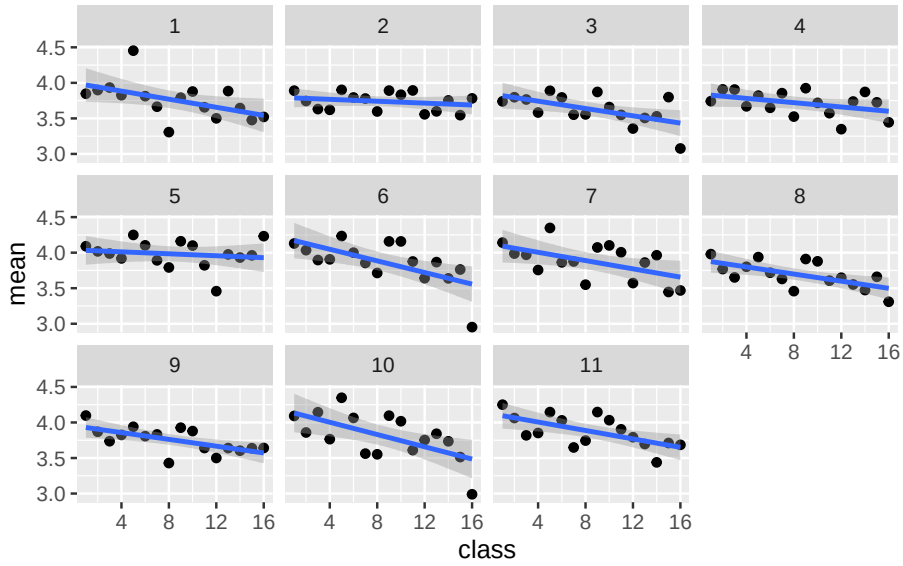
5 groups

Figure 6: Scatter plot for 'income differences' by social class (5 groups) and round



16 groups

Figure 7: Scatter plot for 'income differences' by social class (16 groups) and round



Multivariate

The Table 2 below shows the coefficients of an OLS regression model on the support for government reducing differences in income levels. The overall explanatory power of the model is low. The effect of age seems to be neglectable. Both the social class and subjective income suggest that respondents in more precarious economic situation tend to be more favourable of the government reducing income differences.

Economic crisis and Covid19

As shown in Figure 1, the ESS data indicates a slightly higher average support for redistribution after the 2008 economic crisis and after the 2022 Covid19 pandemic. Evidence from a survey experiment in the USA show that participants are more willing to prioritize society's problems when exposed to issues related to the pandemic (Cappelen et al. 2021). Van Hootegem and Laenen (2023) show that the increase in support for a universal basic income increased with the pandemic but it was short lived.

In this section we explore further the potential impact of the pandemic on support for redistribution.

Table 2: OLS regression coefficients for 'income differences'

Characteristic	**Beta**	**95% CI**[1]	**p-value**
Age of respondent, calculated	0.00	0.00, 0.00	**<0.001**
Gender			
Male	—	—	
Female	0.06	0.03, 0.09	**<0.001**
No answer	0.05	-0.39, 0.49	0.8
Final Oesch class position - 5 classes			
Higher-grade service class	—	—	
Lower-grade service class	0.15	0.10, 0.20	**<0.001**
Small business owners	0.07	0.01, 0.12	**0.013**
Skilled workers	0.22	0.17, 0.26	**<0.001**
Unskilled workers	0.30	0.25, 0.35	**<0.001**
Feeling about household's income nowadays			
Living comfortably on present income	—	—	
Coping on present income	0.17	0.14, 0.20	**<0.001**
Difficult on present income	0.26	0.21, 0.30	**<0.001**
Very difficult on present income	0.45	0.38, 0.52	**<0.001**
No answer	0.33	0.03, 0.64	**0.031**
Refusal	0.15	-0.23, 0.54	0.4
Don't know	0.04	-0.15, 0.23	0.7
cso_unemp	0.01	-0.02, 0.04	0.5

[1]CI = Confidence Interval

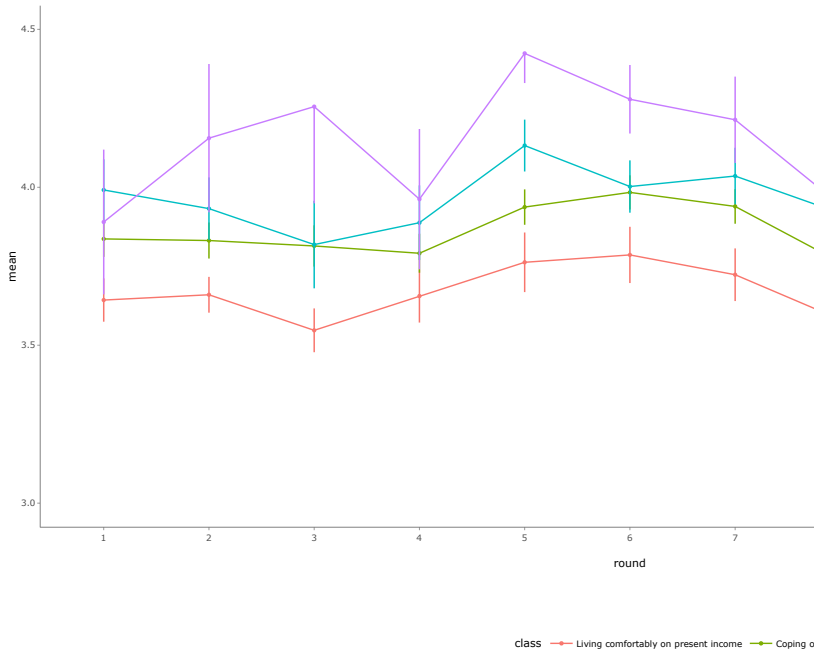
R^2 = 0.046; Adjusted R^2 = 0.044; Sigma = 0.949; Statistic = 35.5; p-value = <0.001; df = 24; Log-likelihood = -25,850; AIC = 51,752; BIC = 51,954; Deviance = 16,060; Residual df = 17,833; No. Obs. = 17,858

Time fixed effects (ESS Round) omitted from the table but included in the model

Time series

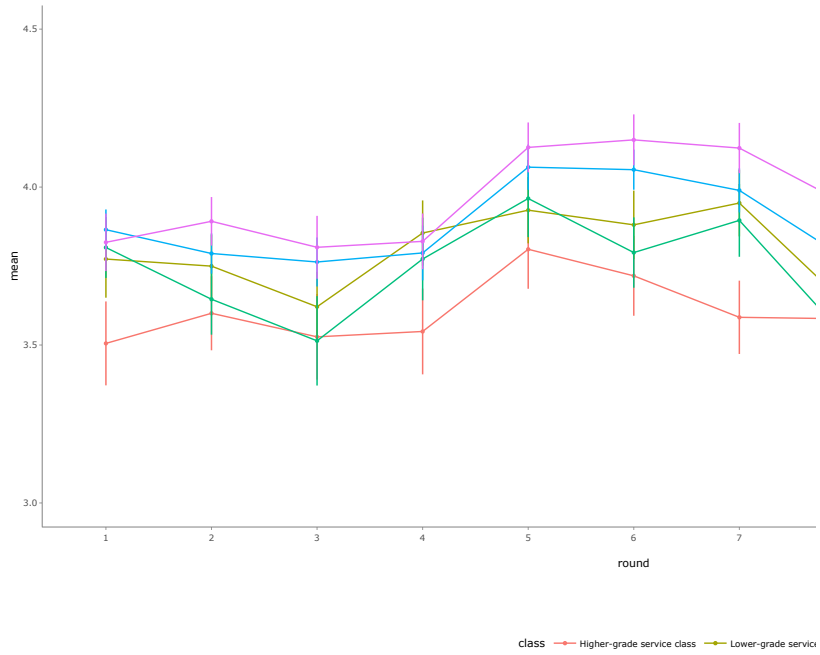
Table 2 suggests that both social class and feeling about household income are significant predictors of support for redistribution. Figure 8 shows that the difference between subjective income groups remains stable over time, with all groups responding similar to 2008 crisis and the pandemic.

Figure 8: Average support for redistribution by financial situation (2002-2022)



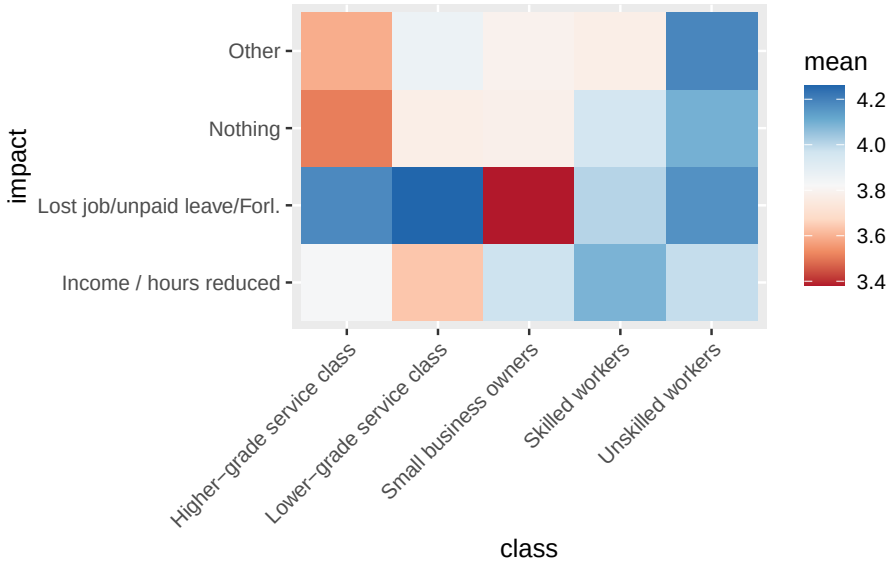
Conversely, the Figure 9 suggests that there is a slightly different pattern in response to the pandemic. There is a trajectory of increasing support for redistribution across skilled and unskilled workers since round 8 (2016). However, for lower-grade service class and small business owners, there seems to be a break in this trajectory captured in the latest wave.

Figure 9: Average support for redistribution by social class (2002-2022)



Job loss

Figure 10: Average support for redistribution by social class (2002-2022)



Support for welfare policies

The data analysed in this chapter refers to a special module from the European Social Survey on welfare attitudes that was fielded in 2008 (Round 4) and repeated in 2016 (Round 8) (see Meuleman et al. (2018) for more on this module).

Large differences acceptable

In this question, respondents were asked to what extent they agree with the following statement:

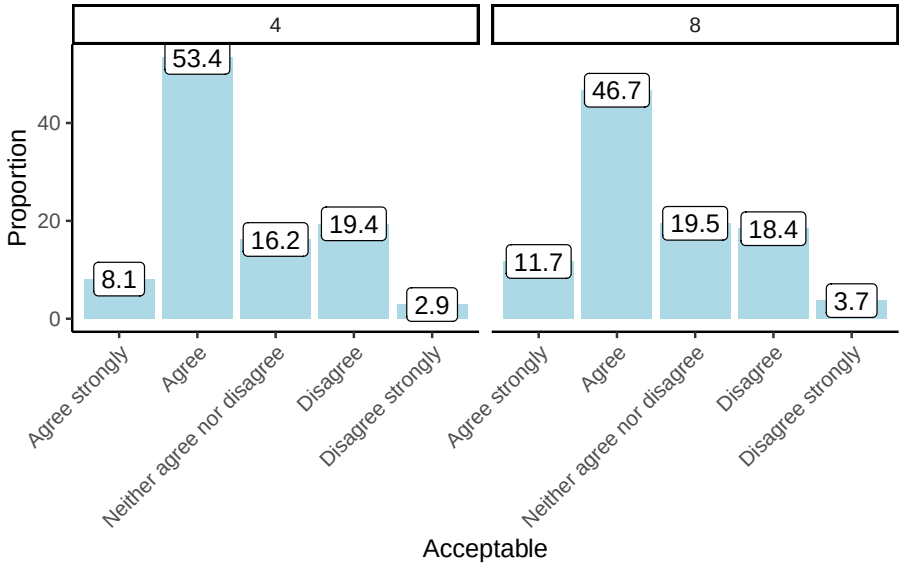
> **i** Question wording
>
> 'Large differences in people's incomes are acceptable to properly reward differences in talents and efforts'

The distribution appears to be similar for 2008 and 2016, with a slight reduction in the proportion of those who "agree" or "agree strongly".

```
# A tibble: 17 x 3
   class5                          class16                          n
   <dbl+lbl>                       <dbl+lbl>                    <int>
 1  1 [Higher-grade service class]  1 [Large employers]             164
```

2	1	[Higher-grade service class]	2	[Self-employed professionals]	359
3	1	[Higher-grade service class]	5	[Technical experts]	617
4	1	[Higher-grade service class]	9	[Higher-grade managers and administ~	1549
5	1	[Higher-grade service class]	13	[Socio-cultural professionals]	933
6	2	[Lower-grade service class]	6	[Technicians]	489
7	2	[Lower-grade service class]	10	[Lower-grade managers and administr~	1392
8	2	[Lower-grade service class]	14	[Socio-cultural semi-professionals]	1487
9	3	[Small business owners]	3	[Small business owners with employe~	1008
10	3	[Small business owners]	4	[Small business owners without empl~	1860
11	4	[Skilled workers]	7	[Skilled manual]	1974
12	4	[Skilled workers]	11	[Skilled clerks]	2074
13	4	[Skilled workers]	15	[Skilled service]	3102
14	5	[Unskilled workers]	8	[Low-skilled manual]	1903
15	5	[Unskilled workers]	12	[Unskilled clerks]	295
16	5	[Unskilled workers]	16	[Low-skilled service]	2289
17	NA		NA		2755

Figure 11: Distribution of 'Large differences acceptable' (2008 and 2016)



A multivariate analysis with the same explanatory variables from the model in Table 2 suggests that gender and class are not statistically significant predictors. However, respondents with worse financial situation tend to disagree more with this statement.

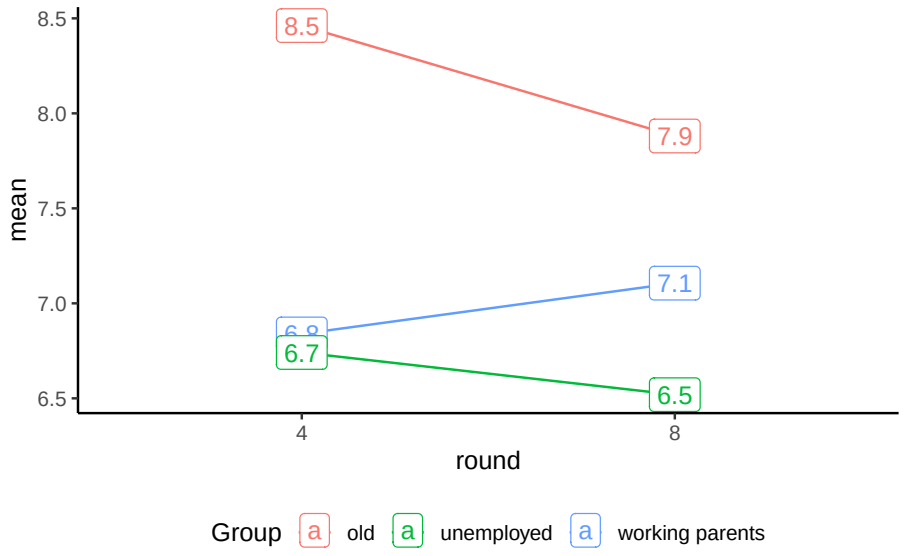
Deservingness

In this question, respondents were asked how much responsibility the government should have in relation to the following groups:

> **Question wording**
>
> People have different views on what the responsibilities of governments should or should not be. For each of the tasks I read out please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much responsibility you think governments should have. 0 means it should not be governments' responsibility at all and 10 means it should be entirely governments' responsibility
> "... ensure sufficient child care services for working parents"
> "... ensure a reasonable standard of living for the old"
> "...ensure a reasonable standard of living for the unemployed"

In the Figure 12, higher values denote higher government responsibility. On average respondents believe that the government should be more responsible for the old compared to working parents and unemployed. However, there was a reduction in this prioritisation for governments' responsibility in relation to older citizens and unemployed and increase in the average prioritisation for working parents.

Figure 12: Mean values for deservingness of government support by group and round



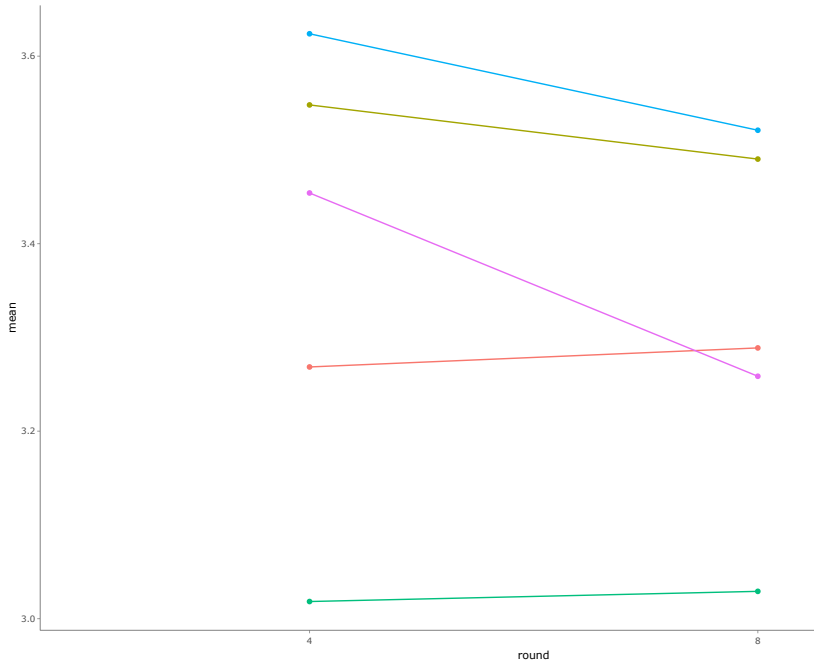
Beliefs about social benefits

The module also included questions in relation to beliefs about the consequences of social benefits and services:

> **Question wording**
>
> Using this card please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that social benefits and services in [country]…
> "…lead to a more equal society?"
> "… make people lazy?"
> "…make people less willing care for one another?"
> "…prevent widespread poverty"
> "…place too great strain on economy"

The average level of agreement remains similar comparing 2008 and 2016. The only exception is the average for "social benefits place too great strain on economy", which oberved a significant reduction in the level of agreement, as shown in Figure 13.

Figure 13: Mean values for beliefs in relation to social benefits by round



PCA

A Principal Components Analysis indicate that these five variables can be reduced to the following two latent dimensions named arbitrarily:

- **Protective** (PC1): “Lead to equal society” and “Prevent poverty”;

- **Disincentive** (PC2): "Make people lazy" and "Make people less willing to care", and "Put strain on economy".

The variables were aggregated within each dimension using the mean value of the non-missing answers. The Table 3 below shows the coefficients of two OLS explanatory models for these two dimensions.

The first model indicates that female respondents tend to provide a slightly lower score on the protective dimension of beliefs about social benefits. None of the other predictors included in the model are statistically significant.

The second model suggests that the group of "small business owners" and "skilled workers" have higher scores compared to respondents of other social classes. In addition, respondents with worse self-reported financial situation tend to disagree more with beliefs related to disincentive dimension of social beliefs.

Table 3: OLS regression coefficients for 'beliefs about social benefits'

	Protective			Disincentive		
Characteristic	**Beta**	**95% CI[1]**	**p-value**	**Beta**	**95% CI[1]**	**p-value**
Age of respondent, calculated	0.00	0.00, 0.00	**<0.001**	0.00	0.00, 0.00	0.9
as_factor(gndr)						
Male	—	—		—	—	
Female	-0.07	-0.12, -0.03	**0.002**	0.03	-0.02, 0.08	0.3
Final Oesch class position - 5 classes						
Higher-grade service class	—	—		—	—	
Lower-grade service class	-0.03	-0.12, 0.05	0.4	0.09	0.00, 0.17	0.051
Small business owners	-0.05	-0.14, 0.04	0.3	0.12	0.03, 0.21	**0.009**
Skilled workers	-0.01	-0.08, 0.07	0.9	0.09	0.01, 0.16	**0.023**
Unskilled workers	0.00	-0.07, 0.08	>0.9	0.08	0.00, 0.16	0.056
as_factor(hincfel)						
Living comfortably on present income	—	—		—	—	
Coping on present income	-0.03	-0.08, 0.02	0.3	-0.03	-0.08, 0.03	0.3
Difficult on present income	-0.07	-0.15, 0.00	0.067	-0.22	-0.30, -0.14	**<0.001**
Very difficult on present income	-0.06	-0.18, 0.05	0.3	-0.48	-0.61, -0.36	**<0.001**
Refusal	-0.20	-1.3, 0.87	0.7	-0.46	-1.6, 0.65	0.4
Don't know	0.84	0.39, 1.3	**<0.001**	-0.53	-1.0, -0.05	**0.029**

[1]CI = Confidence Interval

Time fixed effects (ESS Round) omitted from the table but included in the model

References

Breznau, Nate, Lisa Heukamp, Hung HV Nguyen, and Tom Knuf. 2025. "The Moderating Role of Government Heuristics in Public Preferences for Redistribution." *Journal of European Social Policy* 35 (1): 21–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/09589287241290742.

Cappelen, Alexander W., Ranveig Falch, Erik Ø. Sørensen, and Bertil Tungodden. 2021. "Solidarity and Fairness in Times of Crisis." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 186 (June): 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2021.03.017.

Dallinger, Ursula. 2022. "On the Ambivalence of Preferences for Income Redistribution: A Research Note." *Journal of European Social Policy* 32 (2): 225–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/09589287211066469.

Margalit, Yotam, and Shir Raviv. 2024. "Does Support for Redistribution Mean What We Think It Means?" *Political Science Research and Methods* 12 (4): 870–78. https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2023.57.

Meuleman, Bart, Wim Van Oorschot, Dimitri Gugushvili, Sharon Baute, Sam Delespaul, Tijs Laenen, Femke Roosma, and Federica Rossetti. 2018. "The Past, Present and Future of European Welfare Attitudes: Topline Results from Round 8 of the European Social Survey." *ESS Topline Series*.

Oesch, Daniel. 2006. "Coming to Grips with a Changing Class Structure: An Analysis of Employment Stratification in Britain, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland." *International Sociology* 21 (2): 263–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580906061379.

Tawfik, Amal, and Daniel Oesch. 2020. "Script to Construct an Indicator of Social Class in the ESS." *Https://Www. Europeansocialsurvey. Org/Docs/Shared_user_resources/Oesch/Oesch_social_class_schema. Zip (Zugegriffen Am 11.11. 2021)*. https://scholar.google.com/scholar?cluster=14780777134980176311&hl=en&oi=scholarr.

Van Hootegem, Arno, and Tijs Laenen. 2023. "A Wave of Support? A Natural Experiment on How the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected the Popularity of a Basic Income." *Acta Politica* 58 (3): 695–713. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-022-00260-9.