Beyond Individual Gains: Family-Related Self-Interest and Preferences for Redistribution

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An extensive body of literature on preferences for redistribution focuses on the self-interest approach, which posits that preferences result from rational calculations of the potential gains individuals can obtain from redistributive policies, using explanatory factors like income, labour market status or social class. However, recent research shows that welfare states consider not only individual features but also family characteristics when redistributing income. Consequently, we argue that this dimension, which the literature refers to as family-related redistribution, is relevant to preference formation from a self-interest perspective. We use a combination of survey data from the European Social Survey 2016 and simulation data on redistributive outputs from EUROMOD's Hypothetical Household Tool to study how family characteristics and the way redistributive policies address them affect preferences for redistribution in 14 European countries. We find significant cross-country differences regarding how family characteristics affect preferences, which are driven by the current levels of family-related redistribution in each country. Moreover, individuals in family types which benefit more from family-related redistribution are more supportive of redistributive policies only when these policies are explicitly family-oriented. These conclusions highlight the relevance of considering the family context and how welfare state redistribution addresses it as a driver of welfare preferences.

Introduction

Explaining the formation of individual preferences for welfare state redistribution has been a central focus of social policy scholarship over the past few decades. This question is far from trivial, as evidence suggests that preferences play a crucial role in shaping political behaviour (Schuman & Johnson, 1976) and influencing policy implementation (Rehm et al., 2012; Rueda, 2005).

Theoretical explanations can be broadly characterised into three complementary approaches. The first and perhaps most prominent approach rests on the assumption that redistributive preferences are shaped primarily by economic self-interest (Meltzer & Richard, 1981). This perspective highlights factors such as income levels (Alesina & Giuliano, 2011), labour market status (Rehm, 2009) and social class (Svallfors, 2004) as key predictors of support for redistribution. The second approach focuses on the influence of individual values, norms and beliefs on redistributive preferences. Scholars in this tradition explore predictors such as personal beliefs concerning redistributive justice (Benabou & Tirole, 2006) and the fairness of inequality (Alesina & Angeletos, 2005; Breznau, 2010), or the perceptions of the deservingness of benefit recipients (Hansen, 2019; van Oorschot, 2006). Finally, the third line of inquiry considers the broader contextual and structural factors shaping preferences. This includes the institutional design of welfare states (Arts & Gelissen, 2001; Svallfors, 1997), the feedback caused by specific policies (Pierson, 1993, 2000; Busemeyer et al., 2021) and the level of economic inequality within a society (Dallinger, 2010; Schmidt-Catran, 2016).

Among these three perspectives, the self-interest approach has been particularly influential in analysing preference formation within the framework of political economy (Alesina & Giuliano, 2011). The core premise of this approach is that support for welfare state redistribution aligns with economic gains: individuals are more likely to support general welfare

state redistribution and specific redistributive policies when they expect to benefit from them and less likely to support such policies when they anticipate limited or no gains. Accordingly, redistributive preferences are shaped by characteristics that the welfare state explicitly or implicitly addresses, which in turn predict individuals' redistributive outputs.

While most self-interest accounts of preference formation focus on individual explanatory factors, some contributions have highlighted the need to consider how family and household characteristics might affect welfare preferences. On the one hand, the family tends to constitute an informal safety net for its members in times of financial need, reducing the need for state-based welfare provision for those who benefit from family solidarity (Haussen, 2009; Altamirano et al., 2022; Arévalo-Iglesias, 2025) but also increasing the incentives to demand redistributive policies among those who provide support to their relatives (Häusermann et al., 2016). On the other, there is evidence of an association between individual redistributive preferences and the social class of family members (Paskov & Weisstanner, 2023; Edlund, 2003). In this sense, the family acts both as a welfare provider and a unit of social stratification, influencing self-interest mechanisms of preference formation.

We argue that, in addition to these mechanisms, the family constitutes a pivotal factor in shaping preferences because family characteristics are explicitly targeted by welfare state redistribution, both financially—whether in the form of support and/or obligations—and through services (Bradshaw et al., 2006; Frericks & Gurín, 2023; Van Lancker & Van Mechelen, 2015). Policies such as work-family balance measures explicitly aim to benefit families and are often tailored to address the needs of diverse family forms in distinct ways (Lewis et al., 2008). As a result, family characteristics should influence individual preferences for redistribution, both broadly and concerning specific family-related redistributive policies, creating potential differences not only between those with and without families but also among individuals in varying family types.

Thus, our core contribution lies in studying how this family factor aligns with the core premise of the self-interest approach. If individual preferences for welfare-state redistribution and specific policies correspond to anticipated gains, and because family characteristics determine these gains, individuals who gain more from welfare-state redistribution based on how their family type is targeted by redistributive policies are likely to exhibit stronger positive preferences. This mechanism, which we call family-related self-interest, is based on the policy feedback assumption that once a policy is implemented, those who benefit from it develop an interest in its preservation and expansion (Pierson, 1993, 2000; Hedegaard & Larsen, 2014). Thus, our research questions examine whether and how differences in family-related circumstances—and the corresponding levels of (redistributive) gain—translate into differences in preferences. Consequently, we ask:

- *To what extent do redistributive preferences differ between single individuals and individuals with families, and among individuals in various family types?*

- *To what extent do these differences align with the way in which redistribution addresses family types?*

We employ a combination of survey data on public opinion from the 8th wave of the European Social Survey and simulation data on the redistributive outputs of tax-benefit policies for different family types from EUROMOD's Hypothetical Household Tool to investigate the role of family-related self-interest. Our study covers a total of 14 European Union countries in the year 2016. Data are analysed through a combination of exploratory methods and random-intercept ordinal logistic regression models.

Theory

The self-interest approach serves as a foundational model for understanding preferences for redistribution within the field of political economy (Alesina & Giuliano, 2011). Rooted in Meltzer and Richard's (1981) rational theory of the size of government, this approach operates on the premise that individuals form their preferences for redistribution based on rational calculations aimed at maximising their utility. Simply put, citizens will be more likely to support welfare state redistribution or specific redistributive policies if they anticipate gains from them.

Building on this assumption, research within this framework posits that redistributive preferences are shaped by individuals' socioeconomic characteristics, which influence the extent to which they benefit from redistribution. For instance, studies consistently find that individuals with higher incomes and higher educational attainment are less supportive of redistributive policies (Alesina & Giuliano, 2011; Kitschelt & Rehm, 2007; Rehm, 2009). From a self-interest perspective, this relationship is logical: high-income earners, who frequently overlap with those holding higher educational qualifications, contribute significantly to welfare state redistribution through income-related taxes. However, they are less likely to directly benefit from redistributive policies, diminishing their incentive to support such measures. Similarly, empirical evidence highlights a positive association between labour market risk and support for redistribution (Häusermann et al., 2015, 2016; Rehm, 2009). Individuals facing greater risk of unemployment or atypical employment are more likely to back redistributive policies, as they stand to gain from safety-net provisions like unemployment benefits and social assistance (Rueda, 2005). These findings underscore the core tenet of the self-interest approach: redistributive preferences are closely aligned with individuals' expected outputs from welfare state policies.

Most contributions in this stream limit their focus to the non-family-related characteristics of individuals and what we would call individual-related redistribution, overlooking the fact that individuals often live with other family members whose circumstances may significantly shape their preferences. However, individuals do not exist in isolation, nor does welfare state redistribution treat them as such. A significant proportion of redistributive policies allocate benefits and impose obligations based not solely on individual characteristics but also on family attributes, such as marital status or the number of children (Bradshaw et al., 2006; Frericks & Gurín, 2023). In our opinion this dimension, which the literature refers to as family-related redistribution (Frericks et al., 2023a, 2023b), has been overlooked within the self-interest approach to preferences for redistribution. Since families, and each family form differently, are explicitly addressed in welfare state redistribution, self-interest models of preference formation must account not only for individual attributes but also family characteristics that determine redistributive outputs and consequently affect the utility calculations that underpin preferences for redistribution. Hence, we differentiate between *individual*-related self-interest (based on individual characteristics) and *family*-related self-interest (based on family characteristics).

Our theoretical argument aligns with the basic premise of the literature on policy feedback. The main premise of policy feedback theory is that policies constitute not only an output but also an important input into the political process (Pierson, 1993), which influences the interests and preferences of citizens. When a policy is implemented, those who benefit from it develop an interest in its preservation and expansion (Hedegaard & Larsen, 2014) in a process labelled as positive or self-reinforcing feedback (Busemeyer et al., 2021). For instance, Hedegaard and Larsen (2014) find evidence that parents who benefit from public child-care services show significantly stronger support for such policies, and note the relevance of self-interest in the link between policy implementation and preferences. Extending this logic to the concept of

family-related redistribution, we expect those individuals who, due to their family characteristics, benefit more from redistribution, to show stronger support for redistributive policies.

To the best of our knowledge, no research has examined whether differences in preferences for redistribution between individuals with family and those without align with family-related redistribution and its impact on anticipated gains. Based on the above-mentioned, our first assumption is as follows:

> H1 - *Individuals with families will be more (less) supportive of redistribution than single individuals when they are comparatively better off (worse off) after welfare state redistribution.*

The role of the family in shaping redistributive preferences encompasses a second key dimension. Welfare state redistribution not only acknowledges family structures but also differentiates support based on family type. Frericks and Gurín (2024, p. 1) refer to this as redistributive logics—"the unequal redistribution of public resources to particular family types". Thus, for example, married couples often benefit from tax advantages compared to unmarried (cohabitating) couples; families with children typically receive more support than childless families; and single parents are frequently targeted by tailored benefits and subsidies to alleviate their substantial financial and logistical challenges (Chzhen & Bradshaw, 2012; Frericks et al., 2023b).

Furthermore, while the family serves as a central redistributive principle across all European welfare states, the way in which different family types are targeted by welfare state redistribution varies significantly between countries (Frericks et al., 2023b). As a result, certain family types emerge better off after redistribution in some countries but worse off in others. This variation implies that the relationship between family characteristics and preferences for redistribution might change from country to country, depending on how such characteristics are addressed by family-related redistribution. In other words, we anticipate that the relations between family types and redistributive preferences are context-dependent, shaped by how family-related redistribution is structured within each state.

> H2 - *The more an individual's family type benefits from family-related redistribution, the stronger the individual's support for redistribution.*

Beyond examining the family as a factor in shaping preferences for broader welfare state redistribution, this study seeks to test whether the same dynamics hold for specific family-related redistributive policies. A particularly relevant example in this context would be work-family balance policy, which has gained significant prominence in recent decades. Introduced as a response to the challenges posed by increasing female labour market participation, demographic changes, and evolving family structures, work-family balance policies aim to support families in reconciling work and caregiving responsibilities. Their primary purpose has been to reduce the barriers to employment for parents, alleviate the dual burden of work and family life, and promote gender equality in the labour market (Lewis et al., 2008).

Work-family balance policies explicitly target families with children, including both single-parent households and couples. The primary beneficiaries of these policies are parents who participate in the labour market, as they stand to gain through measures such as parental leave, subsidized childcare, and flexible work arrangements (Ciccia & Bleijenbergh, 2014; Fagnini, 2012; Plantenga & Remery, 2017). By design, these policies provide substantial support to

working families, particularly those balancing employment with the demands of raising children.

Thus, we anticipate differences in support for work-family balance policies between those directly targeted by these policies—such as working families with children—and those who are not. Consistent with the core premise of the self-interest approach, we anticipate that these differences will align with individuals' expected gains from the policy. Specifically, those who benefit from work-family balance policies are likely to express stronger support for them, reflecting the role of self-interest in shaping redistributive preferences.

Moreover, the extent to which anticipated gains drive support for the implementation of work-family balance policies might depend on the extent to which the beneficiary groups targeted by these policies (working families with children) are currently protected by the welfare state. In line with the literature on self-reinforcing policy feedback (Pierson, 2000; Busemeyer et al., 2021), we expect working families with children to be particularly supportive of work-family balance policies in countries where they already benefit from generous family-related redistribution.

> H3a– *Working families with children will be more supportive of work-family balance policies than single individuals, childless couples and families with children who are not participating in the labour market.*
>
> H3b – *The more working families with children benefit from family-related redistribution, the stronger their support for work-family balance policies.*

Methods

Data Source and Sample

The hypotheses outlined in this study are tested using a combination of survey data from the European Social Survey (ESS) and simulation data from EUROMOD's Hypothetical Household Tool (HHoT). The analysis focuses on 14 European countries[1] in the year 2016, which is the last year of implementation of the ESS module on welfare attitudes, allowing us to look not only into preferences for general redistribution but also into specific policies. Our effective sample size is $n=24548$, with a minimum within-country sample size of $n=1158$ (Hungary).

The European Social Survey (ESS) is a cross-national survey designed to monitor and understand public attitudes, values and behaviours across Europe. This study utilises data from the 8th wave of the ESS, corresponding to the year 2016. The unit of analysis is the individual, encompassing all persons aged 15 and older residing in private households, regardless of nationality, citizenship, language or legal status. Participants were selected through random probability sampling, with a minimum target response rate of 70% in each country. Data collection involved one-hour, face-to-face interviews conducted in respondents' homes (European Social Survey, 2019). The ESS is particularly well-suited to the needs of this

[1] Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden.

research, as it provides a broad geographical scope, detailed questions about redistributive preferences and comprehensive information on family characteristics through its household grid.

EUROMOD, and its Hypothetical Household Tool (HHoT), in turn, is a tax-benefit microsimulation instrument designed to analyse the redistributive outputs of tax-benefit policies on households. This tool generates hypothetical households with diverse characteristics and evaluates how tax-benefit policies affect the redistributive outputs of each household type across different European Union countries. By leveraging EUROMOD (and HHoT), we are able to calculate with precision how much various household types gain from redistribution within specific national policy contexts (Hufkens et al., 2019).

Variables and Operationalisation

We use two different dependent variables to measure preferences towards general welfare state redistribution and preferences towards work-family balance policies. For the former, we employ a 5-level Likert scale asking the degree of agreement with the statement "the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels". The variable has been inverted so that higher levels indicate higher agreement, in other words, higher support for vertical redistribution. Preferences towards work-family balance policies are measured through a 4-level Likert scale asking how much in favour the respondent is of the "introduction of extra social benefits and services to make it easier for working parents to combine work and family even if it means much higher taxes for all". Higher levels indicate higher support for this measure.

Building on previous research examining family-related redistribution (Frericks & Gurín, 2023), this study adopts a family model approach by identifying 84 distinct family types based on characteristics relevant to family-related redistribution (Korpi, 2000; Lewis et al., 2008). These characteristics include marital status (married and cohabitating), the presence and number of dependent children (no child, two or three children), household structure (single-parent or two-parent households), household income (low, average and high-income), and the distribution of market earnings between the adults (no earner, single earner, supplementary earner and dual-earner). A summary of all 84 family types is provided in the Supplementary Materials.

Information on whether respondents live with a partner and the number of dependent children in the household is extracted from the household grid. Marital status and disposable household income are directly available in the ESS dataset. To estimate the distribution of market earnings in the household, we impute the market incomes of the respondent and their partner by using the average market earnings (in PPS) for a person of the same gender, age group, occupation (ISCO08-2d), working hours (full-time/part-time) and country of residence as the respondent (or partner). This way, we obtain an estimation of how much each partner contributes to the household income. Data on market earnings is obtained from Eurostat (2022).

Once respondents in the ESS sample are classified into family types (or single individuals), we simulate redistributive outputs for each using EUROMOD. Although the HHoT does not allow us to take into account family members outside the respondent's household, we argue that household characteristics account for a significant share of family-related redistribution, as cohabitation is often a condition for family-related entitlements and obligations (Frericks et al., 2016; Naldini & Long, 2017). Therefore, in the context of this study, our operational definition of family overlaps with the household.

Following Frericks and Gurín (2023), we calculate family-related redistribution as the difference between the redistributive output (disposable income in PPS post-transfers and taxes) for an individual with family and the corresponding single individual with the same market income. A single individual is defined as someone who does not share the household with a partner or dependent children, for whom only individual-related redistribution applies. Thus, the difference between a respondent's redistributive output and that of the corresponding single individual represents the quantity that has been redistributed to the respondent based solely on family characteristics, and can be used as a measure of how much the respondent gains or loses from family-related redistribution.

Research Strategy

We fit ordinal logistic regression models with country-level random intercepts. In all models, we use indicators of different relevant family types as the main predictors. Logistic models are chosen due to the ordinal nature of the dependent variables, but alternative linear estimators are available in the Supplementary Materials. For Hypotheses 1 and 2 we employ preferences for redistribution as the dependent variable, while preferences for work-family balance policies are the dependent variable for Hypotheses 3a and 3b.

To test Hypothesis 1, we use a dummy indicating whether the respondent is categorised as an individual with family (1) or a single individual (0), operationally defined as a person not living with a spouse/partner or dependent children, and subsequently add an interaction term to observe how the association between having a family and preferences for redistribution changes depending on the average level of family-related redistribution in the respondent's country, calculated as the average family-related redistribution across our 84 family forms (see Frericks et al., 2023). If Hypothesis 1 holds, we should observe a positive interaction effect between having a family and the average level of family-related redistribution in the respondent's country.

To test Hypothesis 2, we include our simulated indicator of family-related redistribution received by the respondent in the models for redistributive preferences. If Hypothesis 2 holds, we should observe a positive association between the level of family-related redistribution received by an individual and their support for redistribution. We also control for partnership and marital status and for the number of children to assess the robustness of the estimates for the family-related redistribution variable when considering specific family characteristics.

Finally, we test Hypothesis 3a using a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent's family type is categorised as working parents (1) or other (0), including single individuals, childless couples and families with children who are not participating in the labour market. If Hypothesis 3a holds, working parents should be significantly more supportive of work-family balance policies than individuals in other family types. Subsequently, we test Hypothesis 3b by introducing an interaction term between the working parents' indicator and the average level of family-related redistribution received by working parents in the respondent's country, calculated as the average family-related redistribution across all family forms with at least one working parent. If Hypothesis 3b holds, we should observe a positive interaction effect between being a working parent and the average level of family-related redistribution for working parents in the respondent's country. Additionally, we add our simulated indicator of family-related redistribution received by the respondent to the models for preferences for work-family balance policies, to assess whether family-related redistribution is associated with preferences for work-family balance policies across different family types.

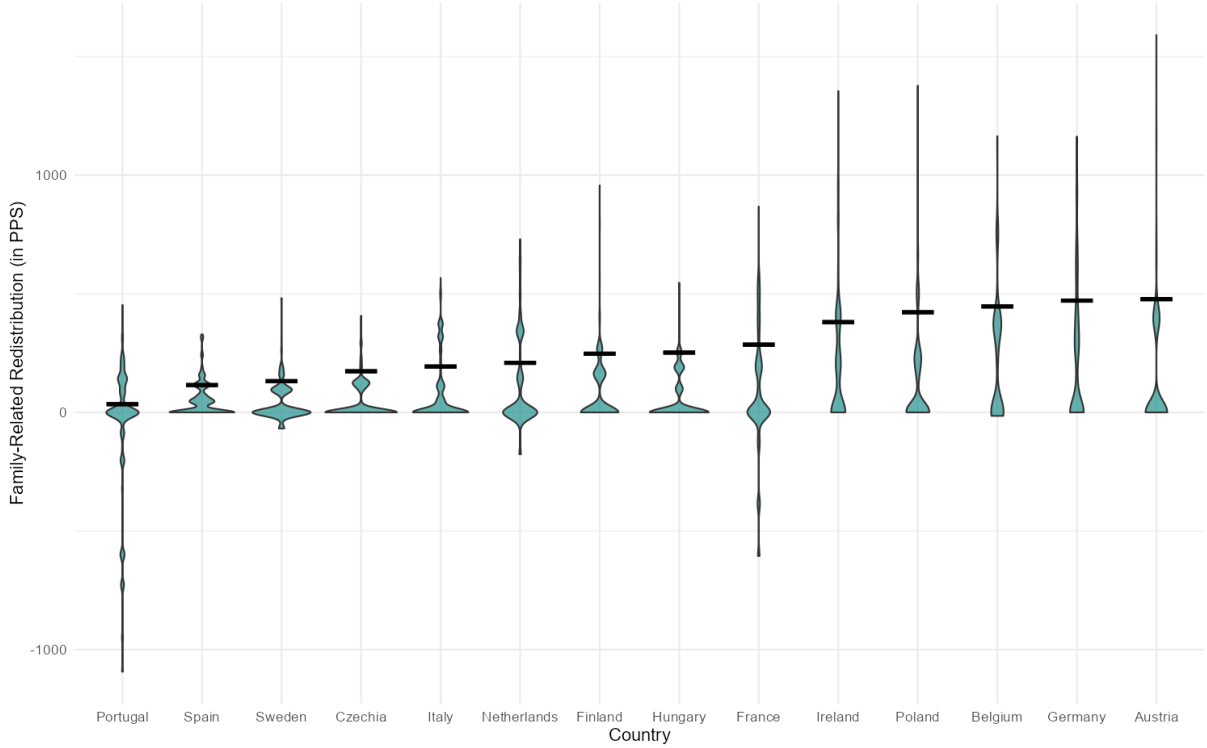
In all models, we control for individual net disposable income (simulated, in PPS), household net disposable income (country decile), age, gender, employment status, educational level, religiosity as a proxy for conservative value orientations, and support for queer rights as a proxy for liberal value orientations. To deal with a large number of missing values for the family-related redistribution, individual net disposable income and household net disposable income variables, we use multiple imputations (Rubin, 1987, 1996). The results are robust when employing alternative strategies to deal with missing values, like complete case analysis and missing variable indicators. The imputation models and robustness checks are available in the Supplementary Materials.

Results

Exploratory results: Family-related redistribution across European countries

Figure 1 reflects the distribution of family-related redistribution (FRR) across our sample in each country. The black bars indicate the average level of FRR across all family forms. We observe family-related redistributive outputs in every country in the sample, with positive average FRR levels in all of them and cases of negative redistributive results for families in only four countries: Portugal, Sweden, The Netherlands and France. Therefore, families constitute a redistributive principle of the welfare state across all countries under study.

Figure 1: Distribution of Family-Related Redistribution per country



Moreover, we see comparatively low average levels of FRR in the Mediterranean countries (Portugal, Spain and Italy), while the highest rankings are occupied by Continental countries (Austria, Germany, Belgium). These scores might reflect the application of the principle of subsidiarity in familialistic welfare states and the support traditionally provided to married couples and the male-breadwinner family model in conservative welfare states.

Preferences for general redistribution

Table 1: Preferences for welfare-state redistribution

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Has family	0.18***	0.21***	0.12*		
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.06)		
Cohabitating				0.18***	0.18***
				(0.04)	(0.04)
Married				0.19***	0.19***
				(0.03)	(0.03)
1-2 children				-0.04	-0.01
				(0.03)	(0.04)
>= 3 children				-0.10	-0.03
				(0.07)	(0.08)
Family-Related Redistribution		-0.20**	-0.23***		-0.14+
		(0.07)	(0.07)		(0.08)
Average FRR (country)		0.11	-0.11		0.08
		(0.96)	(0.98)		(0.98)
Has family × Average FRR (country)			0.34+		
			(0.18)		
Individual NDI	-0.17***	-0.17***	-0.17***	-0.17***	-0.17***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Household NDI	-0.06***	-0.06***	-0.06***	-0.06***	-0.06***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Age	0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00	0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Gender: Male	-0.17***	-0.17***	-0.17***	-0.18***	-0.18***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
NEET	-0.02	-0.00	-0.00	-0.02	-0.01
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
In education	-0.37***	-0.36***	-0.36***	-0.38***	-0.38***
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Higher secondary education	-0.08**	-0.08**	-0.09**	-0.08**	-0.08**
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Religiosity	-0.04***	-0.04***	-0.04***	-0.04***	-0.04***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Support queer rights	0.10***	0.10***	0.10***	0.10***	0.10***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Intercept 1|2	-4.16***	-4.15***	-4.22***	-4.21***	-4.19***
	(0.16)	(0.31)	(0.31)	(0.17)	(0.31)
Intercept 2|3	-2.40***	-2.39***	-2.46***	-2.45***	-2.43***
	(0.16)	(0.31)	(0.31)	(0.16)	(0.31)
Intercept 3|4	-1.42***	-1.42***	-1.49***	-1.48***	-1.46***
	(0.16)	(0.31)	(0.31)	(0.16)	(0.31)
Intercept 4|5	0.66***	0.63*	0.59+	0.60***	0.62*
	(0.16)	(0.31)	(0.31)	(0.16)	(0.31)
Mean AIC	71536.21	71530.06	71528.14	71543.72	71544.25
Num. obs.	28391	28391	28391	28391	28391
Groups (country)	14	14	14	14	14
Mean Variance: country: (Intercept)	0.24	0.24	0.24	0.25	0.24

$^{***}\boldsymbol{p < 0.001}, ^{**}\boldsymbol{p < 0.01}, ^{*}\boldsymbol{p < 0.05}, ^{+}\boldsymbol{p < 0.10}$

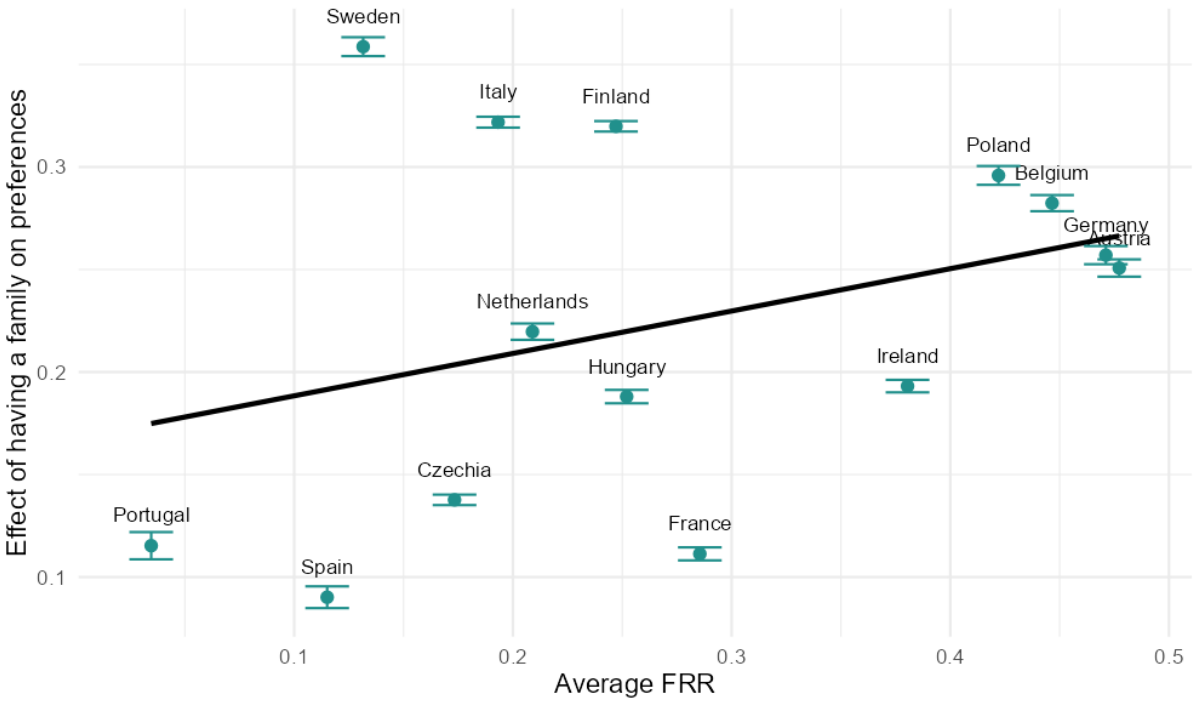
We begin by estimating the association between having a family, operationally defined as living with a partner or dependent children, and preferences for general redistribution of income (Table 1, Models 1 to 3). In all models, having a family is positively associated with support for welfare state redistribution. When disaggregating having a family into partnership status and number of children (Models 4 and 5), we see that couples (either cohabitating or married)

are significantly more in favour of redistribution than those who do not have a cohabitating partner, whereas having children does not seem to matter for redistributive preferences.

According to Hypothesis 1, the association between having a family and preferences for redistribution should be stronger in contexts where individuals with family are comparatively better off than single individuals after FRR. Indeed, we find a positive interaction between having a family and the average level of family-related redistribution (although only significant with a confidence level of 0.9), indicating that the preference gap between individuals with family and single individuals regarding redistributive preferences increases together with average FRR. In other words, individuals with family show stronger support for welfare state redistribution in countries with higher levels of FRR. This relation is reflected in Figure 2, which shows the linear fit when regressing the country-specific total effect of having a family in a random-slope model on the average level of FRR.

Hypothesis 2 posits that the more an individual benefits from FRR, the stronger their support for redistribution. We test this hypothesis by introducing our simulated indicator (Table 1, Models 2, 3 and 5) and find a significant effect of FRR on preferences for redistribution. However, against our expectations the sign of the coefficient is negative, indicating that the more a respondent benefits directly from family-related redistribution, the less supportive they are of redistributive policies. This effect is robust even when controlling for individual and household net disposable income, although the significance level shrinks to 0.9 when considering partnership status and number of children in the model. Hypothesis 2 is therefore rejected.

Figure 2: Effect of Having a Family on Preferences for Redistribution by Average FRR Level



In line with theory, individual and household income, educational level, being in education, being male and religiosity are negatively associated with support for redistribution, whereas stronger support for queer rights increases it. Theoretical expectations are not met for the occupational status predictor, as no significant differences are found between employed and

unemployed respondents. Nonetheless, a positive effect of unemployment on redistributive preferences appears when omitting individual net disposable income from the models.

Preferences for work-family balance policies

Table 2: Preferences for work-family balance policies

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Working parents	0.14***	0.09*	-0.06		
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.07)		
Cohabitating				-0.01	-0.01
				(0.04)	(0.04)
Married				-0.01	-0.02
				(0.03)	(0.03)
1-2 children				0.14***	0.10*
				(0.03)	(0.04)
>= 3 children				0.24**	0.15+
				(0.08)	(0.09)
Family-Related Redistribution		0.20*	0.15+		0.17+
		(0.08)	(0.08)		(0.09)
Average FRR (country)		-0.45	-0.52		-0.57
		(0.58)	(0.57)		(0.72)
Working parents × Average FRR working parents (country)			0.42*		
			(0.18)		
Individual NDI	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Household NDI	0.01*	0.01*	0.01*	0.01*	0.01*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Age	-0.00**	-0.00**	-0.00**	-0.00*	-0.00*
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Gender: Male	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
NEET	0.07*	0.05+	0.05+	0.06*	0.05
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
In education	0.17***	0.17***	0.17***	0.18***	0.17***
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Higher secondary education	0.12***	0.13***	0.12***	0.12***	0.12***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Religiosity	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Support queer rights	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Intercept 1|2	-2.47***	-2.62***	-2.65***	-2.45***	-2.60***
	(0.13)	(0.24)	(0.24)	(0.13)	(0.24)
Intercept 2|3	-0.02	-0.17	-0.20	0.00	-0.16
	(0.13)	(0.24)	(0.24)	(0.13)	(0.24)
Intercept 3|4	2.78***	2.63***	2.60***	2.81***	2.65***
	(0.13)	(0.24)	(0.24)	(0.13)	(0.24)
AIC	61004.8	60999.87	60996.19	61005.51	61003.8
Num. obs.	28391	28391	28391	28391	28391
Groups (country)	14	14	14	14	14
Variance: country: (Intercept)	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.14

$^{***}\boldsymbol{p < 0.001}, ^{**}\boldsymbol{p < 0.01}, ^{*}\boldsymbol{p < 0.05}, ^{+}\boldsymbol{p < 0.10}$

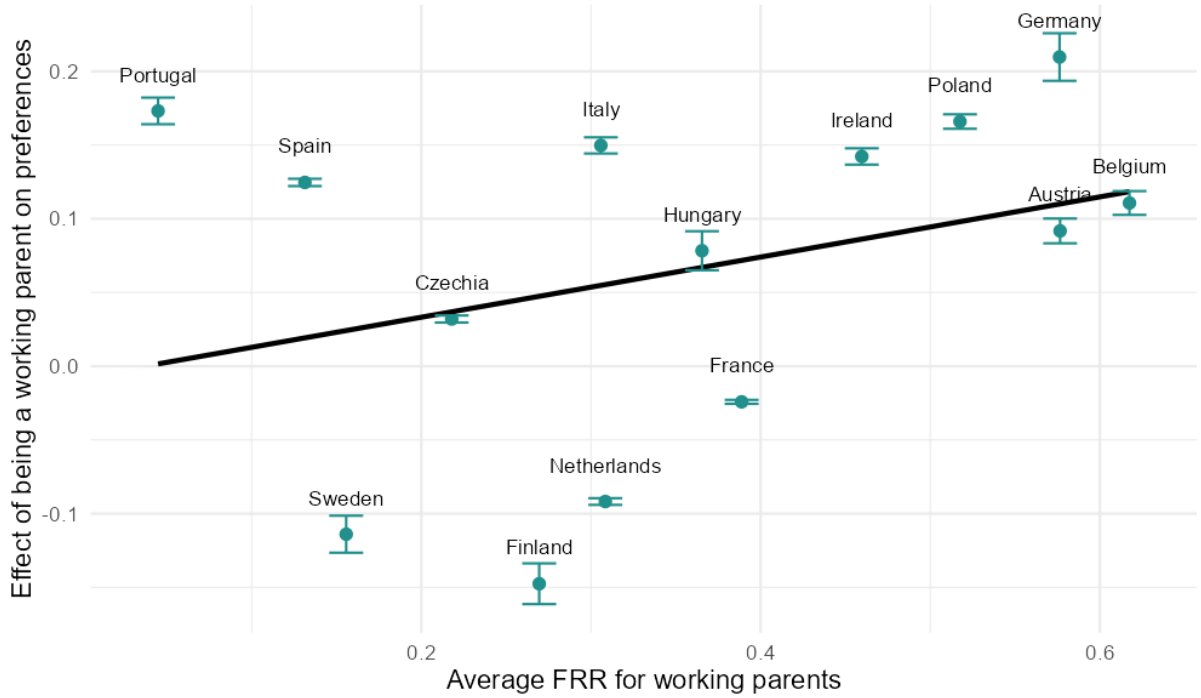
We then turn our attention to how family characteristics and FRR affect preferences for work-family balance policies (Table 2). According to Hypothesis 3a, we expect the target group of work-family balance policies, working parents, to be significantly more supportive of these

policies than other family types and individuals without family. This Hypothesis is supported in Models 1 and 2, where a positive significant association between being a working parent and preferences for work-family balance policies is observed. When substituting working-parent status with partnership status and number of children (Models 4 and 5), we find that the higher the number of children, the stronger the support for work-family balance policies, while partnership does not play a role.

Moreover, Hypothesis 3b indicates that, in line with policy-feedback theory, working parents should be particularly supportive of work-family balance policies in contexts where they already receive generous support from the welfare state. We test this hypothesis by adding an interaction term with the average level of FRR for working parents at country level (Model 3) and find that, indeed, the more working parents obtain from FRR, the more they support the introduction of further work-family balance policies.

The significant interaction in Model 3 is again reflected when regressing the country-specific total effects of being a working parent on average FRR for working parents in a random slope model (Figure 3). This relation seems to be primarily driven by Continental and Eastern-European countries, as both Mediterranean and Scandinavian (including the Netherlands) states act as outliers. While the former group shows a comparatively strong positive effect of being a working parent on support for work-family balance policies despite the low level of FRR for working parents, in the latter being a working parent actually seems to decrease support for work-family balance policies.

Figure 3: Effect of Being a Working Parent on Preferences for Work-Family Balance Policies by Average FRR Level



At the individual level, we observe a significant positive association between the level of FRR received by the respondent and support for work-family balance policies (Models 2, 3 and 5). This evidence constitutes further validation for our self-interest argument that expectations about future gains from FRR affect preferences for family-related redistributive policies. The fact that the expected positive direction of the relation is found for preferences for work-family

balance policies but the opposite is observed for redistributive preferences likely constitutes an indicator of greater conceptual closeness between the former group of policies and FRR. In this sense, preferences for general welfare state redistribution might be driven to a greater extent by vertical cleavages based on socioeconomic status, while preferences for redistributive policies that explicitly target families are more closely connected to horizontal (family-related) redistributive logics.

Regarding the models' covariates, household income, unemployment, being in education, having achieved higher secondary education and religiosity all increase support for work-family balance policies, while age decreases it. The negative effect of age is most probably associated with parenthood and disappears when considering cohort effects, in which case being in child-bearing age (20-45) strongly increases support for work-family balance policies (see Supplementary Materials). Interestingly, individual net disposable income does not affect preferences for work-family balance policies, and the effect of household income is considerably smaller than for redistributive preferences. This evidence supports the idea that vertical socioeconomic cleavages matter more for preferences for general redistribution than for explicitly family-related redistributive policies.

Discussion

In this paper, we have used a combination of survey data from the European Social Survey and EUROMOD's Hypothetical Household Tool to explore whether the role of the family as a redistributive principle of welfare states has implications for public opinion. Our contribution builds upon the self-interest approach of preference formation, extending it beyond individual characteristics, and the literature on policy feedback. We focus on how family factors are explicitly considered by redistributive policies and, consequently, play a role in the utility calculations that drive redistributive preferences.

Our findings widely support the idea that family characteristics are an important factor in preference formation. First, individuals with family significantly differ in their preferences from single individuals, with the former showing higher support for redistribution in all countries under study. Different family types also show different preferences for redistribution, with both married and unmarried cohabitating couples being significantly more redistributive than individuals who do not live with a partner. Family characteristics become particularly relevant when it comes to supporting policies that are explicitly family-oriented. In this sense, we find clear evidence that working parents, the primary target group for work-family balance policies, are significantly more likely to support these policies than the rest of the population. While the impact of family characteristics on welfare preferences has already been studied in previous contributions, these results underscore the relevance of considering the family context in self-interest accounts of public opinion.

The central contribution of this paper, however, goes beyond the description of associations between family types and welfare preferences. Leveraging EUROMOD's Hypothetical Household Tool, we have drawn important conclusions on how family-related redistribution moderates the relation between family characteristics and preferences. First, we find that individuals with family are more likely to support welfare state redistribution in countries where families benefit the most from family-related redistribution. Similarly, working parents are particularly supportive of work-family balance policies when the average level of family-related redistribution for working parents is high. These results speak to the literature on policy feedback and the idea that policies shape the preferences of self-interested citizens, as those who benefit from a certain policy are likely to develop an interest in maintaining and extending it (Pierson, 2000; Hedegaard & Larsen, 2014). In this sense, we provide evidence that family

characteristics become increasingly relevant for the formation of redistributive preferences insofar as they are considered in the computation of redistributive outputs and, consequently, affect the self-interest calculations that shape preferences.

Moreover, we have looked at how the level of family-related redistribution received by individuals directly affects their preferences, reaching opposing results depending on the type of policy addressed. On the one hand, those who benefit the most from family-related redistribution are, as expected, more supportive of explicitly family-oriented redistributive policies such as work-family balance policies. On the other, they show lower levels of support for general welfare state redistribution, a finding that contradicts our second hypothesis. The reason for these contrasting results likely rests on the different nature of the two preference types. Work-family balance policies are explicitly oriented towards families and redistribute resources based predominantly on horizontal criteria, i.e. family characteristics. Meanwhile, general welfare state redistribution refers to a wide array of policies oriented towards the redistribution of resources mainly based on vertical criteria, i.e. income differences. While income differences between families play a role in work-family balance policies, and family income matters for general welfare state redistribution, the conceptual connection with family characteristics is much clearer for the former. In other words, family-related redistribution is only a part of general welfare state redistribution, while work-family balance policies constitute a case of family-related redistributive policies. Therefore, benefiting from family-related redistribution might reduce support for general welfare state redistribution because it positions individuals higher in the income distribution.

The conclusions drawn from this study must be taken cautiously in light of several limitations. First, our theoretical argument is at risk of endogeneity, as not only does policy implementation explain preferences, but preferences also explain policy implementation (Pierson, 2000; Breznau 2017). Due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, we abstain from drawing causal inferences in this paper and propose disentangling the complex feedback dynamics between family-related redistribution and welfare preferences as a task for future research. Second, we are unable to address how family factors beyond the household, which can also influence redistributive outputs, affect preferences. This limitation is determined by the simulation tool we have employed, the Hypothetical Household Tool, which in turn offers strong advantages in terms of modelling household types and estimating redistributive outputs. Finally, there are limitations associated with the wording of our dependent variables. There is evidence that the item employed for general redistributive preferences depends on government heuristics (Breznau et al., 2025), meaning that respondents might not want the government to engage in redistribution even when they perceive society as too unequal if they consider the government to be corrupt or ineffective. Meanwhile, the item on preferences for work-family balance introduces the clause “much higher taxes for all”. Although we consider the mention of taxation a strength, as it makes the redistributive character of the policy explicit, the wording “much higher” may influence responses. Admittedly, the use of these survey items might introduce noise on the side of the dependent variables.

Besides these limitations, we have contributed to the understanding of the formation of preferences for redistribution by acknowledging the role of the family as a redistributive principle of the welfare state. Our contribution builds on the literature on family characteristics and welfare preferences, introducing the concept of family-related redistribution in this body of research and proposing an alternative mechanism through which family factors may influence public opinion.

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