# Introduction

Over the past few decades, cross-national studies on social class and redistributive preferences have predominantly focused on individual class positions (Lindh & McCall, 2020). Recently, however, a growing body of research has begun to focus on how the class composition of social networks influences redistributive preferences (Lee, 2023; Lindh, Andersson, & Völker, 2021; Otero & Mendoza, 2023; Paskov & Weisstanner, 2022). Additionally, social classes tend to form segregated networks according to the homophily principle, whereby individuals have higher chances of forming social ties with others with similar characteristics (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Otero, Völker, & Rözer, 2021). Cross-national comparisons indicate that class differences in social participation and access to social resources increase in countries with high economic inequality, which in turn is related to wider social distance between classes (Otero, Völker, Rözer, & Mollenhorst, 2024; Pichler & Wallace, 2009). Although prior evidence has shown that class-based network *segregation* — defined as the proportion of the same (or similar) class network contacts relative to individual class position — can undermine attachment to society in countries with higher income inequality (Otero, Völker, Rözer, & Mollenhorst, 2022). We know little about how homogeneous class-based networks are associated with redistributive preferences, and whether this has similar implications for the working and service classes (Paskov & Weisstanner, 2022). Theoretically, it is expected that a higher share of ties of the same class is associated with stronger class-based interests, as social interaction in social networks implies one of the micro-processes that shape how individuals experience the class structure (Wright & Cho, 1992). Therefore, in this study, I focus on how network segregation is experienced *differently* across social classes. In other words, I empirically assess how the relationship between class-based homogeneity and redistributive preferences is conditional on the class position of the individual. Furthermore, most of the studies on networks and redistributive preferences have been single-country studies on how network class profiles of specific social classes shape economic preferences (Lee, 2023; Lindh et al., 2021). Moreover, while recent evidence highlights the moderating role of state redistribution on the relationship between single-class profiles and attitudes towards inequality (Lindh & Andersson, 2024). There is a remaining knowledge gap regarding the moderating role of economic inequality in the relationship between class-based network *segregation* and redistributive preferences.

While redistributive preferences may be higher (lower) in segregated working-class (services-class) networks (Paskov & Weisstanner, 2022), little is known about how larger differences in economic resources – represented by income inequality at the country level, can moderate the *conditional* relationship of class-based network segregation to social class on redistributive preferences. In this study, I theorize the role of inequality as the prevailing *distributional context* of economic resources and welfare within a society—the conditions under which political debates unfold and political attitudes are formed (Palme, 2006). Specifically, I refer to post-tax and transfer income inequality (UNU-WIDER, 2023). On the one hand, research on the class-attitude link suggests that income inequality is crucial for understanding how class-based inequalities — i.e., the socioeconomic and political distance between classes— translate into redistributive demands, as it reflects the current state of distributive affairs in contemporary capitalist societies (Curtis & Andersen, 2015; Edlund & Lindh, 2015). A consistent finding is that those in more advantaged classes are more concerned about income inequality and tend to be more supportive of redistribution in contexts of high inequality, whereas the stronger redistributive demands of the socioeconomically disadvantaged remain relatively stable, regardless of inequality levels (Dimick, Rueda, & Stegmueller, 2017; Sachweh & Sthamer, 2019; Wiesner, 2025). Here, it is argued that in unequal societies, the well-off have greater concerns about the negative externalities of inequality (e.g., crime). Moreover, advantaged social classes tend to express greater concern about the shrinking opportunity structure in society, as it implies reduced chances for relative mobility. For them, this translates into a heightened sense of vulnerability, as they have more to lose from potential downward mobility compared to the lower classes (Hertel & Groh-Samberg, 2019). On the other hand, it is well-documented that income inequality affects social relations, reinforcing stratified access to social activities and widening the social distance between classes. In such conditions, the upper classes tend to be more socially active and maintain more diverse networks, while the lower classes become increasingly inactive and segregated in contexts with higher levels of economic inequality (Lancee & Van de Werfhorst, 2012; Otero et al., 2024; Pichler & Wallace, 2009). Existing research has primarily examined how income inequality moderates the relationship between social class and either social networks or redistributive preferences. Against this background, this study aims to address two key questions:

1. To what extent is the association of class-based network segregation on redistributive preferences conditional on social class?
2. To what extent does income inequality moderate the class-specific relationship between network homogeneity and redistributive preferences?

In this paper, I use a sample of individuals from 31 countries, drawn from the 2017 International Social Survey Program (ISSP). This dataset offers unprecedented cross-national comparative data on social networks, social class, and attitudes toward redistribution.

# Theoretical framework: Class, social networks, and redistributive preferences

## Class divides in redistributive preferences

Over the past few decades, research on political attitudes in industrialized societies has consistently highlighted social class as a key driver of public opinion. In this context, social class is understood as the structural position derived from employment relations within the labor market and production units, typically represented by occupations (Lindh & McCall, 2020). Social class, in this context, not only reflects individuals’ labor market relations but also their economic interests and moral perspectives regarding the role of the market and the state in the distribution and redistribution of resources (Svallfors, 2006). Redistributive preferences refer to individuals’ support for policies and mechanisms aimed at reducing economic inequality (McCall & Kenworthy, 2009). These preferences encompass views on taxation, welfare programs, public services, and other government interventions designed to transfer resources from wealthier individuals or groups to those with fewer resources (García-Sánchez, Castillo, Rodríguez-Bailón, & Willis, 2022).

Empirically, the class divide in redistributive preferences is well documented (Brooks & Svallfors, 2010; Curtis & Andersen, 2015; Edlund & Lindh, 2015; Langsæther & Evans, 2020). Class-based explanations of redistributive preferences have predominantly focused on individuals’ socioeconomic position. According to self-interest-driven theories, economic resources or risk exposure explain why working classes with fewer resources and greater job insecurity tend to support redistribution more than the upper classes (Meltzer & Richard, 1981; Rehm, 2009). Furthermore, while material interests often dominate in conditions of scarcity, value-based motivations, such as egalitarianism, may drive stronger support for redistribution under conditions of greater security and weaken under material hardship (Kulin & Svallfors, 2013; Maldonado, Olivos, Castillo, Atria, & Azar, 2019).

Other approaches emphasize the role of social relations in the workplace, which can imprint normative views that ultimately shape political opinions due to the significant time people spend at work (Oesch, 2006). For instance, continuous and diverse social interactions in interpersonal service roles can foster empathy and reinforce egalitarian values (Kitschelt & Rehm, 2014). Conversely, vertical oversight in managerial positions and the emphasis on autonomy in self-employed roles often bolster self-interested and conservative political views (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018).

Given the individualist focus of current approaches on class and redistributive preferences, a network perspective offers a more comprehensive way to understand redistributive preferences beyond the individual level. By focusing on class differences in network ties, the interpersonal dimension of between-class relations is brought to the forefront, emphasizing that social ties encompass both social and economic resources (Lin & Dumin, 1986) embedded in class positions (Weber, 2011, pp. 57–59). This understanding of class can be related to the Weberian idea of *social closure*, understood as the process through which classes seek to secure advantages by restricting access to resources and opportunities. Social closure can take two forms of action. One is exclusion, marked by downward political pressure, where privileged classes use networks to protect their position and limit access for others. The other is solidarism, marked by upward political pressure, where disadvantaged classes mobilize through networks to challenge inequality and press for redistribution (Parkin, 1974).

## Class relations and social networks

Theoretically, class relations can be understood as the structure of social ties between different classes within the broader social system, represented by networks spanning various social strata (Blau, 1977). Social network research consistently demonstrates that homophily—the tendency for individuals to associate with others who are similar—is a structured and persistent feature of social relations (McPherson et al., 2001). For instance, friendships and family ties often display homogeneity in terms of social status or demographic characteristics, while more distant ties tend to connect individuals to different social groups, thereby contributing to network diversity (Diprete, Gelman, Mccormick, Teitler, & Zheng, 2011; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). Moreover, it is well established that sociability preferences play a role in forming segregated networks (Homans, 1951; Visser & Mirabile, 2004). However, this research aligns with the prevailing view that attitudinal similarity within networks arises primarily from structural contact opportunities shaped by the class composition of social ties, rather than from homophilic preferences for socializing with like-minded individuals (Feld, 1981). Thus, to investigate the implications of networks for redistributive preferences, I propose distinguishing between two closely related—but distinct—perspectives on how class-based networks are structured.

First, network diversity refers to the degree of an individual’s connectedness to dissimilar ties (e.g., different occupations or activities), representing access to diverse resources within social networks (Lin & Dumin, 1986). Thus, network diversity refers to the dispersion of an attribute tie (alter) within the network, independently of the characteristic that an individual (ego) has ([Otero and Mendoza, 2023](#ref-otero_power_2023)). Studies by Pichler and Wallace ([2009](#ref-pichler_social_2009)) and Lancee and Van de Werfhorst ([2012](#ref-lancee_income_2012)) have argued that participation in a wider range of formal organizations increases the chances of the upper classes forming more diverse social connections. In contrast, the working classes show a more homogeneous participation repertoire. Similar patterns emerge in the socioeconomic composition of networks, where the upper middle classes maintain more prestigious and diverse networks than the working classes ([Carrascosa, 2023](#ref-carrascosa_class_2023); [Cepić and Tonković, 2020](#ref-cepic_how_2020)). Nonetheless, network diversity cannot capture whether an individual cohabits in networks similar to them because it focuses on differences between the class positions of network ties and does not consider the individual's position.

By contrast, the perspective adopted in this paper is network *segregation,* defined as the pattern of contact an individual has with people who share similar (or the same) characteristics. Here, the focus is on the similarity between the class position of individuals (ego) and their network ties (alters). Therefore, it is conceptually closer to homophily and has been empirically examined through network homogeneity (Otero et al., 2021). Some studies have suggested that property-based boundaries are far less permeable than authority-based ones in the formation of cross-class ties. For example, Wright and Cho (1992) suggest that class interests tend to widen the social distance between proprietors and manual workers, while the intermediate position of supervisors and their more frequent contact with manual workers make cross-class friendships more likely. Similarly, Otero et al. (2021) identified a U-shaped pattern of acquaintance network segregation in Chile, where the middle classes (e.g., lower managerial professionals, clerks, and manual supervisors) exhibit lower network homogeneity than the upper and lower classes. Thus, segregation is most prevalent on both ends of the class structure, particularly among the lower classes. Otero et al. (2021) argue that segregation in the lower classes is often driven by limited life chances and reduced social participation, while upper-class segregation is largely explained by self-selection—a practice that reinforces privileged positions, which can coexist with a broader range of social connections (Otero et al., 2021).

One theoretical implication is that experiencing segregated class-based networks may be related to class differences in redistributive preferences. But how are the two linked?

## Network segregation and redistributive preferences

The argument that social ties have implications for attitude formation is not entirely new. Two approaches have discussed the role of social relations in the formation of redistributive preferences: reference groups and class-based networks.

Processes of social comparison with similar reference groups are one potential mechanism that can explain the formation of redistributive preferences (Condon & Wichowsky, 2020). The key argument posits that people form their perceptions through family, friends, and coworkers’ experiences instead of the whole society, which is described as an availability heuristic that systematically biases inferences about inequality based on the homophily of reference groups (M. D. R. Evans, Kelley, & Kolosi, 1992). Therefore, inferences about inequality are linked to network segregation, which influences the information that ultimately shapes inequality perceptions (Mijs & Roe, 2021). Yet, this research has mainly focused on the cognitive dimension of preference formation through inequality perceptions rather than straightforwardly addressing the influence of network segregation on redistributive preferences (Cansunar, 2021; García-Castro et al., 2022).

Therefore, this paper adopts a second approach, which suggests that social networks provide a comprehensive picture of the class relations that contribute to group identity formation and internalization of social norms (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 2007). Specifically, it has been argued that redistributive preferences are influenced not only by individuals’ social class but also by the class positions of their network ties (Paskov & Weisstanner, 2022). Thus, opinions can either align or divide through social influence processes depending on the class positions of contacts and the level of network segregation (Lindh et al., 2021). These arguments reflect the notion that classes are characterized as collectivities with varying degrees of cohesion and solidarity, comprising asymmetric status-based interactions related to material resources, cultural practices, and political preferences (Morris & Scott, 1996). Resembling the reference group argument, Sachweh (2012) suggests social integration can be impeded in societies with few opportunities for contact between different social classes, creating an “empathy gulf” that hinders individuals from understanding others’ lifestyles amid rising inequality. Consequently, segregated interactions may lead individuals to perceive the lives of different classes as more distant (Sachweh, 2012). Thus, segregation can potentially exacerbate perceptions of others as strangers, reducing empathy and solidarity in turn (Otero et al., 2022). Although both approaches share the assumption that social networks shape information (*availability heuristic*) and affect attitudes (*social influence*), I argue that an advantage of the network perspective is that it has been more effective in defining the structural position of network ties and has more directly addressed the relationship with redistributive preferences.

How do segregated network class-based ties affect redistributive preferences? According to Wright and Cho (1992), the degree of connectedness to certain social classes can affect class identity, class-based solidarity, and common interest recognition. Regarding *segregation*, it can be argued that higher homogeneity (e.g., same or similar class network ties) should have different subjective implications depending on the class position of the individual. For working-class individuals, as higher network homogeneity implies fewer connections with intermediate or service classes, this may explain greater critical views toward economic differences and strengthen perceived class conflictive interests. This may intensify shared experiences of exclusion (e.g., information) and fortify working-class shared identity, which is later reflected in higher demands for redistribution (Parkin, 1974). Conversely, homogeneous networks among the service class may reinforce inequality-legitimating narratives while reducing empathy for the disadvantaged. Thus, service-class individuals with limited exposure to hardship foster an exclusionary form of social closure and legitimize inequality, weakening solidarity toward disadvantaged social classes and reducing their support for redistributive policies (Parkin, 1974).

The class positions of surrounding family members, friends, and acquaintances not only provide information about inequality but are also a source of social influence whose impact on redistributive preferences may be amplified in segregated social networks. , , For instance, Lee (2023) shows that individuals with network ties to the service class through parental connections tend to support redistribution and progressive taxation less than those from working-class family backgrounds. Beyond family ties, Lindh et al. (2021) found that friendship and acquaintanceship network single-class profiles of the managerial class are associated with lower redistributive preferences compared to the class profiles of the sociocultural and working classes. Hence, they suggest that individuals tend to adjust their attitudes based on the class position of their contacts (Lindh et al., 2021). Moreover, since households share risk based on the class position of their members, redistributive preferences are shaped not only by family background but also by the class positions of partners. For example, Paskov and Weisstanner (2022) found that holding working-class family ties bolsters redistributive preferences, whereas ties with the service class decrease them. They show that support for redistribution in working-class individuals who simultaneously have same-class partners and family ties is higher than for working-class individuals with mixed-class family connections, which also replicates for service class individuals with service class family ties. In sum, the preference gradient across classes is more pronounced when the triad of class positions of partners, parents, and individuals simultaneously forms a homogenous network.

According to the previous theorization, as both ends of the class structure, namely working and service classes, should experience homogeneous networks differently, I do not focus on discussing the *direct* association between the overall network segregation and redistributive preferences. The reasoning behind is that network homogeneity – defined as the proportion of similar or same class network ties, refers to the overall degree of segregation across the different class positions. Against this background, this paper aims to study the *conditional* association of class-based network segregation with the class position of the individual on redistributive preferences. Thus, I expect that homogeneity strengthens class-based attitudes at both ends of the class structure, increasing the already high demands for redistribution in the working class and reducing the already low support by the service class. Therefore, I hypothesize that the association between network homogeneity and redistributive preferences is conditional on social class because homogeneous social networks should strengthen common class-based experiences and economic interests (*segregation hypothesis*). In short, I propose that greater network segregation in the working class is associated with higher redistributive preferences, whereas greater segregation in the service class is related to lower redistributive preferences. Therefore, the first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: The greater the degree of network segregation in the working (service) classes, the higher (lower) their redistributive preferences.

## Economic inequality as context for class-based network segregation and redistributive preferences

There are several arguments on why income inequality can play a moderating role in the relationship between class-based networks and redistributive preferences that can be summarized in two key theoretical implications. First, income inequality likely leads to greater segregation due to reduced participation and lower social trust (Kragten & Rözer, 2017; Lancee & Van de Werfhorst, 2012); however, while inequality in economic resources exacerbates social exclusion for lower classes, the upper classes may hold higher opportunities and openness to participate in social life, potentially maintaining or even reducing segregation in more unequal countries. Empirically, previous studies have shown that high levels of inequality erode trust and social participation, particularly among marginalized groups, thereby exacerbating social exclusion (Neckerman & Torche, 2007). In contrast, egalitarian societies foster higher levels of civic engagement and cross-class interactions, which might strengthen solidarity and promote more egalitarian values (Uslaner & Brown, 2005; Yamamura, 2012). Moreover, income inequality reinforces stratification in social participation, as the affluent maintain access to diverse networks while the lower classes face growing exclusion (Lancee & Van de Werfhorst, 2012; Pichler & Wallace, 2009). This stratification limits cross-class interactions and further entrenches social divisions, with the upper classes navigating diverse social environments while the lower classes remain segregated and marginalized (Otero et al., 2021, 2024).

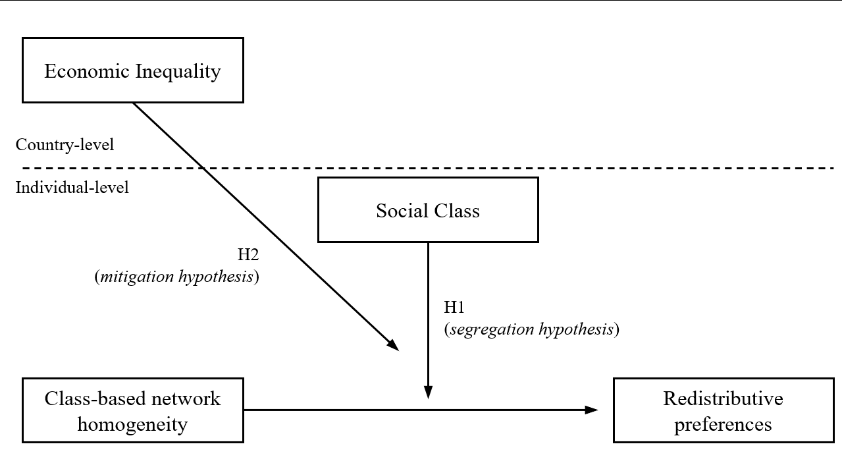
Second, the relationship between class and attitudes weakens in highly unequal contexts, where the service class tends to show higher support for redistribution, contrasting with the relatively stable preferences of the working class. Political economists have argued that high levels of economic inequality in contexts nurture a greater concern for its negative externalities, such as increasing crime rates and decreasing social welfare, which can motivate altruistic support for income redistribution among affluent individuals (Dimick et al., 2017; Rueda & Stegmueller, 2019; Wiesner, 2025). Furthermore, from a sociological moral economy approach, it has been argued that these differences can be explained through diverging views on distributive justice perceptions in resource allocation (Liebig & Sauer, 2016). Empirically, affluent individuals are more likely to perceive inequality as a threat to social mobility and opportunity structures, motivating support for redistribution as a form of procedural justice (Kim & Lee, 2018; Sachweh & Sthamer, 2019; Wiesner, 2025). Also, it has been shown that in contexts with higher income inequality, the support for redistribution might stem from a heightened awareness of mismatches between the consequences and incentives of income inequality (Svallfors, 2006). By contrast, in countries with lower levels of economic inequality due to a comprehensive welfare state, class-based distributive struggles are more institutionalized and politicized, aligning class positions and political attitudes more closely (Curtis & Andersen, 2015; Edlund & Lindh, 2015).

According to all the above, I expect that as the class divide in redistributive preferences narrows in countries with higher income inequality, the association of class-based segregation on these attitudes may diminish, with homogeneous class networks losing strength as individual class differences in attitude decrease. In other words, I hypothesize that the conditional relationship between class-based network segregation and social class is less pronounced in countries with higher income inequality (*mitigation hypothesis*). Given these considerations, the second hypothesis reads as follows:

H2: The greater the level of income inequality in a country, the weaker the conditional association of network segregation by social class with redistributive preferences.

A simplified framework of the hypotheses is shown in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]



# Methodology

## Data

The primary data source for this study is the “Social Networks and Social Resources” module of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) (ISSP Research Group, 2019). The ISSP provides a nationally representative probability sample of the adult population in each participating country. Each country administers a carefully adapted questionnaire to ensure the cross-cultural validity of the data and enable meaningful comparisons between countries. The questionnaire includes sections on social networks, attitudes toward economic inequality, and demographic and socioeconomic background characteristics. The complete sample comprises 47,027 observations across 32 countries. However, after reviewing the required information and applying listwise case deletion, the final sample used in the analyses consists of 32,717 observations from 31 countries (see Table A4 in the Appendix)[[1]](#endnote-2).

## Variables

### Dependent variable

I use two indicators to measure redistributive preferences. The first indicator is support for government redistribution, as measured by the following item: “It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes.” The second indicator is egalitarian preferences measured by the item: “For a society to be fair, differences in people’s standard of living should be small.” Both indicators use a five-point Likert scale with the following categories: ‘Strongly agree’ (1), ‘Agree’ (2), ‘Neither agree nor disagree’(3), ‘Disagree’ (4), and ‘Strongly disagree’(5) (*r* = 0.62). Following Svallfors (2013) I reverse-coded, averaged, and normalized the indicators in a 0 to 100 index, where higher values reflect stronger redistributive preferences for the descriptive analyses. For the main analysis, I included the standardized indicator to observe differences in units of standard deviations.

### Independent variables - individual level

I employ the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarrero (EGP) class scheme to measure social class (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). The EGP scheme is the most consistent and validated measure for class positions in comparative research and has demonstrated its validity in both industrialized and late-industrialized societies (Barozet, Boado, & Marqués-Perales, 2021; G. Evans & Graaf, 2013). Information about occupations, self-employment status, and the number of employees is used to classify respondents into six class positions. Following previous research, I employ a simplified version of the EGP class scheme that collapses three classes (Edlund, 2003; Sosnaud, Brady, & Frenk, 2013). Specifically, this version distinguishes among the Service Class (higher and lower managerial and professionals), Intermediate Class (routine nonmanual workers and self-employed), and Working Class (manual supervisors, skilled and unskilled manual workers) [[2]](#endnote-3) (see Table A2 in the Appendix).

I employed the position generator as the basis for the class-based network homogeneity measure. This instrument has been widely used in social capital studies and follows an ego-centered approach, where it is assumed that social ties to different hierarchical positions in the social structure provide access to social resources (van der Gaag, Snijders, & Flap, 2008). The position generator employed included a list of ten occupations. Here, occupations are presented to the respondent in a grid that allows them to declare whether they know (or do not) a person who performs that occupation. The tie can be classified into four groups, defining tie to this person as a “Family or relative,” “Close friend,” “Someone else I know,” or “No one.” With this information, the first three categories are coded as 1 to represent the presence of a tie (“Knows”) and 0 as the absence of a connection to a person with that occupation (“Does not know”). Subsequently, all declared ties were summed to represent the total number of occupations known by the respondent.

Subsequently, following previous cross-national studies, I classify occupations into three status positions that resemble class positions (Lindh & Andersson, 2024; Otero et al., 2024). The classification is as follows: lawyer, executive of a large firm, and human resource manager are categorized as *higher* positions; schoolteacher, police officer, and nurse are classified as *medium* positions; and car mechanic, bus driver, hairdresser, and home or office cleaner are considered *lower* positions.

Given the above, I adopt established procedures in the literature for measuring homogeneity in ego-centered networks (Völker, 2022). Regarding class segregation, Otero et al. (2022) classified occupations from the position generator into three class positions to compute the proportion of similar ties based on social class, thereby measuring class-based network homogeneity. In this regard, individuals who do not have the necessary information to be classified in any of the occupational classes or declared no network ties were excluded from the analyses, as the aim of the study is to empirically study the share of in-group network ties according to the respondents’ class position. Therefore, I calculate the number of ingroup ties according to the respondents’ class position and divide it by the total number of known occupations. This measure represents the proportion of similar social ties within the personal network, where a value of zero indicates complete *heterogeneity* (i.e., all ties are different), and a value of one indicates complete *homogeneity* (i.e., all ties are similar). Substantively, higher values reflect more relative in-group similarity of ego with their network ties and greater social distance from other social classes in society.

Regarding control variables, the number of social ties is included to ensure that the association between network homogeneity and redistributive preferences is independent of network size. Given the gender-based class inequality in economic resources (Waitkus & Minkus, 2021), age differences in terms of values and socioeconomic vulnerability (VanHeuvelen & Copas, 2018), gender, and age were included as control variables in all models as potential confounders. I avoid over-controlling by other socioeconomic factors in the estimations, as they are closely interrelated with class . Theoretically, income, education, and employment vulnerability are conceived as potential confounders, as they represent the socioeconomic resources and labor market risk within each class (Langsæther & Evans, 2020). In this regard, income, education, and labor market risk have been recognized as potential mediators that would rather mask than clarify the relationship between class positions and political attitudes (Häusermann, Kurer, & Schwander, 2015; Kitschelt & Rehm, 2014).

### Independent variable - country level

To measure economic inequality comparatively, I use the Gini index (post-taxes and transfers) from the World Income Inequality Dataset (WID) (Alvaredo, Atkinson, Piketty, & Saez, 2022). In the supplementary material, I included additional analyses of two contextual factors as controls. However, I do consider them in the main analysis, as my main focus here is to study the moderating role of income inequality[[3]](#endnote-4).

## Methods

First, to identify general patterns at the country level, I describe how redistributive preferences vary across social classes within each country. Second, I illustrate the relationship between average class-based network segregation and social class by country. Third, I examine the country-level correlations between class-based network segregation, redistributive preferences, income inequality, and the gap in network homogeneity between the working and service classes. To test my hypotheses, I employ multilevel linear regression models to account for the hierarchical structure of the data (individuals nested within countries). The analysis begins with estimating a null model with a random intercept to reflect this nested structure. This initial model assesses the intraclass correlation, revealing that 13.5% of the variance in redistributive preferences can be attributed to differences between countries. Subsequently, models including the individual level factors are estimated to examine the association between network homogeneity and social class to test hypothesis 1[[4]](#endnote-5). Following this, Income inequality is included in the estimations by incorporating random intercepts and random slopes for network homogeneity and social class. This model is the basis for testing hypothesis 2 by estimating a three-way cross-level interaction to determine whether income inequality moderates the interaction between network homogeneity and social class. In the latter models, individual-level variables are group-mean centered (CWC) to mitigate collinearity issues between lower- and higher-level predictors and to avoid spurious cross-level interaction coefficients (Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Culpepper, 2013). Additionally, country-level variables are standardized (z-scores) to facilitate comparability in the estimations (Hox, 2010). All the models are estimated employing the “lme4” package in R (Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015). [[5]](#endnote-6)

# Results

## Descriptive cross-country comparison on class, network segregation, and redistributive preferences

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 depicts the differences in redistributive preferences across countries and social classes. As expected, the working class shows higher redistributive preferences compared to the intermediate and service classes in most societies. Notably, there are also some differences between the two extreme cases. For instance, the working class exhibits similar redistributive preferences compared to the intermediate class in the United States, although both classes have higher preferences than the service class. Conversely, the general trend of stronger preferences among the working class persists in Russia, but the preferences of the intermediate class are much closer to the service class.

[Figure 3 about here]

Regarding network segregation, Figure 3 shows that between-country variation in network homogeneity is relatively low, whereas class differences are quite distinguishable. On the one hand, a general pattern is that the working class demonstrates high network homogeneity in most countries. On the other hand, the service class generally exhibits less segregation compared to the intermediate and working classes. In addition, homogeneity in the intermediate class tends to be close to the average of each country. Despite that, some countries show a divergent distribution of network homogeneity by social class (e.g. Philippines), the general pattern of a segregated working class and an upper class with lower segregation holds.

[Figure 4 about here]

Regarding the country-level relationships, Figure 4 depicts the correlation between network homogeneity and income inequality (Panel A), and network homogeneity and redistributive preferences (Panel B). Complementary, I included the correlation between income inequality and the class differences between the working and service classes on network homogeneity (Panel C), and class differences in homogeneity and redistributive preferences (Panel D). Panel A illustrates a positive but relatively weak association between income inequality and network homogeneity (*r* = 0.28), suggesting that in more unequal countries, class-based network homogeneity is also higher. Panel B shows a medium positive association between network homogeneity and redistributive preferences (*r* = 0.44), indicating that a higher degree of network homogeneity goes together with stronger redistributive preferences. Furthermore, Panel C shows that the differences in network homogeneity between the working class and the service class are higher in countries with higher income inequality (*r* = 0.31). Thus, in countries with higher income inequality, the working class tends to be more segregated than the service class. Therefore, income inequality not only is associated with greater overall network homogeneity but also goes along with a wider social distance between social classes. Additionally, Panel D shows that higher national levels of class differences between the working and service classes are positively associated with redistributive preferences (*r* = 0.46). This means that in countries where the working class has more segregated networks than the service class, redistributive preferences tend to be higher as well.

## The segregation hypothesis on redistributive preferences

[Table 1 about here]

A screenshot of a model

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The results regarding the relationship between class-based network homogeneity and redistributive preferences using multilevel models are shown in Table 1. Model 1 shows that individuals embedded in homogeneous social networks are more likely to support redistribution. In Model 2, the introduction of control variables and network size slightly reduces the effect of homogeneity. These results contrast with previous findings, where being more segregated is associated with less attachment to society (Otero et al., 2022) and stronger support for redistribution in more cohesive communities (Yamamura, 2012). In Model 3, individual class position is included, where the association between network homogeneity loss strength and statistical significance (β=-0.04, p > 0.05).

Moving to hypothesis 1 – the *segregation hypothesis* –, the interaction terms of network homogeneity and social class in Model 4 test for the conditional effect of network homogeneity on individuals’ social class. The results show that the association of class-based network homogeneity is conditional on ego’s class position. For the working class (β=0.53, *p* < 0.001) and the intermediate classes (β=0.45, *p* < 0.001), network homogeneity is positively associated with redistributive preferences, in contrast to a negative association of the service class (β=-0.39, *p* < 0.001). To illustrate this result further, based on Model 4, Figure 5 depicts that the changes in redistributive preferences from lower to higher levels of class-based network homogeneity are relatively modest, with the differences in the predicted average estimates in redistributive preferences – on a scale of mean 0 and standard deviation of 1– going from 0.12 to 0.27 in the working class and from 0.09 to 0.14 in the intermediate class. In contrast, the changes in the predicted average estimates of redistributive preferences in homogeneous service class networks are more pronounced, changing from 0.11 when homogeneity is at its lowest point to -0.27 in fully homogeneous networks.

These results confirm previous findings on how social influence processes through class-based network ties affect attitudes in the economic domain (Lindh et al., 2021; Otero & Mendoza, 2023). Additionally, they echo previous arguments on how sharing similar class positions with partner or family ties tends to intensify redistributive preferences depending on individual class positions (Lee, 2023; Paskov & Weisstanner, 2022). Altogether, these results support the *segregation hypothesis* (H1), whereby the class differences in redistributive preferences become wider as network homogeneity increases.

[Figure 5 about here]

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## The mitigation hypothesis on network segregation and redistributive preferences

Table 2 presents the results of the multilevel models for the moderating role of income inequality on the interaction between social class and network homogeneity. First, Model 1 shows the interaction between class-based network segregation and individual class position according to the *segregation* hypothesis (H1). Nonetheless, the *mitigation* hypothesis (H2) aims to test whether income inequality plays a moderating role in the interaction between class-based network segregation and individual class.

[Table 2 about here]

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In Table 2, Model 2 tests the *mitigation hypothesis* that posits that the greater the level of income inequality in a country, the weaker the conditional association of network segregation by social class with redistributive preferences. The results suggest that in societies with higher levels of economic inequality, the interaction of network homogeneity and social class – especially in the service class – becomes less pronounced than in societies with lower levels of economic inequality. To illustrate this result, Figure 6 depicts how the interaction of network homogeneity and social class is gradually mitigated as income inequality increases. The left panel in Figure 6 illustrates that when inequality is low, the conditional association of network homogeneity and social class on redistributive preferences is more pronounced than in contexts of middle and high inequality.

Taking a closer look, differences in redistributive preferences between the working and service classes are smaller when network homogeneity is low, regardless of income inequality. Greater network homogeneity is associated with wider class differences in redistributive preferences, especially in countries with low levels of inequality. These differences, however, gradually become smaller in contexts with higher inequality. These results resonate with previous studies that have argued that the upper classes are more sensitive to income inequality, whereas the working class shows relatively stable attitudes regardless of the contextual levels of income inequality (Curtis & Andersen, 2015; Dimick et al., 2017; Edlund & Lindh, 2015). This also contrasts with previous research that has argued that individuals in unequal societies support a stronger meritocratic distribution of resources and become less concerned about income differences than those of more egalitarian societies (Mijs, 2021).

Also, these results echo the findings of Lindh and Andersson (2024) who showed that individuals in working (upper-middle) class positions with predominantly working (upper-middle) class ties support more (less) income inequality reduction in countries where redistribution is high. Additionally, I build on their findings and provide evidence that post-tax and transfer income inequality moderates the interaction between class-based network homogeneity and social class on redistributive preferences.

In sum, my results jointly suggest that network segregation matters in contexts of low and middle economic inequality but loses relevance when inequality is high. Overall, the results above support the mitigation hypothesis (H2) claims, where the wider class divide in redistributive preferences in homogeneous class-based networks weakens as income inequality increases.

[Figure 6 about here]

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## Additional analyses and robustness checks

I have conducted a series of additional analyses and robustness checks, which are included in the Supplementary Materials. First, to evaluate the robustness of the moderating role of income inequality relative to other country-level characteristics, I re-estimated the main cross-level interaction (**Class × Homogeneity × Gini**) while controlling for variables from the politico-institutional, sociocultural, and labor market domains (Lindh & McCall, 2020). As shown in Supplementary Table S1, the main interaction remains robust to the inclusion of these controls.

Second, I implemented an alternative empirical strategy based on class-profiles (Lindh & Andersson, 2024). Supplementary Table S2 presents models using network class profiles—representing contact for working, intermediate, and upper classes—interacted with individuals’ own class positions. This approach tests whether being embedded in networks composed of similar-class individuals (e.g., working class with a working-class profile) influences redistributive preferences. The results lead to similar conclusions with those obtained using the original class-based homogeneity measure. Nonetheless, I am worth noticing that the single interaction term of Class × Homogeneity may be more parsimonious than including three interaction terms.

Third, I estimated a model with simultaneous three-way cross-level interaction that includes both income inequality and welfare state size to examine whether the inclusion of institutional welfare state characteristics can affect the role of income inequality as a moderator of the interaction between class-based network homogeneity and social class on redistributive preferences. Four versions of this model were tested using different indicators of the welfare state: (i) Tax revenue, (ii) Government spending, (iii) Redistribution, and (IV) a composite index of the size of the welfare state. As shown in Supplementary Table S3, including the second interaction affects both the strength and significance of the original Class × Homogeneity × Gini term. Using tax revenue or government spending, the interactions for the intermediate and working classes weaken but remain statistically significant (p < 0.05). When Redistribution or the composite index is used, the interaction involving the intermediate class remains marginally significant (p < 0.05), while the effect for the working class becomes non-significant (p > 0.05). These results are not unexpected, given the high correlation between income inequality and welfare state indicators and their possible endogeneity. Nevertheless, the main interaction remains robust in the first two specifications.

Fourth, I re-estimated the models using a six-category version of the EGP class scheme. As reported in Supplementary Tables S4 and S5, the results for both the *segregation* hypothesis (H1) and the *mitigation* hypothesis (H2) remain consistent. An interesting finding when employing the 6-class version of the EGP scheme is that the main cross-level appears to be less sensitive by the inclusion of the second cross-level interaction of the welfare state indicators (see Table S5). Under these specifications, the welfare state indicators seem to have less relevance as a country-level moderator. However, these results should be interpreted with caution given the complexity of the models.

Fifth, statistical power in cross-level interactions can be may be affected in multilevel models when employing a restricted number of clusters (Doucette, 2024). For this purpose, I conducted a power analysis for the main and cross-level interaction effects of income inequality based on a series of Monte-Carlo simulations. Based on the specification of Model 2 in Table 2, supplementary Figure S1 shows that detecting the observed income inequality effect would require approximately 500 clusters to achieve conventional power thresholds. Similarly, Supplementary Figure S2 presents the power analysis for the Class × Homogeneity × Gini interaction: the effect for the Intermediate Class × Homogeneity × Gini becomes reliable with a sample of around 100 units, while the Working Class × Homogeneity × Gini effect would require roughly 350 clusters to reach sufficient power.

# Discussion and conclusion

This paper has examined how class-based network segregation at both ends of the class structure is associated with redistributive preferences and how income inequality mitigates this relationship from a cross-national perspective. My first expectation was that class differences in redistributive preferences should not only consider individual class positions, but also the structure of social networks as sources of preference formation. Therefore, my first hypothesis was that class-based segregated networks in both the working and service classes are associated with higher and lower redistributive preferences, respectively.

In this regard, my finding supports the claim that segregation in interpersonal networks in the form of homogeneous class ties can strengthen the already present class divide in redistributive preferences (Lindh et al., 2021; Paskov & Weisstanner, 2022). This has been previously theorized as the micro-process that may explain the subjective process of class consciousness, which implies a clear connection between class position, class identity, and political preferences (Wright & Cho, 1992). As classes are understood as collectivities with similarities in their in-group solidarity and political interests, higher homogeneity in personal networks was expected to reinforce these dispositions, either demanding more redistribution in the working class or decreasing its support in the service class.

Another relevant finding is that when compared with the changes in attitudes in the working class according to the levels of network segregation, these differences are particularly pronounced in the service class. A possible explanation is that the limited or null ties of service class individuals to intermediate and working-class positions could limit awareness about their living conditions and worldviews, which can be associated with a lack of concern about the procedures and consequences of inequality among the service class (Blau, 1977; Otero et al., 2022). Furthermore, the claimed ‘empathy gulf’ is especially evident in how the service class is less willing to act against inequality as a collective commitment when they are highly segregated in homogeneous service class environments, in contrast to the increasing redistributive demands of the marginalized working class (Otero & Mendoza, 2023; Sachweh, 2012).

Thus, my first finding supports the expectation that the relation between class-based network segregation and redistributive preferences is conditional on social class. Higher network homogeneity in the working class is associated with higher redistributive preferences, while homogeneous networks in the service class are associated with lower support for redistribution. Overall, greater network homogeneity is thus associated with a wider divide in redistributive preferences between the working and the service classes.

My second hypothesis was that economic inequality mitigates the conditional association of network homogeneity by social class on redistributive preferences. Theoretically, I understand economic inequality as the context where class-based inequalities in the economic domain are crystallized in attitudes toward redistribution (Edlund & Lindh, 2015). I argued that social influence is linked to redistributive preferences, as it explains how class positions intensify their attitudes as network segregation increases (Lindh et al., 2021). Likewise, recent evidence shows that the association between network class profiles with redistributive preferences follows a similar pattern as individual class positions, and this relationship is strengthened as welfare state redistribution increases at the country level (Lindh & Andersson, 2024). My findings indicate that income inequality indeed *mitigates* the conditional association of class-based network homogeneity and social class on redistributive preferences. In other words, the role of network segregation observed in the interaction of homogeneity and class is less pronounced in countries with higher income inequality. Particularly, the most notable differences in redistributive preferences are observed in homogeneous service class networks. In contrast, preferences in homogeneous working-class networks are relatively unaffected by inequality. Also, the conditional association of class-based network homogeneity by social class prevails mostly in countries with low and middle levels of income inequality. These findings are in line with previous cross-national studies that have pointed out that the advantaged classes are more reactive to the levels of contextual economic inequality, which is associated with a reduced class divide in redistributive preferences (Curtis & Andersen, 2015; Dimick et al., 2017; Edlund & Lindh, 2015).

I interpret the role of income inequality on the conditional association of network homogeneity to the individual social class on redistributive preferences in two ways. First, an important related fact is that unequal societies have smaller attitudinal class differences mainly because of the comparatively higher redistributive preferences in the service class. Thus, the consequences of segregated class relations on redistributive preferences become attenuated as the class divide in political attitudes also loses strength in unequal societies. Along these lines, it could also be that class segregation reinforces the class divide in contexts where social classes have a stronger political meaning reflected in wider class differences in redistributive preferences (Lindh & Andersson, 2024). Second, another possible explanation – still open to empirical scrutiny – is that social networks are more stratified in more unequal contexts, increasing cross-class contacts and lowering segregation mainly in the service class (Otero et al., 2024). Here, it could be possible that higher cross-class ties in the service class toward the intermediate or working class positions are associated with greater empathy that motivates solidarity toward others in relatively more disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions.

The contributions of this study can be summarized as follows. First, I demonstrated that class-based network segregation can reinforce the previously documented class divide in redistributive preferences. Unlike previous studies focused on the direct association of class profiles (Lindh & Andersson, 2024; Lindh et al., 2021), the attention to how network segregation is conditional on the individual class location allowed me to empirically address how the different social classes differ in their redistributive preferences according to the degree of class-based network homogeneity. Second, the relevance of the cross-national comparison provided the opportunity to scrutinize the role of income inequality as a moderator of the conditional association of class-based network homogeneity with the individual social class on redistributive preferences. Particularly, using a three-way interaction, I demonstrated that the conditional association of network homogeneity to social class is more salient in contexts of low and middle inequality but loses strength in societies with higher levels of inequality.

However, this study also has limitations. On the side of the dependent variable, a two-item index comprises a rough proxy for redistributive preferences compared to more detailed questions on willingness to pay taxes or specific welfare policies. Additionally, the position generator employed is limited in accurately representing a class scheme, particularly in the self-employment and authority dimensions. Regarding the sample of countries, I acknowledge that the number of macro-level units—specifically, countries—can limit the strength of the conclusions drawn from the empirical analysis. As noted in the literature, the estimation of random effects and cross-level interactions in multilevel models is likely to be underpowered when based on small country samples (Doucette, 2024). Finally, causality is also a limitation when employing cross-sectional data. Theoretically, contact opportunities between classes and sociability preferences jointly drive network composition. Therefore, I recognize that the endogenous nature of class positions, network structure, and attitudes implies difficulties regarding causal claims. For all the above reasons, I urge readers to interpret the empirical findings with appropriate caution.

Based on the above discussion, other implications of class-based segregation can be drawn for other domains. A first vein is to what extent class-based segregation can be associated with other political attitudes and behavior? Previous studies have suggested that more advantaged classes tend to trust more in strangers, be more engaged in social activities, and have higher propensity to participate in elections. Along these lines, segregation is arguably connected to these dimensions of social cohesion.

Future research should include more fine-grained distinctions in measuring attitudes by including established questions on attitudes toward the role of market distribution or specific welfare policies. Additionally, class-based social networks can be better assessed by incorporating other aspects of the market situation of network ties, such as self-employment status or workplace authority. Finally, longitudinal analyses can contribute to disentangling the temporal relationship between class, networks, and political attitudes.

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# Appendix

[Table A1 about here]

[Table A2 about here]

[Table A3 about here]

[Table A4 about here]

[Table A5 about here]

1. Slovenia is excluded from the study because the measure of support for government redistribution, specifically “It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes,” was not available in the dataset. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Self-employed farmers (IVc) are included in the self-employed class, while agricultural labor (VIIb) is in the working class. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. In this regard, I consider the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in constant 2017 USD (PPP) ensures that economic inequality estimates remain consistent regardless of economic conditions (UNU-WIDER, 2023). Second, following Edlund and Lindh (2015), I consider a measure of the overall size and redistributive capacity based on taxation and spending levels of the welfare state. This measure aims to capture the broader range of services and reflect the actual outcomes of welfare policies. For this, the indicator combines (i) tax revenue as a percentage of GDP (ILO, 2022), (ii) welfare generosity as total governmental spending as a share of GDP (ILO, 2022), and (iii) the current level of redistribution (Solt, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Supplementary analyses employing alternative income inequality measures show that the results are robust when using the Inter-decile (D9/D1) (see Table S1) and the Top 10/Bottom 50 ratios (see Table S2). I also classified countries into low, middle-low, middle-high, and high-income inequality groups based on quintiles according to the Gini index. Hence, I used country-fixed effects regressions to control for the cross-country differences and observed and unobserved societal characteristics (see Table S3). The results are consistent with the multilevel estimations. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. I employed the Restricted Maximum Likelihood (REML) method because it adjusts the estimation of standard errors for small sample sizes and provides better estimates of variance components in the context of cross-national data (Bryan & Jenkins, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)