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Attitudinal polarization towards the redistributive role of the state in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis

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ABSTRACT


The COVID-19 crisis presents a unique opportunity to study how public opinion towards the redistributive role of the state reacts to a major economic shock. The pandemic and the measures taken to stop it exposed citizens to both increased fiscal constraint and heightened redistributive capacity: historical drops in GDP (and fiscal revenue) coincided with unprecedented increases in public spending on healthcare provisions and social policy, as well as staggering amounts of financial liquidity provided to hard-hit economic sectors. How did this affect citizens' attitudes towards redistribution and their assessments of the capacity of the state to intervene? To tackle these questions, we rely on a two-wave panel survey fielded in Germany, Sweden and Spain in late 2018 and June 2020. While preferred levels of redistribution have remained largely stable, our results indicate major shifts and growing ideological polarization around perceptions of welfare state efficiency and capacity, fiscal constraint and political trust. Hence, the COVID-crisis has so far neither led to a left- nor a right-wing shift in citizens' desired level of state intervention, but to an increasingly polarized context of (re)distributive politics, which is likely to imply heightened conflict over economic and social policy in the future.

KEYWORDS COVID-19 crisis; attitudinal polarization; panel data; welfare state; state capacity

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a major health crisis across the globe, and the measures taken to cope with it introduced major restrictions to economic activity, provoking a historical economic contraction and consequently lower tax revenues. At the same time, governments have taken unprecedented public spending measures to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic. Not only did governments ramp up healthcare provisions in no time,

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but they also provided staggering amounts of financial liquidity to hard-hit economic sectors and wage supplements to smoothen consumption and avoid mass unemployment (OECD 2020).

Despite these efforts, the COVID-crisis has intensified actual and perceived social risks, particularly those related to employment and health (Brezna 2021). This presents a unique opportunity to study how public opinion towards the state's redistributive role reacts to a major crisis. Understanding how economic changes affect citizens' policy attitudes and political behavior has become a major concern of political science (Hacker, Rehm, and Schlesinger 2013). While much research has focused on the economic and ideological roots of policy preferences, we still know relatively little about how *malleable* they are over time. Only recently, research moved towards studying how dynamic economic experiences alter policy attitudes and political behavior (Margalit 2019). In this article, we explore the extent to which the crisis has changed citizens' attitudes towards the state's redistributive role on two key aspects: *how much the state should intervene* to redistribute economic resources (i.e. the *level* of intervention); *how much it can intervene*, and *how well* it operates in doing so (i.e. the *capacity* to intervene).

Theoretically, we can imagine four different ways public opinion reacts to such shocks: *shift*, *stability*, *polarization*, or *convergence*. Our expectations going into this analysis are quite open, given the idiosyncratic nature of the pandemic-induced economic shock. First, attitudes can uniformly *shift* in one direction. Studies on macroeconomic conditions and public opinion indicate that an economic contraction tends to shift citizens to the left of the political spectrum and to increase support for social spending (Blekesaune 2007; Margalit 2013; Naumann, Buss, and Bähr 2016), though in some instances, it can also shift aggregate policy preferences to the right (Durr 1993; Stevenson 2001). Moreover, the experience of economic shocks can also spill over to non-economic attitudes, such as political trust (Algan et al. 2017). While other major economic shocks, like the Eurozone crisis, were associated with an overall decline in trust (Foster and Frieden 2017; Muro and Vidal 2017), initial evidence suggests that the shock induced by the COVID-crisis has increased political trust (Bækgaard et al. 2020; Bol et al. 2021; Esaiasson et al. 2020), potentially pointing to the conditioning effect of a swift and robust state response (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011). Second, attitudes may also remain *stable*. If attitudes are deeply rooted in beliefs, they are likely to be sticky. Even in the case of major economic shocks, such as the Great Recession, massive attitude changes have been relatively rare, and on average, a majority of people is likely to stick with their prior views (Margalit 2019).

Focusing on *average* shifts or *stability*, however, can mask significant *attitudinal heterogeneity* in response to the COVID-19 shock. Hence, attitudes can – third – *polarize* when we witness “a movement away from the center toward

the extremes” (Fiorina and Abrams 2008, 567). There is ample evidence of economic shocks having polarizing effects on attitudes with the core conditioning factor being prior ideology (Brunner, Ross, and Washington 2011; Majlesi, Dorn, and Hanson 2020). In response to a shock, citizens try to make sense of a crisis and the world they live in and update their attitudes as a function of their prior leanings (Taber and Lodge 2006). Thus, we might expect that the crisis produces heterogeneous effects due to directionally motivated reasoning (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017). Finally, the opposite of polarization is possible as well, and attitudes may *converge*. A shared experience of a crisis can also create a “rally around the flag” effect (Hetherington and Nelson 2003) and lead to a process of attitudinal convergence. Initial evidence from Canada, Norway, and the Netherlands proposes that citizens indeed tend to rally around the flag and converge on higher levels of political trust (Bækgaard et al. 2020; Merkley et al. 2020; Schraff 2020).

To study the impact of the pandemic-induced economic shock on attitudes towards the state’s redistributive role, we rely on a two-wave panel survey fielded in three countries – Germany, Sweden, and Spain – in late 2018 and June 2020. We selected the three cases to achieve maximum variance along the relevant dimensions of crisis affectedness and government responses. Such a *diverse case* method is well suited to potentially capture the full variation of changes to public opinion (Seawright and Gerring 2008). Despite these differences, our results are remarkably similar across countries. We find no evidence of a generalized shift – neither to the right nor to the left – in citizens’ demand for economic redistribution and welfare provision by the state. However, we do observe more significant shifts in how public opinion perceives the context and capacity for state intervention. Most importantly, we find substantive *ideological* differentiation in how citizens have adapted these perceptions about the room of maneuver and capacity for state intervention in the economy.

Methods

To address how citizens’ attitudes towards the *level* and *capacity* for (re)distributive state intervention have changed after the onset of the COVID-crisis, we rely on a two-wave online panel survey (for further details see Häusermann et al. 2020). This allows us to track changes in participants’ attitudes towards the (re)distributive role of the state. The first wave of the survey captured citizens’ preferences on redistributive policies across several West European democracies. The second wave of the panel was specifically designed to assess how the COVID-crisis and the ensuing governmental measures could affect these attitudes, focusing on three countries: Germany, Spain, and Sweden. The fieldwork for the first wave of the panel took place from 4 to 23 October 2018 in Germany ($n = 1,722$), and from 21 November to 8

December 2018 in Spain ($n = 1,503$) and Sweden ($n = 1,500$). The second wave was fielded in these three countries from 4 to 20 June 2020, and only targeted recontacts from the first survey. The successfully recontacted sample is larger in Germany ($n = 892$) than in Sweden ($n = 653$) and Spain ($n = 643$).¹

The two waves include items that allow us to capture citizens' preferences over 1) *levels* of redistribution by the government, and 2) how they perceive the *context* and *capacity* for this intervention. In this first dimension of *level of intervention* we rely on items capturing:

- (i) agreement with whether income differences should be small for a society to be fair (1-4 Likert scale);
- (ii) agreement with whether social benefits and services (in the respective country) place too great a strain on the economy (1-4 Likert scale);
- (iii) preferences for expansion or retrenchment of welfare benefits and services (ranging 0–28 with higher values indicating support of expansion and opposition to retrenchment);²
- (iv) ideological left-right self-placement (0-10 scale).

To get at the second aspect of state *capacity*, we rely on:

- (i) citizens' perceptions of the *prevalence of tradeoffs* in welfare policy, measured by agreement whether increases in welfare benefits for some people will come at the cost of lower benefits for others (1-4 Likert scale);
- (ii) perceptions of *fiscal constraint*, captured by agreement whether taxes are already high and the government should not levy money from citizens via taxes anymore (1-4 Likert scale);
- (iii) evaluations of *state effectiveness*, captured by whether political decisions are generally implemented effectively in the respective country (1-10 scale);
- (iv) evaluations of *welfare state efficiency*, measured by whether the money that goes into the welfare state is wasted or used efficiently (1-10 scale); and
- (v) *political trust*, measured by trust in politicians (1-10 scale).³

The sample comprises individuals for which we have observations on all relevant variables in the two waves. To assess change in preferences across

¹This difference in the recontact rate is due to the survey company – Bilendi – working with its own proprietary panel in Germany, but with partners in Spain and Sweden, for which not all original participants could be recontacted.

²This measure aggregates preferences concerning expansion and retrenchment on five welfare policy fields: pensions, childcare, education, unemployment benefits, and active labor market policies.

³Table S.1 in Supplementary Information presents the question wording.

time our outcome variables are preferences in wave 2 of the panel, which we model on individual-level characteristics of the respondent, country fixed-effects, and an indicator variable for the second wave. The coefficient for the wave-2 variable is our key estimate of interest since it captures how preferences in wave 2 differ (on average) from preferences in wave 1. It is a measure of average attitudinal shifts. All variables are normalized to a 0–1 scale to facilitate comparison across attitudes. Estimations are based on OLS models including controls for respondents' age, gender, social class (Oesch's 5-class scheme), whether the respondent has children, and ideological self-placement in wave 1 (except for models with ideology in wave 2 as the outcome variable, which do not include the lagged measure as an explanatory factor). The second set of estimations, which address heterogeneity in attitudinal change by ideology, are specified as interactive models. We include lagged ideology (from wave 1) as a moderator, interacting it with the indicator variable for wave 2. This interaction term captures how attitudinal change between waves depends on citizens' ideology. We rely on lagged ideology to avoid endogeneity problems arising from respondents adapting their ideological placement to the crisis.

We probe the robustness of our findings on the ideological heterogeneity of attitudinal responses by estimating additional models accounting for two alternative explanations to ideology, i.e. individual perceptions of economic risk and election winner-loser status (lagged measure of support for the party in government versus opposition). We present the results pooled and by country separately. In a last step, we zoom in on Germany, where we differentiate how attitudes have changed among the main parties' supporters. In Germany we find left- and right-wing parties both in government and opposition. This allows us to better disentangle ideological from winner-loser differences.

Results

Average attitudinal stability and shifts

First we address potential shifts in citizens' attitudes towards the (re)distributive role of the state due to the COVID-19 crisis and the massive government efforts to cope with it. [Figure 1](#) displays average differences in respondents' attitudes between the first and the second waves, when controlling for age, gender, social class, being a parent, ideology in wave 1 and country-fixed effects. There is no evident shift in public opinion about the desired *level* of state intervention in the economy. Despite the massive economic shock, individuals' preferences concerning income redistribution, the economic strain generated by social services, the expansion of welfare benefits and services, and left-right ideological placement remain virtually constant. None of the

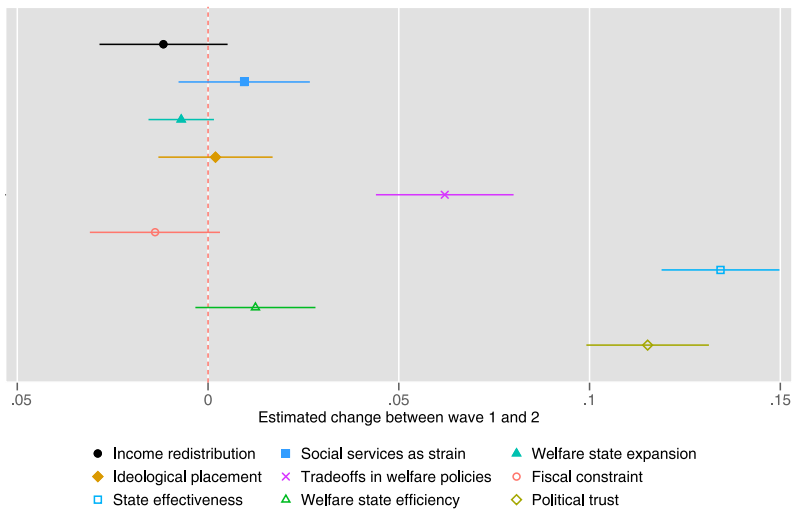


Figure 1. Average predicted attitudinal differences between waves (with 95% confidence intervals).

Note: Estimates based on additive OLS regression models introducing controls for lagged ideology, age, gender, social class, parent status, and country-FE. Full models are presented in table S.2 in the Supplementary Information.

coefficients capturing average shifts between waves reaches conventional levels of statistical significance.

Not all attitudes appear immune to the COVID-crisis. While preferences about *levels* of state intervention show impressive stability, we find substantive shifts on items capturing the *capacity* for redistributive intervention in terms of the constraints faced, and the ability and trust in government intervention. Compared to 2018, respondents are now, on average, more likely to understand welfare policies in terms of tradeoffs, i.e. they perceive that increasing benefits for specific groups will necessarily entail retrenchment in other areas. Attitudinal shifts are also large in what concerns perceptions of state effectiveness in implementing its decisions, and in political trust. Changes on these two items amount to one point on the original 10-point scale, which is substantive. Hence, even if respondents appear to perceive higher constraints on redistributive policies, they are also more trustful of politicians and more likely to perceive the state as effective when intervening. Additional models estimated separately by country (displayed in Figure S.1 in Supplementary Information) indicate that these results are *not* driven by one particular country. Stability in preferences about levels of redistributive intervention is constant across all countries (except preferences concerning income redistribution which shifted slightly to the right in Spain). Concerning

attitudes about the context and capacity for state intervention, the results are robust throughout these country- specific estimations.

Ideological heterogeneity: increasing polarization in assessments of the capacity for redistributive intervention by the state

Some of the stability in public opinion, however, could be masking substantive heterogeneity in how citizens have responded to the COVID-19 crisis. We focus, mainly, on ideological differences – on whether individuals of different ideological leaning differ in how they update their preferences about the state’s role in the economy, and the room of maneuver and capacity for the state to intervene. Below we center the discussion and presentation of results selectively on those items on which we find evidence of ideological heterogeneity – pointing to an increase in polarization. However, it is equally important to address those issues on which stability in average preferences over time is accompanied by stability in how they are distributed within the electorate: we do not find evidence of any ideological polarization regarding income redistribution, social services posing a strain on the economy, or welfare state expansion. In other words, the non-significant results reported in [Figure 1](#) do not mask subgroup heterogeneity in left- and right-shifts when it comes to the preferred level of state intervention, but indeed reflect stability. In itself, this stability is an important finding given the massive economic challenge posed by the COVID-crisis, and its implications for social welfare needs.

We do not observe ideological polarization either when it comes to perceptions of tradeoffs in welfare policies. The increasing understanding that welfare expansion will come – sooner or later – at the cost of retrenchment is a generalized shift in public opinion, common to both right- and left-wing ideological camps. This is an important complement to the evidence on polarization we will discuss subsequently, as it underlines that the shared perception of increased constraints heightens this polarization.

However, we do indeed find evidence for ideological polarization when it comes to the key items capturing perceptions of the room of maneuver for state intervention, and of the state’s capacity to intervene. Hence, even though [Figure 1](#) showed no evidence for significant average shifts in perceptions of the state’s fiscal constraints, we do find ideological differences in how these perceptions have evolved.⁴ As displayed in [Figure 2](#), there is a significant, though rather weak increase in ideological polarization in fiscal constraint perceptions. While right-wing respondents have become more likely to perceive a sharper limit on the state’s ability to levy taxes, left-wing respondents now see more room for increased taxation. The separate country

⁴The coefficient for the interactive term in the pooled model is statistically significant for $p < 0.05$.

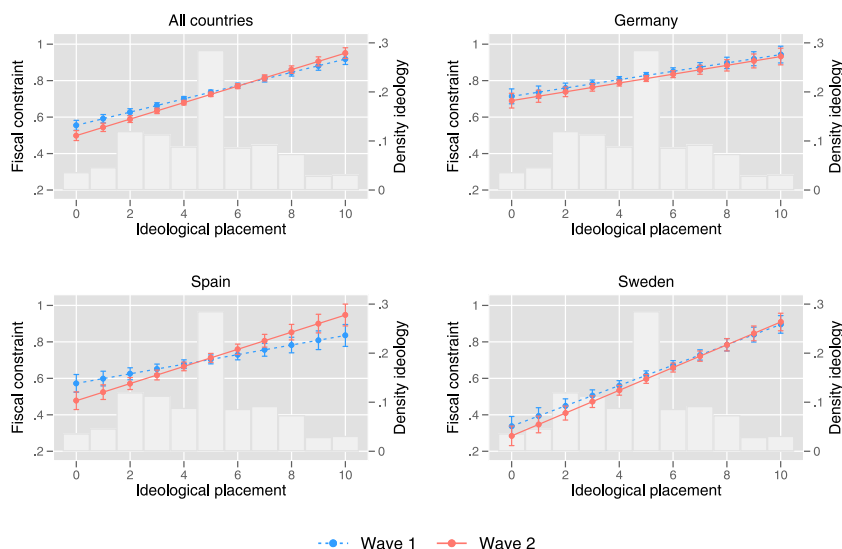


Figure 2. Average predicted perceptions of fiscal constraint by lagged left-right ideology and wave (with 95% confidence intervals).

Note: Estimates are based on interactive OLS regression models introducing controls for age, gender, social class, parent status, and country-FE (in the pooled sample). Full models are presented in table S.6 in the Supplementary Information.

analyses indicate that these results are mainly driven by the Spanish case, whereas in Sweden, polarization is driven unilaterally by left-wing voters seeing more room for taxation.

Ideological differentiation in how public opinion has reacted to the COVID-crisis is strongest in respondents' perceptions of state intervention capacity and political trust. As depicted by the blue dashed line in Figure 3, pre-crisis in 2018, there were hardly any differences in how citizens of different ideological leaning evaluated the state's effectiveness in implementing its decisions. In the pooled model, in Germany, and in Spain, the slope is almost flat, while Sweden depicts a negative slope where right-wing respondents rated state effectiveness worse. By mid-2020, we observe a stronger association between ideology and evaluations of state capacity. In all three countries, polarization has increased, with perceptions of effectiveness having improved among left-wing respondents.

This increasing ideological differentiation is also manifest (to a smaller extent) in the more specific evaluations of welfare state's efficiency (as depicted in Figure 4). Already in late 2018, perceptions of welfare state efficiency were associated with ideology, i.e. left-wing respondents displaying more positive evaluations of welfare-state efficiency. This ideological difference has become more marked by 2020. The change is most remarkable in

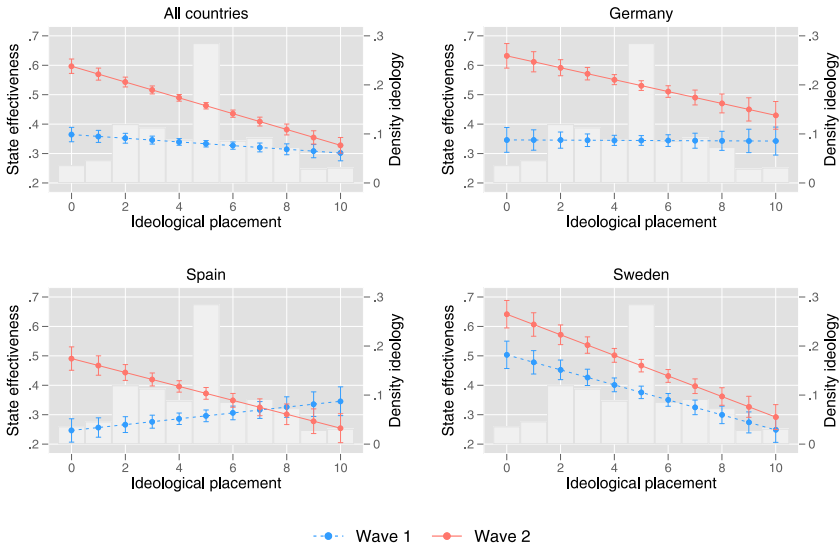


Figure 3. Average predicted perceptions of state effectiveness by lagged left-right ideology and wave (with 95% confidence intervals).

Note: Estimates are based on interactive OLS regression models introducing controls for age, gender, social class, parent status, and country-FE (in the pooled sample). Full models are presented in table S.7 in the Supplementary Information.

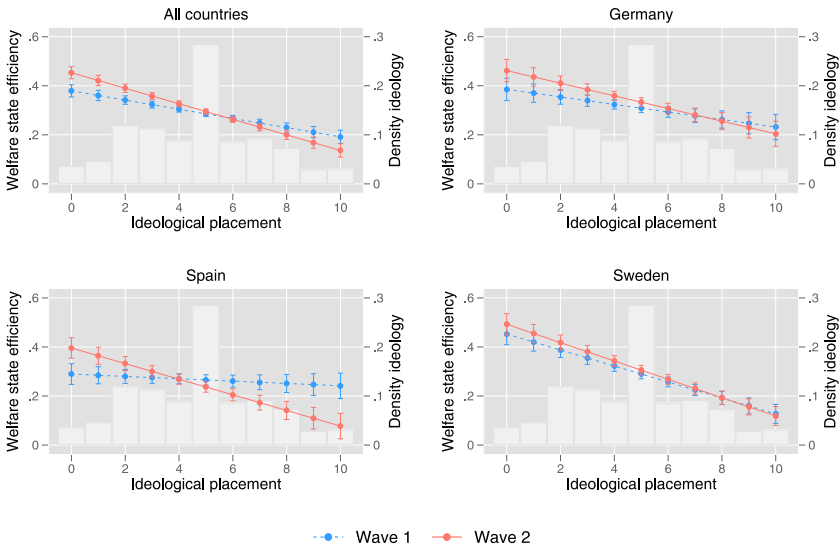


Figure 4. Average predicted perceptions of welfare state efficiency by lagged left-right ideology and wave (with 95% confidence intervals).

Note: Estimates are based on interactive OLS regression models introducing controls for age, gender, social class, parent status, and country-FE (in the pooled sample). The full models are presented in table S.8 in the Supplementary Information.

Spain, where such ideological differences were practically nonexistent in 2018. By mid-2020, respondents on the extreme left and right differ by over two points on the original 10-point scale. Ideological polarization on this item has become somewhat stronger in Germany as well, where left-wing respondents have significantly improved their evaluations of welfare state efficiency.

Lastly, [Figure 5](#) displays ideological polarization regarding political trust. As was the case with state effectiveness, there has been a strong shift towards increasing ideological differentiation in levels of trust in politicians. This trend is replicated across the three different cases under consideration. Ideological differences in levels of political trust were relatively marginal in late 2018. Only Sweden displayed a more marked negative association, whereby right-wing respondents were more distrustful of politicians. In mid-2020, there is a clear negative association in all countries considered. In the pooled model, average differences in political trust between extreme right- and left-wing respondents are more than three times larger in wave 2 than they were in wave 1 of the panel. This trend towards increasing polarization is particularly visible in Spain and Germany. Moreover, in all three cases, shifts in attitudes between waves are larger among left-wing respondents.

This overview of the results summarized in [Figures 2–5](#) highlights the importance of having addressed ideological heterogeneity in attitudinal

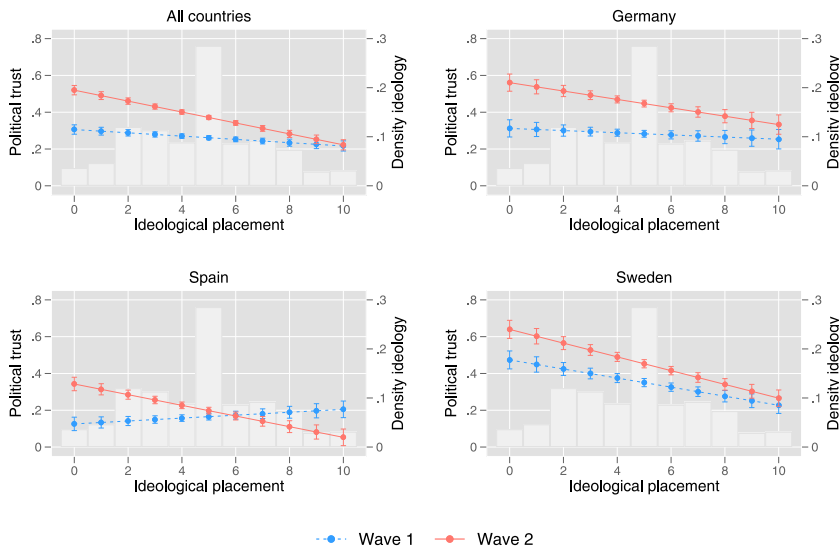


Figure 5. Average predicted political trust by lagged left-right ideology and wave (with 95% confidence intervals).

Note: Estimates are based on interactive OLS regression models introducing controls for age, gender, social class, parent status, and country-FE (in the pooled sample). Full models are presented in Table S.9 in the Supplementary Information.

responses to the COVID-crisis. While the average shifts presented in [Figure 1](#) mostly painted a picture of stability, some aggregate trends were indeed concealing substantive ideological polarization. Moreover, even if there are no signs of change or polarization on preferences concerning levels of economic redistribution by the state, it is important to point out that ideological differences on this dimension were already present in late 2018. Respondents on the left continue to display higher support for income redistribution and welfare state expansion, and to perceive social services as less of a strain on the economy than those on the right. After the onset of the COVID-crisis we observe that, on top of left-right conflict around *levels* of state intervention, ideological differences are also increasingly manifest in what concerns the *context* and *capacity* for state intervention.

Robustness checks: alternative drivers of attitudinal heterogeneity

In terms of alternative mechanisms, we might suspect that increasing ideological polarization in perceptions of fiscal constraint, state effectiveness, welfare state efficiency, or political trust could be grounded not in ideology, but in egotropic or sociotropic economic grievances, i.e. in differences in how left- and right-wing citizens evaluate how they and the national economy will be affected by the COVID-19 crisis. In additional models (included in Table S.10 in Supplementary Information), we also control for respondents' perceptions of how the pandemic will affect their own and their country's economic prospects. Even when additionally controlling for this perception of risk, ideological placement continues to account for the attitudinal change between waves on the outcomes just discussed.

Furthermore, since Spain and Sweden are governed by a left-wing coalition, we might suspect that part of the increasing ideological differentiation could be driven by support for a governing or an opposition party. The fact that trends towards greater polarization are also present in Germany, governed by a coalition of the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, already speaks against this alternative explanation. We perform the same analyses introducing an additional control for whether the respondent had voted in the last election for a governing or an opposition party (included in Table S.11 in Supplementary Information). The results remain robust to this alternative specification.

To inspect the relationship between ideological placement, party support (government vs. opposition) and attitudinal changes more profoundly, we zoom in on the German case, where we can find both left- and right-wing opposition parties. Since the number of observations for some parties is limited, these results need to be cautiously interpreted and mainly serve as an exploratory endeavor. Consequently, as we can see in [Figure 6](#) below, differences in attitudinal change between voters of the different parties are

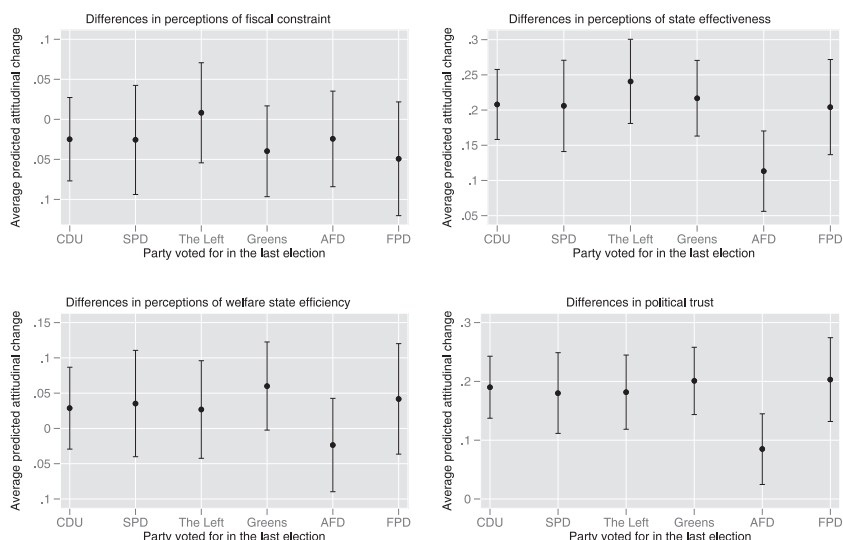


Figure 6. Average differences in attitudes between waves 1 and 2 of the panel for voters of different parties. Note: Estimates are based on interactive OLS regression models introducing controls for age, gender, social class, and parent status. Full models are presented in table S.12 in the Supplementary Information.

relatively small and, in most cases, are not statistically significant from each other at conventional levels – which is partially due to the large confidence intervals produced by the low number of observations per party. However, within parties in the same ideological bloc, we do *not* observe large differences in attitudinal change depending on whether the party is in government or opposition. For example, increases in perceptions of state effectiveness or political trust are similar among voters of the SPD, the Left, or the Greens, despite the SPD being in government and the Left and Greens being in opposition. These findings sustain an interpretation of our findings in terms of political- ideological polarization, rather than government/opposition polarization. However, we do observe signs of a differential pattern displayed by AfD voters, which separates them from other right-wing voters. Perceptions of state capacity and trust are consistently lower among AfD voters than among supporters of other parties. These voters are less likely to have improved their perceptions of state effectiveness, of the efficiency of the welfare state, or their political trust.

Conclusion

Despite the pandemic-induced economic shock, our findings show that citizens' attitudes towards levels of economic redistribution and welfare

provision have remained remarkably stable, indicating that such attitudes are deeply-rooted beliefs and sticky. However, we find significant shifts in public opinion regarding the fiscal context and capacity for state intervention. More importantly, these perceptions about the room for maneuver and capacity for state intervention have become increasingly ideologically polarized. In other words, we find attitudinal stability regarding what citizens want to do with the money but ideological polarization concerning citizens' contextual assessment of what can be done in general. This increases overall polarization around the redistributive role of the state. While left-right discord on desired levels of state intervention continue to constitute a key feature of political conflict, we now also find increasing ideological differentiation in assessments of the context and capacity for the state to intervene. This increasing polarization is likely to affect welfare politics significantly both in terms of the level of redistribution and its type: we do know, e.g. that trust and state capacity drive support for long-term, future-oriented social investment policies (Garritzmann, Neimanns, and Busemeyer 2016; Jacobs 2016); we also know that citizens tend to have more narrow, self-interested social policy preferences under tight fiscal constraint (Bremer and Bürgisser 2020; Busemeyer and Garritzmann 2017); and finally, we know that many distributive conflicts around the welfare state can only be solved via compromising and log-rolling, which tends to require increased tax revenues that are likely to become more difficult to reap in such a context (e.g. Jacques 2020).

The political implications of COVID-19 will continue to unfold for months if not several years. For now, however, it seems unlikely that the COVID-19 crisis will result in a complete reconfiguration of distributive politics. Distributive conflicts will neither disappear and pacify due to attitudinal convergence nor strongly intensify due to ideological polarization of how much the state should intervene. Nonetheless, an increasing ideological polarization in assessing fiscal constraints, state capacity, and political trust will lead to even fiercer political battles about fiscal austerity, as well as the types and levels of social redistribution the state should sustain with its limited resources.

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