

Preferences for Redistribution: Two Decades of Gender Gaps and Generational Differences in Europe

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Abstract

We provide a concise overview of the literature concerning the factors influencing preferences for redistribution, with particular attention to works that have integrated considerations of gender and/or cohort heterogeneity into their analyses. We then present a series of stylized facts on preferences for redistribution based on data from the European Social Survey for a wide array of European countries over the period spanning from 2002 to 2022. We document that, since 2002, the average preferences for redistribution have increased. While the gender gap has remained substantially unchanged, the generational gap has widened over time. Distinguishing women and men by a set of individual characteristics, instead, there exists a not negligible heterogeneity both ‘between’ and ‘within’ women and men. At the country level, the overall gender gap in preferences for redistribution increases as the country’s per capita income or gender equality increase. Conversely, the gender gap decreases in more income, unequal, and religious countries. Finally, looking at the two exogenous shocks, that is, the 2008 financial and economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, we observe that average individual attitudes towards redistribution react to both events but in a surprisingly opposite way, with a relevant heterogeneity across different sub-groups of women and men.

Keywords: redistribution, gender-specific preferences, generational differences, stylized facts.

JEL classifications: H00, J10, P50.

1. Introduction

The inquiry into the origins of the demand and taste for redistribution constitutes a highly debated topic across various disciplines, spanning economics, sociology, politics, and psychology. Beyond the mere theoretical and philosophical concerns, understanding what are the determinants of preferences for redistribution entails manifold potential implications for policymaking, as varying perspectives on the optimal extent of redistribution and corresponding policies lie at the heart of the discourse in political economy. This significance is further underscored by the diversity in preferences for redistribution within contemporary societies, which inevitably manifest into disparate voting behaviours. More specifically, not negligible gender and age heterogeneities in preferences exist. Why should we care about these gender and generational gaps in preferences for redistribution? Further investigation is needed because they are crucial for policy design and formulation. It is along these two

axes that the policymaking debate is mostly looking at when delineating the targets and the beneficiaries of redistributive policies.

The contribution of this paper is 2-fold. First, we briefly review the literature on the determinants of preferences for redistribution. We document that, beyond the role of income and social mobility, many contributions have focused on the relationship between preferences for redistribution and individual characteristics, attitudes, and beliefs. At the same time, a wide strand of the literature has emphasized that preferences for redistribution depend on the macroeconomic and social conditions of the context in which they are formed. Within this wide literature, only few studies have specifically addressed the role of gender and cohort in investigating individual heterogeneity in preferences for redistribution. According to the main findings, women are generally more redistributive than men, with different reasons that lay behind this gender gap. On the contrary, the evidence on the effect of age on preferences for redistribution is not conclusive. Finally, the interaction between gender and age is rarely explored. Indeed, the differential determinants of redistributive preferences by gender and age need to be further scrutinized since, in general, these two characteristics are often treated as mere controls or covariates in the existing literature.

Second, this paper provides some stylized facts on gender and generational heterogeneity in preferences for redistribution. We use data from the European Social Survey (ESS), at present the most extensive source of academically driven cross-national survey data regarding preferences and values within the European context, covering a wide array of countries over a very long period from 2002 to 2022. Overall, we show that the average preferences for redistribution increase. The gender gap does not substantially change, while the generational gap widens over time. Moreover, the gender gap is consistently larger among respondents with higher household incomes compared to those with lower household incomes. Low educated, widowed, and elderly women are the most redistributive, whereas highly educated, single, and young men are the least redistributive. Over time, within each generation, men are less redistributive than women. Regarding political ideology, a gender gap in preferences for redistribution is evident only among right-wing respondents. Moreover, macro-level contextual variables indicate that the higher the level of per capita GNI and country's gender equality, the higher the gender gap in preferences for redistribution. On the contrary, for higher levels of country's income inequality and religiosity, women and men are more similar in demanding increased redistribution. Over a set of different welfare systems, the gender gap in redistributive preferences exists and narrows only in the Mediterranean and Liberal welfare regimes, while it remains relatively constant elsewhere. Finally, the two exogenous shocks during the investigate period, that is, the 2008 financial and economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, seem to relate to average individual attitudes towards redistribution in opposite ways, with some heterogeneity observed across different sub-groups.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews a selection of both theoretical and (mostly) empirical literature on the key determinants of preferences for redistribution, distinguishing those contributions with a specific emphasis on gender and age. Section 3 illustrates a set of stylized facts regarding the intersection of preferences for redistribution by gender and various individual-level characteristics, including cohort disaggregation, as well as macro-level characteristics. The final section concludes.

2. Preferences for Redistribution and Gender Gaps: A Survey of the Literature

Building on the seminal contribution of [Meltzer and Richard \(1981\)](#), the economics and political science literature has focussed on the factors explaining redistributive preferences, identifying a set of diverse yet non-exclusive determinants. A whole body of empirical studies has delved into the role of income and wealth in manifold perspectives, including past or current income (also proxied by education) and future income prospects ([Piketty 1995](#);

Alesina and La Ferrara 2005), actual or perceived income distribution (Cruces *et al.* 2013; Ravallion and Lokshin 2000), as well as income inequality (Yamamura 2012; Olivera 2015; Roth and Wohlfart, 2018) and social and intergenerational mobility (Piketty 1995; Bénabou and Ok 2001; Alesina *et al.* 2018). As a result, a heightened support for redistribution is largely attributed to either individuals experiencing economic deprivation or those perceiving impediments or barriers to social mobility and advancement.

Moving beyond the role of income and positional concerns, a substantial number of studies have stressed the influence of individual characteristics and personality traits and beliefs.¹ Within this literature, it is observed that individuals exhibiting a propensity towards endorsing redistributive policies typically show lower levels of educational attainment, tend to align with left-wing political ideologies, and are more frequently characterized as being single or unemployed (for example, Attewell 2022; Alesina and Giuliano 2011; Guillaud 2013). Additionally, such individuals demonstrate higher levels of risk aversion and lower degrees of overconfidence (Gärtner *et al.* 2017; Buser *et al.* 2020), and they are inclined to hold beliefs attributing success in life to luck rather than individual effort and merit, or exhibit stronger beliefs of social and distributive justice (Fong 2001; Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Bénabou and Tirole 2006). Moreover, individuals with higher levels of altruism, fairness, trust, and underlying other-regarding beliefs, such as compassion or empathy, are associated with a greater inclination towards supporting redistribution (Durante *et al.* 2014; Dimick *et al.* 2017, 2018; Gärtner *et al.* 2017).²

Lastly, preferences for redistribution also result from the interplay between individuals' beliefs and attitudes and the economic and social environments in which they are embedded. The relationship between macroeconomic conditions and attitudes towards redistribution has been extensively examined, including country-level socioeconomic circumstances (Jæger 2013; Andreoli and Olivera 2020; Kambayashi and Lechevalier 2022), welfare state regimes, and welfare provision (Svallfors 1997; Jæger 2006, 2009), experienced income inequality and other macro-level shocks (Olivera 2014; Fisman *et al.* 2015; Roth and Wohlfart 2018; Bellani *et al.* 2023), common values and social norms, such as culture (Guiso *et al.* 2006; Luttmer and Singhal 2011), social identity (Keely and Tan 2008; Costa-Font and Cowell 2015; Kourtellos and Petrou 2022), social capital (Yamamura 2012), and religion (Scheve and Stasavage 2006), racial and ethnic diversity (Dahlberg *et al.* 2012), as well as immigration perceptions (Alesina *et al.* 2021, 2023).

Several of the aforementioned determinants, which have been examined individually in prior literature, have been reviewed and subsequently integrated into a theoretical framework by Alesina and Giuliano (2011). This framework has been empirically tested to analyse these determinants collectively. Recently, Mengel and Weidenholzer (2022) provided an extensive review of the existing literature on preferences for redistribution, offering a comprehensive synthesis of the various factors influencing them.

2.1 Gender and generational gaps in preferences for redistribution

Despite the extensive body of literature concerning preferences for redistribution, there is a notable paucity of research addressing the role of gender and cohort differences in explaining individual heterogeneity. Moreover, the intersection of gender and generational factors remains significantly underexplored. While sociologists and political scientists have long recognized the importance of these issues, economists have only recently begun to systematically examine them. The majority of existing studies mentioned above either overlook gender and age or treat them merely as control variables, thus failing to consider their potential implications for policy design.

¹ Corneo and Grüner (2002) propose a horse race between different motives of support for redistribution focusing on three competing forces, they are referred to as the 'homo oeconomicus effect', the 'public values effect', and the 'social rivalry effect'.

² In the USA, African-Americans are more likely to redistribute than other ethnicities (e.g. Luttmer 2001; Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Luttmer and Singhal 2011).

However, the extant scholarship consistently documents that women and men exhibit distinct preferences, attitudes, and behaviours, such as in risk aversion, competitiveness, and altruism, which correlate with divergent labour market outcomes. These findings are comprehensively reviewed by [Bertrand \(2011\)](#) and [Croson and Gneezy \(2009\)](#). In contrast, the study of cohort gaps in preferences within economics, and the variation of preferences across different generational groups, remains under-researched.

This section offers a more selected review of the literature on preferences for redistribution, focusing on studies that explicitly address gender and cohort disparities. More specifically, we concentrate on analyses that consider as outcomes either gender disparities in redistributive preferences or examinations of the political gender gap.³ This dual focus is motivated by the recognition that attitudes towards the right extent of redistribution constitute a key discriminatory criterion that distinguishes different positional orientation along the left-right political spectrum. [Table 1](#) presents an overall overview of the surveyed studies, categorized by their focus and main findings.

Extensive evidence indicates a wide gender gap in redistributive preferences, with women, on aggregate, generally showing greater demand for redistributive policies ([Shapiro and Mahajan 1986](#); [Ravallion and Lokshin 2000](#); [Corneo and Grüner 2002](#); [Alesina and La Ferrara 2005](#); [Alesina and Giuliano 2011](#); [Luttmer and Singhal 2011](#); [Guillaud 2013](#); [Roth and Wohlfart 2018](#); [Kourtellos and Petrou 2022](#))⁴ and also leaning more towards left-wing ideologies in both the USA and Europe ([Inglehart and Norris 2000](#); [Edlund and Pande 2002](#); [Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006](#); [Giger 2009](#)). Many scholars have also explored the mechanisms that might be at stake in producing such differences. [Gärtner et al. \(2017\)](#) find that gender differences in preferences for redistribution are influenced by individual risk preferences. [Alvarez and McCaffery \(2003\)](#) further argue that women are more likely to support expanded spending on education and social security, whereas men are more likely to favour tax cut or reductions in national debt.⁵ [Bozzano et al. \(2024\)](#) investigate the impact of country-level gender equality on redistributive preferences, finding that historically gender-equal countries have more redistributive tax systems and that, in these countries, women are significantly more supportive of redistribution than men, with political equality being the key driver of this disparity.

From the experimental literature, similar results are obtained. [Buser et al. \(2020\)](#) show that women are generally less competitive than men, and this difference in competitiveness is influenced by social norms and cultural factors. Being less overconfident in their abilities than men, women tend to underestimate their future income prospects and rely more on government intervention as insurance mechanism. According to [Durante et al. \(2014\)](#), instead, the reason is to be found in women's higher levels of altruism and greater preferences for equality. Also, [Ranehill and Weber \(2022\)](#) find that gender gaps in social preferences, such as altruism, and risk-taking behaviour, with men generally exhibiting higher levels of risk-taking than women, translate into a gender voting gap, where women are more likely to vote for more egalitarian redistribution. Contrary findings are observed, instead, in studies conducted by [Assandri et al. \(2008\)](#) and [Beraldo et al. \(2022\)](#), always employing laboratory experiments. These studies reveal instances where men exhibit greater inclinations towards redistribution compared to women, diverging from the prevailing trend in gender-based redistributive preferences.

³ The political gender gap refers to systematic differences in political attitudes, preferences, and behaviors between men and women. These differences can manifest in various ways, including voting patterns, policy preferences, party affiliation, and political engagement.

⁴ It is worth highlighting that these results are mostly reached only including a dummy indicator for females in the empirical analysis, without any attempt to disaggregate women by other characteristics and differences within the women sub-sample.

⁵ The vast literature on the political economy of taxation and the welfare state underscores the transformative impact of women's increased representation in politics, post-female suffrage, on public spending choices, particularly in favour of gender-sensitive policies such as health, child support, social protection, education, and welfare. [Hessami and Lopes da Fonseca \(2020\)](#) provide a comprehensive literature on this point.

Table 1. Literature review on gender and age: main contributions

Paper	Focus	Expl. var(s)	Role	Method	Result
Alesina and Giuliano (2011) . Preferences For Redistribution	Preferences for redistribution	Gender and age	Controls	General Social Survey for USA from 1972 to 2004 WVS for a set of countries. Four waves from 1981 to 2004	Women are <i>more</i> pro-redistribution than men. Age displays an inverted U-shaped relationship
Ashok et al. (2015) . Support for Redistribution in an Age of Rising Inequality: New Stylized Facts and Some Tentative Explanations	Preferences for redistribution	Age (and gender)	Determinant	Survey data for USA and other OECD countries from 1972 to 2010	Age shows an inverted-U relationship with preferences for redistribution
Bozzano et al. (2024) . Women's Voice on Redistribution: From Gender Equality to Equalizing Taxation	Preferences for redistribution	Gender	Determinant	European Social Survey for 34 European countries from 2002 to 2016	Women are <i>more</i> pro-redistribution than men when gender equality is stronger
Corneo and Grüner (2002) . Individual Preferences for Political Redistribution	Preferences for redistribution	Gender and age	Controls	International Social Survey Program 1992 for 12 countries	Women are <i>more</i> pro-redistribution than men. Individuals become <i>more</i> pro-redistributive while aging
Edlund and Svallfors (2012) . Cohort, Class and Attitudes to Redistribution in Two Liberal Welfare States: Britain and the United States, 1996–2006	Preferences for redistribution	Age	Determinant	International Social Survey Program for UK and USA from 1996 to 2006	Cohorts differences are small, suggesting convergence over time
Guillaud (2013) . Preferences for Redistribution: An Empirical Analysis Over 33 Countries	Preferences for redistribution	Gender	Control	International Social Survey Program 2006 for 33 countries	Women are more pro-redistributive redistribution than men

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Table 1. (continued)

Paper	Focus	Expl. var(s)	Role	Method	Result
Keely and Tan (2008) . Understanding Preferences for Income Redistribution	Preferences for redistribution	Gender and age	Determinants	General Social Survey for USA from 1978 to 2000	Young women (with low SES) are 'the most' redistributive category
Ravallion and Lokshin (2000) . Who Wants to Redistribute? The Tunnel Effect in 1990s Russia	Preferences for redistribution	Gender and age	Determinants	Russian Longitudinal Monitoring Survey in 1996	Women and the elderly are 'more' pro-redistribution
Alesina and La Ferrara (2005) . Preferences For Redistribution In the Land of Opportunities	Preferences for redistribution and future income prospects	Gender and age	Determinants	General Social Survey for USA from 1972 to 1994 PSID	Overall, women are 'more' pro-redistribution than men. Individuals become <i>less</i> pro-redistributive while aging
Assandri et al. (2018) . Risk Attitudes and Preferences for Redistribution: New Evidence from the Lab.	Preferences for redistribution and risk attitudes	Gender and age	Controls	Lab experiment with Italian university students in 2015	Women are 'less' pro-redistribution than men
Beraldo et al. (2022) . The Importance of the Future when Deciding Levels of Personal Responsibility and Demand for Redistribution	Preferences for redistribution, individual effort, and future income prospects	Gender and age	Controls	Lab experiment with Italian university students	Women exhibit an optimal tax rate 'lower' than men. Younger individuals are 'more' pro-redistribution than older ones
Durante et al. (2014) . Preferences for Redistribution and Perception of Fairness: An Experimental Study	Preferences for redistribution and perception of fairness	Gender	Control	Lab experiment with American university students	Women tend to choose 'higher' taxes than men
Gärner et al. (2017) . Individual Risk Preferences and the Demand for Redistribution	Preferences for redistribution and risk aversion	Gender and age	Controls	Individual level survey data for Sweden in 2011	Women and the elderly are 'more' pro-redistribution since they are more risk averse

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Table 1. (continued)

Paper	Focus	Expl. var(s)	Role	Method	Result
Kourtellis and Petrou (2022). The Role of Social Interactions in Preferences for Redistribution	Preferences for redistribution and social interactions	Gender	Controls	General Social Survey for USA from 1972 to 2014	Women are 'more' pro-redistribution than men
Luttmer (2001). Group Loyalty and the Taste for Redistribution	Preferences for redistribution and group loyalty	Gender and age	Controls	General Social Survey and decennial censuses for USA	Young women are more pro-redistribution than married women. The support for redistribution declines with age
Luttmer and Singhal (2011). Culture, Context, and the Taste for Redistribution	Preferences for redistribution and culture	Gender and age	Controls	European Social Survey 1–3 rounds for at least 17 countries from 2002 to 2007	Women are 'more' pro-redistribution than men. Individuals become 'more' pro-redistribution while aging
Roth and Wohlfart (2018). Experienced Inequality and Preferences for Redistribution	Preferences for redistribution and experienced inequality	Gender and age	Controls	US General Social Survey 1972–2014 German General Social Survey 1980–2014, and European Social Survey 2002–2014	Women are 'more' pro-redistribution than men. Older individuals are 'more' redistributive than younger ones
Svallfors (1997). Worlds of Welfare and Attitudes to Redistribution: A Comparison of Eight Western Nations	Preferences for redistribution and welfare regime types	Gender	Determinant	International Social Survey Program 1992 for eight countries	Women are 'more' in favour of redistribution and 'less' in favour of large differences in income than men, within all the countries and across welfare regime types
Alvarez and McCaffery (2003). Are there Sex Differences in Fiscal Political Preferences?	Gender gap in fiscal political preferences	Gender (and age)	Determinant (and control)	Original individual level survey data for USA from 1999 to 2000	Women were 'more' likely to support expanded spending on education and social security. Men were far 'more' likely to support tax cuts or national debt cut

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Table 1. (continued)

Paper	Focus	Expl. var(s)	Role	Method	Result
Buser et al. (2020) . Overconfidence and Gender Gaps in Redistributive Preferences: Cross-Country Experimental Evidence	Gender gap in preferences for redistribution and overconfidence	Gender	Determinant	Lab experiment in multiple locations in USA and Europe	Women are 'more' pro-redistribution than men, since they are less over confident than men in their abilities, thus in their future income
Ranehill and Weber (2022) . Gender Preference Gaps and Voting for Redistribution	Gender gap in preferences and voting for redistribution	Gender (and age)	Determinant (and control)	Lab experiment with Swiss university students	Women vote for 'more' egalitarian redistribution than men
Shapiro and Mahajan (1986) . Gender Differences in Policy Preferences: A Summary of Trends from the 1960s to the 1980s	Gender gap in policy preferences (for example income redistribution and social welfare)	Gender	Determinant	Individual level survey data Different sources for USA from the 1960s to the 1980s	In the investigated period, women have become 'more' supportive for redistributive policies
Shorrocks and Grasso (2020) . The Attitudinal Gender Gap Across Generations: Support for Redistribution and Government Spending in Contexts of High and Low Welfare Provision	Gender gap in preferences for redistribution across generation and the role of welfare provision	Gender and age	Determinants	British Election Studies American National Election Studies and International Social Survey Program for UK and USA from 1982 to 2016	The gender gap widens (narrows) in lower (higher) provision welfare states across generations
Edlund and Pande (2002) . Why have Women Become Left-Wing? The Political Gender Gap and the Decline in Marriage	Political gender gap	Gender (and age)	Determinant (and control)	National Election Studies Current population survey for USA from 1964 to 1996	In the investigated period, women have become 'more' left-wing than men. Older individuals are 'more' likely to be left-wing

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Table 1. (continued)

Paper	Focus	Expl. var(s)	Role	Method	Result
Giger (2009). Towards a Modern Gender Gap in Europe?: A Comparative Analysis of Voting Behavior in 12 countries	Political gender gap	Gender	Determinant	Longitudinal cross-national design Eurobarometer for 12 countries from 1974 to 2000	Overall, women become 'more' left-wing than men. Younger women are 'more' left-wing than older ones
Inglehart and Norris (2000). The Developmental Theory of the Gender Gap: Women's and Men's Voting Behavior in Global Perspective	Political gender gap	Gender and age	Determinants	World Value Survey for 36 countries from 1980 to 1995	Overall, women become 'more' left-wing than men. Younger (older) women are 'more (less)' left-wing than men
Iversen and Rosenbluth (2006). The Political Economy of Gender: Explaining Cross-National Variation in the Gender Division of Labor and the Gender Voting Gap	Gender division of labour and gender voting gap	Gender (and age)	Determinant (and control)	International Social Survey Program for 10 countries in 1994 and 1996	Women are moving to the left politically. They show 'higher' social policy preferences than men

The findings on the influence of age on preferences for redistribution are mixed. Some studies suggest that individuals become more supportive of redistribution as they age (Ravallion and Lokshin 2000; Corneo and Grüner 2002; Luttmer and Singhal 2011; Gärtner *et al.* 2017; Roth and Wohlfart 2018). Conversely, other research indicates that older people are less supportive of redistribution (Luttmer 2001; Alesina and La Ferrara 2005; Beraldo *et al.* 2022), while Alesina and Giuliano (2011) and Ashok *et al.* (2015) propose a U-shaped relationship. Finally, Edlund and Svallfors (2012) find that cohort differences are minimal and tend to converge over time.

The interaction between gender and age in shaping preferences for redistribution remains even less explored. Nonetheless, the limited findings indicate notable trends. Keely and Tan (2008) identify young women of low socioeconomic status as the most supportive of redistributive policies. Luttmer (2001) further specifies that young women are generally more pro-redistributive than their married counterparts. Additionally, younger women exhibit a stronger left-wing orientation compared to men, a phenomenon referred to as the ‘modern gender gap’ and originally put forward by Inglehart and Norris (2000), also recently confirmed by Giger (2009), among others. What is more, in recent decades, women have increasingly aligned with leftist ideologies across advanced industrial societies compared to the past. These findings are further analysed in relation to the welfare regimes within which preferences are formed. Shorrocks and Grasso (2020) study the attitudinal gender gap across generations in two distinct welfare regimes, the USA and the UK, and conclude that in contexts with limited welfare provision, such as the USA, women exhibit greater support for social spending and redistribution compared to men. However, as welfare provision increases, women’s preferences for social spending and redistribution may converge with those of men, potentially narrowing the gender gap among younger generations, as observed in the UK.

3. Stylized Facts on Heterogeneity in Preferences for Redistribution

In this section, we present some stylized facts on preferences for redistribution and their heterogeneity *between* women and men, and *within* women and men. We employ data from the ESS, an academically driven cross-national survey gathering information on attitudes and behaviours, and covering a wide array of European countries over a very long period from 2002 to 2022 (that is, 10 rounds conducted every 2 years).⁶ On the whole, the participating countries are 39, although the actual number of countries in each round does vary.⁷

We measure the preferences for redistribution by referring to the answer to the question—repeated across all rounds of the ESS—about whether, according to the respondent, the government should reduce income differences among citizens. The original variable is called *gincdif*. We reverse the scale such that it takes on values from 1 (Disagree strongly) to 5 (Agree strongly).

Figure 1 illustrates the temporal trends in average preferences for redistribution, distinguishing between female and male respondents (panel A) and between age groups (panel B). Comparing the initial and final periods, there is an overall increase in average preferences for redistribution. Additionally, on aggregate, women consistently exhibit higher levels of redistributive preferences compared to men, and this gender disparity remains relatively constant over time. On the other hand, on average, attitudes towards redistribution

⁶ <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/>

⁷ Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK participated in all 10 rounds; Austria, Czech Republic, and Estonia to 9 rounds; Denmark to 8 rounds; Israel, Lithuania, and Slovakia to 7 rounds; Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Italy to 6 rounds; Greece, Iceland, Russia, and Ukraine to 5 rounds; Croatia and Latvia to 4 rounds; Albania, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey to 2 rounds; Kosovo and North Macedonia to 1 round.

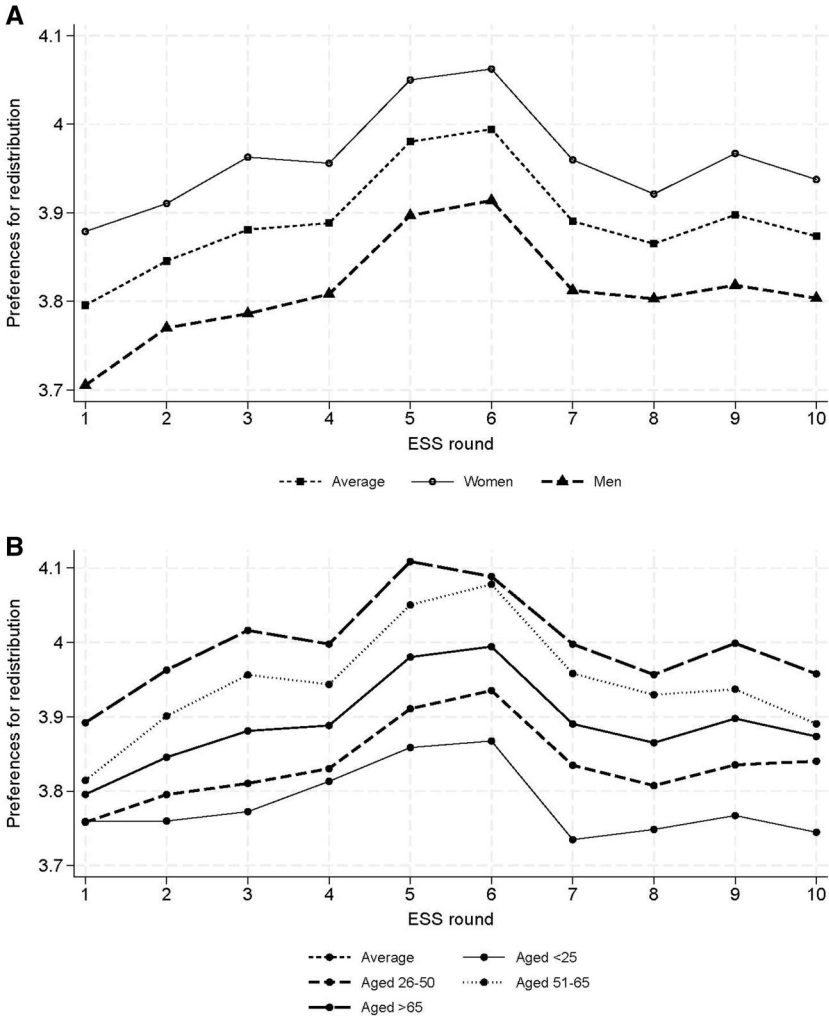


Figure 1. Gender and generational gaps in preferences for redistribution: 2002–2022. Preferences for redistribution are averages by ESS round and by gender and age groups. The first ESS round was from 2002 to 2004, and the last round was from 2020 to 2022.

increase while ageing. The generational gap widens, since elderly become more redistributive over time, while for young respondents, the contrary holds. This observation prompts an intriguing inquiry: who comprises these highly redistributive women (and these less redistributive men)? Do they hold different stances towards redistribution according to their age and other individual characteristics? Is there a role for country-level contextual variables? In other words, it becomes interesting to scrutinize the heterogeneity in preferences for redistribution between genders, as well as within genders. This examination entails delving into some well-established determinants of the demand for redistribution as delineated in extant literature, both at the individual and at the country levels.

Descriptive statistics of all the variables included in the analysis are shown in [Table 2](#), both for all respondents and by gender. We also report the correlation matrices of

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

	All			Men			Women		
	Mean	Std. Dev	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Max
Preferences for redistribution	3.89	1.02	5.00	3.96	0.98	5.00	3.82	1.07	5.00
Female dummy	0.54	0.50	1.00	0.47	0.50	1.00	0.55	0.50	1.00
Age	48.51	18.63	110.00	47.78	18.48	13.00	49.13	18.73	14.00
Household income	5.47	2.76	12.00	5.21	2.75	1.00	5.76	2.73	1.00
Education	3.20	1.89	5.00	3.18	1.84	1.00	3.22	1.93	1.00
Political ideology	5.11	2.26	10.00	5.04	2.23	0.00	5.19	2.29	10.00
Marital status									
Single	0.28	0.45	1.00	0.25	0.43	0.00	0.32	0.47	1.00
Married	0.52	0.50	1.00	0.50	0.50	0.00	0.55	0.50	1.00
Divorced	0.10	0.30	1.00	0.11	0.31	0.00	0.08	0.28	1.00
Widowed	0.10	0.30	1.00	0.14	0.35	0.00	0.05	0.21	1.00
Age groups									
Youth	0.13	0.33	1.00	0.13	0.33	0.00	0.14	0.35	1.00
Adult	0.37	0.48	1.00	0.40	0.49	0.00	0.40	0.49	1.00
Mature adult	0.23	0.42	1.00	0.25	0.43	0.00	0.25	0.43	1.00
Elderly	0.27	0.44	1.00	0.23	0.42	0.00	0.21	0.40	1.00
Generations									
Z Generation	0.02	0.15	1.00	0.02	0.15	0.00	0.03	0.16	1.00
Millennials	0.16	0.37	1.00	0.17	0.37	0.00	0.19	0.39	1.00
X Generation	0.23	0.42	1.00	0.25	0.43	0.00	0.25	0.43	1.00
Boomers	0.29	0.45	1.00	0.31	0.46	0.00	0.31	0.46	1.00
Silent Generation	0.16	0.36	1.00	0.17	0.38	0.00	0.16	0.37	1.00
Country-level variables									
Gini index	29.22	3.94	40.00	·	·	·	·	·	·
per capita GNI	40401.82	13887.33	6920.56	93173.95	·	·	·	·	·
Gender Equality Index	0.87	0.08	0.47	0.99	·	·	·	·	·
Country's religiosity	4.68	1.04	2.11	7.67	·	·	·	·	·

Table 3. Correlation matrix: preferences for redistribution and individual-level variables

Variables	Preferences for redistribution		Preferences for redistribution		Female dummy	Age	HH income	Education	Political ideology	Single	Married	Divorced
	redistribution	female	redistribution	male								
Female dummy	0.073***	0	0.074***	0.036***	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Age	0.075***	-0.173***	0.212***	-0.100***	-0.205***	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
HH income	-0.198***	-0.081***	-0.100***	-0.011***	-0.111***	0.252***	.	.	.	.	.	.
Education	-0.091***	-0.137***	-0.195***	-0.032***	0.022***	0.043***	-0.010***	.	.	.	.	.
Political ideology	-0.168***	-0.044***	-0.029***	-0.079***	-0.565***	-0.1019***	0.016***	-0.032***	.	.	.	.
Single	-0.042***	-0.014***	0.011***	-0.053***	0.220***	0.235***	0.038***	0.037***	-0.656***	.	.	.
Married	-0.006***	0.022***	0.008***	0.046***	0.079***	-0.108***	0.026***	-0.018***	-0.207***	-0.343***	.	.
Divorced	0.019***	0.054***	0.030***	0.164***	0.408***	-0.255***	-0.116***	0.004**	-0.207***	-0.343***	-0.343***	.
Widowed	0.055***											-0.108***

*** p-value > 0.01, ** p-value > 0.05.

Table 4. Correlation matrix: preferences for redistribution and country-level variables

Variables	Preferences for redistribution	Preferences for redistribution female	Preferences for redistribution male	Gini index	Per capita GNI	Gender Equality Index
Gini index	0.123***	0.112***	0.132***	.	.	.
Per capita GNI	-0.173***	-0.161***	-0.180***	-0.399***	.	.
Gender Equality Index	-0.134***	-0.121***	-0.143***	-0.389***	0.723***	.
Country's Religiosity	0.132***	0.122***	0.141***	0.240***	-0.258***	-0.247***

*** p-value <0.01.

preferences for redistribution and individual- and macro-level variables, shown in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

3.1 Individual-level characteristics: trends by sub-groups

Initially, we investigate how demand for redistribution varies disaggregating the female and male sub-samples of respondents according to a set of individual-level characteristics: income, education, political ideology, marital status, and age.⁸ For each of the these characteristics, we compute the average preferences for redistribution for each sub-sample of female and male respondents we are specifically looking at in each ESS round.

We first examine household income. Although the ESS does not provide specific information on respondents' personal income, it includes a variable, *hinctnt*, which categorizes households' total net income from all sources into 12 increasing classes. For our analysis, we distinguish between top and bottom household income for both women and men. Specifically, we classify top income respondents if their household's total net income falls within class 10 or higher, capturing approximately the richest 10% of respondents. Conversely, we classify bottom income respondents if their household's total net income falls within class 2 or lower, representing roughly the poorest 20% of the respondents. As illustrated in Figure 2A, women in bottom-income households express the highest preferences for redistribution on average, while men in top-income households show the lowest preferences. Furthermore, the gender gap in preferences for redistribution decreases, not only within the same income category, that is, between women and men in bottom (or top) income households, but also between the most diverging bottom-income women and top-income men.

The second individual characteristic we investigate is education. For both women and men, we create three sub-samples based on educational attainment: low educated, secondary educated, and highly educated. The ESS variable, *edulvula*, is coded on an increasing scale reflecting the respondent's education level. In some rounds, both the name and the ranking of this variable change, so we standardized them to match the reference variable. In our analysis, we classify respondents as low educated if their score on the original variable is 1 or 2; as secondary educated if it is 3 or 4; and as highly educated if it is higher than 4. Figure 2B shows that, on average, low educated women exhibit the highest preferences for redistribution. Over time, the preferences of secondary educated women converge with those of low educated men, and similarly, the preferences of highly educated women align with those of secondary educated men, indicating a convergence of women's preferences towards those of men. Finally, highly educated men display the lowest preferences for redistribution, though they show an increase in average preferences over time, contributing to the reduction of the gap with low educated women.

⁸ To be noticed that income, education, and marital status are generally highly related to age.

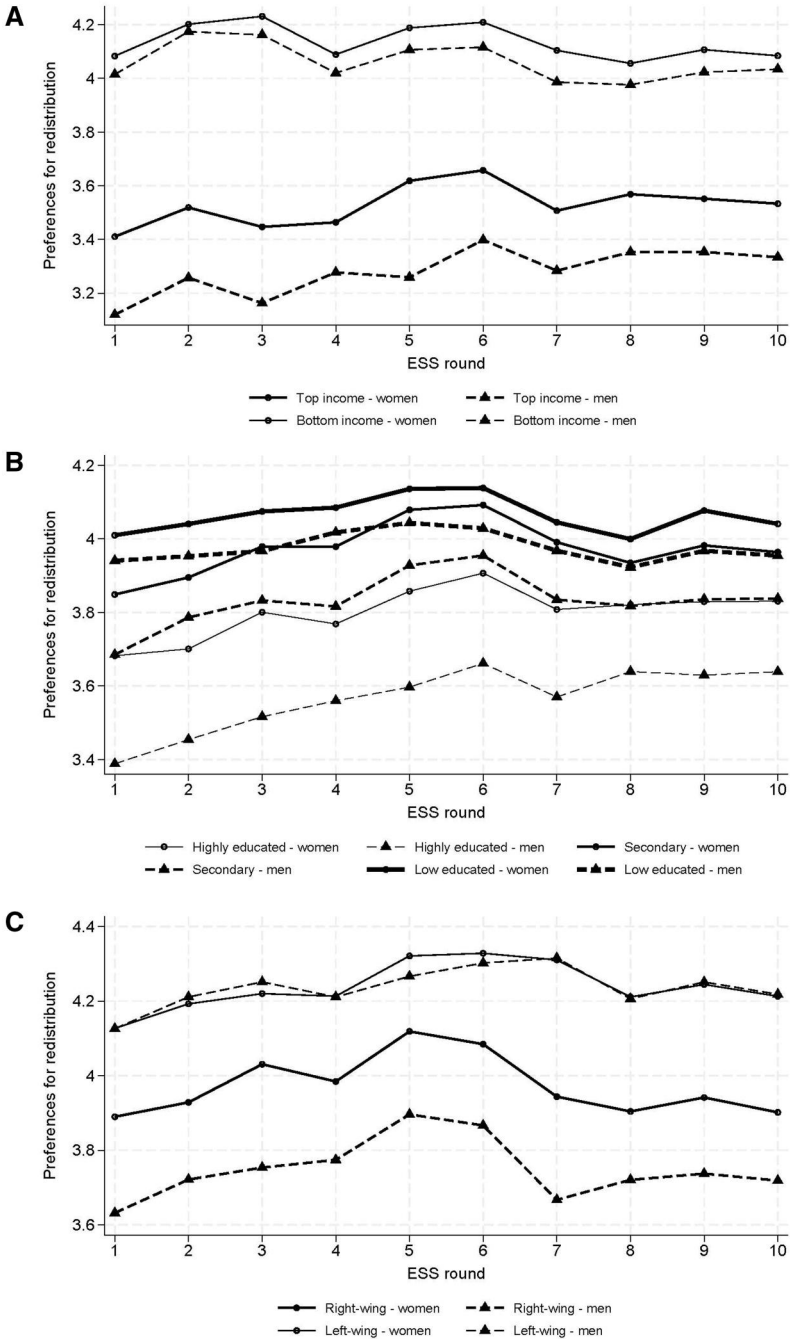


Figure 2. Gender gaps in preferences for redistribution and the role of income, education, and political ideology: 2002–2022. Preferences for redistribution are averages by ESS round and by gender, income, education, and political ideology. In panels (A–C), the average preferences for redistribution for women and men are distinguished by income, education, and political ideology, respectively. The first ESS round was from 2002 to 2004, and the last round was from 2020 to 2022.

Political ideology is another individual attitude that can play a relevant role in orienting preferences for redistribution among both women and men. Consequently, we differentiate between right-wing and left-wing respondents of both genders. The ESS variable, *lrscale*, represents the respondent's 'Placement on left-right scale', ranging from 0 (Left) to 10 (Right). For our analysis, left-wing respondents are defined as those who place themselves at 2 or below on the political spectrum, while right-wing respondents are those who place themselves at 8 or above. Notably, there is no discernible difference in preferences for redistribution between left-wing women and left-wing men; both groups consistently exhibit strong support for redistribution, with a slightly increasing trend over time (see Figure 2C). In contrast, a clear gender gap exists between right-wing women and right-wing men, although this gap has mildly narrowed over time. Right-wing women, on average, are significantly more supportive of redistribution than their male counterparts.

Next, we look at the heterogeneity in preferences for redistribution related to both the respondent's gender and marital status, categorized as single, married, divorced or separated, and widowed.⁹ The ESS variable used for this classification is *marital*. Since the name and ranking of this variable change across some ESS rounds, we standardize them to match the reference variable. Our analysis reveals that, at the beginning of the period (that is, in ESS round 1), men were less supportive of redistribution than women, regardless of their marital status (see Figure 3). This trend persists over the years, with the exception of widowed men, whose preferences for redistribution show a significant, though not continuous, increase. By the final ESS round, widowed men's preferences surpass those of divorced women, becoming very similar to their counterparts. Widowed women are the most supportive of redistribution, although, over time, their preferences converge to those of divorced women. In contrast, the gap in redistributive preferences between widowed and divorced men has widened. Additionally, the initial substantial gap in preferences between single and married individuals, for both women and men, has disappeared by the last ESS round, with both groups now exhibiting above-average preferences for redistribution. However, single and married women still demonstrate higher redistributive preferences compared to their male counterparts.

Figure 4A and B analyse gender gaps in preferences for redistribution by age groups and generations, respectively.¹⁰ Respondents are first categorized into four age groups: Youth (25 years or younger), Adult (26–50 years), Mature Adult (51–65 years), and Elderly (66 years or older). Within each cohort, men are less redistributive than women (see Figure 4A). Among both women and men, the youth group shows the least support for redistribution, while the elderly group shows the most. Over the investigated period, the gender gap among young individuals has widened. This is because the average preferences for redistribution of young men has decreased from the first to the last ESS round, while those of young women have remained relatively stable. Conversely, the gender gap among elderly respondents has decreased over time, primarily due to a significant increase in the average preference for redistribution of elderly men.

Moving to the study of generations allows us to investigate a different type of heterogeneity compared to age groups. A respondent belonging to a specific age cohort in the first ESS round (for example, a young respondent in 2002) differs significantly from a respondent of the same age cohort in the last ESS round (for example, a young respondent in 2022). Therefore, we categorize respondents into five generational cohorts: Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012, not shown in Figure 4B due to the small number of respondents), Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), and the Silent Generation (born between 1928 and 1945). As Figure 4B shows, men are consistently less supportive of redistribution than women within each generation. Both the Silent Generation and Baby

⁹ In the coding of the ESS variable, single corresponds to the category never married.
¹⁰ The ESS variable for the respondent's age is *agea*.

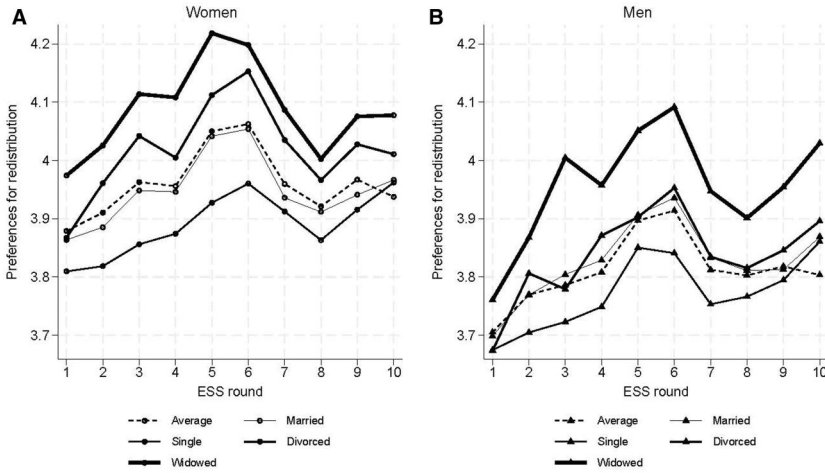


Figure 3. Gender gaps in preferences for redistribution and the role of legal marital status: 2002–2022. Preferences for redistribution are averages by ESS round and by gender and legal marital status. In panel (A) and (B), the average preferences for redistribution are shown separately for women and men, respectively. The first ESS round was from 2002 to 2004, and the last round was from 2020 to 2022.

Boomers exhibit above-average preferences for redistribution among both genders. Looking at women, the preferences of the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers converge over time, whereas this convergence is less pronounced for men. Consequently, the gender gap among Boomers, initially smaller than that among the Silent Generation, becomes larger in the last period. Millennials' preferences increasingly resemble those of Generation X, with this convergence occurring earlier for male respondents. For both Millennials and Generation X, the gender gap observed in the initial period remains relatively unchanged in the final period.

3.2 Country-level variables: the role of the context

We now turn to some stylized facts on heterogeneity in preferences for redistribution between women and men in relation to macroeconomic contextual variables, that is, income inequality, wealth, gender equality, and religiosity. More precisely, for each ESS round and for each country, we compute the averages of the preferences for redistribution for both female and male respondents and we (unconditionally) plot these averages to the various country-level variables.

We start by considering income inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient of equalized disposable income, and sourced from the ESS Data Portal, ESS Multilevel Data. This country-level variable ranges from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating greater income inequality.¹¹ In Figure 5A, we show that the average preferences for redistribution among both women and men increase with higher levels of the Gini coefficient, confirming the well-known finding that greater income inequality corresponds to stronger support for redistribution. However, the gender gap in these preferences tends to diminish as the Gini coefficient rises. This suggests that in countries with higher levels of income inequality, women and men show more similar levels of support for redistribution.

In Figure 5B, we look at per capita Gross National Income (GNI), measured in thousand dollars. Data are taken from UNDP.¹² The analysis reveals a negative relationship between

¹¹ The Gini coefficient is available from 2002 to 2020.

¹² UNDP All composite index and components time series (1990–2021), <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/documentation-and-downloads>

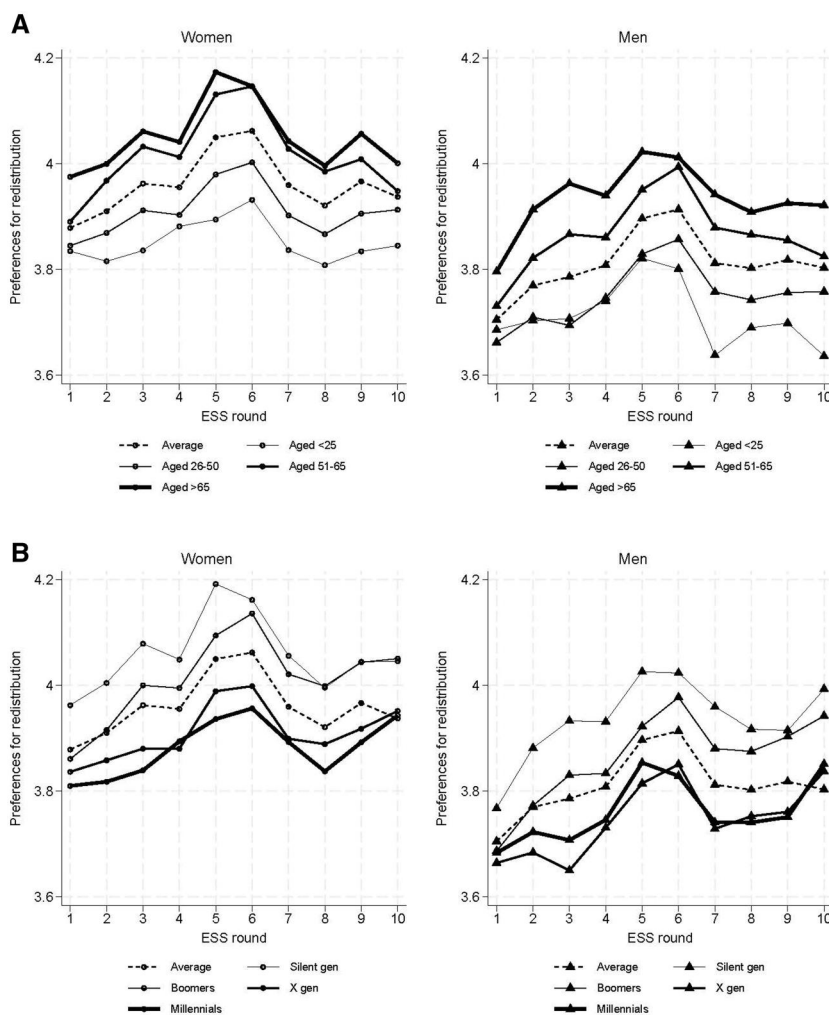


Figure 4. Gender gaps in preferences for redistribution by age groups and generations: 2002–2022. Preferences for redistribution are averages by ESS round and by gender, age group, and generation. In panels (A) and (B), the average preferences for redistribution for women and men are shown separately and distinguished by age groups and generations, respectively. The first ESS round was from 2002 to 2004, and the last round was from 2020 to 2022.

average preferences for redistribution among both women and men and per capita GNI. Specifically, men consistently exhibit lower preferences for redistribution compared to women, and this gender gap widens as per capita GNI increases. In poorer countries, both men and women, particularly women, express higher preferences for redistribution than in richer countries. Additionally, an increase in a country’s per capita GNI is associated with a decline in the demand for redistribution, more markedly among men.

When looking instead at the relationship with gender equality, we introduce the Gender Equality Index (GEI). This index is derived from the UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index, which combines the following dimensions of gender-based disadvantage: the labour market, education, empowerment, and reproductive health. We reverse the original index such that the GEI now ranges from zero (minimum equality) to 1 (maximum equality). Thus,

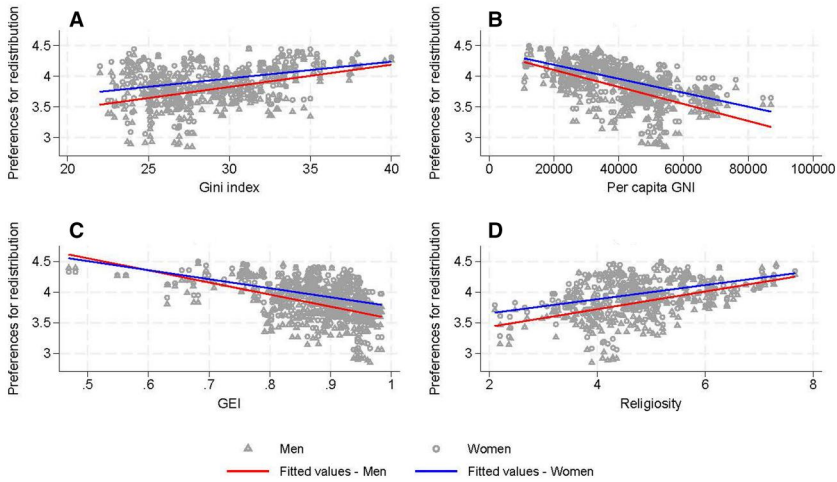


Figure 5. Gender gaps in preferences for redistribution and the role of country-level variables: 2002–2022. Preferences for redistribution are averages by ESS round and by country and gender. Fitted lines are based on averaged data. The scatter plots show the unconditional cross-country correlation between the country's average preferences for redistribution of women and men and the Gini index, per capita GNI, Gender equality index (GEI), and country's religiosity, respectively. The first ESS round was from 2002 to 2004, and the last round was from 2020 to 2022.

Figure 5C shows that there exists a negative relationship between the average redistributive preferences and the GEI. However, in contrast to the pattern observed for per capita GNI, in countries characterized by low gender equality, the gender gap in preferences for redistribution is reversed, with women exhibiting slightly less support for redistribution compared to men. When the GEI approaches a value of approximately 0.6, no discernible gender gap in redistributive preferences is observed. As the GEI increases, women tend to decrease their demand for redistribution at a slower rate than men, leading to a widening of the gender gap in preferences for redistribution. This is in line with what found by [Bozzano *et al.* \(2024\)](#): in more gender-equal countries, it seems to happen that the gender gap in preferences for redistribution becomes 'socially' allowed to emerge, also acknowledged by the 'resource hypothesis' in a different setting ([Falk and Hermle 2018](#)). In other words, women in more gender-equal environments come to exhibit a stronger 'voice' and show higher preferences for redistribution than men.¹³

For each participating country in each ESS round, we also compute an aggregate measure of the country's religiosity by averaging individual responses to the question: 'How religious are you?'. The ESS variable is called *rlgdgr* and takes on values from 0 to 10, with higher scores indicating greater religiosity. Our analysis in Figure 5D reveals a pattern analogous to that observed in Figure 5A. Specifically, for countries with low levels of religiosity, women and men exhibit a greater dissimilarity in their preferences for less redistribution compared to countries with higher levels of religiosity, where both genders

¹³ It is worth highlighting that Figure 5C shows the unconditional (negative) cross-country correlation between the country's average preferences for redistribution of women and men and the GEI. The same pattern is also found in [Bozzano *et al.* \(2024\)](#) making use of a slightly different indicator of gender equality, the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), computed by the World Economic Forum. Their empirical analysis specifies that this relationship is not statistically significant at ordinary confidence levels, after having partialled out the correlation of both variables with per capita GDP, a relevant confounding factor strongly and negatively correlated with average redistributive preferences. At the same time, the relationship between the GGGI and the gender gap in redistributive preferences is positive and strongly significant. Thus, the increasing gender gap in more gender-equal environments is driven by women being more favorable about redistribution, rather than men going in the opposite direction.

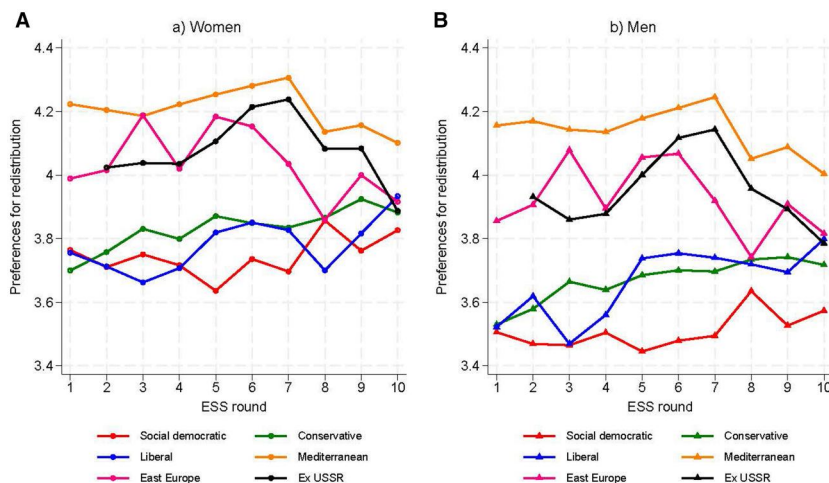


Figure 6. Gender gaps in preferences for redistribution and the role of welfare systems: 2002–2022. Preferences for redistribution are averages by ESS round and by gender and welfare system. In panels (A) and (B), the average preferences for redistribution are shown separately for women and men. The first round was from 2002 to 2004, and the last round was from 2020 to 2022.

tend to express greater support for redistribution. This evidence contradicts existing literature, which generally indicates a negative correlation between religiosity and support for social spending (for example, [Scheve and Stasavage, 2006](#)). At the same time, this evidence suggests that men’s preferences for redistribution might be more influenced by secularization compared to women’s preferences.

Finally, the size and main characteristics of the welfare system in the respondents’ countries of residence may be linked to their preference for redistribution. Indeed, the so called ‘regime hypothesis’ posits a country-level correlation between redistributive policies and public welfare attitudes ([Jæger, 2006](#)). To investigate this relationship, we draw on the existing literature to distinguish six different welfare systems within Europe: Social Democratic, Conservative, Liberal, Mediterranean, East European, and Former USSR (see [Esping-Andersen, 1990](#); [Ferrera, 1996](#); [Fenger, 2007](#); [Kudrnáč and Petrúšek, 2022](#)).¹⁴ Overall, this classification is based on the interconnections among states, households, and labour markets. For each ESS round and for each welfare system, we thus compute the average preferences for redistribution among both female and male respondents.

Consistently with [Svallfors \(1997\)](#), a gender gap exists in redistributive preferences within each welfare system (see [Figure 6](#)). In the Mediterranean welfare system, both women and men exhibit the highest preferences for redistribution, with the gender gap being relatively small and gradually decreasing over time. During the first half of the investigated period (that is, until ESS round 5), individuals in the Former USSR welfare system express lower preferences for redistribution compared to those in the East European welfare system. However, this trend reverses in the latter half of the period, and by the end, the gap between these two welfare categories nearly disappears. The average preference in the East European system becomes slightly higher than in the Former USSR system for

¹⁴ Social democratic countries are Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden; Conservative for Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Switzerland; Liberal countries are Ireland and UK; Mediterranean countries are Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain; East Europe countries are Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovak Republic, and Slovenia; and finally Former USSR countries are Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. According to our sources, a number of ESS participating countries could not be included in any of the six welfare state categories. Data on redistributive preferences referred to Former USSR welfare systems start from ESS round 2.

both women and men. In the Conservative welfare system, preferences for redistribution generally increase over time, with similar patterns for both genders, resulting in a relatively stable gender gap. Men in the Liberal system consistently exhibit higher preferences for redistribution than men in the Social Democratic system, who are the least redistributive since ESS round 2. This pattern does not hold for women. Comparing the first and the last period, the gender gap in the Liberal system narrows, while it remains almost unchanged in the Social Democratic system.

In [Figure 7](#), we look at gender gaps in preferences for redistribution, disaggregating them by the most diverse age groups, that is, the youth and the elderly, in different welfare system separately. The above picture becomes even more complicated and highly differentiated among welfare regimes. For instance, in the Mediterranean welfare system, the narrowing of the overall gender gap over time especially reflects the narrowing of the youth gender gap, while old men and women are drifting apart. On the contrary, in the Liberal welfare system, the overall gender gap reduction does not seem to concern the youth cohort for which instead the gender gap strongly widens. Most notably, young women and men have become progressively less similar in their attitudes for redistribution also in Social Democratic and East European welfare systems over time. The opposite holds for Mediterranean and Former USSR welfare regimes.

3.3 Shocks effects: the 2008 financial and economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic

During the investigated period, two exogenous shocks occurred. The first was the financial and economic crisis in 2008 (that is, ESS round 4), and the second was the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 (that is, ESS round 10).¹⁵ Thus, it is relevant to examine how average preferences for redistribution changed following these shocks, and to determine whether any heterogeneity exists in these changes. As shown in [Figure 1A](#), the 2008 financial and economic crisis is associated with an increase in average preferences for redistribution among both women and men, a trend that persists until 2012–2014 (that is, ESS round 6). This finding aligns with the existing literature. For instance, [Olivera \(2014\)](#) observes that the 2008 crisis increased support for redistribution in several European countries, primarily due to the higher levels of unemployment and youth unemployment that followed the crisis. This increase mainly concerns high-income women, while it appears very weak among low-educated men (see [Figure 2A](#) and [B](#)). At the same time, the rise in redistributive preferences is less enduring for both right-wing women and men (see [Figure 2C](#)), as well as for widowed women and single men, with the former being the most redistributive within their group and the latter the least (see [Figure 3](#)). Furthermore, individuals across all age groups and generations exhibit higher redistributive preferences following the economic crisis. However, preferences for redistribution decline most rapidly among women and men in the elderly group and the Silent Generation, as well as men in the youth group and the Millennials generation (see [Figure 4A](#) and [B](#)). Finally, the post-2008 financial and economic crisis increase in average preferences for redistribution is observed across all the welfare systems, except the Social Democratic system. This increase is less enduring in the East European and Conservative regimes (see [Figure 6](#)).

Turning to the second exogenous shock, a comparison between ESS rounds 9 and 10 provides insights into the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and average preferences for redistribution. Generally speaking, [Figure 1A](#) indicates that average preferences for redistribution slightly decrease from 2018 to 2022. Thus, the pandemic shock overall relates to individual attitudes towards redistribution in a manner opposite to the 2008 financial and economic crisis. However, some heterogeneity exists. Specifically, poorer, secondary or highly educated men, and adult men exhibit preferences for redistribution that

¹⁵ For ESS round 4, the fieldwork period extends from August 2008 to February 2011. For ESS round 10, it spans from September 2020 to May 2022.

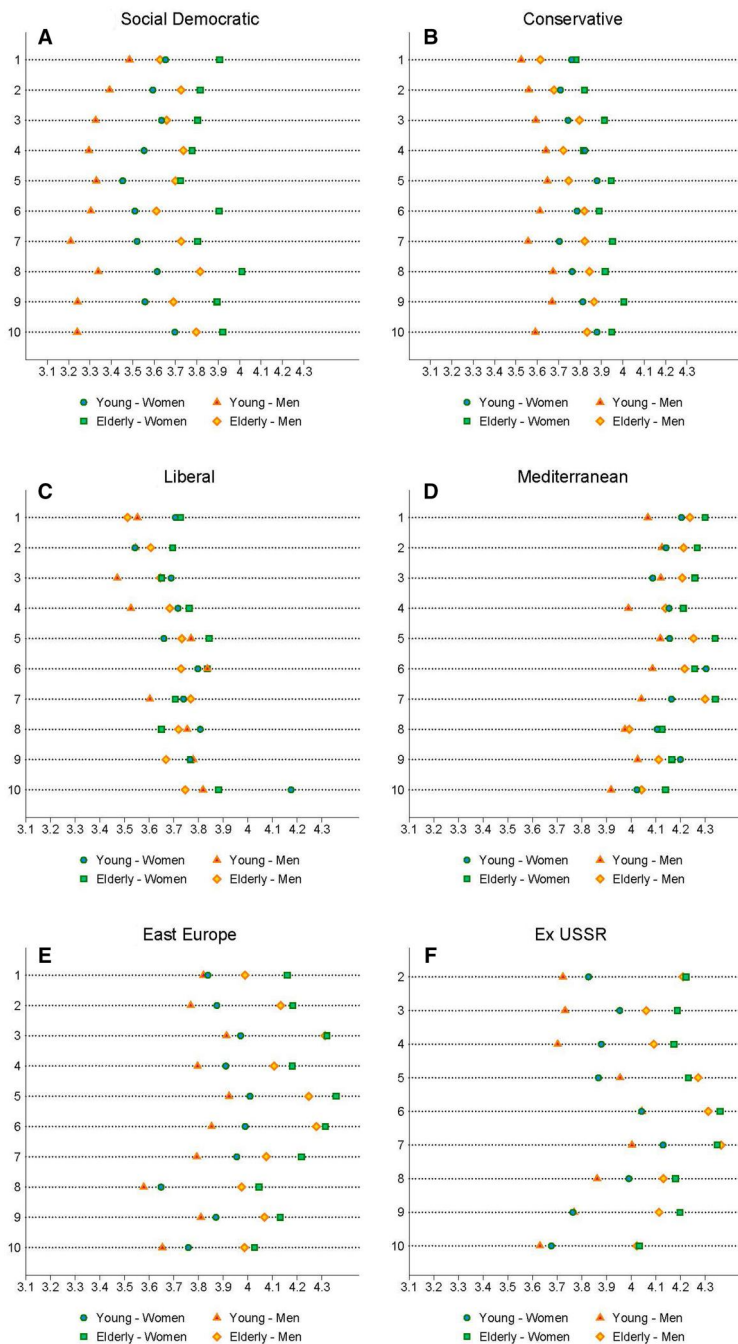


Figure 7. Gender gaps in preferences for redistribution by age groups in different welfare systems: 2002–2022. Preferences for redistribution are averages by ESS round and by gender for the youngest and the oldest age groups in each welfare system. The first ESS round was from 2002 to 2004, and the last round was from 2020 to 2022.

either remain constant or increase very slightly, as do highly educated women, and young and adult women (see Figures 2A and B and 4A). Conversely, there is a pronounced increase in preferences for redistribution among men, irrespective of their marital status or generation. Similarly, this increase is observed among women who are married or single, and who belong to the Millennial or Generation X cohorts, which are the least redistributive over time (see Figures 3 and 4A and B). Finally, for both men and women in Liberal and Social Democratic welfare systems, who are typically less redistributive, the average preferences for redistribution increased after the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 6).

4. Conclusion

Individual preferences for redistribution are determined by complex interactions of factors and what affects these preferences is strongly correlated with gender and age. Our stylized facts confirm that there exist dramatic heterogeneities in preferences for redistribution *between* genders, as well as *within* genders. Notably, the gender gap is consistently larger among respondents with higher household incomes compared to those with lower household incomes. Low educated, widowed, and elderly women are the most redistributive, whereas highly educated, single, and young men are the least redistributive. Over time, within each generation, men are less redistributive than women. When considering political ideology, a gender gap in preferences for redistribution is evident only among right-wing respondents. At the country level, the higher the country's per capita income and gender equality, the higher the overall gender gap in preferences for redistribution. Conversely, the higher the country's income inequality and religiosity, the lower the overall gender gap. A gender gap in redistributive preferences exists across different welfare systems in Europe and, what is more, young women and men are increasingly diverging in their preferences for redistribution in Social Democratic, Liberal, and East European welfare systems, whereas they are becoming more similar in the Mediterranean and former USSR welfare regimes.

Why should we care about gender and generational gaps in preferences for redistribution and policies? Identifying who supports redistribution is the starting point for predicting political behaviour, which in turn translates into voting and representation, and thus into policy outcomes. In democratic regimes, indeed, the policy decisions by elected representatives should, in principle, largely reflect citizens' preferences. But whose preferences? According to the proposed evidence, the answer is not straightforward. It is crucial to understand which are the politically relevant demographic groups whose preferences are translated into policies. This paper represents a first attempt to dig deeper into this complex issue, but additional empirical research is needed in order to shed new light on the stylized facts observed.

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