The politics of inequality and redistribution are a defining theme of our time. This is especially true in the United States and Great Britain, two countries that have experienced a striking growth in income and wealth inequalities since the 1970s. The public’s reaction to rising inequality in these two countries has perplexed many. Some commentators find it surprisingly muted and ponder why support for redistributive policies has not increased. Following President Trump’s election and Brexit, other observers worry that the public’s reaction is forceful, but misguided. According to this latter account, immigrants and racial minorities have become easy scapegoats for voters left behind by globalization and technological change (Inglehart and Norris, 2018).

Asking for More contributes to our understanding of the public’s multifaceted response to rising inequality. It carefully investigates how mass attitudes toward redistributive social policies have changed over time in mature Western Democracies. First, the book documents a striking disconnect between theoretical expectations developed by political economists on the one hand, and attitudinal trends as measured using survey data on the other. Through a close consideration of the limits of models that focus on material interest, the book offers a more general account of the dynamics of social policy preferences in which material interest has “a privileged but not exclusive role” (Elster, 1983, 31). This alternative framework advances the study of mass redistributive preferences in two ways. First, it incorporate fairness judgments into the dominant material self-interest tradition, bridging some of the divide between “material” and “cultural” approaches to political change in the age of inequality. Second, it highlights the key role of the political elite’s competitive struggle for power. The main insight, succinctly put, is that the public’s response to inequality cannot be understood independently of changes in the supply side of politics: within the boundaries set by fairness judgments, what political elites have to say about inequality and redistribution matters as much as the public’s personal experiences with material hardship and inequality.

Asking for More is based on doctoral work that has received the 2016 Mancur Olson Prize for Best Dissertation in Political Economy, awarded by the APSA Political Economy Section. The award committee emphasized its “pioneering contribution” to our understanding of “heterogeneity in public responses to the objective increase in inequality, a major policy and political issue of our time.”

Book Overview

How much should the government redistribute from the rich to the poor? Should the government financially support those who can no longer provide for themselves? How generous should this support be and how should it be funded? Answers to these questions constitute “probably the most important dividing line between the political left and the political right (...) on economic issues” (Alesina and Giuliano, 2011, 94). One prominent line of work starts from the assumption that individuals are self-interested maximizers of material resources. It links differences in how people answer these questions to differences in how much people benefit from redistribution. At the individual level, support for redistributive policies is expected to be inversely proportional to income (Dimick et al. 2012) and wealth (Piketty, 2018). At the country level, popular support should be comparatively higher in countries with a more unequal distribution of income and wealth (Meltzer and Richard, 1981). By extension, support for redistribution is expected to increase as inequality increases, especially among those at the bottom of the income ladder who have the most
to gain from an increase in redistributive spending.

Following a careful gathering and examination of the available longitudinal survey data, I find no evidence that attitudinal trends match these expectations. Despite a sharp growth in income inequality since the 1970s in the United States and Great Britain, support for redistribution in these countries has remained surprisingly stable. In Great Britain, any evidence of change points to a decline in support, paradoxically among low-income individuals. In the United States, there has been a slight increase in support, surprisingly among high-income individuals. Other anomalies emerge from the data. During and following the Great Recession, support for redistribution has increased the most in the country affected the least by the economic downturn, namely Germany. Across Europe, income is a poor predictor of attitudes towards cuts in taxes and social spending. In the United States, while poor Republicans support redistribution more than rich Republicans, there is no similar income difference among people who identify with the Democratic Party: both rich and poor Democrats are supportive of redistribution.

What explains this mismatch between theories that focus on material self-interest and the existing survey data? In the book, I provide a two-parts answer to this question. First, I emphasize the importance of moral reasoning in politics, focusing in particular on fairness considerations in the realm of redistributive politics. In the second part of the book, I turn to the dynamics of mass preferences, focusing on the key role of the supply side of redistributive politics.

Fairness: Why and How it Matters

As documented by research across the social sciences, resource allocation institutions are sustained by a “moral economy,” i.e. a vision of fairness that fosters compliance if respected and can become a “social dynamite” when violated (Binmore, 1998; Scott, 1977; Levi, 1991). Moral psychologists, as well as philosophers, have extensively studied the principles, or norms, at the core of this moral arrangement. In Western democracies, perceptions of fairness echo two concerns. One is the extent to which a given situation departs from the proportionality norm (also called equity norm). The proportionality norm states that individual material rewards should be proportional to individual effort, supplemented by individual features equally accessible to all (e.g. talent, thanks to the genetic lottery, or a degree, assuming a meritocratic educational system). The second concern is the extent to which a given situation departs from the reciprocity norm. The reciprocity norm states that individuals should behave pro-socially if others are behaving in a similar way (Ostrom, 1998).

Building on this literature, I argue that at least two motives are at work in shaping social policy preferences: fairness reasoning and self-interest. I define fairness reasoning as the thought process through which individuals act as if they are a third-party judge ruling on what is fair and what is not. Whether an outcome is perceived as fair depends on how well it fits the norms of reciprocity and proportionality. I further argue that the reciprocity norm is especially important to judge the fairness of the insurance component of the welfare state, i.e. transfers that are targeted to individuals who can no longer provide for themselves. The proportionality norm, on the other hand, is central to debates over the fairness of market outcomes.

In Western societies, agreement with –and reliance on– the proportionality norm and reciprocity norm is quasi-universal. Where individuals differ is in their beliefs about the prevalence of norm-violating outcomes and behaviors. How are such beliefs distributed across and within different populations? On the one hand, voters can hold perceptions of norm violations that align with their own material interest, leading to policy positions that align with economic theory’s expectations (outcome 1). On the other hand, these perceptions can be orthogonal to an individual’s objective material conditions, leading to policy positions disconnected from their own “objective” material interest (outcome 2). I argue that beliefs about violation of the proportionality norm are more likely to be self-serving, while beliefs about violation of the reciprocity norm less likely to
be predicted by one’s economic position. Instead the latter set of beliefs are best predicted by individuals’ position on the liberal-authoritarian continuum (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt, 2012).

One key implication is that individuals’ “fairness beliefs” are two dimensional: they can believe that both norms are being violated, only one of them is, or none is. I argue that an individual’s position on this two-dimensional fairness beliefs space, as predicted by her economic conditions and “moral foundations” (Haidt, 2012), is a form of proto-ideology that voters rely on to interpret redistributive politics.

As a result, introducing fairness concerns alongside self-interest opens the possibility that social policy preferences are at least two-faceted. Workhorse models in political economy treat social policy preferences as uni-dimensional, mapping onto a right-conservative versus left-liberal continuum. Instead, I argue that the importance of fairness beliefs entails distinguishing between two facets of redistribution. One facet is redistribution conceived as giving to the worse-off, especially those who cannot provide for themselves, be it because of unemployment, old age or illness (which I call redistribution to). Because the welfare state is mostly (and increasingly) funded through the taxation of labor income (Kato, 2003), work avoidance is the key issue around which reciprocity concerns crystallize. Jobless individuals, especially if able-bodied, are thus mostly suspect of violating the reciprocity norm. The other facet of redistribution is redistribution conceived as taking from the well-off (which I call redistribution from). The well-off, because they derive the bulk of their income from labor (Smith et al., 2017; Bonnet et al., 2014), are mostly suspect of violating the proportionality norm, namely receiving more in income and contributing less in taxes than their level of personal effort warrants (Benabou and Tirole, 2006).

A third outcome, also examined in the book, is that of voters who hold non self-serving beliefs but temporarily overlook their internal third-party judgment and take policy positions that better serve their own economic interest (outcome 3). This is especially likely with regards to perceptions of violations of the reciprocity norm. Indeed, self-interest and perceptions of free riding often conflict as large portions of the poor (rich) believe free riding to be ubiquitous (rare). I argue that material self-interest overruns beliefs about free riding when the share of income affected by social transfers (if poor) and taxes (if rich) is high.

Using this theoretical framework, the first part of the book describes the ways in which fairness considerations and material self-interest interact and –ultimately– shape mass social policy preferences. In particular, I document how this interaction is itself affected by social policy design. I show how, by factoring in fairness considerations, one can explain the disconnect between income and social policy preferences, and why this disconnect varies across countries, social programs and across parties.

The Dynamic of Mass Social Policy Preferences

In the second part of the book, I build on findings from public opinion research to deductively infer the conditions under which the predictive power of existing models can be expected to increase. More specifically, this requires identifying the conditions under which voters will behave as if rational and self-regarding maximizers of their own income. A key factor is elite-level competition. Indeed, within the boundaries set by fairness considerations, political elites have a lot of latitude. They can choose to emphasize redistribution from the top or redistribution to the bottom, or both. They can also pick any liberal/conservative combination of the two, advocating for taxes on the rich while activating concerns about free riding among the (mostly) undeserving poor free riding on shared resources, or decreasing taxes on the rich while supporting transfers to the (mostly) deserving poor “left behind” by economic change.

I argue that voters who stand to benefit from redistributive spending are more likely to increase their support for redistribution when political elites explicitly compete over distinct redistributive platforms, themselves rooted in sharp disagreements over the fairness of economic outcomes at
the top of the income distribution (i.e. redistribution from). Yet, such a pattern of elite-level competition, while common up until the 1960s, is unlikely to emerge today. What major policy “innovations” of the past three decades have in common is that they frame welfare state reforms around reciprocity concerns which mostly shape support for (or opposition to) redistribution to the jobless and the poor. In the book, I examine several of these innovations, including left-of-center parties’ de-emphasis on taxing the rich and re-emphasis on expanding means-tested programs (e.g. United States, Great Britain and France), welfare to workfare reforms (e.g. United States, Great Britain and Germany), and the populist Far Right’s recent embrace of a large welfare state but only accessible to citizens who have “paid into it” (e.g. France). These policy innovations tap into deeply-held disagreements over the boundaries of social solidarity, themselves based on disagreement over perceptions of violations of the reciprocity norm.

These changes in the supply side of redistributive politics have important implications for attitudinal trends and, ultimately, inequality. First, when elites politicize issues of free riding, support for or opposition to the welfare state is best predicted by one’s position on the liberal/universal versus authoritarian/communal continuum, itself uncorrelated with income. As a result, high-income “bleeding heart” liberals, who believe recipients to be deserving, become increasingly central to anti-retrenchment coalitions. Such trend explains why, even in times of rising inequality, income has not become more predictive of social policy preferences. Second, none of these innovative policy packages is designed to address rising inequality, yet they muster enough electoral support to serve the needs of office-seeking politicians.

By focusing on moral reasoning and on changes in the supply side of redistributive politics, I can better explain the dynamic patterns described above. Germany’s increase in support for redistribution can be traced back to pre-crisis attitudinal trends resulting from an important – and unusual – shift in elite-level competition on redistributive issues. In the United States and Great Britain, policy design and changes in elite-level patterns of electoral competition combine to undermine any straightforward translation of economic conditions into growing demand for redistribution.

**Contribution to Political Science and Political Economy**

*Asking for More* reaches across the full spectrum of relevant literatures, not only in political science and sociology but also in behavioral economics (Henrich et al., 2001; Fehr and Gächter, 2000), evolutionary psychology (Petersen, 2012; Petersen et al., 2012) and moral psychology (Skitka and Tetlock, 1993; Haidt, 2012). Drawing key insights from cutting-edge research on the foundations of human behavior, the book provides a model of social policy preferences with important implications for the ways in which mass support for redistribution should be measured, conceptualized, and its determinants tested. For instance, ignoring the two-dimensional nature of social policy preferences can lead researchers to contradictory or confusing results. The British case is a striking example: while self-interested support for redistribution away from those who are better off is correlated with income and broadly stable from 1986 to 2012; support for redistribution to the poor has, during the same period, unraveled to reach historically low levels.

By examining how universal behavioral motives (material self-interest and fairness reasoning) play out in different contexts (as shaped by elite discourse and policy design), *Asking for More* provides a simple but powerful framework to compare and contrast public opinion, both in terms of structure and trends. This framework offers a bridge between two models of political change. One model, ubiquitous in political economy, approaches political change as a bottom-up process where economic phenomena such as de-industrialization, globalization or the Great Recession affect policy preferences, voting patterns and electoral outcomes. In contrast, behaviorists, especially students of American politics, emphasize the top-down dynamics that structure political change.
*Asking for More* argues that political change happens at the intersection of these bottom-up and top-down processes.
Structure of the Book

Chapter 1. Introduction: The Dog that Didn’t Bark

• Presents the empirical puzzles guiding the inquiry.
• Review the literature in political science and political economy that directly speaks to these puzzles.
• Proposes a new account of the demand side of redistributive politics. This account proceeds in two steps:
  – Step 1 revisits the micro-foundations of mass social policy preferences (part 1 of the book)
  – Step 2 examines the interaction between the demand and supply sides of redistributive politics (part 2 of the book)


Chapter 2. Bringing Fairness to the Study of Redistributive Politics

• Builds on accumulating evidence across the social sciences to argue that fairness reasoning constitutes a core motive guiding preference formation in the realm of redistributive politics.
• Defines fairness reasoning as the thought process through which individuals act as if a third-party judge ruling on what is fair and what is not. Whether an outcome is perceived as fair depends on how well it fits the norms of reciprocity and proportionality.
• Situates fairness reasoning in relationship to other “social preferences” such as envy, altruism (both conditional and unconditional) and inequity aversion. Makes the case for focusing on fairness reasoning as the overriding motive shaping mass social policy preferences.
• Describes how fairness reasoning manifests itself in large group. Proposes a parsimonious definition of fairness reasoning as well as ways to measure its empirical manifestations. The key concept is “beliefs,” i.e. beliefs regarding the ubiquity of behaviors and outcomes that violate norms of fairness.

Chapter 3. Fairness and the Two Facets of Social Policy Preferences

• Examines how beliefs about the violation of fairness norms emerge and how these beliefs are distributed in the population (by income group, education and political party).
• Argues that beliefs about violation of the proportionality norm are more likely to be self-serving, while beliefs about violation of the reciprocity norm are less likely to be predicted by one’s economic position. Instead, the latter set of beliefs are best predicted by individuals’ position on the liberal-authoritarian continuum. As a result, individuals’ “fairness beliefs” are two dimensional; they can believe that both norms are being violated, only one of them is, or that none are.
• Argues that one’s position on this fairness beliefs map, as predicted by her economic conditions and her liberal or authoritarian “moral foundations” (Haidt, 2012), is a form of proto-ideology that most voters rely on to interpret the world.
• Shows that the introduction of fairness concerns alongside self-interest opens the possibility that social policy preferences are at least two-faceted. One facet is redistribution conceived as taking from the well-off, conditional on violation of the proportionality norm (redistribution
The other facet of redistribution is redistribution conceived as giving to those who cannot provide for themselves, conditional on violation of the reciprocity norm (redistribution to).

- Provides evidence for this conjecture using cross-sectional data from Great Britain, France, Germany and Sweden.

Chapter 4. Why Some Care More about Fairness than Others, and why it Matters

- Examines what happens for individuals who are “cross-pressured” (i.e. the self-serving policy position conflict with their fairness judgment). This is especially relevant for the redistribution to dimension.
- Argues that the outcome will depends on what is materially at stake:
  - For economically secure individuals, stakes are low. Expressing policy preferences that align with their fairness judgment is a form of virtue signaling, important for one’s self-esteem and social reputation (Bénabou and Tirole, 2011). Yet, one can expect a reversion to self-interest when the pocketbook consequences increase.
  - For economically insecure individuals, policy preferences are rarely shaped by fairness judgments and are instead in line with their material self-interest. Yet, one can expect fairness reasoning to take over when the pocketbook consequences decrease.
  - The pocketbook consequences of taxation and social transfers vary with social policy design.
- Shows, using European survey data as well as a survey experiment run in France, how the weight given to fairness concerns varies in systematic and predictable ways.
- Discusses two important implications:
  - The reason why income is only a weak predictor of social policy preferences is the existence of heterogeneous fairness judgments among the rich. This heterogeneity is best explained by differences in perceptions of violations of the reciprocity norm.
  - Redistributive coalitions that bring together the poor (the beneficiaries) and the rich who believe free riding to be limited are at risk if the threat of a tax increase becomes credible. Anti-tax coalitions that bring together the rich (the beneficiaries) and the poor who believe that violations of the proportionality norm are limited are at risk if the threat of spending cuts becomes credible. The state’s access to international credit markets and its capacity to issue debt has thus profound implications for electoral politics.

Transition

Jointly, chapters 2, 3 and 4 show that “bringing fairness in,” and examining it alongside material self-interest, better explains the structure of mass social policy preferences in Western democracies. Building on these new micro-foundations, the following puzzles can be better accounted for:

- Why are individuals’ social policy preferences so hard-to-change? (e.g. Margalit (2013))
  - Because they are rooted in a proto-ideological, hard to change, beliefs about violations of fairness norms. Mounting evidence in the evolutionary sciences (Baumard, 2016) and behavioral economics (Ostrom and Walker, 2003) support such assertion.
Why do individuals’ social policy preferences often appear contradictory (Hochschild, 2016) or “irrational” (Bartels, 2005)?

- Because there are at least two facets of redistributive preferences and a lot depends which one is being primed. In addition, stakes are often low, as is the case when respondents are being asked to express a costless opinion about a policy that does not affect them. As a result, reliance on fairness reasoning generate clusters of preferences, such as the “rich bleeding heart liberals” or the “poor welfare-to-workfare enthusiasts” that are hard to explain outside of the framework proposed in this book.

Why is income such a poor predictor of social policy preferences?

- Because the rich are highly divided on redistributive issues, and the poor are not: the rich are the ones decreasing the size of the income gradient, not the poor.

The remainder of the book builds on these micro-foundations to answer the main question of the book: why have we seen no increase in demand for redistribution in times of rising inequality?

Part 2. The Dynamics of Mass Social Policy Preferences: The Role of Elite Competition

Chapter 5. Increasing Support for “Redistribution from”: Evidence from Great Britain

- Examines when researchers should expect to observe an increase (or a decrease) in demand for redistribution in line with expectations from workhorse models. Argues that, among the favorable conditions, are situations where:
  - stakes are high for the poor (or for the rich), as is the case when retrenchment (or tax increases) are credible threats.
  - elites politicize (i.e. disagree) over redistribution from the rich.
  - elites politicize (i.e. disagree) over violations of the proportionality norm.

- Provides evidence using longitudinal survey data collected in Great Britain:
  - Uses individual level panel data (as well as pseudo-panel data) to trace attitudinal change among low income individuals before and after redistribution from was de-politicized (1997 general elections) and re-politicized (2017 general elections). Support for redistribution decrease around and after Tony Blair’s election, while it increased after Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labor Party.
  - Compares attitudinal change before and after the implementation of “Third Way” policies in Great Britain and Germany. Finds that the repoliticization of redistribution from by Die Linke following the Hartz IV reforms created a favorable discursive context: support for redistribution increased, especially among the poor. The absence of left-wing challengers to Tony Blair’s center-right policies in Great Britain can help explain why the same did not happen in Great Britain.

Chapter 6. The Politics of “Redistribution to”: Evidence from Great Britain and the United States

- Explains why the priming of reciprocity concerns, at a time when tax increases are no longer a credible threat decreased the correlation between income and support for redistribution.
- Explains why redistributive preferences correlate with income among the Republicans but not among Democrats
• Documents the overlap in the United States, but not in Great Britain between prejudice and beliefs about violation of the reciprocity norm.

• Revisits the 2016 election results in the United States and the Brexit referendum results in Great Britain from the point of view of fairness judgment and the supply side of redistributive politics. In both countries, beliefs about the violation of the reciprocity norm were key, explaining why material conditions are poor predictors of both attitudes and vote.

• Provides evidence using longitudinal survey data (GSS, ANES, ISSP, BES, BSA).

Chapter 7. Elite Competition since the 1980s and its Implications for the Age of Inequality

• Documents how major policy “innovations” of the past three decades all have in common to frame welfare state reforms around reciprocity concerns which mostly shape support for (or opposition to) redistribution to the jobless and the poor.

• Examines several of these innovations, including left-of-center parties’ de-emphasis on taxing the rich and re-emphasis on expanding means-tested programs (e.g. United States, Great Britain and France), welfare to workfare reforms (e.g. United States, Great Britain and Germany), and the populist Far Right’s recent embrace of a large welfare state but only accessible to citizens who have “paid into it” (e.g. France).

• Discusses the determinants of these shifts in the supply side of redistributive politics, emphasizing the ideological consequences for left-wing parties of a shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. More specifically, it focuses on the central role given to the free movement of goods and capital as an engine of growth. It also highlight the role of growing educational attainment among the electorate, which has important consequences for fairness beliefs.

• Fleshes out the implications for attitudinal trends and, ultimately, inequality:
  – When elites politicize issues of free riding, high-income “bleeding heart” liberals, who believe recipients to be deserving, become central to anti-retrenchment coalitions, explaining why, even in times of rising inequality, income has not become more predictive of social policy preferences.
  – None of these innovative policy packages are designed to address rising inequality, yet they muster enough electoral support to serve the needs of office-seeking politicians.
  – Redistributive coalitions that include the deserving poor and the educated “liberals” further narrow the policy choice-set available to pro-redistribution politicians. Indeed, as documented in chapters 3 and 4, the latter group (self-servingly) believes that the overall income distribution is fair, at least according to the proportionality norm, making them ambiguous supporters of redistribution from the well-off or government interference with market forces. They consequently constitute an unreliable partner in any redistributive policy push centered on challenging the fairness of the overall distribution of market income.

Chapter 8. Conclusion: Rethinking the Interaction between Democracy and Economic Inequality

• Sums up the book’s main findings.

• Examines the implications for our understanding of how democratic politics mitigate or enhance market-driven economic inequality:
  – The scope conditions of workhorse models that predict that an increase in inequality will be mitigated by an increase in support for redistribution are extremely narrow. To simplify, these models only apply if politics elites target socio-economic groups in ways
that match the models’ expectations (pro-redistribution messages for the poor, and anti-redistribution messages for the rich). This was indeed the case in the 1950s and 1960s in Europe where, in many countries, center-right parties were engaged in a bitter political fight with the radical left. Since the 1990s, political elites from mainstream parties appear to have converge on the beliefs that strong state intervention and income redistribution is no longer the best option. Only when the electoral system allows, be it because of opened party primaries (United States) or because of a proportional electoral system (Germany), can entrepreneurial candidates step in to mobilize economic grievances.

- Examines the implications for our understanding of the determinants of social policy preferences and suggests new paths for research:
  - Focusing on two sub-groups of the electorate who are especially likely to hold “conflicting” beliefs about norm violations:
    * “Bleeding heart liberals.” This group is both likely to believe that the economy is fair according to the proportionality norm and that jobless individuals are deserving according to the reciprocity norm. Higher education is likely to be a key determinant of such beliefs: hard work (and financial investment) to obtain a degree buttress the (self-serving) belief that effort pays, while the morally liberal content of a higher education degree promotes the belief that free riding is limited.
    * “Workfare enthusiasts.” This group is both likely to believe that the economy is unfair according to the proportionality norm and that jobless individuals are undeserving according to the reciprocity norm. Given that this group holds beliefs that mirror that of the bleeding heart liberals, it is likely that lower educational achievement is one important driver. Other possible drivers are perceptions of a zero-sum competition over scarce goods, which have been shown to increase concerns about free riding (Skitka and Tetlock, 1993).
  - Studying how elites from different political parties come to perceive the preferences and beliefs of their electorate. Broockman and Skovron (2018) have documented important biases in the United States. The same is likely to be at play in Europe, with implications for the dynamics of mass social policy preferences.
References


Dimick, Matthew, David Rueda and Daniel Stegmueller. 2014. “The altruistic rich? Inequality and other-regarding preferences for redistribution.”.


Haidt, Jonathan. 2012. The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion. Random House LLC.


Petersen, Michael Bang. 2012. “Social welfare as Small-Scale help: Evolutionary psychology and


Piketty, Thomas. 2018. “Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right: Rising Inequality and the Changing Structure of Political Conflict.”.

