


Understanding Public Attitudes Toward Redistribution: Analysis by Ideological Subgroups

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Abstract Existing scholarship suggests that Americans generally support progressive redistribution. However, whether ideological differences exist in views on the progressivity of social programs' policy designs remains ambiguous. Using a conjoint experiment, I investigate how the progressivity of social programs' distributional outcomes and tax sources impacts Americans' social policy support. I find differences and similarities in the effects of progressive social policy designs on different ideological subgroups. Compared to conservatives, liberals are more supportive of social programs having progressive distributional results or tax sources and less supportive of social policies featuring regressive distributional consequences or tax sources. However, both liberals and conservatives prefer progressive social programs over those with regressive designs. This study helps explain the public's preferences for social policies with progressive designs.

In recent years, growing economic inequality has sparked concern in advanced democracies (Bing, Pettit, and Slavinski 2022; Hansen 2023; Sachweh and Eicher 2025). Escalating inequality correlates with various normatively undesirable outcomes, such as reduced levels of civic trust and engagement, poor public health, and elevated rates of homicide and violent crime (e.g., Thorbecke and Charumilind 2002; Schröder and Neumayr 2023). Regarding public opinion toward redistribution aimed at reducing inequality, previous research demonstrates that Americans generally support progressive redistribution (Ballard-Rosa, Martin, and Scheve 2017; Wang 2024). However, little is known about how the progressivity of social program designs, especially these programs' tax sources, affects citizens' support for these programs and whether these effects are conditional on preexisting beliefs. This is the lacuna this paper seeks to fill.

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This study investigates the attitudes of ideological subgroups toward social programs. While liberals usually value equality, progress, and diversity, conservatives generally appreciate “epistemic needs for order, structure,” and “justification of hierarchical, unequal forms of social organization” (Jost 2017, p. 168). Despite these discrepancies, conservatives could also prefer social programs with progressive designs over those with regressive elements, given the choice between the two. This inclination may stem from motivations like perceptions of inequality or other-regarding considerations (e.g., Brooks 2007; Waytz et al. 2016).

Results from an original conjoint experiment reveal both differences and similarities in how progressive social policy designs impact ideological subgroups’ policy support. Between-group comparisons show that liberals are more likely than conservatives to support social programs with downwardly distributive results or progressive tax sources and are more inclined to oppose social programs with regressive components. Nevertheless, within-group comparisons indicate that progressive redistribution elements also bolster conservatives’ social policy support more than those with regressive policy elements. These findings highlight the significance of the progressivity of social programs’ tax sources and distributive results on citizens’ social policy preferences. Also, they underscore the importance of distinguishing between *within-group* comparison and *between-group* comparison across ideological (or income and racial) subgroups for political analyses of redistribution.

Ideology and Redistributive Preferences for Social Programs

As income distributions become more top skewed and pressures from poverty keep mounting, social programs and citizens’ political support for wealth redistribution have drawn increasing attention from scholars and policymakers (Farcy and Ellis 2014; Busemeyer, Abrassart, and Nezi 2021; Hansen 2023; Myers, Zhirkov, and Lunz Trujillo 2024). Research shows that citizens’ redistribution preferences can vary widely according to individual characteristics and predispositions like political views or core beliefs (Feldman and Steenbergen 2001; Blekesaune 2003; Arikan and Bloom 2015; Qi and Haselswerdt 2024), racial and immigrant attitudes (Gilens 1999; Garand, Xu, and Davis 2017; Burgoon and Rooduijn 2021), deservingness perceptions (Petersen 2012; Mårtensson et al. 2023; Magni 2024), and self-interest (Chong, Citrin, and Conley 2001; Guardino and Mettler 2020).

In addition, research demonstrates that when relevant information is provided, citizens can effectively comprehend and respond to the policy designs of redistribution programs (Farcy and Ellis 2014; Heide-Jørgensen 2022). Regarding public attitudes toward social policies, previous research suggests

that the mass publics in Western advanced countries tend to resist government programs designed to redistribute wealth upward (regressive redistribution) but are generally supportive of policies that redistribute wealth downward (progressive redistribution) (Page and Jacobs 2009; Faricy and Ellis 2014; Ballard-Rosa, Martin, and Scheve 2017; Sachweh and Eicher 2025). Moreover, such effects could be conditional on self-interest (e.g., Chong, Citrin, and Conley 2001; Guardino and Mettler 2020).

This study contends that interpreting information about social programs' distributive results and tax sources also diverges according to political ideology since different ideologies are associated with considerable differences in people's attitudes toward social phenomena like inequality. For example, the substance of conservative ideology encompasses "the maintenance of what is traditional and familiar and the justification of hierarchical, unequal forms of social organization." Conversely, liberal ideology emphasizes "equality, progress, diversity, and tolerance of differences" (Jost 2017, p. 168).

Therefore, when knowing that a social program has a regressive distributive consequence or tax source, liberals may be more likely than conservatives to oppose such a policy. This is because, from a liberal perspective, the upwardly distributive result or tax source can "undermine the principle of egalitarianism by exacerbating existing social and economic inequality," and the increased inequality is morally or normatively undesirable (Bartels 2005; Rudolph 2009, p. 147; Weber and Federico 2013). In contrast, conservatives tend to be less enthusiastic about the progressive attributes of social programs due to their relative tolerance of inequality and an emphasis on "personal effort and ability in the determination of one's position in the income distribution" (Foster 2013, p. 181). Based on this understanding, I propose four hypotheses regarding *between-group* (ideology) comparisons.¹

Hypothesis 1a Liberals are more likely than conservatives to support social policies with progressive distributive results.

Hypothesis 1b Conservatives are more likely than liberals to support social policies with regressive distributive results.

Hypothesis 2a Liberals are more likely than conservatives to support social policies funded by progressive taxes.

Hypothesis 2b Conservatives are more likely than liberals to support social policies funded by regressive taxes.

However, other-regarding feelings (e.g., altruism, compassion), perceived economic inequality, and even self-interest may motivate conservatives to prefer social programs with progressive designs over regressive ones. First, conservatives also make decisions based on other-regarding considerations, such as

1. The hypotheses in the main text were reordered and simplified, but their substance remains unchanged.

empathy and altruism² (Waytz et al. 2016; Jankowski 2019; Brewer et al. 2023). Second, according to Elkjær and Iversen (2023), over the past four decades, the overall macroeconomic growth in America has been “exceedingly outpacing low and middle after-tax-and-transfer incomes” (Elkjær and Iversen 2023, p. 392). Along with rising socioeconomic inequality, a growing number of conservatives and Republicans have begun to acknowledge that economic inequality, or lack of social mobility, is a problem in America, and to think seriously about how to enable families to reach or regain a middle-class life (Smith 2023). Related to this, previous work has shown that perceived economic inequality is positively correlated with support for progressive redistribution (García-Sánchez et al. 2020). Additionally, conservatives may support progressive programs if they expect to personally benefit from them (Ellis and Stimson 2012; Voelkel, Mernyk, and Willer 2023). Given all of these considerations, while I expect conservatives to be less supportive of progressive programs than liberals, I still expect them to prefer such programs to regressive ones. Therefore, I have the following hypothesis about *within-group* (ideology) comparisons.

Hypothesis 3 Conservatives are more likely to support social policies with progressive distributive results/taxes than those with regressive distributive results/taxes.

Empirical Approach

To explore the effects of social policies’ redistributive elements, I conducted a conjoint survey experiment on Lucid, a survey company that helps researchers recruit nationally representative samples using nonprobability and opt-in panels (e.g., Myers 2023). Lucid aggregates survey respondents from various sources, collecting basic demographics to enable quota sampling aligned with US Census margins (Coppock and McClellan 2019). The sample for this preregistered experiment was collected online and included 1,638 adult Americans on August 11, 2023.³ The cooperation rate (COOP1) is 44 percent. Conjoint analysis enables scholars to nonparametrically identify and estimate the causal effects of various treatment components simultaneously (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). Compared to traditional experimental designs, conjoint studies offer advantages such as

2. According to previous research, in addition to empathy and altruistic incentives, several other types of “other-regarding” (or “other-oriented”) considerations may affect redistribution attitudes, such as sympathy, social solidarity, and affinity for the poor (e.g., Cavaillé and Trump 2015; Wang 2024).

3. Preregistration: <https://osf.io/kbax6>. Supplementary Material table B.3 presents the demographic characteristics comparison between the samples in this study and in the 2023 Cooperative Election Study.

testing multiple hypotheses simultaneously and improving causal inference by measuring each value's relative explanatory power in affecting attitudes (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015; Jenke et al. 2021; Kiratli 2024). Therefore, this analysis helps determine whether voters' preferences for social policy proposals hinge on multiple policy dimensions and, if so, which dimensions have significant effects.

In this study, respondents reviewed tables showing profiles of alternative proposals for a hypothetical social program—Medicare for All (MFA)—with different policy characteristics. Proposed in 2017 by Senator Bernie Sanders, MFA has become a highly debated social policy proposal and a prominent topic in American political discussions. While MFA has not been passed into law, the conversations and debates surrounding it are “building popular support for significant reforms” (Hoffman 2019). Moreover, debates about MFA's policy design issues, especially tax sources and distributive results, continue. For example, although using progressive taxes (e.g., income taxes and corporate taxes) as funding sources for MFA is the most common proposed approach (Johnson, Kishore, and Berwick 2020; Fisher 2023), flat or even regressive taxes (e.g., sales taxes) have also been proposed (e.g., Reichling and Smetters 2020). I use MFA as a single policy case, acknowledging that findings may vary across policies. However, research on redistributive politics shows consistent ideological differences in redistributive preferences across multiple domains (e.g., Ballard-Rosa, Martin, and Scheve 2017; Bechtel and Liesch 2020), suggesting that these findings could apply to other social policies despite specific nuances of MFA as a case.

Before receiving these proposals, respondents saw this information: “The federal government is considering creating a new program, called Medicare for All, to provide everyone in the United States with free or low-cost health insurance coverage. Many details of this policy are still under discussion. The passage of this policy is dependent on the support of the majority of voters. On each of the next few pages, you will see descriptions of two policy proposals for Medicare for All: Policy Proposal A and Policy Proposal B. We will ask a few questions about each pair of proposals.” Next, respondents were shown a table containing information about two policy proposals side by side, described as “Policy Proposal A” and “Policy Proposal B.” Table 1 displays all the levels of each attribute.

As this table presents, I use two separate attributes to measure the progressivity of MFA proposals' distributive consequences and tax sources. It is important to distinguish between the two, as Cavallé and Trump (2015) illustrate that “redistribution from” and “redistribution to” evoke different patterns of public support. I also include background attributes showing plans of transition from the current system and budget information for MFA proposals. Progressivity attributes are divided into five levels—two

Table 1. Possible conjoint attributes and values.

Attributes	Values
Transition from current system	All private health insurance immediately replaced by Medicare; Private health insurance phased out over five years, replaced by Medicare; Medicare competes with private insurance as a “public option,” and anyone with private insurance can choose to switch to Medicare.
Distributive result of this policy	Lower-income citizens benefit most from this program; Lower- and middle-income citizens benefit most from this program; All income groups benefit equally from this program; Higher- and middle-income citizens benefit most from this program; Higher-income citizens benefit most from this program.
Tax burden distribution of this policy	The government collects a higher percentage of total earnings from higher-income households than lower- and middle-income households to fund this program; The government collects a higher percentage of total earnings from higher- and middle-income households than lower-income households to fund this program; The government takes the same percentage of income from all income groups to fund this program; The government collects a higher percentage of total earnings from lower- and middle-income households than higher-income households to fund this program; The government collects a higher percentage of total earnings from lower-income households than higher- and middle-income households to fund this program.
Total cost per year	\$2.4 trillion; \$3.2 trillion; \$4.3 trillion; \$6.2 trillion

progressive distributive result/tax levels, a proportional distributive result/tax level, and two regressive distributive result/tax levels—to show the degree of the progressivity of distributive consequence/tax source from high to low. Incorporating a budget attribute helps control for fiscal information across scenarios and highlights that government expenditure on these programs is not unlimited. Similarly, the transition attribute enables respondents to consider how a universal healthcare program might be designed.

The levels of each attribute vary randomly, with randomization occurring independently across all subjects, tables, and attributes. Each respondent received and viewed nine pairwise tasks. This allows each respondent to evaluate eighteen hypothetical MFA proposals in total. To create a respondent-friendly surveying environment, the order in which attributes are

displayed is fixed within each respondent's survey but randomized across respondents. After viewing each conjoint table, participants were asked, "If you have to choose, which of these two policy proposals would you support most?" I use paired forced-choice conjoint design to measure respondents' policy preferences.

The full randomization leads to approximately uniform distributions of attribute levels across choice tasks. To test the hypotheses, I apply the estimation strategy for conjoint analyses proposed by previous scholars (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014; Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020). This involves estimating both average marginal component effects (AMCEs), which denote the marginal effect of a particular attribute averaged over the joint distribution of all other attributes, and marginal means (MMs), which measure the preference for profiles displaying a specific feature level, averaging across all other features. Since the latter are preferred for subgroup analyses (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020), I present them in the main text, with conditional ACMEs reported in [Supplementary Material section C](#). Results are unweighted, and standard errors are clustered at the individual level to account for within-subject correlation since each respondent responded to nine conjoint experiments, making eighteen program choices (coded as 1 for the chosen program and 0 for the alternative program). This process resulted in 29,484 total observations.

To detect respondents' attentiveness, I incorporate the battery of three screener questions suggested by Berinsky et al. (2021). Respondents answered these screener questions before responding to the demographic questions, after which they participated in the conjoint experiments. Results presented in the main text ruled out about 17 percent of respondents (285 individuals) who failed to answer two or more pretreatment screener questions correctly, leading to a sample size of 1,353 respondents. Results with the full sample size of 1,638 respondents are reported in [Supplementary Material section C](#).

Results

In general, the results support Hypothesis 1a through Hypothesis 3. [Figure 1](#) presents the estimated MMs with 95 percent confidence intervals for ideological subgroups.⁴ Regarding *between-group* comparisons, for liberals, an MFA proposal with the lower-income group benefiting most (progressive

4. For pairwise comparisons, I measure ideology dichotomously. A dummy variable, "liberal," represents respondents whose ideology scores (five-point scale) are less than 3 (N = 7,308), and a dummy variable, "conservative," represents respondents whose ideology scores are more than 3 (N = 7,182). Because the hypotheses in this study do not treat moderates (N = 9,864) as a subcategory, I exclude them from [figure 1](#), though I report results for moderates in [Supplementary Material section C](#).

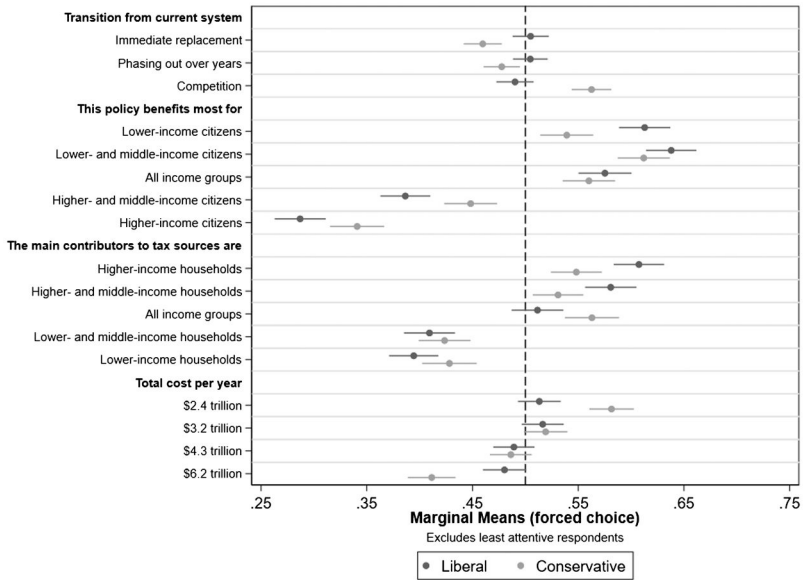


Figure 1. Marginal means by ideological group (with 95 percent confidence intervals). Full results are reported in [Supplementary Material table C.5](#). Liberal observations = 7,308. Conservative observations = 7,182. Liberal respondents = 406. Conservative respondents = 399.

distributive result) is selected about 61 percent of the time, and one with higher-income households as the main tax contributors (progressive tax) is picked about 61 percent of the time as well. For conservatives, however, proposals with these progressive designs are selected about 54 percent and 55 percent of the time, respectively. That is, social programs with progressive distributive consequences (Hypothesis 1a) or a progressive tax source (Hypothesis 2a) are more popular among liberals than among conservatives.⁵ On the regressive values of each redistribution attribute, having higher-income citizens as the greatest beneficiaries or lower-income households as the main tax contributors makes the policy less attractive to liberals than to conservatives. The results are consistent with Hypotheses 1b and 2b.

Turning to *within-group* comparisons for conservatives, conservative respondents are significantly less willing to support proposals with regressive redistribution designs than those with progressive elements. For example, for conservatives, an MFA proposal that has lower-income households

5. Results of formal tests of all hypotheses are reported at the beginning of [Supplementary Material section C](#).

as primary recipients is selected 54 percent of the time, while a proposal with higher-income citizens as the greatest beneficiaries is picked 34 percent of the time. The differences in the MMs between progressive and regressive taxes are similarly substantial. Such considerable differences in effect size reveal that conservatives are more resistant to regressive distributional outcomes and funding sources than to progressive ones, as hypothesis 3 anticipates.

To save space, I briefly report the findings of the other two preregistered hypotheses labeled as Hypotheses 4a and 4b in [Supplementary Material section D](#). Corresponding results are presented in [Supplementary Material tables C.6](#) and [C.7](#). I find that social policies with progressive distributional consequences and tax sources are more popular with the public than those with regressive distributional results and financial sources, as these hypotheses predicted.

Conclusion

Previous work on the politics of redistribution usually investigates social programs and taxes separately. In this paper, I incorporate these two instruments of redistribution into an analytical framework to examine their impacts on citizens' redistribution preferences. Results of *between-ideology* comparisons demonstrate that liberals support social programs with progressive distributional consequences and funding sources more than do conservatives. Moreover, findings of *within-ideology* comparisons show that conservatives also prefer social programs with progressive distributional effects or tax sources over those with regressive designs, much like liberals, but to a lesser degree.

The findings of this study have substantial implications. First, the findings demonstrate that conservative attitudes on social policy are not a “mirror image” of liberal attitudes, suggesting potential areas of agreement across ideological lines.⁶ Accordingly, policymakers and administrators could employ political strategies to address shared concerns and build bipartisan support for certain policy initiatives. Exploring these commonalities may lead to more unified policymaking efforts.

Second, as the results of this study indicate, conservatives' preferences regarding social programs' tax sources and distributive results are less elastic than those of liberals. Whether this ideological difference has material impacts on tax reform and the continuation of existing social programs also

6. The limitations of the selected conjoint design mentioned later mean that the interpretation of these findings needs to be cautious. However, even when presented with two “liberal” policy options, conservatives clearly favor one over the other. It may not be their first choice, but the second choice is still important in building consensus.

deserves the attention of future research, as this phenomenon speaks directly to the “basic dilemma” of contemporary American politics: citizens demand more and more services from the federal government, but are not necessarily willing to pay for them (Micheltore 2012, p. 159).

Certainly, this study has some limitations. For example, MFA and health policy in general differ from other forms of social policy, suggesting some caution about generalizability. Additionally, using only forced-choice outcomes without rating outcomes is a limitation, as it may overstate the absolute level of conservative support for progressive policies relative to the status quo. Moreover, an unconstrained conjoint design leads to some less realistic policy proposals, such as MFA having regressive distributional consequences. Future studies can overcome this study’s limitations and move forward by employing more comprehensive empirical strategies, investigating mechanisms causing differences/similarities in welfare preferences among ideological subgroups, and testing redistribution designs across multiple policy domains.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary Material may be found in the online version of this article: <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfaf046>.

Funding

This work was supported by the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy at the University of Missouri in Columbia [KI 155 to Q.H.].

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Jake Haselswerdt, Michelangelo Landgrave, and seminar participants at the 119th Annual American Political Science Association Conference and the American Society for Public Administration’s 8th International Young Scholars Workshop for constructive comments and advice. The author also thanks the American Society for Public Administration’s 8th International Young Scholars Workshop Best Paper Award Committee for reviewing and nominating this paper for the International Young Scholars Workshop Best Paper Award. Additionally, the author appreciates the editors and anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of this research and their valuable feedback and suggestions.

Data Availability

Replication data and documentation are available in Harvard Dataverse, at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ABP4XA>.

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Public Opinion Quarterly, 2025, 00, 1–13

<https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfaf046>

Research note