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Where I stand and what I stand for: Subjective status, class, and redistribution

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ABSTRACT

While research is increasingly focusing on the political influence of subjective social status, it is yet unclear how the latter shapes attitudes towards redistribution on its own, nor how it interacts with contextual inequality. To address this, we integrate perspectives across sociology, political economy, and social psychology, testing competing hypotheses of polarisation vs. mitigation of redistributive attitudes among social groups. We rely on ISSP data for twenty-five countries across the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania between 1987 and 2019, exploiting the longitudinal potential of contextual information. Results show that individuals with lower subjective status display higher support for redistribution and perception of inequality, independently from their objective characteristics. Contextual inequality plays a key role: in countries with higher income inequalities, high subjective status individuals show higher support for redistributive policies. This suggests that, in highly unequal countries, individuals who feel they are above most of the population display pro-redistribution attitudes in line with the rest of the population. The results have broad implications, suggesting that an approach to social stratification that considers both subjective and objective aspects is central to illuminate support for redistribution.

1. Introduction

How does subjective social status affect attitudes towards redistribution? Moreover, does contextual income inequality play a role in this relationship? While research in political economy and sociology traditionally focused on the political relevance of individuals' objective characteristics, such as class and education (Evans, 1993; van de Werfhorst and de Graaf, 2004), recent years have seen an increasing focus on social status (Chan et al., 2020; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007), and perceptions of social standing (Gidron and Hall, 2017; Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015; Oesch and Vigna, 2022, 2023). Subjective social status refers to an individual's self-perceived position within the social hierarchy (on a ladder from 1 to 10), based on factors such as occupation, education, and social prestige, reflecting how they evaluate their standing relative to others.

Specifically, this emerging literature explores how individuals perceive their relative position within society and the extent to which these perceptions influence political attitudes and behaviour (Gidron and Hall, 2017). In recent years, subjective social status

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has proven useful in explaining support for populism and right-wing populist parties (Bolet, 2023; Engler and Weisstanner, 2021; Gest et al., 2018; Gidron and Hall, 2020; Melli and Scherer, 2024), welfare preferences, and attitudes towards immigration (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015; Fernández-Albertos and Kuo, 2018).

This growing body of work is inspired by Weber's tripartite model of class, status, and power (1968/1922. While the role of class in shaping political preferences has been extensively studied Lipset and Rokkan (1967), Chan and Goldthorpe (2007) have emphasised the importance of both dimensions of stratification for political outcomes. The status dimension remains relatively underexplored, particularly in the context of redistributive preferences.

As in the spirit of the Thomas theorem (Thomas and Thomas, 1928), individuals' views towards redistribution are primarily shaped by their beliefs about: how resources are distributed within the social hierarchy (Bobzien, 2020; Kalleitner and Bobzien, 2024), whether this is perceived as unfair due to context (Kraus et al., 2012), and by the differential salience of socioeconomic status this distribution elicits across social groups (Paskov et al., 2013; Buttrick et al., 2017; Melita et al., 2021; 2023). Consequently, perceived social position may be a more appropriate measure than objective indicators, such as education, occupation, income, in capturing these evaluations. Despite this, the role of subjective social status in shaping support for redistribution remains understudied.

Given that redistributive policies seek to reduce economic inequalities, it is relevant to understand the association between perceived social standing and public support for such measures. As Dahl (1971, p. 95) notes, 'between a condition of objective inequality and the response of a disadvantaged person lie the perceptions, evaluations, expectations – in short, the psyche – of the individual'. By integrating subjective and contextual dimensions, this paper aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of support for redistributive policies in contemporary democracies.

In this paper, our goal is to investigate how attitudes towards redistribution are affected by subjective social status, while accounting for objective characteristics. In doing so, we follow the spirit of the Weberian three-component theory of stratification (1968/1922), which emphasises the relevance of both class- and status-related characteristics for political outcomes (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007), with the *caveat* that our measure of subjective social status (Gidron and Hall, 2017) or position only captures a component, but not the full concept, of the Weberian status (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007), as we will better articulate below.

We first build on the well-established literature linking class to redistributive preferences to posit how social status affects the latter. We then examine how this individual-level variable interacts with contextual levels of inequality, integrating perspectives from sociology, political economy, and social psychology. This latter point follows the thought-provoking contribution by Meltzer and Richard (1981) and the literature in political economy and social policy, which have examined the relationship between subjective individual characteristics, contextual level of inequality, and support for redistributive policies.

However, much of this research has focused on perceived or relative income rather than on approaches explicitly testing the role of status and class, with contradictory empirical results (Cansunar, 2021; Cruces et al., 2013; Melita et al., 2021, 2023; Rueda and Stegmueller, 2016; Weisstanner and Armingeon, 2022; Weisstanner, 2023). By integrating insights across different social-scientific fields of research, we argue that a sociological approach inspired by Weber's three-component theory of stratification (1968/1922), and by recent studies on status (Chan et al., 2020; Gidron and Hall, 2017), offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding attitudes towards redistribution.

In this framework, context is relevant. While structural differences between countries or regions are relevant in shaping support for redistribution (Dallinger, 2010; Fernandez and Jaime-Castillo, 2018; Kenworthy and McCall, 2007; Rueda and Stegmueller, 2016; Steele et al., 2022), Schmidt-Catran's (2016) pioneering research highlights that inequality trends within countries, rather than structural differences between countries, do influence how income shapes redistribution preferences. In this paper, we attempt to bridge these conflicting results by relying on a more comprehensive measure of social status, one that incorporates individual subjective evaluations, in line with the growing body of research on the political implications of subjective social status (Gidron and Hall, 2017, 2020).

Previous experimental research has highlighted the importance of subjective social status in shaping attitudes towards redistribution (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015). Similarly, a cross-national study conducted at single point in time has illustrated how contextual levels of inequality shape individuals perceived social positions (Andersen and Curtis, 2012). Few studies focus on subjective stratification variables. Notably, Rueda and Stegmueller (2016) relying on relative income, while Duman (2020) relies on subjective social class. In the latter study, Duman (2020) further finds that in countries with lower average income inequality between 2005 and 2010 in a single World Value Survey wave, support for redistribution becomes more polarised along subjective class identity lines. However, such study exclusively examines *subjective* social class, without disentangling its effects from those of *objective* social class.

Our study extends these findings by clearly disentangling the roles of subjective social status and objective social class, alongside other objective stratifiers such as education and income. Additionally, we adopt a temporal perspective (Nolan and Weisstanner, 2022) spanning from 1987 to 2019, which allows us to clearly assess both the impact of *structural* levels of income inequality (differences between countries) and *of* changes in income inequality over time (within-country) (Fairbrother, 2014).

Specifically, we analyse how subjective aspects of social stratification influence attitudes towards redistribution in twenty-five countries across the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania, accounting for both differences between countries and within-country inequality trend, employing the structural vs. longitudinal decomposition developed by Fairbrother (2014). To do so, we employ data from the International Social Survey Program from 1987 to 2019 (ISSP Research Group, 2024). This approach allows us to build upon previous research by leveraging over three decades of data, combining the analysis of subjective aspects with a more targeted modelling of the cross-level relationship between context and individuals.

Results from three-level linear multilevel models show that subjective social status, alongside objective characteristics and contextual factors, plays a significant role in shaping redistribution preferences, while controlling, among other stratifiers, for objective social class, and with effect sizes that are comparable to the latter.

In countries with lower structural income inequalities, support for government-driven redistribution is stratified by subjective status, with individuals of higher subjective status expressing lower support. Conversely, in countries with higher structural inequalities, support for government-driven redistribution tends to converge. Notably, in these contexts, the support for government-driven redistribution of high subjective status individuals aligns closely with that of individuals with low subjective status. This macro-micro pattern does not however apply if rich people are identified as those who should be paying more taxes, while it does apply to tolerance towards inequality. These findings support a convergence or *mitigation* hypothesis (Alesina and Rodrik, 1994; Dimick et al., 2017; Fernández and Jaime-Castillo, 2018; Häusermann et al., 2023), and underscore the importance of a comprehensive approach that integrates objective characteristics, their subjective interpretations, and contextual factors to better understand the relationship between social stratification and political attitudes.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Subjective social status

Social status can be regarded as a combination of social esteem in terms of positive or negative privileges, linked with education, income, and occupational status. It constitutes the second component of the Weberian theory of stratification (1968/1922), capturing the 'social' form of power, in contrast to class and politics, which embody its 'economic' and 'political' dimensions, respectively. Consequently, status determines individuals' position within the 'structure of relations of perceived, and in some degree accepted, social superiority, equality, and inferiority among individuals' (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007, p. 513). *Subjective* social status refers to individuals' perceptions of their position relative to others in society. As a relational variable, it reflects how individuals evaluate their standing within the social hierarchy (Gidron and Hall, 2017). It should also be considered conceptually and empirically distinct from social class and objective social status, which are formed by objective indicators that are, however, different from subjective beliefs and feelings about personal standing relative to others in society (Gidron and Hall, 2020).

In the literature, subjective social status is measured using the MacArthur scale (Adler et al., 2000), which requires individuals to identify their position within a 10-point social ladder ranging from 1 (bottom) to 10 (top). This item has been widely related to health and well-being but is now well-established in the sociological literature (Gidron and Hall, 2017, 2020; Melli and Scherer, 2024; Nolan and Weisstanner, 2022; Oesch and Vigna, 2022). The presence of very few generic reference points makes it easily comparable across time and space (Evans and Kelley, 2004; Raudenská, 2024), but doubts have been raised as to what the question really detects (Evans and Tilley, 2017). While we acknowledge this debate, we follow the established literature in treating the scale as a measure of subjective social status, which may also be referred to as subjective position. This measure of subjective social status (or position) represents only one component of the broader Weberian concept of status, which also encompasses lifestyle patterns and social networks (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007). Thus, we remark that while we address our measure as 'subjective social status', for purposes of consistency with the stream of research using the same term, such as Gidron and Hall (2017), this concept does not have the pretence of fully encompassing the original Weberian concept of status.

Previous research has explored the determinants of subjective position within social stratification and their implications for political preferences (Cantril, 1943; Centers, 1949) focusing on relative deprivation (Runciman, 1966), and reference group theory (Merton and Kitt, 1950). These determinants stem from objective current conditions, social background, peers and reference groups, and the broader social and economic context. Individual objective characteristics, such as class, occupation, and education, form the basis of the deductive process. Occupation, in particular, influences social integration and hierarchical position within society (Durkheim, 1933; Weber, 1968/1922), thereby allocating advantages and disadvantages. While the relevance of objective conditions may vary (Curtis, 2016), at its core, subjective status ultimately reflects an individual's subjective reading of their socioeconomic position compared to others (D'Hooge et al., 2018; Evans and Kelley, 2004).

Social background can be considered as the 'lingering socialisation process related to the economic conditions people were exposed to early in life' (Curtis, 2016, p. 11). The political attitudes of socially mobile individuals lie between the class of origin and destination (Bartley and Plewis, 2007), as an upgrade of objective position does not immediately translate into an alignment of political preferences (Ares, 2020; Langsæther et al., 2022). Political attitudes are thus transmitted down through generations, with political socialisation remaining influential despite changes in individuals' circumstances (Gidengil et al., 2016).

Past experiences and early socialisation serve as baseline, more or less unknowingly, as parents provide lasting standards (Irwin, 2015). Individuals draw their subjective status in the social hierarchy from a biased image of the social structure, which is inferred from their material reality and generalisations of subjective samples within homogeneous and non-causal social networks (Evans and Kelley, 2004). These are used as representative samples of the population, leading individuals to often place themselves in the middle of the social structure (Kelley and Evans, 1995). The combination of primary socialisation and peer comparisons generates a non-objective and non-representative image of the world since the reference points are non-objective and non-representative.

Subjective social status often diverges from objective position, resulting in 'status mismatch' or 'status misperception', which may explain why some individuals support redistribution policies contrary to their interests (Duman, 2020). Focusing on Argentina, Cruces and colleagues (2013) found that individuals tend to hold biased perception of income distribution, with such misperceptions significantly influencing their preferences for redistribution if individuals overestimate their relative position in the income distribution. While describing the subjective social status formation process, we acknowledge that we are not considering all possible causes and determinants. Factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and migration background, are relevant in shaping social identification.

2.2. Subjective social status and redistribution attitudes

The study of attitudes towards redistribution is well-established (Abou-Chadi and Hix, 2021; Jaime-Castillo and Marqués-Perales, 2019; Van Oorschot et al., 2022), but the influence of subjective social status remains understudied, particularly compared to objective social class (Fernández and Jaime-Castillo, 2018; Langsæther and Evans, 2020). This is problematic, as both class and status are envisaged as central to understanding the distribution of political power in the classic three-component theory of stratification by Max Weber (1968/1922). Thus, the resurgence of interest on the political implications of social status (Chan et al., 2020; Gidron and Hall, 2017, 2020; Oesch and Vigna, 2022) highlights the importance of the subjective evaluation of one's social standing to also shape political attitudes and behaviour.

How is subjective social status likely to influence attitudes towards redistribution? Unsurprisingly, we expect individuals with lower subjective status to have stronger preferences for redistribution, and vice versa (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015; D'Hooge et al., 2018; Duman, 2020; Fernández-Albertos and Kuo, 2018), similarly to class (Fernández and Jaime-Castillo, 2018; Langsæther and Evans, 2020). Yet, subjective social status may influence attitudes independently of class. Recent research (Bobzien, 2020; Kalleitner and Bobzien, 2024) argues that individuals base their redistributive preferences on their *perceived* fairness of resources distribution, and subjective social status may be a more appropriate explanandum.[1] Kraus et al., 2012 further argue how different subjective class ranks (a concept closely related to subjective social status) can elicit different socio-psychological tendencies: contextualism and solipsism. Individuals on the lower end of the ladder tend to be oriented towards contextualism: to pay attention to their surrounding environment, caring about the influence of 'less safe neighborhoods, threats of job instability, resource fluctuations in schools' (Kraus et al., 2012, p. 549). Together with material self-interest, we can posit why this group will be relatively more in favour of redistribution. On the other hand, higher-status individuals tend to be oriented towards solipsism: their own interests and agentic goals (Kraus et al., 2012), which can in turn lead to not supporting redistribution as they stand to lose from it.

To better illustrate the significance of subjective status in relation to objective measures such as class or income, let us examine their interplay. Consider first the 'typical cases': when subjective status aligns with objective class or income (both high or both low), preferences for redistribution may be reinforced accordingly. Matters differ for the two 'corner cases': individuals who perceive themselves as being at the bottom of society despite a relatively higher objective position, and those who view themselves as being at the top despite objectively lower position. In the first scenario, a perceived low status may evoke a sense of injustice, prompting stronger support for redistribution (Bobzien, 2020; Kalleitner and Bobzien, 2024), even if their objective position might not be particularly disadvantaged. Conversely, those who see themselves at the top may regard redistribution as less relevant, even if they do not bear its costs or may benefit from it objectively. While we do not discount the role of objective characteristics, subjective considerations may play a clear role in influencing redistribution preferences.

2.3. The role of contextual inequality

Subjective social status is closely intertwined with context (Breznau and Hommerich, 2019; VanHeuvelen, 2017), and so are redistribution preferences. The latter can be powerfully shaped by cultural differences surrounding the perceptions of the poor (deserving vs. undeserving), and the extent to which inequality is culturally justified on the grounds of meritocracy (Alesina and Rodrik, 1994; VanHeuvelen, 2017). Indeed, research on the cross-national differences in the development of welfare states and on the evolution of inequality (Atkinson, 2015; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Iversen and Soskice, 2006) focuses on the importance of these 'cultural' norms. Evans and colleagues (2022) have shown how the impact of ascribed or achieved characteristics on class identity varies by cultural context: more specifically, the differing British and Danish cultural context affect whether working class identity is associated with stronger redistribution preferences or negative attitudes towards immigrants (Evans et al., 2022).

Similarly, the social stratification of economic and cultural inequalities is crucial to determine the relevance of individual objective characteristics for assessing social status (Andersen and Curtis, 2012; Lindemann and Saar, 2014). Additionally, the temporal development of structural inequality ensures different opportunities for upward mobility in different contexts and at different times, influencing the relationship between the situation of origin and the current situation (Nolan and Weisstanner, 2022).

But why should we focus on income inequality as the key contextual variable moderating the relationship between subjective social status and redistribution preferences? Despite its centrality in the public sphere (Piketty, 2014; Atkinson, 2015), social scientific research has long divided on the association between social stratification, contextual inequality, and redistribution preferences. The strand of research based on the median voter model (Meltzer and Richard, 1981) holds that where inequality is higher, pro-redistributive preferences should also be stronger (Alesina and Rodrik, 1994). Yet, empirical research shows this is often not the case (Iversen and Soskice, 2006; Kenworthy and McCall, 2007). A counterpoint from the welfare regime approach by Esping-Andersen (1990) shows persistent differences in the 'accepted' levels of inequalities across countries, again remarking the importance of cross-cultural differences. Lübker (2007) and Dallinger (2010) reconcile these views, arguing that the median voter hypothesis holds only when accounting for the welfare regime typology.

Social psychology perspectives further illuminate the differential relevance of contextual inequality across social strata: in contexts with higher inequalities, the centrality of socioeconomic status for people's lives is heightened through status anxiety (Paskov et al.,

[1] Both subjective social status and political attitudes are conceptualised as beliefs, and this might raise criticism about whether a quasi-causal order can be established. An essential feature differentiates them, i.e., the direction, the object of the belief. Whereas subjective status is a belief of one's social standing, political attitudes are projected onto society as a whole and onto policy issues.

2013; Buttrick et al., 2017; Melita et al., 2021, 2023), which is likely to affect attitudes towards redistribution.

Nevertheless, the impact of structural inequality trends is still under-studied. Schmidt-Catran (2016) showed how this cross-sectional between-country approach fails to capture the empirical relationship accurately, if inequality is considered on its own and not within an interaction. Relying on the decomposition of inequality in its between-country and within-country components, he finds that the increases in inequality *within* countries over time are positively related to higher pro-redistributive preferences, but not differences *between* countries. However, no research, to our knowledge, has examined its interaction with *subjective social status* in shaping such preferences.

To address this gap, we review competing mechanisms on the cross-level interaction between inequality and individual characteristics across the sociology, political economy, and social psychology literatures, further developing them in terms of subjective social status. These mechanisms suggest that the relationship between lower social position and stronger pro-redistribution preferences may be moderated by contextual inequality in two ways: *polarisation* or *mitigation*.

For the polarisation direction, a key mechanism comes from research on inequality and civic-political engagement: the conflict hypothesis/theory (Solt, 2008). In contexts of rising economic inequality, relatively poorer and richer citizens will participate more in civic and political arenas. Diverging redistributive preferences are central to this pattern: if on one hand greater inequality prompts poorer strata to coordinate to generate pro-redistributive policies (Karakoc, 2013), higher strata are predicted to increase their participation to prevent this increased redistribution from happening (Solt, 2008). Another mechanism comes from status anxiety and mobility expectations: if 'However, high economic inequality could also lead to lower downward mobility beliefs, and this, in turn, can reduce worries about losing status' (Melita et al., 2023, p. 1456) for the high-status individuals, this will further reduce their attitudes towards redistribution, by reduced threats of status loss further increasing their solipsistic tendencies (Kraus et al., 2012). We can easily adapt this direction to subjective social status: if what matters for redistributive preferences is the *perceived* fairness in the social distribution of resources (Bobzien, 2020; Kalleitner and Bobzien, 2024), the *perceived* position within the social ladder may play an equal if not stronger role than objective characteristics in influencing the latter. What may count here is indeed where individuals *feel* they are, based on several factors we articulate above, rather than their objective income.

If individuals who *perceive* themselves in the lower (upper) rungs of society are on average more (less) likely to support redistribution, this pattern may only be exacerbated if contextual inequality is higher, as both groups have more to gain (lose) from redistribution, based on their self-interest in improving (maintaining) their social status.

The opposing direction appears somewhat counter-intuitive: how can higher levels of income inequality lead to a convergence in redistribution preferences across different rungs of the social ladder, or a *mitigation* of the social stratification gap in redistributive preferences? Going beyond material self-interest, the political economy literature proposes some 'other-regarding' mechanisms, such as income-dependent altruism/inequality aversion (Dimick et al., 2017), and apprehension/fear (Alesina and Rodrik, 1994; Häusermann et al., 2023; Rueda and Stegmueller, 2016).

The argument supporting the *mitigation* mechanism is that upper-strata individuals go beyond their self-interest when macro-level inequality is high, and therefore are more pro-redistribution in those contexts due to their 'other-regarding' preferences (see Dimick et al., 2018 for a comprehensive overview), and, given the decreasing marginal utility of an additional dollar in redistribution, their support for redistribution is more similar to the one exhibited by the lowest strata of the population (Dimick et al., 2017). Altruism is similarly central to the inequality aversion hypothesis: Schröder and Neumayr (2023) find that several studies (e.g., Nair, 2018) posit that individuals react to higher levels of inequality by boosting their own participation with the 'redistributive-component' goal of 'helping a greater number of people in need' (Schröder and Neumayr, 2023, p. 685), with this pattern being reinforced if individuals perceive those in need as part of their in-group (Nair, 2018).

More recently, Häusermann et al. (2023) developed a two-by-two typology of political behaviour juxtaposing income levels and the evaluation of future opportunities. They describe the support of radical forces by 'apprehensive voters', well-off individuals concerned about the future prospects of themselves, their offspring, and their country. Likewise, Engler and Weisstanner (2021) show that individuals with high subjective position have a greater tendency to support radical right parties in contexts of status threat and increased income inequalities.

Alesina and Rodrik (1994) propose a similar mechanism, however rooted in fear. Individuals in the upper income strata may be more willing to redistribute under conditions of high-income inequality due to a fear of social unrest and crime, which is supported by Rueda and Stegmueller (2016). For the period between 2002 and 2009 with European Social Survey data, Rueda and Stegmueller (2016) find that individuals with a higher relative household income are more likely to support redistribution in high-inequality regions, and this is attributed to fear of crime. This apprehension can be further substantiated through socio-psychological concepts: while higher inequality could be cognitively associated to lower mobility (Melita et al., 2023), high status individuals may perceive the damages of social demotion for their offspring as potentially stronger (in the event they occur), and thus support redistribution as an additional channel to ward off against such risk (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997).

Fernandez and Jaime-Castillo (2018) find again evidence in favour of mitigation relying on ISSP data from 1985 to 2010: they find that in countries where redistribution levels are lower, the redistribution preferences of those in the top and bottom (objective) social classes are more similar. They find that this is driven by members of upper classes reacting to contextual redistribution levels, while the members of the working class do not react significantly to redistribution levels (Fernandez and Jaime-Castillo, 2018). In a somewhat similar set up to our paper, Duman (2020) shows how higher average inequality mitigates differences in redistributive preferences along subjective class identity lines. However, the analytical strategy of such study does not distinguish between the *subjective* and *objective* class positions, thus not allowing to identify precisely the interaction of the former with income inequality. Considering also that the latter is an average from 2005 to 2010 which influences responses in a single survey wave, it does not allow to fully disentangle the moderating roles of structural and longitudinal components of inequality (Fairbrother and Martin, 2013).

Despite the contrast between the altruistic vs. apprehensive feelings operating at the core of the aforementioned mechanisms, both arguments are centred on upper-strata individuals exhibiting counter-intuitive attitudes and behaviour based not on their material interests, but on the context surrounding them. Again, we argue that these feelings may be powerfully influenced by an individuals' *perceived* position within the social ladder: to feel fear and/or empathy with people in need, *feeling* near the top of society may be more important than actually *being* there objectively (Bobzien, 2020; Kalleitner and Bobzien, 2024).

These arguments can be further developed through a sociological lens, through the duality between individual agency and structure (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Sewell, 1992). Individual behaviour is not determined only by the characteristics of individuals in a vacuum, nor solely from the social structure without regard to individuals, but by agents who considers their own features within a specific social context (Sewell, 1992). Becker (2021) showed that individuals are also influenced by the characteristics and position of their social group, in addition to their own individual characteristics, in expressing support for redistribution.

Applying this theoretical agent-structure duality to this specific case, we can argue that, even if individuals who perceive themselves at the top of the social ladder feel subjectively that they are faring well in terms of their own material self-interest (even if this is not actually the case objectively), they nonetheless recognise that they are engaged within a wider society. Should said society exhibit high levels of inequality, it is possible that they may be concerned that the system which they feel it has allowed them to flourish may deteriorate. In this case, the classic social ladder metaphor (Adler et al., 2000) relied upon to detect subjective social status in surveys serves well to illustrate this theoretical direction. Individuals who feel at the top rungs of the ladder may understand that if distances between the social rungs become excessively large, the integrity of the entire social structure may be compromised. The solipsism of high-status individuals could turn into contextualism (Kraus et al., 2012), as contexts with higher social unrest could threaten their position in society.

Therefore, we may posit that, where and when levels of contextual income inequality are higher, the individual relationship between subjective social status and redistributive preferences is *mitigated*, as even those self-placed at the top rungs of the ladder are compelled towards more redistribution, through altruism and/or apprehension.

Beyond the contrast concerning the predicted direction of the support for redistribution, there is another consideration to address (Schmidt-Catran, 2016): are these phenomena driven by structural *levels* of inequality (between-country differences) or by over-time *changes* in inequality (within-country differences)? These are not necessarily competing hypotheses, but may originate from theoretically distinct mechanisms. If higher structural *levels* of inequality between countries do influence the higher status individuals' support for redistribution, one underlying mechanism could be *socialisation* (Fairbrother and Martin, 2013): individuals may operate socio-psychologically by relying on a medium/long-term average of inequality over time in their country. On the contrary, if *changes* in inequality do influence attitudes towards redistribution, it would point to *reaction/evaluation* (Uslaner, 2018): individuals updating their preferences based on short-term socio-economic dynamics, as often found for the influence on political trust driven macro-level socio-economic dynamics as growth and unemployment (Lewis-Back & Stegmaier, 2000).

Empirically, Schmidt-Catran (2016) found support for the *mitigation* direction: while the between-country component of inequality is not significantly associated with redistribution preferences on its own, as we mention above, its interaction within household income is significant. More specifically, individuals with top quintile income within each country tend to be less against of redistribution in countries where the structural level of income inequality is higher. In contrast, the within-country component of inequality does not significantly interact with household income, whereas it was significant on its own (Schmidt-Catran, 2016).

2.4. Summary of hypotheses

Considering the theoretical perspectives and empirical findings discussed, we formulate the following hypotheses. First, at the micro level, we expect that *individuals with low subjective social status will show higher* support *for redistribution* (H1). Secondly, at the macro-micro level, the rival mechanisms in the literature lead us to formulate competing hypotheses. For the polarisation direction, we posit that in countries with higher structural *levels* of inequality, *individuals with high subjective social status will show lower support for redistribution* (H2a, polarisation-structural). In contrast, the mitigation direction leads us to expect that *individuals with high subjective social status will show higher support for redistribution* (H3a, mitigation-structural). Symmetrically, we posit that in countries with higher *within-country over-time changes* of inequality, *individuals with high subjective social status will show lower support for redistribution* (H2b, polarisation-longitudinal). In contrast, the mitigation direction leads us to expect that *individuals with high subjective social status will show higher support for redistribution* (H3b, mitigation-longitudinal).

3. Data and variables

We use data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP Research Group, 2024) collected in 1987, 1992, 1999, 2009, and 2019, focusing on twenty-five countries: Australia, Austria, Chile, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States, each observed at least twice.[2] The final sample consists of more than 51,000 individuals nested in twenty-five countries and sixty-nine country-years. Missing information on some variables will reduce the number of individuals included in the models.

[2] Sample sizes are reported in Table A2.

3.1. Subjective social status

Subjective social status (sometimes addressed as position) is measured with the MacArthur Scale (Adler et al., 2000). It measures the individual self-placement on a ten-point ladder which represent the overall society, answering to the question 'In our society there are groups which tend to be towards the top and groups which tend to be towards the bottom. Where would you put yourself now on this scale?'. In line with the literature (Evans and Kelley, 2004), we treat the subjective social status scale as continuous.[3] We note again that this measure only partially captures the broader Weberian concept of status, thus not addressing the nexus of lifestyles and practices engendered by the latter (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007).

3.2. Attitudes towards redistribution

The ISSP questionnaire contains questions related to attitudes toward redistribution repeated in all waves on Social Inequality. We selected two of them, following what is established in the literature on the topic (Van Oorschot et al., 2022). The first dependent variable asks: 'Do you think people with high incomes should pay a larger share of their income in taxes than those with low incomes, the same share, or a smaller share?'. The answers go from 'Much larger share' to 'Much smaller share'. The second outcome variable measures on a 5-step Likert scale the level of agreement with the sentences 'It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes'. We note that these two concepts measure different aspects of redistribution (García-Sanchez et al., 2022): the former focuses on who should bear the burden of redistribution, while the second relates to preferences associated with government-driven redistribution. Thus, we will analyse them separately. The response scales were harmonised and, if necessary, reversed to maintain the same semantic direction, so that high values of the dependent variables correspond to high support for redistribution. In supplementary analyses, we also examine how the key covariates affect the degree to which respondents tolerate inequality, an important precursor for attitudes towards redistribution yet conceptually distinct from them (García-Castro et al., 2022; 2023), relying on the variable: 'Differences in income in [country] are too large'.

3.3. Control variables

We account for factors that may influence the relationships under study or are known to affect both the dependent variables and subjective social status: respondent social class, parental social class, education, age, gender, year. We further include controls for continent, to account for socio-economic differences across country groups, as we will further articulate in the empirical strategy.

Objective social class is measured with the European Socio-Economic Classification (ESeC, Rose and Harrison, 2007), which, by construction, allows for an appropriate cross-national comparison. ISSP contains information to construct valid ESeC categories: occupation, supervisory role or not and if so, the number of workers supervised, and employment status. We employ the package 'iscogen' (Jann, 2019) in Stata 18.5. We use a revised five-category aggregate classification: 'Higher-grade Managers and Professionals', 'Lower-grade Managers and Professionals', 'Intermediate occupations', 'Self-employed', and 'Working class'. Class is used instead of status to mitigate multicollinearity; similarly, social background is captured by the highest reported parental social class. To measure household income, we rely on terciles standardised within country-years (along with a category for missing income), accounting for the not fully consistent measurement of household income in ISSP across countries and time.

Economic and social context is captured by GDP per capita (World Bank, 2022), and Gini Index (LIS Inequality and Poverty Key Figures, 2024).[4] The Gini Index measures contextual economic inequality, while GDP per capita is usually considered a measure of the level of economic development of a country and is included in the analysis to remove a potential confounder of the macro-micro relationship between contextual inequalities and individual subjective status and attitudes. In the event of a lack of data for a given year in the ISSP survey, the information from the nearest year is used instead. We control for the age of the respondent since it can independently influence attitudes towards redistribution, given the diminishing utility of future rewards as age increases which, consequently, reduces the willingness to sacrifice now for future rewards (Evans, 1993).[5]

4. Empirical strategy

We examine the relationship between subjective social status and attitudes towards redistribution, testing the moderating role of structural economic inequality. Given the dependent variables' nature and the hierarchical data structure, a Multilevel OLS Linear Regression appears to be warranted. We opt for a three-level structure: individuals nested in country-years nested in countries. This

[3] Tests confirm that this approach is the most appropriate. Results are not reported here. The ISSP questionnaire also includes a question on subjective social class, which will be used in confirmatory robustness checks of the results (Tables A6 and A7).

[4] Further analysis controlling for Human Development Index is presented in Tables A16 and A17.

[5] ISSP does not include measures of political interest or political ideology. However, robustness checks accounting for union membership, and religious attendance can be found in Tables A10 and A11.

approach allows to properly model country effects, and include random slopes at the lowest level to accurately capture cross-level interactions (Heisig and Schaeffer, 2019). A multilevel approach is also particularly appropriate given the significant socio-economic variation across the selected countries.[6]

To account for social change at the national level, we employ an innovative but well-established decomposition technique (Fairbrother, 2014), which distinguishes between cross-sectional and longitudinal information of the time-varying macro-level variables. This involves creating two variables for each contextual factor, GDP per capita and Gini Index. The first capture the variance between countries, calculated as the average value of the contextual information for each country. The second measures the variance within each country, reflecting deviations from the national average over time. By construction, these variables will have null correlation. Following this approach, we test the moderating effects of both longitudinal and cross-sectional information of the Gini Index, to analyse whether the Gini Index's moderating role arises from structural differences between countries or inequality trends within them.

To ensure, however, that socio-economic and cultural heterogeneity is not excessive, we rely on continent dummies, and further provide a supplementary analysis only for the European context, whose welfare regimes are relatively well codified and less culturally heterogeneous in terms of redistribution preferences (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Iversen and Soskice, 2006; Kenworthy and McCall, 2007; VanHeuvelen, 2017). Results are available in Supplementary Materials Section B.

To further ensure our results are not vulnerable to omitted variables at the macro level, in the Supplementary Materials we follow the approach of 'grandmean-centering' established in the multilevel literature (e.g., Lancee and Van de Werfhorst, 2012; Kanitsar, 2022), which demeans the macro-level variables from the grandmean of the same variable across all countries and all years. This has the advantage of making analyses more comparable across countries. As a confirmatory analysis, we run meta-analyses and meta-regression (Higgins et al., 2003; Liefbroer and Zoutewelle-Terovan, 2021), with results reported in the Supplementary Materials. Individual-level data will be weighted using the weights provided by ISSP, while giving equal weight to each country.

5. Results

The results are organised as follows: 1) we first assess the relationship between subjective social status and objective social class, 2) then address their respective associations with attitudes towards redistribution, 3) examine the cross-level interactions between subjective social status and the two components of inequality, and 4) briefly summarise the results of supplementary analyses and robustness checks that corroborate the main analysis.

5.1. Subjective social status and objective social class

We first explore the descriptive relation between subjective social status (SSS) and objective social class. While the two concepts are clearly related empirically, Fig. 1 highlights a noticeable mismatch between objective class and subjective status. For instance, over 11 % of individuals in the Higher Managerial class place themselves in the lower rungs of the social ladder (1–4), while a similar proportion of Working class members consider themselves at the top, or near enough (7–10). Similarly, the Middle social status attracts a large proportion of individuals across all groups, ranging from 39 % in the Higher Managerial class to 45 % in the Working class. The presence of this mismatch provides further justification to treat these variables as empirically distinct.

5.2. Subjective social status, objective social class, and attitudes towards redistribution

Having this mismatch in mind, let us address how SSS influences attitudes towards redistribution, even when controlling for objective social class and other stratifiers such as income and education. In Table 1, models 1 and 3 reveal a robust and consistent relationship between subjective social status and attitudes towards redistribution: individuals with a lower subjective social status show greater support for higher taxes on high-income individuals and express stronger backing for government-driven redistributive policies. A one-step increase in social status is associated with a mean reduction of 0.045–0.08 points on the 5-point Likert scales of the dependent variables, which corresponds to 6–7% SD (of the dependent variable) for each step, net for objective characteristics. To illustrate, individuals at step 7 on the social ladder exhibits a mean difference in support for redistribution with an individual at step 3 of 0.18 (24% SD) for the first dependent variable, and 0.32 (28% SD) for the second dependent variable. These patterns remain robust even when accounting for factors such as social class, social background, and education.

How does this magnitude compare then to the well-established role of social class, in its objective component? The gradient of support for redistribution by social class aligns with established literature, with the Working Class more in favour of redistribution than the Higher and Lower Managers and Professionals, by 0.092 points for the first dependent variable, and 0.279 for the second (both at the $p < 0.001$ threshold of significance). If we compare these with the above mentioned subjective social status difference between individuals on rung 7 and on rung 3, we see that the gap in redistribution preferences driven by subjective social status is essentially *twice as large* than the one for objective social class in the first dependent variable, and slightly but sizeably larger for the second

[6] To address the potential concern that the number of countries included in the European analysis may be a limitation, we conducted a replication analysis using the Restricted Maximum-Likelihood Estimator and the Satterthwaite method to approximate the computation of the degrees of freedom, as suggested by Elff et al. (2021). The results of this replication analysis are consistent with those of the original analysis and are presented in Tables B4 and B5.

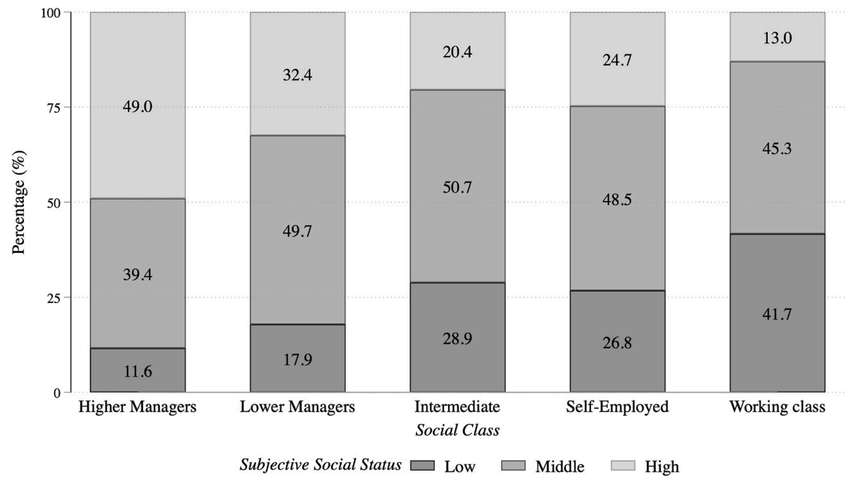

Fig. 1. Subjective Social Status by Social Class.
Note: Individual level data weighted and retrieved from ISSP 1987, 1992, 1999, 2009, 2019. Subjective status: Low (1/4), Middle (5–6), High (7/10).

Table 1
Results of multilevel linear regression models of attitudes towards redistribution.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
VARIABLES	Support for Increased Taxes for Rich People		Government Must Reduce Income Differences	
Subjective Social Status	−0.045***	−0.090***	−0.080***	−0.222***
	(0.005)	(0.023)	(0.007)	(0.036)
SSS * Gini (cross-sectional)		0.001		0.004***
		(0.001)		(0.001)
SSS * Gini (longitudinal)		0.000		0.003
		(0.002)		(0.003)
Social Class (ref. Higher Managers and Professionals)				
Lower Managers and Professionals	0.061***	0.063***	0.177***	0.175***
	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.036)	(0.035)
Intermediate	0.054**	0.055**	0.167***	0.161***
	(0.018)	(0.017)	(0.035)	(0.034)
Self-employed	−0.070***	−0.067***	0.011	0.010
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.037)	(0.035)
Working class	0.092***	0.091***	0.279***	0.274***
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.042)	(0.041)
Gini (cross-sectional)	0.008	0.000	0.000**	0.000***
	(0.007)	(0.010)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Gini (longitudinal)	0.000	−0.005	0.000	0.000
	(0.006)	(0.012)	(0.000)	(0.000)
ICC (country, empty model)	0.03		0.11	
ICC (cy|country, empty model)	0.06		0.13	
Intercept	3.690	3.952	2.878	3.694
BIC	114100.5	113974.1	152574.2	152444.3

Note: Individual level data from ISSP 1987, 1992, 1999, 2009, 2019, weighted. Country level data from World Bank and LIS. 51,576 individuals nested in 69 country-years and 25 countries. Controls: parental social class, education, household income, age, gender, year, longitudinal and cross-sectional GDP per capita, continent. Models 1 and 2 are retrieved from Table A4. Models 3 and 4 are retrieved from Table A5. Exploratory measurement of the modelled variance over the total variance (R squared) can be found in Table A19 of the Supplementary Materials. ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.

dependent variable. While both perspectives are clearly influential for preferences towards redistribution, there is clear value in considering them both. In further analysis, we go a step further and interact SSS and objective social status. More details provided in the Supplementary Analyses and Robustness check subsection. The overall picture confirms the initial argument, showing how subjective social status has an independent and relevant role in affecting attitudes towards redistribution and equality, supporting hypothesis H1.

What is then, the role of the two components of income inequality, considered additively? Results differ across the two dependent variables. For the first, there is a not statistically significant ($p < 0.1$) effect for structural income inequality (differences across countries), and not statistically significant effect for longitudinal income inequality. In contrast, for the second dependent variable, there is a positive and significant (at the $p < 0.01$ threshold) coefficient for income inequality: higher structural levels of inequality seem to increase attitudes towards government-driven redistribution. Again, the longitudinal income inequality variable is not significant.

5.3. Subjective social status, contextual inequality, and attitudes towards redistribution

We come now to the core of the paper: the cross-level interaction between subjective social status and the two components of income inequality. Results are reported in Table 1, models 2 and 4. Matching the standalone results for income inequality components, there are differing patterns across the dependent variables. The interactions with the longitudinal components are never significant. However, things change for the structural component of income inequality: for the first dependent variable, the average levels Gini Index show a not statistically significant coefficient for their interaction with subjective social status. In contrast, for the second dependent variable, the cross-sectional Gini component has a positive and statistically significant (at the $p < 0.001$ threshold) interaction coefficient with subjective social status.

To better interpret these interactions, Fig. 2 illustrates the predicted attitudes towards redistribution with Marginal Effects at the Means and 95 % Confidence Intervals. For ‘rich people should pay more taxes’, the differences between those with a subjective social status of 2 (relatively low) and 9 (relatively high) are larger at the 5th percentile of the cross-sectional income inequality distribution than at the 95th, but the difference is unlikely to be significant. On the contrary, for ‘government must reduce income differences’, we actually see increases in preferences for redistribution across the three key SSS groups, but the increase is very strongly pronounced for the high SSS (9) group, which moves from 3.1 to 3.9 (63% SD). The difference between SSS 2 and SSS 9 does stay significant, but it considerably reduced from almost a full scale point (which corresponds to a considerable 67% SD of the dependent variable) to less than 0.5 (32% SD of the dependent variable).

Considering these results, how do they hold up against our Hypotheses? Addressing the polarisation (H2) vs mitigation (H3) debate, there is clear support for mitigation, especially for the second dependent variable (and with dubious significance for the first dependent). Within mitigation, the strong results for the cross-sectional component of inequality for the second dependent together with the systematically insignificant interaction with the longitudinal show support for the mitigation-structural sub-hypothesis (H3a). We discuss the theoretical implications of these findings in the last Section.

However, how do we make sense of the discrepancy of results for the cross-level interactions between the two dependent variables? It is possible that identifying a precise payer of redistribution (rich people) cognitively discourages high-status individuals from more strongly favouring redistribution, while identifying the government as the entity responsible for redistribution allows for stronger redistribution preferences. Are these key cross-level results just associated to this specific variable? In the next subsection, we address this issue and more with supplementary analyses and robustness checks.

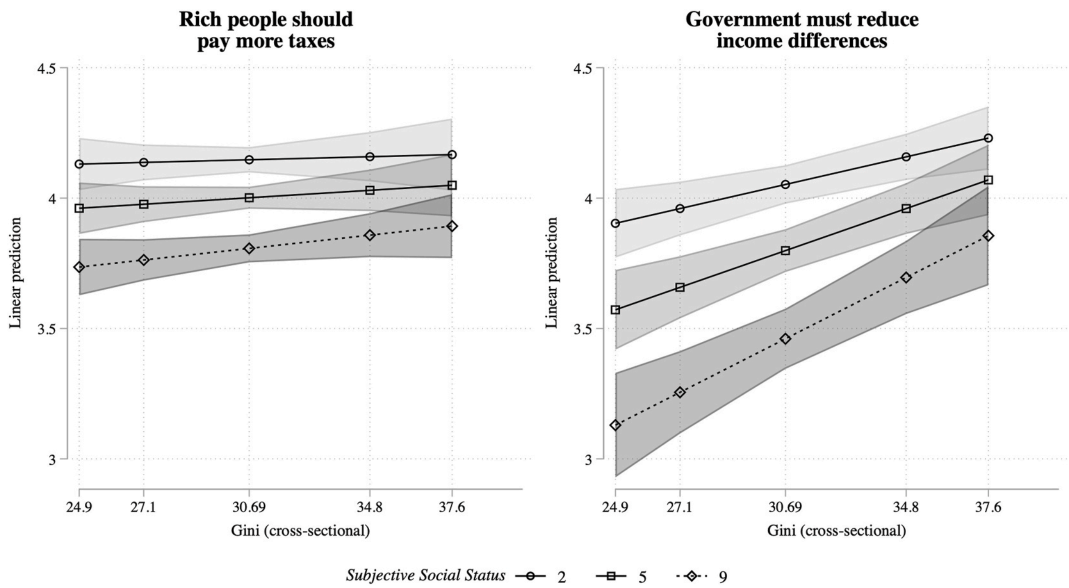

Fig. 2. Linear Predictions of Attitudes Towards Redistribution resulting from Multilevel Linear Regression Models with Interaction between Subjective Social Status and Gini Index (cross-sectional).
Note: Computed from model 4 in Table A4 and model 4 in Table A5. The cross-sectional Gini Index is considered at the 5th, 25th, 50th, 75th and 95th percentiles of the cross-sectional Gini index distribution. Confidence Intervals at 95 %. Individual level data weighted and retrieved from ISSP 1987, 1992, 1999, 2009, 2019. Country level data retrieved from World Bank and LIS.

5.4. Supplementary analyses and robustness checks

To corroborate our main analysis results, we conduct a wide range of supplementary analyses and robustness checks. First, we run a wide range of statistical tests for the statistical assumptions underlying our analytical strategy and especially the multilevel modelling. These are reported in the Supplementary Materials (Tables A18–A21 and Figs. A4–A8), and show that such assumptions are satisfied.

Second, we continue with the discrepancy in results between the first and second dependent variables. As mentioned above, the dataset also provides a variable that captures the individuals' tolerance for inequality (García-Castro et al., 2022; 2023), relying on the variable: 'Differences in income in [country] are too large', on a similar scale to the two main dependent variables. We replicate the main analysis by using this variable as the dependent. The full results are provided for brevity in the Supplementary Analysis, Section C. Notably, the results are very similar in terms of direction, magnitude, and significance to those of the second dependent variable: on its own, a 1-point increase in the SSS scale leads to a -0.077 change in attitudes towards redistribution (significant at $p < 0.001$), while the gap between the Higher Managerial class and the Working class is around 0.113 (again significant at $p < 0.001$). Only the cross-sectional component of the Gini Index is statistically significant (0.037, $p < 0.01$), while the longitudinal is not. Accordingly, the interaction between the cross-sectional Gini Index and SSS is positive and significant (0.006, $p < 0.001$), and the pattern of the Marginal Effects at the Means in Figure C1 is very similar to the second dependent variable, going in favour of the mitigation direction. These results tell us that high-status individuals are more intolerant of inequality in structurally more unequal countries relatively to their counterparts in less unequal countries: while not strictly applying to attitudes towards redistribution, this finding corroborates the credibility of the results of the government-driven redistribution variable.

Third, we shed further light on the joint influence of subjective social status and objective social class, also extended to inequality components on attitudes towards redistribution. Further analysis incorporating the interaction between social class and subjective social status reveals a stratified support for redistribution within classes (more details are reported in Supplementary Materials, Tables A25 and A26): within the same objective class, different SSS shapes differences in attitudes towards redistribution, which are amplified where cross-sectional income inequality is lower and mitigated where it is higher, again corroborating the results of the main analysis.

Fourth, a possible problem is presented by unobserved heterogeneity at the country level, which could bias our results. This issue is partially mitigated by the reliance on the continent dummies, but requires to be addressed more in depth. Thus, we follow a three-pronged approach: grandmean-centering, meta-analysis and meta-regression, and restricting the analysis only to Europe (which is less heterogenous internally).

On one hand, we rely on the grandmean-centering approach to assuage concerns about unobserved heterogeneity at the national level (Lancee and Van de Werfhorst, 2012; Kanitsar, 2022), which makes variables more comparable across countries (Tables A23 and A24). Then, we employed meta-analysis and meta-regression techniques (Higgins et al., 2003; Liefbroer and Zoutewelle-Terovan, 2021). The results of these (Supplementary Materials Section D) show clear support for the main analysis results. Finally, we restricted the analysis to Europe, and further replicated the other two approaches here, and further address possible biases in contextual variables due to the limited number of number of countries. We did so by replicating the analysis using the Restricted Maximum-Likelihood Estimator and the Satterthwaite method to approximate the computation of the degrees of freedom, as suggested by Elff et al. (2021). All of these (reported in Supplementary Materials Section B) show substantially similar patterns.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The social status held by individuals is a major determinant of their socio-political opinions and preferences (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007, Weber, 1968/1922). While research has predominantly focused on the relevance of objective characteristics, such as social class, education, or income (Evans, 1993; van de Werfhorst and de Graaf, 2004), it has so far paid relatively less attention to subjective social status. However, recent literature underscores its significance in explaining socio-political outcomes (Gidron and Hall, 2017, 2020).

Subjective social status reflects individuals' perceptions of their position in the hierarchical social structure. Theoretically, it represents the deductive process resulting from the set of advantages and disadvantages that individuals perceive as related to the position they hold, together with their individual history and their acquaintances. This paper adopted a holistic approach to understanding the interplay between individuals' characteristics and attitudes towards redistribution, inspired by the first and second components of the Weberian theory of stratification (1968/1922), where we proxy, but not fully capture, status relying on subjective social status (Gidron and Hall, 2017), or position.

The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, inspired by the Weberian (1968/1922) perspective on stratification, it examines how subjective social status affects attitudes towards income redistribution and support for government-driven redistribution in a comparative setting, bringing together perspectives from sociology, political economy, and social psychology. While some analyses rely on relative household income (Rueda and Stegmueller, 2016; Weisstanner, 2023) or subjective class (Duman, 2020), our study relied on the more encompassing concept of subjective social status, which sociological research highlights as a better measure than income of an individual's standing within society as a whole, and therefore as a powerful predictor of socio-political outcomes (Gidron and Hall, 2017). We model its direct effects on attitudes towards redistribution while controlling for traditional objective characteristics, such as objective social class (Fernandez and Jaime-Castillo, 2018; Schmidt-Catran, 2016), and find that the effects of subjective social status on attitudes towards income redistribution and support for government-driven redistribution are comparable to those of the latter. This finding remarks a key point in the literature arguing that the *perceptions* about the distribution of resources across the social hierarchy (Bobzien, 2020; Kalleitner and Bobzien, 2024), and their socio-psychological consequences in terms of cognitive orientations (Kraus et al., 2012) and status anxiety (Melita et al., 2021, 2023), can profoundly shape attitudes towards income redistribution and support for government-driven redistribution. This contributes to improve our understanding of individuals' agency by studying the relationship between individual characteristics and political preferences with more granularity.

Second, the paper illuminates the direction in which inequality moderates the aforementioned individual relationships, highlighting the joint relevance of both macro and micro dynamics in shaping the formation of attitudes towards redistribution. Our findings provide clear support to the *mitigation* direction (Fernandez and Jaime-Castillo, 2018; Rueda and Stegmueller, 2016; Schmidt-Catran, 2016), rather than polarisation: where contextual levels of income inequality are higher, the government-driven redistribution preferences are more similar across subjective social status groups. Furthermore, this is primarily driven by the high-status behaving differently according to the contextual level of inequality. This finding lends support to the 'other-regarding' preferences (Dimick et al., 2017) argument, with this pattern being potentially driven by altruism (Nair, 2018), apprehension (Alesina and Rodrik, 1994; Rueda and Stegmueller, 2016), and status anxiety (Melita et al., 2021, 2023) leading even the socially well-of to care about government-driven redistribution, even if only for egocentric motivations (Kraus et al., 2012). Perhaps this is also the reason underpinning the lack of interactive effects if the rich are indicated as a group to tax to finance this redistribution. Nonetheless, the supplementary analyses concerning tolerance towards inequality corroborate the patterns for government-driven redistribution.

Third, the results provide a starkly clear support for *which* component of inequality is driving the moderation, a key issue in inequality research with important policy implications (Schmidt-Catran, 2016). We find that the average *levels* of income inequality (structural differences *between* countries) are mainly driving the effects on government-driven redistribution, while the longitudinal *changes* (*within*-country over time) are never significant in any form. This suggests that individuals show limited responsiveness in adjusting their support for redistribution in response to short-term changes in national inequality.

Empirically, this matches recent interdisciplinary social scientific research on the matter, which however primarily focused on income or objective class (Fernandez and Jaime-Castillo, 2018; Rueda and Stegmueller, 2016; Schmidt-Catran, 2016; Weisstanner, 2023). Theoretically, this points out to a likely *socialisation* mechanism (Fairbrother and Martin, 2013), rather than *reaction/evaluation* (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Uslaner, 2018), aligning with the literature showing how the influence of macro-inequality on attitudes such as social trust operates only on a very slow timeframe, possibly through the socialisation of different cohorts (Fairbrother and Martin, 2013).

Globally, these results reinforce the relevance of subjective social status as a central predictor of socio-political outcomes (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015), echoing findings on populism and radical-right voting (Gidron and Hall, 2017, 2020; Melli and Scherer, 2024), remarking the centrality of a Weberian (1968/1922) perspective considering how *subjective* status, together with *objective* class, influences socio-political preferences. By showing that contextual structural inequality moderates these relationships, these results remark the sociological perspective of individuals as agents embedded in different social structures (Sewell, 1992; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

A key limitation of this paper relates to the specific theoretical mechanism. While we are unable to test whether our key results are driven by 'other-regarding' preferences (Dimick et al., 2017) rooted in altruism (Nair, 2018; Schröder and Neumayr, 2023) or in apprehension/fear (Alesina and Rodrik, 1994; Häusermann et al., 2023; Rueda and Stegmueller, 2016; Melita et al., 2021, 2023), these results aligns with the broader theoretical direction of the duality between agency and structure (Sewell, 1992), as high-status individuals consider their surrounding context in shaping their attitudes towards redistribution. This highlights the importance of both subjective factors and contextual considerations in understanding the broader relationship between social stratification and socio-political outcomes.

Thus, a key direction for future research may be to hone in on the mechanism, potentially relying on originally collected data, to determine whether the higher support for redistribution among self-perceived high-status individuals in high-inequality countries is driven by altruism, apprehension, or a combination of both. Furthermore, it would also be interesting to observe whether and how these dynamics develop within individuals' life course using panel data. Having established the key cross-level pattern in a comparative setting, future research could examine the dynamic relationship between subjective social status and redistributive attitudes in single-country panel studies where the variable is available, and more broadly, whether external events influence individuals' social identity and political preferences, also by considering further macro-economic determinants. Additionally, future developments could extend the picture to electoral behaviour by investigating the causal link between subjective social status and political attitudes, which connects individual objective characteristics to voting choices, particularly how contextual inequality may influence voting choices among high subjective status individuals.

In conclusion, subjective social status joins objective social class and other objective stratification characteristics in being a powerful predictor of attitudes towards redistribution, which we can further illuminate through a comprehensive perspective joining individual stratification characteristics and macro-social dynamics.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Giacomo Melli: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Leo Azzollini:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Data availability statement

The data are openly available on the website of the International Social Survey Program (https://issp.org).

Relationships

There are no additional relationships to disclose.

Patent and intellectual property

There are no patents to disclose.

Declaration of competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2025.103210.

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