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**Concern over Income Inequality and Demand for Redistribution: The
Influence of Culture**

Master's Thesis

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I have written this master's thesis independently. Any ideas or data taken from other authors or other sources have been fully referenced.

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CONCERN OVER INCOME INEQUALITY AND DEMAND FOR REDISTRIBUTION

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Abstract

While the determinants of individual attitudes regarding the concern over income inequality and demand for redistribution are relatively well understood, less is known about what explains differences between countries. Although cultural differences have been proposed as an important factor in shaping both concern over income inequality and demand for redistribution, only a limited number of studies have examined these relationships using up-to-date measurements of cultural differences. The aim of this study is to contribute to the existing literature by analysing whether and how culture influences concern over income inequality and demand for redistribution. The analysis uses aggregated country-level data from the International Social Survey Programme, the World Values Survey, and the World Bank for 41 countries. Inglehart's secular-rational versus traditional and self-expression versus survival dimensions are used to assess the relationship between culture and the two outcomes, and the data are analysed using backward regression. The results present evidence that culture is associated with concern over income inequality and with demand for redistribution, with the secular-rational versus traditional dimension showing the most consistent association.

Keywords: income inequality; redistribution; culture; cultural dimensions; cross-country analysis

CERCS: S180 Economics, econometrics, economic theory, economic systems, economic policy

Introduction

The income difference between the rich and the poor has been and remains a source of concern. Perfect income equality is a situation in which everyone earns the same amount of money. While this is an unrealistic concept, a gap between high- and low-income earners – in other words, income inequality – creates a variety of societal problems (Stiglitz, 2015; Valero, 2022). Despite counterarguments and common misperceptions, redistribution has been shown to effectively narrow the gap between the rich and the poor (Chancel et al., 2026; Sherman et al., 2024). Yet, major differences exist not only in income levels but also in the amount of income redistributed across countries. This is closely connected to questions of social justice, welfare state design, political legitimacy, and social cohesion. With regard to these societal aims, it can be assumed that what matters is not the actual level of income inequality itself, but rather how people perceive inequality and what they consider normal or desirable, regardless of whether that inequality results from more or less extensive redistribution.

A substantial body of research has examined what shapes preferences for income redistribution at the individual level and has identified several relevant factors. Much of this literature suggests that individual perceptions are often more important than objective conditions, and that the actual level of inequality or redistribution is less important than perceptions of income inequality in shaping the demand for income redistribution (Grimalda et al., 2023; Kambayashi & Lechevalier, 2022).

In addition to perceptions, beliefs play a major role, particularly beliefs about what determines individual success and whether these determinants are considered fair. While many scholars have focused on the drivers of individual beliefs and perceptions and their influence on demand for income redistribution, greater uncertainty remains regarding differences between countries. Even countries with similar economic characteristics, which would suggest similar levels of income redistribution, often differ in these aspects. Research suggests that what holds at the individual level may also apply at the cross-country level, as perceptions and beliefs appear to be more closely related to demand for redistribution than objective levels of inequality are. Nevertheless, between-country differences in demand for income redistribution are still not fully understood. Various scholars have reached different conclusions, suggesting, for example, the need for more accurate measures of actual inequality (Schmidt-Catran, 2016) and for further research into the role of political worldviews and historical factors (Alesina et al., 2018).

Many studies have proposed that these differences may also be due to differences in culture (Garrec, 2018; Griaznova, 2025; Hammar, 2020; Luttmer & Singhal, 2011; Perugini & Vladislavljević, 2025). Culture encompasses the values, beliefs, and attitudes through which people interpret the world. However, there is a research gap regarding the impact of culture on concern over income inequality and the demand for income redistribution, as only a limited number of studies have specifically examined these associations. In addition, in many of these studies, cultural characteristics are not specifically measured in their empirical analysis. Although some articles have sought to measure culture specifically using cultural dimensions, they often use some combinations of Hofstede's dimensions. While those dimensions remain among the most cited measures of culture, more accurate dimensions have been constructed over the last few decades.

This article addresses this research gap by investigating the associations between culture, concern over income inequality, and the demand for income redistribution. The article contributes to the literature by examining these associations using an up-to-date framework of cultural dimensions and by improving the understanding of country-level drivers of concern over income inequality and demand for redistribution. Data from the International Social Survey Programme, the World Values Survey and the World Bank are used. Regression analysis is used to examine potential factors influencing concern over income inequality and the demand for income redistribution.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 sets out a theoretical framework and reviews the literature on factors influencing how income inequality is perceived and assessed, as well as those shaping demand for redistribution. Section 3 outlines the data and methodology. Section 4 presents the results. Section 5 discusses the findings and limitations. The last section concludes.

1. Theoretical framework

A first attempt to explain income differences was presented by Meltzer and Richard (1981). They argue that people make decisions based on self-interest and that, therefore, people with lower incomes favour policies that support income redistribution more than those with higher incomes. More specifically, when inequality grows, the share of people whose income falls below the mean income mostly increases as well. This, in turn, creates a situation where more people should vote for, rather than against, redistribution. Meltzer and Richard (1981) describe this idea as the median-voter theorem, which states that if median

income is lower than mean income, demand for income redistribution increases, thereby limiting the growth of inequality (Meltzer & Richard, 1981; Schmidt-Catran, 2016). However, many scholars have challenged this theory and highlighted major shortcomings. The limitations of this theory are also reflected in the continued rise of income inequality over time (Chancel et al., 2026; Sherman et al., 2024). From this point of view, many scholars have put the Meltzer-Richard hypothesis to the test and studied whether it statistically significantly influences demand for redistribution or not (Bonnet et al., 2024; Kuziemko et al., 2015; Milanovic, 1999). Some studies argue that actual inequality still does influence the demand for redistribution (Mengel & Weidenholzer, 2023; Schmidt-Catran, 2016). However, at the individual level, the effect is mediated by several other factors (Schmidt-Catran, 2016).

Another large body of empirical studies presents strong theoretical arguments and results that more convincingly support the hypothesis that perceptions of inequality explain differences in demand for redistribution (García-Sánchez et al., 2020; Janmaat, 2013; Kuhn, 2019; Mijs, 2021; Stantcheva, 2024). While it is true that very wealthy individuals tend to favour redistributive policies less than those with lower incomes (Bonnet et al., 2024; García-Sánchez et al., 2020; Kuhn, 2019), the importance of personal income becomes statistically insignificant for the preferred level of redistribution when being controlled for factors such as future perspectives, for example (Bonnet et al., 2024). People are influenced by far more than mere self-interest and income and are not acting as *homo economicus*. Accordingly, demand for redistribution, as García-Sánchez et al. (2020) put it, does not follow economic models based on self-interest and an objective evaluation of the status quo as it has been posed by classical models such as Meltzer and Richard (1981).

Janmaat (2013) developed a conceptual framework based on findings from over 70 cross-country studies on the different aspects shaping views on inequality. Three concepts are central here: estimations of existing inequality (perceptions), normative views about fair inequality (beliefs) and the evaluation of existing inequality (judgements) (Janmaat, 2013). In addition to perceptions of existing inequality, normative views about inequality and its evaluation also play an important role in shaping demand for redistribution at both the individual and country levels (Engelhardt & Wagener, 2014; García-Sánchez et al., 2020; Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018; Niehues, 2014; Stantcheva, 2024). Although not empirically tested, Janmaat (2013) further theorised that perceptions, beliefs and judgements are interrelated, such that a greater gap between beliefs and perceptions will also influence the judgement of inequality. That is, whether the difference between perceptions and beliefs is

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seen as good or bad. Demand for redistribution has also been shown to be associated with experienced income inequality (Roth & Wohlfart, 2018), as well as the beliefs about the consequences of inequality (Lobeck & Stostad, 2023). Both experienced income inequality and beliefs about its consequences shape how inequality is judged. Thus, an important factor for the demand for redistribution is the level of concern with income inequality.

Another reason the actual level of inequality might be less relevant than the perceived level for the demand for redistribution is that differences in perceptions of income inequality do not necessarily correspond to reality. For actual inequality to influence demand for redistribution, one needs to assume an informed decision-making process (Martín-Legendre et al., 2026), meaning that every individual knows how unequal their society is in terms of income and where they themselves are positioned within that hierarchy. Based on this, one would evaluate whether more redistribution would benefit them. In reality, it is more difficult, if not even impossible, for someone to know how they are socioeconomically positioned within society (Karadja et al., 2017). Although income inequality is increasing in many countries, perceptions and evaluations of inequality differ. The literature suggests that one reason for these biased perceptions is that people tend to be surrounded by others who are socioeconomically and educationally similar to them and are therefore unaware of their exact social position within the broader society (Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018; Mijs, 2021; Stantcheva, 2024). Furthermore, people tend to interpret others' social positions through the lens of their own perceived social position and, as a result, tend to place themselves near the middle of society (Evans et al., 1992).

Misperceptions affect not only the perceived level of inequality but can also influence demand for redistribution by shaping the understanding of how redistributive policies work in general. Misperceptions and incorrect beliefs about the mechanisms of redistributive policies can also lower the demand for redistribution (Sapienza & Zingales, 2013; Stantcheva, 2024). This leads to another important theoretical implication: concern over income inequality may not translate directly into demand for redistribution, because beliefs about the effectiveness of redistributive solutions may differ (Stantcheva, 2024). Therefore, although related, concern over income inequality and demand for income redistribution are two distinct concepts and are analysed separately in this article. Concern refers to the evaluation of the status quo and the degree of dissatisfaction with it, whereas demand refers to support for specific countermeasures. An individual may be highly concerned about the level of inequality but may not believe the government or the state is obligated or able to change the situation. For this reason, both concern and demand will be used as dependent variables in this article.

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People's objective social position still matters to some extent in shaping perceptions of inequality and society, as Evans et al. (1992) show. For example, individuals from higher social classes are more likely to believe that other people's incomes are also higher and, thus, to perceive society as more egalitarian. In contrast, individuals of lower social status tend to perceive society as more elitist (Evans et al., 1992). Objective social position, therefore, does partially influence what social position people ascribe to others. Additionally, if one perceives themselves in a better social position than others around them, or if they perceive the chances for social mobility to be high, they will tend to demand less redistribution. The mechanism behind that is the belief that if one has greater chances to rise through the social ranks, greater redistribution will stand in the way of future success (Bonnet et al., 2024; García-Sánchez et al., 2020; Guillaud, 2013; Mengel & Weidenholzer, 2023; Mijs, 2021; Stantcheva, 2024).

Beliefs function as a basis for evaluating what is perceived as fair. These views about fairness play a crucial role in shaping the views about inequality (i.e. how it should be) (Janmaat, 2013). For example, income inequality is more likely to be seen as justified when people believe that everyone has a fair and equal opportunity to succeed or that success results from hard work (Alesina et al., 2018; Guillaud, 2013; Mijs, 2021; Stantcheva, 2024). García-Sánchez et al. (2020) refer to these as system-justifying beliefs (ideologies), which determine whether the current perceived status quo is seen as fair and acceptable. One of these beliefs – beliefs in meritocracy – has been shown to be an especially important determinant of perceptions of inequality. From a meritocratic perspective, income differences and the resulting inequality are justified by the belief that they stem from a fair process that reflects talent, ambition, and hard work (Mijs, 2021; Teklu, 2018). In other words, for income inequality to be seen as fair, income differences must be seen as the result of individual effort and equal opportunities rather than from luck or other factors beyond individuals' control. If income inequality is believed to have a fair and just origin, as it would in a perfect meritocratic society, people are much more likely to accept inequality and demand less income redistribution (Blouin et al., 2024; García-Sánchez et al., 2020; Garrec, 2018; Janmaat, 2013; Mengel & Weidenholzer, 2023; Mijs, 2021).

The source of inequality is therefore central. More specifically, the source believed to cause inequality, and whether it is evaluated as fair, shapes demand for income redistribution (Alesina et al., 2018; Alesina & Angeletos, 2005; Blouin et al., 2024). This subjective reality emerges partly from experiences. For example, success strengthens belief in meritocracy (Blouin et al., 2024), as one's own achievements are more easily interpreted as the outcome

of hard work. Nevertheless, this interpretation is rooted in a highly subjective personal evaluation.

Another concept connected to beliefs about fairness is social trust, which some scholars have found to influence how inequality is assessed and how demand for redistribution is shaped (Bjørnskov & Svendsen, 2013; Dutta & Sobel, 2023; Kishishita & Matsumoto, 2024; Kuziemko et al., 2015). Others, however, have found no such effect (Devine, 2025; Peyton, 2020). When discussing trust, it is important to distinguish between different kinds of trust. Kishishita and Matsumoto (2024) suggest that differences in results are likely due to different conceptualisations of trust, depending on whether studies examine interpersonal trust, trust in government, or plutocratic influence. Dutta and Sobel (2023) specifically analyse the interplay between interpersonal trust and the acceptance of inequality. They argue that larger income differences across levels of performance are seen as justified and as substitutes for trust in ensuring good performance. Furthermore, trust has been shown to influence demand for redistribution, as it reduces concern about people free-riding on the social welfare system. This, in turn, creates an incentive to expand the welfare state and therefore strengthen demand for redistribution (Bjørnskov & Svendsen, 2013; Dutta & Sobel, 2023). On the other hand, when social trust is lower, people might feel they cannot rely on others, and a large part of society may therefore expect redistribution to help them cope (Statman, 2016).

Next, differences in concern over income inequality and demand for redistribution might also stem from cultural differences. Economic preferences have been shown to be influenced by culture (Richwine, 2024), and several cross-country studies have concluded that cultural differences could potentially further explain country-level differences in demand for redistribution (Faggian et al., 2023; Griaznova, 2025; Lübker, 2007; Luttmer & Singhal, 2011; Martín-Legendre et al., 2026). Here in this article, culture is understood as a set of “[...] values, norms, beliefs and attitudes that distinguish one group of people from another [...]” (Kaasa & Minkov, 2022). Culture, as understood here, is a society-level phenomenon (Kaasa & Welzel, 2023; Minkov, 2018; Schwartz, 2014). It shapes how people perceive and interpret the world, as well as how they interact with it. Further support for the hypothesis that culture plays an important role in shaping demand for income redistribution was found in studies of immigrants. Luttmer and Singhal (2011), and later Griaznova (2025) using the same method, show that the culture of a person’s country of origin influences their demand for redistribution, even after emigrating to a new country.

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One way to measure cultural differences is to use cultural dimensions, which were first conceptualised by Hofstede (1980). Later, many scholars proposed different sets of dimensions (e.g. Inglehart, 1997; Schwartz, 1994). Country scores for dimensions are calculated using large international questionnaires, such as the World Values Survey. It is important to note that cultural dimension scores reflect countries' relative positions to one another, as the concept of cultural difference is meaningful only in comparison with other countries (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010). While many different sets of cultural dimensions have been constructed in the decades since Hofstede's original framework, recent research has shown that simple two-dimensional models of culture can explain quite well the most important cultural differences across the world (Fog, 2021; Kaasa & Minkov, 2022). Hence, it can be assumed that they are also suitable for explaining differences in redistributive demand and concern over income inequality at the cross-country level.

This study uses Inglehart's two-dimensional model: secular-rational versus traditional and survival versus self-expression (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Cultures that emphasise survival values tend to be more ethnocentric and concerned with themselves, value economic and physical security, show greater resistance to change, and have lower levels of tolerance. At the opposite pole are cultures that value self-expression and tend to emphasise values such as gender equality, environmental concern, self-realisation, and openness to change (Dülmer et al., 2015; Inglehart & Welzel, 2010). In theory, societies that score higher on survival values should be more likely to preserve the social status quo and thus be less accepting of transformations. Put differently, when a society is primarily concerned with its mere existence, it may have less capacity to focus on social issues such as redistribution. In contrast, people in societies that score higher on self-expression values feel less need to protect themselves from potentially threatening factors and have a greater capacity to focus on societal issues, such as gender equality and income redistribution.

However, Statman (2016) finds Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance to be positively associated with a higher preference for income equality. This would suggest that in societies where uncertainty avoidance is stronger, income inequality is seen as a potential threat, and demand for income redistribution functions as a way of reducing that uncertainty. Conceptually, Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance has been shown to capture similar elements as Inglehart's survival values (Kaasa, 2021). Both are characterised, among other things, by intolerance of uncertainty and fondness for rules and security. Statman's (2016) results about uncertainty avoidance being associated with preference for high income equality suggest a positive association between survival values and assessing income inequality as problematic,

and also greater demand for redistribution. The problem is that the measure of uncertainty avoidance used by Statman (2016) has been shown to be unreliable; in particular, its replicability has been questioned (Kaasa, 2021; Kaasa & Minkov, 2022; Merritt, 2000; Minkov, 2018). Thus, as the survival pole of the dimension is associated with intolerance of change, it is logically more consistent to hypothesise that it is related to a lower preference for income redistribution.

Furthermore, self-expression is related to individualism (Kaasa, 2021), and more individualistic societies have been hypothesised to be more self-reliant and have fewer potentially *free-riding* groups within society (Alesina & Stantcheva, 2020; Malinoski, 2012). Therefore, if there is no other safety net within society besides the state to help an individual, then logically those societies should tend to assess larger income differences as problematic and show more positive attitudes towards income redistribution.

In conclusion, regarding the survival versus self-expression dimension, this article hypothesises:

H1a: Societies at the survival end of the survival-self-expression dimension tend to be less concerned over income inequality than societies at the self-expression end of the dimension.

H1b: Societies at the survival end of the survival-self-expression dimension tend to demand less income redistribution than societies at the self-expression end of the dimension.

The traditional versus secular-rational dimension contrasts societies that emphasise hierarchy and the importance of clear social structures with more egalitarian societies that value responsibility (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Accordingly, more traditional societies are more likely than secular-rational societies to accept hierarchical structures. For example, Kteily et al. (2017) show that people's social dominance orientation affects perceived levels of social inequality. Their findings suggest that perceptions of inequality are shaped by whether people want to maintain hierarchy in their society. As a result, people who prefer to maintain higher levels of hierarchy also tend to perceive less inequality between different social groups (Kteily et al., 2017) and thus assess inequality to be less of an issue. More traditional societies should therefore tend to demand less income redistribution than secular-rational societies, as greater income inequality can be justified through hierarchy.

Studies on Hofstede's dimensions and preferences for redistribution have also shown that high power distance is negatively associated with preferences for greater income equality (Statman, 2016). The concept of power distance captures different aspects of hierarchy, with societies characterised by greater power distance also accepting greater hierarchy (Hofstede, 1980). These aspects are also reflected in Inglehart's traditional-secular-rational dimension (Kaasa, 2021; Kaasa & Minkov, 2022), which suggests that more traditional societies might believe that persistent income inequality is fair and a logical, or even justified, result of hierarchy. The mechanism behind this could function in a similar way to the previously described system-justifying beliefs (García-Sánchez et al., 2020). Garrec (2018) furthermore suggests that whether the perceived level of inequality is seen as fair depends on the environment in which people are socialised, and that cultural norms and values are among the determining factors. In the context of this article, traditional societies should therefore demand less redistribution, as the perceived level of inequality might be assessed as fair. In conclusion, regarding the traditional versus secular-rational dimension, this article hypothesises:

H2a: More secular-rational societies will tend to be more concerned over income inequality than more traditional societies.

H2b: More secular-rational societies will tend to demand more income redistribution than more traditional societies.

2. Data & Methodology

The data for the empirical analysis in this article were obtained from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), the World Values Survey (WVS), and the World Bank databases. The data from ISSP and WVS were aggregated, calculating mean country scores based on the original raw data. Between 880 to 3,310 respondents (1,366 respondents on average) were surveyed in each country. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1. Because the ISSP survey was conducted in a limited number of countries, data were available for 41 countries. A full list of countries included in the analysis is provided in Table A in the Appendix.

Two main measures are used as dependent variables, which stem from the Social Inequality IV Module of the 2009 round of ISSP data. The first one is item Q6a, "Differences in income in <country> are too large", which measures the subjective assessment of income inequality and is reported on a five-point Likert scale ("concern over income inequality" in

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Table 1). The variable was recoded so that higher values indicate stronger agreement that income differences are too large, thereby indicating that existing income differences are seen as problematic. The second dependent variable is item Q7a, “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,” which measures demand for income redistribution and is also reported on a five-point scale (“demand for redistribution” in Table 1). The variable was also recoded so that higher values indicate stronger demand for redistribution (i.e. higher taxes on high incomes) (ISSP, 2017).

As argued above, how inequality is assessed might be partly due to the mismatch between perceived and desired levels of inequality (Janmaat, 2013; Norton & Ariely, 2011). The analysis, therefore, includes an index estimating the gap between desired and perceived equality, which captures the discrepancy between respondents’ perceptions of the existing social structure and the type of social structure they would ideally prefer. In this study, the variable is constructed from items Q14a (“Type of society: What type of society is [Rs country] today - which diagram comes closest?”) and Q14b (“Type of society: What do you think [Rs country] ought to be like - which would you prefer?”), using the formula proposed by Evans et al. (1992). Higher values of the index indicate a greater mismatch between desired and perceived levels of equality in society. Conceptually, this measure is distinct from both dependent variables, as it does not, in itself, indicate whether respondents evaluate the situation as problematic. The difference may still be interpreted as understandable, deserved, or justified on the basis of merit, effort, or other system-legitimising beliefs. The dependent variable specifically captures respondents’ assessment of whether income differences are too large, whereas this variable measures only the discrepancy between desired and perceived social structure, which is expected to reflect, to some extent, the gap between desired and perceived equality.

In order to control for the influence of actual inequality, the 5-year average Gini index from the World Bank database is used. The 5-year average is used because it reduces sensitivity to temporary short-term fluctuations. Furthermore, if objective income inequality is expected to shape the assessment of income inequality and demand for income redistribution, then the objective inequality from the preceding years is better suited. This is because beliefs are formed over time rather than in response to short-term fluctuations.

For the meritocracy index, only items were used that are unambiguous and clearly related to meritocracy. Thus, four items, which contrast meritocratic explanations of success (hard work (Q1d.) and ambition (Q1e.)) with non-meritocratic explanations (knowing the

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right people (Q1f.) and coming from a wealthy family (Q1a.)), were used. Subsequently, the index was constructed by including the first two with positive and the second two with negative signs. Higher values on the meritocratic index, therefore, indicate stronger belief in meritocracy.

For general trust, the item V23 from the World Values Survey's wave 5 (2005–2009) is used, which asks respondents whether people can be generally trusted. The variable measures the share of respondents who reported that people can generally be trusted. Inglehart's cultural dimensions are measured using country scores calculated from wave 5 of the WVS (Inglehart et al., 2022). For the secular-rational versus traditional dimension, higher values correspond to more secular-rational societies, and for the self-expression versus survival dimension, higher values correspond to societies that place greater emphasis on self-expression values.

Table 1.

Descriptives - unstandardized variables

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Concern over income inequality	41	4.21	0.35	3.28	4.74
Demand for redistribution	41	4.01	0.20	3.66	4.45
Gap between desired and perceived equality	41	38.93	17.56	8.13	73.73
Meritocracy index	41	0.75	0.38	0.07	1.70
Gini index	36	34.74	8.07	24.38	63.90
General trust	39	0.33	0.18	0.04	0.76
Self-expression (vs survival)	40	0.57	1.21	-1.26	2.95
Secular-rational (vs traditional)	40	0.27	0.79	-1.72	1.89

Note: The number of observations varies across variables due to missing data.

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Correlations between all variables are presented in Appendix Table B. As can be seen from Table B, most variables are weakly (0.1–0.3) to moderately (0.4–0.6) correlated with the dependent variables and with each other. However, several strong correlations (above 0.7) are observed, particularly between the gap between desired and perceived equality, self-expression versus survival dimension, and general trust. These correlations indicate a

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potential risk of multicollinearity, which is further assessed using variance inflation factors (VIFs) in the regression analysis.

The gap between desired and perceived equality (0.70), meritocracy index (-0.59), general trust (-0.41), and the self-expression dimension (-0.51) are all significantly correlated with concern over income inequality. The correlations with demand for redistribution show broadly similar patterns. A notable difference concerns general trust, which shows a weaker and statistically insignificant relationship with redistribution preferences, whereas the secular-rational versus traditional dimension shows a weak but statistically significant positive correlation.

For the empirical analysis, an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model is used for each of the dependent variables: concern over income inequality and demand for redistribution. OLS regression is a widely used method in this area of research and has been employed by other scholars to examine relationships between perceptions of inequality, redistributive demand and influencing factors (Bobzien, 2023; Bonnet et al., 2024; Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018; Lübker, 2007; Richwine, 2024). The baseline model equation can be expressed as follows:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{gap between desired and perceived equality}_i + \beta_2 \text{meritocracy index}_i + \beta_3 \text{gini index}_i + \beta_4 \text{general trust}_i + \beta_5 \text{self expression}_i + \beta_6 \text{secular rational}_i + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Where: Y_i = dependent variable for country i , which either represents concern over income inequality or demand for redistribution

β_0 = intercept

β_k = coefficients

X_i = explanatory variables for country i

ϵ_i = error term

The models are estimated using backward regression as a general-to-specific approach, in which theoretically relevant variables are initially included, and statistically insignificant variables are subsequently removed by finding the statistically best-suited model. All statistical analyses are conducted using R in RStudio.

3. Results

Table 2 presents Models 1–4, in which the dependent variable is the concern over income inequality. Model 1 is the baseline model, which includes all independent variables used in this analysis. Model 2 is the result of applying backward regression to Model 1. In Model 1, the Gini index (-0.066, p-value 0.669) and general trust (-0.311, p-value 0.125) are statistically insignificant.

Table 2

The results of OLS regression analysis for concern over income inequality

Dependent variable: Concern over income inequality	Model 1 Method: Enter	Model 2 Method: Backward	Model 3 Method: Enter	Model 4 Method: Backward
(Intercept)	-0.053 (0.638)	-0.052 (0.635)	0.002 (0.986)	0.002 (0.986)
Gap between desired and perceived equality	0.754*** (<0.001)	0.744*** (<0.001)	0.663*** (<0.001)	0.663*** (<0.001)
Meritocracy index	-0.395* (0.020)	-0.408* (0.014)	-0.413** (0.004)	-0.413** (0.004)
Gini index	-0.066 (0.669)			
General trust	-0.311 (0.125)	-0.335+ (0.083)	-0.307+ (0.082)	-0.307+ (0.082)
Self-expression (vs survival)	0.569* (0.038)	0.599* (0.022)	0.452* (0.033)	0.452* (0.033)
Secular-rational (vs traditional)	0.345+ (0.069)	0.393* (0.011)	0.386** (0.003)	0.386** (0.003)
Number of Observations	34	34	39	39
R squared	0.689	0.687	0.697	0.697
Adjusted R squared	0.620	0.631	0.652	0.652
RMSE	0.56	0.56	0.54	0.54

*Note: Calculations by the author. + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. p -values in parentheses. “Enter” refers to the full regression model in which all predictors were entered simultaneously. “Backward” refers to the final reduced model obtained using backward elimination.*

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This suggests that the actual level of inequality, measured by the Gini index, is not significantly related to the assessment of income inequality, which is in line with prior theoretical arguments (Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018; Niehues, 2014; Stantcheva, 2024). At the same time, in Model 2, after the Gini index was excluded, general trust became statistically significant, although only at the 10% level.

Despite the rather low significance level of general trust, it is still somewhat related to the assessed level of income inequality. Concerning the two cultural dimensions, the secular-rational dimension is significant only at the 10% level in Model 1, but significance reaches the 5% level in Model 2. Regarding the self-expression versus survival dimension and the meritocracy index, both show statistical significance at the 5% level in Models 1 and 2, although, in both cases, slight improvements in their p-values and beta coefficients can be noted. The strongest predictor in both models is the gap between the desired and perceived equality of society, which is statistically significant at the 1% level in either model.

Given the sample size of 34 countries, it is plausible that predictors may show weaker statistical significance, as the model was estimated on limited data. The sample size is mainly constrained by data on the Gini index. Empirical as well as theoretical considerations reasonably allow for the removal of that variable without substantially increasing the risk of omitted variable bias. As a result, two additional models, Models 3 and 4, were estimated to test whether results change substantially with a larger sample of 39 countries and without including the Gini index. Subsequently, Model 3 is run with all theoretical variables except for the 5-year Gini index. Model 4 shows the results of the same backward regression method as before. As shown in the table, no variables were left out, and with the larger sample size, the results remain unchanged, adding robustness to the analysis. Models 3 and 4 produce results that are substantially similar to those of Model 2. The statistical significance of the meritocracy index and the secular-rational versus traditional dimension increases in Model 4, rising to the 1% level from the 5% level in Model 2, indicating an even more significant association with the dependent variable. Although all estimates except that of the meritocracy index decrease slightly, the model's overall explanatory power improves.

To ensure that the final models satisfy the classical assumptions of regression analysis, several analytical tests were conducted. Regarding the possible multicollinearity among variables with higher correlations, the variance inflation factor (VIF) indicated no severe multicollinearity. The highest scores were for the self-expression versus survival dimension (4.583) as well as the gap between desired and perceived equality (3.389) and general trust (3.079). All three show slight but unproblematic multicollinearity.

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Heteroscedasticity was tested using the Breusch-Pagan test. With a p-value of 0.126, the test failed to reject the null hypothesis, suggesting no problematic heteroscedasticity. Normality of residuals was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which also failed to reject the null hypothesis, suggesting that the residuals are normally distributed. Overall, the model is statistically significant at the 1% level and explains about 63% of the variance.

Table 3

The results of OLS regression analysis for the demand for income redistribution

Dependent variable: Demand for income redistribution	Model 5 Method: Enter	Model 6 Method: Backward	Model 7 Method: Enter	Model 8 Method: Backward
(Intercept)	-0.052 (0.709)	-0.028 (0.831)	0.037 (0.773)	0.042 (0.742)
Gap between desired and perceived equality	0.447+ (0.069)	0.428** (0.002)	0.230 (0.282)	
Meritocracy index	-0.178 (0.379)		-0.305+ (0.097)	-0.339* (0.021)
Gini index	-0.040 (0.833)			
General trust	-0.259 (0.297)		-0.284 (0.225)	-0.330* (0.045)
Self-expression (vs. survival)	0.341 (0.302)		0.127 (0.644)	
Secular-rational (vs. traditional)	0.404+ (0.085)	0.365* (0.019)	0.492** (0.005)	0.494** (0.004)
Number of Observations	34	34	39	39
R squared	0.389	0.341	0.433	0.412
Adjusted R squared	0.253	0.299	0.347	0.362
RMSE	0.70	0.72	0.73	0.74

*Note: Calculations by the author. + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. P-values in parentheses. "Backward" refers to the final reduced model obtained using backward elimination.*

Created by the author.

Table 3 presents regression Models 5–8 with demand for redistribution as the dependent variable. Using the same backward regression method as with Models 1–4, all

theoretically important variables of the analysis are included in Model 5, including the Gini index. In the next step, backward regression was applied, resulting in Model 6, which includes only two independent variables. In Model 5, none of the variables is statistically significant at the 5% level. Only the gap between desired and perceived equality and the secular-rational versus traditional cultural dimension show statistical significance at the 10% level. In Model 6, the gap between desired and perceived equality becomes statistically significant at the 1% level, and the secular-rational versus traditional dimension at the 5% level.

The same small-sample problem as in Models 1 and 2 also persists in Models 5 and 6. Therefore, two further models (Models 7 and 8 in Table 3) were estimated with a greater sample size. Although none of the variables in Model 5 is statistically significant at the 5% level, and most variables are removed from Model 6 after backward regression, only the Gini index is excluded in Model 7 (Table 3). This is because it is theoretically the weakest predictor and also notably restricts the sample size. Hence, Model 7 includes all other theoretical predictors except for the 5-year average Gini index, and Model 8 is obtained by applying backward regression to Model 7. In contrast to the models for concern over inequality, where the results remained largely the same even with a larger sample, the results are now different. While the signs of the coefficients remain unchanged, the statistical significance varies considerably. Although the gap between desired and perceived equality was statistically significant in Models 5 and 6, it became insignificant in Model 7 and was excluded by the backward regression in Model 8. Instead, the meritocracy index and general trust remain in the final Model 8 and reach statistical significance at the 5% level. The secular-rational versus traditional cultural dimension is statistically significant in Models 7 and 8 at the 1% level, compared to the 5% level in Model 6 and the 10% level in Model 5. The fact that the gap between desired and perceived equality is insignificant in Models 7 and 8 suggests that the relationship between the variable and demand for income redistribution may depend on the sample and, therefore, might depend on some influential countries. Another possibility is that the excluded Gini index caused omitted variable bias, which could influence the other variables. Overall, the instability across model specifications indicates that the relationship between the dependent and independent variables is, in general, sensitive to sample composition and model structure.

Furthermore, because the two cultural dimensions are the main variables of interest in this analysis, it is interesting that the self-expression versus survival dimension does not reach statistical significance across different model specifications. The variable is statistically

insignificant in Models 5 and 7 and is removed by backward regression in Models 6 and 8, indicating no significant association with demand for redistribution. On the other hand, the secular-rational versus traditional dimension is statistically significant and of the same sign across all model specifications, indicating that this dimension is importantly associated with demand for redistribution.

The variance inflation factor (VIF) diagnostics for Models 5 and 6, as well as 7 and 8, show no problematic multicollinearity. The greater adjusted R-squared in Model 8 suggests a better fit than the previous models. Furthermore, the Breusch-Pagan test indicates no issues with heteroscedasticity, and the Shapiro-Wilk test suggests normality of residuals. Overall, all models are statistically significant.

The results may be explained by the small number of observations used to determine the final models. Even with the greater sample of 39 countries rather than 34, when the Gini index is included, the dataset remains small. This in itself is expected for a cross-country dataset, but it also makes variables more susceptible to outliers. Moreover, the relationships between the observed variables seem to be less clear for demand for redistribution than for concern over income inequality, as both use the same sample. In all models, the 5-year average Gini index reduces the sample size to 34 countries. With 6 independent variables, which was the initial number in all baseline models, the risk of overfitting the model or unstable results due to the low number of degrees of freedom is plausible.

4. Discussion and Limitations

Regarding the cultural dimensions, the regression analysis shows that the secular-rational versus traditional dimension is associated with both dependent variables, whereas the self-expression versus survival dimension is relevant for concern over income inequality, but not for demand for income redistribution.

Regarding the self-expression versus survival dimension, the analysis supports hypothesis H1a. A one-standard-deviation increase in self-expression values is associated with a 0.452-standard-deviation increase in the concern over income inequality. Hence, it seems plausible that when a society is less concerned with physical and economic security, there is more opportunity for society to be concerned with social structures that impede quality of life. As a result, larger differences in income are assessed to be more problematic. A further possible explanation may lie in the fact that societies characterised by stronger survival values are more oriented toward stability and security, which could make existing inequalities appear more acceptable compared to the perceived risk of social change.

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A one-standard-deviation increase in secular-rational values is associated with a 0.386-standard-deviation increase in concern over income inequality. This result provides support for hypothesis H2a. One possible explanation for this relationship is that secular-rational and traditional societies differ in how they view hierarchy. In more traditional societies, hierarchical social structures tend to be more readily or inherently accepted, which can lead to assessing income inequality as less problematic. Furthermore, more traditional societies tend to place greater emphasis on authority, family, and religion, thereby reinforcing the acceptance of hierarchical social arrangements. In such contexts, income differences may be more likely to be viewed as a normal part of the social order rather than as a problem requiring criticism. By contrast, more secular-rational societies tend to be less accepting of hierarchy and therefore more likely to assess similar differences in income inequality as more problematic. As secular-rational societies also tend to place greater emphasis on science and gender-equality issues, it is possible that societal issues might be seen as more problematic in general in more secular-rational societies.

These associations hold when controlling for the gap between desired and perceived equality, which was theorised to influence how inequality is judged (Janmaat, 2013; Norton & Ariely, 2011). The gap itself appeared to have a strong and significant relationship (0.663, p -value < 0.001) with concern over income inequality. Another factor appears to be meritocracy: a one-standard-deviation increase in the meritocracy index is associated with a 0.413-standard-deviation decrease in concern over income inequality. This suggests that beliefs legitimising the perceived level of income inequality result in assessing income inequality as less problematic. It also aligns with previous studies (Almås et al., 2020; García-Sánchez et al., 2020), which argue that perceptions of fairness and how societies interpret the causes of existing inequality, including whether unequal outcomes are seen as justified or unjustified, indeed matter.

General trust shows a negative relationship with concern over income inequality, suggesting that greater general trust is associated with assessing differences in income inequality as less problematic. However, it is significant only at the 10% level, which aligns with the mixed expectations and findings of previous studies.

The relationship between culture and demand for redistribution appears to be more complex, as the analysis shows more unstable results across model specifications. Although the variables have stable signs across different models, statistical significance varies.

For demand for redistribution, the secular-rational versus traditional dimension appears to be statistically significant. A one-standard-deviation increase in secular-rational

values is associated with a 0.365 (and a 0.494 in Model 8) standard-deviation increase in demand for redistribution. In other words, more secular-rational societies tend not only to perceive income differences as too large, but this assessment also translates into greater demand for income redistribution. This confirms H2b. This result is consistent across model specifications (Models 5-8), and a possible explanation again lies here in views about hierarchy and fairness. High income differences might be taken as given in traditional societies, where religious and familial authority are central. In such settings, authority comes from a more random or predestined source (such as God, family, the status and class one is born into) and questioning its legitimacy may be perceived as challenging the existing social structure. Therefore, demanding more income redistribution would question the very reality in which the society lives. In contrast, secular-rational societies, although not necessarily dismantling hierarchy entirely, might see the demand for income redistribution less as going against the existing structures than as optimising them to be fairer based on rationale.

Of course, societies cannot simply be categorised as secular-rational or traditional, self-expression or survival cultures, but rather as leaning more toward the values that are characteristic of one or the other. Hence, these results ought to be interpreted as indicating tendencies in how, for example, more traditional or more secular-rational societies approach demand for income redistribution.

Regarding the self-expression versus survival dimension, it did not appear to be statistically significant for demand for redistribution in any model, leaving hypothesis H1b unsupported. Hence, although societies that place greater emphasis on self-expression values show greater concern over income inequality and people tend to see income differences more often as too large, the analysis does not show that this also translates into higher demand for redistribution. As suggested in the literature, different factors tend to influence concern for income inequality more strongly, but the translation into actual demand for redistribution tends to be weaker (Stantcheva, 2024). Thus, it may be that cultures positioned on the self-expression side of the dimension are more attentive to social issues like income inequality and show greater concern, yet this does not necessarily mean society also agrees on a specific solution. Accordingly, it could be possible that demand for redistribution is more strongly associated with only one of the two dimensions. As this article uses a two-dimensional approach based on the argument that the most important cultural dimensions are factor rotations of each other (Kaasa & Minkov, 2022), it could also be that the self-expression versus survival dimension, only to some extent, influences demand for redistribution, which the regression models are not able to capture.

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The strongest predictor in Models 5 and 6 was instead the gap between desired and perceived equality. In these models, the Gini index is accounted for. A one-standard-deviation increase in the mismatch between desired and perceived equality is associated with a 0.428-standard-deviation increase in demand for income redistribution. This would indicate that if the desired equality differs more from the perceived one, then not only does society assess income inequality as too large and therefore problematic, but also demands more redistribution. Although this association is theoretically possible and plausible, the variable becomes insignificant when actual inequality is not controlled for. This observation could indicate omitted-variable bias. It would be, for example, possible that when actual inequality is high, the gap between perceived and desired equality is assessed as problematic, whereas when not controlled for actual inequality, the association becomes less visible.

When the Gini index is excluded, meritocracy and general trust become statistically significant. Although the reason for this instability may lie in sample size or omitted variable bias, the result might still be theoretically plausible and in line with theory. Belief in meritocracy not only justifies differences in income through the belief that success results from hard work and ambition, but is also associated with lower demand for redistribution. From a meritocratic perspective, the unequal distribution of income reflects the outcome of a fair process and therefore does not require government intervention through redistribution. This reflects the same broader question of what is perceived to be fair, as has been discussed before with the secular-rational versus traditional dimension.

General trust appears to be negatively associated with demand for redistribution. Given that the literature on trust shows mixed findings, this result seems to support the idea that if trust in a society is lower, people might feel that they cannot rely on the help of others and may instead expect redistribution to help them cope.

In summary, culture does influence concern over income inequality and the demand for income redistribution. This association persists even after other factors are accounted for. Therefore, the assessment of whether income differences are too large and whether there is a need for redistribution includes a cultural component, understood here as differences in how people think. In this respect, the secular-rational versus traditional dimension seems more influential, as it also underlies the demand for redistribution. Considering Inglehart's theory of cultural change, it is possible that the shift of authority from traditional to more secular-rational sources means that demand for redistribution becomes more of a mechanism supporting the functioning of authority. In contrast, in more traditional societies, this could be seen as trying to undermine authority.

This analysis is subject to several limitations, which need to be acknowledged. Firstly, as briefly discussed above, the sample used in the empirical analysis is limited by its cross-country level character and by the number of countries for which the data were available. This can make the models unstable and more sensitive to outliers. Additionally, missing values in the Gini index further restrict the sample. Although widely used in other studies, it is also worth noting that the Gini index is derived from the Lorenz curve, which means that two countries can have the same Gini even if their income distributions differ. Future research may test whether the associations found in this article also hold when using alternative measures of income inequality. Furthermore, regarding the determinants of demand for income redistribution, it may be reasonable to explore additional explanatory variables in future research. Secondly, although the backward regression method helps determine statistically significant variables, its selection process is data-driven, which may increase the risk of excluding important variables that, due to sample size, may not reach statistical significance. Finally, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inference and instead shows associations; hence, the present design does not permit causal conclusions and requires further examination in future research.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine whether and how cultural differences may explain between-country differences in concern over income inequality and demand for redistribution. To this end, the article uses a two-dimensional approach to culture, which has been shown to account for most major cultural differences across countries. To measure culture, this article uses Inglehart's cultural dimensions. The findings of the regression analysis support the hypothesis that country-level differences in concern over income inequality and demand for income redistribution are associated with the cultural context. However, the association is more clearly evident for the concern over income inequality, where the hypothesised relationships with the secular-rational versus traditional and the self-expression versus survival dimensions are supported by the empirical analysis across different model specifications. Regarding the demand for redistribution, only the secular-rational versus traditional dimension is associated on a statistically significant level.

This article adds to the existing literature by using a more theoretically concise framework for measuring culture that captures broad cultural patterns when analysing country-level differences. The article provides clear evidence that culture is an important determinant of differences in concern over income inequality and in demand for

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redistribution. It also discusses potential reasons and mechanisms explaining why societies differ in how they assess income inequality and support income redistribution. An important implication for policymakers is therefore that both concern over income inequality and demand for redistribution are shaped not only by economic conditions, perceptions, and beliefs, but also by the broader cultural context.

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Appendix

Table A.
List of included countries

List of included countries

Country	
Argentina	Lithuania
Australia	New Zealand
Austria	Norway
Belgium	Philippines
Bulgaria	Poland
Chile	Portugal
China	Russia
Croatia	Slovakia
Czech Rep.	Slovenia
Cyprus	South Africa
Denmark	South Korea
Estonia	Spain
Finland	Sweden
France	Switzerland
Germany	Taiwan ROC
Hungary	Turkey
Iceland	Ukraine
Israel	United Kingdom
Italy	United States
Japan	Venezuela
Latvia	

Created by the author.

Table B.

Correlation matrix

Correlation matrix (Pearson's pairwise correlation coefficients)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Concern over income inequality	1.00							
2. Demand for redistribution	0.62***	1.00						
3. Gap between desired and perceived equality	0.70***	0.43**	1.00					
4. Gini index	-0.12	-0.22	0.25	1.00				
5. Meritocracy index	-0.59***	-0.43**	-0.57***	-0.12	1.00			
6. General trust	-0.41**	-0.26	-0.65***	-0.33	0.39*	1.00		
7. Self-expression (vs survival)	-0.51***	-0.41**	-0.78***	-0.35*	0.67***	0.74***	1.00	
8. Secular-rational (vs traditional)	0.26	0.36*	-0.11	-0.64***	0.03	0.44**	0.14	1.00

*Note: Calculations by the author. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$*

Created by the author.

Resümee

**MURE SISSETULEKUTE EBAVÕRDSUSE PÄRAST JA NÕUDLUS ÜMBERJAOTUSE
JÄRELE: KULTUURI MÕJU**

Mikk Viilukas

Antud magistritöös uuritakse, kuidas kultuur on seotud riikidevaheliste erinevustega selles, mil määral ollakse mures sissetulekute ebavõrdsuse pärast ning nõutakse sissetulekute ümberjaotamist. Käesolev magistritöö lisab väärtust olemasolevale kirjandusele, kasutades Ingleharti kultuuridimensioonide näol terviklikumat ja aktuaalsemat lähenemist kultuurile võrreldes varasemate uuringutega. Selle kaudu on antud töös võimalik spetsiifilisemalt analüüsida seoseid kultuuri ja sissetuleku ebavõrdsuse pärast muretsemise ja sissetulekute ümberjaotamise nõudmise vahel.

Töös antakse alustuseks ülevaade teoreetilisest raamistikust, sealhulgas varasemas kirjanduses analüüsitud võimalikest mõjuritest, mida käesolevas analüüsis kasutatakse kontrollmuutujatena. Seejärel tuletatakse hüpoteesid kultuuri võimaliku mõju kohta. Kultuurimõõdikuna kasutatakse Ingleharti kultuuridimensioone: ratsionaalne versus traditsiooniline ja eneseväljendus versus ellujäämine. Töö empiirilises osas kasutatakse agregeeritud andmeid andmebaasidest ISSP, WVS ja WDI. Analüüsimeetodina on kasutusel regressioonanalüüs enter- ja backward-meetodil.

Analüüsi tulemused näitavad, et erinevused kultuuris on seotud riikidevaheliste erinevustega sissetulekute ebavõrdsuse pärast muretsemises ja nõudluses sissetulekute ümberjaotamise järele. Sealjuures selgitavad mõlemad kultuuridimensioonid muret sissetulekute ebavõrdsuse pärast, kuid nõudlust ümberjaotamise järele saab selgelt seostada vaid kultuuridimensiooniga, mis vastandab ratsionaalse versus traditsioonilise mõtteviisi.

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