

<sup>1</sup>KU Leuven

<sup>2</sup>Pacte Grenoble

Polarizing or bridging? How political discourse influences ideological divides in redistributive preferences

Bakgrund/Frågeställning

Scholars distinguish cultural from economic leanings among the general public, where the economic dimension is built upon the opposition between egalitarianism and laissez-faire, and the cultural dimension is grounded in the cleavage between authoritarianism and libertarianism (Achterberg & Houtman, 2009). While for cultural views the importance of political discourses has been evidenced (Bohman, 2011; Czymara, 2020), for the economic dimension the impact of the politicization of inequalities and redistribution has largely stayed under the radar. However, in contemporary welfare societies, questions on ‘who should get what and why’ are central parts of political discourses as well (van Oorschot, 2000). Potentially, it is this politicization of inequalities and redistributive issues that could explain people’s views on how to deal with inequalities. In this hypothesis, political frames affect how citizens cognitively understand issues by suggesting what the essence of an issue is and providing a representation of it (i.e., type of mental recipe for developing opinions), (Nelson & Kinder, 1996; Slothuus, 2008; Slothuus & De Vreese, 2010).

Yet, beyond affecting egalitarian preferences as such, these political discourses could also bridge or widen divides between ideological groups in society. If for instance parties make redistributive issues more salient, it could more strongly divide left- and right-wing citizens who traditionally hold distinct views on the legitimacy of social inequalities. In contrast, strong pro-redistributive discourses could stimulate more egalitarian opinions among all ideological constituents and hence narrow political oppositions on redistributive issues. Despite this potential relevance of political discourses to impact both economic preferences and its ideological divides, little research has analysed this in detail.

As a result, we focus on how the salience and position of political discourses on economic redistribution influence public preferences for the distributive principle of equality. In addition, we test whether the salience and position affect how left-right placement shapes preferences for equality, in order to check whether discourses have a bridging or polarizing function. This is done by estimating multilevel models and cross-level interactions on data of the European Social Survey (2018/2019) and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (for political discourses). Results indicate that pro-redistributive positions of parties stimulate support for equality as well as narrow ideological divides in these preferences. The salience, however, does not have a significant influence on these preferences or ideological gaps. These results demonstrate the importance of political discourses in explaining economic preferences and the ideological divides therein.

Metod och Resultat

Konklusion