Public support for welfare and redistributive policies in Ireland

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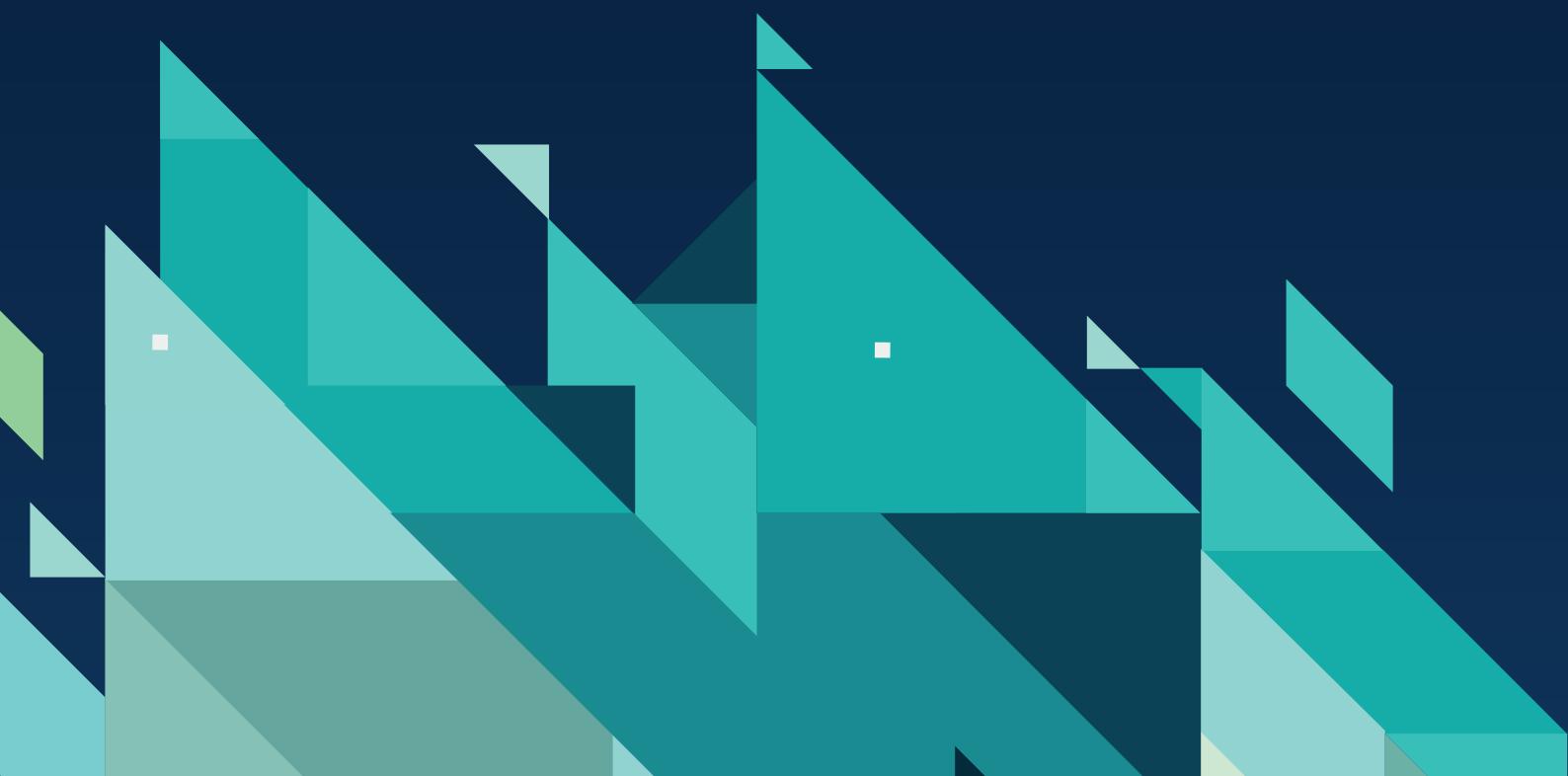
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PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR WELFARE AND REDISTRIBUTIVE POLICIES IN IRELAND

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FOREWORD

The high level of public support (71%) for reducing the income gap is one of the most welcome aspects of this pioneering report by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and Community Foundation Ireland.

The figure, one of the highest in Europe, shows that even in times of challenge and complexities, there is a sense of fairness and support for equality within our society. Something all of us should be proud of.

Public recognition of the role of welfare payments and supports in helping to achieve fair wealth distribution is again very positive.

However, views become more mixed when it comes to recipients of certain supports. There is a higher level of support for government spending on older people and childcare for working families than there is for those who are unemployed. This raises important questions about how this vital safety net has become so unfairly stigmatised.

Negative labelling or perceptions toward people receiving these payments are not only unfair, but can also have a long-term impact by lowering public support for welfare payments.

The report highlights a responsibility on those who comment on or debate the social welfare system to ensure accuracy and avoid misconceptions that can unfairly stigmatise individuals, households or even communities.

Partnering with 5,000 voluntary, community and charitable organisations as well as expert researchers and advocates, the Community Foundation will reflect on these findings and examine how they can advance our equality mission.

With our partners, the Foundation will examine how the report can be effectively utilised to ensure that the welfare system's role in addressing inequality and offering opportunities is appreciated and understood.

We also encourage others to take the same responsible approach.

Denise Charlton,
Chief Executive, Community Foundation Ireland

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ABBREVIATIONS

CSO	Central Statistics Office
ESS	European Social Survey
SES	Socio-economic status
VS	Voter Surveys

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current report presents findings of a research project that explored attitudes towards welfare and redistributive policies among Irish residents. Public support for the welfare state is an important foundation for democratic governments to pursue the policies needed to alleviate poverty in society. The study draws primarily on data from the European Social Survey (ESS), which is supplemented with information from the Election Survey.

Three in every four Irish residents indicate that they agree that the government should take measures to reduce differences in income. This proportion is slightly higher than the European average (71%) and the proportions in other northern European countries (Figure 2.1). Support for income redistribution is higher among females, those in the lowest income quintile and those from the unskilled and skilled manual social classes (Table 2.1). Young people and those born in Ireland, and those who place themselves to the left in terms of their political attitudes are also more supportive of redistribution.

To get behind these general sentiments around distribution, the study also explores the attitudes to more concrete welfare and tax policy, as well as ideological basis for redistribution. While the connection found between social position (e.g. low income) and support for redistribution might be explained by self-interest (i.e. the belief that greater redistribution would improve their own material conditions), there is also evidence that it is influenced by people's views on fairness. In Ireland, perceptions about unfairness of the income of the rich is associated with support for redistribution as much as perceptions of how unfairly low the income of the poor is. In countries such as Norway and France, unfairly high incomes are more strongly associated with support for redistribution (Figure 3.6).

ATTITUDES TO SOCIAL BENEFITS

A high proportion of respondents in Ireland (64%) believe that social benefits prevent poverty (down slightly from 69% in 2009), but there was a small increase in the proportion of respondents who agree that 'social benefits lead to a more equal society' from 52 per cent in 2009 to 53 per cent 2016[1] (Figure 3.4). However, apart from these positive beliefs, there are also more negative sentiments, with 58 per cent believing that 'social benefits make people lazy'. Younger people, those on the right of the left-right scale, and those with lower educational attainment are more likely to agree that social benefits make people lazy (Table 3.1). While that belief declined over time, Ireland has one of the highest proportions in Europe of respondents agreeing with this statement (Figure 3.5).

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[1] This question is from a special module fielded in ESS 2009 and 2016 only.

There is a higher level of support for government spending on older people and childcare for working families than there is for those who are unemployed. The same pattern is observed in most European countries but, in Ireland, the gaps between these three groups are significantly smaller. A third of respondents indicated that they would agree with higher taxes if it meant more or better public services. This is the sixth highest percentage across the 27 participant countries (Figure 3.7).

CHANGE OVER TIME

Over the period 2002 to 2023/4, support for redistribution in Ireland fluctuated around 75 per cent. Trends differ across social class groups. Support for income redistribution among the working class in Ireland is now at the highest level since 2002 (Figure 4.2). Events such as a government campaign focused on welfare fraud and budget announcements have a significant but short-lived impact on welfare attitudes (Figure 4.7) and support for redistribution (Figure 4.9). The impact of the pandemic is also visible. Those who experienced job loss during the COVID-19 pandemic are more supportive of redistribution, regardless of their financial situation (Figure 4.10), suggesting that the enhanced role of government in supporting incomes during that period boosted support for redistribution.

These findings suggest that there is a strong basis of support for government policies of redistribution; however, these are sensitive to framing, with a focus on fraud rather than citizens' entitlements, leading to more negative sentiment about redistribution. Attitudes to welfare are also sensitive to trade-offs and perceived hierarchies of deservingness. Awareness of one's own potential reliance on social benefits motivates support for redistribution but so does people's sense of what is fair. Lessons from behavioural studies suggest that providing information to individuals about the extent of existing inequalities influences individual support for redistribution. These findings underscore the importance of governments addressing misperceptions related to welfare recipients and providing reliable information about inequalities in society.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Many vulnerable individuals and families in Ireland, each with different profiles, circumstances and needs, are struggling to make ends meet and are falling into poverty. According to 2024 figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO), 12 per cent are at risk of poverty and 16 per cent experience material deprivation. A significant part of the Irish population relies on welfare benefits (social transfers), but the current level of support is often insufficient to protect them from poverty. Given the limits to government finances and the competing demands for funding social welfare in Ireland, it is crucial to have a better understanding of the public support to State actions designed to address these challenges.

With this objective, the current report presents findings of a research project that explored attitudes towards welfare and redistributive policies among Irish residents. Ireland offers a particularly relevant context for this research. Over the past few decades, Irish society experienced different levels of economic growth, income inequality and poverty (Roantree et al., 2025). In this sense, the changing socio-economic environment provides valuable information to examine the factors associated with public support for welfare policies and income redistribution. To explore this, we analyse multiple rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS) conducted between 2002 and 2024.

The research project was guided by the following general questions:

- **Who** in Ireland supports income redistribution?

- **What** do Irish residents think about welfare policies?

- Has the overall support for welfare policies and income redistribution **changed** over time?

Chapter 2 in this report addresses the first question of a diffuse and generalised support for income and wealth redistribution in Irish society. Chapter 3, addressing the second question, examines more specific support for welfare policies, beliefs about social benefits and their beneficiaries. Finally, Chapter 4 looks at change over time in relation to these topics and explores the possible impact of the 2008 economic recession and the 2020 pandemic.

1.1   PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There is a substantial body of research on attitudes to welfare policies and the factors that influence their development. The analyses presented in this report stem from the following theoretical advancements on this topic.

1.1.1 Societal level influences

First, while the literature highlights several macro-level correlates (e.g. political culture, trust in government), economic inequality stands out as the most discussed factor. Comparative research in Europe found higher support for income redistribution in countries with higher inequality (Velev and Schmidt-Catran, 2024; Finseraas, 2009). However, despite rising levels of inequality in the past decades, support for redistribution remained apparently stable over time (Lupu and Pontusson, 2023). Nevertheless, some studies emphasise the role of perceptions of inequality in this relationship, which may differ from actual trends in inequality (Trump, 2023), and covering a longer period of time, Hillen and Steiner (2025) find evidence that demand for redistribution grows when levels of inequality rise, so lack of policy responsiveness might be due to other factors rather than a lack of public demand.

1.1.2 Socio-demographic predictors of welfare attitudes

Several socio-demographic characteristics have been found to be associated with welfare attitudes and support for income redistribution. In terms of gender, women are found to be systematically more progressive in relation to policy preferences and support for redistribution (Shorrocks and Grasso, 2020; Inglehart, 2018; Grasso and Shorrocks, 2025). The drivers of this gap are less understood, however, with some explanations pointing out to the role of societal normative and policy frameworks (Goossen, 2020), and others highlighting men's overconfidence in their abilities and consequential disfavour of social protection policies (Buser et al., 2020).

Another important factor underlined in the literature is the difference across age groups and generations. Steele, Cohen and Van Der Naald (2022) find statistically significant differences across a sample of 30 countries with older respondents being more favourable of income redistribution. Using age-period-cohort analysis, Grasso and Shorrocks (2025) highlight the association between gender and generation, with the cohorts of women born after 1946 being more supportive of redistribution compared to men in their cohorts.

1.1.3 Political attitudes and welfare attitudes

There is robust evidence on the significant association between welfare/ redistributive attitudes and a range of ideological dispositions. Overall, almost all studies indicate higher support for welfare policies and redistribution among those who positioned themselves as more left-leaning in the left-right ideological scale (Jaeger, 2008). Although country-level characteristics might play a moderation role, Lindqvist (2025) finds that this relationship is generalised across most European countries.

1.1.4 Welfare for whom?

A central concern in the literature on the support for the welfare state is the extent to which the public have a hierarchy of groups that are seen as more or less deserving of support. In an overview of this research, van Oorschot and Roosma (2017) note that support for welfare policies, social transfers and redistribution is conditional on the social legitimacy of these policies' target groups.

Support for redistribution policies and anti-poverty strategies is also related to individuals' understanding of the causes of poverty or wealth. Those that attribute poverty or wealth to individual behaviour or disposition are less likely to support redistribution policies, while those that attribute them to external, structural forces are more likely to support redistribution (Bullock, Williams and Limbert 2003).

1.1.5 Experimental studies of welfare attitudes

Numerous experimental studies have examined how conceptions of fairness or the willingness to regard the interests of others informs decisions, and behaviour is not just driven solely by self-interest as suggested by earlier models (Meltzer and Richard, 1981). These experiments routinely find that individuals care about fairness. In a meta-analysis of such experiments administered in the past two decades, Nunnari and Pozzi (2022) identify an overall aversion to inequality, despite high levels of heterogeneity across studies and participants.

Based also on another meta-analysis, Ciani, Freget and Manfredi (2021) show that providing information about the level of inequality in surveys affects concerns about inequality but has a 'small effect' on demand for redistribution. Finally, Chow and Galak (2012) indicate that the way in which inequality is framed (the rich making more than the poor or the poor making less than the rich) influences the negative relationship between conservatism and support for redistribution.

1.2 METHODS AND DATA

Social researchers make use of a varied set of methods to assess welfare attitudes. However, the main quantitative method in this field is social survey (Steele and Breznau, 2019; Svallfors, 2012). Despite their limited capacity to capture nuance and ambivalence in welfare attitudes (Goerres and Prinzen, 2012), surveys help researchers to identify trends and patterns within and across different societies.

In this sense, the main data source selected for this project is the European Social Survey (ESS)[2]. More than 20 European countries participate in this cross-sectional survey that is conducted roughly every two years. Ireland is one of the few countries that participated in all 11 rounds since 2002. On average, 2,200 people in private households who were aged 15 or older and resident in Ireland were

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[2] For more information, visit www.europeansocialsurvey.org.

interviewed in each of these rounds.

This research analysed several questions from a special module on welfare attitudes that was fielded in 2009 and 2016. However, most of the analysis is based on a core question, included in all rounds, on the role of the government in reducing income inequalities. This question is used as an indicator of generalised support for the welfare state. Beyond that, the ESS questionnaire contains several other questions relevant to this research related to socio-demographic characteristics. In addition, based on the class scheme developed by Oesch (2006), a 'social class' variable was constructed using questions about the respondent's occupation (following the Tawfik and Oesch (2020) script).

This research also relied on public opinion data from Voter Surveys (VS) conducted immediately after the European elections (2014, 2019, 2024). The survey offers additional information particularly on electoral behaviours and political attitudes.

Finally, we draw on one of the Eurobarometer surveys that are conducted by the European Commission. The 2025 survey collected useful information on support for higher taxes, which is part of the trade-off involved in greater redistribution.

CHAPTER 2

Who supports redistribution?

The European Social Survey (ESS) question used to assess support for redistribution asked participants to indicate if the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels. The interviewer manual does not contain any additional instruction in relation to this question, so respondents provided their answers according to their understanding of the following wording: 'Using this card, please say to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: "The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels".' The answer alternatives presented were 'Agree strongly', 'Agree', 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'Disagree', and 'Disagree strongly'.

This question has been widely used across comparative studies on welfare attitudes and redistributive preferences (Finseraas, 2009; Jaeger, 2008; Lindqvist, 2025). However, recent studies have raised concerns in relation to the reliability of this question as a measurement of support for redistribution. Margalit and Raviv (2024) argue that reduction in income differences is too abstract and respondents in general do not link it to concrete redistributive measures. Similarly, it has been suggested that this question only captures a diffuse inclination to equality and that is why responses might be inconsistent with voting preferences across countries (Dallinger, 2022). Nevertheless, Breznau et al. (2025) argue that the absence of a relationship between this measurement and other expected correlates (voting preferences, support for concrete policies) is due to the omission of views on government (trust and perceptions of corruption) as a moderating variable. In addition, this report also describes support for more concrete welfare policies in Chapter 3.

Similar to the main ESS question, the Voter Survey (VS) questionnaires also ask whether voters are in favour of 'wealth redistribution from the rich to the poor' using a scale from 0 ('fully oppose') to 10 ('fully favour'). The original scale of this variable was inverted for this analysis. So, in the results presented here, higher values indicate more in favour of redistribution. In economic terms, wealth is a broader concept than income, encompassing all an individual's assets including property; however, respondents are not given any further information on its meaning.

2.1 HIGHER SUPPORT IN IRELAND COMPARED TO OTHER NORTHERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

The overall levels of support for income redistribution in 2023 shown in Figure 2.1 is in line with the south/north geographical divide identified before (Meuleman et al., 2018), with Finseraas (2009) suggesting that countries with higher income inequality tend to be more supportive of income redistribution. About 76 per cent of respondents in Ireland indicated that they either 'agree' (45%) or 'agree strongly' (31%) that the government should reduce income differences. This percentage is higher than the European average (71%), and the one observed in other northern European countries such as the UK (70%), Iceland (68%), Norway (68%), Sweden (66%) and Finland (62%).

FIGURE 2.1: PROPORTION WHO AGREE THAT THE 'GOVERNMENT SHOULD REDUCE INCOME DIFFERENCES', EUROPE, 2023
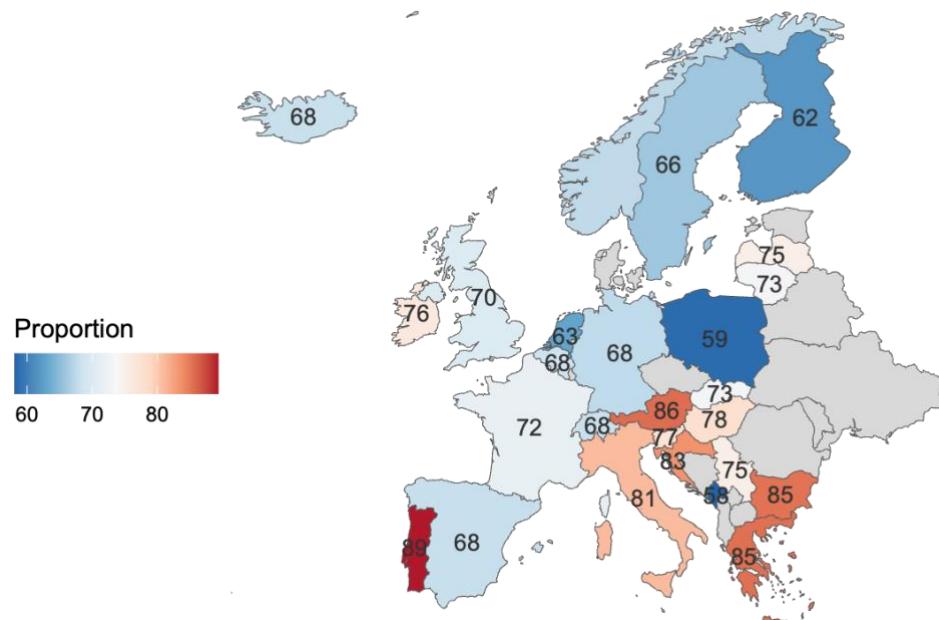
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey Round 11.

2.2 FEMALE AND LOWER SES RESPONDENTS ARE MORE SUPPORTIVE OF REDISTRIBUTION

Despite the profusion of studies on the relationship between gender and welfare policies, there is a gap in understanding the gender dimension of beliefs and perceptions in relation to these policies (Garritzmann and Schwander, 2021). Considering the marked gender differences in access to the labour market and levels of pay in Ireland (Hingre et al., 2024), it is plausible to also expect differences in demands for income redistribution.

On average, there is no statistically significant differences for male and female individuals in the latest rounds of both surveys. The ESS question on the government role has the same proportion of agreement for male and female respondents (76%). Similarly, the voter study identified similar mean values for wealth redistribution across male (5.4) and female (5.2) participants.

However, as shown in Figure 2.2, there is some variation across time in relation to this gap. Considering all 11 rounds of the ESS together, there is a significantly higher support for redistribution among female respondents compared to male respondents. However, both genders tend to follow a similar trend in their support for redistribution over time.

FIGURE 2.2:   SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION IN IRELAND BY SEX, 2002–2023
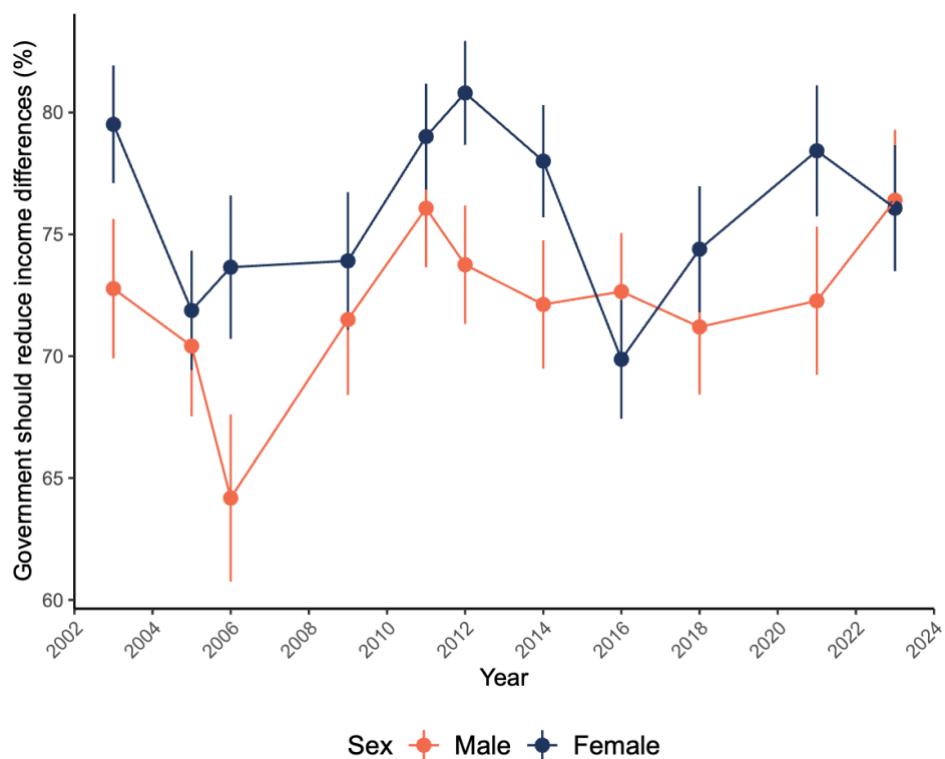
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.

In addition, data suggest an age pattern where younger respondents tend to be more supportive of income redistribution in Ireland. As shown in Figure 2.3, the opposite pattern is observed in Finland and Iceland, which are two of the countries with the highest positive correlations. Although the UK also has a similar negative relationship between age and support, the agreement among young respondents (18–35) is higher in Ireland.

FIGURE 2.3:   **SCATTER PLOT OF SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION BY AGE AND COUNTRY, 2023**
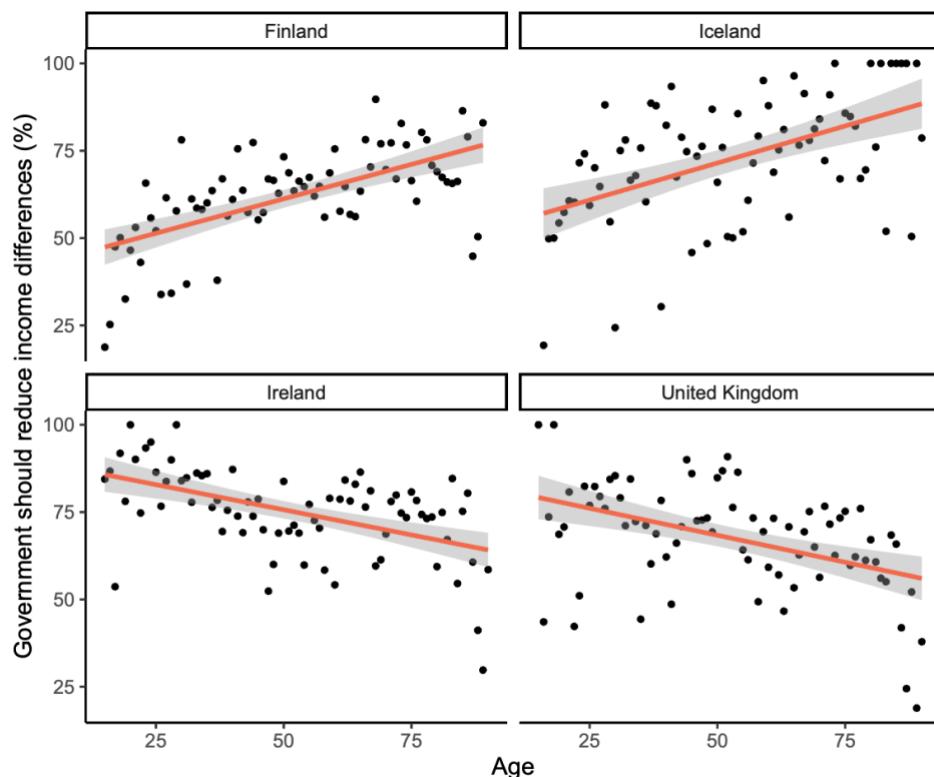
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey Round 11.

Using a longer time period, however, we observe different relationships depending on the time of the data collection. These different associations over time might suggest a context-dependent association or different levels of support across generations instead of age groups. This topic is further explored in Chapter 4.

Finally, there is robust evidence for the association between socio-economic status (SES) and overall welfare attitudes in Europe (Svallfors, 2012; Kulin and Svallfors, 2013; Langsæther and Evans, 2020; Steele, Cohen and Van Der Naald, 2022). In Ireland, the analysis using social class, household income, and 'feeling about financial situation of the household' suggests a negative relationship between SES and support for redistribution. The mean values shown in Figure 2.4 indicate that both 'skilled' manual and 'unskilled' workers show higher levels of agreement with the government reducing income differences, whereas 'small business owners' and the 'service class', which includes managers and professionals, show lower levels of agreement. Higher support is also found among those in lower income quintiles and whose financial situation is 'very difficult'.

FIGURE 2.4: **MEAN VALUE OF SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION BY SOCIAL CLASS, INCOME QUINTILE, AND FINANCIAL SITUATION, IRELAND, 2002–2023**
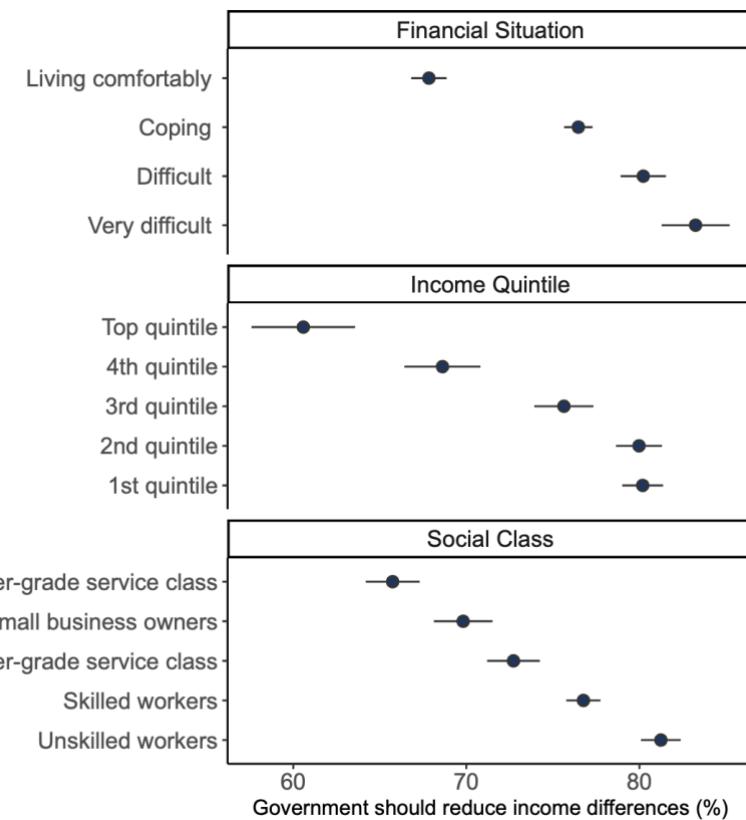
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.

2.3 LEFT-WING VOTERS ARE MORE SUPPORTIVE OF REDISTRIBUTION

There is a consistent pattern of association between the respondents' ideological positioning and support for redistribution. The survey includes a traditional question implemented in international surveys designed to assess ideological position of individuals (Aybar, Pérez and Pavía, 2024). In this question, respondents are asked to point out where they would position themselves in a scale where 0 means the left and 10 means the right[3]. Results consistently indicate that individuals who place themselves more to the left of the scale tend to be more supportive of redistribution, even though this correlation is weaker in Ireland compared to other European countries.

With the data from the 2024 Voter Survey, it is also possible to examine differences in redistribution preferences across voting choice in the European Parliament elections. On a scale varying from 1 to 10, People Before Profit (7.5) and Sinn Féin (6.4) voters indicate the highest support, whereas Green Party (4.7) and Fine Gael (4.7) voters reported the lowest support among the main parties. Even when controlling for positioning in the left-right scale, differences between the former two and latter two parties are statistically significant. These estimates should be

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[3] In Ireland, the mean value of this scale in the 2023/2024 round was 4.78.

interpreted with caution due to the small sample size of respondents who voted in the last European elections. However, Attewell (2021) indicates that this pattern is consistent across most Western European countries, and welfare attitudes are relevant predictors of voting even for parties with focus on non-economic issues such as 'immigration' and EU integration.

2.4 AGE, GENDER AND SOCIAL CLASS ARE RELEVANT EVEN CONTROLLING FOR ECONOMIC ACTIVITY, EDUCATION AND FINANCIAL SITUATION

We created a statistical model[4] to assess the extent to which these individual factors are associated with support for redistribution in Ireland. In addition to these main variables, the model includes a measurement of the household financial situation. A subjective measurement was chosen ('feeling about current income – living comfortably/coping/finding it difficult/finding it very difficult) instead of household income due to the high proportion of missing values in the former (about 40% in Ireland).[5] However, as a robustness check, we re-estimated the model using household income instead of the subjective measure and the results for the main variables remained broadly consistent (see Appendix). The following control variables were also added to the model: economic activity ('Main activity in the last seven days'), educational attainment, and political ideology ('Placement in the left-right scale').

Table 2.1 details the estimates of the model detecting significant differences across groups for two outcome variables: (i) Whether the respondent 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statement on redistribution (combining the two response options); and (ii) whether the respondent 'strongly agreed' with the statement. The results in this table, as well as in subsequent tables and figures throughout the report, are presented as odds ratios. An odds ratio lower than 1 indicates that the group is less likely to experience the outcome compared to the reference group (presented separately in the table). An odds ratio greater than 1 suggests that the group is more likely to experience the outcome than the reference group. Older age groups show higher support compared to the youngest group (18–24 years old), which is the opposite relationship found for the latest round in 2023, but also found in other participant countries such as the UK. Both SES variables (social class and financial situation) suggest that respondents in more precarious socio-economic situations are more likely to be favourable of the government reducing income differences.

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[4] We use a logistic regression model which is a statistical method commonly employed to estimate the probability of an outcome occurring (in this case, supporting redistribution) based on one or more independent variables (e.g. gender, age, social class). Similar results are found using a linear model and the original 5-point scale as response variable (please see Appendix). As observations from multiple rounds were pooled together for this analysis, we added to the model the variable denoting the round to account for the shared variance and dependence of observations within each round.

[5] Previous research has also found that subjective measures of financial strain are strongly correlated with measures of consistent poverty and material deprivation in Ireland (Slevin et al., 2025). Further, income measures alone fail to capture the extent of households' needs and resources (Watson et al., 2017).

TABLE 2.1: **LOGISTIC REGRESSION ESTIMATES (ODDS RATIO) FOR 'SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION', IRELAND, 2002–2023**

Characteristic	'Agree' or 'Strongly agree'		'Strongly agree'	
	OR[1]	SE	OR[1]	SE
Age group				
18–24	—	—	—	—
25–35	1.19*	0.076	1.27**	0.084
36–45	1.15	0.078	1.50***	0.085
46–55	1.15	0.079	1.34***	0.086
56–65	1.66***	0.086	1.68***	0.090
>66	1.43***	0.105	1.46***	0.109
Gender				
Male	—	—	—	—
Female	1.12**	0.038	1.05	0.040
Born in country				
Yes	—	—	—	—
No	0.83***	0.050	0.75***	0.056
Final Oesch class position				
Higher-grade service class	—	—	—	—
Lower-grade service class	1.33***	0.058	1.12	0.065
Small business owners	1.11	0.062	0.96	0.071
Skilled workers	1.51***	0.052	1.23***	0.058
Unskilled workers	1.95***	0.062	1.33***	0.064
Placement on left-right scale	0.90***	0.010	0.89***	0.010

1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.
Note: Higher scores on left-right scale indicate placement on the right of centre. 'Main activity', 'Educational attainment' and 'ESS round' omitted (see Appendix for full table). Abbreviations: OR = Odds Ratio, SE = Standard Error.

Those who were not born in Ireland are significantly less likely to support redistribution compared to those born in Ireland. This is a pattern found in other European countries by Gonnot and lo Polito (2023), who suggest that this could be explained by experiences with discrimination and lower access to social benefits. As discussed earlier in this chapter, both female respondents and those who place themselves on the left of the left-right scale are more likely to support income redistribution, even when controlling for other factors such as age and social class[6]. Although, the coefficient for female respondents is not significant in the model for 'strong agreement'.

Overall, the examination of individual factors associated with support for income redistribution in Ireland goes in the same direction of the literature pointing out the role of material interests (financial situation) and perspectives of upward mobility (social class) (Bonnet et al., 2024). Some studies also point out to the relevance of interpersonal trust as a predictor of support for redistribution. However, the ESS variable on interpersonal trust is not statistically significant when included in this model (see Appendix).

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[6] Coefficients for the control variables were omitted to facilitate reading, but the full table can be found in Appendix.

CHAPTER 3

What do people think about welfare and tax policies?

This chapter moves from general support for redistribution to consider individuals' perceptions of fairness and their support for specific policies. Is the general public more or less favourable of policies directed at specific groups? Is there evidence of a hierarchy of recipients? It also considers beliefs about the causes of inequality and how such beliefs relate to attitudes towards redistribution.

The data analysed in this chapter draws on a special module from the European Social Survey (ESS) on welfare attitudes that was fielded in 2009 (Round 4) and repeated in 2016 (Round 8) (see Meuleman et al., 2018 for more on this module). These rounds of data collection contain additional questions on beliefs about welfare, social benefits and their beneficiaries.

3.1 MERITOCRATIC DIFFERENCES ARE ACCEPTABLE FOR YOUNGER RESPONDENTS AND THOSE WHO POSITION THEMSELVES MORE TO THE RIGHT OF THE IDEOLOGICAL SCALE

As discussed in the previous chapter, a few socio-demographic characteristics such as age and social class may influence people's views on redistribution. The connection between these two factors, social position and redistributive preferences, tend to be explained by self-interest, meaning that people may support redistribution if they believe that it would improve their own material conditions and lives. However, a large body of research shows that other factors related to people's views on fairness are also relevant to understand overall support to welfare policies (Cavaillé, 2025).

In the 2016 ESS, respondents were asked to what extent they agree with the statement that 'Large differences in people's incomes are acceptable to properly reward differences in talents and efforts'. The majority of participants in Ireland (58%) either 'agree' or 'agree strongly' with the statement.

A multivariate analysis with the same explanatory variables from the model of Table 2.1 suggests that gender and class are not statistically significant predictors of agreement that large differences in incomes are acceptable. However, older respondents and those who identify more with the political right tend to agree more with this statement.

3.2 THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD HAVE MORE RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS OLD CITIZENS AND WORKING PARENTS COMPARED TO THE UNEMPLOYED

A crucial aspect of the sustainability of modern welfare states is the public support given to its policies. A vast literature in social sciences has addressed the social legitimacy of welfare policies that are targeted at specific groups (van Oorschot and Roosma, 2017), as they indicate contentious views on which social groups are more or less deserving of the State attention. In the ESS, respondents were asked to indicate how much responsibility governments should have for the following:

'… ensure sufficient childcare services for working parents'

'… ensure a reasonable standard of living for the old'

'… ensure a reasonable standard of living for the unemployed'

In Figure 3.1, higher values denote higher government responsibility. On average, respondents from all countries (except the Netherlands) believe that the government should be least responsible for the unemployed compared to working parents and older citizens. It is also worth noting the magnitude of the differences between groups across countries. The gap between unemployed and other groups is much larger in Poland and Germany, compared to other countries such as Spain, for example. In Ireland, similar to Switzerland, the gaps between these three groups are significantly smaller.

FIGURE 3.1:   MEAN VALUES FOR DESERVINGNESS OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORT BY GROUP AND COUNTRY, 2016
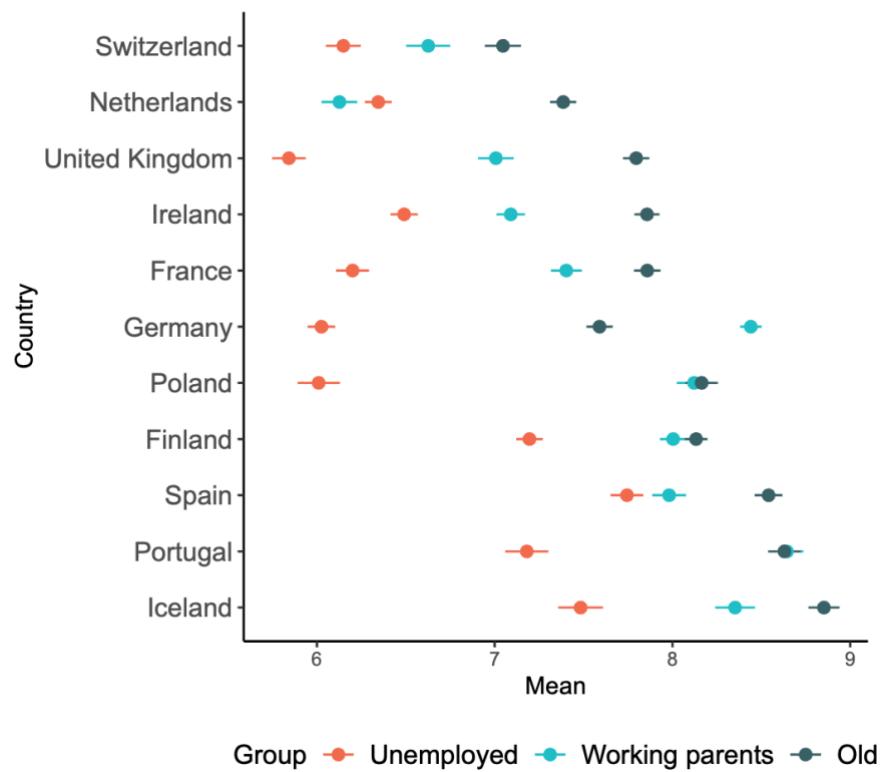
In Ireland, the ranking of prioritisation is similar across different characteristics of respondents. However, comparing age groups, the older the respondent, there is an increasing prioritisation of the 'old' and decreasing prioritisation of 'working parents' (Figure 3.2). In addition, among those who view their financial situation as 'very difficult', there are no significant differences in the prioritisation of working parents over the unemployed.

FIGURE 3.2:   MEAN VALUES FOR DESERVINGNESS OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORT BY GROUP, IRELAND, 2016
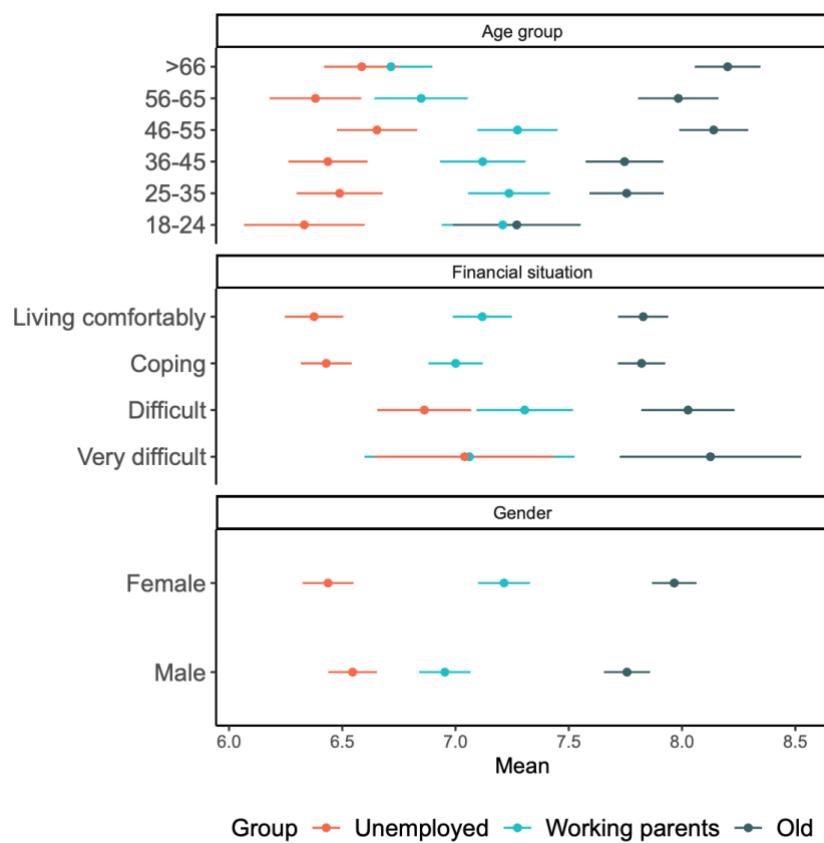
3.3   MOST RESPONDENTS INDICATE THAT IMMIGRANTS COULD RECEIVE SOCIAL BENEFITS AFTER HAVING WORKED AND PAID TAXES FOR AT LEAST ONE YEAR

Overall, data from 2016 indicates that about half of respondents in Ireland believe that immigrants should obtain rights to social benefits/services 'After worked and paid taxes at least a year'. The other options that received most answers were 'Once they have become a citizen' (19%) and 'After a year, whether or not have worked' (16%).

As shown in Figure 3.3, only 5 per cent in 2016 indicated that 'They should never get the same rights'. This proportion is significantly higher in countries such as Hungary (30%) and Czechia (24%). In Ireland, this proportion is also higher for those in worse financial situation (19%) and among those who are unemployed and not looking for a job (18%).

FIGURE 3.3: **DISTRIBUTION FOR 'WHEN SHOULD IMMIGRANTS OBTAIN RIGHTS TO SOCIAL BENEFITS/SERVICES', IRELAND, 2016**
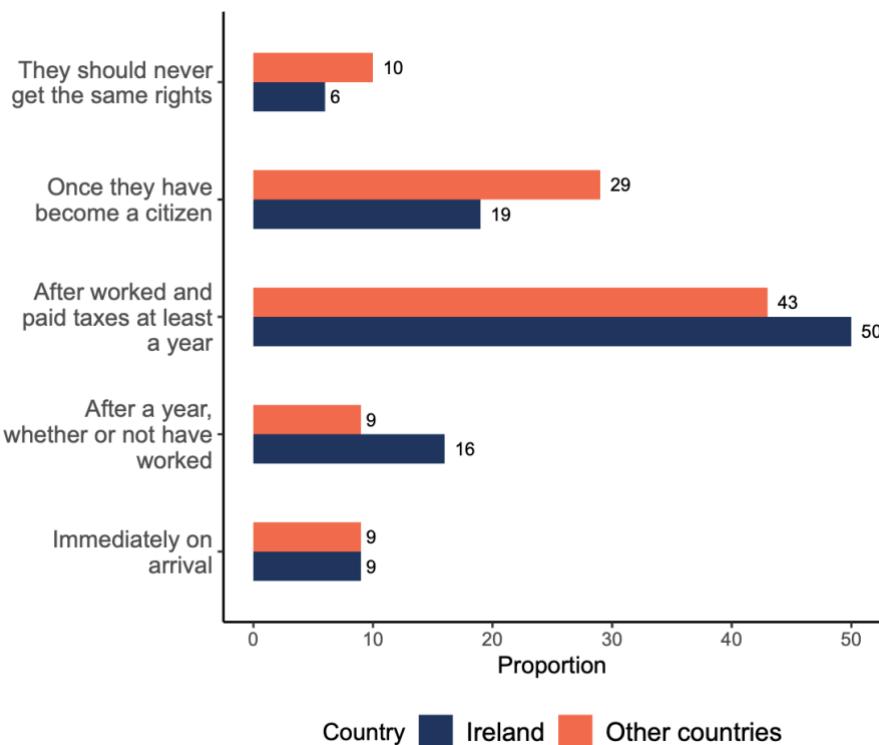
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey Round 8.

3.4 THE VIEW THAT 'SOCIAL BENEFITS MAKE PEOPLE LAZY' IS MORE PREVALENT IN IRELAND COMPARED TO THE EUROPEAN AVERAGE

The module also included questions in relation to beliefs about the consequences of social benefits and services. Participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree that social benefits and services in [country]…

'… cost businesses too much in taxes/charges'

'… lead to a more equal society'

'… make people lazy'

'… make people less willing care for one another'

'… prevent widespread poverty'

'… place too great a strain on the economy'

The average level of agreement with these statements reduced slightly between 2008/2009 at the onset of the recession and 2016 during the recovery period. Nevertheless, the ranking of agreement among statements remains the same, as shown in Figure 3.4. The exception is the average agreement with 'social benefits

lead to a more equal society', which observed a minor increase and surpassed the average agreement with 'put a strain on the economy' and 'cost businesses too much in taxes'. It is also worth noting the strong decline in the percentage who agree that it hurts the economy and business. This might be due to the rising unemployment and collapse of businesses during the financial crash.

FIGURE 3.4: **PROPORTION OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT SOCIAL BENEFITS, IRELAND, 2009/2016**
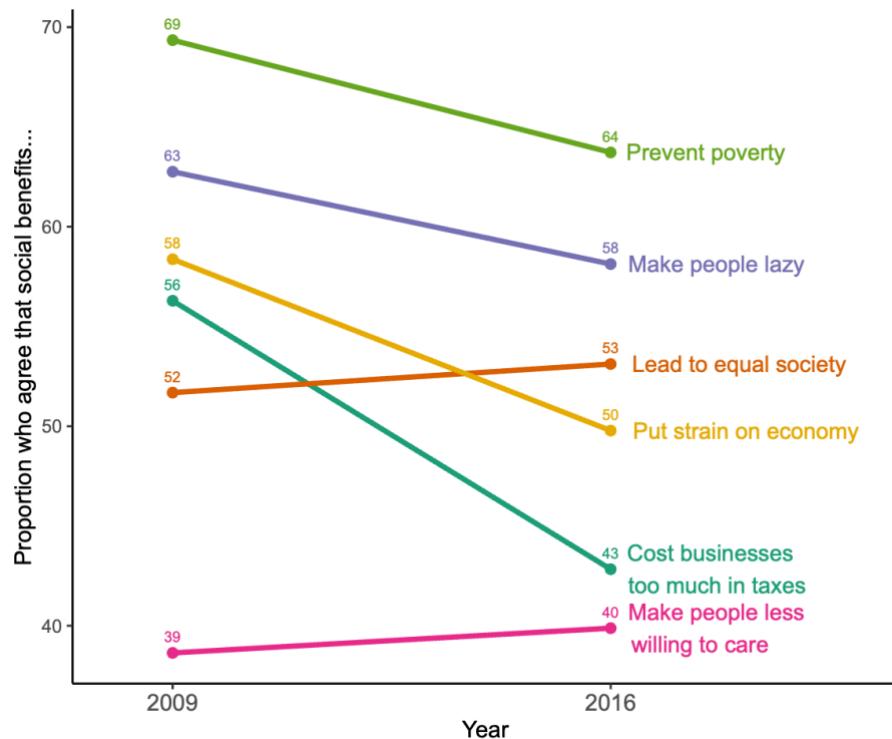
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.

Despite the reduction from 2009 to 2016, as shown in Figure 3.5, Ireland (58%) had the third highest proportion of respondents agreeing that 'social benefits make people lazy', behind Portugal (63%) and Poland (60%). This proportion is significantly lower in countries such as Iceland (24%), Sweden (35%), and Germany (43%). Finally, as expected, those who strongly agree that 'social benefits make people lazy' are also less likely to support income redistribution (68%), whereas those who strongly disagree are more supportive of redistribution (84%).

FIGURE 3.5: **PROPORTION OF AGREEMENT THAT SOCIAL BENEFITS MAKE PEOPLE LAZY, EUROPE, 2009/2016**
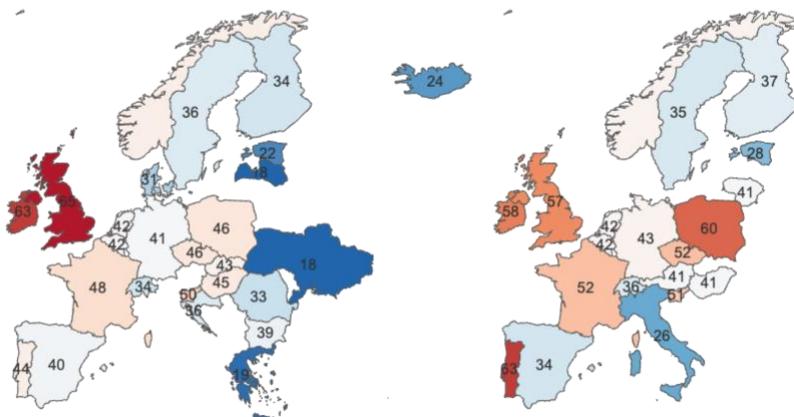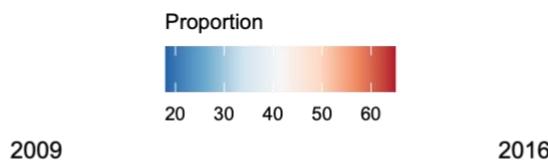
3.5 YOUNGER RESPONDENTS IN IRELAND ARE MORE LIKELY TO AGREE THAT SOCIAL BENEFITS MAKE PEOPLE LAZY

Table 3.1 presents coefficients of the regression models for the countries with the highest proportion of agreement with the statement on laziness: Ireland, Portugal, Poland and the United Kingdom. The significant explanatory variables are different across these four countries. In Ireland, respondents in the 18–24 age group are more inclined to agree with this statement compared to all older age groups. Conversely, the difference between age groups is not statistically significant in any of the other three groups.

In Portugal, female respondents have 75 per cent increased odds of agreeing that social benefits make people lazy compared to men. Differences across social class groups are not significant in Ireland or Poland. But both in Portugal and the UK, the working class have higher odds of agreeing with the statement on laziness compared to the higher-grade service class.

Finally, in Ireland, the UK and Portugal, the agreement is higher among those respondents who position themselves more to the right of the left-right ideological scale. The exception is Poland, where the opposite effect is statistically significant.

TABLE 3.1: **LOGISTIC REGRESSION ESTIMATES FOR AGREEMENT THAT 'SOCIAL BENEFITS MAKE PEOPLE LAZY', 2016**

Characteristic	Ireland		United Kingdom		Portugal		Poland	
	OR	p-value	OR	p-value	OR	p-value	OR	p-value
Age group								
18–24 (Ref.)	—		—		—		—	
25–35	0.44	0.002	1.05	0.9	0.64	0.2	0.84	0.6
36–45	0.43	0.002	1.23	0.4	1.15	0.7	0.69	0.2
46–55	0.29	<0.001	0.94	0.8	1.14	0.7	0.93	0.8
56–65	0.42	0.002	0.81	0.5	1.19	0.6	0.66	0.2
>66	0.27	<0.001	1.06	0.9	1.55	0.3	0.72	0.4
Gender								
Male (Ref.)	—		—		—		—	
Female	1.09	0.4	1.07	0.5	1.75	<0.001	1.06	0.6
Oesch class position								
Higher-grade service class (Ref.)	—		—		—		—	
Lower-grade service class	1.35	0.069	1.64	0.003	1.70	0.054	0.86	0.5
Small business owners	0.81	0.2	1.88	0.001	3.08	<0.001	1.14	0.5
Skilled workers	1.17	0.3	1.83	<0.001	2.08	0.002	0.69	0.080
Unskilled workers	1.10	0.6	2.42	<0.001	2.89	<0.001	1.18	0.5
Placement on left-right scale	1.10	<0.001	1.36	<0.001	1.07	0.016	0.93	0.003

Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.
Note: Higher scores on left-right scale indicate placement on the right of centre. 'Main activity', 'Born in country', 'Educational attainment' and 'ESS round' omitted (see Appendix for full table).

3.6 UNFAIRNESS OF INCOME DISTRIBUTION IS RELEVANT FOR SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION IN IRELAND

As argued by Cavaillé (2025), support for redistribution is also dependent on people's perceptions of fairness. One might be more supportive of redistribution if they perceive that the richest in society earn too much (proportionality principle). At the same time, redistribution might be preferred if the poorest are receiving too little (reciprocity principle). In a special module conducted in 2018, the ESS asked respondents to assess how fair are the incomes received by the top and bottom deciles of the country's income distribution as well as their own gross income. The scale goes from -4 (Low, extremely unfair), through 0 (Fair), to 4 (High, extremely unfair).

Figure 3.6 shows the odds ratio of these variables added to the model described in Table 2.1. To facilitate reading, we reversed the scale of the assessment for the bottom decile, so higher values denote unfairly low. For most countries, the more unfair the income of the top decile is perceived, the higher the odds of supporting redistribution. This relationship is particularly strong in Norway, for instance, where each unit in the unfairness scale of the top decile is associated with 51 per cent higher odds of supporting redistribution. In addition, if a respondent perceives the bottom decile as unfairly too low, the odds of supporting redistribution are also higher. In Poland, for instance, the unfairness of the bottom income decile is a stronger predictor of support compared to the unfairness of the top decile. In Ireland, both variables have weaker but nonetheless significant effects.

FIGURE 3.6:   EFFECT (ODDS RATIO) OF PERCEPTION OF 'UNFAIRNESS OF INCOME' ON 'SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION', 2018
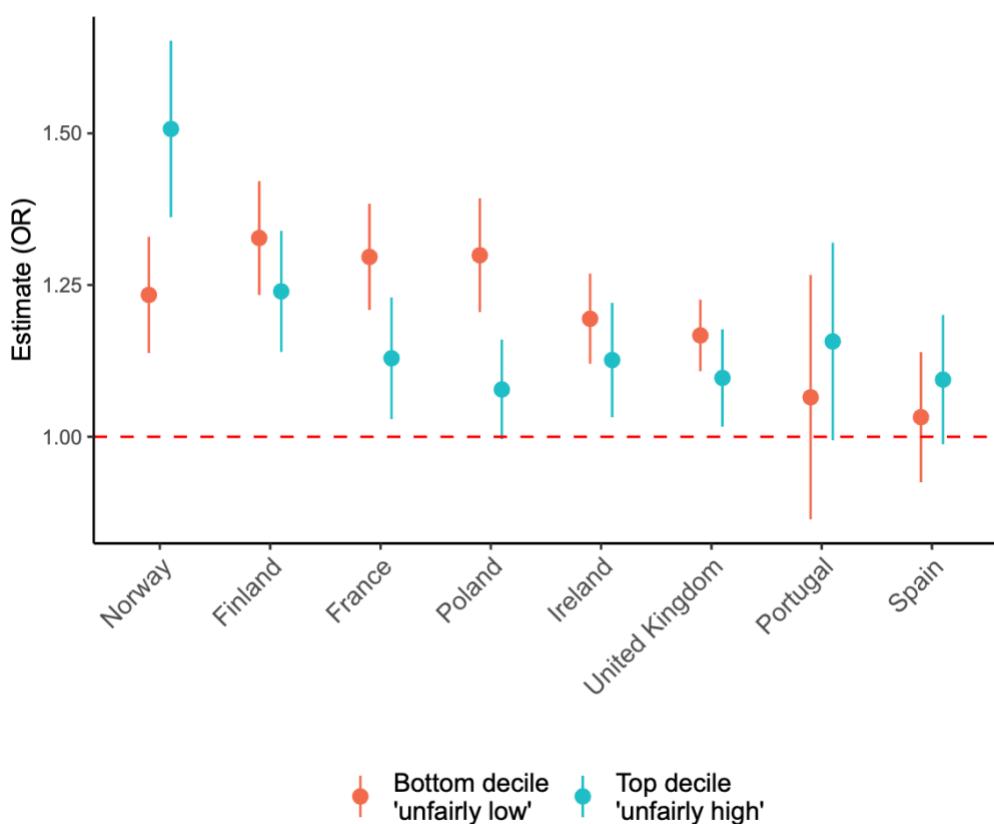
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.
Note: The odds ratios come from separate models estimated for each country including all the controls outlined in Table 2.1.

3.7 A THIRD OF THE IRISH POPULATION WOULD AGREE WITH HIGHER TAXES IF IT MEANS MORE OR BETTER PUBLIC SERVICES

In terms of policy relevance and social change, it is important to assess how much support for redistribution coincides with willingness to act on that through paying more taxes, for instance. Using data from survey experiments in Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom, Bremer and Bürgisser (2025) note that support for tax cuts is not widespread and unconditional. The study indicates that ideology and self-interest play a role in preferences for progressive reforms as well.

As part of the National Election and Democracy Study (NEDS), An Coimisiún Toghcháin (2025) conducted a post-election survey between 2024 and 2025 including questions on attitudes and policy preferences. Respondents were asked to what extend they agree that 'The government should increase taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services'. About 32 per cent of respondents agreed with this statement (8% 'strongly agree' and 24% 'somewhat agree').

To explore relative differences across groups, we ran a logistic regression model using agreement with tax increase as a response variable. The explanatory variables included gender, age group, educational attainment, and social class. In addition, the model also includes a question on acceptance of inequality (agreement that 'There is nothing wrong with some people being a lot richer than others'). As expected, those who 'strongly disagree' or 'somewhat disagree' have, respectively, 26 per cent and 22 per cent lower odds of supporting tax increase compared to those who strongly agree with the inequality statement.

The results also indicate that women have 6 per cent higher odds of agreeing with tax increase compared to men. In relation to age, those older than 65 (16%) and aged between 55 and 64 (11%) also have increased odds of supporting tax increase in comparison with those younger than 24. No significant differences were found across other age groups, social class or educational attainment.

In 2025, the Eurobarometer conducted a survey on citizens' attitudes towards taxation. Participants were asked which among the following statements they agreed the most:

- Taxes are too high, and I would decrease them even if it means fewer or lower-quality public services.

- I agree with higher taxes if it means more or better public services.

- Both taxes and public services should stay at the same level.

In Ireland, 35 per cent indicated that 'taxes are too high' and 25 per cent indicated that taxes 'should stay at the same level'. However, 34 per cent of the Irish respondents indicated that they would agree with higher taxes if it meant more or better public services. This is the sixth highest percentage across the 27 participant

countries. This proportion varies from 16 per cent in Luxembourg and Belgium to 42 per cent in Sweden and Spain. Comparing countries at the national level in Figure 3.7, there is no clear relationship between this proportion and the overall support for redistribution measured by the ESS in 2023.

FIGURE 3.7: **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION AND AGREEMENT THAT THERE COULD BE 'HIGHER TAXES IF IT MEANS MORE OR BETTER PUBLIC SERVICES', EUROPE, 2023/2025**
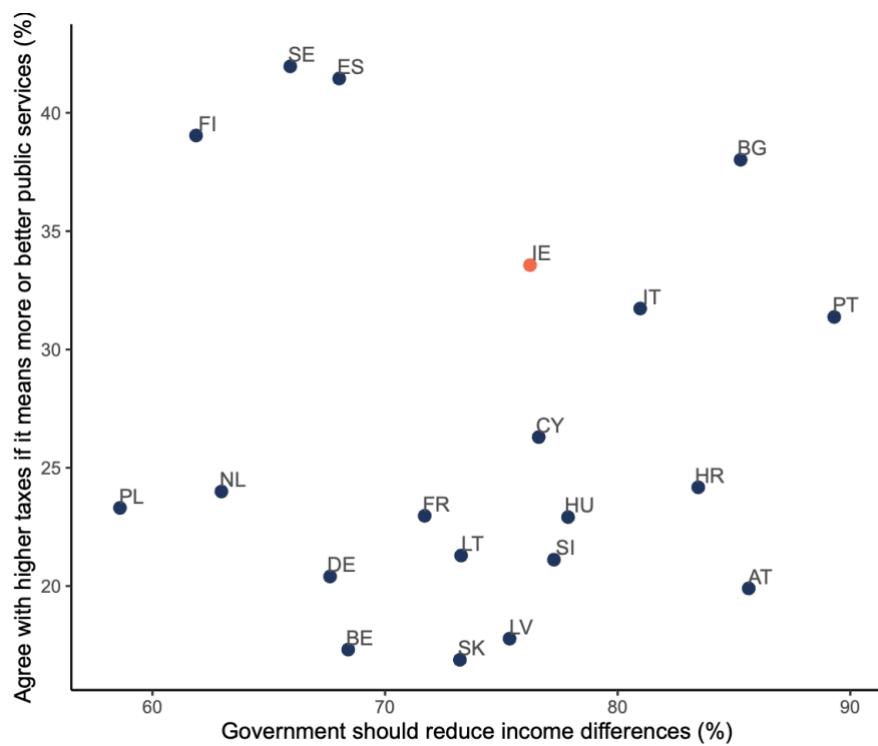
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey Round 11 and Eurobarometer Flash Survey 2025.

It is important to note that the Eurobarometer did not include any question on general support for redistribution, so it is not possible to test if this relationship exists at the individual level. The fact that these averages are drawn from different surveys, each with specific methodologies and administered in two different time periods, cumulative measurement errors may arise. Therefore the results should be interpreted with caution. However, other studies conducted in Europe suggest there is a positive association at the individual level that is moderated by political attitudes and socio-economic status (Naumann, 2018; Jacques, 2023; Witko and Moldogaziev, 2025).

Comparing ESS data on support for specific welfare policies and government policies, Rosset, Poltier and Pontusson (2025) found mixed evidence for policy responsiveness. Although tax policies in several countries have moved in the same direction of the increasingly progressive attitudes to welfare, unemployment policy has not had the same trajectory.

CHAPTER 4

Has support for redistribution changed over time?

The period covered by the research from 2002 to 2024 encapsulates two significant societal shocks, the financial crisis and recession starting in 2008 and the pandemic starting in 2020. Both shocks resulted in significant changes in the labour market, in the reliance on social transfers and especially in the pandemic, changes in the role of the State in people's everyday lives. Here we consider how support has changed over the past 20 years and whether these major shocks influence public opinion on redistribution. There are also more routine events that occur over the period that might be expected to influence attitudes, such as the regular cycle of budgets. The chapter also assesses whether there is evidence that such events are associated with any change in attitudes.

Figure 4.1 displays the proportion of respondents in Ireland and other countries who agree that 'Government should reduce income differences' by year of the start of the survey. Overall, there is a stable agreement (70%). Rounds 5 to 7 (2009–2012) as well as 10 to 11 (2022–2024) show a slightly higher agreement compared to other rounds and the European average. This overall trajectory in Ireland is similar to Portugal and differs substantially from the British and Dutch trajectories. The increase during the years of economic recession (when both Ireland and Portugal were severely affected) suggests a relationship between macro-economic indicators and support for redistribution.

FIGURE 4.1:   PROPORTION AGREEING THAT THE 'GOVERNMENT SHOULD REDUCE INCOME DIFFERENCES' BY YEAR, 2002–2024
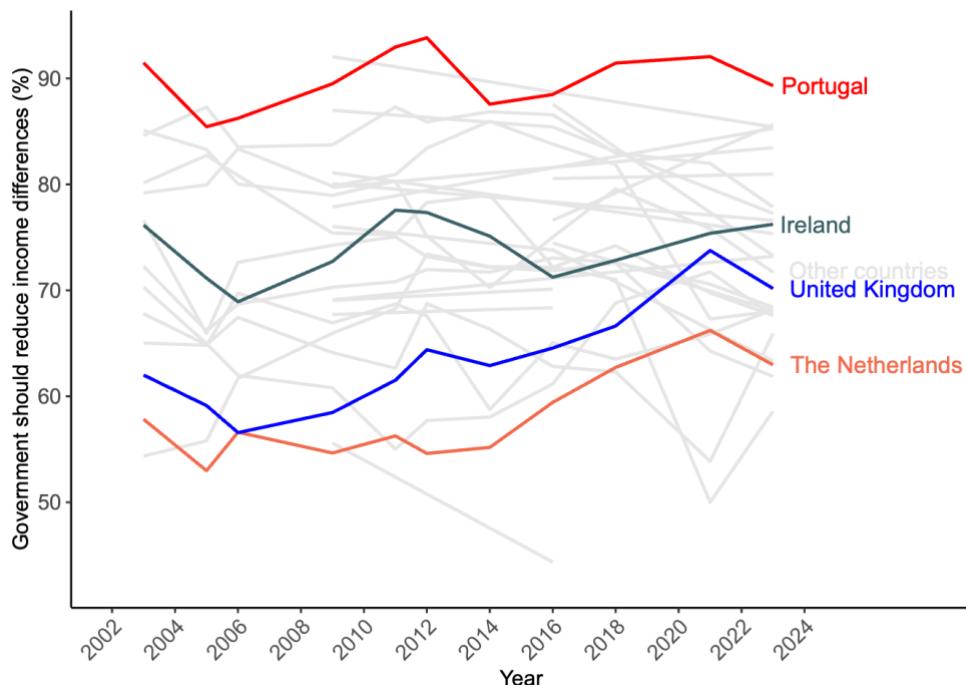
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.

However, the recovery from the economic recession initiated a different trajectory for different social classes despite the overall increase during the recession. As shown in Figure 4.2, respondents in the service class had an overall reduction in the level of support for redistribution since the peak of the economic recession. On the other hand, respondents grouped into the working classes (skilled and unskilled) have a trajectory of stable or increasing support since then. In fact, 85 per cent of unskilled workers indicated in the latest round that the government should reduce differences in income, which is the highest proportion in the time series since 2002. Pattern of support for redistribution among skilled manual workers (many of whom are in the construction sector) and small business owners closely track the unemployment rate. These two groups were amongst the hardest hit by the Great Recession in Ireland. Small business owners also see a peak in support during the pandemic.

FIGURE 4.2: **PROPORTION AGREEING THAT THE 'GOVERNMENT SHOULD REDUCE INCOME DIFFERENCES' BY SOCIAL CLASS AND YEAR, IRELAND, 2002–2024**
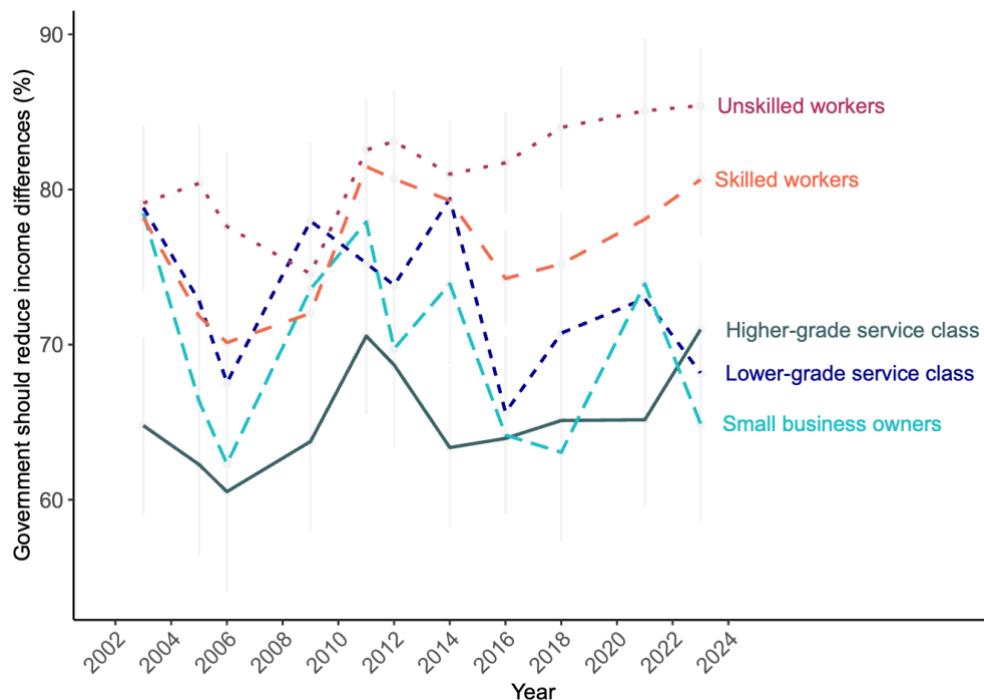
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.

The solid line in Figure 4.3 represents the seasonally adjusted monthly unemployment rate from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and the points represent the monthly proportion of respondents supporting income redistribution in Ireland, with size proportional to the number of respondents. The dotted line shows the three-month moving average of the support for redistribution[7]. Although based on a limited number of observations, the sharp increase and decline in unemployment rates is not clearly accompanied by comparable changes in support, at least in visual examination of these two trends. The patterns in Figures 4.2 and 4.3 suggest that large structural changes in the need for income supports may influence support for redistribution within social classes; smaller short-term fluctuations in unemployment do not affect support levels.

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[7] The ESS data collection period for each round in Ireland varied from five months up to 20 months.

FIGURE 4.3:   MONTHLY UNEMPLOYMENT RATE AND MOVING AVERAGE (3 MONTHS) OF SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION, IRELAND, 2002–2023
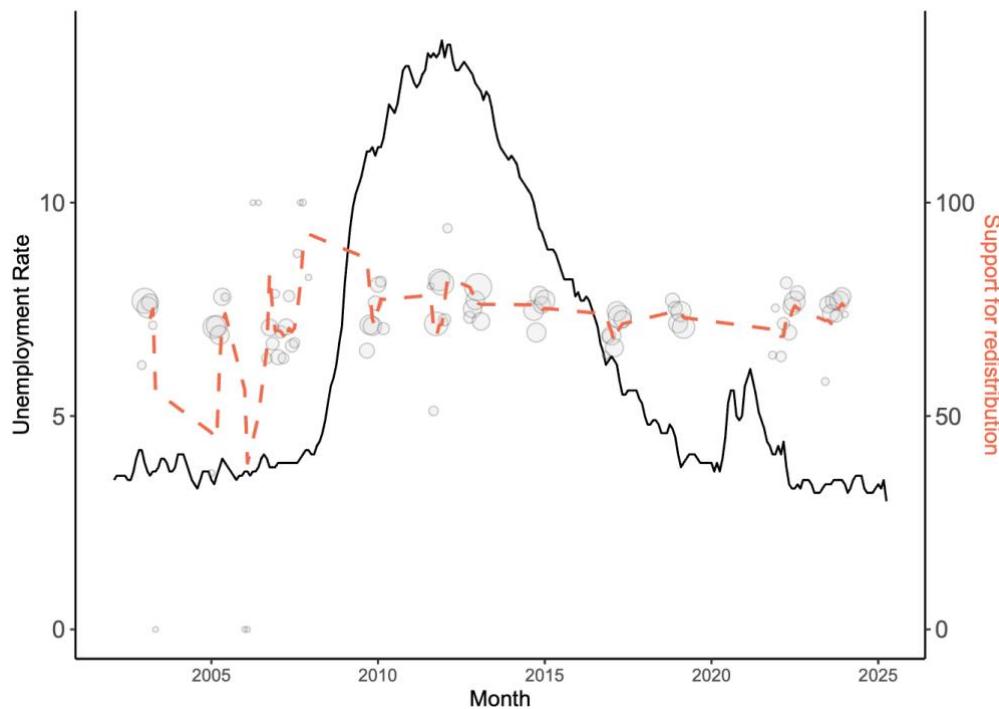
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey and Central Statistics Office.

4.1   AGE AND GENDER

The relationship between age and the response variable seems to change across rounds. As discussed in Chapter 2, the multivariate regression model indicates that, considering all rounds, older respondents are more supportive of the government reducing income differences. However, the average support by age observed in the latest round (11) seems to indicate the opposite (see Figure 4.4). During the third and fourth rounds (2006–2009), there is a positive association between age and support for redistribution.

FIGURE 4.4: SCATTER PLOT FOR 'REDUCE INCOME DIFFERENCES' BY AGE AND EUROPEAN SOCIAL SURVEY (ESS) STARTING YEAR, IRELAND
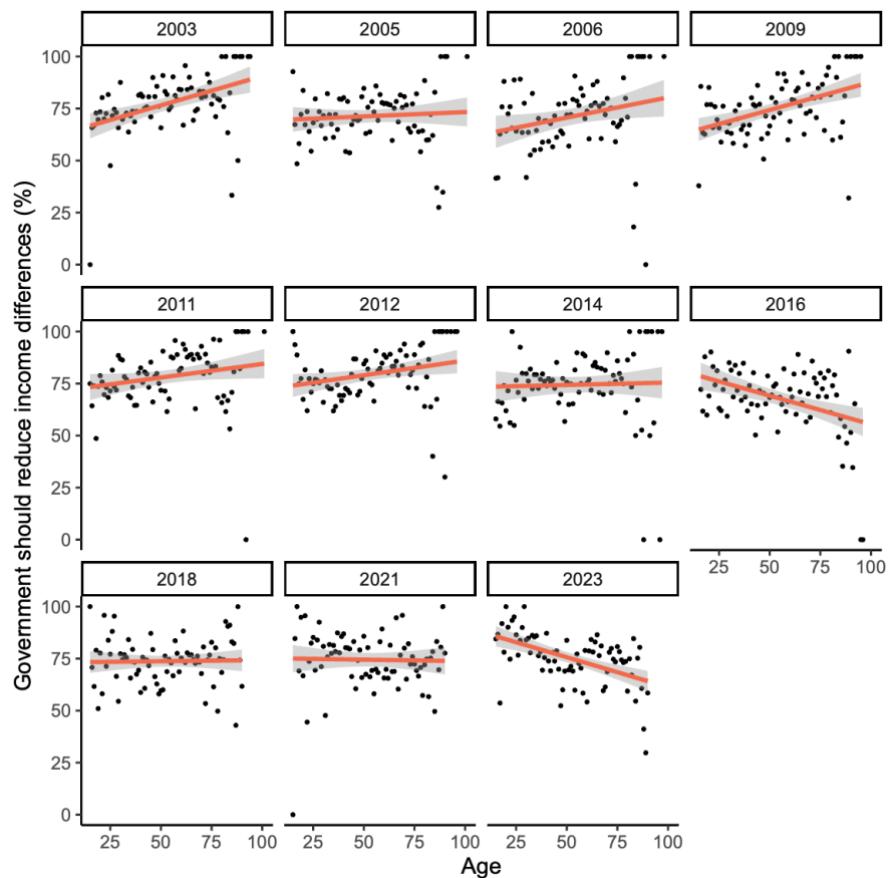
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.

To try to disentangle age and period effects, Figure 4.5 presents the support for redistribution across respondents grouped according to their birth year (pseudo-cohort) and gender. The younger cohort born in the 1980s to early 2000s, who are aged 18–21 years old in the beginning of the series (2002) show increasing support as they enter and establish themselves in the labour market. The two older cohorts show a substantial variation, with higher average support during the recession and early years of the economic recovery (2008–2014).

FIGURE 4.5:   SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION OVER TIME BY PSEUDO-COHORT AND GENDER, IRELAND
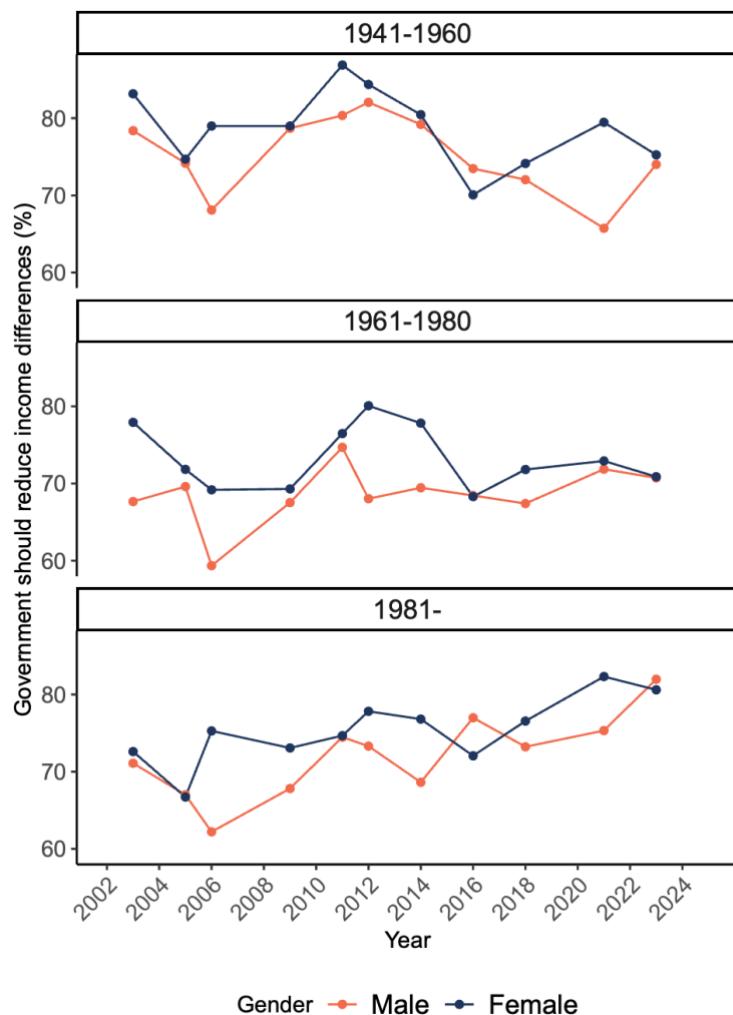
The visual examination of Figure 4.5 suggests a common aspect between the youngest and the oldest cohort, which is the divergent gender trajectories from the second to the third round (2004 and 2006). In addition, the oldest cohort also experienced a similar gender divergence between the ninth and tenth rounds (2020 and 2022). These two periods are marked by the increasingly unstable economic boom and the pre-/post-periods of the pandemic.

4.2   RELEVANT EVENTS

There is a growing number of studies showing that socio-economic events shape attitudes, preferences and beliefs related to welfare and redistribution (Giuliano and Spilimbergo, 2025). Due to the cross-sectional nature of the European Social Survey (ESS), testing the impact of these changes, such as the recession or the pandemic, is challenging. The survey interviews different individuals across substantially different time periods, so the differences found across rounds might be due to a diverse range of measured and unmeasured factors.

However, several Event Study methods provide tools to examine the impact of more specific events contained in shorter time frames. Dunaiski and Tukiainen (2025), for instance, detected a difference in the perception of fairness of income in Finland in the period immediately after the country's 'Tax Day', when authorities publish a list of individuals with the highest taxable income in the country. The authors utilised the 'Unexpected Event During Survey' (UEDS) design (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno and Hernández, 2020) to assess the impact of the event, taking the respondents interviewed before the event as the control group in a quasi-experiment approach.

4.2.1   Attitudes are impacted by government campaigns

During the 2016–2017 data collection, the Irish government launched a campaign against welfare fraud. With the slogan 'Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All', the Department of Social Protection funded a widely publicised media campaign with the intent of increasing fraud reporting and changing public perceptions of welfare fraud (Devereux and Power, 2019). The campaign ran from April to July 2017. The majority (73%) of the respondents had been interviewed by then and the remaining interviews were conducted during the period of the campaign. After analysing the content of the campaign and reporting statistics, Power, Devereux and Ryan (2022) show that it had not affected the overall number of fraud reports, but may have impacted the public legitimacy of welfare recipients in general.

Using data from the ESS, we assessed the impact of this campaign on welfare attitudes in Ireland. Figure 4.6 depicts the seven-day exponential moving average[8] of three variables in the 30-day time window around the launch of the campaign on 17 April. For two of three selected statements related to welfare attitudes, the visual examination suggests a change of trajectory after the beginning of the campaign. The variables were used in their original format (5-point agreement scale) to avoid reduction in statistical power, considering the already reduced number of observations with a narrow time bandwidth.

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[8] Exponential moving averages attributes greater weight to more recent observations, making it more responsive to potential trajectory changes.

FIGURE 4.6: **SEVEN-DAY EXPONENTIAL MOVING AVERAGE (EMA) FOR THREE QUESTIONS ON WELFARE ATTITUDES, IRELAND, 2016–2017**
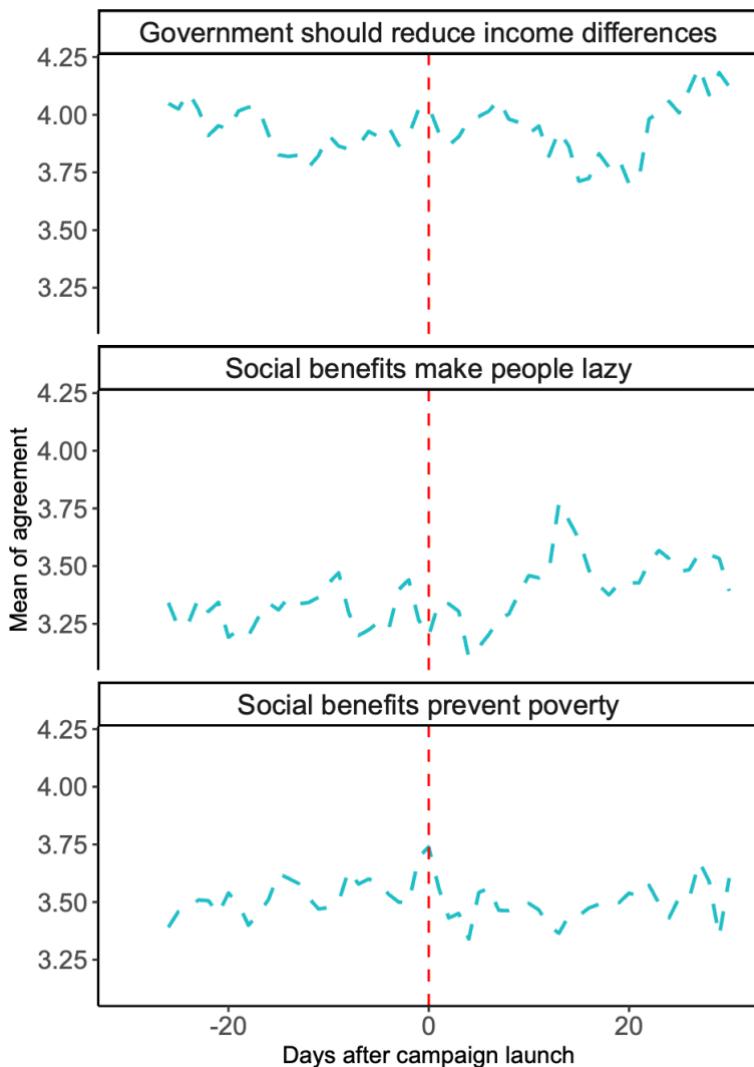
The difference between the percentages of agreement and mean values of these variables before and after the launch is only statistically significant to agreement with 'prevent poverty'. In the Unexpected Event During Survey design, the chance of being part of the group pre-event or post-event is assumed to be 'as good as random'. However, considering that period after the event coincides with the final quarter of the data collection and the stratified sampling approach, it is reasonable to expect that it may contain a higher proportion of hard-to-reach respondents (e.g. employed, higher social class, younger respondents). Consequently, we conducted balance tests comparing these two groups and observed a higher likelihood of interviews being conducted with female respondents, younger respondents and students after the event, which suggests potential violation of the ignorability assumption (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno and Hernández, 2020). To address

this issue, we pre-processed the data using entropy balancing (Hainmueller, 2012), a common method employed to generate balanced samples in the assessment of causal effects. Following the analytical strategy proposed by Muñoz et al. (2020), we then created an ordinal regression model including a binary variable identifying the group interviewed before the campaign launch (control) and the one interviewed after the event (treatment). As we expect that participants who were interviewed in the next few days of the campaign launch were more exposed to the treatment compared to other participants, we also included in the model a variable denoting the temporal distance from the event (in number of days) as well as an interaction term between this variable and the treatment group. We also removed from the analysis respondents who indicate that they do not watch, listen or read news about politics or current affairs (9%), as they were unlikely exposed to the campaign.

Figure 4.7 presents the estimates of the effect of being interviewed after the launch of the Department of Social Protection campaign. No significant effects were found for the variables related to support for redistribution and the view that social benefits make people lazy. However, the model detects a statistically significant decrease on the level of agreement that social benefits prevents poverty among interviews conducted after the launch of the campaign compared to those interviewed, using different time windows around the launch date. As an additional robustness check, we replicated the same analysis with a different date arbitrarily chosen as the median of the control group (25 February 2017) and no significant effects were found for any of these variables comparing the interviews conducted before and after this date.

FIGURE 4.7:   ORDINAL REGRESSION ESTIMATES FOR PERIOD OF INTERVIEW, IRELAND, 2016–2017
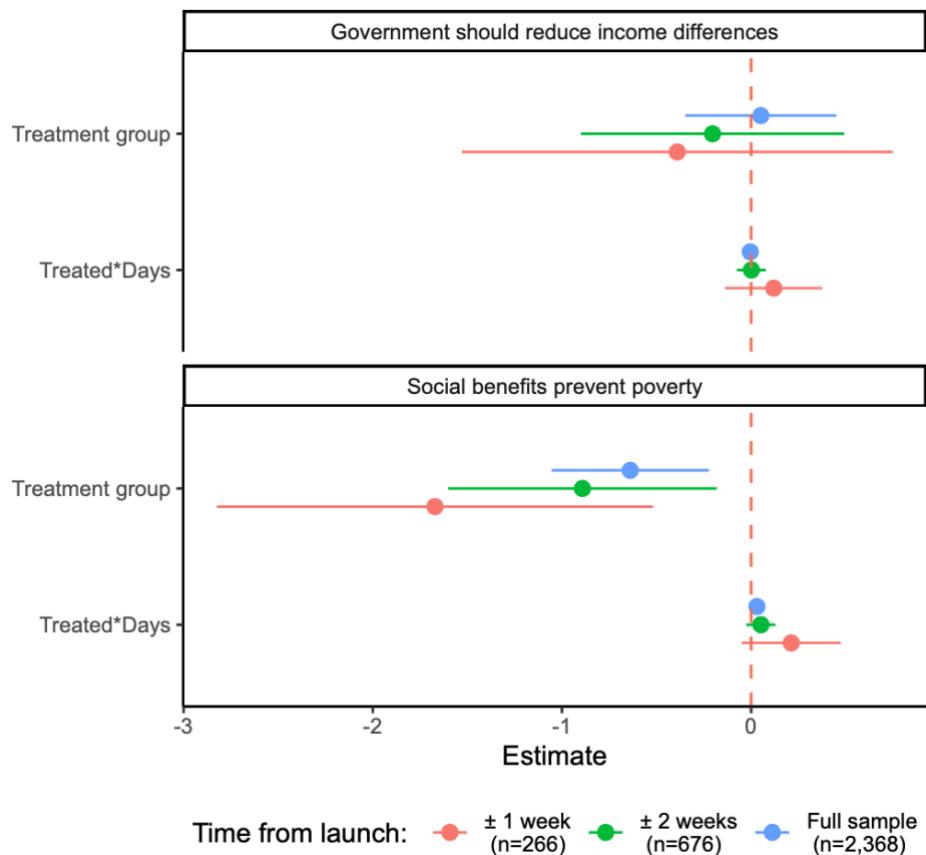
4.2.2   Budget announcement

Another relevant event for welfare attitudes and support for redistribution is the annual budget announcement for the following year. This cannot be considered an unexpected event as the government provides prior indication of when it will be announced. Therefore, some participants might be expecting such an event and cannot be considered analogous to a control group in a quasi-experiment. Nevertheless, we hypothesise that the media coverage after the announcement may increase the salience of welfare policies and positively impact respondents' support for redistribution. It is noteworthy that those who reported that they did not consume any media in a typical day were excluded from the analysis (between 3% and 10% depending on the round).

The announcement dates in Ireland coincided with the European Social Survey fieldwork in six different years: 2006, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014, and 2023. Figure 4.8 shows the seven-day exponential moving average for the agreement with the statement that the government should reduce differences in income. The analyses use the same 60-day time window around the announcement of the budget.

FIGURE 4.8:   **SEVEN-DAY MOVING AVERAGE FOR SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION WITHIN THE 30-DAY PERIOD OF THE PUBLIC BUDGET ANNOUNCEMENT, IRELAND**
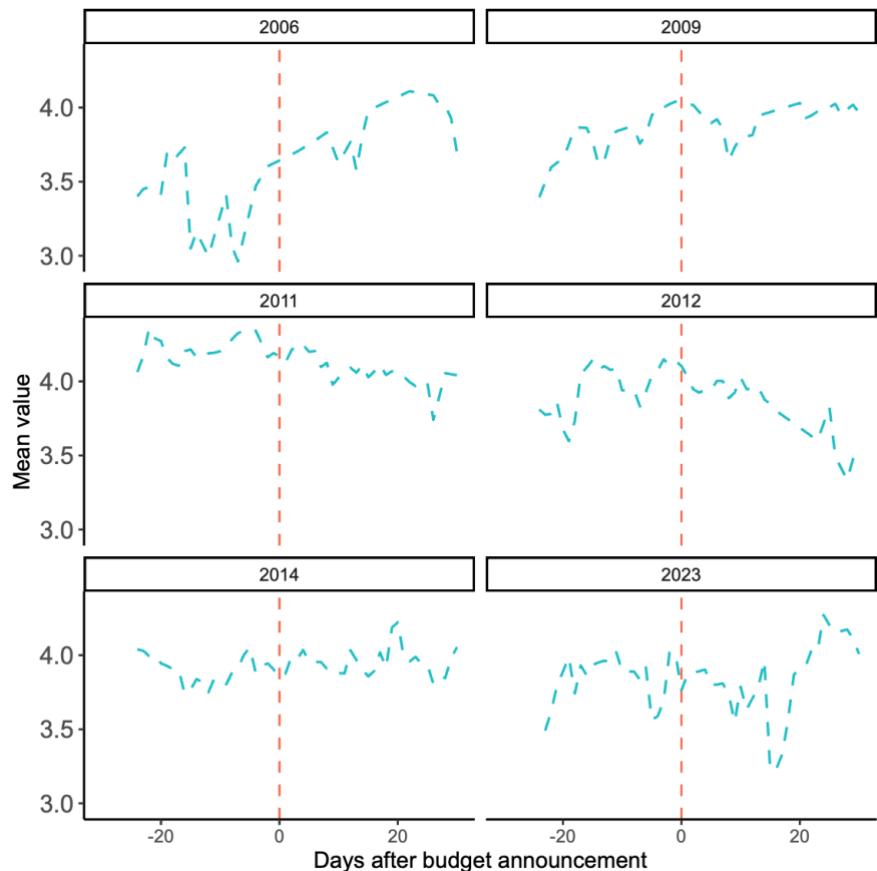
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.

To test the impact of the budget announcement, we adopted a similar approach to the one discussed in the previous section. The model includes the same re-weighting procedure to control for systematic differences in the sample composition of those interviewed before and after the announcement.

As shown in Figure 4.9, when we look at subsets of the sample in varied time windows (10, 14 and 30 days before and after[9]), no statistically significant differences were found in support for redistribution comparing the period before and after the budget announcement. The only exception is found using the shortest time window in 2012, where we found lower support for redistribution after the budget announcements. We note that Budget 2012 was one of a series of austerity budgets that implemented significant cuts to public spending. Distributional analysis showed that collectively the four austerity budgets from 2009 to 2012 were progressive, with the highest income deciles losing most, but Budget 2012 was regressive with the lowest income decile experiencing a biggest decline in income (Callan et al., 2012).

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[9] A shorter time window of one week, as used in the previous analysis, could not be used as some models failed to converge due to the low number of observations.

One potential explanation of this result is a higher salience of redistributive issues prior to the publication as a result of media speculation and campaigns from different organisations attempting to influence the public debate. In this interpretation, the higher support for redistribution only occurs in the month prior to the announcement. Therefore, changes in the period immediately before the budget may minimise the appearance of change post-budget. The data offer further potential to investigate the impact of specific budgetary packages but is beyond the scope if the current report.

The same analysis was replicated using 'satisfaction with government' as a dependent variable. In this case, no significant differences are found regardless of the time bandwidth. This relatively weak and short-lived effect found in Ireland goes in the same direction of Dunaiski and Tukiainen's (2025) conclusion that political events such as the 'Tax Day' in Finland have limited impact on attitudes.

FIGURE 4.9:   ORDINAL REGRESSION ESTIMATES FOR BEING INTERVIEWED AFTER THE BUDGET ANNOUNCEMENT BY YEAR AND TIME WINDOW, IRELAND
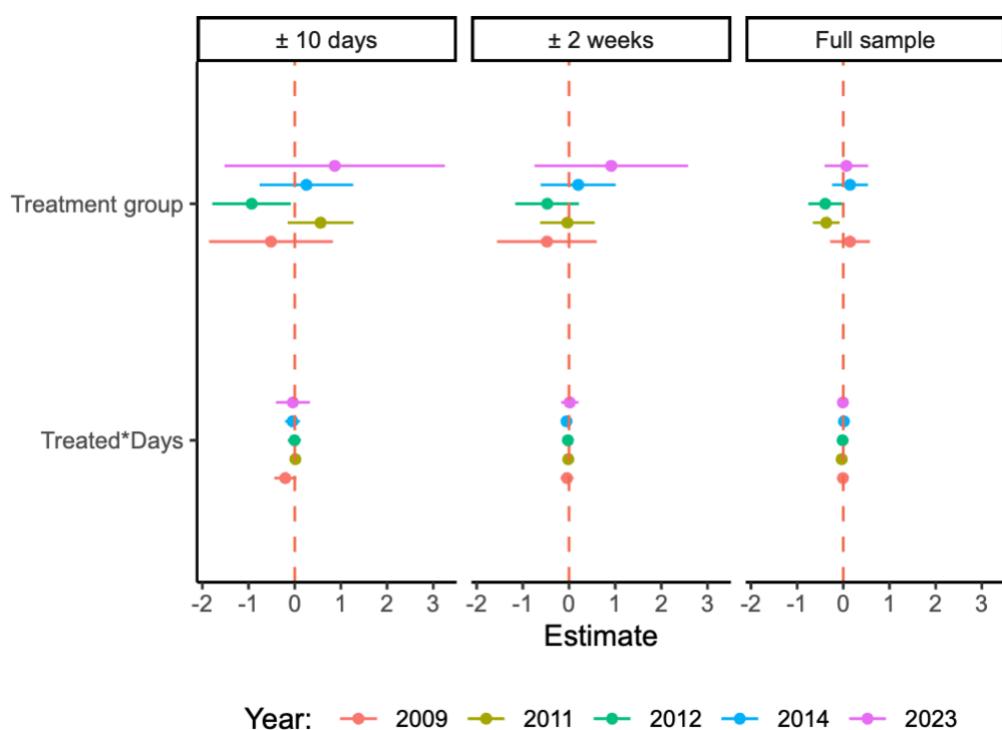
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey Round 8.
Note: Plots are based on samples including interviews from different time windows. For instance, the first plot (+/- 10 days) includes the comparison between the group interviewed up to 10 days 'before' the budget announcement (control group) with the group interviewed up to 10 days 'after' the budget announcement.

4.2.3 Pandemic

A major event experienced during the ESS time series was the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence from a survey experiment in the United States show that participants were more willing to prioritise society's problems when exposed to issues related to the pandemic (Cappelen et al., 2021). Van Hootegem and Laenen (2023) observed that support for a universal basic income in Belgium increased with the pandemic but it was short-lived.

In response to the pandemic, the Irish government introduced a major package of income supports. This included the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme/Employer Wage Subsidy Scheme (see Alamir, McGinnity and Russell, 2024 for further discussion of government supports). At their height, these schemes were supporting one million workers and 37,000 enterprises, at a cost of €16.7 billion up to October 2021 (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2021).

The first ESS data collection after the pandemic in Ireland occurred between November 2021 and August 2022. By this time, as shown in Figure 4.3, the unemployment rate was already returning to levels similar to the period before the start of the pandemic. The survey included a specific module on items related to respondents' experiences during the pandemic. A sub-group of questions asked participants to indicate if any of the following happened to them as a result of the coronavirus pandemic:

> 'I was made redundant/lost my job'

> 'I have not been in work at any time since the start of the pandemic'

> 'The income from my job was reduced'

> 'My working hours were reduced'

> 'I was furloughed'

> 'I was forced to take unpaid leave/holiday'

> 'None of these'

Figure 4.10 shows the proportion of respondents who agree that the government should reduce differences in income by social class and personal impact of the pandemic. Overall, the working class seem to be supportive of redistribution regardless of the pandemic experiences. On the other hand, the higher-grade and lower-grade service classes seem to be more supportive among those who lost their jobs (85% support) compared to those who indicated that nothing happened (65% support).

FIGURE 4.10: **PROPORTION OF SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION BY SOCIAL CLASS AND PERSONAL IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC, IRELAND, 2021**
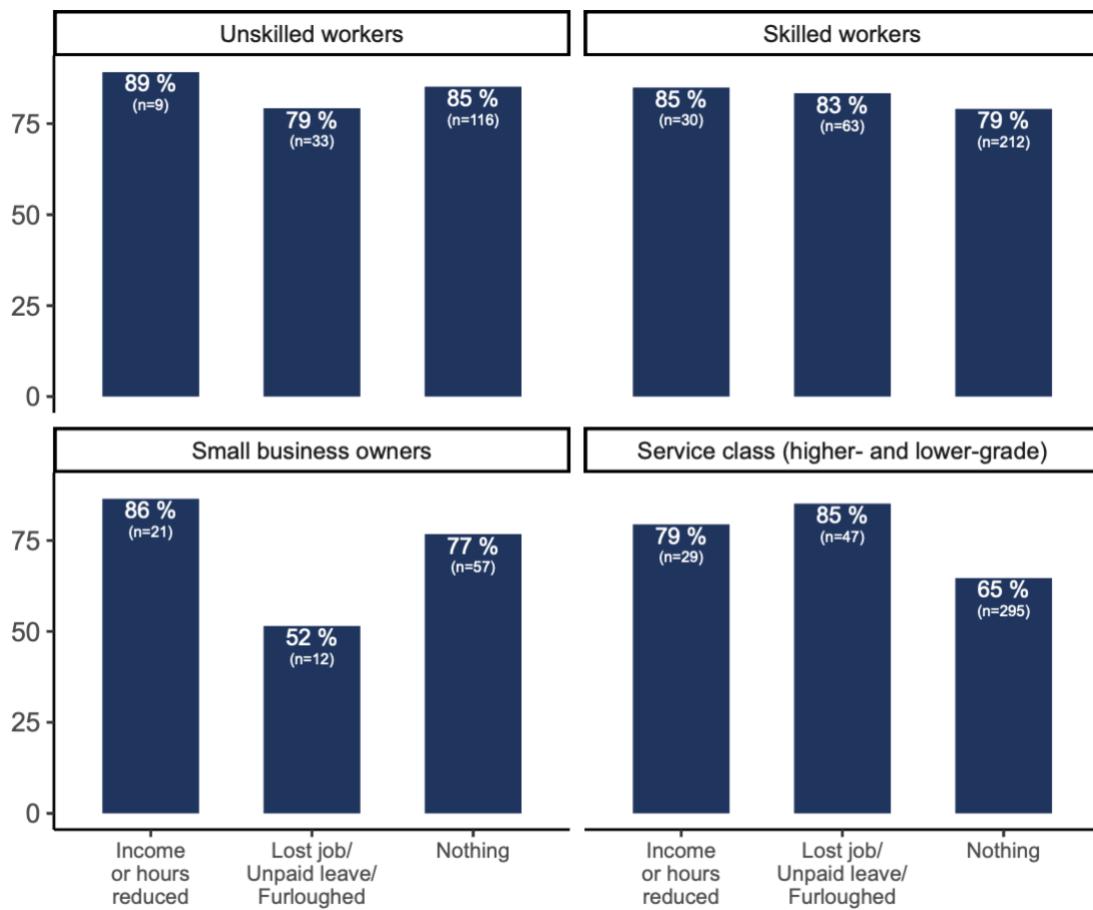
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.
Note: Respondents can appear in more than one of the impact categories. Responses to the impact categories 'Don't know', 'Other', and 'Refusals' were omitted from the figure. Lower-grade and higher-grade service classes were collapsed due to the low number of observations.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions and policy implications

Public support for the welfare state is an important foundation for democratic governments to pursue the policies needed to alleviate poverty in society. The attitudes examined in this study are key indicators of this support. On some issues, public attitudes can be an instigator of policy change. For example, public support for abortion in Ireland was widespread prior to the referendum in 2018 (Elkink et al., 2020). On other issues, a policy action may prompt changes in attitudes and behaviour.

In Ireland, about three-quarters of the adult population support redistribution, either agreeing or strongly agreeing that the government should reduce differences in income. This is among the highest proportions in Europe. The level of support is particularly high among low-income households, females and the younger cohort. While the overall proportion fluctuated over the period analysed (2002–2024), it never fell below 69 per cent, giving Irish governments a sustained backing for redistributive policies.

At the same time, compared to other European countries, Ireland has a higher proportion of respondents who are willing to pay more taxes if that leads to improved public services. Although there is no clear relationship between the aggregate country-level support for redistribution and willingness to pay more taxes, evidence from a post-electoral survey in Ireland also suggests that those who are more averse to inequality are also more willing to pay higher taxes.

Despite the high levels of support for welfare policies and redistribution, Ireland also has one of the highest proportions of people in Europe who believe that 'social benefits make people lazy'. This points to the importance of addressing public misconceptions and challenging negative stereotypes about welfare recipients.

Findings from experimental research suggest that the framing of policies is important, as is the provision of information on the extent of inequality. This is reinforced by this report's findings on the 2017 'Welfare Cheats' campaign. Framing the receipt of social transfers as potentially fraudulent decreased the perception that social benefits prevent poverty, which is associated with higher support for welfare policies and redistribution. In this sense, campaigns that emphasise entitlements and rights are likely to reinforce a more collective 'public good' view of the welfare state and counteract negative perceptions of individuals in receipt of benefit as undeserving. Efforts should be made to highlight the positive role of social protection in promoting equality and social cohesion.

The analysis of survey data over time also shows that support for redistribution tends to increase during periods of economic crisis, such as the 2008 recession and the COVID-19 pandemic. Ireland experienced a substantial level of government intervention in the economy during the pandemic, which resulted in social transfers to those that may not previously have drawn on such benefits. This translated into higher support for government redistribution. The increase in support during the pandemic was particularly noticeable among small business owners. However, the nature of the pandemic as an external shock meant that the public is less likely to attribute blame to those who found themselves in need of government support, therefore the support for redistribution in these circumstances may not sustain over time.

Nevertheless, despite the short-lived effects of these external events, policymakers may take the opportunity of these moments of support to implement more permanent reforms that go beyond the periods of crises.

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APPENDIX

This Appendix contains additional analyses that were either mentioned in the main report or provide supplementary results to the ones presented in the document.

The report includes a table with the coefficients of a logistic regression model explaining support for redistribution. The table omits the effects for specific variables to facilitate reading. Table A.1 shows all variables included in the model.

TABLE A.1:   LOGISTIC REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS (ODDS RATIO) FOR 'SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION' (ALL VARIABLES), IRELAND, 2003–2023

Characteristic	OR[1]	SE
Age group		
18–24	—	—
25–35	1.19*	0.076
36–45	1.15	0.078
46–55	1.15	0.079
56–65	1.66***	0.086
>66	1.43***	0.105
Gender		
Male	—	—
Female	1.12**	0.038
Born in country		
Yes	—	—
No	0.83***	0.050
Highest level of education, ES – ISCED	0.96***	0.008
Final Oesch class position – 5 classes		
Higher-grade service class	—	—
Lower-grade service class	1.33***	0.058
Small business owners	1.11	0.062
Skilled workers	1.51***	0.052
Unskilled workers	1.95***	0.062
Financial situation		
Living comfortably on present income	—	—
Coping on present income	1.38***	0.039
Difficult on present income	1.64***	0.063
Very difficult on present income	2.11***	0.106
No answer	4.11*	0.610
Refusal	0.77	0.460
Don't know	1.06	0.243
Main activity		
Paid work	—	—
Education	0.92	0.088
Unemployed, looking for job	0.86	0.085
Unemployed, not looking for job	0.83	0.145
Permanently sick or disabled	0.95	0.126
Retired	0.98	0.081
Community or military service	1.29	0.641
Housework, looking after children, others	1.10	0.063

Characteristic	OR[1]	SE
Other	1.22	0.185
No answer	1.37	0.357
Refusal	24,375	103
Don't know	0.00	131
Placement on left-right scale	0.90***	0.010
ESS Round		
1	—	—
2	0.82*	0.083
3	0.69***	0.088
4	0.83*	0.086
5	1.22*	0.091
6	1.08	0.090
7	1.10	0.093
8	0.95	0.088
9	1.01	0.092
10	1.16	0.104
11	1.15	0.095

1 *$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.
Note: Higher scores on left-right scale indicate placement on the right of centre. Abbreviations: OR = Odds Ratio, SE = Standard Error.

The main outcome variable in the report is measured through the grouping of 'strongly agree' and 'agree' options for the statement that 'Government should reduce income differences'. In Table A.2, we show the results of an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model using the same independent variables and the outcome variable in their original format (5-point scale).

TABLE A.2: **OLS REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS FOR 'SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION' (ORIGINAL VARIABLE), IRELAND, 2003–2023**

Characteristic	Beta	95% CI	p-value
Age group			
18–24	—	—	
25–35	0.08	0.02, 0.15	0.008
36–45	0.09	0.02, 0.15	0.008
46–55	0.06	-0.01, 0.12	0.074
56–65	0.19	0.13, 0.26	<0.001
>66	0.15	0.07, 0.23	<0.001
Gender			
Male	—	—	
Female	0.05	0.02, 0.08	0.002
Born in country			
Yes	—	—	
No	-0.10	-0.14, -0.06	<0.001
Highest level of education, ES – ISCED	-0.02	-0.02, -0.01	<0.001
Final Oesch class position – 5 classes			
Higher-grade service class	—	—	
Lower-grade service class	0.14	0.09, 0.19	<0.001
Small business owners	0.06	0.00, 0.11	0.037
Skilled workers	0.20	0.16, 0.25	<0.001
Unskilled workers	0.27	0.23, 0.32	<0.001

Characteristic	Beta	95% CI	p-value
Financial situation			
Living comfortably on present income	—	—	
Coping on present income	0.16	0.12, 0.19	<0.001
Difficult on present income	0.26	0.21, 0.31	<0.001
Very difficult on present income	0.42	0.35, 0.49	<0.001
No answer	0.50	0.17, 0.84	0.003
Refusal	-0.01	-0.40, 0.39	>0.9
Don't know	0.01	-0.20, 0.21	>0.9
Main activity			
Paid work	—	—	
Education	0.00	-0.07, 0.07	>0.9
Unemployed, looking for job	-0.02	-0.09, 0.04	0.5
Unemployed, not looking for job	-0.01	-0.12, 0.10	0.9
Permanently sick or disabled	0.06	-0.03, 0.15	0.2
Retired	-0.01	-0.07, 0.05	0.7
Community or military service	0.15	-0.32, 0.62	0.5
Housework, looking after children, others	0.03	-0.02, 0.08	0.2
Other	0.13	-0.01, 0.27	0.072
No answer	0.12	-0.16, 0.40	0.4
Refusal	0.17	-0.82, 1.2	0.7
Don't know	-1.7	-3.0, -0.42	0.010
Placement on left-right scale	-0.06	-0.06, -0.05	<0.001
ESS Round			
1	—	—	
2	0.01	-0.06, 0.07	0.8
3	-0.06	-0.13, 0.01	0.10
4	-0.01	-0.08, 0.06	0.8
5	0.23	0.16, 0.31	<0.001
6	0.19	0.12, 0.26	<0.001
7	0.18	0.11, 0.26	<0.001
8	0.03	-0.04, 0.10	0.3
9	0.09	0.01, 0.16	0.019
10	0.15	0.07, 0.23	<0.001
11	0.20	0.13, 0.28	<0.001

1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.
Note: Higher scores on left-right scale indicate placement on the right of centre. Abbreviations: CI = Confidence Interval.
SE = Standard Error.

Table A.3 shows the results of the same model reported in Table A.2 using pooled data from all other ESS countries (excluding Ireland).

TABLE A.3: **OLS REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS FOR 'SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION' (ORIGINAL VARIABLE), ALL ESS COUNTRIES EXCEPT IRELAND, 2002–2024**

Characteristic	Beta	95% CI	p-value
Age group			
18–24	—	—	
25–35	0.08	0.06, 0.09	<0.001
36–45	0.08	0.06, 0.10	<0.001
46–55	0.13	0.11, 0.14	<0.001
56–65	0.17	0.15, 0.18	<0.001
>66	0.18	0.16, 0.21	<0.001
Gender			
Male	—	—	
Female	0.10	0.09, 0.11	<0.001
Born in country			
Yes	—	—	
No	-0.07	-0.08, -0.06	<0.001
Highest level of education, ES – ISCED	-0.01	-0.01, -0.01	<0.001
Final Oesch class position – 5 classes			
Higher-grade service class	—	—	
Lower-grade service class	0.15	0.14, 0.16	<0.001
Small business owners	0.10	0.09, 0.11	<0.001
Skilled workers	0.25	0.23, 0.26	<0.001
Unskilled workers	0.26	0.25, 0.27	<0.001
Financial situation			
Living comfortably on present income	—	—	
Coping on present income	0.18	0.17, 0.19	<0.001
Difficult on present income	0.31	0.29, 0.32	<0.001
Very difficult on present income	0.39	0.37, 0.41	<0.001
No answer	0.09	0.02, 0.17	0.009
Refusal	0.08	0.00, 0.16	0.050
Don't know	0.14	0.00, 0.28	0.057
Main activity			
Paid work	—	—	
Education	-0.10	-0.12, -0.08	<0.001
Unemployed, looking for job	0.06	0.04, 0.08	<0.001
Unemployed, not looking for job	0.05	0.02, 0.08	0.003
Permanently sick or disabled	0.10	0.08, 0.13	<0.001
Retired	0.05	0.04, 0.07	<0.001
Community or military service	-0.20	-0.31, -0.09	<0.001
Housework, looking after children, others	-0.01	-0.03, 0.00	0.12
Other	-0.01	-0.05, 0.03	0.6
No answer	-0.01	-0.09, 0.08	0.9
Refusal	-0.07	-0.30, 0.15	0.5
Don't know	0.14	0.03, 0.26	0.017
Placement on left-right scale	-0.09	-0.09, -0.09	<0.001
ESS Round			
1	—	—	
2	0.00	-0.02, 0.01	0.6
3	0.05	0.03, 0.07	<0.001
4	0.06	0.04, 0.08	<0.001
5	0.09	0.08, 0.11	<0.001
6	0.13	0.11, 0.15	<0.001

7	0.11	0.10, 0.13	<0.001
8	0.12	0.10, 0.14	<0.001
9	0.15	0.13, 0.17	<0.001
10	0.12	0.10, 0.13	<0.001
11	0.09	0.08, 0.11	<0.001
Country			
AT	—	—	
BE	-0.20	-0.24, -0.17	<0.001
BG	0.08	0.03, 0.13	0.001
CH	-0.27	-0.31, -0.24	<0.001
CY	0.05	-0.01, 0.11	0.13
CZ	-0.75	-0.80, -0.71	<0.001
DE	-0.33	-0.36, -0.29	<0.001
DK	-0.75	-0.81, -0.69	<0.001
EE	-0.27	-0.32, -0.23	<0.001
ES	-0.03	-0.06, 0.01	0.2
FI	-0.05	-0.09, -0.02	0.005
FR	-0.04	-0.07, 0.00	0.035
GB	-0.37	-0.41, -0.34	<0.001
GR	0.31	0.26, 0.35	<0.001
HR	-0.01	-0.06, 0.05	0.8
HU	0.18	0.14, 0.21	<0.001
IL	0.05	0.01, 0.10	0.014
IS	0.00	-0.05, 0.06	>0.9
IT	0.05	0.00, 0.10	0.030
LT	0.04	-0.01, 0.09	0.094
LV	0.05	0.00, 0.10	0.057
ME	-0.44	-0.51, -0.37	<0.001
NL	-0.44	-0.48, -0.41	<0.001
NO	-0.23	-0.27, -0.19	<0.001
PL	-0.15	-0.19, -0.12	<0.001
PT	0.16	0.13, 0.20	<0.001
RO	0.10	0.03, 0.16	0.005
RS	-0.02	-0.09, 0.05	0.5
RU	-0.18	-0.23, -0.13	<0.001
SE	-0.21	-0.25, -0.18	<0.001
SI	0.11	0.06, 0.16	<0.001
SK	-0.17	-0.22, -0.12	<0.001
TR	0.26	0.19, 0.32	<0.001
UA	-0.07	-0.14, 0.00	0.064

1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.
Note: Higher scores on left-right scale indicate placement on the right of centre. Abbreviations: CI = Confidence Interval.
             SE = Standard Error.

In the logistic regression model included in the report, one of the SES measures is 'feeling about the household income'. This variable is used as alternative to household income due to the low response rate for this variable. Table A.4 replaces the subjective measure with the household income deciles as measured in the survey (the variable 'HINCTNTA').

TABLE A.4: **LOGISTIC REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS (ODDS RATIO) FOR 'SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION'
(HOUSEHOLD INCOME), IRELAND, 2003–2023**

| Characteristic	OR[1]	SE
Age group		
18–24	—	—
25–35	1.37**	0.112
36–45	1.37**	0.114
46–55	1.25*	0.114
56–65	1.87***	0.124
>66	1.60**	0.149
Gender		
Male	—	—
Female	1.08	0.051
Born in country		
Yes	—	—
No	0.82**	0.064
Highest level of education, ES – ISCED	0.98*	0.010
Final Oesch class position – 5 classes		
Higher-grade service class	—	—
Lower-grade service class	1.31***	0.076
Small business owners	1.13	0.084
Skilled workers	1.45***	0.070
Unskilled workers	1.90***	0.084
Main activity		
Paid work	—	—
Education	1.00	0.133
Unemployed, looking for job	0.78*	0.103
Unemployed, not looking for job	0.79	0.181
Permanently sick or disabled	0.90	0.160
Retired	0.86	0.109
Community or military service	1.27	0.684
Housework, looking after children, others	1.16	0.086
Other	0.99	0.239
No answer	1.54	0.969
Refusal	9,056	148
Placement on left-right scale	0.92***	0.013
ESS Round		
4	—	—
5	1.20	0.103
6	1.25*	0.100
7	1.45***	0.103
8	1.16	0.098
9	1.13	0.104
10	1.17	0.116
11	1.24*	0.106
Household's total net income, all sources	0.91***	0.010

1 *$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.
Note: Higher scores on left-right scale indicate placement on the right of centre. Abbreviations: SE = Standard Error.

In some studies, interpersonal trust is pointed out as a relevant predictor of support for redistribution. However, the ESS variable on interpersonal trust is not statistically significant when included in the main model for Ireland as shown in Table A.5.

TABLE A.5: **LOGISTIC REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS (ODDS RATIO) FOR 'SUPPORT FOR REDISTRIBUTION' (INCLUDING INTERPERSONAL TRUST), IRELAND, 2003–2023**

Characteristic	OR[1]	SE
Age group		
18–24	—	—
25–35	1.18*	0.076
36–45	1.15	0.079
46–55	1.14	0.079
56–65	1.65***	0.087
>66	1.43***	0.105
Gender		
Male	—	—
Female	1.11**	0.038
Born in country		
Yes	—	—
No	0.83***	0.050
Highest level of education, ES – ISCED	0.96***	0.008
Final Oesch class position – 5 classes		
Higher-grade service class	—	—
Lower-grade service class	1.33***	0.058
Small business owners	1.11	0.062
Skilled workers	1.51***	0.052
Unskilled workers	1.93***	0.062
Financial situation		
Living comfortably on present income	—	—
Coping on present income	1.38***	0.040
Difficult on present income	1.63***	0.063
Very difficult on present income	2.08***	0.106
No answer	4.12*	0.610
Refusal	0.76	0.460
Don't know	1.06	0.243
Main activity		
Paid work	—	—
Education	0.91	0.088
Unemployed, looking for job	0.86	0.085
Unemployed, not looking for job	0.83	0.145
Permanently sick or disabled	0.94	0.126
Retired	0.98	0.081
Community or military service	1.29	0.642
Housework, looking after children, others	1.10	0.063
Other	1.21	0.185
No answer	1.38	0.358
Refusal	24,337	103
Don't know	0.00	131
Placement on left-right scale	0.90***	0.010

ESS Round		
1	—	—
2	0.83*	0.083
3	0.69***	0.088
4	0.83*	0.086
5	1.21*	0.091
6	1.08	0.090
7	1.10	0.093
8	0.95	0.088
9	1.00	0.092
10	1.16	0.104
11	1.14	0.095
Most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful	0.99	0.008

1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.
Note: Higher scores on left-right scale indicate placement on the right of centre. Abbreviations: OR = Odds Ratio, SE = Standard Error.

In Chapter 4, we conducted an analysis showing a significant decrease in the level of agreement that social benefits prevent poverty among interviews conducted after the launch of the Department of Social Protection campaign compared to those interviewed before that, using different time windows around the launch date. As an additional robustness check, we replicated the same analysis with a different date arbitrarily chosen as the median time of the control group (25 February 2017) and no significant effects were found for any of these variables comparing the interviews conducted before and after this date, as shown in Figure A.1.

FIGURE A.1: ORDINAL REGRESSION ESTIMATES FOR PERIOD OF INTERVIEW IN RELATION TO PLACEBO DATE, IRELAND, 2016–2017

1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Source: Authors' own analysis of the European Social Survey.