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Fairness predispositions towards the rich and the poor and support for redistribution in the Nordic welfare state

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A B S T R A C T

The impact of individuals' fairness predispositions on public support for the welfare state receives less attention than the effect of economic self-interest on this support. Amid growing income differences even in previously egalitarian Nordic countries, predispositions about what is fair in society are rapidly becoming more politically salient. We examine how fairness predispositions towards the rich and the poor are linked to the support for three dimensions regarding how redistribution ought to be organised: access, conditionality and contribution. We then disaggregate these links for different income brackets and between elites who hold leadership positions and the rest of society (citizens). Using data pertaining to Finnish citizens and elites in 2018 and 2020, respectively, we show that the two fairness predispositions are related in various ways to the support for these three dimensions, with differences across income brackets and tentative differences between elites and citizens. These findings underline the importance of considering fairness predispositions even in welfare states emphasising economic equality.

1. Introduction

Economic inequality has intensified in advanced economies across the globe (Piketty, 2013; Beckert, 2022), including in the Nordic countries, where universal and comprehensive welfare state structures were designed to enhance redistribution and collective well-being (e.g. Barth et al., 2021). In response, burgeoning research has delved into the political implications of inequality in relation to voter turnout (Lahtinen et al., 2017) and various forms of political support and behaviour (Hall, 2017; Rueda and Stegmueller, 2019; Weisstanner, 2022). While most of these studies have focused on the political consequences of the unequal distribution of economic resources, individuals' perceptions of inequality may be just as politically consequential (e.g. Cavaillé, 2023; Kim and Hall, 2023; Eick, 2024).

Our study contributes to this strand of research on the political implications of inequality. We focus on the impact of predispositions about fairness on the support for redistribution through the welfare state. Fairness predispositions are enduring and akin to moral perceptions in that they shape how individuals view economic conditions such as inequality (Sachweh, 2012; Starmans et al., 2017; Piston, 2018). From the perspective of fairness, support for redistribution can be seen as a reflection of social norms of exchange (Arts and Gelissen, 2001; Mau, 2004) rather than self-interest, which has been the prevailing paradigm in most contemporary studies (e.g. Rehm, 2009; Garritzmann et al., 2018; Busemeyer and Tober, 2022). However, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive, as individuals may act based on their personal fairness predispositions and their self-interest (Cavaillé, 2023). The relevance of fairness predispositions has already been suggested in the moral economy literature, which has argued that 'individual actions and attitudes [*with respect to economic inequality and the welfare state*] are embedded in a wider horizon of shared norms and values and therefore cannot be understood from a strictly rational-action perspective' (Sachweh, 2012: 421; see Thompson, 1971; Bullock et al., 2003; Piston, 2018; Ahrens, 2019). Building on these studies, we thus suggest that predispositions about fairness towards the poor and the rich could be one such norm which impacts how individuals regard the welfare state and specific welfare policies, especially in terms of three dimensions according to which redistribution is organised: access, conditionality and contribution (see Arts and Gelissen, 2001; Roosma et al., 2013: 239; Taylor-Gooby et al., 2018).

Moreover, we contend that the impact of fairness predispositions on support for these three dimensions may be sociodemographically stratified. First, income may moderate the impact of fairness predisposition through in-group affinity (e.g. Lamont, 2000; Danckert, 2017),

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especially as income inequality worsens. Second, elites are differentiated from the rest of society (citizens) by being in a position (i.e. holding formal leadership positions in key national institutions, such as large corporations, politics, civil service and interest groups) that enables them to participate in policy discussion and decisions (Ruostetsaari, 2015; Hoffmann-Lange, 2018: 80). Such a position may also expose elites to more accurate knowledge about the welfare state's redistributive process than that which citizens can access (see related Gingrich, 2014). Hence, compared to citizens, elites may rely less on fairness predispositions as a heuristic to determine their support for the welfare state. Disaggregating this impact is essential, because elites' policy preferences are understudied despite their outsized influence on public opinion (Zaller, 1992; see for exceptions on elites Ruostetsaari, 2015; Gulbrandsen, 2018; Kantola and Kuusela, 2019; Kuusela and Kantola, 2023). In sum, we study two possible lines of stratification by exploring how this link varies (a) by income brackets and (b) between elites and citizens.

We test these propositions using data collected in 2018 and 2020 among Finnish citizens and elites, respectively.[1] As a Nordic welfare state, Finland is characterised by universalism, conditionality and high taxation. These features purportedly help to mitigate economic inequality (Blomgren et al., 2014) and should thus generate public support for the persistence of these features of the Nordic welfare state. However, welfare state reforms during the past ten years have threatened to roll back some of these features. For instance, the labour market service model of 2022 (see Kangas and Kalliomaa-Puha, 2019 for the activation model), implemented by a centre-left government, introduced harsher conditionality. The current right-wing government, inducted in June 2023, is introducing even more stringent conditionality than before while simultaneously lowering labour taxation. Notably, these developments are not specific to Finland; they have also taken place in other European welfare states (Knotz, 2018). Altogether, they lead us to wonder whether there could be an undercurrent of opinion among both citizens and elites on dimensions of redistribution that are related to predispositions about fairness and that lend political support to the pursuit of such welfare state reforms.

In the following, we first describe the dimensions according to which redistribution is organised in contemporary welfare states. Next, we elaborate on how fairness predispositions are linked to individuals' support for these dimensions but also outline how these links may vary across income brackets and between elites and citizens. Thereafter, we specify our data and analytic strategy before presenting our results. The final section discusses these results and concludes the research.

2. Dimensions of organising redistribution in contemporary welfare states

According to Roosma et al. (2013), there are seven aspects to contemporary welfare states: welfare mix, goals of the state, range, degree, design of redistribution, implementation process and outcomes. Consequently, Roosma et al. (2013) found that public attitudes to contemporary welfare states are multidimensional and should not be subsumed into a single attitudinal dimension of general support for the welfare state. In this study, we focus on one aspect of the contemporary welfare state: its redistributive design. Roosma et al. (2013: 239) stated that this aspect covers issues such as 'who should benefit from the redistribution in different policy areas, who should contribute to it, and for what reasons and on what conditions, [*and*] who should carry the burdens of redistribution'. It is pertinent to explore public attitudes to this aspect when worsening economic inequality coincides with tighter fiscal pressures and shifting policy priorities. Worsening economic inequality suggests a greater need for redistribution; however, contemporary welfare states are struggling to expand redistribution due to fiscal austerity and emerging policy priorities, such as financing defence expenditure and the green transition (e.g. Im et al., 2024). Under these conditions, questions about how redistribution ought to be organised may become more politically salient and contested, because redistribution will not be expected to achieve as much as before with the same or shrinking finances.

Recent research on public attitudes to this dimension has studied public support for specific sets of welfare policies, such as social investment, social consumption and workfare (e.g. Rehm, 2009; Garritzmann et al., 2018; Busemeyer and Tober, 2022). Different sets of policies build on various redistributive logics and impose diverse redistributive outcomes. Some studies disaggregate these policies further by differentiating them by their policy fields (e.g. Bremer and Bürgisser, 2023). In contrast, we take a more aggregated approach. Political debates on how redistribution is organised may reflect differences in not only policy demands but also ideas about how redistribution itself ought to be organised (see Hall, 1997; Palier and Surel, 2005; Carstensen and Schmidt, 2015).

Drawing on rich research on the design of welfare states (e.g. Torfing, 1999; Sumino, 2016; Fossati, 2018; Blomqvist and Palme, 2020), we posit that beliefs about how redistribution ought to be organised revolve around three broad dimensions: (1) who can access the welfare state (access); (2) how can one access the welfare state (conditionality); and (3) how is the welfare state financed (contribution)? The first principle relates to whether access to the welfare state should be universal or targeted. The second principle relates to whether there are obligations or responsibilities that should be fulfilled in exchange for receiving benefits or services. The third principle relates to the financing of the welfare state and, in particular, who should contribute more. Together, these three dimensions represent ideas about how inputs of redistribution ought to be organised in terms of who pays (contribution), how outputs of redistribution ought to be organised in terms of who the beneficiaries are (access) and how the benefits can be obtained (conditionality).

3. Fairness predispositions and support for dimensions of organising redistribution

Research on public support for the welfare state has often focused on the role of economic self-interest (e.g. Rehm, 2009; Garritzmann et al., 2018; Busemeyer and Tober, 2022; Baute 2024). It has argued that individuals support welfare policies that they perceive to be beneficial to themselves. However, some studies have shown that some individuals support policies which do not appear to be in their economic self-interest. For example, Rossetti et al. (2021) found that less-educated individuals in Belgium, who face elevated labour market risk, support activation policies imposing stringent conditions on unemployment benefit recipiency. These findings imply that there are other motivations underpinning individuals' support for the redistributive design of the welfare state that co-exist with self-interest (Cavaillé, 2023).

The moral economy approach offers one such plausible motivation (e.g. Thompson, 1971; Bullock et al., 2003; Mau, 2004; Martin, 2023). Sachweh (2012: 422) described the moral economy approach to inequality as values and norms 'about social stratification […] shared by upper and lower classes […] representing part of society's moral infrastructure'. One such shared value or norm is predispositions about fairness (Sachweh, 2012: 436). Alongside self-interest, predispositions about fairness may influence individuals' support for the welfare state, because the welfare state reflects societal norms of exchange (Mau, 2004) to maintain social solidarity and justice (Arts and Gelissen, 2001; Hall and Lamont, 2013; Hall, 2017).

Piston (2018) explained that such predispositions are about whether the rich and the poor receive their fair share of economic resources. This view is supported by research on equity theory in social psychology, which suggests that individuals pay attention to the fairness of poverty

[1] The two samples cannot be merged because they are samples of two different populations. The samples also utilise different weights, which raises further barriers to merging them.

and wealth as outcomes (Adams, 1965; Hochschild, 1981). Individuals often consider poverty and wealth to be unfair if they are disproportionate to effort (i.e. wealth due to luck or privilege, poverty due to inequalities in the system) (Bullock et al., 2003; Alesina and Angeletos, 2005: 962; Ahrens, 2019; Mijs, 2021). According to Piston (2018), these predispositions are formed based on political socialisation, which encompasses parents' predispositions and a person's own exposure to the rich and the poor (see Danckert, 2017). Hence, these studies underline that views about the rich and the poor are not merely attitudes; instead, they are moral convictions about the correct state of affairs in society.

Research has shown that fairness predispositions underpin a range of policy preferences and voting behaviour (e.g. Cavaillé, 2023; Kim and Hall, 2023; Martin, 2023; Eick, 2024). However, the extent to which fairness predispositions relate to support for the welfare state remains understudied. Previous studies have focused on how these predispositions affect individuals' perceptions of inequality (Lamont, 2000; Sachweh, 2012), demand for income redistribution (Ahrens, 2019) or support for various types of welfare policies (Bullock et al., 2003). However, to our knowledge, no prior research has considered how these predispositions influence support for the dimensions (access, conditionality and contribution) according to which redistribution ought to be organised (henceforth dimensions).

Regarding the first principle (access), we expect that predispositions towards the poor exert a greater influence on support for universalism than predispositions towards the rich. Debates related to access often revolve around targeted versus universal access. Universalism guarantees access to benefits for the entire population of a country, whereas targeting restricts access to specific groups (Blomqvist and Palme, 2020). We expect that predispositions towards the poor exert a greater influence because welfare benefits are most frequently used by less socioeconomically advantaged groups, such as the poor and unemployed.[2] More socioeconomically advantaged groups are less likely to rely on these benefits. If people think that the poor have less than they should fairly have, they may embrace a redistributive principle that guarantees the poor access to benefits rather than one that restricts access and relies on means testing.

Regarding the second principle (conditionality), we expect that predispositions towards the poor also exert a greater influence on conditionality than predispositions towards the rich. Debates on this principle often focus on the notion of fulfilling obligations and responsibilities in exchange for receiving benefits (Knotz, 2018; Rossetti et al., 2021; Horn et al., 2024). Obligations and responsibilities are often used to push welfare beneficiaries towards re-employment and labour market integration (Fossati, 2018). Since the less socioeconomically advantaged use benefits more frequently than the more socioeconomically advantaged, they are more likely to encounter these obligations and responsibilities. Crucially, these obligations and responsibilities may impose additional costs on already vulnerable welfare beneficiaries, thus exacerbating their economic precarity. If individuals think that the poor have less than they should have, they may oppose the imposition of obligations and requirements in exchange for receiving benefits.

Regarding the third principle (contributions to finance the welfare state), we posit that predispositions towards the rich exert a greater influence on contribution than predispositions towards the poor. As those who are economically better off are more likely to be net contributors to the welfare state than those who are worse off (Sumino, 2016), debates on contribution tend to target the former rather than the latter group (Rowlingson et al., 2021; Sachweh and Eicher, 2023). If people think that the rich have more than they should have, they may support the idea of those who are better off in society paying more to give back to society.

Hypothesis 1a. Individuals who think that the poor have less than they should fairly have support universalism.

Hypothesis 1b. Individuals who think that the poor have less than they should fairly have oppose conditionality.

Hypothesis 1c. Individuals who think that the rich have more than they should fairly have support the better off paying more.

3.1. Personal income as a moderator

While fairness predispositions may be linked to support for different dimensions of organising redistribution (access, conditionality and contribution), the intensity of these links may vary. Building on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Danckert, 2017), we suggest that group identification is one means by which these links may vary. Individuals who identify with the poor may feel that poverty is a personal problem. Conversely, individuals who do not identify with the poor may view poverty as a distant issue, even if they feel that the poor do not have enough. Similarly, individuals who do not identify with the rich may consider the rich not having enough to be a problem solely for the rich. Hence, group identification influences whether individuals view a problem as a personal one or as pertaining only to others. When a problem is perceived as personal, individuals may feel that it requires close attention and may strongly demand a solution. Thus, group identification alters the intensity of the links between fairness predispositions and support for the dimensions of access, conditionality and contribution. When individuals identify with the poor/rich and feel that the poor/rich do not have enough, they are more likely to act on these fairness predispositions.

Identification with in-groups may be based on different social bases, including kinship (de Swaan, 1988), social class (Evans and Mellon, 2016), place of residence (Cramer, 2016), ethnicity and race (Woo et al., 2019) and employment status (Danckert, 2017). Group identification may also be based on income, which is one determinant of people's life experiences. When individuals who have similar incomes share similar life experiences, they may form in-groups (see Danckert, 2017: 781). Research has shown that group identification does occur along income lines. Shayo (2009) suggested that individuals may identify with those who have similar incomes to themselves. However, the strength of income-based group identification appears to differ across income groups. Martinangeli and Martinsson (2020) provided experimental evidence that the rich identify with their own income group more than the poor do. Lamont (2000) showed that the poor do identify with other poor, but they also draw boundaries and distinctions between themselves. These differences notwithstanding, these findings indicate that individuals do identify with those who have similar incomes to themselves. When intensifying economic inequality sharpens the boundaries of life experiences afforded to different income groups (see Lakner and Milanovic, 2016; Häusermann et al., 2023), group identification based on income may be amplified.

In sum, the intensity of fairness predispositions' impact on support for the dimensions of access, conditionality and contribution may vary by income groups. Individuals do not need to be poor themselves to think that the poor have less than they should fairly have. However, we expect that the impact of fairness predispositions towards the poor is stronger among individuals who think that the poor have less than they should fairly have and who concurrently have lower incomes. A similar argument applies to predispositions towards the rich. Since universalism is pro-poor in practice, individuals with lower incomes who think that the poor have less than they should fairly have may support universalism more strongly. Concurrently, such individuals may oppose conditionality more strongly as well. Regarding contribution, individuals with higher incomes who think that the rich have less than they should fairly have may oppose the better off having to pay more.

[2] Our focus here is on welfare benefits. In contrast, welfare services tend to be used by more socioeconomically advantaged groups, such as the middle class and those who are highly educated (Ghysels and van Lancker, 2011).

Hypothesis 2a. The association between fairness predispositions towards the poor and support for universalism is stronger among individuals with low incomes than individuals with high incomes.

Hypothesis 2b. The association between fairness predispositions towards the poor and support for conditionality is stronger among individuals with low incomes than individuals with high incomes.

Hypothesis 2c. The association between fairness predispositions towards the rich and support for the better off paying more is stronger among individuals with high incomes than individuals with low incomes.

3.2. The differing impacts of fairness predispositions between citizens and elites

Following the positional approach to conceptualising elites (Hoffmann-Lange, 2008; 2018; Ruostetsaari, 2021), we distinguish between elites and the rest of society (henceforth citizens) based on whether individuals occupy formal leadership positions in political, business, media or civil society organisations.[3] These formal leadership positions grant elites power and participation in policy decisions (Hoffmann--Lange, 2018: 80). Ruostetsaari (2021: 118) clarified that the positional approach presumes that elites have the resources to exercise power based on their leadership positions in the most important organisations in society, which distinguishes elites from ordinary citizens.

Elites and citizens may also differ in their knowledge and information about the redistributive design of the welfare state as well as its challenges (Lupton et al., 2015). By virtue of their formal leadership positions, elites may be more exposed to detailed information on this than the average citizen. Their positions grant them resources to obtain such information at lower cost. In contrast, recent research has suggested that citizens have incomplete knowledge about the welfare state (e.g. Ferrera et al., 2023; Eick, 2024). Leschke and Scheele (2024) demonstrated that precarious workers are unaware of their social and labour rights, which impacts the effectiveness of the welfare state in mitigating their economic precarity. Gingrich (2014) argued that the extent to which citizens are informed about the implications of welfare policies affects their demand and support for various welfare policies. Using experimental evidence, Goerres et al. (2020) demonstrated that providing citizens with varied information about the redistributive design of welfare policies affects their support for these policies. In sum, these findings suggest that welfare policies are becoming increasingly complex in their redistributive design, and imply that public support for the welfare state often operates in a low information context where the public may lack a comprehensive understanding of the redistributive design of contemporary welfare states.

Rich research has demonstrated that the public turns to heuristic short-cuts to determine their political opinions and behaviours in low information contexts (e.g. Dancey and Sheagley, 2013; Bernhard and Freeder, 2020). In the same manner, the public may rely on heuristics such as fairness predispositions to determine their support for the dimensions of access, conditionality and contribution. Information asymmetry means that citizens and elites may depend on fairness predispositions to different degrees. Citizens are more likely to rely on such dispositions as heuristics when determining their views on the dimensions according to which redistribution should be organised. While such dispositions may also shape elites' views, these dispositions are probably juxtaposed against information about the distributive design of such dimensions and how they may affect their self-interest.[4]

Hypothesis 3. The links between fairness predispositions and support for universalism, conditionality and contribution differ between citizens and elites.

4. The changing Nordic welfare state in Finland

The Nordic welfare state, based on the principle of universalism rather than the Bismarckian model of maintaining citizens' social (occupational) status (Palier, 2010), stresses that welfare benefits as well as services (which are not the focus of this paper) should be made available to all legal residents in need (Blomqvist and Palme, 2020). Benefits do not target specific groups or exclude others. The universalist Nordic model enables coverage of social risks even for those who lack access to social insurance benefits. It is financed by progressive tax policies that impose high personal income taxes. Along with extensive social transfer programmes, peak-level collective bargaining and wage compression, Nordic welfare states have exhibited lower poverty rates, less economic inequality and stronger inter-generational mobility than welfare states based on other welfare models. The development of the Nordic welfare state was facilitated by corporatism: Nordic elites collaborated in the development of the welfare state, as they considered it to be in their best interests to prevent the spillover effects of widespread poverty and social exclusion, which were previously prevalent in Nordic countries (Baldwin, 1989).

After a deep recession in the early 1990s (and later in some countries), the Nordic welfare states began to emphasise conditionality, whereby welfare benefits and services are obtained only when specific behavioural standards are met (Torfing, 1999; Kananen, 2012). Although the expansion of this principle of conditionality was more prevalent in liberal welfare states, such as the UK and the US, it did occur (to a lesser degree) in the Nordic welfare states. While benefit recipiency and service use did not depend on social contributions per se, residents were urged to find employment to contribute to the welfare state, which faced worsening financing problems due to a rising dependency ratio. Since the 2000s, the use of welfare benefits and services has become more strongly linked to work-related obligations, and there are sanctions for not meeting these obligations. For instance, in Finland, the 'activation model' was launched by the centre-right Sipilä government on 1st January 2019 (Kangas and Kalliomaa-Puha, 2019). The centre-left Marin government that took over abolished this model on 1st January 2020 and enacted its own activation model, termed the 'new labour market service model', on 2nd May 2022, which also included conditionality.[5] Under this government, unemployment benefits may be paused if unemployed workers do not submit four job applications every month. Therefore, in principle, welfare benefits and services remain available to all in the Nordic welfare state (universalism), but recipients and users must behave in specific ways in order to have full access to these benefits and services (conditionality). Furthermore, the better off among the population are expected to contribute more to financing the welfare state (contribution). Thus, universalism and conditionality govern how welfare resources, largely financed through high and progressive taxation-generated contributions, should be distributed and

[3] There are other definitions of elites. Beckert (2022), for example, focused on wealth. The definition that we rely on does not presume that elites are rich. Instead, it focuses on the formal leadership positions that elites occupy in key national institutions (such as large corporations, civil service, politics and interest groups), which enable them to participate in and influence policymaking.

[4] Elites may also rely on other perspectives, including managerialism and the interests of the organisations that they represent (see Kantola, 2020: 905). These perspectives may also dampen the impact of fairness predispositions on their views on these principles.

[5] It is worth noting that the Marin government reformed the administration and operations of social and health services from municipalities to well-being service counties in 2022. One of the purposes of the reform was to improve citizens' equality in terms of access to services.

reciprocated within the society of the welfare state.

The new right-wing coalition government formed after the 2023 parliamentary elections has proposed a further tightening of conditionality (Finnish Government, 2023). Concurrently, the government has proposed weakening universalism and lowering the progressive income tax rate. When these (actual and proposed) changes are considered collectively, they seem to suggest a rollback of the Nordic welfare state. Such changes are not specific to Finland and have been observed in other European welfare states, including those belonging to other welfare regimes (Knotz, 2018). Thus, while our analysis is limited to Finland, our findings are relevant to other European welfare states.

5. Research design

5.1. Data

We used data from two surveys with identical measures of fairness predispositions towards the rich and the poor.[6] The first was a nationally representative cross-sectional survey conducted among the general public during the summer and fall of 2018 in three stages. The first stage used an online survey of 20,000 people sampled randomly from a national population register (response rate of 12.1%). As more highly educated citizens and pensioners were overrepresented among these respondents, the second stage targeted 13,197 people from underrepresented sociodemographic groups for interviews in person or over the phone (response rate of 7.6%). After the second stage, the target of 4000 respondents had not been met, and less-educated citizens of working age remained underrepresented. Therefore, 4214 participants from an internet panel (n = 40,000) maintained by the research company in charge of data collection were contacted (response rate of 16.2%). The final dataset consisted of 4076 respondents. We compared the composition of the sample against the national population for representativeness and generated weights that adjusted our sample for gender, age and education. We conducted list-wise deletion by excluding observations with missing values for any of the covariates included in our study. The final study sample consisted of 3303 respondents.

The second dataset was based on a cross-sectional survey of elites across several fields of activity that was conducted in 2020. We identified these elites by finding dominant institutions and organisations and then selecting individuals who held leading positions in them or exerted significant influence on policy. This strategy followed the procedure elaborated and recommended in several studies of elites (e.g. Hoffmann-Lange, 1992, 2018; Best, 2012; Bunselmeyer et al., 2013; Ruostetsaari, 2021). The survey was sent to 3580 individuals in the fall of 2020 (response rate of 19.6%). Although the response rate was lower than that obtained by a similar survey conducted by Ruostetsaari (2015) in Finland, it fell within the range obtained by other surveys of elites (see Best, 2012; Bunselmeyer et al., 2013; Teney and Helbling, 2014).[7] A total of 728 respondents completed the survey, yielding a sample size comparable to other surveys of elites. We conducted list-wise deletion by excluding observations with missing values for any covariates. Our final sample consisted of 557 respondents. Surveys of elites frequently suffer from the overrepresentation of certain sectors (Bunselmeyer et al., 2013; Teney and Helbling, 2014). In our sample, elites in business and administration were overrepresented compared to Ruostetsaari's (2021) count of the number of elites in different sectors in Finland. We address this problem below. Additionally, it was impossible to pool these two datasets because they targeted different populations, were collected at different times, relied on different sampling strategies and contained weights exclusive to each sample. Hence, we conducted the analyses separately for both samples.

5.2. Variables

Both datasets contained similar questions regarding fairness predispositions towards the rich and the poor, which are our explanatory variables. Following Piston (2018), we operationalised both fairness predispositions using questions asking respondents about their views on the amount of money the poor and the rich have. Respondents were asked to choose between the following five options: (1) much less money than they should have, (2) slightly less money than they should have, (3) roughly as much money as they should have, (4) slightly more money than they should have and (5) much more money than they should have. Respondents were asked this question twice – first for the poor, then for the rich. We recoded both variables as binaries. For the rich, we combined 'much more' and 'slightly more' into one category (1 – more money than they should have) and 'roughly as much', 'slightly less' and 'much less' into another category (0 – less than they should have/neutral). For the poor, we combined 'much more', 'slightly more' and 'roughly as much' into one category (0 – neutral/more than they should have) and 'slightly less' and 'much less' into one category (1 – less than they should have). This was done for the citizen and elite samples.

We used three variables to operationalise the three dimensions (access, conditionality and contribution) according to which redistribution ought to be organised. For the first dependent variable (access), we used a question asking whether social security benefits should belong to everyone living permanently in Finland. Essentially, this question asked respondents whether access ought to be universal or targeted. It was replicated in both datasets. The variable was binary in the citizen dataset, whereas it was an ordinal variable with a five-point scale ('strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') in the elite dataset. For comparability, we recoded the latter into a binary variable.[8] For both datasets, a value of 0 indicates opposition to universalism and a value of 1 indicates support for it.

For preferences regarding conditionality, we asked respondents whether social security should be reformed so that individuals have to perform socially useful actions in return for support. Essentially, this question asked respondents whether welfare beneficiaries should fulfil obligations or responsibilities in exchange for receiving welfare benefits. This question was in both datasets. This variable was binary in the citizen dataset but ordinal with a five-point scale in the elite dataset. For comparability, we recoded the latter into a binary variable such that a value of 0 indicates opposition to conditionality and a value of 1 indicates support for it in both datasets.[9]

For views on whether the better off in society should pay more to finance the welfare state (contribution), we relied on two different questions because they were not replicated in both datasets. For the citizen dataset, the question asked respondents whether large companies ought to be taxed lightly to boost job creation. For the elite dataset, the question asked respondents whether capital income should be taxed

[6] Note: both the citizens and elites datasets (including a description of the sampling strategy) are stored and publicly accessible on the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (https://www.fsd.tuni.fi/en/). The identification strategy for the elites dataset and the specific wording of the variables are elaborated in the supplementary material.

[7] Studies have consistently reported difficulties with recruiting respondents for surveys of elites (Hoffmann-Lange, 2008). Best's (2012) study yielded a response rate of 13.7 percentage, whereas Bunselmeyer et al.'s (2013) and Teney and Helbling's studies yielded a response rate of 37.0%.

[8] In the elite dataset, the question asked if social security benefits belong to all permanent residents of Finland. We coded 'Strongly disagree', 'Disagree', 'Neutral' as 0 (oppose universalism), and 'Agree', 'Strongly agree' as 1 (support universalism).

[9] In the elite dataset, the question asked if social security must be reformed in such a way that, in return, the support must be done more than currently for something socially useful, such as studies or volunteering. We coded 'Strongly disagree', 'Disagree', 'Neutral' as 0 (oppose conditionality), and 'Agree', 'Strongly agree' as 1 (support conditionality).

progressively, as with earned income. In the citizen survey, the question measured contribution preferences based on beliefs about whether low taxes stimulate job creation. However, the question also determined views regarding the extent of the tax contributions that large companies should make to society. In the elite survey, the question concerned the underlying notion that the wealthy should pay more. Although the two questions asked about different types of taxes imposed on different populations, they nevertheless spoke to the underlying notion that the better off in society should contribute more and give back to society. They were thus appropriate proxies offering a meaningful comparison between the views of citizens and elites. Both variables were ordinal, with five-point scales on which higher values indicated support for higher taxation of large companies and capital income. For comparability with the two variables above, we recoded these variables into binary variables where 0 indicates opposition or neutrality to the better off paying more and 1 indicates support for it.

Our moderator variable is respondents' personal gross monthly income, which was measured differently in the two datasets. In the citizen dataset, it was coded in income brackets ranging from less than 500 euros per month to more than 12,500 euros per month. In the elite dataset, it was reported in euros. We recoded elites' income to match the income brackets used in the citizens' dataset. Additionally, we omitted three observations whose income brackets range from 1 to 3 (less than 500 euros per month to 1499 euros per month) to reduce sensitivity to outliers during our analyses. These observations fell below the 1st percentile of this variable's distribution. Omitting them reduced the skew from −0.355 to −0.018. Finally, we included a similar set of controls for both datasets (according to data availability in both datasets) - age, gender, education, marital status and left–right ideology. For the analyses of the citizens, we also included respondents' mother tongue as a proxy for ethnic background. For the analyses of the elites, we included the sector that these elites belonged to, in line with the positional approach (Ruostetsaari, 2021).

5.3. Modelling strategy

We conducted our analyses separately for the citizens and the elites in a stepwise manner. The first set of models analysed the direct relationships between fairness predispositions towards the rich and the poor and support for universalism, conditionality and the better off paying more. We tested each outcome separately and in that order. In the second set of models, we added an interaction term composed of fairness predispositions towards the poor or the rich and personal income. For each outcome and each dataset, we ran two separate analyses where one included an interaction term between fairness predispositions towards the poor and personal income, and the other included an interaction term between fairness predispositions towards the rich and personal income.

We estimated all outcomes using logit regressions and applied robust standard errors. For estimations pertaining to the citizen data, we also applied region fixed effects and added population weights adjusting for age, education and gender. Based on Ruostetsaari's study (2021: 118), we calculated weights representing the sizes of various elite sectors and applied them to estimations regarding the elite dataset to correct the over/underrepresentation of some sectors of elites. We calculated the weights using Ruostetsaari's (2021) breakdown of Finnish elites in 2021.

We ran a series of additional robustness checks. For both the citizen and the elite data, we replaced binary versions of fairness predispositions with their scalar versions and re-estimated analyses using linear probability models. Additionally, we re-estimated models using the citizen data without region fixed effects and models using the elite data without weights.

6. Results

6.1. Descriptive results

Fig. 1 presents unweighted sample means for fairness predispositions towards the poor and the rich and support for universalism, conditionality and the better off paying more. Caution needs to be exercised when comparing and interpreting these results due to the differences between the two samples as described above. On average, respondents in the citizen dataset report higher predispositions that the poor have less than they should and the rich have more than they should in comparison to respondents in the elite dataset. Respondents in the citizen dataset also report lower support for universalism, conditionality and the better off paying more than respondents in the elite dataset. The average respondent in the citizen dataset opposes universalism and the better off paying more but supports conditionality. Conversely, the average respondent in the elite dataset supports universalism and conditionality and is neutral regarding the better off paying more.

Note: Means represent sample means in the citizen and elite datasets.

6.2. Regression results

6.2.1. Direct associations between fairness predispositions and support for dimensions of redistribution

Table 1 presents regression results for direct associations between fairness predispositions, income and support for universalism, conditionality and the better off paying more.[10] Model 1, which presents logit estimates for the citizen sample, shows that fairness predispositions towards the poor are significantly correlated ($p < 0.05$) with support for universalism. Predispositions towards the rich and personal income are not significantly correlated with support for universalism. Citizens who believe that the poor have less than they should are more likely to support universalism than citizens who believe that the poor have more than they should or are neutral on this topic. Model 2 shows that fairness predispositions towards the poor and personal income are significantly correlated with support for conditionality ($p < 0.005$). Predispositions towards the rich are not correlated with support for conditionality. Citizens with higher personal incomes are more likely to support conditionality and citizens who feel that the poor have less than they should are less likely to support conditionality. Model 3 shows that fairness predispositions towards both the poor ($p < 0.05$) and the rich ($p < 0.005$) are significantly correlated with support for the better off paying. Personal income is not associated with support for the better off paying more. Citizens who feel that the poor have less than they should and citizens who feel that the rich have more than they should are more likely to support the better off paying more.

Models 4 to 6 present logit estimates for the elite dataset. Models 4 and 5 show that neither fairness predispositions towards the poor nor fairness predispositions towards the rich are significantly associated with support for universalism and conditionality. Instead, personal income is significantly associated with these two outcomes ($p < 0.005$). Personal income is negatively associated with support for universalism but positively associated with support for conditionality. Model 6 shows that fairness predispositions towards the rich and personal income are significantly associated ($p < 0.005$) with support for the better off paying more. Elites who feel that the rich have more than they should and elites with lower incomes are more likely to support the better off paying more.

We conducted three robustness checks to evaluate the sensitivity of results presented in Table 1. The results are available in the supplementary material (see Table A3). In the first check, we replaced the binary versions of fairness predispositions with their scalar versions. In the second check, we re-estimated the models using linear probability

[10] Full regression tables are provided in the online appendix.

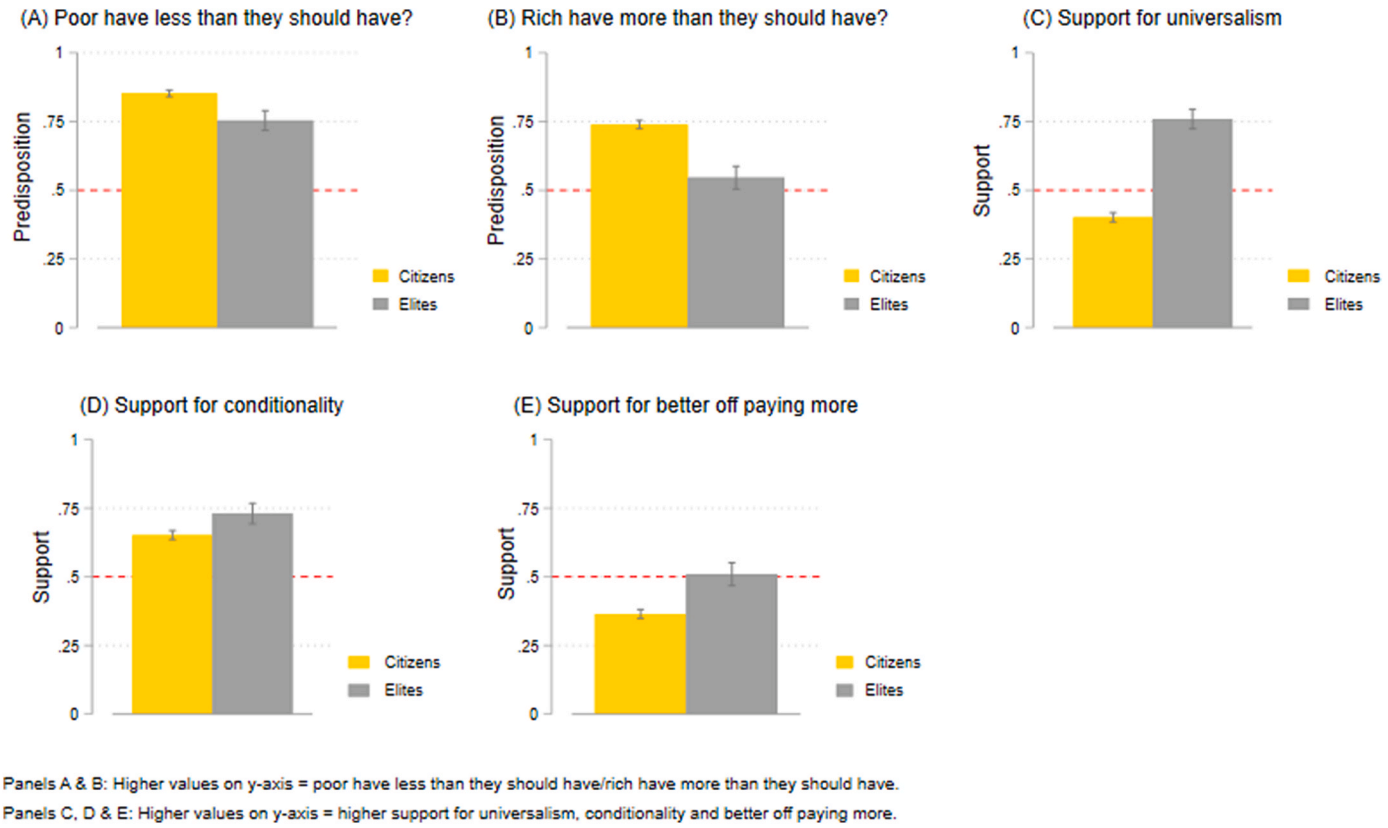

Fig. 1. Unweighted sample means for fairness predispositions towards the rich and the poor and support for universalism, conditionality and the better off paying more in the citizen and elite datasets.

Table 1
Regression results for direct associations between fairness predispositions, income and support for universalism, conditionality and the better off paying more.

	Citizens			Elites		
	(1) Universalism	(2) Conditionality	(3) Better off paying more	(4) Universalism	(5) Conditionality	(6) Better off paying more
Poor have more than they should or neutral (ref.)						
Poor have less than they should	0.313*	−0.396**	0.307*	0.315	−0.451	−0.445
	(0.130)	(0.141)	(0.140)	(0.382)	(0.373)	(0.346)
Rich have less than they should or neutral (ref.)						
Rich have more than they should	−0.004	−0.061	0.605***	−0.266	−0.382	1.826***
	(0.103)	(0.110)	(0.087)	(0.356)	(0.364)	(0.341)
Personal income (brackets)	0.019	0.165***	0.033	−0.234***	0.387***	−0.444***
	(0.029)	(0.031)	(0.028)	(0.073)	(0.073)	(0.087)
Intercept	−0.194	−1.322***	−0.930***	−0.417	−3.255*	0.953
	(0.294)	(0.311)	(0.314)	(1.556)	(1.433)	(1.501)
Number of observations	3311	3311	3311	557	557	557
Pseudo R^2	0.067	0.096	0.084	0.114	0.221	0.328
Robust standard errors in parentheses						
*p < 0.05 **p < 0.01 ***p < 0.005						
Respective weights applied.						

Note: Estimates for controls and intercepts not displayed to conserve space.

models. In the third check, we removed region fixed effects from the analysis of the citizen dataset and removed weights from the analysis of the elite dataset. None of these checks yielded noteworthy differences from the results presented in the base models in Table 1. Thus, our main findings are insensitive to different estimation strategies and operationalisations of the variables.

6.2.2. Associations between fairness predispositions and support for dimensions of redistribution conditional on income

Next, we turn to the results from the second set of models in which interaction terms between fairness predispositions and personal income were included. To ease interpretation, Table 2 presents marginal differences for fairness predispositions on support for each dimension of redistribution conditional on different income brackets. The full regression results can be found in the supplementary material. To conserve space, we present conditional marginal differences for fairness

Table 2
Marginal differences in the probability of support for universalism, conditionality and the better off paying more based on fairness predispositions conditional on personal income (brackets).

		Fairness predispositions							
		Citizens				Elites			
		Poor - Difference between poor have less than they should vs. Poor have more than they should or neutral (ref.)		Rich – Difference between rich have more than they should vs. Rich have less than they should or neutral (ref.)		Poor - Difference between poor have less than they should vs. Poor have more than they should or neutral (ref.)		Rich – Difference between rich have more than they should vs. Rich have less than they should or neutral (ref.)	
		Coefficient	Standard error	Coefficient	Standard error	Coefficient	Standard error	Coefficient	Standard error
Dimension of redistribution	**Personal income (brackets)**								
Universalism	Minimum	−0.160	(0.057)	−0.013	(0.042)	−0.120	(0.231)	−0.245	(0.194)
	Median	0.064*	(0.027)	−0.001	(0.022)	0.043	(0.069)	−0.045	(0.056)
	Maximum	0.179***	(0.062)	0.018	(0.057)	0.081	(0.068)	0.013	(0.064)
Conditionality	Minimum	−0.201***	(0.054)	−0.027	(0.045)	−0.379	(0.204)	−0.260	(0.196)
	Median	−0.077***	(0.026)	−0.012	(0.022)	0.063	(0.053)	−0.053	(0.057)
	Maximum	0.059	(0.055)	0.005	(0.039)	0.032	(0.069)	0.006	(0.063)
Better off paying more	Minimum	0.064	(0.051)	0.065	(0.040)	−0.057	(0.150)	0.491***	(0.161)
	Median	0.062*	(0.028)	0.127***	(0.021)	−0.063	(0.046)	0.334***	(0.067)
	Maximum	0.058	(0.069)	0.221***	(0.053)	−0.065	(0.073)	0.256*	(0.110)

predispositions only at the lowest (minimum), median, and highest (maximum) income brackets.

Turning first to citizens, Table 2 shows that citizens who feel that the poor have less than they should are significantly more likely to support universalism but only at the median and highest income brackets. Fairness towards the rich is not significantly associated with support for universalism at all income brackets. Next, citizens who feel that the poor have less than they should are significantly less likely to support conditionality but only at the lowest (minimum) and median income brackets. Fairness towards the rich is not significantly associated with support for conditionality at all income brackets. For the better off paying more, fairness towards the poor is weakly associated ($p < 0.05$) with it only at the median income bracket. In contrast, citizens who feel that the rich have more than they should are significantly more likely to support the better off paying more at median and maximum income brackets. Additionally, this difference in support between citizens who feel that the rich have more than they should and citizens who feel that the rich have less than they should widens as income rises. In other words, fairness predispositions towards the rich become more important for support for the better off paying more as income rises.

Turning next to elites, Table 2 shows that fairness predispositions towards the rich and poor are generally not associated with support for most dimensions of redistribution at all income brackets. The exception is fairness predispositions towards the rich and support for the better off paying more. Elites who feel that the rich have more than they should are significantly more likely to support the better off paying more at all income brackets. However, this difference in support between elites who feel that the rich have more than they should and elites who feel that the poor have less than they should diminishes as income rises.

We ran three similar robustness checks to assess the sensitivity of these interaction terms. The results can be found in the supplementary material (Table A4). Overall, there are few differences when comparing the results from the base model to those from the robustness checks. In a few instances, different modelling strategies yield levels of statistical significance that varies from the ones in the base model. However, none of these strategies overturns the (non)significance or direction of correlation. The only noteworthy difference is found in the support for conditionality among elites. When estimating using a linear probability model, fairness predispositions towards the poor and the rich are significantly associated with support for conditionality among elites at the minimum income bracket ($p < 0.05$). As these two results are not replicated elsewhere, they are probably an artefact of the estimation strategy. In sum, the main findings presented in Table 2 are insensitive to different estimation strategies and operationalisations of variables.

Finally, Fig. 2 presents the predicted probabilities of support for universalism, conditionality and the better off paying more when fairness predispositions (conditional on income) are significant predictors (see Table 2). These predicted probabilities rely on the same model used to estimate results shown in Table 2. Fig. 2 adds to the findings presented in Table 2 by clarifying the magnitude of the impact of fairness predispositions at different income brackets.

Panel A shows that citizens do not support universalism at all income brackets irrespective of their fairness predispositions. However, as personal income rises, the gap in support for universalism between citizens who feel that the poor do not have enough and those who feel otherwise widens. Among citizens who feel that the poor have less than they should, there is no distinguishable difference in their support for universalism based on their income. The same applies to citizens who feel that the poor have more than they should.

Panel B illustrates that citizens generally support conditionality. Citizens who believe that the poor have less than they should are less supportive of conditionality than those who feel otherwise, but this difference in support diminishes and becomes indistinguishable as income rises. Among citizens who feel that the poor have less than they should, there is a distinguishable difference in their support for universalism based on their income.

Panel C demonstrates that citizens are generally opposed to the better off paying more taxes regardless of income bracket and fairness predispositions. However, as income rises, the gap in this opposition to the better off paying more between citizens who consider the rich to have more than they should and those who think otherwise widens. Among citizens who feel that the rich have less than they should, there is no distinguishable difference in their support for the better off paying more taxes based on their income. The same applies to citizens who feel that the rich have more than they should.

Finally, Panel D shows that elites' support for the better off paying more taxes depends more on fairness predispositions towards the rich than on income. Elites who feel that the rich have more than they should support the better off paying more, whereas elites who feel that the rich have too little oppose it. This difference in support is significant across all income brackets. Among elites who feel that the rich have more than they should, there is no distinguishable difference in their support for the better off paying more based on their income. The same applies to elites who feel that the rich have less than they should.

We round off this section by relating these findings to our hypotheses. First, results from our citizen dataset support Hypotheses 1a, 1b and

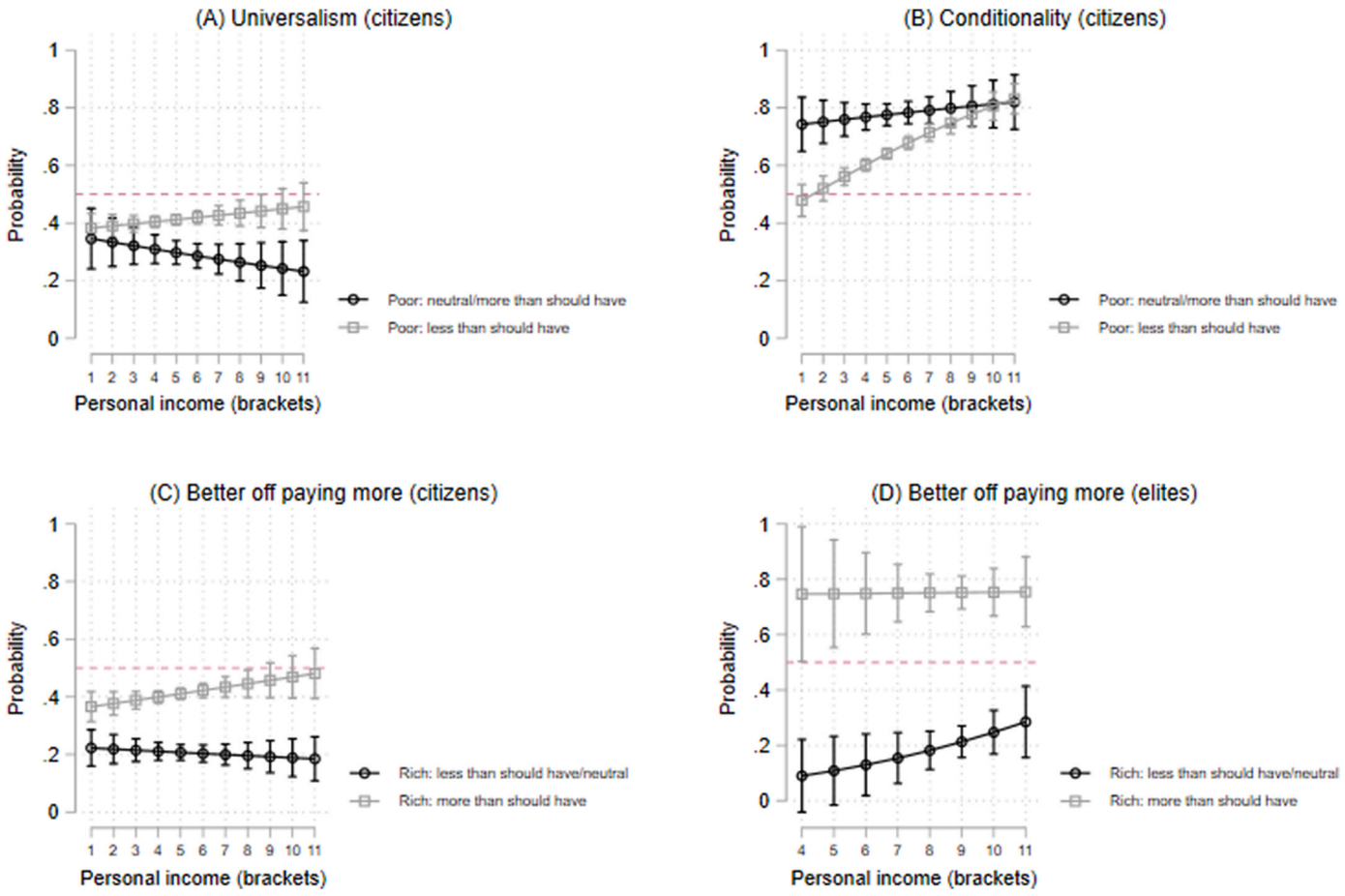

Fig. 2. Predicted support for universalism, conditionality and the better off paying more at different income brackets.
Note: Whiskers denote 95 percent confidence intervals. Dotted horizonal lines represent a probability of 0.5 on a probability scale from 0 to 1.

1c, which state the direct associations between fairness predispositions and support for the three dimensions of access, conditionality and contribution. However, results from our elite dataset only support Hypothesis 1c, which is related to contribution (the better off paying more). Next, results from our citizen dataset show that income moderates the links between fairness predispositions and support for the three organisational dimensions. However, the moderating impact of income only unfolds in the way we had expected for conditionality, thus supporting Hypothesis 2b. The collective results provide tentative evidence that the links between fairness predispositions and support for the three dimensions differ for citizens and elites. For most parts, fairness predispositions are significantly associated with support for the three dimensions among citizens. In contrast, only fairness predispositions about the rich are significantly associated with the dimension on how the welfare state should be financed. These findings support Hypothesis 3.

7. Conclusions

Our study examines how predispositions towards the rich and the poor, understood as enduring moral convictions about fairness (Piston, 2018), influence support for welfare states. With escalating economic inequality even in previously equal Nordic countries, such fairness predispositions will probably become more politically salient and consequential (Sachweh, 2012). We explore the impact of these fairness predispositions on three dimensions that represent contested ideas about how redistribution ought to be organised (see Hall, 1997; Palier and Surel, 2005; Carstensen and Schmidt, 2015) – access, conditionality and contribution – and which may inform welfare policymaking.

Our results yield three takeaways. First, different fairness predispositions are linked to support for access, conditionality and contribution in varying ways. Fairness predispositions towards the poor are linked to support for universalism (access) and more conditionality, but only among citizens. Fairness predispositions towards the rich are linked to support for more contributions from the better off among both citizens and elites. Second, income affects the size of the gap in support for universalism and conditionality between citizens who consider the poor to have too little and citizens who consider the poor to have too much. Income also moderates the gap in support for the better off paying more between citizens who consider the rich to have too much and citizens who consider the rich to have too little. Third, there is tentative evidence of differences between elites and citizens in terms of the significance of links between fairness predispositions and support for the three dimensions. Fairness predispositions are significantly associated with views on all three dimensions of redistribution among citizens, but these dispositions are only associated with views on the better off paying more among elites. Descriptively, elites on average also appear to be more supportive of universalism than citizens on average. In sum, our findings highlight that the moral economy approach is relevant to understand public (especially citizen) support for how redistribution ought to be organised according to the dimensions of access, conditionality and contribution.

These findings suggest that recent reforms to the Finnish welfare state – the tightening of conditionality, the erosion of universalism and the fall in tax rates for the better off – track ongoing public debates about economic fairness and how redistribution ought to be organised. However, the findings also show that the persistence of universalist redistribution in this Nordic welfare state appears to be bolstered by elites

rather than citizens. Additionally, unlike citizens, elites' support for universalism and conditionality is not linked to their fairness predispositions. This tentative divergence between citizens and elites underscores the need for further research on elites' political opinions. We also posit that our findings are relevant for other contemporary welfare states. Different welfare regimes pursue various welfare policy mixes and have varying societal goals. However, the design of redistribution across different welfare states often returns to similar questions regarding who can access the welfare benefits, how one can access them and how they can be financed (Arts and Gelissen, 2001; Roosma et al., 2013; Taylor-Gooby et al., 2018). When fiscal pressures due to austerity or expenditure on other policy priorities, such as defence or the green transition, cause policy trade-offs (e.g. Im et al., 2024), ideas about the various dimensions upon which redistribution should be organised may become even more contested.

We suggest four avenues for future research. First, the differences we found between citizens and elites are tentative and are not directly comparable. The elite and citizen samples relied on dissimilar questions and sampling strategies and were measured during different time periods. The survey of elites was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic and after three landmark welfare reforms. We cannot rule out the possibility that the tentative differences observed between the elite and citizen samples stem from these contextual differences. Additionally, the cross-sectional design of both datasets prevents us from ruling out the reverse causality that policies shape fairness predispositions (Campbell, 2012). However, studies have shown that support for the welfare state is downstream from attitudes to various social groups, including the poor and the rich (e.g. Laenen, 2020). Thus, there are reasonable grounds to suggest that fairness predispositions, as deep-seated moral views (Piston, 2018), motivate support for the welfare state. In light of this, future studies could examine whether similar results emerge when repeated (i.e. panel) data collection strategies sampling both citizens and elites and accounting for temporality are employed. Second, it is plausible that our statistically insignificant findings in our analyses of elites are due to the small sample size of elites. Our findings on elites should be caveated in this regard. Despite these limitations, our findings provide an important glimpse into elites' support for the welfare state, which remains critically understudied. Elites may view the welfare state differently from citizens and adopt a managerial perspective or positions that represent the interests of organisations they lead. As surveys of elites suffer from low response rates and small samples, future studies could attempt to use different methods (e.g. interviews) to evaluate these other explanations. Third, we focused on personal income as a moderator. Recent studies have suggested that wealth may matter as much as income in this regard (Berman et al., 2016; Beckert, 2022), which future studies could explore. Fourth, we explored how fairness predispositions towards the rich and the poor shape elites' and citizens' support for different dimensions of how redistribution should be organised. We do not however study how these fairness predispositions affect which dimension they prioritise. Future studies could thus explore the impact of fairness predispositions on welfare priorities.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Zhen Jie Im: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Hanna Wass:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Anu Kantola:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition. **Heikki Hiilamo:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2024.102823.

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