

Fair Enough?

Fair Enough? proposes and tests a new framework for studying attitudes toward redistributive social policies. These attitudes, the book argues, are shaped by at least two motives. First, people support policies that increase their own expected income. Second, they support policies that move the status quo closer to what is prescribed by shared norms of fairness. In most circumstances, saying the “fair thing” is easier than reasoning according to one’s pocketbook. But there are important exceptions: when policies have large and certain pocketbook consequences, people take the self-interested position instead of the fair one. *Fair Enough?* builds on this simple framework to explain puzzling attitudinal trends in postindustrial democracies, including a decline in support for redistribution in Great Britain, the erosion of social solidarity in France, and a declining correlation between income and support for redistribution in the United States.

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(Continued after the index)

Fair Enough?
Support for Redistribution in the Age of Inequality

CHARLOTTE CAVALLÉ
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To Linda McNulty and Dominique Cavaillé.
C'est mine mais c'est aussi un peu yours.

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Acknowledgments

Welfare states – love them or hate them, their existence is a constant source of wonder. How did some societies achieve social solidarity on such a mind-boggling scale? How resilient is the welfare state in the face of economic change, fiscal stress and immigration? How does the existence of such an institutional behemoth affect mass political behavior, EU politics or the development of financial sectors? I knew I had a keen interest in these topics but where to start?

A class with Jim Alt and Torben Iversen on the politics of redistribution provided the original spark. This class introduced me to the analytical clarity and tractability of formal theory. One model, (in)famously known as the “Meltzer and Richard model,” stood out to me. According to this model, democracies have a built-in inequality moderator, one rooted in voters’ self-interest. The idea that, to paraphrase Adam Smith, the democratic invisible hand would lead voters to selfishly pursue more collectively equal outcomes was an appealing starting point. I had no doubt that it was wrong, but I could not find a convincing explanation of where exactly the model fell short. Claims that people were neither rational nor selfish income maximizers made me suspicious as they often betrayed a misunderstanding of formal theory. Arguments that people were simply misinformed about inequality implicitly assumed that inequality, like rain, was an empirical fact, not a social construct. An emphasis on a cultural “second dimension” that would distract voters from issues of inequality and redistribution did not align with my personal experiences in France and Great Britain. Growing up in France, I vividly remember intensive coverage of factory closures and picketing workers whose actions were supported by a large share of the population. Vacationing in Northern England, I was struck by the difference in rhetoric: my grandparents’ newspaper was full of references to “welfare scroungers.” In other words, talks of inequality and redistribution

were ubiquitous in both countries, though the tone in each was very different. This book represents a decade of work spent grappling with these issues.

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