

Is redistribution to remedy inequality inhibited by ‘distrust in government’ (Kuziemko, Norton, Saez, Stantcheva 2015)?

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The median-voter model posits that median voters’ tax rates rise with the mean-median income gap,¹ creating a self-correcting mechanism that regulates inequality as voters demand more redistribution. Yet, the global Gini coefficient rose from 0.60 in 1820 to a peak of 0.72 by 1910, fell, and returned to 0.72 in 2000. Even with current inequality retreating from all-time highs, at 0.67 in 2020,² commensurate political demand to reverse the underlying pattern of high inequality is lacking. This pattern is termed the Robin Hood Paradox,³ which states that inequality and demand for redistribution are negatively correlated.

The commonly postulated explanation attributes this discrepancy to distrust in governments. Kuziemko’s randomised experiments disseminated interactive information on US income inequality and the benefits of redistributive taxes. These surveys, despite having large effects on participants’ views about inequality, closed only 0.93 percentage points of the more than 10% partisan gap for all taxes except the estate tax, whose support roughly doubled.⁴

Another structural driver is that capital holders, who disproportionately benefit from economic expansion, tend to lobby governments to preserve this advantage.⁵ This channel supplements, not competes with, governmental distrust to explain the Robin Hood Paradox.

¹ Meltzer, A.H. and Richard, S.F. (1981) 'A rational theory of the size of government,' *Journal of Political Economy*, 89(5), pp. 914–927. <https://doi.org/10.1086/261013>.

² Chancel, L. et al. (2022) *World Inequality Report 2022*, Harvard University Press eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674276598>.

³ Lindert, P.H. (2004) *Growing Public: Volume 1, The Story: Social Spending and Economic Growth since the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Kuziemko, I. et al. (2015) 'How Elastic Are Preferences for Redistribution? Evidence from Randomized Survey Experiments,' *American Economic Review*, 105(4), pp. 1478–1508. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20130360>.

⁵ Bonica, A. et al. (2013) 'Why hasn't democracy slowed rising inequality?,' *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 27(3), pp. 103–124. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.27.3.103>.

In this essay, redistribution refers to the transfer of wealth from the rich to the poor. Distrust, as quantified by Kuziemko as the share of tax dollars respondents believed were wasted, can be broken down into inefficient fund usage, corruption and beliefs about beneficiary-deservingness. This essay uses Kuziemko's results to establish their mechanism, tests this mechanism against deservingness, self-interest and structural capture and finally resolves the tension into a single conditional model.

It acknowledges distrust as an empirically substantiated constraint on redistribution but qualifies it as a multiplicative discount, not a veto. Kuziemko's asymmetric results are best explained by three mutually reinforcing reasons: beliefs about administrative competence and capture, beliefs about the deservingness of beneficiaries and the fairness of the income-generating process, and whether institutional distrust is cleanly separable from interpersonal, citizen-to-citizen trust. The latter distinction determines whether institutional design alone can remedy the trust deficit. Overall, these mechanisms redirect, not reduce, citizens' redistributive appetite towards pre-distribution, automated transfers, and sub-national delivery. Distrust thus caps the suitability of redistributive policies rather than underlying demand for equity.

Distrust as a Genuine Inhibitor

Kuziemko's mechanism highlights that preference-updating is conditional on government perceptions. Individuals who view the government as wasteful and thus expect tax revenue to be squandered exhibit little to no increase in redistribution demand. This is in accordance with Okun's leaky bucket, which postulates that wealth transfer from the rich to the poor inevitably generates economic inefficiency due to administrative costs in implementing and enforcing transfer programmes.⁶ Consequently, rational agents discount their expected gain from transfer payments by their perceived losses through administrative inefficiency and elite capture, reducing their demand for redistribution.

⁶ Okun, A.M. (1975) Equality and efficiency, the big tradeoff. Brookings Institution Press.

The median-voter model's assumption that rational utility maximisation is a key driver of human motivation understates social norms' role in shaping redistribution demand.⁷ Beyond expected transfer value, fairness and procedural justice also govern preferences. This leads to an amplifying dynamic: people support equity over strict equality,⁸ causing them to apply a disproportionate penalty on redistribution amidst perceived administrative inefficiency. Public choice theory completes the logic. Since equity-attuned voters naturally expect patronage and bureaucratic capture of tax revenue, their opposition to redistributive policies becomes internally consistent rather than paradoxical.⁹ An ideological shift towards free market capitalism further embeds fiscal scepticism of redistributive policies as a societal default, exacerbating the effects of individual-based fairness-discounting.¹⁰

These preferences persist even after policy implementation. A significant positive correlation between perceptions of government legitimacy and tax morale was found in both Latvia¹¹ and Southern Ethiopia.¹² Taxpayers who perceive the government as legitimate and trustworthy are more likely to voluntarily comply with tax rules, leading to lower rates of tax evasion. Therefore, distrust in governments constrains the revenue collected for redistribution even if the redistributive policies are nominally supported.

⁷ Luebker, M. (2014) 'Income Inequality, Redistribution, and Poverty: Contrasting rational choice and behavioral perspectives,' *Review of Income and Wealth*, 60(1), pp. 133–154. <https://doi.org/10.1111/roiw.12100>.

⁸ Ahrens, L. (2020) 'Unfair inequality and the demand for redistribution: why not all inequality is equal,' *Socio-Economic Review*, 20(2), pp. 463–487. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwaa051>.

⁹ Buchanan, J.M. and Tullock, G. (1962) *The calculus of consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy*.

¹⁰ Bonica, A. et al. (2013) 'Why hasn't democracy slowed rising inequality?,' *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 27(3), pp. 103–124. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.27.3.103>.

¹¹ Mickiewicz, T., Rebmann, A. and Sauka, A. (2017) 'To pay or not to pay? Business Owners' tax Morale: Testing a Neo-Institutional Framework in a transition environment,' *Journal of Business Ethics*, 157(1), pp. 75–93. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-017-3623-2>.

¹² Lorato, T., Sendaba, Y. and Tadesse, T. (2024) 'Tax evasion attitude and taxpayers' perception of government legitimacy: evidence from Southern Ethiopia,' *Cogent Economics & Finance*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322039.2024.2371944>.

Empirical observations largely concur. The twin-peaked hypothesis highlights two distinct trends that associate favourable perceptions of state transparency with higher social expenditure.¹³

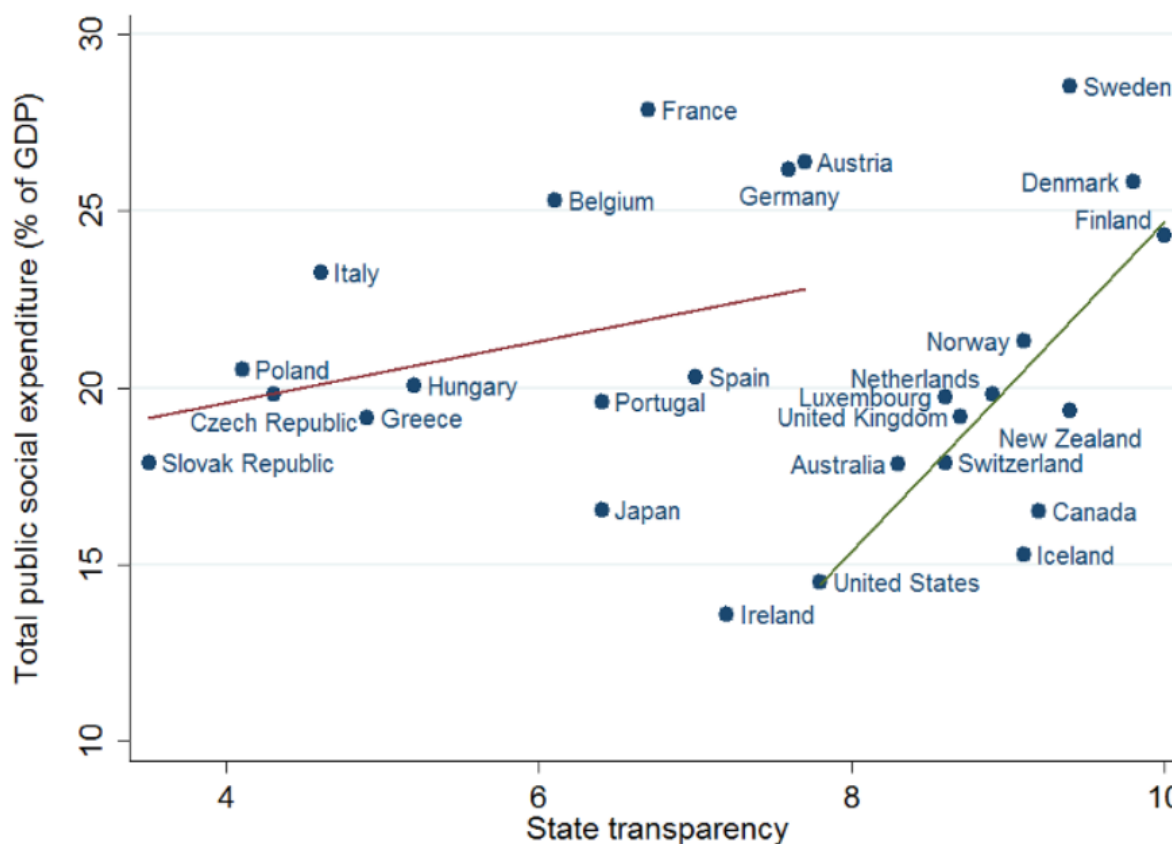


Figure 1: Twin-peaked relationship between welfare-state generosity and perceptions of state transparency¹⁴

This helps to explain the Nordic welfare states' large welfare budgets available for redistribution, as highlighted by the green line.¹⁵ As trustworthy citizens are convinced

¹³ Algan, Y., Cahuc, P. and Sangnier, M. (2015) 'Trust and the welfare State: The Twin Peaks curve,' *The Economic Journal*, 126(593), pp. 861–883. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eoj.12278>.

¹⁴ Algan, Y., Cahuc, P. and Sangnier, M. (2015) 'Trust and the welfare State: The Twin Peaks curve,' *The Economic Journal*, 126(593), pp. 861–883. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eoj.12278>.

¹⁵ The “twin peaks” refers to the two lines in the graph. As explained, the green line corresponds to trustworthy citizens who are willing to contribute to tax revenue as they believe that their tax revenues will be used to fund effective social welfare programmes. On the other hand, the red line corresponds to a large proportion of untrustworthy individuals hoping to take advantage of a large welfare budget without bearing the costs. These attitudes are reflected in a less transparent state.

that their tax payments are not being misused, they willingly contribute to redistributive policies. Conversely, the lower demand for redistribution in the US has been attributed to racial heterogeneity, where the poor are disproportionately black.¹⁶ This racial animosity fosters distrust of redistributive policies that would have an outsized benefit on black populations, reducing political demand for redistribution.

Altogether, distrust operates at every stage of the redistribution chain, from suppressing stated preferences to constraining tax revenue. It thus acts as a systemic, not localised, dampener on redistribution.

Distrust's Limits

While governmental trust is a necessary condition for redistribution demand, it is by no means sufficient. Singapore has been able to maintain a fluid and productivist welfare state under a dynamic government-citizen interaction model with legitimacy as the central constraint of welfare governance.¹⁷ This has allowed it to undertake significant redistributive policies in public housing, healthcare and education while maintaining fiscal discipline. In contrast, China's instrumentalist welfare policy is used to maintain the party's authority while simultaneously promoting economic development and social stability.¹⁸ Without an explicit objective of promoting an equitable distribution of wealth, redistribution through taxation and social policy is minimal despite China's unusually strong fiscal capacity and control of assets.¹⁹ This confirms that governmental distrust, while genuine, cannot solely account for redistribution's political weakness.

For example, individuals who overestimated their relative position on the income distribution tended to demand greater redistribution once informed of their true ranking.²⁰

¹⁶ Alesina, A., Glaeser, E. and Sacerdote, B. (2001) Why doesn't the US have a European-Style welfare system?, National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w8524>.

¹⁷ Ng, H. (2026) 'Legitimacy and the fluid Singaporean welfare state,' *Sociology Compass*, 20(5). <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.70197>.

¹⁸ Li, B. (2025) 'Social Stability through Responsive Social Policy,' in Cambridge University Press eBooks, pp. 242–262. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009668385.011>.

¹⁹ Walder, A.G. (2023) 'China's Extreme Inequality: The Structural legacies of State Socialism,' *The China Journal*, 90, pp. 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1086/725576>.

²⁰ Cruces, G., Perez-Truglia, R. and Tetaz, M. (2012) 'Biased perceptions of income distribution and preferences for redistribution: Evidence from a survey experiment,' *Journal of Public Economics*, 98, pp. 100–112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2012.10.009>.

This effect is further supported by Kuziemko's own study, which highlighted the estate tax's salience and the public's common misconceptions contributing to the online surveys' unexpected effectiveness in improving public support for the tax.²¹ This suggests that poor information also plays a significant role in determining redistribution demand.

Beyond information, public perception of poverty is a key driver of redistributive policy support. Americans' hostility towards welfare schemes reflected the perceived lack of effort by the poor, rather than institutional mistrust.²² This parallels the ideological shift towards free market capitalism.²³ When existing inequalities mirror societal heterogeneity, horizontal distrust between citizens is magnified into opposition to redistribution when recipients are perceived to be social outgroups, in line with the racial animosity effect highlighted earlier.²⁴ This suggests a conflation of institutional distrust with that of beneficiaries, implying that beneficiary deservingness remains key in determining demand for redistribution.

These dynamics are compounded by independent frictions orthogonal to trust. Three in four Americans surveyed were concerned about worsening income inequality.²⁵ Yet, US President George Bush's estate tax repeals, which reduced taxes on the wealthiest estates, still garnered large public support because the public were unaware of the policy's true beneficiaries.²⁶ Optimistic attitudes toward social mobility can likewise lower

²¹ Kuziemko, I. et al. (2015) 'How Elastic Are Preferences for Redistribution? Evidence from Randomized Survey Experiments,' *American Economic Review*, 105(4), pp. 1478–1508. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20130360>.

²² Alesina, A. and Glaeser, E. (2004) *Fighting poverty in the US and Europe*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199267669.001.0001>.

²³ Bonica, A. et al. (2013) 'Why hasn't democracy slowed rising inequality?,' *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 27(3), pp. 103–124. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.27.3.103>.

²⁴ Alesina, A., Glaeser, E. and Sacerdote, B. (2001) *Why doesn't the US have a European-Style welfare system?*, National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w8524>.

²⁵ Bartels, L.M. (2005) 'Homer gets a tax cut: Inequality and public policy in the American mind,' *Perspectives on Politics*, 3(01). <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592705050036>.

²⁶ This support was largely driven by misinformation over their true wealth, leading many to believe that they would become wealthy from the tax cuts to their estates. Source: Bartels, L.M. (2005) 'Homer gets a tax cut: Inequality and public policy in the American mind,' *Perspectives on Politics*, 3(01). <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592705050036>.

redistribution demand as individuals believe they can join the wealthy.²⁷ These factors highlight parallel mechanisms independent of trust that lower demand for redistribution.

The elite class dampens redistribution demand as they have a natural incentive to repeal redistributive policies and secure most of their wealth. Wealthy elites pursue these interests through political lobbying, influencing government decision-making and reducing redistributive policy implementation as seen in opposition to tax reforms in Uruguay and Chile.²⁸ These elite-biased constitutions have been shown to reduce redistribution,²⁹ and reduced support for redistributive policies parallels documented elite wealth concentration.³⁰

Even when trust is secured, governmental inefficiency concerns continue to affect redistribution demand. Perceived administrative inefficiency coupled with the purported perverse incentives of taxation cause citizens to discount redistribution benefits against a perceived loss in market efficiency.³¹

Altogether, these mechanisms reveal that distrust is one inhibitor in a multifaceted system. Each factor, from information failure to elite capture, independently depresses redistribution demand parallel to governmental distrust. Rather than diminishing trust's role, this reframes the question from whether distrust inhibits redistribution to asking at which stage of the redistribution chain it acts most powerfully, namely preference formation.

²⁷ Alesina, A., Stantcheva, S. and Teso, E. (2018) 'Intergenerational mobility and preferences for redistribution,' *American Economic Review*, 108(2), pp. 521–554. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20162015>.

²⁸ Bogliaccini, J.A. and Luna, J.P. (2016) Deflecting my burden, hindering redistribution: How elites influence tax legislation in Latin America, Working Paper Series. <https://doi.org/10.35188/unu-wider/2016/135-2>.

²⁹ Albertus, M. and Menaldo, V. (2013) 'Gaming Democracy: Elite Dominance during Transition and the Prospects for Redistribution,' *British Journal of Political Science*, 44(3), pp. 575–603. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123413000124>.

³⁰ Saez, E. and Zucman, G. (2020) 'The Rise of Income and Wealth Inequality in America: Evidence from Distributional Macroeconomic Accounts,' *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 34(4), pp. 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.34.4.3>.

³¹ Stantcheva, S. (2024) 'Perceptions and preferences for redistribution,' *Oxford Open Economics*, 3(Supplement_1), pp. i96–i100. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ooec/odad038>.

Distrust as a Mediator

As Stantcheva acknowledges, governmental distrust outweighs the efficiency cost of taxes alone. Yet, distrust offers only a partial explanation for the Robin Hood Paradox as demonstrated by information gaps, beneficiary-deservingness beliefs, and structural elite capture, each independently perpetuating opposition to redistribution. This requires distinguishing preference for equality from support for redistribution: citizens can favour greater equality while rejecting state redistribution as the means to achieve it. This is modelled by a multiplicative, rather than additive, conditional trust function:³²

$$S = \frac{I * D * T}{100}; 0 \leq S, I, D, T \leq 10$$

The multiplicative model directly predicts Kuziemko's estate tax asymmetry. A near-zero T coefficient disproportionately suppresses S even when $I * D$ is large. Consequently, the estate tax's far greater visibility contributed to a significantly larger T coefficient which generated marked improvements in support S relative to other, more opaque tax transfers.

This explanatory model applies directly to the universalism thesis. Rather than solely attributing policy support to institutional trust, the model supports the thesis's claim that a virtuous cycle between universal policy design and trust in fellow citizens' deservingness drives demand for redistribution.³³ Distrust in governments does not solely inhibit redistribution to remedy inequality. Rather, distrust and poor redistributive policy design mutually reinforce each other, inhibiting the remediation of inequality.

Redirecting Redistribution Demand

By suppressing demand for direct fiscal transfers, distrust may ultimately serve not to reduce redistribution demand but to redirect it towards instruments that bypass the state's bureaucratic machinery. This state trust deficit can be filled by private corporations, as seen by the negative correlation between private healthcare financing and governmental

³² In the equation, S refers to support for redistributive policies, I refers to self-interest, D refers to beneficiary-deservingness, and T refers to government trustworthiness. Each variable is bounded between 0 and 10, serving as a metric of their respective variable.

³³ Rothstein, B. and Uslaner, E.M. (2005) 'All for All: Equality, Corruption, and Social Trust,' *World Politics*, 58(1), pp. 41–72. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2006.0022>.

trust.³⁴ This decentralisation incurs a trade-off between efficient centralised risk-pooling and delivery flexibility.³⁵

Equity-seeking citizens who distrust state delivery prefer regulated constraints on market distribution to discretionary transfers via untrustworthy intermediaries. Consequently, they channel redistribution demand to government regulation of market distribution, explaining why untrustworthy governments tend to over-regulate while under-redistributing.³⁶ This manifests as pre-distribution, where governments regulate the primary distribution of economic wealth through market-oriented structural reforms like union rights and education before it reaches citizens.³⁷ The automated, non-discretionary nature of pre-distributive policies removes bureaucratic conditionality,³⁸ in line with Buchanan's demogrant model of Universal Basic Income that avoids bureaucratic rent-seeking.³⁹

Distrust's Policy Implications

Since distrust functions as a discount on redistributive policy value rather than a civic trait, institutional reforms, not information campaigns, are the lever to strengthen redistributive policy support. Tax hypothecation renders tax revenue traceable, theoretically increasing taxpayers' propensity to comply since payment is clearly linked to service delivery.⁴⁰ Even

³⁴ Cammett, M. (2013) 'Does Non-State provision of social services promote or undermine citizen trust in government? The case of health care in Europe,' SSRN Electronic Journal [Preprint].
<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2309692>.

³⁵ Tiebout, C.M. (1956) 'A pure theory of local expenditures,' *Journal of Political Economy*, 64(5), pp. 416–424.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/257839>.

³⁶ Charron, N., Harring, N. and Lapuente, V. (2019) 'Trust, regulation, and redistribution why some governments overregulate and under-redistribute,' *Regulation & Governance*, 15(1), pp. 3–16.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12277>.

³⁷ Hacker, J.S. (2011) The institutional foundations of middle-class democracy. essay, pp. 33–34.
https://assets.website-files.com/64a8727f61fabfaa63b7b770/64aab85cf813ccbee57ce07f_hacker_pn.pdf
(Accessed: June 21, 2026).

³⁸ Lehto, O. and Meadowcroft, J. (2020) 'Welfare without rent seeking? Buchanan's demogrant proposal and the possibility of a constitutional welfare state,' *Constitutional Political Economy*, 32(2), pp. 145–164.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10602-020-09321-7>.

³⁹ Buchanan, J.M. (1997) 'Can democracy promote the general welfare?,' *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 14(2), pp. 165–179. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0265052500001862>.

⁴⁰ Wilkinson, M. (1994) 'Paying for public spending: Is there a role for earmarked taxes?,' *Fiscal Studies*, 15(4), pp. 119–135. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5890.1994.tb00213.x>.

if its practical application has had mixed results,⁴¹ countries like Italy and France continue to run hypothecated tax programmes.⁴²

Conditional cash transfers (CCTs) link social spending to verified objectives, helping to allay fears about beneficiary-deservingness and build support even in low trust polities. Brazil's Bolsa Família⁴³ and Mexico's Prospera⁴⁴ coupled cash transfers with universal societal goals like education, effectively providing relief to the poorest families while maintaining widespread public support in their respective countries. Even if political support for CCTs is fragile, joint implementation with universal programmes can reduce both governmental and interpersonal distrust since citizens themselves directly receive these benefits.⁴⁵

Digitalisation offers governments an opportunity to increase transparency and build credibility. Such an e-government utilises information technology to promote transparency, trust and security while securing property rights,⁴⁶ thus building support for redistribution. Estonia's post-Soviet digital transformation reduced corruption, fostered inclusive growth and rebuilt public confidence in market institutions.⁴⁷ While not universally replicable, Estonia provides a compelling proof-of-concept that an e-government can effectively remedy inequality through inclusive growth.

⁴¹ Boden, R. (2021) 'Pensioned off? Evaluating the UK's National Insurance scheme,' *Public Money & Management*, 41(8), pp. 646–655. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2020.1862993>.

⁴² Cylus, J. et al. (2018) 'Identifying options for funding the NHS and social care in the UK: international evidence,' *London School of Economics and Political Science Research Online* (London School of Economics and Political Science) [Preprint]. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8269-1578>,.

⁴³ Hall, A. (2008) 'Brazil's bolsa Família: a Double-Edged sword?,' *Development and Change*, 39(5), pp. 799–822. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2008.00506.x>.

⁴⁴ Niño-Zarazúa, M. (2020) 'Mexico's Progres-a-Oportunidades-Prospera programme and the rise of social assistance in Latin America,' in *Oxford University Press eBooks*, pp. 547–572. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198827535.003.0020>.

⁴⁵ Kerstenetzky, C.L. (2009) 'Redistribuição e desenvolvimento? A economia política do programa bolsa família,' *Dados*, 52(1), pp. 53–83. <https://doi.org/10.1590/s0011-52582009000100002>.

⁴⁶ Espinosa, V.I. and Pino, A. (2024) 'E-Government as a development strategy: The case of Estonia,' *International Journal of Public Administration*, 48(2), pp. 86–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2024.2316128>.

⁴⁷ Espinosa, V.I. and Pino, A. (2025) 'E-government, inclusive growth, and the legitimacy of capitalism: lessons from estonia,' *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 238, p. 107248. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2025.107248>.

Conclusion

Distrust in governments does inhibit redistribution and thus fails to remedy inequality. However, it acts as an endogenous function of fairness, beneficiary-deservingness, and institutional transparency rather than an exogenously defined constraint. Kuziemko's null results on redistributive policy support despite large shifts in inequality beliefs evidence this distrust-mediated model. The deepest obstacle to redistributive policy support is not citizens' mistrust of the state but the uncertainty of whether redistribution will be efficient, fair and targeted towards legitimate beneficiaries. The core issue is how to build credible institutions worthy of redistributing wealth, rather than redistribution per se.

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