Does religion distract the poor?
Income and issue voting around the world

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Abstract: This paper asks whether religion undermines the “natural” negative relationship between income and left voting that is assumed in standard political economy models of democracy. Analysis of cross-country survey data reveals that this correlation indeed disappears among religious individuals. This is the case largely because there is a “moral values” issue dimension that has an equal and opposite correlation with income as the “economic” dimension, and the votes of the religious poor are better explained by their positions on moral than economic issues, especially in countries with multi-party systems. We conclude by discussing implications for theories of redistribution.
“The rich everywhere are few, and the poor numerous…where the poor rule, that is a democracy.”

Aristotle, The Politics Book 3, Chapter 8

“Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”

Karl Marx, Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, 1844.

Aristotle’s view of democracy is perhaps the most basic building block of political economy theories of elections. From Downs (1957) to Persson and Tabellini (2003), the starting point for thinking about electoral politics is generally a one-dimensional spatial model in which the policy space is about taxation and redistribution, and voters’ preferences are driven primarily by their place in the income spectrum. According to this view, the overall level of redistribution should be a function of the underlying level of income inequality (Romer 1975, Meltzer and Richard 1981), and since Aristotle’s statement about the right skew of the income distribution is correct, the poor masses in unequal societies should vote for parties of the left that promise confiscatory levels of taxation and redistribution (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006, Boix 2003).

Indeed, the expansion of the franchise to the poor in the early 20th century was followed by a period of increasing progressive taxation and expanding welfare benefits in Europe (Lindert 2004), but the worst fears of expropriation turned out to be unfounded. Moreover, a large number of empirical studies have turned up scant evidence of a positive relationship between income inequality and redistribution, and if anything, the
cross-country data display a negative relationship, with some of the most unequal societies—like the United States—undertaking the least redistribution.

Many explanations have been offered for this puzzle, but at least since Marx and Engels, one of the most prominent is that poor people do not naturally come to understand their economic self-interest in progressive taxation and redistribution. In fact, political entrepreneurs may be able to mobilize them more easily around other issues like moral values or group identities like religion or race, causing the equilibrium amount of redistribution to decrease as parties seek votes by taking positions on these other issues (Roemer 1998, Lee and Roemer 2005).

Indeed, a robust yet under-theorized aggregate negative cross-country relationship between religiosity—measured with church attendance and belief in God—and the size of the welfare state (Gill and Lundsgaarde 2004, Scheve and Stasavage 2005) has motivated a recent renaissance in theories about religion, voting, and party platforms. At least since Lipset and Rokkan (1967), political scientists and sociologists have recognized that confessional affiliation and religiosity are surprisingly powerful and stable predictors of voting behavior in Western Europe and the Americas—even in very secular societies—while the importance of economic class continues to decline (Rose and Urwin 1969, Lijphart 1971, Dalton 2006). Very recently, media pundits have focused on a so-called “culture war” in the United States, in which a moral values issue dimension is said to have surpassed the importance of the traditional economic issue dimension (e.g. Brooks 2001). Many of the contributors to this literature come from a Marxian perspective, and have breathed new life into the notion that preferences on the moral values issue dimension have a disproportionate pull on the poorest, least educated voters.
(Frank 2004). In other words, while the votes of the wealthy are thought to be consistent with their economic self-interest, because of their attachment to religion and traditional moral values, those of the poor are not.

These classic and contemporary debates imply basic questions that are amenable to cross-country survey research. How tight is the link between income and voting behavior across countries? More precisely, is electoral competition in most democracies generally about one economic issue dimension on which preferences can be inferred from income? Or does the importance of religion, moral values, or some other issue dimension consistently rival or even swamp that of the economic-redistributive dimension? If so, how do preferences on these other issue dimensions correlate with income? Finally, do the poor—especially the religious poor—place greater weight on non-economic issue preferences than the wealthy, as hypothesized by Marxian thinkers?

Section one reviews and expands upon the theories linking religion, income, voting, and redistribution. One possibility is that religious individuals vote for the right simply because they are more conservative on the economic issue dimension (Scheve and Stasavage 2005). Thus democracies with a higher density of religious voters would demonstrate lower levels of redistribution primarily because political parties converge on a more economically conservative voter than in more secular societies.

Second, the prevailing Marxist argument is formalized by Roemer (1998), who presents a model in which the economic-redistributive issue dimension is bundled together with a dimension related to moral values and the role of organized religion. This model has a range of empirically plausible equilibria where morally conservative poor voters are sufficiently unlikely to vote for the party of the left that it moderates its
platform in search of votes from relatively wealthy secular voters. Thus the presence of a salient second dimension puts downward pressure on the equilibrium tax rate, providing another potential explanation for the negative correlation between religiosity—perhaps a proxy for the salience of this second dimension—and redistribution in the cross-country data.

The remainder of the paper examines these potential links between religion, income, preferences, and voting with individual-level data. The second section starts with the observation that the relationship between individual income and vote choice has been rather weak and non-linear in advanced industrial countries since 1970. The first three income quartiles are indistinguishable from one another in their propensity to vote for the left, but left voting drops off dramatically among the top quartile. In contrast, church attendance has a clear, linear (negative) impact on left voting. Furthermore, we find strong evidence of an interactive effect of income and church attendance on vote choice that is consistent with the Marxian perspective. Whether we use pooled data from the Eurobarometer since 1970 or a larger sample of countries from the 1990s covered by the World Values Survey, we find that the effect of income on vote choice is barely discernable among those who attend church every week, while it is quite large among those who never go to church. Moreover, the impressive relationship between church attendance and voting against the parties of the left is driven disproportionately by the poor.

In the third section we move beyond the simple analysis of income and religion, and approach the data in a way that is more consistent with the theory literature on multiple issue dimensions. We introduce issue scales based on factor analysis of large
numbers of questions from the World Values Survey, showing that while income is correlated with more conservative economic preferences, wealthy leftists and poor conservatives are surprisingly common. Furthermore, the moral values dimension creates a clear cross-cutting cleavage, displaying the same slope as the economic dimension but the opposite sign in its relationship with income: while the poor are significantly more liberal on the economic dimension, they are similarly more conservative on the moral values dimension. Meanwhile, those who attend church are dramatically more conservative on the non-economic issue dimension, but only moderately so on the economic issue dimension.

Next, we explore the impact of issue preferences on voting, and break this down among the two-by-two matrix of wealthy, poor, religious, and secular individuals, with a goal of explaining why the religious—especially the religious poor—vote the way they do. For all income groups, the main story is that the religious vote for the right primarily because of their preferences on the moral values issue dimension, but among the poor, a small part of the religion effect is driven by the relative economic conservativeness of churchgoers, which lends at least some credence to the Scheve-Statstavege perspective. These results also show that in general, moral values push individuals in the opposite direction from their economic preferences, especially among the churchgoers. As expected, the much greater impact of income on voting among secular than religious voters reported in section two is due to the relative importance of the economic issue dimension among the secular. Even among the secular poor, however, there is a slight push to the parties of the right coming from their relative moral conservativeness.
This section also sheds light on cross-country differences. We find that the moral values issue dimension has a large impact on the vote in many countries with multiparty systems, even surpassing the economic issue dimension in countries with large Catholic populations where proportional representation facilitates Christian Democratic parties.

The individual-level analysis undertaken in this paper does not allow us to explain cross-country or diachronic differences in welfare expenditures or redistribution, but it does provide clear indications about the assumptions and modeling strategies that are most likely to yield successful explanations. The more speculative final section explores implications for theories of redistribution, suggesting that while the assumptions of Roemer (1998) may need to be revisited, the moral values issue dimension quite plausibly helps explain why some countries redistribute more than others. We conclude with an intriguing post-hoc conjecture inspired by our results: conflicted voters in majoritarian countries with two-party systems must often choose between their moral and economic preferences when voting, while proportional representation reduces the barriers to entry for “hybrid” political parties that take leftist positions on one issue dimension and rightist positions on the other.

II. Theoretical perspectives on religion as Opium

If income and religion matter for aggregate policy outcomes in ways that can be addressed through positive political theory, it is in the way they shape preferences on issue dimensions, and in turn, the way the distribution of voters’ preferences on these issue dimensions shape the incentives of parties when setting their platforms. The main goal of this paper is to provide a firmer footing for such theories by establishing the
microfoundations that are often assumed rather than researched: basic facts about the impact of issue preferences on vote choice in democracies. In particular, we are interested in the relative impact of economic and what we will call “moral values” preferences, with an eye toward improving existing models that posit links between inequality, religion and redistribution.

One such model suggests that there is one overriding economic issue dimension, and churchgoers simply have more conservative preferences on this dimension. If so, this might explain in a rather straightforward way why religious countries provide less social insurance and do less to redistribute income. Scheve and Stasavage (2005) present a model in which religious individuals prefer lower levels of risk-sharing and redistribution because they derive psychic benefits from religion that serve as a substitute for the welfare state as a buffer against adverse life events. If religion is an “opiate,” it operates directly on economic preferences. An alternative with the same empirical prediction would be that religious individuals prefer smaller government with less ability to redistribute income because big government is perceived as a threat to the power and prestige of the church, or because the church is a competitor with the state in realms like schooling or charitable activities. In either case, within countries, the empirical expectation is that more religious individuals have significantly different preferences than secular individuals on the economic issue dimension, and this difference is a powerful predictor of differences in their vote choices. Moreover, a simple median voter model with a single dimension would predict that on the main economic issue dimension, the pivotal voter in more religious societies prefers less redistribution than the median voter in more secular societies, leading to cross-country differences in redistribution.
Another possibility is that though church attendance and religiosity are in decline in much of Europe, such variables are mere proxies for the presence of a second “moral values” issue dimension that has broader resonance and sufficiently strong weight in voters’ evaluation of parties and candidates that voters—especially the poor—ignore their economic preferences when voting. In contrast to the Scheve-Stasavage model, the religious poor are indistinguishable from the secular poor in their preferences on the economic-redistributive dimension, but a sufficient percentage of them care deeply enough about the non-economic issue dimension that they vote for the right in spite of their material interests. Of course the converse may be true among the secular wealthy for whom progressive moral values are highly salient: they may vote for the left in spite of their economic interests.

One informal interpretation of the Marxian argument is that there is an asymmetry whereby the wealthy—perhaps because they have too much to lose—base their votes primarily on their economic interests while the moral values dimension is more salient among the poor. This is essentially the logic of Thomas Frank’s recent American best-seller, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*

Following a slightly different Marxian analytical approach relying on the distraction of the poor, Roemer (1998) presents a model with two issues, tax policy and religion, and two parties, one representing primarily poor voters and the other representing the rich. In the tradition of Meltzer and Richard (1981), income is perfectly correlated with preferences on the economic dimension. Preferences on the religious dimension are correlated with the first dimension, but only weakly so. That is, the rich are more conservative on the religious dimension, but there are large numbers of wealthy
moral liberals and poor moral conservatives. His analysis shows that if the median religious voter is wealthier than the rest of the population, the equilibrium level of redistribution will be less than that preferred by the median voter. The idea is that as long as there are some poor voters for whom religion is highly salient, the left party will have incentives to abandon these voters in search of some secular rich voters, which moves the tax policy outcome away from the poor constituency’s ideal point. In fact, Roemer explores equilibria where as the salience of religion increases, the tax rate proposed by the Left can fall “possibly even to zero.” In this story, the religious “opiate” works not by altering the preferences of the poor over redistribution, but by distracting them from their material interests.

The remainder of this paper attempts to ascertain whether any of these Marxian perspectives is consistent with individual-level data on voting. The next section examines the impact of income and religion on voting, discovering that a simple version of the “distraction” hypothesis holds up rather well. The third section introduces issue scales in order to explain why this is the case.

II. Religion, Income, and Voting

It is well known that measures of religiosity and church attendance are far better predictors of vote choice in advanced industrial democracies than income or proxies for class affiliation (Dalton 2006). Before trying to understand why this is the case, it is useful to establish two additional stylized facts that have not been emphasized in the literature thus far. First, the relationship between income and voting is not only far weaker than assumed in workhorse political economy models, but it exhibits an
interesting non-linearity. Second, the impacts of income and religion on voting are clearly conditional upon one another.

Throughout the paper, we rely primarily on two datasets. The best source for consistent time series data on income, religion, and vote choice over a long period of time are the Eurobarometers, starting in the early 1970s. We also use the World Values Survey, which allows us not only to expand the number of countries, but more importantly, to supplement data on religion, income, and vote choice with a rich array of questions on preferences related to moral values and economic policy later in the paper. We start with the blunt indicator of voting behavior used in virtually all of the comparative literature. We generate a dummy variable for left voting that codes all parties of the left—primarily Communist, Socialist, Social Democratic, and Labor—as one, all parties of the right and center as zero. This is an unsatisfactory approach in many respects—especially since we are interested in multiple issue dimensions, and the “expert” coding on which we rely seem to privilege the economic issue dimension. We improve on it below, but for present purposes this is the best way to attain some semblance of cross-national comparability. Moreover, it is analytically useful in that it treats all countries as if voters’ choices were constrained to a simple binary choice between “left” and “right,” as implicitly assumed in the “distraction” theories explored above.

[FIGURES 1A AND 1B HERE]

Figures 1a and 1b are drawn from the Eurobarometer pooled data set. We are able to include France, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Denmark, Great Britain and Spain from 1970 until 1992. These figures represent scatter plots of average
left voting by the top and lower income quartiles and by people who attend church very frequently and never, respectively. We compare these averages against a 45 degree line which indicates a hypothetical world in which the top and lower income quartiles in Figure 1a, or weekly church goers versus those who never attend in 1b, voted identically for the left. All years that fall below the line indicate a higher average of left voting among the lowest income quartile (Figure 1a) or church goers (Figure 1b). Correspondingly, years above the line indicate a higher average of left voting among the wealthy (1a) or secular people (1b). These graphs show that differences in income are surprisingly bad predictors of average voting for the left, as all years fall close quite close to the 45 degree line. In contrast, church attendance clearly affects the average of left voting in the expected direction: religious people simply do not vote for the left.¹

[FIGURES 2A AND 2B HERE]

Figures 2a and 2b are box plots of average left voting by income group. Figure 2a is drawn from the Eurobarometers, which characterize respondents by income quartiles, and pools over all countries and years, though very similar plots can be obtained by year and individual country. Figure 2b is drawn from the advanced industrial countries covered by the second wave of the World Values Survey, which provides data on income deciles. We pool over all countries, though again, the story is consistent within countries. The countries included are France, Britain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, Spain, Ireland, USA, Canada, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Austria. These graphs show that on average, there is no difference between poor and middle-class voters, both of whom vote for parties of the left with a probability of around

¹ We replicated these graphs using the Eurobarometer Trends data set to increase our number of years, though sacrificing some comparability on the income variable, and found a very similar pattern.
In fact, it is rather striking that slightly less than half of European voters in the first income quartile vote for the left over more than two decades, and the average is not far above .5 for the first two deciles in the World Values Study. While income always has a substantively small but statistically significant impact on voting in probit models using either survey—even when the typical battery of control variables is introduced—these graphs show that the relationship is driven almost entirely by the wealthiest quartile. Even still, according to both surveys, on average well over 40 percent of the wealthiest individuals vote for parties of the left.

The familiar Marxian perspective is that religion dampens the “natural” association between income and voting. Both surveys include several highly correlated variables tapping into religiosity here we use one simple, comparable, and powerful variable that has been used in other studies—frequency of church attendance—though other variables yield very similar results.

In Table 1, using the World Values Survey, we present the results of a probit model where the left dummy is the dependent variable, and the independent variables are income, church attendance, and their multiplicative interaction. We also include a matrix of country dummies, but do not report the results. Instead of reporting coefficients, we report the dF/dx, which can be interpreted as the change in the probability of voting for the left associated with a unit change in the independent variable.

The results are quite consistent with the Marxian story about religion. Among individuals who never go to church, going from the lowest to the highest income decile is associated with a 3 percent decrease in the probability of voting for the left.
people who go to church every week, the effect of income on voting is statistically indistinguishable from zero. Another way to think about the result is Figure Three, which reports predicted probabilities of voting for the left at low (2nd decile) and high (8th decile) values of income, and low (never) and high (weekly) values of church attendance. It shows that the difference between low and high income groups is negligible among the religious, and much more pronounced among the secular. It also drives home the importance of church attendance in predicting the vote. Those who attend church every week vote for the left with very low probability regardless of income, and those who never attend are very likely to vote for the left, especially the poor. Moreover, the impact of religion is somewhat larger among the poor, which may go a long way toward explaining the surprisingly low rates of left voting among the poor displayed above.

We have conducted similar analysis using the Eurobarometer, which includes more years and fewer countries. Rather than presenting nearly identical results of pooled analysis using the lefty voting dummy as the dependent variable, we are able to present results of multinomial logit analysis by country, where income, church attendance, and their multiplicative interaction are the independent variables. We are able to do this more successfully with the pooled Eurobarometer data than the World Values Survey because we have many more observations for each country, reducing the problem of sparsely populated cells, especially with some of the smaller parties, and in countries where relatively few people attend church.

[FIGURE 4 HERE]

Figure Four plots out the predicted probabilities of voting for each party by income quartile (we only show those receiving support of more than five percent of the
respondents in a given country), with separate predictions for the secular (never attending church) and religious (attending church every week). Perhaps the most visually striking result is the dominance of parties of the right among the religious—especially in countries using proportional representation, where the right is split in such a way that an explicitly Christian party coexists with other parties of the right. In several countries with Christian parties—Luxembourg, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany—the predicted probability of voting for these parties among the religious is well above 60 percent. Religious voters also prefer the broader parties of the right in France and Great Britain, but in both cases the predicted probability is below .5. Likewise, the predicted probability of voting for the parties of the left is much greater than that for the parties of the right among the secular.

Second, the graphs illuminate further the nature of the interaction between religiosity and income. As income increases, one would expect to see a clear negative slope for the parties of the left and a positive slope for the parties of the right. For the most part, these lines are quite flat among the religious. In fact, in Belgium, Denmark, Italy, and Germany, the slope for Christian parties is positive, suggesting that the strongest support for these parties is among the religious poor. This suggests an interpretation of Christian Democratic platforms that we will discuss further below: they appeal to poor individuals with preferences for redistribution on the economic dimension, but morally conservative legislation on the second dimension. Although still not terribly impressive, only among the secular do we see the relationship assumed by standard political economy models: with some exceptions, relatively poor voters are more likely to vote for parties of the left—especially the far left in multi-party systems.
III. Income, religion, and policy preferences

In order to sort through the possible explanations for the impact of religion and income on voting, it is necessary to measure individuals’ policy preferences on both an economic and non-economic issue dimension. This is a step generally not taken in the literature. Much of the comparative literature builds from a sociological tradition that sidesteps the political economy questions motivating this analysis, focusing on cleavages as defined by group membership rather than issue preferences. While making note of the stubborn impact of religious affiliation, the key preoccupation in this literature is with the decline of “class” voting. More recently, a great deal of attention has been given to voting based on “values” or “issue” that are thought to be replacing social class, but in virtually every study, the issues in question are a shifting menagerie of attitudes on issues as diverse as environmentalism, gender, and nuclear power, alternatively referred to as a “new politics” or “post materialism” dimension. Preferences on these issues are often combined into a single index, the impact of which is compared over time with variables capturing membership in class and religious groups (see, e.g. Dalton, Flanagan, et al 1984, Dalton 2006).

Meanwhile, survey researchers in American politics, under the influence of Converse and The American Voter, have largely stayed away from the notion of “issue voting” altogether, opting instead for a preoccupation with partisan identification, which is thought to be more stable and coherent than, and hence causally “prior” to issue positions. Yet a body of research including Achen (1975) and Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2006) shows that voters’ issue preferences appear to be incoherent and
unstable largely because of measurement error. Correcting for measurement error by constructing issue scales from multiple survey responses yields issue scores for individuals that are as stable and coherent as party identification. While this does not allow one to sort out the undoubtedly complex causal chain running between issue preferences, party identification, and vote choice, it allows us to shed some light on the relative impact of different issue dimensions on vote choice, and contrast these impacts across different groups. Moving beyond the “post-materialism” focus of most comparative survey research, our approach is to use standardized issue scales to directly contrast the impact of economic and moral values on vote choice, as well as the relationship between income, religion, and issue preferences.

We use the second wave of the World Values Survey, which contains a large number of useful questions for 17 advanced industrial countries. Our first step was to recode all policy-related attitude questions—as well as “feeling thermometers” and the like—so that answers are coded consistently on a scale from “left” to “right.” Second, we selected 8 questions that are clearly tapping into the economic-redistributive issue dimension, and 17 that are clearly tapping into a dimension related to traditional versus progressive moral values (see Appendix). We then imputed a small number of missing values, and conducted factor analysis (by country), generating preference scores for each respondent. These were then standardized to have mean zero and standard deviation one.

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2 Unfortunately some good questions, e.g. on abortion, were inconsistent or contained missing values. Our inclusion of questions was driven primarily by consistency and completeness of coverage. One of the advantages of our approach is that the inclusion or exclusion of specific questions has virtually no impact on the results. Of course measurement error is a greater concern for the economic than the moral values dimension since the former includes 8 questions and the latter 17. However, Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2006) show that the difference in measurement error between 8 and 17 questions is trivial.
Hereafter, we refer to these scores as “economic” and “moral values” issue preferences.\textsuperscript{3} The two scales are uncorrelated in all countries.\textsuperscript{4}

As noted above, the classic political economy literature on electoral politics and redistribution (e.g. Meltzer and Richard 1981), assumes that there is a single issue dimension on which preferences are perfectly correlated with income (high income individuals prefer right-wing policies). Roemer (1998) makes a similar assumption about income, but envisions a second dimension with a positive but weaker correlation.

[FIGURES 5A AND 5B HERE]

Figure 5a, suggests a very different starting point for theories of redistribution. The respondent’s income decile is represented on the horizontal axis, and the issue scores for the economic and moral values dimensions are displayed on the vertical axis. Using all the respondents from the advanced industrial countries contained in the World Values Survey, Figure 5a presents fitted regression lines for economic and moral values preferences using solid and dotted lines respectively. As one would expect, wealthier individuals are more conservative on the economic dimension, but the slope is surprisingly flat. Moving all the way from the first to the 10\textsuperscript{th} decile is associated with less than a standard deviation increase in economic conservativeness.\textsuperscript{5} Furthermore, the moral values dimension has almost an identical slope in the opposite direction. Wealthier

\textsuperscript{3} We also conducted exploratory factor analysis for each country including virtually all policy-relevant opinion or attitude questions in the World Values Survey, and were pleased to see that an economic and moral values dimension emerged as the first and second dimension in virtually every country. We have also constructed various “post-materialism” scores based on the prevailing literature, and find that these are far less powerful than our moral values dimension in vote equations in every country, and they are often statistically insignificant. We know of no other study that directly contrasts the impact of a “moral values” versus “new politics” cleavage. It appears that the second dimension in most wealthy countries is not new at all, and the description of Lipset and Rokkan (1967) of a “cosmopolitan” versus “traditionalist” cleavage is as apt today as it was then.

\textsuperscript{4} In no country does the correlation exceed .12.

\textsuperscript{5} Note that there is no evidence of the type of non-linearity seen above in the box plots of income and voting behavior.
individuals are significantly more liberal than the poor on the moral values dimension. These graphs look virtually identical for every single country in the World Values Survey.

Such graphs call into question the starting point of traditional political economy models of income redistribution. An individual’s place in the income spectrum is a rather poor predictor of his or her preferences over redistribution. Moreover, income is just as highly correlated with a non-economic dimension, and the correlation is in the opposite direction. If the impact of income on the vote travels though preferences and voters put equal weight on both dimensions, we should expect income to have no discernable impact on the vote. However, if voters place greater weight on economic issues, we would expect to find the weak impact of income reported above.

Figure 5b displays the relationship between church attendance and issue preferences. As one might expect, those who attend church frequently are considerably more conservative on the moral values dimension than those who do not. A move from occasional church attendance on holidays to attendance once per week is associated with an entire standard deviation increase in moral conservativeness. In contrast, greater church attendance has a miniscule, though statistically significant, impact on economic conservativeness. This graph suggests that if religion’s impact on vote choices runs through preferences, the non-economic issue dimension likely dominates, which is more consistent with the “distraction” arguments than the Scheve-Stasavage perspective.

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6 For those who are skeptical about issue scales, consider a single question with response ranging from 1 = incomes should be made more equal to 10 = income inequality should be maintained as incentive for hard work. Moving all the way from the first to the 10th income decile is associated with a move of less than two points to the right in preferences over redistribution.

7 Note that outside the United States, those who frequent religious services are slightly poorer on average than those who do not. Based on a bivariate regression based on respondents in industrialized countries, moving from no church attendance at all to attendance more than once each week is associated with
Now that we have some sense of how income and religious groups differ in their preferences, the next step is to examine how these preferences affect the vote. Again, we start with a binary “left vote” dependent variable, and then move to multinomial logit.

The simplest type of analysis, reported in the first column of Table 2, includes only the issue scales and country dummies (not reported). The fit of the model is better with the issue scales than in the models above with the income and church attendance variables, and the issue scales are excellent predictors of vote choice. Again, we report the dF/dx in order to ease interpretation. Moving from a country’s average economic issue position (zero), to a position one standard deviation above the mean (1) implies a 16 percent reduction in the probability of voting for the left. A similar move on the moral values dimension implies a 12 percent reduction in the probability of voting for the left. More analysis lies ahead, but once again, the standard political economy model of voting does not stand up very well. Not only does the second dimension exhibit a negative correlation with income, but it also clearly has a powerful impact on the vote.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The next step in our analysis is to ask whether the weight placed on economic versus moral issues varies with income and church attendance. A simple version of the Marxian argument states that the poor—especially the religious poor—do not pay attention to their economic preferences when voting, while the wealthy ignore the moral values dimension and vote based on their (conservative) economic preferences. Though we can obtain similar results by interacting the issue scales with the continuous income and religion variables, the easiest way to interpret the results is to generate dummies for moving down one half of one income decile. Interestingly, in the United States it is associated with moving up .3 of one decile. On the United States, see Gruber (2006).
low (1st and 2nd decile) and high (9th and 10th decile) income, and low (never or very rarely) and high (every week or more) church attendance, and interact these with the issue scales. We also include the continuous income and church attendance variables. The results are presented in the second column of table 2. The dF/dx numbers for the interaction terms can be interpreted directly as conditional marginal effects of economic and moral values preferences for each group.

Again, the simple Marxian “distraction” argument receives empirical support. First, consider the secular wealthy, for whom the economic issues coefficient is well beyond twice as large as the moral values coefficient. Contrast this with the religious poor, for whom the moral values coefficient is actually slightly larger than the economic issues coefficient (though the difference is not statistically significant). The impact of economic preferences on vote choice is more than twice as large for the secular wealthy as for the religious poor, and the impact of moral values is 1.5 times greater among the religious poor than the secular wealthy. More generally, the wealthy place a bit more weight on economic issues than do the poor, but again, religiosity appears to make a bigger difference: Those who do not attend church place much greater weight on economic issues, and much less weight on moral issues, than those who do.

Though some of these inter-group differences in weights may not seem large at first glance, in order to understand the implications for voting it is necessary to multiply these weights by the inter-group differences in means hinted at by the graphs 5a and 5b above. The next step in our analysis is to estimate how much of the differences in voting behavior across the rows and columns of the two-by-two matrix of income and church attendance presented in Figure 3 above can be explained with issue preferences, and
compare the explanatory power of the two issue dimensions in accounting for these inter-group differences. In Figure 6, we simply multiply the mean issue preference for each group by the coefficient for that group from Table 2. These products are presented in italics. We also present in bold the difference between these products for each group and issue dimension, which can be interpreted as the inter-group difference predicted by the model for each issue dimension. In the far-right column and bottom row, we report the raw inter-group differences in left voting. By looking at the last two columns and last three rows, one can get a sense for the extent to which issue preferences explain inter-group differences in voting.

[FIGURE 6 HERE]

Starting at the bottom left, first let us consider the 5 percentage point gap in left voting between rich and poor religious people. Recall that this gap is statistically indistinguishable from zero. The model suggests that religion causes people to be pulled in two directions. Differences in preferences on the economic dimension push the poor toward a four percent *increase* in the probability of voting for the left, but their moral conservativeness creates an equal and opposite push *away* from the left. Next, consider the significant 14 point gap between rich and poor secular respondents. Most of it (9 points) can be accounted for by the relatively leftist preferences of the poor on the economic dimension. Thus when we combine differences in preferences with the weights on those preferences, we see that the economic issue dimension drives a wedge between the rich and the poor primarily among the secular. While the relative moral conservativeness of the poor does push both religious and (surprisingly) secular poor people away from the left by the same amount (four percentage points), the economic
progressiveness of the poor only dominates among the secular. This is quite in keeping with the simple version of the Marxian “distraction” hypothesis.

Next, let us consider the much more substantial differences between secular and religious respondents: 33 percentage points separate the poor and 22 percentage points separate the wealthy. Perhaps not surprisingly, a very large portion of these differences (19 percent in both cases) can be explained by the relative moral conservativeness of churchgoers. The impact of the economic issue dimension is minimal by comparison. It does not shed any light on the differences separating religious and secular wealthy people. There is, however, a small hint of the Scheve-Stasavage effect among the poor, for whom the economic issue dimension pushes churchgoers gently to the right.

In sum, differences in issue preferences help explain an impressive amount, though certainly not all of the differences in voting behavior between groups. Much of the impact of income on voting is driven by economic preferences, but this relationship is driven by non-churchgoers. Conservative preferences on moral values issues push the poor—in particular the religious poor—away from what most political economy theories would consider their “natural” parties.

[FIGURE 7 HERE]

The advantage of using a dummy dependent variable is that we are able to have sufficient observations in each cell to estimate the interaction model. Of course the disadvantage is that we throw away a good deal of useful variation. Our second cut is to examine the relative impacts of the two issue scales on vote choice in each country using multinomial logit. Figure 7 presents the results in a way that allows us to contrast the impact, for each issue dimension, of a one standard deviation move to the right in issue...
preferences on the predicted probability of voting for each major party. Once again, in
order to avoid too much information on the graphs, we only include parties favored by
more than five percent of the respondents. Note that $T1$ refers to the economic issue
dimension, and $T2$ refers to the moral values dimension. A positive coefficient on $T1$ or
$T2$ means that as preferences move to the right, the respondent is more likely to vote for
the party in question. We position each party in Figure 7 according to the size of its
coefficient on $T1$ and $T2$.

The spirit of the Roemer model is that there are two parties, one of whom takes
positions to the left, and one of whom takes positions to the right of the average voter
(standardized in our analysis to zero) on both dimensions. If the economic dimension
dominates in the decision-making of most voters, we would expect to see that the parties
are located on the same side of zero for both dimensions with a non-trivial gap between
the parties of the left and right, but with a much larger gap between them for the
economic dimension—indicating a larger impact of the first dimension on vote choice.
This is exactly what we see in the first group of countries in Figure 7: the UK, USA,
Canada, and Japan. The impact of the first dimension is significantly larger than the
impact of the second dimension, but the impact of the second dimension is also
significantly different from zero. This group of countries has one important thing in
common: they have institutional environments—above all small electoral districts—that
put downward pressure on the number of political parties. Looking only at Britain and its
majoritarian, single-member-district colonies, it would be tempting to conclude that
economic preferences are much better predictors of vote choice than preferences on
moral values.
However, the moral values dimension begins to look more important in the remaining countries, where more permissive forms of proportional representation allow voters to choose from a wider range of parties. First, in every country that has such a party, the moral values dimension dominates in explaining the probability of voting for Christian or Christian Democratic parties. In some cases, the impact of economic preferences on the probability of voting for these parties is indistinguishable from zero. At the same time, the probability of voting for a secular party of the right is best explained by economic preferences.

Likewise, the economic dimension almost always dominates in explaining the votes for Social Democrats, Socialists, and Labor parties. In fact, in some cases the impact of the second dimension is not significantly different from zero for these parties. An exception is Germany, where the impact of the second dimension on the probability of voting for the SPD is roughly the same as that of the first dimension. The Italian case is also interesting: The economic dimension has no impact on the probability of voting for the Socialists (whose positions were rather arguably center-right on the economic dimension during this period) while it does have a larger impact for the Communists.8

The “Center” parties are also interesting. As one might expect, the impacts of both issue dimensions are smaller than for other parties (see, e.g. the Free Democrats in Germany), and they generally appear in the center of Figure 7. There are often asymmetries, though, suggesting that these parties are taking centrist positions on one dimension but attracting voters to the right (or left) of center on the other. The results also suggest that there is even a class of parties for whom the predicted probability of

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8 Our plan is to deal with “postmaterialism” and green parties in a separate paper. The interesting result here is that the probability of voting for the greens is driven by the non-economic dimension.
receiving a respondent’s vote goes up as she becomes more economically progressive and as she becomes more morally conservative (or vice versa). Such parties on both sides of the zero point can be seen in the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, and Denmark.

Finally, one can get a rough sense of the overall importance of the two issue dimensions in different countries by observing the spread of the party codes around zero for each dimension. The spread is clearly greater for the economic issue dimension in the majoritarian countries, even though two of them—the United States and Canada—demonstrate very high rates of church attendance. Among the multi-party PR systems, the first dimension is also clearly a better predictor of vote choice in the secular protestant countries of Northern Europe: Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. With the exception of Spain, the spread around zero is larger for the second dimension in the PR countries with large Catholic populations, revealing that in Germany, Italy, Belgium, and Austria, the second dimension actually has a larger impact on vote choice than the first dimension. It is not a stretch to say that, at least in the early 1990s, vote choice in Italy was dominated by a non-economic issue dimension.⁹

IV. Implications

This paper was motivated in large part by what Peter Lindert (2004) called “the Robin Hood paradox:” the fact that democracies with highly unequal income distributions conduct so little redistribution. Another motivation is an intriguing negative cross-country correlation between religiosity and redistribution. Setting aside some of the many plausible explanations, we have used issue scales drawn from cross-national

⁹ We have conducted similar analysis for Catholic countries in Latin America—Brazil and Mexico—and find that the moral values dimension has a significant impact on voting while the economic dimension does not.
survey data to address variants of the Marxian argument that religion undermines the “natural” relationship between income and voting, either by altering preferences over redistribution or by creating a second issue dimension that distracts the poor from their material interests. We stop short of offering a new model of redistribution, our results suggest assumptions and approaches that might be fruitful.

First of all, Aristotle’s intuitive assumption about income, preferences, and voting does not fit as comfortably with individual-level data as one might expect, and the micro-foundations for workhorse models in political economy are surprisingly weak. Though the correlations are in the expected direction, poor people vote for parties of the right in surprisingly large numbers, and many of them have rather conservative preferences on economic issues.

Second, the main contribution of the paper is to show that there is a second issue dimension with an equal and opposite income correlation as the economic dimension, and in many countries, this dimension has at least as large an impact on vote choice as the economic dimension. Moreover, it appears that the poor—who are on average more economically progressive but also more morally conservative than the average voter—place slightly greater weight on the non-economic dimension. This is especially true of the religious poor. Though not quite consistent with the assumptions of Roemer (1998), it is not difficult to envision a similar type of model based on the cross-cutting cleavage uncovered in this paper that produces the same result: equilibrium redistribution decreases as parties of the left give up on the morally conservative, religious poor and seek some of their support among the morally progressive wealthy. Perhaps this would
help explain the negative correlation between religiosity—a blunt proxy for the impact of the moral values issue dimension—and redistribution in the cross-country data.

Our findings also suggest, however, that such models must pay greater attention to incentives created by electoral institutions. Roemer’s model assumes a strict, American-style two party system that is extremely rare in practice. Poor, morally conservative voters are forced to make a choice between their economic and moral preferences. Yet if there are low entry costs for parties in the presence of these two salient dimensions, it is easy to envision a model of party formation and platform choice where as long as there are more than two parties, economic and moral values issues need not be bundled together by the parties, and there will be “hybrid parties” that take liberal positions on the economic dimension and conservative positions on the moral values dimension, and vice-versa.\(^\text{10}\)

In the United States, the Republicans adopt positions to the right of the Democrats on both issue dimensions, and voters with morally liberal but economically conservative preferences (or vice-versa) are forced to choose which preference dimension is more important to them. But faced with the menu of choices available in the Netherlands, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries, for example, voters need not choose one preference dimension on which to base their vote. Our data analysis reveals that “liberal” parties sometimes offer a choice for morally moderate but economically conservative voters, and Christian democratic parties appeal to voters with right-wing preferences on moral issues but relatively centrist preferences on economic issues.

In spite of all the talk about a “culture war,” this study shows that economic preferences are far better predictors of vote choice in the United States than moral values

\(^{10}\) See Schofield and Sened (2002) for a model of this type.
preferences. Yet the opposite seems to be true in several relatively religious European
countries with multi-party systems. Perhaps this is because hybrid parties absolve
conflicted voters of the need to suppress their preferences on the less salient dimension.

All of this might have implications for the next generation of theories of
redistribution. If proportional representation absolves parties of the need to bundle
economic and moral issues together, it is not clear why a salient moral values dimension
should suppress redistribution. Something like Roemer’s “distraction” logic seems most
plausible in countries like the United States, Canada, and Australia, where moral values
are highly salient for a segment of the religious population, and where single-member
districts hold down the number of parties and encourage them to bundle issues.

In conclusion, while our findings clear up some very old questions about income,
religion, and issue voting, we hope they will be most useful as building blocks for further
theoretical and empirical work on redistribution.
References


Figure 1a: Income and left voting (Eurobarometer)

All observations below the 45 degree line are years where on average, the poor voted more for the left than the rich. Observations close to the line suggest that poor and rich voted similarly for the left.

Figure 1b: Church attendance and left voting (Eurobarometer)

All observations above the 45 degree line are years where respondents who never go to church voted on average more for the left than people who go to church every week.
Figure 2a: Average percent of population voting for parties of the left by income quartile, Europe, 1970-1992 (Eurobarometer).

Figure 2b: Average percent of population voting for parties of the left by income decile, industrialized countries circa 1990 (World Values Survey).
Figure 3: Predicted probability of voting for the left

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<th>Difference</th>
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Figure 4: Predicted probabilities of voting for various parties by income level among respondents who go to church every week versus those who never go to church.
Figure 4, Cont: Predicted probabilities of voting for various parties by income level among respondents who go to church every week versus those who never go to church.
Figure 4, Cont: Predicted probabilities of voting for various parties by income level among respondents who go to church every week versus those who never go to church.
Figure 5a: Income and Issue Preferences (WVS)

Figure 5b: Church attendance and issue preferences (WVS)

Solid line: Economic issues scale
Dotted line: Moral values issue scale
Issue scales have mean zero and standard deviation 1, and higher values indicate moves to the right.
Figure 6: Using issue preferences to account for cross-group differences in voting behavior

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Figure 7: Changes in Predicted Probabilities of voting for various parties associated with a one standard deviation move to the right on the *economic issue scale* (T1) and *the moral values issue scale* (T2)

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***Party codes:*** BRITAIN 1-Labour 2-Conservative; USA 1-Democrat 2-Republican; CANADA 1-NDP 2-Liberal 3-Progressive Conservative; JAPAN 1-Japan Socialist 2-Liberal Democratic; FRANCE 1-Socialist 2-Ecologist Movement 3-Republican (UDF RPR); GERMANY 1-Social Democrats (SPD) 2-Free Democrats 3-Christian Democrats (CDU CSU); SPAIN 1-United Left (IU) 2-Socialist (PSOE) 3-Popular Party (PP).

**Note:** Party codes are presented as they appear in the World Value Survey (1995-1997) codebook.
Figure 7: Continued

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**Party codes:** ITALY 1-Communist 2-Socialist 3-Green 4-Social Democrats 5-Christian Democrats: NETHERLANDS 1-Labor (PvdA) 2-Democrats 66 (D’66) 3-Center Democrats (Right Wing) 4-Christian Democrats 5-Liberals (VVD); BELGIUM 1-Socialist Party (Flemish) 2-Party for Freedom and Progress 3- Ecologist (Flemish) 4-Ecologist (Walloon) 5-Socialist Party (Walloon) 6-Christian Socialist (Walloon) 7- Catholic people’s party (Flemish CVP); AUSTRIA 1-Socialist (SPO) 2-Freedom Party (FPO) 3-Greens 4-People’s Party (OVP); FINLAND 1-Social Democratic 2-Greens 3-Center 4-Conservative (National Coalition); SWEDEN 1-Social Democratic Labor 2-Green 3-People’s Party 4-Center 5-Conservative (Moderate Coalition); NORWAY 1-Labor (DNA) 2-Socialist (SV) 3-Progressive (FRP) 4-Conservative (H); DENMARK 1-Social Democrats 2-Socialist People’s Party 3-Conservative People’s Party 4-Liberal.

Table 1: Income, religion, and votes for the left in industrialized countries, WVS

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Observations 15813
Pseudo R2 0.09

*** p<.001
Coefficients for country dummies not reported
Table 2: Issue preferences and vote choice, World Values Survey

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<th>Std. Err.</th>
<th>dF/dx</th>
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<td>(0.01) ***</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(0.02) ***</td>
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<td>(0.01) ***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incomedeciles</td>
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<td>(0.002) ***</td>
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<td>Church attendance</td>
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Observations: 18422
Pseudo R2: 0.15
15811 0.12

*** p<.001
Coefficients for country dummies not reported
Appendix: Questions used in factor analysis for construction of issue scales

Economic scale:

V86. Imagine two secretaries, of the same age, doing practically the same job. One finds out that the other earns considerably more than she does. The better paid secretary, however, is quicker, more efficient and more reliable at her job. In your opinion, is it fair or not fair that one secretary is paid more than the other?
1 Fair  2 Not fair  9 Don't know

V87. (firmown). There is a lot of discussion about how business and industry should be managed. Which of these four statements comes closest to your opinion?
1 The employees should own the business and should select the managers
2 The owners and the employees should participate in the selection of managers
3 The government should be the owner and appoint the managers
4 The owners should run their business or appoint the managers

Now I'd like you to tell me your views on various issues. How would you place your views on this scale? 1 means you agree completely with the statement on the left; 10 means you agree completely with the statement on the right; and if your views fall somewhere in between, you can choose any number in between.

V125 Incomes should be made more equal
V126 Private ownership of business and industry should be increased
V127 The government should ensure that everyone is provided for
V128 Competition is good. It stimulates people to work hard and develop new ideas

We need larger income differences as incentives for individual effort
Government ownership of business and industry should be increased
People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves
It brings out the worst in people

I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all?

V140 Labor unions
V146 Major companies

Moral values scale:

Here is a list of qualities that children can be encouraged to learn at home. Which, if any, do you consider to be especially important? Please choose up to five.

V22 Religious faith

On this list are various groups of people. Could you please sort out any that you would not like to have as neighbors?

V60 Homosexuals

V92. If someone says a child needs a home with both a father and a mother to grow up happily, would you tend to agree or disagree?
1 Tend to agree  2 Tend to disagree
V93. Do you think that a woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled or is this not necessary?
1 Needs children  2 Not necessary

V94. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Marriage is an out-dated institution"
1. Agree  2. Disagree

V95. If someone said that individuals should have the chance to enjoy complete sexual freedom without being restricted, would you tend to agree or disagree?
1 Tend to agree  2 Neither/it depends  3 Tend to disagree

V96. If a woman wants to have a child as a single parent but she doesn't want to have a stable relationship with a man, do you approve or disapprove?
1 Approve  2 Depends  3 Disapprove

People talk about the changing roles of men and women today. For each of the following statements I read out, can you tell me how much you agree with each. Do you agree strongly, agree, disagree, or disagree strongly?
V98 A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work
V99 Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay

I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all?
V135. The churches

V167. (Antigay) I'd like to ask you about some groups that some people feel are threatening to the social and political order in this society. Would you please select from the following list the one group or organization that you like least?
5. Homosexuals   Mentioned 1 Not Mentioned 2

V178. (strictmoral) Here are two statements which people sometimes make when discussing good and evil. Which one comes closest to your own point of view?
A. There are absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. These always apply to everyone, whatever the circumstances.
B. There can never be absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. What is good and evil depends entirely upon the circumstances at the time.
1 Agree with statement A   0 otherwise

Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between, using this card.
V197 Homosexuality  Never Justifiable  Always Justifiable
V198 Prostitution  1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6 / 7 / 8 / 9 / 10
V200 Divorce
V201 Euthanasia-- ending the life of the incurably sick
V202 Suicide