

# Self-interest, Sociotropy and Social Policy

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## I Introduction

The question of whether citizens are motivated primarily by self-interest or by broader societal concerns has long occupied political scientists. This distinction—between self-interested and sociotropic motivations—has proven particularly consequential for understanding political behaviour and policy preferences. While economic theories of voting have traditionally emphasized rational self-interest, a substantial body of empirical research has challenged this orthodoxy, finding that sociotropic considerations often outweigh narrowly egoistic calculations (Kim, 2014; Miller and Ratner, 1998). Nevertheless, certain contexts appear to activate self-interested reasoning (Chong et al., 2001; Doherty et al., 2006), suggesting a more complex interplay between these motivations than previously acknowledged.

Despite the theoretical and empirical significance of this question, research on self-interest and sociotropy has remained disconnected from scholarship on social policy preferences. This represents a significant missed opportunity, as social policy scholars have long grappled with related questions in different terminological frameworks, notably in debates over universalism versus means-testing in welfare provision (Gugushvili and van Oorschot, 2020). Integrating these research traditions offers the prospect of theoretical enrichment and empirical refinement in our understanding of welfare attitudes.

In this article, we address this gap through two survey experiments with British samples which examine the conditions in which self-interested and sociotropic motivations shape social policy preferences. Our first experiment investigates attitudes toward a pension reform that provides a means-tested supplement at varying income thresholds (£14,999, £29,999, and £49,999). Our second experiment examines responses to a cost-of-living payment targeted at different occupational groups, with variations in income eligibility and payment levels.

Our findings reveal a nuanced relationship between self-interest and sociotropy in welfare policy preferences. While respondents consistently demonstrate self-interested motivations, sociotropic considerations manifest in distinctive patterns that defy simple characterization. In our first experiment, respondents exhibit stronger sociotropic motivation when pension reforms benefit broader segments of the population, a pattern consistent with the 'paradox of redistribution' thesis advanced by Korpi and Palme (1998). This relationship is moderated by ideological orientation, with social conservatives displaying particular opposition to reforms that exclusively benefit those with the lowest incomes.

Unexpectedly, our second experiment reveals a contrasting pattern; respondents demonstrate stronger sociotropic motivation when cost-of-living payments target more narrowly defined, lower-paid segments within occupational groups, contradicting our pre-registered hypotheses. Here, we observe limited ideological heterogeneity; instead, self-defined motivations of 'deservingness' and 'hardworkingness' emerge as more salient criteria that transcend conventional ideological divisions.

We propose that this apparent contradiction may be resolved by considering the specific targets of welfare policies. When policies address wider categories (as with our pension experiment),

citizens tend to express broader sociotropic motivation, aligning with the paradox of redistribution. Conversely, when policies target narrowly defined groups (as with our cost-of-living experiment), sociotropic judgments become more discriminating, prioritizing perceptions of deservingness over inclusivity. This conditional relationship between policy design and the nature of sociotropic reasoning has significant implications for both scholarly understanding of welfare attitudes and welfare policy design.

## II Literature and Initial Hypotheses

### *Self-Interest and Sociotropy in Political Behaviour*

The concept of self-interest has been a central preoccupation of political science, generating diverse theoretical frameworks and competing empirical claims. The breadth of this concept has necessitated multiple operationalizations, particularly in economic voting research in which scholars have distinguished between self-interested and *sociotropic* motivations, the latter referring to concerns about group or national outcomes rather than personal circumstances. Studies using American National Election Study (ANES) measures of personal and national economic evaluations have consistently found that sociotropic considerations exert greater influence on voting behaviour than assessments of personal economic circumstances. This pattern extends beyond economic voting to specific policy domains (Franko et al., 2013; Lau and Heldman, 2009; Legerski and Berg, 2016).

However, the interpretation of sociotropy remains contested. Some scholars have interpreted the predominance of sociotropic motivations as evidence against the self-interest paradigm (Lewin, 1991: 45). Yet this interpretation might be premature. As Kiewiet and Lewis-Beck (2011) argue, sociotropic voting may reflect cognitive processes that are rooted in self-interest. For example, voters might conclude that their personal economic circumstances reflect numerous non-political factors, making national economic trends more reliable indicators of government performance. Alternatively, as Bechtel and Liesch (2020) suggest, general economic improvements may simultaneously increase sociotropic evaluations and expectations of personal benefit. Kinder and Kiewiet (1981, 132, cited in Kiewiet and Lewis-Beck, 2011) articulate this ambiguity succinctly:

'Sociotropic voting may proceed out of altruistic concern for the well-being of all Americans. Alternatively, sociotropic voting may be totally self-interested. Prototypical sociotropic voters may... use information about the national economic condition as a superior indicator of the government's ability to promote (eventually) their own economic welfare—and incidentally that of their fellow citizens as well.'

These conceptual ambiguities have motivated more precise empirical investigations of self-interest. This literature acknowledges the significance of self-interest while identifying specific conditions in which it becomes salient. Chong et al. (2001) demonstrate that "people are more likely to recognize their own self-interest, and to act upon it, when their stakes in the policy are clear or when they have been primed to think about the personal costs and benefits of the policy" (see also Doherty et al., 2006). Similar conditional relationships have been documented in studies of monetary policy (Bearce and Tuxhorn, 2017), immigration (Meltzer, 2021), and trade (Maria Schaffer and Spilker, 2019).

## *Experimental Approaches to Self-Interest*

The methodological turn toward experimental designs has offered new opportunities to isolate the causal effects of self-interest. Some experimental studies have examined self-interest indirectly while investigating other dimensions of political behaviour. For instance, Armingeon and Bürgisser (2021) explored how information, self-interest and ideological orientation shape trade-offs between redistribution and environmental protection, finding that self-interest tends to have greater influence than ideology. Addressing the relative scarcity of experimental work focused explicitly on self-interest, Haselswerdt (2020) exploited age-based eligibility criteria in Medicare and student debt relief schemes to examine the influence of self-interest on policy evaluations, confirming its substantial impact.

Despite these advances, experimental studies centered on self-interest remain uncommon, and those that exist rarely examine how ideology moderates self-interested reasoning. This represents a significant omission, as observational studies indicate that both economic and cultural ideological orientations substantially influence the expression of self-interest. Contemporary scholarship suggests that the ideological foundations of political preferences have shifted; as economic cleavages have attenuated (Ford and Jennings, 2020), cultural ideology has assumed greater explanatory power. Studies of self-interest must account for this evolving ideological landscape.

## *Self-Interest, Sociotropy, and Social Policy*

Our research addresses a notable gap in the literature. Despite investigations of self-interest and sociotropy across various policy domains—including monetary policy (Bearce and Tuxhorn, 2017), immigration (Meltzer, 2021) and trade (Maria Schaffer and Spilker, 2019)—these concepts have not been systematically applied to social policy preferences. This oversight is particularly striking given the social policy literature's engagement with related concepts using different terminological frameworks.

The debate over universalism versus means-testing in welfare provision is a particularly relevant parallel. While certain scholars emphasize the redistributive efficiency of means-testing, Korpi and Palme's (1998) influential "paradox of redistribution" thesis contends that "the more we target benefits at the poor and the more concerned we are with creating equality via equal public transfers to all, the less likely we are to reduce poverty and inequality." This argument primarily addresses macro-level outcomes rather than individual preferences, yet suggests correspondence with individual-level attitudes toward welfare design.

Research on preferences for means-testing versus universalism has yielded complex and sometimes contradictory findings. Certain studies report that lower-income voters tend to prefer means-tested benefits (e.g., Greenberg, 2018; Gugushvili and van Oorschot, 2020), aligning with the self-interest hypothesis. However, studies in Denmark, Australia, and Poland have identified a positive association between affluence and support for means-testing (Forma and Kangas, 2012; Goul-Andersen, 2011), challenging simple economic interpretations. The relationship between ideological orientation and welfare design preferences is similarly complex. While most research indicates that left-wing and liberal ideologies predict support for means-testing (e.g., Greenberg, 2018; Gugushvili and van Oorschot, 2020; Reeskens and van Oorschot, 2013), certain studies document left-wing support for universalism (Goul-Andersen, 2011).

## *Hypotheses Development*

Building on this literature, we develop six initial hypotheses addressing the relationship between self-interest, ideology and support for welfare policies. Our first hypothesis concerns basic self-interest:

**H1:** Support will be greater among voters who benefit from the policy.

The relationship between ideology and sociotropic motivation requires more nuanced consideration. Economic ideology concerns attitudes toward redistribution, with left-wing positions typically grounded in notions of social solidarity, a conceptual cousin of sociotropy. Recent scholarship has refined our understanding of this relationship, with some research suggesting that affluent left-wing voters prioritize policies addressing new social risks (Häusermann et al., 2013) and experimental evidence indicating that left-wing ideology shapes the weight assigned to costs and funding mechanisms (Gallego and Marx, 2017). Nevertheless, the basic association between left-wing economic positions and redistributive preferences remains fundamental, reflecting underlying psychological orientations:

**H2:** Left-wing ideology predicts sociotropic motivation.

Cultural ideology is more complex, as it concerns principles of freedom and autonomy rather than economic distribution. Scholars have debated whether conservatism and liberalism involve distinct orientations toward economic solidarity. Conservatism can coexist with support for redistribution, as some conservatives interpret neoliberalism as corrosive to traditional institutions and communities. Malka et al. (2017) finds that right-wing cultural views frequently accompany left-wing economic positions across 99 countries, particularly among lower-income citizens.

However, conservative cultural values also correlate with self-interested orientations toward welfare policy. Psychologically, conservatives tend to prioritize loyalty to in-groups (Haidt and Graham, 2007), potentially limiting sociotropic concern for broader populations. In their analysis of the welfare preferences of radical right supporters, Busemeyer et al. (2022) find that such voters express moderate support for "deserving" recipients like the elderly while strongly favouring workfare policies and benefit reductions for the unemployed and poor, a pattern consistent with authoritarian ideology.

In contrast, the association between liberalism and sociotropy appears more consistent. While classical liberalism emphasized the virtues of enlightened self-interest, subsequent liberal thinkers from T.H. Green onward have stressed the importance of redistribution as a precondition for realizing human potential. Freedman (1996), a leading theorist of liberalism, identifies this redistributive commitment as central to liberal ideology, without which liberalism becomes something else.

Empirical evidence supports this theoretical association. Throughout Western democracies, liberal cultural attitudes have long predicted support for redistributive policies (Kriesi et al., 2008). Analyzing American and European electorates, Mellon and Prosser (2017) find that liberal support for redistribution is largely independently of personal economic circumstances:

**H3:** Liberal ideology predicts sociotropic motivation.

Beyond ideological predispositions, certain demographic characteristics consistently predict redistributive preferences. Occupational context shapes political orientations in ways that transcend immediate material interests. Sociocultural professionals operate in environments characterized by ambiguous task structures requiring creative responses and engage in symbolic-interactive relations with service recipients, fostering empathetic dispositions (Oesch, 2006; Kriesi et al., 2008). Consequently, these workers tend to embrace cultural liberalism and, to a lesser extent, economic redistribution (Kitschelt and Rehm, 2014: 1677-8).

Educational attainment has a complex relationship with redistributive preferences. While higher education often correlates with reduced support for redistribution – this reflects the economic advantages that typically accompany educational credentials – research demonstrates that educated individuals exhibit greater sympathy toward welfare recipients (Van Der Waal et al., 2010). This pattern may reflect the socially liberal attitudes that higher education tends to foster (McArthur, 2023).

Finally, gender consistently emerges as a predictor of redistributive preferences, with women generally displaying stronger support for welfare provision than men (e.g., Alesina and Giuliano, 2010).

Based on these established patterns, we propose three additional hypotheses:

**H4:** Employment in sociocultural sectors predicts sociotropic motivation

**H5:** Education predicts sociotropic motivation

**H6:** Gender predicts sociotropic motivation

### III Experiment one

Our first experiment examines how self-interest and sociotropy shape attitudes toward pension reform in the United Kingdom. We leveraged an experimental design to disentangle the effects of self-interest from ideology while controlling for demographic characteristics that might influence redistribution preferences.

The United Kingdom represents an archetypal case for studying these phenomena. Historically structured around class-based cleavages reflected in a two-party system, the UK's political landscape has undergone significant transformation following deindustrialization (Sobolewska and Ford, 2021). As Ford and Jennings (2020) note, traditional class-based voting has weakened considerably, while new cleavages have emerged along dimensions of education, geography, age, and ethnicity. These evolving political alignments provide a rich context for examining how self-interest and sociotropy influence contemporary welfare politics.

For three reasons, our experiment concerns pensions. First, pensions constitute one of the few remaining universal benefits in the UK system. Second, as a major component of both national budgets and personal incomes, pensions represent a policy area where respondents are likely to hold informed preferences. Third, unlike means-tested benefits that often evoke strong moral judgments about recipient deservingness (e.g., unemployment benefits or asylum support, see Van Oorschot, 2000; Thorp and Larner, 2024), pensions elicit more neutral evaluations, allowing us to more cleanly assess self-interest and sociotropic considerations rather than attitudes toward specific social groups.

Building on Haselswerdt's (2020) design, we randomly assigned respondents to one of three vignettes describing a fictitious pension reform proposal. The vignettes varied only in the income threshold determining eligibility for a 10% increase to the weekly basic state pension: £14,999, £29,999, or £49,999. The precise wording was as follows:

*"We now want to ask you about your views on changes to your state pension proposed by academics at a UK-based university.*

*Under the proposals, individuals with a household income of less than £[14,999/29,999/49,999] per year would receive a 10% increase to their weekly basic state pension. Those who earn more than £[14,999/29,999/49,999] per year would receive no increase."*

Following exposure to the vignette, respondents indicated their opinion of the proposed change using a 5-point scale ranging from "very negative" to "very positive," with a "don't know" option available.

This design enables two distinct analytical approaches. First, we can assess whether falling below the specified income threshold affects policy support, a direct test of self-interest comparable to Haselswerdt's work. Second, by comparing responses across the three treatments, we can evaluate how self-interest and sociotropy operate at different levels of means-testing, reflecting real-world policy design considerations.

We fielded the experiment as part of the 2021 Welsh Election Study (Wave 5), with data collection occurring between 18 March and 6 April 2022 (N=3,041). YouGov fielded this survey, using nationally representative samples. For analytical rigor, we excluded 'don't know' responses (8.5% of respondents) and implemented a manipulation check requiring respondents to recall the income threshold from the vignette.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 18% of respondents failed this check and were excluded from the analysis, though their exclusion did not substantively alter our findings.

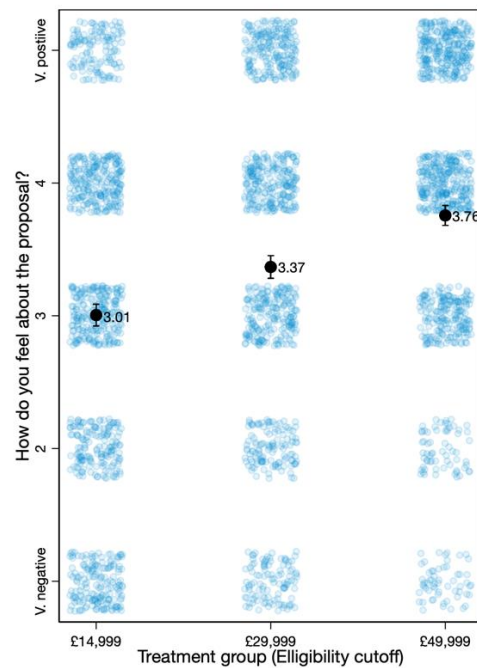
## *Results*

Our first hypothesis posited that eligibility would predict support for the pension reforms. This prediction was strongly confirmed (Figure 1), offering robust evidence that self-interest underpins voter preferences. However, the magnitude of this effect decreases as the eligibility threshold rises, suggesting that the gap between self-interested and sociotropic motivations narrows when more inclusive policies are proposed. This finding aligns with literature highlighting voter skepticism toward narrowly targeted means-testing. Notably, these patterns persist despite the implicit differences in fiscal cost across treatments—policies with lower thresholds would be less expensive—suggesting that financial considerations were not salient to respondents. This finding holds for economic right-wingers (see Figure 2) and may reflect the lack of information about costs in experiment one.

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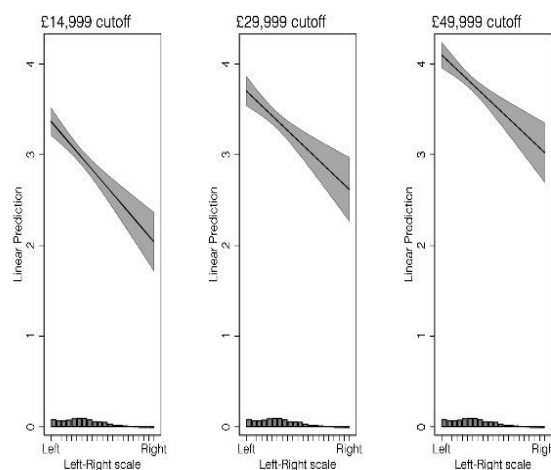
<sup>1</sup> *'Earlier in the survey we asked you your opinion on a proposed change your state pension. Can you remember what the income cutoff for the pension rise was? [Open]'*

**Figure 1 - Treatment heterogeneity – eligibility**



While demographic variables (H4-H6) did not emerge as significant predictors of policy support, ideological factors demonstrated substantial explanatory power. As predicted in hypothesis 2, economic left-wing ideology strongly predicted support for the proposed reforms (Figure 2). Importantly, both economic left-wing and right-wing respondents displayed increased support as eligibility thresholds widened, though left-wing respondents maintained consistently higher approval levels across all conditions.

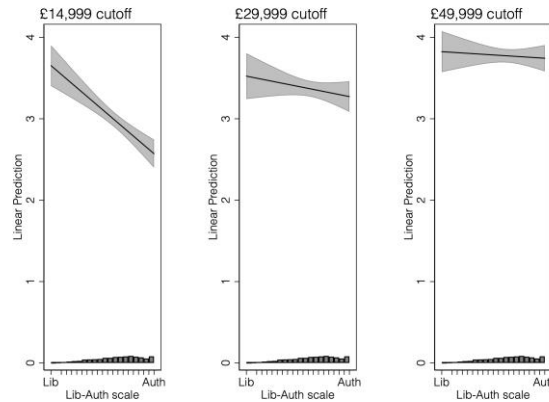
**Figure 2 - Treatment heterogeneity – economic ideology**



Cultural ideology also influenced policy evaluations, though in a more complex way. As hypothesized (H3), social conservatism predicted opposition to the pension reform at the lowest

threshold (£14,999), but this relationship weakened to statistical insignificance at higher thresholds (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Treatment heterogeneity – cultural ideology**



The response patterns across ideological groups warrant careful interpretation. Liberal respondents exhibited relatively consistent evaluations across the three thresholds, potentially reflecting a principled commitment to justice. As noted in our theoretical framework, liberals often conceptualize welfare as a necessary precondition for realizing human potential, a perspective that may transcend specific policy design features.

In contrast, social conservatives demonstrated markedly lower support for the narrowest reform (£14,999 threshold), with their approval increasing substantially for more inclusive thresholds. This pattern may reflect two distinct mechanisms: First, as Gugushvili and van Oorschot (2020) demonstrate, social conservatives generally oppose severe means-testing; the £14,999 threshold represents the most stringent means-testing among our treatments. Second, social conservatives often hold negative perceptions of groups concentrated in lower income deciles, including the unemployed, ethnic minorities, and immigrants. The literature suggests that social conservatives may not regard these groups as "deserving" recipients (Busemeyer et al., 2022; Rathgeb, 2021; Thorp and Larner, 2024), potentially explaining their aversion to policies narrowly targeted at the lowest income threshold.

These findings reveal the complex interplay between self-interest, sociotropy, and ideology in shaping welfare policy preferences. While self-interest remains an important determinant of policy attitudes, its influence varies systematically with policy design and ideological predispositions. Most notably, the divergent responses to eligibility thresholds across ideological groups suggest that sociotropic considerations are neither uniform nor ideologically neutral; rather, they reflect deeper normative commitments regarding deservingness, fairness, and the proper scope of redistribution.



## IV Experiment two

### *Hypotheses*

The findings of experiment one raise further questions about self-interest, sociotropy and ideology. In a second experiment, we explore these issues with a conjoint design, allowing more precise analysis of the influence of target groups, cut-off level, affordability and increase level.

In experiment two, we target specific groups, enabling assessment of the foundations of the results of experiment one. As noted above, positions towards the cut-offs probably reflect sociotropy and attitudes towards ingroups and outgroups.

The experiment describes a cost-of-living payment to six groups of public sector workers: nurses, teachers, armed forces, civil servants, police officers and care home workers. We also vary payment amount, eligibility and programme cost and ask respondents to make a binary choice between two profiles and rate individual profiles on a scale of 0-10.

According to the Ipsos veracity index (2022), the occupations enjoy different levels of trust among the UK public. Though the armed forces are not in the index, their popularity among social conservatives means that we include them (see below).

Occupation	Trust
Nurses	89%
Teachers	81%
Care home workers	76%
Police officers	63%
Civil servants	56%
Armed forces	n/a

Among our sample, attitudes towards the payments should reflect attitudes towards target groups.

**H1:** Average marginal component effects (AMCEs) will reflect public attitudes toward target groups

For our second attribute, cut-off level, we include three eligibility levels: annual salary under £30,000, £40,000 and £50,000. These differ from WES, but selected occupations tend to be richer than average citizens and, from 2022-24, there was high inflation in the UK.

Following our argument that positive attitudes at higher cut-offs reflect sociotropy, we expect that differences between evaluations of the cut-offs will not be statistically significant. These are payments for small groups, rather than the wider population.

**H2:** Differences in the AMCEs of the eligibility levels will not be statistically significant

Results should reflect aspects of economic ideology. Beyond absolute attitudes towards the payment, economic right-wingers should have more favourable evaluations of lower payment amounts.

**H3:** Economic ideology will predict attitudes towards the proposed payments measured on the 0-10 scale (question 2), left-wingers tending to be favourable and right-wingers tending to be unfavourable

**H4a:** Economic right-wingers will favour lower payment amounts (measured by MMs)

**H4b:** Economic right-wingers will be more motivated by affordability (measured by question 3)

**H5:** Economic left-wingers will favour higher payments amounts (measured by MMs)

Cultural ideology is different. In our first experiment, liberal evaluations of the raise varied little across cut-offs, potentially reflecting the liberal preoccupation with justice. In our second experiment, we also expect to observe this effect.

**H5a:** Compared to social conservatives and economic right and left-wingers, liberals will be less sensitive to target groups and cut-off levels (measured by MMs)

**H5b:** Compared to social conservatives and economic right and left-wingers, liberals will be more motivated by fairness (measured by question 3)

In our first experiment, social conservative evaluations were sensitive to the lowest cut-off, potentially reflecting attitudes towards low-income groups. In our second experiment, we expect social conservatives to be more sensitive to the target groups, reflecting social attitudes towards the groups, and particularly favourable to armed forces, reflecting social conservative attitudes towards authority (Altemeyer, 1981).

**H6:** Social conservatives will be more sensitive to target groups and will be very favourable towards armed forces (measured by MMs)

**H7:** Social conservatives will be more motivated by deservingness/hardworkingness (measured by question 3)

In our second experiment, we include Altemeyer's right-wing authoritarian scale and a short version of the social dominance orientation scale (Aichholzer and Lechner, 2021), enabling deeper analysis of the foundations of social conservative preferences.

**H8:** For target groups with low ratings among social conservatives, we expect that ratings will be even lower among respondents scoring high in authoritarian aggression and social dominance, reflecting dislike for outgroups and desire to justify inequalities and group hierarchies (measured by MMs).

**H9:** For the armed forces, we expect that ratings among social conservatives will be even higher among respondents scoring high in authoritarian submissiveness and conventionalism, reflecting conformism and loyalty to authority (measured by MMs).

## The experiment

We used a conjoint experiment (Bansak et al, 2021), offering respondents a choice between two fictitious cost-of-living payments which varied the target occupation, payment amount and eligibility; respondents chose one proposal in a forced choice and rated both on a 0-10 scale.

Following this, we asked respondents about the extent to which their responses were motivated by a) the deservingness of the occupation, b) the ‘hardworkingness’ of the occupation, c) the affordability of the proposed payment and d) the fairness of the eligibility criteria (all on a 0-10 scale). The full design is included in appendix one, along with a screenshot of an example task.

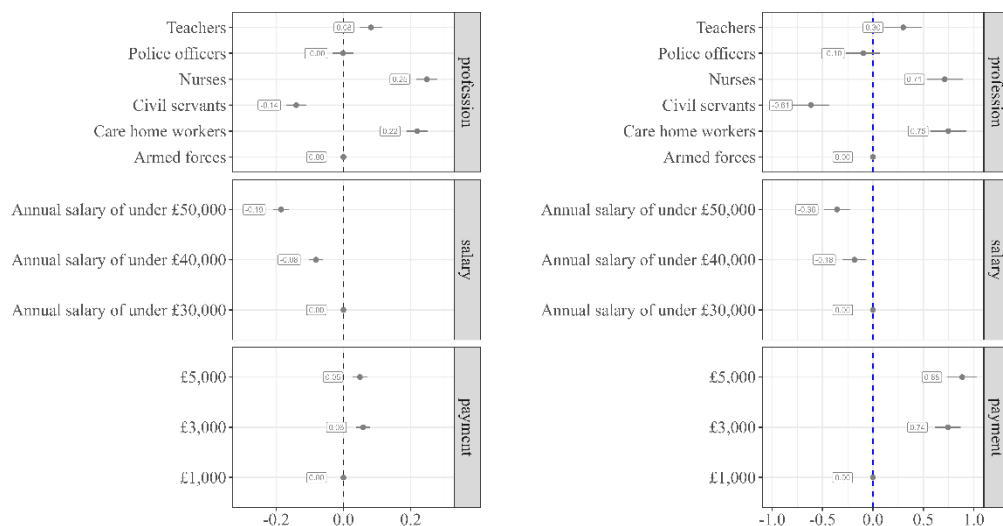
We fielded the experiment in June 2024 on the Prolific platform with a representative sample of the UK population. The sample size followed power calculations based on an anticipated effect of 0.05 ( $p < 0.05$ ), an attribute with 6 values, and a sample of 1,100 individuals completing 6 forced conjoint tasks; this indicated that our experiment would produce statistical power of 0.94, such power being consistent with expectations in the discipline of political science.

For the experiment, our estimands are the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) and, for analysis of subgroups, Marginal Means (MMs) (Leeper et al., 2020). The motivations were not part of the experiment and we analyze results with Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions and descriptive statistics.

## Findings

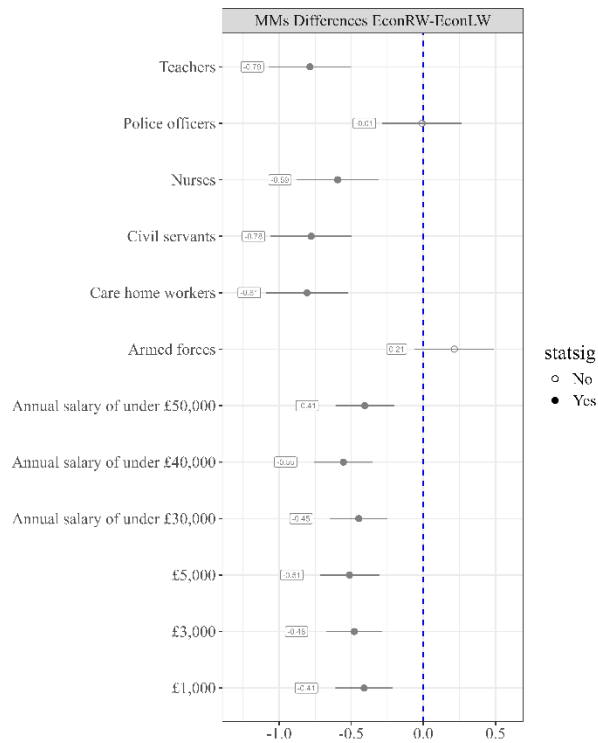
Consistent with hypothesis 1, average marginal component effects (AMCEs) reflect public opinion of target groups. As figure 4 shows, our sample has relatively positive attitudes towards payments for nurses and care home workers and relatively negative attitudes towards payments for civil servants. There is ideological heterogeneity in attitudes towards the target groups. As hypothesis 6 predicted, social conservatives have a more positive view of payments to armed forces. Social conservatives also have a more positive view of payments to police officers and, overall, social conservatism is associated with higher programme ratings. However, attitudes towards ingroups drive this; social conservatives have a less positive view of payments to teachers and care home workers.

**Figure 4: Whole sample AMCEs for binary and ratings measures**

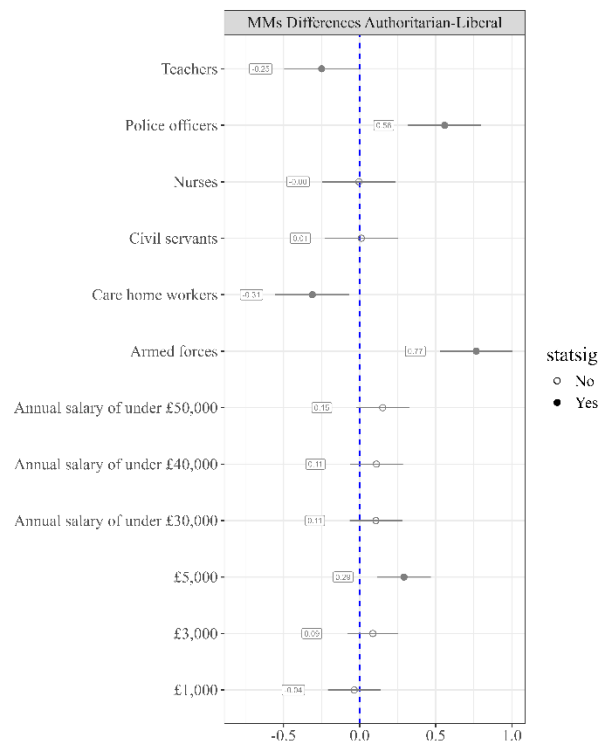


Respondents tend to favour higher payments and, consistent with hypothesis 5, left-wing ideology is associated with this. Other findings are consistent with hypotheses about economic ideology. Left-wing ideology is positively associated with ratings on the 0-10 scale (hypothesis 3) and economic right-wingers are more motivated by affordability (hypothesis 4b). Indeed, economic ideology is a better predictor of many outcomes than cultural ideology (see figures 5 and 6). Contrary to hypotheses 8 and 9, psychological scales do not explain outcomes.

**Figure 5: Marginal means (MMs) differences in economic ideology with rating measure**



**Figure 6: Marginal means (MMs) differences in cultural ideology with rating measure**



Findings contradict our expectation that evaluations of the cut-offs will not be statistically significant (hypothesis 2). In contrast to experiment one, respondents favour payments at lower salary thresholds (see figure 4). Contrary to the logic of the paradox of redistribution (Korpi and Palme, 1998), our findings suggest that respondents favour means-testing if relevant measures target very specific groups.

What is driving this? Worry about costs does not appear to be relevant. Concern about affordability is comparatively low and, as we have seen, respondents favour higher payment amounts.

There is some evidence of different attitudes towards occupations. In the case of ‘popular’ occupations such as nurses and care home workers, respondents are even more favourable towards higher payments and lower salary thresholds, i.e. the range between the rating of the lowest and highest payment/threshold is greater. In the case of ‘unpopular’ occupations such as civil servants, ranges are smaller.

But contrary to hypothesis 5a, there is limited evidence of ideological heterogeneity in sensitivity to target groups and cut-off levels. Compared to social conservatives and right and left-wingers, liberals are just as sensitive to target groups.

Effects associated with the motivations of deservingness and hardworkingness (correlated at 0.82) are notable. These motivations are not associated with higher ranges between evaluation of the lowest and highest salary threshold, but have positive effects on ratings which are larger than those associated with cultural and economic ideology (see Table 1). Moreover, the two motivations are sensitive to occupations. Those who report above the median value of

deservingness and hardworkingness only rate the payments for civil servants marginally higher than the broader sample (average, 4.60; deservingness, 4.68; hardworkingness, 4.69). But for nurses (average, 5.93; deservingness, 6.45; hardworkingness, 6.48) and care home workers (average, 5.97; deservingness, 6.49; hardworkingness, 6.52), differences are considerable and more so than for economic and cultural ideology. For these occupations, there is also an interaction with payment amount, respondents who are more motivated by deservingness and hardworkingness favouring higher payments.

**Table 1 – Motivations, ideology and ratings of the programmes (OLS regression with unstandardized coefficients)**

	(1) Rating	(2) Rating	(3) Rating	(4) Rating
Hardworkingness	0.237*** (0.008)	0.229*** (0.008)		
CulIdeology		0.022 (0.017)		0.041** (0.017)
EconIdeology		0.146*** (0.021)		0.147*** (0.021)
Age		-0.004*** (0.001)		-0.005*** (0.002)
Gender		0.157*** (0.047)		0.202*** (0.047)
Deservingness			0.225*** (0.008)	0.216*** (0.008)
_cons	3.761*** (0.059)	3.195*** (0.150)	3.786*** (0.063)	3.131*** (0.153)
<i>N</i>	13248	13080	13248	13080

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

How should one theorize the motivations of deservingness and hardworkingness? In literature, these motivations are often associated with radical right populism, such voters distinguishing between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ (Busemeyer et al., 2022). Whilst there is a correlation between deservingness (0.08) and hardworkingness (0.11) and social conservatism, these motivations have a wider basis. As we have noted, deservingness and hardworkingness are associated with support for payments to care workers; contrastingly, social conservatives tend to disapprove of payments to this occupation. Indeed, there is a small (but statistically significant) correlation between deservingness (0.06) and hardworkingness (0.05) and left-wing ideology. In Western countries, many voters combine left-wing economic values and social conservatism, often not thinking in ideological terms (Converse, 1964; Kriesi et al., 2008). In terms of welfare preferences, such voters might be particularly motivated by deservingness and hardworkingness.

**Table 2: Pairwise correlations for motivations and ideological and psychological scales**

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1) Deservingness	1.000							
(2) Hardworkingness	0.817 (0.000)	1.000						
(3) Affordability	0.182 (0.000)	0.241 (0.000)	1.000					
(4) Fairness	0.268 (0.000)	0.308 (0.000)	0.430 (0.000)	1.000				
(5) EconomicIdeology	0.057 (0.000)	0.045 (0.000)	-0.088 (0.000)	0.037 (0.000)	1.000			
(6) CulturalIdeology	0.078 (0.000)	0.111 (0.000)	0.187 (0.000)	0.076 (0.000)	-0.261 (0.000)	1.000		
(7) RWAuthoritarianism	0.027 (0.002)	-0.004 (0.660)	-0.063 (0.000)	-0.009 (0.297)	0.090 (0.000)	-0.114 (0.000)	1.000	
(8) SocialDominance	0.023 (0.008)	-0.011 (0.189)	-0.120 (0.000)	0.009 (0.327)	0.325 (0.000)	-0.251 (0.000)	0.373 (0.000)	1.000

## V Conclusions

Our experiments offer substantial evidence for the continuing relevance of self-interest in welfare attitudes, while simultaneously challenging conventional understandings of sociotropic motivation. When directly benefiting from a proposed pension reform, respondents were more supportive, confirming the enduring power of self-interest in policy preferences.

Yet contrasts in our results provide insight about the complex nature of sociotropic reasoning; its character fundamentally shifts with the scope and framing of redistribution policies. When policies target broader populations, as in our pension experiment, citizens express more inclusive sociotropic motivations that align with the paradox of redistribution (Korpi and Palme, 1998). This suggests that universalistic policy designs may indeed generate broader coalitions of support that transcend narrow self-interest. However, when policies narrowly target specific occupational groups, as in our cost-of-living experiment, sociotropic motivations become more discriminating, prioritizing perceived deservingness over inclusivity. This finding remained remarkably consistent across all six occupations, suggesting a robust pattern rather than an artifact of particular policy domains.

These results challenge academic orthodoxies and conventional political wisdom. For welfare state scholars, our findings suggest that the paradox of redistribution operates conditionally rather than universally; its logic applies primarily when policies address broad social categories rather than narrowly targeted groups. For policymakers, our results indicate that the political viability of redistributive policies depends on how beneficiary groups are framed and perceived. Universal benefits may indeed generate broader political support when targeting general populations, but more selective targeting may prove more politically sustainable when addressing specific occupational or social groups, provided those groups are perceived as deserving.

The ideological dimensions of these preferences further complicate political calculations. While economic ideology consistently predicted overall support for redistributive measures, cultural values shaped responses to specific policy designs in more nuanced ways. Social conservatives, in

particular, demonstrated stronger resistance to narrowly targeted benefits at the lowest income levels, a pattern that cannot be explained by financial considerations alone. This suggests that welfare politics increasingly operates along multiple ideological dimensions that do not neatly align with traditional left-right divisions.

Perhaps most intriguingly, our second experiment revealed that self-reported motivations of ‘deservingness’ and ‘hardworkingness’ transcended conventional ideological categories, with effects that outweighed those of both economic and cultural ideology. These motivations, often associated with radical right populism, had broader appeal across ideological spectrums, correlating weakly but significantly with both social conservatism and left-wing economic positions. This finding speaks to the emergence of welfare attitudes that cut across traditional political alignments, potentially explaining the electoral success of parties that combine economic redistribution with cultural conservatism.

The implications extend beyond academic debates to the fundamental challenges facing advanced welfare states. As traditional class-based politics continues to erode and new social cleavages emerge, the political coalitions supporting redistributive policies are being radically reconfigured. Our research suggests that successful welfare politics will increasingly depend on understanding and engaging with complex, cross-cutting judgments about deservingness that do not map neatly onto conventional ideological categories. The future viability of redistributive politics may hinge on crafting policies and narratives that resonate with these emerging sociotropic judgments while still addressing genuine material needs.

This study has several limitations that future research should address. Though our findings regarding narrow targeting and sociotropic motivation appear robust across multiple occupational categories, these hypotheses emerged during analysis rather than being pre-registered. Confirmatory studies with explicit pre-registration would strengthen confidence in these conclusions. Moreover, our findings are inevitably shaped by the policy domains and national context under investigation. Future research might explore how these dynamics operate across different types of benefits, recipient groups, and welfare regimes.

How might the UK compare to other countries? Though the UK has a postmaterial political culture, implying less propensity to stigmatize outgroups, the residual/liberal nature of its welfare state encourages the stigmatization of means-tested benefits and strong support for those universalist benefits/services which do exist. In alternative welfare regimes, such as the conservative and social-democratic models, attitudes might be different.

Beyond replication, future research should explore the relationship between ideology and the motivations of deservingness and hardworkingness that proved important in our experiments. How do these seemingly non-ideological motivations interact with established political ideologies in shaping welfare preferences? To what extent do they reflect psychological dispositions rather than political values? And how might political entrepreneurs mobilize these motivations to construct new coalitions supporting or opposing redistribution? Answering these questions is essential not only for advancing social science but for understanding the changing politics of redistribution in an era of declining class-based politics and rising inequality.



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## Appendix one: Experiment two

‘To address the cost-of-living crisis, some academics are proposing one-off payments to selected groups of public sector workers. The academics are considering different payment amounts, eligibility thresholds and programme costs.

But there are financial constraints and the academics wish to establish public attitudes towards the payments.’

### *Example iteration*

	<b>Proposed payment 1</b>	<b>Proposed payment 2</b>
Occupation	Nurses	Teachers
Payment amount	£1,000	£3,000
Eligibility	All nurses with annual salaries of under £40,000	All teachers with annual salaries of under £50,000
Programme cost	£200 million	£300 million

1/ Which proposed payment do you prefer, payment 1 or payment 2?

2/ On a scale from 0-10, where 0 is rate very poorly and 10 is rate very highly, how would you rate each of the proposed payments described above?

3/ ‘On a scale from 0-10, where 0 is not at all and 10 is very much, to what extent were your answers to questions 1 and 2 motivated by the following?’

- a) The deservingness of the occupation
- b) The hardworkingness of the occupation
- c) The affordability of the proposed payment
- d) The fairness of the eligibility criteria

### *Attributes, values and iterations*

Our attributes and values are below.

Attribute	Value
Occupation	Nurses; Teachers; Armed forces; Civil servants; Police officers; Care home workers
Payment amount	£1,000; £3,000; £5,000
Eligibility	Annual salary under £30,000; annual salary under £40,000; annual salary under £50,000