Inequality and Redistribution – Public opinions in a comparative view

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Welfare states reduce inequalities among citizens by redistributing income. This is anchored in citizenship rights and the idea of equality. But redistribution is contested among politicians and also among citizens. Not only does acceptance vary within social groups within countries. Also between countries the acceptance of redistribution differ. The paper argues, that public opinions toward redistribution are one of the preconditions of redistribution because they create the room for the actions politicians can take. Therefore it should be asked what shapes this public opinions. Interindividual differences in the preferences for redistribution and equality due to individual interests are well known. The paper therefore asks primarily how the country differences in attitudes to inequality and redistribution can be explained. Such differences are also a well established result of comparative research, but there is a lack in encompassing theoretical and empirical explanation for the country differences in the redistribution, people accept. Therefore the paper reconstructs comparative research, mainly based on the welfare regime approach, which explains country differences with cultural factors. It shows the shortcomings of that approach and discusses in how far approaches from political economy, where preferences for redistribution are explained as rational reaction to economic conditions of the single countries, can fill the gap. The paper combines both approaches and shows, that neither political economy nor regime approach alone offer an adequate explanation. Ideas are embedded in economic factors; vice versa, is the impact of the economic factors mediated by culture. Hypothesis on country differences are tested controlling for individual characteristics based on data from ISSP 1999 and additional data about country characteristics such as GINI, GDP, ethnic fractionalisation etc.. Multilevel regression is used because individual and country level data are combined. Therefore we can estimate the importance of individual level compared to country level characteristics.