



If unequal, don't change it? The inequality-redistribution puzzle among political elites

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Abstract

Despite accumulated empirical evidence suggesting that economic inequality influences citizens' redistributive preferences, evidence of this relationship among political elites remains scarce. This study aims at filling this gap using an elite survey data set of more than 2300 legislators from Latin America, a region with the highest levels of inequality in the world. We first examine the general association between economic inequality and political elites' redistributive preferences. In a second step, we focus on the conditional effect of self-positioning in the left–right ideological scale. Our findings suggest a modest negative longitudinal association between economic inequality and legislators' support for redistribution. In line with our expectations, right-wing and market-oriented legislators are less prone to support redistribution when inequality increases. However, we also find this pattern among left-wing and State-oriented members of parliament. Implications and limitations of our results are considered in the discussion section.

Keywords

Inequality, Latin America, MPs, political elites, redistributive politics

Introduction

Economic inequality has long drawn the attention of social scientists because of its potential pernicious effects on economic growth, stability, education, health, or crime (Neckerman and Torche, 2007; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Unsurprisingly, scholarly interest in it has only increased with recent evidence suggesting that economic inequality

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is on the rise in comparative terms (Piketty and Saez, 2014; Sánchez-Ancochea, 2020; Zucman, 2019).

A crucial aspect of these academic debates refers to the relationship between economic inequality and redistribution (Bénabou, 2000; Dallinger, 2010; Franko, 2016; Meltzer and Richard, 1981). While it seems largely unquestioned that redistribution via taxes and transfers is important to tackle economic inequality (Joumard et al., 2012), not all individuals seem equally prone to support economic redistribution and, interestingly, structural inequality itself seems to influence people's preferences on redistribution. In contrast to the extensive research on the relationship between economic inequality and support for redistribution among citizens and *economic* elites (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006; Boix, 2003; Kenworthy and Pontusson, 2005; Kevins et al., 2018; Meltzer and Richard, 1981; Schmidt-Catran, 2016), comparatively less is known about the influence of inequality on redistributive preferences among *political* elites. Here, evidence suggests that political elites' propensity to support redistribution can be affected by their overall perceptions of the poor (De Swaan et al., 2000; López et al., 2022), expectations about their future productivity (Hossain, 2005), and trust in the ability of the State to intervene in the economy (Reis, 2005). Our study contributes to this stream of research by examining the general association between inequality and redistributive preferences as well as the conditional effect of political elites' ideology in Latin America. To do so, we fit multilevel regression models using a comparative elite-level survey data set of more than 2300 members of parliament (MPs) from 18 Latin American countries, collected over the span of almost 10 years (2010–2018).

Our results underline a modest negative longitudinal association between economic inequality and legislators' support for redistribution, which holds for both legislators of the left and the right. That is, as expected, right-wing MPs are less likely to support redistribution in contexts of higher economic inequality. However, we also find this pattern (comparatively weaker) among left-leaning legislators. An alternative operationalization of ideological orientation using MPs' preferences about State intervention in the economy further supports the overall modest negative effect of economic inequality on support for redistribution among legislators, regardless of their ideology.

Inequality and preferences for redistribution: citizens, economic elites, and beyond

A salient explanation for the association between economic inequality and preferences for redistribution builds upon the median voter hypothesis (Dallinger, 2010; Meltzer and Richard, 1981). This theory posits that the median voter is expected to benefit more from redistribution in contexts of sharp economic inequality, which would make them more willing to support redistribution the higher the inequality is. Conversely, the median voter will support redistribution to a lesser extent if economic inequality is substantially reduced, as the odds of having to finance redistribution via taxes may overpower potential benefits. The general prediction from this model is that preferences for redistribution will be stronger the higher the economic inequality of the country is (Franko, 2016; Kenworthy and Pontusson, 2005; Kevins et al., 2018; Meltzer and Richard, 1981; Roberts, 1977).

As appealing as it is, this stylized explanation has been put into question for different reasons, such as the inaccurate perceptions of actual inequality that people have (Bobzien, 2020), the fact that preferences for redistribution are importantly affected by cultural understandings of which levels of inequality are acceptable (Luttmer and Singhal, 2011; McCall and Kenworthy, 2009), or even that the association between these two variables may not be linear (Bénabou, 2000; Dallinger, 2010). In this regard, different studies have found either a negative association between economic inequality and stronger preferences for redistribution, or no association at all (Bénabou, 2000; Breznau and Hommerich, 2019; Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018; Kelly and Enns, 2010).

Building upon the assumptions of the median voter model, a key line of research focuses on the effects of economic inequality on economic elites' preferences towards redistribution. The expectation here is straightforward: economic elites will oppose redistribution, and such opposition will be stronger in countries with higher levels of economic inequality. In a nutshell, economic elites are expected to act as utility-maximisers that fear worsening their position if redistribution policies are embraced (Acemoglu et al., 2011; López et al., 2022), even more when high levels of inequality mean that redistributive efforts should mobilize important resources obtained via taxation. As income redistribution becomes more equal, redistributive pressure on the wealthy tend to diminish (Boix, 2003). Recent studies find, however, that under certain circumstances, redistribution can be in the interest of economic elites (see Romero-Vidal, 2021; Rueda and Stegmueller, 2016).

While these streams of research have greatly contributed to our understanding of how inequality affects preferences for redistribution among both citizens and economic elites, comparatively less is known about the links between economic inequality and redistributive preferences among political elites. This research gap is of the highest relevance considering that changes in redistributive policies can largely depend on the extent to which political elites advocate for redistribution (Higley and Burton, 2006; Weihua and Ye, 2017).

In this vein, democratic theory suggests that in contemporary democracies, political elites are elected to represent the interests of their constituents (Dahl, 1971). Without elections, policymakers would have little incentive to be in line with the public regarding policy preferences (Gilens, 2005). This means that, at least in theory, elected politicians in democracies will pursue public policies that are in the best interest and/or requested by their electorate. Assuming representation dynamics, it is even possible that the preferences of the representatives are aligned with the interests of large sectors of the population (España-Nájera and Martínez Rosón, 2020; Luna and Zechmeister, 2005; Rodríguez-Zepeda and Otero-Felipe, 2021). Combined with the median voter hypothesis, this reasoning would lead to a straightforward association: preferences for redistribution among legislators will be stronger, the higher the economic inequality is. To put it into different words, if more people tend to demand public redistribution as inequality increases, and politicians need more votes to win elections, legislators will be more supportive of redistribution in countries with higher levels of inequality.

Although political elites may have incentives to adapt their preferences for redistribution to appeal to larger sectors of the electorate and get better electoral results, they also have their own agenda and interests (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006; Boix, 2003;

Romero-Vidal, 2021). MPs in democratic contexts are elected representatives who are also in close contact with and often depend on economic and business elites (Pedersen, 1995; Rodríguez, 2004).¹ Since economic elites are likely to oppose to ambitious redistributive measures (Reis, 2005), MPs' redistributive preferences might be weaker in countries with higher economic inequality (Lupu and Warner, 2022). Thus, it seems unrealistic to assume that MPs' redistributive preferences are solely explained by the overall levels of economic inequality in a country. Instead, their attitudes towards redistribution are more likely to respond to a nuanced combination of variables potentially conditioned by economic inequality. More specifically, we posit that MPs' redistributive preferences will be differently affected by the interaction between economic inequality and political ideology.

According to Jost et al. (2008), there are two fundamental attributes that help us explain whether individuals position themselves more to the left or the right in the ideological scale: justification/rejection of inequality and resistance to/acceptance of social change.² Those who position themselves to the right of the political spectrum are less likely to perceive economic inequality, and more likely to justify it, while the opposite is true for left-wing individuals. Although we also expect legislators to justify or reject inequality depending on their ideology, our main interest is not in the comparison between left- and right-wing legislators, but in the preferences of left- and right-wing legislators, separately, as inequality varies. We thus focus on the interaction between economic inequality and MPs' ideological position to explain preferences towards economic redistribution.

Building upon the accepted idea that left-wing identification correlates with a more accentuated and negative perception of inequality, we expect that left-wing legislators will be more supportive of redistribution, the higher economic inequality is (H1). The intuition behind this argument is that elected officials with a propensity to perceive and disapprove inequality will not be oblivious/inactive to higher levels of economic inequality and will at least modify their preferences in reaction to it. This is even more the case considering that preferring a strong intervention of the State in the economy is at the core of left-wing ideologies (Herwartz and Theilen, 2017; Tavits and Letki, 2009).

Conversely, we believe that right-wing legislators will have different incentives to change their preferences about redistribution in contexts of higher inequality. First, higher levels of economic inequality mean that redistribution, if taking place, would imply stronger State intervention in the economy. Second, and assuming that right-wing ideology builds upon an understanding of society that relies more on market-oriented solutions and sees economic differences as a product of intelligence, effort or hard work, more redistribution would mean that those who have (allegedly) worked the most will also have to make economic efforts to guarantee redistribution via taxes. In sum, redistribution will be less supported among right-wing MPs because of *what* it means (intervention of the State in the economy), but also because of *who* is paying for it (more affluent people, allegedly being more prepared or having worked more), with both trends exacerbated when inequality is higher (H2).

Data and methods

In order to test our hypotheses, we employ the "Parliamentary Elites of Latin America database from the University of Salamanca" (PELA-USAL) (Alcántara, 2022). PELA

gathers data on the opinions, attitudes, and policy preferences of MPs in all Latin American countries since 1994, on issues such as democracy, political institutions, political careers, and social and economic inequalities. These data are gathered in face-to-face interviews held in MPs' offices in the Parliament headquarters. The final sample represents the overall party composition of the legislative chamber (the lower chamber in bicameral democracies), without gender or age quotas. Interviews are conducted in Spanish or Portuguese by trained interviewers.³

PELA data allow us to study the evolution of legislators' preferences towards economic redistribution, relying on comparative survey data of more than 2300 MPs across 18 Latin American countries over the last decade.⁴ In our analysis, we use all waves in which legislators were asked about preferences towards economic redistribution. Although elite surveys are not unquestioned as a research tool, mainly due to potential reliability issues, they are recognized to have played a key role in the study of elites' attitudes and to be particularly promising to test theories comparatively. Key for this research is that elite surveys allow gathering important amounts of data at a reasonable cost (both money and time) and facilitate responding empirical questions about the attitudes of political elites using standardized questions (Rodríguez-Teruel and Daloz, 2018: 94–95). Furthermore, PELA strategy of data collection has been shown to perform better on average than non-probability techniques often used in elite surveys in terms of response rates and biases (López, 2023). The face-to-face design used by PELA is likely to play an important role in this regard (Vis and Stolwijk, 2021).

To measure our *outcome variable*, i.e. redistributive preferences, we use a question asking legislators the extent to which they consider the State should implement firm policies to reduce income inequality on a 7-point scale (being 1 if they strongly disagree and 7 if they strongly agree).⁵ In line with previous research on the topic (López et al., 2022), an average of 6.05 across all available waves of PELA indicates that most legislators tend to endorse the idea that the State should reduce economic inequality. Descriptive statistics of our outcome and main predictors can be seen in the online Appendix (Table A2, Supplementary Materials).

Our core predictors are *economic inequality* (measured at the country-year-level) and *legislators' ideological leaning* (measured at the individual-level). To measure economic inequality, we calculated the Gini index for each country-year using data of disposable (post-tax, post-transfer) income inequality from the “Standardized World Income Inequality Database” (SWIID) (Solt, 2020). The SWIID maximizes the comparability of economic inequality data, incorporating data from the OECD Income Distribution Database, the Socio-Economic Database for Latin America and the Caribbean generated by CEDLAS, the World Bank, or the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.⁶

To operationalize MPs' ideological leaning, we followed a two-fold strategy. First, we used the self-placement question that asks legislators to locate themselves on a 10-point left-to-right scale (1 being radical left, and 10 radical right). Second, considering previous research that suggests that this scale might not always be a reliable indicator in all Latin American countries because the State versus market logic is not necessarily associated with the left–right logic (Alcántara and Rivas, 2007), we also used a self-placement question asking about the preferred role of the State in the economy along a 10-point

scale (1 being entirely pro-State, and 10 entirely pro-market). However, given that these variables are strongly correlated ($0.48, p < .001$), we introduce them in separate models to avoid collinearity issues.

Country-year-level controls

Economic growth. Previous studies suggest that when estimating the effect of the Gini index, it is necessary to include economic prosperity in the regression function to ensure that the effect of inequality is not spurious (Finseraas, 2009; Schmidt-Catran, 2016). To account for a possible contextual effect of economic performance on legislators' redistributive preferences, we include the annual national real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita (in \$1000, at current prices and purchasing power parities) for each country-year included in our sample, drawn from the Penn World Table (PWT) (Feenstra et al., 2015). To optimize the model fit and avoid biased estimates due to extreme cases, we used the logarithm of the GDP per capita, which in our sample varies between 7.5 and 10.

Public support for redistribution. Preferences on economic redistribution can be affected by cultural understandings of which levels of inequality are acceptable (Luttmer and Singhal, 2011; McCall and Kenworthy, 2009), which is also in line with electoral explanations of MPs' support for redistribution. To control for this, we include the mean level of support for redistribution among the public for each country-year included in our sample, using data from the Americas Barometer from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) (2022). LAPOP asks citizens from every Latin American country to evaluate, on a 7-point scale, the extent to which they consider that the country government should implement firm policies to reduce income inequality (from 1, strongly disagree, to 7, strongly agree).⁷

Level of democracy. As Gilens (2005) points out, without elections, policymakers would have little incentive to consider citizens' policy preferences. Previous scholarship on democratization suggests that in democratic contexts political power is less concentrated among political elites, making this group more prone to commit to policy concessions to the public, including income redistribution (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006; Boix, 2003; Lupu and Warner, 2022). To account for a possible effect of the level of democracy on legislators' support for economic redistribution, we included the Electoral Democracy Index from Varieties of Democracy (V-dem) (Coppedge et al., 2021). This index is a weighted average of the main components of Robert Dahl's polyarchy (freedom of association, clean and fair elections, freedom of expression, elected officials, and suffrage).⁸

Individual-level controls

To control for a possible incumbency effect on MPs' support for economic redistribution, we included a dummy variable indicating whether the legislator was a government or opposition member (1 for incumbent). We also controlled for re-election using a dichotomous variable (1 for re-election), and for the nature of MPs' appointment (1 for either

elected or designated). Last, we included the following standard socio-demographic controls: gender (1 for female), age (a continuous variable that varies from 19 to 86 years old), and education (3-point scale, 1 being undergraduate, 2 being graduate, and 3 having postgraduate studies). Table A3 in the online Appendix describes the summary statistics for all variables.

Methods. To test the association between economic inequality and legislators' support for economic redistribution, we employ hierarchical linear mixed models (Snijders and Bosker, 2012). Since economic inequality is a characteristic of the group to which individuals belong, the failure to account statistically for such grouping may lead to biased standard errors (Bell and Jones, 2015; Fairbrother, 2014; Schmidt-Catran and Fairbrother, 2016). Since our main variable of interest (country-year economic inequality) is time-variant, we distinguish two levels of analysis: MPs (level 1), and country-years (level 2) – creating a unique identifier for country-survey-year combinations. To account for the clustering of observations, we fit a two-level random intercepts model, where the intercept depends on random characteristics of the country-year in which data were gathered, and predictors are characteristics of individuals and countries each year (Schmidt-Catran and Fairbrother, 2016). We estimate models that allow the intercept to vary randomly by country-year to account for any within-country variation in countries that have been observed in multiple waves. To include a genuine within-country estimator, we calculate and separately introduce the group-mean of our main predictor of interest (economic inequality) for each country, and then subtract each overall average from each specific country-year in order to analyse both cross-sectional and longitudinal associations between inequality and MPs support for redistribution. The cross-sectional and the longitudinal components of inequality are orthogonal to each other by construction, and thus their effects can be estimated separately (Fairbrother, 2014; Schmidt-Catran et al., 2019; Schmidt-Catran and Fairbrother, 2016).

To test whether support for economic redistribution is conditional on MPs' ideological leaning, we use cross-level interactive models that assume a random intercept and a random slope for the left-right and State versus market variables (see Heisig and Schaeffer, 2019). Given our interest in the cross-level interaction effects, we estimate the effect of the longitudinal component of inequality on the relationship between ideology and legislators' support for redistribution, which has been suggested to be more accurate to control for unobserved heterogeneity at both the individual and country-level (see Giesselmann and Schmidt-Catran, 2019).

Our sample includes a total of 2316 valid responses at the individual-level, and 34 observations at the country-year-level. For each model, we report regression coefficients (B) and confidence intervals (CI) at the 95% level. We focus our interpretation on confidence intervals and not p values as they have the advantage of reflecting the results at the level of data measurement (du Prel et al., 2009) and are better suited to understand the strength of the evidence and related implications (Cumming, 2008; Romer, 2020).⁹ All models were fitted using restricted maximum likelihood considering it offers more reliable estimates when level 2N is small (Schmidt-Catran et al., 2019). As a robustness check, we also report the results of fixed-effects models in Supplementary Materials (Table A4, Supplementary Materials).

Analysis and results

Before the multilevel models, we analyse our data descriptively. At the individual level, the evolution of legislators' redistributive preferences suggests an increase in support for redistribution over time (Figure A1, Supplementary Materials), but this pattern is not consistent between countries (Figure A2, Supplementary Materials). Furthermore, there is a negative relationship between support for redistribution and left-right positioning that seems consistent cross-nationally, both using the left-right and State versus market scales (Figures A3 and A4, Supplementary Materials).

At the country-level, we see a negative relationship between legislators' support for redistribution and the level of inequality (Figure A5, Supplementary Materials). Legislators from countries with the lowest levels of inequality (Venezuela, Uruguay, Argentina, El Salvador) have, on average, higher levels of support for economic redistribution. Conversely, legislators from some of the most unequal countries in the region (Colombia, Paraguay, Peru, Chile) have, on average, lower levels of support for economic redistribution.¹⁰ The correlation between the average Gini index and average levels of support for redistribution per country is -0.32 . However, decomposing into the cross-sectional and longitudinal components of economic inequality indicates that there is a stronger relationship longitudinally (Figure A6, Supplementary Materials), with a correlation of -0.47 .¹¹ Given that as Snijders and Bosker (2012: 60) put it, "it is the rule rather than the exception that within-group coefficients differ from between group coefficients", a negative correlation in both components is a solid starting point to substantiate this relationship. Yet, inferential techniques are needed to see whether this association holds when individual and country-level controls are included, as well as to test cross-level interaction effects between political ideology and economic inequality.

Table 1 presents the results of the hierarchical linear regression models. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) calculated after estimating a null model (a model with no predictors) indicates that more than 9% of the variance in the sample is located at the country-year level. In models 1 and 2, we introduce the left-right and State versus market measures, respectively, and the Gini index, without decomposing into its cross-sectional and longitudinal components. Models 3 and 4 account for separate cross-sectional and longitudinal effects of economic inequality. Finally, models 5 and 6 include an interaction term between the longitudinal measure of economic inequality and legislators' left-right/State versus market positioning, respectively. All models control for both the individual and the contextual-level predictors.

Models 1 to 4 suggest that, as expected, legislators' ideological leaning is strongly associated with levels of support for economic redistribution. Right-wing legislators ($\beta = -0.13$; 95% CI = $(-0.16, -0.11)$) and those who defend the market ($\beta = -0.12$; 95% CI = $(-0.15, -0.10)$) are less prone to support redistribution than their left-wing and pro-State peers. This effect holds when accounting for the individual and contextual-level controls. In supplemental analysis, we re-estimate the model controlling for a possible effect of MPs' membership to conservative parties (Table A5, Supplementary Materials).¹² Main results remain the same.

Models 1 and 2 further suggest that the Gini index is negatively associated with legislators' support for redistribution ($\beta = -0.03$; 95% CI = $(-0.07, -0.00)$). Although this

Table 1. The Effect of Inequality and Political Ideology on Legislators' Redistributive Preferences.

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Individual-level variables						
Left-right positioning	-0.13*** (-0.16 to -0.11)		-0.13*** (-0.16 to -0.11)		-0.14*** (-0.17 to -0.11)	
State-market positioning		-0.12*** (-0.15 to -0.10)		-0.12*** (-0.15 to -0.10)		-0.13*** (-0.16 to -0.10)
Female	0.10 (-0.02 to 0.22)	0.07 (-0.05 to 0.19)	0.10 (-0.03 to 0.22)	0.07 (-0.05 to 0.19)	0.10 (-0.02 to 0.22)	0.09 (-0.03 to 0.21)
Age	0.01*** (0.00 to 0.01)	0.01*** (0.00 to 0.01)	0.01*** (0.00 to 0.01)	0.01*** (0.00 to 0.01)	0.01*** (0.00 to 0.01)	0.01*** (0.00 to 0.01)
Education (graduate)	-0.04 (-0.18 to 0.11)	-0.02 (-0.16 to 0.13)	-0.04 (-0.18 to 0.11)	-0.02 (-0.16 to 0.13)	-0.04 (-0.18 to 0.11)	-0.01 (-0.16 to 0.13)
Education (postgraduate)	-0.06 (-0.22 to 0.09)	-0.02 (-0.18 to 0.13)	-0.07 (-0.22 to 0.09)	-0.03 (-0.18 to 0.13)	-0.07 (-0.22 to 0.09)	-0.02 (-0.17 to 0.13)
Incumbent party	0.11 (-0.01 to 0.22)	0.10 (-0.01 to 0.21)	0.11 (-0.01 to 0.22)	0.10 (-0.01 to 0.21)	0.11 (-0.00 to 0.23)	0.10 (-0.01 to 0.22)
Reelected	-0.16*** (-0.28 to -0.04)	-0.14*** (-0.26 to -0.02)	-0.16*** (-0.28 to -0.04)	-0.14*** (-0.26 to -0.02)	-0.16*** (-0.28 to -0.04)	-0.14*** (-0.26 to -0.02)
Elected representative	-0.11 (-0.23 to -0.00)	-0.10 (-0.21 to 0.02)	-0.11 (-0.23 to -0.00)	-0.10 (-0.21 to 0.02)	-0.11 (-0.22 to 0.01)	-0.10 (-0.22 to 0.01)
Designated representative	-0.05 (-0.16 to 0.07)	-0.06 (-0.18 to 0.05)	-0.04 (-0.16 to 0.07)	-0.06 (-0.17 to 0.06)	-0.03 (-0.14 to 0.09)	-0.05 (-0.17 to 0.06)
Country-year-level variables						
Gini index	-0.03*** (-0.07 to -0.00)	-0.04*** (-0.07 to -0.00)				
Gini index (cross-sectional)			-0.02 (-0.06 to 0.01)	-0.03 (-0.06 to 0.01)		
Gini index (longitudinal)			-0.12*** (-0.23 to -0.01)	-0.13*** (-0.25 to -0.01)	-0.04 (-0.17 to 0.09)	-0.07 (-0.19 to 0.05)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Public support for redistribution	-0.20 (-0.50 to 0.11)	-0.24 (-0.55 to 0.07)	-0.09 (-0.41 to 0.23)	-0.12 (-0.45 to 0.21)	-0.11 (-0.40 to 0.18)	-0.18 (-0.47 to 0.11)
GDP per capita (logged)	0.25 (-0.08 to 0.57)	0.23 (-0.11 to 0.56)	0.16 (-0.17 to 0.50)	0.13 (-0.21 to 0.48)	0.13 (-0.16 to 0.42)	0.10 (-0.18 to 0.38)
Level of democracy	-0.74 (-1.88 to 0.40)	-0.74 (-1.91 to 0.44)	-0.63 (-1.75 to 0.50)	-0.61 (-1.77 to 0.54)	-0.33 (-1.32 to 0.66)	-0.24 (-1.18 to 0.71)
Cross-level interactions						
Gini index (longitudinal) X Left-right						
Gini index (longitudinal) X State vs. market						
Constant	5.97*** (2.64 to 9.31)	6.33*** (2.89 to 9.77)	6.34*** (3.05 to 9.63)	6.73*** (3.36 to 10.11)	5.59*** (2.86 to 8.31)	-0.01 (-0.03 to 0.01)
Level 1 variance	1.61	1.60	1.61	1.60	1.60	1.58
Level 2 variance	0.10	0.11	0.10	0.10	0.04	0.01
Log-Lik. (full model)	-3,885.61	-3,880.80	-3,886.32	-3,881.31	-3,884.24	-3,874.98
ICC	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.02	0.01
N individuals	2,316	2,316	2,316	2,316	2,316	2,316
N country-years	34	34	34	34	34	34

GDP: gross domestic product; ICC: intraclass correlation coefficient.
 Confidence intervals (CI) at 95% in parentheses. Significance indicators are provided for comparability and transparency purposes. See Wasserstein and Lazar (2016) for a discussion on the meaning and limitations of *p* values.
 ****p* < .01, ***p* < .05.

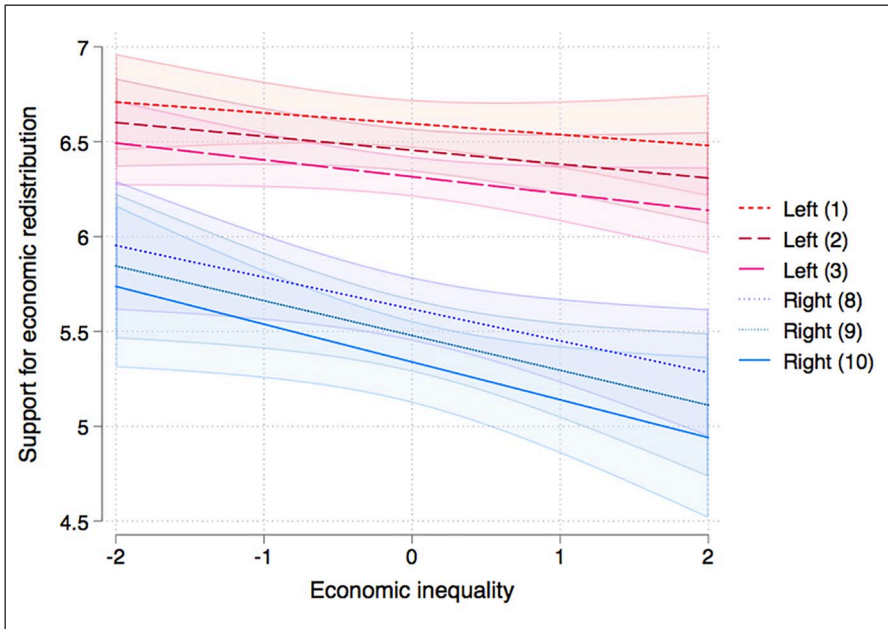


Figure 1. Support for redistribution, conditional on levels of economic inequality and left–right self-placement (95% CI).
 Source: Authors’ own elaboration.
 Results are based on model 5, including individual and contextual-level controls.

effect holds in both the mixed- and the fixed-effects models (Table A4, Supplementary Materials), decomposing into the cross-sectional and longitudinal portions of inequality allows us to avoid analysing this effect as an uninterpreted weighted average of both components (Schmidt-Catran and Fairbrother, 2016). Models 3 and 4 suggest that the association between economic inequality and MPs redistributive preferences is mainly longitudinal ($\beta = -0.12$; 95% CI $(-0.23, -0.01)$), not cross-sectional ($\beta = -0.02$; 95% CI $(-0.06, 0.01)$).

After assessing the general association between economic inequality and ideological positioning on legislators’ support for redistribution, models 5 and 6 test the interactive hypotheses proposed. These figures show the association between legislators’ left–right and State versus market ideological positions and their levels of support for redistribution, conditional on their country levels of economic inequality. To better understand these results, in Supplementary Materials, we present predicted redistributive preferences among left- and right-wing MPs, getting rid of centre/left–right ones and focusing on those with clear ideological allegiances: left-wing MPs (self-positioned in the range between 1 and 3) and right-wing MPs of (between 8 and 10) (Figures A9 and A10, Supplementary Materials). Considering our sample size, we also replicated the analysis including 90% CI (Figures A11 and A12, Supplementary Materials).

Figure 1 shows that as expected, right-wing legislators are less prone to support economic redistribution than left-wing ones. However, in contrast to H1, left-wing

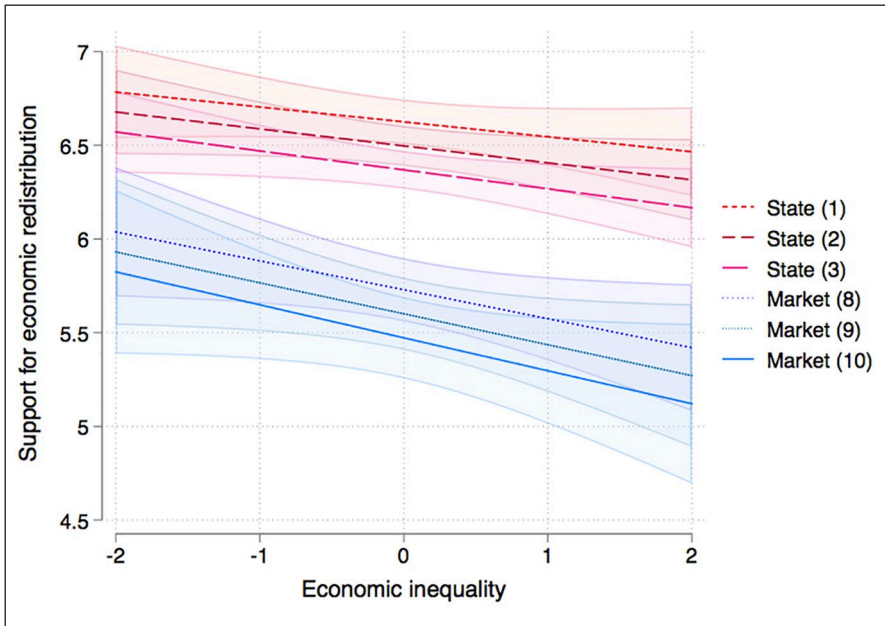


Figure 2. Support for redistribution, conditional on levels of economic inequality and State versus market self-placement (95% CI).

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Results are based on model 6, including individual and contextual-level controls.

legislators are less likely to support redistribution the higher the economic inequality is. The steeper negative slope for right-wing legislators (i.e. the stronger effect of inequality in this group) makes legislators' left-right ideological differences towards redistribution wider in countries with higher levels of economic inequality and narrower in contexts of lower inequality. Acknowledging that these results could be influenced by the imperfect association between left-right and State versus market preferences (Alcántara and Rivas, 2007), we also show results for the interaction using MPs' positioning on the latter.

Results in Figure 2 indicate that, as expected in H2, market-oriented legislators are less prone to support redistribution than State-oriented ones, and this effect tends to increase in contexts of higher inequality. However, and running against H1, we find that legislators who hold strong pro-State preferences are also less likely to support redistribution at higher levels of inequality. The effect is again stronger among legislators of the right.

Three main conclusions emerge from the analyses conducted so far. First, conservative legislators are less likely to support redistribution the higher the economic inequality is, regardless of how we measure political ideology (that is, using preferences about the intervention of the State in the economy or self-location in the left-right scale). Second, and in opposition to our expectations, higher levels of economic inequality are negatively associated with preferences for redistribution among both pro-State and left-wing and legislators. Third, redistributive differences between left-right and pro-State/pro-Market MPs are almost indistinguishable when levels of economic inequality are low.

Overall, there is no evidence to substantiate that legislators' support for redistribution will be higher in more unequal countries, regardless of how ideology is measured. Nevertheless, the substantive negative effect of economic inequality on attitudes towards redistribution must be put in context, as the highest plausible value for the effect associated with variations in the Gini index in support for redistribution is -0.7 (in a scale ranging between 1 and 7).

Discussion and conclusion

This study has explored the association between economic inequality and political elites' redistributive preferences, considering the moderating effect of political ideology. Our main findings suggest that economic inequality modestly influences legislators' preferences for redistribution: in contexts of higher economic inequality, Latin American legislators are less likely to endorse State intervention to reduce income inequality. This negative link is consistent across ideologically distinct groups, although it is particularly strong among right wing and pro-market legislators. Furthermore, this counterintuitive effect (Helfer et al., 2023) cannot be simply discarded arguing that left-wing legislators can be more focused on non-economic issues in the region, because the effect also exists for legislators who advocate for the intervention of the State in the economy. Thus, even if the data available does not allow us to find a definite answer to this puzzle, we speculate the effect can be explained by three main reasons.

First, it could be that the neoliberal paradigm is so deeply rooted in the region that even legislators who defend State intervention do not support a strong and decided intervention of the State in the economy (Yates and Bakker, 2014). Second, the increase in inequalities during the period under study might be embedded in a vicious cycle of State capture (that is, the process in which concentration of wealth at the very top enables the capture of democratic institutions; see Karl, 2019), making both right- and left-wing political elites more prone to mirror economic elites' interests in countries with high levels of inequality. Third, and somehow related, left-wing legislators may be well aware of both the difficulties and limitations of State intervention in highly unequal contexts, as well as of the political conflict that redistributive social policies tend to create against powerful elites and insider groups (Holland and Schneider, 2017; Kapiszewski et al., 2021; Roberts, 2021), which would make them less prone to support redistribution.

Thinking of the implications of our research, the explanations referred above tap into the idea of the inequality trap, defined as an enduring cycle in which rising concentration of income often leads to a more concentrated political power, making inequality harder to reduce (Kelly, 2020; Kelly and Enns, 2010; Rodríguez, 2004; Sánchez-Ancochea, 2020; Uslander, 2008). In this vein, the lack of redistribution in highly unequal societies might be explained not only by the size of the changes required and the technical complexity associated (Emmenegger, 2009; Lindvall and Rueda, 2014; Pilati and Perra, 2022; Roberts, 2021; Rueda, 2005), or by political elites being less redistributive due to the influence and privileged access of more affluent individuals (Gilens and Page, 2014; Lupu and Warner, 2022; Suhay et al., 2021). Our study indicates that the lack of redistributive behaviour among some politicians can also be affected by changes in their attitudes towards redistribution, rather than external pressure alone.

Despite the consistency of the associations shown above, four caveats of our study must be considered. First, our main effects are substantively modest in size. Even comparisons between the highest and lowest levels of economic inequality give us limited leverage to explain overall support for redistribution among MPs, which clearly calls for further studies on the topic. Second, our study builds upon data from Latin American countries. While this case-selection allows us to exploit variation in levels of inequality, the anchoring of the left–right scale can be different across countries and world regions (Freire and Kivistik, 2013). Therefore, further studies including other regions of the world are required to test the generalizability of the results presented here. These studies will ideally include a longer time frame that allows a more fine-grained consideration of within-country variation in MPs' support for redistribution, which is constrained in our sample due to data availability. Third, our comparative approach does not allow us to analyse in detail specific cases that can be useful to better understand the association between inequality and redistributive preferences. Case studies could be more effectively used to incorporate historic events in the narrative as well as to test an alternative explanation not explicitly considered in our paper: that high levels of inequality are in reality the outcome of economic policies designed and implemented by MPs who oppose redistribution. This explanation does not affect main results and implications of our paper (e.g. it does not affect and cannot explain why left-wing MPs oppose redistribution at higher levels of inequality), but it certainly adds a layer of the highest importance to explain the inequality trap mentioned above.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Recent studies, however, suggest that the extent to which elites are more responsive to the wealthy tends to vary considerably across countries (see Elkjær and Klitgaard, 2021).
2. This idea is in fact supported by abundant empirical evidence based on surveys and experiments (Carney et al., 2008; Graham et al., 2009; Kahan, 2013; Krosch et al., 2013).
3. More detailed information is available at <https://oir.org.es/pela/en/methodology/>
4. Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic, Uruguay, and Venezuela; see Table A1 Supplementary Materials for a display of the terms covered in each country, as well as the specific years of fieldwork and total number of interviewees.
5. “The State should implement firm policies to reduce income inequality between the rich and the poor.”
6. The SWIID employs the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) as the standard. For a full description of the SWIID, see <https://fsolt.org/swiid/>
7. “The (Country) government should implement strong policies to reduce income inequality between the rich and the poor.”
8. More information is available at <https://v-dem.net/about/v-dem-project/methodology/>
9. The general discussion on how to report regression results goes beyond the scope of this paper. See Greenland et al. (2016) or Hubbard and Lindsay (2008) for more information.
10. Figure A5 (Supplementary Materials) suggests that the cross-sectional association between inequality and legislators’ support for redistribution could be affected by a cluster of five countries (Paraguay, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Guatemala). Thus, in Figure A7 (Supplementary Materials), we report the same scatterplot included in Figure A5, excluding this group of countries. While the slope is rather flat using the cross-sectional measure, with a correlation of 0.14, it becomes steeper using the longitudinal measure, with a correlation of -0.63 (Figure A8, Supplementary Materials). These results further suggest that the association is mainly longitudinal.
11. To see the extent to which this association is dependent on outlier cases, we calculated this bivariate correlation 18 times, excluding each country at a time. Although it remained negative in all cases using both measures, it varied between -0.23 when excluding Colombia and -0.38 when excluding Brazil using the cross-sectional measure, and between -0.38 when excluding Honduras and -0.52 when excluding Peru using the longitudinal measure.
12. Recent evidence suggests that conservative parties often represent economic elites and tend to play an important role opposing to redistributive measures (Ziblatt, 2017). To control for a possible effect of legislators’ membership to a conservative party, we re-estimated the model including a dummy variable that groups legislators from conservative parties, based on the Political Representation, Parties and Presidents Survey (PREPPS) data set (Wiesehomeier et al., 2021). PREPPS includes a 20-point left-to-right scale (1 being radical left, and 20 radical right) for Latin American parties, which in our sample varies between 2.3 and 19.4. Since the median value for the parties included in our sample is 14.1, we created dummy variable (1 for MPs who are members of parties located over the median).

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Résumé

Malgré l'accumulation de preuves empiriques tendant à indiquer que les inégalités économiques influent sur les préférences des citoyens en matière de redistribution, ce lien reste peu documenté dans le cas des élites politiques. Cette étude vise à combler cette lacune dans la littérature existante en utilisant les données d'une enquête sur les élites menée auprès de plus de 2300 législateurs d'Amérique latine, une région où l'on trouve les niveaux d'inégalité les plus élevés au monde. Nous commençons par examiner l'association générale entre les inégalités économiques et les préférences des élites politiques en matière de redistribution. Dans un deuxième temps, nous nous concentrons sur l'effet conditionnel de l'auto-positionnement sur l'échelle idéologique gauche-droite. Nos résultats suggèrent une association longitudinale négative modérée entre les inégalités économiques et le soutien des législateurs à la redistribution. Conformément à nos attentes, les députés de droite et ceux qui privilégient le marché sont moins enclins à soutenir la redistribution lorsque les inégalités augmentent. Cependant, nous observons également cette tendance parmi les députés de gauche et ceux qui privilégient l'action de l'État. Les implications et les limites de nos résultats sont examinées dans la discussion finale.

Mots-clés

Amérique latine, députés, élites politiques, inégalités, politique de redistribution

Resumen

A pesar de la evidencia empírica acumulada que sugiere que la desigualdad económica influye en las preferencias redistributivas de la población, la investigación sobre esta relación entre las élites políticas sigue siendo escasa. Este estudio tiene como objetivo contribuir a llenar este vacío en la literatura utilizando datos de una encuesta que incluye más de 2300 legisladores de América Latina, la región con los niveles más altos de desigualdad en el mundo. Primero se examina la asociación general entre la desigualdad económica y las preferencias redistributivas de las élites políticas. En un segundo paso, se estudia el efecto condicional del autoposicionamiento en la escala ideológica izquierda-derecha. Nuestros hallazgos sugieren una modesta asociación longitudinal negativa entre la desigualdad económica y el apoyo de los legisladores a la redistribución. En línea con nuestras expectativas, los legisladores de derecha y los partidarios del mercado son menos propensos a apoyar la redistribución a medida que la desigualdad aumenta. Sin embargo, también encontramos este patrón entre los parlamentarios de izquierda y con orientación estatista. En el apartado de discusión se analizan las implicaciones y las limitaciones de nuestros resultados.

Palabras clave

América Latina, desigualdad, élites políticas, parlamentarios, políticas redistributivas