Preferences for Redistribution of Legislators: Survey Evidence from Three Countries *

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Abstract

We analyze original survey data of legislators in Colombia, Italy, and two Pakistani provinces to study determinants of preferences for redistribution. We examine the relationship between preferences for redistribution and individual-level variables that include legislator demographic characteristics, reasons for entering politics, and partisanship. We find that large majorities of legislators in all three countries have proredistributive preferences, as do ordinary citizens. Generally, legislators with more pro-social motivations for entering politics are also more favorably inclined towards redistribution. Partisan affiliations are also strongly and significantly correlated with preferences for redistribution in most places. We see mixed evidence that legislators with lower incomes are more pro-redistributive. We interpret these results to suggest that the views of elected representatives about redistribution tend to align with their values and partisanship, and that for these elites, redistributive preferences may be independent of their social positions. [146 words]

Keywords: Parliamentary representatives, political elites, preferences, redistribution

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1 Introduction

What do high-level elected public officials believe about redistribution and what shapes their preferences? These questions are consequential since elected officials help determine government policies that affect redistributive outcomes for the population at large. Although there is an extensive literature about citizen redistributive preferences (Alesina and Giuliano, 2011), we know less about elite preferences, especially outside European countries. In this note, we present original survey data to document and analyze legislator preferences in three countries located in different global regions. We show a consistent impact of partisanship, and thus the fundamental role of political organizations in shaping the economic policy preferences of elected officials. We also document the possible importance of pro-sociality as opposed to self-interest and the limited importance of immediate material self-interest.

Our sample consists of Italian, Colombian, and Pakistani national and/or first-level legislators. Our data allows study of correlates of attitudes towards redistribution. We group determinants into three theoretical buckets: measures of material self-interest, measures of motivations for political entry, and partisanship.

We find that most legislators report favoring redistribution. Parallel surveys of representative samples of citizens document that legislator preferences align with those of voters. In the domain of redistribution, we thus observe no "representation gap" between views of citizens and elected representatives. To our knowledge, ours is the first cross-regional study to corroborate this pattern, recently documented for European countries (Guenther, 2025).

Our main contribution is to extend research on elite attitudes to redistribution from a limited set of settings (Helfer et al., 2024; Márquez Romo and Marne-Marcos, 2025). We show that partisan affiliations are consistently associated with redistributive preferences. Given the heterogeneity in the strength of political parties and party systems in Italy, Colombia, and Pakistan — which suggests that partisanship only weakly aligns with economic policy preferences in Colombia and Pakistan — this is surprising. Our data analysis suggests that

partisanship plays an independent role above and beyond material determinants of redistributive preferences for legislators. In addition, we report some evidence showing that legislators with pro-social motivations for political entry may be more in favor of redistribution.

2 Expectations

We class theories of preferences over redistribution into three large buckets: characteristics that capture the material self-interest of the legislator; self-regarding versus pro-sociality motivations; and partisan affiliations.

Interest-based theories of redistributive preferences predict that they depend on how redistribution affects the individual's material interest. Elected legislators typically come from the upper segment of the income distribution and as a general rule, would oppose redistribution if their only consideration were policy effects on their immediate personal situation.

Since political elites enter the political realm precisely to represent the interests of others, their expressed preferences may encompass more than material self-interest. The second factor that we consider is the legislator's degree of pro-sociality; that is, the degree to which he weighs the interests of others against his own self-interest. We expect that legislators who are more pro-social will also express preferences that favor redistribution, since redistribution favors the median voter (cf. Fehr et al., 2022).

Finally, we consider the partisan affiliation of legislators. The left-right dimension in politics is traditionally organized around issues of redistribution (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). We expect that, all else equal, legislators affiliated with leftwing parties will be more proredistribution than those affiliated with center or rightwing parties.

These considerations lead us to investigate the following three hypotheses:

- H1: Legislators whose material interests will be helped/harmed by redistributive policies will favor/be opposed to redistribution;
- H2: Legislators who are less/more self-interested and more/less pro-social will be

less/more opposed to redistribution;

• H3: Legislators affiliated with parties of the left/right will be less/more opposed to redistribution.

3 Sample, survey design, and data collection

From 2022 through 2024, we targeted survey requests to all national-level representatives in Colombia, all national- and regional-level legislators in Italy, and all provincial-level legislators in the two Pakistani provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Punjab. The selection of countries was opportunistic, due to linguistic and other markers of access, but we deliberately included legislators from less developed countries to ensure global comparison. Literature contends that political elites in the Global South have low levels of commitment to redistribution (see López et al. (2022) and more generally Wilkinson (2007)) and we sought to assess this with original micro-level data.

The final sample consists of 46 Colombian, 117 Italian, and 291 Pakistani legislators, the latter divided into 116 from KP and 175 from Punjab; for details, see Table 1. Response rates ranged from 5 percent in Italy to 56 percent in Pakistan. We have only 45 observations from Colombia, and caveat that these results are likely to be fragile due to the small number. Results are representative by party in KP and Punjab and drawn from all parties in Italy, but unrepresentative by party in Colombia. See Table ?? for more information.

The parallel legislator and citizen surveys provide: (1) demographic characteristics (gender, age, education completed, household income, sources of income other than salary); and (2) partisanship. We also asked legislators for (3) reasons for entering politics, whether they harbored ambition to run again, and whether they had other family members in politics. For details, see Appendix ??. None of the material presented in what follows was pre-registered; all of it received Institutional Review Board approval or exemption.

Table 1: Descriptive information about surveys of legislators and citizens

Country/province	Subjects	Mode(s)	Number in pool	Response number	Response rate	Collection date
Colombia	Senators	in person	108	11	10%	May 2023 - March 2024
Colombia	Representatives	in person	188	35	19%	May 2023 - March 2024
Italy	Senators	email	461	11	2%	$\mathrm{Jun}\ 2022\mathrm{-Apr}\ 2023$
Italy	Deputies	email	863	22	3%	$\mathrm{Jun}\ 2022\mathrm{-Apr}\ 2023$
Italy	Regional legislators	email, phone	895	84	9%	$\mathrm{Jun}\ 2022\mathrm{-Apr}\ 2023$
Pakistan	KP MPAs	in person	145	116	80%	Jun-Nov 2022
Pakistan	Punjab MPAs	in person	371	175	47%	Jan–Feb 2023
Colombia	citizens	online	NA	1,000	NA	Mar 2023
Italy	citizens	online	NA	1,998	NA	Nov 2021
Pakistan, KP	citizens	online, in person	NA	1,484	NA	Nov-Dec 2021
Pakistan, Punjab	citizens	online, in person	NA	500	NA	Dec 2022

Notes: NA = not applicable. KP = Khyber Pahktunhkwa. MPAs = Members of the Provincial Assembly. Surveys were circulated in Spanish in Colombia; in Italian in Italy; and in English and Urdu in Pakistan. In Italy, we surveyed Senators and Deputies elected in 2018 (to the XVIII Legislature) and also in 2022 (to the XIX Legislature), because the latter elections occurred while our survey was underway. In-person survey responses were collected electronically via Qualtrics on enumerators' tablets. Vendors for citizen surveys: Colombia, Netquest; Italy, Lucid; Pakistan, Direct Focus Community Aid (DFCA). Citizens were selected to be representative by age, gender, income, and macro-region in Colombia and Italy and by rural/urban in KP. The Punjab citizen sample was collected entirely in the province's capital, Lahore. In-person KP citizen surveys were filled out on paper by enumerators and subsequently input electronically.

4 Legislator and citizens preferences for redistribution

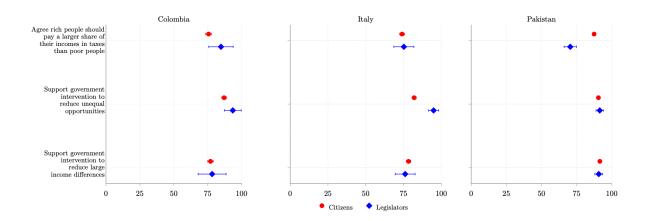
The measures we use to capture redistributive preferences are whether the respondent: (1) agrees that the rich should pay a larger share than the poor of their income in taxes; (2) supports government intervention to reduce unequal opportunities; and (3) supports government intervention to reduce large income differences.¹

The data depicted in Figure 1 show that more than 75 percent of both citizens and legislators in the three countries support progressive taxation, favor government intervention to reduce unequal opportunities, and support government efforts to reduce large income differences. In most cases, no statistically significant differences exist between preferences of citizens and those of legislators. In the few cases with significant differences — Italy, in response to the question about government intervention to reduce unequal opportunities and Pakistan, in response to the question about progressive taxation — the differences are substantively small.²

¹The first question is original to our survey; the second is taken from the General Social Survey; the third is from Alesina et al. (2018).

²We have been unable to locate survey data from Pakistan measuring citizen redistributive preferences

Figure 1: Shares of legislators and citizens favoring redistribution in three countries



5 Correlates of legislator preferences

To unpack individual-level legislator correlates of redistributive preferences, we analyze an index of preferences created using principal component analysis (PCA) of answers to the three questions reported above. In Table 2, we report regression results for the main theoretically-relevant determinants and standard control variables. Thanks to the large number of respondents, we are able to present results separately for each of the two Pakistani provinces. (For parallel results for citizens, see Table ??.)

5.1 Material Self-Interest

To measure material self-interest, we asked respondents if they had sources of income that captured inherited wealth or position. Specifically, we asked if they had income from land-holding (relevant in Pakistan), as a business owner, or from self-employment. We compare responses by these legislators to those who are professional politicians without visible signs

against which to compare the distribution we find. For Colombia, the 2017 World Values Survey (WVS) reports that the average respondent scored 6 on a 1 to 10 scale in answer to a question about whether the government should take more responsibility to ensure everyone is provided for (World Values Survey, 2017, p. 36), where higher numbers indicate greater support for redistribution. This is slightly higher than we find. In 2016, average Italian responses to the same question we asked were distributed almost identically (an average of 5.92 compared to our average of 5.87, reported in Table OA-13 of the online appendix of Alesina et al. (2018)); for response patterns across Europe, see Rueda and Stegmueller (2019, p. 25, fig. 1.3).

Table 2: Regression results for legislators' support for redistributive policies in three countries

	Colombia (1)	Italy (2)	Pakistan - KP (3)	Pakistan - Punjab (4)
Income: business/landholder	0.658	-0.620**	0.694	-0.830***
,,	(0.608)	(0.293)	(0.517)	(0.296)
Social vs private motivation	0.176	0.190*	0.364***	0.637***
P	(0.222)	(0.099)	(0.103)	(0.119)
Leftwing	0.915**	1.442***	(0.200)	(0.220)
	(0.392)	(0.367)		
5 Star Movement	(0.00-)	1.669***		
5 Star 1.10 (chieff)		(0.370)		
PTI		(0.0.0)	-0.182	0.596***
			(0.174)	(0.185)
Male	-0.744*	0.176	-0.141	0.414*
	(0.395)	(0.284)	(0.247)	(0.214)
Aged 35-49	0.810	1.190	-0.141	0.334
g	(0.842)	(0.941)	(0.258)	(0.379)
Aged 50 or more	0.918	1.711*	0.016	-0.011
0	(0.787)	(0.956)	(0.299)	(0.376)
College degree	-1.284**	-0.198	-0.120	-1.310***
	(0.581)	(0.308)	(0.246)	(0.391)
Plan on running again	0.279	0.364*	0.672	-0.164
0 0	(0.417)	(0.215)	(0.519)	(0.341)
Family member in politics	-0.054	0.094	0.407	-0.518***
J I I I	(0.494)	(0.288)	(0.299)	(0.190)
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Observations	41	92	108	173
Observations R^2	0.471	0.441	0.249	0.381
Ti.	0.471	0.441	0.249	0.361

Notes: The dependent variable is an index formed using principal component analysis. Standard errors in parentheses. * p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01.

of inherited advantage or personal wealth, with the idea that redistribution harms the former more than the latter.³

The regression results reported in Table 2 show that business owners and landholders are significantly less likely to support redistribution than those parliamentary peers without outside sources of income only in Italy and in Punjab. This resonates with a sociological literature that depicts Punjab as home to large landlords wielding economic and political power (Martin, 2016) but is surprising for Italy, which has seen considerable turnover of elected legislators in recent decades (Verzichelli et al., 2022). In Colombia and KP, legislators with markers of inherited wealth are no more likely than their peers to oppose redistribution.

³We also asked respondents for their total household income. However, income buckets were designed to capture differences for the population at large, so that anywhere from 80 to 100 percent of legislators fall into the highest category in each country (see Tables ?? and ??); thus, the measure is not relevant for comparing legislators to each other.

5.2 Pro-Sociality

The survey provided six possible motivations for entering public office and asked politicians to report the importance of each; thus, in principle, a respondent could report that all six were equally important (although no one did; for a visualization of the responses to all questions, see Figure ??). We focus on a subset of possible motivations to distinguish between answers that reflect pro-sociality ("to help those in need or serve others in my community") and those reflecting private self-interest ("the salary," "career opportunities or pension after holding office," and "less appealing opportunities in the private sector").⁴ To construct the pro-sociality measure, we take the (normalized) difference between these social motivations and measures of private interests. This construction accounts for the fact that almost all legislator respondents reported that they entered politics for pro-social reasons; we thus take this in relation to their expressions of self-interest.

Results in Table 2 show that in three of the four sites, legislators who are more prosocial are also more supportive of redistributive policies; the coefficient is positive but not statistically significant in Colombia, perhaps because of the small sample size. We interpret these results as capturing that elected officials are more interested in representing the average citizen than in their own material self-interest when the two conflict. However, we note that almost no respondents in Italy and very few in Colombia admitted to self-serving motivations for political entry, suggesting possible self-censorship (see Figure ??).

5.3 Partisanship

Finally, we turn to partisan determinants of redistributive preferences. We first face the problem that the Pakistani political spectrum is not arrayed on the traditional European-derived left-right dimension (Mufti et al., 2020); likewise, one of Italy's major political parties — the 5 Star Movement, or *Movimento 5 Stelle* — does not fit neatly on the left-right spectrum (Diamanti, 2014). In Table 2, we thus isolate the impact of affiliation with the Italian 5 Star

⁴The distinction draws on the literature that shows that different motivations for entering public service are important predictors of corruption (Hanna and Wang, 2017; Ashraf et al., 2020).

Movement and the then-governing Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Both political groupings emerged out of anti-corruption crusades, initially positioning themselves as redistributive although moving over time towards the political center. We expect both continue to attract politicians who express redistributive preferences but we are unsure how strongly.

Results in Table 2 confirm the importance of affiliation with leftwing parties in Colombia and Italy and with the 5 Star Movement and the PTI in Italy and Pubjab. Only in KP, where political conflict is traditionally organized along tribal lines (Lyon, 2019), does partisan affiliation not prove a statistically significant determinant of redistributive preferences.

None of the control variables emerge as systematically relevant to redistributive preferences across the four sites.

6 Conclusions

The original data analyzed in this note show that legislators who are more pro-social and less self-interested express greater redistributive preferences, as do legislators affiliated with leftwing or new anti-corruption parties. Landholders and business owners are generally opposed to redistribution, but otherwise our measures of self-interest do not emerge as significant determinants of redistributive preferences.

We offer two main interpretations. First, results suggest that pro-sociality may reflect an underlying ideological and social commitment to representing the interests of the median voter, although this should be followed up using other methods of eliciting legislators preferences, if possible.⁵ Second, we find that partisan affiliation is an important predictor of redistributive preferences in all but one site. This finding reveals the importance of political parties in organizing the policy preferences of political representatives and more generally, in organizing lines of political conflict. That this is true in Colombia — a country generally considered to have a weak party system — and in the province of Punjab in Pakistan — also

⁵We considered use of a list experiment but at the time were considering administering the survey by telephone and thought it would be too confusing to respondents.

considered a political unit with a weak party system that is not organized on the traditional left-right dimension — is surprising evidence for the need to reconsider the role of political parties in the global South.

We conclude with a reminder that we also found a high degree of pro-redistributive policy preferences among legislators and consistently close correspondence with citizen preferences. This new result asks for additional research on policy congruence in regions beyond that of western Europe.

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