

ECONOMIC RECESSIONS AND CONGRESSIONAL PREFERENCES FOR REDISTRIBUTION

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Abstract—We study if U.S. members of Congress who experienced an economic recession during early adulthood vote differently on redistribution-specific bills. We find that politicians who experienced a recession hold more conservative positions on redistribution, even compared to members of the same party. In light of recent empirical evidence showing that voters become more supportive of redistribution following a recession, our findings suggest that macroeconomic shocks might have a polarizing effect: recessions can create an ideological wedge between voters and their future representatives. We hypothesize and present evidence suggesting that this wedge might be explained by politicians' more privileged background.

I. Introduction

RECENT empirical evidence shows that U.S. citizens' support for redistributive policies increased in response to personal experiences of economic hardship during the Great Recession (Margalit, 2013) and that the impact of these experiences can be long lasting, since U.S. citizens who grew up during a recession are more supportive of redistribution later in life (Giuliano & Spilimbergo, 2014). These results have led to speculation in the popular press that the Great Recession will lead to big policy shifts toward greater government redistribution, not only because of a general movement of the electorate to the left, but also because "today's young adults become tomorrow's policymakers and thought leaders" (*Time*, 2009).

However, the assertion that the macroeconomic environment has the same effect on the preferences of both voters and the future political elites is neither obvious nor supported by empirical evidence. Indeed, U.S. voters differ from their representatives along a series of characteristics that could make them respond differently to the same macroeconomic shock.

One such difference is salient in the context that we study: politicians are more likely than the average citizen to come from an elite background (Carnes & Lupu, 2016; Eggers & Klačnjak, 2019; Thompson et al., 2019). Recent findings show sharply lower support for redistribution among elites (Fisman et al., 2015), and it is not clear *ex ante* if economic downturns would diminish or sharpen these differences. It is possible that rather than causing a general movement to the left for both voters and their representatives, recessions can have a polar-

izing effect, moving the preferences of voters and political elites further apart. The lack of evidence on how macroeconomic shocks affect politicians' position on government redistribution is a key missing piece in this debate. This paper moves a first step to fill this gap.

We study whether members of the U.S. Congress (MCs) who have experienced a severe economic recession during early adulthood take different positions on redistribution when voting in Congress from those who have not experienced a recession. We focus on politicians' experiences during their impressionable years, defined in social psychology as between the ages of 18 and 25, when individuals' core values and political beliefs are formed, remaining largely unaltered thereafter (Dawson & Prewitt, 1969; Krosnick & Alwin, 1989; Sears, 1975).

We focus on exposure to severe economic downturns, since these are the ones that should be salient in an individual's process of preferences formation. We focus on state-level recessions, as opposed to national ones, since in the latter case, we would be merely estimating differences in preferences for redistribution across different cohorts of MCs. To assign a state of residence to each MC for each year during the 18 to 25 age range, we create a novel data set by collecting biographical information on all MCs born after 1911. We measure an MC's preferences for redistribution using the ideology score associated with her roll-call votes cast on redistributive policies. To identify the impact of recessions on future MCs' preferences, we exploit cross-sectional and time variation in macroeconomic conditions, which allows us to control for both cohort effects and any unobservable state-specific factor that affects the preferences of future MCs.

Focusing on a politician's experiences during early adulthood allows us to investigate the association between macroeconomic shocks and a politician's own preferences. If we studied economic shocks that take place when politicians are already in Congress, we would not be able to disentangle the impact on politicians' preferences from that on their constituents, since these shocks would be perfectly correlated. This strategy minimizes concerns that the association we uncover is driven by a general movement to the right of an MC's electorate rather than of the MC herself.

We find that MCs who lived in a state hit by a recession when aged 18 to 25 are significantly more likely to have a conservative position on redistribution policies relative to other MCs in the same Congress. Importantly, we show that this result holds even if we compare only MCs from the same party, indicating that the impact of recessions is not solely driven by a larger Republican representation among recession-affected MCs. Additionally, we do not find any significant result for

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votes unrelated to redistribution, which suggests that experiencing a recession during one's impressionable years affects MCs' position only on redistributive issues, without being associated with a more general ideological shift.

We discuss possible mechanisms that could explain these results. In particular, the result could be explained by a selection channel, with economic recessions shaping the pool of future MCs by selecting individuals who are ex ante less supportive of redistribution. We provide two pieces of evidence that, although ultimately not excluding it, suggest that a selection channel is not likely to be a major mechanism underlying the findings. First, we show that recession-affected and non-recession-affected MCs do not differ along any available pretreatment characteristic that is likely to correlate with political preferences. Second, we do not find any effect of a recession experienced by an MC at other ages, which is consistent with the social psychology literature that identifies the impressionable years as those in which core individual beliefs and preferences are formed.

If recessions experienced during the impressionable years lead future MCs to change their preferences for redistribution, what might explain this polarizing effect of recessions between future politicians and the general electorate? In the last section of the paper, we put forward one potential explanation for the creation of this ideological wedge following negative macroeconomic shocks. We hypothesize that there may be heterogeneous effects in the response to a recession based on one's socioeconomic background. In particular, the individuals in our sample are more likely than the average citizen to come from a more affluent background (Carnes, 2013; Carnes & Lupu, 2016; Eggers & Klačnjaja, 2019; Thompson et al., 2019), and this may lead them to respond differently to a recession experience. This hypothesis squares with several theoretical arguments. In particular, it is consistent with differential belief updating and different personal experiences of a recession depending on one's socioeconomic background. We discuss these arguments in more detail in section IVB. We provide one piece of suggestive evidence consistent with this hypothesis: we show that the effect of a recession experience is stronger among MCs from more elite backgrounds, namely, those who obtained their bachelor degree from an Ivy League college and those whose parents were employed in an elite occupation.

Our paper adds to a long literature on the determinants of individual preferences for redistribution and political responses to economic shocks (see Alesina & Giuliano, 2011, and Margalit, 2019, for reviews) and is most closely related to Giuliano and Spilimbergo (2014) and Roth and Wohlfart (2018), who study the long-run effects on redistributive preferences of experienced recessions and inequality, respectively. Fisman, Jakiela, and Kariv (2015) and Margalit (2013) focus instead on short-term impacts of recessionary experiences on preferences for redistribution. More generally, the paper speaks to a growing literature on the role of macroeconomic experiences in the formation of beliefs and attitudes (Malmendier & Nagel, 2011, 2016) and of early life experi-

ences on political attitudes (Madestam & Yanagizawa-Drott, 2012; Fuchs-Schuendeln & Schuendeln, 2015). In showing the relevance of MCs' experience of an economic recession during early adulthood, our paper complements studies that have shown how politicians' voting records on specific issues are affected by their personal experiences (Gelpi & Feaver, 2002; Washington, 2008).

Our findings speak to the literature on the unequal responsiveness of U.S. legislators to the preferences of more- and less-well-off citizens (Bartels, 2008; Gilens, 2012). Carnes (2013) argues that part of this democratic deficit is due to the overrepresentation of more affluent citizens among U.S. political elites, whose personal preferences are more aligned with those of wealthier citizens. Our paper provides evidence that the ideological wedge between the average American voter and her representatives can be further exacerbated by the polarizing effect of macroeconomic shocks. Not only are political elites drawn from ex ante more conservative strata of society, but the way in which individual preferences for government intervention form in response to economic shocks differs between future politicians and the average voter.

II. Data

A. MCs' Biographical Information

We use the *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress* to manually collect biographical information on all MCs born after 1911.¹ We collect information on year and state of birth, the state where the MC attended high school, and, for each school attended after high school, the state of the school (or foreign country if abroad), the school name, the year of graduation (or the year when the MC left the school, if a degree was not obtained), and the degree obtained or pursued.

We use this information to assign a state of residence to each MC for each year during the 18-to-25 age range. We use information on the type and date of each degree to infer the year in which the MC joined a school, considering the typical length of a degree.² For the year-MC cases in which this procedure fails to assign a state of residence, we assume that the MC was residing in the state of the last school attended.³

We collect an array of additional biographical characteristics, which we describe as we introduce them.

¹The choice of 1911 is motivated by the fact that the data to compute the indicator for state-level economic recessions are available starting from 1929, as explained in the next section. Therefore, we focus on all MCs for which we can observe state-level economic growth data for their whole 18-to-25 age period.

²We consider the following lengths to complete a degree: four years for BA, PhD, and MD; 3 years for DCS, EDD, and JD; two years for AA, MA, MBA, and Rhodes Scholar; and one year for LLM, AMP, and Fulbright.

³For instance, if an MC obtained a BA when 21 years old from a school in Massachusetts and then obtained a JD when 25 years old from a school in New York, we assign Massachusetts as state of residence for the period 18 to 22 and New York for the period 23 to 25. For the 6% of MCs who did not go to college, we use information on the state where they attended high school.

B. MCs' Voting Records

We use House and Senate roll-call data for Congresses 76 to 113 from voteview.com. For each Congress in the sample and for each MC, we calculate the ideology score by applying the W-Nominate algorithm (Poole & Rosenthal, 1997) to the subset of roll-call votes related to redistribution, with higher values associated with more conservative positions. We use the Poole and Rosenthal 109 category-specific issue codes to define redistribution-specific roll-call votes. Specifically, we consider the following issue codes: (3) Tax rates, (8) Unemployment/Jobs, (15) Food Stamps/Food Programs, (18) Welfare and Medicaid, (26) Minimum Wage, (45) Education, (86) Social Security, (88) Housing/Housing Programs/Rent Control, (103) Medicare.⁴

We also construct a separate W-Nominate score calculated only among members of the same party, which we use in our analysis that exploits within-party variation.

It is important to underline that roll-call voting behavior is not only affected by an MC's personal preferences, but also by the party line and constituents' preferences. In our analysis, we try to isolate the role of personal preferences by exploiting only within-party variation and by controlling for voters' preferences.⁵

C. Economic Recessions

We construct a measure of state-level recessions using data on per capita personal income at the state-year level from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, which is available starting from 1929.⁶ We define a given state in a given year as being hit by a recession if its real per capita personal income growth is lower than -3.5% , the 10th percentile of the distribution across U.S. states from 1929 to 2008.⁷

Our definition of "recession experience" is motivated by three considerations. First, we focus on state-level recessions, as opposed to national ones, in order to leverage variation in exposure among MCs belonging to the same cohort. Second, we focus on severe cases of economic downturn since these are the ones that should be salient in an individual's process of preferences formation. Third, we use the same approach of Giuliano and Spilimbergo (2014), allowing us to directly compare the effects of a recession experience on the preferences of U.S. legislators in relation to U.S. voters.⁸

⁴We focus on the first dimension of the W-Nominate score.

⁵Comparing voters' preferences elicited through surveys and MCs' preferences elicited through roll-call voting behavior presents methodological challenges (Simonovits et al., 2019). An extensive literature in political science attempts to compare voters' and politicians' preferences by placing both on the same liberal-conservative scale (see Bafumi & Herron, 2010).

⁶Personal income is calculated before taxes, but it includes Social Security and other government benefits.

⁷The year 2008 is the one in which the youngest MC in our sample turns 25.

⁸For simplicity, throughout the paper, we use the term *recession* instead of *severe recession*, although the former is generally defined as any period of negative economic growth.

In appendix table A2, we show that this measure is a meaningful indicator of economic hardship. Using Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data on state-level unemployment from 1976 to 2012, we show that the recession indicator is associated with a sizable increase in the state's unemployment rate.

Figure A1 shows which states experienced a recession in each year, highlighting considerable variation in the presence of recessions across years and states.

We construct as our independent variable an indicator taking the value 1 if, over her impressionable years, the MC experienced at least one year of recession in the state(s) where she resided.

We restrict the sample of MCs and Congresses in three ways. First, we consider only MCs born after 1911, for whom we have recession data for the whole 18-to-25 age range. Second, we drop observations for the independent legislators in our sample. Third, in order to have a meaningful number of MCs in each Congress, we drop representatives before the 85th and senators before the 91st Congress.⁹ We are left with a total of 2,164 unique MCs and 28 Congresses. Appendix table A1 presents descriptive statistics for our sample.

III. Empirical Strategy and Results

A. Main Results

In order to estimate how experiencing a recession during the impressionable years affects MCs' voting behavior, we estimate the following model:

$$y_{ic} = \beta \text{Recession}_i + \sum_s \alpha_s + \gamma_{\text{birth}} + \gamma_{\text{birth}} \times \text{congress} + \lambda_c + \varepsilon_{ic}, \quad (1)$$

where y_{ic} is the redistribution-specific ideology score for MC i in Congress-chamber c . Recession_i is an indicator taking the value 1 if the MC experienced at least one year of recession during her impressionable years. The baseline specification includes Congress-chamber fixed effects, λ_c ,¹⁰ and year-of-birth fixed effects, γ_{birth} , which control for any unobservable cohort-specific factor, ensuring that we are not simply picking up generational trends common to MCs born in the same year; cohort-specific time trends, $\gamma_{\text{birth}} \times \text{congress}$, which help to rule out the possibility that MCs from cohorts experiencing more recessions are characterized by differential trends in some underlying characteristic correlated with their ideological leaning; a series of 51 indicators, α_s , one for each state (plus DC), taking the value 1 if the MC spent at least one year in that state during the 18-to-25 age range. These dummies control for unobservable state-specific factors that could

⁹That is, we drop chambers for which we have fewer than 100 representatives or 50 senators. We show in the appendix that results are unaffected by this choice.

¹⁰One indicator for the House and one for the Senate for each Congress.

TABLE 1.—RECESSION EXPERIENCE AND VOTING ON REDISTRIBUTIVE ISSUES

Sample:	(1) Redistr W-Nom All	(2) Redistr W-Nom All	(3) Redistr W-Nom (in party) All	(4) Redistr W-Nom (in party) All	(5) Redistr W-Nom (in party) Dem	(6) Redistr W-Nom (in party) Rep
Recession 18–25	0.072** (0.031)	0.085* (0.044)	0.087*** (0.032)	0.058** (0.022)	0.095*** (0.034)	0.075 (0.056)
Observations	12,705	12,705	12,625	12,625	6,846	5,779
R-squared	0.083	0.251	0.334	0.668	0.371	0.372
State 18–25 Dummies	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cohort FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cohort Trends	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Congress-Chamber FE	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Congress-Chamber-Party FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Congress-Chamber-Party-State FE	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Standard Deviation Dep. Var.	0.583	0.583	0.498	0.498	0.486	0.481

Standard errors in parentheses, clustered by MC and by state where impressionable. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, and * $p < 0.1$. For details on the specification, see section IIIA.

affect the preferences of future MCs who were residing in a state for some of their impressionable years.

Finally, we show results, including Congress-chamber-party fixed effects, to investigate whether a recession experience influences an MC's ideology relative to other members of the same party in the same legislature. Throughout the analysis, standard errors are double-clustered by MC and by the state where the MC spent most of her impressionable years.¹¹

Table 1 presents our main results. Column 1 shows the raw correlation between recession experience and ideology among members of the same legislature. Column 2 shows results for the specification with state-where-impressionable indicators, year-of-birth fixed effects, and cohort-specific time trends. The coefficient β is positive and significant (p -value = 0.056), implying a more conservative position. The effect is politically meaningful: having experienced a recession translates into an increase in the ideology score of approximately 15% of a standard deviation. In order to gauge the magnitude of the result, consider the median Democratic MC in the 113th House, Congressman John Yarmuth (KY), who has a value of the Redistribution W-Nominate Score of -0.72 . A movement away from him of 0.085 (the coefficient in column 2) in the redistribution-specific ideology score is equivalent to moving past 29 House members out of 200.

One possible interpretation of the results presented so far is that MCs who experienced a recession were more likely to enter the Republican Party than those who did not. In column 3, we replicate the analysis in column 2 exploiting only within-party variation. We are comparing, within the same legislature and party, MCs who experienced a recession during their impressionable years to MCs who did not.¹² Even after account-

ing for an MC's party affiliation, we find a large role played by a recession experience: MCs who experienced a recession have an ideology score that is 17% of a standard deviation more conservative than MCs from their same party. Therefore, the association between recessions and MCs' voting behavior on redistribution-related issues is not solely driven by a greater likelihood that recession-affected MCs choose to run for different parties.

In column 4 we further include Congress-Chamber-Party-State-represented fixed effects, restricting the comparison to MCs from the same party, representing the same state in the same Congress, assuaging concerns that results are driven by voters from states experiencing more recessions who are electing more conservative politicians. The magnitude and significance of the results are largely unaffected (p -value 0.011).

In columns 5 and 6, we separately look at MCs from the Democratic and Republican Parties, respectively. We find that the results are mostly explained by recession-affected Democratic legislators (even if we cannot reject the equality of the two estimated coefficients), consistent with a move to the right among the group of MCs who are on average more supportive of redistribution.

In the online appendix, we present an extensive set of additional results that show the robustness of our findings to different samples, variables definition, and clustering strategy.

B. Roll-Call-Level Analysis

In table 1 we are aggregating roll-call votes on nine issues related to redistribution. Which specific issues are more significantly affected by a recession experience? To answer this question, we estimate separate specifications for votes taken on each of the issues. To conduct this analysis, we cannot use the W-Nominate score as a measure of ideology, since calculating it requires a sufficiently large number of roll-call votes in each legislature. As an alternative, we conduct an analysis at the roll-call level. Specifically, for each vote on a

¹¹For about 6% of the observations, the MC spent the exact same share of her impressionable years in two different states. For these cases, we randomly pick one of the states for the purpose of clustering, but the results are insensitive to this choice. In table A4, we show robustness to alternative clustering.

¹²For the specifications leveraging within-party variation, we calculate a separate W-Nominate score for members of the two parties.

TABLE 2.—ROLL-CALL-LEVEL ANALYSIS

	(1) Vote Conservative	(2) Vote Conservative	(3) Vote Conservative	(4) Vote Conservative	(5) Vote Conservative	(6) Vote Conservative	(7) Vote Conservative	(8) Vote Conservative	(9) Vote Conservative
A: Redistribution Roll Calls									
Bill Issue	Unemployment Jobs	Food Stamps and Programs	Welfare Medicaid	Housing Programs Rent Control	Education	Minimum Wage	Social Security	Medicare	Tax rates
Recession 18–25	0.027** (0.010)	0.025* (0.013)	0.017** (0.008)	0.020*** (0.007)	0.014* (0.007)	0.019 (0.015)	0.003 (0.008)	0.000 (0.006)	−0.001 (0.006)
Observations	168,854	85,855	109,884	235,896	351,808	41,022	64,501	61,109	321,139
R-squared	0.651	0.612	0.678	0.681	0.711	0.602	0.734	0.813	0.718
Issue	8	15	18	88	45	26	86	103	3
Mean DV	0.438	0.391	0.476	0.444	0.528	0.486	0.636	0.548	0.557
Percent Change	0.061	0.065	0.035	0.045	0.026	0.040	0.0040	0.001	−0.001
B: Placebo Roll Calls									
Bill Issue	Homosexuality	Women Equality	Human Rights	Abortion	Immigration Naturalization	Voting Rights	Minorities	Narcotics	Foreign Policy
Recession 18–25	0.031** (0.013)	−0.004 (0.008)	−0.000 (0.007)	0.014 (0.021)	0.003 (0.006)	−0.002 (0.012)	0.004 (0.017)	0.006 (0.009)	0.009 (0.008)
Observations	31,880	55,717	46,996	134,186	152,565	33,375	9,709	102,123	160,659
R-squared	0.597	0.688	0.596	0.500	0.571	0.681	0.506	0.522	0.672
Issue	22	5	16	21	59	61	73	81	36
Mean DV	0.576	0.734	0.872	0.560	0.616	0.562	0.627	0.742	0.710
Percent Change	0.053	−0.005	0	0.024	0.005	−0.004	0.007	0.007	0.012

All specifications include State 18–25 dummies, cohort fixed effects, cohort trends, and Congress-chamber-party-roll-call fixed effects. Standard errors in parentheses, clustered by MC and by state where impressionable. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, and * $p < 0.1$. For more details on the specification, see section IIIB.

specific issue taken by an MC, we look at whether the MC voted in a conservative way, which we define as casting the same vote as the MC with the most conservative W-Nominate score (looking at the first dimension of the score) in that Congress-chamber. That is, we calculate the dependent variable $VoteConservative_{ipcv}$, which takes the value 1 if MC i , who belongs to party p , voted in the same way on roll-call v as the most conservative MC in her Congress-chamber c .¹³ We estimate the following model:

$$VoteConservative_{ipcv} = \beta Recession_i + \sum_s \alpha_s + \gamma_{birth} + \lambda_{pcv} + \varepsilon_{ipcv}, \tag{2}$$

where λ_{pcv} are Congress-chamber-party-roll-call fixed effects, so that we are comparing the position taken by recession-affected and non-recession-affected MCs from the same party on the same roll-call vote.

Panel A of table 2 reports the results, with each column focusing on one of the nine issues related to redistribution. We find the largest coefficients for votes on the issues of Unemployment/Jobs, Food Stamps/Food Programs, Welfare and Medicaid, and Housing/Housing Programs/Rent Control. On these issues, recession-affected MCs are between 3.5% and 6.5% more likely than non-recession-affected MCs to vote in a conservative way. Interestingly, and in line with our the-

oretical expectations, these issues are the ones most closely related to insurance against negative economic shocks.

In panel B of table 2, we consider a set of “placebo” categories of roll-call votes unrelated to redistribution.¹⁴ While many of these issues are ideologically divisive, we do not expect an MC’s position on these issues to be significantly affected by a recession experience. Reassuringly, only for roll calls in one out of these nine issues do we see a coefficient similar to the ones in panel A, while all the other coefficients are insignificant or have the opposite sign. This suggests that experiencing a recession during one’s impressionable years affects MCs’ position only on policies more directly related to redistribution, without affecting ideology more broadly.

IV. Mechanisms

In this section, we discuss possible mechanisms behind our findings.

A first possible mechanism hinges on the impact of recessions on the selection margin: economic recessions may shape the pool of future MCs by selecting individuals who are ex ante less supportive of redistribution. We present evidence suggestive of a limited role of this selection mechanism in section IVA.

Second, recessions could affect MCs’ voting behavior through their impact on the electorate’s preferences. While Giuliano and Spilimbergo (2014) show that recessions

¹³For the minority of cases in which the most conservative MC does not cast a vote on that roll call, we consider the second most conservative or third most conservative MC.

¹⁴To identify the most conservative MC for these issues, we use the second dimension of the W-Nominate score. Results are similar if we use the first dimension.

TABLE 3.—RECESSION EXPERIENCE AND PRETREATMENT CHARACTERISTICS

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	Female	Female	Minority	Minority	Ivy League	Ivy League	Elite Parents	Elite Parents	Relative in Congress	Relative in Congress
Recession 18–25	0.007 (0.018)	0.009 (0.017)	−0.038 (0.024)	−0.031 (0.021)	0.000 (0.020)	0.001 (0.019)	0.043 (0.070)	0.039 (0.068)	0.028 (0.019)	0.029 (0.019)
Observations	12,705	12,705	12,705	12,705	12,705	12,705	2,461	2,461	7,340	7,340
R-squared	0.134	0.154	0.147	0.235	0.450	0.453	0.191	0.207	0.173	0.175
Congress-Chamber FE	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Congress-Chamber-Party FE	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Cohort FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State 18–25 Dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Dep. Var. No Recession	0.106	0.106	0.110	0.110	0.085	0.085	0.317	0.317	0.022	0.022

Standard errors in parentheses, clustered by MC and by state where impressionable. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, and * $p < 0.1$.

experienced during the 18-to-25 age window move voters to the left, they also show some evidence that recessions experienced later in life lead to more conservative attitudes. As older voters are more likely to turn out to vote, this may have an impact on the identity of the candidates who decide to run. While this mechanism is plausible, we continue to find a significant association between recession experiences and voting behavior even when we compare MCs in the same Congress and party, who represent the same state, and thus face an electorate with the same preferences (column 4 of table 1).

Third, experiencing a recession during the impressionable years may have a direct impact on future MCs' preferences on redistribution. In section IVB, we discuss possible theoretical arguments that can rationalize the opposite effects of recessions on the process of preferences formation between future MCs and the general public.¹⁵

A. Evidence on Selection

If a selection mechanism explains our findings, we expect MCs who experienced a recession to differ from other members in the same Congress along several characteristics that correlate with conservative preferences. To shed some light on the relevance of this mechanism, we can test whether recession-affected and non-recession-affected MCs differ along any available pretreatment characteristic. First, we look at the MC's gender, a strong predictor of political preferences (Chaney et al., 1998; Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2004), collecting information on female MCs from the Office of Art and Archives of Congress. Second, we look at whether the college where an MC obtained her bachelor's degree was in the Ivy League. Third, we look at an indicator taking the value 1 for MCs from a racial minority group (African American, Hispanic, Asian Pacific) using information from the

¹⁵Recessions experienced during the impressionable years could influence future MCs' career and education choices, which may in turn affect their private incentives once in Congress. While the direction of this effect is ambiguous, this could push MCs rightward on redistribution-specific bills. Ultimately we cannot rule out this mechanism, but we do not find a significant effect of recessions when ages 18 to 21 on the likelihood of pursuing postgraduate education (coefficient 0.024, p -value 0.643).

Office of Art and Archives of Congress. Fourth, we look at whether the MC had relatives who served in Congress, using information from the McKibbin (1979) ICPSR data. Finally, we look at whether an MC's parent's occupation qualified as an elite occupation (e.g., business manager, lawyer, politician), using information from the Congressional Leadership and Social Status (CLASS) data set (Carnes, 2016).¹⁶ Using this data set, Grumbach (2015) shows that MCs with upper-class parents are significantly more conservative. A drawback of these two last variables is that these data sets cover only a subset of Congresses (76th to 94th and 106th to 110th, respectively), limiting the sample size in these regressions. In table 3, we use equation 1, to test whether recessions predict any of these pretreatment characteristics. Results suggest that in states and cohorts that experience a recessions, we do not see an overrepresentation of MCs who were ex ante more or less likely to support redistribution.

As a second piece of evidence on the selection mechanism, we test whether an MC's experience of a recession outside the 18-to-25 age range also affects her positions on redistributive issues. If experiencing a recession directly affects future MCs' preferences, we expect our findings to be specific to recessions experienced in the preference-forming years (the 18-to-25 age range); in other words, recessions experienced at other ages should have no effect on MCs' ideological positions over redistribution. This would be consistent with the "impressionable years" literature in social psychology, which shows that experiences and events occurring at different ages have a less important role in the formation of an individual's views of the world. If instead recessions affect the pool of future MCs from a given state and cohort by selecting individuals who were ex ante systematically less supportive of redistribution, we have no reason to believe that the impressionable years period should be the only important period shaping the pool of future MCs: we would expect to find a significant impact of recessions even when experienced during other age ranges.

¹⁶Appendix table A8 reports the list of occupations and their classification as elite or nonelite. The CLASS data set records up to three occupations for each main breadwinner. The occupations of about 10% of parents in the sample cannot be classified as elite or nonelite. Our variable *Elite Parents* is the share of an MC's parents' occupations classified as elite.

TABLE 4.—RECESSION EXPERIENCE IN OTHER AGE RANGES

Sample:	(1) Redistr W-Nom All	(2) Redistr W-Nom All	(3) Redistr W-Nom (in party) All	(4) Redistr W-Nom (in party) All	(5) Redistr W-Nom (in party) Dem	(6) Redistr W-Nom (in party) Rep
A: Recession when 10–17 years of age						
Recession 10–17 (state of high school)	–0.023 (0.051)	–0.031 (0.047)	0.006 (0.032)	0.001 (0.033)	0.059 (0.045)	–0.041 (0.043)
Observations	12,435	12,435	12,358	12,358	6,652	5,706
R-squared	0.081	0.252	0.354	0.669	0.406	0.381
State of high school Dummies	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cohort FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cohort Trends	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Congress-Chamber FE	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Congress-Chamber-Party FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Congress-Chamber-Party-State FE	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Standard Deviation Dep. Var.	0.584	0.584	0.497	0.497	0.487	0.480
B1: Recession when 26–33 years of age (in state of last college)						
Recession 26–33 (state of last college)	0.011 (0.051)	–0.030 (0.046)	–0.056* (0.031)	–0.043 (0.029)	–0.028 (0.040)	–0.072 (0.046)
Observations	12,705	12,705	12,625	12,625	6,846	5,779
R-squared	0.080	0.235	0.331	0.666	0.369	0.355
State of last college Dummies	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cohort FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cohort Trends	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Congress-Chamber FE	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Congress-Chamber-Party FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Congress-Chamber-Party-State FE	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Standard Deviation Dep. Var.	0.583	0.583	0.498	0.498	0.486	0.481
B2: Recession when 26–33 years of age (in state represented)						
Recession 26–33 (state represented)	0.003 (0.046)	–0.053 (0.043)	–0.045 (0.034)	–0.041 (0.033)	–0.045 (0.033)	–0.061 (0.051)
Observations	12,705	12,705	12,625	12,625	6,846	5,779
R-squared	0.080	0.278	0.405	0.657	0.453	0.464
State represented Dummies	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Cohort FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cohort Trends	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Congress-Chamber FE	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Congress-Chamber-Party FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Congress-Chamber-Party-State FE	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Standard Deviation Dep. Var.	0.583	0.583	0.498	0.498	0.486	0.481

Standard errors in parentheses, clustered by MC and by state where impressionable. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, and * $p < 0.1$.

Table 4 presents the results for recessions experienced by MCs during two other eight-year periods in life. Panel A shows the results for the 10-to-17 age period, while panels B1 and B2 display the results when we consider the 26-to-33 age period.¹⁷ Recessions experienced in these two age ranges have no impact on MCs' preferences for redistribution. The point estimates are small, mostly statistically insignificant, and not robust across different specifications.

While we cannot provide conclusive evidence on the absence of any effect of recessions during early adulthood on the selection into a political career of individuals who were ex ante systematically less supportive of redistribution, we see

¹⁷In panel A, we consider an MC as living, between 9 and 17 years of age, in the state where she graduated from high school. Since we do not have clear information on where an MC was living between 26 and 33 years of age, in panel B1 we consider the MC as living in the state where she attended the last college in the 18-to-25 years of age period, and in panel B2, we assume the MC lives in the state she represents in Congress.

these results as suggestive of a limited role of this mechanism in explaining our findings.¹⁸

B. Explaining the Wedge between Voters and Representatives

If recessions experienced during the impressionable years period have an opposite impact on the preferences of future MCs and the general electorate, moving the former to the right and the latter to the left on redistributive issues, what explains this difference?

In this section, we put forward one potential reason behind this polarizing effect. Specifically, we advance the hypothesis that the impact of negative economic shocks on the formation

¹⁸Alternatively, recession experiences may affect a candidate's decision to select a specific party, increasing the likelihood of entering the Republican Party for reasons unrelated to a change in preferences. While this is theoretically possible, we show that the result is present when we exploit only within-party variation.

of individuals' political preferences may present heterogeneous effects based on socioeconomic background. Relative to ordinary citizens, future politicians come on average from more affluent backgrounds: during the 1999-to-2008 period, almost every member of Congress held a college degree, and only 20% grew up in a working-class home, compared to 65% of all American citizens (Carnes, 2013). Future MCs' parents earned more than twice as much and were more than six times as likely to hold a college degree when compared with the general American population (Thompson et al., 2019). This hypothesis squares with several theoretical arguments.

First, in a postmaterialist values framework (Inglehart, 1990), early life experiences of economic hardship will emphasize people's materialism later in life, leading them to place more importance on material well-being and physical security over postmaterialist values. While recessions make everyone more materialistic, this effect will vary depending on one's economic background: high-income materialists will be more averse to redistribution, while low-income materialists will support more redistribution, being the ones poised to benefit from it (Inglehart, 1990).

Second, future politicians and average citizens are likely to experience a recession differently. For the latter, a recession is likely to be associated with the conditions in Margalit (2013), that is, a direct experience of economic hardship such as the loss of employment. Because of their different socioeconomic backgrounds, future politicians are more likely to be insulated from the direct effects of the recession and to see the government response to the recession as wasteful spending (Thal, 2017, 2019).

Third, in line with theory and evidence from political psychology and economics, people who start from different prior beliefs are likely to process the same information differently (Baliga et al., 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2006), by evaluating supportive arguments as stronger and by placing greater emphasis on aspects of the evidence confirming preexisting views because of confirmation bias. Accordingly, citizens coming from a more affluent background—and therefore with more conservative political beliefs (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005; Cohn et al., 2019)—may be more likely to blame the government for the negative economic outcomes and react to the recession by increasing their aversion to government intervention in the economy.¹⁹

Finally, individuals who managed to become successful citizens despite having lived through a recession when young will be more likely to believe that effort matters more than luck to achieve economic success, a belief negatively correlated with support for redistribution (Alesina & Angeletos, 2005).

While MCs come on average from affluent backgrounds, there exists variation in the social class they grew up in. If our hypothesized mechanism is correct, the reduced support

for redistribution following a recession experience should be stronger among MCs from more elite backgrounds.²⁰

As a first measure of elite background, we use the indicator for whether the MC obtained her bachelor's degree from an Ivy League college. An advantage of this measure is that it is available for the whole sample.

As a second measure of elite background, we use an MC's parent's occupation from the CLASS data set (Carnes, 2016). We rely on both our own coding of occupational categories as elite or nonelite (the variable *Elite Parents* described in section IVA), and on a variable relying on the prestige score assigned to each occupation by the U.S. Census. Specifically, we manually match each of the 722 specific occupations in the CLASS data set to the list of 1980 U.S. Census occupational codes, obtaining information on the prestige score of the occupation.²¹ We then define the indicator variable *Elite Parents Census*, which takes the value 1 if the MC's parent's most prestigious occupation falls in the top 20% of the distribution of occupational prestige scores in our sample.

Table 5 shows heterogeneous treatment effects along these dimensions. Among MCs who received a bachelor's degree from an Ivy League college, we find a large impact of a recession experience during the impressionable years (columns 1 to 3): MCs with a recession experience vote significantly more conservatively on redistribution-related issues (the effect ranges between 49% and 63% of a standard deviation, depending on the specification). Conversely, among MCs who did not receive a bachelor's degree from an Ivy League college, the effect is significantly smaller and marginally insignificant.

Columns 4 to 9 report heterogeneous effects in parental background. MCs whose parents had elite occupations exhibit stronger responses to recessions experienced during the impressionable years. The coefficient on the interaction term is statistically significant when we use the *Elite Parents Census* indicator.²²

V. Conclusion

Recent evidence shows that experiences of negative economic shocks early in life have a long-term positive impact on support for redistribution. This paper finds an opposite effect focusing on the universe of American MCs born after 1911: MCs who experienced a recession during their impressionable years are differentially more likely to have a conservative

²⁰ Although we are not aware of a survey measuring redistributive preferences of elite American voters that we can use for our analysis, tables 7 and 8 in Giuliano and Spilimbergo (2014) suggest that individuals with higher educational attainment responded less to a recession experience.

²¹ The list of the 1980 U.S. Census occupational codes and the associated NORC/GSS prestige scores are available at https://gss.norc.umd.edu/documents/codebook/GSS_Codebook_AppendixF.pdf.

²² Importantly, MCs classified as nonelite come on average from an affluent background relative to the average citizen. For instance, virtually all (94%) the MCs in our sample attended college. As a consequence, we do not necessarily expect the coefficient on "Recession 18–25" to have a negative sign.

¹⁹ This resonates with recent evidence pointing toward a decrease of trust in government following negative economic shocks (Algan et al., 2017; Guiso et al., 2017).

TABLE 5.—THE EFFECT IS DRIVEN BY MCs WITH AN ELITE BACKGROUND

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	Redistr W-Nom	Redistr W-Nom	Redistr W-Nom	Redistr W-Nom	Redistr W-Nom	Redistr W-Nom	Redistr W-Nom	Redistr W-Nom	Redistr W-Nom
Recession 18–25 × Ivy League	0.318*** (0.075)	0.310*** (0.076)	0.227*** (0.071)						
Recession 18–25 × Elite Parents				0.201 (0.126)	0.199 (0.126)	0.167 (0.135)			
Recession 18–25 × Elite Parents Census							0.530*** (0.133)	0.544*** (0.137)	0.293** (0.143)
Recession 18–25	0.050 (0.044)	0.056 (0.043)	0.058 (0.045)	−0.022 (0.085)	−0.015 (0.086)	−0.019 (0.091)	−0.005 (0.085)	−0.002 (0.086)	0.014 (0.085)
Ivy League	−0.132*** (0.040)	−0.115*** (0.042)	−0.049 (0.038)						
Elite Parents				0.133** (0.056)	0.133** (0.056)	0.168** (0.072)			
Elite Parents Census							−0.112 (0.077)	−0.114 (0.078)	−0.054 (0.098)
Observations	12,705	12,705	12,705	2,461	2,461	2,461	2,312	2,312	2,312
R-squared	0.240	0.256	0.442	0.313	0.322	0.529	0.314	0.322	0.527
Congress-Chamber FE	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Congress-Chamber-State FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Cohort FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State 18–25 Dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cohort Trends	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
SD DV	0.583	0.583	0.583	0.662	0.662	0.662	0.662	0.662	0.662

Standard errors in parentheses, clustered by MC and by state where impressionable. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, and * $p < 0.1$.

position on redistribution policies compared to members of the same party in the same legislature. We hypothesize that the overrepresentation of affluent citizens among U.S. MCs, together with the presence of heterogeneous effects in the response to a recession experience, may be an explanation for our findings.

Our paper highlights the presence of a novel channel through which macroeconomic shocks can have an impact on policymaking by shaping future political elites' views on redistribution. Our findings suggest that economic recessions can create a wedge between voters and their future representatives by moving their preferences in opposite directions. In light of this evidence, it would be interesting to conduct a more thorough analysis of the ways in which the effect of macroeconomic shocks on preference formation differs across different groups of citizens.

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