WHAT DO PARTISAN DONORS WANT?

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Abstract   Influential theories indicate concern that campaign donors exert outsized political influence. However, little data have documented what donors actually want from government, and existing research has devoted less attention to donors' views on individual issues. Findings from an original survey of US donors, including an oversample of the largest donors, and a concurrently fielded mass survey document significant heterogeneity by party and policy domain in how donors' and citizens' views diverge. We find that Republican donors are much more conservative than Republican citizens on economic issues, whereas their views are similar on social issues. By contrast, Democratic donors are much more liberal than Democratic citizens on social issues, whereas their views are more similar on economic issues. Both parties' donors, but especially Democratic donors, are more pro-globalism than their citizen counterparts. We replicate these patterns in an independent dataset. Our findings have important implications for the study of American politics.

Members of Congress are advised to spend nearly half their working hours raising money from large-dollar donors (Grim and Siddiqui 2013), putting them in constant touch with a narrow slice of the US population: under 1 percent of Americans donate over $200 in any given election cycle (Center for Responsive Politics n.d.). Yet, even as influential theories express concern about donors' potentially outsized influence on policy (e.g., Hacker and Pierson 2011), remarkably little is known about what they actually want from

government, particularly compared to the massive amount of survey data collected on the opinions of ordinary citizens and even politicians themselves.[1] To inform theoretical and substantive research on donor influence, this research note provides a more detailed account of donors' policy preferences.

To date, scholars have largely conceived of donors' views on a single ideological dimension. Prior research (e.g., Bafumi and Herron 2010; Hill and Huber 2017) documents that the "donor class" in each party is more extreme than citizens of that party on this overall dimension. We break new ground with findings about donors' views specific to each party in multiple policy domains. To the best of our knowledge, this heterogeneity has heretofore not been reported.

To do so, we build on previous efforts to interview donors to political campaigns (these studies are described in Online Appendix A). We analyze an original survey of partisan donors ($n = 1,152$), whom we define as those who give to only one political party, and who constitute the vast majority of individual donors (Li 2018). Unique to our survey is that it included an oversample of 495 of the top 1 percent of donors. The respondents to our survey collectively contributed over $17.2 million to campaigns since 2008. We compare donors' views to the benchmark of partisan citizens' views measured in a separate original survey. This comparison allows us to assess how donors are different from citizens of the same party—the most comparable group in the public, and to whom politicians may be more responsive were donor influence to decline (Lax, Phillips, and Zelizer 2019).

Our data reveal extremely large differences between the political views of partisan donors and mass partisans; however, these differences dramatically vary by party and policy domain (economic policy, social policy, and globalism). By advancing an understanding of donors' preferences that makes distinctions between the parties and between policy domains, our work can help significantly refine theoretical and substantive understandings of donors' views and potential influence, as well as point the way toward possibilities for future research to understand the mechanisms that generate the distinctive views held by each party's donor class.

Survey of Political Donors

We were able to conduct a survey focused on partisan donors thanks to the data Bonica (2014) made available, which join donor histories across many years, allowing us to identify donors who consistently give to only one party regardless of who controls government. To recruit donors to our survey, we constructed a sampling frame based on data from Bonica (2014): the names and addresses of all disclosed political donors in the US, updated for giving in 2016. We then

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1. Our work is related to but distinct from the literature that has documented affluent Americans' views (e.g., Gilens 2012).

selected all donors who, according to the Bonica (2014) data, since 2008 have given a disclosed donation to any campaign affiliated with one party but, at any time since 1978, had never given a disclosed donation to a campaign affiliated with the other party. Among this group, we computed the total amount each donor had donated from 2008 to 2016 and allocated the top 1 percent of donors to a "super-elite" stratum and all others to a "bottom 99 percent" stratum. The average donor in the top 1 percent strata gave $37,447 in disclosed donations during 2008–2016. Finally, within each party, we randomly sampled 4,100 donors from each stratum (a recruitment sample with $n = 16,400$). To recruit these donors to our survey, we sent them a letter in February 2017 at the address associated with their donations. The letter directed donors to a website where they could enter a unique identifying code and respond to the survey.

The AAPOR RR1 response rate for the door survey was 7.0 percent. The response rate among Democratic donors was 10.8 percent, and the response rate among Republican donors was 3.2 percent. Table 1 compares the donor recruitment sample and survey respondents on observable characteristics (see Online Appendix E for additional descriptive statistics related to donors' contributions and geography). The donor sample is generally closely representative of the recruitment sample on many characteristics. The exception is that very large donors were less likely to respond to the donor survey. Thankfully, we oversampled very large donors in anticipation and so still have responses from 495 of them.

Survey of the US Mass Public

To compare donors with mass partisans, we also gathered 1,636 survey responses from the US mass public from Survey Sampling International. We

Table 1. Characteristics of partisan donors who were recruited, and those who responded to survey

	Recruited to participate (with oversample)	Respondents
Total donated since 2008 (mean)	$19,002	$14,967
# donations since 2008 (mean)	32.8	55
Top 1% of donors by amount	50%	43%
White	93%	94%
Male	59%	61%
Self-reported age (mean)	Unknown	63
Self-reported millionaire?	Unknown	52%
N	16,400	1,152

NOTE.—Race and gender are estimated from last and first names. The white category refers to non-Hispanic whites.

drew a quota sample to achieve benchmarks on education, gender, race, and party identification. This mass survey launched the same week that the survey invitations arrived to donors by mail; the median response date to the mass and donor surveys was two days apart. The quota sample is generally similar to the American National Election Studies and the American Community Survey on key demographic variables.

Question wording for the policy-preference items for the three policy domains can be found in the appendix. We preregistered which survey items would be used to construct each of three issue indices. For ease of interpretation, we rescaled every item to range from 0 to 1 and then averaged responses to the rescaled items in each area into an additive index. The *economic issues* index consists of five items on issues such as taxation and increasing government spending on various public programs. The *social issues* index comprises four items related to gay marriage, the death penalty, gun control, and abortion. The globalism index consists of four items on issues related to trade, immigration, and whether the US should focus on problems at home or abroad. The economic and social items and indices were coded to lie between 0 (most liberal) and 1 (most conservative). The globalism items and indices were coded to lie between 0 (most pro-globalism) and 1 (most anti-globalism).

Our goal was to assign items to indices based on the theoretical priors specified in the preanalysis plan (see Online Appendix H). An alternative approach would be to simply assign all items to a single additive index of liberal-conservative ideology, which is what an atheoretical exploratory factor analysis may recommend (Broockman 2016). If donors and mass partisans do not differ across issue domains and a single dimension were sufficient to capture their views, then little heterogeneity should emerge in the results across our *ex ante* prespecified policy domains. That is, any bias from inappropriately assigning variables to separate indices that tap the same latent constructs should bias us away from finding heterogeneity across issue domains. However, as discussed in the next section, we do indeed observe important heterogeneity across issue domains. A confirmatory factor analysis of our measurement model can be found in Online Appendix B.[2]

We also replicate our findings in an independent dataset Hill and Huber (2017) collected by merging donation records to the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). We preregistered which items in these data would be used to form each policy index as well as the hypotheses in both datasets (see Online Appendix H). These tests represent a conceptual—rather than exact—replication, as they rely on different items and the survey was

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2. Higher random measurement error in the mass public responses could also make mass partisans appear more moderate than donors across all issue domains in both parties. However, there appear to be systematic sources of heterogeneity that cannot be accounted for by measurement error per se: Our principal conclusions regard how the differences between mass partisans and donors vary by issue domain and party, differences simple random measurement error in the mass survey responses could not easily generate.

conducted at a different point in time. This is a strength, not a weakness; if our findings replicate in this different dataset, they likely are not confined to the scope of our particular sample and questionnaire.

The results presented in the main text are unweighted, and weighted results appear in Online Appendices C and D. The weighted results are similar, and in fact usually stronger.

Results

Figure 1 shows the mean difference between donors and mass partisans by item in each of the three policy domains. Points farther to the right indicate instances where donors are more conservative than citizens in their party, whereas points farther to the left indicate instances where donors are more liberal than citizens in their party. Each subfigure shows individual issues in one of the three policy domains. The last row in each subfigure gives the mean
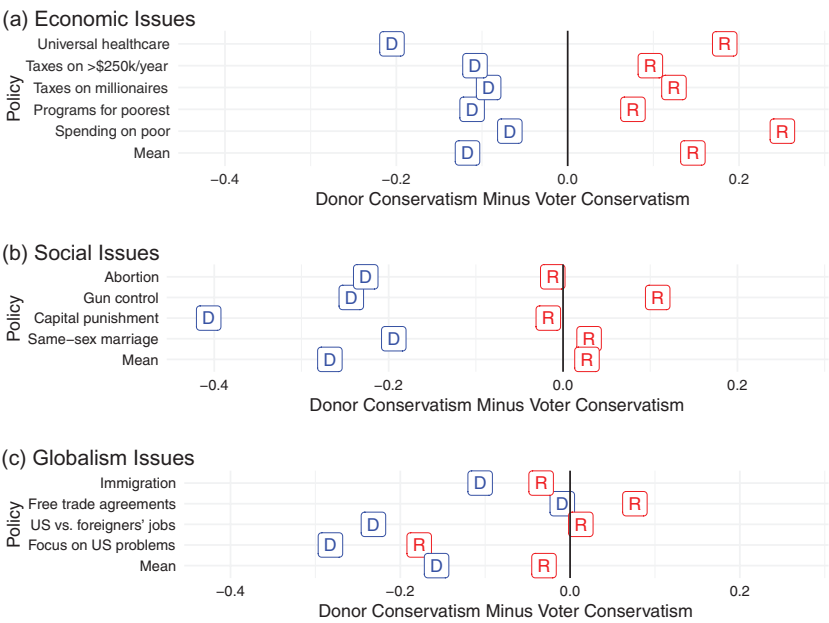

Figure 1. Mean differences between donors and citizens on individual items. Each point shows the average difference between donors and mass partisans (difference between donors and voters for Democrats = D, Republicans = R). Each row shows this difference on an individual issue; the last row of each subfigure shows the average difference on an additive index formed from these issues.

difference in each policy domain, averaging together responses to the individual issue items shown just above. Figure 2A also summarizes the differences between donors and mass partisans by policy area, showing the mean among donors with a $ and mass partisans with an M.

We first examine Republicans. According to figure 1A, Republican donors are, on average, 0.15 units more conservative on economic issues than Republican mass partisans. For example, 52 percent of Republican donors strongly disagree that the government should make sure all Americans have
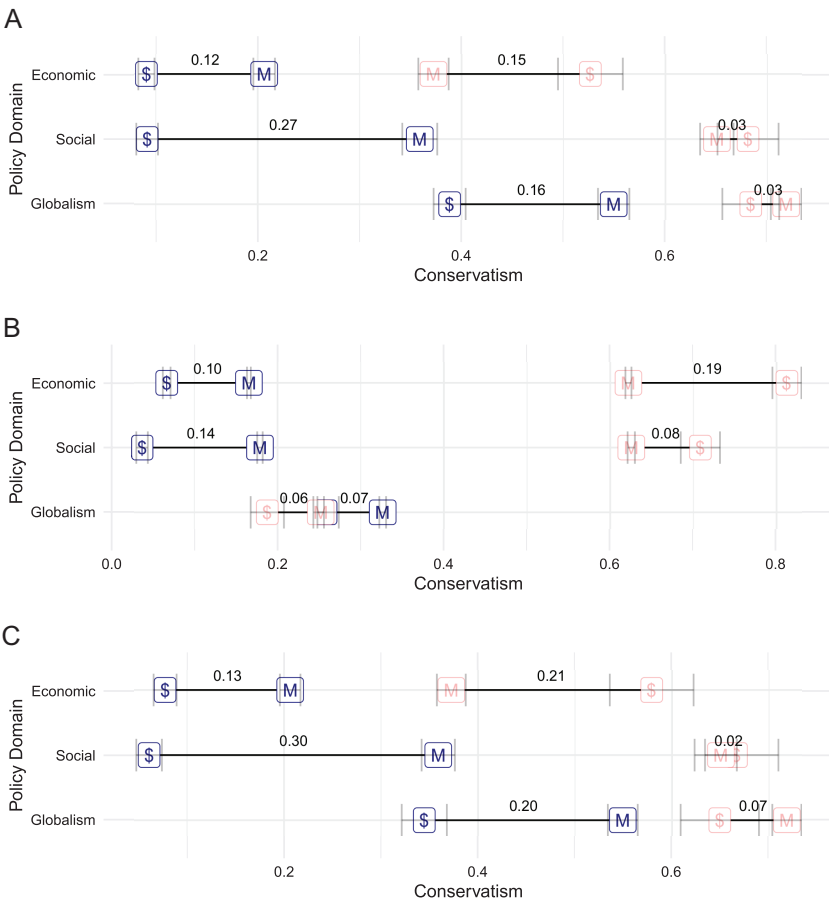
Figure 2. Mean of policy indices, by party and policy domain. The $ and M symbols show the average score on each index for donors and the mass public, respectively. The numbers above the black bars connecting these symbols reflect the average difference between donors and mass partisans. Democratic points are labeled with dark characters, and Republicans with light characters. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals are overlaid in gray.

health insurance, versus only 23 percent of Republican citizens. This gap is fairly consistent across the four economic items. On the other hand, figure 1B shows that Republican donors are similar to citizens on social issues on average, with a difference of only 0.03 units on the average issue. One exception is that Republican donors are especially conservative on gun control. The difference in these differences between donors and voters on the average economic and social issue ($0.15 - 0.03 = 0.12$) is highly statistically significant ($t = 5.89$; see Online Appendix D for regression results that provide formal statistical tests). It is also substantively large: *The gap between Republican citizens and Republican donors on economic issues is as large as the gap between Republican citizens and Democratic citizens*. Panel 2b replicates this analysis in the Hill and Huber (2017) data. We obtain a similarly sized and statistically significant difference-in-differences estimate of 0.11 ($t = 7.89$).

Where Democratic donors and citizens are concerned, figure 1B shows that Democratic donors are 0.27 units more liberal than Democratic mass partisans on social issues, compared to the 0.12-unit average difference on economic issues shown in figure 1A. For social issues, the gap is particularly pronounced for capital punishment: 80 percent of mass Democrats support the death penalty, whereas only 40 percent of Democratic donors do. For economic issues, Democratic donors are somewhat more liberal on the issue of universal health care than on other economic issues, where their views are only slightly more liberal than mass Democrats. The overall difference-in-differences estimate between donors and voters on social versus economic issues is 0.15 ($0.27 - 0.12$) and statistically significant ($t = 14.79$). This difference is substantively large: The gap between Democratic citizens' and donors' views on social issues is nearly as large as the gap between Democratic and Republican citizens' views. We also replicate this analysis using the Hill and Huber (2017) data in figure 2B. Although the point estimate is smaller (a difference-in-difference of 0.04 units), it is correctly signed and statistically significant ($t = 10.24$). Overall, these findings accord with Maks-Solomon and Rigby, who find that "rich and poor Democrats disagree on social issues while rich and poor Republicans disagree on economic issues" (2019, p. 1).

Finally, figure 1C shows that donors are more globalist than mass partisans in both parties. As summarized in figure 2A, the estimate in our survey is an average difference of 0.12 units, which is statistically significant ($t = 13.34$), and similar in size to the large differences described above. For example, 83 percent of citizens agreed with the statement "We should pay less attention to the problems overseas and concentrate on problems here at home," versus only 44 percent of donors. Although this difference exists in both parties, it is mainly driven by Democrats. As shown in figure 1C, Democratic donors are more globalist than Democratic mass partisans on all issues except for free trade. On the Republican side, the main item that drives the gap is the general question on concentrating on problems at home versus abroad. Republican donors are actually less globalist than mass partisans on trade policy. Why

does free trade seem to be an outlier issue for both parties? It could be because trade has stronger economic features than the other issues in this domain, and so patterns on it bear some resemblance to the patterns in the economic domain. Figure 2B shows that we again obtain a similar and statistically significant estimate when replicating this analysis in the Hill and Huber (2017) data (an average difference of 0.07, $t = 8.52$).[3]

Exploiting our survey's large oversample of super-elite donors, we find that these results consistently grow stronger when limiting our comparisons to the top 1 percent of donors. Figure 2C presents these results. Among Republicans, the difference between mass partisans and the top 1 percent of donors is 0.19 units larger on economic issues than social issues ($t = 6.75$). Among Democrats, it is 0.17 units larger on social than economic issues ($t = 15.11$). The top 1 percent of donors in both parties are also 0.16 units more globalist than mass partisans ($t = 14.07$). Hence, the most elite donors exhibit preferences even more in line with our overall findings.

Online Appendix D presents regression results with formal statistical tests. The online appendices also present additional analyses: limiting our comparisons to the top 1 percent of donors, weighting the data (see also Online Appendix Figure OA1), the relationships between the policy indices and the amount donors contributed (Online Appendix Figure OA2), and distributions of the indices by party for citizens and donors (see Online Appendix F).[4]

Potential Mechanisms

What could explain the pattern of results described above? Although our data are not designed to test specific mechanisms, we discuss potential theoretical explanations in hopes that our descriptive findings will inspire subsequent research.

3. Republicans are more pro-globalist than Democrats in the Hill and Huber (2017) data likely because their survey was administered in 2012, when Republicans were more supportive of free trade. In 2017, when we collected our data, the partisan difference on this issue was reversed. Further, the issues on each of the two surveys differ, with Hill and Huber (2017) focusing more on military intervention and not including items on immigration. Nonetheless, donors were more globalist than citizens in both parties in both datasets.

4. One potential concern is that our comparisons between donors and mass partisans conflate differences in donor status as well as differences in the strength of partisan attachments. However, fairly modest differences in party ID strength emerge between donors and mass partisans: Democratic donors who identify as Democrats are 0.16 scale points stronger on the standard seven-point party ID scale (which has a three-point range in this subsample, as it is defined by three levels of partisan strength); for Republicans, the analogous figure is 0.10 scale points weaker. As a result, the point estimates do not change when controlling for the strength of party ID by introducing dummy variables for every level of party ID and their interactions with issue area into the regressions reported in table OA5: the Economic Issues × Donor coefficient changes from 0.12 to 0.11 for Republicans and from 0.15 to 0.16 for Democrats, and the statistical significance levels remain the same.

Donors have two main characteristics that distinguish them from the mass public. First, individuals who can afford to donate to campaigns should have higher income, wealth, and education in general. Indeed, in our data over half of donors are millionaires (see sample characteristics in Online Appendix E). Other research finds that individuals higher in socioeconomic status and who live in high-income areas are generally more economically conservative and more socially liberal—that is, less populist and more libertarian—all else equal (Bramlett, Gimpel, and Lee 2011; Malka, Lelkes, and Soto 2019). Self-interest may clearly play a role for this pattern on economic issues; on both economic and social issues, Malka, Lelkes, and Soto (2019) also discuss possible mechanisms for these associations related to psychological dispositions such as needs for security or certainty.

Second, partisans who choose to donate should have greater levels of interest in politics than those who choose not to do so. Those with greater interest in politics tend to have more extreme views, either because having extreme preferences motivates political interest and participation (Abramowitz 2010; Hill and Huber 2017) or because attentiveness to political messages causes individuals' preferences to grow more ideologically consistent and loyal to their parties' policy stances (Lenz 2012; Broockman 2016). Donors therefore should be more extreme than mass partisans on average (i.e., Republican donors more conservative and Democratic donors more liberal).

Given these two characteristics of donors (higher socioeconomic status and greater interest in politics), one potential source of the heterogeneity by party and policy domain we document is *cross-pressures*. That is, for some policy domains, donors' wealth, income, and education on the one hand and greater interest in politics on the other hand work in competing directions, whereas for other policy domains they reinforce one another. For instance, on social issues, Republican donors are cross-pressured: Their greater wealth and education should be associated with more liberal attitudes (Bramlett, Gimpel, and Lee 2011), but their greater interest in politics would predict greater conservatism (Lenz 2012; Broockman 2016). This may net out to their views on social issues looking similar to mass partisans. Conversely, on economic issues, there is no cross-pressure: Both their wealth and political interest predict greater conservatism than mass partisans. On the other hand, Democratic donors experience cross-pressure on economic issues, with their greater political interest predicting economic liberalism but their greater income and wealth predicting economic conservatism. However, we found that Democratic donors appear to be slightly more economically liberal than mass partisans, suggesting that partisan loyalty may outweigh economic self-interest. On social issues, Democratic donors are not cross-pressured: Both their greater wealth, income, and education *as well as* elevated political interest should lead them to be more liberal than mass Democrats on social issues, which we find they are to a much greater extent than they are on economic issues.

Why are donors—particularly Democrats—more pro-globalism? Previous research has tied globalism (e.g., pro-free trade and immigration) to higher levels of cosmopolitanism (Jackman and Vavreck 2011). This could be due to both the economic and cultural benefits elites draw from globalization. Another possibility is that donors tend to live in urban areas where they are exposed to foreigners and foreign cultures more often, and so develop greater positive affect for foreign individuals and cultures (Bramlett, Gimpel, and Lee 2011).

To test these theoretical mechanisms, future research will likely require additional data on the preferences of wealthy individuals who do not choose to donate. Panel data tracking wealthy individuals over time would provide additional leverage to understand to what extent changes in their political views may cause or are caused by changes in their donation behavior.

A final theme future research could explore is to what extent donors may also appear to be more extreme on certain dimensions due to differences in intensity. Donors may assign more personal importance to some policy domains than others, and this could explain differential gaps in extremity by party and policy area if intensity and extremity are correlated. Separate from intensity is the issue of confidence (Ortoleva and Snowberg 2015). Because donors are more interested and active in politics, they may exhibit greater knowledge and confidence in their opinions, which is also correlated with extremity.

Implications for Understanding American Politics

Our results may be relevant to understanding asymmetric polarization, or the empirical claim that Republican politicians have polarized more than Democrats. Insofar as economic issues represent the "first dimension" of American politics captured in these analyses, our findings lend credence to theories that suggest a role for donors in contributing to this pattern (Bafumi and Herron 2010).

In addition, research on the influence of the wealthy has found that legislators appear to represent affluent copartisans better in cases when affluent and nonaffluent voters within their party disagree (Lax, Phillips, and Zelizer 2019). Our work provides additional structure that helps predict when these disagreements among copartisans are most likely to occur. For example, these findings may help explain why the Republican Party pursues policies such as tax cuts for the wealthy and the restructuring of entitlement programs, which many surveys indicate go against the preferences of their own partisan voter base. On the other hand, these results may help explain why Democrats often prioritize making liberal social policy proposals despite having more popular policy positions on economic issues.

Finally, our findings may shed light on recent leaders of both parties (e.g., George W. Bush, Barack Obama) pursuing pro-globalism agendas in support

of free trade and expanded immigration, as well as the popularity of anti-globalism populists (e.g., Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders) among citizens in both parties (Oliver and Rahn 2016).

Appendix

Question Wordings

ORIGINAL SURVEY

This section gives the wording of the survey questions we combined into each index, as specified in our preanalysis plan.

Economic issues

1. Do you think federal government spending on each of the below should be increased, decreased, or stay the same? *Aid to the poor* (Increased; Stay the same; Decreased)
2. The federal government collects tax money and spends it on many different types of programs. How much do you support spending money on government programs that benefit only the poorest Americans? (A great deal; A lot; A moderate amount; A little; Not at all)
3. The federal government collects tax money from many different sources. How much do you support raising tax money through income taxes on people who earn over $1 million per year? (A great deal; A lot; A moderate amount; A little; Not at all)
4. The federal government collects tax money from many different sources. How much do you support raising tax money through income taxes on people who earn over $250,000 per year? (A great deal; A lot; A moderate amount; A little; Not at all)
5. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: "The government should make sure that every American has health care coverage, even if it means raising taxes to pay for it." (Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree)

Social issues

1. Do you support or oppose allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally? (Strongly support; Somewhat support; Somewhat oppose; Strongly oppose)
2. Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder? (In favor; Not in favor)
3. What do you think is more important—to protect the right of Americans to own guns, or to control gun ownership? (Protect the right of Americans to own guns; Control gun ownership)

4. There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view? (By law, abortion should never be permitted; The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger; The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established; By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice)

Globalism issues

1. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: "We should pay less attention to the problems overseas and concentrate on problems here at home." (Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree)
2. Which of these statements comes closer to your own views? (We should protect American jobs even if it means reducing the standard of living of people living overseas; We should improve the standard of living of people living overseas even if it means losing some American jobs)
3. In general, do you think that free trade agreements like NAFTA and the policies of the World Trade Organization have been a good thing or a bad thing? (Good thing; Bad thing)
4. When it comes to people from less developed countries immigrating to the United States, which one of the following do you think the government should do? (Let anyone come who wants to; Let more people come than we do today, but not everyone; Keep letting in the same number of people as we do today; Let fewer people come than we do today; Prohibit people coming here from other countries)

HILL AND HUBER (2017) SURVEY

For the replication using the Hill and Huber (2017) data, we again preregistered the construction of three issue indices. For the economic issues index, we use five survey items from the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES) on government spending on social programs, tax cuts, and the Affordable Care Act. For the social issues index, we use three survey items on gay marriage, abortion, and the don't ask/don't tell policy. For the globalism index, we use five survey items on free trade and the conditions under which military intervention in foreign contexts is appropriate.

Economic issues

1. Congress considered many important bills over the past two years. For each of the following tell us whether you support or oppose the legislation in principle. 2011 House Budget Plan. The Budget plan would cut

Medicare and Medicaid by 42 percent and would reduce debt by 16 percent by 2020. (Support; Oppose)

2. Congress considered many important bills over the past two years. For each of the following tell us whether you support or oppose the legislation in principle. The Tax Hike Prevention Act. Would extend Bush-era tax cuts for all individuals, regardless of income. Would increase the budget deficit by an estimated $405 billion. (Support; Oppose)

3. Congress considered many important bills over the past two years. For each of the following tell us whether you support or oppose the legislation in principle. Repeal Affordable Care Act. Would repeal the Affordable Care Act. (Support; Oppose)

4. Congress considered many important bills over the past two years. For each of the following tell us whether you support or oppose the legislation in principle. Affordable Care Act of 2010. Requires all Americans to obtain health insurance. Allows people to keep current provider. Sets up health insurance option for those without coverage. Increases taxes on those making more than $280,000 a year. (Support; Oppose)

5. If your state were to have a budget deficit this year it would have to raise taxes on income and sales or cut spending, such as on education, health care, welfare, and road construction. What would you prefer more, raising taxes or cutting spending? Choose a point along the scale from 100 percent tax increases (and no spending cuts) to 100 percent spending cuts (and no tax increases). The point in the middle means that the budget should be balanced with equal amounts of spending cuts and tax increases. If you are not sure, or don't know, please check the "not sure" box. (0 = All from tax increases; 100 = All from spending cuts)

Social issues

1. Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view on abortion? (By law, abortion should never be permitted; The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger; The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established; By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice)

2. Do you favor or oppose allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally? (Favor; Oppose)

3. Congress considered many important bills over the past two years. For each of the following tell us whether you support or oppose the legislation in principle. End Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Would allow gays to serve openly in the armed services. (Support; Oppose)

Globalism issues

1. Congress considered many important bills over the past two years. For each of the following tell us whether you support or oppose the legislation in principle. US-Korea Free Trade Agreement. Would remove tariffs on imports and exports between South Korea and the US (Support; Oppose)
2. Would you approve of the use of US military troops in order to intervene in genocide or a civil war? (Yes; No)
3. Would you approve of the use of US military troops in order to assist the spread of democracy? (Yes; No)
4. Would you approve of the use of US military troops in order to protect allies from foreign attack? (Yes; No)
5. Would you never approve of the use of US military troops? (Yes; No)

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are freely available at *Public Opinion Quarterly* online.

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