

# Partisan Differences in Charitable Giving: Evidence from Individual-Level Survey Data

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## Abstract

Are political attitudes and charitable donations linked? While many observers argue that conservatives are more generous toward charities than liberals, this claim has yet to receive systematic theoretical or empirical analysis. Drawing on economic and psychological theories of charitable giving, we ground this claim in a theory of giving motivations, as well as develop new predictions about the relationship between party and giving. We then test these predictions using multiple individual-level data sets, including an original panel survey around the 2012 election. Contrary to popular expectation, yet consistent with existing evidence on giving behavior from other fields, we find no evidence that Republicans donate more than Democrats. Instead, partisans differ in the types of organizations to which they donate, a finding that comports with evidence from other fields. Finally, we find that charitable giving, unlike other economic behaviors, is immune to the effects of short-term political events.

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Charitable donations by individuals play an essential role in wealth redistribution and social service provision in the United States, exceeding \$240 billion in 2013 alone. To what extent are these donations driven by political attitudes? Given that attitudes toward government redistribution are strongly influenced by party and ideology, political beliefs likely play a large role in private giving decisions as well. Indeed, such claims are often made in presidential campaigns and in the press, with members of both parties accusing the other side of stinginess in charitable activity.

Yet despite an extensive literature on the determinants of opinions toward the public welfare state, political scientists still know virtually nothing about the political causes of private donations. In this paper, we provide the first systematic analysis of how Republicans and Democrats differ in their charitable giving. Drawing on theoretical insights from economics and psychology, we develop and test expectations for how partisanship may influence donation amounts. In doing so, we ground popular claims of conservative generosity in a view of giving as motivated by altruism, or the desire to contribute to public goods. We also develop two new predictions: namely, that differing social contexts lead partisans to donate to different types of organization, and that the party of the president influences donations via partisan perceptions of the economy.

We then empirically test each of these predictions using multiple data sets on individual-level behavior. This includes the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey and the General Social Survey, as well as our own original panel survey fielded around the 2012 presidential election. To our knowledge, our data include all public opinion surveys that ask both about donation amounts and political attitudes.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, we find no difference in donation levels between Democrats and Republicans. Instead, we find that partisans differ primarily in where they donate: Democrats give more to non-religious causes while Republicans donate more to religious organizations, especially their own congregations. Finally, we find no evidence that the party of the president affects giving, despite successfully replicating other studies showing that the

political landscape affects partisans' economic outlooks and other consumption behaviors. While seemingly counterintuitive, our results are in fact broadly consistent with existing findings on motives for giving in other disciplines.

In addition to being of practical importance to numerous social welfare organizations, our findings have implications for our understanding of public opinion, cultural polarization, and partisan bias. While many observers have lamented a growing ideological divide among the mass public in the United States (e.g., Bishop 2009), and have speculated that this divide maps on to consumer behavior (Oliver, Wood, and Bass 2015), evidence for these hypothesized differences has been lacking. Our results show that ideological divides do map on to one type of consumer behavior, namely the types of charitable organizations citizens donate to. Yet our results also reveal the limits of partisan influences on economic activity (Gerber and Huber 2010). Unlike general economic perceptions or vacation spending, charitable donations are relatively immune to the effects of political control.

## **Why do people give?**

Charitable giving represents a significant amount of economic activity in the United States. Donations by individuals constitute 75% of total contributions and over 75% of yearly non-profit revenues. Put simply, many charities would cease to exist without individual donations (Giving USA 2014).

Given that charitable giving is so substantial, researchers outside of political science have long studied what motivates citizens to give away their hard-earned money. While there are many potential links between motives to give and political attitudes, virtually no study has explored these connections. Even Brooks (2006), who offers the most systematic empirical study of the relationship between ideology and donations, overlooks theories about giving because "...the giver's motive is irrelevant. Charity depends on behavior, not on motive" (27).

In contrast, we believe it is important to examine what is already known about motivations for giving before diving into the data. Understanding what motivates citizens to donate helps generate predictions about how and when partisanship plays a role in this decision. In this section, we draw on the economics and psychology literatures that offer three broad explanations: donating as a public good, donating as a social activity, and donating as a consumption good. We briefly review these explanations before discussing how partisanship may interact with these motivators.

## **Giving as a public good**

Perhaps the most intuitive explanation for giving is that donors seek to support the provision of public goods. Indeed, this explanation is embedded in U.S. tax policy, which allows taxpayers to deduct charitable contributions, while also exempting charities from paying taxes. The justification for such policies is that charities serve “public interests” (Senate Finance Committee 2013). Charities’ fund-raising strategies also assume that donors care about funding public goods: for example, public radio stations regularly remind viewers that their donations pay for the news, and UNICEF informs donors that their \$17 contribution pays to immunize children (Vesterlund 2006).

Though intuitive, empirical evidence for this explanation is mixed. Many studies have attempted to uncover altruistic behavior by searching for the so-called “crowd-out effect”: namely, if giving is motivated by a desire to fund public goods, then increases in government spending on public goods should reduce the motivation to give. Several studies have either failed to find such a relationship, or have found less of a relationship than a pure public goods explanation would predict (Brooks 1999; Kropf and Knack 2003; Marcuello and Salas 2001; Reece 1979).

While these studies are rather indirect tests of the public goods motivation, others have found some evidence for this motivation in the lab (Goeree, Holt, and Laury 2002; Harbaugh, Mayr, and Burghart 2007). For instance, Harbaugh, Mayr, and Burghart 2007 find, using

fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) scanners, that when individuals are required to donate to charity – via a mandatory tax – neural activity occurs in areas linked to reward processing. Although these results indicate that people derive benefit from providing public goods, the effects are more pronounced when individuals choose to donate funds, indicating that non-altruistic considerations are also at play. Similarly, in a field experiment, DellaVigna, List, and Melmendier (2012) do not rule out a role for altruistic motivation, though they note that it is not the most important driver of giving behavior. Thus, only a minority of studies find a role for public goods motives in charitable giving, while those that do find an effect find it to be relatively small.

## **Giving as a social act**

A second perspective focuses on giving as a social act that is meant to communicate something about one's self to the broader community. In this view, donors consider how their gifts will affect their reputation (Tullock 1966) and are motivated by a desire to avoid scorn, receive social acclaim (Becker 1974) and signal their wealth in a socially acceptable fashion (Glazer and Konrad 1996).

This perspective has received the most empirical support. Many laboratory experiments with abstract public goods games find that individuals are willing to incur costs in order to have their contributions recognized (Clark 2002). This is especially true when donations are announced in public or when they are directly observable (Alpizar et al. 2007; Barclay 2004; Bateson, Nettle, and Roberts 2006; Bereczkei, Birkas, Kerekes and 2007). In an observational study, Harbaugh (1998) leverages a natural experiment in which a law school changed from reporting all donations to reporting only the categories of contributions. Consistent with the view that giving is a social act, the change to category reporting increased the proportion of donations made at the minimum amount necessary to be recognized. And in their field experimental study, DellaVigna, List, and Melmendier (2012) find that informing potential donors in advance of a door-to-door solicitation decreases the proportion of door openings

by 9 percentage points. This suggests that giving is primarily driven by social pressure: in the absence of such pressure, potential donors willingly opt out of giving.

## **Giving as consumption**

Finally, a third perspective sees giving as a type of consumption, whose benefits accrue only to the individual donor (Arrow 1974; Andreoni 1989; Cornes and Sandler 1984; Steinberg 1987; Schiff 1990). In most accounts, this private benefit takes the form of the “warm glow” that contributors feel from doing their part.

An implication of this view is that giving should respond to economic conditions. Studies that vary the costs of donating find that giving increases as costs decline (Bekkers 2005; Eckel and Grossman 2003; 2004; Karlan and List 2006). Other studies have similarly shown a robust positive relationship between personal wealth and giving (Bekkers and Wiepking 2011; James and Sharpe, 2007; Wiepking 2007) and levels of donations are responsive to the broader economic environment (Giving USA 2009; List 2011; Reich and Wimer 2012). These results point to the logical conclusion that individuals who have more to donate, donate more.

Other studies have found that perceptions of personal financial situations are as important as reality (Havens and Schervish 2007; Schlegelmilch et al. 1997; Wiepking and Breeze 2012). People who consider themselves “financially better off than most other people” report higher donations to relief appeals (Bennett and Kottasz 2000); those who worry about their financial situation donate less, regardless of their actual financial situation (Wiepking and Breeze 2012); and alumni giving is higher among those with more confidence in the economy (Okunade 1996).

## Motivations for giving: a role for partisanship?

How might political attitudes interact with these three broad motivations for giving? In this section, we amend the charitable giving literature with what political scientists know about the behavior of partisans. As a result, we generate three distinct expectations about how politics may influence giving.

First, if providing public goods is a key motivator for donating, then partisan differences in views about the efficacy of government programs should lead conservatives to donate more. Indeed, conservative politicians have made such claims. For example, Paul Ryan, the 2012 Republican vice-presidential candidate, said that a Romney administration would fight poverty via private charities, describing government anti-poverty programs as creating a “debilitating culture of dependency wrecking families and communities” (Achenbach 2012). Similarly, Wall Street Journal reporter John D. McKinnon defended Mitt Romney’s low effective tax rate, pointing to the fact that “Republicans favor a world in which people pay fewer taxes and give more to charity, believing that private spending is more effective than that of the federal government” (McKinnon 2012).

This theoretical view also finds support among public opinion scholars. One of the most robust findings in the study of public opinion is that conservatives support spending on the poor in the abstract, but do not support government programs intended to help the poor in practice (Smith 1987; Campbell and Sances 2014). One interpretation of this result is that conservatives believe government programs to be ineffective at helping the poor. Supporting this view, Huber and Paris (2013) show that respondents are twice as likely to associate soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and food banks with “assistance to the poor” than they are to associate government programs with assistance. This explanation – that Republicans believe private delivery of social services is more effective – is also supported by work showing conservatives to be more supportive of social spending via tax expenditures as opposed to direct spending (Faricy and Ellis 2013; Haselswerdt and Bartels 2011).

Thus, the public goods perspective on charitable giving predicts that partisans will differ

in the amount of money they give to charity. In particular, if Republicans and Democrats both wish to help the poor, yet disagree on whether public or private provision is more effective, then we should observe Republicans giving more.

In contrast, viewing giving as a social act yields very different predictions. If both Democrats and Republicans donate in order to boost their reputation, individuals will be discerning about who is on the receiving end of these donations. Individuals will donate to groups with which they associate or to causes that others in their social network have embraced. Moreover, although previous work has demonstrated that while the nonprofits' goals and beneficiaries are not primary motives for donating, these factors are important when individuals choose *where* to donate (Ostrower 1997; Bennett 2003). If this view of giving is correct, partisan differences in charitable giving may be a function of Democrats and Republicans having different tastes and communities. Democrats and Republicans differ in their recreational hobbies, television viewing, coffee preferences, and even baby names (Vavreck 2011; Oliver, Bass, and Wood 2015), while simultaneously creating insulated social networks by selecting mates with similar political outlooks (Huber and Malhotra 2013) and choosing to live among copartisans (Cho, Gimpel, and Hui 2013). The partisan difference in preferences and behaviors is starkest when looking at religious communities. Frequent church attenders – of all denominations – are disproportionately Republican, while a majority of religious non-identifiers and non-attenders are Democrats (Green 2010).

One consequence of these differences is that Democrats and Republicans may have different reputational aims when choosing where to donate, worry about punishment for not donating to specific groups, and receive solicitations to donate to different types of organizations.<sup>1</sup> In particular, religious community members may feel pressure to donate to their congregation on account of tithing requirements, collection plates, and congregational

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<sup>1</sup>Solicitation is a key driver of charitable giving. A large majority of all donation acts occur in response to a solicitation. For a review see Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) or Wiepking (2010).

fundraisers. Consequently, Republicans and Democrats – by virtue of their differing levels of religious practice – may donate to different organizations with the former donating more to religious organizations and Democrats donating more to secular, or non-religious, organizations.

Finally, if giving behavior is akin to any other consumption activity, we must consider how partisans differ in their economic behavior. Previous work has demonstrated that partisanship colors attitudes about the economy: Republicans report more positive economic expectations when a Republican is in the White House, and vice versa for Democrats (Bartels 2002; Evans and Andersen 2006). These divergent attitudes further translate into real economic behaviors, such as sales tax receipts and vacation spending (Gerber and Huber 2010; 2009). If giving is merely another form of consumption, then we should find evidence of partisanship and political control affecting donation amounts.

## Data and measures

Testing the foregoing hypotheses proves challenging on account of there being limited micro-level data that includes measures of both political identities and charitable giving. To overcome this challenge, we use multiple data sources, including our own original survey data, to analyze these questions.

The first data set, the 2000 Social Capital Benchmark Survey (SCCBS), includes measures of both charitable giving and political ideology. The survey asks respondents how much money they donated to both religious and secular organization, as well as about their general ideology. The SCCBS has the benefit of a large sample size, being comprised of samples of between 500 and 1,500 respondents from 41 communities.<sup>2</sup> While potentially useful for ana-

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<sup>2</sup>The SCCBS also included a nationally representative sample of about 3,000 respondents. Our results are insensitive to which sample we use, but we rely on the larger sample as it includes a larger absolute number of donors.

lyzing the relationship between ideology and giving (Brooks 2006), these data also face some key limitations. For instance, the SCCBS does not ask respondents about party identification, and includes a non-standard question wording to measure ideology.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the SCCBS offers a valuable first look at the relationship between political beliefs and charitable activity.

Our second data source is the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS). This nationally representative survey of about 1,000 respondents includes detailed questions about charitable giving, while also capturing respondents' partisanship and political ideology. Importantly for our analyses, the GSS differentiates not only between religious and secular giving, but also whether religious giving went to individuals' own congregations or to other religious causes. While the GSS has been fielded every few years since the 1970s, only the 1998 sample included charitable giving questions. We use these questions to corroborate the SCCBS findings using different political explanatory variables.

Finally, we analyze an original two-wave panel study conducted around the 2012 presidential election. This survey was conducted on a diverse national sample that was recruited through Survey Sampling International (SSI).<sup>4</sup> The two waves of the study bracketed the

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<sup>3</sup>The SCCBS ideology question reads: "Thinking politically and socially, how would you describe your own general outlook—as being very conservative, moderately conservative, middle-of-the-road, moderately liberal, or very liberal?" Responses may differ from more traditional political ideology questions by explicitly asking respondents to consider their views on social issues.

<sup>4</sup>SSI recruits participants through various online communities, social networks, and website ads. SSI makes efforts to recruit hard-to-reach groups, such as ethnic minorities and seniors. These potential participants are then screened and invited into the panel. When deploying a particular survey, SSI randomly selects panel participants for survey invitations. We did not employ quotas but asked SSI to recruit a target population that matched the (18 and over) census population on education, gender, age, geography, and income. The resulting

2012 presidential election, with the first wave being conducted in the weeks leading up to the election and the second wave occurring in the weeks after the election.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the SCCBS and GSS, we asked respondents to report how much they expect to give – rather than how much they gave in the past year – to both religious and non-religious charities in the upcoming year, as well as their partisanship and ideology. Importantly, these panel data allow us to not only replicate the cross-sectional findings from the SCCBS and GSS, but also to track changes in planned giving in response to a political event.

## **Giving as public goods: do Republicans give more?**

The first explanation for why people give is that donors want to provide public goods. From this explanation comes the expectation that Republicans, by virtue of their economic worldview, should donate more to charity. We test this prediction using regressions to estimate the relationship between donations and political identities in three samples. As the dependent variable, we use the sum of the respondent’s reported contributions to all nonprofits.<sup>6</sup> Following previous studies (e.g., Gerber and Huber 2010), we add one to the total amount donated and then take the natural log in order to account for the skewness of this variable.

Our key independent variable is political identity, which we measure using both political ideology and party identification. As discussed above, the SCCBS only includes an ideology

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sample is not a probability sample but is a diverse national sample. Numerous studies using sample from SSI have been published recently in political science (Berinsky, Margolis, and Sances 2014; Kam 2012; Malhotra and Margalit 2010; Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo 2013).

<sup>5</sup>The first wave of the survey was conducted between October 17 and October 31, 2012. The second wave of the survey was conducted between November 13 and November 27, 2012. 75% of the postelection surveys were completed by November 19, 90% by November 21.

<sup>6</sup>Question wordings for these measures are available in the online appendix.

measure, whereas the GSS and SSI capture both ideology and partisanship. As partisanship is a more robust measure of political views than ideology (Converse 1964) and a consistent predictor of real-world behavior, such as vote choice and economic perceptions (Bartels 2002; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004; Gerber and Huber 2009, 2010), we present results using partisanship when it is available, and ideology when it is not. We present results using linear regressions, but other estimators give similar results.<sup>7</sup>

To isolate the effect of partisanship from other factors that are also predicted to affect giving, we adjust for a number of control variables. The most important of these is income, which is known to strongly correlate with political conservatism, and which, from the consumption explanation, is also expected to affect donation amounts. We also control for religiosity, measured as church attendance. This variable is intended to capture differences in social pressure faced by Republicans and Democrats, which may also impact giving independent of any connection with public goods preferences.

Figure 1 summarizes the results of our regression analyses across three data sets (the full tabular results are available in the print appendix). Each panel represents a different data set, the vertical axis represents a specification, and the horizontal axis represents the difference in donation amounts between Republicans and Democrats. For instance, points farther to the right indicate that Republicans donate more than Democrats, whereas points farther to the left indicate Republicans donate less. Because the dependent variable is measured in logs, we express the plotted differences in terms of percentages.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>We show results where we trim the 99th percentile of the giving variables (to account for outliers) and using Tobit regressions (to account for the large number of zero donations) in the online appendix.

<sup>8</sup>While coefficients in a model with a logged dependent variable are often interpreted as a percent change in the outcome for a small change in the predictor, this approximation only holds with small changes in the independent variable, and is therefore inappropriate for indicator variables that switch from zero to one, such as party (Kennedy 1981). We there-

(Figure 1 about here)

The first point presents the bivariate relationship between ideology and giving in the SCCBS, with no controls. These initial results look quite similar to the conventional wisdom often repeated in the press, as well as earlier analysis Brooks (2006). In this simple bivariate relationship, conservatives give 76% more to charity than liberals. In the second model – represented by the second point – we adjust for household income. Again conservatives appear to give significantly more than liberals; the substantive effect is actually ten percentage points larger, at 86%, than in the bivariate regression.

In the latter two specifications, however, this large difference disappears. In the third estimate, we control for both household income and religiosity, measured by church attendance. After accounting for religious activity, the sign on the conservative variable actually flips: conservatives donate about 11% *less* than liberals, once differences in church attendance are taken into account. Finally, the fourth point represents giving differences between conservatives and liberals after controlling for income, church attendance, and other demographic controls that may be related both to ideology and charitable giving, including gender, marital status, race, region of residence, family size, age, and education. Again, there is no difference between liberals and conservatives in their generosity, either statistically or substantively. Taken together, the results indicate that once we control for observable demographic characteristics, there is no difference in charitable giving between liberals and conservatives. In particular, simply adjusting for differences in church attendance between conservatives and liberals annihilates any conservative advantage in giving.

Results from the GSS using individuals' ideologies, shown in the second panel, yield a very similar pattern: a large conservative advantage in giving at the bivariate level that

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fore compute the “percentage difference” using Kennedy’s (1981) unbiased estimator, and present this quantity instead for ease of interpretability. We perform the computation using the SELDUM package in Stata (Ries 2011). The print appendix includes the untransformed coefficients.

quickly evaporates once we adjust for other determinants of giving. In the third panel of Figure 1, we replicate this pattern by focusing on partisan differences in the GSS. In the first two specifications, we again find a large and precisely estimated relationship between partisanship and charitable giving. Without any controls, Republicans give 201% more than Democrats. Simply adjusting for income differences reduces the percentage difference to 85%, and adding religiosity reduces it to 34%. Finally, the giving gap shrinks 23% when we adjust for other demographic differences. While perhaps substantively significant, these latter two estimates are not statistically different from zero at conventional levels.

Finally, the bottom panel of Figure 1 conducts the same analysis using the 2012 SSI sample. These results echo the findings from the other samples. Although Republicans plan on donating more than Democrats in a direct comparison and when controlling only for income, these differences disappear after accounting for religiosity and other demographic variables. And although not statistically significant, the sign representing the difference between Republicans and Democrats actually reverses itself.

In sum, we do not find evidence supporting the partisan extension of the “giving as a public good” explanation. The donation gap between conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats, is driven largely by religiosity. These results rule out the possibility that Republicans donate more as a way to provide social services in an efficient manner, or that partisans donate in ways that comport with their views about government redistribution.

## **Social pressure: comparing religious and non-religious giving**

Our finding that religiosity is a consistent predictor of charitable giving raises the question of where individuals choose to donate. If Republicans and Democrats differ in their religious involvement, partisans may feel different pressures about who should receive these donations, leading partisans to donate to different types of causes. Indeed, the second expla-

nation for why people give is that donors seek reputational gains from their giving. In this case, differences in partisans' preferences, behaviors, and communities will produce different pressures when making decisions about donating. So while partisanship and ideology may not determine overall levels of giving, political differences may affect *where* partisans choose to donate.

To test this hypothesis, we focus on one salient difference between Democrats and Republicans, namely, that Republicans are more likely to attend church and be involved in organized religious groups compared to Democrats. If giving can be traced, in part, to social standing within groups, Republicans and conservatives should be more likely to give to religious organizations, particularly their own house of worship, while Democrats and liberals should be more likely to donate to secular nonprofits.

Fortunately, all three of our data sources ask about religious and secular giving separately, which allows us to disentangle how people choose to donate their money. We again begin by examining the SCCBS. In panel (A) of Figure 2, we compare conservatives to liberals in the SCCBS and Republicans to Democrats in the GSS and SSI. We do this using regressions similar to those estimated earlier, and the full results are presented in the appendix. As above, the dependent variables are the logged amount of donations plus one, we compute and present the “percentage difference” for ease of interpretation, and the models include the full set of covariates that appear in the final models of Figure 1. The horizontal axis still represents this percentage difference in giving, while the vertical axis denotes giving to different types of organizations.

(Figure 2 about here)

The first data point presents the SCCBS results for donations made exclusively to religious charities. Even including income, church attendance, and demographic control variables, conservatives donate 53% more to religious charities than liberals. The relationship reverses itself, however, when looking at giving to secular charities. In the second point, directly below, conservatives donate about 28% *less* to secular charities than conservatives.

Thus, the overall null result that we find in the SCCBS data occurs because conservatives donate more in one arena and less in another.

The second set of results in Figure 2 replicates the partisan findings in the 1998 GSS. Here, Republicans donate 43% more to religious charities compared to Democrats; however, there does not appear to be a difference in secular giving between partisans. The substantively large partisan gap we found in Figure 1, therefore, occurs because Republicans donate 43% more to religious organizations. Finally, the third plot replicates the partisan results in the 2012 SSI. Again we find evidence of selective partisan giving: Republicans plan to donate about 22% more to religious organizations, although the results do not reach statistical significance at conventional levels, while Republicans intend to donate 33% less to secular causes. That some of the results in the GSS and SSI are not significant is likely due to the much smaller number of observations in these surveys relative to the SCCBS; nonetheless, the sign and substantive magnitude of the coefficients is strikingly consistent across all three data sets.

An additional advantage of the GSS is that we can further disaggregate religious giving into one's congregation and to other religious causes beyond one's place of worship. While the totals of the two questions are summed to look at religious giving in the top portion of Figure 2, we separate the two religious giving questions in panel (B). This figure shows that Republicans donate 45% more to their own congregation, but there is virtually no difference, only 3%, in donations to other religious organizations. The earlier finding that Republicans in the GSS donate more than Democrats is not only driven by Republicans donating more to religious organizations, but more specifically to their own religious congregation.

To summarize, we find strong evidence supporting the partisan extension of the “giving as a social act” explanation. Partisans not only differ in whether they donate to religious or secular causes, but the partisan gap is starkest when comparing Democrats' and Republicans' donations to their own religious congregation. The “passing the collection plate” explanation of charitable giving is consistent with the social pressure hypothesis: those more entrenched

in the religious community feel more pressure to donate to their own house of worship. Taken together, while politics has little influence on overall levels of charitable giving, Republicans and Democrats choose very different charitable recipients.

## **Giving as consumption: does political control matter?**

A final explanation of giving treats charitable donations like any other consumption activity; this perspective predicts that donations will change as the costs of donating change. Here, we bring together the charitable giving literature with political science research on partisan biases. Knowing that the party of the president affects partisans' economic views and behaviors, we test whether partisan biases also influence decisions about giving. To do so, we estimate the short-term consequences of the 2012 presidential election using a two-wave panel study. This strategy offers three advantages over traditional cross-sectional analyses.

First, the panel design mitigates concern that Democrats and Republicans may answer questions about donating differently. If, for example, Republicans feel more social pressure to give, they may overestimate their donations relative to Democrats, producing an inaccurately wide gap between Republican and Democrats. In a panel setting, however, we compare changes over time rather than absolute differences, thereby accommodating partisans having different response patterns. Second, omitted variable bias is less of a concern because both observed and unobserved respondent characteristics are held constant. A large number of control variables is not necessary because – assuming these characteristics and their effects remain the same between the waves – they “difference” out of a model with multiple waves of data. And finally, a panel design with a small window between the waves is an improvement over panel surveys that have waves months, or sometimes years, apart. For example, Democrats and Republicans may interpret events and experience the world differently over an extended period of time. In this case, one may incorrectly attribute the changes in charitable giving to the political environment, when another event actually produced the change

over time. As the window between the two waves of the survey shrinks, it becomes more reasonable to assume that the effect is due to the presidential election rather than other occurrences between the two waves. The short time window between the two waves of our data increases the plausibility that we can attribute the results to the presidential election rather than another event.<sup>9</sup>

Before making any modeling assumptions, Figure 3 presents the raw results graphically to show the main trends. The top portion shows we can easily replicate Gerber and Huber’s (2010) findings. For Republicans, who viewed the economy more negatively in the weeks leading up to the election, perceptions of the economy dropped even further after President Obama was re-elected between the two survey waves. Despite the absence of a shift in political control, the partisan gap on the economy grew over a short time period. The second graph in the top of Figure 3 shows that these shifts in economic perceptions carry over into how much people plan to spend on vacations in the next year. The slight decrease found among Democrats is significantly smaller than the same change among Republicans. These results point to Republicans updating both their perceptions of the economy as well as their planned spending in response to President Obama’s re-election.

The bottom portion of Figure 3 tests whether these effects also occur for charitable giving. In contrast to general economic perceptions, planned charitable giving was unaffected by the election. In all three measures – total giving, giving to one’s congregation, and giving to charities aside from one’s congregation – Republicans and Democrats did not diverge in their reported behaviors over time.

We corroborate these results in regressions reported in the appendix. Using model specifications that both exclude and include a lagged dependent variable, we find that Republican and Democratic perceptions of the economy and spending plans diverged in the small window leading up to and directly after the presidential election. The initial partisan gap that

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<sup>9</sup>For a more detailed description of causal identification with short time windows see Gerber and Huber (2010).

existed widened after the election. In contrast, no such change occurred for partisans' plans about giving to charity. Similar to the cross-sectional analyses, Democrats are more likely to donate to secular causes and Republicans are more likely to donate to religious causes, but the size of these gaps remains constant before and after the election.

In sum, we do not find evidence that partisanship affects giving via the “giving as consumption” explanation for giving. Although political control influences perceptions of the economy and vacation spending, its influence stops short of decisions about charitable giving. This result bolsters the finding of giving as motivated by social pressure: because partisans' social environments did not change as a result of the election, it is intuitive that their giving activities also remained constant.

## Conclusion

Individuals play a key role in maintaining the financial health of nonprofit organizations. Understanding what individual attitudes predict giving is therefore important both for the vitality of nonprofits and the welfare state as a whole. Previous research and media commentary have popularized the notion that conservatives give more to charitable causes than liberals; however, the importance of this question requires careful, corroborated analyses. This paper draws on insights from the charitable giving literature to generate and test expectations about political attitudes and charitable giving.

We begin by testing the public goods view by asking whether Republicans are more generous in their charitable giving than Democrats. This hypothesis is intuitive: conservatives oppose government redistribution out of efficiency concerns, and so favor private redistribution more than liberals. However, using the proper statistical approach, we find little support for this claim. After adjusting for differences in income and church attendance, liberals and conservatives do not differ in their levels of overall giving.

Finding no differences in levels of giving, we next test the social pressure view by asking

if liberals and conservatives differ in the types of charitable causes they give to. We find that giving decisions match the religious gap currently found in politics: conservatives, who are more likely to identify with organized faiths and attend church, donate to religious organizations, while liberals, who are more likely to be secular or only moderately religious, donate their money to secular organizations.

Finally, we ask if the external political environment influences giving behavior. Using a panel survey bracketing the 2012 election, we test whether biased economic perceptions affect charitable giving as well. Although we replicate previous findings showing the effect of political control on consumption behaviors, this effect does not extend to charitable giving. This finding supports our interpretation of charitable giving as driven by fixed social identities, rather than transitory economic perceptions.

Our results have practical implications for nonprofit organizations, as well as theoretical implications for our understanding of public opinion. For nonprofits, our findings can be informative for targeting solicitations. Although previous research indicates that conservatism is a reliable proxy for identifying potential donors or donor communities, our results suggest social pressure is the most effective strategy, regardless of donors' public goods preferences (Dellavigna, List, and Melmender 2012).

Our findings also constitute some of the first evidence that partisans' differ in their cultural activities. While many popular commentators have lamented such divisions (e.g., Bishop and Cushing 2008; Murray 2012), detecting these differences in actual data has proven difficult. Only Oliver, Wood, and Bass (2015), who show that liberals and conservatives differ in their choice of baby names, have shown direct evidence of partisan divergence in cultural – but not consumptive – behavior. In contrast, we show that such differences also extend to spending behaviors in the form of charitable donations.

Finally, our results show the limits of partisan economic perceptions on actual behaviors. While existing evidence shows that political control affects economic perceptions (Bartels 2002; Gerber and Huber 2010), and that economic perceptions matter for giving (Havens and

Schervish 2007), we do not find evidence that political control and partisanship exacerbate economic considerations of donating. Instead, partisanship's effect is felt through decisions about *where* to donate, and this effect is rooted in social pressures that do not change with political events.

As one of the first analyses of this question, our paper inevitably leaves many open questions for future work. One is whether our individual-level results replicate at more macro-levels. Some observers have noted a tendency for Republican-leaning states to donate more than Democrat-leaning states (Brooks 2006; Chronicle of Philanthropy 2012). It would be interesting to ask whether these macro-level patterns can be reconciled with our individual-level findings, as well as whether the differences in target organizations, and the muted effects of political control, also occur at higher levels of aggregation.

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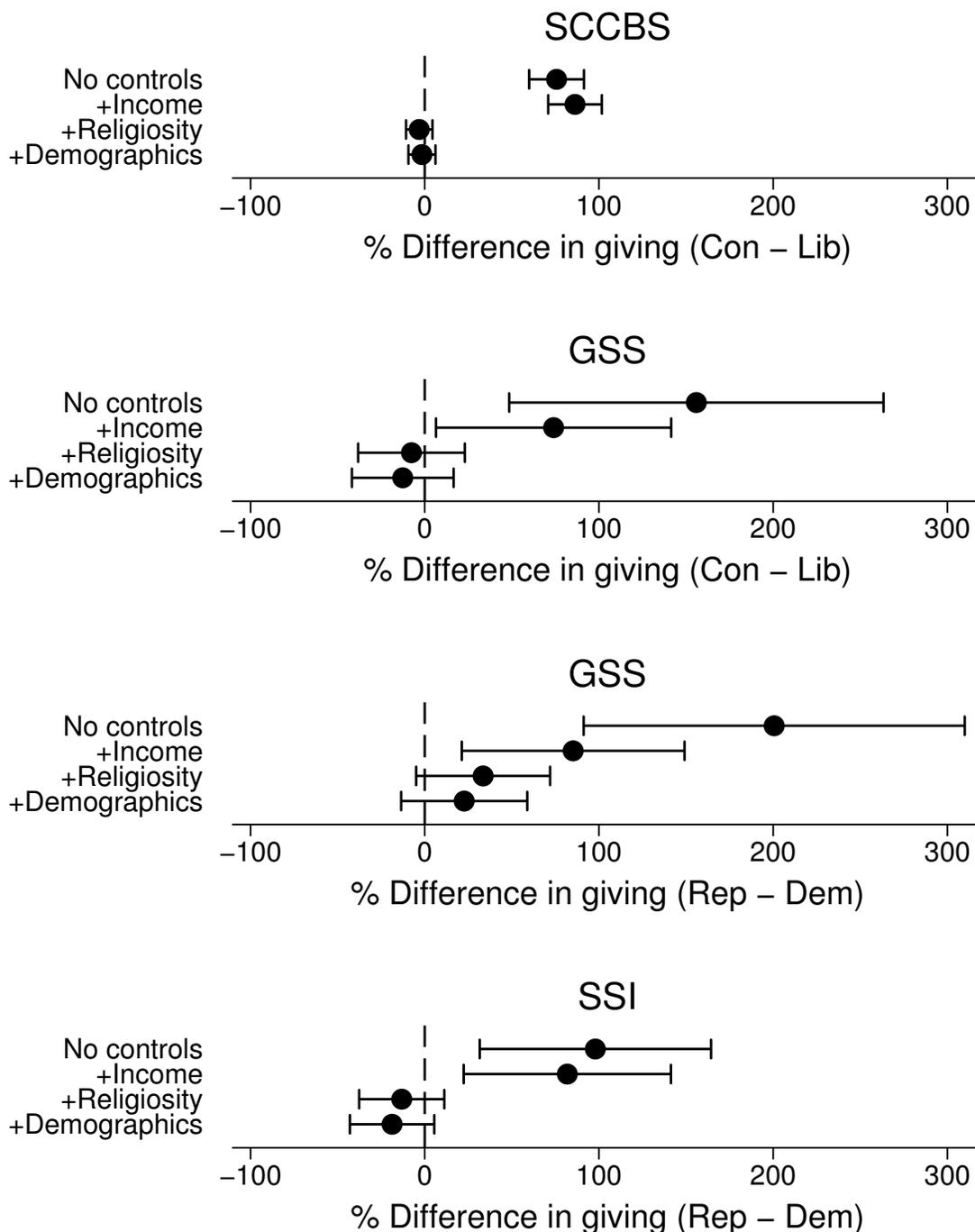
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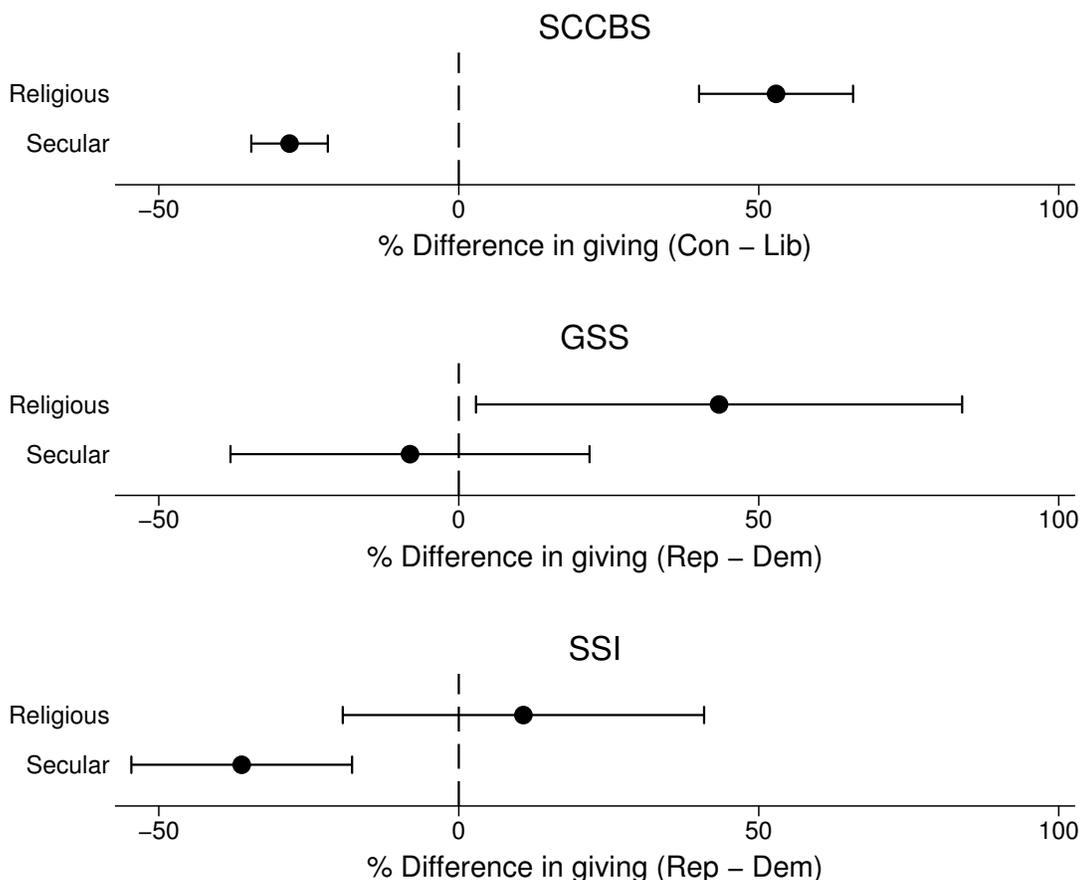
Figure 1: Republicans do not give more to charity than Democrats after adjusting for other differences.



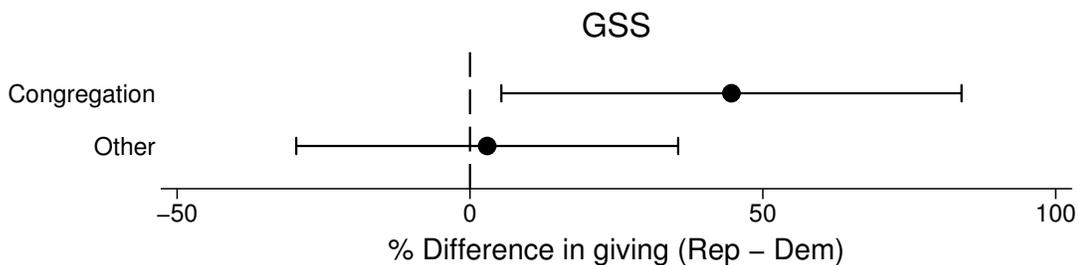
Notes: Outcome variable is  $\log(\text{charitable contributions} + 1)$ . Points represent the percentage difference in giving between Republicans and Democrats calculated using OLS regressions, with lines spanning 95% confidence intervals. Please see the text for details on variable codings.

Figure 2: Republicans give more to religious causes; Democrats give more to non-religious causes.

(A) Disaggregating total giving: religious vs. non-religious charities



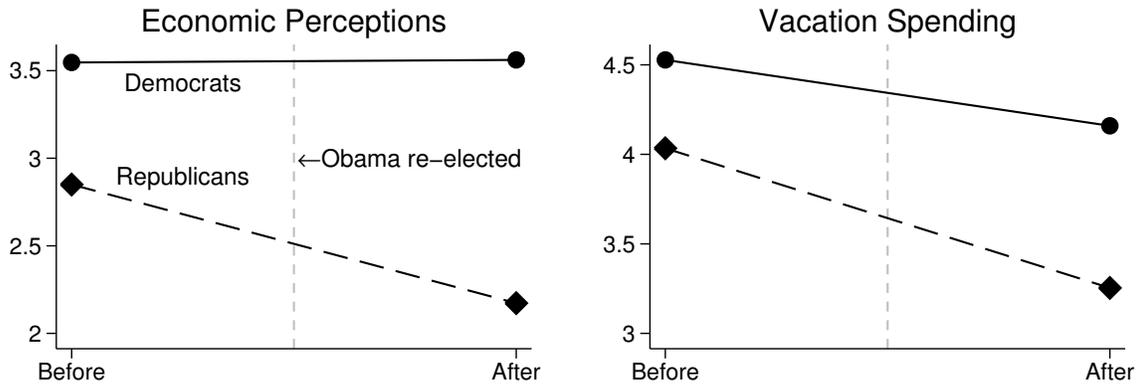
(B) Disaggregating religious giving: church vs. other



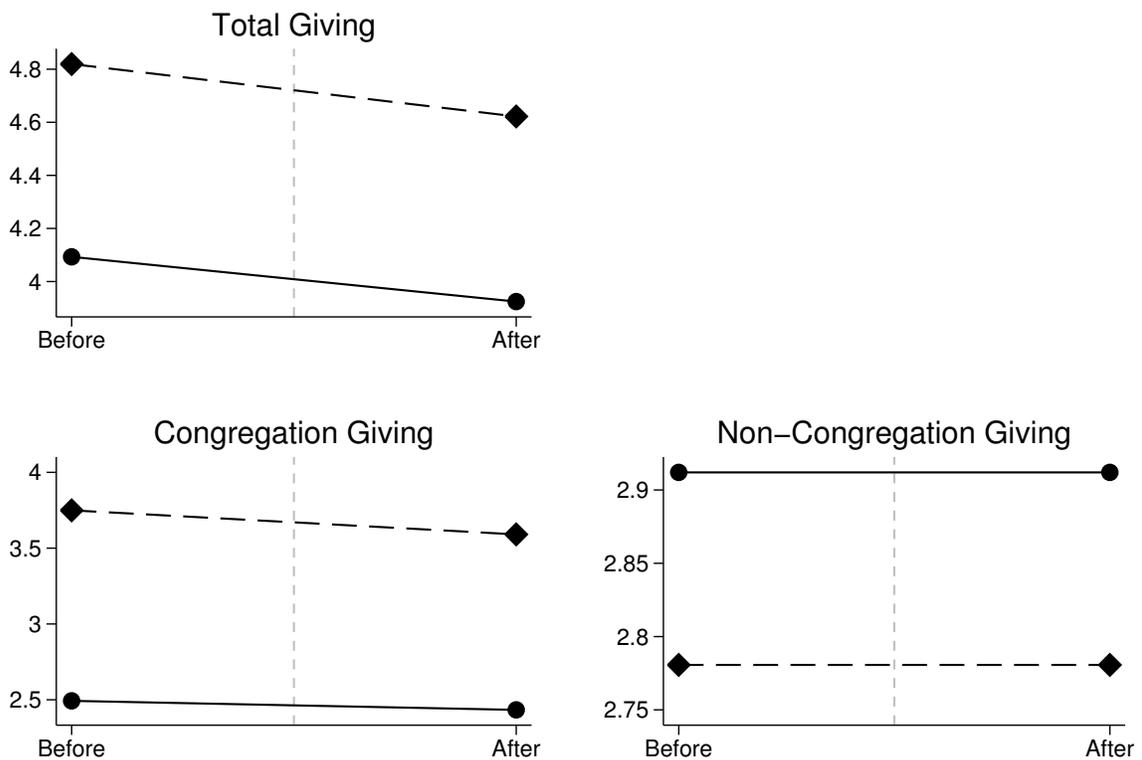
Notes: Outcome variable is  $\log(\text{contributions} + 1)$ . Points represent the percentage difference in giving between Republicans and Democrats calculated using OLS regressions, with lines spanning 95% confidence intervals. All estimates come from specifications adjusting for income, church attendance and demographics as in Figure 1.

Figure 3: The party of the president affects partisans' economic behavior, but does not affect giving.

(A) Economic behavior



(B) Charitable behavior



Notes: Points are averages by party and by survey wave. Data are from the SSI 2012 sample.

## Appendix: Regression results

Table A1: Regressions corresponding to Figure 1.

(A) SCCBS				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Conservative	0.565*** (0.046)	0.623*** (0.042)	-0.031 (0.040)	-0.015 (0.040)
Income	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Church attendance	No	No	Yes	Yes
Other demographics	No	No	No	Yes
N	19,194	19,194	19,194	19,194
(B) GSS				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Conservative	0.963*** (0.217)	0.574** (0.200)	-0.065 (0.170)	-0.120 (0.172)
Income	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Church attendance	No	No	Yes	Yes
Other demographics	No	No	No	Yes
N	1,049	1,049	1,049	1,049
(C) GSS				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Republican	1.118*** (0.187)	0.632*** (0.177)	0.300* (0.148)	0.216 (0.151)
Income	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Church attendance	No	No	Yes	Yes
Other demographics	No	No	No	Yes
N	1,049	1,049	1,049	1,049
(D) SSI				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Republican	0.698*** (0.172)	0.612*** (0.168)	-0.131 (0.145)	-0.196 (0.153)
Income	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Church attendance	No	No	Yes	Yes
Other demographics	No	No	No	Yes
N	1,427	1,427	1,427	1,427

Notes: Dependent variable is  $\log(\text{total donations} + 1)$ . \* =  $p < 0.05$  \*\* =  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$

Table A2: Regressions corresponding to Figure 2.

(A) Disaggregating total giving: religious vs. non-religious charities.

SCCBS		
	(1) Religious	(2) Secular
Conservative	0.425*** (0.043)	-0.330*** (0.045)
N	19,194	19,194
GSS		
	(1) Religious	(2) Secular
Republican	0.371* (0.145)	-0.071 (0.167)
N	1,049	1,049
SSI		
	(1) Religious	(2) Secular
Republican	0.112 (0.139)	-0.438** (0.148)
N	1,427	1,427

(B) Disaggregating religious giving: church vs. other

GSS		
	(1) Religious	(2) Secular
Republican	0.112 (0.139)	-0.438** (0.148)
N	1,427	1,427

Notes: Dependent variable is  $\log(\text{donations} + 1)$ . All specifications control for income, church attendance, and additional demographics as in Table A1 column (4). \* =  $p < 0.05$  \*\* =  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$

Table A3: Regressions corresponding to Figure 3.

(A) Economic behavior

	Economic Perceptions			Vacation Spending			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)	
Republican	-0.692*** (0.050)	-0.656*** (0.057)	-0.950*** (0.053)	Republican	-0.412** (0.157)	-0.354* (0.178)	-0.588*** (0.161)
Lagged DV	No	No	Yes	Lagged DV	No	No	Yes
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Controls	No	Yes	Yes
N	1,218	1,218	1,218	N	1,218	1,218	1,218

(B) Charitable behavior

	Total Giving		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Republican	-0.029 (0.107)	-0.136 (0.121)	-0.148 (0.111)
Lagged DV	No	No	Yes
Controls	No	Yes	Yes
N	1,218	1,218	1,218

	Non-Congregation Giving			Congregation Giving			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)	
Republican	-0.038 (0.111)	-0.082 (0.126)	0.038 (0.117)	Republican	-0.099 (0.098)	-0.149 (0.111)	-0.092 (0.099)
Lagged DV	No	No	Yes	Lagged DV	No	No	Yes
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Controls	No	Yes	Yes
N	1,218	1,218	1,218	N	1,218	1,218	1,218

Notes: Data are from the SSI 2012 sample. Economic perceptions is measured as the change in the original five point scale. Changes for spending and giving variables are computed as:  $\log( (\text{post-election spending} + 1) / (\text{pre-election spending} + 1) )$ .