ORIGINAL PAPER

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How Issue Positions Affect Candidate Performance: Experiments Comparing Campaign Donors and the Mass Public

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Abstract

In light of important limitations in using observed contribution behavior or surveys to assess how donors respond to candidate issue positions, we present novel experimental evidence about how habitual donors (individuals who contribute above average amounts, multiple times, and in consecutive elections) respond to candidate issue positions. Using a vignette design, we provide causal evidence about the support for two types of divergence from typical candidate issue position bundles—being too extreme or bipartisan. We show "typical" candidates outperform all others in terms of likelihood of attracting donations, primary votes, and general election votes. We also find that donors' responsiveness to positions vis-à-vis a non-donor sample is not solely driven by partisan intensity and key demographics (i.e., high educated, high income, age, etc.). These results provide evidence that party-consistent positioning among candidates and incumbents may be reinforced by donors' opposition to issue positions that diverge from the party-standard.

Keywords Donors · Experiments · Campaign finance · Polarization · Congressional elections · Issue positions

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Are donors more likely to contribute to a Congressional candidate who consistently adopts their party's standard issue positions? Will individual donors withhold contributions from candidates who reach across party lines on an issue? What about supporting a candidate who is extreme relative to party norms? Answers to these questions are surprisingly difficult to find in American politics scholarship despite the fact that Congressional offices spend an exorbitant amount of time interacting with donors. For example, a substantial portion of a Representatives' daily schedule is devoted to fundraising from individuals and Political Action Committees (PACs) (Grim and Siddiqui 2013). Although most research on campaign contributions centers on organizations like PACs, individual donors account for the bulk of donations to House candidates (as well as the Senate and Presidency) (Barber et al. 2016). Understanding how candidate positions affect donation behavior is particularly important because the vast majority of campaign communication uses a combination of ideological appeals and party cues when targeting donors (Hassell and Monson 2014).[1]

There are multiple explanations for why donors contribute to specific campaigns, but many accounts stress the role of donor and candidate ideology. Individual donors may view contributing as a consumption good based on their own ideology (e.g., Jacobson 1980), particularly because donors exhibit coherent ideologies at high rates (e.g., Francia 2003). Individual donors also tend to hold positions on issues that are closer to elected officials than the mass public, suggesting donors might be contributing because of this alignment on specific issues (e.g., Barber 2016a). The reach of these individual donors is not confined to their home districts either—many individuals give to candidates regardless of the district the candidate is running in (Gimpel et al. 2008).

Many scholars posit that elite party polarization (defined here as party consistency across issues) arises for reasons outside of the Downsian interaction between candidates and the median voter. For example, candidates might adopt party-consistent positions to maximize their ability to raise funds from donors (e.g., Barber et al. 2016) or to support party cartels in legislatures and conflicts with the president (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 2015). The role of donors in driving this polarization is an area of ongoing concern. Donors are also viewed as an important group for winnowing candidates before general elections, which has led researchers to study the primary process (e.g., Hall 2015). However, less consideration has been given to the donor class' affinity for or dislike of party consistent, extreme, or bipartisan issue bundles. This is particularly pressing because individual donors appear even more ideologically extreme than primary voters (e.g., Hill and Huber 2017). This means we may be overlooking a potential driver, or check on, party polarization by not measuring directly how donors respond to a full range of candidate issue positions. In other words, we cannot tell if donors are driving polarization or simply going along with it.

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[1] There are of course many reasons that individuals donate, including personal connections with a candidate, party leadership outreach, or the importance of a single issue. Our analysis focuses only on the importance of candidate issue positions in the set of issues studied here.

Prior efforts to measure how individual donors respond to a candidate's issue positions (1) used self-reported donation behavior in general population surveys, (2) estimated policy preferences from administrative records alone, or (3) surveyed donors who are matched with administrative records. These previous studies improve our knowledge of the motives that drive donors by showing that the positions held by incumbents (usually proxied by their roll call votes) correlate more strongly with donors than the general population (e.g., Barber et al. 2016). However, no previous study causally identifies how donors respond to candidates who support policies that are more extreme or too moderate for their party compared with candidates who support party-line agendas (which are normally observed in roll call voting records).

The straightforward approach of correlating roll call votes with donor preferences from surveys has great intuitive appeal, but may be misleading for several reasons. Most fundamentally, estimating the effect of donor preferences on elite behavior using the correlation between the politician's vote in Congress and a donor's opinion or behavior requires a plausible theory of what causes issue divergence or convergence between donors and legislators. This estimation challenge is exacerbated by the frequency with which candidates adopt party-consistent positions in contemporary elections—that is, we rarely observe roll call votes for issues that are too extreme for an incumbent's party (an extremist legislator) or roll call votes for issues that are supported by the other party (a bipartisan legislator). While it is obvious that the degree of responsiveness to a candidate's issue positions is not randomly assigned because it arises due to the strategic choice of a candidate who has to anticipate how donors (and voters more generally) will respond to her positions, the implications of this observation for estimating and understanding the influence of donor issue positions are profound.[2] A counter-factual issue position (or roll call vote) that a candidate might have made but chose not to, perhaps to secure a donation, will not be reflected in administrative data, opinion surveys, or roll call votes. Aside from both parties strategically selecting issue positions from a typically narrow window, issue positions that may induce a donation can also be correlated with other factors that influence donating during a campaign that are not captured in contribution records; for example, a candidate's background information, the electoral competitiveness of the district, or valence attributes of the candidate.[3]

There are also limits to analyzing candidate positioning using only administrative contribution records. Contribution records merged to opinion surveys can reveal distinctions among donors (i.e., Hill and Huber 2017) but do not test how donors would respond to a candidate who takes different positions. Similar methods that utilize survey questions correlated with roll call items, or scaled contribution records, still provide limited information for understanding how donors respond to candidate

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[2] For consistency, we will refer to a candidate as "her" and a donor or voter as "he" throughout.

[3] This is also a problem in cases where candidates diverge from party norms, as when a moderate candidate runs in another party's stronghold. Because a moderate running is a strategic calculation reflecting the chances of party victory absent being moderate, we cannot resolve whether donors are (or are not) supporting these candidates because of their positions or their relative chances of victory.

issue positions (i.e., Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2017). With polarization in Congress, narrow issue positioning, and donors generally only contributing to one party, it is difficult for analysts to determine if donors are very responsive to candidate issue positions or are wealthy partisans who are only interested in supporting their "team".[4] While previous research clearly establishes donors are more extreme than non-donors, we do not know if they are more or less extreme than legislators, nor if their responsiveness to candidate positions exacerbates or limits party polarization.

In light of these potential challenges to accurate inferences about the responsiveness of donors to issue positions, we fielded two experiments that produce, by design, variation in issue positions that are unrelated to the described attributes of a politician and her political constituency. Specifically, we randomly assign positions to candidates that are both within and outside the typical range of positions observed during elections. We use a sample of *habitual* donors—by that, we mean individual donors who make several contributions totaling thousands of dollars every national election cycle (midterm and presidential). This feature of our sample is meant to capture high-value donors who are active in many races and regularly solicited for contributions by several candidates per cycle.

Our analysis of these data provides clear evidence that habitual donors do respond to the positions that candidates take. In particular, while some of these sets of issue positions are rarely observed for high quality candidates (outside of the experimental setting), we find that a candidate is less likely to receive a donation when a single issue position (out of three) she takes is (1) more extreme than normally observed, or (2) adopts an element of the other's party's agenda. The effect of being unconventional on an issue is most pronounced in the primary contest. These candidate types are rarely observed, and this is precisely why we need to study how habitual donors would respond to their candidacies because the observational setting will not provide (unconfounded) estimates. Lastly, an identical experiment administered on a sample of partisan citizens demonstrates that habitual donors are also remarkably more sensitive than ordinary citizens to issue positioning when placed in hypothetical primary and general elections (with larger effects in the primaries).[5] Broadly speaking, our results demonstrate that donors prefer candidates who hold positions consistent with their party's norms followed by candidates who hold one extreme position among other party-consistent positions. Bipartisan candidates performed the worst among donors and the mass public. Additionally, the penalty for deviating to a position that is too extreme or bipartisan is larger among donors than the mass public.

We note that focusing our attention on a habitual donor sample may limit our implications to donors who have a history of supporting candidates with party-consistent positions (since most candidates do). Indeed, it could be that less habitual

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[4] It is also difficult to rule out the possibility that donors are simply better informed and so report issue positions in-line with the incumbents they support.

[5] We use outcome measures about voting for this comparison because we are interested in how individual donors, who are a subgroup of the general voting population, respond to issue positions compared to their general population counterparts. Because members of the general population do not contribute, primary and general election voting are common evaluative metrics to compare donors and non-donors.

donors step in when candidates fail to heed party norms. Although to the degree those donors are active regularly, they would become habitual donors and therefore eligible to appear in our sample. Our analysis allows us to understand if these repeat donors would support candidates who deviated from those norms. Additionally, in comparing donors to non-donors, we show that both donors and non-donors respond in the same way to deviations from party norms, implying that the "potential dono-rate" does not display radically difference preferences. Nonetheless, a useful avenue for future research is to examine how the behavior of active and less active donors differs in response to a full range of issue positions.

In the next section, we review the literature on how individual donors respond to politicians' issue positions. From there, we describe in detail two survey experiments designed to assess the responsiveness of donors and the mass public to a broader range of issue positions. Our data section also details our donor sample and how they were recruited. Our results section follows, where we show the likelihood of contributing to a candidate declines when she deviates from the standard party positions. We also show how deviations from standard party positions affect vote choices among donors and the mass public, including models demonstrating that differences between donors and the mass public are not due solely to differences in partisan intensity or demographics.

Individual Donors and Their Responsiveness to Candidate Positions

One reason scholars are concerned with trying to understand how donors respond to candidate positions is the predictions of the classical Downsian model of strategic candidate behavior. In this model, politicians are highly responsive to voter preferences and position themselves in the ideological space to maximize their expected vote share (Downs 1957). In a two party system, therefore, many models predict that both candidates have an incentive to adopt positions that are moderate to maximize their electoral chances. But of course, it is rarely the case that both candidates for office in a two-party system take the same position, leading naturally to the question of why candidate positions diverge. This has led some scholars to speculate that the preferences of individual donors, who provide the resources necessary to build viable primary campaigns and fund operations through the general election, help winnow out more moderate candidates.

Analysis of donor preferences began with self-reported survey questions on donor status embedded in larger surveys of the general public (see our Supplemental Material Table A1 for a summary of all donor studies). That work finds donors come from a narrow demographic subgroup of the larger population and are more interested in the political process than the mass public (i.e., Verba et al. 1993). However, the concern with self-reported behavioral questions is that these measures can overstate actual behavior (i.e., Vavreck 2007), and this issue is especially worrisome with donors because their characteristics (high interest, partisan, ideological, etc.) are correlated with over-reporting political activities. In other words, a very partisan individual might report donating on a survey even if he did not in order to signal his public spiritedness or party support.

Beyond self-reported donor status, previous research has taken two courses of action: (1) individual donors are analyzed using their contribution records only (i.e., Bonica 2014) or (2) individuals are surveyed using contact information available from their contribution records thereby eliminating the problems with self-reporting (i.e., Francia 2003). Previous research using administrative data only, particularly the creation of the Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (DIME), advances our knowledge on donors by creating an ideological continuum of contributors and candidates (Bonica 2014). With these data, researchers can create ideal points for donors in order to quantify their ideological extremity. However, diagnostics of these scales show that contribution records are less reliable measures of ideology for individual donors than PACs or the candidates receiving the donations (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2017). Distinguishing between a donor who makes contributions for extreme ideological reasons and a donor who does not care about ideology and simply contributes to support their party is difficult (Hill and Huber 2017). Therefore, using administrative data only, questions remain about how responsive individual donors are to candidate positions.

The second method of analyzing donors, via surveys from administrative records, provides more leverage on how donors respond to a candidate's issue positions than administrative data alone. Barber et al. (2016) provide evidence that donors are supportive of the policies voted on by incumbent members of the Senate. Moreover, a survey of donors on the roll call votes made in the Senate show that donors are much more likely to support their Senators' roll call vote than the mass public (Barber 2016a). Donors also say that they are more likely to contribute for ideological reasons than a need for access (Barber 2016b), which suggests that the motives of individual donors are more policy-based than PACs looking for face-time with Congressional offices. These studies provide novel evidence that donors are more ideological than the mass public. However, they do not address how constrained representatives are (or are not) by donors. If a member of Congress supports a position that is more extreme than their party standard will donors still make contributions? Can a member of Congress reach across the aisle and vote for a bill that is at odds with their party? Perhaps donors are simply well informed about past voting by legislators and therefore appear better aligned with their elected officials. Current literature cannot speak to possible deviations from the equilibrium represented by past roll call votes, and this limitation is addressed by our experimental design.

Experimental Design and Data

In light of the arguments raised in the previous sections, and in contrast to prior observational research, we randomly manipulate candidate positions. Our experiments include a diverse set of candidate positions, include multiple issue positions and other markers of candidate characteristics in the same manipulation (e.g., party and non-political experience), and are followed by a range of outcome measures. These data therefore make it possible to test how habitual donors' evaluations change as candidates adopt different positions without the confounding issues that likely biases the estimates derived from similar observational analysis. At the same

time, they improve on prior research by more closely representing the multiple issues on which candidates take positions.

Issue Areas and Issue Positions

We first identified six different issue areas (federal taxes, Social Security, abortion, welfare, concealed handguns, and the conflict with ISIS), which cover social, economic, and foreign affairs. These are salient issue areas for which many contemporary candidates for federal office take positions. In each of the six, we wrote a brief description of the issue area and then created six distinct positions within each issue area.

As an example, the issue positions we crafted in the area of concealed handgun laws appear in Table 1; all issue positions as well as the text used to introduce each issue area appear in Supplemental Material. Currently, concealed carry handgun laws vary by state, and the party "aligned" positions we presented are actual policies in place at the state-level. These mainstream positions are bookended by an extremely conservative and an extremely liberal position. These positions are purposely designed to be more extreme than those normally observed among successful candidates for statewide or national office in order to test if donors are driving polarization or limiting it. Where possible, we designed these six positions to approximate a continuous scale, allowing us to vary their ideological position while otherwise minimizing all other differences across conditions.

To verify our assumptions about the ideological meaning of each issue position, we conducted a pilot study online in December 2015 in which 1011 general population respondents evaluated the ideological meaning of each issue position (Gerber et al. 2018). The goal of the pilot study was to determine whether a general population sample thought each position was very liberal, liberal, moderate, conservative,

Table 1 Example of an issue and all positions

[Introduction seen on first page] Concealed carry handgun laws regulate whether and when private citizens can carry a firearm under their clothing. Those laws currently vary by state. Most states have some requirements before carrying a concealed handgun, but some states have no restrictions while others have banned them completely

- **[Extreme liberal]** I support amending the U.S. Constitution to allow confiscating privately owned handguns and to prevent any state from permitting people to carry a concealed handgun
- **[Aligned position: liberal]** I support "no-issue" concealed carry gun laws. These laws prohibit any private citizens from carrying a concealed handgun
- **[Aligned position: somewhat liberal]** I support "may-issue" concealed carry gun laws. These laws require approval by local authorities, like the police department, to carry a concealed handgun
- **[Aligned position: somewhat conservative]** I support "shall-issue" concealed carry gun laws. These laws require minimal criteria, like residency and age verification, to carry a concealed handgun
- **[Aligned position: conservative]** I support "unrestricted" concealed carry gun laws. These laws do not require a permit to carry a concealed handgun
- **[Extreme conservative]** I support a law that requires all teachers and university professors to carry concealed handguns for public safety

Bolded, bracketed text did not appear in treatments. See Supplemental Material for all six issue areas

or very conservative.[6] In other words, does our ideological ordering map onto how actual citizens view our positions? Respondents saw every issue position for a given issue area presented in a random order on a single screen (i.e., Table 1 but randomized without the labels). We find that these issue positions show that our ex ante ideological ordering correspond well with average respondent perceptions. Given that donors are more interested in politics and more ideological than average voters (i.e., Francia 2003), it is not unreasonable to expect our habitual donor sample to be more able to recognize the ideology of our positions.

Constructing the Candidate Vignette

We designed a series of vignettes describing hypothetical candidates for the House of Representatives. Each vignette had three core elements: the candidate's partisanship, their prior experience, and three issue positions. By providing multiple pieces of information about each candidate, we more closely approximate the range of information citizens have when evaluating typical House candidates and reduce concerns that any responses to our manipulations are due to demand effects arising from subjects identifying our specific research interests. Additionally, our design allows us to avoid the possibility that subjects are making guesses about a candidate's partisanship on the basis of the issue positions they adopt or are relying solely on the candidate's issue positions to evaluate their valence (i.e., non-policy) characteristics.

Each respondent was exposed to a vignette with a candidate from their own party. Respondents were first asked their own party identification, and then the candidate in the vignette was assigned the respondent's party (including Independent leaners as partisans). Pure Independents were randomly assigned a Democratic or Republican candidate, but among the habitual donor sample, only 2% self-identify as purely Independent. Second, the candidate's prior experience was randomly assigned. These are marks of competency from the private and public sector that a subject might take into consideration when voting. Candidates were described as having been a manager of a company with 10, 100, or 1000 employees (with the number of employees assigned at random with equal probability). Additionally, candidates were randomly assigned with equal probability to have no additional political experience, have been "a member of the city council," or "a member of the state legislature."

Third, our core area of focus is how citizens respond to the issue positions the candidates took. Each candidate was assigned issue positions for three separate issue areas, selected at random from the six issue areas tested in the pilot. Issue positions for *two of these three* issue areas were always selected to be "aligned" with the candidate's party. For aligned issue positions, Democratic candidates were assigned at random to take either a liberal or somewhat liberal position, while Republicans took either a conservative or somewhat conservative position. These are the typical

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[6] The survey was conducted using a sample provided by Survey Sampling International. See "Data Gathering" subsection for details.

positions that most credible candidates adopt in real elections, and therefore, represent a candidate who (perhaps strategically) aligns her positions with her party.

For the third issue area, however, we assigned a broader range of potential issue positions (this third issue was placed in a random order among the three issues presented in the vignette). On this third issue, candidates were assigned with equal probability to take (1) another aligned position, (2) an extreme position, or (3) a bipartisan position. The bookended positions found in Table 1 are our extreme positions, and the extreme liberal position was assigned to the Democratic candidate and the extreme conservative position was assigned to Republican candidates (extreme positions were never assigned to the opposite party). A "bipartisan" position was defined as a position that is mainstream and *aligned for the other party*. For example, a Republican candidate in the bipartisan condition was assigned to either a liberal or somewhat liberal position as their third position (the logic behind this definition of bipartisan is described in more detail below). Note that these manipulations affect only *one of the three* issues the candidate supports.

We classify each candidate's overall ideological positioning on the basis of the manipulation of the third issue position. The "aligned" candidates represent the sort of candidates who most often run for (and win) office in the contemporary American system. The remaining two groups allow us to understand if opinions change as candidates take positions less commonly observed among otherwise quality candidates. The "extreme" candidate takes one position that is likely too extreme even for members of that party. For example, a Democratic candidate with two mainstream liberal positions who also supports a nationwide constitutional ban on handguns is classified as extreme. Therefore, this treatment represents a candidate who is more extreme than "extremists" who are generally observable during elections (e.g., Hall 2015). If donors prefer this extremist candidate to a more party-aligned one, then this would provide evidence that donors are seeking to pull candidates even further to the ideological poles.

By contrast, the "bipartisan" candidate reaches across the aisle to take a position normally held by members of the other party. This condition represents the rare instance when a member of Congress does not support a bill espoused by their party coalition. We note that this bipartisan candidate does not adopt a position that is a median between liberal and conservative norms, an alternative treatment we discuss in the conclusion as an area for future research. Instead, a candidate who adopts the position of another party would simulate a moderate ideal point for a member of Congress who mixes and matches roll call votes across parties. Although adopting a position from the opposite party might signal inconsistency, it might also signal a willingness to work with the other party on issues. For example, when the Affordable Care Act repeal bill passed in the House but failed in the Senate in 2017, some Republican legislators supported the Republican-sponsored bill even though many constituents in their districts would be made worse off by ACA repeal. On the other hand, a much smaller group of Republican legislators (i.e., Charlie Dent and John McCain) voted against the repeal in defiance of their party coalition.[7] Our

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[7] On the Democratic side, Senator Jon Tester of Montana has an A-score from the NRA, and Joe Manchin III (WV), Joe Donnelly (ID), and Heidi Heitkamp (ND) are also in the A range, compared to almost every other Democrat with an F rating. They have these high NRA scores because they consistently

As a reminder, this is the candidate's information:
A **Democratic candidate** for the U.S. House of Representatives with experience as **a manager of a company with 10 employees.** During the campaign, the candidate focuses on these three issues:

1. **The Threat of ISIS:**
   Candidate's policy stance: I do not support sending additional air power or any ground troops to Syria and Iraq

2. **Federal Income Tax Laws:**
   Candidate policy stance: I support raising the top marginal tax rate to 43% for those making more than $1,000,000.

3. **Social Security:**
   Candidate policy stance: To keep Social Security solvent, I support raising the income cap over the next few years from $118,500 to $250,000 so that more money is raised in taxes.

Suppose this candidate is running to represent the **Democratic Party** in an open seat **primary election** (there will be no incumbent on the ballot). Based on past election results in this district, the winner of the **Democratic Party** primary is **likely to win in the general election.**

If you lived in this district, how likely would you be to **vote for** this candidate if they ran against a typical candidate from the **Democratic** party in this **primary** election?

Note: This is a screenshot of an aligned Democratic candidate.

Fig. 1 Screenshot of candidate vignette

hypothetical bipartisan candidate—who held one position of the other party and the rest of their own party—simulates this tradeoff. Of course, most Republican House and Senate members voted for the repeal (and the ones who did not might face primary challenges from extremists), and so this type of bipartisan candidate is rarely observable outside the experimental setting. Therefore, even though these types of candidates are rare, we believe that our definition of bipartisan is a realistic representation of deviations toward the other party.[8]

A sample of the full vignette appears in Fig. 1. After respondents saw this candidate vignette, we asked several outcome measures. We first provided election contexts about a hypothetical open seat (such that incumbency does not signal competency) primary election and later asked about a general election. Our hypothetical elections included a randomization for the expected competitiveness of the district.

Footnote 7 (continued)

adopt positions that are espoused by Republicans on gun rights. (That is, they did not take ambiguous positions or moderate positions.).

[8] Candidates can also adopt ambiguous positions when they disagree with their party, and future research should explore how donors respond to ambiguity.

We randomly told respondents that the candidate's party was likely to lose, likely to win, or equally likely to loss or win in the *general* election. This competitiveness randomization was displayed for both the primary and general election vignette. This randomization is included because respondents might be more likely to support or oppose a candidates on the basis of her issue positions if they believe the general election will be competitive or lopsided.

We analyzed two sets of outcome measures (one for the primary and one for the general election context). Each primary and general election set of measures included likelihood of (1) voting for the candidate, (2) contributing if the donor lived in the district, and (3) contributing if they lived outside the district. We include outcome measures about voting in order to have a common metric to compare donors with non-donors. We include outcome measure for within and outside the district because of the prevalence of donations to districts where the donors does not live (Gimpel et al. 2008) and to mitigate concerns that a respondent's knowledge of his own district would invoke other considerations. While this experimental setting does not fully capture the context in which out-district donations are solicited, we test the effect of candidate positions in a setting where other key factors that influence out-district donations are held constant (i.e., the competitiveness of the race or a candidate's background).[9] In the primaries, we specified that the candidate was running against a "typical candidate" from the same party, and for the general election, the candidate was pitted against "a typical candidate" from the opposite party. Donors are therefore asked to weigh voting for the candidate in the vignette compared to candidates that they typically observe during elections. We do this in order to fix in the respondent's mind the choice as a comparison to their past voting record during actual elections.

Data Gathering

Habitual Campaign Donors

Our donor sampling frame includes Federal Election Commission (FEC) donation records that were processed by the data firm TargetSmart to include demographic data and email addresses. Our sampling frame included 24,000 randomly selected individual contributors. We had several requirements for a contributor to be selected into our sampling frame. First, we wanted a sampling frame of habitual contributors who give more than average—here, the average (mean) is determined by the average contributor in the universe of donors on file at TargetSmart. Contributions must have above average (1) number of contributions and (2) amount given for an election year. In addition, contributors in our sampling frame must have also contributed in the two most recent elections at the time of sampling (2014 and 2012). Our sampling

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[9] An additional advantage of this design is that if there are other external pressures that guide donations (e.g., peer pressure to support party norms), the survey context is less affected by these factors than publicly reported contributions, allowing us to focus more fully on the effect of ideological considerations.

frame is also balanced on party identification where 50% of donors are Republicans and 50% are Democrats (estimated via contributions).

We also required complete contact information with each contributor including a full mailing address and an email address. The former is reported by the FEC (with varying completeness) and the latter comes from a proprietary consumer file that TargetSmart uses to match with the FEC contribution records. Although email recruiting helps streamline sampling (as opposed to mailing via United States Postal Service), we found less success with these email addresses. We conducted a soft launch of 1000 donors who were contacted via email, and the bounce rate (percentage of emails that were not delivered) was 64%. As a result, our sampling strategy was threefold. We randomly selected donors into three different contact methods: email contact only (n = 14,000, which includes the 1000 soft launch), postcard in the mail only (n = 3000), and email contact plus a postcard (n = 7000).[10]

After removing bounced email addresses and undelivered postcards because these donors were never actually contacted, our response rate was 6.06% with a sample size of 908 donors.[11] Note that one of our treatment assignments is not analyzed in this paper and therefore is not included in our analyzed donor sample (n = 636).[12] As an incentive, we included the option of donating $1 to the charity of their choice among four options. Two of the options were not ideological (Red Cross and United Way) and the other two have a clear ideological orientation (American Enterprise Institute and Nature Resource Defense Council). Donors also had the option of forgoing a donation. In the end, 23% chose not to donate, 34% selected a non-ideological option, and 43% selected an ideological option. We fielded for over a month across April and May of 2017.

Before analyzing our experimental results, we first compare our analyzed sample (636) with the initial sampling frame (24,000) to evaluate whether our collected sample is similar to our intended target.[13] Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations of demographic information and contribution behavior from both groups. First, our analyzed sample has partisan balance in the total amount of contributions, but is slightly more Democratic. Second, our sample and sampling frame are similar on age, race, total amount of contributions, total amount given to presidential candidates, and total amount contributed to Democrats and Republicans. We do find some differences, however, including less contributed to House candidates (although the average is still $4834), a greater number of total contributions made, and fewer contributions made to both in and out of state candidates. This implies that our sample gives more to PACs and interest groups (and less to House candidates) relative to our sampling frame, although our sample still contributes thousands of dollars per cycle to House candidates as well. In Supplemental Material Table A2 we present

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[10] We also had 46 postcards returned as undelivered.

[11] 908 completed surveys over 14,994 contacted with valid email or mailing addresses.

[12] The excluded treatment assignment is a candidate who adopts completely unorthodox positions, which is not directly comparable to the other treatments used in this analysis.

[13] Table 2 excludes one respondent who could not be matched back to their contribution records because they incorrectly entered their unique pin to the point of not being recoverable, which we used to track who completed our survey from our sampling frame.

Table 2 Demographic and contribution behavior of survey sample versus sampling frame

	Sampling frame	Survey sample
Age	65	67
	[12.86]	[12.04]
White (1 = yes)	0.81	0.85
	[.39]	[.36]
Male (1 = yes)	0.75	0.69
	[.43]	[.46]
Total amount contributed in 2012 and 2014 combined	$11,487.81	$11,452.72
	[23,137.06]	[25,957.60]
Total number of contribution in 2012 and 2014 combined	14.78	17.64
	[30.05]	[23.87]
Total amount contributed to House candidates	$5655.20	$4833.55
	[9256.87]	[9463.72]
Total amount contributed to presidential candidates	$2217.49	$2024.62
	[2275.91]	[1910.53]
Total amount contributed to Democratic candidates	$7616.75	$8331.13
	[17,053.08]	[21,989.61]
Total amount contributed to Republican candidates	$7878.39	$7592.56
	[17,645.04]	[16,679.03]
Total number of contributions in 2012	5.08	6.12
	[5.60]	[6.85]
Total number of contributions in 2014	3.84	4.34
	[5.19]	[5.91]
Total amount made to in-state candidates	$4586.94	$3918.05
	[6501.59]	[6680.26]
Total amount made to out-state candidates	$3480.76	$2916.96
	[6242.95]	[4785.71]
Observations	23,929	635

Standard deviations in brackets

Sampling frame includes individuals who later could not be contacted because of bad contact information (bounced email and/or undelivered postcards). Those individuals were removed when calculating the response rate because they were uncontactable. Data are from TargetSmart and are FEC records merged with a consumer file for demographics and email

a balance assessment (means, standard deviations, and f-test results from a multinomial regression predicting treatment assignment) that shows our randomization occurred as intended.[14]

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[14] Pre-treatment demographic information is available in Supplemental Material.

The Mass Public

Data for our mass public results comes from a survey administered online in April 2016 to 2059 subjects using a sample provided by Survey Sampling International (SSI). SSI recruits subjects from the United States with sample benchmarks similar to general population marginal distributions by age, gender, income, race, and education. While we focus on randomized treatment effects estimated with this sample (as well as the donor sample), this SSI sample is slightly younger and more liberal than the general population, suggesting caution in interpolation to the general population. See Supplemental Material Table A3 for sample demographics, where we also present randomization tests showing our assignment procedure appears to have been successful on balancing covariates. Because most of our theoretical arguments are applicable to those who (at least weakly) identify with a party, our mass public analysis dataset is composed of 1742 individuals who are either partisans or partisan-leaners (again, these respondents are evaluating candidate from their own party). We do not weight the habitual donor sample (for whom the population characteristics are unknown) or mass public sample because the purpose of this study is to establish the presence of randomized treatment effects arising due to candidate issue positions (see Miratrix et al. 2018).

Results

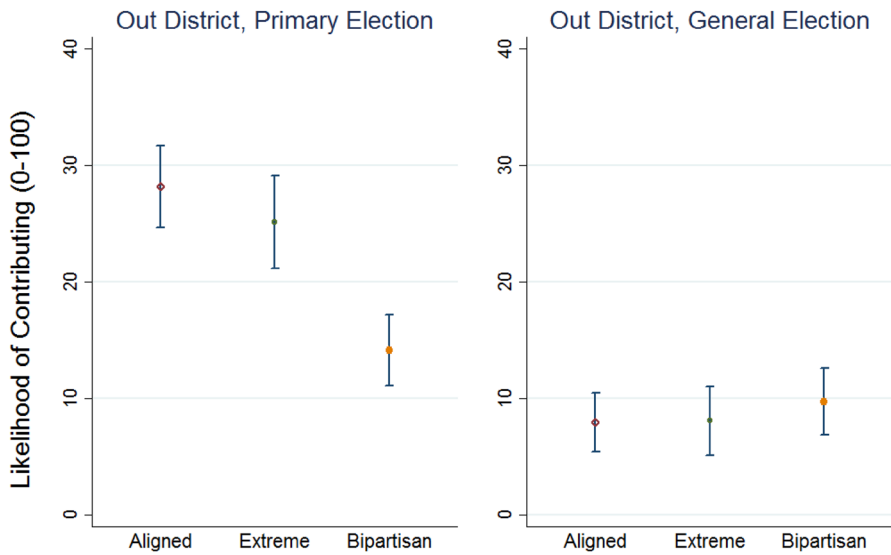### Contributing In and Out of the District

We start by examining the likelihood of contributing to each hypothetical candidate for the House (aligned, extreme, or bipartisan). Figure 2 displays the mean likelihood of contributing to a candidate (on a zero to 100 scale) in the donors' home district with 95% confidence intervals. The left panel is the outcome measure for donating in the primaries and the right panel is the outcome measure for donating in the general. As a reminder, each hypothetical candidate was running against "a typical candidate" that the respondent has observed during an election. A few patterns are worth noting. First, the aligned candidate received the highest average likelihood of donating for both the primary (54) and the general (66) relative to all other candidate types. Second, donors show responsiveness to issue positions across all candidate types. The extreme candidate received a lower average likelihood of contributing than the aligned candidate, but the extreme candidate is evaluated more highly for contributions compared to the bipartisan candidate. And the difference between the best fundraising candidate (Aligned) and the worst fundraising candidate (Bipartisan) is stark—a difference of 24 points (57% reduction in likelihood to contribute) in the primaries and 17 points (30% reduction) in the general election. Lastly, the likelihood of contributing for any given candidate changes by electoral context; donors were more likely to give in the general election than the primaries.

For contributing to a House candidate outside the district, Fig. 3 shows the patterns are slightly different. First, the likelihood of contributing to a candidate outside
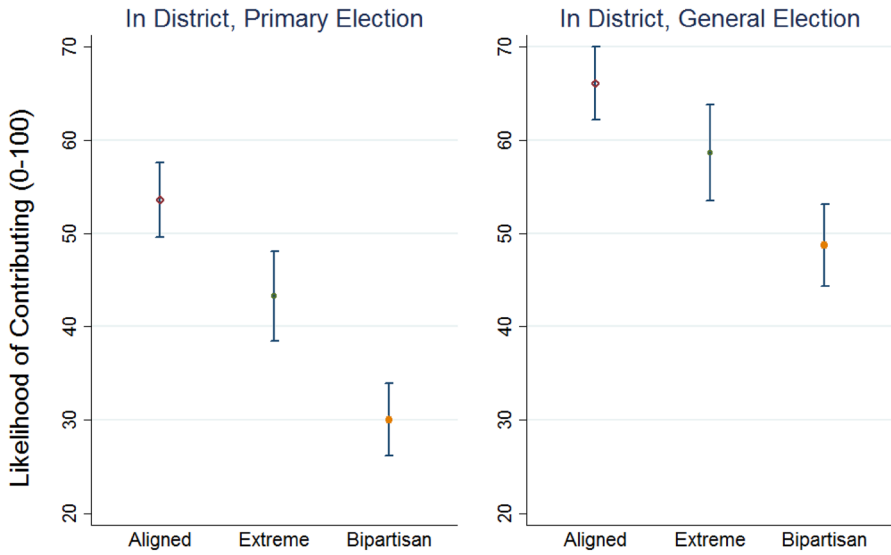
Note: Average evaluation of each randomized House candidate with 95% confidence intervals

Fig. 2 Likelihood of contributing within donors' district, primary and general elections

Note: Average evaluation of each randomized House candidate with 95% confidence intervals

Fig. 3 Likelihood of contributing outside donors' district, primary and general elections

the district is lower on average compared to contributing inside the district. Second, in the primary election context, we find no significant difference between the aligned candidate and the extreme candidate's ability to fundraise even though the aligned candidate did marginally better (28 compared to 25 respectively). But both candidates were significantly better fundraisers than the bipartisan candidates. For example, the difference between the aligned candidate and the bipartisan candidate was 14 points on a zero to 100 scale, representing a reduction of 50% in their likelihood to contribute. Lastly, donors do not appear responsive to issue positions for candidates outside their districts in the general election. Either our outcome measure did not fully capture the realities of donating outside the district, or donors contribute outside the district for reasons other than issues (i.e., party attachment dominates all other considerations). We also note that these results are largely parallel to our sample's actual contribution data as measured using FEC records. That is, habitual donors give to both in and out of district candidates, but in-district candidates receive more money.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that a donor's likelihood of contributing to a candidate is influenced by the issue positions of the candidate they are donating to, but this responsiveness is also dependent on the electoral context. Donors appear most likely to contribute when candidates hold positions that are aligned with their party, especially if the candidate is running in their own district. A candidate who holds only one of three positions that is too extreme for her party will have more difficulty raising contributions compared to an aligned candidate, but this effect is smaller in the general election context. However, an extreme candidate is overwhelmingly preferred to a bipartisan candidate for three of the four contribution outcome measures. To put this preference for an extreme candidate over a bipartisan candidate into context, a Democratic (Republican) donor is more likely to contribute to an extreme Democratic (Republican) candidate who supports a tax rate of 90% (10%) for high income earners than a bipartisan Democratic (Republican) candidate who supports a 3% tax reduction (increase). In other words, being very extreme on one of three issue positions is preferred to compromising with the other party. These results suggest that candidates have strong incentives to uniformly support their party's issue positions, and if they deviate from the standard party position, the preferred move by donors is not to compromise but to become more extreme.[15]

Primary and Election Voting: Do Donors Differ from the Mass Public When Evaluating Candidate Issue Positions?

Finally, this subsection explores how donors supported the same hypothetical candidate in terms of voting. In addition, we compare donor evaluations with a mass

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[15] At the same time, donations do not go to zero for extreme or bipartisan candidates. These candidates can therefore still raise money, although less effectively than mainstream partisan candidates. We think these relative magnitudes are important because only one candidate can actually make it out of the primaries and into the general election (excluding cases like jungle primaries). In other words, if the goal is to win elections and maximize contributions, then relative magnitudes are exceedingly important.
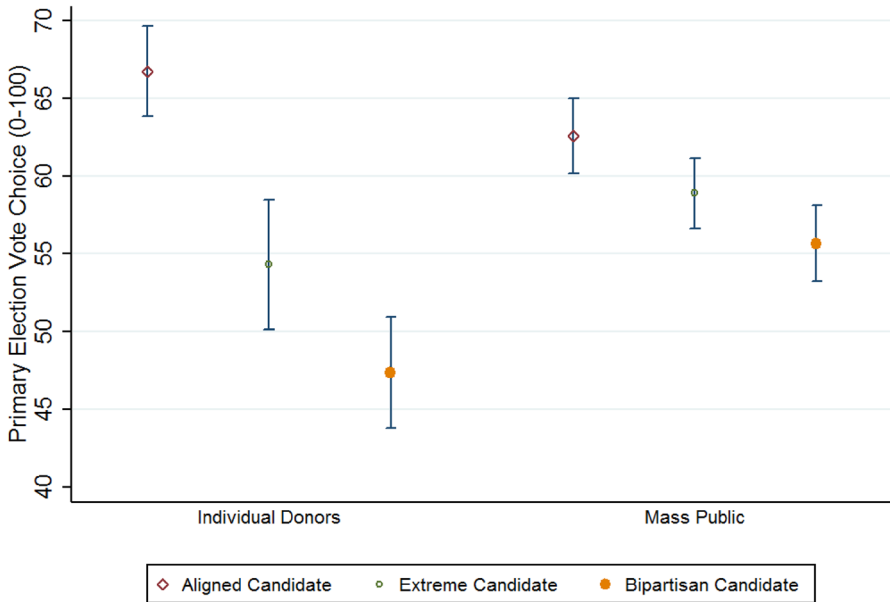
Note: Average evaluation of each randomized House candidate with 95% confidence intervals

Fig. 4 Likelihood of voting in a primary election, donors compared to the mass public

public sample of self-identified partisans. We start with voting in a primary election in the respondent's home district against an "average candidate" from the same party. Figure 4 shows two panels where the left panel is the donor sample and the right panel is the mass public sample. A few interesting patterns emerge. Focusing just on the left panel of donors, we show a significant difference between each of the unaligned candidates. We show a significant, and substantively important, drop in support for the extreme candidate compared to the aligned candidate, and an even further reduction of support for the bipartisan candidate. Having one of three positions supported by the other party, therefore, makes the candidate for the House less viable in the primaries to the donor class.

The mass public sample shows the same pattern of support for the aligned candidate over all over unaligned candidates. We find a difference between the aligned candidate and the extreme candidate of 4 points, but this difference is only significant at a 90% level. However, we do find a significant difference between the aligned candidate and the bipartisan candidate, which we believe to be substantively important. Even among the mass public who mixes and matches issue positions across a range of issue areas on opinion surveys (i.e., Ahler and Broockman 2018), a party-consistent aligned candidate is still preferred, on average, to a candidate who holds one position that is traditionally supported by the other party. On the other hand, the mass public sample is still receptive to all three types of candidate, and even the bipartisan candidate breaks the 50 out of 100 threshold for likelihood of voting.

The most startling difference between the donor sample and the mass public sample is how sensitive donors are to issue positions by comparison. Although both
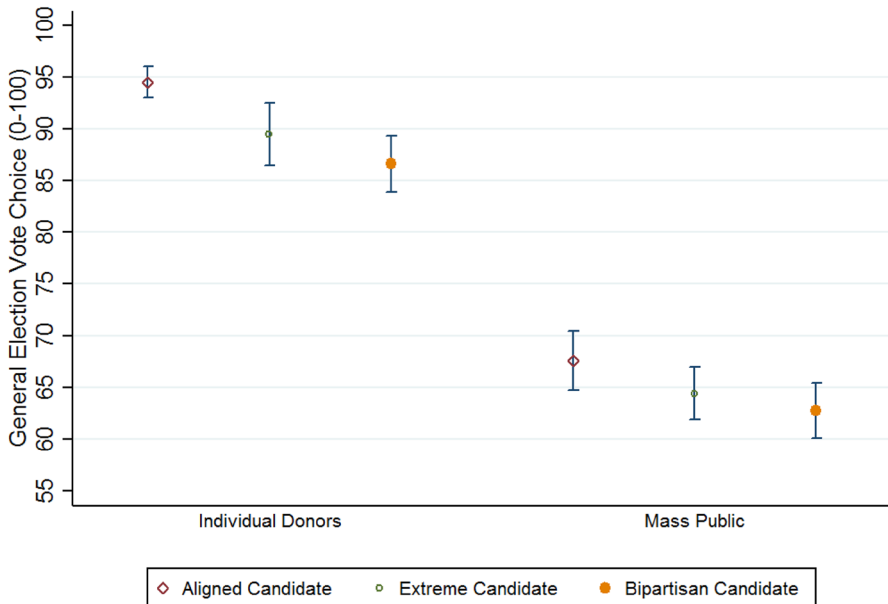
Note: Average evaluation of each randomized House candidate with 95% confidence intervals

Fig. 5 Likelihood of voting in a general election, donors compared to the mass public

samples prefer the aligned, party-consistent candidate over all others, the difference between the likelihood of voting for the aligned candidate and the other candidates are dramatic for donors. For example, the difference between the aligned and bipartisan candidates (both sample's most and least preferred candidates) are substantial for donors (20 point reduction, a 35% change in their likelihood of voting for the candidate) but are modest for the mass public (7 point reduction, a 12% change).

What about voting in a general election? In Fig. 5, we show the same pattern of hyper sensitivity among donors when evaluating candidates with one of three unaligned positions. The aligned candidate was strongly supported by donors, receiving a 95 out of 100 on likelihood of voting for her in the general election. Because donors are highly moted to participate in politics, and almost uniformly partisan, it is not surprising that they would be that enthusiastic to vote for an aligned candidate in a general election. And because this is a general election where the alternative is voting for an average candidate of the opposite party, all candidate types received an average likelihood of voting above 80 from donors. However, we do find a significant difference between the aligned candidate and all other unaligned candidates—even the extreme candidates receives a five percentage point drop in likelihood of voting support. In other words, donors show sensitivity to candidate issue positions in the general election contest too. The mass public on the right side of Fig. 5 shows far less enthusiasm for all three candidate types, but the aligned candidate is still the most preferred. We find an insignificant difference between the aligned and extreme candidate for the mass public sample, but the bipartisan candidates are both evaluated significantly worse than the aligned.

When compared to the masses, donors have both similarities and differences. The groups are similar because the aligned candidate is the most preferred among both groups, and both have the same ordering of candidate preferences (i.e., aligned is preferred to extreme, is preferred to bipartisan). Therefore, we may observe successful candidates in equilibrium holding party aligned positions across as many issues as possible in order to maximize their ability to fundraise and attract ordinary voters simultaneously. And if they are to hold an unaligned position, the most optimal choice is a position that is too extreme for their own party (not bipartisan).

Donors and the mass public are different in both their base level of enthusiasm and their sensitivity to unaligned issues. In the primaries, donors' evaluations of candidates vary widely, which could be occurring for several reasons. First, because the primaries are an election to represent their party, and because donors are an extremely partisan group, they might be particularly sensitive to an electoral context that determines who represents their party. Second, donors are likely also aware of how important contributions are during the primary process to fund campaign operations (i.e., Francia 2003), and so they might be especially punitive in the primaries. Third, donors are also more ideological than ordinary *primary* voters (Hill and Huber 2017), and this intense ideology might be clearest in a primary election context.

Donors also appear enthusiastic for any candidate in the general election, which again might be driven by how intensely partisan donors are compared to ordinary citizens. For example, the worst performing bipartisan candidate still averaged 87 out of 100 in the general election even though donors made clear that this was a bad choice to represent their party in the primary election outcome measure (47 out of 100). As a general election comparison, the *best* performing (aligned) candidate among the mass public averaged 19 points less than the *worst* performing (bipartisan) candidate among donors.

To summarize this section, aligned party-consistent candidates receive the highest likelihood of voting and bipartisan candidates receive the lowest among both donors and the mass public. Donors are highly responsive to issue positions when selecting a candidate in the primary election. Donors are also responsive to candidate positioning in the general election, but they still show a high level of support for any candidate representing their party.[16] On the other hand, the mass public shows smaller differences between candidate types, and these differences do not change much from the primary to the general context. For example, all candidates receive a moderate (above 50 out of 100) level of support in the primary and general election from the mass public.

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[16] One question is whether donors are responding to candidate positions per se, or are instead inferring other characteristics (e.g., valence) on the basis of those positions. If it is the former, spatial models of donating predict donors support candidates who are more ideologically similar, and more ideologically extreme donors should therefore penalize extremist candidates less. We investigate this pattern empirically in Supplemental Material (See Tables A7 and A8) and find that "very" liberal/conservative donors show no significant difference in support between the extreme candidate and the aligned candidate. That is, donors who are more intensely ideological do not punish extremist candidates, consistent with the view that donors are choosing which candidates to support on the basis of the match between their ideology and that of the candidate.

Are Donors Unique or are Differences Driven by Intense Partisanship and Demographics?

We showed that donors evaluate candidates much differently than the mass public in terms of issue positions. But we know from previous research, and the summary statistics presented in our data section and Supplemental Material, that donors are more intensely partisan, older, whiter, richer, and better educated than the mass public on average. There could be something unique about participating in the process as a donor that changes their evaluations of candidates in a more ideological way. It could also be the case that these individuals evaluate candidates differently simply because of their different demographics (i.e., Verba et al. 1993). To investigate this, we pooled the donor and mass public samples and estimated interaction models to measure differences by partisan intensity and demographics. Although both samples were not collected at the same time, and therefore were not part of the same randomization, the experimental instrument and outcome measures were identical.

To assess whether donors are distinct from the mass public after accounting for demographic differences, we created three interaction models by stacking the two experiments together. The outcomes are the previously displayed primary voting (0–100) and general voting (0–100) measures. *Model 1* includes interactions for each treatment variable with an indicator variable for being a donor (1 = yes, 0 = no). This model also includes interaction terms with the candidate types, which represents treatment effects among donors, as is seen below.

$$Model\ 1 = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Extreme_i + \beta_2 Bipartisan_i + \beta_3 Donors_i$$
$$+ \ \beta_4 \big(Extreme_i * Donors_i\big) + \beta_5 \big(Bipartisan_i * Donors_i\big) + \delta Controls + e_i$$

All independent variables (including controls) are indicator variables as well.[17] The excluded candidate type is the *Aligned* candidate, such that β_1 and β_2 are differences for non-donors from the aligned group. As a reminder, the *Aligned* candidate has three issue positions that are all within the range normally observed for that party, and so β_1 and β_2 are the effect of deviating from the mainstream on one of three issue. The vector *Controls* includes a number of variables meant to account for expected differences in candidate evaluations. First, we controlled for variation in the candidate vignette including (1) indicators for which issue areas the respondent was shown, (2) indicators for whether they saw the "somewhat" liberal (conservative) or liberal (conservative) position among the two aligned positions, (3) indicators for each of the randomly assigned background experiences, and (4) indicators for the randomly assigned electoral competitiveness. Second, we also controlled for characteristics of the respondent including partisan strength, age, race, gender, income, and education.

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[17] We use control variables in this interaction analysis to reduce sampling variability and to help rule out the possibility that differences across samples are due to demographic differences rather than donor status per se.

Table 3 Primary election voting with interaction specifications

	(1) Donor interactions only	(2) Donor and partisan strength interactions	(3) Donor, partisan strength, and demographics interactions
Extreme candidate	−3.391**	−8.786**	−9.449
	[1.697]	[3.536]	[6.976]
Bipartisan candidate	−8.334***	−7.877**	−1.782
	[1.748]	[3.491]	[6.828]
Donor	0.828	1.555	−0.606
	[2.806]	[2.836]	[3.623]
Extreme candidate * donor	−9.212***	−11.22***	−9.578*
	[3.049]	[3.159]	[5.156]
Bipartisan candidate * donor	−11.10***	−11.76***	−6.948
	[2.951]	[3.024]	[4.985]
Constant	62.82***	64.54***	62.07***
	[4.837]	[5.109]	[6.403]
Individual level controls for all models:			
Demographics (race, gender, age, income, and education)			
Partisan strength			
Candidate vignette controls for all models:			
Issue areas (abortion, ISIS, taxes, guns, Social Security, and Welfare)			
Candidate's party			
Background experience (private and public sector)			
Electoral conditions (likely to win, loss, or toss-up)			
Aligned candidate means	64.1	64.1	64.1
Observations	1958	1958	1958
R-squared	0.113	0.117	0.131

All dependent variables are indicators such that yes = 1. See Supplemental Material Table A5 for full regression results. Excluded categories among displayed variables are Aligned candidate treatment, mass public sample, and interaction between Donor and Aligned candidate. Standard errors in brackets. ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$

Model 2 includes the donor interactions plus four additional interactions of the treatment variables with partisan strength (both strong and not strong partisan interactions. Leaners are the excluded category). This model attempts to capture differences in partisan strength between the donors and the mass public. *Model 3* takes this specification a step further by also including demographic interactions with treatment variables. We include 12 interactions for each of the two treatment variables totaling 36 demographic interaction terms estimated for age, race, gender, income, and education. These demographic interactions in *Model 3* are in addition to the two donor interactions and four partisan strength interactions. Full regression results appear in Supplemental Material Tables A5 and A6.

Table 3 displays these three different model specification using the primary election outcome measure. Starting with *Model 1*, we find highly significant effects for both of our donor interaction terms. As a reminder, these results include various controls for demographic differences, partisan strength, and the various manipulations

Table 4 General election voting with interaction specifications

	(1) Donor interactions only	(2) Donor and partisan strength interactions	(3) Donor, partisan strength, and demographics interactions
Extreme candidate	− 2.733	− 7.795**	− 7.014
	[1.705]	[3.556]	[7.006]
Bipartisan candidate	− 5.506***	− 5.977*	− 5.778
	[1.757]	[3.512]	[6.857]
Donor	21.44***	22.45***	23.42***
	[2.821]	[2.852]	[3.640]
Extreme candidate * donor	− 2.813	− 4.915	− 6.931
	[3.060]	[3.173]	[5.184]
Bipartisan candidate * donor	− 2.154	− 3.460	− 3.867
	[2.967]	[3.041]	[5.011]
Constant	62.65***	64.39***	63.61***
	[4.862]	[5.135]	[6.434]
Individual level controls for all models:			
Demographics (race, gender, age, income, and education)			
Partisan strength			
Candidate vignette controls for all models:			
Issue areas (abortion, ISIS, taxes, guns, Social Security, and Welfare)			
Candidate's party			
Background experience (private and public sector)			
Electoral conditions (likely to win, loss, or toss-up)			
Aligned candidate means	77.6	77.6	77.6
Observations	1960	1960	1960
R-squared	0.249	0.253	0.265

All dependent variables are indicators such that yes = 1. See Supplemental Material Table A6 for full regression results. Excluded categories among displayed variables are Aligned candidate treatment, mass public sample, and interaction between Donor and Aligned candidate. Standard errors in brackets. ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$

in the candidate vignette. *Model 2* further confirms these results with consistently significant donor interactions even while adding interactions of candidate types and partisan strength—we find a ten point reduction for both donor interaction terms even with the partisan strength interactions. This implies difference in evaluations between donors and the mass public are not purely a result of differences in partisan strength between the two groups.[18] *Model 3*, which interacts every individual level characteristic with the treatment variables, shows some reduction in the magnitude of the donor interactions, particularly among the bipartisan group. However, it is notable that the reduction in magnitude for the bipartisan candidate is less than 50% of the treatment effect (although the standard errors also increases). However, the donor interactions still largely hold for the extreme candidates. Taken together,

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[18] Supplemental Material shows the full interaction model, and we find that the extreme candidate is evaluated more favorability among strong partisans.

campaign donors do evaluate candidates differently in terms of issue position that they support beyond what their intense partisanship and demographics would predict. (Moreover, that these results hold when controlling for survey measures of, for example, partisan intensity, suggests that they are not an artifact of demographic differences between the samples that are correlated with attentiveness to the survey instrument.)

Table 4 repeats this exercise for our general election outcome measure. Here we find less differences between donors and masses once interactions are included in the models. Consistent across all three models is the large and significant coefficient for the donor indicator variable, which again reflects the general election enthusiasm gap between donors and the mass public. However, interaction terms between the donors and the treatment variables are muted for all. It is noteworthy that a 6 point insignificant reduction still exists for the extreme candidate-donor interaction term in the most saturated interactive model. This suggests that donors and the mass public largely evaluate the differences between general election candidates similarly once accounting for demographics. Therefore, the biggest difference in voting between donors and the mass public occurs during the hypothetical primary process, with the necessary caveat that this difference might narrow with a comparison to a sample of primary voters.[19]

In general, we think our results demonstrate that donors engage in a within-party "fight" during the primaries over candidates' issues positions, but in the general election, donors see the choice more as an "us vs. them" conflict between parties. Almost all donors are still partisans, leading them to support any candidate type from their party in the general election.[20]

Conclusion and Discussion

Are candidates for office evaluated on the basis of the issue positions that they take? We argue that because high quality candidates for office almost always stake out issue positions that are aligned with their party, observational research exploiting differences in the issue positions candidates adopt to study how issues affect candidate evaluations likely suffers from a substantial problem of unobserved confounding. Most importantly, candidates who adopt (or do not adopt)

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[19] Hall (2015) finds that in a district that barely nominates an extremist, the extremist does 9 percentage points worse in the general election. Even though we find the largest drop in the primaries, our general election results are still similar to Hall's 9 percentage point drop—we find a drop in 7.5 percentage points among the mass public with an additional (insignificant) 4.7% drop among the donor sample (Table 4). Hall's larger drop of 9 percentage points might be attributed to other (negative) factors that are correlated with being an extremist in an observational setting, such as greater difficulty garnering PAC contributions. More generally, extremist candidates in Hall's dataset differ on other characteristics from non-extremists (i.e., valence attributes beyond officeholder experience), which may also contribute to poorer electoral performances.

[20] In addition to appealing to a broader electorate in a general election, donors might also understand that extremist candidates who win primaries may encourage higher turnout among the other party (Hall and Thompson 2018).

non-standard positions may do so either because they anticipate an electoral or fundraising environment that will reward (or punish) those positions.

For this reason, we present and analyze a novel experimental design in which candidate positions are randomly manipulated independently of other candidate characteristics. This allows us to assess how candidate issue positions affect proxies for behavioral outcomes like contributing and voting. This means we can estimate how donors respond to issue positions that are rarely observed in contemporary Congressional races, including candidates who adopt more extreme or bipartisan issue profiles. This novel data collection reveals that habitual donors (and sometimes the mass public) do react to candidate issue positions when forming evaluations of candidates, and that these issue positions appear to affect both primary and general election contributing and voting.

Unlike prior work on donors (and the mass public), the candidates presented in our vignette have party labels and adopt three specific issue positions from a larger set of six issue areas, a design that allows us to recreate more fully the naturalistic environment in which candidates for office stake out specific positions in multiple issue areas. Additionally, we measure multiple theoretically relevant outcomes. We find that compared to party-aligned positions, candidates are evaluated less favorably when they adopt a single extreme or bipartisan position. The negative effects of being extreme are generally smaller than the effects of being bipartisan, particularly when respondents are asked about how they would vote or contribute in a primary election. Moreover, the mass public has more difficulty distinguishing between an aligned candidate and an extreme candidate compared to donors.

The negative effect of being an extreme or bipartisan candidate is most prominent in the primary election setting. We speculate that candidates may want to distinguish themselves in crowded primary elections. If so, she has two possible paths—she can become more extreme or she can become bipartisan. If there is not a specific district-level reason to deviate to a more moderate position (i.e., Democrats in pro-gun districts), then our results clearly show that the more optimal deviation is to be more extreme. This may be why primary challengers position themselves as ideologically pure instead of positioning themselves as pragmatic candidates who mix liberal and conservative positions.

Broadly speaking, our results also clearly show that donors play a role in pulling the parties apart—even our aligned candidate is decidedly partisan. If an aligned candidate is most preferred, donors are still constraining candidates to only support their own party's positions, which would result in "polarized" ideal points. And, for some donors, being extreme is still an acceptable outcome, and this support for extremity does not persist to the mass public. But a potential silver lining to this observation is that the ordering of preferred candidates (Aligned > Extreme > Bipartisan) is the same for both donors and the mass public. So even though donors are descriptively different than the mass public with respect to demographics and socioeconomic status, they largely "agree" on which candidates are preferred to represent their party.

Of course, there are limits to our analysis. Because our results come from a survey experiment, we might worry about demand effects, where respondents can

interpret the desired outcome of our treatment conditions. Moreover, our data are from self-reported outcomes following treatment assignment and not actual behavioral measures like recorded donations. Although this is a concern that we share, we placed respondents in rich vignettes with multiple positions while also varying the context of choice (i.e., contributing in and out of the district, primary voting, and general voting) to obscure our research motives. Therefore, we can evaluate if effects are robust and politically relevant (as in evaluating primary vs. general elections). At the same time, as we note above, we did not consider two alternative types of positions candidates sometimes adopt when deviating from party norms: moderate positions (that is, positions ideologically between the standards for the two parties) and ambiguous positions. Future research, using the approach we deploy here, should examine how those classes of positions, when added to a larger set of issues, affect candidate support and evaluations. Nor do we consider how candidate evaluations would be affected by a single deviation from party norms in a larger portfolio of positions, although we are concerned that in the survey context providing too many positions would overload respondents and potentially cause them to ignore the treatment material.

Another limitation of our analysis is about measuring the mechanism by which respondents punish candidates. We cannot assess how donation and vote choice effects happen; it could be the treatments induce differences in ideological placement, uncertainty, valence, or some combination of these factors. Because our analysis is randomized across a variety of features, however, we know that our treatment effect estimates are not biased by the observed interplay of elite position-taking and anticipated voter evaluations. Finally, we note that our study examines only the behavior of a candidate's issue positions on her level of support. If potential donors also consider the challenger's positions (for a comparable analysis in the case of turnout, see Hall and Thompson 2018), then a further avenue for research is to study the effect of those challenger's positions in isolation, as well as how the pairings of two candidates' positions affects realized support.

These limitations notwithstanding, we provide two important empirical results. First, we show that donors do draw on positions in evaluating candidates and appear to express a relatively strong preference for party-aligned candidates. This is therefore direct evidence that donors are sensitive to the issue positions supported by their party and appear to prefer candidates toe the party line, even before members take office. Second, we diagnose whether this responsiveness to positioning is a function of the demographic differences of donors (partisan intensity, age, income, race, gender, and education), and we find that much of the differences in our donor sample cannot be attributed to demographics alone, particularly in the primary election context. Donors appear to be uniquely responsive to the positioning of candidates, which in-part, drives their contribution behavior.

Candidates therefore have incentives (monetarily and a loss of votes) to avoid adopting extreme or bipartisan positions on average for the six issues tested here. Even adopting a bipartisan issue, which one might suppose could signal independence and leadership abilities, is perceived by donors as undesirable. While some work suggests that elites might forgo personal and district preferences to build a "party brand" or advance a party's efficacy in office (Cox and McCubbins 2015), our data suggests donors (and even the mass public on average) have embraced party orthodoxy, implying elite

polarization is not entirely divorced from mass behavior (but at the same time, donors are not pushing parties to become more extreme).

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